

**SHEILA FINCH**

**Reach**

THE FIRST THING HE NOTICES when he's finished dying is that the man and woman who've appeared by the bed are over seven feet tall. They don't look like any doctors he's ever seen.

"Welcome, Mr. Thayer," the woman says.

The room is sterile, white, anonymous. He finds it hard to think coherently. He picks something to concentrate on. The woman's skin and hair shine molten gold.

He shakes away the lingering fog in his head. "Where am I?"

"South California."

"No. I mean --"

He remembers now that his car went off the interstate overpass in a freak storm. He would expect a morgue, but these two don't look like morticians. The woman's blue tunic hugs her body in a designer version of static cling. Not angels either. He finds that reassuring.

She lays a hand on his brow. "You must expect some cognitive dissonance, Mr. Thayer. Try moving your legs."

He doesn't feel her hand.

Terror that he might not be dead but paralyzed grips him, and he's afraid to find out. "When Cole Thayer dances - " a reporter once gushed in a small-town paper, "he's ten feet tall!" It's hype, not a view shared by the ranking critics of the dance world, but he can't imagine never dancing again.

The tall visitors wait. He takes a deep breath. He might as well find out right now. He closes his eyes, flexes his toes, raises each leg an inch or two. They move without pain. He opens his eyes and glances down. They're intact. They're also obviously not the legs he used to have. His hands start trembling.

"You have a friend from your own time waiting for you," the man says. He wears some kind of metallic skinsuit that sparks as he moves. "This is her house."

South California. A friend from his own time. "Okay -- When am I?"

The woman smiles at the man. "I would say the brain came through admirably, wouldn't you?"

"What you'd consider the near future," the man explains. "Your friend, Eileen Lambert, arranged for your neurosuspension."

"Charles won't agree to a divorce," Eileen said. "It's against his religion."

They were sitting on the bluffs in her Lamborghini, watching a summer sunset wash over Catalina Island. Middle-aged, she'd never seemed more desirable to him than now when it appeared he couldn't have her. She had eyes such a dark blue they were almost violet. He wanted to run his fingers over the familiar lines of her full breasts, bury his nose in dark hair already turning silver. Memories of her were imprinted all over his skin. Even if his brain suffered from amnesia, he thought, his body would instantly recognize hers.

"Charles doesn't love you like I do," he argued. "Come away with me. Together we could find heaven on earth."

"We're both too old to find poverty romantic." She leaned over to kiss him, taking the sting out of the words.

He pulled back. Her wealth -- or rather, Charles's -- had a nasty habit of intruding into their most intimate conversations.

"You can't expect to dance forever," she said.

And there was the heart of his discontent. No matter how he drove himself, his body never reached the goal he set. Dance classes at the Y had been a skinny kid's ticket off the streets of Los Angeles. He'd worked harder and longer than any dancer he knew -- still did -- and now time was running out. Dancing was a young person's game. Even so, he might've been satisfied with his mediocre success if he hadn't met Eileen.

