

The Destiny Series – a “The Pretender” fanfic by Niceole R. Levy

Author’s Note: Takes place after the season three finale. Per the rules of this repost, no revisions have made from the original posting other than combining the story into one file – so the typos are as old as the story.

And because it’s just an old habit... no, the characters aren’t mine, but the fun was – thanks to the creators for making something so cool I couldn’t resist writing them myself!

Chapter 1 – Left Behind:

Parker struggled to open her eyes but it was useless. After several attempts at lifting the seeming 20 pound weights that were now her eyelids, she mentally commanded herself to stop wasting the energy. Instead, she tried to focus on the swirl of voices she could hear around her. Someone was yelling, arguing about something that was "her choice." She knew that the voice was familiar, but she her brain seemed unable to pull the information as to who was speaking out of its recesses.

Another, more brusque voice told the first speaker to "mind his own business." And she was certain that a female speaker had ordered a security team into the room. Parker tried again to discern the voices, but she found that she was only wasting energy. Only two things were clear to her -- she was somewhere in the Centre, and she felt as if she were nearly dead.

Later that night

It was the third time she heard the sound that Parker began to wake. She wasn't certain what it was, but she knew that an artificial noise was close to her, ringing in her ears like some sort of alarm, only not quite so loud. Again she found herself fighting to make any movement, her body feeling as if it were weighed down by cement. "Focus." She called the command out in her mind, willing her body to do something, anything to let her know that she really was still alive. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, she felt her left hand move on the bed. Better still, she felt her eyelids actually begin to lighten. That was when she heard his voice.

"Miss Parker? Miss Parker, can you hear me?"

She continued to work on opening her eyes, her lids lifting in what seemed an agonizing effort. Her eyes blurred from the sudden intake of light and she fought the urge to close them again.

"Parker."

She heard the voice again and somewhere inside her, she felt a suddenly overwhelming need to move, to run. Something was wrong. There was danger -- somewhere. Someone she loved was in trouble. She knew it was true but she couldn't remember who or why. Desperate, she tried to rise up from the bed only to have her body restrained by two gentle hands, one placed on her forehead, the other taking firm hold of her left hand.

"No, Parker, please don't try to move. You've got to lie very still. Do you understand?"

Somehow, she managed to nod as she sought out the speaker with the strong but gentle voice. That was when she saw his eyes, and she realized how familiar the hold on her hand was, the care he was showing in the way he spoke to and touched her.

"Jarod."

He leaned closer and she was finally able to gain a clear view of his face. Even in her weakened state, she could tell that he looked terrible. He hadn't shaved in several days, nor did it appear that he had slept. And the sadness, God, there was such a sadness in his eyes, even more so than there usually was. "What was causing that?" she wondered silently.

"Why are you here?" She barely managed to croak out the question. Jarod's eyes clouded over with emotion Parker could feel deep in her chest. Something had gone very wrong.

Her father. The thought raced through her mind as quickly as the shot that had placed her in this bed had ripped through her body. Someone had tried -- no, not someone, Raines had tried to kill her father. She remembered something else, too -- pain. The most intense pain she had ever felt in her life.

"My father?" Her voice sounded weak and ragged, and she would have hated it had she the energy to think about it. As it was, she was struggling just to stay awake. She felt Jarod's grip on her hand tighten, but her fears were calmed by the slight smile that crossed his face.

"Your father is fine. Well, not fine, he's worried sick about you, but otherwise --"

Parker nodded, glad to know that he remained unharmed. Some part of her brain told her to ask about Raines, but before she could mount the question, she again heard the beeping sound that had caused her to wake. She was about to ask Jarod what was causing it when Jarod began speaking.

"Parker, there's something we need to talk about before we lose you to dreamland."

She could tell he was trying not to sound worried. She still couldn't figure out why he was here. He'd been ready to leave on the plane, hadn't he? With his father and -- and --

"Parker, do you remember what happened?"

Again she nodded. She could feel her energy waning, and she tried hard to focus on his face in order to stay awake.

"You were shot in the back. The bullet missed your heart, but it did a lot of soft tissue damage and you lost a lot of blood -- and it's still inside of you."

"Why?"

Concern flooded Jarod's face again. He was so worried about her. She wanted to smile at him, to tell him that he didn't need to worry, but fear began to gnaw at her heart. There was something about that look on his face that told her she was facing something far worse than what she'd already been through.

"The bullet is lodged in your lower back. It's not near your spine, Parker. I don't want you to be concerned about that. There's no danger that you'll suffer permanent damage. Do you understand?" She nodded and, reassured, he continued.

"We didn't remove the bullet because of something we found in your lab work. Parker, did you...did you know that you were pregnant?"

The look that she was certain passed over her face gave him the answer. Pregnant? Oh, God. Thomas. Her mind spun as fear took firm hold of her. She was carrying Thomas' child and she had been shot. They had killed her baby -- the last piece of Thomas she had left.

Suddenly, she felt Jarod's hand against her face and realized that he was wiping tears from her cheek that she hadn't even known were falling. His voice filled her mind, calming and reassuring.

"Your baby is alive, Parker. He's the strong-willed, stubborn sort, just like his mother. You probably should have lost him, given everything you've been through, but he's still there. That's his heartbeat on the monitor."

Her body suddenly filled with energy caused from adrenaline, Parker turned her head to the right and saw the fetal heart monitor which, she now realized, had been emanating the beep that had awakened her.

"It's a boy?"

"I did an ultrasound as soon as we realized."

She turned back to face him, sensing that there was more he needed to tell her.

"Parker, the problem is that if we go in to remove the bullet, there is a very strong chance that you will miscarry. The procedure will be too invasive, and -- well, the odds aren't good."

"No." The word came out strong and clear, and Parker realized that her voice, the one she knew and was comfortable with had somehow found its way back into her mouth.

"You should know that your father is in favor of doing the surgery."

"No."

She saw Jarod looking at her, searching her eyes for understanding of the situation she was now in.

"The more advanced your pregnancy becomes, Parker, the more pressure you'll be putting on your back, and on the bullet. You'll be in excruciating pain, and you won't be able to take anything for it without risking --"

Jarod stopped speaking when he felt her grip on his hand tighten. He looked down at their hands, now ferociously bonded together, then back to her face.

"Please, don't let them take my baby."

She wondered what his response would be. In her heart, she knew she had little right to ask him for anything after all she had done to him. Yet, Parker knew that somehow, Jarod was the only person who cared for both her and her son. He leaned still closer to her, softly brushing a few strands of hair from her face as he looked at her.

"I promise you, I won't let anyone hurt you or your son, Parker. Not ever again."

Their eyes were locked now, each seeing in the other someone that had been missing for so long -- their best friend. Parker didn't know how Jarod would protect them, but she knew that he would, no matter what it took. Suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion, Parker felt her eyelids begin to close. She was tempted to fight until she heard Jarod's voice in her ear once more.

"Listen to his heart, Parker. It's so strong. He'll always be with you. He's the way that Thomas left behind his love for you."

Chapter 2 – A New Day:

Jarod stared at the medical reports in front of him, reading them with greater attention than any materials he had ever studied before. Thankfully, the news was good. Three weeks past the shooting, Miss Parker was nearing as full a recovery as could be expected, considering she was still facing major surgery following her pregnancy.

The news he had really been hoping for came in the later pages of the report. Just to be certain, he re-read them again, and then quickly stood to push the buzzer that Mr. Parker had instructed the Centre to install in Jarod's cell. After a moment, Sam entered. He immediately registered the look on Jarod's face.

"Good news?" Jarod smiled and nodded, then exited the room closely followed by Sam. These past weeks in the Centre had provided Jarod with some incredible insights into the woman he thought he knew so well. For instance, for someone who was legendary for inspiring terror in others, Miss Parker was extremely beloved by her immediate subordinates. Jarod had always known this to be true of Sydney and Broots, but he was stunned to see the level of concern that Sam had displayed from the moment they'd rushed her off the helicopter and into the medical unit. It had taken four other sweepers to stop him from killing Willie that very afternoon. And for days following the shooting, secretaries and technicians from Security and Special Sections had found excuse after excuse to drop by the Medical Unit to "check on things."

She was also, apparently, extremely valuable to the Triumvirate. Far more important, Jarod mused, than they would have liked to admit. But their actions had spoken volumes. Immediately after their return to the Centre, Mr. Parker had, in full view of Mutumbo, issued a directive that Jarod and only Jarod was to supervise his daughter's care. The Pretender had half expected Mutumbo to laugh in the older man's face. After all, Raines was definitely Mutumbo's pet and he had been behind the shooting in the first place. But much to everyone's surprise, Mutumbo had agreed. He had also ordered his personal security team to stand guard outside Miss Parker's room.

Jarod knew that Mutumbo's actions could partly be justified by need to pacify the clearly furious Mr. Parker. Still, he couldn't help but feel that there was a hidden motive behind Mutumbo's sudden concern for Miss Parker's well-being, and he intended to spend a great deal of time trying to find out what that motivation might be.

As he and Sam rounded the corner to the medical unit, Jarod chuckled at the sound of Miss Parker's raised voice – a sure sign that she was indeed feeling better.

"I don't care who said so, I said that I am going for a walk and that's that."

Jarod entered the room just in time to save the flustered nurse from any further onslaught from her patient. He didn't even attempt to respond to the glare that Miss Parker threw his way, he had grown immune to them. Besides, he knew now that she only behaved this

badly when she was scared, and she knew that he would be coming some time today with the test results.

"What the hell do you want?" Parker was standing next to her bed, still clearly weak, but determined to have her own way. She wrapped her robe tightly around her then fixed her glare on her visitor.

"Why, to see you, sunshine." As he finished speaking, Jarod pasted the biggest, goofiest smile on his face that he could muster. It was just the thing she needed to help ease her anxiety. She rolled her eyes at him and fought to suppress the laugh that was growing inside of her. In order to stop it, she turned away from him and walked to the mirror in order to fix her hair.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going for a walk, Dr. Frankenboy. You planning to try and stop me?"

"I suppose not, if you promise to let Sydney go with you."

"He's already on his way."

She was terrified to hear what he had to say. Even his light mood hadn't been able to squelch the gnawing fear in her stomach. 'Please,' she thought, 'please let my son be okay.'

Jarod noticed that she kept brushing her hair even though she had groomed it to perfection in just a few seconds. He opened the report and moved it toward her.

"You can see for yourself if you want."

She stopped moving the brush and instead took it in both hands, squeezing it tightly.

"Why don't you just tell me."

Jarod closed the file and walked closer to her. He turned her so that she was facing him, and carefully removed the brush from her hands. Then he took both her hands in his.

"The amniocentesis shows no irregularities."

. * * * * *

.

Sydney saw Sam standing outside Parker's room and knew that meant that Jarod was inside. He was glad, and wondered if Parker's request to go for a walk hadn't been for his benefit. She knew that he was worried sick about Jarod. Three weeks had passed since his return, and so far, the Pretender had been safe. But Sydney wasn't naive enough to think that would continue much longer. His usefulness was coming to an end, at least as far as

Mr. Parker was concerned. Jarod had saved his daughter. No one expected him to have any loyalty to the man he considered property because of it.

Sydney smiled at Sam and pushed open the door just in time to see Jarod tenderly brush his hand against Parker's cheek. He realized that he was wiping tears from her face, and concern immediately filled him.

"Is everything all right?"

Parker nearly jumped away from Jarod at the sound of Sydney's voice. Then, embarrassed, she found herself giggling like a schoolgirl caught under the bleachers with her boyfriend. Thankfully, Jarod spoke up, saving them both from further scrutiny.

"Everything and everyone is fine."

Sydney looked at them both for a moment, his mind processing the information.

"You mean, the baby is going to be all right?"

"As long as his mother behaves herself, yes, he should be just fine."

Though nothing could have made her angry at that moment, Parker feigned her best icy stare for Jarod's benefit. Her son was fine. Baby Thomas -- she'd already begun thinking of him that way, and he was going to be fine. She knew that she had Jarod to thank for. But how, she wondered, do you thank someone for sacrificing their life for you?

She had only recently learned the details of what had happened that day at the airfield, thanks to her father's orders. He had instructed everyone to keep business matters away from her until she was recovered. As if Jarod's life was a business matter.

That thought made her smile, and she broke from her thoughts long enough to see that Jarod and Sydney had fallen into comfortable conversation. She turned back to the mirror and began applying what little make-up she had the energy to put on, anxious to give them some time together.

There was a time, she reminded herself, when Jarod's life had been nothing but a business matter to her. God, had that really been as recent as three weeks ago? And yet, she knew that somewhere inside of her, he had always mattered more to her than that. Nothing that was just business could have made her so angry the past three years.

Still, she knew that she had to say something to him about what he'd done, what he was still doing. He'd given up his father and the boy in order to stay with her. And then, thanks to darling Brigitte, he'd lost his freedom. Then, instead of hating her for all that she'd done to him, he'd dedicated himself to saving her life and the life of her son.

Parker was pulled back to the present as the door to her room opened again. She cringed when she saw that it was Matthew, Raines' new pet sweeper. She hadn't needed to be told that Willie wouldn't be around anymore. The fact that her father was still alive and Raines had, in effect, been ordered to remain in his office and research labs at all times until further notice told her that her father was once again firmly in control of the Centre, and that Willie had been dealt with immediately.

Matthew stopped just inside the door, his robotic manner reminded Parker of a bad science fiction character in a movie Jarod had sent her to tease her once, something about a mad scientist in a secret laboratory...

"The Triumvirate would like to see you, Jarod."

Jarod nodded and began moving toward the door, despite the tension he had felt begin to emanate from both Parker and Sydney at Matthew's words. He had been expecting them to make some kind of offer or ultimatum now that Parker was no longer in immediate danger. He stopped at the door and turned back to offer his two friends a smile. He understood their concern, and of course, he couldn't tell them that he was planning to leave the Centre in just 24 hours, right after Parker had safely been sent home.

He followed Matthew out of the door and noticed that four other sweepers were waiting in the hallway to escort them to the meeting. He had to admit, it was nice to know that they weren't underestimating him. Still, he would be free again soon, and able to set in motion the plans he had been formulating for Miss Parker's future.

They walked down several corridors before they came to a stop in front of the Triumvirate Council Room. Jarod was ushered inside, and was a bit surprised to find that the Triumvirate was nowhere to be seen. The room was completely empty, even devoid of furniture. Matthew pushed him roughly so that he fell further into the room, then quickly stepped outside and closed the door.

Jarod stood and tried to evaluate the situation. If they were trying to frighten him, it seemed a lame attempt. He had expected some sort of threats, perhaps even a veiled attempt to hold Miss Parker against him as some kind of leverage. They had momentarily thrown him off balance. As he scanned the room searching for more information with which to work, his eyes were pulled to a large glass partition at the top of the room where a group of lights had suddenly been turned on.

"Thank you for joining me, Jarod."

Jarod felt his eyes narrowing as he looked into Lyle's smiling face. God, he hated this man. He was responsible for so much of the pain that Jarod had lived through – the experiments, Kyle's death. Even worse, Jarod was convinced that Lyle was the one who had murdered Thomas, had left his body there for Parker to find. That anyone could be so cruel to her had caused a new level of hatred to form inside of Jarod's heart. He stared up at his nemesis and wondered if one day he would be able to hate him enough to kill him.

"What's this game, Lyle?"

"No game, genius. Your free pass at the Centre has expired. My dear, sweet sister is going to live and, while I'm eternally grateful to you for that, it's a new day here in Centreland."

"Meaning"

"You know that theory about every action having an equal and opposite reaction? Well, around here, every action has multiple reactions. Now, the Triumvirate, they were extremely upset with Mr. Raines for trying to kill my father. Now, Mutumbo is a smart man. He knew that he was going to have to do something to make my father happy. That would be why you've been running around like you own the place."

"I'd hardly say that." Jarod was beginning to feel extremely concerned about his situation. Lyle was definitely making some kind of play, and the genius had to admit that he was having trouble seeing what that play might be.

"The bottom line is, now that the whole fuss has blown over and Raines has had his hand slapped and Willie... Well, it's back to business as usual. Which means it's deal making time."

"I'm not making any deals with you, Lyle."

"Oh, you're not making any deals, you're the subject of one. See, my sister's little bastard opened up a whole new possibility for us."

Jarod felt his blood run cold in his veins. Hearing this demon refer to Parker and Thomas' child as a bastard made him want to jump through the glass and break Lyle into small pieces. Jarod clenched his fists tightly then forced himself to let his hands drop slack. He had to keep his composure.

"I'm still waiting for the punch line."

Lyle laughed and then stared hard at Jarod.

"The punch line is that my father had to make a deal. The Triumvirate wants its Pretender. So, in exchange for Parker being allowed to carry and keep her child who, at best, will only be an average Pretender, dear old dad agreed to institute Project Renewal."

"Cute name, what's it mean?"

The room stood silent as Jarod stared up at Lyle, waiting for an answer. His mind swirled with the possibilities of Lyle's statement when his ears suddenly filled with the sound of rushing water. He looked down to see that he was already standing ankle deep in water, the room filling so quickly, Jarod realized that there would be no escape. Within

seconds, the water was up to his chest, and he was beginning to swim, fighting to keep his head above the water.

"Lyle! Lyle, what is this?"

"Project Renewal, genius. You were the best Pretender we had. But now, you're damaged goods. So the only way to salvage you is to start from scratch, and that means, you have to die."

Jarod was near the top of the room, staring at Lyle who stood protected behind the glass partition. He strained to keep his face above the water, knowing he was fighting a losing battle. In moments, the freezing cold water had engulfed his whole being, and he felt himself beginning to drown. He continued to fight, human nature not allowing him a quick surrender, yet soon his energy faded and he felt his body beginning to sink down into the room.

As his mind began to fade into a searing blackness, Jarod had one clear thought -- he had never really believed they would actually kill him. Then, one image fixed in his mind, and it stayed with him until he could no longer think or feel anything -- Parker's face, beautiful and smiling, and looking at him.

Chapter 3 – Decisions:

Parker paced in her living room, restlessly waiting for Sydney and Broots to arrive. She was more than a little anxious to hear what they had to tell her.

Jarod had escaped again -- at least that was the official Centre story. She'd been told that morning when she'd asked to see Jarod before leaving the medical unit to return home.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible Angel."

"Daddy, he did save my life. I just want to say goodbye to him."

Her father had looked away then, a sure sign that he was trying to think of something to tell her. She hated feeling that kind of distrust toward him. He had truly been a loving, attentive father since the shooting, and though they had disagreed about her decision to continue with the pregnancy, he had resigned himself to her wishes and actually had managed to be a little supportive in the past few days. But she knew him too well. He was most definitely not planning to tell her the truth about Jarod.

"He's escaped again." Parker swallowed hard and stared at her father. Something was very, very wrong. She knew that she couldn't let him see her concern, so now she used his trick and turned away, moving to the bed where she continued packing her small bag.

"When did this happen?"

"Last night after his meeting with the Triumvirate. We're still not sure how he did it. I mean, the cameras were on him the whole time, but somehow, he managed to slip out. We think that maybe Angelo --"

Parker turned quickly and stared hard at her father.

"Angelo couldn't decide to help a flea find a dog, Daddy. Don't pull him into this."

Mr. Parker squinted as he regarded his daughter. In the weeks since Thomas' murder, he had hoped she was returning to her old self. Yet as events had unfolded, it had become clear to him that his daughter's penchant for feeling and caring for the people around her had only grown stronger since the handyman's death. He wondered still if it hadn't been a mistake to allow -- no, no use wondering that. The man was dead and now his grandson would grow up without a father. He'd survive. After all, his Angel had managed without her mother, hadn't she?

"Angel, no one is pulling Angelo into anything. What I was going to say is that we think Angelo may be able to get a lead on him. He's in his cell right now."

Parker was about to speak but stopped short when her step mother entered the room. God, she hated that woman. Brigitte strolled to her father's side and, pulling the ever-present

lollipop from her mouth, attempted to plant a kiss on her father's lips. Parker was about to turn away until she noticed her father make a very obvious move to avoid contact with his wife.

That was one thing to be grateful for. Sydney had told her about Brigitte's cold response to her shooting, and her father's reaction to it. Despite the fact that nearly a month had passed, he was still clearly angry at Bitchit for her behavior, and that was almost enough to make Parker forget about her concern for Jarod. Almost.

"So, going home are we, luv?" Brigitte forced herself to try and be pleasant to her step daughter. Clearly hubby was still angry with her and she knew that the only way to get back in his good graces was to find a way to smooth things over with his Angel. Far easier said than done. Brigitte genuinely hated Parker. She was too damn strong, too difficult to shake. And now, just when Brigitte had managed to capture the spotlight by announcing her pregnancy, Daddy's Girl had not only saved his life, but was now carrying the man's grandson. Smiling, Brigitte watched Parker finish packing as she thought about the child her nemises carried. He was definitely going to be competition for her son. She was truly going to have do something about that.

Sydney entered smiling, his happiness at Parker's recovery unmistakable. He, like everyone else, knew that she was facing a difficult road, but he was more than a little proud of the strength she'd displayed in choosing her child's life over her own health, and though he was worried about her, he believed in his heart that Jarod would find a way to keep both of them safe.

Seeing Mr. and Mrs. Parker in the room, Sydney moved quickly to stand beside Miss Parker.

"Ready to go home?" Parker turned to him and tried to smile, but Sydney instantly recognized the concern in her face. He covered and reached out to take her suitcase. As he did so, Mr. Parker stepped forward to embrace his daughter. Sydney couldn't help but notice that he held her as if she were made of glass. Genuine concern? Sydney hoped so.

"Angel, you take care, and call me if you need anything."

"I will Daddy. I promise, I'll get back to work as soon as I can."

"You just take care of my grandson. The Triumvirate owes you a few extra weeks of recovery time. Hell, if it wasn't for you, Raines would've taken over the place."

Miss Parker again tried to smile. She returned her father's embrace and then, without any word to Brigitte, walked out of the door, closely followed by Sydney.

Now she was home, waiting for some word on what her two friends had been able to find out about Jarod. Exhausted from her pacing, she sank onto the couch, her left hand instinctively falling over her stomach. He would never have escaped without contacting

her right away, she was certain of that. He had promised to look after them, and he never lied. Infuriated, teased, and annoyed, yes, but he never lied.

Finally she heard car doors closing and moved to the front door to let the two men in. She instantly noticed that Sydney seemed to have aged five years since he'd left yesterday and Broots was shaking so badly, that it took all of his nerve just to say hello to her when he entered.

"What is it? What's happened?" Sydney had crossed the room and stood in front of her mantle with his back to her. Broots stood beside her, looking down at the floor. Neither man spoke.

"Damn it, would you please tell me what happened?"

Sydney continued to stand facing away from her. Broots, who was more than a little concerned about how Miss Parker was going to take this news, finally found his voice.

"M-Miss -- Miss Parker, maybe you should sit down."

Parker looked at Broots, tempted to snap at him for his concern until she saw his face. Clearly, they were as worried about her as they were about Jarod, and so she moved to the couch and sat down without argument. Broots cleared his throat as he took a seat next to her. After a moment, Sydney finally turned to face them.

"Jarod did not escape from the Centre."

"I knew that, Sydney. If he had, he would've contacted us by now. The question is what have they done with him?"

Sydney moved to the couch and sat on the other side of her. As he took his seat, he reached over and took her hand. This more than anything told Parker that something horrible had happened. She fought her natural born instinct to turn away from truths she didn't want to know. Straightening in her seat, she looked first at Broots and then at Sydney.

"What happened to Jarod?" Her voice nearly broke over the words, fear growing inside of her that she might already know the answer. She felt Sydney's grip on her hand tighten.

"Jarod is dead."

Lyle and Raines stood in the observation room of Renewal Wing Lab 13 and watched the activity going on inside. Jarod lay motionless on a cold metal table, several medical staffers working at different points around him.

Both men looked up as the doors opened and Mr. Parker entered. He approached his son, averting his eyes from Raines and instead taking in the scene in the room.

Silence fell as the three men watched doctors hook up multiple IVs to Jarod's body along with five electrical stimulators. Unable to contain himself, Raines drew in a ragged, oxygen tank-aided breath and spoke.

"The first two stages of the project are already complete. Now that his body temperature has been restored, the chemical injections and electronic pulses will begin altering his memory processes."

Mr. Parker looked at the man who had recently become his most hated enemy. Did he realize, Mr. Parker wondered, how close he had come to dying? Did he know that the Triumvirate's orders to "let sleeping dogs lie," had meant nothing to him when he'd found out that his daughter and grandson had nearly died because of the disloyal traitor who now stood beside him. It had only been concern for his family that had kept the elder Parker from solving the problem on his own, and as far as he was concerned, the sleeping dogs could only be left to lie for so long.

"I still don't understand why it was necessary to stop his body functions by freezing him with the water?" Lyle didn't really care why they'd done something awful to Jarod, he'd enjoyed it too much to care why, but he felt a serious need to try and dissipate the tension between his father and Raines. Proud of the process he had invented, Raines was only to happy to answer.

"Fluids are routinely used to help warm a body that has suffered extreme hypothermia. By dropping Jarod's body temperature, we were able to use IV fluids laced with the chemical compounds used in the Renewal process, giving us greater access to Jarod's synaptic connections."

"So you saturated his brain?"

Raines looked at the younger Parker male, a smile crossing his face. "Exactly. And when we're through, Jarod will be the perfect Pretender."

Sydney sat in the chair beside Miss Parker's bed in the darkness as he watched her sleep. It had been nearly ten hours since he'd broken the news to her. She had sat quietly for moment, letting the words sink in. Then she had stood, slowly walking toward her bedroom. She had barely gone 10 steps when she began to collapse to the ground.

Sydney wasn't sure who had reached her first, he or Broots but they both grabbed hold of her, lowering her gently to the floor. Sydney hadn't been sure what kind of reaction to expect but he had known instinctively that hearing of Jarod's fate would devastate her.

Now she lay sleeping in the bed where he and Broots had lain her hours earlier. She woke several times, screaming alternately for Thomas and Jarod. Sydney had stayed with her, knowing there was little he could do but try to comfort her, to let her know she wasn't alone. Yet part of him knew that in a way only Parker could truly understand, she was alone because she had lost them both.

Thomas had been the love she could have, at least, that they had all thought she could have. He was disconnected from everything that was the Centre, safe for her to share the rest of her life with. He had been the first man she had ever willingly let inside of her heart. But they had, of course, been wrong. The Centre had deemed him a threat, and that meant that now he was gone.

Jarod was something he knew Parker could neither understand nor explain. He imagined that Parker had never decided to care for Jarod, it had simply happened. The connection between the two was completely organic and completely unbreakable. Friends as children, enemies as adults, they had found an immediate source of common ground with the news of Parker's impending motherhood. He knew that Jarod had intended to be a part of Parker's pregnancy and of her son's life. It had not been a choice for the Pretender, it was simply the way things were to be.

Sydney had asked Jarod once, just after Thomas' death, if he would have really been able to let Parker go to Oregon to start her new life with Thomas. Jarod had thought for a moment and then said, "Yes, I could have let her go. I wouldn't have wanted to, but to see her free, I would have done it."

Now they were both gone, and Parker had once again been left behind. Sydney looked heavenward and said a silent prayer that Jarod had finally found some kind of peace, and that God would let Parker find the same in the life she carried inside of her.

The Centre
Two Weeks Later

Parker walked slowly down the hallway, her usual five inch stilettos replaced by more sensible two inch pumps. She hated them, but she was already beginning to feel small twinges of pain in her back and she wanted to try and put off the inevitable as long as possible.

Opening her door, she walked to her desk and looked at the mountain of paperwork that sat before her. Her father had asked her to do the security section evaluations, and though the work was fairly easy, it was time consuming. She'd already been working on it for five hours today and she was tired. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

It had been two weeks since Jarod's death. Her life seemed to constantly be defined by the lengths of time which had passed since someone died -- 20 years since her mother, since Faith, 5 months since Thomas, 2 weeks since Jarod.

She still couldn't believe he was gone. She knew that he was. Sydney and Broots had seen the DSA of the Triumvirate's execution of their prize -- the man she had hunted for three years of her life. They had asked him to perform simulations, he had refused and they had shot him. That's all it had taken to end his life.

The first few days after she'd heard had been a nightmare of guilt and sadness. She knew that he had sacrificed his life for her when he had returned to the Centre to care for her. That, added to her guilt over Thomas had threatened to send her over the edge. Of course, Sydney had been there to save her. He had talked to her, made her see that she couldn't take the blame for Jarod's choices or for Tommy's. Still, she carried them with her everyday.

It had been the fourth day of her at-home recovery period that she'd made her decision. She knew that she had limited time, of course. Jarod had told her that at best she'd feel reasonably healthy until her seventh month of pregnancy and she was already five and a half months along. Still, with Broots' help, there was a chance.

She couldn't bring Jarod back, but she could make sure that she found his father and the boy, that she helped them find a place to hide from the Centre forever.

* * * * *

Jarod sat huddled in the corner of his dark room, confusion clouding his mind and leaving him more frightened than ever before in his life.

Images floated through his mind -- images of him flying planes and driving cars, of him performing operations -- but they kept telling him that those sights were just delusions produced by his breakdown. He had never been in the outside world, they reminded him, so how could he have ever done those things? Yet they seemed so real to him.

He also remembered a man that seemed very important to him. The man was tall and had gray hair, and at first, Jarod had thought it was Sydney. But Mr. Raines had told him that Sydney was dead, that he'd been gone for years. So who was the man in the vision?

Jarod began to shake more violently and he reached over and tore the blanket from his bed, wrapping it around himself as he tried desperately to crawl even further into the corner. He knew they were watching, they were always watching. If he could just have a few moments of privacy, some time to try and sort out all that he was thinking, then he knew that he could recover from whatever illness had taken hold of him. Suddenly, Jarod grimaced in pain and his body tightened even more. Anytime he thought about ways to end his suffering, to find an answer to what was wrong with him, it came back again. This, he knew, was his punishment. It had all been his fault, they'd told him so. She'd

done it because of him, because of what he'd said to her. He still couldn't remember the argument, but he knew that it had been real and that after they had fought she'd run away, heading for the elevator, and that before anyone could stop her, she'd taken out her gun and shot herself.

Miss Parker was dead, and it was his fault. They'd told him that seeing her body had triggered his breakdown, and he clearly remembered holding her body, blood covering her white suit, as she had lain motionless in his arms. God, what had he done? He had killed her.

* * * * *

Raines sat in his office watching the monitor which displayed Jarod's room. He could tell that the control device was working. Any time Jarod thought of recovery, his brain automatically fed him an image of Miss Parker's dead body, or at least, what he perceived to be her body. It always sent him spiraling back into depression and fear.

Watching now as the Pretender huddled in the corner, tears flowing as he again relieved the painful "memory" of Parker's death, Raines reached for the phone and dialed Mr. Parker's office.

"Yes."

"It's me. He's broken. We can begin the rebuilding process."

"Then do it."

"What if Miss Parker or Sydney discover what's going on?"

There was silence for a moment before Mr. Parker answered, "Don't worry, none of them will ever find out that Jarod is still alive."

Raines hung up the phone, then stood to leave for the day. If he had kept watching the monitors for just a moment longer, he might have seen the flash of movement in the vent just above Jarod's place on the floor. Movement that signaled that someone else inside the Centre was aware of Jarod's presence and was keenly aware of the danger that surrounded his friend.

Angelo moved quickly through the vents and headed through his world of tunnels to find the person he knew needed desperately to know that Jarod was alive. He had felt her pain for days, and he knew that she needed to know the truth.

Chapter 4 – Resurrection:

Broots tried hard to walk down the long hallway to Miss Parker's office, but his legs screamed for him to run. She was going to flip when she saw what he'd found. While part of his excitement came from knowing that she'd be pleased with his work, more came from the knowledge that he was helping her find a way to make peace with Jarod's death.

He had to admit, it was a little shocking to see how hard she has taken his passing. Still, he knew that he had never had the benefit that Sydney had of seeing the two together as children. Not for the first time, Broots wished he had known Miss Parker as a little girl, before her mother died. Somehow, he knew that she would have been the type of child who would have spoken to a small, smart nerdy kid like himself, even if the other kids thought he was a freak. That was why he loved her, why Debbie loved her. No matter how hard she tried to hide behind the Miss Parker the Centre demanded she be, they saw the person she really was.

He opened the door to her office and stopped short at the scene which unfolded in front of him. Miss Parker had apparently fallen asleep at her desk. This was actually not an uncommon occurrence these days. Everyone knew she had come back to work too soon, but only he and Sydney knew the real reason why. But seeing her resting wasn't what made him stop, it was the man sitting in the room with her.

It had become clear in the past year that Angelo, though still trapped in the emotional hell that Raines had created for him as a child, had begun developing strong human attachments. This of course, was shocking, since Angelo had previously only been able to feel other people's emotions, not his own. Sydney had always been someone he felt safe with and Jarod had always been a trusted ally, but it was Miss Parker who seemed to trigger the new aspects of Angelo's personality.

The savant often snuck into Miss Parker's office, simply sitting in the corner, watching her as she worked. Though Miss Parker had snapped at Sydney to keep "Cousin It" out of her way, Broots had not been able to miss that fact that after a few weeks, Miss Parker had simply removed the screws from her air system vent completely, making it easier for Angelo to crawl inside her office.

Now Broots stood with his mouth open as he watched Angelo sink to his knees beside Miss Parker, his hand gently stroking her face. Broots had never seen Angelo make such an obviously intentional movement, and one motivated completely by what appeared to be his own emotions, not the pull of someone else's.

After a moment of watching, Broots heard footsteps behind him, and quickly turned to see Sydney approaching. He put his fingers to his lips to silence any words the shrink might have spoken, not wanting to startle Angelo. Sydney came to stand next to him, and his eyes also widened at the sight of the two occupants in the room.

Sydney pushed Broots the rest of the way inside, wanting to close the door and keep others from prying into the intriguing moment. The two men froze as Miss Parker began to stir, and were afraid she would startle Angelo if she woke up angered or shocked by his behavior. Both men were further amazed, however, when her eyes opened, and she looked down at the strange man beside her with a smile on her face.

"Baby okay. Baby knows you love him."

Parker smiled wider at his words and her hand reached up to take his, which had still been moving gently against her face. She moved Angelo's hand to her stomach, where the baby was beginning to make his first truly noticeable signs of movement. Angelo's face lit up at the sensation of the child moving inside of her, and he laughed like a small boy on Christmas morning.

That sound was what finally forced a shocked gasp of surprise from Sydney. Parker turned to see her two friends standing, mouths wide open, just inside of her closed office door. For one evil moment, she considered screaming at them just because it was what they expected her to do, but the moment passed quickly. She no longer had the energy to be the Ice Princess.

"Are you two planning to stand there all day or did you have a reason for stopping by?" As she spoke, Miss Parker straightened herself in her chair, careful not to startle Angelo, who's hand still rested gently on her stomach.

"He's never done that before, Parker." Miss Parker looked up to catch Sydney's eyes, not certain of what he meant.

"Done what?"

"Laughed. Angelo doesn't laugh. Laughter is an emotional response. He doesn't do it."

"Apparently, he does now." Parker stood, and stretched, easing herself away from Angelo and walking towards Sydney and Broots.

"What did you find?"

Broots, suddenly remembering the file that had brought him here, opened it and held it where Parker could read it. Though her face betrayed nothing of its contents, Broots knew that she was thrilled by what he'd found.

"Still nothing. Well, I vote we let Lyle spend the rest of the day chasing his tail and Major Charles, alone. Sydney, would you mind driving me home?"

"Of course not, Miss Parker. I have to give Broots a ride too, if you don't mind." Parker mustered her best, "if you must" look and walked back toward her desk.

"Just give me a minute to get my things." As she picked up the stack of reports on her desk and dropped them into her briefcase, Parker knocked another file off of her desk onto the floor. It's contents spilled out in front of Angelo, who immediately scooped up a photograph that had fallen out of the folder.

"Friend."

Miss Parker leaned down to retrieve the papers and saw that Angelo had picked up the photograph of Jarod that she had kept in his pursuit file. Sadly, she looked at Angelo and wondered if he understood that Jarod was gone.

"Yes, he was your friend, Angelo, but Jarod is gone now."

"Not gone."

Parker sighed at Angelo's words. He continued to stare at the photo, suddenly losing all consciousness of everyone else in the room. Parker leaned closer to him, trying to re-focus his attention, wanting to make him understand.

"Angelo, Jarod is gone."

"Not gone. Miss Parker not gone. Jarod not gone."

Sydney, now knowing that something was definitely going on, stepped forward to the twosome on the floor.

"Angelo, what do you mean, Miss Parker's not gone?"

"Friend sad Miss Parker's gone. Miss Parker's not gone, not hurt self like bad man says."

Silence filled the room as the trio absorbed the words that Angelo had spoken. Sydney, afraid to believe in the growing hope that had taken root in his heart, pushed Angelo further.

"Is Jarod alive, Angelo?"

"Scared, confused. Needs daughter."

Sydney's eyes locked with Parker's as she reached up and grabbed Broots' wrist, silencing whatever words he might have been thinking of speaking in a room where extra ears were always listening. She stood, leaving the rest of the papers and then, taking a deep breath, picked up her briefcase.

"He's never going to get it, Sydney, and maybe that makes him the lucky one."

Sydney stood, nodding in agreement with Parker's statement. The group left the office in silence, leaving Angelo sitting next to Parker's desk. After a moment, Angelo returned to his crawl space and began the long trek back to where his friend was so scared and lonely. Reaching his destination, he leaned close to the vent and saw that Jarod's room was empty. He lay down, waiting for his friend to return.

* * * * *

Sydney's car stopped near a lonely stretch of beach and the trio climbed from the vehicle, moving several hundred yards away before they began speaking. Broots noticed that Miss Parker winced in pain several times as she made her way, and a careful glance at Sydney told him the older man had made the same observation.

"Broots," Miss Parker stopped walking and turned to face the two men. "You're the computer magician. Could the Centre have fabricated the DSA of Jarod's assassination?"

"Miss Parker, with the technology the Centre has access to, yes, they could have. I doubt most people, even me, would be able to tell."

"It makes sense, Miss Parker." Sydney chose his next words carefully, not wanting to deepen the wounds he knew were already opening up inside of her. "Your father knows that you're aware he's been less than honest with you about some things. If he told you Jarod was dead, you probably wouldn't have believed him, but by telling you that he had escaped..."

"He sent me looking for the lie he really wanted me to believe." Parker took in a breath, letting the weight of what had just happened in her office sink in. Jarod was alive. Another Centre lie, another lie told to her by her father. Jarod's escaped, Jarod's dead. When all along, Jarod was trapped somewhere inside the Centre...and at Raines mercy.

"Broots, you're sure the information you have on Major Charles is good?"

"I'd bet my life on it, Miss Parker. There are too many coincidences. It has to be him and the boy."

"You may just have to make that bet, Broots. Sydney, you and I will go and find the Major." Sydney nodded at the statement, but Broots, confused, began to question her plan.

"But, Miss Parker, shouldn't we --" Parker cut him off, urgency, not anger, forcing her to do so.

"Look, I know I'm running around right now doing the brave, strong woman thing, but I am pregnant and I'm not going to be able to get Jarod out of there by myself. We're going to need Major Charles' help.

"Broots, I need you to stay here and lay a false trail for us. You have to make them think that we're on following a lead, a different lead, and you have to keep them from finding out any of the information you discovered today."

"I already deleted everything from my computer, and I used a masking program so that if they try and restore it, it'll destroy itself." Broots was proud when he saw the small glimmer of approval that showed in Miss Parker's face.

"All right, Sydney, I suggest you head home and pack. Broots, file a false flight plan from some member of the executive counsel so they don't get suspicious about us flying commercial instead of taking the jet."

"You got it Miss Parker."

"And find out anything you can about where they have Jarod. God only knows what Raines has done to him by now."

"Very good, Jarod." Raines wheezing voice was barely audible over the hum of machinery in the lab. He looked down at the Pretender, who lay strapped to a metal table, his body hooked once again to a myriad of electronic stimulators.

A fine sheen of sweat covered Jarod's body, and he was easily twenty pounds lighter than the day he'd "died" just weeks earlier. His face was contorted into a mask of pain, and though he fought to control his fear, he was already anticipating the next onslaught of pain.

"Now, Jarod. What is the purpose of simulations?"

Jarod's mind scrambled as he searched for the right answer. 'Please,' he thought, 'please, give him the right answer.'

"The purpose o-of s-simulations is to help others by – by --" Jarod felt his body tensing, waiting for the burst of pain he knew would come if he failed. Then suddenly his mind cleared, and he knew the right words to say.

"The p-purpose of s-simulations is t-to h-help others by discovering the b-best solutions to all p-possible problems."

Raines smiled as he looked up at the observation room. Mutumbo, Mr. Parker, Lyle and Brigitte looked on, watching the results of Phase Three of Project Renewal.

"Very good, Jarod. Very good. That'll be all for today."

Jarod couldn't hide the sigh of relief as he heard the words come from Mr. Raines. He was so tired and he hurt everywhere. More than anything, he wanted to lie down and sleep and dream about the only thing that gave him any peace.

The guards led Jarod towards the door, but stopped when they heard Raines address the Pretender.

"Jarod, I was thinking of letting you work on simulations in your room tomorrow. Do you think you could handle that? Before you answer, you have to realize what will happen if you fail to complete your tasks."

Jarod felt a war taking place inside himself. He wanted, more than anything, to never come back to this room. Agreeing to do the simulations on his own would make that happen, unless he failed. God, how much worse would the treatments be if he wasn't successful?

"I-I, I w-would like that v-very much."

A nod from Raines told the guards to remove Jarod from the room. After a moment, he heard the loud speaker in the observation room turn on. He looked up and saw that Mutumbo had activated the device.

"Very impressive, Mr. Raines."

"Thank you, sir." Raines watched Mr. Parker keenly, aware that he was still on dangerous ground with the Chairman. To his surprise, the man said nothing, though his son was only too happy to speak up.

"I've never seen him so agreeable. But Raines, what's with the stuttering?"

"Don't worry, Lyle. The stuttering doesn't affect his usefulness, only the enjoyment of speaking to him."

* * * * *

Jarod crawled into his bed, pulling the covers up over his head in order to get the cameras away. It was the only thing he did that they didn't like, the only thing they didn't punish him for.

He ignored the pain that the treatment had left in his body, and instead fought to breathe slowly and evenly, willing himself to go to sleep. Quickly, his mind drifted and his brain shut down, except for the safe place that Jarod allowed himself to visit only in his sleep.

He walked up to the door to the old stone cottage and opened the door. As always, she was sitting in the window seat, waiting for him.

"Hi, Jarod. It was a terribly bad day today, wasn't it?"

Jarod rarely answered her. Instead, he walked to where she sat and sank into her arms. Again, as always, he released the tears that he had held in all day as guardian angel held him close.

"Please, Parker. Please, don't let them hurt me anymore."

Chapter 5 – The Calm Before the Storm:

Sydney felt Parker shift for the third time in five minutes in the seat beside him, the action prompting him to let his eyes drift over to steal a glance at his companion. Having seen her in various moods over her three decades of life, it was clear to him that she was both worried and in pain, and it frustrated him that there was little he could do to help with either situation.

Thankfully, the flight was coming to an end. Soon, they would land in Portland, then journey to the house where Broots was certain Major Charles and the boy were hiding. Sydney could only hope that the man would hear them out rather than run at the first sight of Parker approaching, though even he had to admit she made a far less threatening huntress now that she was nearly six months pregnant. Each time he looked at her, he couldn't help but remember how beautiful her mother had looked at this same point in her life. She had been so hopeful, so certain that the tiny life she carried inside of her would fix the strain in her marriage. Looking at Parker, he knew that she faced a whole set of fears her mother could then have only imagined, though her beauty, as always, matched her mother mark for mark.

"Sydney, what do you think Raines is doing to him?" It was the first time in hours that she'd spoken, though she continued to look out the window and away from his face.

"If I know Raines at all, he's trying to find some way to regain control over Jarod. Raines is driven by a need to break Jarod's spirit. If there is a way to do that, I'm certain he's looking for it."

Parker nodded but remained silent. She was exhausted, but fought the urge to close her eyes. She could no longer stand to sleep. Each dream she'd had since discovering that Jarod was alive was a torture filled nightmare. Images of Jarod screaming, suffering -- and all because he had tried to help her. She wondered what Major Charles would say to her when she told him about the events of the past six weeks. Would he blame her for what had happened to his son? It was irrelevant, after all, no one could blame her more than she blamed herself. Still, the two had reached an uneasy peace in the Major's cell during his stay at the Centre, and she hoped that they could build upon that in order to free the man who had risked everything to free both of them.

Parker felt a chill run through her, and silently prayed that Jarod wouldn't have to endure too much horror before they could get him out, and that whatever had been done to him could be undone.

* * * * *

Broots looked around the hallway and continued toward Mr. Parker's office. He had spent the morning carefully constructing a web of clues and misinformation that had Mr. Lyle convinced his sister had taken off to Florida in search of Major Charles, who, according

to Broots' false information, was there following a lead on his wife. Broots had even used a few of the contacts he'd formed with some of the less-than-law-abiding folks he'd met in his travels with Miss Parker to "pretend" to have seen the Major with the boy, so that if Lyle arrived in hopes of upstaging his sister, he would be fully convinced that she was really there, following the trail.

He knocked on the door to Mr. Parker's office, and getting no reply, entered, quickly shutting the door behind him. He had caught sight of something interesting in Mr. Parker's hand when he'd passed the Chairman in the halls that morning, and he was anxious to get a closer look at it.

It amazed Broots how brave Miss Parker made him. Even when she wasn't there, just the thought that he was somehow helping her made him willing to take risks he knew he would never have taken without her. Those risks made him stronger, made him jump a little less each time that Lyle snuck into a room, or Brigitte glared at him, and he knew that Miss Parker was responsible for making his time at the Centre easier to survive. Of course, sneaking around the Chairman's office wasn't exactly a good way to survive, but he knew that the folder he'd seen was important and needed further inspection.

Broots bypassed Mr. Parker's desk, instead moving to the small credenza on the left side of the room. He was still amazed that Mr. Parker thought no one knew about his "secret" storage area, and that he continued to keep papers he deemed "highly confidential," inside of it.

The "secret" was the one thing that he had kept from Miss Parker in the past few years. He had almost told her once, but he realized that at times she could be extremely reckless and he worried that she would come in here searching for answers about her mother or some other lie her father had told her and end up in more trouble with Raines and the Triumvirate. It was laughable really, him worrying about a woman who he had personally seen take on six armed sweepers and live, but she was his friend, and worrying about her was part of the deal whether she liked it or not.

Pulling out several folders from the compartment, Broots flipped through them quickly until he found one labeled "RENEWAL." He replaced the other folders, then tore open the one he hoped would give them some answers about Jarod.

Seeing the contents, Broots drew in his breath. He stared at pictures of Jarod, who looked thin, exhausted and terrified. Never had Broots imagined the genius who had made laughing stocks of the Centre's best employees -- himself included -- looking so weak and broken.

There were also two DSA's in the folder, and Broots quickly duplicated them on the hand-held recorder he had brought with him. Then he returned the originals and the photos to Mr. Parker's hiding place and left.

In less than an hour he was on the phone to Sydney, who absorbed the horrible news of Broots' discovery.

* * * * *

"Jarod." Raines had been standing in the Pretender's room for several moments watching him work. He saw the bolt of fear that traveled through Jarod at the sound of his voice, and inside he smiled. It was an amazing feeling to finally have this man at his mercy. He had lived for it for years, and now he had broken the man that Sydney had considered unbreakable. He had finally been proven right over his kinder, gentler colleague, and he was enjoying his time in the Triumvirate spotlight.

"Jarod, I wanted to speak to you about your last simulation."

Jarod sheepishly looked up from his computer, his brown eyes fighting to hide the fear that had knotted up inside of his stomach the moment Mr. Raines had spoken his name.

Today was the first full day he was allowed to work on his own. He had completed three simulations already, but each one got progressively more difficult, and the last had taken him nearly four hours to complete. He had been asked to simulate the actions of a man who had entered a government building and gone on a shooting spree. He had killed two guards, and injured several bystanders. The Centre wanted to know how the man would have "performed" if he had not been fueled by emotion, but rather on a true mission of assassination. Jarod's simulation results had terrified him -- if the man had acted as the Centre requested, he would have been able to kill a dozen or more people, and quite possibly to escape if given the best set of circumstances.

"Why did you give the man only a 75 percent chance of survival?"

"B-because, M-Mr. Raines, If extra s-security w-was in p-place for a s-special event o-or b-because of a n-national s-security threat, his escape routes w-would have b-been limited t-to t-two options."

Raines saw that Jarod, after finishing his explanation, immediately began to prepare himself for punishment. That was what pleased Raines the most, to see this once arrogant man reduced to a constant fear of failure. Still, he knew that overpunishment could destroy the parts of Jarod' mind that were still valuable, and so he decided to end his torment for today.

"Thank you, Jarod. You can stop working for today. Matthew will take you to the solarium for your walk now."

Relief clearly played over Jarod's face, and he stood on shaky legs to head toward the door. It slid open as Mr. Raines depressed the remote control, and Jarod came face to face with Matthew.

As he traveled the path around the solarium, he again tried to fight off the feeling that he had walked outside in the real sunlight. An image filled his mind of standing near a wrecked car with Miss Parker, who looked exhausted but beautiful just the same. She seemed so sad in his memory. But it wasn't a memory, he reminded himself. It was a hold over of his delusions.

He looked up and let the glass-filtered sunlight burn into his face. He missed her so much, and he missed Sydney. They were the only two people who had ever really cared about him, and now they were gone. He squeezed his eyes tight against the tears that threatened. Tears were useless -- that's what Mr. Raines had told him and he was right. The tears couldn't bring them back, couldn't undo whatever horrible thing he had done to Miss Parker in that last, terrible moment.

Lowering his head, he began another lap around the solarium. Maybe if he walked quickly enough, he thought, he could finally get ahead of the demons that haunted his mind.

* * * * *

The boy, who after much thought had decided to call himself Jay, stared at his reflection in the mirror. He had a suntan -- a real tan. He had never been allowed to actually feel the sun on his body, not until these last few weeks, when Dad had taught him to do things like chop wood and swim and ride a bike. Dad. God, he loved the sound of that word. Dad. He had a Dad.

He was still uncertain about how he should feel or act sometimes. He had only been out in the world for a little over a month now, and he constantly found himself tripping over words, worrying that he would sound "too smart," and give away the secret of who he was. Dad told him to relax, that in time, he would develop a natural sense of how to be around other people. Jay hoped that was true, because he was already certain he didn't enjoy feeling this uneasy.

Despite his misgivings, he had never felt so happy. He hadn't even known what that word meant just weeks earlier. He remembered the conversation he'd had with Miss Parker, when she'd described the things that "real kids" did. He had been dumbfounded, unable to conjure any idea of what she meant. Now he knew. He would always be grateful to her that she had tried to help him, even though it had been Dad and Jarod who had actually set him free.

Jay walked outside and picked up the basketball that sat on the front porch of their house. His Dad had gone to check with some contacts and see if there had been any word from Jarod. They were both terribly worried about him, and he knew Dad was still upset that Jarod had stayed behind at the airfield that day.

Jay smiled to himself and headed toward the basketball hoop in the driveway. He was amazingly good at the game, despite his brief time playing, and though he knew he owed that in some measure to his pretending skills, he also had discovered a genuine love of the sport.

As he shot from various points on the driveway, Jay thought about what had made Jarod choose to stay. He was certain that it had been Miss Parker. He had seen the look on his brother's face when the bullet hit her, sending her flying into her father's arms. He also remembered the way Miss Parker had looked at him that day in the Centre, the love that he had seen there, but he knew that love had been for the boy that looked like him, not for the one who sat in front of her in the cell.

His mind drifted from serious thoughts into a make believe game. He was pretending to be Michael Jordan, and in this mode sank shots that would make the other kids in the neighborhood turn green with envy and was about to skunk an imaginary Karl Malone in the NBA finals when he heard the car pull up behind him.

He turned, expecting to see his father, but he instead saw Sydney exiting the driver's side of a dark blue sedan. Then, he saw Miss Parker climb from the passenger side. For a moment, he felt a rush of fear. His father had warned him that if anyone from the Centre ever came, he should run as fast as he could. But he couldn't run, at least not away. Instead he ran toward Miss Parker.

Sydney, too, rushed to Parker's side. Her face had gone completely pale when she'd seen the house the Major had chosen for a hide out. Climbing from the car, she realized that she must never have actually looked at the address, or if she had, it had simply not registered in her mind.

"Miss Parker, are you okay?" She looked to her right and saw a teenage Jarod staring back at her. No, she reminded herself, not Jarod, his clone. She also felt the firm grip of Sydney's hand on her left arm.

"Parker, everything okay?" She swallowed and looked up at Sydney. She took a deep breath and then nodded, a weak smile crossing her face.

"I -- I just didn't realize it was this house."

Sydney squinted as he wondered what she meant, and then his brain finally processed the information. He was about to speak when he instead heard the familiar sound of young Jarod's voice.

"Jarod said that he bought it after, well after your friend died. He thought you might want to come here one day. Dad and I, well, we figured no one would look here for us."

Parker nodded. As always, Jarod had thought of something no one else would. She had sold this house the week after Thomas' funeral. He had bought it in both of their names,

and she had felt that she would never wanted to see it following his death. She had donated the money from it's sale to one of Tommy's favorite charities, but she had still dreamt of the life she almost had in this house with him.

"Perhaps we should move this discussion inside." Sydney looked at the others, waiting for some sign of agreement. Finally, the boy moved toward the house.

"Yeah, come on in. By the way, I decided that my name is Jay. You know, it makes things less confusing, at least it will when Jarod comes home."

Sydney saw Parker instantly tense at the mention of Jarod's name, and he reached over and took her arm as they made their way to the house.

* * * * *

Lyle stormed into his Florida hotel room dialing furiously on his cellphone.

"Hello?" He instantly calmed at the sound of the purring voice on the other end of the line.

"It's Lyle. Any word on my sister and Dr. Freud?"

"Nope, luvvie, nothing new. She's been spotted in Tampa and in Jacksonville, coming up empty in both places. She called Daddy Dearest today and told him she would be gone for at least another day."

"It seems strange to me that I haven't been able to actually find her. Do me a favor?"

"Anything, luvvie."

"Check the Centre travel records, just to be certain everything checks out."

* * * * *

He saw the car and instantly thought the worst. They had come again, and they had taken another one of his sons. He threw the car into park and ran toward the door, his gun drawn as he pushed open the door.

He moved in, ready to take on whoever might be there, but he stopped as soon as he saw the person standing in his living room. Miss Parker stood by the fireplace, her eyes glued to a photograph on the mantle. Her hand rested on her obviously pregnant stomach, and there were the faintest hint of tears in her eyes.

"What --"

Parker turned her eyes away from the photo and looked at the Major. She took a moment, then spoke the words she had traveled all this way to say.

"I need your help, Major. Jarod needs your help. He's in the Centre and we have to get him out."

Major Charles stood for a moment, just looking at her. He knew that this woman had spent the last three years hunting his son, hoping to return him to the Centre. Now, she was standing in front of him telling him that they had to rescue him from that very place.

He knew that most people would have held the gun on her, gotten Jay and gotten the hell out of there, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He had seen something in her during their conversation in his cell, something that he knew made them very much alike. Even more than that, he had seen the look on his son's face as he'd held her in his arms after the shooting. She mattered to him, and now it was clear to Charles that Jarod mattered to her. He lowered the gun, and shut the front door to the house.

"What do you want me to do?"

Chapter 6 – Another Day at the Office:

Jay sat alone in the living room, his eyes fixed on the computer screen in front of him. He had volunteered to co-ordinate with Broots via computer in order to create a blue print of the Renewal Wing, and to try and pinpoint Jarod's location. He had also sensed that the adults very much wanted to protect him from the other things they needed to discuss, and though he felt he could handle whatever that was, he knew it was important to them to feel as if they had kept the sordid details away from him.

Those sordid details were displaying themselves in streaming video over Miss Parker's laptop. Broots had e-mailed the copies of the DSA's he'd found in Mr. Parker's office, along with a caution that what was on them was very disturbing. Thankfully, Jay had left the room on his own, and they hadn't been forced to send him away like a child. He was far more than that, thought Sydney, yet he was just a boy and he didn't need to see all of the horrors that the Centre could create.

Those realities were, however, something Miss Parker was all too familiar with, and as they watched Jarod struggling for breath as he was drowned, then screaming in agony as he was pumped full of drugs and electrocuted over and over again, Sydney saw the weariness in his young protégé grow tenfold. He knew she felt responsible for what had happened, and though everyone, including Jarod's father had tried to convince her otherwise, until Jarod was free and safe she refused to let herself off the hook.

For his part, Major Charles sat motionless, tears streaming down his face as he watched the son he barely knew fight for his life and his soul. He closed his eyes, unable to watch anymore, and for a brief moment he allowed his mind to drift back to those years when he and Margaret had struggled to conceive a child. They had wanted a baby so badly. Would they do it again, he wondered, knowing what they were doing – bringing a child into the world who faced a destiny of suffering and pain. They had wanted so much for that baby boy. Now he wondered if his son was going to survive his latest visit to the Centre.

Miss Parker switched off the computer and stood, needing to move around to try to shake the startling images from her mind. Raines was a dead man. If she hadn't already planned to make him suffer for his part in her mother's death, this would have sealed it. Fighting to keep the tears in her eyes from falling, she turned and looked into the pained faces of both of Jarod's "fathers."

"I have to be back in Blue Cove tomorrow morning or else my father's going to send someone after me. We've got to figure out what we're going to do."

Charles thought for a moment, and couldn't help but smile when a thought of his son passed through his mind. Sydney noticed, and couldn't help but be curious as to what had caused it. Charles saw Sydney looking at him and explained.

"I was just thinking how much easier this would be if we had Jarod with us."

The comment even managed to bring a slight smile to Parker's face, and she crossed back to her seat, catching sight of Jay working hard in the next room as she did so. Suddenly, a smile Sydney hadn't seen in months erupted on her face, and it was quickly followed by laughter.

"What's so funny Parker?"

"We are, Sydney. We have Jarod with us!"

The two men looked at her for a moment as if she was crazy, but then she motioned toward Jay. The group then stood and walked into the living room. Jay looked up from his work as they approached, Sydney walking to the chair next to him and sitting down.

"Jay, how would you like to do a simulation?"

* * * * *

Raines watched on a monitor as Jarod climbed into bed, exhausted from his first full day of performing sims without supervision. His results so far had been impressive, and the Triumvirate was more than pleased to have their prize back in the fold. There was still enormous pressure to recover the Jarod clone, so much in fact that the still recuperating Miss Parker had been left to follow up a lead on his whereabouts, but for now, the powers that be had been appeased.

Thinking of Miss Parker brought a frown to his rarely animated face. Her injury had been a critical miscalculation. While he knew that the Triumvirate would have been angry at him for ordering Mr. Parker's assassination without a directive, they would have seen the benefits to eliminating the chairman, and would have dropped the incident without reprisal. Mr. Parker's survival, however, had left him with a whole new set of problems.

The injury of his daughter had brought out in Mr. Parker a protective streak the likes of which Raines had never seen. Hell, the man would barely speak to his own pregnant wife, and her only faults that day had been bringing Miss Parker to the airfield in the first place, and a comment which Raines hadn't heard, but also hadn't been surprised by when it had been recounted to him. Yet the old man was treating her as if she had pulled the trigger herself.

To no one's surprise, Willie had disappeared quickly after their return, never to be heard from again. Also to no one's surprise, the brunt of Mr. Parker's fury had been and still was directed at Mr. Raines. That had become clear at the Triumvirate council meeting this morning.

"I think we should re-institute the electrical stimulation treatments." Raines had spoken the words expecting little in the way of argument from anyone. His plan so far had been

phenomenally successful, and he couldn't imagine that anyone wouldn't want to increase the results.

"It seems to me that we've achieved what we were after." The room fell silent after Mr. Parker spoke, and everyone waited to hear what Raines' response would be. The two men regarded each other for a moment, sizing up the situation. Finally, Raines responded.

"Restoring the treatments will ensure that we don't lose any ground we've gained with Jarod. It will also give us greater control over him."

"And damage him further, isn't that right?" Hearing Mr. Parker's words, Mutumbo quickly turned to Raines.

"I was under the impression that the only side effect Jarod was experiencing was the stuttering."

Raines glared at Mr. Parker, struggling to keep his fury under control. It was a conspiracy of the fates that Willie had hit the wrong damn Parker!

"Jarod is not suffering any further complications."

Lyle shifted in his seat to the left of his father as he waited to see who would get the upper hand as the debate continued. Clearly, battle lines in the power struggle between his father and Raines were being drawn. That meant he had to weigh his options. It was difficult to tell whom the Triumvirate was really backing these days. Their light admonishment of Raines for planning to kill his father seemed to show that Raines had not been wrong in his estimation of his father's importance to the Triumvirate. Yet his father was still the Chairman, and Mr. Parker was determined to eliminate Raines and his power base.

Lyle wished Brigitte were there. They would have been able to communicate in that special way they did during council meetings and he would have another person's opinion about how to proceed. But his father had ordered her to remain in her office researching additional leads on Jarod's father – another punishment for her disregard of his sister. Finally, Lyle made his choice and jumped on a bandwagon.

"No, but there are no guarantees that further treatment won't cause additional damage, is there? I mean, it would be a tragedy to have spent three years trying to recapture Jarod only to destroy him now that he's home."

Raines was about to respond to the younger Parker when Mutumbo silenced him, his hand raised to stop all discussion in the room. "Mr. Raines, am I to understand that you can guarantee increased results from the Pretender, or are you just speculating?"

"Sir, I believe that –"

"Daddy – Oh, I'm sorry. Am I interrupting?"

Mr. Parker immediately re-focused his attention on his daughter and stepped quickly away from his wife to embrace the younger woman.

"Angel, how are you?" He placed a kiss on her cheek, and was pleased to feel her return his embrace with a strong hug.

"I'm fine, Daddy." The two stepped away from each other and Mr. Parker looked at his daughter, his eyes growing dark as he suddenly remembered another woman who had worn her face so many years ago.

"Daddy, are you all right?" The words made Mr. Parker realize that he had not hidden the sudden surge of emotion that had taken hold of him, and he quickly moved toward his chair, putting distance between himself and his daughter. He didn't answer her, but instead cleared his throat and picked up a pile of papers.

"So, luvvie? How was Florida?"

"A colossal waste of time. Everywhere we went, Sydney and I were two steps behind Major Charles and the boy. Like son, like father I guess."

"Hmm? I wonder. You know, Mr. Lyle also went to Florida – don't worry, he didn't have any luck either, but he also didn't seem to have any luck finding you."

Parker smiled. So he had tried to follow her. Thank God for Broots and his magic computer.

"Well then, he must not have been looking very hard. It's kind of difficult for me to hide these days, all things considered. Though, you must understand that, you're showing so much more than me."

The dig made Brigitte's face go red with anger, and she was about to attack her stepdaughter when reason grabbed hold of her. She was barely back in her husband's good graces, and if she and Lyle's plan was going to work, she had to remain the dutiful and loved wife of the chairman. Miss Parker read this thought, and decided that now was the time for her to make her next move.

"Daddy, I was hoping we could have lunch today. There are some things I'd like to discuss with you – about the baby."

"Of course, Angel. Why don't we meet back here at say, 12:30?"

"Do you mind if we make it 11:30? I can't seem to make it past noon these days without eating."

"Well, whatever's good for my grandson."

Brigitte fought not to throw up her breakfast at the exchange. She much preferred her husband's cold indifference to his daughter. This fawning, overprotective bit was getting on her last nerve, and Miss Parker was loving it which just made Brigitte that much sicker. She excused herself and headed in search of Lyle. Maybe he could make her feel better.

* * * * *

At 8:10, Security Chief Daniels, the headman in Communications Room 227 frowned as he looked at the papers the phone man handed to him. He didn't know anything about a phone problem, but the order for service had been submitted by Mr. Parker himself, which meant that he had no choice but to allow the phone company man into the room. The man sat down his equipment and began a methodical check of all the phone line connections in the room.

* * * * *

The phone call reached Raines at exactly 8:20 a.m.

"Mr. Raines, please, please help me. I want to come home."

Raines immediately recognized the voice. It was Jarod's clone. A smile of utter satisfaction crossed his face. He had told Miss Parker that the boy would never cooperate with Jarod or his father.

"And I want you to come home, son. Where are you?"

* * * * *

Lyle stormed toward Parker's office, furious about the time he'd wasted in Florida and over Brigitte's news that his father was continuing his disgusting display of fatherly concern where Parker was concerned. Now they were having lunch? They never had lunch. "To talk about the baby," that's what Brigitte had said. Well, if there was going to be a family lunch, he was damn well planning to be a part of it. She wasn't cutting him out just because she was delivering the first grandchild. He was too close to getting what he wanted, at least now that Brigitte had finally gotten pregnant, and he wasn't letting his sister screw it up.

As he rounded the corner, he nearly collided with Broots, who was running toward Miss Parker's office.

"Broots, watch where the hell you're going!"

The nervous technician backed up five feet from the man who sent chills down his spine, fighting to catch his breath.

"S-sorry, Mr. Lyle. I, uh, I have to find Miss Parker right away."

"What's so important?"

Lyle immediately noticed the nervousness of the computer geek go up ten notches. Whatever he had was good, and Lyle definitely wanted to take a look at it before his sister got a chance to see it.

"Broots, My father has made it very clear that we aren't supposed to overburden Parker, you know, in deference to her condition. So, why don't you tell me what it is, and I'll let you know if it's something you need to tell her about."

Broots glanced at his watch. It was 8:45. He took a deep breath, and held out the paper in his hand.

"Well, Mr. Raines just got a phone call..."

* * * * *

At 8:55, Sydney entered Lab 10 in Renewal Wing, and placed several objects on a table. After a moment, a figure emerged from the shadowed corners of the room. He approached the table, carefully scanning the objects. He picked up the first object and began to study it.

Back in Communications Room 227, Daniels looked at the monitor that covered Lab 10. It was strange for Dr. Green to work in Renewal Wing, but apparently he needed a more neutral environment for his research today, something about the weirdo Angelo being too emotionally attached to Miss Parker, and needing to get him away from her.

Everything seemed to be progressing smoothly, as Daniels glanced at his watch and saw that it was 9:10, almost time for him to make his morning rounds. Suddenly a loud crash sounded in the lab. The chief looked up to see that Dr. Green was lying on the ground, and Angelo was throwing things around the room, screaming wildly.

"Briscoe, Roades, Michaelson, get in there now."

Following their chief's order, the men ran from the room, leaving only Daniels and the phone repair man. Daniels picked up the phone to call for backup, but found that the line was inoperable. He turned to question the man behind him, but found himself slipping into unconsciousness, barely having time to realize that he'd been sucker punched by a telephone repairman.

* * * * *

Miss Parker again headed toward her father's office, this time though, a mask of rage covered her face. As the clock hit 9:20, she threw open the door and marched straight up to his desk.

"How dare you! I thought that we were finally finished lying to each other, Daddy."

Mr. Parker looked up from his desk, stunned by his daughter's words.

"Angel, calm down. What are you talking about?"

"You told Lyle not to let Broots tell me about the lead on Major Charles?"

"What are you talking about? What lead?" Parker watched as her father's own rage began to boil as she explained.

Major Charles, now wearing the security jacket he'd stolen from Daniels rather than his phone repairman costume, strolled down the hallway of Renewal Wing level 13. The place was a virtual ghost town. He made his way quickly to Lab 13, and pulled hopefully on the door. It opened with a whoosh of air as he entered, his right hand reaching into his pocket for the gun he had there. His internal clock told him it was 9:25. He had 20 minutes until all of Broots and Jay's computer-hacked handiwork would be detected. Twenty minutes to save his son.

At 9:40, the guard at Centre Lot 17 waved goodbye to the phone repairman. He noticed that the man looked upset about something, but he figured the job had just been a waste of time, so the guy was pissed about it. He took back the authorized badge and watched as the van drove away.

At 9:45, a technician in the Main Security Room of the Centre began his routine recycle of the cameras in all levels of the Renewal Wing. It took less than two minutes for his program to detect a problem with the cameras controlled by Communications Room 227. He tried to call. No answer. That was very bad. He grabbed a phone and called in a code red for 227.

Miss Parker was stalking around her father's office, yelling about her brother's interference in her duties when the phone on Mr. Parker's desk began to ring. As he reached over to answer it, he heard a cry of pain escape from his daughter's mouth, and

he quickly rushed to her side, helping her first sit, then lie down on the leather couch in his office.

He was about to head back to the phone when Broots entered, and seeing the scene, rushed to Miss Parker's side as well. Broots reminded Mr. Parker of his daughter's fragile health – there was still a bullet in her back – and the two men agreed that they should take her home immediately. Mr. Parker never noticed that his phone had continued to ring.

* * * * *

The sun had barely come up the next morning before Miss Parker loaded her suitcase into her Porsche and drove off toward Lake Catherine, Maine.

It had worked. It had really all worked and now Jarod was free from the Centre. Even better, Raines and Lyle were both in serious trouble with the Triumvirate for falling for what was obviously a well-concocted scheme of Major Charles and the clone. She wished she had been there to see the explosion, but once her father had finally been informed of the situation – it had taken security almost an hour to track him down at her house – he had insisted that she needed to stay home and rest. In fact, knowing how stressful a place the Centre would be the next few days, he had insisted she take the rest of the week off, suggesting a getaway to ensure she would be kept out of the commotion. If there was any suspicion that anyone in the Centre had actually helped in the plan, it had yet to be voiced. Sydney had been sent home on medical leave himself since he'd suffered a concussion during Angelo's "attack" on him. It still amazed her that just holding the photo she'd held while thinking about saving Jarod had been enough to communicate to Angelo what they needed him to do, but it had worked beautifully. Parker was worried about Broots, and wished he was headed out of town with her, but they all knew that it would be too suspicious for them to all be absent from the Centre at the same time.

The moment she reached Lake Catherine, Parker felt her heart swell with emotion. This place had meant so much to her mother, and when they had been trying to decide on a safe place to take Jarod following his "escape," this had been the first place she'd thought of. There had been no question that Ben would be more than happy to see them. He thought the world of Jarod, and Parker knew that even though he had no idea of their connection to each other, he would do anything for her just to honor the memory of her mother.

She pulled up in front of Ben's Inn and climbed from the car, grateful that the trip was over. Her back was killing her from the drive, and she knew that she would have to ask one of the men to come and get her things for her.

She was halfway up the stairs when the door opened and Sydney stepped outside. Parker didn't know that he'd been waiting for her by the window for nearly an hour. She did know, however, that he looked

exhausted and worried and that terrified her. She gripped the banister as she made the last step up, and braced herself.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Parker, he's – they've hurt him. They've hurt him very badly."

Parker began to move toward the door, but Sydney reached out to stop her from entering.

"I don't know if you should see him. There -- Parker, there may not be anything we can do for him."

Parker looked at Sydney, stunned by his words. If Sydney was giving up hope -- Suddenly, she pushed past him, moving more quickly than she would've thought she could, and headed upstairs.

She could hear voices in the bedroom at the end of the hallway on the second floor and she moved toward them. Entering the room, she saw Ben trying to comfort an obviously distraught Charles. Her heart tightened as her eyes moved to the bed.

Jarod lay motionless, his head obviously marred by burns from what had clearly been brutal electric shocks. He was hooked to a heart monitor, and his heart was beating strong and regular. Her eyes locked on the new electrodes that had been placed on Jarod's forehead, the ones that led to the brainwave monitor on the other side of his bed.

Jarod's brain was still active – in fact, it was terrifyingly, hyperactive. Sydney entered the room and stood behind her as tears sprang to her eyes and her hand flew to her mouth in horror.

"Oh, my God! Raines did the same thing to him that he did to Angelo, didn't he?"

"Yes, Parker. He did."

Chapter 7 – The Rebirth of Jarod:

Parker continued to look at Jarod, Sydney's words ringing in her ears. She was barely conscious of Ben leading Charles from the room, leaving her alone with Sydney and Jarod.

After a moment she felt Sydney move away from her as he crossed over to Jarod's bedside, taking the seat Charles had vacated. He sat and waited for a sign that she was ready to continue. Finally, after several minutes, Parker nodded at Sydney.

"Raines used the same sort of shock torture on Jarod that he used on Angelo, but with very different results. You remember when he planned to use the process on Davey?"

Parker nodded, remembering the little boy that Jarod and Angelo had saved – rather, that Angelo had sacrificed himself to save.

"Apparently, Raines has refined his technique. He uses specific emotional triggers to numb the subjects ability to process emotion."

"What does that mean, Sydney?"

"I think I have to show you." Sydney finished speaking and leaned closer to Jarod. He placed a hand on the Pretender's shoulder, and spoke gently, but firmly into his ear.

"Jarod, it's time to wake up now."

Parker nearly jumped as Jarod's eyes flew open at Sydney's command. He rose from the bed using an economy of movement. He came to rest sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes staring straight ahead. Parker moved to Sydney's side and looked into Jarod's face. She had to stifle a cry of shock when she saw his eyes. They saw nothing – it was as if they were looking straight through the walls of the room and into the universe outside.

"Syd, what – " Parker stopped speaking as Sydney raised a finger to his lips. He then turned his attention back to Jarod.

"Jarod, I have a simulation I'd like you to run."

Parker stepped back as Jarod stood, moving from the bed to the small table on the opposite side of the room. He pulled back the chair, sat down, and then waited for instructions from Sydney.

"Load sim 279." Jarod punched the numbers into the computer, and as the information flowed before his eyes, he seemed to absorb it, moving through the 47 pages of information in a matter of seconds. He then began typing on the keyboard, his fingers flying. After little more than four minutes, he stopped moving, and lowered his hands to his lap.

"The simulation is complete."

Parker opened her mouth to try and speak, but she couldn't find any words. They had turned him into a machine. No, not they – Raines had done this, and her hatred of that monster had never been stronger.

Sydney stood and walked to the desk. He leaned over and scanned Jarod's results. After a moment, he stood up and placed a hand on Jarod's shoulder.

"Very good work, Jarod. You may rest now."

Jarod stood, pulling his body away from Sydney's hand as if it were a piece of lint resting on him, and returned to the bed. Before Parker even realized it, he was lying down again, sound asleep.

"What in God's name did he do?"

"Jarod's emotions have been completely closed off. Raines has turned him into his version of the perfect Pretender – someone completely devoid of any emotions. I'm afraid that without knowing what triggers they used to program him, there is no way we can undo the damage Raines has caused.

Parker was about to speak when a loud crash sounded from downstairs. The two quickly headed in that direction, Parker casting one last glance over her shoulder to see that Jarod still lay motionless in the bed.

They arrived in the kitchen and saw that several glasses lay shattered on the floor. Charles was stooped over, beginning to clean up the mess and Jay stood across the room, a look of shock frozen on his face. Parker immediately moved to the boy and put her arms around him.

"Jay? Jay, are you all right?"

"I-I, I didn't mean it."

With those words Jay dissolved into tears and he clutched Miss Parker tightly in his arms as he wept uncontrollably.

"It's all right, Jay. Shh, it's okay."

Charles stood, much of the broken glass piled into his hands as he headed toward the trash can. He saw the tender way in which Parker was trying to comfort his son, and after depositing the now shattered pieces of crystal, he moved closer to them, signaling that Sydney should also join them.

"He was pretending to be Jarod. We told him it was too dangerous, but he wanted to try."

Just then, Ben entered the room with a towel, and it was only when he pulled Jay away from Parker that the other adults noticed the cut on the boy's hand. Parker sat down in a nearby chair and looked to Charles for answers.

"What happened?"

"He was crying. He kept saying, 'I didn't mean to hurt you.' And then, I don't know, he just picked up the glasses from the counter and hurled them into the ground. Then he just moved away, almost afraid that he was going to be punished for what he'd done."

Finally calm, Jay walked up to Charles and the man took him into his arms in a warm embrace.

"I know you want to help Jarod, son, but not like this. Promise me, no more, all right?"

"All right, Dad." Clearly Jay was still shaken from what had happened, so Ben moved to his side, placing a hand on his back and guiding him to the door.

"Come on, Jay. Why don't you and me go for a little walk?"

Jay looked to Charles for permission, and the Major nodded. The boy looked apologetically at Miss Parker and Sydney, then walked out, keeping close proximity to Ben. Once she was certain he was gone, Parker turned to Sydney.

"Sydney, we can't just leave him like this."

"Parker, Do you think that's what I want? I want Jarod to be well again, but I'm afraid of what could happen if we push him or if we take the wrong course —"

"What wrong course could there be, Sydney! Look at him. He's dead. Sydney, he can't feel anything."

"I know that Parker. I hate seeing him like this, too, but if we do the wrong thing —"

"What? He gets worse. How much worse could he get, Syd? They cut out his heart. They have killed Jarod. Now we can't just leave it like this. We can't!"

Charles cleared his throat and was glad to see that it worked to interrupt the argument, which was growing more heated by the moment. He knew that Sydney and Miss Parker weren't really angry at each other. Parker broke the gaze she shared with Sydney and turned her attention to Charles.

"I'm sorry, Charles. I know you're his father and we shouldn't be talking about this like you aren't here."

"Parker, I agree with you. We can't just leave things like they are, but I think Sydney also has a point. We have to be careful about what we do. We don't want to ruin whatever chance he has to be well again."

Parker didn't answer, but she didn't yell at anyone either, and Charles figured that was as good as agreement where this volatile young woman was concerned. Sydney moved behind her, his hand gently coming to rest on Parker's shoulder.

"What do you suggest we try?"

"What about the serum Jarod used to help Davey and Angelo?"

Sydney moved around to face Parker, and he kneeled down so that they were looking at each other eye to eye.

"We've considered that, but the proportions are very exacting and have to be extremely precise." Parker dropped her eyes, but Sydney quickly lifted her chin to look back at him.

"I'm sure with Jay's help we can recreate it."

"Sydney, I know there aren't any guarantees, but we have to try."

Sydney looked over her shoulder at Charles, and as Jarod's father nodded his agreement, Sydney allowed himself one small, hopeful smile.

"Then we better get started."

It had taken nearly eleven hours and two break-ins to the medical laboratory in town to complete the development of the serum that would hopefully reactivate the synapses in Jarod's mind that had been shut down by Raines' treatments. Jay and Sydney had worked tirelessly, and the older man immediately noticed a turn for the better in Jay's mood now that there was finally something he could do to help the man who still lay upstairs.

For her part, the hours that passed were amazingly painful for Parker. She took turns with Major Charles sitting at Jarod's bedside. Each time she left the room, she felt the vice on her heart tighten a little more. She knew Sydney and Jay were working as quickly as they could, yet they all knew that the more time that ticked away, the less chance there was that all of the Jarod they knew could be recovered.

Sydney and Jay returned with the completed serum, and Parker was more than a little upset when the men insisted she leave the room before administering the treatment to Jarod. She wanted to protest, but even Charles seemed concerned, saying they had no

idea what effect the serum would have on Jarod, and they didn't want him to come back to them only to find out that he had done something to hurt Parker.

Frustrated, but knowing they were only acting out of concern for her, Parker wandered onto the front porch of the inn. She had hardly been there for a minute when Ben appeared next to her, a cup of hot tea in his hands. She smiled at him and took the cup gratefully.

"You really should get some sleep, you know. That little guy in there is probably pretty tired."

"Oh, I think that's one of the benefits of being inside there, he can sleep whenever and wherever he likes."

Ben smiled at her, and she realized that for the first time since – God, since Thomas' death, she felt safe. It was a laughable thought, Jarod was in terrible trouble, the Centre would probably be looking for them soon, but Ben made her feel...well, the way a father was supposed to make you feel. He moved off to the porch swing, and Parker sat beside him. She thought again of her mother, of much joy this place and this man had brought into her life. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, allowing herself just a few minutes of peace and quiet.

Ben looked over at her several minutes later, and smiled when he saw that she had fallen asleep. He reached over and gently removed the teacup from her hands, and then, sitting back, he continued to rock the swing, staring at the stars as he sat with the sleeping daughter of the woman he loved. How many times he had wished that this beautiful girl were his, that he would have had the chance to give her and Catherine the lives they had deserved. But of course, that was all just wishful thinking.

He turned his eyes away from the stars to watch her sleep. He was so glad that she had thought to come here, that she had trusted him to help. There wasn't much he could do other than offer them a place to hide, but it was something, and it was for her and Jarod, and that made it worth whatever risk might be involved. He wondered what was happening upstairs. Could Parker handle it if Jarod didn't recover? He sighed deeply and hoped that outcome wasn't something that anyone inside the house would have to face. They all loved Jarod so much, he didn't know how any of them would deal with losing him – not this way.

Sydney sat beside Jarod, still waiting. Everyone else had finally gone to bed, though he imagined Parker would be up any time now, demanding to know what had happened. The truth was, nothing much. They had given Jarod the first dose of the serum, but it hadn't seemed to have any effect. He didn't know what else there was to try if the serum didn't work.

"No. Please, I didn't mean it."

Sydney looked immediately at Jarod as the mumbled words escaped his lips. They were the same words Jay had said earlier.

"Please, I didn't mean to hurt you. Please, don't."

Jarod cried out again, louder this time, and Sydney sat down on the bed beside him, trying to rouse him.

"Jarod? Jarod, it's Sydney. Can you hear me?"

"Please, God, NO!" Jarod sat bolt upright as he screamed, and Sydney pulled the trembling man into his arms, holding him tightly against his body.

"Jarod, it's all right. You're safe now. They can't hurt you here."

After what seemed an eternity, Jarod seemed to calm, his body going slack against Sydney, his breathing slowing. Sydney eased the man he loved like a son back against the pillows.

"Sydney, is he all right?"

Parker's words were barely more than a whisper behind him. Sydney nodded as he took a towel and wiped Jarod's brow.

"I think so. The serum seems to be allowing something to get through, I'm just not sure what, at least, not yet."

"You should get some sleep. I'll stay with him."

"Miss Parker –"

"Look, Sydney. You can't stay awake forever, and Charles needs to get rest. I'll stay with him. I promise, if I think things are getting out of control I'll come and get help."

He studied her for a moment, then feeling his own exhaustion, he decided to give in. After giving her brief instructions on administering the second treatment and on watching the monitors, he headed off for some much needed sleep.

At 2 a.m., Parker administered the second injection. Since his brief outburst earlier, Jarod had remained completely still and silent. Still, that he had felt something – even fear – for just a moment had to be a good sign, didn't it?

It was nearly 5 a.m. when Jarod called out again, and this time what he said chilled Parker to the bone.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Parker. Please, please forgive me."

She quickly moved to the bed, ignoring Sydney's admonishments that she keep her distance from him, and began to stroke his forehead.

"Jarod, you didn't hurt me. Drove me crazy, yes, but you've never done anything to hurt me."

"I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."

Parker's mind reeled as she tried to figure out what he was talking about. Why would Jarod think he had hurt her? Then Sydney's words played over again in her head. "Specific emotional triggers" – and she knew – Raines had somehow used Jarod's feelings of protectiveness toward her against him.

"Jarod, I'm okay. I'm right here with you. All you have to do is open your eyes and you'll see that. I'm right here."

Jarod squeezed his eyes tighter, fighting to keep them closed.

"N-no, y-you aren't h-here. Y-you aren't r-real!"

Parker looked at him, clearly seeing the tension level in his body rising along with the beeping of the heart monitor. She glanced at the brainwave charts, and saw that the activity level had dropped some, but she was now too worried about Jarod's immediate health to leave and get Sydney. She had to find a way to calm him down. Easing herself further onto the bed, she laid down beside Jarod, pulling him tightly against her.

"Jarod, I know that you're scared. But I promise you, I'm not going to let anything hurt you. Whatever it is that you think you did, I want you to know that I'm okay, and I'm right here with you."

She moved him so that his head rested where he could hear her heart beating. He began to cry, and instinctively pulled her tighter against him. Parker stifled a cry as a jolt of pain shot through her back.

"P-please, p-please f-forgive me."

"Shh, I do, Jarod. I forgive you. I promise."

Sydney and Charles met outside of Jarod's door later that morning, both bleary-eyed but unable to sleep any longer. Sydney opened the door and let out a sigh at the sight that greeted them as they entered.

Parker and Jarod lay tightly wrapped in each other's arms. Sydney smiled, if this was Parker's idea of "keeping her distance," he couldn't imagine what would have happened had he told her to stick close to the sleeping genius.

He walked to the brainwave monitor, and was stunned to see the drop in activity — the treatments were working. He looked at his watch and saw that there was still nearly an hour before it was time to administer the third and hopefully, the final dose of serum. He signaled to Charles, and the two left so that the sleeping occupants of the room remained undisturbed.

Ben and Jay were already downstairs making breakfast as the two men made their way to the kitchen. Before long, several stacks of pancakes stood on the dining room table and they were all about to dive in when they heard Miss Parker's unmistakably panic-stricken voice cry out from upstairs.

"Sydney!"

The shrink bolted from his chair, quickly followed by the rest of the group. They met Parker at the stairs.

"He's gone!" Sydney looked at her, stunned by her words.

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's gone, Sydney. I woke up and he wasn't there anymore."

Nervously, Sydney glanced at his watch. They only had 25 minutes until it was time to give Jarod the final treatment. They had to find him or they risked losing him forever.

"Major, you and Ben check outside. Jay, you and I and Miss Parker will check the house. We have to find him, quickly."

Everyone fanned out in the directions Sydney indicated, and they began an all out search for Jarod. Miss Parker went from room to room upstairs. Having no luck, she headed to her own room to grab her shoes and head outside.

She opened the door to find Jarod sitting at her dressing table, holding her hairbrush in his hands.

"Jarod?"

Slowly, Jarod turned to her, his hands still gripping the hairbrush. He looked at her, and it was clear that he had been crying. Parker moved closer to him, kneeling cautiously in front of him so that she wouldn't startle him.

"Jarod, are you all right?"

"M-Michael?"

Parker's hand flew to her mouth as that one word registered inside of her. As much as she hated that name, she had never heard anything more beautiful in her life than the sound of it coming from Jarod's lips.

"Jarod, do you know who I am?"

"They t-told me you were dead, P-Parker. They told me you killed yourself because of – because of m-me."

Parker moved toward him, pulling him into his arms. She held him close, and nearly burst out crying herself when she felt his arms tighten around her.

"Jarod, I'm fine. You didn't do anything wrong. Not to me, not ever. Raines tried to make you sick. He tried to make you believe that, but it's not true, none of it. Okay?"

Parker felt Jarod nodding his head against her shoulder, and she just held him there, knowing that she needed to let the others know where he was, but finding herself unable to move away from him.

For his part, Jarod didn't understand much of what she was saying, but he felt terrible and figured he had been sick or something and that she would explain it all to him later. At the moment, all he could think of was how long he had dreamt of holding her just like this, and how much better it felt in reality than it ever had in his dreams. He pulled her closer to him, and felt a sense of pure joy run through him. He didn't even mind when Sydney came into the room and pushed a needle into his arm, or when he heard his friend's voice filter through the haze that began to overtake his mind once more, this time because he was just too tired to fight it.

"Welcome back, Jarod. We've missed you."

Chapter 8 - Aftermath:

Jarod slammed down the lid of the laptop as he stood and moved toward the door of the New Mexico cabin he had shared with his father and brother the past six weeks. He was vaguely aware of Charles looking at him as he stormed off up the well-worn path he walked each and every time his frustrations built to the breaking point. But he couldn't bring himself to stop. He needed to move – the quicker the better.

Part of him knew that he was being too hard on himself. He had been almost completely broken down by Raines' psychological torture, and it was only due to the determination and ingenuity of his friends and family that he was alive and functioning again. Still, it wasn't enough.

There were gaping holes in his memory. He could clearly remember helping George Harper and his son in the Silicon Valley two years earlier, but then he had no recollection of where he had traveled for nearly three months. He could remember Sydney's favorite color, but it had taken him nearly three weeks to remember the name of his mentor's twin brother.

The truth was it made him feel powerless – and that was something Jarod was very unused to feeling. The past three years had empowered him, made him think he was capable of handling any situation. And it wasn't just because he had his pretender skills to fall back on. He knew he had grown up, become a man during his experiences in the real world, and Raines had tried to take all of that away.

Worse still, he had tried to take Parker away.

Jarod had walked nearly two miles as his thoughts turned to her. God, he missed her. He had understood when, just two days after he'd regained consciousness, Parker had insisted on returning to Blue Cove. She had been worried about leading the Centre to him, and though he hated to see her leave, he had let her go without causing any great scene.

It had taken him less than a day to realize that he no longer knew how to separate his own life from hers.

He supposed now, in retrospect, that he never had known how to do that, he'd only been able to create the illusion that his distance from the Centre was distance from her. Now he could see that had never been the case. If he had been apart from her, unconcerned about her welfare, he would have never spent so much energy trying to help her see the truth about herself and the people around her.

That was why he was working so hard to complete his recovery. Parker was entering her seventh month of pregnancy, and Jarod knew that she was about to endure the hardest weeks of her life. She needed him, and he had to be certain he could be there for her. But

he wasn't certain, couldn't be until he found a way to counteract the lingering affects of Raines' "treatments."

The rage was the hardest thing to control. It came out of nowhere, and it scared the hell out of him. He had felt something like it before – when he had nearly killed Patrick Harper's kidnapper, when Lyle had killed his brother – but this was a far more intense, illogical feeling. He knew it came from his fear – the fear Raines' had fostered in side of him during his captivity, and he knew rationally that the fear was false. But his mind couldn't seem to stop reacting to it.

What, he feared, would happen if that rage exploded around Parker? Was it possible that he could hurt her? He knew that during his illness, Sydney and his father had been fearful of letting her near him, afraid of just such a thing. Part of him knew that the thought was ludicrous – he would die before he hurt her. Yet he had battled the onslaught of emotion enough times these last weeks to know that he might not be able to stop himself from hurting anyone or anything in his path when it struck.

Just two weeks ago, Jarod had left young Jay paralyzed with fear when he tore apart his bedroom in the cabin. He had been working at the computer, watching DSAs to help him fill in some of the gaps in his memory when he suddenly "saw" Parker lying dead in the elevator again. Part of him had instantly rebelled at the vision, yelling in his mind that it was a lie. But the inevitable eruption of rage had come, and he had broken every stick of furniture in the room before he looked up into the scared face of his younger self and finally snapped out of the episode.

Jarod shuddered as he imagined the same incident happening with Parker She was far more fragile than she realized. She would have tried to help him, and he – God, who knew what he would have done. What he did know was that he wasn't yet ready to take the chance.

Besides, he still had to get the damn stuttering under control. That also came out whenever he was stressed or frightened, and it drove him insane. It was happening less, and he tried to remind himself of that. Still, it was frustrating him to feel so damn vulnerable. He needed to heal, to be whole again. He had a promise to keep.

Jarod looked at his watch and calculated the time in Blue Cove. Sydney would still be at the office. Then he turned and headed back to the cabin.

* * * * *

Sydney fought the urge to jump out of his chair and run to Parker's side. He watched carefully as she fought through the pain that gripped her as she headed out of the conference room on her way back to her office. He released the breath he'd been holding when she stood up a little straighter and finally made it out of the room.

He turned to scan the room and make sure no one had seen her difficulties, but found himself sick to his stomach when he realized that Mr. Parker had been too busy fawning over his pregnant wife to even notice his daughter. Not for the first time, Sydney thought how undeserving the man was of a daughter as fine as the one he had.

Standing to leave the room, Sydney headed down the hallway to her office. He peaked in and saw her lying down on the couch, and he quietly pulled out of the room, not wanting to disturb her. He knew that she didn't want to appear weak within the walls of the Centre. It was why she insisted on continuing to work, filling her days with security systems reviews and training briefings. Generally, her discomfort went unnoticed, especially by her family. But to those closest to her, namely himself, Broots and Sam, her pain was a constant presence, and unfortunately, an enemy they could do nothing about.

He entered his own office, shutting the door and sinking into his chair. He was so worried about her. Things were progressing much as Jarod had predicted, and though it wasn't surprising, it was far more difficult to watch than Sydney had anticipated. He knew that the coming months would be even more difficult, and wondered how he would finally convince her to stay away from the Centre, even though he understood the fear that kept her coming.

It had all come from the conversation she'd overheard shortly after returning from her "vacation." Raines had somehow survived yet another huge mistake, though the Triumvirate had subjected him to a 75 hour T-board following Jarod's "escape" before stripping him of several projects and sending him on his way. Of course, that story was only known to them because Broots' had tapped into the Triumvirate DSA files. As far as the majority of the Centre was concerned, Jarod was still dead.

After updating herself on Raines' status, Miss Parker convened a meeting of the pursuit team immediately, and in true Miss Parker style, she had made it clear that "the Jarod Clone" was to be found immediately. She was again in charge, and no mistakes or failures on anyone's part would be tolerated. Sydney remembered the looks of eager competitiveness that had grown on the faces of both Mr. Lyle and Brigitte. They couldn't wait to upstage Parker by bringing in the Centre's prize themselves.

It was after that meeting, when Parker had been walking toward her father's office that she had caught the sound of Raines' voice – and to her horror, her father's.

"We had an agreement, Raines."

"Jarod's escape has made our agreement irrelevant. If the Triumvirate wants the child, they will have the child."

"There'll be no need. She'll find Jarod and the clone and return them."

"Even if she does, you know your daughter. She is easily distracted. That's why the child's father is dead."

"I told you, the baby won't distract her, and my grandson is not going to become your new pretender. I'll see to that."

Raines stormed out of her father's office, his new favorite sweeper Matthew in tow. It had taken all of the strength Parker had for her to turn and walk back to Sydney's office and tell him about what she had heard.

He knew that was why she was spending so much energy here, trying to prove that her son wouldn't interfere with her commitment to the Centre. He also knew that her time was running short, and that she was going to have to accept her own limitations soon enough.

The ringing of his phone pulled him from his thoughts.

"This is Sydney."

"Sydney, it's good to hear your voice again."

The joy that flowed through Sydney at the sound of Jarod's voice was as intense as the worry he had just felt for Parker. Still, he knew where he was, and he had to keep up appearances, just as he, Parker and Broots had planned following the completion of Jarod's escape. They had known that he would eventually make contact with one of them. That was when they would "discover" he was alive, and call Mr. Parker on the lie regarding Jarod's death.

"Jarod? It can't be –"

Jarod instantly picked up on Sydney's play, and he fell into line, not wanting to put those he cared for most in any danger.

"But it is, Sydney. It seems the rumors of my death have been – well, I hate to fall back on clichés, but you get the idea."

"Are you all right?" The lengthy pause that followed his question worried Sydney. He knew the road Jarod had been forced to walk since re-awakening had been a difficult one, and he feared the young man's struggles were far from over.

"I'm getting there, Sydney. You should tell the Triumvirate that they shouldn't let Raines play with toys he doesn't understand. You never know what consequences there might be."

"Jarod, I'm so glad that you're alive."

"So am I, Sydney. So am I." Again there was a long pause, and Sydney remained silent, sensing there was a specific reason for Jarod's call.

"I-I was wondering, Sydney. Well, I had to leave in s-such a hurry and I have been a bit b-busy recovering – h-how is everyone doing? I've been so out of the loop."

Despite Jarod's playful tone, Sydney could sense the true worry in his voice. The stuttering had given him away. Sydney also knew exactly what he was asking.

"Oh, everyone's the same here, Jarod. Though I don't think you'll be seeing Miss Parker over your shoulder anytime soon. I'm afraid she'll be having to go on leave any day now."

On the other end of the phone, Jarod shut his eyes tightly. She was getting worse. He gripped the phone a little more tightly and silently swore when he heard his voice break into still more stuttering as he spoke again.

"W-well then, y-you better t-tell Lyle to get some n-new running s-shoes. H-he's in f-for quite a chase."

Sydney wasn't surprised to hear the line go dead following Jarod's last statement. He leaned back in his chair, and let a smile play on his face for just a moment. Jarod was definitely on his way back. The question was, how much time would he have to complete his recovery before the Centre was able to dog his steps once again.

* * * * *

Jarod stood in the kitchen, his newly programmed cell phone still clutched in his hand. She needed him. There was no question of that. She would never take good enough care of herself, not out of stubbornness, but out of worry that her father would find fault with her for being weak. And he knew that losing her son would devastate Parker in a way that nothing else had ever before been able to do.

He turned around to find himself face to face with Jay. It was still so strange to him, seeing this boy who was, literally, a part of him. Still, it was clear to anyone who'd spent time around them together that they were very different. Jay was, after all, still a boy, a boy with a chance to experience what it was like to be a kid with a father around that loved you and the freedom to do what you wanted. He would always have to be careful, but he would have more of a life than Jarod had ever even been able to imagine when he was fifteen years old.

There was one thing they had in common, however, and it was plain to see what from the question Jay asked expectantly.

"Were you talking to Miss Parker?" Jarod smiled at the younger version of himself. What was the mysterious power Parker held over the Russell men? Jay had spent five minutes with her in the Centre and four days total since his own liberation, yet he was completely enamored of her.

"No, I didn't think it was safe to call her yet. That was Sydney."

"Oh, well, um, did he say how she was?"

Jarod was about to answer when his father walked in and noticed the two in conversation.

"What are you two talking about?" Before Jarod could open his mouth to respond, Jay did it for him.

"Oh, Jarod just called Sydney." Charles looked to his elder son, an expectant look on his face.

"Really? Did he say how Parker was doing?"

Jarod smiled as he looked from his father to Jay. Yep, devotion to Parker was definitely a genetic trait with the Russell men.

* * * * *

"He changed the will."

That statement had been enough to make Lyle pull out of the delightfully fun Asian prostitute who had been writhing beneath him as he'd reached out to answer the phone. He sat up quickly on the bed, his heart pounding with the expectation of Brigitte's next words.

"And?"

"Not safe to talk about now. I'm on my way over."

Lyle hung up and quickly moved to get dressed. He carelessly tossed several hundred dollars on the bed and with a harsh, "get out," ordered the woman from his home. He vaguely heard the door open and close as she exited a few moments later, his mind teeming with curiosity at what Brigitte would have to say.

She arrived ten minutes later, her pregnant belly straining against the tight black spandex she continued to insist on wearing. The outfit would not have been one he would have allowed her to wear if she were his wife, but of course, there was a very good reason she wasn't. Still, her look left a lot to be desired.

That was one thing he had to hand to his sister. Parker knew how to be pregnant and still look like a damn sexy babe. Brigitte thought it was all about "the tighter the better," but his sis had modified her normal wardrobe of short skirts and tailored suits to outfits made of free flowing silks with longer hemlines and loose waists, making her even more appealing than usual. Not for the first time, Lyle cursed his luck that the sexiest woman he had ever seen was his sister – his twin, no less.

He shook his head to force that thought away. He and Brigitte had important business to discuss. He closed the front door and followed her into the kitchen where she was already devouring an ice cream bar taken from his freezer.

"So, what does the new will say?"

"Good news, bad news, luvvie. The good news is that Daddy Parker has now split the estate evenly between all three of his children and me, meaning that you and I stand to inherit three fourths of it."

"And where is the bad news in that?"

"The bad news is that doesn't include his Centre shares. He left his those to Parker to be held in trust for her son." Brigitte polished off the ice cream bar and plopped down into one of Lyle's dining room chairs.

"Damn it! I knew he would do something stupid like that. God, he's felt so guilty about killing the plumber ever since he found out Parker was pregnant."

"Carpenter." Lyle turned sharply, his eyes narrowing as he looked at his stepmother.

"What?"

Brigitte leaned back, her hands stroking her very pregnant belly.

"Thomas was a carpenter."

"Whatever. We can't afford to lose those stocks."

"Exactly. Which means we can't afford for your darling sister to deliver that baby."

Lyle thought for a moment about Brigitte's words, the sense of them registering instantly. If Parker lost the baby, his father would restructure the will again, and with a little influence, he would see that the only fair thing to do would be to split the shares between his family – again leaving he and Brigitte with the majority of the spoils should his father suffer an untimely death. He pulled up a chair across from Brigitte, a smile crossing his face.

"We can take care of it tonight."

* * * * *

Moonlight poured through the skylights of Catherine Parker's studio, bathing her daughter in the comforting light. Miss Parker pulled her soft cashmere blanket tighter around her to fight the chill of 3 a.m. and tried to close her eyes in an effort to at least pretend she was resting.

The weeks following her return had found her nights plagued growing bouts of pain in her back and nightmares even worse than those she normally suffered. Visions of Jarod being tortured, of Thomas lying dead, of her baby being handed to Raines – that was definitely the worst one.

She could never ever let them get their hands on her baby. She owed Thomas better than that. He had died because of the Centre, she'd be damned if they would hurt his son, too.

For one painful, awful moment, she had considered giving up her baby to keep him safe. She could just disappear before he was born, tell everyone something had gone wrong – it's not like that wouldn't be believable considering the bullet that was still lodged in her back – and just give him to Jarod in the hopes that he would find the baby boy a safe place to grow up.

It had taken less than a second for her to see how impossible that idea was. She could never give up her son. In fact, she knew she would die trying to keep him with her.

That thought had brought a momentary smile to her face. Jarod had been right. She was, after all, her mother's daughter.

That knowledge didn't solve her immediate problems, however. She was furious with her father for having struck any kind of bargain with the Centre regarding her child. Why, she wondered, couldn't he have just once done the right thing? He could have warned her. Told her to take her son and disappear, hell, he could have even helped her. But once again, he had failed.

Desperate to get her mind on something else, Parker let her thoughts wander Jarod. Sydney had come to her office as soon as he'd gotten off the phone with the wayward pretender, and she had been thrilled to hear that he was on the road to recovery.

After enjoying the good news, however, there had been work to do. She and Sydney had headed straight for her father's office to confront him about the story of Jarod's death. Of course, they'd just been treated to another session of lies from her father about how he didn't know what Raines had been up to, etcetera, etcetera.

God, she was so sick of his lies! And watching him fawn all over Brigitte was enough to nearly induce morning sickness. Parker had, thankfully been spared that horrible aspect of pregnancy, and, much to her delight, it continued to plague Bitchit even though she was in her eighth month.

Parker looked at her watch and saw that yet another hour had passed. Her back began to throb again, and she stood up in defeat, deciding she might as well at least lie in bed and be miserable. She was nearly across the living room when she heard the noise.

Instinct told her to move for her gun, and she circled around, acting as if she had absently forgotten something on her desk. She reached into her briefcase and pulled out the Smith

& Wesson handgun, and carefully shielded it behind her back as she tried to figure out where the intruder was. That was when he jumped toward her.

She raised her gun and fired, receiving a groan of pain for her efforts. But the shot hadn't stopped his momentum, couldn't stop the figure dressed from head to toe in black from falling into her hard and driving her into the floor.

The moment she hit the ground, Parker knew something was horribly wrong. Pain radiated from her lower back all over her body – through her legs, into her abdomen and up toward her neck. She fought to draw in breath as the pain overwhelmed her, and she lost consciousness before the figure limped out of her front door.

* * * * *

Jarod drove steadily down the twisting curves of the Delaware interstate, still chiding himself for how silly he had been. The solution had been so simple. Thank goodness Jay had brought it to his attention.

"Well, if you're that worried, why don't you let someone else take care of her?" Jarod had looked at the boy as if he'd lost his mind. Jay reading this, continued.

"I'm just saying, I mean, you could take her to Ben's or maybe to someone else you know will take good care of her. There has to be someone."

Jarod had been about to say that no, there was no one else and Ben's was too risky after their recent stay there when he suddenly saw the face of a kind, old priest smiling in his mind.

That had settled things. He had contacted Father Moore, who was delighted at the idea of caring for Catherine's daughter. He then contacted a friend he'd made at the hospital that was just 25 minutes from the priest's cabin. John Adamson had assured Jarod that it would be no trouble getting him on staff there, especially since John – who had worked with Jarod at a hospital in New York during a pretend to expose a corrupt pharmaceutical testing program – could vouch for his excellent credentials.

The job would allow Jarod to stay close to Parker and make all the arrangements for her delivery and surgery, but would also give him a place to escape if he felt the need to put distance between them, and because it was a research job, he wouldn't be risking any patients' lives with his still healing memory.

Having done all that he could do from New Mexico, he had bid goodbye to his father and Jay and, after determining a set time and place where they would again rendezvous, he headed to the airport. He hated to leave them, but he knew they understood that he couldn't possibly have any peace until he was certain Parker was safe.

He had mulled that thought over and over in his brain during the flight to Delaware. All these years, he had thought he needed his family to find peace, and now he was leaving his family in order to find it.

He felt his heart begin to beat a little faster as he turned onto Briar Road and headed the last two miles to Parker's house. He tried to imagine how different she would look now. Her pregnancy would show far more than it had the last time he'd seen her, but he knew she would still be beautiful. Despite his misgivings about the amount of control he had over his emotions, he couldn't wait to see her.

He turned the lights out and pulled the car around back so that no one would notice his arrival, and so that they could leave undetected once he convinced her that it was time. That would be the hardest part of his mission, and he only hoped that his nerves didn't set off a stuttering fit. He really didn't want her to see him like that.

He headed to the back door and jimmied it open as he had so many times when he'd come here to leave her gifts. He made his way to her bedroom and peaked in carefully, fully expecting to see her 9-millimeter pointing at his face. Instead, he found an empty room and a rumpled bed.

That was a bad sign. It was nearly 5 a.m. and if she wasn't asleep it meant she was up and in pain. 'Well,' he thought, 'maybe that could work to my advantage. Maybe, just maybe she'll put up less of a fight about leaving.'

He walked into the living room and scanned it for her, his eyes now adjusted to the dark. As his vision fell on her body lying on the floor, his heart nearly stopped.

He was beside her before his brain had even fully registered the situation. He heard his voice call out her name, and barely noticed that he stuttered over the P four times before getting it out.

He checked her pulse. It was weak but there. His immediate thought was that something had happened with the baby, and he carefully moved her so he could check for bleeding or signs of a miscarriage.

He was glad to see nothing, and he continued to say her name, trying to rouse her. He touched her face, and almost pulled his hand away when he realized how cold she felt. He quickly pulled off his jacket and placed it over her. It was then that he noticed the gun in her hand, and the smell of gunpowder that still sat in the air.

"P-Parker? P-Park-ker, w-wake up."

He felt a brief sense of relief as her eyes fluttered open, but it quickly disappeared when he saw the fear in her face. She weakly reached out and clutched at his shirt, trying to pull him closer.

"Jarod, something's wrong."

"P-Parker, w-what happened?" He watched as she struggled to find the words. He hated to make her tell him, but he needed to know what had happened to her in order to help her.

"Someone was here. He – he came at me and I – I think I shot him. He – He fell and pushed me..."

Jarod's blood began to run cold as the doctor in him took over and began to match her symptoms with the information she'd just given him. He had to get her to help and fast. The fall had caused the bullet to move, and was she bleeding internally, not from a miscarriage but from the damage the dormant missile had done.

He rushed to get the down comforter from her room and he carefully wrapped her in it. His heart constricted at the groan of pain that tore from her lips as he carried her to the car. He ran back in, grabbing more blankets, some water and, almost as an afterthought, her gun. He wasn't sure why he picked it up, but he instinctively knew he would want it later.

He ran back to the car and found that Parker had passed out again. He started the car and drove a mile down Briar before turning on the lights and increasing his speed as he made his way toward the help that Parker and her son needed.

* * * * *

Sydney awoke with a start as his phone sounded. He groggily reached over and picked it up.

"This is Sydney."

"Sydney, someone broke into Miss Parker's house tonight. I need you to find out who."

"Jarod? Is she all right?"

"No, she isn't. I'll take care of her. I think there's a blood trail from the intruder – she managed to get a shot off. I need you to find out everything you can about what happened."

"Of course. I'll take care of it."

The line disconnected and Sydney sat for a moment in stunned silence. It was only later that he realized that Jarod had not stuttered once during the phone call.

Chapter 9 – Mr. and Mrs. Russeler:

The emergency room at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Hospital was notoriously busy. This was the place where any variety of injuries, from multiple gunshot victims to the unending series of drunks needing fluids and a good night's sleep flowed through the doors. Needless to say, it was a safe assumption that Dr. Spencer Townsend had seen it all since coming to the Delaware hospital.

She was in the fifteenth hour of what looked like the shift that would never end. Somehow, it had seemed that becoming the head of Emergency Surgery was supposed to cut down on the number of hours she worked, but instead, she found that her life revolved around the hospital more and more.

She stood up, about to go and get her twentieth cup of coffee when she saw the man walk in carrying a woman in his arms. The man was in his mid thirties, very handsome – and he was panic stricken. Spencer immediately headed toward the couple.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"It's my wife. She's seven months pregnant and she's bleeding internally."

Spencer directed the man into a triage room, and she directed her favorite nurse, Angela, to follow. Spencer couldn't help but notice the gentleness in the way the man laid his wife on the stretcher in the room, and she decided then and there that this couple would remain under her care for the duration of their crisis.

"What can you tell me about what happened?" A strange look crossed the man's face, and Spencer quickly recognized it as fear.

"Sir, all I care about is helping your wife. Whatever you tell me, it'll stay here."

The man's face relaxed a little, and he took his wife's hand and leaned close to her as he spoke.

"My name is Jarod Russeler. I'm a federal agent. During my wife's first trimester, she was shot by someone coming after me, and the bullet is still lodged in her lower back. She took a fall tonight, and I think it must have moved the bullet."

"Okay, Jarod. We're going to bring in the ultrasound and check on the baby and your wife. What's her name?"

"Catherine."

The ultrasound arrived and Angela, who had finished hooking Mrs. Russeler up to an IV and a fetal heart monitor was about to shoo Jarod away when a look from Spencer held her back.

Spencer decided to first check on the baby's condition. There was no question that if things had happened the way Jarod said, Mrs. Russeler would be in surgery within the hour. What was in question were the baby's chances of survival.

After a moment, the baby's image filled the screen of the sonogram screen, and Spencer felt her options doubling. The baby's heartbeat was already registering steady and normal on the monitor, and now she could see that the baby was actually active and in no apparent distress.

"Angela, get a setup for an amnio. We need to check the baby's ox-sat levels."

Angela nodded and left to get the materials the doctor needed. Spencer looked over and saw that Jarod's whole focus was on his wife, on trying to comfort her and to get her to wake.

"Jarod."

He looked up at her, nearly surprised to hear his name. Then his eyes fell on the screen of the ultrasound.

"Your son's doing fine for now. I'm going to check on his oxygen saturation levels. Do you know what that means?"

She was surprised when Jarod nodded yes, but accepted his answer and continued.

"Okay, I'm going to use the ultrasound to check her back. Do you know where the bullet was sitting?"

"Lower left side, about two inches from her spine."

Spencer decided not to ask how he knew that in such detail and instead, eased Catherine Russeler onto her side with Jarod's help. Moments with the ultrasound showed Spencer that her patient was definitely bleeding internally, but that the rupture was slow and contained.

"She was in a lot of pain when I found her."

Spencer nodded at Jarod's words, and continued to work with the ultrasound.

"I'm not surprised. The bleeding is fairly contained in the muscle tissues, but the tearing affected several nerve bundles. She probably had pain receptors shooting off all over the place."

"Can you save them both?"

Spencer looked up into Jarod's face. He was so obviously devoted to the family that lay in her care, and she felt a sudden compulsion to do better than her best for them.

"I think we can. I'm going to page Dr. Carl Young. He's the lead OB/GYN here. But that's just as a precaution. I think we can fix the damage in Michael's back without delivering the baby."

She saw the worry that crossed Jarod's face, and also noticed a hint of something else, but she wasn't sure what it was.

"But, I – the, uh, doctors said initially that there was no way to do surgery without losing the baby."

"They were right at the time, Jarod. Especially in the first trimester, a procedure this invasive would have definitely ended the pregnancy. But your son's probably only two to three weeks away from being able to be born and not end up on a respirator. I'd like to give him that time if I can. So we'll do the surgery to stop the bleeding, and we'll keep Dr. Young on standby, just in case there's a complication and we have to deliver her tonight."

"What will the baby's chances be? I mean, if you have to take him tonight?"

"I won't know for sure until I see the ox-sat levels, but I'm guessing from what I saw in the ultrasound that he'd still have pretty good odds. Just not as good as the ones he'd have in a few weeks."

Jarod nodded and looked back to his wife. He reached out with his other hand and gently brushed the hair away from her face. Spencer sensed that he needed to tell the sleeping woman something, and so she excused herself to contact Dr. Young and track down the test results.

Alone with Parker, Jarod finally let the tears he'd been fighting fall down from his eyes. Why couldn't anything ever be easy for her? She'd already been facing so much, and now this – it just didn't seem fair that she was always the one who was left hurting. He leaned close to her, his heart full of things he wanted to say, his mind knowing there were only two things he needed to say.

"I promise you, Parker, you're going to be all right, you and Tommy. And I promise I won't leave you. I won't ever leave you again."

* * * * *

Broots paced in Sydney's office, waiting for the shrink to return from yet another meeting with Mr. Parker. The older man was furious that his daughter had disappeared, and even more upset that it appeared foul play had been involved. Quite frankly, his level of concern had surprised both Broots and Sydney, but neither had told him what they knew about Miss Parker's sudden disappearance from Blue Cove.

Actually, what Broots had known up until today had been pretty limited. Jarod had called Sydney in the middle of the night, telling him that Miss Parker had been hurt and that he was taking her away. Sydney had called Broots' shortly after that, and he had met his colleague at Miss Parker's house.

Broots was horrified when they saw the blood trail that ran from her living room to the front door. Sydney quickly told him the blood was from her assailant and not from their friend, but Broots still couldn't help but worry. He had taken a sample from the blood and searched for any other forensic clues that would help he and Sydney determine who had attacked Miss Parker. Then Sydney had called Mr. Parker to report Miss Parker missing.

Sydney entered the office and crossed toward Broots.

"How'd it go?"

Sydney shook his head, not wanting to discuss his meeting with the Parker family.

"Did you get the results back?"

Broots handed Sydney the file folder that he had brought with him that morning. The psychiatrist carefully opened the folder, suspecting what it might say, but almost dreading having it confirmed. He looked down and read the page.

"AB negative with the pretender genetic factor." Sydney closed the file and looked at Broots. "Lyle."

"Yeah, Syd, it's definite. Are you going to tell Jarod?"

"I have to. I'm extremely concerned about how he'll take the news, Broots, but he has to know. If Lyle was willing to go this far, Miss Parker can't come back here, not until there's a way for she and the baby to stay safe."

"Have you heard from him again?"

"He called early this morning, but Parker was still in surgery. Hopefully we'll hear something soon."

Broots nodded and dropped his eyes to the floor. 'Please,' he thought, 'please, let her be okay.'

* * * * *

Parker slowly became aware of her surroundings, registering immediately that she was not in her own home and that she wasn't alone. She opened her eyes and blinked several times before looking around to get a better idea of where she was.

A hospital. Suddenly the events in her house came racing back to her and her right hand flew to her stomach as she felt pressure on her left.

"He's okay, Parker. He's still with you."

The words sank in as she relaxed a moment and let herself accept that her son was all right. She turned her head to where Jarod's voice had come from, and found him sitting beside her, looking absolutely exhausted.

"Jarod, where are we?"

"A hospital in Delaware, but away from Blue Cove. The Centre has no idea where you are."

"How did you know?"

Jarod smiled and moved from his chair to the side of her bed, her left hand remaining warm in the grasp of his.

"I didn't. I was coming to bully you into going on an early maternity leave somewhere I could keep an eye on you."

"Thank God." Suddenly Parker was no longer able to hold at bay thoughts of what had almost happened that night. Tears spilled from her eyes as Jarod reached out to wipe them away.

"Jarod, I was so scared. I've never felt so helpless in my life."

"Shh. I know. I know. But you're safe now, you both are."

They sat there like that for what seemed a long time, and only allowed distance to come between them when the nurses came in to check on her vital signs. After they finished, Jarod returned to his seat on her bed.

"You should get some rest. We can talk about everything later."

"You should get some rest, Jarod. You look like you haven't slept in days."

"I haven't. I'm not a big sleeper anyway. Besides, I'd much rather sit here and watch you sleep."

Before Parker could respond, a red-haired woman wearing surgical scrubs entered her room.

"Well, well, I see my star patient is awake."

Parker noticed Jarod smile at the woman, and a momentary surge of jealousy ran through her.

"Jarod, I hope you're taking good care of Catherine for me."

Catherine – the name hit Parker and caused a momentary bout of confusion before she realized that Jarod had invented a cover for them in order to keep them hidden from the Centre. She should have realized that sooner, she chided herself, and wondered if she would ever have her edge back or if motherhood had permanently stolen it away.

"She seems great to me, but then again, she always is." Jarod smiled at Parker, and she smiled back, signaling that she got the pretend and wouldn't give them away.

"Honey, if you keep talking like that, people are going to actually start to believe that you like me."

Spencer laughed at Parker's comment, and she was glad to see that her patient was in such good spirits following what had been a very tricky and long procedure. But they had gotten the results they wanted – Mrs. Russeler was alive and the baby's condition was stable.

"I just wanted to check in on you before I finally head home. I don't know about you two, but I'm beat."

Parker decided she liked Spencer's manner and she relaxed around the woman who she guessed was not much older than her. Spencer went on to explain that they would keep her hospitalized until the baby's oxygen levels showed his lungs were fully developed – two to three weeks at most, and then they would deliver him via c-section and remove the damnable bullet from her back.

Spencer left after admonishing Parker to get some rest, and as if the words held some magic power to make her sleep, her eyelids began to droop. She was nearly out when she felt the warmth of Jarod's hand against her face, making her feel safe and cared for.

Jarod watched her drift off to sleep and then settled back into his chair, finally letting his own eyes close for a few hours of sleep. He woke with a start from yet another nightmare about Parker being hurt to see that she was still resting comfortably. Knowing there was no way he could get back to sleep, he stood and walked into the corner of the room, pressing a speed dial button on his cell phone.

"This is Sydney."

"Did you find anything?"

The pause that followed his question told Jarod that not only had Sydney found something, but it was also something Sydney did not really want to tell him.

"How's Miss Parker?"

"Stable, for now. We're going to try and wait a few weeks before they deliver the baby. Hopefully, we'll be able to keep her comfortable until then. Sydney, what did you find?"

"The blood in Miss Parker's house is AB Negative, and contains the pretender genetic factor."

Jarod closed his eyes and his body burned with the fury he'd so often felt since recovering his mind and heart following Raines' torture. Lyle. That one word reverberated over and over in his mind, and he silently wished -- not for the first time -- that he had killed Parker's psychopathic brother that day in the Appalachians.

"Watch him, Sydney. Watch everything he does. This time, he's going to have to pay for what he's done."

Jarod hung up the phone as pain shot through his hand, and he looked down, realizing it was coming from the vice-like grip he held on the small appliance. His emotions were building into a cold rage, and probably would have reached the breaking point had he not heard Parker yelp in pain from her bed.

He dropped the phone in his chair and moved to her side. She was still battling pain without the aid of any painkillers. Especially now, it was crucial that the baby not have anything interfere with his last weeks of growth. The onslaught of discomfort hadn't woken her, but she was clearly disturbed.

Jarod held her hand and tried to calm her, but it wasn't helping. Then he remembered a moment from his early recovery in Maine, and he climbed into the bed beside her, snaking his body into the open space so that he didn't jostle her. He eased her head onto his chest, and let his arms wrap around her.

"It's okay, Parker. I'm right here."

Jarod felt her relax in his arms. He lay there, just holding her for hours. And then he drifted off into the first dreamless sleep he could remember.

* * * * *

"We have to find her." The urgency in Lyle's voice only stood to infuriate Brigitte more. If he hadn't blown everything, there wouldn't be a problem.

"We will, luvvie. If she's on her own, she'll make a mistake. And if she isn't, well, then we just have to wait for Jarod to show."

Lyle looked at his stepmother, confusion playing over his face.

"Lyle, if she's with Jarod, then he knows her little fall was no accident. That means he'll be looking for whoever did it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, watch your back. He'll come for you this time, and we'll have to be ready."

Chapter 10 – Retribution and Rejoicing:

Lyle sensed Sydney's eyes on him, and he straightened his walk, trying to hide the limp he'd been battling all week. His sister's aim apparently never failed her, even when she was taken completely by surprise.

It had been six days since Parker's disappearance, and he and Brigitte had not been able to find any solid leads on her whereabouts. Broots had reported several possible sightings in various parts of the country, but so far, they had all turned up empty.

His father was furious, and Lyle again wondered why it was that no matter what he did, how low an act he committed to win favor with his father, when push came to shove Parker was always the child that mattered most to the old man. Was it just the difference in years spent together, or was the man just consumed by guilt over all that he had taken from his daughter? Lyle wasn't sure, but it was damn infuriating.

Things would change when Brigitte's son arrived. That little jewel was going to be his key to the kingdom, all he had to do was bide his time, and of course, find his sister before her son got in the way.

Knowing the course of action he needed to take, Lyle entered his office and dialed the phone.

"Yes, Matthew. I'd like to see you right away."

Dr. Spencer Townsend stretched in her chair and then went back to the paper she was reading on new protocols for dealing with HIV patients in emergency medicine. She was still on page two of the paper after more than three hours, mostly because she found herself constantly looking up to check on the patient whose bedside she occupied. And that sent her mind wandering into the thoughts she'd been having about Jarod and his wife for the past several days.

There were things about them that were clearly on the up and up. Their obvious affection for each other was one, and their dedication to the little boy that thankfully still occupied his place inside his mother's womb was another. They were both interesting, intelligent people, and though Catherine could definitely be a handful – as many of the nurses had found out – she was at heart as kind a person as Jarod.

What didn't add up was Jarod's seemingly endless knowledge on so many different subjects, things that went beyond the reach of an ordinarily educated person. Each time a change occurred in Catherine's medical condition, Spencer faced a pointed round of questioning by Jarod, who knew medical terminology better than most residents.

Then there was the matter of what the man could do on a laptop.

She hadn't been purposely trying to look at his work, but she'd dropped by at the end of a night shift to check on Catherine. Spencer had entered the room to find Catherine asleep and Jarod working away on his computer. They'd chatted for a moment, and then Catherine had begun to wake. Jarod had jumped from his chair, rushing to his wife's side, and Spencer had only been turning away to leave when she'd noticed the screen of his computer – he had accessed INTERPOL records on a man named Tommy Tanaka.

She didn't know who he was, and she supposed that a federal agent might be able to access those kinds of things on his own, but somehow, she knew that Jarod wasn't quite what he appeared to be. That didn't make Spencer afraid of him, it just left her with the knowledge that she was possibly involved in something much bigger than she'd previously known, and though she was curious as to what it was, it in no way caused a ripple in her resolve to help this family.

Catherine began to toss in her sleep, and Spencer stood to check her vital signs. Though the baby's condition had improved over the past week, he was still a few days shy of being ready to be born. Spencer just hoped that Catherine could hang on that long.

In the week since Jarod had carried her into the emergency room, his wife had lost nearly 10 pounds, and though she was in still stable, clearly the daily stress of enduring the pain of her back injury was taking its toll.

Spencer spoke calmly to her patient, trying to soothe her. She was getting barely more than four hours of sleep a day, the pain proving too much for her to fight back, and Spencer knew that they were running out of time. Soon, the benefits to the baby would be outweighed by the increasing risks to his mother's health, and she dreaded having to broach that subject with Jarod.

As if he'd heard his name in her thoughts, Jarod entered the room, his now ever-present laptop in hand. He settled his things on the table across the room, then walked over to Catherine's side and gently took her hand in his.

"Has she been asleep long?"

"Barely an hour. She just went in and out before that."

Jarod nodded in response to her words, his whole focus once again falling on the beautiful woman who lay in the bed. Sensing she was no longer needed, Spencer headed toward the door.

"Thank you for staying with her, Spencer."

Spencer looked back at him and smiled, then exited the room to try and get a few hours of sleep herself.

Once she was gone, Jarod sat down on Parker's bed, her hand still held in his. He had been there no more than five minutes before her eyes shot open, her body tensing as if it had been hit by an electric jolt. Her hand tightened in his, and he leaned forward so that his face was close to hers.

"I'm here, Parker. I'm right here."

Slowly, as the initial shock eased, she was able to open her eyes. She looked up at him, tears threatening to break free.

"Jarod, I don't think I can make it."

Her voice sounded so weak and small to him, and he had to fight not to crumble in front of her when he heard it. He eased his body the rest of the way onto the bed, and curled himself around her.

"I know you're tired, Parker. It's almost over. Just a few more days."

"I don't know if I can –" Her voice faltered as she lost her fight with the tears and they began to stream down her face. Jarod reached up and gently wiped them away.

"The Ice Queen melteth."

He was relieved when she managed a small half-laugh in response to his joke. This was what he done many times over the past few days. Parker would feel herself reaching the breaking point and he would pull her back, carefully rebuilding her confidence and resolve. He knew that she was terrified of letting her baby down. He also knew that she was completely exhausted and emotionally drained from being ill and frightened.

"Just talk to me for a while, okay?" She looked at him hopefully, not caring what he wanted to say, just wanting him to stay close to her, to be there to keep her focused on their goal.

"Okay, well, Broots and Sydney send their love."

"When did you talk to them?"

"Just before I came back. Broots has been driving the Centre crazy by placing false leads on you all over the map. He had sweepers flying from Arizona to New York to Florida in 48 hours."

"How's Lyle?" He sensed a faint edge of venom in her voice as she mentioned her brother's name. He had hated telling her that Lyle was responsible for hurting her. It wasn't as if she and her twin were close, but Jarod knew it still had to hurt to know how completely willing he was to betray and injure her to get what he wanted.

"Still limping. Sydney says you caught him right in the thigh. He sent Matthew out to find you."

It was Parker's turn to notice the sound of Jarod's voice. She knew that Matthew was the sweeper Raines had used to frighten Jarod during his captivity, and his appearance into the game of cat and mouse they were playing with Lyle and the Centre had brought back many of the terrible memories of that time. She squeezed his hand to let him know she was with him, and he smiled slightly and continued.

"I hacked into the your father's lawyer's files. He changed his will again. That's why Lyle came after you."

Parker looked at him questioningly, and Jarod took a deep breath before continuing. Even when her father tried to do the right thing he still ended up getting Parker hurt, and Jarod couldn't help but think how sad that was.

"He left his Centre shares to Thomas, to be held in trust by you. He left everything else to be split equally between his wife and his three children."

"So, he was trying to kill Tommy. Ironic, considering he's probably the bastard that killed his father."

Parker closed her eyes and Jarod watched her as she tried to let go of the rage that was growing inside her. She had confessed to him that she believed her father had at least known about the order to kill Thomas, and that her brother had probably been the one to carry out the directive.

For her part, Parker knew that she couldn't afford to let anymore hate and resentment take up residence in her heart. She needed all of her strength to take care of her baby. Still, she couldn't help but wonder if her father would even care that her brother had tried to kill her son.

After a while, she opened her eyes and looked up at Jarod. As she'd been trying to clear those thoughts from her mind, another more worrisome one had entered it. Slowly, she brought her hand to Jarod's face and touched it to his cheek.

"Let it go, Jarod." The look that crossed his face let her know that he understood what she meant, but that he did not agree.

"I can't. He could've killed both of you. I can't just let that go."

"You have to. Look, nobody hates needing anyone more than me, you know that, but I need you, Jarod. We need you. Please, just stay away from him."

Jarod wondered if he'd been able to hide the emotion that swept through him at her words. She needed him – and she was telling him so. Could she possibly know how much that meant to him? But he couldn't just let Lyle walk away from what he'd done to her.

"Lyle is being taken care of, Parker. And I promise, I'm not going anywhere near him to do it."

She looked at him with a continuing gaze of disapproval, but she decided she had no choice but to accept his promise. She listened as Jarod began telling her about the rest of his conversation with Sydney, and her eyes closing under the weight of her constant exhaustion.

* * * * *

As he sped down the road in his Mercedes, Lyle didn't know what made him angrier – that Matthew had failed again to find his sister or that Brigitte was acting as if the whole thing were his fault. If she had better control over his father, none of this would have happened.

And Matthew, the ignorant bastard – he had tracked a lead on Parker to some bed and breakfast owner in Maine. The man had confirmed that Parker had been there, but said she had left three days earlier for Canada. Was it possibly his sister was becoming even more difficult and annoying than Jarod?

There was another problem, too. The Triumvirate was furious over the Centre's failure to recapture Jarod or his clone. No leads on the pretender or his family had come up in days. With Parker gone, Raines still feeling the burn over Jarod's escape, and his father going nuts over Parker's disappearance, the displeasure of the powers that be with the Russell family's continued freedom fell squarely on his shoulders.

He was definitely having a bad week. Little did he know it was about to get much worse.

Lyle had parked his car and was headed into his home. He was still lost in thoughts of the Centre, and didn't notice the five stealthily moving men who approached him with near silent perfection. He didn't notice them until they were on him and he was falling into unconsciousness from one powerful blow to the back of his head.

* * * * *

He couldn't see anything through the hood that covered his face, but he could hear voices around him, many of them and they were speaking Japanese. That alone was enough to send terror running through Lyle's whole being. His last encounter with the Japanese – specifically the Yakuza – had not gone well and had cost him his thumb.

The hood was ripped off dramatically, and Lyle squinted his eyes shut against the bright light that filled the room. Once they adjusted, they fell squarely on the face of Tommy Tanaka.

"Hello, Mr. Lyle. So good to see you again."

The man smiled and Lyle felt himself go weak inside. Whatever was about to happen would not be good – at least, not for him.

* * * * *

Jarod paced anxiously in the hallway waiting for the nurse to finish with Parker. He checked around the corner once, twice, then caught himself doing it a third time. Spencer was running another ox-sat level on the baby and Jarod was praying that the levels were acceptable. He just couldn't handle watching her suffer anymore.

Ten days had now passed since Lyle's attack and Parker was growing weaker by the day. The constant pain and lack of sleep were beating her down, and her appetite had all but disappeared. Were it not for the IV's that forced nutrition into her body, she and the baby would be getting almost no nourishment at all.

Her spirits had brightened a bit when he'd told her how his revenge against Lyle had unfolded. Tommy Tanaka had been an obvious choice to aid in his plan. Jarod had noticed more than once in the past year how people developed strong loyalties to Parker despite her outwardly gruff demeanor, and the Triad boss was no exception. His youthful sexual attraction to her had developed into a healthy respect and admiration, and when he had learned of Lyle's transgressions against his friend, he'd been more than happy to aid Jarod in his little scenario.

Once they had kidnapped him and taken him to their warehouse, Tanaka had made things very clear to Lyle – he wanted information on the Centre, detailed information about the Triumvirate, the managing council and any other relevant employees. He did not reveal why he wanted the information. That hadn't been necessary. Lyle had spilled his guts for hours, giving Tanaka everything that he wanted.

Lyle now knew that Tanaka owned him. He would do anything the crime boss asked, or Tanaka would reveal his betrayal to the Centre, which, of course, would sign Lyle's death warrant. He had not given Lyle any specific instructions, only a warning that he would be back when "the time was right."

Parker had loved the idea of her brother cowering in fear, and she had no doubt of Tanaka's ability to cause such a scene. She only regretted that she had not had a chance to see it herself. It was a fitting punishment -- her brother would finally know what it felt like to be under the control of someone else, wondering when his life would be turned upside down – just like Jarod. Just like her.

But that pleasure had only eased her pain, it hadn't taken it away. The surgery that had saved her life had also worsened her own situation, leaving her bed-ridden and unable to move into any position that alleviated the spasms in her back. Though she had spoken the words many times, Jarod now knew that they were true – she couldn't take much more.

Spencer rounded the corner wearing surgical scrubs, and Jarod looked at her hopefully.

"So, you ready to be a daddy?" The smile that erupted on Jarod's face told her the answer. They walked into the room together just as the nurse was cleaning up from inserting Parker's new IV.

"So, Catherine? Had about enough of this?" Her patient glared at her from the bed, no trace of humor on her face.

"If that's a joke, it's not funny." Spencer smiled as Jarod moved to his wife's side.

"No joke. Spencer says you're ready to go." Parker closed her eyes, waiting for them to tell her that they were only kidding, but no words came and she allowed herself to feel a momentary rush of relief before general anxiety swept through her. She reached for Jarod's hand.

"You can be there, can't you?" Jarod looked up at Spencer who nodded her acquiescence, then he turned back to Parker.

"Where else would I be?"

"After they take him, Jarod. I want you to stay with him, okay?" Parker saw that he was about to argue, but she quickly stopped him.

"He's going to be all alone, Jarod. We're all he knows and I can't be with him. Please?" The truth of her words hit Jarod and he allowed himself to be silently proud of how good a mother she already was.

"Whatever you want."

The two were sharing a special moment and Spencer hated to break into it, but she wanted to get Catherine into surgery as soon as possible.

"Hey guys, are we having a baby or what?" They all shared a nervous laugh, and Spencer went to open the door, signaling the orderlies waiting outside to come in.

Sydney was sitting in his office reading the results of a new set of twin studies when his phone rang.

"This is Sydney."

"It's a boy." Sydney smiled at Jarod's statement, but he quickly felt his concern jump to the forefront of his mind.

"A healthy boy?" There was a slight pause that made Sydney worry more, then he heard the unmistakable squall of a crying baby, and his worry subsided.

"How does he sound to you? He's a little small yet, only 5 pounds. But, yeah, Syd, he's going to be fine."

"How is Parker?"

"Still in surgery. There's some scar tissue around the bullet now, so it's taking longer than they thought to get it out. I'll call you when it's over."

The line went dead, and Sydney shook his head, wondering if either of his beloved protégé knew just how irreversible and unbreakable the ties they'd built in the past six months really were.

The nursery was quiet when Spencer entered, all of the babies momentarily sound asleep. All except one, who was looking wide-eyed at the man that held him.

"Have you let that baby get any sleep?" Jarod looked up at Spencer's words, the tiny bundle in his arms snuggling closer to him as he did so.

"Hey, it's not my fault. His mother's been keeping him up at all hours."

"Speaking of, what do you say we introduce this little guy to her, hmm?" Jarod's heart tightened as he looked into Spencer's face for reassurance that her tone meant what he hoped it did – that Parker was okay.

"That's one very tough mommy you have there, little boy." She looked up into Jarod's face as she continued. "The bullet did a little more damage than we thought, and there was some more bleeding, but she's going to be fine, Jarod."

Spencer knew the look that appeared on Jarod's face even though she rarely got to see it – it was the look of someone truly grateful for what she had done. So much of her work in the ER went unnoticed by those it helped – maybe that was why she had demanded she be left on this case. This family had truly needed her help, and she was pleased that she had been able to give it to them.

Parker had barely woken when the door to her room opened, and she saw Jarod enter with a small, blue blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms. She immediately felt herself fall into a whirlwind of emotions. Her son was alive and more than that, healthy enough to be brought to her. She had come through for him. But she would be able to do that always? As much as she already loved the tiny being, her doubts began to surge forward.

Jarod sat on the edge of the bed and smiled at her as he handed her the baby. Her son. She looked in his face, and she clearly saw Thomas' smile and her eyes. God, he was really hers. As quickly as her doubts had risen, then flowed away. Looking into his beautiful little face, she knew that she would die before she let her son down – ever.

Jarod settled onto the bed next to them, his arm wrapped under hers to help her support the baby. He said nothing, only watching her as she bonded with her son.

He was more than proud of Parker; he was in awe of her. Still, he sensed that now wasn't the time to tell her that. Instead, he just lay there beside them, glad that he was here to share this amazing day with her. More than an hour passed before he finally spoke.

“How are you feeling?”

“Believe it or not, I have no complaints. God, after the past few weeks, I don't think I can ever complain about not feeling good again.”

Jarod laughed at her words, knowing she meant them now, but also knowing her too well to think they would hold. Parker slowly moved her finger up and down the baby's right cheek, the infant at last sleeping soundly in his mother's arms.

“Thomas Gates II. Or will it be Thomas Gates, Jr.?” Jarod asked the question earnestly, realizing it had always been assumed the baby would carry his father's name, and that he simply didn't know how she planned to phrase it. She turned to look at him, and Jarod saw a deep sense of emotion in her eyes.

“Actually, I was thinking that Thomas Kyle Gates was our first choice.”

The words touched Jarod's heart in place he hadn't allowed himself to go in a very long time. His brother – so briefly a part of his life – and yet he had loved him so very much. Then the synchronicity of all struck him – Thomas and Kyle – two men who had been taken away from life just as they'd found something to truly make them happy. The names fit together. He sat up and took the baby from Parker, the infant equally at home in his arms.

“Well, then, welcome to the world Thomas Kyle.”

Chapter 11 – The End of the Dream:

Jarod added wood to the blaze in the stone fireplace of the Wyoming cabin that was for now, his home. Their home, he corrected. He, Parker and Thomas had been here for nearly six weeks now. It frightened him to think that never in his life had he been as happy as he had during those six weeks.

He had been forced to move his little "family" just three days after Thomas' birth. Spencer had been working in the ER when Matthew appeared, four other sweepers in tow. Something about the men had unnerved her and she had approached.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" Matthew reached into his pocket and pulled out two pictures. One was of Jarod, the other of his wife.

"Have you seen these two people?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have." Spencer looked up from the photo at Matthew, staring him directly in the eye.

"I treated this woman for a back injury, oh, about two weeks ago or so. But she was released after 48 hours. She said something about visiting family in California."

"Have you seen the man?"

"Mm-hmm. He showed up about two days later. I told him the same thing I told you."

Matthew grabbed the photos from her hand and smoothly returned them to his jacket pocket. He directed the sweepers to check around the hospital – just in case. It had taken all of Spencer's nerve to return to her desk and not run to Catherine's hospital room. Instead, she wrote a note and handed it to Angela, who quickly headed off on a long, winding path to where the Russelers were enjoying some time with their baby.

After reading the note, Jarod had acted swiftly, using his scrambler to place a call to the Centre that would easily be traced to a dummy number he had set up in California nearly two years earlier. Less than five minutes after he placed the call, he saw the sweepers fly out of the parking lot in their ever-present black sedans. Jarod still didn't know how or why Spencer had said California, but he thanked God that she had set up a story he could verify so easily.

Still, he had decided it was best to move Parker and Thomas just in case Matthew became suspicious and returned. Remembering his earlier plan to take the new mother to Wyoming, he phoned Father Moore who quickly made arrangements for a place for them to stay.

Thinking back to the day he had made those plans, Jarod had to smile. He had been so afraid that he would hurt Parker, terrified he wasn't well enough to be around her. He'd been so foolish. Taking care of Parker had been the thing that had healed him. He was strong again, focused, and it was all because of the strength she had fostered in him by letting him care for her.

Yet despite his overall feelings of contentment, the trip to Wyoming had caused a great deal of turmoil for Jarod. With Parker well on the road to recovery, and the intimacy of their little room in the Delaware hospital shattered, he wondered just how their relationship would unfold in new surroundings. He desperately wanted to believe that they had permanently turned the corner. He couldn't imagine going back to the days of cat and mouse, friend and foe – it had taken too much out of both of them.

He'd had no idea that Parker shared those same concerns. She, too, had seen the change in their relationship and realized that she had only two choices – fight it or surrender to it. She'd glanced over at her son, sleeping soundly in his car seat, and decided she no longer wanted to fight it. Jarod was her friend. He had shared the most important and difficult times of her life with her, and she wanted him around for whatever else might be coming.

They'd settled into the little Wyoming cabin, and for several days, Jarod had done little more than care for his two charges. Father Moore became a frequent visitor, and Jarod couldn't miss the joy it sparked in Miss Parker to hear the old priest recount stories about her mother.

Once Parker was back on her feet, he had contemplated working at the hospital as he'd originally planned. But something inside him told him to enjoy the time he had with her and the sweet little boy who now held a firm grip on his heart.

Jarod turned away from the refueled fire and looked over at the two sleeping forms on the couch. Parker had drifted to sleep after nursing Thomas, and the infant lay snuggled against his mother's chest, a look of pure innocence on his face. 'God,' he thought, 'how am I ever going to let them go?'

He knew he would have to. Not immediately, of course. Lyle and Brigitte still posed an enormous threat to Thomas and until they were neutralized, Parker could not return to Blue Cove. But he knew that the end to this amazing time in his life was coming, and he had begun trying to prepare himself for its eventual arrival.

It wasn't as if he hadn't thought of trying to convince her to stay. Many times, he had prepared to sit down and do just that. And then he imagined what it would be like for Thomas to never have a home, never be able to trust that he had one place where he belonged. That's would life would be like if they had stayed with him, and though Jarod knew he wanted better for both of them, he still didn't know how he was going to handle watching them walk away.

Thomas began to squirm on Parker's chest and Jarod walked over and carefully picked the little boy up so as not to wake his mother. Snuggling the baby close, he wandered to one of the windows, and the two watched the sunset as Jarod spoke quietly to the baby boy.

"Thomas, sometime soon, I'm not going to be able to be with you all the time. That'll be okay for you because you have yourself one heck of a mother there. And she'll always love you and protect you and make you feel safe. But wherever I am, I'm going to be loving you, too, and if you ever need me, I promise I'll know and I'll come and find you wherever you are."

Lying on the couch, Parker fought to keep her eyes from betraying the tears that had welled up inside of them. She'd woken the moment Jarod had taken the baby, but knowing her son was safe, she had tried to go back to sleep. Then she'd heard his voice. And the tears had started to come.

Why was life always so damn unfair to them? First, Thomas had lost his father before he'd even been born. Now, he was going to lose the only one he knew because there was no way the three of them could stay together indefinitely. The Centre would see to that, they always did.

So often in these past weeks, she'd been forced to battle some of the strongest emotions she'd ever faced in her life. Her regret over her two Thomases never knowing each other, her intense gratitude toward Jarod, her hatred of her brother – each of these things had plagued her. But now she knew that the hardest thing she would have to face would be walking away from Jarod, and, with her going, taking away the only family he had truly ever been a part of.

She couldn't bring herself to open her eyes and face him, and Jarod kept his back to her, his eyes also filled with tears as he held Thomas closer and watched the sun sink behind the mountains.

Brigitte gave birth to a baby boy three weeks after Thomas Kyle Gates' arrival. Master Parker, as he was known, was a healthy if not attractive baby, and his father beamed with pride over the new arrival, and outwardly appeared to have everything a man could want – a new baby to carry on the family name, a beautiful young wife and a position of enormous power. But there was a hole inside of Mr. Parker, and nothing around him could fill it.

He missed his daughter terribly. He never mentioned her anymore other than to ask Sydney if there had been any news in the search for her, but he had stopped expecting to hear good news. Something told him that he might never see her again. He knew that most of the people who knew him thought he was getting what he deserved. So often, he had dismissed her in favor of something or someone else. He had always forced her into a lower place in his life.

Did any of them, he wondered, any of the people who thought he didn't deserve her realize that he felt the same way himself? Loving Catherine and being his Angel's father were the only two good things he had ever done in his life, and no one was more aware of that than he. Yet he had squandered that good fortune, and now he was left surrounded with the consequences of those actions.

He had everything all right -- a beautiful young wife? -- A deceitful viper who was probably thrilled by his daughter's absence. And Lyle -- it was funny how he never thought of Lyle as Catherine's son, but as his own -- almost as if the man had sprung from him fully grown -- twisted into the image of the perfect child to be heir apparent at the Centre.

But he wasn't the perfect child -- she was.

Sam's generally placid expression had these last two months been replaced by one of sadness. He missed his boss more than anyone would imagine -- well, anyone but Sydney or Broots. They would understand. Hell, they probably felt the same way.

He knew most people didn't get Miss Parker, but that just made her all the more important to Sam, because he did. And he was beginning to wonder if he would ever see her again.

He knew she was with Jarod. Sydney had told him as much. And though he had devoted most of the last three years of his life to helping her catch Jarod, Sam knew she couldn't be in better hands.

But life at the Centre was -- well, it wasn't a life without the person he'd focused on for so many years. His loyalty had always been to her, never this place, and it was becoming unbearable to search for Jarod and his family under the malicious direction of Mr. Lyle.

He was on his way to yet another strategy meeting with the new search coordinator, but Sam knew all their efforts were useless. Miss Parker had been the only one smart enough to catch Jarod, and they were all just chasing their tails now, waiting for the Triumvirate to lose patience with Lyle and change leaders. Unfortunately, they all knew that probably meant working for Brigitte, and that was an even worse possibility.

The ringing of his cell phone broke his chain of thought, and Sam flipped it open to answer the call.

"This is Sam."

"Working hard." A smile broke out across Sam's face at those words that nothing could erase, except his fear that someone would see it and know instantly whom he was

speaking with. He forced himself to resume his earlier mask, and moved into a corner of the hallway.

"Miss Parker, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Sam, but I need your help." After weeks of purposelessness, Sam felt re-energized. Had he been looking in a mirror, he would have seen his body straighten up, his shoulders squaring as he answered.

"Tell me what you need."

They had fought for the first time in months, and it had unnerved them both. This wasn't their usual banter or an angry word or two, but a real, full out argument.

Jarod didn't want her to contact her father, and she felt she had to. It was the central point of the disagreement, though both knew there was more to it than that.

He didn't want her to go and she didn't want to go, but she had to and they both knew it. Unfortunately knowing it didn't make it easier to accept.

"Jarod, I need him on my side if I'm going home."

"When has he ever been on your side, Parker? I can't believe after everything he's done, you're still willing to trust him."

"I didn't say I trusted him. I said I needed him. Those are two different things if you hadn't noticed." At that Jarod threw up his hands, storming out of the living room towards the kitchen.

"Fine, do what you want. You always do anyway."

Angrily, Parker stood and followed him into the kitchen, stopping in the doorway while he continued to the stove where he checked on dinner, slamming the lids of the pots down as he did.

"Jarod, I have to go back. You know that. Thomas needs to be at home and I have a life to get back to."

"And such a great life it is, Parker. Are you going to start taking Tommy to work with you right away? You know, the heir apparent training program at the Centre is such a terrific way to raise children. Look at how well you turned out."

His words stung her and it took all her energy to fight down the urge to lash out at him. He wasn't angry with her, he was angry at the situation. The fact that she knew him well enough to know that frightened and thrilled her all at the same time.

Jarod turned his back to her and leaned against the sink for support. For her part, Parker was tired of fighting a battle that couldn't be won. She had to leave, and they both had to accept that.

She walked over to him, her right hand coming to rest gently in the middle of his back.

"Don't you think that if it could work – don't you know I would stay? But it won't, Jarod. Anymore than my moving away with Thomas would have worked, I know that now. The only way I – we can ever be free from the Centre is if we find the truth about all the secrets it holds over us. Then we can take back control of our lives."

He hated hearing the words, but knew they were true. There was still so much they both had to do before the Centre could be completely cut out of their lives, before the people that they loved would be safe. And though he knew that, it still seemed damn unfair.

He turned toward her, his eyes showing his surrender.

"All right, Parker. What is it you want to do?"

Parker sat in the hotel lobby in Maine, her heart pounding as she saw her father walk through the doors. She couldn't read his face, and wondered if he was angry that she had called Sam to arrange their meeting. In fact, her father hadn't even known where he was headed when the two men left the Centre. Keeping Sam the only one that knew meant that no other Centre personnel would be showing up unannounced.

He walked up to her and she stood, not certain how to greet him. Her uncertainty was momentarily pushed aside as her father stepped closer to her and wrapped her in an embrace. The shock of his actions made it hard for her to react, but eventually she had pulled her arms up from their slack positions at her side, and returned his embrace.

"Angel, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too, Daddy."

He held her a moment longer, then stepped back, his attention immediately turning to the stroller beside her chair. He moved so he could get a better look at the tiny figure inside.

"Angel, he's beautiful. Definitely a Parker."

Parker smiled half-heartedly at his comment, her nerves still a little frayed from seeing him again. She sat down in her chair, afraid that he might notice her legs shaking – they were actually shaking.

"Actually, he's a Gates, Daddy."

"Wha--, oh, well, yes, of course. Named him after his father then?"

Parker nodded. Anxious to break eye contact with her father, she reached over and picked Thomas up, cradling him close to her. He smiled a big, toothless smile as she did so, and this finally brought a smile to her face as well.

"You really are doing well, aren't you, Angel?"

"Yes, Daddy. I am, but there are some things we need to talk about."

For the next hour and a half, Mr. Parker sat in stunned silence as his daughter told him about the attack on her, about who was responsible. He had thought to defend his son, but she had evidence to support her claim, and as he looked at the lab report showing that her attacker had clearly been her twin, Mr. Parker decided to simply sit back and for once hear his daughter out.

She told him about the will, about her suspicions about Lyle and Brigitte working together, about how close she had come to losing Thomas. She never mentioned Jarod, and though the Chairman might have suspected the Pretender was in some way responsible for helping his daughter get out of Blue Cove, at this point, he couldn't let himself be upset.

Finally, she finished with the details. Then she squared her shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

"Daddy, I need you to change your will. I realize you were only trying to do what you thought was best for us, but I can't have my son caught in the middle of some war over an inheritance I don't even want for him."

"But Angel, those shares will guarantee his future."

"Daddy, I want you to hear me when I say this to you, and no matter what I want you to believe me. My son will never, never be a part of the Centre, and anyone that tries to make him a part of it will be cut out of his life forever. I need you to do this for me, not because it's expedient or because it's what anyone else wants, but because it's what I need you to do."

And there it was – the challenge to him. Could he finally do the right thing by his daughter by protecting her son? Just days earlier, he had been thinking how much he had let her down. Now here she was, giving him a second chance.

"You'll come back to work?"

"As soon as I get home and get settled. I'm not living under the illusion, Daddy, that I can ever be free of that place, not anymore. But my son will be – I owe his father that."

For a long while, Mr. Parker sat there, looking at his daughter as she held his grandson. God, she looked so much like Catherine.

"I'll take care of it. I promise you, Angel."

"Dad, you wanted to see me?" Lyle entered the atrium a little hesitantly. Each time he had been summoned in recent weeks, he couldn't help but be terrified that somehow his father or the Triumvirate had discovered his betrayal. He was no fool. Spilling his guts to Tommy Tanaka had saved him for the moment, but if the Centre ever found out what he'd done –

"Yes, son. I wanted to let you know that your sister is coming home." Mr. Parker studied the shocked expression that passed over Lyle's face, then observed the careful way his son changed his expression to give the appearance of familial concern.

"Really? When did you hear from her?"

"Yesterday. Oh, that son of hers is something else, too. I can't wait to get them back home."

Lyle moved a little, walking in a careful, measured circle. He didn't want to let his father see how anxious this news made him. Now he would be able to fix things, given the right opportunity. Clearly the child had been born prematurely, and premature babies could die easily, couldn't they?

"Where has she been? I mean, she did realize we were all looking for her, didn't she?"

"Yes, yes. Apparently she had an accident and needed some specialized medical care. So, she went to a hospital where she could get it. With so much going on, she just – well, she didn't want to worry any of us."

"Well, that's, uh, great, Dad. Be sure to tell her to let me know if she needs anything." Lyle gave his father a winning smile of sincerity, and turned to leave the room.

"Lyle, there's just one more thing." Lyle started to turn back but never completed the movement. Instead, he was struck by the still-powerful arm of his father in full swing. The blow sent him flying back toward and eventually slamming into the wall. He felt his father grab him by the neck, and shock mixed with a suddenly real fear of this man held him still.

"You got your wish. I've changed the will." Lyle's eyes went wide with panic as he realized that his father knew of his attempt to kill Thomas. He opened his mouth to defend himself, then, thinking better of it, stood silent.

"I'm not entirely certain yet why you did what you did, but understand this – If any harm comes to my daughter or my grandson at your hands or anyone working for you, son or no son, I'll kill you myself."

Mr. Parker released his son a moment after he finished his words, and stepping back, straightened his suit and started to walk from the room, stopping in the doorway.

"And don't think anyone can stop me." With that, the older man walked from the room as if nothing had happened.

Lyle stood stunned, unsure of what his next move should be. His father could easily have killed him but hadn't, which meant he still had time to plan a counter-maneuver with Brigitte. But they had to be careful, more careful than ever now or all of their plans for the Parker dynasty would be ruined.

'Damn it,' he thought, why couldn't his sister have just died at the damn airfield when Willie shot her. It certainly would have made his life easier.

The cab honked its horn for a second time, and Jarod threw open the door to the cabin, letting the driver know they were aware of his presence. Then he turned back inside and headed in the bedroom to get Parker's luggage.

He was still smarting from her refusal to let him drive her and Thomas to the airport. Part of him understood that she couldn't handle saying goodbye to him in a public place. Part of him couldn't help but want to fight for every minute he could get with them before they went back to a life that would force them apart.

Parker was just finishing dressing Thomas, and she looked up as Jarod walked in. He looked at her, asking with his eyes if he could take her things. She nodded yes, looking down at the baby to keep herself from falling apart.

Satisfied that they were finally ready to go and that she hadn't left anything behind, Parker picked up Thomas' bag and then the baby and headed outside. Jarod had already placed her luggage in the trunk, and had secured Thomas' car seat as well.

She handed the baby to him, and Jarod held the baby boy in his arms for a moment, then he made Thomas giggle by tickling him under the chin. He placed a soft kiss on the baby's cheek, then on his head, and then he turned and put the infant into his car seat.

All that was left was for them to say goodbye. But neither one of them could say anything. They just stood there, looking at each other, until finally Parker moved forward, her arms wrapping around him. Jarod clung to her, wanting to hang on for just one more second.

She stepped back from him, her right hand raising and coming to rest on his cheek. Then she took her hand away and climbed into the cab, quickly telling the driver to go.

Jarod stood there as they drove away, continued to stand there for several minutes after they'd gone. After what seemed like forever, he turned back toward the house, his heart heavy with a sadness he sensed was now a permanent part of him.

It was hours before he saw the picture she had left on the mantle. Father Moore had taken it one day while they were all out enjoying an unusually warm Wyoming winter day. The photo showed Miss Parker holding Thomas as she smiled at Jarod, who sat right beside her.

He picked up the picture and held it, unable to take his eyes off of it. Then, as if guided by something he couldn't explain, he flipped the photo over. As his eyes filled with tears, he sank onto the couch as he read the words again.

"No matter what happens, Jarod, we will always be your family."

Chapter 12 – Beginnings:

Parker couldn't help but notice the weight that settled on her shoulders the moment she entered the Centre's doors. Though she had been in contact with the office for over a week by phone, her search for a nanny had thankfully given her an excuse to delay her return to work.

That excuse vanished when Greta appeared. Parker grimaced remembering the thirty interviews she'd endured in the past three weeks. Things had gotten so awful, her father had even offered to let his and Brigitte's nanny do double duty so his Angel could get back to work, as if she'd let anyone associated with Brigitte anywhere near her son.

But that was before the blessed Greta had finally arrived. The two women spoke easily together, something Parker found unusual since she so easily intimidated most women, and they seemed to share views on how things for Thomas should be done. Parker was already prepared to hire her pending Broots' background check when the woman did something else Parker wasn't used to – she told her the truth.

"Miss Parker, before you decide whether or not to hire me, there is something I think you should know." Parker raised her eyebrows, and shifted Thomas from arm to the other as she wondered what the young woman had to say.

"You see, I didn't just happen to hear about your job. I, um, well, I'm friends with a friend of yours. Actually, Jarod sent me."

Parker fought the urge to smile at that. Why should she be surprised? Jarod was as worried about who would care for Thomas as she was, and she should have known that he would find a way to put in his two cents about just who that should be.

She'd thanked Greta for telling her about Jarod's "referral," and told her she'd call the next day. Even though Parker trusted Jarod implicitly, she could hardly tell the Centre that she'd hired a nanny on his say so, so there was still the matter of letting Broots run required background check, but she knew that her search was over.

Now Greta was where Parker wanted to be more than anything -- home with Thomas. Her heart was heavy enough from having to leave him, and it certainly didn't help that she was leaving him to come back here. 'Just remember,' she told herself, 'you're doing this for him.' The thought 'and for Jarod' passed through her mind as well, but she couldn't let herself think about that now, it would only add to the pain in her already tightened chest.

She hadn't spoken to Jarod since she'd left him standing in front of their cabin in Wyoming four weeks earlier. As much as she missed him, Parker was well aware of why he hadn't called. Still, her heart nearly stopped each time her cell phone rang, and she had even woken a few nights, just before Thomas' 2 a.m. feeding, reaching for the phone,

certain she'd heard it ring, but it never had, and she knew it might be a while before it did.

Finally reaching her office, Parker strolled in expecting to see a stack of paperwork and unopened mail on her desk. Instead she was greeted with a sight so humorous, it actually managed to make her smile.

Sydney, Broots and Sam were all seated on the floor in front of her desk. They had apparently come to welcome her back, but Angelo, who was also there, seemed to have other ideas. He had brought nearly three years of accumulated confetti he'd made from scraps of paper, and he was merrily flinging it all over the office. He didn't seem to notice that he had completely covered the three other men, who were sitting patiently, allowing the savant to enjoy this childlike moment.

"Working hard, I see." The men looked up at Parker's words, and then she burst into laughter. They looked so ridiculous, like paper-covered snowmen. Angelo howled with joy when he saw her, and ran forward, throwing paper on her, too. Parker quickly closed the door, and Angelo continued his unique decorating.

"This is what you've all been up to while I was gone? No wonder the Russell family is still on the loose."

Sydney had now made it to his feet, and he quickly made his way to Parker. He had seen her several times since her return, in fact he and Broots had been at the house to welcome her back. Jarod had called to let them know she was on her way back so that he and Broots could complete the surprise they'd begun for her weeks earlier.

He remembered the easy smile that had come to her face when she'd walked in and saw he, Broots and Debbie waiting for her. Sydney also knew he would never forget those first few moments of watching Parker with her son. Thomas had definitely brought out the best in his mother, and the weeks away from the Centre had allowed her to grow up in so many ways that the Centre had tried to prevent.

Though she was trying to appear at ease now, Sydney could see that returning to the Centre was far from easy for his young colleague. Silently, he wished that there had been away for her to remain free of this place, but he knew from his talks with Jarod that she had been right – running was no way for her son to live.

Jarod was an entirely different matter. He had never heard as much sadness in Jarod's voice as he had over the past month. He'd heard from Jarod nearly every day, and Sydney sensed this was because the Pretender was not yet sure what to say to Parker. Neither had told him what happened during their time together, but Sydney knew that his earlier instincts had been right on target – the two had formed a stronger bond than they'd ever imagined possible, and now they were having to learn to live with the enormous emotional weight of that connection.

The merriment in Miss Parker's office was shattered by the ringing of her phone. She stepped forward to the desk and placed her briefcase down as she answered the phone.

"What?"

Sydney could tell by the change in her face who was on the other line, and his suspicions were confirmed when she finally spoke again.

"Of course, Daddy. I'll be right there." Parker hung up the phone and closed her eyes for a moment. She was truly back in hell, and it seemed a lifetime of hours stood between her and the moment she would return home and hold her son in her arms again.

Finally, her mask of resignation in place, she turned back to face her co-workers.

"Well, duty calls. Broots, do me a favor and get someone up here to clean up. All I need is for Raines' to see this."

"Sure thing, Miss Parker."

"And guys, thanks."

Miss Parker exited the room, leaving behind a group of pleased and happy men. They knew it was only a matter of time before she screamed at one of them, but they didn't care. She was back and that was all that mattered.

Jarod returned to his apartment, dropping the heavy gear that was required for his current pretend. He had spent the last three weeks infiltrating the state search and rescue dive team in Massachusetts, in search of the team member he believed was responsible for drowning the team leader, a man named Ray Haskins.

Haskins had left behind a wife and three daughters, and Jarod was certain it had something to do with a report he'd been preparing on funds being embezzled from the state resource fund. After three weeks, Jarod had zeroed in on the responsible party, a woman named Eve Dalton – a lieutenant with the state police, and an expert diver – one who could easily sabotage the gear of another team member, especially one who didn't think he was in any danger.

He sat down on the couch, placing a bottle of cold Yoo-Hoo on the table next to his laptop. He tried to tell himself that he needed to get to work. His plans for Ms. Dalton were going to go into action in less than 36 hours, and there were still some small details he needed to clean up, but he couldn't make himself turn on the computer. All he wanted to do was think about them.

It had been this way every day. He'd come home, knowing there were a million things he needed to do, but all he wanted to do was lie here on the couch and imagine what they were doing. Was Parker feeding him? Was Thomas playing with Billy Bear, the teddy bear Jarod had brought to him in the hospital? Were they scared? Were they in danger? The thoughts tormented him and made his heart ache for them.

He was at least happy that she had hired Greta. He'd met the young woman in his first year out of the Centre during a pretend in Hells Kitchen. She had been an invaluable help as he tried to find the drug dealer who was selling poisoned drugs to suburban teens. She was only 19 then, struggling to get through college, and working as a counselor at the local youth center. Now she was a college graduate with a degree in child psychology, and a heart that had seen too much tragedy.

It was that that had made him think to match her with Parker. The two had so much in common, and when he'd approached Greta with the idea, she'd been thrilled. She needed a break from the horrors of the neighborhood, and Jarod hoped that by the time she was ready to return home, Parker and Thomas would be free to return to him.

If that's what she wanted. That was the problem. With so much distance between them, it was so easy for his doubts to start running away with him. Did she want a life with him? She'd never actually said that, only that she would have stayed with him if it would've worked. What did that mean? Now, with so much silence between them, he didn't know.

He sat up, forcing himself to turn toward the computer and turn it on.

"You've got mail." The computer voice rang out to him. Grudgingly, Jarod entered his password and waited for the messages to download.

After a moment of scanning the names of those who had sent him mail, Jarod saw the e-mail address he used to communicate with Sydney and Broots. Worried, he opened the message quickly.

Answers will not come without questions. Don't you think it's time to call?

Sydney.

Jarod scanned the message again, reassuring himself that it in fact was just an admonishment by his mentor. Then he considered the message. Was Sydney right, was it finally time to call?

Parker closed the door behind Greta, noticing that Sam was in his self appointed spot across the street. He had begun parking there each night the moment she'd returned to Blue Cove, and though she hoped she would never need to call on him for help, she had to admit it made her feel better to know that someone she trusted was so close by, keeping watch over her and Tommy.

She rushed into her bedroom, eager to peel off her Centre suit and crawl into her comfortable silk pajamas. Then she walked into the nursery and smiled down into the happy face of her baby boy.

"Hey there, little man. Are you ready to play with Mommy for a while?"

Thomas reached his arms toward her and she felt the now familiar rush of emotion in her heart as she reached down and picked him up. She held him close for a moment, breathing in his wonderful baby scent, and as she did, her eyes scanned his nursery, reminding her of their homecoming.

It had taken all of Broots' self control to let her unload Thomas' bag and place the baby into Debbie's ready and loving arms before he'd dragged Parker down the hallway to a door which was adorned with an enormous blue ribbon. She remembered seeing Sydney fight down a smile as the two men ushered her into the room.

What greeted Parker on the other side of the door was a fully decorated nursery. The two men beamed with pride at their handiwork – the walls were decorated with tiny, stenciled construction tools in tribute to the baby's father, and mountains of stuffed animals and toys filled each corner. Parker was awestruck by the love that had gone into the room – love, she reminded herself, for her.

Looking at the room now, she couldn't help but drift back to the thoughts she'd had that day. So often, she'd wondered what she had done in her life to deserve the leeway that those who really loved her granted. She certainly knew how difficult she could be, and though she wanted to be loveable, it was hard for her to let anyone inside the walls the Centre had worked so hard to build inside of her. But always it seemed there had been Sydney and Broots, tunneling away at the sturdy barriers and worming their way inside. Then Thomas and the baby – and, of course, there was Jarod.

For now, she didn't have the energy to face such questions. She was exhausted from her first day back at the Centre, and all she wanted was to settle down into the window seat and play with her son. She carried Thomas out into the living room, stopping to pick up his favorite blanket and Billy Bear, and then she climbed into the comfortable cocoon of the window, placing Thomas in the crook of her lap and bent knees.

God, what a hideous day it had been. She'd been summoned to her father's office where her brother and stepmother waited under Mr. Parker's stern gaze to welcome her back home. It was all Parker could do not to break Lyle's neck after what he'd tried to do to

her and her son, but she'd promised her father she'd leave the situation alone for now, and so she'd fought down the urge to kill him.

Brigitte sat with one of her ever-present lollipops stuck in her mouth, and it pleased Parker to no end to see that the troll was still saddled with forty extra pounds of weight. It had taken almost no time for Parker to recover her figure – of course, that was thanks in part to the hell she'd been through physically – but Parker still knew it would drive Brigitte insane to see her back in her short size six skirts so soon after giving birth.

The meeting had only lasted an hour, but it seemed to take forever and her only escape had been a promise to come to dinner Friday night so that she could meet her new baby brother. She hated to think of going to their house, mostly because she knew her father expected her to bring Thomas, and she didn't want her son anywhere near the troll or her back stabbing twin.

Parker forced those thoughts out of her mind and instead thought about Jarod. She had half expected him to break his silence today. She knew he wasn't staying away out of anything other than self-preservation, but she missed him terribly and she was beginning to feel a little abandoned. She knew Sydney had picked up on this, though she would never admit it to him.

A loud gurgle from Thomas brought Parker out of her head and she smiled down at her son. She knew so clearly now what his father had been talking about, that night when they'd sat in her dining room, talking about her mother. Parker had been convinced that the studio had been her mother's refuge from all of the horrors of her life.

"No, Parker, you were." She could still hear his voice, and now she knew the truth of his words. If her mother had found half the joy in her that she found in Thomas, then Parker couldn't help but feel she had done something wonderful for her mother after all.

Snuggling Thomas close to her, she rocked him gently, staring out at the moon as it shined above them.

Lyle and Brigitte were on their best behavior at the family gathering Mr. Parker had called. To their knowledge, the Chairman didn't know the part Brigitte had played in the plan to eliminate Parker's son, but he was definitely watching everything Lyle did, and so they played things very carefully.

For her part, Brigitte found the whole evening barely tolerable. Her stepdaughter wore a tight, black wool dress to the dinner, rubbing the blond's face in the fact that she still looked like a beached whale following the birth of her son. It also drove her insane to see her husband holding Thomas protectively, cooing over the baby when he hardly ever even looked at the child she had given him.

Parker, meanwhile, adopted an attitude of survival. She would do what she had to do to get out of the dinner in one piece as quickly as possible. To that end, she had marched directly over to Master Parker's bassinette, and picked up the baby. This action had not gone unnoticed by anyone in the room, most of whom had half-expected her to turn her nose up at the new baby.

Parker looked down at the little boy and noticed that he didn't look anything like her father. Of course, neither did she, but she knew why that was true, and she knew the same could be true of her new "brother." Hadn't Broots himself caught Lyle and Brigitte fooling around? Parker had her suspicions, but for now, she had decided to keep her own counsel.

She had, however, nearly come unglued when Lyle tried to take Thomas from her father. Parker had never thought herself capable of moving as fast as she had to intercept the baby, saying she needed to go change him before dinner. Once they were safely inside one of the guest rooms, Parker couldn't stop the small shudder of fear that ran up her spine as she held her son close to her.

Dinner passed uneventfully, minus a few barbs thrown by the Parker women, and mercifully, Thomas had begun screaming to be fed at about 9:30, giving Parker the perfect excuse to head home.

Unfortunately, her son had fallen sound asleep on the way, and she knew she would have to wake him to feed him, or else face the wrath of his tiny screams when he woke up starving in a few hours. She parked the car and pulled the sleeping baby out of the car. As she did so, she noticed Sam pulling up into his usual spot. Smiling, she continued into the house, quietly shutting the door behind her.

She was greeted by the sight of a roaring fire, and Jarod sitting on a blanket in front of her fireplace. He had turned to look at her as she entered, and now sat staring at her, both unsure who should speak first.

"Jarod, I – Sam's right across the street." She swallowed hard, her nerves suddenly failing her and making her feel like a flock of butterflies had taken flight inside of her. God, he was here, right in front of her, and that was all she could think of to say, "Sam's right across the street"? Thankfully, Jarod responded positively to her nervousness, standing up and crossing to her.

"I'm not afraid of Sam."

They stood there, staring at each other for a moment, their eyes only breaking contact when Thomas began to squirm in Parker's arms.

"I – I'm sorry. I should go feed him and put him down. Give me a minute?"

"I'll be waiting right here."

Parker was halfway down the hall before she stopped and turn back to look at Jarod again, just to make sure that she wasn't dreaming and that he was really here. He smiled at her, a nervous, uniquely Jarod smile that sent the butterflies inside of her flying again, and made her very aware of the reality of his presence.

She laid Thomas down just long enough to change into her pajamas and then headed back into the nursery to feed her son. She laughed as Thomas sucked hungrily at her breast, acting as if he hadn't eaten in days rather than just a few hours. Was it possible, she thought, that just a few months ago she and Jarod had been worried that he was too small to be healthy?

Jarod – her mind couldn't help but turn back to thoughts of him. There seemed to be so much they needed to say, and suddenly she couldn't think of a single thing. She was just so glad he was here, so close to her again. She had known she missed him, but not how much, not until this very moment.

In the living room, Jarod stoked the fire and nervously anticipated Parker's return. He knew he could join her in the nursery, but he needed a few more moments to prepare himself for whatever was about to happen.

He'd decided to come here after watching Eve Dalton be arrested for murder and embezzlement. He had come because he realized that the sense of satisfaction he normally got from the justice he doled out just didn't feel the same. He was still convinced he was doing the right thing, helping those who couldn't help themselves, but it just didn't feel like the most important thing in his life anymore.

What he didn't know was what he was going to say to her. Do you want to spend your life with me seemed like a heavy question to lay on someone you hadn't even talked to in a month. But, God, did he need to know the answer.

Neither of them needed to worry so much about what would happen next, because it happened so easily, so naturally that neither would later be able to recount exactly how the scene had played out, they would only remember the enormity of the commitment they made to each other.

He walked into the nursery and saw her standing up from the rocking chair, gently cradling Thomas in her arms as she headed for his crib. Jarod moved toward her as she lay the sleeping infant down, pulling his quilt softly over him. She felt Jarod standing behind her, and smiled as he placed a hand on her shoulder. She reached up and took his hand, and they just stood there, watching Thomas sleep.

After a few moments, she turned quietly, and, keeping hold of his hand, led him from the room. Once in the hallway, they had started talking softly about something that now

seemed unimportant as they headed toward the blanket Jarod had set out in front of the fireplace.

She looked back to tell him something, and at that exact moment her foot caught on the edge of the end table and she tumbled to the ground, pulling Jarod with her. They hit the floor, the softness of the blanket somewhat breaking their fall and then they both froze, hoping the noise hadn't awakened the sleeping baby.

When silence continued to rule the house, Parker looked at Jarod to apologize for her clumsiness. Instead, they both burst into giggles, neither stopping to say that this behavior wasn't like them or that it wasn't smart. Instead they surrendered to the fit of laughter, though they struggled to contain the noise to just their small area of the world.

As the laughter began to subside, Parker looked at him once again to offer her apologies. Jarod, too, finally fought back his giggles just in time to catch her eyes as she lifted hers to his. And then, it just happened. One or both of them leaned closer and their lips brushed, and after what seemed a lifetime of waiting, they were kissing.

The kiss was gentle and slow, both waiting for some sign that the other was indeed ready for what was about to happen. Then each reached for the other, holding them more securely. The kiss deepened, their hold tightened, and there was nothing more to fight or to keep them apart as his hands began to peel away the silk that stood between them.

Later, they didn't speak. She lay on her side, Jarod snuggled against her back, his cheek resting against hers. His right arm lay under her body, extending in front of her, and she lifted her left hand and placed it in his. And then, they began to stroke each other's fingers. There was no urgency to the movement, and they continued to lay in silence, the physical connection between them having made the long-existing emotional one all that much stronger.

Time went by and they continued to hold each other in the same way. Then her fingers curled into his and his wrapped around hers, and they drifted off to sleep.

It was early morning when Jarod woke. That brought immediate tension into Parker's body, which was now curled against his side, her head lying on his chest. He smiled and reached a hand to her face, gently stroking her cheek.

"It's okay, Parker. I'm not going anywhere."

Parker flew away from him, her body shaking, and panic flooded Jarod. He had never seen her react that way to anything. He moved quickly to her, his hands taking her arms as he tried to calm her.

"Parker, what is it? Tell me what it is."

She shook her head, silent tears streaming down her face. Her body continued to shake. Helpless, Jarod pulled her into his arms, holding her tight against him.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere,’ the words suddenly flooded back to Jarod from deep inside his memory. Faith had said those words to Parker once. And now, feeling the fear that gripped Parker’s soul, he imagined that Thomas must have said them, too, maybe even her mother.

Realization taking hold, Jarod rocked her gently in his arms. There was no way to fix this for her, and though he hated that knowledge, he accepted it and did what he could to help it pass. Finally, her body began to relax against him, and she lifted her head.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Parker. We both have too many demons to think they'll all go away in one night."

She nodded against him and stayed in his arms for several more minutes. He began pulling her back toward the blanket to lie down when she turned and stopped him.

"Let me check on Tommy while I'm up."

She stood and walked naked through the living room and into the nursery. There was something very touching to Jarod in the fact that she didn't feel the need to cover herself around him. When she didn't return right away, he guessed that Tommy was awake and hungry, and he laid back down, waiting for her.

After a while, she returned, sinking down beside him, her head coming to rest on his chest once again as his arm wrapped around her, holding her close.

She slept again. Jarod watched over her, sleep holding far less appeal than the pure joy he felt from seeing her relaxed and content in his arms.

He felt her breathing change, and then she was looking up at him. And then she smiled and Jarod was sure he felt his heart actually grow in order to hold all of the love he felt for her. His lips found hers and once again, the rest of the world slipped away as the two lovers said with their bodies what both were still hesitant to say in words.

Chapter 13 – Centre Games:

Miss Parker stormed down the stairs and into the alley of the Manhattan brownstone. Moving swiftly, she lost the three sweepers who were trailing her, and turned two corners before she found what, or rather who she was looking for.

"Charles, can you get out on your own?"

Major Charles stood still, his hand holding open a hole in a chain-link fence that Jay had already climbed through.

"We'll be fine." He smiled at her and then headed through the opening himself. After they were through, he and Jay headed down another alley and into an adjacent building where they had an escape route set up. Before he entered the building, Charles looked back over his shoulder in time to see Miss Parker kicking over several boxes so that the hole in the fence was now covered. Then she began swearing angrily and headed back toward her sweeper team.

Charles couldn't help but smile again as he followed his son down the path they had memorized two months ago when they'd arrived here. If only Jarod could have seen her. For someone who had never been trained to pretend, she was getting pretty damn good at it.

Matthew held the file tightly in his hands as he walked to the office of his mentor. He entered the room to find Mr. Raines staring at a DSA display. He glanced over the older man's shoulder, and saw a frozen frame of two men. One stood, a gun in his hand, the other sat slumped on the porch of a house, obviously dead.

Before he could figure out exactly what was happening in the DSA, Raines looked up and saw him. The gruff man quickly snapped off the DSA player, and glared up at his protégé.

"Do you have the latest report?"

"Yes, sir." Matthew handed him the file, then stepped back awaiting some reaction to the information. To his surprise, Raines seemed unmoved by what he read, and for a moment, Matthew wondered if the old man really understood what he had in his hands.

"Would you like me to put a team in place, sir?"

"No, Matthew, I would not like you to put a team in place."

"But, Sir, we can –"

"Don't make the mistake, Matthew, of thinking I'm uncertain of my course. This information will aid me in my purpose. It isn't up to you to question that."

Few people could make Matthew feel fear, but this man did. He knew that wasn't a rare thing, hell, even Miss Parker was afraid of Raines. Of course, she had reason to be, Matthew mused. Still, he knew he had crossed some imaginary boundary with the man to whom he'd pledged his loyalty, and he decided to exit before any more upset could be caused.

Raines watched the rattled sweeper leave then sat back in his chair, taking a deep, satisfying breath of oxygen. 'Yes,' he thought, 'this information will help me a great deal. Soon, the Centre will be exactly what it always should have been – Mine.'

Parker couldn't wait to get home, which wasn't unusual these days, but today it was worse than normal. She'd had to endure yet another lecture about her failures from her father today, and for some reason, it had stung her in way it never had before.

What else did he want from her? she wondered as she drove the twisting road home. She'd sacrificed her freedom, saved his life, brought her son back to this god forsaken place, and gone back to running across the earth chasing every Russell male in sight, and it still wasn't enough.

'He wants your loyalty.' The thought raced through her mind, and on its way, pierced her heart. 'That's exactly what he wants, and it's the one thing I can't give him,' she thought. Her loyalty belonged to others now – to the family that loved her for what she was, not for what they wanted her to be.

Still, part of her did believe her father loved her, just not in the right way. Not in the way that she loved Thomas. Never could she imagine holding her son back from his own life, his own happiness for her own sake. It would have been tragically unfair. Of course, isn't that what Jarod had been trying to drill into her head for the last four years, that her father had never been fair to her?

Jarod – another difficulty altogether. She hadn't seen him in nearly three months, though she had spoken to him several times since their few precious days together. And she had needed very much to hear his voice on those brief but so important occasions.

Part of her still couldn't believe that it had happened, that they – that she – had finally surrendered to her feelings. She had fought them so hard, for so long, and she knew the same was true for Jarod.

Lovers – they were lovers now. No, she corrected herself, they were more than that. Those nights had been more than making love – she knew she and Jarod had mated for life as they moved together in the firelight of her living room, as they'd lain together in

her bed. They were a family now, she, Jarod and baby Thomas, and nothing short of death was going to change that.

Which of course left her poised on the edge of the very fears that plagued her each day they were apart. What would happen to her if something happened to Jarod?

That thought terrified her. She remembered once, just after Thomas' murder, thinking that she would survive the tragedy, not because she didn't love her carpenter, but because he wasn't Jarod. At the time, she'd pushed the thought aside, thinking herself too horrible for words for even allowing it to crop up in her mind. Now, she understood where it had come from. Despite the enormity of her love for the father of her child, her love for Jarod was a part of who she was – as inescapable it seemed as her connection to the Centre.

She pulled up in front of the house, and immediately noticed that Greta's car was not in the driveway. Her first instinct was to feel panic – had something happened to the baby? Then logic kicked in. Surely Greta would have reached her if there were a problem. More than likely, she was out somewhere with Thomas. Or, was there another possibility?

She felt a small tinge of hope start to grow inside of her – could it mean what she hoped it did? Carefully, she climbed from the car, walking toward the house as she would after any other long day at work, just in case someone was watching her. She opened the door, and immediately felt a sensation of warmth pass through her body.

There was a white rose lying on the floor, just inside the door.

She closed the door and saw that the one rose led into a trail of them, leading through the living room, and down the hall toward her bedroom.

She followed the trail, stopping only to pause in front of the door to Thomas' nursery. She could hear the soft tones of Jarod's voice as he spoke to the baby. Not wanting to interrupt the little private time the two had together, she continued on the rose-strewn path to her bedroom.

There she found a candlelit dream – more roses, a gift-wrapped box lying on her pillow, and the unmistakable scent of Jarod's cologne. She approached the package, and pulled the card from the top of it.

"Take this box into the bathroom and wait for me."

Smiling, she did as she was told, and picked up the box. She opened the bathroom door to find still more surprises waiting for her.

Jarod had filled the bathtub with steaming water, then sprinkled it with still more roses. Candles lit the room, giving it a warmth that invited Parker into the waiting water. She peeled away the Armani suit she'd worn to work that day, piled her hair atop her head,

then climbed into the tub, the heat of the water stinging her skin a bit as she sank into its depths and closed her eyes.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, allowing the heat of the water and the gentle aroma of the roses to push the stress of her day far away. Then she heard the door open, and she opened her eyes, immediately finding Jarod's in the soft light of the room.

He smiled at her, and then sank to his knees beside the tub. Gently, he reached out his hand and caressed the side of her face and her neck.

"Welcome home." His voice was nearly as soft as his caress, and it sent shivers through her body. She pulled her hand from the water, and placed it warm and wet against his cheek. They said nothing else, instead just enjoying the feeling of being close to each other again.

The contact was broken when Jarod stood to remove his own clothing. Parker watched him, aware of the desire he stoked inside of her with each movement he made. Jarod also continued to look at her, watching the way her eyes took in the sight of him. Never had anything made him feel so completely wanted or loved as that look.

He climbed into the tub, stepping in behind her, and she moved forward to give him room to sit down. Then she was leaning back against his chest, held in the strength of his arms, his heartbeat strong against her back. At that moment, Parker was convinced that nothing on earth could make her feel happier than this – sitting here with Jarod, her son safe in his room down the hall.

"So, how goes the hero business?"

Jarod smiled at her words, pulling her tighter against him. The time away from her had been so difficult, so empty, and yet it had been far more bearable than the weeks when she'd first come back to Blue Cove. Because, he knew, that then he had lived with doubt. This time, though the separation had been longer, he had known each and every moment of the time that he would be coming home when it was over – home to her and Thomas. It made his work even more clear, more focused, and it made the justice he meted out even more satisfactory because now there was more than just the emotional reward of knowing he was helping someone else, there was the knowledge that he could come back here – back to his family.

"The hero business goes well. But the hero missed you very much."

She turned slightly in his arms so that she could look up at him, her hand coming to rest on his chest.

"The hero was missed." She smiled up at him, wishing she could make herself say the words she felt so strongly inside of her. But her old enemy fear was holding them in, and

despite all of the strength Jarod's presence brought to her, she still felt weak in the presence of the nemesis she had yet to find a strong enough weapon to fight.

"I saw your father and Jay this morning. Rather, the back of them as they were busy escaping through the streets of Manhattan."

"Oh, and did a gorgeous Angel happen to help them get away?" She couldn't help but smile again at the look of pure adoration in Jarod's eyes. Did he have any idea how that look made her feel?

"She might have bought them a few extra minutes." The smiles on both their faces slipped away as the look in Jarod's eyes turned to one of pure desire and longing. He eased himself lower in the tub, pulling her up against him as he did. Their lips were now just barely apart.

"Thank you." He whispered the words against her lips, and then he claimed them, kissing her like a man who hadn't eaten in days suddenly faced with a feast of riches.

She wasn't sure what he was thanking her for – for helping his family, for being here with him -- the truth was it didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was happy and he was here.

The Triumvirate was unused to being summoned. They were especially unused to being told they had made a mistake. So, they were more than a little displeased at Raines for doing both. And though the evidence he presented was difficult to refute, Mutumbo was not yet ready to cave in to the wishes of his underling.

"Mr. Raines, you have three times this year defied the wishes of the Triumvirate. You, sir, should consider yourself lucky that you are still able to have an opinion."

Raines considered Mutumbo's words, then crafted his own carefully. He knew that he was putting himself completely on the line this time. Another failure of the magnitude he'd experienced with Jarod or the clone would certainly mean the end of his life, and he was far from ready to give up his quest for control of the Centre.

"That is why I've come to you with this information. Clearly, the time for blind trust and pat reassurances of control have passed us by. Mr. Parker has lost the ability to dictate what she does. The Gates child is proof of that. So is this." He motioned toward the files he had placed in front of the Triumvirate members. Each contained still photographs of Miss Parker. One showed her standing in an alley while Major Charles and the clone climbed through a fence. Another showed her looking back over her shoulder at a fleeing Jarod, as she directed sweepers in the opposite direction.

"You've had the sweepers watching her?" Raines nodded his response to Mutumbo's question, and then continued on.

"Further delays could destroy any possibility of success with the SP Project. Clearly her emotional ties to Jarod are growing. We have to cut them before our ultimate goal becomes unattainable."

Mutumbo watched Raines as he thought about what the man was asking. Siding with Raines would mean acting without Mr. Parker's approval, and that meant the possible need to eliminate the Chairman were he ever to discover the project's status. The man still had many valuable characteristics that the Triumvirate needed, and that would be a most unwelcome possibility. Yet none of them could deny the benefits that would be reaped from the successful completion of the SP Project.

"Mr. Raines, you have conditional approval to proceed, however, each and every aspect of the project must have Triumvirate approval, is that clear?"

Raines straightened up in his chair as victory became his. He didn't care that they planned to watch him like a parent watching a small child – he would deliver the SP Project successfully, and he would finally have the satisfaction of showing Miss Parker the destiny she had been born for.

Raines' reverie was interrupted by one last question from Mutumbo.

"What will you do about the child? It will hardly be believable that she disappeared and left him behind."

"The Gates child may have some potential. We'll be able to evaluate him once he's been brought in. If nothing else, he will ensure Miss Parker's docile cooperation."

Letting him go would always be the hardest part, she knew that. Knowing, however, did not make it easier. As she waited for Jarod to finish dressing, she walked the living room, Thomas sleeping soundly against her chest, snuggled into the dark blue silk robe that had been Jarod's gift to her.

For some reason she found herself thinking of her mother and Ben. She had no idea how many times her mother had actually visited him in Lake Catherine, and she knew that they had only been friends for many years before their romance had bloomed. Still, she wondered how he had been able to let her go so many times, and how in God's name he had survived when the last time had truly become the last time.

Jarod walked into the living room with a vice around his heart. He watched her holding Thomas and tried to remember all of the reasons why he didn't just put them in the car

and drive away with them, disappearing forever. There were good reasons, he knew that, but, God, he didn't want to walk out of this door again.

She looked up at him and stopped walking. He moved to her, wrapping his arms around the two people he loved most in the world. How long would it be, he wondered, before he would hold them again?

Finally, knowing he had to leave before the sun rose, he forced himself to let them go. He pulled on his jacket, picked up his bag and walked toward the back door and away from them. As he drove away, he felt hot tears sting his face.

Miss Parker watched him go, and then she walked into her bedroom, crawling into the bed they had shared so recently. She leaned back on the pillows, his cologne still lingering there, and holding her son close, she cried, and she whispered the words she could not say when he was there.

"I love you, Jarod. I love you."

Later, as she strolled into the Centre, no one would be able to see how sweet a night she had spent, nor how painful a morning she had endured. She was simply Miss Parker, all business.

Sydney, of course, could sense something, but he knew better than to mention it. Over the past few months, she had occasionally mentioned small things to him about Jarod, and though he suspected they had taken some rather large steps in their relationship, he felt they would both come to him when they needed help navigating the difficult path of their love for each other. Until then, he would wait and simply be happy in the knowledge that they had finally found their way back together.

Unfortunately, whatever had happened left her in a worse than usual mood, and Broots had chosen this morning to be late. He strolled in at 8:30, half an hour past when the morning staff meeting should have started, rolling down his sleeve as he held a doughnut between his teeth.

"Nice of you to join us, Mighty Mouse."

Broots looked up, a little surprised at the reprimand. When Miss Parker saw the confused look on his face, it only annoyed her more.

"Did you forget how much I hate to be kept waiting?"

"No, Miss Parker, but I was doing that stupid physical and it took forever."

"Physical?"

"Yeah, didn't you get the memo? You're up next."

Broots reached into his pocket and pulled out a now glaze-covered piece of paper, which dictated that all Centre employees had to report to the Centre infirmary for their basic yearly physical.

"Oh, beautiful. Like I'm in the mood for this today." She stormed out of the office, dropping the memo on the floor as she went. Broots watched her go, then turned to Sydney.

"What's with her?"

Sydney shrugged, uncertain as to what he should say to Broots. As close as the technician and Miss Parker were, he wasn't sure how much Broots actually knew about Miss Parker and Jarod, and he would be damned if he was going to risk her wrath by spilling the beans.

Miss Parker stormed through the halls on her way to the infirmary, more annoyed than she'd been in all of the weeks she'd been back at the Centre. It wasn't that the physicals were any big deal – they happened every year. She just didn't feel like being poked at today. Emotionally, she felt like an exposed nerve, and it was taking every ounce of energy she had to hide that fact from the rest of the world. She just couldn't deal with this. She'd tell the doctor she had a meeting and give him five minutes – no more.

She rounded the corner on her way to the elevator and froze when she saw Brigitte head into Lyle's office. She didn't stop because Brigitte was visiting her brother, that happened often enough. What did get to her was the look of pure cat-ate-the-canary satisfaction that was glued to her brother's face as he opened the office door to usher his stepmother inside.

Something was wrong, very wrong if Lyle was that happy. A knot slowly began to form in her stomach as she wondered what it could possibly be. Was it something about Jarod? She reached for her cell phone, and realizing she had left it in her office, she cursed herself. Now she would have to wait to call him. He had given her a new phone during his last visit, one with his numbers preprogrammed and cloaked inside of it. She had to let him know that there might be some kind of danger.

Entering the elevator, she pressed the button that would take her to the infirmary floor.

Sam could tell something was going into action. Had he not picked up on the thread of tension that was building in the sweepers he'd seen that morning, he would certainly have known from the directive he had received. Raines had ordered him to conduct a retraining session for several junior level sweepers, an assignment that would pull him away from Miss Parker. And that meant trouble, Sam was sure of it. The wheezing

bastard always found a way to separate him from his boss when she needed him most. This time, he would not fall for it.

Sydney and Broots had told him she was on her way to the infirmary, so he headed there, too, taking a longer route that would make it seem he was headed elsewhere. He hoped no one could see the urgency in his walk, or the worry that he felt growing inside of him. Something was definitely wrong, and he had to get to her soon.

Miss Parker entered the infirmary and found the doctor and his nurse waiting for her.

"I have a meeting in five minutes, so you'll have to hurry."

"That won't be a problem, Miss Parker. This won't take long at all."

She slipped off her jacket and sat down on the exam table, and the nurse came over and slipped a blood pressure cuff around her arm. Meanwhile, the doctor pulled out his stethoscope, and moved to check her heart beat, his gloved hand first moving in a circle over her heart. She didn't notice the motion.

What she did notice was that within seconds of his touch, she began to feel sick to her stomach. Her body began to feel weak, hot and cold all at the same time, and she immediately knew that she had been drugged. She reached out with what little strength she had left and gripped the doctor's arm.

"Don't bother to fight it, Miss Parker. There's nothing you can do."

Sam rounded the corner of the hall and froze when he saw Miss Parker being wheeled out of the infirmary on a stretcher. Quickly, he forced his body to move back into a place of concealment. What in the hell were they doing to her? His first instinct told him to run down the hall, grab her and leave, but he knew at this point he would only get them both killed. Besides, he had a promise to keep, and he moved quickly through the halls of the Centre, returning to Miss Parker's office. He searched for her keys, stopped to grab her cell phone, which he saw lying on the desk, and headed out of the building for what he now knew would be the last time.

It took him 14 minutes to reach Miss Parker's house. He raced up the front steps and quickly opened the door. A startled Greta, who immediately sensed his worry, met him inside.

"Sam, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Greta, I need you to get Thomas' things as quickly as you can. We have to leave here, now."

Greta nodded and handed him the baby while she went to pack. Miss Parker had tried hard to shield her from the realities of the place she worked, but Greta knew from the things Jarod had told her that it was a place where many bad things had happened. Where they still could happen, she reminded herself.

Once, Miss Parker had told her that if anything ever went wrong, Sam would come for her and the baby, and they should go with him, no questions asked. And so that was what she would do, despite her now growing fear for her friend.

As soon as Greta was done packing, Sam loaded she and Thomas into his car and headed quickly away. Before they could even make it a mile from the house, the rearview mirror provided Sam a view of five black sedans pulling to a frantic stop in front of Miss Parker's house.

They drove for less than 10 minutes before Sam stopped in front of an old garage just on the outskirts of town. He opened the door, letting Greta and Thomas inside, then he returned to the car to drive into a grove of nearby trees. He pulled the baby's suitcase and car seat out of the car, then ran back to the garage, shutting the door.

Inside the garage sat an old red pick-up. Greta noticed that the doors read "Gates Restoration, Where Everything Old Is New Again."

"This belonged to Tommy's father?"

Sam nodded as he fastened the car seat into the truck.

"Miss Parker couldn't bring herself to sell it. So she put it into storage. She told me it was here, in case any kind of emergency ever came up."

Greta nodded as Sam took the baby and settled him quickly into his seat. As Greta climbed in, he threw open the door of the garage, quickly checking to see if any Centre sweepers had found their location. Satisfied they were still ahead of the game, Sam climbed into the truck and hurried off.

They drove for nearly an hour before he pulled Miss Parker's cell phone from his pocket, and began randomly trying the preprogrammed numbers inside.

Jarod sat in the Durham, North Carolina train station, trying to stave off the growing sense that something was very, very wrong. He had called Sydney, and the old man had assured him that everything was fine as far as he knew, and Sydney had also promised to keep an eye on Miss Parker for him.

When his cell phone rang, he reached to answer it, expecting to hear Parker's voice on the other end so he could feel silly about being worried.

"Hello?"

"Jarod, it's Sam." That small phrase sent terror racing through Jarod's body. It was a fear he hadn't felt since he'd found her lying on the floor of her house after Lyle's attack.

"They have her, Jarod. I got the baby and Greta and we're out of town, but I wasn't sure where to take them, and someone has to go back for her."

"Take them 2355 Madison Drive in Lake Catherine, Maine. The man there will know what to do."

"Jarod –"

"I'll get her out, Sam. You just take care of our son."

Jarod hung up the phone and raced out of the train station, his mind not even registering the last words he'd spoken to Sam.

Brigitte could not believe her ears. The news Lyle had just told her was definitely too good to be true, yet he assured her it was. Miss Parker was being confined by the Centre indefinitely for an experiment, and that meant that they could now safely put their plan of action against Mr. Parker into action without her around to spoil it.

"So, when do you think we should make our move?" Lyle's words pulled her out of the fantasy she was already indulging about being free of her old and difficult husband.

"No time like the present. I'll begin tonight."

Parker woke and instantly felt the cold of metal underneath her. She looked around groggily, and instantly realized two things – she was completely naked, her body covered by a thin sheet, and she was restrained – her torso and arms held down by long straps which cross the entire width of the table, her ankle held by some kind of shackles.

She moved her eyes around, trying desperately to figure out what was happening. As she did so, her eyes locked onto the stuff of which her nightmares were made – Raines.

"Miss Parker, you're awake. How fortunate for us."

She went to speak, and found that her throat was dry and sore from whatever drug they had given her. When sound did finally come out, she was horrified by how weak she sounded.

"Raines, what the hell are you doing?"

"Where is the boy, Miss Parker?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your son. We sent someone to gather him up, so he wouldn't be left without proper supervision, and he was no where to be found."

Parker let herself feel some measure of relief inside. Sam had kept his word. How he had realized she was in trouble she might never know, but he had gotten to her son before the Centre bastards had, and that was all that mattered.

"Raines, why do you care where my son is? Since when is my status as a mother of interest to you?"

"Oh, but Miss Parker, it's always been of the utmost interest to me. You see, it's by far the most important thing you'll ever do."

A sense of great unease settled into Parker as she heard his words, saw the look of joy that crossed his face. Suddenly, the room seemed very familiar to her, and she knew exactly what Raines was planning.

"Don't do this. Please —" her words were cut off as a mask was placed over her face. She fought her own natural urge to breath, knowing they were trying to render her unconscious, struggling even though she knew she would lose the fight.

"Surely, you must have known that you were born to a greater purpose than just running the corporate offices, Miss Parker? You are going to be the mother of the future of the Centre -- The most genetically perfect Pretender ever born."

She felt a nurse release one of the shackles on her ankle from the table, it's slack allowing her to place Parker's leg in what was unmistakably the stirrup of a gynecological table. Parker's body was flooded with the urge to fight, but the anesthesia was already controlling her body, forcing her down into unconsciousness.

"You act as if I'm giving you something you don't want, Miss Parker. As if having Jarod's child isn't something you've dreamed of."

She felt her other leg being moved, and she fought the veil of darkness that was enveloping her as the mask was removed.

"Not like this, please." The words were barely audible as she slipped into blackness, her last thought following her into the dark. 'I'm sorry, Jarod. I'm sorry I couldn't stop them.'

Raines saw that she was out, and he motioned to the waiting medical team.

"Begin the insemination."

Hours later, a nurse checked on a still sleeping Miss Parker, making sure that her vital signs were stable. As she checked her pulse, she took the sleeping woman's left arm at the wrist, not noticing that her ever-present silver ring was missing from her hand.

Mr. Parker sat in his office staring at the report that sat in front of him. The Centre doctors had diagnosed a serious anomaly in his daughter's heart functions during her physical, and she had been sent immediately to a medical facility where she could receive specialized treatment.

He knew he should believe it. Self-preservation told him to believe it. But if it was true, why were his grandson and his nanny gone, and why did Raines look as if he'd just won the lottery?

The sound of movement behind him startled the Chairman, and he whirled around in his chair to see a dark figure standing in the corner.

"Who's there?"

A man moved out of the shadows, and it took Mr. Parker a moment to realize who it was. As realization hit, he felt something being pressed into his hand. Quickly the figure slunk back into the corner, hiding against the wall.

"Daughter needs help."

He heard the words and knew instantly that his daughter was in grave danger. Any doubts he was wrong were banished when Mr. Parker looked down into his hand. It held his daughter's square silver ring.

Chapter 14 – The Walls Crumble:

Sydney walked along the path that led to the public rose garden of Blue Cove Municipal Park, a knot twisting in his stomach. He could not remember ever being summoned to a meeting outside the Centre's walls by Mr. Parker. His anxiety was heightened by his inability to reach Miss Parker. He had been told some story about a heart problem detected in her physical, but he knew that if that were true, she would have contacted he or Broots to care for Thomas in her absence. That she had not done so told him that she had not left the Centre on her own terms.

He rounded the last turn of the path and saw the Chairman standing there, anxiously staring out at the grove of white roses that stood in full bloom before him. The roses had been donated by Mr. Parker in Mrs. Parker's memory shortly after her death. Not wanting to startle the other man, Sydney cleared his throat to announce his arrival, causing Mr. Parker to turn toward him.

"Sydney. Thank you for coming."

"You said it was important, sir."

"You received the memo about my daughter?"

"I did."

"It's a lie." To reinforce his point, Mr. Parker pulled his daughter's ring from his pocket and handed it to Sydney.

"What's happened?" Mr. Parker turned back to face the roses as he considered his answer to Sydney's question.

"Years ago, Catherine told me that Raines had managed to get -- he had engineered time alone with my Angel without either of our consent. He did this in order to run some tests on her."

"Catherine mentioned that once. She was furious with him."

"Yes, she was. I think it was that day that made her decide to try to run away."

Sydney felt his eyes widen at Mr. Parker's words. So, Miss Parker had been right. Her father had been completely aware of her mother's plan to leave and take the young girl away from the Centre.

"After I saw what Raines' tests were for, I had no choice but to agree with Catherine that the best thing for our daughter was that she be taken as far away as possible."

"Sir?"

"Raines determined that my daughter was a class-one breeder. Do you know what that means, Sydney?"

Sydney felt his blood run cold. Did he know what it meant? He had seen that same term applied to folders of the women incarcerated with he and Jacob in the concentration camps, women who could produce children of enormous intellectual potential.

"He planned to take her once she reached adulthood and use her to produce children with Jarod. When I found out, I was horrified. I had already let him get away with so much – to let this happen..."

Mr. Parker's words trailed off and Sydney fought to remain silent. He didn't want to take the chance of interrupting, yet his mind was screaming questions he wanted answers to.

"I went to the Triumvirate and demanded that they put a stop to Raines project, the SP project. They agreed, but only after I made a deal with them. I had to agree to allow Gemini to go forward, despite Catherine's objections, and not interfere in its progression.

"I lived up to my end of the bargain, even after they – after Catherine. I did these things to protect my child, Sydney, do you understand that?"

"I don't think I'm the one that needs to understand. Why are you telling me this?"

Finally, Mr. Parker turned away from the roses that bore his wife's name and looked Sydney in the eye. Sydney was amazed at what he saw there. Life – for the first time since Catherine's death, he saw true life in Mr. Parker's eyes.

"The Triumvirate has broken our agreement. Raines' would never have taken her without their approval. Which leaves me with one question."

Sydney's brow furrowed as he wondered what it was the Chairman was about to ask.
"And what is that?"

"How soon can you get Jarod to the Centre?"

From his vantage point on the cliffs, Jarod had seen Sydney drive away from the Centre. He watched cars come and go, keeping track of how many staffers were inside the building at all times.

Once the afternoon shift of security guards and non-classified personnel arrived, Jarod reached for his cell phone and quickly input a now familiar number.

"Hello?"

"Ben, it's Jarod."

"Jarod, they're here and settled. But Sam wants to speak with you."

Jarod waited as he heard the phone shifted from Ben's hands to the sweepers.

"Jarod, now that they're safe, I'll head back –"

"No."

"Damn it, Jarod, you can't go in there alone."

"And you can't leave Thomas alone. You should be safe there, but we can't take that chance. Sam, you know what it would do to her if anything happened to that little boy."

The long pause that followed told Jarod that Sam was considering his words. It was a terrible choice he knew that. His friend was in trouble and Sam wanted to come and help her, but he also knew how much Thomas needed his protection now.

"All right, I'll stay here. But Jarod, you get her out of there."

"I will, Sam. Tell Thomas that his mother and I will be home soon."

Jarod hung up the phone, and was about to return to his lookout post when the cell phone's ring shattered the silence on the cliffs.

"Hello?"

"Jarod, this is Sydney."

"Sydney, where have you been? I've been trying to reach you –"

"I know, Jarod. Raines' has Miss Parker."

"Do you know where?"

"We're working on it. Broots and I will contact you in a few hours. Are you close?"

"Close enough."

"Then listen to me, there's already a plan in place to get her out. All we have to do is find out where Raines is keeping her."

"Who is `we,' Sydney?" Sydney paused. He knew this would be the most difficult part. Jarod would not like what came next, and it would take all of his strength to convince the Pretender to agree.

"Mr. Parker is helping us."

"No, Sydney. How could you expect me to trust him after everything he's done to her, to us? How can you?"

"Jarod –"

"No, I'll get her out on my own."

"Jarod, listen to me. We don't have time for this. We have to get her out of here as quickly as possible."

"And you believe that Mr. Parker is the key to that?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. She's in terrible danger, Jarod. We have to trust him."

"How can you be sure he isn't a part of it, Syd? This could all just be some ruse to get me to come out of hiding. He knows what she means to me."

"Raines is responsible for this, Jarod. Only him."

Jarod squeezed his eyes shut tightly, hating that Sydney was right. It would be so much easier to get to her with help from inside.

"Fine, Sydney. But you tell that bastard if he double-crosses us, he's a dead man."

Sydney looked over Broots' shoulder for the 100th time, and when Broots glanced up at him, he moved across the room, his nerves getting the better of him.

He had finally convinced Jarod to go along with the plan Mr. Parker had set in place, and he had done it without revealing the truth of Raines' plan. It was only a temporary reprieve from the truth. Eventually, Jarod would have to be told what Raines' had planned to do. But for now, all that mattered was getting Miss Parker out of the Centre's clutches.

"I've got it."

Sydney whirled around at Broots' words.

"Where?"

"She's in Renewal Wing. There's a set of rooms hidden behind the walls to rooms 251 and 252. That's where they have her."

Relief flooding him, Sydney flipped open his cell phone and dialed Jarod's number. Just a few more hours, and it would all be over.

Brigitte slammed the door to Lyle's office. She stomped angrily to his leather couch and plopped down on it miserably. Lyle looked up from his desk, and observing this, let a small smile cross his face.

"Bad day?"

"How the hell am I supposed to kill him if he doesn't come home?"

"Oh, having problems with the ball and chain?" Brigitte glared over at her stepson, the sarcasm in his voice only adding to her foul mood.

"Very funny. What the hell is going on around here anyway?"

"I don't know. I saw him this morning, he seemed fine."

"And that would be the problem, Lyle. He's not supposed to be fine anymore, is he?"

Lyle stood and walked over to the couch. He sat down beside Brigitte, taking her leg in his hand as he did. He pulled it over into his lap and began rubbing her calf muscle.

"He's probably just worried about Parker. I'm sure he bought their cover story. He told me about her 'heart condition' today."

"So what?"

"So, don't you think a man of his age having a heart attack after one of his children, his favorite one no less, endures a health crisis will be more believable?"

"Maybe. And maybe I'll just choke him and we'll have to think up a way to explain that!"

Lyle chuckled and pulled Brigitte's other leg into his lap. Then he pulled her down so she was flat on the couch, and he pressed his own body down against the length of her.

"Oh, poor baby. Why don't you let Lyle make it better?"

Brigitte stared at him for a moment, then rolled her eyes.

"You'll have to try very, very hard."

"Oh, don't worry. Very, very hard is definitely on the menu."

It was not unusual to see Mr. Parker in Renewal Wing, so it did not raise any suspicions in the two sweepers who watched him exit the elevator and head toward the research laboratory.

What did surprise them was the sudden wave of darkness that swept through the hallway just after he passed by them. They heard the elevator doors open again, and swung around to try and see who might be approaching. Instead they heard the rattle of a metallic container being rolled out of the elevator toward them, and then felt a painful, burning sensation in their throats as some silent chemical began to render them unconscious.

Moments later, Sydney exited the elevator, his gun drawn, and headed toward room 251. He found Mr. Parker waiting there for him. Sydney raised the small walkie-talkie in his hand.

"Broots, we're here."

Without any fanfare, the lights of the electronic lock began to blink out a six-digit code, and both men heard the air whoosh through the doors as the powerful magnetic lock was released. Sydney stepped back to the side as Mr. Parker entered.

Matthew sat inside the door, his chair resting against what appeared to be a solid metal wall. He stood, instantly on guard, and pulled his weapon.

"You shouldn't be here, sir."

"Where's my daughter, Matthew?" Mr. Parker took a step closer to the young sweeper, and the man raised his gun higher, aiming it directly at Mr. Parker's heart.

"I said, 'you shouldn't be here, sir.'"

"Raines is not going to win, Matthew. Not this one. Where is my daughter?"

Mr. Parker heard Matthew cock his gun. The action was immediately followed by a slight disturbance in the air as the bullet fired from Sydney's silenced handgun flew through the air, striking Matthew in the chest.

The younger man dropped to his knees, shock on his face. His gun clattered to the ground as his hand lost the ability to hold it.

"I told you, son. Raines isn't going to win."

Matthew's body dropped to the floor as Sydney entered the room, carefully averting his eyes so as not to look at the younger man – he couldn't afford to. He could feel guilty about what he'd done later, once Miss Parker was safe.

"Broots, go ahead."

The slight sound of metal grinding filled the room as the metal wall in front of them began to roll upwards, disappearing into the ceiling above. In front of them sat a shocked nurse, and an unconscious Miss Parker.

Sydney quickly pointed his gun at the woman who sat beside his friend.

"If you want to live, stay quiet and stay where you are."

The woman nodded her agreement, her hands raised in the air in surrender. Mr. Parker moved to his daughter, carefully scooping her up into his arms. A slight moan escaped her lips, but she remained sleeping.

"It's all right, Angel. Daddy's here now."

Mr. Parker moved out of the doorway back into Room 251 as Sydney disabled the phone in the room. After making sure the unit was inoperable, Sydney, too, stepped outside of the secret room.

"We have her Broots."

The metal door began to close as Mr. Parker looked back in at the nurse.

"What about her?"

"She'll say nothing."

The nurse nodded quickly, indicating her agreement as the door dropped down, shielding her from view.

The two men headed out into the hallway, making their way to the staircase on the rear side of the building. They began the long climb up toward the roof.

Security Room 23 was a hive of activity as usual, and Supervisor Davidson had no time for interruptions. So of course, he was less than thrilled to see Mrs. Parker enter the room, and even less happy to see she was in a terrible mood.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. – "

"I'm looking for my husband. Have you seen him?" Frowning, the supervisor turned to his crew, who were busily monitoring the security cameras."

"Anyone see Mr. Parker recently?" Beaumont, one of the younger technicians turned around and looked at Davidson.

"Uh, I did. He entered Renewal Wing about twenty minutes ago."

"Headed where?"

"He was in the 250 hallway – probably the research lab."

Without a word of thanks or acknowledgement, Mrs. Parker spun around and exited the room.

The helicopter approached the roof of the Centre with little notice. Broots had made sure that a clearance code for the chopper was already in the computer, and all it took was Jarod's spoken confirmation to make everyone at the Centre think they were experiencing a planned landing.

He sat down on the rooftop four minutes ahead of schedule, his heart pounding. If all had gone according to plan, Sydney and Mr. Parker were almost here, which meant Parker was just minutes from finally being free. There would be no more coming back, no more playing for time. Their games with the Centre were over.

He thought of Broots, and hoped the computer wiz would be able to keep his cool long enough to walk out of the Centre, his part in the plan done. He was then supposed to drive home, where he would pick up Debbie and drive away from Blue Cove, also for the last time.

The door opened and Jarod spun around, his gun out and ready in case Sydney's confidence in Mr. Parker had been misplaced. As soon as he saw them emerge onto the roof, his heart tightened in his chest.

She was unconscious. Wrapped tightly in a warm blanket and cradled in her father's arms, she looked as innocent as Tommy did as she rocked him to sleep in his nursery.

Jarod immediately stepped forward, his arms extending. Mr. Parker noted the urgency with which the Pretender reached for her and knew in his heart he had been right to do this. But he wasn't ready to let her go. He looked down into his sleeping daughter's face.

"She is so beautiful isn't she?"

"Yes, she is."

"I do love her, Jarod. I know you don't believe that, but I hope you'll tell her I said it just the same."

Unable to wait any longer to have her back in his arms, Jarod stepped forward, his arms wrapping around her. For a moment, the two men held her together.

"I will. I promise."

Mr. Parker eased his hold on his daughter and was about to step away when the door opened again. Sydney turned and aimed his gun but was met with a bullet that sank into his right arm, causing him to drop his weapon.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?"

Mr. Parker glanced over his shoulder and saw his wife standing just a few feet away, a gun in her hands. The sight made him tighten his arms around his daughter.

"Darling, I don't think this is part of the Triumvirate's plan, is it?"

Mr. Parker looked back at Jarod. Then he felt Jarod's hand pushing something against his underneath Parker's body. It took him only a moment to realize it was a gun. The older man took it, but kept his arms laced around his sleeping Angel.

"Brigitte, let this go. It doesn't concern you."

"Oh, I think it does. And I think I'm going to be a very popular girl around here once walk back in with Jarod on one arm and your little Angel on the other."

Mr. Parker began to turn around, an action causing no concern in Brigitte since she knew her husband was incapable of doing any dirty work himself. The fool didn't even carry a gun. So it came as a total shock to her when he raised one and fired at her twice, hitting her once in the torso. She crumpled to the ground, a cry of pain escaping her lips as she fell. Seeing she was down, Mr. Parker turned back to Jarod and his daughter.

"Get her out of here, Jarod, now. I'll take care of this."

Jarod moved quickly to the helicopter, settling Parker inside. Sydney crawled in beside her, his arm still bleeding from Brigitte's bullet. Jarod climbed into the pilot's seat, firing the engines quickly.

As the copter took off, Jarod looked down at Mr. Parker. As much as he had always hated the man who helped steal his life, he could no longer deny that the man did love his daughter. He loved her imperfectly, with the heart of a flawed man, but he did love her.

He had just turned his eyes back to the night sky when he heard something that caused him to jerk his eyes back to the roof. Looking down, Jarod saw Mr. Parker fall to the ground, a gun extended from Brigitte's hand. She sitting up now, watching as her husband fell to the ground.

Sydney was stunned when he heard Jarod roar the word no as he looked at the roof. Quickly, Sydney leaned over to see what had happened and his heart sank, not for the man who had just lost his life, but for the woman who sat beside him. How in god's name could they tell her this after everything else?

Ben Miller's inn had been closed for three days. A sign out front said there was a plumbing problem, but the truth was the building had been turned into a refuge camp – a Centre refuge camp.

Broots had arrived with his daughter, joining Sam, Greta and the baby. Their arrival was closely followed by that of Jarod, Miss Parker and Sydney. Jarod quickly doctored Sydney's arm, and then he settled Miss Parker in the room that had once been her mother's.

Putting on his doctor's façade, he checked her from head to toe. As he did so, he found bruises on her ankles, and a red mark on her chest that looked like some kind of chemical burn. But they were the only outward signs of injury she bore. A blood test showed him that she had been heavily drugged, but that the neuro-inhibitors the Centre was famous for were working their way out of her system.

Once he was finished, he allowed himself to be a man again, and he climbed into the bed beside her, tears stinging his face. The thought of Raines' or his goons touching her, hurting her was too much to bear, yet he knew he had to. If she had had to survive it, he could survive the knowledge of it.

He had almost fallen asleep when a soft knock came at the door. He sat up as Sydney entered, his arm wrapped in a sling.

"Sydney, you shouldn't be out of bed."

"I know, but, Jarod, there's something I think you should know. Something she shouldn't have to tell you."

Jarod moved to the edge of the bed as Sydney eased himself down into the antique rocking chair that sat there.

"What is it, Sydney?"

"I need to tell you about the SP project, Jarod."

She could feel the shackles on her, but now she could scream. The heavy weight that had been on her chest before was gone, and she could move and fight and she did, lashing out, screaming at the top of her lungs. She fought them, fought the hands that were trying to still her. Then she heard his voice.

"Parker, I'm here. I'm here, sweetheart. You're safe."

'No!' her mind screamed. 'It's a trick. They're trying to trick you.'

"Michael, listen to me. It's Jarod. I'm here with you. All you have to do is wake up."

'Michael. He called me Michael. They wouldn't know that, would they?' Her mind struggled to understand what was happening. Could he really be here?

"Open your eyes, sweetheart. Come on, I'm right here."

Parker's eyes opened, expecting to see that she was still trapped in the Centre, a victim of a cruel mind trick. Instead, they focused in on the amazing sight of Jarod's face, his brown eyes boring into her as he tried to help her come back to reality.

"Hi there, beautiful."

Parker reached for him and he pulled her into his arms, holding her tight against him. He could feel the horrible tension that was gripping her body, a mixture of fear and rage that he knew she was only just beginning to deal with.

"It's okay. It's over."

She said nothing, just kept holding him. Then just as suddenly as she reached for him, she pushed him away, panic on her face.

"Where's Tommy? Where's my baby?" Jarod placed his hands firmly on her arms.

"He's downstairs being spoiled rotten by Debbie and Broots. He's fine."

"Broots is here?"

"Broots, Debbie, Sydney. Everyone we love is here, or almost here. Dad and Jay are on their way."

Parker felt a small pocket of relaxation begin to grow inside of her. They were all safe, but it wasn't over, and she knew it. She had to tell Jarod what had happened, what Raines had done.

As if he was reading her mind, Jarod reached out and placed his hand against her cheek.

"I know, Parker." She looked at him, confused.

"W-what do you mean?"

"I know about the experiment. Your father told Sydney what Raines was planning to do."

Parker felt a wave of tears rush forward, but she fought them. She didn't want to fall apart, not when they had so much to deal with.

"I'm sorry, Jarod. I'm so sorry."

Jarod pulled her toward him, and though he felt her fight his embrace, he held fast, holding her tight against him.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. You survived this, Parker. That's all that matters. And if you are carrying our child – she's still ours, Parker. Nothing can change that. Nothing can change how much I love you."

That was what did it. He finally said the words, said them to her when she felt so undeserving of them, yet she knew he meant them. And the tears won. They came out so fast, her sobs so deep that she began to think she would never stop crying. All the while, Jarod held her, letting her rage against the violations she had suffered, letting her mourn the freedom of choice the Centre had stolen from her.

Finally, her body stilled against him, and she pushed back, not to get away from him, but to look up into his face. They sat there, just looking at each other for a long time. Then he could see that exhaustion was beginning to take its toll on her, and he knew she needed to rest. There was more, of course, that she had to hear, but it could wait. It had to. He just couldn't burden her with that now. He reached out to try and guide her back to the bed, but she took his hand and clasped it between both of hers.

"What is it?"

He froze, then quickly tried to cover even though he knew it was too late. The down side, he realized, to knowing her so well, was that she knew him equally. She had seen he was holding something back.

"Parker, not now. Please, you can't take anymore."

"I'm already a wreck, Jarod. Please, just tell me. Is it Tommy, is something wrong?"

"No, no. I promise you, he's fine."

"Then what is it?"

"Parker, please. I can't do this, not now." He tried to stand, but she pulled him back down on the bed. He fought to keep his eyes from hers, but she reached out and turned his face with the gentlest motion of her hand, and he found himself staring into her eyes again.

"What?"

"I told you, I knew what happened because your father told Sydney. He – Parker, he helped us get you out."

He saw the stunned look that crossed her face. She let go of his hand, her right one reaching up to nervously push her hair out of her face.

"Daddy helped? I mean, he knows about us?"

"He knew I would come after you and he knew I could get you somewhere safe. He and Sydney got you up on the roof and I met them there with a helicopter, but before we could leave, Brigitte showed up."

Parker felt her stomach roll over. She knew what was coming. She didn't know how, but she knew. Still, she had to hear Jarod say it.

"She tried to stop us, but we got away. But, Parker – she...she killed your father."

Had she been standing, her legs would have collapsed out from under her. As it was, she felt as if the room had begun spinning around, and it took her some time to realize she was once again in Jarod's arms, his strength the only thing keeping her sitting upright.

"I was wrong, Parker. He did love you. I want you to know that. No matter what else he did in his life, he did love you."

Jarod rocked her in his arms. She didn't cry. She had no tears left to cry. In fact, she felt the fiercely strong walls she had spent so many years building begin to climb up inside of her, attempting to take her pain and rage and force it down inside of her.

But she couldn't let that happen. Suddenly full of an energy born from her grief, she moved so she was facing Jarod.

"Make love to me, Jarod."

He couldn't hide the surprise he felt at her words. He had expected many things from her, but not this. She was so weak and she'd been through so much, he had even told himself it might be weeks before she was ready to be with him again.

"Parker, it's too soon."

"I need you, Jarod, please. I feel like I'm starting to die inside."

And then he understood. She needed him to free her, to help her let go of the torrent of emotion that was building up in her.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You are the one person I know will never hurt me."

Then she was in his arms. Jarod touched her with a gentleness he had not even been sure he was capable of, each movement of his hands, his lips and his body designed to give her solace, to show his love, and most importantly, to drive her toward the release she needed.

Parker clung to him, each moment of their lovemaking another moment that the walls lost their strength. He was winning. They were winning. They were going to survive all of this and they would do it together.

Then the walls crumbled. She cried out against him, their bodies so close it was difficult to tell they were two separate people. Then she was lying against him, his arms holding her as her grief flowed freely.

Hours later, when her tears had long since stopped and they had both slept and woke in each others arms, he felt her lift her head from his chest. He looked down to see her staring up at him, her eyes still sad, but free of the intense pain that had filled them earlier.

"I love you, Jarod."

The words were so quiet, he would've sworn he imagined them if he hadn't seen her lips move. He smiled at her, his hand moving to her cheek, moving softly against her skin.

"I know, Parker. I've always known."

Chapter 15 – And They Lived:

Parker stood in front of the black marble tombstone for the first time in over a year. For the very first time since the second name had been added. It was still dangerous to be here, she knew that, but she couldn't ignore the first anniversary of her father's death. So she stood here, unable to cry, unsure of how she felt, holding two-dozen red roses in her hands.

Finally, she knelt down, placing 11 of the flowers under her mother's name, another 11 under her father's. It seemed so right to have them together again. As much as she hated Lyle, she was at least grateful to him for making sure their father was laid to rest here, in the one and only place on earth he would ever find peace.

Standing, she walked slowly back toward her car, stopping only when she neared another black marble marker. This one was smaller, and had clearly been visited even less than that of her parents. She hated that, hated that no one else seemed to remember him. But she would, always, and so would his son.

She leaned down again, placing the two remaining roses under Thomas' name, and then she let her fingers trace the carved letters. So many times, she had silently thanked him for everything he had meant to her, for their son, yet it never seemed to her to be enough. It would, she knew, never be enough until the man who had taken him away paid for what he had done.

Parker stood again, wiping away the one errant tear which had somehow found its way to her cheek, and walked quickly to her car, climbing in and driving straight to the airport. She boarded a plane to New York, where she stayed only long enough to grab her luggage, change her clothes, let down the hair she had worn up earlier in Delaware, and board another plane, this one bound for California.

Hours later, she fought exhaustion as her taxi headed through the hills of San Francisco toward her house. She yawned and stretched trying to wake herself, a small feeling of excitement beginning to grow in her stomach. She couldn't wait to get home.

The car stopped and she hopped out, paying the driver and grabbing her things. She was halfway up the stairs when the door flew open and she dropped everything she was carrying to scoop Thomas Kyle up into her arms and hold him tightly, her eyes catching a smile on Sam's face as he checked the street to make certain the area was free of interlopers and sweepers.

"Mommy, you were gone too long."

"I'm sorry, baby. Did you take good care of everyone for me?"

"Mommy, Catherine was very good, but that other one..."

Parker immediately burst into laughter at her son's commentary. Thomas, who had just officially turned 16 months old spoke like he had been in school for years, and it was clear that he had definitely inherited her genius intellect. He also considered himself quite the big brother. He had immediately fallen in love with baby Catherine, but his feelings for her twin brother were far more complicated. Michael – she still couldn't believe Jarod had insisted on naming the poor little boy after her – seemed to annoy Thomas very much. Sydney was certain it was because Thomas thought of himself as his mother's "baby boy" and he was damn sure not ready to share her with another one. It was a reminder that for all his brilliance, her son was still a small, impressionable little child – something she hoped she and Jarod would never forget.

Finally inside the house, Parker set Thomas down and moved quickly to the bassinet where five-week-old Catherine lay sleeping soundly. Thomas eagerly climbed the stairs, his hand held tightly in Sam's much larger one. She watched them go for a moment, then Parker scooped up her sleeping daughter, cuddling her close and finding immense comfort in the happy gurgles her little girl made. She still couldn't believe the joy her children brought to her life, though she knew she would always be afraid for them, especially the twins. If Thomas' development was any indication, her twins, who had benefit of two Pretenders for parents were going to be leaps and bounds ahead of their peers, and it was going to be difficult to hide what they were from those who would look to hurt them.

As she smiled down at Catherine, it seemed so impossible to her that she had ever been afraid to know she was carrying her beautiful new babies. Honestly, she still sometimes felt guilty over that fact. That's when Jarod would remind her of what she had been through, telling her that anyone would have felt the same way. Thankfully, they had never been able to tell for certain if the twins had been conceived during Raines' experiment at the Centre, or during those first days when she and Jarod had been reunited, and both knew that it really didn't matter – their children were theirs, and they loved them more than they had ever imagined possible.

She heard Thomas' anxious footsteps on the stairs, and Greta's soft voice calling him back to put on his pajamas. Then she heard another set of footsteps approaching and looked up. She found herself staring at perhaps her favorite sight in the world.

Jarod entered, baby Michael cradled in the crook of his right arm. He looked up at her, and as he made his way to her, he brought up his free arm and let it pull her close to him, both babies safely held between them.

"I missed you." She didn't reply to his words, and he knew that meant the trip had been harder on her than she'd expected. He had warned her that might be the case, but she had refused to put it off any longer. Parker had understood that she had to put the babies first, and she waited throughout her whole pregnancy to say goodbye to her father. Now that the twins had safely made their way into the world, she simply stated it was time for her to go.

Later, after both babies had been put in their cribs and Thomas had been read three bedtime stories, both his parents using silly voices to make him laugh, and long after Greta had headed up to her attic apartment, Jarod and Parker lay in their bed, wrapped in each other's arms. As much as he had missed her, they had not made love, Jarod sensing that tonight, she just needed to be held. Finally, after what seemed hours since he'd heard her speak, she broke the silence.

"Anything?"

"No. Dad and Jay called from Dallas, but the lead they had on Mom and Emily came up empty."

"I'm sorry, baby. I know how much you want to find them." And she did. Though she knew she and the children were Jarod's life, Parker understood that until he had the chance to see his mother, to feel her arms around him again, there would always be a hole in his heart.

"We'll find them. Hey, if I can be lying here with you, anything can happen, right?"

"You say that like we weren't destined to be together."

"Oh, no. We were destined to be together. I just wish it hadn't been so hard for the two of us to figure that out."

She smiled and snuggled closer to him. She hadn't yet told him about the discovery she'd made in Blue Cove, and because she had long since learned that it was hurtful to him for her to keep a secret, she sat up and turned to face him.

"Jarod, there's something I have to tell you."

And she did. She told him about the letter she'd found in her safe deposit box at the bank, how she'd gone there to get her mother's wedding ring, and found the letter sitting under it. It was from her father, and all it said was, "Please forgive me." Wrapped in the note was a DSA.

"Did you watch it?" Jarod saw her nod, and he instantly recognized the well of pain that whatever it was had opened up inside of her. She moved to her bag and pulled the small disc out, handing it to him.

Jarod moved from the bed and opened the closet. He pulled out his DSA player and set it up on the desk. He also noticed that Parker had slipped into the bathroom, and soon he heard the shower running.

He popped in the disc, his heart pounding. Somehow, he knew that whatever he was about to see was going to draw them back into the Centre's web, and there was little more in life he dreaded more than risking his family's safety.

He pushed play and the screen came to life. Before him played a scene that had been recorded in Mr. Parker's office, Brigitte, Lyle, Raines and Mr. Parker present. The date on the disc was May 8, 1999. Mr. Parker was pacing, worry written all over his face.

"You're certain she doesn't know anything?" The older man spoke without looking at anyone in particular, but it was Lyle who responded.

"She couldn't know anything. I gave her the drug as we agreed. She slept through the whole thing."

"Why did you leave the body there? That wasn't what we agreed to."

Now Lyle looked at both Brigitte and Raines, Mr. Parker noticing the action, but not reacting to it. Raines then joined the conversation.

"It was necessary in order to build the illusion that the Centre was not involved."

"Darling, she'll be fine," Brigitte cooed as she moved to her husband's side, her arm entwining with his. Mr. Parker accepted her closeness, but his focus was now entirely on his son.

"What happened, exactly?"

"I snuck in once I heard him start the shower and gave her the drug. Then I knocked on the door, told him there was an emergency and I didn't want to upset Parker and would he come out and talk to me. Once we got on the porch, he knew what was up."

This comment made the older man visibly uncomfortable. He looked around the room, then back at his son.

"Did he say anything?"

"He told me she needed him. Then I pulled the trigger. We tossed the house, set up the fall guy and disappeared before she ever woke up."

Jarod clicked off the DSA and closed his eyes for a moment, once again trying to fathom the evil that made up Lyle. He had killed a man who had begged for his life, a man whose only crime was loving a woman who so deserved and needed to be loved. And Parker, who had suspected all along that her brother was the one who pulled the trigger, now knew her suspicion to be the truth.

He stood and moved to the bathroom. Though the shower was still running, he could hear Parker's tears over the water, and he climbed out of his own clothes and stepped in behind her, his arms wrapping tightly around her body. That made her cry harder, and she leaned back against him, needing his support to stay on her feet.

"I can't let it go, Jarod."

"I know, sweetheart. I never expected you to."

Lyle strode down the hallway toward his office, a man possessed with the air of someone who had grabbed the brass ring firmly between his fingers.

The days immediately following his father's death last year had been the most active days in the history of the Centre, and Lyle had most definitely been the beneficiary of all that activity.

First, there had been the issue of what really happened on the rooftop. Brigitte swore that she had only shot the Chairman in an attempt to stop him from aiding in Parker and Jarod's escape. Certainly, there was evidence to support her claims, and the disappearances of Sydney, Broots and the techie's daughter made it all the more clear that some kind of conspiracy had been set in motion to ensure his sister's release.

Mutumbo was furious, as was to be expected. More times than he cared to count, Jarod had outsmarted the Centre, and he was sick and tired of it. He issued a directive to find them, stunning everyone by stating Jarod was on "kill" status, meaning he was not to be apprehended alive.

Though Lyle had been surprised by this, he understood the logic. After all, they had plenty of Jarod's genetic materials in storage, and even if his sister wasn't pregnant, there would be time for more attempts once she was secured back inside the Centre.

He'd been delighted to find out the details of Raines' secretive SP project, because it meant that his sister was no longer a concern for him. She would be a prisoner of the Centre forever, if of course, they let her live. Parker didn't strike him as the kind of woman who would give up her children willingly, which meant if she caused too much trouble, her days could well be numbered.

But that had been something to think about in the future. All Lyle wanted to concentrate on in those first days was his new position as Chairman. Mutumbo and the remaining Triumvirate members Ellison and Trebor had named him to the position 48 hours after his father's death. He had moved into his father's office – his office – immediately thereafter, and he had demanded to be left in charge of the recovery efforts to find his sister and her wayward Pretender.

There were other things he had to worry about, of course. Brigitte had been under the impression he intended to share his rule with her, but he'd had other plans. A respectable six months into her widowhood, Brigitte had become Mrs. Parker again, this time as Lyle's wife. It had been a terrible decision on her part. Once her shares were firmly under

his control, stepmommy had become excess baggage as far as Lyle was concerned. A small leak in the fuel line of the Centre jet had taken care of that problem for him.

And then there had been the issue of his son, the child everyone believed to be his brother. He had given the child to Raines to test if it was of any value to the Centre, but he had failed to demonstrate sufficient Pretender potential. The boy had then become part of one of Raines' experimental groups – Lyle hadn't even seen him in more than three months. Occasionally, he felt a small twinge of guilt about that, but he easily brushed it off. The kid was probably better off with whatever he would live through in the Centre than it would be living with him.

Now he was putting the pieces into place for his final move against the Triumvirate. Once he was finished, he would be the undisputed king of the Centre, and the power he would wield would be far greater than anything his father had ever dreamed of.

Lyle reached his office and fought the small surge of guilt he felt as he pushed the door open, remember the man who had once occupied this space. He hated that any shred of humanity still beat inside of him; it would make things so much easier for it to just disappear. Still, Mr. Parker had been his father, and though Lyle would always believe his father had allowed Raines to steal him away in favor of protecting his sister, he had in some way loved the old man.

Shaking off his nearly sentimental thoughts, Lyle walked to his desk and saw a large, gift-wrapped package sitting there. He opened the card, which simply read, "Happy Anniversary." There was no signature. Intrigued he opened the gift, pulling off the paper and lifting the lid on an obviously expensive box.

Inside sat a gold and jade dragon – the symbol of Tommy Tanaka's sect of the Triad.

Activity in the San Francisco house had increased ten-fold over the past few weeks. First, there had been the arrival of Jay and Charles, who Jarod simply wanted close to him during what was going to be a trying time. Then Broots and Debbie had arrived – much to Jay's delight – and soon thereafter, Sydney, who had left Michelle and Nicholas in their new home in Vancouver in order to return and help the two adults he still loved like children.

Then their plans had begun to fall into place. First, there had been the uncomfortable and tense time when Parker had flown to Japan, accompanied only by Sam, to negotiate a deal with Tanaka. As usually happened when he was worried about her, Jarod and Parker had fought about the trip. It had taken her two days to wear him down, but of course, she had won.

And as much as he hated to admit it, she had been right. It would take years to fix the legitimate operations of the Centre, not to mention the monumental effort they would have to dedicate to helping all of the damaged souls who were still trapped in the Centre – people like Angelo, people like Dannie/Einnad, who still lurked in an asylum, trapped between his true self and the monster Raines had created. And both of them knew that despite their desire to hide away from the world, they owed it to her mother to finish what she had started. With so much good to do, there was simply not enough time to worry about dismantling the Centre's more criminal enterprises, and that meant they needed to be rid of them, the sooner the better.

Parker's solution was to reach an agreement with Tanaka for the Triad to systematically absorb the illegal businesses. So, she had traveled to Tokyo, convinced her old friend of the logic behind her plan, and returned secure in the knowledge that Lyle's life was about to get very uncomfortable, and that the Triad was more than willing to take over the multi-million dollar criminal industries of the Centre.

Then there was the continuing search for Margaret and Emily. These were, of course, the only two people left alive the Centre could use as leverage against the group, and it was imperative they be found. But still, the Major had been unable to find any viable leads on his missing wife and daughter. Jarod knew his father was beginning to fear something terrible had happened to them, but Jarod couldn't allow himself to believe that. They would find his mother and sister, it would just take time, he was certain of that.

Next, Broots had developed a new computer virus, which was now working to undermine the daily operations of the Centre. It worked on a completely random timetable, disrupting things as simple as the lights coming on and off, and as major as the dumping years worth of records from the computer system.

And all the while, Lyle was beginning to feel the noose tighten around his neck as Tanaka forced him to make one seemingly bad business decision after another, in exchange for his continued silence. The power play had extra weight because the Triad boss had done his own surveillance of Lyle in the past year, and he knew that Lyle had planned a coup against the Triumvirate – one none of them were to have survived.

So Lyle sold piece after piece of Centre property to the Triad at ludicrously low prices – all the while, struggling to hide his actions from the Triumvirate. What he didn't know was that Broots' computer program was systematically feeding the information on the transactions into the Triumvirate's private computer files. It was only a matter of time before Mutumbo and company stumbled onto his trail, and discovered just what he'd been up to.

Meanwhile, Jarod was building the life he and Parker would live next. They were agreed that, while their children would always need security and would require special arrangements for their education, the three should have as normal a life as possible. To that end, he was carefully weaving some of the truths about their lives together with well developed dossiers so that anyone who might check them out later would find only a

happy couple who adored their three babies and ran a corporation dedicated to the salvation of all children.

But it all hinged on what would happen next – on the scenario that Jarod had predicted in his SIM. It had chilled him to the bone to pretend to be Lyle – but it had been necessary. If he were right, the Centre infrastructure would crumble to the ground with little more than a gentle push from them.

The push came when a dossier on Alberto Trebor made its way to Interpol. The file, prepared more carefully than any criminal report Interpol Chief Rene Dangel had ever seen, detailed years of criminal trespasses committed by the international financier who people knew but knew little about. It had taken less than an hour to get an arrest warrant for the man and bring him into custody.

The man was taken to jail and booked, then placed in a holding cell. Four hours later, he was found lying on his cot, dead. Though there were no outward signs of trauma, an autopsy would later reveal that the man had died from exposure to a poison that contained a rare chemical compound found only in South Africa.

Three weeks later, Mrs. Irina Ellison sat in her living room, several FBI agents searching her home as she quietly waited for her lawyer's arrival. The agents, deferring to her increased age and community position, agreed to allow her to travel to the Federal Building with her attorney. They all walked outside, and climbed into their cars, and the agents looked up just in time to watch the car containing Mrs. Ellison explode.

When word reached Mutumbo that his two fellow Triumvirate cronies had met less than pleasant endings, he took it as a sign that it was time to remove the dangerous cancer that had infected the Centre. Mr. Lyle had been a poor choice to succeed his father, and it was only now that Mutumbo saw what Mr. Parker had known all along – his son was a poor substitute for the fierce, strong-willed brilliance of his twin sister.

His actions were further motivated by a report he'd received on some rather questionable business transactions the new Chairman had made. Clearly, the man needed to be dealt with, and it needed to happen quickly. It was a plan he would put into play, but would never live to see. The assassin who fired one single shot through the window and into his brain made certain of it. Hours later, the authorities would find the man they'd come to question sitting on the couch, the phone receiver still in his hand.

Lyle drove down the road in Blue Cove toward his house, his fears dissipating by the second. The Triumvirate was dead. He still wasn't certain how law enforcement had picked up their trails, but he had managed to eliminate all of them before the authorities could get to them, which meant that for now, he was safe. Still, he had Tanaka to deal with, but the man now had no power over him. With the council gone, Lyle had absolute authority over the Centre, and that meant he had nothing to fear regarding the secrets he'd revealed. Tanaka was a reasonable man. He had reaped many benefits from his blackmail, and now that his leverage was gone, he would simply drop the matter.

Lyle smiled to himself – it had all fallen into place so easily. Now, if he could just find his sister, he thought. She remained the only danger to his authority, since many people in the Centre were still loyal to her, and might support her were she to try and take over. What joy it would give him to kill Jarod in front of her – certainly, if finding the carpenter dead had almost sent her over the edge, then watching Jarod die would certainly do the job.

He was entertaining himself with these thoughts as the black BMW moved up behind him, then along side him. He looked up just in time to hear the hissing sound coming from his tire as a metallic object thrown from the car made contact with the steel-belted radial. The car slammed on its brakes, dropping back behind him again as Lyle realized he was losing control of his car. Panic gripped him as he looked up and saw a large tree looming in front of him. It was the last thing he would ever remember.

As news of the Centre fatalities began to reach San Francisco, Sam quietly excused himself for the night. He knew that with Major Charles and Jarod both in residence, Miss Parker and her children would be safe without him.

His plane landed in Delaware just after midnight, and he quickly rented a car and drove to Blue Cove, heading toward a house he had never been to before. He pulled up in front of the dark house. Two sweepers stood out front, and Sam couldn't help but note the surprise on their faces as he walked up to them.

"Sam, What are you –"

"Leave now. There's no reason for you to be a part of this."

Sweepers were trained to face down any enemy, and they were taught that their only loyalty was to the Centre. Unfortunately for the occupant of the house, they were also human beings, made with human weaknesses. And these two men, despite everything they had been taught, could sense the danger that radiated from Sam. They knew that if they disobeyed him they would die, and so they moved quickly to their cars and drove away.

Sam entered the house and quietly made his way to the bedroom. That was where he found Mr. Raines. The old man lay in bed, his wheezing breath sounds filling the room.

The former sweeper moved closed to the bed, and he leaned down over the old man, pinching his oxygen line in order to wake him. He was rewarded with Raines' wide-open eyes, which stared up at him with a questioning rage.

"Miss Parker had her baby, Mr. Raines, two of them -- A boy and a girl -- and you will never, never touch them."

With that, Sam reached over and turned off Raines' precious oxygen tank. The old man reached with obvious futility toward the life-saving appliance, half falling out of bed, but Sam moved it farther away, ensuring it was out of reach. Then he stood there, watching the old man suffocate, watching every last ounce of breath leave the monster's body, so he could be certain that the family he had come to love would always be safe.

Hours later, after he had turned the oxygen tank back on and set the scene in the bedroom to look like a death by natural causes, Sam searched every corner of Raines house. He found documents about Miss Parker's mother, and a memo ordering the death of Sydney's brother. He found reports detailing his efforts to warp the then Bobby Bowman while acting as his counselor.

Then he found the Holy Grail, and he left to do what needed to be done.

Epilogue

The Catherine Parker Children's Foundation – the new name of the former Centre, had done much impressive work in their first few months under new management. That meant many changes in the professional lives of the two people who now ran the charitable organization.

Jarod and Parker Russell were quickly accepted into the community, a group of people who had longed wondered what actually took place in the great gray stone building on the edge of town. Many of them remembered the beautiful and mysterious brunette who had disappeared more than a year before, and they were awed by the incredible work she and her new husband were doing with the business she had inherited from her father. Medical research was published, missing children were reunited with their parents, and though everyone was curious about where the couple had gotten there seemingly endless resources, their devotion to each other and to their children made them welcome additions to Blue Cove.

No one outside of the Foundation knew about the horrors that were still inside the building, the damaged, tortured souls that Jarod and Parker worked every day to try and save. Each day, they felt emotionally drained from working with Angelo and Danny and the boy they'd come to know as Simon – the son Lyle had callously handed over to Raines. It broke Parker's heart to see how withdrawn and tormented the little boy was, and she had promised herself she would do everything she could to heal the boy and make him a part of her and Jarod's family.

And no one knew about the man who lay in the Foundation infirmary – his back broken beyond repair, his mind trapped in a body that no longer received commands from his brain. He was alive because his sister had demanded he be kept alive – because once he had stood in front of a man who begged for mercy and had given none.

Personally, Jarod and Parker's lives changed dramatically as well. Once they had settled into their home, she had invited Ben for a visit. And during a private moment in the studio that had once been her mother's favorite place, Parker told him that he was in fact her father. She had been worried when he'd begun to weep, but she was quickly reassured when he pulled her into a tight embrace, and uttered the simple words, "Thank God." From then on, Ben was a frequent visitor to Blue Cove.

Jarod was also getting used to having family around – Charles and Jay had settled in town as well, feeling there was safety in numbers. The Russell men would stick together, and be ready in case any of their enemies reappeared.

Broots also returned to Blue Cove, becoming the head of security for the Foundation. He had spent much of his first few days back searching for Sam, who had disappeared during the Centre upheaval, and who had yet to return. Parker was more than a little worried about him, though she knew her friend was more than capable of caring for himself.

And though Sydney had determined he would stay retired, he frequently visited, Michelle in tow, to check on the progress of Jarod and Parker's family.

This was one of those weekends, and Jarod was still upstairs dressing the twins while Parker tried unsuccessfully to convince Thomas to eat his cinnamon-apple oatmeal before her breakfast guests arrived. Unfortunately, her son was mounting a case for chocolate Pop Tarts instead, and she silently reminded herself to kick Jarod's ass for that when they were alone later.

She was about to try and explain again why oatmeal was a better breakfast when the doorbell rang. She walked to the door, expecting to see Sydney and Michelle there. Instead, she found Sam flanked by two women, one older, one clearly young enough to be her daughter.

She was about to speak to Sam when she noticed the face of the older woman. She had seen that face so many times – in the photo that Jarod still carried with him everywhere he went. Realizing what was happening, Parker tried to speak, but she found she had no words. She looked at Sam, then at the younger woman, trying to find her voice.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Jarod holding both of their squirming babies in his arms.

"Parker, Tell Sydney to come take one of these—"

He stopped the moment his eyes saw who stood in the doorway. He blinked, certain it had to be a dream. It couldn't be that after all the years of hoping and searching, after all the dead ends and false leads that this could have happened.

His mother and sister were standing on his front porch.

"Mom?"

Parker turned and quickly took the babies from his arms, and she watched as Jarod stepped into his mother's embrace.

"Yes, Jarod. I'm your mother. And I love you so very much.

Still watching the scene, Parker sat down on the couch, Sam joining her there as the reunion of mother and son continued. The two held each other tightly, and she knew without seeing that tears were flowing freely from Jarod's eyes. Tears also flowed from Emily's eyes as she watched her mother and brother embrace.

In the hours that followed, Margaret and Emily were reunited with Charles, and they met Jay, and they learned about Parker and the children, and began to absorb just the slightest bit of all the history there was for them to catch up on.

And as the hours passed, Parker watched Jarod, and she knew that the hole in his heart had finally closed forever, a thought that couldn't help but make her think of those who weren't there to share the day with them.

And then she felt strong arms wrap around her, and she turned to look up into Jarod's eyes, and she knew that her whole life had been lived to reach this moment – and it had been worth it.