

Saving Jakob

saving.jakob@gmail.com

September 8, 2010

Foreward

This is a work of fiction. All characters are imaginary and any resemblance to real persons or other works is completely accidental. This work includes romantic scenes between two young men. If this is illegal where you are then please don't read it.

While this story appears on the surface to be mostly fantasy, it does have a science fiction base. All will be made clearer in the sequel.

Originally this work was going to be a short story with a rather sad ending. As I began writing more and more scenes cropped up until suddenly I had a monster on my hands. So here it is, enjoy it or hate it but at least it's free. There are no sex scenes in this story, however those should begin showing up in the sequel (once I finish this monster anyway).

This document was written using VI on a Mac using the MacTex distribution of LaTeX. Please no comments on using VI or other editors. I learned VI 20 years ago and it works for me.

This is my very first attempt at writing so I welcome suggestions and advice or even error submissions. Please send comments and suggestions to me at saving.jakob@gmail.com

Thanks and enjoy!

Chapter 1

It was one of those nights that happen in late summer. Nice and warm during the daylight hours but brisk enough that the tourists were nowhere to be seen come sunset. Officer Andrews walked slowly down the beach where, hours before, people had swarmed like ants on a dropped piece of candy. There was remarkably little trouble for such a busy day this late in the season, but his patrol this evening included the beachfront and the caves due north of there. Occasionally local college students had staged late night parties along this section of the coast and had gotten caught in the sometimes vicious tidal currents around the caves. Official policy was that the parties were not allowed although that rarely stopped them from starting.

Tonight was different though. It was cool and peaceful and Officer Andrews took a few minutes to just appreciate the sunset sky. The sound of waves breaking on the beach began to lull him into a reverie of days gone by when he noticed a light where there shouldn't be any. Boating is strictly forbidden along the swimming areas of the coast in town but this light was coming in to shore. As he prepared to write a citation for boating, the light came closer to shore and it was now possible to make out two figures. He wiped his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming but the vision remained. There was a young man carrying a small child through the water. He was somehow held above the water and both of the youngsters were glowing with a nearly incandescent light.

As he watched in shock the older of the two figures came in as close to the shore as he was able to do so with fins and a tail like a fish. In nearly waist deep cold water he held up the child and watched him warily.

In a very broken English he said "Help! Please!" and shoved the small child further forward.

Officer Andrews dashed into the water and retrieved the small child. He was obviously injured and in extremely bad shape. As he turned to shore the other figure who had brought the child to him disappeared with a slap of a tail against the water.

Very carefully he set the small child down and reached for his radio.

"Dispatch this is Andrews. I need an ambulance ASAP at the north end of the beach. I've got a small boy, maybe six or seven years old, badly injured. Please respond."

"Andrews this is dispatch. I have an ambulance on the way they should arrive in three to four minutes. Please advise on condition of the child."

"Dispatch, this kid's a mess. It looks like he's been bleeding all over. He definitely has some broken bones and looks like it's bad. He's unconscious and I'm afraid to move him any further. He was washing up on shore when I found him."

He knew he would have problems with this report but there was no way on earth he could tell them that a merman had brought the kid to him and then left while he was getting the kid to shore.

He held the boy's hand while waiting for the ambulance crew to arrive. There seemed to be some small response in him, nothing more than a light squeeze, that let him know the kid was a fighter and would pull through. When the paramedics arrived and began loading him on a back board and binding his limbs down the boy screamed when they tried to separate his hand. It was the only sound he had made thus far. Rather than upset him, Officer Andrews rode to Memorial Hospital in the back of the ambulance.

The ride was not long, but that night it felt like an eternity. The paramedics took care of the kid as best they could until arrival at the hospital. The ride occurred in complete silence save the sound of equipment and the occasional muttering of the paramedic.

As the back door opened and they began to wheel the child out, the paramedic looked at Officer Andrews and said with some heat, "You get the bastard that did this. Don't let it happen to anyone else."

Despite the best of intentions to start paperwork, the child himself prevented it. Every time he went to leave the kid screamed and the doctors were afraid it would get worse if he left. So rather than going back for his squad car and doing busywork he was here, in a surrounding that made him uncomfortable with a child who was hurt worse

than anyone he had ever seen. And the wait went on for almost an hour before the kid finally was finally put under general anaesthetic for emergency surgery.

Speaking for the record, hospital couches are notoriously uncomfortable and it was no exception at Memorial Hospital. Despite this fact, it didn't stop Officer Andrews from falling deeply asleep while the kid was in surgery. Dispatch had arranged for another officer to retrieve his car and finish his route that night so that he could be there when the kid woke up—if he did. The doctors were afraid to give odds on it at this point.

He awoke with a startle at the touch of a nurse. The sun was coming up and the nurse was telling him something but his brain refused to kick into gear until the word 'coffee' caught his attention. He slowly rose and approached the area the nurse had pointed to him where he found coffee and some sort of cheese danish to eat.

Feeling more himself and remembering the severity of the situation he asked, "Where's the Doctor who is treating the child?"

"Right this way Officer. He asked me to wake you up so he can give you an update."

They walked down halls that said 'ER Staff ONLY' at every door until he finally arrived at an office. It was well apportioned with dark old paneling on the walls unlike the medicinal white of nearly everything else in the corridor. The office reeked of smoke and as he entered he could see why. The doctors was smoking like his life depended on it.

"Officer... ?"

"Andrews."

"Ah. Officer Andrews I'm Dr. Talbot. I've just spent the past several hours doing emergency surgery on our young John Doe here. It was touch and go but I think he's going to pull through. The list of injuries is extensive but the worst damage seems to be to the rib cage and to his feet. A complete list will be forwarded to you as soon as it's typed up, but basically he had eleven broken bones including three ribs, extensive burns on his feet, a fair amount of damage to his liver, one lung was punctured, and signs of brutal sexual abuse. As you know the saltwater may have rendered the swab we took useless for DNA evidence depending on how long he was in the water."

Dr. Talbot paused to take another puff from his cigarette, as if steeling himself for worse to come.

"There is also indication from scars that he has been severely beaten at several points in the past year or two. There is abundant scar tissue present on his back, buttocks, and shoulders. It's just a guess right now, but the burns on his feet appear to have been from curing concrete. I've seen that sort of injury before when I worked up in Jersey. Nothing that can stand up in court understand, but I think this kid was beaten, sexually assaulted, and then had concrete poured around his feet to sink him in the ocean."

"Do you think this is somehow mob related? I didn't think anyone really did the concrete shoe bit."

"From what I know the mob doesn't, but idiots trying to kill someone who believe what they see on TV try it occasionally."

"How long until he wakes up and can talk?"

"At this point I'd say sometime tomorrow at the earliest. He'll be in no condition to give a statement officially you understand as he will be on narcotics for the pain, but you might be able to get his name out of him at least."

"Okay, I need to get started tracking him down. I'll get down to the station and see what I can do from there. Please call me as soon as you think he will be waking up."

With that Officer Andrews handed Dr. Talbot a business card and began to walk wearily towards the front desk where he could call his wife.

Chapter 2

The next evening at work, Officer Andrews began filling out some of the paperwork for the current case that had literally been handed to him. Since he had found the boy and he had some level of rapport with him the Chief had assigned him the job of identifying the boy and locating his family so he could be returned, or in the worst case, put into foster care.

As he began, small details began to run together until all he could see was the little sandy haired kid he had pulled out of the ocean. As he worked the sheer emotion of how anyone could do such awful things to anyone, but much less to a child, began to surface. What started as a cold ball of sorrow in his heart turned quickly to a fiery rage. The persons responsible would be caught and brought to justice and he would be the one to bring them in.

With a new spark of fiery determination he finished the paperwork and decided to check out the scene where he had found the boy, or rather where the boy had been brought to him.

The beach was nearly empty as a storm front had moved in during the night. The air was cold and brisk. He walked to where he had 'found' the boy but there was nothing to be found. Not a single clue or bit of evidence to point him in a direction. It seemed that all he had was one naked, badly injured kid pulled from the ocean. On the unofficial list he had a merman, if that was even the right word. How do you put that together and find out who he is? He had started checking the missing child reports that morning and had put out a news alert that a child with that description had been found, but he didn't expect much result from it. It was rare to find a child in such condition alive and while he was thankful for the change of pace, he knew that the odds of tracking down the family were not high.

The kid had to have been dropped from either a boat or an airplane. Given that the airports are so tightly secured after 9/11/2001 he found it far more likely that a boat was used. He began to formulate a plan that would involve a great deal of legwork checking the rental records and boats for every rental place in the area. As he thought about the problem he realized it could take weeks. This being a coastal town on the Atlantic seaboard there were a lot of recreational boat rental places.

He barely noticed where he was walking as he thought out ways to find the attempted murderers. He wandered the beach for what must have been half an hour before he realized he was at the far north end of the beach where the caves began. As he looked at the first cave he saw a head break the surface. It had to be the merman, or more likely merboy from the looks of him. He appeared to be maybe 12, pre-adolescent at the very least, and very definitely fish from the waist down. He stopped and looked at the boy who shook his head once and came closer.

"Can you speak English?"

"Help."

"Ahh, so not very much, huh?"

The merboy shook his head in the affirmative.

"But you understand more than you can speak?"

Another affirmative shake of the head.

"Were there any other items with him? Clothing or anything at all that might help identify him?"

The boy had a strange look on his face and dove below the surface of the water. Officer Andrews waited around for about 20 minutes until the boy returned with a piece of concrete. It looked to have been broken in half and there was a clear imprint of a foot inside of it. Closer inspection revealed nothing but he hoped a lab somewhere might be able to make something out of it.

"This was around his feet, right? How did you get it off him?"

In answer the merboy pantomimed grabbing the rock and pulling apart at the middle. Andrews was stunned that so young a child could have such strength, but then again he had never seen one with a tail before either.

"I'm going to find who did this to him. Is there anything you can do to help?"

A negative shake of the head.

“Is there some way I can leave a message for you to meet me? I may need your help with this and anyone who would hurt a child needs to be brought to justice.”

Another negative shake of the head and a wistful look on his face. The merboy turned and pointed off in the distance. As near as Andrews could figure he was pointing directly at the hospital where the boy was taken.

“He’s hurt very badly, but the doctors think he will make it. At least physically he will be fine. How traumatized he is will be another story entirely. He may never fully recover.”

At that the merboy dove and left. Andrews waited around another 15 minutes to make sure he didn’t reappear and then headed down the beach and towards the car.



Elsewhere in the city a slightly overweight man with a cigarette in one hand and a beer bottle in the other was watching television. As the news about a child being found in very bad shape in the ocean flashed across the screen he yelled for his wife.

“Seems the kid is in trouble again. Well good riddance. I’m not gonna bail his ass out yet again. This time he’s on his own.”

The wife, perhaps knowing the value of silence, cried.



There was chaos outside the station when Officer Andrews arrived. It seems the news crews had heard from the scanners the night before that a child had been found and were all over the story. He was fortunate enough to have the luxury of going in through the gated officers only doors to the station but feared that he would not be spared from having to deal with the press on this one.

He had spent the past four hours without success talking to owners of boat rental places right on the water. Other than the one inland boat rental place, the only other conclusion possible was a private boat. But at least it was somewhere to look.

As he opened the doors he heard the Chief calling his name.

“Andrews! Come here and tell me what you’ve got.”

“Well Chief, so far we have a brutalized youth dumped in the ocean. He’s not awake yet so we don’t have a name or any history. I’ve been checking boat rental companies this morning under the assumption that he had to be dropped from something but so far nothing solid.”

“Well Andrews since you found him, you get to brief the press on the situation. The press picked up on it from the scanners last night and are all over it. Get out there and tell them what we know and that we’re working with the state police on this one.”

“All right.”

Andrews walked towards the front of the building where the conference room was located. There were quite a number of people in the room already and they were obviously waiting for an official statement of some sort.

After the usual bluster of questions at the sight of someone official looking, the press quieted down and he was finally able to tell them the very little information they currently had.

“At this time we have extremely limited information so I will not answer any questions. Last night around 6pm a young boy was found in the ocean. He’s around age seven, 4’7”, 46 pounds, sandy blonde hair and green eyes. He suffered extensive injuries and has not yet been conscious long enough to tell us his name. If you have any information regarding the identity of this child please contact the police department. Thank you all.”

Officer Andrews nearly ran out of the conference room to beat the crush of the press that was present, barely missing the photograph of the boy they had on display. He barely made it out before the press tried to hound him into answering questions and lost them in the maze-like halls of the police station.

Back at his desk, he was just settling in to contact the last of the boat rental places when an all units call was made from the hospital. Hostage situation at the hospital with an officer involved.



The blessed darkness began to fade and with it came the return of pain. It took time for him to remember that indeed, he was male and that thinking was normal. It took even longer to figure out what was going on. The pain, though bad, was far lessened from the peaks it had reached previously. He couldn’t see anything but wasn’t sure if his eyes were open or if the room was dark. He tried to move his legs and arms but agony added itself to the chorus of pain he felt when he did.

He lay there just enjoying breathing. Something felt wrong with his breathing but he couldn't identify the cause. It was almost a struggle, but yet a struggle he had expected to never have again. He tried to ask for a glass of water, but something was over his mouth providing cool fresh air to him and he couldn't speak.

The longer he lay there, the more he began to panic. How did he get here? Where is here? Why can't he move? What's the thing on his face and down his throat doing?

As the panic built he began to hyperventilate and then was shocked by an alarm sound of some kind. It was the first sound to penetrate the hazy fog his head had been swimming in and added to his panic.



Nurse Watkins was the first to notice that something wasn't quite right about the officer that came to watch the boy. At 67 years old she knew enough about working with the police to wonder why he would be here watching a boy when no threats had been made. She kept her eyes on him as she went about her various duties, even managing to hang around her desk looking busy on the computer she could barely use while he was in the room.

It was when she went to check on a patient in another room that something changed. She took off at a sprint for the kids room and sure enough, the officer was disconnecting the oxygen system helping keep him alive. She let out a scream "Stop that this instant! His life depends on that equipment!"

"Just turn around and leave and nobody gets hurt that isn't already. Stick around here and that is *going* to change."

"I can't do that Officer. Or are you even a cop?"

"Oh I'm a cop, and you're about to find out what exactly I'm willing to do."

He drew his weapon and took a quick shot at her, but missed and hit the wall.

"Oh that's smart. Shoot up the ICU. That won't get any attention here at all. Maybe you should go back to bad guy school. Given that this is a kid I'm placing bets on two minutes for the real cops to arrive."

"Don't worry, it won't take that long to finish the job."

He aimed the gun towards the boy just as a sudden glow surrounded the boy and he vanished.

"Oh that's really good. What did you do, aim a flashlight at him? Come on out of there now and leave the kid alone. He's just a kid, damn it all! He doesn't need to die that young."

"Where the hell did he go? Will you quit blathering woman! I've got a job to finish!"

"What do you mean? Did you lose him while he's strapped into that traction rig right in front of you? You really are slow. Maybe they kicked you out of bad guy school?"

At that final barb, he turned the gun towards Nurse Watkins and without warning lunged at her and took her hostage. He began leading her towards the patient transport elevator to get downstairs and out of the hospital but as they approached, the doors opened and police entered the hallway.

The standoff lasted a few minutes, but ended abruptly when Nurse Watkins reverse kicked him in the groin and ran for it. At that point the other officers took him down.



It had been hours since his limited conversation with the human. He had decided to take the slow route home rather than blend there immediately to give himself time to think. His name, which humans would be unable to pronounce designed as it were for being used underwater, was best translated as Starfish. His mother had told him for some time that if he had interactions with humans he should tell them his name is Star. She thought some might even find the name amusing given it's alternate use for a famous human.

He was now below the depth where human eyesight functioned very well and was relying solely on the *nexus* for sight. It was always a relief to be free of the human senses and swim as he had been born to do. Joining with the *nexus* allowed him to see and feel the presence of the other sea creatures and move among them without conflict.

As he swam he reflected on how different his race was from humans. Those of his race were essentially immortal until the birth of their perfect mate, and remained as juveniles until that time. With the birth of their mate came a joining courtesy of the bond with the *nexus* that left both parties aware of the others health and location. It was almost like feeling what they felt except distant. But now a new surprise had arisen. Never before had a human been born that could join with the *nexus*, so there had never been a bond between a human and one of his people. He had been completely unaware of the birth of his mate until he had been dumped into the ocean. He hadn't known that being out of the water would block the bond and wasn't sure that any of his people knew of it either. He supposed that those who had gone amongst the humans long enough to learn their languages would have some idea although that might explain why both mates usually went together.

One other obstacle faced him in the immediate future. Until his mate and he were joined he was unable to shift into a full human shape. Which meant no way to effectively speak to them and no way to walk among them and find

his mate. The vocal apparatus of his people in normal form was not able to produce all the sounds of the human languages due to lack of air in lungs to activate vocal chords. Instead, their language was to the humans, a series of whistles, clicks, and a variety of other sounds that humans would be unable to reproduce.

His parents had been strongly encouraging him to learn at least one of the human languages. He had decided on one called English because of its frequent occurrence in the world. While he could understand most of it that he heard, he would be completely unable to practice speech until maturity. Or at least that is what his parents had told him. His own personal experiments had resulted in a very limited number of words that he could speak - although the general utility of them was completely random. Or so he had thought until the night he first felt his mate's half of the bond.

It was like being drug out of the water to die. So much pain. So much hurt. He wasn't sure at this point if his mate would be sane or not, but he knew he had to help. So he blended and arrived instantly at the location of his mate. He was a young child although not the infant that he had expected. And some of the man made rocks were pulling him into the depths. Anger and pain gave him a strength he didn't normally possess and he ripped the rock apart and pulled him to the surface. He was hurt though. Desperately. His only chance lay with his own kind to save him - but how to tell which ones had hurt him and which would help him. He vaguely remembered his parents telling him something about police being there to help humans although they frequently were 'crooked' as his mother called it.

It was out of desperation that he pulled from the *nexus* to speed his motion through the sea and get his mate to help. The same desperation that led him to approach a human and place the most important person in his life in their care.

He knew that his people would accept his mate, if he could ever meet them. He didn't know anything about his mate yet and wasn't sure if the *nexus* would give him the same abilities and strengths that it did his people. Would he be able to swim or breathe in the depths? There was no way to know until he was better and had matched his state of growth. He wasn't completely sure of the growth rate of humans, but if it matched his people then he had five or six years before he would be able to find out. Provided he survived the next few hours. He had been badly injured and for all his other gifts, Star was no healer. Healers existed among his people but were exceedingly rare and he had not yet managed to become acquainted with one.

Now the big problem remained. How to break the news to his parents that his mate was a human. Unlike some of the stories he had heard of the humans, his people had no prejudice against same gender pairings since they were chosen as perfect by the *nexus*. He was not quite so certain about a pairing with a human though.

Without warning the full force of his bond with his mate kicked in and there he was, floating in the water in front of him. With a desperate fear he grabbed onto him and began to pull him to the surface so he could breathe. It took several desperate minutes of swimming to reach the surface and his unexpected passenger was unconscious by this time. With a strength born of desperation he lifted him out of the water and tried to hold him so the water would run out of his lungs. The splints on his arms and legs groaned and he felt the pain explode through his body in unconscious sympathy with the child. After a long moment he began a labored breathing on his own.

Jakob. His name is Jakob. But how could he know this? He was unconscious and hurt, yet some spark remained and it told him that his name was Jakob.

Chapter 3

Ted Andrews awoke from a deeply troubled sleep by the ringing of the bedside phone.

“Hello?” he answered in a sleepy voice.

“Ted, this is Sgt. Smythe at the station. You might want to head down to the station. A situation has arisen that will involve your case.”

“I’ll be right there Dave. Thanks for the heads up.”

As he dressed he glanced at the clock and realized he would have been getting up shortly anyway. He kissed his sleeping wife goodbye and left the house.

At the station he was shocked at the look on the faces of his fellow officers. Whatever had happened that look told him just how serious it was going to be.

“Ted, come on in here and let me fill you in.” said Dave Smythe as he began ushering him in and closing the door.

“Last night one of our own tried to kill the boy you brought in. Thanks to a feisty nurse we managed to get him unharmed, but the kid disappeared. At this point we don’t know what’s going on, but now Internal Affairs is involved and from what I’ve been told the FBI won’t be far behind. *We might* have an identity on the boy finally. Got a call from a school teacher late last night after the evening news broadcast and she’s going to come in today and speak to you about him. For now I want you to focus on the kid’s welfare. Find out who he is, how he got hurt, and protect him. If we find him again you’re going to become his security detail until we know just what is going on.”

“Sounds good Dave. I’ll talk to the teacher and then begin a search around the hospital. In his condition he couldn’t have gotten too far.”

Forty five minutes later a neatly dressed older lady was brought to his desk. He immediately rose and exclaimed “Mrs. Choate! I thought you had retired by now. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing fine Ted Andrews. It’s good to see you doing well for yourself. If you have pictures I think I can confirm who your young Mr. Doe is.”

He reached into the folder on his desk and produced three color photos of the boy’s face.

“Yes, that’s him. His name is Jakob Muellerson. I have his information here for you, but I think I need to talk to you about the family before I do.”

“Let me guess, he has a tendency to fall down stairs and the like?”

“Exactly. He shows up to school periodically with large bruises or broken bones and claims he fell down or got into a fight and he is not the type to get into a fight. I’ve never had more than suspicions but that wasn’t enough to call Division of Family Services about. How did you know about that anyway?”

“I can’t give you specifics but old injuries made the doctors at the hospital suspicious about it.”

“Please help him. He’s one of those really shy kids. Hard to get through to but when you do it’s worth all of the effort you spent. A lot like you were as I recall,” she said with a soft smile.

“I’ll do my best for him, I promise you that. I’ve got to get to the hospital and find him first. There was an incident last night and he’s gone missing. Any thoughts on where he might be?”

“Well his address is in this envelope but I can’t imagine him going there. He tends to daydream a lot so it’s hard to say really.”

“Okay, well I’m headed to the hospital right now. Thanks for taking the time to help this boy. If anyone has ever needed help I’d say it’s him.”

Officer Andrews spent the next several hours performing a fruitless top to bottom search of the hospital. He hadn’t really thought Jakob would be there but there was only one other place he thought he might search, and that seemed too far fetched to be believed. After all the excitement he had almost managed to convince himself that

Jakob really had washed up on shore and he hadn't seen a merboy, or whatever the correct term might be. It was, however, worth a shot and so he decided to head out and check the area of the beach where he had found him the previous evening.



Star was getting desperate. His strength was running out from holding Jakob above the water. He knew Jakob was badly hurt and so he did what he had solemnly promised to never do unless an emergency. He broadcast a call for help and for a healer through the *nexus*. The response came immediately as the water around him shimmered with others blending to his location. His parents, being so tightly bound to him, were the first to arrive and were understandably upset.

"Son, why have you called us this way? What is wrong?" asked his father with a note of concern to his voice.

"I can't explain it but this is my mate and he's human. He's hurt very badly and he blended from a human hospital to me out of fear. I can't help him but a healer might be able to."

Several notes of consternation sounded from the gathered group of people, but moments later a healer arrived and the crowd grew silent.

"Who has summoned me? What is the emergency?" asked the kindly looking older merman.

"I have," cried Star. "My mate is human and is hurt beyond the ability of his people to heal. Will you help him?"

The healer came toward Star as others made a path for him. As he began to check over Jakob he began to swear at what he found. "Whoever did this meant to kill him. I will do what I can as any healer would but he cannot be returned to where he came from. If he is others will surely continue the same abuse. For now we must get him to land for the healing of his kind needs land and air and a human form."

With that the healer gathered Jakob in his arms and began to move toward the coast. Star bravely volunteered, "Sir, if you will let me I can show you a place we can blend to on the coast. It's far from the normal places the humans gather and should be safe at this time of night." With a nod of assent Star focused closely on the *nexus* and felt it come alive as the healer and his parents joined with him in it's warmth. With little more than a thought Star blended them all to the caves on the far north end of the beach where Star had met the human policeman.

Upon arrival the healer assumed human form and carried Jakob out of the water and laid his inert body on the rocky shore. His parents followed suit and joined him, but Jakob, being a juvenile was unable to join them. At the look of disappointment on his face the healer moved Jakob close enough so Star could hold his hand during the healing.

"Now Star I'm going to need your help to heal him. The secret of our healing lies in the bond with the *nexus* as it's shared between two joined beings. You will need to connect to the *nexus* and focus on your mate as much as you can. This will help feed him the energy that he will need during the healing. His wounds are serious and if you falter he may die." The old healer was caring but honest with Star.

This time, connecting to the *nexus* was different. He felt it right away as he focused on Jakob's form and heart. There was a warmth there, buried under an enormous load of pain. In flashes Star saw images of some of the things that had been done to his mate. As his anger grew he felt Jakob pull away from him instinctively and his heart nearly broke. With a feeling that he could not explain he let go of the pain and let love show through. A love that would help him to heal from the pain and make things better rather than worse.

In what seemed like minutes it was done. Star felt the healer finish his working with the *nexus* and Jakob begin to stabilize and breathe on his own. With a sigh he stretched his arms and tail out and relaxed a bit.

The tired old healer looked at him with unabashed happiness on his face. "You're a joined pair all right, and although I've never heard of such a thing, I'm glad he's going to be okay."

"We should leave soon. The sun is up now and there will be humans about at any time," said his father.

"But wait! What do we do with Jakob? How do we protect him and where will he live?" asked Star nearly in tears.

"That is something that must be figured out, but for now he needs to live among his own kind. He is too young and hurt to be changing all the time yet he must be near his mate," said the old healer with a look of compassion on his face. "He will also sleep for the next several days after a healing of this magnitude. Whatever solution is chosen, it needs to be soon. For now I must go. This days healing was difficult and I must rest."



Officer Andrews walked along the beach in the early morning sunshine. As he walked toward the caves at the far north end of the beach he noticed what he thought was a light coming from that area. He swore under his breath and picked up his pace.

He arrived just in time to see two men, a woman, and the merboy speaking in some language that sounded more like dolphins than humans. The boy was lying on the ground. Just then the older of the two men made a running dive into the water, breached above the water to show his new tail, and then disappeared into the depths.

He approached slowly so as not to startle anyone, and said "Is Jakob okay?"

The adults were startled but the merboy seemed relieved. The adult male said something to the boy, and then turned to him.

"My son here", and he pointed to Star, "tells me you were the one who saved Jakob's life the first time. He thinks we can trust you, but my wife and I are unconvinced. We have seen too many times where the uniforms of your kind are used for the benefit of oneself over others. Explain to me how you plan to keep Jakob safe and what you will do to ensure it."

Officer Andrews was more than a bit shocked to be addressed so by a pair of naked adults, but began to formulate an answer.

"You're right. One of the bad cops tried to kill young Jakob here last night. That's why he disappeared from the hospital. I have orders to be his security guard until this mess is all sorted out. Basically that means that rather than my normal job, my entire job will be to take of him and make sure he is safe. I've not yet spoken to my wife about this, but based on what I've seen and heard from others, I suspect my wife and I will wish to adopt young Jakob here to give him a safe home at last. At least we will if he would let us. It has to be his choice after all. So how do you all come into this? I've met your son here before but why are you human?"

"We are of the people," replied his mother calmly. "We live in the sea, partake of the *nexus* and live in peace. We can assume human form at will in order to hide ourselves from your world and it's problems. My husband is correct. We need some sort of assurances that Jakob will be kept safe. He is our son's mate and this is very important to all of us."

"Do you mean your son is sexually active with Jakob?"

Some dialogue rapidly took place between Star and his parents and then his father replied, "Not at this time but understand that with time, healing, and maturity that will be likely."

"So why can you speak English and your son cannot? And what are your names?"

"Our son's name is best translated as Star. Our names are based on types of currents and I do not know of a translation. For convenience you may refer to us as Pat and Linda. Our son is a juvenile and until he is able to shape shift he will not have the vocal apparatus to speak English. He understands just fine however."

"Well for now I need to get young Jakob back to the hospital. He's still a very hurt young man. All the assurances I can give you is that I will be there and whatever fate befalls Jakob will also befall me. Is there a way for me to get in touch with you if your help is needed Star?"

Star looked forlornly at the officer and shook his head no. His father, however, had other plans. "There is a way, but it is not something that is done often. I will have to seek permission for it to be used and am uncertain if the circumstances will allow, but I will try. Can you meet us back here in three days at sunset?"

"I can and will be happy to do so. Star, Jakob is in good hands with me. I will stay with him at the hospital at all times okay?"

"One thing. Jakob has been seen by one of our healers. The worst of his injuries are now safely healed, but he will sleep for several days while recuperating. There is also great risk of damage to his mind and heart from all that he has experienced. He needs help still and I fear it is a help that my people simply lack experience in providing."

"We have specialists for children who have undergone situations like this, and I will make sure that he gets to see the best."

"It makes me sad to think that your kind need such specialists for children. Isn't there enough pain in the world without adding to it? It's small wonder our kind mistrust yours so badly," replied Star's father.

"I can't disagree with that at all. I think it's truly a shame that some humans are so horrible and that the rest of us have not yet found means of identifying and helping them, but the situation is complex beyond my ability to explain. Hopefully some day it won't be that way anymore. In the meantime, I need to get Jakob to the hospital again so he can rest and recover."

He gently picked up the sleeping boy and began to carry him back to his car. Jakob mumbled something in his sleep when his hand separated from Star's, but he quickly settled down again.

An attentive ear would have heard two small splashes as Star's parents slipped back into the ocean to return to their home with their son.



Dr. Talbot returned to his office, doffed his coat, and laid down on the lumpy couch in his office to nap. He idly wondered how many times he had done this since his residency had ended all those years ago but eventually gave up

on counting as useless. When situations arose he had to be around. As head of the ER it was his responsibility to make sure that it ran smoothly and that meant covering shifts for other doctors as well as handling problems.

Problems. Tonight had been too full of them. Now he was down one room due to the police investigation into the events of last night. He still wasn't sure that left them with enough rooms to handle the usually busy ER, but there was no option. The police had promised to be done as quickly as they could, but he suspected that the infamous red tape would slow things down and he'd be without that room for at least a month.

More worrisome was the boy that had disappeared. He had had emergency surgery and shouldn't have been able to wake up yet from the anaesthetics that were used, so how he managed to escape was beyond him. The poor kid must be terrified to trust anyone. He was fairly certain they could get him past the worst of the physical injuries but emotional damage was a different problem, and unfortunately one that was going to have to be handled by Family Services. That in and of itself was frightening to anyone who had worked with that system before.

Thoughts of the boy and the situation he would have to deal with stayed with him until sleep finally overtook him.



As Star's parents carried their exhaustively sleeping son home they spoke quietly about what had happened. As usual, Star's mother Linda started the conversation.

"What do you think of the policeman? Can he be trusted? My instincts tell me he can be and that he was sincere, but how do we make sure?"

"I'm not sure if he can be or not, but he did seem sincere. I liked the idea of him adopting Jakob rather than having him go back to his family. Of course it's not fair to judge his family based on what happened, but I get the feeling that this kind of abuse had gone on for years and they haven't done anything about it - that or they caused it."

"I agree. We need to keep an eye on what's happening to Jakob though, and the only way to do that would be to become surface dwellers again for a time. But how do we work through the security that's going to be around him and how do we explain ourselves to the humans? They will want to know everything they can about anyone who associates with Jakob."

"If we can trust the policeman we may have a solution. He can place us at the hospital as undercover assistants there to secretly watch Jakob. Of course that ruse wouldn't hold up with other cops - but we don't have a lot of options. We will have to work something out. I'm sure one of us could take a menial job at the hospital as a pretense."

"How do you think the elders will react to a request for a pearl so the policeman can call us? The pearls themselves are common enough, but how can we know the humans won't try to entrap us?"

"Oh that's easy, we just make sure we are human before we blend to him. That way all they can find is another human." replied her husband with a large grin.

"I think we may have another problem though. I think they're dream sharing already and the age difference is too great. Has there been another of our kind bond to a human before?" asked his wife.

"I'm not completely certain young Jakob is actually a human. Remember the histories—once we were two peoples. One of the land and one of the sea and able to live on either. The land dwelling brethren were thought lost to history but maybe they weren't. Maybe they mixed with the normal humans and so were forgotten. If so, that might explain what is going on here. Although the age difference is going to be a problem. They need time together to strengthen the bond between them, yet if they are dream sharing already things are progressing too quickly. Jakob needs to grow for a few more years before they will be close to the same physical age."

"I'm more worried about how the real age difference between them will play out. Star is almost 110 years old already. Although he's still a juvenile physically he has a great deal of life experience that Jakob doesn't. With our own kind it wouldn't be such an issue, but the humans place great emphasis on age differences. I guess we will just have to wait and let them work that out between them."

Chapter 4

Jakob dreamed.

At first the dreams were without form or fear but as it usually did, that changed and began to involve his memories.

He was lying in bed. It was quiet in the house. He heard the bedroom door open and pretended to be asleep. Someone sat on the edge of his bed and didn't move for a while. Eventually he felt a hand reaching into places hands weren't supposed to go, and still he played asleep. Eventually the hand and it's owner left, closing the door behind them.

The dream changed. Now he was at school in the cafeteria and someone was dumping a bowl of soup on his head. It was hot and it burned as it ran down his shirt. Then suddenly he was at home explaining what had happened and getting a beating from his father for being a wimp. The buckle of the belt made his already burnt back bleed.

He was in a shed. He was bent over a table and tied down. Once again he felt hands where they shouldn't be and then pain like nothing he had felt before. It felt like his insides were being split into pieces. He screamed and cried as the wood work table left splinters in his face, but nobody came to help and still the pain continued.

He was at a youth camp. He was having fun working on basket weaving. He really enjoyed wetting down the reeds to make them flexible enough to make baskets with. But as before, there were other people. Thankfully the dream changed just after someone yelled "Let's put a firecracker up his ass and see what it does to him." He did *not* want to remember that trip to the hospital.

He was being picked up from school by his 'uncle'. He wasn't really his uncle, but rather was someone his father owed money to. Since his dad couldn't pay him, the took him twice a week and made him take his clothes off to have pictures taken. All this passed through his mind during the drive to the house where the pictures were taken, and he relived every single embarrassing moment of it.

He was at a parent teacher conference. His mother and father were both there and that meant trouble. The teacher was explaining that they knew he could do better in school, but was barely making a 'C' most of the time. They wanted to put him into some special program that would cost money. His father said "We aren't interested. He's just a dumb kid so a C is fine for him. He won't ever amount to anything anyway." His mother said nothing and they left. His father beat him again that night for making him to go talk to "that stupid bitch" that was his teacher.

He was outside playing with a ball and talking to a kid who had just moved into the neighborhood. His father came out and told the kid "Get lost! He's too stupid to have friends!" and proceeded to chase him out of the yard.

It was warm and he was inside the living room beside the fireplace. He was at the age where he was curious about his middle name and he was asking his mother, "Mom, what's my other name?" His mother responded "Anthony" just as his father walked in and said "shithead."

The dreams continued. Constantly changing, constantly reminding him of all the horrible things that had been done to him. Faces, places, and situations revolving into a hurricane of pure horror. At some point the dreams became true nightmares rather than memories and the situation worsened. The dream of oblivion and the sweet calm peace of death called him and just as he was about to welcome it inside, another dream started. One that was different.

He was surrounded by a deep emerald light, suffused with warmth, and at peace. There was the face of an older boy and it called to him. There was also music. Almost more of a rhythm rather than pure music but it was unlike any music he had ever heard. It soothed his hurts, calmed his heart, and soothed his soul. For the first time in a very long time, Jakob slept peacefully.



The house was an older one, with a lack of repairs beginning to take their toll. The yard needed mowing and the detached garage didn't really look safe to enter. The second story of the house had a window broken out and plywood put up over it. The paint on the front porch was peeling and anyone looking closely would notice the many layers of paint that had built up on the house.

Officer Tandry knocked on the door and waited. After a few minutes he knocked louder, and upon hearing no response decided to contact the station. He had been given the task of checking on the Muellerson boy's family situation and while no answer didn't necessarily mean anything except that nobody was home, something just felt wrong about the situation.

He radioed the station and after a few minutes was told to come and get a warrant. One of the local judges had been called and decided the risk to the boy was significant enough to give a warrant for forced entry. Twenty minutes later he was back with the warrant.

The front door that he had knocked on was unlocked so he opened the door. In a town of this size it was unusual to leave a door unlocked, even in the nicer sections of town. Here it was unheard of. He drew his weapon and entered slowly, calling out "Police! Don't move!" as he entered.

The living room was empty of people, but the rubbish around the room told quite a story. Numerous empty liquor bottles littered the floor and almost every available piece of furniture. Filled ashtrays littered the floor beside one big recliner set in front of the older model television set. There was a doorway leading back to the kitchen area and he decided to follow it.

The scene in the kitchen was horrible. The kitchen was relatively clean and well used. Dishes were draining on a drying board and the sinks were empty and clean. In the middle of the floor were two people, tied together, each with one small bullet hole in their forehead and blood draining onto the floor around them. The back door was wide open with no signs of forced entry.

Tandry called the station to report the situation and to get a crime scene unit sent over. In the meantime he began a preliminary search of the premises.

Upstairs were two bedrooms, one obviously the parents based on the king sized bed and the smell of liquor in the air. The other was the boys room, as evidenced by the photo hanging on the wall. The room was neat and despite having one window covered with plywood, was fairly bright with the light on.

A further search revealed a basement with some machine shop tools in it and nobody else at home.



Officer Ted Andrews arrived at the hospital and carried in the unconscious, naked child. When Dr. Talbot saw him he got the boy on a gurney and began having people check him out. After about 20 minutes of hurried work, Jakob was released to a room and a confused Dr. Talbot followed him in.

"Ted, I can't for the life of me imagine how that boy healed that serious a set of injuries that quickly, but he has. No signs of the incisions for surgery, not even a scar. The broken bones are mended and look solid enough to walk on. What happened to him?"

"Dr. Talbot, please believe me when I say I couldn't tell you. All I know is that something miraculous happened and the boy is alive. From the look of him, he's going to sleep for a while, but I'm going to stay here with him the whole time he's here. If you could, please arrange to have a cot brought in for me. In the meantime I need to call my wife about the situation here."

"All right Ted, but I want the explanation at some point that you aren't giving me. I didn't get to be the head of the ER without knowing when someone is holding out on me."



Beth Andrews was looking over a patients chart when her cell phone rang. Looking at it she realized the number was here in the hospital and quickly answered.

"Hello?"

"Beth, it's Ted. I need to talk to you about something serious and the sooner the better. I'm in the ER in one of the triage rooms, but I'll be moving to another room shortly. Can you come down here so we can talk for at least a few minutes? It's important or I wouldn't interrupt your shift."

"Well Ted, I have a surgery in 20 minutes so I can't be away long. They can't do open heart surgery without their Profusionist after all. I'll be right down."

"Love you Beth Andrews!"

"I love you too, you man of mysteries!"

As she ended the call, she stood and began to make her way down to the ER. Her job as a profusionist was a critical one. When surgeons do open heart surgery and have to stop the heart, she is the one who keeps the patient

alive via machines while the heart is worked on. Some of the patients were serious enough that it could not be put off, as was the case she had in about 20 minutes.

She left her office and rode down in the elevator wondering just exactly what was going on. She figured it had something to do with the case of the boy he had told her about, but couldn't imagine what.



Ted's cell phone rang and checking the number found it was the station calling.

"Andrews. What's going on?"

"Officer Andrews this is dispatch. I was just asked to call you and let you know that the parents of the boy have been found and that they were executed mob style. A full team has been sent over and the feds are now here so they've got a full team as well."

"Thanks for the update Dispatch. Keep me informed if you would?"

"Sure thing Officer Andrews. Take good care of the kid for all of us."



Beth Andrews arrived in the ER and Dr. Talbot immediately pointed her to one room with it's doors closed. She knocked and then went on in to her husband sitting in a chair beside a small boy in a hospital bed.

"Beth, this may take more than 20 minutes, so if you want to wait until after the surgery just say so."

"Is it serious enough for me to call for a replacement at the last minute?"

"I think it is, but that's a call only you can make."

"Let me make that call then. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Beth left the room, leaving Ted alone with his thoughts again. Even after seeing all that he had seen he couldn't imagine how it had happened. Why mermaids and mermen for goodness sake? Worse yet was how in the world was he going to tell his wife? Would she believe him, or would she want to go with him to meet them again? He just couldn't answer that himself.

He was checking Jakob's forehead for fever when Beth returned.

"I've managed to get a replacement for me and to take the rest of the day off, so I'm yours Ted. What's going on?"

"Remember how much we tried to have kids only to find out that I'm sterile?" asked Ted.

"Of course, how could I forget. I still think we should adopt a kid while we're still young enough to change that much, but you've always been hesitant about it. So what?"

"I think we may need to adopt this kid. He's been abused, beaten, sexually assaulted, and twice has almost been killed. He's a special kid and he's going to need a lot of love and care. Plus I just found out that his parents were murdered presumably by the same group that tried to kill him. I won't lie to you, it might be dangerous, but if we don't help this kid he's going to end up in a DFS foster home and you know how much trouble those places can bring. I don't know if I'm ready but I think that when he wakes up we should make the offer to him."

"Whoa. I see why you let me call for a replacement. This is a big decision and not one to make lightly. How messed up is he going to be do you think? Given all of that he might become a troublesome lad to deal with later on. But I will tell you the same thing I've told you before, I want kids and if this let's us have one then I'm all for it. How much trouble do you think we'll get from DFS and the courts?"

"That's one thing I've not yet worked out, but I plan to call DFS today to find out what's involved. The boy seems to trust me and I think being around someone he trusts will be a lot of help to the poor kid. I don't think the court system will be a big problem, but DFS is awfully bureaucratic. It may take a while for them to get the situation sorted out to their satisfaction. We might need to do something else though. We may have a need to move closer to the ocean. I know it will wipe out most of our savings, but trust me when I say the ocean is going to be a big part of his life."

"What do you mean the ocean will be a big part of his life? Ted it's not like you to beat around the bush. If you need to tell me something just say it. I would think you know this after all these years."

"This is something I'm not sure how you're going to handle until you see it for yourself - which won't happen for another 2 days. There's more to the story than I put in my report and some of it even I don't quite believe just yet."

"Okay, then tell me what you can so I at least have an idea. Moving close to the ocean ups the cost of real estate significantly. I think if there's a chance we're going to blow most of our savings on a move, I ought to know the whole story."

"All right then, here goes. The whole truth is that when I found Jakob here, he was being carried by a merboy who appeared to be around 11 or 12 years old. He saved him from out in the ocean and brought him to shore for

help. I brought him here to the ER and Dr. Talbot can tell you how much was wrong with him when he arrived. Later he disappeared and I once again found him in the same spot on the coast, but this time the merboy's parents were there as well as another older seeming merman. They did something to heal him - check his chart and you'll see what I mean. Jakob had surgery yesterday for some of the damage and today the incision marks are completely gone. Not even a scar. Dr. Talbot is giving me some grief about knowing what's going on, but I can't explain it to him. They'll think I'm crazy."

"Ted, if I didn't know you as well as I do I'd think you're feeding me a line of crap on this. But I do know you, and you wouldn't lie to me about something this important. Why did you say that two days would be needed before I could see for myself?"

"I'm supposed to meet them at the same spot again in two more days. Sunset of the third day. They're arranging for some way for me to communicate with them to keep them informed of his condition. It appears that their son and young Jakob here are mates and need regular contact. I'm not exactly sure of all the details but one thing they were clear about. After all the abuse he's suffered he needs someone who can accept and love him as he is and make sure that he gets the psychological help that he's going to need to recover from all that was done to him. I'm also considering something else. We've lived off of my salary for a long time now while putting yours in savings - yet you make significantly more than I do, and definitely enough for us to live on easily. If this goes through and we do get to adopt Jakob here, I want to leave the force and start a business of my own. That'll let me spend more time with Jakob while keeping him near the ocean. I'm thinking maybe a dive boat operation or something like that. What do you think?"

"Well you're right, we could afford to do it pretty easily and I have no problem with you leaving the force. I'll sleep easier at night if you do. But I don't know anything about running a dive boat business and neither do you. There's going to be some tough times too. What are you going to do during the winter? You know the tourists won't be around so a dive boat might be a financial burden in the winter."

"I hadn't thought of that. Any ideas?"

"Maybe it could also serve as a fishing trawler or lobster boat during the off season? I don't know enough about either to know if that's possible for a tourist boat or not."

"Well we can work the details out. For now the biggest question is going to come with the Division of Family Services and what they decide is best for Jakob. Oh, if he agrees to the adoption I want his help in picking a house. I think it will help him feel more like part of a family finally. It seems his birth family didn't take care of him at all."

"That's a shame really. I don't know how anybody could treat a child that way but at least he's alive. I just hope we're not getting in over our heads. I've read of problems with children being adopted at an older age. I'd hate to give him false hope."

"That's something we'll have to work out with DFS and Jakob when he wakes up. My best information right now is that he'll sleep for several days due to exhaustion from the healing. Oh and that reminds me, I've been put on guard duty for Jakob until we know he'll be safe. Unfortunately that means I need to be here day and night for at least a few days. I'll see if I can get someone I trust as a backup in case I'm needed but I'm not sure if there will be anyone to do the job. The department is all tied up right now with Internal Affairs because an officer tried to kill Jakob the first time he was in the hospital."

Beth walked over and slowly put her hand on Jakob's head. He was so deeply asleep he didn't even move. Ted noticed the affection in her eyes and knew that she would be a fantastic mother if just given the chance. She had a very strong maternal instinct and liked helping kids out.

"So when do you call DFS about Jakob?"

"As soon as I get a chance. If you can spot me watching Jakob here for a few minutes I'll make the call now. Just yell if something weird is going on and I'll take care of it. The door stays locked and only Dr. Talbot can come in aside from the two of us."

"All right. I'll watch Jakob while you go make that call."

Beth sat idly playing with Jakob's hair for about five minutes while Ted called DFS to see about the possibility of an adoption. She was thinking about how nice it would be to have a baby around the house, but Ted had fallen for this kid and frankly she couldn't stand to see him hurt anymore.

Ted returned and said "Well it looks like DFS will send over someone to talk to us today. They will want financial data and all that sort of thing. Can you go and have the bank get a financial statement ready for me while I stay here and watch Jakob?"

"Sure thing but it might take a while. Remember that we have a new account representative at personal banking and he may not know the ropes just yet."

"I'd forgotten about that. Well tell them you're in a hurry and need it quickly and maybe they'll cooperate. If not complain to the management and take it as far as you need to."

"Okay love, I'll see you shortly." and she hugged and kissed Ted as she left.

It was three hours later that the DFS person finally showed up. Beth had come by and dropped off financial statements from the bank and then left to run some errands. The lady from DFS looked to be in her 50s, had auburn hair with a slight amount of gray to it, and was definitely not what he expected.

“Mr. Andrews I presume? I’m Maybel Dreifus from DFS.”

“Thanks for coming so soon Ms. Dreifus, I’m Ted Andrews and lying on the bed here is Jakob Muellerson.”

“Will he be conscious soon so I can speak with him?”

“From what the doctors have told me they expect him to sleep for a few days to recover from all the injuries he’s sustained.”

“Very well, so you are interested in adopting this child? What makes you think you could be a good parent for him? Are you married?”

“Yes I’m married and while neither of us have children, we’ve wanted them badly for quite some time. I’m sterile and we have long considered adoption but put it off. On this particular case the boy trusts me and as a result I’ve been put on guard duty to make sure nothing untoward happens to him again. My wife and I spoke for some time earlier today about this. I have a financial statement here showing that we have ample resources to cover the cost of a new home and his medical expenses. The only thing we weren’t sure about is what is the proper procedure to adopt? We’ve not seriously investigated it before now.”

“Well some states make adoption into quite a painful process. We prefer to make things somewhat simpler as any home is better than a group home in my opinion. The first thing you will have to do is get yourself and your wife approved to be foster parents. Normally that is a lengthy process but we can, in some cases, speed things up. Since you’re an officer and your wife works at the hospital this is one case where we can rush the paperwork through relatively soon. Once you are registered foster parents you could legally foster the child for a year. At the end of that year we would interview the child and you and your wife to make sure things are going well. If they are going well then you would have the choice of pursuing adoption at that point. From that point on it’s just a matter of scheduling a hearing and some minor red tape.”

“What about any biological family he might still have? How is that going to affect the adoption?”

“That has the potential to complicate things to a great degree. If there is an extended family and they decide to pursue adoption themselves the judge will go with them. In that case the only way to pursue it is to talk the family into letting you adopt him. Keep in mind that during the foster period or the first three years of adoption that the extended family can change their minds and pursue it. Once the child reaches 14 they can have some say in where they go, but in this case that won’t matter. He won’t turn 14 until the extended time period is up anyway.”

“Right now our current home is too small to house a child for an extended period. My plans are, if Jakob agrees, to get him to help us hunt for a house. We can setup a tent for him in the living room in the meantime and make that into a fort for a bedroom temporarily. Do you think that will be a problem? We plan to find a house on the coast and close quickly on it and as you can see from the financial statement we can afford to do so.”

“That’s a consideration that will have to be made. How long do you expect it to take to close on a house?”

“My wife is out looking around right now I’d bet, but the final choice would be up to Jakob here. Since we’re paying by cashiers check there won’t be any hassle with closing loans or anything so I don’t foresee any reason why we couldn’t be moved in within a month at the most after choosing a place.”

“What about the media coverage of the missing boy. I fear that is going to cause a problem for him no matter what is decided. Do you have any thoughts on how to handle that?”

“Honestly I’ve been considering that and I think the best bet would be to move to a different school district so the kids won’t know him. I have a feeling he didn’t have many friends so that won’t be as much of an issue. In time the media will forget about him and he will be able to live as normal a life as he chooses.”

“Well officially I can’t tell you that you have a good chance at this, so I’ll just say that I hope it works out for you,” she said with a wink and small smile as she left.



After getting the bank statement for the DFS people, Beth Andrews decided it was time to look around town for a house. Ted has said it needed to be near the ocean and to be honest, that property was dreadfully expensive but she liked the idea herself. It’s not like they couldn’t afford it. She was surprised when the bank statement showed they had saved over \$4 million in ten short years just by living on her husbands pay.

Her first stop was to check with a realtor she knew, but unfortunately they didn’t have any property listings that were on the shore right now.

Her next step was to drive along the coast and see if anything was for sale. She drove for about an hour without luck, then came upon an old castle looking structure. It was made with honest to goodness stone and sat high on a cliff overlooking the ocean some 40 feet below. It looked as if it had been taken good care of, but was uncertain about the amenities it would offer. She wrote down the address as a potential and continued her drive.

Two hours later she had amassed a list of 7 pieces of property that were either for sale or looked like the owner might be willing to sell. Some were simply empty lots along the coast and those seemed to offer the best deal.

She was thinking it was a good thing Ted had asked her if she thought she should get a sub for the surgery today. With all this going on her mind was still in a whirlwind and that's not a situation to be in when someone's life depends on your steadiness and skills.

As she returned to their little two bedroom home, she noticed the front door sitting open. Rather than take chances she called 911 to report a break-in and then called Ted to let him know about it. She remained in the car with the engine running until the police arrived to check it out.

When the police finally arrived there were two officers. They insisted that she stay in the car as they entered and checked out the place to make sure nobody was still there.

Some fifteen minutes later, one of the officers returned and told her it was safe but that she should avoid the kitchen for now. They needed to treat it as a crime scene because their cat had been beheaded and left in the sink to be found.

Once the police radioed in, there was no shortage of people going through her home. The kitchen was off limits but the rest of the home seemed fine. Nothing was damaged or anything aside from the back door which had been broken in.

As she went into their bedroom to change clothes, she noticed something the police had missed in their cursory search. The cats head had been left in the middle of their bedspread. She yelled for one of the officers who came and asked her to step outside so they could check the house more thoroughly.

In the end all that had been done was the break-in and killing of the cat. Nothing was missing or destroyed. The police believed it was due to the case Ted was working on, despite the fact that he was just on guard duty now and the investigation was being handled by a group of local police and FBI working together. As she was mulling things over, the FBI people arrived and asked her if she could stay in a hotel or somewhere else for a few days. They needed to be very thorough in the search of the house as any fingerprints or footprints could help lead to an arrest.

She agreed and drove back to the hospital. She could crash on the couch in her office. Ted wouldn't be a problem since he had a cot in Jakob's room for now. That should suffice until the police were done with their house.



Somewhere across town, two nondescript men were busy pouring gasoline around the inside of a two story white house. They were extremely thorough, soaking everything on both floors heavily. As they left one left a small device with a timer on the counter. Ten minutes later the two men were safely away when the house exploded and proceeded to burn wildly.

Chapter 5

Time had passed quickly for Ted. Jakob still only rarely muttered or moved but that was a good sign. Dr. Talbot said his vitals were improving and he could be awake as early as late the following day.

Ted had been worried about Beth after hearing what was done to their cat, but she handled it like a pro and holed up in a coworkers office so that her name wasn't obviously associated with where she was sleeping nights. It had been two days since the break-in at the house and yet nothing had been found. Some fingerprints on the back door but no match to any known offender. The ground had been too hard and dry to leave much in the way of footprints so no luck there either.

Tonight he was supposed to meet with Pat and Linda at the coast. Dr. Talbot had offered to watch over Jakob until he returned, so he and Beth were free to go meet them.

"So what did you find out about houses, Beth?" asked Ted.

"Found a few empty lots and an old castle that looks promising but no idea yet if the owner will be willing to sell or for how much. I've been trying to contact the owner but haven't had a return call yet."

"An old castle? Sounds romantic." said Ted with a lascivious grin.

"Oh cut that out, at least while you're driving. The castle looks good but there's no telling what kind of amenities are installed. I flat out refuse to use an outhouse in my home."

"That would get cold in the winter time. What about the empty lots? Any of them look good?"

"Well there were three lots. One is way overpriced. The other two are decent enough but they sit pretty low and I'd be afraid of flooding during storms."

"So that leaves them out. We'll have to go by and see the owner of the castle tomorrow and see what we can work out."

"Sounds good to me. What did Dr. Talbot think about Jakob's condition? Will he be waking soon and if so how long before he can go home with us?"

"Dr. Talbot said he will probably wake up tomorrow late and that his vitals are improving constantly. Going home will be more problematic now that we've had that break-in at home. We may have to swing a hotel for a month or so unless we get truly lucky with a house soon."

"Well we can do a hotel suite. That would give us at least two bedrooms and a shared living room with small kitchen. I'm sure there's a local hotel chain we could depend on for security."

"Yeah, that would work out. Maybe you could check into that tomorrow. Ask them for pricing for a month at a time."

"I'll do that. So far away is this place we're going? Will we be there soon? What should I expect?"

"It's about four miles from the hospital by air, but it's a bit farther in all this traffic. Should have remembered that today is Friday so all the late night parties are going strong. We're going to the north end of the public swimming beach. There's some caves up there by the hills that are fairly isolated. Might have to chase a party out if the college students are there again though."

"You think there will be people swimming at this time of year? Are they crazy or something?"

"Oh there will be a few swimmers, mostly tourists, but for the most part I expect it to be fairly quiet. If we're lucky there won't be anyone there at all."

They drove another few minutes and pulled into a parking spot in an otherwise empty parking lot.

"I guess we're going to be in luck. No cars usually means no tourists either."

As they got out of the car and started walking, Beth asked Ted "So what do I expect here? Are they really half human and half fish?"

"Well, the last time I saw them they looked full human, naked but human, and except for the fact that the cold didn't bother them I'd say they were human otherwise. They definitely spoke English well enough and their son at

least understands it. Speaking of which, their son apparently is too young to take human form. Something about a bonding that I didn't really understand. I guess we'll know in a few minutes."

They arrived at the caves just as the sun was starting to set. They sat down together on a rock and waited in silence enjoying just being together.

A few minutes later their reverie was interrupted by the sound of splashing and looking into the water they saw three figures swimming towards them. The two adults slipped out of the water, fully human appearing in every way. Their son, however, stayed in the water and one could easily tell he was a merboy.

"Pat, Linda, this is my wife Beth. Beth, these are Pat, Linda, and Star is there in the water."

Linda took Beth's hand, shook it firmly, and said "It's nice to meet you. I hope you have good word about our son's mate?"

Ted replied, "Indeed we do. Right now he is sleeping soundly and the doctor taking care of him expects him to awaken sometime late tomorrow. There is no telling how he's going to be feeling yet, so he might be in the hospital for an extra day or two just to make sure he's okay."

"This means there is good news all around then. I have spoken to the elders and they have agreed to let you have a pearl. It's a special living organism that bonds to a living host. It will link you with me so that in time of need you could make me aware of your need. The bonding process will be painful but if you are willing it may be helpful to have a way to contact us."

Ted thought for a moment and then replied, "I'm willing. If these two young men are to be together then we have to make sure we can contact each other. We have already discussed adopting Jakob with the authorities and while it will take time, I believe it will work out for the best. We're also looking for a new home on the coast so that Jakob and Star can spend time together more easily."

Pat looked around and then said, "Ok Ted. Please hold out your left arm. This will be painful but will bring no long term harm to you."

Ted held out his arm as Pat removed a large pearl from a small pouch hanging around his neck. He then placed the pearl on Ted's arm. It glowed briefly and then began to dig into his arm. As it dug, a tattoo appeared on his arm. It was emerald green and gold and in the form of a mermaid with the pearl remaining visible as a hair ornament.

Ted managed not to scream as the pearl dug in, but it was a close thing. It was pure agony for a few minutes and then the pain slowly receded.

As he recovered Beth asked, "Is he okay? Ted are you okay?"

Ted spasmed a few more times and then replied, "I'm okay, it's just pain and it's already going away."

Pat then said, "In a few minutes, when you've had more time to recover, we will complete the bonding. That won't hurt at all, it's a simple matter of touching the pearl in your arm to the one embedded in my arm." With that he showed that he had a similar tattoo on his left arm.

Ted recovered and then offered his arm to Pat, who in response touched their arms. There was a small shock that ran through both of them and the tattoos took on an iridescent shimmer that they lacked before.

Pat said, "Now that they are bonded together we will be able to locate each other at need and in times of great stress, call for help through the bond. It's similar to what the nexus does for us naturally save that it does nothing more than communication. We've used them for surface dwellers a few times in my lifetime. You should be honored that you were deemed important enough to gain one."

"I am honored and I hope that this will make the job of protecting those we love simpler. At least we can stay in touch this way."

At that point Star perked up and said something sounding of chirps and whistles.

Linda said, "Star wants to know how soon after Jakob is released from the hospital he can come and visit us here? They do need to spend time together and get to know each other after all."

"Well, according to what Dr. Talbot has said he should be in good health once he wakes up. I don't see any reason we couldn't bring him down here tomorrow evening, providing the doctors approve it and we keep him warm enough."

"We'll also have to get him some clothing. A hospital gown simply won't do. I'll do some shopping for him tomorrow and see what I can come up with," inserted Beth.

"On that note we had better get back to the hospital. Dr. Talbot can't watch him for very long and someone needs to be with him."

Beth watched in awe as both parents leaped into the water and changed form. Their forms were beautiful and truly adapted for an aquatic environment.

As they walked back to the car Ted asked, "So what did you think of them?"

"They're amazing people. I was surprised they were so fluent in English though. It makes me wonder if they spent time here posing as human."

"I've wondered that as well. They even have the local accent down so it must have been close enough to pick that up. It's something to ask them when we see them next."

"No question about it though. They're merpeople, or whatever the proper term is. I was skeptical but you were right love. Sorry I doubted you."

"Don't worry about it love. I doubted it myself after the first time I met them, but things kept popping up that I couldn't explain any other way."

"Like what?"

"Well for starters, Star brought Jakob to me in the ocean. A normal person would have had hypothermia from the cold water at this time of year, but he had nothing but his tail on. Another odd thing that stands out is how did he happen to be in the right area to save Jakob? That seems to be stretching coincidence, wouldn't you say? Then the thing that finally convinced me was when Jakob just disappeared from the hospital. He didn't walk out, or if he did none of the security cameras saw it. He just vanished and the nurse that was on duty said that he glowed for a moment and then was gone. The final thing that convinced me I wasn't imagining things was finding Jakob with Star yet again at the same location. Add all of those things up and you get one basketful of odd that I can't think of another way to explain. Of course, now we also have this tattoo to explain."

"I can see why you would doubt it. It's all so strange. What's the link between Jakob and Star? Why do they keep meeting each other in emergencies?"

"Star's parents said that they were chosen as perfect mates for each other by something called the *nexus* or something like that. No clue what it is or what that means, but they did imply that it would make them closer than most couples."

"But how did it know that Jakob would turn out gay? I mean he's only eight and some change. Far too early for sexual orientation to become a factor. Also, are you sure you're okay with having a gay son?"

"Well, as for how it knew I have no idea, but I don't care if he's straight, gay, or into animals as long as he's happy and healthy."

Beth laughed at that and then said, "Well at least he will have someone to care for him that won't mind if he's gay or not. That will make his life somewhat easier, although I bet school will still be abominable to him."

"That's something else we need to discuss. We need to find a good school to send him to that's close by. You might ask your realtor friend if she knows what school district the coastal properties are in. Given how far out it is we might have to transport him to and from school."

"Have you talked to your boss yet to see about possibly leaving the force after this is all done with? I know they need you, but I think you have the priorities right. Jakob needs a compassionate and understanding father figure more than they need you."

"I've not spoken to anyone about it yet. I wanted to make sure the foster care and adoption thing went through before I made that decision. Once I talk to them about it they'll start looking for a replacement and might just let me go after the new guy is trained."

"What's the next step in starting the foster care and adoption thing?"

"Well according to the nice lady from DFS all we really have to do is fill out some paperwork and let them come inspect our home. From what I understand they're making that more of a formality than anything serious given the nature of what's been going on lately. I left the paperwork at the hospital so we can do that when we get there. You hungry?"

"Not really yet, but we can stop and grab some fast food on the way in if you are. It's got to be better than the hospital food."

A quick turn and they went through a local burger chain's drive through lane. Fifteen minutes later they were at the hospital and eating, while a thankful Dr. Talbot went back to his normal routine.

The paperwork was far more substantial than the DFS lady had implied. Much of it was permission forms allowing DFS to do a full background check. Authorization for blood work to check for drugs, and so on. They spent nearly three hours filling out forms. By the time they were done they were glad they had stopped for food.

It was now almost 8pm and Jakob was moving around restlessly in bed. Ted went over and straightened his hair a bit. At the first touch he calmed down and fell deeper into sleep.

"Is it strange for that to happen?" he asked his wife.

"Is what strange?"

"When I touch him he calms down and goes into a deeper sleep."

"I really don't know if that's normal or not, but it does seem odd. I'll ask friends who have kids and see what I can find out."

"Good. Maybe you could take this paperwork to the DFS office tomorrow for me. I want to get this going as soon as possible. If you would, ask them to have the blood work done here at the hospital so they can do mine while I'm watching Jakob."

“That won’t be a problem since tomorrow is my day off, but I have a surgery the following day so I won’t be able to run any errands that day. After that I’m free for the weekend save a short shift in the ER on Saturday night.”

“Do you think you could stop by our insurance agent and talk to them about the house tomorrow? Normally I’d do all of this, but my job is to stay here and guard Jakob and I can’t do other things and guard him at the same time.”

“I’ve already spoken to the insurance agent and he said that they would cover the back door plus anything the police damage during the investigation. On a more important note, who did this and why our house? Is it a random vandalism or is this related to Jakob here?”

“I’ve not talked to the chief yet, so I don’t know the whole story, but I’ve got an itch telling me that it’s related to Jakob here. Only it sounds like whoever did it isn’t getting very good information since I’m not a part of the investigation at all.”

“Okay love. I’m going back to the office and get some sleep. See you in the morning for breakfast.”

“Good night Beth.”



Meanwhile, at the police station things were starting to come together on the investigation into the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Muellerson and the assault on Jakob. The FBI had files on related incidents around the eastern seaboard and believed this was related to a child prostitution and porn ring. Jakob was just one of a long string of victims who had usually been found dead, along with their parents. They had managed to connect the modus operandi of the culprit here with three other killings in the state, all because of the decapitated bodies of the victims pets.

There was also an investigation into a suspicious house fire that the FBI believed was a filming location. The FBI had brought in a forensics team to check out what was left of the house, but their was little chance for a significant find with a fire that large.

Interviews with the officer who had tried to kill Jakob led to nothing more than a request for his lawyer and no further information was forthcoming on that front.

One of the Andrews’ neighbors, upon questioning, had reported seeing a tall man in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans at the back door of the house, but unfortunately she didn’t get a look at his face.

Chapter 6

Breakfast had been good that morning, but then he always enjoyed having breakfast with Beth, rare event that it was. It somehow seemed special and today was no exception. Their work schedules conflicted so often that they frequently only saw each other for one meal a day. With any luck that would soon be changing for the better. But that all depended on what Jakob thought of the matter.

About an hour after Beth left, Dr. Talbot knocked on the door. Ted let him in with a question, "So any idea what time today he'll wake up?"

"If I were to guess I'd say this afternoon, but there is no sure fire way to tell. His EEG shows that he's in a normal albeit heavy sleep. I'm just going to remove the IV from his arm. With that gone hunger or thirst should wake him in a bit. I'll also remote the catheter so that having to use the bathroom might wake him up as well."

Dr. Talbot removed the IV and the catheter calmly and swiftly without Jakob even moving.

As he was leaving, Dr. Talbot asked Ted, "Do you know when Beth is due back? She has a surgery consult this afternoon and the surgeon really needs her expertise on this one."

"I'm not completely sure, but I think she was planning to be back here by lunch time. She's out running some errands right now. Would you like me to have her find you when she arrives? Or better yet, I can call her and have her pickup some lunch for all of us and you can join us for lunch."

"That sounds wonderful. Please do call her and I'll meet you here at noon."

"Quick question doc. Is it normal for a child his age to go into a deeper sleep when someone touches them? I've noticed it a few times now that he'll be fidgeting in his sleep and when I go touch his arm he calms down."

"From my experience there is no such thing as 'normal' for any child. They're all different. But yes, I have seen children who were that way before. It's like the touch helps calm them down or something."

Lunch time rolled around and Beth returned carrying numerous bags of things, some of which were takeout from a local Italian eatery. They called Dr. Talbot and he joined them for a nice light lunch.

"So Dr. Talbot, how is your day going so far?"

"Not too bad Beth. No big emergencies yet today, just the usual people coming in for the flu and whatnot. Before I forget, you're needed for a surgery consult at 2:00 this afternoon. It seems the surgery for tomorrow may have a few complications you need to know about in advance."

"Okay, that sounds rather ominous, but I'll be glad to go. Maybe it won't be as serious as it sounds. I always dread the really lengthy surgeries. Anything beyond six hours is torture for everyone involved."

"So how's Jakob doing today?"

"So far he's quietly sleeping, but he's been squirming around more so I suspect he'll awaken before too long," replied Ted.

"Well I hope he does. I picked up three sizes of each of the clothing I bought for him just in case one doesn't fit. Small, Medium, and Large for children. There's sweatpants, t-shirts, shoes, socks, and underwear. I had to guess on the shoe size so they may be too big or too small."

"I'm sure it will work out just fine Beth. Thanks for doing that for him."

"Oh it's no problem. I also talked to Penny at the realtor's office. She says she might have a property available for us to check out. It's right on the coast but it's in town so it might be a touch more expensive. It's something to look at anyway."

Dr. Talbot interjected, "You're looking for a new home are you? What are you looking for, I know a few people who would be willing to sell for the right offer."

"Well, we're looking for something on the coast with good access to the Atlantic and in a decent school district."

"So why the interest in a house?" asked Dr. Talbot.

Ted replied, "We're thinking of adopting Jakob here, provided he's willing. Since our current home wouldn't be large enough we're looking to buy. Since Jakob here seems to have an affinity for the ocean I thought it might be a good thing to look for."

"Would you be interested in a lot without a home on it?"

"As long as it's coastal that would be workable. Building a home takes time but it would be what we wanted then."

"Well an old card playing buddy of mine is a general contractor and he has some acreage he's been wanting to sell. You might be able to get a deal on the land plus him building the house for you. I'll call him this evening and see what he has to offer."

As they continued to talk about houses they slowly became aware that they were being watched. Dr. Talbot looked over and saw Jakob laying there with his eyes open and looking around.

"Well hello Jakob! I'm Dr. Talbot and these two kind people are Ted and Beth Andrews. How do you feel?"

A very quiet voice said, "Can I have something to eat and maybe use the bathroom?"

"Of course you can Jakob! Let me do one quick test to make sure you don't have a concussion first. Look right at me and open your eyes as wide as you can." Jakob complied as Dr. Talbot shined a pen light into his eyes.

"Looks good to me. If you wish to use the bathroom it's that door right there, and there is no need to worry, nobody here will hurt you in any way."

Jakob started to get up then realized he was in a hospital gown that hid nothing. Being embarrassed he sat there blushing.

"Oh goodness look at that blush. Don't worry Jakob we'll promise not to look if that makes it easier. Once you're done in the bathroom we have some clothes for you to try on," said Beth.

Everybody turned their heads and Jakob almost ran for the bathroom. A few minutes later he returned and making sure he was facing them asked in that same quiet voice, "Where are the clothes for me to try on?"

Beth, without turning around, said "Check out the gray bags on the floor. All of them are clothes and at least one of most of them should fit you. I didn't know what size you are so I bought three of everything."

"Thank you," Jakob almost whispered before dashing back into the bathroom.

After a short while, Jakob returned clad in bright blue sweatpants, a black t-shirt, and shoes and socks. He looked much more self-confident when dressed but was unsure what was going on.

Ted explained, "Jakob, at least I assume your name is Jakob?"

A small shake of his head up and down was reassuring to them all.

"Well Jakob, you were hurt very badly and dumped in the ocean. I managed to find you on the beach and brought you here to the hospital. You've been here for four days now and have spent most of it asleep. Before we do all of the questions about what happened, I want to make sure you're completely okay. Do you hurt anywhere?"

Jakob shook his head side to side, indicating that he didn't hurt.

"I'm very glad to hear that Jakob. We were all worried about you. You said you're hungry? Do you like Italian food Jakob?"

Once again Jakob answered with a nod of his head and a barely audible, "Yes."

Ted quickly opened another carryout box of food and brought it and some silverware over to the bed where Jakob was sitting. He handed them to him and went to sit back down.

"Jakob, while you eat Dr. Talbot and I are going to step out into the hall to talk for a few minutes. I don't want to disturb your meal. Beth will keep you company okay?"

He nodded his head while chewing a mouthful of food and just kept on eating.

Ted and Dr. Talbot stepped outside the room to talk.

"Doc, is there a child psychiatrist around that you would recommend? I fear that after what he's gone through he's going to need some help dealing with all of it. I'm still not sure how to break it to him that his parents are gone but it has to be done. I just don't want to hurt him."

"There are two really good ones here at the hospital in the psychiatric ward. I can get you their cards and set things up. In the meantime, do you plan to keep Jakob here or take him elsewhere? I only ask because we really need the room here."

"I think we will take him to a hotel and we will stay with him there. It'll be safer than here with less people around all the time, especially considering what someone did to our house."

"I agree, and I was sorry to hear about your cat."

"When can we check him out?" asked Ted.

"I'll start the paperwork now. You talk to him, let him know what has happened, and I'll have the discharge done in about an hour."

"Thanks Doc," said Ted as he reentered the room.

He nodded at his wife as he walked in, then saw that Jakob was still eating.

"Might not want to eat all of that Jakob, you've been out long enough that it might make you sick later, but the choice is yours to make," he said in the kindest voice he had.

Jakob nodded and kept eating for a little while, then finally stopped and said, "Thank you."

"Jakob, while you eat I'm going to go over a few things you need to know. I'll warn you up front that some of them are very sad and some aren't. I feel it's always best to know what's going on, even if it's bad, so you can make the best choices you can. Is that okay with you?"

He nodded his head and said, "Uh huh."

"Okay, here we go then. So far as we can tell there have been two attempts to kill you. One that left you in the ocean, and another while you were unconscious here in the hospital. Shortly after the attempt here in the hospital, I was assigned to guard you from harm until the culprits are behind bars. I was assigned, in part, because I was the one who found you and brought you and also because I was too concerned about you to be very good at the investigation side of things."

"Do you remember anything that happened while you were in the ocean? A face or anything of someone who helped you? Do you remember Star?"

Upon hearing the name, Jakob stopped eating and just looked at Ted and said, "That was real?"

"Yes, it was. I've met Star and his parents myself and they seem to be really kind people. In fact it was because of you that I got this tattoo. It lets me contact them so the two of you can meet." He rolled up the sleeve of his shirt to show Jakob the tattoo with the pearl.

"Now here's the part that will get confusing. Star and his family have asked that we not reveal their existence to anyone else. So when I spoke to Dr. Talbot earlier and I said that I found you, that was partly a lie. Star actually found you and brought you to me for help. We can't mention Star and his family to anyone, not even the police. Do you understand that?"

Jakob's eyes were alert and he had a small smile on his face. He said, once again in the subdued voice, "Yes."

"Okay then. That's the good news. You have someone who cares for you in Star. I think he'll be a wonderful friend and maybe more than that someday. In the meantime I have some bad news. When the attempt on your life here at the hospital failed, whoever tried to kill you decided to take their anger out on your family. Your mother and father were both found murdered in the house."

Ted expected crying or maybe hysterics from the child, but instead looked more steady. Ted asked, "Are you going to be okay Jakob? I know this is hard to hear, but you have to know the whole truth."

"I'm okay," replied Jakob.

"Okay then, here's the last bit of news relevant to this discussion. Beth and I have talked to the Division of Family Services. Normally you would be released to a foster home as soon as you got out of the hospital. They have made an exception for you and sped up our application to become a foster family. What I'm saying is that I'm already protecting you, so why don't you come live with us for a while and see how you like it? I won't lie to you, our house is in a bit of a mess right now so we will be staying in a hotel for a month or two while we shop for a bigger house. If you are interested in staying with us, and maybe having us adopt you, you get to help choose the house we live in - including where your bedroom is located and all that."

Jakob's smile got a bit larger and he said the first full sentence they had heard from him. "I hated my family. They knew what was going on and didn't stop it. I think I would like living with you."

"Okay then, that's settled. You'll come home with us - or at least to the hotel that passes for home right now. We'll start house hunting tomorrow, okay?"

"Cool."

"Also, just so you know, it was your teacher Mrs. Choate that helped us figure out who you are. I'll contact her and make arrangements for you to miss a few days of school. You need some time to adjust to all these changes, plus we'll need time to get to know each other and to get you some clothing and things for school. We can't get any of your stuff from your room until the FBI finishes their investigation, ok?"

Jakob nodded his head and asked "When can I meet Star? I want to thank him."

"Well the plan is that as soon as you're released, we'll go to the beach and see if they're there yet. If not I'll see if I can make this tattoo work."

It was maybe 20 minutes later when Dr. Talbot arrived. "I've some paperwork here that will let me release you to Officer Andrews care. If you have any pain, headaches, or nausea please don't hesitate to come back and we'll check you over."

Ted took the paperwork, signed where necessary, and handed it back to Dr. Talbot.

"Okay then, that's all taken care of, so why don't we head down to the car and see what's going on at the beach."

The car ride to the beach was rather quiet. Jakob seemed to be a pretty quiet kid, an understandable situation given what he had heard of the father. It took ten minutes to reach the beach, and as hoped it was nearly deserted. The ocean was simply too cold to swim in at this time of year.

They made the short hike up to the northern end of the beach and then carefully made their way down to the caves. A group of local college students were there having a party which Ted had to break up and tell them to move along.

When all was clear and quiet, they found a comfortable spot to sit down and wait.

Their patience was rewarded about ten minutes later as three ripples broke the surface. Two of them came out of the water as naked humans while Star had to remain water bound, a situation he couldn't wait to remedy.

"Jakob, these two people are Star's parents, Pat and Linda. Star, as you might guess, is the young person still in the water. Why don't the two of you sit and talk while the rest of us do the same?"

Jakob moved closer to the water and found an almost dry spot to sit on. Star moved closer and waited for Jakob to say something.

"Oh, by the way, Star can't speak English yet but he understands it very well. I think you two can work out a system to communicate at least the basics," interjected Ted.

Jakob looked closer at Star's face and realized with a start that it was the same face he saw in his dreams. The face associated with the green light and the music and complete peace. He reached out his hand and Star grabbed it like it was a lifeline. When their hands touched they both gained a soft nimbus of light around them for a moment, but it winked out almost as soon as it started. They spent several minutes just staring at each other before Star finally pantomimed "Hello" to him.

"Hi," said Jakob in very quiet voice filled with wonder.

The next thing either knew Ted was interrupting a hug that had apparently been going on for some time. As he came closer Ted said, "Guys, I know you care for each other but it's been almost two hours now. Jakob's legs are soaked and we need to find a motel for the night still. How about we try to get a schedule together and meet regularly. It's a shame you can't change form yet Star. Then we could do some stuff that all of could attend easily."

Star said something and his mother translated for him, "Do we have to go now? I know it's late and there are things to do, but we need time together to get to know each other."

"Well, honestly we have nothing super pressing, but Jakob is wet and in this weather that could make him sick - especially after all that's been done to him. We don't want him in the hospital again," replied Beth.

"How about this. We will stop and get Jakob some more appropriate clothing tomorrow and try to meet back here again tomorrow night?" asked Ted.

Star once again said something and this time his father cut in. "No Star, he can't stay here just yet. Not until your ages align. We still have a few years before either of you can stay the night."

"What about a swimming pool? Does it have to be salt water? Could he manage that if Jakob were already there?"

"Our young can survive in either fresh or saltwater so that's no problem and it might just solve our quandary here. Find a spot with a private pool that is heated and Jakob and Star can spend more time together."

Beth interrupted the conversation, "Wait, isn't there that resort on the south side of town that has private pools? I know they're pricey, but this is off season so we might get a deal, especially for a month."

"Good idea Beth! Let's go check it out tonight. If all works out you two might get together in a pool as soon as tomorrow."

Everyone said their goodbyes quickly except Star and Jakob who took the time for another long hug. As he turned to leave Jakob said, "I'll see you again soon, okay?"

Chapter 7

It had taken a great deal of haggling on his part, but Ted was fairly proud of the deal he had gotten on a suite with a private pool. It would take yet another chunk out of their savings, but if it kept Jakob safe then it was worth it.

Jakob was almost beside himself at the size of his room. Of course having several video game systems and a large screen tv didn't hurt matters much either. He had spent part of the night playing with the system. He wasn't able to use the pool yet as they had just rechlorinated it and it was still far too strong to swim in but they were promised it would be cleared up by the next evening.

The night had been peaceful, aside from a few nightmares on Jakob's part which were quickly calmed in turn by Ted or Beth.

Ted called and checked in with the station. Nothing new had been found yet, but their own home had been broken into and several things were obviously missing or broken. He also found out that the folks from the FBI would be paying him back for the hotel room - which got a snicker out of Ted. He hadn't told them where he was or how long he would be here.

"Beth, we need to go by the house. It seems someone else broke in and vandalized the place and probably stole some stuff too. I bet our laptops are gone anyway."

"Oh great, that's just what we need right now. Well, it's just that much less we would have to move anyway. So Jakob, want to go shopping for clothes first and then maybe look at some houses with us?"

Jakob was shocked to be included in such a big decision but quickly answered, "Sure. That sounds like it would be fun."

The shopping trip took longer than any of them expected. They had to find sizes that fit, and he needed some decent school clothes as well. Jakob was a bit upset by that but as soon as the department gave the word, he would be going back to school again although at a different school than before. In the end they were glad they had three people to carry the various bags of clothing, shoes, and the like.

The loading of clothing into the car was interrupted by Ted's phone ringing.

"Hello?"

"Hi Ted, this is Dr. Talbot. Remember I told you about my friend in construction that might have some property for sale? Well it turns out he does have one piece of land. Nobody wants it because of it's location but it's big enough that a great house could be built on it."

"What's the problem with the location?" asked Ted.

"Well, it's like this. The land sits on a cliff overlooking the sea. These days people only want property that they can step out their back door and walk onto the beach. This one sets about 40 feet above the ocean. On the plus side it's solid rock and never floods. Oh yeah, the road to the place needs some repair work. The place has been abandoned for about 40 years. There was an old house on it, but it burnt down about 30 years ago and was never rebuilt."

"Okay, can you give me directions so we can check it out? If it looks okay I'd like to talk to this friend of yours about a deal."

Dr. Talbot gave directions to an area north of town along the cliffs. Ted could see why he mentioned the road being a problem, it was a real nightmare to drive on and was more potholes than road.

The site itself was a slab of bare rock that ran to a cliff side edge. The view of the ocean was fairly spectacular from this height.

"Well folks, what do you think? If the price is right we could build a really nice home here. Could even build a pool if someone special asked really nicely." Ted let out a big laugh as Jakob looked stunned.

"I'm sorry Jakob, I didn't want to make you uncomfortable. I was trying to be funny by implying that of course we're going to have a pool." Ted approached Jakob and offered a hug, which Jakob gladly accepted.

“So, what do you think Beth? Would this work with some fixing of the road?”

“It certainly has the most spectacular view of anything I’ve ever seen. We should build a nice deck on the back so we can sit out and watch the ocean.”

“What do you think Jakob, are you up for helping design a new house for us to live in?” asked Ted.

Jakob was quiet for a long time, then very quietly said “Really?”

“Yes, really. You get to help. As I told you at the hospital we’re your foster family, and with time I hope that you will allow us to adopt you as our own son. Given all that, we might as well let you be a part of the family from the start, right?”

Jakob started to cry and mumbled a meager “Yeah.”

Beth and Ted both comforted him with a big bear hug. He choked out, “I wasn’t allowed to help with anything at my old home. I was always a problem and in the way. I never got to do anything.” and then he broke into tears again. It took a while, but finally Jakob calmed down a bit and they broke the three way hug.

“Feeling better now Jakob?” asked Beth.

“Yes, and thank you.”

At almost the exact same time Ted and Beth held out a hand to him. As they walked away a somewhat upset boy walked hand in hand with what he hoped would be his new family.

That night they stayed in the resort suite and marveled at the luxury of it. King sized beds with satin sheets, a fully stocked refrigerator and the whole bit.

“Well it’s good to know we’re getting good service considering what we’re paying for this place,” said Beth around a laugh.

“No complaints here. How about you Jakob, you like your room?”

“Yeah! It’s huge and has it’s own tv set!” replied Jakob

During the night Jakob still had nightmares, some bad enough that he finally gave up and came in to sleep with Ted and Beth. It was an odd feeling for them, but he certainly slept better that way.

The next morning, Ted gave Dr. Talbot’s friend a call to begin discussing the situation with the property. In the meantime, Beth woke Jakob up to see about breakfast.

“Wake up sleepyhead,” said Beth.

Jakob sort of rolled to one side and snored lightly, so she gently touched his head and said “Jakob, wake up honey.”

It took a few more tries before Jakob finally opened his eyes and gave a slightly slurred “Good morning.”

“What do you want for breakfast? It looks like we have enough stuff here to cook about anything.”

“Pancakes? I love pancakes. Especially with peanut butter.”

“Let’s go see what we have. I’m pretty sure I saw everything to make pancakes, and I know we have peanut butter and syrup.”

A few minutes later Jakob had dressed and the two of them went to make some pancakes. The cupboard was well stocked with anything a family might need, including one of those baking mixes that make pancakes really easy. As Beth began making pancakes Jakob sat and watched her, and eventually had the nerve to ask “Can I help?”

“Of course you can Jakob! I’m sorry, I didn’t even think to ask. Here, can you stir this for me while I start getting the pan hot?”

Jakob took over stirring the batter while Beth prepped the stove and pan. When they started cooking Jakob was happy to get to turn them over. They came out a little lopsided and not looking exactly like pancakes, but the look on Jakob’s face made it all worthwhile.

As Ted reentered the room, Jakob called out “Pancakes!”

“Good! I was just ready to eat something before giving you both some really good news.”

Breakfast was a quiet event as everybody dug into the packages with gusto.

After the meal was over and while Beth was clearing the dishes away, Ted asked “Jakob, how would you like to help design our own house? That is, if you think you might be interested in living with us?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never designed a house before, but I’m willing to try. You’re the nicest people I’ve met so yes I want to live with you.”

“Good! I’m so glad you like us Jakob. I hope we can show you that we love you and will help you any way that we can. Now, today we have something difficult to do. We need to take you by the police station so you can tell one of my friends there what happened to you. Don’t worry we’ll be right there with you the whole time. Nobody will hurt you, that I promise.”

“I’m scared,” said Jakob. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I think I understand Jakob. I’ve never had anything like that happen to me, but remember this. Beth and I will be there for you, we can stop anytime you want for a break, and they really need any information you have to catch the people that did this. From what I was told when I checked in with the station, the FBI thinks this group

has been doing this to other children for years. You have a chance to help put an end to that. But in the end the decision is yours to make. They won't make you tell them anything and I'll be there to be sure. Plus, if it would make you more comfortable I can call my lawyer and have him there for it as well. That way we know nothing is going on that isn't supposed to."

"Well, if I have to do this having another person there might be good," said a very subdued Jakob.

"Think of it this way Jakob. We can ask them to record this so they don't have to repeat this interview ever again. Plus, once we're done we can all go out to eat and then come back here and see if we can get Star to come for a visit for a while. How's that sound?"

Hearing that Star would be there that night brightened Jakob up considerably and he replied, "Okay."

It was a good thing they started so early in the morning as the testimony Jakob gave took almost six full hours. The FBI agents were very considerate of his age and status as the victim but Jakob paid a terrible price in the retelling anyway. There were numerous breaks for Jakob to cry and Ted and Beth were both there for him each time. Beth even held his hand during the toughest parts. Sometimes the things that Jakob told left them all in tears, but in the long run it just made Ted furious that anyone could do some of these things to a child.

After the lengthy affair, the three loaded up in the car and Ted asked, "What do you all want for dinner?"

"I don't care really," replied Beth with a grin.

"Can we have pizza?" asked Jakob quietly.

"Pizza it is! There's a good place over on Broadway. We'll go there. That okay with everyone?"

Beth and Jakob chimed in that was okay, and off they went. Dinner took another hour or so, and then it was time to go back to the resort.

Back at their suite at the resort, Jakob asked if he could change and go swimming. Ted suggested that they all change and swim for a while, so everyone took turns in the bathroom and changed into swimming gear, which Beth had thoughtfully purchased while out clothes shopping.

Jakob took off like a shell from a shotgun, ran to his room, closed the door, and was changed and back in less than a minute. It took the others slightly longer to get changed but they were all ready within five minutes.

The private pool was indoors and attached directly to the suite of rooms. It wasn't huge, but for privacy it was ideal. There were no windows save a small skylight overhead. The pool was nice and warm and the smell of chlorine though diminished was still rather strong.

"I hope there's a shallow end, I can't swim." said Jakob.

"Would you like to learn how Jakob? One of us can teach you, besides you do have incentive to learn don't you?" said Ted with a grin.

They slowly acclimated to the warm shallow end of the pool and sat about teaching Jakob to float and get his face used to being under water.

Jakob slowly noticed a warming as he thought of Star and about the time he noticed it, Star appeared about three feet from him. His parents were a few feet behind him and a few seconds slower in arriving.

It was their first time to see Pat and Linda in their natural form. It was very similar in nature to the way Star appeared, only larger. There were iridescent scales on their tails and when they captured the light just right it made them seem to glow faintly.

Pat said, "Well, it's good to see we're all here. This is perfect! I hope it didn't cost you too much."

"Well, it's costing enough, but it's off season so they were willing to deal while we find a better house. I think we're going to build one. We found a lot high on a cliff overlooking the sea that seems almost perfect. The current owner is in the construction business and he's offered a discount on the land if we have him build our home. It seems he has some prebuilt luxury sections that were destined for a place in Japan that are available for cheap."

"That's wonderful! I'm glad to hear it's working out for you all! Any thoughts on a layout yet?"

"Well, if we use those luxury sections that he has, we are limited to eight octagonal rooms in any order we want them. If we use the layout I've been thinking of that will leave room for a very large pool right in the middle of the house with each room having easy access to it. But I want Jakob to have his say in how things go so we might change things around a little bit."

"I'm glad to hear that you are getting Jakob to help with this. I know that he's been through a lot and maybe that will help him feel more included."

They all looked over towards Jakob with concern written on their face, but Jakob was lost in his own world with Star. They were holding hands and Star was pantomiming how to swim. Very slowly Jakob placed both of his hands in Star's and began to attempt to swim. He fell underwater almost instantly but Star moved underneath him and pushed him up out of the water.

Star said something to his father and he translated "Star wants to swim underwater while holding you up until you get the hang of it Jakob. He won't let you go, he promises."

"Thank you, sir."

“Jakob you don’t have to be so formal. You two are a true joining so you might as well get used to calling me dad since in our culture you’re as good as married already.”

At the word ‘married’ Jakob blushed and leaned in close to Star. Their next few attempts at swimming went remarkably better. Star remained submerged and let Jakob lay on top of him. He finally got the arm motions down and was eventually able to stay afloat using just his arms.

The adults left the kids to play on their own while they had a more serious conversation.

Ted started it off by saying, “Today Jakob had to retell everything bad that had been done to him for the police. I see why they wanted him dead so badly. He knew names too and that’s going to put a lot of heat on that terrible organization. We already knew one bad cap was involved but it looks like it might go higher than that as well.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” asked Linda.

“Maybe just allowing time together with both Star and Jakob would be enough. He seems happier and just better when they are together.”

“Well, in all honesty, they *are* better when together. It’s a part of the bonding process with each other and bonding to the *nexus*. It’s both a benefit and a curse as one will eventually come to feel what the other feels. It makes some things in life better and at other times it’s less desirable. For instance injuries can debilitate both of them.”

“You have mentioned this *nexus* before. What exactly is it and how does it work?”

Pat let out a long laugh and then said, “If we knew we would tell you. All we know for sure is it’s an energy source that allows us to bond with one perfect mate. Our culture uses it for many things from transportation to basic things like vision in the depths and the ability to survive in most temperatures. It’s energy does seem to be stronger when both parties are in water, and the water doesn’t have to be connected for it to work. That’s how we were able to blend here. Star followed his link with Jakob and we followed Star using our bond as his parents.”

“Okay, what does this blending mean?”

“Blending is how we transport ourselves from one place to another instantly. It takes a lot out of us to do it and it draws heavily from the *nexus*.”

“Why is it called blending? Sounds like something you’d need to make margaritas,” said Ted.

Pat and Linda both laughed for a few moments at that and then Pat said, “Well, I fear it’s because of the way you perform the blend. What you have to do is visualize where you are using the *nexus* and then the same for where you are going. Once you have both images in mind you literally ‘blend’ them together to become one. It’s at the moment they become one that the blending occurs and you are transported. It’s a difficult skill to learn, but fortunately Star has had over a hundred years to get quite skilled at it. He’s pulled off blends that I would never try and does so with extreme precision.”

“A hundred years? How old is he and are you all?” exclaimed Beth.

“Well Star here is 110 years old. My wife and I are considerably older than that, but I don’t want to make you feel odd about it so I won’t reveal our ages. But consider this, we remember when Atlantis was a thriving culture.”

Ted and Beth both stood and appeared shocked. It took several moments for them to regain their composure and when they did Linda voiced their concern out loud.

“So you’re telling me that a 110 year old is the perfect mate for an eight year old? How can that be? Their age difference will be a major problem won’t it?”

“We have discussed that with the elders and while it may be a problem at some point, I doubt it will be the issue you expect. Unlike humans, our kind doesn’t age until our perfect mate is the same biological age as ourselves. Note that this age is the apparent age. Our mental development is just as different. Some aspects of juveniles remain undiscovered until adulthood. So while Star will have world experiences that Jakob hasn’t, it won’t be quite the issue that you believe it could be. As you can see, both boys are playing just fine right now. Among our people it’s common for a person to remain juvenile for over a millenia before their mate is born.”

Ted, still surprised at the openness they displayed about their kind, finally managed to blurt out, “But how do you speak English so well and with a local accent?”

Pat laughed heartily and said, “Because we lived here for a few years to learn the tongue from native speakers. We still go among humans at times and need to stay abreast of the current language of the regions we frequent. I actually owned a business here for three years at one point.”

“What other languages do you speak?”

“Oh that’s a difficult one. You see when you live a long time you have to learn a variety of languages. Cultures and governments rise and fall and every time it happens the language changes. I speak at least 20, and probably quite a few that I’ve simply forgotten about.”

“Thirty three here,” chimed in Linda.

“Understand one thing though, just because we are old does not mean we have been all over or witnessed historic events. For the most part our people stay in the depths while humanity lives its life unwatched. We only occasionally

go to the surface so we miss much of the history of the world.”

“How is all of this going to affect Jakob? I know he can blend already, that must be how he got out of the hospital, but what else will he gain?”

“That’s something we are unsure about. It will depend on what his heritage is. There are legends that once we had a sister people who lived in air as we live in water, but just as we can go on land, they could change and swim. If he is descended from that line it would explain much. If he’s not, and I know of no way to test something like that, then there is no idea what all he will gain. But I will give you this thought. If he can connect to the *nexus* enough to blend, he will probably live an extremely extended lifespan. Because of this it is of the utmost importance that he spend some time with our people and learn our ways as well as his own.”

“Well, Jakob will have to go back to school soon enough, but summers are still free for students, so there’s nothing preventing him from going to visit, at least if you have a deep sea diving suit ready.”

“That’s going to complicate things. I am so accustomed to our people that I forgot he cannot breathe while underwater.”

“Okay, I have something else I want to mention. I’m not sure how this will sound so *please* do not take offense. Humans don’t regularly go around nude. Do we need to all be dressed or all undressed?”, asked Beth.

“Hmmm, that would really depend on how each of you views it. Our people can’t carry clothing with them when we change, and bags are so cumbersome. But either way, we will be nude when we first arrive so even if we had clothing here, we would still be nude part of the time. What do you think Ted?” asked Pat.

“Well, it’s not going to be a problem for a while. What I’m worried about is when they boys sync up in age and hit puberty. They may get embarrassed by erections. I don’t want them to feel embarrassed about something natural so I’m tempted to say let’s just all go nude in the pool but dress when we leave the pool area. What do you all think of that?”

“That sounds workable, although doesn’t having to dress to go into the rest of the house sound like there is something wrong with it? I don’t want the boys to think it’s wrong or anything,” said Linda.

“Okay, how about everyone goes around dressed as they wish. If they want to be nude that’s fine and if they want to be clothed that’s fine as well,” suggested Ted.

“That solves that, and it looks like Star has already solved how to introduce that to Jakob. He depantsed him.”

The adults looked over at the younger two and sure enough Jakob was embarrassingly naked while Star was holding up the shorts like a flag in a game.

Ted called out, “Hey boys come on over here, we have some things to discuss. Jakob don’t be embarrassed just come as you are, it’s not a problem and never will be a problem to be nude here.”

Star came over quickly and tossed the swim suit out of the pool onto the deck. Jakob was quite a bit more shy about it, keeping as much of his body underwater as possible so nothing could be seen.

“Hey guys, we’ve all talked about it and made some decisions for all of us to work together. Since you brought it up Star we’ll talk about nudity first. We’ve decided that all of us will go around however we are the most comfortable. If that’s nude then that’s fine. If it’s clothed that’s fine as well. Nobody will ever get in trouble for being nude around here, okay?”

As Jakob realized he wasn’t in trouble he began to slowly stand a little more but still keeping certain vital areas underwater.

“We’ve also talked a lot about language and age. It turns out that Star here is quite a lot older than you Jakob. We don’t expect that to change things much, but just know that we don’t mind. Star won’t be able to speak English effectively until you have grown to his size Jakob, so until then we’ll just have to make do. Star, can you write English? If so we might be able to work something out that way.”

Star said something and his father translated, “Yes, he can read and write English and that will be a good workaround until he can change shape. I see that Star has already made progress in teaching you to swim Jakob. That’s a good thing to learn for anybody but especially for you.”

Beth looked thoughtful for a minute and then chimed in. “There’s something else that’s been bothering me and I just put a finger on it. It’s no bother to us right now, but some people consider gay relationships to be bad. Jakob I want you to know that Ted and I feel that if it’s true love then there’s nothing wrong with that. I’m sure that hasn’t occurred to either of you yet, but it would have and I wanted to make our position clear. We will love you both no matter how things turn out and the words that other people use do *not* define who we are.”

“How do I know if I’m gay or not?” asked Jakob.

“Well, that’s something you will learn as you get older. You’re still a bit young to understand just yet, but basically it’s when a man loves another man like I love Beth,” said Ted.

“This has to do with sex doesn’t it?” asked Jakob.

“That’s definitely a part of it, but as I said you will understand more when you’re older. When that day comes I’ll tell you everything about it and answer any questions you might have. Deal?”

“Okay,” said Jakob.

“Good, let’s all play!” said Beth as she dunked Ted.

Three hours were spent in happy play by the adults and the kids. Jakob somehow forgot his shyness and was soon running around without a care in the world. The unfortunate thing was that the scars on his back and buttocks were quite visible and he sometimes covered them if he realized someone was looking at them.

As the games came to an end and everybody started to get tired, Ted whistled loudly and got everybody’s attention. As they gathered around he said, “Well everyone it’s been fun, but we really need to get some sleep tonight. We have a busy day tomorrow and need to make sure we are well rested. Pat, Linda, Star you all are welcome to stay here or go home as you wish. I’m not sure what sleeping arrangements would work for Star so I will leave that up to you all.”

“Actually Ted we need to go home as well. Star has some important things to do tomorrow as well in preparation for his joining with Jakob.”

“Okay, well you all have a great night and we will hopefully see you again tomorrow.”

“I honestly expect that we will become rather regular visitors Ted,” replied a laughing Linda.

They all waved goodbye, and just as suddenly as they had arrived, the three of them disappeared.

Jakob felt the weakening of his bond with Star, but took comfort in knowing that it was still there and that he was okay.

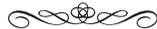


A massive FBI raid was planned in cooperation with the local police for that night. Twenty seven homes were to be raided and searched from top to bottom. The number was so large they had to call in massive reserves from the FBI just to pull it off. At that moment there were 270 FBI agents and close to 50 local police ready for the raid. The plan was to hit them hard and fast and get any evidence they could, while not letting any of them escape.

The information provided by Jakob had led to these homes as either filming locations or people involved in what could turn into the largest child prostitution bust in the country. They weren’t taking any chances either. Every officer whether local or federal had bulletproof armor on under their uniforms and came heavily armed.

The raid was set to go down at 2:00am sharp to hopefully catch most of them abed.

As the clock finally ticked 2:00am three of the homes literally exploded. The rest were found to be empty of people, although there was a great deal of information left that most would consider unimportant. Hopefully enough that they could get the ring shutdown.



In a supposedly empty hotel room across town, a tall man with a dark tan was working on burning papers. He had no plans of being caught by the FBI and so was disposing of evidence that tied him to the ring. He had to be careful not to set off the hotel’s fire suppression system.

He had barely gotten word soon enough to warn the others and get what information he could. At least the three main homes they had used were rigged to blow as soon as the cops were there. Maybe they’d lose some of their interest in him if they died.

This information had to come from the boy that escaped. Nobody else could have overheard names except one of their kids. They had been so careful and had never had anyone survive the precautions they took before. Normally the concrete boots solved the floating problem quite nicely, but somehow it failed this time around. He guessed they would have to be more direct next time and make sure the kid was completely dead before sinking them, not just unconscious like they usually did. It was cruel to let them live long enough to know they were drowning, but he liked that aspect of it better than the money he had made from this business.

As far as he was concerned that’s all it was. A business. But now the FBI were closing in and it was time to liquidate some assets and get out of the country.

Chapter 8

Dr. Talbot answered the phone, "Hello?"

"Hey Paul, this is Derek up in Psych. How's it going? I got your message to call."

"Hey Derek. I have an unusual case for you. Do you think you'd have time to come down here and meet with me on a consult? I've got a patient that will need your help soon."

"Is this the kid from the news?"

"Yeah. He's really had it rough and I fear he's going to need some help to keep himself on an even keel."

"Sure, tell you what, I've got a client here in a few minutes, but can make it in about an hour and fifteen minutes if that works for you."

"Sounds good to me Derek. Look forward to it."

Dr. Paul Talbot hung up the phone and went on about his normal morning business until Dr. Montgomery showed up at his office.

"Come on in Derek. Glad to see you again. How's the golf game doing?"

"Not too bad, still not getting any birdies but getting better. Yours?"

"Can't complain, except that I never get to play anymore. Running the ER keeps me pretty well tied down."

"So what's up with the consult. I've never had you ask for a personal interview for a consult before now."

"Well, this case is different than anything I've ever had. He came in beaten, abused, sexually assaulted, and a hair's breadth from dying. A rogue cop tried to kill him while he was here in the ER. He disappeared and somehow made it all the way to the beach with 13 broken bones. The same officer found him again and brought him back, but he was fully recovered at that point. I know he suffered severe sexual abuse from someone, and from the scars on his back and buttocks tell that he was beaten pretty regularly over several years. The kid's only eight years old and I worry about him. He seems to trust Officer Andrews completely and will quite likely be adopted by him and his wife Beth."

"How did he get to the beach in that condition?" asked Dr. Derek Montgomery.

"I wish I knew. But more than that I want to know what happened that caused severe injuries to heal. I had to do emergency surgery on him due to a collapsed lung punctured by a piece from a broken rib. That by itself should have kept him off his feet, but he was out from the anesthesia too."

"So how's his personality? Did he seem out of it like he was in shock or anything?"

"No, now that you mention it he seemed like a normal, really quiet or shy kid."

"Well, I'd be glad to meet with him provided his guardians approve, of course. What about his family? Are they going to be a problem?"

"As far as DFS was able to determine his parents were killed in another incident and there are no extended family willing to take him."

"Well at least he has a place to go to. Foster homes aren't usually the most trusting environs and he's going to need to be around people he can trust for quite some time."

"I figured as much. The poor kid is going to have a tough time of it all, but I think he'll need your help to get through it and to stay sane."

"Well, I'll do what I can. Have his guardians call my office and setup a time for Monday afternoon. That will give me the weekend to brush up on some related literature. I'll tell my staff to make sure and make an opening for him even if it's over my lunch hour."

"Okay, I'll give them a call here in a bit and see that they contact your office. You sure they can make time on this short a notice. It is Friday after all."

"Monday is my slowest day of the week, so it should be okay. If not they can reschedule one of the appointments and fit him in that way. Not a problem at all."

They stood and shook hands and Dr. Montgomery left.

Dr. Talbot continued his rounds. It was quiet in the ER. As happened some of the time there were dead hours there. They were fortunate to work for one of the few hospitals that actually had enough staff that they didn't have lines of people waiting eight hours or more to see a doctor. He had been to other hospitals where that was a common practice. It was tough keeping the budget controlled enough to allow for the extra people, but that's what a large part of his job was. He very rarely got to do actual ER work unless he was covering a shift for someone as he had been doing the night Jakob was brought in.

Thinking about Jakob just left him more confused. How did the kid heal so much so quickly? The scars from the incisions were almost gone already. He had found several months worth of healing where he expected angry red incisions welts.

Stilling his thoughts, he dialed the cell phone of Ted Andrews and relayed the message from Dr. Montgomery.



Ted's phone rang and it was Dr. Talbot. He talked for a while and then hung up and redialed Dr. Montgomery's office and made an appointment with the secretary for Monday afternoon at 2:00pm.

That morning had once again found Jakob asleep in their bed. He had been whimpering in his sleep when Ted got up to check on him. So he carried him into their room and laid him on the bed. He seemed to sleep soundly thereafter.

After a breakfast of cold leftover pizza, done at Jakob's insistence, Ted asked everyone to gather in the living room of the suite so they could talk about a few things.

"Jakob we have a bit to talk about before we get started today. Right now we're officially your foster family and we hope that you like staying with us. But in a year or so there will be the chance for us to adopt you. Now what that would mean is that you would take our last name and get a new birth certificate showing Beth and I as your parents. I know that's a long time away but I want you to understand that you will have a say in where you go. We both hope you will stay with us, but it has to be your decision. So you take the time to think about it so when the day comes, you know what you want to do."

"Now the next thing we have to talk about is you seeing a special doctor. You know how cuts and things hurt, right?"

"Yeah," replied Jakob.

"Well there is another kind of hurt that affects your heart and mind. Dr. Montgomery specializes in helping children like you to get better. That way they don't bother you when you grow up and live your own life. Does that make sense to you? Remember that we will love you no matter how things turn out and will do all we can for you."

"I think so."

"I've taken the liberty of calling and setting up an appointment for you on Monday afternoon at 2pm. Beth won't be able to go, but I'll be there in the waiting room for you. Dr. Montgomery is one of the best in his field and should be able to help you, but if you don't like him or want to try someone else, please let me know so I can make the arrangements. It's important that you trust him."

"Can I tell him about Star?"

"I'll tell you what. You meet him first and see if you like him without mentioning Star or his family. If you like him and trust him, I'll meet with him and fill him in on what's going on. We might have to arrange a meeting with him and Star's family so he will believe us. It is after all, a bit unusual to say the least."

"Okay, I can do that."

"Thanks Jakob. Now on to the more fun stuff. We are going to meet with the construction guy about the house. What he told me on the phone is that he has some luxury units they built for a company in Japan that he will sell us for a really low price because we are buying his land from him. No matter how we do it, this house is going to be huge, so keeping it clean will require some chores for all of us. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah, I think so." replied Jakob with a tone of doubt in his voice.

Ted and Beth both laughed and Beth said, "Don't worry, the chores won't take away from time with Star."

Jakob looked quite a bit happier then.

"One more thing we have to talk about is school. I'm sure you're not looking forward to going back to school, I know I never was, but in this case you do need to finish school. That's important for your future no matter what you decide you want to do. I'll talk to your teacher Mrs. Choate and I think we can get your assignments reduced and allow them to be done here at home. As long as you promise to do your best and not cheat. Is that okay?"

Jakob nodded his head to imply that he would do his best.

"Good. That's all we needed to talk about. Since today is Friday I thought we might do something special tonight. What would you like to do Jakob?"

“Well, I wanna see Star tonight if I can. Other than that I don’t know. I’ve never been asked before.”

“How about we get a board game and play that? Maybe we can go by the toy store and find something waterproof that Star could join in on? Would that be okay?”

“Yeah!”

“Okay, Beth was going to run some errands, so how would you like to go meet the construction guy about the house? He might even let you sit on one of the big bulldozers he has.”

“Cool!” replied Jakob.

Ted and Jakob walked outside to where his patrol car was parked. It was still there and appeared intact, so they got in and drove about 30 minutes to the lot that Dr. Talbot’s friend had directed him to.

It was a big house, probably in the \$3-5 million range. They pulled up and got out of the car and walked over to what appeared to be a foreman.

“Excuse me, could you direct us to Joe Flannigan? I was told to meet him here today.”

“Sure, he’s the guy in the bright red hardhat over by that bulldozer talking to the driver.”

“Thanks, I see him now.”

They walked across the dirt road where the construction equipment came in and out and waved to the guy in the red hat.

As they walked up, Joe said “Ahh, you must be Mr. Andrews and Jakob, right?”

“Got it in one,” grinned Ted.

“Good deal, glad to meet you both,” he said as he shook hands with both, one after the other.

“So I hear you are interested in the property and having me build a house for you huh?”

“We sure are. We wanted to see one of the units if we could, and maybe let Jakob sit on a bulldozer if he could.”

A sparkle appeared in Joe’s eyes as he said “How about more than just sit. I’ll take him on a ride if he wants.”

Jakob looked enthused at this, so Joe and Ted helped him up onto a bulldozer and Joe got in the seat behind him.

They took about 10 minutes riding around the area and even scooped some dirt that needed moving. When they got back Jakob was really excited and wanted to ride more big machines.

“One of these days you’ll get your chance kiddo, but today all the rest of the machines are busy working on this big house. Let’s take a ride over to the storage area where the big units are and we can talk about your house then.”

“Okay, do you want to ride with me? We have enough room for all three.”

Joe laughed and said, “I’ve never got to ride in a police car so why not.”

They drove about 20 miles south of town to an old storage yard. Each of the units were immediately visible.

“I’ve got eight units available. Each is 50’ wide by 60’ long and 12’ high. They’re luxury units that were designed for a hotel in Japan, but the hotel went bankrupt and couldn’t afford to pay for them. I’ve already written them off on taxes so anything I make is profit. I was thinking like this. You want to buy the property and the units, I’ll sell you both and build you a dream house for \$2 million. You’d have a huge house that’s all first class construction for a fraction of the price of a home on the coast.”

“That sounds reasonable, but can we see inside one of them first?”

“Certainly. Come on over here, I brought the keys with me.”

They walked a little ways over to the first unit where Joe produced a key and unlocked the door. As they entered they realized just how enormously large these units were. Each was octagonal in shape with each of the eight edges being 30’ long. The module they were in was a bedroom and had a king sized bed on a nice raised stand with a beautiful solid wood headboard.

Joe explained, “The original plans called for these to be joined and the joint pieces would be bathrooms or hallways or closets as needed. The nice thing about this is you can come up with how you want them laid out, and we can put them together to match your plans. That way you save money on the construction but still get customization.”

Jakob was looking around in awe. The roof sloped upward and had a skylight at the top. He asked, “Do all of them have the window up there?”

Joe said, “Yes the skylight is in each unit, plus we can cut windows out of the unit anywhere you want them. They come prewired for a full audio/video system with outlets allowing for computers as well.”

They walked around a bit more, admiring the quality of the construction and the sheer size of the units. Eventually they walked back outside and Ted began asking questions again.

“So how long would it take to assemble them in a square with a space for an indoor pool in the middle?”

“Well, the pool is going to be tough. That land is mostly solid rock atop that cliff and it’ll be difficult to get that done in less than a month. The other units can be moved into place about four weeks after the pool is dug out. Once we have that done, the finish work will take about a week and then you have a home. It’s fast, easy, and relatively inexpensive given the size of the home. Central heat and air conditioning are already built into the units too.”

“Okay, I’ve already talked to Beth about this. Let us go home and Jakob and I will draw up some plans and get them to you. Then you can go over it and make sure we didn’t miss anything. I’ll call you later if I can get your cell number.”

“That sounds good Ted.” he said as he pulled out a business card that had his cell number listed. “Call me anytime you have questions.”

As they walked around the last of the units another of the workers came around the corner. When Jakob saw him, he freaked out and hid behind Ted.

“What’s wrong Jakob?”

“That man, he’s one of *them*.”

“You mean one of the ones that hurt you?”

“Yes! I don’t know his name though.”

About that time the man they saw realized he had been recognized and took off at a run.

Ted was torn. His job was to guard Jakob, not chase bad guys despite the fact that he wanted to. So instead he stayed where he was and asked Joe, “What is that man’s name?”

“George Powell. He’s been here about five or six years now. Good worker.”

Ted immediately called the station and reported the situation. He was told that a warrant would be issued and a search warrant for his property as well.

As Ted bent over to hold Jakob a gunshot went through the space his head had just occupied. It seemed that the guy running was bait for a trap.

Ted picked up Jakob and ran as low as he could, dodging behind the big units or whatever else he could find for cover. It took a while to get back to the car, but finally they made it. Whoever had taken a shot at him didn’t hang around to see if it had connected or not. He called the station and reported it and was told that units were already en route and they would handle it. He was to get the kid out of there and somewhere safe.

They took off in the patrol car as fast as Ted could manage. They hit the interstate and then took a shorter route into town, where he proceeded to do what he could in case he had someone tailing him. Finally, he pulled into a parking garage with multiple exits and waited for a while. No other cars appeared in five minutes, so he assumed at that point that he was clear and drove on. Back at the station they changed cars back into his family car that he had driven to work all those days ago. It was one of those nice midsized cars that was far more comfortable than sporty. They drove around to make sure it was clear and then headed back to the resort. Once there they went inside and bolted the door.

“Are you okay Jakob? Not hurt or anything?”

“I’m scared Ted. Why are they doing this?”

“I’ve told you I’ll always be honest with you, so here’s what is going on. The bad men that hurt you know you can tell the police who they are, so they’re trying to kill you before you can talk to the police. Apparently not all of them are in contact regularly or they would know about the big bust the other day. This could just be someone trying to get revenge, but there’s no way to know without questioning them.”

“Can I use the bathroom now? I think I had an accident.”

“Sure Jakob, take all the time you need. I’ll be right out here.”

Ted stayed right outside the bathroom door the entire time it took for Jakob to shower. He called through the door, “Are you sure it’s okay to come out naked? I don’t have any clean clothes to wear.”

“Jakob we really meant that. Don’t be embarrassed or worry that someone will make fun of you. Beth and I love you like you were our own son and would never do that, so come on out and get yourself some clothes. But stay away from the windows just in case, okay?”

Shortly after that a very wet and very naked young boy streaked across the room and was dressed before Ted could tell him not to worry again.

“Do you want to go swim again? Maybe we can get Star to come and help calm us down.”

“But how will Star help calm you down, Ted?”

“By calming you down and making sure you’re safe. Besides, he probably knows something is wrong so he might already be here.”

The two entered the pool room and sure enough Star was there waiting for them.

“Let’s swim Jakob”

Ted began removing his clothing and while Jakob watched stripped down to nothing and jumped in the pool. Jakob slowly followed suit and was soon in the water being hugged by Star.

They stayed in the pool for a couple of hours at least. Then Beth came home and Ted had to explain what had happened.

Beth was understandably upset and spent a little while just holding on to Ted. After she finally got over what she referred to as her ‘clingy’ phase they talked about their days.

“Well I guess my day was quite a bit less frightening than yours. I went by DFS and filled out the rest of the paperwork that they ‘forgot’ to send over. That took almost three hours. Then I went and got a few groceries and went by the house to see if the investigation was going okay. It seems that the locals have finished their work but the FBI still want access to the house for another week at least. Oh yeah, I also went by the Post Office and had our mail forwarded to the box here. How did the house discussion go? Do you think it’s going to happen?”

“He’s made us an offer that I don’t see how we can refuse. Land plus complete construction of a new house using some luxury units for a hotel in Japan. The house would be enormous, but it’s well insulated and comes with all the conveniences. Whole package for \$2 million. We can swing that easily and have plenty left over for furniture and appliances that we like. Jakob and I still need to sit down and doodle our way to a house that works for all of us. I also heard from Dr. Talbot. We have an appointment with Dr. Montgomery for Monday afternoon at 2:00pm. I’ll take Jakob over there and we’ll see if he thinks we can trust him. If so I’ll fill him in on things.”

“Hey Star, could you and Jakob come over here for a minute?” asked Ted.

“Star, I have a quandary that only you and your parents can resolve. We have setup an appointment with a child psychiatrist for Jakob on Monday afternoon. In order for a psychiatrist to be able to really help the patient he has to be able to trust the patient is telling the truth. Of course that trust has to run both ways. I’ve talked to Jakob about this and he is willing to meet him without mentioning you or your family, but in order to be of the most help to Jakob, he should really know about you and your family so that he knows Jakob isn’t making up stories. I’m not sure how your family wants this handled. I will meet with him and see if I think he’s trustworthy as well, but I want your opinion before any decision is made.”

Star looked lost in thought for a moment and then started pantomiming something in the air. Being terrible at charades Ted didn’t get it, and neither did Beth or Jakob. Beth looked lost in thought for a moment and then went and got a notebook, pen, and some towels. “Here, dry your hands and arms off then you can write on the notebook.”

Star did as instructed and managed to slowly write “My parents will have to make that call. Could they maybe meet him in human form first and see if they deem him trustworthy? Mom has a talent for that. I will ask them to come here now.”

It was only minutes later that Pat and Linda appeared in the pool. On approach they spoke to Star in their own tongue for a while and then came on up and out of the water where they once again became human.

Pat said, “Star here told us what is going on. How likely is it that this doctor can be trusted?”

“Fairly likely. Dr. Talbot wouldn’t recommend someone who would put their career or money above the care of a patient. I trust Dr. Talbot and by extension trust anyone that he trusts.”

“Let’s do it this way then. Why don’t Linda and I accompany you to the meeting. We can all set down and talk to him. If we decide we can trust him we can invite him over here that evening.”

“That sounds good to me. I think this will work out. I hate having to tell one more person about you all, but it seems necessary. If we don’t then Jakob can’t be honest with the doctor and then he may not be able to help him.”

Linda then joined the conversation with “How about tomorrow we bring over some clothes that fit and we can practice getting around in shoes again. It’s been some time since we last wore them and if I remember correctly, it takes a little while to get used to them. How formal should we be?”

“I’d imagine business casual would be okay. Either a nice dress or slacks and a nice blouse,” said Beth.

Ted chimed in with, “But really I don’t know that it would make a lot of difference. Nothing too fancy now, it’s just a doctors office in the hospital.”

“Okay, boys why don’t you go and play some more. We’ll finish working out the details and then let you know what we come up with, okay?”

The two boys moved away in a complicated game of some sort that they had made up.

The adults continued the discussion for another half an hour before finally deciding they had done all they could. Pat and Linda left, but Star and Jakob were still playing. They let them play until around nine o’clock before calling Jakob for bed time. He was reluctant, but no more so than any other child with a friend over.

Star gave Jakob a last hug, kissed his forehead, and then left.

Jakob got out of the pool, grabbed a towel and dried off, and then went to his room to get ready for bed.

“You work at the hospital, have you heard any good or bad about Dr. Montgomery?”

“Not a peep, but then I work in the cardiac ward and he works in the psych ward so our paths wouldn’t cross.”

“Can you ask around some of the nurses on Monday and see what their take on him is? I don’t want to alert him, but I want to check him out and make sure he’s not going to try to use this to hurt our slowly growing family here.”

“I’ll check around and see if anyone has any dirt on him. I’ll have to be discreet though, it wouldn’t do for someone in my position to be caught questioning a doctors trustworthiness.”

The remainder of the weekend was spent swimming, working on ideas for a truly enormous house, and generally just giving Jakob some play time. Jakob almost seemed like a totally different kid now. He was still quiet, but would

now yell and scream happily like a typical eight year old while playing.

Monday morning dawned cold with frost on the ground. Beth had to leave for work around 5:00am that day so Ted made breakfast.

He walked into Jakob's room and gently called his name and shook him to wake up.

"Jakob, wake up. Breakfast is about ready."

Jakob seemed to be a fairly heavy sleeper and it took a few more tries to get him even partially awake.

They had a nice breakfast, and then headed down to see Joe Flannigan and give him the sketches they came up with. It would be his job to turn those sketches into reality. Joe was glad to receive the sketches but was hesitant for them to stay around too long, The shooting last time they were there made Joe really uncomfortable and he didn't want to see anybody get hurt.

They left from there and then killed some time driving around town looking at houses they liked and disliked and just getting to know each other better.

Finally Ted decided it was time for Jakob to meet some of his coworkers so they drove to the police station.

Jakob was in awe of all the police cars and equipment that he saw, but he was really surprised at the reception he got inside.

His coworkers were all glad to see Jakob alive and well and many of them apologized profusely that one of their own had tried to hurt him.

Then Sgt. Dave Smythe saw them and asked them to step into his office.

"Hey Ted, I see you're doing your job admirably. And you must be Jakob. It's nice to meet you young man," said Sgt. Smythe while shaking Jakob's hand.

"Hey Dave, how's the investigations going? I'm anxious to get some of the stuff out of our house - at least if anything of value is left."

"The feds said that they should be clear of the place by some time next week Ted. We've been done for a couple of days already. But the feds have more and better crime scene equipment than we do and they're hoping to get enough evidence to lock a few people up for life."

"By the way, I wanted to let you know where we're staying. Beth and I will foot the bill for anything above standard per diem rates so don't worry about that. We're staying at that exclusive resort south of town off the Interstate."

"Oh I know. They've already contacted me about it. They're going to let you stay for a whopping \$100, no matter how long you need to stay as long as it's off season. They heard who was staying there and decided to be supportive rather than greedy."

"Wow. They didn't say anything about it to me. I'm not sure how they figured out who Jakob is, but at least that's one less worry."

"We did manage to catch the runner down at the construction site. No idea who the shooter is, but the runner has lawyered up. At least we have him on conspiracy to harm a minor charges so we can keep him for as long as needed."

"Dave, I also wanted to let you know something. I'm thinking about leaving the police force. I think Beth and I are going to adopt Jakob here, provided he's willing, and Beth is always worried about me every time I come to work. With a child in the house it wouldn't be fair to him for me to be in danger all the time. What do you think?"

"Well Ted, you've been a fine officer and I trust you. I hate to see you go, but can appreciate putting family first. When do you think your last day will be?"

"I was thinking that once this current assignment is over. That way I'm around for Jakob's sake and will be able to stay around after he's safe again."

"That's a good plan Ted. I'll post a notice for an opening once this is all cleared up. We'll have to agree on a date so we can have a going away party."

They shook hands and Ted said, "Thanks Dave. I really appreciate it."

As they walked back out to the car, Jakob said "You're quitting your job because of me? Why?"

"Because Beth and I both love you Jakob. The police don't need me particularly, anyone with a degree in Criminal Justice would be able to do the work. But I want to devote as much time as I can to being a good father for you."

Jakob hugged him and then got in the car.

Chapter 9

Dr. Derek Montgomery's office was nice. Light colored wood paneling with comfortable couches in the waiting room. There were paintings of peaceful scenes hung on the wall and a nice wooden receptionists desk.

Ted approached the receptionist and said, "Hi, I'm Ted Andrews. This here is Jakob Muellerson and he has an appointment with Dr. Montgomery at 2:00"

"Yes, he's been expecting you. Please go right on in." she said and pointed to the door off to one side.

Ted opened the door and the two of them entered a nice office with a big wooden desk and a nice leather chair in which sat Dr. Montgomery.

"Hi Ted, Hi Jakob. How are you all doing today?"

"Not too bad," said Ted. "And yourself?"

"Can't complain at all. Come on in and have a seat. This is an informal process so no need to stand around all day." He motioned to a couple of chairs facing the desk and they both took seats.

"Now during a normal therapy session only the patient is allowed in, however for this initial interview Ted can stay too. Is that okay with you Jakob?"

Jakob shook his head yes but said nothing.

"Good. I'm glad to hear that. How are things going between yourself and your foster family Jakob?"

"Great," said Jakob in an almost inaudible voice.

"Jakob, I'm here to help you, but it will be difficult to do that if I can't hear you. Do you think you can speak a little bit louder?"

"Okay."

"Much better. Thank you Jakob. Now Dr. Talbot filled me in on some of the situation but I wanted to explain how this works. Jakob, you will be doing a lot of talking in these sessions. In order for this to work and really be of help to you, you will need to be completely honest with me. Some of what we talk about will remind you of very bad things. Part of the healing process is to talk about those bad things with someone you trust and who knows how to help you. I would guess that for quite some time, these sessions are going to result in a lot of emotional pain for you. I am very sorry about that, but it's necessary or we wouldn't go through with it. Does this make sense to you Jakob?"

"Yes"

"Now as for you Ted, there are going to be times when Jakob won't want to come to a session. It's going to be up to you and your wife to make sure he comes. I know how difficult it is to face bad things, but he will need to see me in order for the treatment to have effect. Do you think you can handle that?"

"I think so, but there is something important we need to talk about first."

"Oh? What would that be?"

"How much we can trust you. I've decided to be blunt rather than try to feel you out. Dr. Talbot recommended you and I trust his opinion. There is an unusual situation with Jakob here and it involves something that must never be put in writing or let out to anybody else. It can't be published or anything else. I promise that this particular information can cause no harm to us or to Jakob, but I will need your word before we can tell you everything. I was going to have Jakob here feel you out, but maybe direct is the best approach."

"Goodness. That is direct. Well, my professional license requires that I keep information held in confidence unless ordered to reveal it by a court mandate. So I can't promise complete silence in that regard, but no person in my profession will be able to do any better, so I guess it depends on how badly you want Jakob here to see me."

"What if I told you I can prove it to you, but that neither you nor anyone would believe it without proof?"

"I can't think of anything of the sort that would tend to that extreme, but I guess in that situation I'd be a fool to reveal it."

“Jakob, I think that’s the best we’re going to get. You need to be able to be completely honest with him for him to help you. What do you think?”

“He seems okay to me.”

“Okay Doc, I’m going to go contact someone if I can reach them. Shouldn’t take more than the remainder of the hour slot. You and Jakob get to know each other and if you’re free tonight we’ll provide you with the evidence to prove what would otherwise sound like an outrageous lie.”

“Okay. Do I tell him all of it or just wait for you?”

“Wait for me. The truth will be easier coming from me.”

“Back in 45 minutes or so doc.”

Ted left the room and nearly sprinted to his car and then made a mad dash for home. He quickly took off his shirt, stuck his arm in the water, and then concentrated as hard as he could on Pat.

It only took a minute or two before Pat appeared in the water before him. He pulled his arm out and said, “Sorry to bother you so soon but something has come up. Jakob needs to be able to tell his psychiatrist everything and be completely honest about it. But without evidence he won’t be able to understand or believe it. In that case he might do more harm to Jakob than good. Would you all be willing to be seen in your natural form by the psychiatrist this evening here?”

“I’m glad you called me Ted. Normally I would say no chance, but if you think it’s the best for Jakob then we will come. We’ll be here around 6:30pm like last night. I have to go for now but will see you then.”

“Thanks Pat.”

Ted redressed and then sped towards the hospital again. He made it back just in time to catch the last ten minutes of Jakob’s session with Dr. Montgomery.

The secretary waved him on inside, so he opened the door and went on in.

“Sorry to interrupt but I just received permission to tell you the entire story and to have you at our room tonight at 6:30pm for proof if you can make it.”

“Well that’s a relief. I must say the build up is getting me rather antsy. So what’s going on that you couldn’t tell me before?”

“When I found Jakob here the first time, he wasn’t alone. A merboy had saved him and brought him to shore and asked me to help him. It was very important to him. I’ve met him and his parents several times. Jakob and the merboy, whose name is Star, are considered a mated pair in their culture. They come and visit us so that Jakob and Star can spend time together, which apparently is very important at this stage. Oh, since they travel in their natural form when they become human they are nude so we have a clothing optional rule around our place. That way nobody gets embarrassed about nudity as they get older.”

“Merboy? Well, I see what you meant that nobody would believe me anyway. Okay, I’ll be at your place at 6:30pm. Can you give me directions?”

“It’s at the luxury resort south on the Interstate,” said Ted as he gave him the address and the room number.

“Please keep in mind that this is a recent development, so I don’t expect you will need to focus on this with Jakob very much unless he brings it up. Okay?”

“I understand, the first goal is to help Jakob. We made some good progress today for a first session. I’m glad I agreed to take this case.”

They continued to chit chat for another five minutes or so and then the next appointment arrived so Ted and Jakob had to leave.

Once they were in the car, Ted asked, “So what do you think of him, Jakob?”

“He seems nice.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I didn’t think Doc Talbot would steer us wrong, but you never know how people will react to strange things. So tell me, how are you taking all this with Star and his parents?”

“It’s hard to say. I like Star a lot and love playing with him. I don’t know his family very well but Star’s fun to hang around with. He’s even teaching me to swim!” said Jakob with much enthusiasm.

Ted laughed and said, “I bet that’s going to be a very important skill in your future Jakob, so make sure you become really good at it and comfortable in the water.”

“So what do you want to do today? We have several hours before we need to be back at the suite. Any ideas?”

“Can we go on back and practice swimming? I want to show Star I really am trying.”

“I tell you what. Let’s go by the school and talk to your teacher about your schoolwork and then we can go. Is that okay?”

“Do I have to go back to school already?”

“No, you will need to do your schoolwork at home until we find out who it is that keeps hurting you.”

“Okay,” said Jakob with a melodramatic sigh.

Ted got a nice long laugh out of that one. “Believe me Jakob, I didn’t like school much either so I understand. But if you want to go to college some day you need to do well in school.”

They drove to the school Jakob was attending and that Ted had attended before him. Felker Elementary was a pretty typical elementary school. It was mostly brick and windows with a large gymnasium that doubled as a cafeteria. The front doors opened right onto the office so it was fairly easy to figure out where to go.

Ted knocked on the office door and was told to come inside.

“Hello, I’m Officer Andrews and this is Jakob Muellerson. I need to speak with Mrs. Choate if I could please.”

“Well you’re in luck officer. Classes are already over for the day and Mrs. Choate stays around until 5:00pm. Here, let me call her and she can come meet you.”

“Thanks.”

The secretary made a phone call and a few minutes later Mrs. Choate opened the door.

“Jakob! It’s good to see you up and around so soon! How are you?” She gave him a big hug and waited for an answer.

“I’m okay. Ted here saved me.”

“Well then I thank you too Ted. Although I remember him as Teddy from when I had him in my class. Shall we go to my room and talk?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Ted.

They walked past several classrooms and entered one that Ted had fond memories of. He asked “You haven’t changed rooms after all these years? I thought you would have at least moved closer to the front of the building.”

“Now why would I want to change rooms? I’ve had this room for over 30 years and it’s always been just fine for me. Besides, the extra exercise is good for the kids. Isn’t that right Jakob?”

“Yes ma’am,” replied Jakob.

“You’ve always been a good boy Jakob. Now let me guess, you want to talk about makeup work for the time he’s been gone?”

“Well and future work as well. He’s still officially under police protection. There have been gunshots aimed at him so we aren’t taking any chances when we can avoid them.”

“Oh my goodness. Well the past work is no problem. Jakob is a good student and I’m sure that trend will continue. I can always tell. I can get you all the missed assignments and can arrange to have the future work ready for you when you pickup the packet of makeup work. How’s that sound?”

“That would be great. Thanks for the help yet again Mrs. Choate. Beth and I are making the effort to adopt Jakob here, provided he wants us to, so you’re helping us all.”

“That’s wonderful! Let me tell you Jakob, you couldn’t ask for kinder people for a family. They’ll take care of you and help you become whatever you want to be.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Choate” said Jakob slightly above a whisper.

They left the room and headed back out to the car, but something was wrong. Ted had Jakob stay in the school office while he checked it out. As he looked at the car wondering what he had seen to make him nervous he heard a shot and felt something sting in his arm. He realized distantly that he had been shot, but quickly put his hand over the wound and ran back inside. The secretary called the nurse while Ted called in the shooting. The nurse could do little more than bandage it and tell him that it was at least a clean shot—through and out again.

It took around four minutes for the police to arrive. When they did, they were unable to find the shooter. An interview with Ted later revealed he had been alerted when he noticed that the car window was down. He always left them up to make it more difficult for thieves. When they checked his car they also found a small container of plastic explosive wired into the starter. All that had saved their lives was his subconscious noticing the window, which was actually broken out not rolled down. They were able to remove the explosives easily, but this level of danger was something new to Ted. It was time to start hiding out and staying hidden since the thugs obviously knew who had Jakob.

Another officer gave Ted and Jakob a ride to the hospital where Dr. Talbot put some stitches in the bullet holes after making sure they were clear of lead fragments.

Because of this latest attack on them, Ted decided deception was the best. He had the police take him a ways out of town and then take a longer way back to where they lived. The roads they traveled were so straight and long that there was no way anyone could follow them without being seen.

Throughout all of this Jakob was terrified. He hid down in the car and wouldn’t sit up, not that Ted could blame him. It took them almost an hour to get back to the room and to get inside without being seen. Ted then called Beth and left a message for her to call him as soon as possible. The other officer left with his car so it looked like nobody was here.

When they got inside, Jakob hugged Ted for all he was worth and wouldn’t stop crying. Ted just held him until he finally fell asleep and then put him on the bed to sleep.

Ted's phone rang and he stepped out of the bedroom to answer it without disturbing Jakob.

"Hello?"

"Ted it's Beth. What's wrong?"

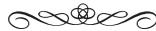
"Someone tried to kill us again today. A gunshot hit me in the arm and they put plastic explosives in the car. Left the car to the department - they'll disarm and tow it to the station for safekeeping. But for now I'm worried that if they're this determined they might hurt you to get at us. Could you wait around and ride over with Dr. Montgomery? That way they won't recognize the car at least. I'd leave the car there and we'll figure something else out. You might need to call in for a few days."

"Okay Ted. I'll go talk to Dr. Montgomery right now. You say he's coming over tonight? To meet Pat and Linda I assume?"

"Shit. Sorry. It's been a busy afternoon. Yeah, we talked to him and I think we can trust him. I got to talk to Pat and he agreed that if it was necessary he could meet them. I think it is necessary or else Jakob and Dr. Montgomery won't trust each other. For this to work they have to be honest with each other."

"It's okay hon. You've had a rough day. Just make sure to take care of yourself while you're at it. I'd better go now to catch Dr. Montgomery. I love you, Ted Andrews."

"And I love you Beth Andrews."



A darkly tanned man was sitting in an upper story window of the local library. He had a perfect line of sight to the front of the elementary school across the street. He had been here on a stakeout for three days without any luck, but he knew that eventually the meddling cop would show up to get the kids school work.

He had noticed them going in and had enough time to get some plastique planted in the car and get back to his spot before they returned. It was close though. Too close. He thought the cop might have gotten a view of his back as he came outside. One thing was certain, something had clued him in. Probably the damned broken window. But nothing he could do about that. He would just have to take the shot when he had it. The kid didn't come out on the return. His moment came and he made the shot. He winged him in the arm. Nothing fatal unfortunately but it would make him nervous. The only problem is that now they were going to hole up somewhere.

He removed the silencer from his gun and with deft practiced movements broke it down so that it fit into his book bag. He then calmly walked to the elevator, rode it down, and walked out onto the sidewalk in front of the library. Boldness was his best disguise in this case. He made it to his car without interference and left before the cops arrived en masse.

He drove at a calm, even sedate pace. Eventually he reached the lower income neighborhoods and there he entered a rundown apartment building. He checked his mailbox and went on up to his apartment without interference. Even the local hoods stayed away from his place.

The apartment was mostly empty. Just a bed, a small lamp, and a few things in the kitchen. Nothing there to really indicate it was his.

The letter that he was expecting had not shown all week. He was supposed to receive payment for this job. He had decided to get a head start on the job. It was the last time he did that. He would give it one more day and then return to his home and leave this job behind once and for all.

Chapter 10

Dr. Derek Montgomery was surprised when Beth Andrews asked him to give her a ride back to her place. He was doubly shocked when he learned why it was necessary. He agreed to take her, of course, but he was beginning to doubt the wisdom of showing up there with all this gunfire and explosives going around. He had to admit though, he was skeptical of the story he had been told. He decided to try to get a little information out of Beth.

“So tell me Beth, what’s with all the secrecy. Surely what Ted told me about merboys was just a story to get me interested. What’s really going on?”

Beth laughed briefly and responded, “Oh no. I’m not going to give it away that easily. You’ll have to see them to believe it, just like I did. But let me tell you something, once you get over the shock, it opens your eyes to a whole different world. One that doesn’t exactly coincide with the one we thought we lived in.”

“Wait, you’re trying to tell me that the merboy is real??”

“Essentially yes. Of course his parents are real as well. They should be there tonight. I bet Ted had to ask if it was okay for you to meet them. I’m sure he explained how Jakob had to be honest with you and having you believe him was just as important.”

“That’s the truth. If you all didn’t go to this much effort for me to meet them, I would definitely think he was lying and try to dig for truth in it. As it is, I’m still skeptical.”

“That’s understandable. I was skeptical at first too, but meeting them changed that all too quickly. You need to take the next exit.”

“Okay, and thanks for the directions. I knew this was out here, but didn’t know exactly how to get here. We will need to get some food as well. I fear I didn’t eat lunch today. I had an unexpected emergency client that took up my lunch time today.”

“That’s no problem. We have a fully stocked kitchen, so I can whip something up and we can all have dinner. Although I’m not sure what Star can eat.”

“Which one is Star?”

“He’s the child. He appears to be around 12 or 13 years old. I’m not sure exactly which and neither are they.”

“You mean they don’t keep birth records?”

“I’m not sure if they do or not, but what I actually meant is there are some physiological differences in their race. Physically Star is 110 years old, but he has the body and mind of maybe a 13 year old. The only difference is that he has 110 years of experience being a 13 year old. Oh, and he can’t speak English yet but he understands it quite well.”

“*110 years old?*”

“That’s what we’re told. His parents won’t give their age, but say they both remember Atlantis before it disappeared.”

“Okay, now I’m going to have to see them to believe this. It’s almost too much to take in.”

“Believe me when I say I understand. We’re trained as medical professionals. We believe what we can see and reproduce in a lab. This is different. They’re real. Which makes us wonder what else is real that we have discounted as legend over the years?”

“Exactly my point. If these people are real what other mythological creatures are real?”

“Okay, here we are. Take the left side and head towards the back. We’re the last door on the end there.” said Beth.

“Will do.”

As they parked Dr. Montgomery said “I really hope that this isn’t some kind of joke being played on me. It’s not my birthday so it can’t be that.”

“It’s no joke. You can see for yourself in a few minutes.”

They pulled into a parking spot in front of the small house-like suite and got out of the car.

Beth pulled Dr. Montgomery to a stop and said, "Let me call first. After today Ted is more than a little uneasy."

She pulled out her phone, spent a minute or so talking to Ted, and then unlocked the door and showed Dr. Montgomery inside.

Inside was a brightly lit living room with a small kitchenette and dining room all together. Ted was standing there waiting for them, and was alone.

"Hey love. How are you doing? Let me see that arm."

Beth checked over Ted's arm to make sure all had been done correctly. Finding that it had been cleaned and bandaged properly was a relief.

"Hey hon. Hey Dr. Montgomery. I assume you're ready for a rather world-changing experience?"

"Indeed I am. I just hope this works out to be exactly what you said it would. I'd be upset if I came over for nothing."

"Oh no worries on that regard. Star is already here. In fact he appeared shortly after Jakob was in the pool. Come on through and we'll go meet him."

As they walked through the door into the pool area, Dr. Montgomery stopped and gasped in surprise.

Jakob was there naked as the day he was born. Star was there heavily involved in teaching him to swim.

"Boys, can you come over here. I have someone I want Star to meet."

The boys stopped their playing, and made a dash for them. Star of course won their little race, and chattered something to Jakob. Shockingly, Jakob chattered something back to him and grinned.

"Ahh, so Star is teaching you their language Jakob. Good idea!" said Ted.

Beth decided to make introductions. "Dr. Montgomery you already know Jakob here, but the other young man is Star. As you can see he's nothing less than we told you to expect. Star do you know when your parents will be coming?"

Star said something and Jakob immediately said "Soon."

"You seem to be picking up their language pretty quickly Jakob. How long have you been working on it?"

"Two days now. I know several words and a few phrases but that's about it. It's hard to learn at first, but once you go underwater it makes more sense," replied Jakob.

Dr. Montgomery looked bewildered and then asked, "I hope this isn't considered impolite, but I have to ask, can I examine you Star? I've never met one of your race before and am curious."

Star looked a bit uneasy but then decided and nodded his head up and down.

Jakob interjected, "Don't press too hard on the tail section. It's sensitive and dries out easily."

Dr. Montgomery carefully checked around Star's waist to make sure there was no costume or anything and finally had to conclude it was either real or the best costume he'd ever seen. There were no bones like you'd expect to find in the tail section. Instead it was packed with muscle tissue.

"Oh! Look what we discovered Ted!" shouted Jakob. He took Star's hand and they dove underwater and stayed down. After a few minutes Ted began to worry and dove into the pool after them. From underwater he could hear them having a conversation quite clearly. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but Jakob appeared to have no problem. He wasn't holding his breath either—his chest was moving rhythmically as if he were breathing. He pointed to the surface and then made for the surface himself.

Once they surfaced he could hear Jakob breathing normally. He said, "Please don't do that without warning me first. I was afraid you were going to drown."

"I'm sorry Ted, but when Star and I are touching I can breathe normally underwater, except that I breathe water in and out instead of air."

Ted hauled himself out of the pool and stripped out of his wet clothing.

Beth said, "See, I told you we are in a nudity okay area."

Dr. Montgomery gave out a slightly panic induced laugh and replied, "I didn't believe it even in front of my own eyes, but there's no way Jakob could have been under water that long normally."

It was, of course, about that time that Star's parents showed up. Upon seeing them just appear in the water Dr. Montgomery passed out.

They managed to get Dr. Montgomery to wake up fairly quickly. Fortunately he hadn't hurt himself when he fell.

Pat and Linda were both out of the water and looking completely human. They had made the transformation while the others woke Dr. Montgomery. Star was still in the water and Jakob had joined him to continue the game they had been playing.

"Are you okay, Dr. Montgomery?" asked Ted.

"Sorry about that. Yes I seem to be all here. By the way, please, call me Derek."

"Okay Derek. I'm glad you're all right. You had us worried there for a moment."

“Sorry about that. I think it was just the shock of seeing them just appear there.”

“Yeah, I forgot to warn you about that. Not that you would have believed it without seeing it. That’s also how Jakob got out of the hospital—he took himself to Star here who brought him back to the shore and had a hand in healing him as I recall.”

“Quite correct Ted,” answered Pat. “Star managed to keep him supplied with enough energy to heal the wounds he had suffered. That’s why he’s back and physically healthy right now.”

“Where are my manners. Derek, this is Pat and his wife Linda. They’re Star’s parents. Pat and Linda this is Derek Montgomery, the psychiatrist that will be helping Jakob work through what was done to him.”

“Pat and Linda? Nice to meet you. I hope this doesn’t seem rude, but those seem to be awfully ordinary names for someone as extraordinary as you are,” replied Dr. Montgomery.

Linda laughed and said, “Indeed they are. Our actual names are unpronounceable to the human vocal apparatus. We use Pat and Linda when we have to go among humans. It’s just easier to say.”

“Shall we sit down and get to know one another? There’s no point in standing when there’s perfectly usable chairs over there,” said Beth.

They all sat down and then Ted began the whole story of what had really happened with Jakob. It was a lengthy retelling and by the time it was done most of them had tears in their eyes. The entire time Jakob and Star played some elaborate game of tag in the pool.

When the retelling was done they all sat in quiet contemplation for a few minutes, then Derek spoke, “I never would have believed this if Jakob had told me. Even now seeing it for myself, it’s difficult to believe. It makes me doubt all the things we supposedly ‘know’ about the world and the creatures within it.”

“That’s one of the reasons we decided it would be better for us to present it rather than to have Jakob tell you about it. This way you know he’s not making something up and can honestly help him rather than trying to get him to admit that the truth is a lie. As you can see, Star plays a very important part of Jakob’s life. They’ll be together a long time I would hazard to say.”

“Now that we have the big show and tell out of the way, how about I fix us some dinner? I would imagine that Jakob will want to eat in here with Star. Is there anything I should avoid for the meal?” asked Beth.

Pat grinned and said “Well I’m not fond of brussels sprouts or hominy, but other than that I’m good. There aren’t any foods we can’t eat, so anything really should be fine.”

“That’s good, because I don’t like either of those myself,” laughed Beth as she left the pool area to start cooking.

“How do you all know English so well and even speak with a local accent?” asked Derek.

“Linda and I spent a few years pretending to be human. I even started my own business. It’s still in business and the profits are deposited into an account for me so that when I go to the surface world I have a bit of money to work with. It’s nothing elaborate but it is sufficient.”

“Well, that’s a lot more mundane than I was expecting. I was half expecting to hear you say that you can speak any language you wish to or something like that.”

“No, but Linda and I speak quite a few. Although some like ancient Latin are dead languages now. We do try to keep in touch with the surface world occasionally.”

“So why is it that Star can’t speak English, yet he speaks your own tongue just fine?”

“That’s a question of maturity. Our race remains as juveniles until their perfect mate is born. The *nexus* creates a bond between perfect mates so that when both are the same apparent age then they begin to age together. Right now Star is still a few years ahead of Jakob, so Star remains a juvenile until their ages align. Then the bond between them becomes far stronger and Star will be able to change to full human and use a human vocal apparatus. His comprehension of English is quite advanced however.”

“So you’re saying that right now Star doesn’t have vocal chords like we do?”

“Something like that. Essentially he needs a set of lungs and vocal chords to speak and doesn’t have them just yet. Give him a few years and he will gain them. Although it is difficult to say what else will change for Jakob. We have no recorded instances of one of our kind bonding to a human before.”

“So Jakob is the first? What does that mean for your people?”

“We won’t know that until a few years pass and we see if Jakob can shift his form or not. If he can’t, then he will not be able to join our society at all. He would be limited to the surface and Star would probably stay with him most, if not all, of the time. There is no reason to worry about it though. We will just wait and see how things transpire and adjust as we need to.”

“That’s quite a flexible attitude about it. Most humans would be hurt at the thought that their own child might have to live far away.”

“Oh for us it would not be far away. He could always come visit and we can do likewise. Once the age difference decreases we could all meet up and go to a restaurant or something.”

“Food is ready everybody! If I can get some help we can setup on the poolside table and eat in here so we can all be together.” said Beth as she walked in from the other room.

Everybody pitched in save Star who couldn’t leave the water. They had a nice dinner and chit chatted during it. Star ate at the side of the pool and seemed to enjoy the flavors of the casserole Beth had put together.

“Well folks, I hate to break up the fun but I have to be at work early in the morning. It was nice meeting you all and I’ll have my secretary call you to make an appointment for Jakob next week. Okay?”

“That’s fine Derek. I carry my cell with me all the time so have her call me there. She should have the number.” responded Ted.

“Good night Derek,” said Pat and Linda almost at the same time.

Star even clicked something out and Linda translated as “That’s a goodbye from Star as well.”

Eventually the evening came to an end. Jakob had conked out and had to be carried back to his bed. Star whistled a good night to them and left right behind his parents.



Finally. After days of waiting, the envelope he had been expecting arrived. He darted back to his apartment and ripped it open. Sure enough, there was a deposit receipt for \$500,000 into his secondary account. He quickly made a few phone calls and rapidly had the money transferred to an overseas account to prevent the payer from going back on his word. Soon it was all done and he had his payment. Now the real fun began.

His target was both the boy and the cop that was guarding him and anybody else who got in the way. He knew that the wife worked at the hospital at some high paying job and that was the best place to learn more about their whereabouts. Tomorrow would be an interesting day. When found he got to do anything he wanted as long as both of them died. He had plans for this one. The brat kid had escaped a death that was almost guaranteed. He wanted to know *how* he had escaped. There should have been no way the kid could have gotten out of the concrete.

He began moving around the room slowly accumulating pieces of something. Each was hidden with a precision that bespoke of an ex-military operative. Shortly he had all the pieces together and had a long range sniper rifle ready to go. His usual modus operandi was to shoot from as far away as he could and this time would be no exception. His previous attempts had been only half-hearted since he hadn’t been paid yet. Now it was time to get serious, and the game was about to begin.

He pulled out a map and marked all the places he had seen either the cop or the kid. A red dot was carefully placed on each location. He could bet that they wouldn’t go near the school again or the police station. But the hospital was a good bet. The kid would be in all kinds of hurt after what had been done to him. How he escaped that first time was unknown as of yet, but he would find out that and everything else he wanted to know.

The map indicated he probably had a five mile radius circle to search. It seemed all too convenient so he began to go over the map again. Nothing new appeared but he did begin to wonder what he had missed. He *knew* there was something else but he couldn’t see it just yet.

Then it hit him. The boat! How could he have forgotten that. He had taken the kid almost a mile out to sea before dumping him. How did he get from that far out at sea to shore? Something was missing and now that he had thought about it he wondered if it was the same method the kid used to escape from the cop that had tried to off him in the hospital. Now that he was on the right track he also wondered how the kid had been walking around so well. He knew that the kid had several broken bones. There’s no way he should be up and mobile this soon. The more he thought about it, the more he began to realize it was circular reasoning. He couldn’t solve it without more information, so he made his plans for the hospital the next day and went to bed.

Chapter 11

The next day dawned bright and clear. No sign of the clouds that are so common late in fall. Ted was still asleep and Beth was enjoying a little alone time in the kitchen when a sleepy Jakob walked in.

“Good morning sleepyhead,” said Beth.

“Morning,” mumbled Jakob as he headed to the restroom.

When Jakob returned he looked a little more alert. He quickly realized he was still naked and ran back into his room, only to come back out a few minutes later in shorts.

“Jakob, it’s okay to go naked. Remember what Ted said?”

“Yeah, but you’re a girl,” said Jakob as a big blush climbed his face.

“Well, I’ll tell you what. Around the house you can treat me like one of the guys. I saw you and Ted yesterday and you weren’t embarrassed. Was that because Star was there?”

“Kinda. I forgot about the rest of you. I’m sorry,” said Jakob looking depressed.

“Jakob honey, it’s okay. You were excited and had fun. Remember we want you to be happy and Star obviously makes you happy. That’s all that’s important. Now come on over here and let’s figure out what to do about breakfast.”

Jakob seemed more enthusiastic about breakfast.

“Jakob, do you like ham and scrambled eggs?”

“Yes.”

“Then how about I make something that Ted and I both enjoy. Basically you make scrambled eggs, put some onion and green pepper in it, and some canned ham. It’s like an omelet without the shape.”

“Mmmm, that sounds good Beth. Do we have any peanut butter and biscuits? That would go good with that.”

“We certainly do Jakob. I’ll put some biscuits on as well. Oh and there’s strawberry jelly here too.”

“Thank you,” said Jakob.

“I want to ask some questions to get to know you Jakob, so how about we make it a game. You ask me one question about me and I’ll answer, and then I’ll ask you one question about you and you get to answer.”

“Ummm, okay, sure. Do I have to go first though?”

“Not at all. I just wanted you to have the opportunity to. So I’ll go first. What’s your middle name?”

“Anthony. What’s your middle name?”

“Denise. How old are you?”

“Eight, but I’ll be nine in October. How old are you?”

“I’m 31. Where were you born?”

“New York City. Where were you born?”

“Denver. When’s your birthday?”

“October 30th. When is your and Ted’s birthdays?”

“Mine is April 2nd, Ted’s is November 16th. What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue. What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue, but I like some greens too. What’s your favorite animal for a pet?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had one. What’s your favorite pet?”

“I just love animals. It could be any kind and I would get attached to it. I’ve had cats, dogs, birds, lizards, frogs, and fish as pets. Do you have any hobbies?”

“Not really. Mom and dad wouldn’t get me anything to try it out. I think I like computers, at least I do at school when I get to use one. I’m beginning to like swimming. What hobbies do you have?”

“Well, I like reading, cooking, origami, and painting. Do you like sports?”

“No! My dad liked to drink and watch them. It always meant trouble for me. Do you like sports?”

“Nope. I’m more an artsy sort of girl. Do you like school?”

“I like to learn things, but the other kids pick on me all the time, so not really. It would be okay without the other kids. Did you like school?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I was picked on too, but I finished high school and went to college to get training for my job. What’s your favorite subject in school?”

“Reading. Do you and Ted really want to be my family?”

Beth sat there a bit shocked, but responded quickly with, “Yes, we do Jakob. Ted and I can’t have children of our own. We’ve talked about adopting many times but Ted wasn’t sure about it yet. I can tell you this Jakob, Ted and I love you very much and we’ll help you in any way we can. If you think it best to go into foster care with someone else we will respect that. I hope that you’ll choose to stay with us though.”

Jakob sat there amazed at the open expression on Beth’s face. In his eight short years he had never had anyone say they loved him. He’d never even had parents hug him before. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea of being one of the Andrews family. His next question demonstrated just how much he had missed out on.

“If you adopt me, can I change my name to Andrews?”

“That’s part of the adoption process sweetie. It would have to happen that way. Don’t you like your last name?”

“No. It reminds me of too much hurty stuff. Can I get a hug?”

“You never have to ask that Jakob. Just come over here and get one anytime,” said Beth opening her arms to give him a huge hug.

“I want you to be my family. You all like me.” said Jakob through a big hug.

When Beth looked down at Jakob his face was covered in tears. She hugged him tighter and said, “It’s all right sweetie. We want to adopt you and will always do the best we can for you. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Jakob through a snuffle.

Just then Ted entered from the other bedroom. Seeing the hug going on he asked, “Can I get a hug too?”

Jakob let go of Beth and ran to Ted and gave him a big hug.

“Thanks Jakob. I appreciate that very much.”

“I want you all to adopt me. You actually like me and I don’t want to lose that.”

“Jakob we don’t just like you, we love you too sweetie,” said Beth.

They all had a big three way hug for a few minutes.

“So, how about we eat, wait the 30 minutes for our meal to settle, and then go see about swimming lessons?” said Ted.

“Okay!” said Jakob.

They sat down and had a nice breakfast, all the while talking about the day.

“So, aside from swimming with Star, what would you like to do today? Any thoughts? I’d request that we stay here inside for safety’s sake. Whoever wants to hurt Jakob is getting serious about it.”

“Swimming is fine for me,” said Jakob.

“We can swim for a while, maybe watch tv or play a card game, and probably swim some more,” laughed Beth.

“For now, let’s watch the news and see what’s going on in town—if that’s okay with everybody,” said Ted.

They sat down, and after a few minutes Jakob climbed into Ted’s lap and sat with him. There was a brief mention of the shooting, but nothing substantial enough for Ted to think it was over.

Jakob watched the clock more than the tv set and when 30 minutes was up he said, “Let’s swim!” and took off for the pool.

Despite his previous embarrassment, Jakob was quick to shuck his shorts and jump into the warm water. Ted was only a few feet behind Jakob in getting into the pool. Once in he promptly started a splash fight with Jakob.

Beth stayed behind and cleaned up after breakfast then grabbed a book and sat in a pool chair to read for a while.

The fun and games continued until Star suddenly appeared in the midst of them and splashed them all with a quick flick of his tail. At the point Ted said he was out and left Jakob and Star to play.

“So how do you think Jakob’s doing so far hon?” asked Beth.

“I’d say he’s got a long way to go, but having Star around certainly cheers him up. He’s also becoming more comfortable with us. It really makes me feel good having him accept us as a family.”

“Same here. He’s come a long way, but the hard part will start when he starts seeing Dr. Montgomery.”

“Yeah, I’m more worried about that than I am how he handles being labeled as gay.”

“That’s definitely something to worry about as well, but at least we have a few years before that becomes an issue. That’s one reason I wanted to stress that nudity is okay, that way when Star or his family show up, nobody will be embarrassed at the lack of clothing. Hopefully by the time that comes up they will be comfortable enough to not be embarrassed by erections. You and I both know that will be an issue, if it isn’t already.”

“Well, that will be a talk we can have together as a family. No reason to have just the guys there for it. Plus if we treat it as a family discussion they may not be quite as embarrassed through the talk.”

Ted laughed, “Well at least we have four or five years before that becomes an issue. I’m going to try really hard to not get embarrassed by that talk, but I still will be.”

“You might want to have the talk about erections sooner rather than later. We can just ignore it and not make an issue out of it, but I think he would feel better knowing that it just happens and it’s okay.”

“That’s a good point. I’ll try to work that in today while Star is still here. That way I can tell them both it’s okay. Star won’t have to worry about that for awhile fortunately for him.”

Beth looked at the boys playing and then commented “You know, it’s good to see them playing like that. I’ve been worried about how Jakob’s going to handle all that happened to him. Seeing him like this gives me hope that he’ll turn out okay after all. I guess there’s nothing that TLC can’t fix in the long term.”

“Jakob’s certainly more adventuresome while Star’s around, although I must say that he seems to have accepted us readily enough. I worry too, but not as much as I did before. I think having Star and his folks around all the time will help mitigate what will come in therapy with Dr. Montgomery.”

“Why don’t we both swim with them for a while. Maybe some fun playtime would be good for all of us. Plus, it will give us a chance to have a discussion with both of them too”

“Suits me,” said Beth.

They both undressed and jumped into the pool, in a manner intended specifically to splash both of the boys. The splash war went on for about twenty minutes when Ted decided now was as good a time as any.

“Hey boys, why don’t you all come over here to the shallow end for a few minutes. We want to talk about something with you.”

Everyone gathered in the shallow end of the pool, which was almost too shallow for Star, and got comfortable.

“Now, we need to talk to you both about something that most people consider embarrassing. Star, you might already know this but even if you don’t you will probably have to deal with it in a few years once Jakob here catches up to you in growth. What I wanted to talk to you about is erections. Do you know what your penis is?”

“Nope,” said Jakob while Star nodded his head that he did know.

“Okay, the thing that hangs between your legs that you pee out of is called your penis. I’m sure by now you’ve noticed that sometimes it gets stiff and stands up, right?”

“Yeah, what causes that?” asked Jakob.

“Well, to be honest there are a lot of reasons it can happen. What we wanted to tell you is that around here and in our house when it gets done there is nothing to be embarrassed about. You don’t have to run and hide or anything like that. Since we’re being casual about nudity we can be casual about that too. Trust me on this, sometimes you will get an erection for no apparent reason—it just happens. We just wanted you to know that around us it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Now around other people, you might want to hide it because some people consider that part of the body to be ‘dirty’ for some reason and as such think it should be hidden all the time.”

“So I don’t have to hide it in the morning if I don’t want to?”

“That’s right Jakob. This goes for you as well Star once you can change forms, okay?”

Star chittered something and Jakob said “That’s a yes.”

“What we’re trying to do is to have a home were there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Basically we’re trying to make sure that Star and his family aren’t embarrassed by showing up nude, or if Star here pops an erection during the shape change, okay?”

“Cool. Thanks Ted.”

“You’re welcome boys. Now, I’d say it’s time for Splash Fight!” and then Ted dunked Jakob.

After another big splash fight, complete with the others finally dunking Ted, Beth heard her cell phone ring. “I’ll be right back, need to get the phone.”

“Hello?”

“Hey Beth, it’s Nurse Manning at the cardiac desk. I had just a call from someone named Dr. Albien wanting to speak to you on a consult. It sounded fishy to me so I checked the state licensing board and there isn’t a Dr. Albien. Now it might be out of state, but I was suspicious. He left a call back number if you want it.”

“Yeah, you better give it to me, I’ll have my husband check it out. Okay, I have paper and pencil so go ahead.”

Beth wrote the information down and then said, “Okay, I’m going to get my husband out of the pool and see if he can figure anything out. Thanks!”

“No problem, was glad to help.”

Beth hung up and went to get Ted out of the pool.

“Hey Ted! Could you come here, I think I need your professional opinion.”

Ted swam across the pool and exited via the stairs in the shallow end.

“What’s the problem love?” asked Ted.

“Got a suspicious phone call at work. Nurse Manning called me and said she had a call from a ‘Dr. Albien’ wanting to consult on a case. I don’t know any doctor by that name, and anyway doctors don’t consult with profusionists except in very rare circumstances. Nurse Manning also checked the state registry and there is no licensed individual with that name in the state. If he’s practicing in state he would have to be registered.”

“Ahh, and you want me to check out the number for you?”

“That and the name. Maybe I’m being paranoid, but there’s been too many shots fired and too many explosives found to take chances.”

“Okay, let me have that paper and I’ll go call Dave and see if he can dig something up on it for me.”

“Thanks love.”

Ted walked into the other room, got his phone, and called the station.

“Police department. How can I help you?” said the voice on the phone.

“It’s Officer Andrews, can I speak to Sgt. Smythe please?”

“One moment while I transfer you.”

“Thanks,” replied Ted.

It took almost a minute before anyone answered the phone. Dave must have been doing something.

“Sgt. Smythe.”

“Dave, it’s Ted Andrews. I need a favor.”

“Sure Ted, I’ll do what I can. What do you need?”

“My wife just received a disturbing phone call at her office in the hospital. Someone claiming to be a Dr. Albien wanted her to consult on a case. Problem is that profusionists don’t do consults that way, or at least very rarely. He left a number and I was wondering if you could run it for us to see if it’s legit. I worry that it might be the mad man that’s been after Jakob trying to track us down.”

“Sure, give me half an hour or so and I’ll call you back on your cell.”

“Thanks Dave, I appreciate it.”

Ted hung up and back into the pool area to find Beth.

“Beth, Dave is going to run the number and check the database to see if Dr. Albien shows up or not.”

“Thanks love.”

“No problem. Anything to keep us all safe.”

Ted jumped back into the pool and swam laps while the boys played some game involving an awful lot of splashing and yelling.

Some time later Ted’s phone rang and he got out of the pool to get it.

“Hello?”

“Ted, it’s Dave at the station. I did some checking on that number. It’s a prepaid cell so no registration on it of any kind. Did find one thing out though. It turns out there really was a Dr. Albien in the state, but he died about ten years ago due to gun fire. Sounds like we might have either a copycat or the real killer of Dr. Albien hunting for you and Jakob.”

“Crap. How’s the feds doing with the crime scene stuff?”

“Nothing new has turned up but they’re still checking things out. Want me to sick them on this number?”

“You bet. Maybe they can turn something up about it. Thanks for the help Dave.”

“Any time Ted. Just take care of that kid for us, okay?”

“No sweat Dave.”

Chapter 12

It took some effort, but greasing a few palms told him that the wife's name was Beth and that she worked at the hospital. It was time to get them to hole up so he could take his time in killing them.

He got a prepaid cell phone and called the hospital.

"Memorial Hospital, how may I direct your call?"

"Beth Andrews, please."

"One moment please while I transfer you to that department."

"No problem."

"Cardiac, this is Nurse Manning, what can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if I could speak to Beth Andrews. This is Dr. Albien and I need her for a patient consult."

"I'm sorry sir, but Ms. Andrews is on leave for the next few weeks. Can someone else help you?"

"No, no I'm sorry but I wanted to talk to her. Thanks anyway."

This was perfect. Now the nurse will be suspicious and will call Beth to let her know about it. It was time to ditch the prepaid phone. He drove out of town for an hour and then tossed the phone he had called from into the river. It should short out and that would be the end of that loose end.

He took a leisurely route back into town. He didn't really care which route he took so long as it was different from the one he took out. It turned out to be a nice quiet drive with some decent fall foliage. An unexpected bonus for this days work.

He went back to the run down apartment he had been living in, wiped it down, loaded up his gear, and left it for the last time. Outside he loaded the few things he had into a stolen car and then went back into the building. While inside he took out a small device somewhat larger than a pack of cigarettes. He had picked this building because it was old, the timbers it was made from were dried out, and most of the furniture in the entire building would go up in flames with no accelerant needed. He set the small device up, started a timer, and left the building. In 20 minutes it would ignite white phosphorous and burn the building to the ground. The white phosphorous would leave a trail that by it's nature would indicate arson, which is just what he wanted.

Now for the next move. He headed back to the school that the kid attends. He arrived late in the afternoon so that he could see what was going on. Since most grade school teachers have to work past the end of classes he should find what he was after easily enough. He entered the public library again and climbed the stairs up to the partially hidden spot he had used previously.

He had to wait almost an hour for the right teacher to come out. He had a silencer on his sniper rifle. It greatly reduced the range of the weapon but prevented hurried escapes too.

He saw her coming out of the building. He lined up the sights and waited for her to near her car. Once she started heading toward a car he fired a single shot. He then broke down his rifle, hid it in his bag and left again.

Assassinations were simply the best way to get someone to make stupid mistakes. He was fairly sure that the boy and his guardian would attend the funeral for the kid's teacher, no matter what the risk.

Since the kid's guardian was a cop he had another stop planned, just as a precaution.

He drove over to the police station and parked across the street at a shopping mall. The mall was the perfect spot for the next part of his plan. He entered with his needed equipment in a backpack and headed towards the elevator. Getting access to the roof was simple for someone with his skills. He found the most likely door, picked the lock, and about a minute later was on the roof. He edged over to the side facing the police station and began to unload his backpack. What he had was a small rocket launcher and a few canisters of a knock out gas. It shouldn't kill anyone, but it would keep them unconscious for about an hour. The nice part was that the gas was colorless and without odor so it had a chance of getting the entire station. He lined up his shot, holding back from the edge so nobody on the ground saw him. He fired, hid the launcher inside an air handler unit, and headed back down. He

didn't see another person until he reached the mall itself. From there it was chaotic and busy and he lost himself in the crowd with no particular destination. Eventually he headed out to his car and pulled away without attracting any special attention.

Next he drove to the hospital and parked. He pulled out a set of the blue clothes that most hospitals use and pulled them on quickly in the car. Next he got out two more small packages of white phosphorous fire starters and put them in his pocket. He got out of the car and headed into the building like he owned the place. He looked around for an elevator and found one that went to the basement. Most hospitals go for efficient design so the laundry for sheets and the like were in the basement out of the way of everybody. He wandered around keeping a firm, determined look on his face. Occasionally someone would try to get his attention to ask a question but he would brush them off and continue on his way.

Eventually he made his way to the laundry facility. Upon entering there were two workers busy doing laundry. He walked over to them and boldly asked them "Have you all gotten the sheets done for fourth floor yet? We need them in a hurry."

The worker looking confused said, "Sheets for fourth? We haven't gotten any that I know of yet. Are you sure you sent them down?"

"Of course I'm sure. I sent them down myself. They should be down here somewhere. Where would the incoming soiled linens be put?"

"Over here, I'll show you."

As the guy turned around to head towards a stack, he dropped one of the small packages into a laundry about to go into the dryer. He then followed the guy over to the incoming laundry area. Sure enough there were no carts from fourth floor.

"We have to find them. We need those done as soon as possible. Can the two of you help me find them?"

"Well we aren't supposed to leave, but the process down here is mostly automatic these days so sure, we'll help. You check around in here just to be sure. Stan and I will check the elevators and the chute system."

"Thanks for helping. I really appreciate it."

As the two workers went into an elevator he got to work. He checked around the dryers and sure enough there was a great deal of lint built up. They were probably supposed to clean it, but it looked like it hadn't been touched in several years. He carefully planted the other package among the lint so it wasn't obvious. He made sure the two timers were set for an hour and then left quickly. He knew the two workers would be confused and remember him, but they should remember a nurse from fourth floor and hopefully not connect it to him right away. That step came much later.

He stepped into a bathroom and took off the green scrubs routinely worn by many people in a hospital. He dropped the clothes into the trash, covered them with paper towels, and then walked back out of the hospital with nobody the wiser.

Now he had set the city up for some grand chaos, and the best part was that it would confuse the police and cause them to split their efforts. He knew the FBI was in town and checking out the kids parents house and the cops house, but they should just help to confuse the issue. The local police and the feds rarely work together well and with this much confusion it should be a masterpiece of confusion.

He still had about 45 minutes to go before the bombs went off at the hospital. That should be enough time for the cops to wake up, realize what had happened to them, and start checking the building out. Then while they are searching the building, the hospital will go up. Something was still missing though. One piece of the game he was playing with law enforcement. Then he had it. He could see the main water tower for the town up on some hills just to the west of town. If he hurried he could make it up there before the bombs went off.

He set out following the speed limit and being careful to do nothing out of the ordinary. Once he was clear of town he did speed it up a bit, but only until he arrived at the water tower. He took his last white phosphorous bomb and planted it on the large feed pipe that supplied the city with water pressure. He set it for 30 minutes and then left.

Now the water tower would go before the hospital, which would mean they wouldn't be able to get water to help put out any fires that developed. It was the perfect last gambit to keep everybody confused and in a panic.

He took his time driving back to town. He knew that all hell would break loose shortly. That was evident from the police cars that passed him with their lights and sirens blaring heading towards the police station. Some would have been dispatched to start the investigation of the teachers death, but the rest would be on their way to the station to find out if everybody was okay.

He killed some time just driving around town a bit. He was just turning onto the street with the hospital when he saw smoke and people evacuating the building. He smiled and it was a cold, dead thing to see. When the first firetruck pulled up he parked nearby and waited for the fireman to leave to investigate. As they left, he grabbed an extra coat and suit with sealed mask and quickly put them on. He then strode into the hospital with the other men

like he was there to help. At the first chance, he ditched the police team and headed to the stairs to the fourth floor. This was his real goal all along.

On the fourth floor chaos reigned. Nurses were hurrying to get patients out of the building, but without operational elevators there was no way to get the bed bound patients out of the building.

As he arrived he told the first person he saw, "You need to get out of here. The fire is getting close. I'm here to start creating a fire break. Go go go!"

Sure enough, as he had expected, the people responded more like animals than people. The fear overcame them and they bolted to the stairs as fast as they could. He now had a few minutes to get the records he wanted.

He got to their computer system and found it locked. But that was okay, all he really needed was in the rolodex sitting on the desk. He paged through it and found the cell number of Beth Andrews. He ripped it out and headed back down the stairs. Now the rest of the fun could begin. He took off his suit, found the storage for hospital uniforms and put on a doctors white coat. He took time to comb his hair and make sure he looked professional and then headed back down the stairs himself. Once at the lobby he ran like the building was on fire and headed out the front doors, where he milled around for a little while just to appear normal. The firefighters were perplexed about how to stop the fire since they had no water to work with. Inwardly he snickered at their pathetic attempts. Water wouldn't put out a white phosphorous fire—it would only put out the secondary fires that were ignited by the primary.

Finally there were enough people outside that it wouldn't look weird for him to leave. He calmly walked over to his car, got in, and left.

He found a nice shady spot away from all the excitement and pulled over. He now had the number, all he needed to do was to reprogram the prepaid to her number and he could listen in on them, or freak them out by calling them. He pulled out a surprisingly small device from his bag and connected it to the phone. He modified the number of the phone to match Beth's phone and then he waited for someone to call.



Beth's phone rang. She answered with, "Hello?"

"Hi Beth, this is Mildred from the hospital. I wanted to let you know to stay away. There's a very large fire and they're having to evacuate everybody. The rumor going around is that someone set the blaze in the laundry room in the basement."

"Holy crap! Are the police and fire there yet?"

"The police haven't been seen, but the fire department is here. Nothing they can do though. It seems somehow the main water tower in town was ruptured and there's not enough water pressure to run the hoses."

"I'd better tell my husband so he can call the station. Stay safe Mildred."

"Thanks, you do that too, and stay away from the hospital. Rumor going around is that this was aimed at you."

"Will do Mildred. Take care."

"Bye."

"Ted! Come here quickly!"

Ted came running when Beth called for him like that.

"Ted something is wrong. There's an enormous fire at the hospital and the rumor going around is that it was set for me. Mildred just called and said that the fire department is on site but that the water is out so they can't run the hoses. She also said that the police haven't shown up at all. Sounds like something is wrong."

"Thanks for getting me love. I'll call the station right now and see what's going on."

Ted grabbed his cell and dialed the station number. The phone rang and rang, but there wasn't an answer.

"Something is very wrong. We need to stay here since they don't know where we are yet, but I bet all of this is aimed at getting rid of Jakob. Someone is serious about it."

Ted went to see Star in the pool and to ask him some questions.

"Star! Could you two come over here for a minute?"

Star and Jakob came at his call and waited patiently.

"This is getting bad. Whoever is trying to kill Jakob is causing all kinds of chaos around town. It seems they've damaged the water tower, set the hospital on fire, and done something to the police station. Is there a way you, maybe with the help of your family, could get us out of here if needed? I want to use this as a safe haven for the moment but it's only got the one door and that's dangerous if they find us.

Star shook his head to indicate that no, there was nothing his family could do. He pantomimed that he could get Jakob out, but not the parents.

"Okay Star, you and Jakob stay close together. If anything goes wrong get out of here. Beth and I will be fine and will take care of the problem. Okay?"

Both boys solemnly nodded their head, indicating that they would leave if it got bad.

Ted returned to the living room and sat down. He decided to try calling the station again. This time he got a groggy answer.

“Hello? Ummm, Police Station.”

“This is Ted Andrews, is Sgt. Smythe around?”

“I’m not sure if he’s conscious yet. Let me check.”

The phone was set on the desk and Ted could hear a lot of moaning and the sounds of people moving unsteadily.

“This is Smythe. What’s going on Ted? We’re kind of busy here right now.”

“Have you heard of all the attacks around town? From what I’m told the water tower is out of service and the hospital is on fire.”

“Add the police station was bombed and a teacher was murdered and you’ve got what’s going on Ted.”

“Bombed?”

“Yeah, with some kind of knock out gas. By the time we found the broken window the gas had gotten to most of us. It was just pure bad luck that it hit near a cold air return for the furnace system. It got the whole station.”

“Damn. No wonder I couldn’t reach anyone earlier. I’m glad you’re coming around, but I’m worried that this may be targeting Jakob still. The hospital thing worries me.”

“Well add a teacher to the list of things that affect you. Didn’t you have Mrs. Choate for a teacher? Well she’s the one that was assassinated.”

“Oh no!” cried Ted. “I took Jakob to talk to her about getting assignments for the rest of the year. Actually, someone took a shot at us there too.”

“Yeah. This is getting serious. I spoke to the FBI as soon as I woke up. They think it’s a hired killer that they nick named ‘Chaos’. They called him that because that’s what he does everywhere. He causes so much ruckus and confusion that nobody has a chance to figure out what the intended target was until he’s long gone. He’s a damned smooth operator too. The FBI have been hunting him for years and he evades them every time. The closest they’ve come to catching him was a chance description by someone who they think saw him. All they got was tall, dark haired, and wearing a coat.”

“Dave, right now nobody except you knows where we are staying, so keep that information to yourself for me. I’m afraid to leave the place and put Jakob at more risk than I have to. We have an escape plan for Jakob should something go wrong, but Beth and I will be stuck right in the middle of things.”

“Okay Ted. You take care of yourselves and if something comes up, don’t hesitate to call. I’ll have units there as fast as I can.”

“Something tells me that by the time you got units here, we’d be dead already, but thanks for the offer.”

“No problem Ted. Be safe.”

As he relayed the conversation to Beth she exclaimed, “Chaos sounds like a fitting name for this guy.”

“It certainly does hon. We just have to hole up here until Dave gets us the all clear.”

He went into the pool area again, and spoke to the boys.

“Okay guys, here’s the deal. Someone had damaged the water tower to the town and then set fire to the hospital. They’re getting everybody out, but they can’t stop the blaze without water. Also I have bad news Jakob. Can you be strong for me?”

“I don’t know if I want to hear it, but okay.”

“Mrs. Choate was murdered. The police are working to find out who did it and why. They haven’t got many clues except that they think it all ties in to you.”

Jakob cried a little bit. Mrs. Choate had been the only teacher to ever be kind to him. Other kids thought she was too harsh but he got to see the honest and caring person that she was. Ted and Star hugged him and both cried a little bit, though for vastly different reasons. Star didn’t know her but was upset because Jakob was. Ted had had Mrs. Choate as a teacher and had liked her too.

Chapter 13

Jakob and Star were in the pool again. They seemed to be lost, staring into each others eyes and holding hands. To those who knew no better, it almost appeared like they were dating. Those familiar with *nexus* training would immediately recognize it as a trance to help the bonding process. They had been at it for over an hour. Jakob was getting better at tapping into the *nexus* when he wanted to rather than only in emergency, but he still was having trouble controlling the energy it provided once he had embraced it.

Something was different this time. Star felt an amazing depth of fear from Jakob. The fear had no particular source, but rather was all encompassing. He was afraid of the water, he was afraid of people, he was afraid to trust, and worst of all he was afraid to love anyone. Star realized as he was feeling all of this that Jakob had finally broken through a barrier and was fully enmeshed with the *nexus*. He started to move to point this out to Jakob and as he moved the connection broke and Star stopped feeling his mate's emotions.

Star gently pulled on Jakob's arm and moved to the side of the pool. They had partially solved the communication problem by using a crayon and some of the wax paper that came with the kitchen. It wasn't great, but it allowed them to communicate better. Jakob's command of his native language was improving but there were some sounds that a human throat simply could not produce. No amount of practice or training would help him in that regard.

Star wrote, "Why afraid?"

Jakob thought about it for a moment, and then realized that the two of them had connected because he remembered feeling warm and loved for that period. He thought about the question Jakob was asking and tried to come up with an answer that made sense. Finally he grabbed Star's hand and said, "I think that's something Dr. Montgomery will have to help me with. I think it's related to my past but I don't know for sure."

Star nodded his head and said "Yes" in his own tongue.

Star looked at Jakob and then took his hands and headed out into deeper water. He knew that Jakob was afraid of the deep end, but he wanted him to see this from a different perspective. Holding hands Jakob walked into the deep end and jumped a little when the water covered his head. Then he finally opened his mouth and inhaled water. It was strange for him but he was somehow able to breathe water just as easily as air—as long as he was touching Jakob anyway. They went to the very deepest part of the pool. Star indicated that he should sit on the bottom and look at the surface.

Jakob looked up and noticed how nice the surface looked. The patterns that were forming from waves hitting the sides and the colors that were brought into existence as small rainbows formed due to the mist in the air. He then looked back at Star and noticed a slight smile. When his eyes met Star's they connected stronger than they ever had. It seemed that Star's parents were right, the bond with the *nexus* was stronger in the water than out of it. As he was thinking along those lines he felt the connection change and suddenly he was in the shallow end of the pool. Still underwater and still staring into Star's eyes, but in a new place. The feelings coming from Star were of victory and something akin to the winning of a battle. Jakob wasn't sure what had just happened so he motioned him to the surface and stood up. Getting all the water out of his lungs took a few coughs and then he went for the wax paper and crayons.

He immediately asked Star, "Was that a blend? Did you do that?"

Star carefully wrote, "It was a blend, but you did it."

"But how did I do that? I wasn't trying to do that."

Star wrote, "Your fear of deep water and the desire to be in shallow water."

"So because I was afraid of where I was at, it took me to where I was thinking of, which was the shallow end of the pool?"

Star chirped, "Yes."

"Let's try that again! I want to be able to do that on purpose!"

The two boys spent the next couple of hours blending between one end of the pool and the other. Finally, Jakob was getting tired and they called for a rest break. Jakob laid on the side of the pool while Star floated beside him, still holding his hand. It seemed like physical contact was a necessary thing, on the same level as breathing. The more time they spent together the easier it became to read emotions from each other.

At one point while they were still in the deep end and focusing, something else happened. For no apparent reason their thoughts, for just a moment, became one and a brilliant emerald green light covered the pool and it's surroundings. This scared Jakob who, without thinking, dropped Jakob's hand and started drowning. Star quickly reestablished the physical contact necessary and Jakob could suddenly breathe again. They went to the shallow end and Jakob surfaced doing the coughing routine once more. He looked frightened so Star gave him a hug and held him until he was coherent enough to ask questions.

"What was that? Did we do that? Is that supposed to happen?"

"Let me go get Ted and Beth too," said Jakob.

Ted and Beth were in the living room talking about something when Jakob walked in.

"Can you come to the pool. Something just happened and Star is getting his dad to explain it. It might be something important."

They walked into the pool area just as Pat and Linda arrived.

In English Pat said, "What's going on boys? Star, why did you call like that?"

Star whistled and clicked an answer faster than Jakob would have had a chance to explain.

"The bond is getting stronger! This is truly a good sign! The light you saw is what happens when bond mates link and work together to do something. Watch and Linda and I will join so you can see the result."

Pat and Linda held hands and suddenly a brilliant blue light shone from them.

"Why is the color different?" asked Ted.

"We really don't know what that represents, but it's a pretty common occurrence."

"So it doesn't hurt anything and we didn't do anything wrong?" asked a concerned Jakob.

"That's right. Although I would suggest you practice that during the daytime. At night it would shine through the skylight and curious people might come and investigate."

"Thanks Pat and good job boys. I'm proud of you both!" said Ted.

"Pat, Linda I think we need to go in the other room and have a chat while we let the boys play some more. Some more things have happened and I want to keep you informed," said Ted.

"Okay, let's go."

They walked to the living room and everybody sat down. Ted started out with the worst of it.

"Some bad things happened today and I fear that a lot of people got hurt. Someone nicknamed 'Chaos' did something to the town water tower to cut off water then lit fires in the hospital basement. No idea if there are injuries or not but you can bet there are at least some. That same someone gassed the police department with a knockout gas so the police couldn't help direct people leaving the fire. And to top it all off, Jakob's teacher was murdered and we believe it was the same guy that did all of this. He's trying to find Jakob and is making sure to raise enough chaos around it so nobody can see what he's really after. The boys know of all of this, but it upset them and I didn't want to upset them again without reason."

"That's awful," said Linda. "What do you plan to do about your safety? Jakob and Star can blend if needed but the two of you would have to find a more mundane way out. Any thoughts?"

"We've been talking about options. The windows are usually good exits in an emergency, but I would rather not plan to use the windows just in case there's more than one assassin out there. Do you two have any ideas? We're rather drawing a blank here."

"Well, the only alternative would be to move elsewhere, but it would be unwise to move Star and Jakob right now. They feel safe here and that's critical in this stage of the bonding. We had better come up with another plan of some kind. What all do you know about this assassin? Any quirks to his method that might lead us to an answer?"

"From what I got Dave at the station his nickname is 'Chaos' because he likes to cause collateral damage. Usually he causes so much damage that nobody is ever sure what his target is. This time he either made a mistake or is toying with us. By killing Jakob's teacher he warned us who he was after. But then I think about it some more and think he did that intentionally. He wants to play games with us first."

As they were discussing this, Beth's phone rang. When she looked to see who it was, it showed that she was calling.

"Ted, my phone shows that I'm calling myself. What the heck is that?"

"Crap, it means someone has cloned your phone. Let me take it."

"Hello?"

"Is this Ted? I sure hope so since I want to talk to you so badly."

"It's Ted. Now who are you, how did you get this number, and what do you want?"

“Why Ted, that’s not a very neighborly thing to do. I got this phone number from the hospital, just before I set it on fire of course.”

“Why are you trying to kill us? And why the games?”

“Well Ted, you see it’s like this. I was paid a great deal of money to make sure that you and the boy die. I get to dictate my own terms on how that is done. But I do so love to play with people. It’s a shame they never live through it.”

“We will not only live through it, but we’ll see that you’re caught.”

“I do want to know one thing before I go. How did the kid get out of the concrete. That’s worked in every other case.”

“You bastard!” screamed Ted as he hung up the phone and then turned it off.

He looked at the others and said, “This is bad. That was the killer. He got your phone number from the hospital before he torched the place. He then cloned your phone and could have been listening in on any calls you have made. There other thing he could have done is trace the phone here, but that would mean access to the phone company’s CALEA equipment and I’m not sure he could do that. We need to make plans to move ASAP. One problem is that none of us has a car that is here.”

“We can have the front desk send a limousine around. The killer won’t expect that, I hope. What’s more important is that we have to figure out where to go. We need someplace that has lots of water around it.”

“I would suggest a police safe house, except there was at least one cop involved in this, so he may know the locations - and there aren’t any near water,” said Ted.

“Yeah, I think that idea is out. So is the idea of using any rental houses our families might have—too easy to track that based on who we are,” said Beth.

“What about renting a beach house for a while? It’s out of the way, near the ocean, and probably empty right now,” said Ted.

“I could see that working out. It won’t be anywhere near as private as here but we could make it work.”

“Where’s the phone book? I’ll call around and see if I can find one that’s on the beach and not too pricey.”

Pat interjected, “Wait a minute before you do that Ted. I might be able to help out here. Remember how I told you that I own a company here and get the profits from it?”

“Yeah”

“Well, it turns out that the company I started leases beach houses and the like for tourists. Also has a couple of bed and breakfast’s as well. If I can use your phone I can call and see what’s available and get you in it for free.”

“That would be great, especially if they’re close to the ocean.”

“Most of them are built so that if you open the front door, you step on a boardwalk, and it’s about three steps from there into the ocean. You’re right in that they are mostly deserted this time of year because of the cold water. That’ll be a problem for Jakob here, but we’ll help all we can.”

Ted handed Pat the phone and he made a call. After about 10 minutes of talking to people on the phone he had something worked out and hung up the phone.

“Okay, here’s the deal. I’ve got the best beach house we have reserved for all winter if needed. It’s big enough that Linda and I can stay with you as well. Better yet, it has a jacuzzi that is big enough for 12 people so we can turn off the bubbles and have a heated indoor pool that Jakob and Star can use.”

“How far away is it?” asked Linda.

“You know where Main Street runs into the beach? Go south about 15 miles and it’s there on the coast. Summervale Properties owns a number of houses and stuff along there.”

“All right then. Let’s get our stuff packed up, get the kids, and call the front desk for a limo.”

Ted and Beth went into their room and got the one suitcase each together rapidly. Jakob didn’t have much but a few clothes so they put them in a grocery bag and just carried that along.

The limo arrived about an hour later. The driver loaded the trunk as they piled in. The interior was dark leather and it had all of the amenities, including a snack and drink bar. Jakob made short work of everything in the snack case but wisely didn’t try to get into the bar. Pat, Linda, and Star were probably already there.

Ted gave the driver the map and paid him with the last of the cash he had on him. He also scanned all around looking for concealed people watching them. He didn’t see anything, but that wasn’t reassuring given what Chaos had pulled off already in town.

They took off and Ted was glad the limo had tinted windows. They could barely see out and nobody should be able to see in. It was a short drive to the address Pat had given them. The beach house looked a little nicer than a normal home. It definitely had more windows in the front than Ted was comfortable with, although since they opened directly onto the ocean it wasn’t quite so bad. The rooms were nicely furnished and Pat had had the staff bring in a load of food and supplies sufficient to last a month.

Pat and Linda were there sitting on a couch. As Jakob walked in, he felt a tug in a different direction and made a beeline for the hot tub and Star.

Beth had decided to keep her phone off and had pulled the battery just in case it still tried to communicate with the cell towers around the area. Ted had made the suggestion that they drop it (turned off) in the mail to their own house and let the post office hold it. That way they would get it back eventually and not have to risk having it on them.

They set about opening things and seeing where everything was with gusto. Beth was extremely pleased with the full kitchen rather than the little kitchenette the last place had had. Since going into profusion as a profession she had made cooking her hobby and she did the choice proud. Nothing was particularly hard to make, but she had a knack for seasoning that others seemed to appreciate.

Ted checked the area for security. All of the windows were on the front side of the place, so only the living room, kitchen, and hot tub room had visibility to the outside. Fortunately there were blinds that could be pulled closed to keep people from peering inside. Ted went around turning on lights and closing blinds.

It took all of half an hour for Jakob to get into the hot tub. Most of that time was spent with Pat filling the tub. Jakob was surprised at how long it took to fill a 12-person hot tub. Once it was filled, Jakob shucked his clothes and got in, with Star appearing moments later.

Ted was still worried, so he went outside and checked around the outside of the house. There were no side or back windows which helped and hindered all at the same time. The part that worried him the most was that this Chaos character was prone to going overboard. If he was willing to burn down a hospital to get a phone number, there was no telling what extent he would go to.

It was a quiet evening in the beach house. Linda helped Beth fix some food and everybody ate in the hot tub room so Star could join them. Star, with his father acting as translator, asked why Jakob needed to wait 30 minutes after eating before getting in the water.

“That’s a good question Star. The reason is that with our stomachs filled any strenuous exercise will cause us to get nauseous and possibly throw up.”

When the meal was over, Jakob helped by carrying dishes to the kitchen and the dishwasher. Once his 30 minutes were up though, he was right back in the water with Star. Almost immediately the boys held hands and got lost in each others eyes. Jakob was become more used to the sensations of the *nexus* finally. It amplified many senses and took time to learn to cope with it. Star definitely had the advantage in that area, given his real age. As they concentrated on the *nexus* Jakob began to hear a voice. At first it made no sense whatsoever, but after a time he could at least tell there were words in it. The only problem was that there was nobody else in the room and Star hadn’t said a word.

Jakob asked Star, “Did you hear that voice?”

Star shook his head side to side.

“I heard it and it sounded like it came from the *nexus* itself. Not from someone else connected to it. It was different and almost alien seeming somehow. Should we ask your parents?”

Star nodded his affirmation so Jakob went searching for Pat and Linda.

“Hey Pat, Linda can you all come to the hot tub room for me? I need to see if this is normal or if I’m imagining things.”

Being curious by nature all the adults followed Jakob into the room.

Jakob got back in the water and said, “Is there any way you can listen in on my connection to the *nexus* Pat?”

“Yes, but it will require physical contact. Would it be okay if I put my hands on your shoulders?”

“Sure. I just want to make sure I’m not hearing things.”

Jakob took Star’s hands again and felt Pat’s bigger hands on his shoulders. He then reestablished and strengthened the connection that was always there now. In a few moments the voice came again and it was just beyond his ability to comprehend it. After a minute or two, Jakob weakened the connection and asked Pat, “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah, and I have no idea what it is, but it did come from the *nexus*. No doubt about that. Could you make out any of the words? They seem to be repeating something over and over.”

“Nope, I can hear them and could maybe mimic them while listening, but no idea what it means.”

The conversation was interrupted when a bullet came through the blinds and broke the windows out. A voice from somewhere below said, “Here kitty kitty. Chaos has come home to roost.”

Everybody that could blended out of there. Ted and Beth were stuck but headed downstairs to see if there was anything they could do. Upon arriving downstairs they found the front door wide open, despite Ted having locked it earlier. Standing outside on the boardwalk was a man. He was dressed in dark clothing and had dark brown hair. He looked just like anybody else. Nothing special to draw the eyes attention to him.

“It was so convenient of you to call for a limo. It seems my employer has someone working for the limo company, so it was a simple matter to find out where you were. Now we’re going to play a few games, but first we seem to have one member of your group missing. Where’s the kid?”

“He’s upstairs asleep right now. He’s had an eventful day,” said Ted.

“All the better since he won’t be expecting me when I arrive. We’ve had some good times together that boy and me. I plan to relive them as soon as I’ve finished...”

His long spiel was interrupted by a very large, very angry merman moving fast. He leaped out of the water and hit Chaos in the back of the neck. Ted heard the sound of the neck snapping even from a distance.

A very angry and very tired Pat shifted and was once again human in form.

“Are you okay Pat?” Ted asked the winded merman.

“Will... be... okay... Just need to catch my breath. I’m not a young man anymore you know.”

A few minutes later Linda, Star, and Jakob showed up at the board walk.

There were many tears of joy shed that day, the day Jakob Muellerson was saved.

Note from the author:

Below is the original ending of this piece. It was going to be a last chapter and end the story, but I just liked the characters too much to want to do this to them.



A woman sat in chair beside a hospital bed. The room was like any other hospital room. It smelled faintly of antiseptics and the walls were one of the typical light pastels that hospitals believe cheer people up.

In the bed lay a boy, maybe seven or eight years old. He had dark hair and was covered in sweat. He wasn't moving.

A doctor walks in and walks over to the woman.

"Mrs. Muellerson, I have bad news for you. Your son is in a coma and there is very little brain activity. We don't know when or even if he will ever wake up. Also, just so you know, I've contacted the domestic abuse people at the police department and they are taking you to safe house. The bruise on your face and the bruises and scars on your son's body tell a pretty bad story."

"He killed my son, or might as well have. I wish I had come here before it got this bad. I never believed he would do that to our son."

While the doctor spoke, Jakob dreamed.