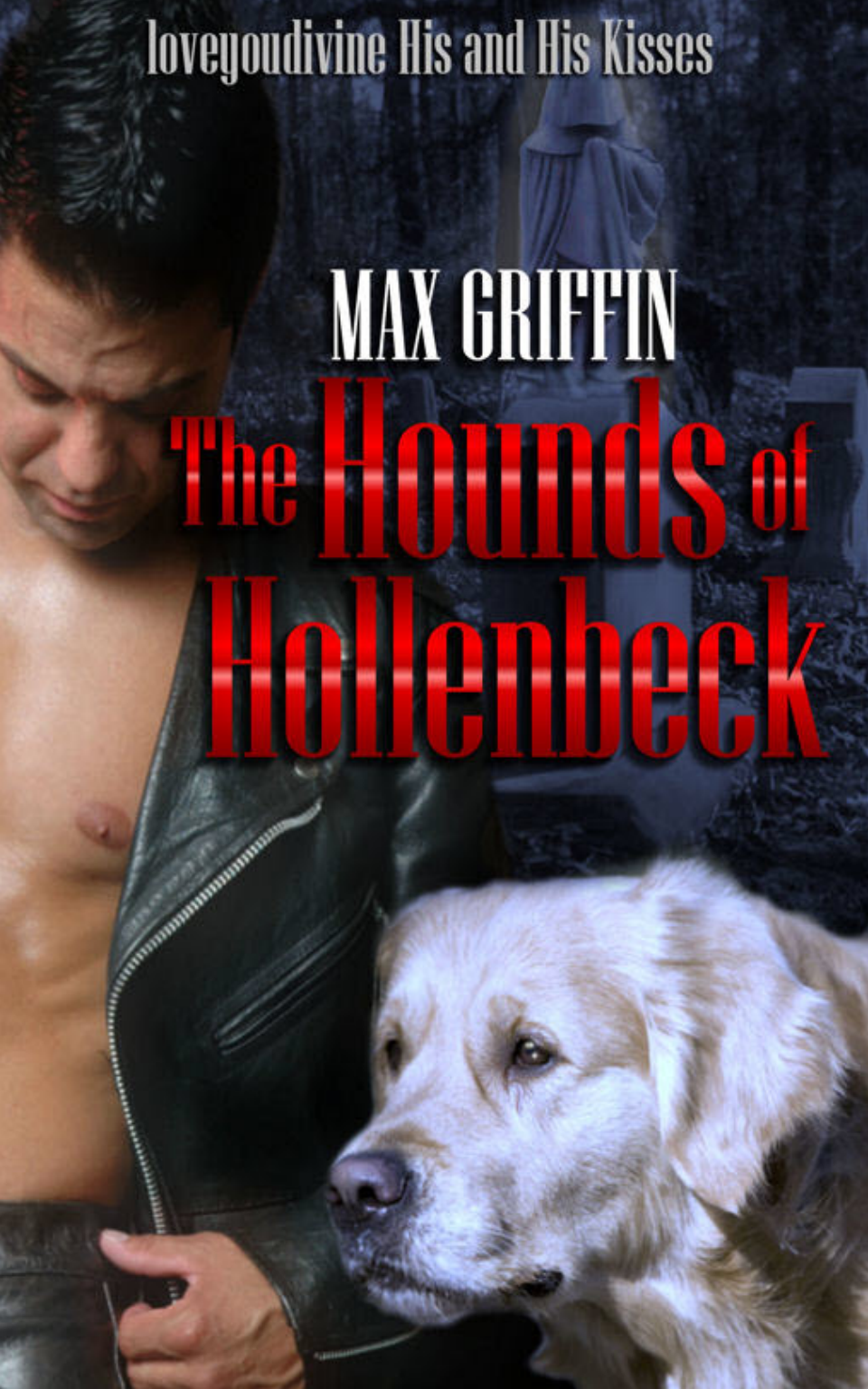


loveyoudivine His and His Kisses

MAX GRIFFIN

The Hounds of
Hollenbeck



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The Hounds of Hollenbeck

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The Hounds of Hollenbeck

By

Max Griffin

*For Anastasia Rabiyyah,
my mentor, editor, and cover artist.*

Chapter One

The ancient, blue van prowled the dark and empty streets.

It shuttled between shadows and pools of yellow illumination, creeping along and puffing foul exhaust. Scraps of trash and the occasional leaf swirled in random breezes in its wake. A rusted dent scarred the right rear panel and mud obscured the license plate. Opaque, tinted windows cloaked the van's driver. A dog hung out of the window on the passenger's side, his ears flopping.

The driver ran one hand over the sparse beard that bristled on his sunken cheeks. He pushed greasy ropes of dark hair back onto his balding head and reached out to pet the dog. His hands were filthy, his long fingernails fouled with grime, but the dog didn't

care. A misborn mongrel, the creature's burly torso filled the passenger seat. Under the mud matting his shanks, his mottled fur was mostly yellow, but flecked here and there with traces of gray. One ear flapped in two pieces from an old injury.

Disintegrating warehouses huddled along one side of the street. Brambles and weeds entwined a chain link fence running along the other side. An old cemetery, dark and silent, lay beyond the fence. The cemetery's plots had been exhausted nearly a century ago and no mourners remained to visit the dead entombed there. Deep inside the cemetery, a statue of a grieving monk loomed on a small hillock, a gift from a long forgotten benefactor. A shroud of stone cloaked the monk's features, his face forever hidden from view. Crumpled cigarette butts, IV needles and used condoms littered the base of the statue, marking it as a meeting place for drug deals and male prostitutes.

The blue van wheezed along the near boundary of the cemetery. Now and again the dog's nose twitched as he picked up some new scent. Then he

dropped back inside and *woofed* at the driver. The van slowed.

"You found someone for us to play with, Chip-pie?" The man's whispered voice was high and whiny, but even so, seemed to bubble up from the depths of his throat.

The dog *woofed* again, gazing up at the driver. He nodded his head up and down, as though answering, "Yes." His tail wagged like a crazy metronome and he pawed at the steering wheel. The van pulled to the curb and the driver doused the lights. The dog whimpered in anticipation. The engine stumbled and coughed to a stop.

"Where is he at, Chippie?" The man looked at the dog as though expecting an answer.

The dog stood on the seat and pointed his nose toward the cemetery. He tossed his head and *woofed* again. The dog's eyes reflected the street lamps with a verdant internal gleam.

"There in the cemetery, Chippie? Is our new toy out there?"

The dog *chuffed* and jerked his head.

"The Hounds of Hollenbeck

The man smiled. He reached into the back seat and pulled out a filthy fake cast, which he slipped on to his arm. He twisted his hand to make sure the cast was secured and opened his door. "Anyone else out there, Chippie, or just our new toy?"

The dog leapt over him to the street, twitching his nose as he tipped his head this way and that. He peered back at the man. This time he shook his head back and forth, as though to say, "No, there is no one else."

Missing teeth gaped through the man's smile. The two set off into the cemetery, the canine bounding ahead of the human into the murky night.

"Chippie! Come back here, dog!" His voice wafted through the darkness, trailing after his mutt. When the statue of the monk loomed out of the darkness, the man hid in the shadows. In the chill air of this night, he saw another person huddled in the cemetery, a young man. He was hunkered down, resting with his back against a tombstone. He shivered slightly and clutched at his bright yellow and green letter jacket.

The dog sped in the direction of the newcomer. He stopped momentarily at the statue of the hooded monk to relieve himself.

"Chippie. Where are you, Chippie?" The man called out in his high, bubbly voice.

The dog scratched at the dirt, sniffed around the base of the statue, then looked directly at the figure crouched against the cold and trotted over to him. He wagged his tail, and the young man ruffled his ears. "Are you Chippie, fella? How you doin'? Yeah, you're a *good dog*."

Woof! Frantic with glee, the dog licked at his hands and face. *Woof, woof!*

Time to move, the man decided. "Chippie! Is that you, dog? Come here, boy. Come to pappa!" He panted and clouds of breath puffed from his mouth while he wiped a sheen of cold sweat from his brow.

Chippie turned toward his voice. *Woof!*

The man wove his way through the tombstones. As he approached, the other coalesced out of the darkness and took clearer form. He read the name *Walt Sedgwick*, embroidered in script over the heart of

the letter jacket. The fellow was young and slim, with shaggy hair and a discouraged beard. Dirt smeared his face and he could hear his stomach growl. *Good. I bet he's lookin' for a trick. Well, he's gonna get what he's askin' for, and more!* A dry chuckle rasped in his throat.

"Hey, mister, didja lose your dog?" Walt's clear tenor rang through the darkness. His voice shivered in the cold.

He'll be a nice toy for us, all right, the man thought. He stopped short, feigning surprise at finding someone here.

Woof! Chippie slobbered ever more frantic licks onto the young man's hand before stopping and looking at his master. The mutt's head bobbed up and down.

The man plastered his most woebegone look across his face. "Yeah, he's my dog. Chippie, come here boy." The man dangled the leash. The dog didn't move.

The man sighed and edged closer. "I was gonna take him for a walk, y'know, to do his business? But he ran off before I could get his leash on him." The

man rubbed his cast. "It's hard, with my arm the way it is."

Walt smiled and tousled the dog's ears again. "I think he already did his business, over there by the statue."

"Yeah, that's good." The man struggled with the dog's collar and leash. "Could you maybe help me, young fellow? My arm hurts so bad, and I can't get the leash on him. He don't like it much."

"Sure, why not?" He took the leash from the man and clipped it to the dog's collar. The dog sat on his haunches and looked first at one, then the other.

"I wonder, could you please help me get him back into my van? My arm hurts when he tugs at it. It takes two good arms to get him back inside the van."

The other narrowed his eyes and peered at the older man. He wrinkled his nose. "What's in it for me?"

You don't smell so good, neither, the man thought. But he said, "I ain't got no money or nuthin' to give you, but I'd sure be grateful if you'd help." The man paused. "I've got some snacks in my van you

could have. And you look cold. I could give you a warm place to sleep, if you want." The man held himself and shivered.

Walt's stomach growled again and he hesitated. But then he shrugged. "Sure, why not?" He tugged on the leash. "C'mon, Chippie, let's go."

"Oh, thank you so much, young man. It is so good of you to help an old man like me." He rubbed the cast again and beamed. The scent of his rotting teeth fouled the frigid air.

All the way to the van the man babbled about how badly his arm hurt, about how the dog was so hard to handle, about how *good* it was for Walt to help him.

"Here, let's put him in the back." The man rushed ahead and opened the rear door of the van. "If you'll climb in the van and pull on the leash, then maybe he'll go in after you."

Trash and an overpowering stench clogged the rear of the van. Walt seemed to balk for a moment and shivered in a gust of cold air. He climbed in and tugged at the leash. "C'mon Chippie, let's go!" The

dog resisted a moment and then leapt into the van. His forepaws thrust against the young man's shoulders and frantic licks cascaded across his mouth and cheeks. *Woof!* The two tumbled to the floor of the van, Walt laughing and the dog *woofing*, wagging and licking.

The smelly man climbed into the van with them. "I'm so sorry. Chippie, what are you doing? Get away from there!" His voice was sharp and biting. Casting a wary eye on Walt to be sure he wasn't looking, he picked up a crowbar from the clutter on the floor and hid it behind his back.

The dog whimpered and withdrew.

Still laughing, Walt sat up and wiped at his face. "It's all right. He's just happy to be back here I guess."

The stinky man came closer, gazing down upon him. The dog crouched and panted, watching, his tongue drooling out of his mouth and slobber pooling in the trash on the floor. The dog tipped his head as though to get a better view of what was to come.

Walt locked eyes with the man and touched his crotch, as though in invitation. He smiled and waggled his hips.

The stinky man smiled back, and then, with no warning, swung the crowbar. Walt flopped to the floor of van, blood spouting from a wound in his scalp. The van shook as the man swung the crowbar four more times in rapid succession, careful not to strike the head again. Dropping the crowbar, he bound his victim's wrists and ankles with duct tape. One long piece went all the way around Walt's head, muffling his mouth.

The man ruffled Chippie's ears. "Good dog. This one looks like he'll be a fun toy."

Chippie nodded in fervid agreement. *Woof!* His tail wagged with an insane frenzy.

The man slammed the rear door of the van and crawled to the driver's seat while Chippie leapt into the passenger seat. The engine coughed and smoked before it started. Together they drove away, a man and his dog.

Chapter Two

Allen's face split into a happy grin when he entered the lab. Clean canine smells and the cacophony of cheery doggy banter filled the room. The animals rushed to the edges of their gleaming steel cages in their eagerness to greet him.

"Teena! How's my best girl?" He knelt next to one of the cages and let the dog inside sniff at his outstretched hand. "I bet you'd like a treat, wouldn't you, Teena?"

She wagged her tail, her eyes riveted on her best friend. *Woof!* He pulled a doggie treat from the stash in his pocket and held it through the bars of her cage. Her tongue slipped the morsel from his palm and she crunched on it. He waited for her to finish and then let her lick his fingers. Her greeting com-

plete, she sat on her haunches, her tail thumping in glee. Her brown eyes never left him, as if waiting to find what her pal wanted to do today. She pressed her nose through the bars and nuzzled at the pants pocket where Allen stashed her treats.

He laughed and tousled her ears through the bars. "No more treats for now, girl." He marveled anew at her perfect canine form. Her golden fur was speckled here and there with traces of silver covering her lithe, muscular form. The end product of years of genetic engineering, her enigmatic breed would never win any dog shows. Allen didn't care. He thought his friend was beautiful. *Not like me*, he thought, catching his reflection in the glass cabinetry lining the walls behind the cages. *Too tall, too skinny, frizzy hair. Good thing dogs don't care if I'm geeky.*

He jumped when the door to the lab opened.

"Hey, Allen, what's up?" A sturdy, middle-aged woman stood in the doorway, tying her thick, graying hair into a bun.

"Trish! I thought only us graduate students came in this early." He stood and straightened his lab coat.

Finished with her hair, she strode to the supply cabinets. "Sarnok has some tests he wants me to run today. I've got to draw blood on Deuce here and have the results by nine." She opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of latex gloves.

Allen glanced at the door. "Dr. Sarnok's here this morning?"

"Yeah, he's prowling around. Be careful. You know he eats doctoral students for breakfast."

"I guess I better get busy then. I've got a full set of protocols to run with Teena this morning." He reached for the latch on the cage.

"Hey!" Trish pointed to a sign on the wall. Notices about animal safety plastered the walls of the lab: precautions about leashes and warnings to be alert for violent behaviors. "Put the leash on her first, okay? I don't want no dog bitin' my arm off."

Allen pursed his lips but reached for the leash. "Teena won't hurt anyone. You know there's not been

an incident in three years, not since Dr. Sarnok reduced the non-canine genetic material in the dogs."

"I don't care. You follow the rules, y'hear?" She turned her back and jerked supplies from the cabinets.

He grinned and winked at Teena. "Shall we get some work done, girl?"

Her tail stopped thumping and her head shook the other way, an emphatic *no*. She licked at his hand again and nuzzled through the cage at the pocket with the treats.

"Not now, Teena. After we finish our tests, then you can have another treat."

She looked at him, her head tipped to one side. Then she *woofed*, ready for the task ahead.

"That's a good dog." He hooked the leash through her collar then opened the cage. "Okay, girl, we'll go outside and you can play for a bit before we get to work."

Her ears perked up and she padded to the door to the lab, straining on the leash. Outside the lab, she led Allen down the hallway toward the experi-

mental test range. She cast from one side of the hallway to the other, nose to the floor, stopping now again to sniff out some interesting new odor. Allen waited for his friend to satisfy her curiosity. "Don't take too long, Teena. We've got lots of work to do today."

An older man dressed in a prim, creased white lab coat entered from a side corridor and blocked Allen's way. "Hello Allen." He was handsome enough to be an aging movie star. His flaxen locks were flecked with gray and styled in an expensive haircut. He peered into his PDA and seemed to ignore Allen. A delicate scent of cologne hovered about him.

"Oh, hello there, Dr. Sarnok." Allen jerked at Teena's leash, edging down the hallway toward the door to the test range. With his short, skinny build, worn blue jeans, t-shirts, and shaggy halo of sandy hair, he always felt ill at ease around his glamorous adviser.

"What tests are you running today, Allen?" Sarnok continued to flip through screens on his PDA.

"We're going to do a couple of the new search protocols today, sir. Eighteen B and C if we have time." He tugged again at Teena's leash. She sniffed at Sarnok's shoes, her tail wagging. "Teena! Stop that!"

Sarnok looked up. "Mr. LeClerc. That is an experimental animal." He stooped and tugged at the red tag clipped to her ear. "CHIP.13.5." Sarnok pronounced it: chip dot thirteen dot five. The same code was tattooed to her other ear.

"I know. I'm sorry, Dr. Sarnok."

"You know it is not good to anthropomorphize these specimens. They are neither our pets nor our friends. They are CHIPs, Canine-Human Inter-genetic Prototypes."

God, could he be more of an asshole? Allen wondered. *Be careful, now. He can screw you.* "I know that, sir. I'll try to do better." Teena tugged at her leash, tracking some new scent down the hall, jerking Allen's arm about. He snapped on the leash, wishing Sarnok would go away.

"See that you do." His grim gaze glowered over his glasses. "If you don't have proper scientific detachment, your results won't be valid."

"I understand, Dr. Sarnok."

"If your results are not valid, then your dissertation won't be valid." He licked his lips with a thin smile. "We wouldn't want that to happen, now would we, Mr. LeClerc?"

Allen flushed. "No sir, not at all sir."

"Just so we understand each other." Without another word, Sarnok pivoted and walked away.

Teena stood still, her head tipped to one side, looking back and forth between Allen and the departing Sarnok. Then she sniffed, put her nose to the floor and tugged on the leash once more. Allen let Teena lead him the rest of the way down the hall and out the door to the test range.

Once in the fenced area outside, he released her. He sat and watched while she romped in the grass, scouting out new smells, her happiness revealed in her spinning tail. He knew Dr. Sarnok would disapprove, but Teena hated being in the cage

and so loved being outdoors. It wouldn't hurt to let her have some fun before running the protocols. She was a good dog and was always diligent with the tests. She liked puzzling out the scents and clues and finding the right trail. Allen knew this was at least in part due to instinct and careful engineering, but he thought at least some of her joy in the running tests derived from pleasing her friend Allen.

Everyone needs a friend, even experimental test animals. Even lonely graduate students.

At noon, Allen walked from the lab to the main campus, the morning's test results stuffed into his battered briefcase. He didn't rate an office at the gleaming new CHIP facility and instead had a cubbyhole in the attic of the old Zoology Building. As he passed by the Union, he decided to have lunch in the cafeteria.

The place was a madhouse of bustling undergraduates. He wove his way through the crowds, juggling his tray and his briefcase and detesting the mob. At the front of dining area, some Navy ROTC cadets

sat in their crisp white uniforms at three tables they had pushed together. Allen's eyes locked with one good looking cadet who had a dark tan and piercing blue eyes. *I know I've seen him someplace before.* They nodded at each other and recognition flashed in both pairs of eyes at the same time. *He's the guy who bought me a beer at the Tool Box last weekend. What was his name?* The other guy flushed and lowered his gaze to his half-eaten burger. *Pete! That's it. So what was a ROTC guy doin' hittin' on me at the Tool Box?* Pete refused to meet his stare and Allen returned to scanning for an empty table.

Three coeds vacated a table in one of the far corners and he dashed to it. He swept aside the newspapers and plates they had left behind and wedged the contents from his tray onto the table. He loaded his now empty tray with the mess the coeds left behind and snaked his way through jammed tables to the waste bin on the far side of the room.

Just as he dumped the tray, someone else put their tray on his table. His heart sank as he fought his way through the crowd to confront the usurper.

"Excuse me." He stood over the table thief and cleared his throat.

The young man sitting at his table looked up at him and an impossible, infectious grin flashed across his face. "I'm sorry, I saw you come in and it looked like you were alone, too. It's so friggin' crowded in here. Do you mind if we share?" He wiped his hands on his napkin and stood. "I'm Sam, by the way." He stuck out his hand.

Allen took his hand out of reflex and shook it. "I'm Allen." His gaze roamed around the room and then returned to the other's handsome face. He had a neat goatee and it looked like he hadn't shaved today. Allen repressed a tingle in his loins. "Sure, I guess. Nice to meetcha."

Sam stripped off his black leather jacket and plopped back down in his chair, muscles flexing on his hairy arms. His meal was already half eaten. "That's great. I really appreciate it." He took an immense bite out of his hamburger. "These friggin' freshmen really get on my nerves, y'know?"

Allen slipped into his seat. Sam wore a tight-fitting black t-shirt that exposed his lithe, muscled form to perfection. Allen felt his body reacting and was glad the table cloaked his incipient erection. This guy even had raven colored hair, buzzed short to his scalp. He remembered seeing him someplace before, he was sure of it. No one had a right to be this sexy. *Careful, boy. He's probably straight, and would beat you up if he saw your hard on.*

Allen lowered his gaze. "I know exactly what you mean. Always babbling and pushing. Superficial and self-centered." He stirred his soup.

"You must be a graduate student too? I'm a first year criminology major."

"I'm a doctoral student in Zoology." Allen's heart quickened. The discomfort that always plagued him while talking to a good looking guy washed over him.

"Wow, a doctoral student. I'm impressed." Sam chewed on a wad of fries. "I'm studyin' to get my masters. Dunno yet how I want to specialize. How about you?"

"I'm working with the CHIP project. You know, it's the big Army contract that Dr. Sarnok has?"

Sam nodded. "Oh yeah, I think I heard of it. Seems to me a friend of mine worked for that Sarnok guy. Peggy Delameter. Maybe you know her?"

Allen's heart sank. *So, he's straight after all.*
"Sorry, no. Is she your girlfriend?"

That got him a strange look. "Not hardly." Sam took another hefty chunk out of his hamburger. "Say, haven't I seen you around, maybe? You ever go to the Tool Box?"

Allen's face flushed deep red. "Maybe."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure I saw you there last Saturday night. I was gonna ask you to dance, but it looked like you were with someone else." More hamburger disappeared into his mouth. "I hung around 'til closing but you never came back." He winked.

Allen's hard on was full blast now. No one ever asked him to dance. "Really? I wish you had. One guy bought me a beer, but he wasn't my type. I wasn't with anyone." *Shit! What am I doin'?* *He's way outta my*

league. He remembered now. He had seen Sam staring at him from across the bar and had fled rather than be disappointed again. He remembered his erotic fantasies from later that night too.

“Well, I wish you’d hung around. I think you’re cute. I bet we’d have fun together.” He drained half his soda. “Look, I’m late for class, but I’d really like to get to know you.” He pulled a card from his jacket and scrawled on the back. “Gimme a call, okay? I’m not workin’ tomorrow night so maybe we can we can go out for a show or dinner or somethin’.”

Allen gave him stunned stare. With trembling hands he slipped the card into his shirt pocket. “I’d like that.” He opened his briefcase and tore out a sheet of notepaper. He scrawled his name and cell phone number on it. “Look, here’s my number too. You can call me anytime, okay?”

Sam swiped at his mouth with his napkin, having made his meal vanish. He creased the paper and slipped it into his jacket. “You can count on it, Allen.” He flashed another of those impossible grins while he

slipped into his jacket. He bussed his dishes and strode away, leaving Allen agape.

He pulled Sam's card from his pocket and scanned it. Adrenalin tingled through the fingertips that clutched at the card. In neat letters it announced, "Sam Sondergard, Detective Sergeant First Class, Hollenbeck Police Department."

I just made a date with a cop. How hot is that?

Chapter Three

A brilliant orange and red sunset silhouetted the mountains west of the city when Sam pulled his Honda Civic into the parking lot. He checked his note on where Allen lived. *Deep River Apartments on Lincoln Street, number 710.* For their first date, they'd settled on an early dinner, followed by attending a production of *Sweeney Todd* by the Browning College School of Drama.

He stepped out of his car and shuffled through the leaves shed by the trees overhanging the parking lot, inhaling the sweet, musky smell of the fall vegetation. Allen's apartment was in an old, brick structure from another era. It was run down, and weeds clogged the sidewalks. Sam recognized the kind of cheap residence where students and other transients

clustered. *At least there's not any druggies in this complex.*

A smile split his features when he saw Allen burst from the entryway. *God, he's so cute it hurts to look at him.* His crisp white shirt glowed in the last rays of sunshine and his red necktie billowed behind his shoulder like a flame born by the wind. His khaki pants broke in a perfect crease at mid-calf over his loafers. *He's so slim and fit, and those wire-frame glasses make him look so friggin' intellectual.* He suppressed the stirrings in his loins. *Don't want to scare him off.*

Sam opened his arms and gave Allen a quick hug. There was a moment of resistance before he returned it, as though he wasn't used to such affection. "You look great. You smell nice too!" *Except for the curly hair, he looks like Ethan Hawke in that movie.* Sam searched his mind for the title. *Something about sunrise or sunset.* He thought about kissing him, but decided against it.

"You look great, too. I like the gangster look. I'm all in white and you're all in black!" Sam wore all black, down to his necktie.

He grinned and spread his arms. "I like the contrast too." He waved to his car. "Your chariot awaits, my Prince."

Sam wound his way through the traffic to the other side of town and Potemkin's, the restaurant he'd picked for dinner. "So, I know you're a zoology student. You said you volunteered for the gay helpline, too?"

"Yeah, one night a week. Mostly I give out HIV information, where to get tested and stuff. There's always a lot of teens who call, too. I really feel for the ones whose parents don't get it. Why harass your own kid for bein' gay?"

"I bet it's hard on them. I went on a family dispute call last fall where the dad beat the shit out of his son for bein' gay, then kicked him out." Sam pulled up to a stoplight and turned on the radio. Willie Nelson wailed from the speakers and Allen winced. "Put this sixteen year old kid on the street with nowhere to go. You want something else? I've got some CD's." He pointed to a case in the back seat.

Allen grinned and brushed at his hair. "Nah, that's all right." He leaned back and looked at the neat suburban homes outside the car. "That happens more often than you might think, kids being abused by their parents for being gay. There's a safe house and shelter at the College, thank God, but lots of the kids won't go."

"They're afraid the county will make 'em go back to their abusive parents, so they'd rather live on the street. I saw a lot of that in San Francisco." Sam shook his head as he pulled away from the light.

"We try to keep them here in Hollenbeck. They're safer here. Lately, though, we've not been doin' very good at that." Allen frowned. "There's one kid, Walt, that I was tryin' to get off the street and into foster care. He just disappeared last week, without a trace."

"Walt? Shit, that was the name of the kid I mentioned, the one that got booted by his dad." He paused while he turned a corner into a busier, commercial part of town. "I thought he was long gone, run off to the big city. You been talkin' to him?"

"Well, it might be a different kid. They don't always give their real name. I just hope he didn't try to go home. His wacko father would kill him, from what he said. There hasn't been a murder lately, I hope?"

"Not hardly, not in this town. Hasn't been a murder here in decades." He pulled into the parking lot of a former Village Inn. An onion-shaped dome perched over the entrance and Russian and US flags flanked the front door. "This is it, Potemkin's."

The restaurant was quiet this early. Only one other couple shared the dining room with them, an elderly man and his wife. Clear plastic tubes and a breathing mask connected the woman to a green oxygen tank. Sam looked away. *Poor woman. Glad I quit smoking.* Wallpaper colored Soviet red lined the walls and deep blue plush carpet covered the floors. The muted lighting invited intimate conversation and the delicate contralto of Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* comforted their ears. They settled into chairs upholstered in blue velvet while the *maitre de* lit the candles at their table.

"Katya will be your server this evening, Mr. Sondergard. Would you care to see the wine list?"

"Yes, please." Sam took the small folder and leafed through it and then glanced at Allen. "Do you have any preferences?"

"I think I like white, but I don't know much about it. Whatever you pick will be fine."

He grinned. "So I have a whole new world of pleasure to show you. They don't really have Russian vintages here. These are all from the Caucasus, mostly Georgia." He closed the folder and leaned forward. "I'll order a nice white for us. So, tell me a little about yourself. Where are you from? How did you wind up at Browning?"

"Gee, there's not a lot to tell. I grew up in a little town in Wisconsin. Spring Green, maybe you've heard of it?"

Sam shook his head.

"There's some Frank Lloyd Wright stuff there. Anyway, my parents ran a motel. I went to Luther College in Iowa and became interested in the connection between genetics and behavior. Shane, I mean

one of my professors, helped me get the research assistantship here with Dr. Sarnok."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Shane?"

Allen blushed. "Well, he was kind of my boyfriend too. Except he wasn't, because he was married. We had to sneak around, and then he dumped me. It's a long story."

Sam reached out and touched Allen's hand. "It sounds like he must have hurt you."

"He was just in a bad situation, and when his wife got pregnant he didn't know how to change it." He shrugged. "It hurt, but it's over. He did help me get admitted here, and get a position at the CHIP lab. That's a great opportunity for me."

"I've heard that Sarnok guy can be kind of a jerk. He's got that reputation."

"He is pretty exacting sometimes. But I'm learning a lot, and I love working with the dogs in his lab." Allen beamed.

They paused while Sam ordered the wine. "I've had the Kekheti before. I think you'll like it. It's a moderately sweet white from Ostia."

"I trust you." Allen sipped his water. "How about you? You're not from here either, are you?"

"No, I grew up in Alameda, in the East Bay. My mother is an assistant DA there. I guess that's how I became a cop. I wanted to catch the bad guys."

"I can understand that. Solving crimes must be like doing research. You gather evidence and solve a puzzle."

"Sometimes. Usually there's a lot of luck in it, too."

"So your mother's a lawyer. What about your father?"

Sam frowned. "I don't know him at all. My mother left him when I was two and he found God. He's a preacher somewhere in the Central Valley."

A waiter arrived with their wine and Allen took a sip. "This is wonderful! It has kind of a vanilla flavor."

"That's very perceptive. Ah, here's our server. Hello, Katya."

"Good evening, Mr. Sondergard." She beamed at them and her lips dimpled. Her flaxen hair twined

in braids about her head and she wore a bright red Heidi dress over a pressed, linen blouse. She pulled a pad from the depths of her skirt and a pencil from a weave in her hair. "Welcome back. How are you this evening?"

"I'm good, Katya. This is my friend, Allen LeClerc." He paused while they shook hands. "He's never been here before, so what's the best thing on the menu tonight?"

"The stroganoff is always good."

"What did you have tonight, Katya?"

"I had the katmis satsivi."

"Ah, chicken with walnut sauce. What did the chef have?"

"The katmis satsivi, sir."

"Then I'll have that too." He turned to Allen. "It's got other things in it besides chicken and walnuts: garlic, cinnamon, cloves. It's really good."

"I'll have that too."

Katya took notes. "Excellent choice, gentlemen. I assume you will have borscht and the salade Russe?"

Sam tilted an eyebrow at Allen.

Allen grinned in response. "You clearly know what you're doing. Go ahead and order for both of us."

"That's what we'll have, then, Katya."

"I'll be right back with your salads." She whisked away their menus and left.

"Wow, the server even knows your name. You must be a regular."

"I come here a lot. Back in San Francisco I dated a guy who was a second generation Georgian. Kutsna used to cook for us when we lived together."

Allen lowered his eyes. "I've never had a live-in boyfriend. It must be wonderful." He turned his gaze back to Sam. "I'm sorry it didn't work out for the two of you."

A memory of pain touched Sam, but he shrugged. "It was great while it lasted."

Allen heaved a sigh. "So, you never told me what brings you to Browning. This is a long ways from the big city by the bay."

Sam pursed his lips. "That's a sad story. I'm not sure I should burden you with it on our first date." He gazed into the amber fluid in his wine glass. "After

Kutsna...left...my mother found me the job here, through the local DA. It was perfect. It took me away from the memories in San Francisco, and I could go to school and get my master's degree."

"He must have hurt you, like Shane hurt me. I'm sorry I made you talk about it."

Sam shook his head. "It's good for me to talk about it. But it's not what you think. He was killed in a shootout during a convenience store holdup, about a month after we moved in together." His shoulder twinged from the bullet he'd taken that night, before killing the perp. *Shit. Why am I telling him this? He'll think I'm a whiny crybaby.*

"Oh, that's horrible." He reached out for Sam's hand and stroked it. "I'm so sorry," he murmured.

"It was three years ago." Their eyes met and Sam lost himself for a moment. *His eyes are so blue, like crystalline pools of perfection. I could lose myself in those eyes.* He shook his head and heaved a sigh. "Life is for the living." He squeezed Allen's hand. "You know, I've been with other guys in the last three years, but there's something different about you. Something

comforting." He blushed. "I sound like a slobbery queen on Oprah."

"Not at all. I feel a connection to you too." They sat in silent communion, holding hands, until Katya arrived with their soup and salads.

Allen grinned. "This is fantastic." He looked around. "I love this place. Did you see the pictures of Lenin and Eisenstein in the front?"

"Yeah. But he didn't look much like Einstein to me."

He dimpled. "It wasn't Einstein. It was Sergei Eisenstein. He was a Russian director from the silent film era. *The Battleship Potemkin* was his most famous film." Allen pointed to a black and white photograph of a baby carriage rolling down a long staircase. "That's a famous scene from the movie."

"Silent films, huh? I'm more of a Hitchcock fan, myself."

"I love Hitchcock! What's your favorite?"

"I'm not sure. I love *Psycho*. But there was this black and white one with Joseph Cotton that I saw

once that I liked a lot. He played a serial killer hidden away in this normal, little town."

Allen beamed at him. "I love *Psycho*, too." He pursed his lips. "I'm trying to remember, maybe *Shadow of a Doubt* is the other one you're thinking of?" He shrugged. "Anyway, I love the way that Hitch finds evil lurking where you least expect it."

"Well, I guess I'm a sucker for films with evil killers. But then, I'm a cop."

"I like them too. Hitchcock knew that there's something about evil that fascinates."

The voices of the elderly couple ordering their meal wafted from across the room. The woman's hoarse voice seemed to bubble from dark, foamy depths inside her chest. Allen glanced at her and shook his head. "The poor thing." He touched Sam's hand. "I'm glad you don't smoke."

"I feel the same about you." Sam squeezed his hand, and then ran a finger around his wine glass. "There's darkness in all of us. I think Hitch scares us with our fear of what's inside us, that we'll let it out."

Allen frowned. "You think so? Or is it that evil is hidden under the surface wherever you look? Even in a place like Hollenbeck."

Sam snorted. "Trust me. This town is too boring to have any evil lurking inside it."

After the play, they strolled hand in hand in the Campus Commons, a large park in the middle of the College. The main buildings faced onto this wooded reserve, while College Street looped about it. Tonight, as with most nights, cars cruising the night clogged the street.

Allen took his hand and smiled. "I had a wonderful time tonight." They detoured around puddles in the sidewalk and the air filled with the fresh scent of the light shower that had come and gone while they were in the play.

"I did too." A light breeze rustled the trees and stirred the leaves that clustered on the ground. "Geeze, look at all these worms." He looked in disgust at the slimy creatures that covered the walkway.

"It's the weather. They've come out because of the rain." Allen knelt and probed the soil to the side of the path. A gaggle of beetles waddled away from his fingers. "See, there's a whole universe down here if you know where to look."

"It's just creepy. You know beetles eat dead things."

"That's the way of the world." Allen stood and brushed himself, then took Sam's hand again. "Let's sit for a bit. I know a place down by the Duck Pond." He led the way to a secluded park bench that rested under an ancient oak tree. Ducks paddled in the moonlight across the little pond, quacking and diving for food.

They sat close to one another watching the birds swim and the moonlight glimmer on the pond. Allen sighed. "I'm glad you sat at my table in the Union, even if you are a table thief."

"Is that what you thought I was doing?" Sam put his arm around him. "I saw you come in and decided I wasn't going to let you get away." He brushed

Allen's hair out of his eyes. "Did you know you have the most beautiful eyes?"

"These beady things?"

"You have eyes that were made to be kissed."

He leaned forward and slipped off his glasses. Allen's breath warmed his cheek as his lips brushed his eyelids. "Even here, in the moonlight, your eyes are this incredible color. I don't know that I've seen that shade of blue before."

Allen's finger traced a line down his cheek.

"You're so beautiful you scare me, you know that?" His sigh broke in his throat.

"The only thing I'm afraid of is that I'll lose you, now that I've found you." He wove his fingers through Allen's soft curls. Sam pulled him close and inhaled his sweet scent. Their lips touched in a silent grace note of anticipation.

"We found each other, I think," Allen whispered in his ear.

Sam pressed closer, pulling him in a tight embrace. Their lips touched anew, this time in a thunderous crescendo of sensation. Their bodies twisted in

longing and their souls rejoiced at the promise of new love. Sam dared to slip his tongue forward and the willing softness of the other's mouth yielded to his advance. Their tongues twined about one another and their teeth clicked in percussive cadence to their yearning. The kiss lasted but a moment, but it promised an eternity.

Sam pulled back and gazed into his eyes. "Where did you learn to kiss like that?" His heart raced in his chest and his hands trembled.

A smile played with Allen's lips and his eyes twinkled. "You mean where did *you* learn to kiss like that, don't you? I felt as if we were the only people in the universe. Like you didn't have anything else to do but kiss me." He rested his head on Sam's shoulder.

"I felt the same way." He descended again, his mouth greedy for sensation and his soul hungry for sustenance.

The second kiss stretched longer than the first. Allen's hands traced circles on his back and his muscles rippled in response. His own hands reached lower and stroked the hardness that strained at Allen's

khakis. Their moans of pleasure merged with the quiet splash of ducks diving and the gentle rustle of leaves blowing in the breeze. Their tongues embraced in a liquid caress that transcended passion and sang with ardor.

Sam gasped, withdrew and played again with those amazing curls. "With any other guy, I'd have you off in the bushes by now. But with you, I want the first time to be special."

"I know what you mean." His fingers played with Sam's earlobes and followed tendons down his neck to his collar. "I want this to be more than a one night stand, you know? It's already the best first date I've ever had in my life. Shit, it's the best date I've ever had."

"Me too." Sam grinned. "Does that mean you'll go out with me tomorrow night?"

Allen sat back and fisted him in the shoulder. "Of course, you idiot."

"I'll fix dinner if you'll come to my place." He leered at him. "Said the spider to the fly."

Allen just smiled back and kissed him on the cheek. "I'd like that. A lot."

They strolled through the park and back to Sam's car. On the way, a dilapidated old van cruised by, streaming blue exhaust in its wake. Sam didn't notice the van slow and the man inside stare at Allen before it sped away into the darkness.

Chapter Four

Sam loved cooking. For him, the kitchen seemed like a chemistry lab: if you followed the secret formula, magic appeared. In contrast with the lab, the magic in the kitchen always smelled good. Besides, cooking for an appreciative audience fed his soul.

“That was one fantastic meal.” Allen gazed across the candlelit table in Sam's apartment. A CD of classic rock pulsed in the background: the Moody Blues performing *Nights in White Satin*. Allen had brought it from his apartment after finding nothing but bluegrass in Sam's collection. “I can't believe you fixed all of this just for me.”

“You know, my momma always told my sisters the way to a man's heart was through his stomach.”

Sam sipped his wine. "That was when I decided I needed to learn how to cook."

Allen blushed. Sam thought he was cute when he blushed.

Allen gestured at the table. "This must have taken you hours to fix. You grilled the salmon to perfection and that salad was wonderful! What was in it, anyway?"

"Just some odds and ends. Barley, pears, feta, spinach, radicchio."

"Shit. I don't even know what radicchio looks like."

"It's that reddish lettuce-like stuff. It's a little bitter, but the orange juice and honey in the dressing sets it off nicely, don't you think?"

"I just know it was delicious." He lifted his wine glass. "This is, what? Our eighth or ninth date? I feel like I've known you forever."

Sam flashed an evil grin. "Forever? I'm that boring already?"

"No, no! I mean, well, we've just really hit it off. Usually, I'm dumped before the fourth date. But if

I actually make it to a fourth date, well by that time I'm usually the one looking for a way out. But with you...I just want more."

"So you said the other night. *More! More!*" Sam snickered. "Did I get the quote right?"

Allen stuck out his tongue. "Yeah. You gave it to me too."

"Sure did." He held his glass high. "How about a toast?"

Allen raised his glass too. "To us?"

"I was going to toast you, but 'to us' is better." Their glasses clinked and they drained the last of the wine. "We should break them in the fireplace, but I don't have one." He stood and walked behind Allen. "I had this feeling we'd really hit it off, and I was right." He rubbed his lover's shoulders, feeling the tension sluice out. "You seem kinda tight tonight. Bad day at the lab?"

"No more so than usual. That bastard Sarnok. He's always sneaking around, bullying people." He rolled his head under Sam's hands. "Mmmm...that feels so good."

Sam dug his fingers deeper into the tangled muscles of his neck. He loved massaging Allen's body, feeling the tedious tensions of the day fade away and the happy sexual tensions of the night arise. "What'd the SOB do now?"

"He reamed out the vet, Doctor Harzig, because he gave his GA the day off to study for comps. And he's always pressing for more results. Wanting more and more from Teena. Today, he threatened to pull me off the project!"

"That'd suck. What would happen to your dissertation?" Under his fingers, Allen's neck muscles coiled into little nodules of stress. "Relax, will you, babe?"

He pulled Sam's hands to his lips and kissed them. "Thank you. You called me babe!"

Sam bent forward and kissed his neck. "Shall we clear the table before or after?" He let his hands slide lower, slipping under his shirt and caressing his smooth chest. His nipples popped on cue, turning into hard, little nubs. He pinched at one while nuzzling, cheek to cheek, with his new lover.

"Mmm. If we do it later, then we'll have to get out of bed, right?"

"Right."

"Then let's do it now." He stood up and hugged Sam close.

Sam's hard cock pressed through their slacks against Allen's. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth, letting their tongues play tag. He broke it off and pulled back. "Whoa! We better stop now, or I'll just drag you to bed and we'll never get the dishes done."

The table was wedged into a corner of Sam's little kitchen. Allen gathered dishes from the table and passed them to Sam at the sink. "I'd figure out a way to finish my dissertation," he said, continuing their conversation. "That doesn't really worry me. But if he pulls me off the project, I won't see Teena! And who knows what they'll do to her."

"Teena's your dog, right?"

"Yeah. She means more to me than just a dog, though. She's pretty special. Careful, here comes the

crystal." He passed the wine glasses to Sam's soapy hands.

"Got 'em." He doused the glasses in the sink. "Wish I could meet this wonder dog. You make her sound like that dog on the Jetson's – what was his name?"

"Rawlf? Something like that. But that was silly. Dog's can't talk; they don't have any of the right vocal structures." He scanned the table. "I think that's it. Hand me a towel, will you?" He started to wipe the table down, catching crumbs in his hands. "I wish you could meet her too, but they're real strict about security in the lab. We've even got a full-bird Air Force colonel who doesn't do anything but monitor security."

Sam loaded the last of the dishes in the dishwasher and wiped his hands on his jeans. "Well, I can't complain. I can't even be out of the closet at *my* job in this fuckin' Podunk town. The Chief'd fire me for sure and then I'd have to drop out of school."

"We need to graduate and get out of here, go someplace civilized."

"I agree, lover. Someplace where I can fight crime, you can play with your puppies, and I can play with you." He wrapped his arms around Allen and ground their hips together. "Mmm...I see you're still nice and hard."

Allen wiggled like a puppy having his tummy tickled. He ran his hands across Sam's buzzed hair. "I love the prickly way your hair feels. Looks hot, too." He slid his hands inside Sam's shirt. "You're nice and furry there, too, just the way I like."

Sam groaned. "Personally, I'm a sucker for blonds." He let his hands roam inside Allen's shirt. "I like the way you feel too, nice and smooth." His fingers nipped at his nipples, tugging on them. "Those little things are so delicious." He lowered his head and used his teeth to loosen the buttons, one by one. "Look at'em, all pink and hard." His teeth nibbled at them, tugging at Allen's skinny chest. He pulled at the shirt, stripping it off and letting it drop to the floor.

"Babe, you're so hot." He clutched at Allen's butt, seizing him closer and tighter. Their bodies spun together, around and around and then down the hall

toward the bedroom. Their fingers tore at one another's clothes in a frenzy to see more and feel more. They left a trail of discarded clothing behind: shoes, jeans, shirts, underwear.

Once in bed, Allen nuzzled into Sam's furry crotch, licking, finding his way behind the balls. He ran his tongue up and down Sam's hard shaft. "That's so nice. I love the way it looks and smells and feels." He grinned and slipped a condom onto Sam's hard cock.

"God, that's sweet." Sam retreated and opened the nightstand. He pulled out a tube of lube. He squeezed a liberal portion into his palms and then rubbed them together, warming it. He knelt between Allen's legs, waving his cock at him.

Allen slipped a pillow under his hips and spread his legs. He ran his hands on his hard cock, smearing the pre-cum up and down. He twisted his hips and opened his legs, sliding across the white satin sheets. "Any time you're ready, my love."

"Mmm, you look so hot. I never get tired of looking at you." Sam reached out with one hand and

massaged Allen's cock. The other reached back, behind, to his exposed hole, caressing and teasing. Allen's hands retreated, and he clasped them behind his head. He lay open, exposed and ready. His back arched when Sam's forefinger penetrated him. Sam grinned, seeing the pre-cum drool out of Allen's cock. With one hand he spread the fluid up and down his lover's shaft. The other hand penetrated, first one finger, then two, then the whole hand, into his lover's hole. Under his skilled ministrations, he felt the sexual tension coil inside Allen's body even as his muscles relaxed and opened. He longed to kiss that opening, to slip his tongue where his fingers now probed. Soon, soon. They'd agreed to be safe until their HIV tests came back and that wouldn't be for another week.

"Are you ready, babe?" He grabbed his own cock and adjusted his hips.

"Oh fuck yeah, I need to feel you inside of me. Do it!"

Allen's chest heaved and his pulse fluttered in his neck. He loved giving pleasure, feeling Allen's ec-

stasy resonate through the lightning rod between his legs. He leaned forward and guided his cock inside Allen, slow, a bit at a time. Allen's hips oozed forward and his sphincters gripped then released. Before long, Allen engulfed him, a wonderful soft wetness enclosing him. He sighed and leaned forward, gripping Allen's wrists to hold their bodies in place. Together they thrust, in and out, back and forth, their breath mingling and quickening, their hearts racing.

Sam was close, so close. He paused with just the tip of his dick in Allen's hole. He leaned forward and devoured his mouth. His tongue penetrated; their teeth clicked. Allen's hard cock slicked against his abdomen, leaving a trail of fluid. He thrust again, deeper, and then his body wrenched. He flattened himself on top of Allen, maximizing body-to-body contact. He couldn't have enough of him. At that moment Allen was all that mattered in the whole world, giving to him, making him happy. Sam's back arched and his hips lurched in involuntary spasms. Allen cried out in pleasure even as his own pulse thundered in his ears.

The spasms slowed and Allen twisted one hand free and pulled him closer. His body lurched and Sam felt hot liquid jet up his chest. He gave his hips a lazy swivel, still inside his lover, still massaging him while he careened to his own orgasm.

"You do this so good," Sam murmured. He loved being inside his lover, especially now, afterwards. He cuddled and kissed Allen's nose, careful not to dislodge his cock. "Who taught you to be so good?"

Allen's smile seemed coy. "Truthfully? No one's ever been as good as you. So I guess you taught me."

Sam grinned. "Really? No shit? You're the best I've ever had too." His cock slipped free. "Oops. Give me a while and we'll go again, okay?" He reached into the nightstand and pulled out a bar towel. He used it to wipe Allen first, then himself. "You said something there, while I was inside you."

Allen seemed to catch his breath. "Yeah? Was it 'More, more'? Like the other night?"

"Well, maybe that too. But you said I was your love."

"Did I?" Allen took the towel and wiped at his crotch.

"Yes, you did. I hope you meant it, because I think I'm falling in love with you too."

Now Allen's breath seemed to catch in his throat. "What could you possibly see in me? You're athletic and smart. And you're so masculine! I'm just this wimpy, skinny egghead."

Sam caressed his cheek. "I don't know who you've been talking to, but I think you're just about perfect. If you're game, I'm willing to give us a try. I think this might be the real thing. For both of us."

Allen started to cry. "Fuck, look at me. What a faggot." He swiped at his tears. "Yes, I'm willing! You're more than perfect! A dream come true!"

At that instant, the phone in Sam's apartment clamored to life. "Shit." Sam climbed out of bed.

Allen reached for his hand. "Let it ring."

"Can't. That's the land line. The Department makes me keep it just for them. They wouldn't call

unless it was some kind of emergency. Where's my underwear, anyway?" He grabbed his shorts from the floor and hopped on one foot, trying to put them on. The phone continued to ring. "Fuck it." He strode back into the kitchen with his shorts balled in one fist.

"Sondergard here." He squirmed into his underwear with the phone jammed between his shoulder and his ear while he listened. He froze, and his eyes widened. "No shit? How many bodies did you say?"

He paused. "Lemme get a pencil and paper." He pulled his grocery list off the refrigerator and fished a pen out of a drawer. "Okay, go, gimme the address."

Another pause. "Yessir. I'll be right there. Give me maybe twenty minutes." He hung up and glanced up to find Allen staring at him.

"I'm sorry, I gotta go. Some professor at the University found a bunch of bodies on her squirrel farm."

"Squirrel farm? You mean Dr. Eckhorn? I know her! Is she all right?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Freaked, I bet, though. I guess she was digging around for squirrels or something and found a severed hand instead. Now it looks like her squirrel farm has been used as a body dump by some freak job."

"Shit. I did field work there last year, for her class. A body dump?"

"Yeah. I'm the only one on the force with any real forensic experience. I'm gonna hafta be the lead on this." He jerked his jeans up and snatched his shirt from the floor. "I'm really sorry, babe, but I've gotta go. Dunno when I'll be back. Where's my damned shoes?"

"Over here. I'll get 'em." Allen handed him the shoes and then sat at the kitchen table. "Will you be okay?"

Sam stopped and peered at his lover. "Sorry, you're new to this. This is part of bein' with a cop. Yeah, I'll be safe. There's always backup, and I wear a Kevlar vest when I'm on duty. You've seen my gun." He saw Allen grin at that one and he smiled back. "I mean the other one, the one that shoots bullets. But

look, this is gonna take over my life for a while. I'm afraid I won't be much company." He gave Allen a tentative kiss. "Forgive me?"

"Sure. Of course. Just be careful. I don't want to lose you. I just *found* you."

"Don't worry, babe. You're stuck with me. Stay here as long as you like. There's spare keys in that drawer. I've gotta rush." He ran to the bedroom, then returned, strapping on his shoulder holster. "Lemme grab one last kiss." He gave Allen a quick buss, slipped on his leather jacket and dashed out the door.

Chapter Five

Shadows from the red lights on the police cruisers swirled across the little nature preserve in a mad, asynchronous dance. The darkness and the drizzle conspired with the flashing lights to give everything an erratic ruddy glow. Flashlight beams shot through the dense forest as police and coroner's technicians probed the soil, searching, passing from visibility to invisibility in light and shadow. Occasionally a voice called out and the coroner sifted the earth with a shovel. So far they had found parts of at least three bodies.

Sam sighed. He'd already lost one battle with the Chief, arguing that the search should wait until daylight. His boss had insisted they continue despite the danger of damaging evidence, saying, "Boy, we

gotta look like we're doin' somethin' besides standin' around with our thumbs up our butts." Sam had his own opinion about what was up the Chief's butt, but kept it to himself.

This would be a major case, his case. There hadn't been a murder in Hollenbeck in eighteen years, and none of the other cops had even seen a murder scene, let alone investigated this kind of killer. Sam had worked homicides in San Francisco; murder was a familiar evil. He shuddered as the cold rain slid under his collar and dribbled down his spine. He dreaded studying the victims. They would become more real to him than the living. But getting to know the killer was the worst. At least two of the bodies had been mutilated sexually as well as dismembered. This killer was depraved, one of those stone cold murderers who found life in the death of others.

His only witness sat waiting in the rear of the Chief's cruiser, her breath fogging the windows. Her hands smeared at the window nearest Sam, and he saw a mud-streaked face peer out. That would be Dr. Lucy Eckhorn, Allen's Professor acquaintance, who

had found the body parts earlier today. He clipped his badge and ID to his jacket and slipped into the back seat with her. *Have to start someplace*, he thought.

"Good evening, ma'am. I'm Detective Sam Sondergard. I wonder if I might ask you a few questions?"

She wiped at her eyes, streaking more mud on her face. "Can't you make them stop, officer?" Her voice trembled and tears welled in her red, puffy eyes. Gray hairs straggled in a wet tangle from the bun unraveling at the back of her neck.

"I'm a Detective, ma'am. Uh, make who stop, ma'am?"

"Those men! They're destroying my habitat! Look at them, traipsing around, digging, destroying! What will my *spermophilus beecheyi* do?"

"Spermi-what, ma'am?" *Is she nuts, or what?* Sam was used to traumatized witnesses, but usually the violence to humans was what upset them.

Tears didn't stop her eyes from rolling. "*Spermophilus beecheyi*. I suppose *you'd* call them ground squirrels, like those awful people in the

neighborhood. But this is *my* research lab and *their* home! And now all those awful men are destroying it! Can't you do something?"

"Ma'am, didn't you find a disarticulated human ear there today?"

"Yes, surely. That was awful too. It was all covered with ants. Right there with my poor, innocent *spermophilus beecheyi*! And now *they're* being punished instead of the criminals! That's just like you cops!"

"Ma'am, we have to investigate. They've found pieces of at least three bodies out there." He pulled out his notebook. "Tell you what, why don't you tell me about your, uh, habitat, did you call it? Who comes here, what it's for, and so on. Then I'll see what we can do."

She tugged at a tangle of hair and settled into her seat. "I'll have you know, officer, that I've had this habitat since I came to Browning College thirty years ago. It was ideal, back then. Out in the country, teaming with *spermophilus beecheyi*." Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "I've presented papers to the

State Zoological Society on them, you know. They've been nominated for awards."

"Yes, ma'am. So you study these, er, ground squirrels here, then. Who, besides yourself, comes here?"

"Well, students in my field zoology classes come here. But I haven't taught that for over a year."

"So you're the only person who's been here for the last year, ma'am?"

"I didn't say *that*, officer. Really, I'd think you could listen better!"

"So who else comes here, ma'am?"

"Those awful neighborhood children, for one. They think it's a park, to play in! And their older siblings are worse, degenerate. I swear, I found *beer cans* and *condoms* in my habitat a couple of months ago. I'd think you'd know. I filed a trespass complaint with you people."

"Yes, ma'am. We'll check that out. Do you have any names of people we should talk to?"

"Hardly. You people wouldn't do anything about my complaint. But there's the parents. You

might talk to them. They sued to have my habitat closed. They called it a *nuisance!* They said my *spermophilus beecheyi* were ruining their lawns. As if their lawns were more important than science!"

This wasn't getting him anyplace. "Ma'am, I wonder if you could tell me what happened today? What you were doing and what you found?"

"Well, I was here gathering data. Did you know that *spermophilus beecheyi* have the most *interesting* mating habits? They —"

"Ma'am, please. Just tell me what happened today."

She sniffed. "Well. I saw that the ground was disturbed, like someone had been digging. Last month, I found possum traps in my habitat. I'm sure that the neighbors set them. Can't you investigate that, officer?"

"I'm a homicide detective, Ma'am, but I'll be sure to pass that on to the right people. Go on, please. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I saw the ground was disturbed, so I got down on my hands and knees and dug, with my

hands, you know? Sure enough, I found blood and this *thing* down there. I thought it was one of my *spermophilus beecheyi*, but instead it was an *ear*! It was awful! That was when I called the police."

Sam knew that neighbors had called the police when they heard her hysterical screams, but he didn't challenge her version of events. "So you found this ear. Have you ever found anything like that before here?"

"I told you. They killed one of my *spermophilus beecheyi* last month."

"But you hadn't found any *human* parts before."

"Don't be silly. I would have reported it." She sniffed again.

"How about people hanging around here, people that shouldn't be here? Have you seen that?"

Lucy's face flushed in anger. "Yes! Weren't you listening? Those loutish neighbors, their bratty kids and their degenerate teenagers!"

A hand rapped on the door and Sam swiped at the window. The Chief and the county coroner hud-

dled outside under the Chief's umbrella. He closed his notebook. "Well, thank you, ma'am. We'll probably have some more questions for you later." He paused. "Would you like a ride someplace? There's no reason for you to stay here."

"No. I have to stay. I have to watch." Lucy again rubbed her sleeve against the fog on the window and stared outside.

Sam closed the door and stood in the rain. Neither thought to make room for him under the umbrella. The Chief nodded toward the figure in the car. "How's the Professor lady takin' things?"

"It's hard on her, sir. Finding a body like that, and now we're digging up her life's work. She's pretty upset."

The Chief snorted. "She'll get over it. They always do." He surveyed the scene. "Well, boy, it sure looks like you've got your work cut out."

Sam nodded. "Yes, sir. We'll need to call in some specialists, sir, maybe the FBI VICAP team."

"No sir-ee, boy. We're gonna handle this locally. We don't need no federal boys comin' in here and tellin' us what to do."

"But sir, we don't even have a proper forensics lab here!"

The coroner chimed in, "That's right. This is way beyond my capacity."

"I said no. I'll decide if and when we need outsiders, do you hear me?"

What an idiot. Maybe the DA will listen to reason.
Sam nodded. "Yes sir."

"You know this'll take a lot of time, boy. You'll probably have to quit school until this case is solved."

"Sir, you know that I go to school in my off-hours." Sam scowled at his boss.

"That was before this came up, Detective. I want twice-daily written reports on your progress. I want you to think about nothing else until you've got this case solved. No classes. No social life. This *case* is your life, as of right now. Do you hear me?"

Sam made no comment. An image of Allen as he had left him earlier tonight, alone in his apartment,

flashed across his memory. *Rinky-dink town, blubbery, fat-ass, stupid small-town politicians, and no union to protect me.* Once he got his degree he'd blow this place for sure and go back to the city.

"I asked you a question, Mister," the chief growled.

"Yes sir, I hear you." Maybe he could work something out with his professors.

Just then an immense bus pulled in with a huge red CNN logo on the side. Sam saw the satellite uplink antenna on the roof of the bus. *Oh God, the national media have already picked this up.*

"Shee-it, looky that. I'll handle the press, boy. You just get this solved. Now get to it!" The chief made a futile effort to pull in his belly as he swaggered over to where the news crew was setting up.

Sam and the coroner stood in the rain and watched the men digging. Sam ran his palm over his buzz-cut, swiping rainwater from his head "So just how many bodies are here anyway?"

The coroner shrugged. "It's hard to say right now. Clearly there's at least three victims here. But I

won't know how many until I get back to the morgue. Some of the body parts are jumbled together."

Both men stood just inside the yellow police lines, with the press and thrill-seekers from the surrounding neighborhood jammed behind them.

"There's going to be hell to pay over this one." Sam pulled his jacket tighter about him and shivered.

"This sucks. Do you think we'll be able to identify any of the victims?"

"Hard to say at this point. We'll have dental records, of course, but you'll have to tell us where to look for comparisons."

"Shit. Any fingerprints?"

"Well, we dug up a hand next to the ear that what's-her-face, that crazy squirrel lady, found. I think it was fresh enough that we can get prints off of it."

Sam stroked his goatee. "Yeah. So if the victim's prints are in IAFIS, and if we can find a match, then we've got one ID."

"Yeah, right. Fat chance." A faint rumble of thunder interrupted their conversation. "You think these vics might be locals?"

"Or students. We've had three missing persons reports so far this year. Kids, really. Guys in their late teens, early twenties. Two were from campus and one from the town. I thought they were runaways but this makes you wonder." He remembered Allen's comments about the runaways who called gay helpline and shuddered.

"Yeah. Well, give me whatever information you've got on them. Anything will help me make ID's."

"Sure." He pulled his leather jacket tighter against the rain and the chill fall air. The crew continued to dig, the rain continued to fall, and the lights on the police cruisers continued to flash. Lucy Eckhorn huddled in the Chief's patrol car, weeping.

Chapter Six

Pete jogged down the dark street, his breath puffing from his mouth in frosty clouds. His running shoes ground against the asphalt with a weary *chuff, chuff, chuff* sound. The combination of his sweat and the chill of the night air conspired to make his skin clammy. His leg muscles burned from running. *I haven't run this much since boot camp.* The cold air ate into the soft tissues of his throat and lungs. Running, he concentrated on where to take the next step, on the pain in his legs, on anything but the shambles he'd made of his life.

He stopped, panting, with his hands on his knees. This was getting him nowhere. He looked around and saw a bench across the street, a bus stop.

His chest heaving, he staggered over and plopped down.

He pulled up his t-shirt and used it to wipe at his face. When he was done, it fell back and clung to his damp body. Bright red letters proclaimed *Browning ROTC* across his chest. Sweat stained the armpits and soaked the fabric.

It felt good to be alone. No one ever came here, especially this late at night. Abandoned warehouses lined one side of the street. An old cemetery nestled on the other side, an unkempt chain link fence marking the boundary between the living and the dead.

Pete didn't know if he ran away or toward something. Maybe it was a little of both. The humiliation of his expulsion from the ROTC corps still stung. He could live without his now ex-girlfriend, Ellen, but the other cadets were his only real friends. All of that was gone now, while an uncertain future loomed before him.

Running kept his mind occupied and empty, a solitary exercise for a solitary soul. His breath husked in and out, fogging the air around him. It must be

colder than he thought. He shivered and rubbed his thighs.

A dog nosed its way through the chain link fence, sniffing at the ground. Pete watched, thinking, *What a mutt*. The dog was a mongrel of no obvious breed. Free of the fence, the dog padded up and sniffed at his running shoes, whimpering. Pete reached out and tousled the mutt's ears.

"What's with you, fella? You got no friends either?" The dog licked his hand and shivered.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. He just wanted to be left alone, but the dog was having none of it. He barked once and nuzzled his shoes again. "I got nothin' for you, fella. I got nothin' for nobody."

Headlights crawled down the street toward the man and the dog. Pete looked away. As the van approached, the dog became more active, running into the street, then back to Pete, tail wagging. Pete ignored him. The van passed with a foul stench of exhaust. He closed his eyes in disgust.

The dog barked again, looking first at Pete then at the van. The driver parked less than half a

block away in front of a storefront with boarded up windows. The engine coughed to a stop and a door clunked open. He sighed and glared at the van. This was just how it had started last week, when the vice cop cruised him. This vehicle was more dilapidated though. Pete wasn't interested. He wasn't really interested in anything anymore, least of all anonymous sex or hunky guys.

A dirty, little man crawled out of the van. *He's creepy lookin' anyway. Good. Not that it matters. Not that anything matters,* Pete thought. The cold sabers of loneliness and rejection twisted in his heart.

The van lurked in the shadows between the yellow pools of light from the streetlamps. The man reached into his van and pulled out bags of groceries. One arm was in a cast. He seemed to favor that arm, making his chore more difficult.

The dog barked one more time and then scrambled to the man, who shouted, "Shoo, go away dog!"

Pete thought the man's voice sounded weak and whiny. He watched as the dog sniffed all around

the man's legs and feet. The man tried to shoo the dog away, juggling his groceries. Then one of the sacks ruptured and the man teetered, losing his balance. In the next instant, the man lay sprawled on the sidewalk surrounded by boxes of cereal and plastic bags of potato chips. Canned goods rattled away down the sidewalk.

"Shee-it. Goddamn dog." The man sounded close to tears. He looked around and his eyes landed on Pete. "Hey, mister! Could you help an old man?" Pete tried to ignore him. "Please mister. I hurt my arm again. Could you please help me?"

Pete sighed. Maybe if he helped, the man would leave him alone. He got up and strode to where the man kneeled.

Using his good arm, he stacked canned goods in a clumsy array, stuffing them into the torn bag. "Oh, thank you, young man. Thank you. You're a good person!"

The man's high, bubbly voice grated on his nerves. He wished he'd just shut up. Pete knelt and

started to help with the groceries. "Are you all right? That looked like quite a tumble."

The man clambered to his feet, rubbing the arm with the cast. "I don't know, my arm hurts bad. I think I broke it again." The dog now hunkered at the man's feet, his eyes never leaving Pete, his tail switching back and forth. "Thank you, young man. You're so kind to help me."

Pete finished gathering the scattered groceries. The man smelled very bad, and the van reeked of something, but he couldn't say what. He wondered if the man lived in the van, or maybe he was a squatter living in one of the abandoned warehouses. Pete felt sorry for him, even as he cringed away from the offensive odor. *Maybe he's worse off than I am. I guess I should be grateful that I still have a place to sleep.*

The man stood over him, one hand still worrying over the cast. "You're so kind. I wonder if you could help me. I got more sacks in my van. My arm hurts so bad. Could you take my bags inside for me?" The man's voice seemed to erupt from diseased depths inside his throat.

Pete sighed. He really did feel sorry for the old guy. "Sure, why not? I got nothin' else to do." He stood. "Where they at?"

"Here, inside the van." The man opened the rear door and Pete reeled back from the stench that wafted out. "They're behind the seat. If you just crawl in you'll see them. Thanks so much, young man. You're so kind."

"Sheesh, what you been keepin' in there?" *Smells like dead bodies*, he thought. Pete held his breath and crawled into the van.

He didn't see the man pick up the crowbar. He didn't see the dog sit up, as if to get a better view. He didn't see the man swing the crowbar at his head. The pain only lasted for a few seconds before he lost consciousness.

The smelly man swung the crowbar three more times and the van shook. Blood and brains splattered across the trash littering the floor. The dog's tail lashed back and forth and he *woofed*. Pete's head looked like a ruptured watermelon, with bone and tissue glistening red in the faint light.

The man tossed the crowbar into the van and tousled the dog's ears. "Good job, Chippie. We got ourselves another toy to play with."

The dog *woofed* at him and his tail quivered with mad delight.

"He was a pretty one, wasn't he? Too bad I kinda got carried away and ruined him." The smelly man put the groceries Pete had gathered for him back into the van, slammed the rear door and crawled over Pete's body into the driver's seat. "What're you waitin' for, boy?"

Chippie gave a happy *arf* and jumped into the passenger seat. The man wiped his hands on his jeans, leaving gory streaks. Together, they drove off into the darkness.

Chapter Seven

Sam slouched on a picnic table, stroking his goatee and staring at the pitiable pile of evidence in front of him. The city had given him the storage garage where it kept road maintenance and park equipment to use as his evidence barn. Bags of fertilizer stacked in one corner reeked of chemicals, while rusty tools hung on the walls, and a vending machine with sodas rattled in one corner.

He arranged two picnic tables in the middle of the garage and laid out his evidence. The floor was still cluttered with the trays of dirt and mud scraped from Dr. Eckhorn's research habitat, but here in front of him, on one table, was what little useful evidence he'd found. A real forensics team should have been at work sifting through the dirt, searching for hidden

clues. The Chief was too cheap to pay for that, so Sam was the one shaking trays over screens and plucking out bones and scraps of paper. At least one of his buddies from school, who was also on the force, helped with the task. Together, they sorted out what looked like animal bones, picking up a few paltry traces of physical evidence. If only they had the tools and the lab needed to do this right.

He worried some about the animal tag from the Zoology Department at Browning College that turned up. Like the other bits, it was embedded in the soil near one of the bodies. Besides the name of the college and the department, the code "CHIP.7.5" was stamped on it. CHIP had to refer to the lab where Allen worked. Most likely, someone working in the lab also worked for the squirrel lady and just dropped the tag in the squirrel habitat. But fear for Allen still tickled his brain. That was one loose end he had to track down, and soon.

Sam got a soda from the vending machine and sat on the table, musing. So far, he had no clue what to do.

Gravel crunched, announcing the arrival of his partner. "Hey Sam. How's it going?"

Sam smiled. "Hi Brad. Like crap." Sam gestured at tiny pile of evidence. "I got nothin'. How're things with you? What'd I miss in class yesterday?"

"Nothin' that's not in the book. I copied my notes for you, though."

"Thanks! How's your wife?"

"She's doing great, thanks. Bigger than a house. She can hardly wait for the kid to come."

"Yeah, I bet. Hey, thanks again for having me for dinner last month. It was great."

"Sure. We enjoyed it too. So did Loretta." Loretta was the unexpected blind date for Sam, set up by Brad's wife. "Didja ever call her? I think she'd go out with you if you asked."

Sam didn't look at Brad. "Nah, been busy." He poked at the evidence and thought of Allen. He knew Brad would be okay with him being gay. But he couldn't risk losing his job, and Brad wasn't bright enough to not slip up by accident and spill the beans.

The Chief's version of "don't ask, don't tell" really sucked.

"Not much to go on here." Brad plopped his pudgy form on the other side of the picnic table and pulled out a candy bar.

"No. We need VICAP to come in and help with a psych profile, but the Chief won't permit it. I got no leads at all." Sam poked at the evidence. "Did I tell you we tracked down the owner of this ring?" He held up a Browning class ring with the initials DAG engraved on the inside. "We tracked the prints through IAFIS. Seems DAG is one Douglas Anthony Gleason. He disappeared about a month ago."

"So how'd his prints get in IAFIS?"

"His dad was in the military, and when he was a kid he got a job at some army base that required he be printed. Presto, he's in IAFIS and we've got the ID for one vic."

"Tough on his parents. Who made the call?"

"I did." Sam frowned. "Seems the kid was gay. They said they no longer had a son. 'Good riddance,' they said. Real hateful."

"No shit? How could anybody do that to their own kid?" Brad wadded up the candy wrapper and stuffed it in his pocket. He pulled another candy bar out from same pocket and unwrapped it. "You want one?" He reached for his pocket.

Sam shook his head. "No thanks."

"What else you got?"

"Don't got much. There was some blood evidence, on that photo and the cigarette pack, but the coroner said it was so degraded he couldn't even tell if it was canine or human."

"Tell me about the photograph." Brad crunched on his candy bar.

"Oh yeah, one of the coroner's techs found it under one of the, uh, torsos. Looked like something printed out from a computer, but it was all faded and washed out. I sent it off to a friend in the computer science department. If anyone can recover that image, Marcie can." He pursed his lips. "You know, all the vics were male?"

"Yeah, you told me that already."

"Okay, I forget. Anyway, I pulled missing persons reports from the last year. That turned up at least five guys the right age and profile."

"Any leads there?"

"Not so far. Another detective's interviewing the families. Interesting thing, though. At least three of the five were gay."

"How'd you figure that out?"

"Well, two of them got scooped up in a vice scam. You know the routine: hang out in a tearoom someplace, get some guy to ask for sex or expose himself, then arrest him."

"Yeah. Always seemed odd to me they never arrest anybody on lover's lanes where straight kids do the same kinda stuff. Lucky for us studs, though, huh?"

"Right." Sam picked up the animal tag and turned it over and over in his hands. "I took one of the missing person reports myself, last fall. Some mousy woman came in with this story about how her kid got caught doin' the nasty with his boyfriend. Her husband went ballistic and beat the shit outta the

kid." Sam tossed the animal tag back into the pile.

"No surprise the kid vanished. I figured he'd run off to the big city. Now I wonder if pieces of him are strung out in the morgue. His name was Walt something. I might check the gay help center and see if they've got anything on him." He shrugged. "I guess I should talk to the squirrel lady again. She might have something to tell me."

"She'll tell you about squirrels. Peggy worked in her department up until last year when I knocked her up, I mean when we got married. Trust me, all that wacko squirrel lady ever talks about is squirrels." Brad picked up the tag. "Hey, where didja get this?"

"It was buried near one of the bodies. I figured it was a tag for one of the squirrels," Sam lied. "It says it's from the Browning Zoology Department."

"Dr. Eckhorn doesn't tag her squirrels. That's an old tag, but I recognize it. Peggy swore about havin' to keep track of 'em. The CHIP means it's from the CHIP Lab."

"Yeah, so?" Sam kept his voice cool.

"Well, there shouldn't be any of the CHIP animals there, that's for sure. That's Dr. Sarnok's big, hush-hush, top secret contract with the Army. All the animals are kept locked up in his lab and you need special clearance to get out there. Even his test ranges are secured. It's all in the new research park at the south end of campus."

"Interesting." Sam picked up the tag again, all the while worry about Allen gnawed at his gut. "So this shouldn't be there? Maybe it fell out of the squirrel lady's purse or something?"

"No way. Everything about that project is secure. They'd never let a wacko like her around it." He chewed on his candy bar and frowned. "Rumor is that one of the animals attacked a graduate student a couple of years ago and put her in the hospital, but it was all hushed up. Anyway, the animals are all kept secure. Real secure. And they kept track of 'em with these tags. Peggy hated the damned things, all the paperwork and everything."

"Well, anything that's out of place is worth following up on." *Especially if it involves Allen. He never said those damned dogs were dangerous!*

"Hey, you don't think animals did this, do you?"

"Well, no, the coroner says there are clear knife and saw marks on the bones. Some of the bones look like they've been gnawed at too, probably by a dog. But we figured that could have happened after they were dumped." Sam looked at the pile of evidence and tapped his finger on the table, then sipped at his soda. "You know, now that I think about it, that doesn't make much sense."

"Why's that, Sam?" Brad finished his candy bar and looked around to see if anyone else was there. Then he pulled a pack of cigarettes from the secret stash inside his shirt. "You mind?"

"Nah, go ahead." He shook his head when Brad offered him one. "Look, we found the body parts buried in groups, right?"

"Right." Brad closed his eyes and exhaled, his pupils narrowing in the buzz from the cigarette.

"So how did animals get at the bones to gnaw on them if they were buried? I don't think an animal would dig them up, gnaw on them, and then re-bury them right next to where we found them, do you?"

"Dunno. Don't sound like it. But the people in the Zoology department could tell you, especially that Sarnok guy. Peggy says he's a big cheese when it comes to dogs." Brad let the smoke ooze from his nose and then tried to blow a smoke ring, but with no success. "So what, you think the bones were gnawed on first and then buried by the perp?"

"That's the only thing that makes sense."

"But that doesn't make sense either." Brad ground out his cigarette. "Why would the perp leave the bodies around where a dog could chew on them?"

"Exactly." Sam put the animal tag in an evidence bag. "I think I need to talk to this Sarnok guy."

"Good luck. Peggy says he's a major league asshole."

"Well, I can be an asshole too, and I'm an asshole with a badge." Sam looked grim.

Chapter Eight

The office manager for the CHIP lab sat at attention behind her desk. Sam knew all about her from Allen. Her sunny expression and her pleasant voice masked a heart of darkness.

"I'm sorry, but Dr. Sarnok is out of town and won't be back until tomorrow. He's the only one who can answer your questions." The office manager for the CHIP lab smiled. He was sure she was delighted at the opportunity to say no. She rotated her solid form in her chair and opened a file drawer, dismissing him.

Sam leaned forward and spoke to her back. "This is a murder investigation, Ms..." he paused to read her nameplate on her desk. "Ms. Eberhard. The District Attorney can compel your cooperation."

Her chair rotated back in his direction and she sniffed, primping at her short, efficient hairdo. "Mrs. Eberhard, please," she said in a prim voice. "I'm sorry Detective, but this is a US Army project. We are not authorized to give out any information, not even to you. I'm sure Dr. Sarnok will cooperate with the police, but not today. Now if you want to discuss this with the College's Legal Counsel, I can give you directions."

Sam thought her sunny smile would darken Hell. He closed his notebook. "That won't be necessary. Can you maybe make an appointment for me to speak to Sarnok?"

"Surely." She clicked through screens on her computer. "Dr. Sarnok is available at two o'clock tomorrow. Will that do?"

"Sure." Sam pulled out his card. "If you think of anything, please call me at this number."

"I'll be sure to do that, Detective." She stood. "Would you like me to show you out?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Eberhard. I'll be back tomorrow. See that Sarnok is here tomorrow, or I *will*

show up with a warrant and rip your precious lab apart."

Closing the door behind him, Sam strolled down the hallway away from the administrative offices. He smiled when he saw Allen, wearing worn blue jeans and a ruffled white lab coat, pop out of a door. A largish, yellow mutt tugged at a leash that was wrapped around his right wrist.

"Hey! What are you doing here? Teena, heel!" A goofy grin popped across his face at the sight of his lover.

Now that smile would light up Heaven, thought Sam. "Part of my investigation. We found a CHIP tag buried at my crime scene. Probably nothing." They touched hands. Sam crouched and let the dog sniff his fingers. "Is this Teena?"

Allen beamed. "Yup, meet my best friend." He fished in his pocket. "Here, give her a treat. Let her lick it off of your palm."

Sam held the treat out and Teena's tongue whisked it into her mouth. "Yeah, you're the *bestest*

dog, aren't you!" He stroked her fur. "She's beautiful. I understand now what you see in her."

Allen tousled her ears. "She's a great dog, that's for sure."

Teena sniffed at Sam's boots and then placed slobbery doggie kisses on his hand. She looked back and forth between the two and *woofed*, her tail quivering like a banshee. She plopped down on her haunches and started licking herself.

"I think she likes you." He glanced around and gave Sam a quick peck on the cheek. "There's almost no one here today. All the big shots got called off to Fort Huachuca for some confab."

"Isn't that the Army Intel School? Why would they go there?"

"You know I can't talk about that. But Army Intel is one of our big funders. That's not a secret." He looked toward Mrs. Eberhard's office. "You know, you really shouldn't be here without a pass."

"You mean from Mrs. Eberhard? I've met her. I don't think she liked me much. The feeling was mutual."

"The dragon lady." Allen looked again to be sure her door was closed. "If she catches me talking to you, I'm toast."

"Yeah, I don't want to get you in trouble. I'll be back tomorrow, though. I've got a meeting with Sarnok."

"Sarnok? Why?"

"I need to find out why this was at my crime scene." He pulled the baggie with the CHIP tag in it.

Allen's eyes widened. "Let me see that." He inspected the tag and handed it back. "Teena's got one too." He pointed to her ear. "This one's pretty old, though. The 'seven' means it's from a generation seven dog. There haven't been any of them around for at least three years. You found that at Dr. Eckhorn's habitat, you say?"

"Yeah. Near some, uh, other evidence."

"No way that shoulda been there. The tags always stay with the dogs, no matter what, until they're, I mean, unless they die or something. Then the dog's body is incinerated and the tag is destroyed."

Sam quirked an eyebrow at him while petting Teena. "Any chance someone could have just dropped it by accident?"

"I don't see how. Not unless there was a big screw up in the security procedures." He glanced again at the closed door. "We really shouldn't talk here," he whispered. "Dinner tonight, maybe, at your place?"

"Can't tonight. I've got a ton of paperwork, and the Chief wants me to write a press briefing and a report for the governor. Maybe tomorrow will be better."

Allen pursed his lips. "I guess I've got a bunch of paperwork to do, too, back in my office on campus. Plus I gotta be here early tomorrow morning for the vet's visit." He sighed. "I just miss you!"

"I'm sorry. Sometimes bein' with a cop sucks."

Allen grinned at that. "Well, that's not necessarily all bad. If you catch my drift." He punched Sam in the shoulder and waggled his eyebrows like Groucho. "Look, I gotta go before the dragon lady hears us. Call me tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure."

Allen tugged at Teena's leash and departed down the corridor.

Chapter Nine

That afternoon found Allen in his cubicle in the Zoology building on campus, staring at a pile of test results waiting to be coded for the computer to analyze.

"Hey, Allen! Are you gonna stay here all night?" Seth, the veterinarian for the lab, never knocked, he always just barged in. Seth somehow wound up at Browning College years ago, in the sixties. He'd been strung out on drugs and fleeing a boring middle class Bronx family. He was now old and fat and mostly bald. The only remnant of his youthful rebellion was a bushy beard and a shoulder length fringe of iron-gray frizzy hair. "It's time to close up, boy." Seth slapped Allen on the shoulder.

Allen didn't quite cringe at the touch. "I didn't realize how late it was. I guess they'll still be here tomorrow." He gestured at the test results piled on his desk.

"You betcha. Don't forget, first thing tomorrow we're doin' the quarterly checkup on the dogs. Hey, I'm gonna stop for a drink or twelve before I go home. Wanna join me?" Seth had been married four or five times, depending on which story he felt like telling. He lived alone when he wasn't shackled up with an undergraduate.

This time Allen did shudder. *Is he hittin' on me, or what? I just wish he'd leave me alone!* "N-n-no," he stuttered. "I mean, no thanks. But, uh, I've got things I need to do. You know. At home."

"You okay, Allen?" Seth looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Need a lift?"

"No. Thanks, but no." Allen straightened papers on his desk. "I think a walk home will clear my head. You know, let me clear things out from the lab before I get home." Allen licked his lips, and glanced up at Seth.

"Sure, sure, no problem, son." Seth slapped Allen again on the shoulder. "See you first thing in the morning, then." Seth waddled away.

Allen started out on his usual path to his small apartment, a couple of miles from campus. Allen's route took him by the intramural athletic fields. Despite the hazy fall drizzle, a group of young men were playing touch football. Allen pulled his coat tighter and walked to the far side of the field.

"Hey!"

Allen walked on.

"Hey! You, over there! Could you throw us our football?"

Allen looked across the field. Several young men in athletic shorts and sweatshirts stood staring at him. He could see their chests heaving from their game. One of them had a muddy wound on his knee with a trickle of blood running down his hairy leg.

"How about tossing our ball this way?" One of the young men pointed.

Allen stared in horror. There it was, a football, not twenty feet from him. He knew he'd never be able

to throw it all the way to the young men, but how could he ignore them? Allen looked around for rescue, but there was no one else there. He glanced again at the young men, who stood waiting with their hands on their hips. He was trapped. He inched toward the football and picked it up. It was large in his hands, rough and rigid. He gripped it as hard as he could, rotated his body and flung the ball toward the players.

The football floundered through the air, bounced once and rolled to a stop about a third of the way to the players. Allen stood, grief-stricken and humiliated.

"Jee-SUS. He throws worse than a friggin' GIRL."

"Or a friggin' faggot."

Allen heard scornful laughter from the young men. No one said thank you.

He turned and rushed on. He didn't want to face anyone else. Not tonight. Not in person, anyway. He didn't even want to face his roommate, a doctoral

candidate in mathematics who was totally focused on his research.

Allen decided to take a longer way home, across the railroad tracks and through the old Parish cemetery. No one went that way and no one else would confront him.

The sun was just setting when Allen got to the cemetery. The skeletal branches of autumn trees fretted in the wind. The rain turned to infinitesimal droplets of gray mist that covered Allen, like the colorless stones about him, with a dewy gloss.

He tramped toward the cowled statue in the middle of the cemetery. Allen always felt a certain affinity for this silent, shrouded image of a monk, rendered in concrete, his hood obscuring his bowed face. A student in art history once told Allen it was a copy of a *pleurant*. In the Middle Ages in France wealthy families hired professional mourners, *pleurants*, to attend funerals, their faces shrouded to hide their tears. Later statues of these mourners-for-hire adorned cemeteries.

Allen paused before the statue, disgusted. Someone had splattered red paint over the veil and chest, a senseless mutilation. In the misty effluence, it almost appeared that tears of blood flowed from the shrouded eyes of the figurine.

"Bastards." Allen felt his throat constrict with anger, close to tears himself. The statue was innocent, it had hurt no one. Why would anyone deface this solemn figure, too humble and sad to even reveal its features? "Bastards!" Allen rushed on, eager to get home.

The chain-link fence on the far side of the cemetery was ragged with unkempt grasses and rusty gaps. The cemetery was on the boundary between the college, the railroad tracks, and an older, decaying part of town. This area had once been prosperous, with light manufacturing and warehouses. Now, the buildings were abandoned and run-down. A few blocks beyond, broken down apartments and townhouses clustered together: the perfect slum for college students.

A beat up, old, blue van wheezed past him, leaving a foul cloud of exhaust in its wake. Allen

waved his hand in front of his face in irritation. The van stopped about a half a block away. He saw a stooped man get out, struggling with some packages. His right arm was in a cast. A dog jumped from the van, looked left and right, and then trotted toward Allen. The dog looked so much like Teena that he gaped before he saw the animal was a male. It was larger too, more robust than his friend. *It must be just a chance similarity, then.*

The man called out to do the dog. Allen couldn't make out what he said, but the dog *woofed* and then continued to trot toward Allen. The man hobbled after, holding his arm and juggling his packages.

Strange. This was not yet the residential district. In fact, this was not the greatest neighborhood. Many of the buildings were abandoned; others were used by marginal businesses that opened only intermittently. Why had the van stopped here?

When the dog reached Allen, it stopped and plopped down right in front of him. The dog stopped so abruptly and so close to him that Allen almost

tripped. He sidestepped and started to go on, but the dog immediately jumped up and blocked his path again. Allen frowned. "What's the matter, buddy?" The dog *chuffed* back at him and tried to lick his hand.

Allen reached out to ruffle the dog's ears when his eyes caught sight of a tattoo, just like the one on Teena's ear. Allen knelt and looked. There it was. CHIP.7.5. A dark blue tattoo, just like Teena's. There was a tear in the other ear, like a tag had been torn loose.

"Oh, you've got my dog. Thank you so much, young man." The man's voice was whiny and high-pitched. It burbled, like he needed to clear his throat. "It's so hard for me with this cast, you know."

Allen stared at him. "Where did you get this dog?"

The man looked confused. "What, what? You mean my little Chippie?" The man juggled packages, then reached out and petted the dog, whose tail spun in crazed response. "Bad dog, running away like that!" The dog shivered and whimpered.

"Sir, I really have to ask, where did you get this dog?"

"Why, I got him from the pound. He's my only friend, ain't you, Chippie?" The dog *arfed* his happy response and seemed to nod its head.

With a thrill of adrenalin, Allen recognized that gesture. "Sir, this dog has a tattoo on his ear. Did you happen to notice it?"

"Sure did. That's how I knew his name was Chip, the tattoo says so." The man rubbed his cast and peered up at Allen. He wasn't really smaller than Allen, he just hunched into himself and somehow made himself seem smaller. "The papers from the pound say so too. Got 'em in my van if you wanna look."

Allen paused. He really wanted to go home. But if this dog came from Dr. Sarnok's project and was only generation seven, it could be very dangerous. He sighed. It wouldn't take long to check. "If you don't mind, I'd be interested to see the papers."

"Sure, sure, that's good. Come on back to my van with me." The dog's tail wagged madly and he romped ahead of them.

Allen followed the man back to the van. Once there the man opened the rear door and the dog leaped inside, then sat and looked at Allen, waiting. "The papers is in there someplace. I'm not just sure where. I can't look so good with my bad arm, but you can look if you like." The man gestured at the debris in the back of the van.

Allen wrinkled his nose. The van smelled very bad and was clogged with garbage and litter. He already regretted this errand, but felt an obligation to at least look. The seventh generation animals had been very advanced mentally, even more than Teena, but also very unstable. He climbed in the back and started to sift through the mess. From the looks of things, the man must be homeless, living in this van.

The van heaved as the little man climbed in behind Allen. "You won't take my dog away from me, will you mister? He's my only friend." The dog whimpered at that.

The man smelled like he hadn't bathed in months, and the odor from his rotting teeth made Allen want to vomit. Still, Allen felt sorry for the pathet-

ic fellow. He concentrated on looking for the papers. If this was a lab animal, it really wasn't safe being around it. "Are you sure you have papers from the pound here, sir?"

"They are there, you bet." Then man dumped his packages and rested his good hand on Allen's shoulder. Allen cringed away from the touch and the intensified body odor.

"I'll be just a moment." Allen looked up in time to see the first of a dozen brutal blows rain down, piston-like, on his face and head from the man's other hand, the one with the cast on it. Allen didn't even have time to raise his arms to protect himself—he was down on the floor of the van after the third blow and unconscious after the fourth or fifth. The man slipped his cast off, and rubbed his fist, gazing at Allen and panting. He closed the rear door and then he bound and gagged Allen with duct tape. Finished, he crawled to the driver's seat.

"Good dog, Chippie." The dog spewed foul urine on Allen's still body and followed the man to

the front of the van. He nuzzled the smelly man and wagged his tail. *Woof!*

"Yeah, Chippie, we've got another one to play with." The man petted the dog without looking at him as he started the engine and drove off.

Chapter Ten

Sam pulled into the decaying strip mall and eased his car to a stop. Dirty rainwater and trash from the fast food restaurant on the corner filled the chuck-holes in the parking lot. Over half the stores were empty and boarded up. A tattoo parlor and an Asian take out restaurant flanked the storefront that held the Hollenbeck Pride Center; a sharp scent of garlic and ginger penetrated his car.

He trudged across the parking lot, evading the soggy leaves and other detritus that cluttered the pavement. A long crack snaked across the center's window and someone had repaired the break with duct tape. Pride flags and a huge Silence = Death poster filled the front of the center.

Inside the Pride Center, a young man wearing mascara sat behind the counter, leafing through a glossy magazine. A half dozen rings pierced his right ear, while a wire ran through his left eyebrow. A silver bead protruded from the dimple in his chin and his wrists bore barbed wire tattoos. Green highlights spiked his coal-black hair. Sam glanced at the open page of his magazine and saw pictures of hairy men barely clad in leather. ABBA, singing *Take a Chance on Me*, wailed from the headphones of his iPod.

Sam cleared his throat.

"Can I help you?" The young man spoke with a Texas twang. He turned a page in his magazine and didn't look up.

Sam rolled his eyes and tapped his badge on the counter. "I'm Detective Sergeant Sam Sondergard with the Hollenbeck Police Department. I need to ask you some questions."

The young man sighed. "So, you're a cop." He glanced up from his magazine and his eyes widened while he drawled, "Well, shut my mouth! Ain't you just the most butch thang I've seen in a month of Sun-

days!" He extended a limp hand to Sam. "I'm Charlie, dearie."

The hand drooped like a wet noodle in Sam's grasp. "Nice to meet you, Charlie."

"Charmed, I'm sure." He perched his hands on his hips while his eyes roved over Sam from head to toe. "I declare, you're as pretty as two pigs in a poke."

Sam flipped open his notebook. "Can you tell me a little bit about what you do here, Charlie?"

Charlie grinned and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the counter and his chin in his upturned palms. One toe traced circles on the floor while he fluttered his eyelids. "Well, Sam, you know this is a gay pride center, right?"

"That's what the sign says."

"I knew you were a smart one, hon." He smiled. "You ever go the bars? I just know I've seen you someplace."

"This isn't about where I go." Sam frowned. "Isn't the gay helpline staffed here?"

"You lookin' for help, sugar? You just ask ol' Charlie and she'll give you mo' help than you ever imagined." His hips rotated and he leered.

Sam scowled at him and slapped a photograph of one of the decaying torsos from the crime scene on the counter. "I'm trying to find who did this."

Charlie shrieked and reeled back. "You get that nasty picture away from me, you hear?" He held his hands over his face and trembled. "I don't need to see no sick shit like that! Who you think you are, anyway?"

Sam replaced the photo in his notebook. "So are you ready to answer some questions?"

"What's going on out here?" A slim, balding man in khakis and a crisp, button-down shirt emerged from the back. He put an arm around Charile. "Shush, Charlie. It's all right." He glared at Sam. "What's going on here? Are you harassing him?"

Sam sighed. *Why are things always so complicated, anyway?* "I'm Detective Sergeant Sam Sondergard, Hollenbeck PD." He flashed his badge. "I'm investigating a murder and I have reason to believe the victim

may have been a gay youth. I'm hoping you can help me by answering some questions."

Baldy glanced up from comforting Charlie and frowned. "Let me see your badge again, please." He inspected it, and then handed it back. "Very well, officer. Come on back to my office."

Sam cringed at the *officer*, but decided to let it pass. He followed him through a hallway cluttered with boxes of flyers to a small office in the back. The other pointed to a folding chair sitting next to a desk where file folders teetered in precarious piles. He plopped into a tattered executive chair and glared at Sam. "I won't tolerate any police harassment, officer. Let me make that clear, right off."

"I just need your help, sir. I don't want to harass anybody. I promise you." He stuck out his hand. "Can we start over?"

The other hesitated for a moment, and then shook his hand with a firm grip. "I'm Mark Haddock, officer. Can I ask what happened with Charlie?"

"Call me Sam. I showed him this." He pulled out the photo.

Mark examined it and handed it back.

"Gruesome. I can see where it would throw poor Charlie in a tizzy. I'm afraid he's two sandwiches short of a picnic, if you catch my drift. Still, he's cute as a bug in a rug." He peered at Sam's face. "You know, you look real familiar. Do you maybe know a guy named Allen?"

Sam nodded, a smile tickling his features at the mention of his lover's name.

"Yeah, you're Allen's squeeze, right? Sam. He said he was datin' a cop and he showed me your picture."

"Allen and I have been seeing each other, yes." A tinge of guilt washed through Sam at using his relationship with Allen as an entrée to this interview.

"Allen's great. We all love him here." He scowled at Sam. "You be good to him, y'hear? He deserves it!"

Sam smiled through his irritation. "Allen is terrific. I couldn't agree more. Now, I wonder if you could help me out with my investigation?"

"Sure, sure." He leafed through some papers on his desk. "Say, you don't know where Allen's at, do you? Our regular volunteer couldn't make it last night, so we tried to get him to come in. He didn't answer his phone." He winked. "Or were you keepin' him busy?"

Sam frowned. "I was working last night. Allen might have been in his lab." *Strange. He didn't answer his cell this morning either. I'll have to check in with him when I'm there to see that asshole Sarnok.*

"Could be." He shrugged. "So what does that horrible picture have to do with the center?"

"This victim was male, and about the age of a runaway the department investigated earlier this fall. A young man named Walt Sedgewick. The circumstances of his disappearance made us suspect he might have used the services available here."

"What circumstances were those?"

"His old man beat him up for being gay and kicked him out, put him on the street. Don't you help connect kids like that with youth services?"

"God, people can be such heartless bastards. Yeah, we do that. Allen is really good with these kids." His eyes narrowed. "Allen didn't talk to you about this, did he?"

"We never discuss business."

"That's good. I'd hate to think he violated the confidence of a client. Especially with a cop." He tapped his finger on his desk. "So, how do you think Walt is connected with that photo?" He paled. "Say, you don't think that's *Walt*, do you?"

"I certainly hope not. I'd like nothing better than to learn he's safe in a foster home someplace. We're following up on all missing persons of the right gender and age. He's next on the list. It's all routine."

Mark snorted. "Not routine for whoever's in that photo." He shuddered. "As to Walt, I wish he were in a foster home. He's scared shitless he'll wind up back with that bastard that beat him up." He gazed at Sam in silence for a moment. "Maybe you can help us find him, officer. Walt hasn't been around here for weeks. He just disappeared."

"Maybe he took a bus to a bigger city?"

"I doubt it. He was livin' on the street, sellin' his body for food. Too proud to take help from us. Too afraid to let social services help him. But the poor kid didn't have a pot to piss in. No way he could afford a ticket out of here."

"He might have hitched a ride."

"Could be. Are you going to look for him?"

"I'd like to rule him out as my victim. Can you tell me where I might find him?"

"He used to cruise in the old warehouse district. I think he was sleeping in Maple Ridge Cemetery for a while. At least I saw him when I was handing out condoms to the sex workers who hang out there."

Sam jotted notes and nodded his head. "That's helpful. I wonder, have any other of your clients, about the same age and size, disappeared recently?"

"Those poor kids appear and disappear all the time. Most of 'em do go off to the big city, like you said. We manage to place a few with youth services." He pursed his lips. "It does seem like a few more than usual might have gone missing this fall, though. Why?"

"Well, if this isn't Walt, it might be another of your clients."

"Tell you what, officer." He didn't seem to notice Sam flinch at the misnomer. "I'll work up a list for you. How's that?"

"That'd be great. I'll be in touch." They shook hands and Sam strode out.

Charlie whistled at him as he left. "Y'all come back any time, stud!"

Sam grinned and waved at him. Back in his car he pulled out his phone and called Allen's cell. Still no answer. He left a message on his voice mail, then called the land line at Allen's apartment.

"Hullo?"

He recognized Allen's roommate. "Is Allen there?"

"Nah. He didn't come home last night." A pause. "Is this Sam?"

"Yeah."

"I figured he spent the night with you."

"No." Sam frowned. "You say he didn't come home at all last night? You're sure?"

"He wasn't here when I went to bed at midnight. He wasn't here when I got up at eight. You figure it out."

Sam reflected that the roommate had the personality of a potato. An obnoxious potato. "He didn't get a call from his family or anything, did he?"

"Not that I know. You want I should take a message?"

"No. Wait, yes. Have him call me, okay?"

"Will do. I'll post a note on his door."

"Thanks. Bye." The roommate had already hung up. Sam stared at his phone. *Where could he be? He doesn't own a car, so he can't have been in an accident.* He thought about calling the emergency room, and then felt foolish. *Maybe he just fell asleep in his office.*

Sam glanced at his watch. *Shit! I'm gonna be late!* He sped away to his appointment with Dr. Sarnok. *Allen's probably hard at work in his lab right now. God, I'm a ninny to worry like this.* He stomped on the accelerator, and water from a chuckhole sprayed across the windshield, momentarily blinding him. He

Max Griffin

swore, swerved, and sped by a beat up blue van that crept down the street, trailing steamy exhaust.

Chapter Eleven

Sam waited in the conference room at the CHIP lab with the project veterinarian, Seth Harzik. Like the entire CHIP facility, the lab was new and sleek, jammed with chrome, stainless steel, and teak paneling. A floor-to-ceiling window filled one wall of the conference room, looking out on a groomed campus that gave way to the college's forest preserve beyond. Late fall drizzle misted the windows. Outside, empty trees had already begun their winter sleep.

"Dr. Sarnok will be with you shortly, Detective." Seth lounged in a conference room chair. One of his shirt tails trailed under his white lab coat, flopping over his stained slacks. "His class should be out in ten or fifteen minutes. Meantime, how can I help you?" He slurped at a diet soda.

Sam sipped at the gourmet coffee that Seth had served him. "You can start by telling me what happens in this lab, Dr. Harzik."

"Seth. Please, call me Seth." He leaned back even further and put his feet up on a leather conference room chair, folding his hands over his abundant belly. "Well, you know this is an Army project?"

Sam nodded. "Top secret, I understand."

"Oh no, not at all." Seth chuckled and scratched at his fringe of gray hair. "Our methods are classified, but not our project." He shook his head. "I just don't know where these rumors get started."

"So then, tell me what the project is about."

"Well, it's simple, really. We're developing animals to help with search and rescue missions in urban warfare. Specifically, we're developing dogs with enhanced intelligence that can operate independently of human handlers."

"Superdogs?" Sam put his designer coffee cup on the conference room table and got out his notebook.

"Well, sort of. With training, a normal dog can acquire a vocabulary of as many as 200 words. But without enhancement, animals can't grasp grammar or syntax. They also generally don't have very good problem solving skills. These all seem to be related, controlled by the same genetic sequence. That's what our project is about." Seth stopped and guzzled about a quarter of his diet soda. "Our genetically enhanced dogs understand as many 800 words, and can follow grammar and syntax as well. And they can gather data and solve problems."

"You're telling me these dogs can talk?" Sam's tone dripped with skepticism.

"No, no." Seth chuckled again, indifferent to the scowl that earned him from Sam. "Dogs can't possibly talk. They don't have any of the necessary anatomical structures. What our enhanced dogs can do is understand what is said to them. They can recall and follow complex instructions. And they can figure things out and act independently."

Sam frowned. "You gotta be kidding?" Then he thought about how Allen talked about Teena. Maybe it wasn't so farfetched after all.

"I'm not kidding at all, Detective. There's a long tradition of using animals in combat, even after horse cavalry became obsolete. The Brits used carrier pigeons in the Second World War, and the Germans trained falcons to track down and kill the pigeons." Seth took another hearty swig from his soda. "Surely you know about police using dogs? In drug enforcement, for example?"

Sam nodded. "But this is an Army project. These superdogs will be used exactly how?" Sam wasn't bothering with notes, but kept his notebook open in case Seth happened to reveal something useful to the investigation.

"The idea is that the dogs will be sent into urban warfare settings, to find kidnap victims or even terror cells. They can move about without a human handler and will be equipped with radio locator collars. When they find the target, they can bite on a

transmitter on their forepaw and the US cavalry comes to the rescue. Just like the movies."

Sam tried to keep his face impassive. "So you're breeding dogs for combat? Like pit bulls? Are they dangerous?" He remembered Brad's story about a dog putting a graduate student in the hospital.

Seth looked appalled. "No, no. These animals are *trackers*, not warriors. Their training suppresses any residual instinct they might have to attack. Their job is to hunt, to *point*. That's the great thing about dogs, their genotype is so malleable. They have so many instinctive behaviors to choose from."

"And the Army pays for this?" He waved his pen at the luxurious conference room and the manicured campus. "For all of this?"

"They sure do. And our results are showing it's worth it. The dogs have a, uh, high success rate in search simulations. Very high. When they're deployed, they can be used in places that troops can't go. They will save lives."

"How high is the success rate?"

"That is classified, Detective." An older man stood in the doorway to the conference room. He wore a tailored suit underneath his white lab coat. He held out his hand. "I'm Dr. Sarnok. I trust Seth has been helpful to you?"

Sam shook his hand and showed his badge. "I'm Detective Sergeant Sam Sondergard. Yes, he has been quite informative."

Sarnok favored Seth with a cold glare, and then looked back at Sam. "I trust he has been discrete as well. Our project is not exactly secret, but we don't hand out press releases either. I hope you understand."

"Of course, sir." Sam dropped the evidence bag with the CHIP tag on the conference room table. "Do you recognize this, sir?"

Sarnok poked at it with one finger, turning it over so he could read it. "It's one of our animal tags. It identifies a specimen from over three years ago." He glanced at Seth over his glasses. "That particular specimen was superseded by more advanced genotypes."

Dr. Harzik would have been in charge of disposing of it."

"Uh, disposing of it?"

"Surely. It was an obsolete design, no longer needed. Our protocol calls for obsolete designs to be humanely disposed of." Sarnok stared at Seth, who concentrated on his soda can, turning it around and around in his hands. Seth now perched on the edge of his chair, not saying anything, not meeting Sarnok's gaze.

"You mean put to sleep." Sam wrote in his notebook.

"Exactly. Dr. Harzik will have records on the date and time for this specimen. That controls the experimental genotype, keeps it out of the general population." Sarnok poked again at the tag. "May I ask how you happened to come by this? It should have been destroyed with the specimen."

"It was found at a crime scene." Sam didn't see any reason to be more explicit.

Seth looked up at that. "A crime scene? You mean Dr. Eckhorn's habitat?" Sarnok snorted, but

Seth ignored him. "Is that what this is about, those bodies they found at Dr. Eckhorn's site?"

"I can't comment on an active investigation. But what if it *were* found there, Seth?" Sam sipped at his coffee and put it down. It was cold.

"Well, look, the papers said those bodies were maybe from a serial killer? Someone who targeted young men?" Seth leaned forward and peered at Sam.

Sarnok snorted again. "You know, I don't see what this..."

"What if that were true, Dr. Harzik?" Sam ignored Sarnok, his eyes boring into Seth.

"I was thinking, one of our graduate students is missing."

"He's not missing, Dr. Harzik." Sarnok sniffed as he said it. "He's just derelict in his responsibilities and didn't come to class or work this morning. Really, he has no idea how inconvenient that is for me."

Seth nodded. "Exactly. Allen never misses class and certainly never misses a day at the lab. We were supposed to do the quarterly med check on Tee-na this morning, and he didn't show up. We'd even

talked about it yesterday afternoon. It's not like him at all to miss an appointment like that."

He didn't show up to work? Fear stabbed at Sam's heart and his breath caught in his throat. *Cool, stay cool, Detective.* He jotted meaningless scribbles in his notebook. "What was that name again?"

"Teena." Sarnok glared at Seth.

Sam remained impassive, but thought, *Of course he'd think I was asking the name of his dog, not of a real person.*

Sarnok droned on, oblivious. "Dr. Harzik means CHIP.13.5, the experimental animal that's the subject of Mr. LeClerc's dissertation." Sarnok's mouth turned down and he looked disgusted. "There is nothing suspicious about this absence. Can we please get on with this so I can get back to my work?"

Seth's news smothered Sam's breath, and ice filled his stomach. *This can't be happening. He can't really be missing. He must be sick or something.* Worry clogged his brain and fogged his senses.

As if from a distance, Seth's voice pounded through his fear. "But his roommate said he never

came home last night. I called, when he didn't show up this morning." Seth stood for emphasis and his forefinger clicked on the table as he made his points. "He wasn't at work today and didn't go to class either. He doesn't have any friends or social life except for that dog. The lab is his whole life. He and Teena have a special bond."

"Graduate students don't need a social life. It gets in the way of their research." Sarnok turned to Sam. "Really, Detective, I'm quite busy. Do you have any real questions for me?"

Sam's head spun. He heaved a deep breath and tried to calm his racing heartbeat. "Dr. Sarnok. Seth. Is there someplace Allen might be? This could be serious, if he, in truth, is missing. We're hunting a serial killer who targets young men, men just like Allen. I think we should launch a search for him." *That's it. Get the whole department looking for him. Shit, this is nuts.*

Sarnok's dour expression didn't change. "Dr Harzik can take you to the administrative office for

his file." Then his expression did change, becoming more animated. "Did you say a search, Detective?"

"Yes. Apparently Allen, I mean this LeCLerc fellow, has been missing more than twelve hours. That's enough to warrant concern." *Stay cool. That's what I'll tell the Chief.* He pictured his reaction, and shuddered. The chief would never let him launch a search for someone missing only twelve hours. Allen's face flashed in his mind, but Kutsna was there too, as he'd look as the life drained from his eyes so long ago in San Francisco. *I can't let it happen again!* His breath clogged like molasses in his throat and he choked down panic.

"A search. A search in an urban environment." Sarnok's eyes flashed as he sat down, at last invested in the conversation. "Please, let's talk, Detective. We're ready for an experimental real-world trial. Perhaps we can assist you in your search."

Harzik's mouth gaped. "You're *not* ready for this."

"I'm the sole judge of that, Dr. Harzik. How about it, Detective? This is the perfect opportunity for

CHIP.13.5 to prove the value of my research." He glared at Seth, who seemed about to speak. "And if the specimen and Mr. LeClerc really do have a 'special bond' as Dr. Harzik so romantically asserts, then so much the better, no?"

Sam sat frozen in his chair and reflected on Sarnok's words. "You mean send your superdog out to look for Allen?" He thought about the Chief, about his fellow cops. No way they'd search for Allen, not without a clear link to the serial killer investigation, not with him only missing twelve hours. This might be his best hope. "Tell me more. How do we know when Teena, when the dog, finds something?"

Sarnok's face split in a delighted smile. "We'll give you a transponder, Detective. Chip.13.5 will notify you when it has LeClerc in visual range, and the GPS unit will give you the exact location. It'll work here just like it'll work in Baghdad, except that we'll be monitoring too, from the lab." Sarnok nodded and rubbed his hands together.

"Right, just like Baghdad." Seth's tone of voice did not make that sound like a ringing endorsement.

Maybe this'll work. At least it's a plan, Sam thought. "We're pretty short-handed, Dr. Sarnok. I'm sure the department will be glad for the help. Thank you, sir." Sam closed his notebook and hid his trembling hands under the table. "What are the next steps?"

Sarnok stood. "Follow me to the lab. I'll get you the equipment, and there will be some non-disclosures for you to sign. Standard Homeland Security and DoD stuff." He glanced at his wristwatch, and then peered over his glasses at Seth. "Dr. Harzik. Please see me in my office at, shall we say, three?"

Seth's face showed no expression. "Sure. Three."

Sarnok and Sam left the room together. Seth sat at the conference room table and finished his soda, staring out the window.

Chapter Twelve

Consciousness returned to Allen in muddy lumps of sensation that burrowed into his psyche and invaded his awareness. Smell intruded first. With each breath, it seared his nostrils with a putrescence of excrement and urine and rotting flesh. His nose longed for his mouth to inhale even one corrupt breath, but his mouth wasn't working.

Pressure abused him next. The arteries in his head throbbed with each heartbeat, squashing his brain, swelling and constricting like bellows. Soon after, his ears filled with a soundless buzz that droned in cadence with the thrumming pressures. Underneath other sounds murmured: the *plop, plop, plop* of water dripping, the wordless whisper of conversation.

In the background a song warbled, as if someone played an ancient and erratic tape. He recognized the Moody Blues and *Knights in White Satin*. The memory of dinner with Allen three nights and an eternity ago flashed in his mind.

His head throbbed to each dissonant note blaring from the speakers.

Pain visited him next, and then it wouldn't depart. Molten lava boiled in his skull, roiled by the smells and the pressures and the sounds. His arms and shoulders ached, as though they strained against some enormous burden. His cheeks puffed against his eyelids, which felt glued shut. From someplace unseen, a chill breeze wafted across his body.

He concentrated on the dull ache in his eyes. First one, then the other eyelid pried open. A gritty husk encrusted each lid. He squinted through the pain and saw candles arrayed around him: dozens of candles in an otherwise dark and filthy room. Flames in the wicks flickered on the floor, on shelves, above him, below him, all around him. Images of a church grotto with prayer candles fluttered in his mind. Light

and shadow rippled across senseless forms that puddled in his vision.

In an instant, the scene flitted from blurred confusion to sharp focus. He would never forget the moment when those vague shapes coalesced into horrible reality. He tried to scream, but his mouth still failed him. He tried to flee, but his wrists and ankles wouldn't move. His body could only writhe helplessly, yearning for escape.

Shock shuddered through the depths of his being at the realization that he was naked and bound. He twisted his head about in horror at the sight of his arms and legs spread-eagled wide and wrapped with duct tape to an X-shaped cross. The tape held him suspended just above the floor, with his wrists and shoulders bearing all of his weight. He stretched his toes down and blessed relief pulsed through his arms as his feet once again supported his weight.

But it was the shapes spread out before him that gripped Allen with terror and drove icy knives of panic through his gut. A severed human hand gleamed purplish and swollen in a puddle of filth at

his feet. Slimy bloody things, like decaying sides of meat in a slaughterhouse, hung nailed to the wall. A rack of small jars filled one whole wall. In the flickering light, the objects in the jars floated in random eddies of fluid. Then the contents of one jar rolled about and a disembodied eye stared at Allen, the optical nerve trailing behind it like a worm burrowing into the interior. The sour notes of the defective tape mocked him.

Bile gushed up Allen's throat. When it hit whatever dammed his mouth, it sought the next nearest exit and spewed out his nostrils and down his chest. He gagged and choked and fought for breath. Still the song meandered on. *Oh, how, I love you.* His mind whispered soundlessly with the vocalist and memories of Sam echoed deep in his soul, almost out of reach.

Where am I? What the fuck is this place? He struggled for memories.

He remembered walking home. He remembered the mutilated statue and he remembered the smelly man and his van. Wait! He'd been mugged!

His head throbbed in misery with the memory. That must be it.

"Well, looky what we have here." Allen jerked his head and saw his captor enter the room. He chewed on a piece of fried chicken and his cast was gone.

What's goin' on? Allen writhed and tried to speak. "Mmhph, mphp!" No words escaped his lips, just incoherent sounds.

"Our little chicky is awake, Chippie. Ain't he cute?" The man took another bite from his chicken. He chewed with his mouth open and bits dribbled out between his missing teeth.

A dog trotted into the room, gazed at Allen, and then looked up at the man and nodded his head. This strange dog nodded to the smelly man just like Teena nodded to Allen! He remembered the dog too, now. *Shit, that dog's from the CHIP project for sure. How the fuck did he wind up here? Generation seven. I'm even more fucked, if that's possible.* Allen's eyes rolled in terror.

The homeless man wiped his fingers on his dungarees and lifted his t-shirt to wipe his chin. Details about the man flared at Allen. A grisly tattoo of a skull leered from his forearm. Sparse whiskers filled his sunken cheeks. His worn boots clumped on the filthy wooden floor as he approached.

"Are you thirsty, my pretty?" He reached out and Allen flinched away. "I just want to stroke your hair, my lovely." His fingers ran through Allen's hair, smoothing out tangles with the gentlest of touches. "So pretty, you are." His voice bubbled from the foul depths of his throat and his fetid breath washed across Allen's face.

He pulled a knife from inside his waistband. Allen squirmed and tried again to scream. The man grabbed a shock of hair on Allen's head and twisted, no longer gentle. "Don't worry, my pretty. I ain't gonna cut you just yet." His chuckle expelled the odor of rotting teeth. "I'm just gonna cut a little hole here in the tape on your mouth, so we can put a straw in for you to drink. Don't you want a drink?" He showed Allen the straw. "Don't you worry, my pretty. We're

gonna be friends. I take care of my friends." He waved the knife at the dog. "Me and Chippie, we take care of our friends, don't we Chippie?"

The dog's deep brown eyes appeared warm and full of intelligence, just like Teena's. The dog's head bobbed up and down. His tail wagged, and he whimpered in eager anticipation. Allen lashed his head back and forth and his hands and legs twisted in their bonds.

"Hold still, my pretty." The point of the knife pricked Allen's crotch, just where his cock met his torso. He froze and the man laughed. He twisted the blade so the edge pressed against Allen's skin. "What shall I do now, my pretty?" Allen's eyes pleaded for mercy and the man laughed.

"Maybe I will cut you, just a little. So you'll be grateful I don't cut you more."

Allen gasped as the knife broke his skin. He screwed his eyes shut and twisted his head to one side.

The man seized him by the nape of his neck and twisted his head down. He screamed and sprayed

spittle into Allen's face. "Look! Watch while I'm cuttin' you or I'll cut you wide open right now and let your guts flop out."

Allen shook his head and then squinted his eyes open. He saw a trickle of blood run down from where knife rested. All the hair was gone from his crotch. *Jesus. He must have shaved me while I was out.* A thin, red line, already healed shut, scarred his bare skin.

"Good, good. You watch, boy." The knife slid upward and the red line grew. He used just enough pressure to break the skin but not enough to do any damage. A drop or two of bright red blood trickled down Allen's torso and dripped off his genitals. He stopped when the knife was midway on his chest. "Ain't that pretty, boy? Ain't you grateful I didn't cut you more?"

Allen could only stare in horror.

The man jerked at his hair. "Ain't you grateful, boy? Nod your head if you're grateful!"

Allen nodded his head up and down and prayed in silence, if not for mercy, then for release.

The man laughed again and pulled the blade back. Chippie whimpered in resonant delight. *Now*, when his victim squirmed, *now* when his victim's attention was focused on him and only on him, *now* was the time when the stinky man finally felt alive. His lips mouthed the song that repeated in the background. *Oh how I love you.*

This was but the beginning. The stinky man longed for the intimate rapture they would soon embrace, a rapture known only to an exalted elite. The stinky man hungered for that intimacy. He yearned for those transcendent moments when all that mattered was the communion of his knife with another's flesh. Soon, soon they would be conjoined in a divine sacrament of fear and longing and death.

Chapter Thirteen

Seth slouched on the wrong side of an endless expanse of teak desk. On the other side, Sarnok peered at his computer monitor and ignored him. The scent of fresh flowers and Sarnok's cologne tickled at his nose.

Take your time, you nasty piece of shit. I've got all the time in the world. He dug a filthy handkerchief out of his pants pocket and blew his nose. *Damned flowers. Slimy bastard has to have fresh flowers and fancy paintings to show how important he is. We'll see about that.* He honked into his handkerchief again and then wadded it back into his pocket.

At last Sarnok looked up. He stirred his coffee with a silver spoon and took a sip. No one offered Seth coffee and he wouldn't ask. "So, Dr. Harzik." His

eyes gleamed through narrowed slits. "Do you have anything to tell me?"

"What would I have to tell you, Dr. Sarnok?"

Seth kept his voice smooth as silk. *This is gonna be fun.*

"Come now, Dr. Harzik. I'm an expert in animal behavior. It wasn't hard to read your body language today with that boorish detective." More coffee passed through his lips.

I wonder if he laps that stuff up with a forked tongue. Seth shrugged.

Sarnok smiled a smile that his assistant, Mrs. Everard, would have envied. "I'm sure you recall. We were discussing the euthanasia procedures for obsolete specimens, the euthanasia procedures for which you are personally responsible."

"I recall, Dr. Sarnok. I also recall the project protocols regarding those procedures."

"Excellent. I trust you also have documentation on how you have complied with those protocols?" Sarnok sneered as if he already knew the answer.

"You know very well how those protocols have been followed."

Sarnok turned and pulled a file from a drawer.

"I certainly do, Dr. Harzik. The protocols specifically call for euthanasia of genotypes no longer needed for research or breeding purposes. That euthanasia is to take place in your clinic, under your supervision, to assure that the experimental genotypes are isolated to the laboratory." Sarnok rested his hands on the file in front of him. Another of those crocodile smiles graced his lips. "You know there are serious consequences, legal and biological consequences, should the experimental genotype in any way contaminate the general canine gene pool."

"Dr. Sarnok, I know all about consequences." Seth's flat voice filled the room like Sergeant Friday reciting the facts. "I know what the protocols say, too." Seth leaned forward and glared at Sarnok. "I also know what you told me to do two years ago, to save money for your fancy desk and your paintings and your fresh flowers." He waved his hands around the room and leaned back.

"Strange that I do not recall that conversation, Dr. Harzik." Sarnok opened the file. "I do recall my

written directions, however. I have a copy right here." He held up a piece of paper then returned it to the file. He pursed his lips and picked up another paper from the file. "I asked your graduate assistant to make copies of some files from your clinic. According to your own records, you have not followed those written instructions." He shook his head. "That could be very bad for you, Dr. Harzik." More head shakes. Regret filled his face, but his eyes glowed with joy.

Seth's face flushed. "That was at your specific order. You cut my budget. You told me to take the animals to the county shelter where they'd be euthanized for free." Seth heaved a breath and lounged back in his chair. *You got him, man. Just a few more seconds now.*

Sarnok frowned and Seth grinned. *I bet you're wondering why I'm not sweating and begging for mercy. Just you wait.*

He turned the screws one more twist. "I repeat, I do not recall that conversation, Dr. Harzik. The written record, however, is quite clear." He closed his file

folder and tapped on it for emphasis. "Quite clear indeed."

"Sounds like I'm in big trouble then, huh?" Seth fiddled inside his lab coat, looking for something.

"It would seem you have quite a bit of explaining to do, Dr. Harzik. Especially if one of the experimental genotypes is now loose in the community." Sarnok nodded and sorrow again clouded his features. His eyes, though, twinkled with silent laughter.

Seth pulled a small device from the depths of his lab coat and placed it on Sarnok's desk. He pushed a button on top, sat back and laced his fingers over his paunch. *This is it.* He smiled.

The tinny voice spouting from the recorder was unmistakable. Both men heard Sarnok cursing at Seth. "I don't care about your fucking protocols. We're done with these animals, we can't afford the security for 'em, and we're out of money for your clinic."

"So what do you suggest I do, Dr. Sarnok?" Seth's voice was tinny too, but clear.

"I don't give a fuck what you do. Take 'em to the county shelter. They'll get rid of 'em for free. Fuck the biohazard procedures."

Seth punched the button again and lounged back in his chair. "Yessiree. Big trouble, all right. "

Sarnok's face first drained of color, and then flushed crimson. "You little snake!" he hissed. "You taped me! I'll get you for this! You're fired! You'll never work again, you fat creep!"

Seth's Cheshire smile expanded over his grizzled beard. "Now, now, Dr. Sarnok. You should really be careful what you say. You never know who might be recording, you know. By the way, have you read the *consequences* for violating this state's whistle-blower laws? To say nothing of conspiracy to violate the NIH biohazard rules. Then there's the little matter of mixing the human and canine genomes. If news of *that* got out, well, who knows what would happen?"

Sarnok seemed about to explode. He started to speak and stopped himself. After a moment of silence, he returned to the calm, controlled administra-

tor. "Can we come to some kind of accommodation, Dr. Harzik?"

Seth's expression never wavered. "Are you offering me a bribe?"

"Oh no, not at all. But there has clearly been a misunderstanding. Perhaps we can work together somehow? For the good of the Lab and the project?"

"You mean the project that makes innocent dogs intelligent and then kills them? Is *that* the project you mean, Dr. Sarnok?"

Sarnok's breath came in shallow husks now, the role of predator and prey reversed in a sudden turnabout.

"For the good of the college then, Dr. Harzik? Could we come to some understanding for the college and the students? I'm begging you."

Gotchya! "Yes, for the students. And for the dogs. I want you to stop killing these animals. I don't care what the security costs."

Sarnok nodded. "That is possible. Now that we have results we can tell the Army we need the specimens for baseline research, perhaps."

"Whatever. But I want you to fucking *stop killing these dogs*. They're smart, as smart as people. You *made* them that way. It's murder to kill them. You are going to stop it. Right now."

With a deal in the offing, Sarnok's color started to return to normal. "We can do that." His eyes narrowed once again. "It occurs to me you can't use that tape without incriminating yourself."

A laugh percolated up from deep within Seth's belly. "You are so correct. Let's get this straight. I don't like you. You don't like me. We've got each other by the balls. You keep your side of the deal, I keep mine. You don't hassle me, I don't hassle you. Clear?"

Sarnok nodded. "Perfectly clear."

Seth knew this wasn't the first deal Sarnok had cut in his career and it wouldn't be the last. *Slimy snake's probably scheming how he can use this against me in the future.*

"We still need to do the test today with CHIP.13.5. We promised that cop."

Seth frowned. "I think that it's a mistake. I don't think Teena's ready for it." He pursed his lips.

"Tell you what. When Allen turns up, you give her to him. She should be his dog, not yours or the project's."

"But that animal is our most advanced specimen! We need that genotype to produce future generations!"

"Yeah, yeah, you can use her to breed more pups, or whatever. But she's Allen's dog."

It was Sarnok's turn for pursed lips. "This trial will give us valuable data." He hesitated. "I accept your terms. Title to the animal will be signed over Mr. LeClerc with residual rights to the genotype held by the Lab."

"Done."

Chapter Fourteen

Teena shuddered. Where was Allen? He was always around, but now there was just Doctorsarnok and Doctorharzig. Teena didn't like Doctorsarnok. He smelled wrong and his voice hurt her ears. He spoke too loud and made it hard for her to concentrate.

"Allen is in danger." Doctorsarnok's voice hammered at her, as if she couldn't understand if he didn't shout. Teena always understood. "Do you understand?"

Teena nodded. Allen was her best friend, more than Doctorharzik who was kind to her, more than Trisha who sometimes fed her. More even than Deuce who was in the cage next to hers and sometimes played with her in the garden. Teena worried about her friend Allen. Doctorsarnok was so stern.

"You must concentrate. You must find him. Do you understand?" Doctorsarnok repeated himself.

Teena nodded. Of course she understood, but Doctorsarnok always needed her to remind him. Teena thought he must not be very good at remembering things. Not like Teena. Teena knew she was good at remembering. Allen said so and she knew it was true.

"When you find him, what do you do?" Doctorsarnok scowled at her. She knew that meant he was angry. Teena didn't know what she had done to make him angry. She lay down and nibbled at the band on her right paw. The light on the band glowed just like it always did once she learned how Allen wanted her to bite it. Not too hard, not too soft. Just a little nip.

Doctorsarnok did something on the big table in front of him and the light went out. "That's good. Just like that." He scowled again. "This is important. Concentrate. You must find Allen." He held Allen's shoe out and Teena sniffed at it. Silly Doctorsarnok. Teena knew what Allen smelled like. Maybe Doctorsarnok forgot what he smelled like. He wasn't good at re-

membering, not like Teena. Teena's tailed thumped against the floor of her cage.

Still scowling, Doctorsarnok took Teena down the hall that led toward the gardens where she and Allen played. But he went the wrong direction and opened a new set of doors, doors Teena had never been through. The doors led to a new garden, full of new smells. Doctorsarnok put her inside a new room. It was small, with a cage for her at one end. It had a bad chemical smell, like the moving boxes in some of the outdoor games she played with Allen. They moved around without legs and farted bad smells from their behinds. Sometimes she followed the smells for Allen.

"Get in." Sarnok pointed at the cage, so Teena climbed inside. She smelled Doctorharzik and saw him sitting inside the little room too. Doctorsarnok sat down next to him. When the room started to sway and bounce, Teena whimpered and hunkered on the floor. She had never been in a van before.

"You last saw Misterleclerc in the Zoology building on campus, right?" Doctorsarnok sometimes

used words Teena didn't quite understand. She knew "Misterleclerc" was another name for Allen, though. Her ears pricked up.

Doctorharzik's voice rasped against her ears. She liked his voice. "Yeah. He was working on data entry. I offered him a ride home, but he wanted to walk. If we start at the Zoology building, she might actually be able to track him." Doctorharzik scratched his head, in that strange way humans sometimes did. "With all due respect, I tell you again I think this is a mistake. She's never been in a real city. The urban simulations are just not the same thing." Teena couldn't understand all the words, but she could tell from the scents that Doctorharzik and Doctorsarnok didn't like each other. Not like Teena and Allen. They liked each other a lot.

"That's up to me to decide. Me alone." The little room swayed again and she hunkered back down. Doctorsarnok fiddled with something in front of him and Teena heard music. Teena liked music. It made her want to dance. Then she remembered Allen, and concentrated. That was her job.

At last they were in a new place, a place filled with people smells. But she could smell Allen too, mixed with all the other *interesting* odors. Doctorsarnok snapped the leash off of her collar. He grasped her head and stared into her eyes.

"Teena! Listen! Your job is to find Allen. When you see him, send the signal."

He reached into a pocket and pulled a towel from a plastic baggie. Teena sniffed at it and recognized the odor of the nice man from the lab yesterday, the one who gave her treats and talked to Allen. Lately, the scent of that man sometimes clung to Allen. She could tell they liked each other from the way they both smelled when they talked. Her tail wagged with the memory.

"When you find Allen, send the signal and then *wait*. This man will come. Do *nothing* until this man is there." He released Teena's head. "Do you understand?" Teena nodded her head up and down, her tongue lolly-gagging out of her mouth. "Go! Find Allen! Hurry!"

Teena romped off, nose to the ground and tail wagging merrily. This was like the games she played with Allen. She cast back and forth. Allen had left many scent trails. She knew she needed to find the strongest.

She followed the scent along the walkways on the campus. It was hard to keep the trail. The rain had washed so much away. There were so many *interesting* smells. Teena longed to follow her nose and see what smelled so new, so intriguing. But Teena was a good dog and her motivation was high. She stayed on her job. She sniffed across sidewalks, then along a big, flat, green place. Allen must have stopped here, his scent was strong and she smelled sadness and fear. Her heart quickened. Allen was in danger, Doctorsarnok said so. Her nose twitched. There was the odor of strange human males sweating, very faint. And a faint leather smell too. Back and forth. Allen left this place. She followed his scent, loyal to friend and to her duty.

The path crossed a strange hill with endless metal strips running in each direction and bad-smelling wood. She almost lost Allen in the bad smell, but

she picked him up again on the other side of the railroad tracks, in another garden. This garden was nicer, with pleasant echoes of flowers and happy bushes. Teena thought of the forest where Allen sometimes took her and Deuce to play. She liked playing with Deuce. He made her feel all melty inside. A faint smell of death lingered here too, and she saw strange upright stones. She recognized human markings on the stones, *writing* Allen called it.

One big stone image looked almost like a human, but it didn't smell human at all. Teena sniffed at it and sneezed at chemical smells from the paint splattered on it. The sharp odor of doggie urine, almost like Deuce's, pried a startled *woof* from her. Allen was here too. He smelled sad. Teena wanted to lick his hand and make him feel better.

Teena scampered on, following Allen's scent. She could tell he was sad; it was so clear in his scent. She whimpered and wanted to nuzzle with him and make him feel better, but he wasn't there. Good dog. Teena must be a good dog and find him. Then she

could lick his hand and he would laugh and they would play together.

Teena pushed through a tangle of weeds and a fence and was back on one of the big concrete walks, the ones with the moving boxes that farted the bad chemical smell. But there were no moving boxes and no humans here. There were old chemical smells, smells of rotting wood and decay. Teena wagged her tail, her nose to the ground. Allen's scent was strong again.

Then there was a new smell, that same doggie smell, then one she'd smelled at the stones. Teena barked and looked about. The smell was so distinctive, so like Teena and Deuce, yet unlike too, almost a Wrong Smell. Allen's scent and the new doggie scent mingled, as though they walked together. Teena lowered her nose and followed the path. Concentrate. Find Allen. Danger. Good dog!

Suddenly a Bad Smell assaulted her nose, a very Bad Smell. A dead things smell. It was faint, but so very distinctive. Just like the time Teena found the dead squirrel in the woods. She remembered Allen

said "good dog" but she didn't think he meant it. His nose wrinkled and he turned away.

She lost Allen's scent, right here where the Bad Smell was. She cast about, trying to pick it up again. No Allen. There was the chemical smell, like the moving boxes made, but it was as if Allen had disappeared. Teena ran back and forth, backtracking to the tangled fence, then forward again. No more Allen. Teena whimpered.

One of the moving boxes came down the concrete walkway toward her, but she didn't see it. She had to find Allen! He was in danger. Suddenly there was a loud, awful, hurting noise from the moving box. Teena yelped and leapt to one side as the car swerved to miss her. The moving box seemed to shout "stupid dog!" Teena understood that. Doctorsarnok called her that when she made a mistake.

Teena sat on her haunches and thought. She was *not* a stupid dog. She knew that. Allen told her she was the smartest dog ever. She thought about the moving boxes, about the chemical smells, about the little room that Doctorsarnok, Doctorharzik, and Tee-

na were in earlier that day. The little room that swayed and jiggled.

Boxes couldn't talk, only people could talk. The moving box must have had a human inside of it! Just like earlier! It must be a little moving room with humans in it, moving around. She had seen the moving boxes before, in her training, she had just never made the connection that humans might be inside them. But the chemical smell the boxes made was the same as the little swaying room they were in earlier today. They must be the same!

Teena's tail thumped against the sidewalk, thrilled at puzzling out this new idea. Then she remembered. Concentrate. Find Allen. Her best friend was in danger. She put her nose to the ground to sniff him out, then stopped and sat again, thinking. Maybe Allen got *inside* a moving box and that was why she couldn't find his scent. The Bad Smell, the smell of death, was strongest just where Allen's scent vanished. She thought long and hard, her head hurting with the effort.

Teena knew what she must do. She must follow the Bad Smell, the smell of death that was with the chemical smell of that moving box. Allen must have gotten inside the moving box that with the Bad Smell, so if she followed that scent she would find Allen. She knew she could follow the chemical smells. That was one of the games she played with Allen. The Bad Smell just made it easier.

Many hours passed while Teena tracked the smell. At last, in darkness of night, she hovered, wet, cold, and lonely, outside a dark building. The smell here was Bad, very Bad. But she could smell Allen again too, faint but sure. And he was so very afraid, she could tell. He was in danger and she had to help him. She looked at the band on her forepaw. She longed to send the signal, to bring a human to help. But her orders were clear. She must not send the signal until her quarry was actually in sight. Scent was not enough. Silly humans. Smelling was so much better than seeing. But she would be a good dog, even now. She knew she must see Allen. She padded

The Hounds of Hollenbeck

around the building with the Bad Smell, looking for a way inside.

Chapter Fifteen

Sam twisted in the driver's seat of his car, prowling through the old warehouse district. *Dammit, Teena, where are you leadin' me?* He still hadn't told anyone on the force about Teena, or about his search. His terror that Allen's disappearance might be connected to the serial killer was his secret, an ice-cold knife that twisted into his chest with each breath. *Fuck, maybe I should have told 'em about the disappearance.* Then he thought again about the Chief. *Stubborn, stupid, bigoted. No way he'd let me follow a lead like this.* He shuddered and drove on. *Twenty four hours. If nothin' turns up in twenty four hours, then I'll tell him.*

The rain from the day before still drizzled and puddles filled the streets. A light fog reflected the glare of the headlights and obscured the night. The

GPS that Sarnok gave him this morning glowed on the seat next to Sam, a bright red line showing the path Teena followed. He circled again and again over that route, searching for a clue to Allen's location.

The instructions from that asshole Sarnok echoed in his head. "Stay away from Teena until she gives the signal that she's found Allen. She'll have your scent too, so she'll recognize you as a good guy when you show up."

"Why does she need to know I'm a good guy?" Sam remembered what's-his-name, Harzik's, words: the dogs were "*pointers*." "I thought all she did was search?"

"It's just a precaution, I assure you. But if she catches your scent before she finds Allen, she might stop looking. So stay at least one hundred meters away from her until she gives the signal that she's got him in sight."

Brad's tale echoed in his head too, about the graduate student who wound up in the hospital after being attacked by one of the CHIP dogs. Then he thought about Teena's burly, muscled body. *I*

wouldn't want a dog like that attacking me, that's for sure. He shuddered. *This is so fucked. What am I gonna do?* Images of Allen mixed with the horror of Kutsna's blood-soaked body and the dismembered and mutilated corpses from his crime scene. *I've gotta find him. He's gotta be okay.*

Sam wheeled around another corner and adjusted the car's defoggers. He swore as his windows misted over and he pulled to the curb. The GPS screen shut down to save power. He tapped at it and it flared back to life. It still showed a flashing red dot that revealed Teena's location, less than five blocks away. She hadn't moved more than sixty feet for the last thirty minutes, like she was casting back and forth scouting for something. *Maybe she's close to findin' him.*

He flicked on the dome light and pulled out his notebook. *What have I missed?* Worry gnawed at him. *Give the damned signal, Teena!* Harzik told him the dog's name was short for thirteen. That idiot Sarnok wouldn't even acknowledge the dog should have a

name, or that she was anything other than an experimental weapons system.

He jumped when his cell phone rang. "Yeah? Sondergard here." Sam continued to stare at the GPS display and the flashing red dot that marked the dog's location. That dot moved to and fro in a slow circle, a red echo of Teena's movements.

"Hey Sam, this is Marcie."

Oh yeah, Marcie in the Computer Science department at the College. She had the photo the coroner's tech found wadded beneath one of the torsos.

"Hey, Marcie. You got anything for me?"

"I just might, Sam. That was a pretty crappy copy you gave me. Lots of degradation. But I've been fiddling the eigen values and playing with the algorithm..."

"Yeah, yeah, Marcie. Look, I'm kinda in the middle of something. Can you spare me the details until later?" The transponder just changed to flashing bright green! Teena was in visual contact with Allen. He wedged the cell phone between his shoulder and his ear and jerked the car away from the curb.

"Sure Sam, sorry." He heard her take a deep breath. "The photo looks like the inside of a room someplace, with a body in the foreground. But the background is what's interesting. There's a faded sign in the background."

"So can you read it?" Sam glanced at the GPS screen and swerved around a corner.

"Most of it. It says 'Klusuma's' then two letters, a 'W' and an 'H' or maybe an 'A.' That's Klusuma's, K-L-U-S-U-M-A.' It's Latvian, you know."

Sam didn't know. "So is there a Klusuma's W-something around here?"

"Sorry, no Sam, I did a search and couldn't find anything. Like I said, the sign was faded and looked pretty old, maybe even partly painted over."

Sam turned another corner and the cell phone flipped out of its precarious perch and landed on the passenger seat. "Shit." Sam reached for the phone and drove one-handed, holding it to his ear. "Okay, thanks Marcie. That's all good to have. Look, can I call you later?"

"Sure Sam. You owe me a dinner for this. We still on for next week?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks again Marcie. I gotta go." Sam flipped his phone shut and peered at the buildings. He was close to Teena. That meant he was close to Allen.

The buildings in this part of town were over a century old. Over the years they had seen many tenants and a jumble of faded signs covered the walls.

Sam skidded to a halt and then eased the car back. He pointed it so the headlights shone on the side of an old two story warehouse with a boarded up front. There, on the side, in faded red and white paint, a sign announced, Klusuma's Wholesale — best prices in Hollenbeck. *Shit! This must be the place in the picture!* A glance at the GPS confirmed Teena was here too! *Teena, I love you! You're a fuckin' superdog for sure!*

Sam flipped off the car's headlights and organized his thoughts. He wanted to rush in, but he needed backup. He grabbed his cell phone and called the police switchboard. This late, it would probably ring through to the officer on duty.

An automated voice informed him "This call is being recorded" and then Brad's voice came online. "Hollenbeck Police Department, Sergeant Delameter speaking."

"Hey Brad, Sam here."

"Hi Sam! What's up?"

"Look, Brad, I'm onto something. I'm parked outside an old warehouse at, uh, just a sec." Sam rolled down his window and peered at the street signs. "It's at the corner of First and Niklass The address is 36 Niklass Street. You got that?"

"Just a sec, lemme get a pen. That's 36 Niklass, right?"

"Right. I think our serial killer might be here. The photo lab at the College lifted an image off that print that connects to this location."

"No shit! What can I do to help?"

"Brad, I need backup. Can you send a patrol car over here?"

"I'll radio them, Sam. But there was a pile-up on the freeway a few minutes ago and they're all handling that right now."

"Brad, I just need backup." Sam worked the action on his weapon, making sure he had a full load.

"I understand, Sam. I'll tell 'em it's urgent. Don't do nothin' 'til they get there."

"Right. Thanks! Hurry, okay Brad?"

"You bet, Sam. You be careful, y'hear?"

"I always am. Just get me some backup." He flipped his phone shut.

He climbed out of his car and opened his trunk. He stripped off his leather biker's jacket and pulled on his Kevlar body armor, then jerked the jacket back on. He pulled out a nightstick and a flashlight and clipped them to steel loops on his coat and fastened his badge to the collar.

He splashed through the puddles and approached the warehouse, holding his weapon in both hands. From the front it looked like it hadn't been occupied in years. He skirted around the side of the building to the rear. *Shee-it*. He stared at a dark blue van, ancient and in disrepair, but with current license plates. *Someone's here, all right!*

Sam's heart raced and his pulse thudded in his ears. Memories of that awful night when Kutsna lay bleeding in his arms flashed through his mind. *Not again, not with Allen.* Determination clenched his heart. He stalked the van with his gun held at the ready, listening and watching. *No sound. No movement. Probably empty.* Sam felt the hood. *Still warm. Been driven in the last thirty minutes or so.* He circled around and flashed his light in the rear window. Trash cluttered the interior – fast food wrappers, garbage bags, filthy clothes. But no one was in the van. His nose twitched at the smell from the van. He knew that smell. *Dead body smell. This is it.*

He looked the warehouse up and down. A wooden staircase clung to the rear of the building, leading to a second floor door. Even in the gloom and fog, he could see the door was ajar. He heaved a deep breath, steadied his weapon, and crept forward.

Dammit, Brad, where's my fuckin' backup?

Chapter Sixteen

Teena cowered in the darkness, miserable and afraid. She watched and waited. She was a good dog. She found Allen, she nibbled at the bracelet, and now she waited. Good dog.

She hunkered in the shadows, her nose between her paws, her eyes riveted on her friend. She smelled his fear and his fatigue. He was naked and bound to two pieces of wood in a big X. Why would Allen do that? She smelled his blood too. A crust of dried blood clung to one side of his head and ran from his ear down to his shoulder. Dozens of tiny, healed cuts marked his naked body, each with their own rusty trail of blood. Teena's tail switched. She longed to run to Allen and lick his hand and make

him smile. What happened to her friend? Wait and watch. Good dog.

For a moment she raged with the compulsion to rip the flesh from whoever did this to him. No. That would be a Bad Dog, a very Bad Dog. Allen wouldn't like that. Wait and watch. Good dog.

Maybe this was a test, like the other tests, to see if she would follow orders. Doctorsarnok was so stern when he told her to wait. She waited. Good dog. When it was over Allen would laugh and give her treats. She longed for this test to end. This was hard, much harder than the other tests.

The Bad Smells roiled about her, smells that drove the fear and rage inside her. Good dog. Wait. Watch. A bad man-smell lingered here, strong and fetid. Even stronger she sensed the dog-smell from earlier, the not-quite familiar dog-smell. She knew now that this was another Wrong Smell, that this was a Bad Dog. Not like Teena. She was a good dog.

The Dead Thing smell was the worst of all. It burned into her nose. It was everywhere, over all of the other smells. She trembled. Bad Smell, Wrong

Smell. Wait and watch. She shuddered, her heart racing, longing to leap forward and do *something* about all those wrong smells, but she didn't. Good dog.

Why didn't the good man come, like Doctor-sarnok said he would? Teena huddled and waited. She was good at waiting. Allen said so.

* * * *

Sam gripped his gun in both hands and crept through the old warehouse. He advanced in a silent half crouch, warily turning corners, alert to danger. The stench threatened to overwhelm him. He gagged on the dead body smell; the stale urine and shit added a foul undercurrent. He knew that the fetid odors would numb his olfactory nerves in a few minutes. *Concentrate, Detective. He's here someplace.*

Dim light flickered ahead. He paused, every sense quivering and alert. A voice gurgled from the direction of the lights. It seemed to erupt from a throat diseased and clogged with phlegm.

"How are you, my pretty?"

Hiding in the shadows, he peered around a corner. Dozens, maybe hundreds of candles flickered

and illuminated the horrors in this place. His professional eye took in the whole scene in a single glance. *There he is! Oh my God, what have they done to him!* Allen hung suspended and naked from an X-shaped cross, bound in place by duct tape. His head weaved back and forth, one side was encrusted with dried blood. Puffy, purple bruises distended his features almost beyond recognition. His eyes, sunken black pools, stared out from swollen sockets. Dozens of tiny gashes marked his torso. Someone had shaved all the hair from his body and head, making him even more naked and exposed. A wild memory of an entomologist's display flared in Sam's mind, as though some insane metamorphosis had transformed Allen to an enormous insect spread out for inspection.

The gun trembled in his grip.

"I asked you a question, my pretty!" The man with the corrupt voice appeared out the shadows and pressed his body against Allen's, holding a knife to his genitals. A white satin scarf fluttered about his neck.

Allen's head bobbed then, and his voice croaked, but no words came out.

He's alive! Thank God. Reflexes and training took over. "POLICE! Drop the knife!" he shouted, in his best command voice.

Allen's head jerked again and swiveled in his direction. The man with the knife froze, then he snatched the blade to Allen's throat.

"DROP IT. NOW. Or I'll shoot!" His voice blared loud and confident in his ears. *Dammit. I can't get a shot.* He stepped out from the shadows and revealed himself and his gun. "NOW. DROP THE KNIFE NOW."

The man's eyes jerked wildly about, then found Sam. His smile revealed gaps in his teeth. "Drop the gun. I'll slit his throat, I swear it." His voice shrieked against Sam's ears. Then, before Sam could react, he twisted his body behind Allen, using him as a shield. "How good is your aim, officer? Do you want to risk it?" His voice was calmer now, taunting.

"Good enough to blow your brains out. Drop the fucking knife. I'm not kidding." *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Sam rotated into the room to get a better shot.

"Stop!" The knife pressed against Allen's throat and a bright trickle of red tracked down his chest. "I'll do it, I swear!" Even now his voice seeped from his mouth like a festering sore. "I'll do it!" His elbow twisted and his grip tightened.

* * * *

Fatigue pummeled Allen's body and every joint ached. He hadn't slept in over a day. He shook his head trying to clear the fog and his brains slammed against his skull. A shout rang out from somewhere. *Sam's voice! He's here. What's he doing here?*

The man's stink penetrated his fuzzed consciousness. A sharp pain nicked at his throat. Someone was shouting, but the words were an inchoate blur. Then the scene coalesced with a sudden, horrible clarity. Sam crouched across the room, with a gun, and it pointed his way! The man, the one who beat him and cut him and called him *his pretty*, that

man cowered behind him. That sharp pain at his neck could only be the bite of a knife slicing his flesh. *Oh god, let it be over. Just let it be over.*

The man's voice shrieked from behind him. "I'll do it!" The pressure at his neck increased. *Now? Not now!*

Fire blazed from the barrel of Sam's gun and an explosion cracked in the room. The pressure at his neck increased and the pain flared. More fire erupted from the gun and another explosion blasted his ears. Something hot and wet splashed against his cheek and he heard a splatter behind him, as though someone had thrown a plate of spaghetti against the wall. The pressure at his neck disappeared and he heard the thump of a body falling.

Sam was on him in an instant, running his hands over his neck. "Oh baby, what has he done to you?" Allen wanted to tell him he was fine, but the tape still bound his mouth and only incoherent grunts came out.

"You're okay, babe. He didn't cut your throat!" A grin flew across his face and Allen thought he al-

most giggled. Sam looked around and then picked up the knife where it had clattered to the floor. "He can't hurt you ever again, babe. I shot him. His brains are all over the wall behind you. He's dead."

He closed his eyes while Sam cut the tape, releasing his wrists and ankles. He immediately collapsed against his lover, unable to stand. Strong, loving hands eased him to the floor.

"Shit, shit, babe, I'm so sorry." He pried at the tape around Allen's mouth. "Just a minute, let me get this off of you."

He gasped when at last his mouth was free. His voice croaked again, but no words came out. He yearned to say "thank you," but could he thank him for saving his life? He let his head fall back and contented himself to breathe free once more.

"Sweet Jesus, look at you." Tears welled in Sam's eyes as he removed his leather jacket and covered Allen's nakedness.

"You're safe now, babe. I'm here."

He heard the click of cell phone keys. He opened his eyes and gazed at his lover through slits. *Safe. God, I'll never feel safe again.*

Sam punched at the keys on his phone. His hands shook so hard that the phone flew from his fingers and clattered to the floor. "Shit!" He put his gun on the floor next to Allen and picked the phone back up with both hands.

He must be calling for help. *It's going to be all right.*

That was when he saw Chippie.

He crouched in the shadows on the other side of the room. He hunkered low on his forepaws, with his rear elevated on his haunches, ready to launch an attack. His mouth foamed and his eyes glowered feral red in the candlelight. He pawed at the floor with his tail jammed between his legs.

Sam! Watch out! Watch out for Chippie! Allen tried to speak but only croaks escaped his parched throat. He flopped at Sam, trying to warn him.

Sam reached out with one hand and stroked Allen's brow. "It's all right, babe. I'm here." The other

hand gripped his cell phone. "We need an ambulance right now! This is an official police emergency. Send an ambulance to..." That was as far as Sam got before Chippie launched his assault.

A raging, snarling mass of yellow fur tore into Sam, bowling him over. Sam's head hit the floor with a sickening crack. Allen looked on in helpless horror. Chippie wrenched at Sam's neck and blood spouted upwards.

Sam's gun lay there on the floor, right next to him. Allen gripped the gun. When he lifted it, it was so heavy and strange in his hands. It was still hot from being fired, and reeked of gunpowder. It wobbled as he pointed it toward Chippie. He couldn't aim! If he shot, he'd shoot Sam too! More blood fountained while Chippie snarled and tore at his lover.

Out of nowhere another dog launched into the fracas before Allen. The newcomer bowled over Chippie and tore him away from Sam. The attacker looked familiar, almost Teena or Deuce. The two animals roiled in a maelstrom of canine rage. *What's go-*

ing on? Allen's head throbbed with fatigue and confusion.

The gun wobbled in his hands. The dogs, bound together in a torrid blur of snarls and fur, tumbled on the filthy floor. Sam lay immobile; dark blood pooled from the bite wounds on his shoulder.

Without Allen's conscious volition, the gun exploded in his hand. Allen's arm jerked with the recoil: once, then four more times in rapid succession. The dogs yowled and whimpered. The gun flew from his grip and clattered across the floor while Allen collapsed. Silence echoed after the thunder of the weapon. He beheld the still forms arrayed about him: the stinky man, Sam, and two bloody bundles of yellow fur. Then his vision faded along with the last of his consciousness.

Five bodies lay there, mute and motionless. The candles flickered in a hint of a breeze. Sirens wailed in the distance.

Epilogue

Months later, Allen and Sam huddled close together in the Hollenbeck cemetery. They stood in front of a small plain monument. Inscribed on it were the words: *In Loving Memory*, followed by six names: Daniel Anthony Gleason, Peter Moulton, Walter Sedgewick, and three others, the victims of the Hollenbeck Serial Killer. The town that neglected these young persons when they were alive had erected this small memorial to their memory after their grisly deaths.

Allen squeezed Sam's shoulder. "If it weren't for you, my name would be there."

Sam clasped his friend's hand. "Mine too. We're both lucky."

Allen said nothing and gazed about the cemetery. The city had cleaned it up, repairing the fence and tending to the graves. Bright flowers blossomed at the base of the old statue of the monk. Allen remembered the red paint that defaced the hooded one on that day so long ago when his life changed forever. Allen gestured toward the cryptic figure. "You know, I always used to think that the hood was there to hide his tears."

Sam stared over at the impassive figure. "And what do you think now?"

"Now? Now, I'm not sure. I wonder if the hood is there as much to keep the world out as to keep his tears within."

Allen knelt and left a small bouquet of flowers at the monument. "Let's go. I've seen enough."

He stood and his head twisted about, looking for the third member of their household. "Teena, where you at, girl? Come on! It's time to go." Teena romped up to him, licked his hand and *woofed*, then she licked Sam's hand too. Her tongue lolled from her

mouth in that goofy way that dogs have. Teena was happy to be with her two best friends. Life was good.

They departed together, two men and their dog, together at last.

About the Author

Max Griffin writes horror and science fiction stories, often with a dark twist. Authors as diverse as John Updike, Dean Koontz, Richard Matheson, and Lawrence Sanders inspire and inform his literary style.

Max Griffin is the pen name of a professional mathematician who is the author of a textbook and numerous research articles. When he is not writing fiction, his days are filled with teaching mathematics and statistics, research, and administrative work at a major comprehensive university in the southwest. He is the proud parent of a daughter who is a librarian. He is blessed to be in a long-term relationship with his life partner, Mr. Gene, who is an expert knitter.

The two humans in Max's household are the pets of an Abyssinian cat named Mr. Dinger, short for [Erwin Schrodinger the Cat](#). Mr. Dinger graciously lets them live in his home in return for food and occasional petting. Oh, and there's that litter box thing they do for him too.

Visit Max on the Web:

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