

Paparazzi of Dreams by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

"I don't get it," she says, adjusting the telephoto.

It's all about waiting -- her and me, sitting in the car, waiting for the sun to go down, waiting for our third -- Ryan -- to signal that Xavier has gone to bed. I'm stuck in the passenger seat with Morgana to my left. She's the experienced one; I'm the rookie. At least, that's how I'm playing it.

We're parked at the end of a dirt road just outside the gate. The guard hasn't seen us, won't come down even if he does. Just call the sheriff and we're off, gone before anyone gets here because we not only have a scanner, we have headquarters with their moles in the various law enforcement agencies all over the country monitoring every call.

Celebrityville USA. We're all so lucky that everyone wants a piece of the action.

"I mean," Morgana says, still fiddling with the focus. She's using the damn camera as a spyglass. "My dreams are just as crazed. Really. The last time I got Xavier, we get the standard naked-in-front-of-a-crowd thing. And you know, it's from his point of view, so except for that quick take at his johnson, we don't see much of anything -- just crowd reaction and laughter, lots of laughter. Hell, I can have that dream on my own."

Not with a johnson, I think, but of course I don't say that. I keep my own counsel. Hell, I even keep my own name. I am undercover with the Dream Merchants. They all call me Max, and I've been here long enough to answer to it.

I bite my fingernail so that I don't give Morgana my first answer. The first answer would've been the honest one: if you think this is all such a crock, why the hell do you do it?

But I know why she does it. I've seen the money. I watch the kids buying this stuff, readily packaged by the mass-market conglomerates, the ones that used to sponsor magazines and stuff on glitz. Smart corporate execs -- they figured out, once the dream technology became viable, that other people's dreams sold well on the internet. Digitized, compartmentalized, surreal as hell.

The car is cold. Night on the beach, tiny towns. Celebs should know better than to trust locals with information about travel. Northern California was once the celeb hotspot, then they all had to move north. Oregon kept its secrets for the longest time -- poorest state in the nation by the teens, lots of hunger, lots of need for work -- desperate people don't talk much.

But in the last few years, the economy has turned around and word is getting out. Nur and Catherine with their palace on the Elbow; Sappho (stupid name, that) and Jenella in Yachats; and of course, Xavier -- once Xavier and Lorita -- with their very famous house just outside of Depoe Bay.

Lorita moved on to Cannes -- what goes around comes around, they say, and what was hot will be again -- but Xavier stayed after the divorce. Word is that she got the career, and he got the money, but for all her Oscars, he's still ranked number one at the box office.

And because of that, his dreams are worth almost as much as his pictures. More, if you count the price per second. Only he doesn't get automatic ownership. The dream has to be in a permanent form before that happens: recorded, copyrighted, registered.

That's where I come in.

Or at least, where I'm supposed to come in. My motorbike is parked inside the back of the van. We get the recording, I head to the nearest node, and I download the entire thing, along with the proper

documentation, to the copyright office.

A few more of these, and I'll be trusted enough that no one'll double-check me. I'll be able to move up in the company, maybe even go into the private offices, view the records, see if anyone is breaking any real laws.

We try to shut these places down one by one, but it's hard. Mostly I'm gathering evidence for a creative artists' lobbying group, one that wants Congress to change the copyright laws to account for the changes in technology. My bosses want to make dream theft illegal: my job is to find ways to convince the politicians that it's worthwhile to buck the multi-billion dollar entertainment industry.

Morgana finally sets the camera down. She pushes the dispenser button on the coffeemaker in the dash. She fills her mug, then points to it. "You look like you need some."

I do, but I hate the generic crap she uses. In my car, which is currently residing in Jersey until I'm done with this stupid assignment, I have primo European beans, roasted to perfection and ground the moment I press dispense. Then boiling water shoots through the grounds, a shot of powdered milk (still can't keep the real stuff -- there are limits to technology, even now), and a touch of sugar, and I have the perfect cup.

I miss it.

"You don't even seem thrilled that we're gonna get Xavier," Morgana says.

Oops. Mistake on my part. Rookies should always be slaving for the big celeb get.

"Xavier's been got before. You said so yourself just a few minutes ago."

"Yeah, but there's always the possibility we'll get the max dream, you know? The one that replays the split memories with him and Lorita, or maybe the one that mixes his real memories with some fantasy he's having."

"Everyone has dreams like that," I say.

"But not based in life. When you dream about Lorita, Max, you dream about the woman you've seen on the screen. When Xavier dreams of her, you know you're getting the woman he's seen and touched and tasted."

"Too bad dreams don't come in all five senses," I say.

Morgana blows on the mug, trying to cool the brew. It stinks of oil and cheap water. The beans smell old. "They're working it. They say within ten years, we'll be able to have it all -- smells, touch, taste -- everything."

Except that running commentary we sometimes get when we dream: that dialogue about the future or about your worries or about the way it actually feels to stand naked in front of a crowd.

Last time I had that dream, complete with my johnson looking as tired as it does in life, I was standing in front of sixteen refreshers at the detective agency that hires me out, trying to explain the intricacies of copyright law as it pertains to our clients.

I'm yammering about the differences between ownership of form versus the actual dream, and hoping that the class will understand how the law is always behind the technology, when I realize I'm cold. Not just any cold. Icebox cold. I look down -- the famous johnson shot every man has in these dreams -- and I

don't think of covering it up.

Instead, I get someone to close a window. And then I go on. The class doesn't look; the class doesn't laugh. They're all taking notes, and as I call up the information they're typing on their PDAs, I see that the class is actually taking notes on what I say, not on what I look like.

And, I have to admit, there was a sense of disappointment I can still feel. A sense of disappointment that, if some paparazzi were stealing my dream through a telephoto attached to one of those special cameras, wouldn't come through. Some parts of dreams are still private -- even now.

"Lights out." Ryan's voice sounds small and oddly rich through the digitized intercom on Morgana's busy dash.

Morgana hits the timer she glued to the edge of the steering wheel. The damn timer makes an actual ticking sound, like those antique clocks rich people like to keep in their living rooms.

I slip on my leather gloves, my heart starting to pound. The next fifteen minutes are crucial: Ryan can't get caught; he has to get the dream -- there has to be a dream -- and then he has to get back to us, before I can head off on the bike.

At least we're doing Xavier tonight. Pretty Xavier Calliende, so famous he's only known by one name. All of America -- hell, all of the world -- recognizes that five-five frame, that boyish face with its fashionable golden skin and smoky eyes. He's been dream-captured so much that even his sleep habits are well known. It only takes him five minutes from lights out to REM -- hence Morgana's timer -- and his dreams tend to rotate through pretty fast.

We only have time to wait through the first REM cycle: Much longer than that, and we're as close to getting caught as possible. Someday, Morgana wants to find a way to arrive and set up in the middle of the night: rumor has it that Xavier's best dreams happen before dawn, but the guards shift at that time, so there are twice as many people on the estate, making it nearly impossible to collect the pre-dawn REM.

The ticking continues. I slip on my bomber jacket, and adjust the collar so that the automatic helmet doesn't hit me in the neck when I activate the damn thing. Precisely ten minutes into the wait, I'll head to the bike -- provided we get some kind of communication from Ryan.

Then I just wait -- again -- until he comes crashing through the bushes with his little prize.

Five minutes in, Morgana relaxes like she's the one dreaming. She sips the last of her crap coffee, then dispenses another cup, not offering me one this time. I won't have time to drink it if all goes to plan.

The oil-and-old-bean smell makes my stomach turn. Stakeouts were bad enough when I was a rookie detective on homicide. Then I quit, and joined a major D.C. detective agency, thinking that job might be more interesting.

It wasn't: mostly political stakeouts, trying to catch some politician in a controversial act. I jumped at the chance to work for the lobbying group.

They taught me that what companies like the Dream Merchants do isn't really illegal -- not yet, anyway. The dreams are -- to use the words of the damn techs -- floating out there for anyone to pick up. Freedom of expression belongs to the person who codifies it, kinda like shouts heard at a rally.

Of course celebs control how their images are used, but here's the beauty of dream marketing: most of us don't see ourselves in our dreams. We're the protagonist, the point-of-view character, and there's no "image" involved.

It's all in the process of change, of course. Celebs are picketing Congress, and one or two of the senators have had their dreams stolen, so they know what a violation of privacy it really is.

The timer dings softly. Ten minutes.

Morgana looks at me, tilts her head slightly, her regal command to get my butt out of the car and on the way to the cycle.

"We don't know if he has something yet," I say, mostly because I hate these coastal nights, with their fog and damp chill and instant cold. It's July, for crissakes, and it's fifty-five degrees out there, if I'm lucky.

"Just get ready," she says. "I'll signal you."

I roll my eyes, ease the car door open, and wince as the fog seeps into the interior. I gotta ride in this stuff. I'll be happy when we move operations back to the City of Angels, where nights are seventy-five and balmy and I don't have to worry about sliding off some cliff in the foggy dark.

As I climb out, I hear Ryan's voice, all rich and velvety in the intercom. "Long REM. But I think I got the bulk. I'm seeing extra guards, so I'm heading out."

I push the door closed, careful not to let the latch make a telltale click. There aren't any guards near this part of the gate, but you can't be too careful. The last thing I want is to get caught -- trespassing is still illegal, and we're within breathing range of that silly little crime.

I slink along the side of the car, crouching so that my head isn't visible above the roof. Dream Merchants know what they're doing; their vehicles are all camouflage-equipped. When the camo isn't on, this one is a dusky gray. But right now, the exterior is sliding from green to black, depending on the light.

My bike also has camo, and I almost can't see it along the car's back edge. But I feel for the handlebars, find them, and flick the dismount switch.

The level lowers the bike to the ground -- the hydraulics almost silent in the evening air. In fact, aside from a few confused birds and ever-present shush-shush of the Pacific, I'm not catching much of anything. Even the highway is quiet, something that's mighty rare on 101 in the summer.

Then I hear it: the crunch of leaves, the heavy breathing, the snap of branches as they move back and forth. I climb on the bike's leather seat, touch the collar of my bomber jacket and duck as the automatic helmet curls out of the jacket's back and form-fits around my head.

I slide my fingers over the automatic controls, rev up the silent engine (which has always struck me as a contradiction in terms) and wait -- yet again -- holding my breath.

Through the glazed window, I see Morgana giving me a thumbs up, telling me what I already know. The great crashing sounds, the sobbing breaths, the creature looming through the forest that Xavier bought is Ryan, with the handful of guards coming right after him.

Ryan scales the fence like a monkey, the camera around his neck. He's skinny and barely twenty, and more athletic than he should be, given his diet of cappuccinos and pizza. He flips over the fence, and somehow manages to land on his feet, catlike.

He slides up next to me, hands me three discs -- the important one no bigger than my thumb; the other two decoys in case the guards catch me -- and hurries to the passenger side of the car.

I spin the bike out, heading down the gravel driveway as fast as I can. My wheels spit gravel and I long

for a bigger windshield, but those, as my Dream Merchants bike trainer insisted, are for wimps. I hunch down, my head barely above the bars, and let the bike skid and slid its way to the highway.

The guards know where I'm going. Even though we're almost three decades into the new century, there's still only one artery on the Oregon Coastline, and that's Highway 101. The question is whether I'll go south or north.

If I were banking on me, and of course I'm not, I'd head north to Lincoln City and all the tech stuff that migrated over here fifteen years ago.

Instead, I hit 101 for all of five blocks, then cross the bridge in the center of Depoe Bay, heading toward the Coast Guard station, down in the World's Smallest Harbor. There's a government node there, one most people don't know about, and I'm gambling Xavier's guards fall into the most people category.

Soon as I reach the Coast Guard station, I'm off the bike, the helmet's gone, and the bike is stashed behind a Jeep Wrangler that has probably seen half a million miles. My bomber jacket is gone and I'm freezing my ass off, but I'm walking like a local -- the sleeves of my sweatshirt pushed up, my thumbs hooked in the pockets of my jeans like this is any old night.

I get to the node, punch in the all-express number for the Copyright Office, add Dream Merchants' privacy code, and download the raw REM from Xavier, along with the date and my employee code.

Xavier, still warm in his bed, probably dreaming of Lorita like half of America, doesn't realize that the dreams he probably can't even remember -- the starter dreams that his brain first cycled out just after midnight -- are now the property of Dream Merchants.

And, if those dreams are any good, they'll be uploaded before Xavier begins his rumored main dream cycle at dawn.

\* \* \* \*

The team picks me up in front of the Sea Hag, the oldest restaurant in this tiny burg. I walked up from the Coast Guard station. Morgana drives back down, louver the bike onto the back of the car, and we head to the condo Dream Merchants is paying for just north of the city.

The views are spectacular, even in the middle of the night. The ocean has a kind of glow, some of which is reflected light from nearby hotels. The rest comes from the stars -- the real ones -- and the moon and the ocean's general ambience, all white foam and violent water.

It's way too back-to-nature for me.

I'm the last one into the condo, after spending a few minutes on the balcony, watching the guards drive aimlessly back and forth searching for a green-black car or a single-rider motorcycle. One sheriff's vehicle got added to the search but didn't do much. Some wag on the police scanner opined that we were halfway to Portland by now -- showing no one completely understood the operation, which Morgana took to be a good thing.

Soon the whole search will be called off. Law enforcement can't do much -- they haven't witnessed the so-called trespassing, after all -- and the guards do have a duty to Xavier: they can't leave his place vulnerable all night.

By the time I go inside, Morgana has the gas fireplace on high, the windows shaded and the radio beside the door on so loud you'd think she hasn't yet reached her sixteenth birthday.

She and Ryan are huddled in what passes for the living room -- a high-ceilinged narrow room with floor-to-ceiling windows and the hardest sofa I've ever had the misfortune to sit in. Fortunately, Ryan's hogging it, so I have to bring one of the kitchen chairs into the room.

Morgana's tweaking the download, trying to get high rez enhancement, going for vivid colors -- a hallmark of Xavier dreams, as opposed to dreams posing as Xavier dreams. In addition to being one of the biggest stars in the world, Xavier's one of those minority of people who dream in colors so vivid Jackson Pollack would have been jealous -- if he were alive, dreaming, and trying to make a fortune off the uncensored images in his head.

"Mostly fragments," Morgana says, spitting the words, as if it's Ryan's fault that Xavier's most recent dreams had no logical consistency. Fragments can be sold as individual images, but they don't command the prices that the full-story dreams do.

A few vendors arrange the fragments like they are a dream, but the fans catch onto that trick pretty quickly, and often avoid repeat visits to those sites. So Morgana's under strict orders to find linked images first and foremost.

Ryan puts his hands behind his head and stretches out on that uncomfortable couch. He watches the get, unconcerned by Morgana's tone.

"Finally," she says, as the images bump and settle into something passing for an actual dream.

I lean forward, interested in spite of myself.

Xavier's dream starts mundanely enough: Our Point of View Character -- obviously Xavier himself -- is sitting on an embankment in the middle of a filthy downtown. Takes me a minute to realize we're in Chicago about twenty years ago, before Xavier is Xavier, and before I'm even old enough to vote.

Xavier's wearing torn blue jeans and scuffed Nikes, and they don't look like the uniform of the day. They look like the best he's got. He's breathing hard, sifting embankment dirt through his grimy fingers like he's looking for something or waiting for someone and needs something to do with his hands.

Then the image focuses on those hands and what I take for grime is actually blood. Above him, an L train clankety-clanks by, and the embankment is gone. We're down in the Loop in the days before the L got upgraded to bullet train, back when the tracks were rusted and made of a thick metal that came from the middle of the previous century.

Xavier's got a girl pressed up against the staircase, and they seem to be alone. She's begging him, and I realize after a second that she's not begging him to touch her like most women would nowadays, she's begging him to let her go. Her breath is pretty raspy and her eyes are awful big, glassy -- not with drugs or lack of sleep, but actual pain.

Then I recognize his grunts, and know what he's doing and a tear squeezes out of her left eye as she turns her face away.

The moment after he finishes, he zips up -- the sound almost the only thing in that surreal scene -- then she shoves him, hard, so that he stumbles backwards.

But he recovers, pushing her back, and she slams into the wrought iron steps. He grabs her, shoves her again, and again, until her head doesn't look female any more. Blood's spattering, more blood than would ever be at that kind of crime scene. The streets just run with it. He slaps her again and suddenly Morgana's fast-forwarding.

"What the hell're you doing?" I ask before I realize that I probably shouldn't speak.

"Seeing if there's anything good here," she says.

"That's not classic," I say. "It's not the long-empty-hallway dream or the falling dream or your basic wet dream. It's -- "

"A goddamn rerun," Morgana says. "He has this thing damn near once a week, and it's fucking useless. Ice Cream Dreams has owned this thing for ten years, and it's practically the same frame for frame. It's one of his repeaters, and it isn't even very popular. It's just somewhere that his brain stutters to with too much regularity, and not enough variation to make it worthwhile for the rest of us."

The dream ends with the rivers of blood flowing into Lake Michigan. This image goes on for what seems like forever, or maybe it only does because Morgana is fast-forwarding. Hell, when Xavier dreams it, there might be some overlying commentary or music or maybe even screaming from the dead girl, but for the rest of us, watching an unenhanced dream, all we get is blood and silence.

Morgana slows the fast-forward down when we reach Xavier again, sitting on an embankment. Only this time, he's not beside the L. He's sitting on a tree-lined shore that leads into the blood-filled lake.

In the distance, little sailboats dot the horizon, white against the blue sky, a nice ironic counterpoint to the red water, and the blood on Xavier's hands.

I'm shaking. Ryan is asleep. Morgana is cursing under her breath. She sits even closer to the screen, studying it for some kind of difference and apparently not finding any.

The REM section ends with a few more fragments -- floating faces, a bit of blood, a woman screaming as her eyes grow wide -- and then it all ends.

Morgana freeze-frames the last image -- the screaming woman -- and curses again.

"A wasted night. I should be doing still photography for all the good this is doing me." She runs a hand through her hair and then snaps the screen off. "Fuck. You paid a fee on the copyright, didn't you, Max?"

"Following instructions," I say as laconically as I can manage. My heart is still racing from those dream images. He has that dream more than once a week? Has anyone tripped to the significance of that?

Morgana sighs. "At least it's unfiltered REM. We won't get in trouble for poaching on Ice Cream Dreams' material."

"It's the form," I say idly, and then wish I hadn't.

Morgana swivels, focuses on me as if I'm the REM recording. "What?"

I'm supposed to be a rookie, someone who knows nothing. But I might have just blown that image. I try to recover as best I can by pretending I don't know that I said something I shouldn't even understand.

"That's what you're always harping on," I say. "The perfect form. That's the problem with the other dream factories, you say. They don't know how to make their forms work even when the dream-story is lame. So I figure the copyright office shouldn't care, right? It's just the form that's the problem, and we sent an unfiltered capture. It's bound to be different than the unfiltered capture sent by Ice Cream Dreams however long ago. And it's definitely different from the one they eventually started to sell."

Her gaze is sharp, measuring. She glances briefly at Ryan, but he snuffles, asleep, not even famous

enough for either of us to grab his camera and record his dreams.

"You're learning awful fast," she says.

I shrug.

"I don't think I've ever had an assistant who learned this fast." That measuring gaze would've made me uncomfortable if I hadn't spent so many years as a cop, perfecting a gaze like that myself. Still, I'm not sure how to play it -- as someone who does feel uneasy under a heavy stare, or as someone who doesn't.

After a moment, I say, "You make that sound like a bad thing."

Now it's Morgana's turn to shrug. "I can't figure you out, Max. You're not excited by the get. You find snuff dreams fascinating, and you understand form. You sure you didn't do this before? Maybe some illegal stuff? Porn? Underage vids? Teen wet dreams?"

I feel my shoulders relax. She's going the wrong direction with this. She thinks I've got more experience in the business than I let on, not that I'm undercover.

"No," I say. "But I don't think this is rocket science."

She laughs, picks up the equipment, and pops the get out of the machine.

"Still," I say, "that dream is fascinating."

"Worthless." She picks up the equipment. "He's going to be in this burg for a few more days, but I'm not sure I want to waste any more time on him. Maybe Xavier's passe."

"Maybe for you," I say, "but have you considered what the dream means?"

"Oh, don't get all creepy weird on me, Max. I like you. I thought you were level-headed." She stuffs the get into a nearby bag, then shoves the screen against the wall. She gets on the love seat, and stares at the fake fire, ignoring the very real ocean, which is visible in the window next to her.

"I am level-headed," I say. "I thought you were too."

She frowns at me, then glances at Ryan. He snorts again, deep in some REM sleep of his own.

"What are you getting at?" she asks.

"You said it a minute ago," I say. "You make money off celebs. That's your job, right? A kind of paparazzi of dreams."

"Hell, I used to be the real thing," she says, like being any kind of paparazzi at all is a respectable job.

"And if you're like me, you contract with Dream Merchants on a per-job basis because it's not worth their while to have anyone on staff, particularly if they get faded or go a different way."

She's watching me now as closely as she had a few moments ago, but this time her dark eyes are avid. She's hearing money talk, which appeals to her.

"So?" she says.

"So, I assume you've studied dream theory?"

"It's crap," she says. "Who cares if flying is a sex dream or going through a damn tunnel is a metaphor for the penis entering the vagina?"

"That's not what I'm talking about," I say. "That is crap. I'm talking about the real stuff, the stuff they've figured out that's like real science."

She crosses her arms. "What? That everyone dreams? That you don't live long if you don't dream? That images change from culture-to-culture, but remain the same if you were brought up in the same tradition? Yeah, I got all that and it's worth about as much as the air I just used to tell you about it."

"You missed one," I say.

She sighs. Morgana likes to play games, but hates it when other people do. "What?"

"Repeated dreams," I say.

"Stress- or guilt-related, or maybe building on some other kind of emotion." Her voice is flat like she's reciting from a textbook. "Happens when the dreamer is feeling that emotion and the brain believes that emotion needs to be relieved, which is why most of these things are stress dreams. However, Xavier's main stress dream is one where he walks into a studio for a big movie, and they tell him they gave the part to some two-bit newcomer, and he can just leave. Or, the variation is that he is already acting in the role, asking everyone if he's good enough, and finally, they tell him no, he's not, and then the two-bit newcomer takes his place."

"I'm not talking about Xavier or stress dreams," I say, which isn't entirely true. I am talking about Xavier, and maybe I should shut up. Maybe I should just let this one go. It's my old cop instincts, the ones that gave me my own personal stress dream -- walking up to a crime scene, seeing the perp pull the crime off, and trying to stop him, only to find myself wrapped in plastic, unable to move. "I'm talking about memories."

"Fuck." Morgana leans back in her chair. "You had me going for a minute there."

"Huh?"

"You can't prove someone else's dream is a memory," she says.

"Sure you can," I say, "and they've done it, repeatedly, particularly with famous folks. Since a lot of these people became famous due to a single -- often traumatic -- event."

Maybe this is cop work. Maybe I am giving myself away. But there's a part of me that really doesn't care. This work is impersonal and it does burn you out. Or maybe I'm just a bit disgusted at my own reaction to the dream, that hint of excitement I felt, as if I really did understand the get and the high it gives.

"You're talking about survivors of accidents and stuff?" Morgana asks.

I have her attention now.

"Movie-of-the-week kinda people?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say.

"I don't work that low," she says. "I don't think I've even thought of getting a get from the fifteen-minutes-of-fame folks."

It's my turn to sigh. She's more familiar with Xavier than I am, and I'm intrigued enough to need information. Only I have to go at it as if I'm not, as if we're two people sitting in a car, waiting for someone else to record the dreams of yet another person.

"I don't care how low you work," I say, because in my book, it's pretty low even now. "I'm talking about a studied phenomenon. They've realized with those people that they'll relive the trauma in their dreams over and over and over again. Usually detail for detail."

"Like a repeat." Her plucked brows come together. She bites her lower lip, obviously thinking.

"You say Xavier has that dream every week?" I lean forward on my chair, brace my elbows on my knees, and look at her.

She doesn't move -- at least not much. If nothing else, her eyes get narrower. "Yeah."

"So maybe it's more than a repeat. Maybe it's a memory."

"Of a film role?" she asks.

"Maybe," I say. "I don't watch his movies. I wouldn't know a damn thing about him if he weren't a get."

"Started modeling, hired off the street back about eighteen years ago, when some talent agency was looking for 'the real thing,' not some generic pretty boy. Gets an agent and a manager, makes some real money, they find him bit parts, the camera loves him, and he has one of those break-through teen idol movies -- "

"\_Heartbeat\_," I say, because I do know something about him, and because that movie was impossible to avoid. Just like the post-\_Heartbeat\_ publicity when he falls in love with his leading lady, Lorita, who had already had two Hollywood marriages behind her, and this one -- she says at the time -- is the one that's gonna last.

Of course it doesn't. But by then, Xavier's on the map, and he's got some kind of golden touch, something that makes him choose the movies that connect with a generation. You name the best movies of the last ten years, and Xavier's been in most of them.

"\_Heartbeat\_," Morgana says, shaking her head. "The damn thing still holds up."

As if it's a century old instead of a decade. But, I suppose, if you live day-to-day, the way she does, a decade does feel like a hundred years.

"Hell," she says, "if you don't know what happened after that, then what in God's name are you doing in this job?"

"I know what happened," I say. "I just haven't seen any of his films."

Partial lie. I don't remember the ones I have seen. I catch them late night, and realize about halfway through that I have watched the damn thing before, and it's such fluff that it made no impression at all.

"Consequently," I say, "I don't know if those dream images we just watched are from some movie."

Morgana raises her eyebrows. "Our Hero Xavier raping and murdering a girl? He didn't even do that in \_Double Double\_ where he plays both the protag and the villain."

"Not even the early stuff?" I ask.

"Maybe the modeling," she says. "But I had to go back through the shoots once, and I don't remember anything violent. They used him for the clean stuff, you know, aftershave and clothing and cars. Nothing that would appeal to the rougher crowd."

And as she says this last, her voice slows down. She's figuring it out.

My heart is pounding, and my breathing's a little ragged, and that makes me uncomfortable. I'm not sure I like how I'm thinking, so I ignore it.

Ryan, thank God, is still snoring on the couch.

"You think this might have actually happened?" Morgana asks, finally. "You think Xavier might have raped and murdered some girl?"

"Two points to the lady," I say.

"Shit." She stands up, unable to sit with the idea. She paces to the screen, then grabs Ryan's souped-up camera, staring at it, thinking about the images it stole out of thin air. I'm staring at it too, wondering why I'm so hyped, and basically knowing even though I don't want to.

The cop's get: solving an unsolved. But I'm not a cop any more, and I'm not interested in that get. I'm working government and business now, protecting creativity and creative minds all over the country.

Yeah, right.

"Shit," she says again. "That's like combining the old and the new."

"Huh?"

She threw me with that one. I don't know what she's talking about. Then she crooks her finger at me, leads me out of the condo's living room away from snoring Ryan.

We go into the first bedroom, then beyond, into the square box that passes for a kitchen. She grabs a Diet Coke out of the fridge and sits at the table, opens a window so that we get ocean noise, and taps her fingernails on the can.

"Old and new," she says, "the ultimate get. You know, the dreams that aren't dreams but memories. The memories that expose a celeb in a way that's sensationalistic, breaking an expose that'll be everyone else's get for a week, maybe even months. It's got everything, Max."

Okay, so she is ahead of me.

"Everything?" I ask.

"You gotta know the history of celebrity. It's full of crimes of the century, trials of the century, ruined careers, and tabloids, tabloids, tabloids. Then we get TV, and tabloid shows. Then the internet comes along, and the tabloids become hourly, you know, the get of the gets. The dreams, they're just a high-paying version of the photograph -- the chopper over the wedding stuff -- but they don't pay the way a sensational get does, particularly if you're the one who breaks it and controls the information."

Her face is flushed. I've never seen her so thrilled.

"You don't just control the flow, eventually you become part of the story. Book deals, movies of your own -- "

"And you become one of those fifteen-minutes-of-famers," I say, trying to keep myself calm.

"If you're bad at it, sure," she says. "Or it's the get of a lifetime, and you make a career out of it, you become the expert on dream memories or subconscious crimes or whatever. You become the go-to person. See, that's part of the history of celebrity, too. The Louella Parsons, and Walter Winchell, and Barbara Walters and the goddamn tears, and Entertainment Tonight and Sanford Cooper and all those folks. They started with a major get, and they parlayed that get into a career of gets."

"The second-tier celebrity," I say, using another of her terms.

"Shit, no," she says. "The celebrity journalist. A lot of these folks -- Hedda Hopper, Liz Smith -- they're not just chasing the get, they create it. In her day, Hopper was the one who used her influence to create the celebrities or destroy them."

"Power," I whisper.

And Morgana smiles. "Now you're getting it, Max."

"All from one possible murder," I say.

"A celeb murder pre-fame," she says, "that no one's nailed down."

"And yet," I say, "it might only be a dream."

"Or a scene from a movie," she says.

"Or one of his fantasies," I say.

"Yuck," she says, as if her life and imagination are pure. She guzzles the Diet Coke. "You know, I got some money stashed, and I'm getting mighty tired of sitting in cars, waiting for some lame-o famous person's subconscious to vomit a storyline. Maybe we should chase these images."

"We?" I say, even though that was what I was initially going for. I thought I needed Morgana, but maybe not. I was going for the white-knight thing, solving a twenty-year old crime, but she's already made it something bigger -- and something that intrigues me, against my better judgment.

"We, smart boy," she says. "You're the one who figured this out, so I assume you're the one who's done the reading on dreams and memory and crap. Besides, you like getting your hands dirty, all the background stuff. You told me that when I hired you and I remember thinking, 'Why the hell should I care?' Well, I care now, and it'll be really cool."

She turns things on me faster than I can imagine. I've never known anyone who controls the people around her like Morgana does. Usually I'm the one in charge, but in this case, it's her.

"What'll be cool?" I ask.

"The way we'll work together," Morgana says. "I'll head back to L.A. and dig up every image I can find of Xavier -- even his goddamn baby pictures. You head off to -- Where is that? D.C.? -- and see if you can find the girl or what happened to her."

"It's Chicago," I say, wondering how she can miss the L or the lake. But places aren't Morgana's strong suit. People are.

"Fine," she says, "whatever. Blow into the Windy City and see if you can find this thing."

"Then what?" I ask.

"Then we break the get. We have the scoop of the century -- or at least the decade. And it'll be news not just because Mr. I-Can't-Make-An-Unpopular-Movie murdered his way to stardom, but also because we used new technology to catch him."

She grins at me, and I feel even more off-balance. I was sort-of thinking along those lines -- the arresting of a movie star lines -- when I started talking to her, but not about individual and personal fame. That's Morgana's thing, not mine.

"What if I can't find anything?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Hell, we just spent a fortune on a get that turned out to be a repeat. I figure if you're gone for a frickin' month, burning 10K a day in expenses, the losses won't be any greater than this one was."

I would never spend 10K a day, but I don't tell her that. If she's willing to use the expense account to send me to Chicago and keep me out of the waiting/motorcycle gig, I'm a happy man.

"That's what I got?" I say. "A month?"

"Babe, you got half a year if you bring in the get." She grins at me. I've never seen Morgana so pleased. She reaches across the table and cups my face with her hand. Her skin is cold from the Coke can. "You're something else."

"Yeah," I say, wondering what I've just gotten myself into. "I certainly am."

\* \* \* \*

The nice thing about undercover is you don't have to report in weekly, even monthly. The rough thing about it is that when you're done, you have to justify each action, explain your reasons for doing each and every little thing.

I lie awake in my narrow bed in the smallest room of the condo, listening to the surf pound and the occasional truck go by on 101, wondering if I should resign from the agency. Because this really has nothing to do with stealing dreams and putting them into a form. If I'm right about the get (and I cringe, realizing Morgana's language has seeped into my brain), then this is about an actual old-fashioned crime -- murder -- not a new-fangled, hard-to-prove, maybe-not-ever a crime, like dream theft.

Morgana's already out of here, heading to Portland to catch the six A.M. back to L.A. My flight's two days from now, giving me time to close up the condo and explain to Ryan why he'll be working with a new team. Ryan'll be just as happy as the rest of us to blow this burg -- celebs like tiny towns for the intimacy and illusion of privacy, but these places are hell on the rest of us.

I can hardly wait to get to the Windy City and use my real training -- digging through old records, opening a cold case, seeing if a real-life murder actually happened some twenty years ago in the Loop.

\* \* \* \*

I spend the next night in Portland at Powell's City of Books, the biggest bookstore in the U.S. for going on thirty years now, buying every single volume I can find on Xavier and his cronies. There are way too many of these things, and I'm not happy looking like some overage fanboy with too much time on his hands. I even buy a black City of Books book bag just so that I don't have to carry these things around in public.

Ryan's still in Depoe Bay, still in the condo, waiting for the new team. He says he wants to get the ultimate Xavier get -- which, in Ryan's mind, is still that predawn dream -- and he's willing to sit on that fence in the cold damp air every night for the rest of his life to achieve it.

The new team'll answer to him. He seems relieved that Morgana's gone, and he's never really even noticed me. He'll forget that we were even there two days from now.

Me, by the time I get on the plane to Chi-Town, I know more than I ever wanted to know about the publicist's version of Xavier Calliende's childhood, youth, and pre-fame days.

It seems like there's a template for actors, at least the successful ones: broken homes, a lot of siblings, need for attention, poor school behavior rescued by love of the theater, a gift for performance or comedy or music. Xavier had all three according to his early teachers, and then he fell in with the wrong crowd. He was living on the streets when his pretty face got him a modeling job -- kind of the twenty-first-century version of getting discovered in a soda shop.

My cop self, reading between the lines, thinks no one noticed this kid until he suddenly ended up on the silver screen. The teachers hear his background, vaguely remember his face, look up their old class lists, and claim they remember him. He's tossed out of the house, heading down the drugs-and-alcohol path toward total ruin, most likely paying for his habits by turning tricks when one of those tricks actually looks at his face and realizes that this boy is a meal ticket.

I log on at thirty thousand feet, surf through the garbage on Xavier to the scandal sheets, figuring the tabloids that Morgana admires so much probably have the uncensored versions of Xavier's past -- at least the stuff they dare publish without getting threats from Xavier's "people."

I find a lot of facts to confirm my guesses, along with some early names. I also search the old news wire databases for unsolved teen murders in Chicago, but get so many hits that I feel discouraged even before I start.

I log off, catch a few zzzs, startle awake when I realize that if I dream, anyone on the plane can peer into my brain. Not that I'm famous enough. Not that I'm interesting enough.

But this job has gotten to me, and that's when I realize how badly I need this break.

\* \* \* \*

Chicago is an old-fashioned blue-collar town. Carl Sandburg called it the City with Big Shoulders, and not much has changed in the 100-plus years since he wrote that line. The people are blunt and hard-edged. They also come in all shapes and sizes, mostly a little overweight and a little underdressed.

Chicago reminds me how much I hate the world of celeb. All surface and glitter, all appearances and images -- even the goddamn dreams. It's refreshing to hear someone curse me for grabbing a cab before they can; it's thrilling to have the clerk at the hotel treat me like I'm important rather than some nobody who's in town to view the stars; it's exhilarating to walk the streets and not scan passing people to see if they're someone I "know."

Once I'm inside my hotel room in one of the glitzy places on the north side of the river where, apparently, the money's always stayed since someone decided to settle in this swampland and call it a city. I am using the Dream Merchants expense account to live in comfort for the week -- or months -- that I'll be in the Second City, but I'm only using that account at the hotel.

The rest of the time Max has left the building. The rest of my time in Chicago will be as myself, Burton

Kleeland, the former New York City policeman, here on assignment for my new job, working a cold case, tracking the background of a suspected criminal for a crime that happened decades ago. There won't be any mention of Xavier, or Dream Merchants or Hollywood. Only one dead girl, possibly raped and murdered, and left by the L for someone else to find.

It's amazing how easy it is to slip back into my old self. First thing I do is get rid of the Hollywood clothes -- no jeans and ponytails and casual white shirt that somehow has to stay white. I clean off the fake tattoos and take out the earrings, glad I didn't get anything else pierced so that I looked like the middle-aged former metal-head I was supposed to be.

The secondhand stores in the Loop carried the rumpled clothes I needed to reclaim old Burt Kleeland. Jeans still -- guys my age always wear jeans -- but a suit jacket over them, an old suit jacket that has seen better days. A trench coat for the rain, and a shabby umbrella (same purpose). Button-down shirts for under the suit coat, and a few ties so that it looks like I'm trying to be serious about my job. I even get real shoes -- the kind that have leather exteriors and look like they belonged to my father. I only plan to wear those when I have to flash my old badge at someone. The rest of the time I'm holding onto my Nikes.

Research in Chicago's a pleasant thing. This is a city that holds onto its history with big meaty fists. First, I go to the Chicago Cultural Center, a Romanesque building that had been built in the 1890s as the Chicago Public Library. The place smells cool and dry, probably a combination of the marble interior and the stone exterior, along with some sort of sophisticated air-conditioning system.

The Museum of Broadcasting lives in this place and while I like all the ancient television shows and the monuments to entertainers I've only seen on documentaries, I'm not in the mood to browse. What I want is the research center two floors up, manned by a disgruntled teenager and an elderly maven who spend their days handing out old-fashioned headphones for the old-fashioned equipment, and taking people's drivers licenses for the folks who want to work on the new equipment.

Me, I'm going for both. I want to see what Chicago thinks of its native son, Xavier Calliende. I want to see if the city's broadcast media recorded his meteoric rise to fame or jumped on the bandwagon afterwards.

And I want to use the scanning equipment for a few visual comparisons. They might cut some time off my work.

The cool quiet of the research library calms me quicker than a glass of wine. I haven't been in cool quiet for nearly a year. I've been alone with my own thoughts -- all that damn waiting -- but never looking at something that interests me, trying to figure out the past in the best way possible.

First I use the digital index to see what's in the archives about Xavier. I find the expected stuff -- more recorded versions of Entertainment Tonight than anyone should be allowed to see; a few Dateline: Entertainments; and a lot of little movie-promotional feeds. Of course there's a Biography and all of the Biography rip-offs, as well as ancient, downloaded and perfectly preserved internet sites -- as Morgana would say, little tiny pictures of a not-quite-real past.

I skip all of that. I'm looking for the local stuff, the stuff that often doesn't make it into the national consciousness. I want the Xavier only Chicago knows.

But after two hours of searching, it seems that the Xavier Chicago knows is the same one whom the rest of the world knows. My hunch about his past becomes even more real to me -- Xavier was a nobody until somebody discovered him.

So I go back to the desk, hand them my driver's license and a fifty, and get the keycard for the image-comparison scanner. I also have to sign a waiver that I won't use this machine for nefarious purposes, and I must acknowledge that the Department of Homeland Security could be watching me at any time, worrying about the images I'm trying to compare. I could be a terrorist, after all -- the bogeyman from my childhood.

I take the keycard and the little ID number the disgruntled teenager gave me and wander into the secondary research room. This one's smaller than the main one, partly because the equipment's smaller. The old stuff is big and bulky, desktop sized. The new stuff fits in the palm of my hand.

I have to sit out in the open to do my work, unlike the other sections of the research library. The equipment is so small that I might steal it if the old biddy and the boy aren't watching my every move. (I'm sure they're not, but illusions are always more powerful than reality, even in research libraries.)

I take the freeze-framed dream image of the girl, her face half-turned away from the protagonist's, a tear on her cheek, and plug it into the comparison scanner. It'll take a few minutes because I don't have a full-frame face.

I looked, of course. In fact, I searched for one. But even when Xavier's humping the girl, he's not really looking at her. Her face isn't quite there. It's almost like he couldn't quite remember her, and his brain wasn't willing to supply a new face in place of the old one.

The weird thing is, though, that the image of the tear-streaked half-turned face is so clear it's of photographic quality. If I were back on the old job, I could've used that face for a partial holographic 3-D reconstruct, and one of the forensic art and sculpt team could've used that partial to recreate the whole face.

I'd go to the Chicago Police Department and beg for help from their forensic unit if I have to, but until I do, I'm going to see what I can do on my own.

The little scanner in front of me beeps, then a printer next to me spits out two 8.5 x 11 single-spaced sheets of references with images that match this girl's face.

I grab the sheets as they emerge, my heart pounding. All the references are twenty years ago, just like we thought. But half of them are for a missing persons report. A quarter are news broadcasts from the same period. And the last quarter are a series of documentaries on the grisly and violent Loop Rapist -- a man they caught literally red-handed.

\* \* \* \*

Of course, I don't believe what I'm finding. Did Xavier pay off someone to take the fall for him? Was an innocent man accused? And worse, is Xavier Calliende, America's Favorite Action Hero, really the Loop Rapist?

A shiver runs through me that has nothing to do with the chilled recycled air.

I take my list and go back to the digitized index, checking out all of the news reports and two of the most reputable companies' documentaries. I also hang onto my keycard, just in case my scan is flawed.

But when I settle myself in the main room, in cubicles that were designed back in the late 1990s, and I plug my headphone into a jack that had been designed in the same period, I look at the image the biddy in the back has sent to my screen. (Patrons aren't allowed to touch the old videos and DVDs. We must give a reference number to the biddy, and then she puts everything into the machines. We poor peon

patrons only get to watch.)

The image on my screen is high-quality reproduction of a missing poster, clearly designed by a loving family. A girl -- what passed for an All-American Girl in my childhood -- rounded cheeks, blue eyes, brownish blond hair and a fresh-faced smile -- dominates the page. In one photograph, she's laughing and cuddling the All-American Dog -- some kind of mid-sized mutt. In another, she's staring sideways at me, her hair done up, the background all foamy and pretty -- a graduation photo.

And in the photo that matches Xavier's dream/memory vision, her face is turned sideways in the exact angle of the vision. She's looking at a friend who has been cut out of the photograph, and there are no tears on her cheeks. Her smile is soft and radiant, the kind of smile that girls get when they're in love.

I peer at the person the poster designers cut off: from what I can tell, it's not Xavier. All I have to go on is an arm, a shoulder, and a bit of hair. Hair changes color, but shoulders and arms have a certain sense of definition, and unless Xavier was really small and scrawny when he knew this girl, he isn't the guy in the photograph.

Then I look at the rest of the poster. It was clearly family-designed for an unexpectedly missing person. The girl's name was Holly Lescoe, and she was an honor student at one of the suburban high schools. She'd gone downtown to see a play with a friend, and neither girl had returned.

The story, apparently, was major local news because of the Loop Rapist, and because Holly was the All-American Girl. If an innocent like Holly, beautiful and smart (her whiteness implied), could become a victim of the Loop Rapist, anyone could.

And sure enough, a few weeks later, the community's worst fears had come true. Holly Lescoe, All-American Girl, had washed up on the shores of Lake Michigan. She'd been beaten so badly that it took dental records to identify her, and after the autopsy, the medical examiner confirmed rape.

I watch the coverage, read through the files. The only thing that ties the victims of the Loop Rapist together was that they were in the Loop and they were female. Otherwise, they have nothing in common -- not ethnicity, not age, not occupation or attitude. They vary from teenage girls to elderly women, and they all died brutally: raped, beaten, and tossed into the lake.

One afternoon, about a year after Holly Lescoe's body washed up, an off-duty police officer sees a man carrying a bundle toward the boat docks near Jackson Park. The man scurries past when he notices the cop watching him.

The cop follows him, notes that the bundle is dripping red, and gets close enough to realize that the man is covered in blood. That's when the off-duty cop calls for back up which miraculously arrives within five minutes, and they catch this guy, this Tony Knickerson, trying to dump a body into a boat. The boat's his, and the bottom is covered in guts and blood.

The guts belong to fish. The blood is human.

The physical evidence links Knickerson to all of the Loop Rapist killings. His semen is inside the bodies, his skin cells beneath several fingernails (apparently not washed away by that wily lake). Their blood is in his boat and on his clothes -- since he never once tried to cover his tracks.

Tony Knickerson didn't even have a trial. He confessed as soon as he got inside and, in exchange for staying off death row, told the cops where to find more bodies. He went to prison for life.

I sit back in my chair, study all of the news footage before me -- the girl whose face clearly belongs to

Xavier's memory -- and go over what I know.

I know that physical evidence of that magnitude is hard to fake. I also know that Xavier lived on the streets in those years. Literally on the streets, doing drugs and/or dealing them, possibly turning tricks. He probably saw lots of stuff he didn't want to see, lots of stuff he needed to forget.

Like the murder of Holly Lescoe?

That could as easily be a guilt dream as a memory dream. They are related, after all, and it would make some sense: he hadn't stepped in. He hadn't stopped the crime. He had seen it all, and he blamed himself.

I bite my lower lip as I consider: he saw her well enough to remember her face, remember the tears, but not well enough to see what she looked like during the rape. Had there been a period of time between? Had he tried to save her and failed?

Is Xavier Calliende's hero complex that simple? Is he a hero in his imagination and a failure in his life? Does he have to act that out on screen?

I don't know, and I'm not sure I care. I'm going to follow through on all of this, but it has lost its luster for me. Even if I can prove that Xavier saw the crime, I can't charge him with anything. All we have is a dream, after all. No clear evidence that he could have stopped the killer. No clear evidence that Xavier hadn't made Holly Lescoe cry on his own, so that when he heard of her death, he was able to put the pieces together.

Actors have vivid imaginations -- that's part of the job.

It's a dead end, a blind alley, and all of those other tacky cliches. Still, it got me away from Dream Merchants for a short time -- a much needed break so that I can go back undercover and try to get enough evidence to convince Congress to create a crime where, at the moment, there is none.

\* \* \* \*

I stay in Chicago for a week longer than I need to. One full month on Dream Merchants' dime. Or their daily 10K as the case may be.

I figure I deserve it. Hell, thinking about celebs, all the waiting, the damn dirt of seeing into someone else's subconscious, is worth a 300K vacation, even if it is in a hot, sticky urban environment where I know no one.

I do a bit of work, of course. I look at the evidence -- sure enough: it's complete, good, accurate, and well documented. The Chicago Police Department has had a bad reputation for years, but clearly, in this case, they wanted to put the Loop Rapist away forever, and no one made any mistakes.

Then I go back to the basics. I want to make sure that Xavier's path couldn't've crossed Holly Lescoe's and I discover that I'm the one who made a rookie mistake.

Their paths crossed. Their paths crossed major.

They grew up on the same block until Xavier ran away. They went to the same schools, they spent years together in the same rooms.

Maybe he saw her in the Loop that day, maybe he thought of going over to her, talking to her, but was ashamed.

Maybe he saw her with Knickerson, thought she had a boyfriend, and didn't want to bother her.

Or maybe she talked to him, tried to save him like girls of that age were wont to do, and he pushed her away -- into the arms of Knickerson.

I have a hunch we'll never know. After all, Knickerson's a rapist and murderer: there ain't no trusting what he says. Holly Lescoe's dead. Her friend is still missing. And the only possible witness, Xavier Calliende, has so much to lose by even mentioning this case that he's probably tried to put the whole thing out of his mind.

Which is probably why it all lurks in his subconscious as a nightmare: one that ends with rivers of blood.

\* \* \* \*

When I can finally face returning to Dream Merchants and the hunt for the get, I call Morgana. I'm in the fancy hotel, lying on my bed, imagining her in that cruddy car, in the cold, hitting the dispenser for the even cruddier coffee.

"Hey, dollface, it's Max," I say, donning a persona I'd rather forget. "Remember me?"

"Whatcha got for me?" she asks.

"First, tell me about the films and the modeling," I say.

She pauses. She hasn't expected me to take control of the phone call.

"Lots of pretty boy pictures. Some creepy stuff early on -- a bit of Heroin Chic, I think -- remember those perfume ads from the turn of the century? All those skinny people glomming onto each other in stick-like fashion? -- I got those, but they're not rape imagery or anything. They're just gross."

"Nothing else?" I ask.

"Hey, I did a lot of research, especially for me. I even went back into his first agency's archives -- after hours, of course."

"Of course," I say, knowing how it worked. She knows someone everywhere that's important. Her ability to move around a modeling agency after it closed is no surprise at all.

"I couldn't find a damn thing," she says. "So I have hopes for you."

"Well," I say, "it's a bust here too."

"You spent a month on a bust?" she asks.

"Yep," I say. "The girl exists, or did. She was the victim of the Loop Rapist. Remember him?"

"No," Morgana says, sounding bored. "I don't do true crime."

So I go into the whole song and dance, telling her the history of the Rapist, all about the evidence, and all the legwork I did. She's yawning a few times, and then she gets silent.

I think -- I hope -- she's fallen asleep.

Instead, midway through some explanation of DNA, she interrupts me. "Max?"

"What?" I try not to have relief in my voice. She's gonna tell me to shut up, which I will gladly do.

"Did you use an image scan to find the girl?"

"Yep," I say. "I used the tear-stained frame from Xavier's dream and -- "

Too late, I realize Morgana's trapped me. I feel my face flush but I go gamely on, hoping she's dumber than she really is.

" -- and used one of those research machines. It turned up a missing person poster. Must've been all over Chicago at the time. That's probably how he knew about her."

"C'mon, Max." Morgana isn't dumb. Dammit to hell. "He saw her, didn't he?"

So I tell her. I tell her everything. I remind her that the guy's blameless, that he won't talk for fear of jeopardizing his career, that if this were a true get, he probably would've sued to have the dream images removed from Ice Cream Dreams site.

She uh-uh and uh-has me, and I'm hoping I'm convincing her. I'm convincing me.

When I pause for breath, she says, "When are you coming back here?"

"Day after tomorrow," I say. "I'm booked on a flight out in the morning."

"Report to the L.A. office," she says. "I'm hearing stuff about Cosimo. He might be staying at the Four Seasons. I have a guy on the inside. If we can get the suite next door, we have a perfect get. Except that I'm going to need my best runner."

Me, on the goddamn bike.

I sigh. "I'll be there," I say, and hang up, feeling uneasy. Feeling like it's not over yet.

\* \* \* \*

And of course it's not. By the time I get off the plane in L.A., the story's everywhere -- mainstream media has picked it up.

\_Did Xavier Witness a Murder\_?

\_Did America's Greatest Action Hero Wimp Out\_?

\_Why Couldn't Xavier Save the Girl He Loved?\_

Talking heads are on the overhead screens in LAX, speculating on the meaning of the dream. The dream they're showing is the raw footage we got a month ago -- and they attribute it to Dream Merchants.

They specifically attribute it to Morgana.

She's on the big screen in front of me, pontificating about guilt dreams, repeating the damn pop psychology I rattled at her.

"Maybe he's making these films because he wishes he had been a hero," she says, sounding every bit as oily Walter Winchell and Barbara Walters and Sanford Cooper.

She looks serious. She sounds serious. But I know those eyes -- days of waiting in the cold make you really familiar with someone's eyes -- and she's gloating. She's got the get of the decade, and she's on her way: the expert on the guilt dream as it applies to celebrity.

Another screen cuts away to Xavier, running from a limo to his house on the Oregon Coast. The camera catches his famous face, and because I, like the rest of America, am intimately familiar with all of his moods from his movies, I know what he's feeling:

Devastated.

His life will never be the same.

Because I sat in a fucking condo with a fake fire burning, looking at his subconscious dealing with something I really don't understand and thought I could have a get. A cop get, but a get all the same.

I stand in front of the giant screen, Morgana still talking, happy with her newfound power, and my stomach twists. We're no different after all. It's just different things that make us hot. She wants fame and the power to destroy. I want justice and the power to make things right.

Only I used my limited powers to help hers.

Mistake. Big mistake.

Her eyes -- twenty sizes too large, and flat on the screen -- sparkle. I can't go back to Dream Merchants. I can't see this woman ever again.

I turn around and head down the corridor toward ticketing. I'm going back to D.C.

I have a different get, one I didn't expect. Congress is full of people with gray areas in their subconscious. Repressed memories, stuffed-away good-time moments, buried actions-not-taken. Lots of guilt dreams in both Houses -- and those guilt dreams are bipartisan.

If I can't convince those people to change the laws now, given the look on Xavier's face, given the wreck Morgana and I have just made of his life, then I'll never get the federal laws to change.

I'll have to travel state to state and find some other way to make this illegal. Ban the dreamcording cameras, ban the sale of other people's dreams, ban the sale of dreams altogether.

I'll figure it out. I'll go head-to-head with the entertainment lobby if I have to.

Because I do have to.

Or no one will ever be able to sleep soundly again.