



CHAIN REACTION

Book Three

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Seventeen years earlier...

Eric Thomas sat on his knees as he colored his picture. He was very good at it, if he had to say so himself and he often did. Better than his twin Matt. Both were better than the other kids in preschool.

“What are you drawing?” His mother asked looking over his shoulder.

“Our new family.” He stated proudly. Taking the pink crayon he added a bow to the baby’s head. In the drawing were his parents, Matt, Eric, Brian who was standing because he would be old enough to when the baby arrived and a baby stroller with the prettiest little girl smiling happily inside.

Matt peeped up to see what the hubbub was about. “We’re having another boy, dummy. Dad said.” He pushed Eric’s shoulder and almost caused him to draw where he didn’t want to. It incited a tussle and their three-month pregnant mother pulled them apart, as usual.

“Boys!” Their imposing father hollered. “Your mother has a baby and another on the way. Stop acting like animals.” Luckily he was feeding Brian in his arms keeping his temper in check.

“Katherine Ann is a girl.” Eric huffed out as he pulled away from Matt. He wrote his name expertly on his masterpiece. Matt and Eric were the first in their class to write their names. Matt was technically first but Eric right behind him. It was easier for Matt since two of the letters were the same.

“What a stupid name?” Matt taunted. “Even if we have a sister, you aren’t going to call her that.” Matt had named Brian. Their parents said Eric could name their next child pending their approval.

Eric only glared at Matt. “You may call her Kate and she’s my sister.”

Their mother laughed. “And if it turns out to be a boy?”

“She isn’t a boy.” He rolled his eyes. Grandma Ann had told them the truth. Then he stuck his tongue at Matt who knew their mother was going to have a daughter and was just being difficult because he was cranky.

That time Matt started the bout and Ron handed Brian over to their mother. After ending their scuffle he marched them to their room where they were ordered to stay until dinner.

“Eric?” Matt said lying on his bed.

“What?” He was still mad.

“She’s a girl. Grandma’s never wrong.” He rolled over to face Eric. “And I like the name Kate.”

Sometimes he wondered what it would be like without a twin and then sometimes it wasn’t so bad.

Self Control or Lack Thereof

Eric woke up early to take his morning run. He was working on managing his temper and regular exercise evened his mood. It wasn't as if he blew up over small things. It was that big things kept happening to his family in more rapid and increasing intensity. More often than not, his younger sister Kate was put in the most danger and it was that helplessness that fueled his uncontrolled rage.

He listened to the rhythm of his feet as he passed through the Santa Katrina neighborhood in his usual route. His pet German Shepherd Zeus kept up easily. The steady pace and the quickened heart rate cleared his mind to better sort through the problems he faced. A road led down into the park. He reached out mentally to feel other people's presence. Sensing he had enough privacy, he sped up to faster than most humans but not too much for Zeus to keep up.

Eric's family was very gifted even among people with metaphysical skills. He was born with telekinesis, telepathy, empathy and deterrence. None of it manifested until he was in high school over six years earlier. Telekinesis was from his father's side and the others were from his mother. His identical twin Matt and his younger brother Brian were born with the same gifts. Kate, who had a different father, didn't originally have telekinesis but had two others. She could communicate on a fundamental level with animals. More amazingly she was able to share dreams with people. Not only would they wake up remembering any conversations that took place but they could also pass things through. It was even possible to bring the person through which was how he rescued her weeks earlier.

Even though they were born with their respective glitches, Kate had an extremely well developed sense of empathy. She found that by utilizing it with other gifts she could teach people her skills and learn from them if they used their skill while they were connected. They shared their gifts evenly and learned others from friends and some not so friendly people. Eric and Matt had shared as well but only with each other. They had a strong connection as twins. His younger brother Brian had some minimal success with his dorm-mate but Kate had to reinforce the lesson.

From Kate's boyfriend Greg, they learned to black out people's senses and to see through other people's eyes. Greg's cousin Meg, who was also Kate's best friend and Brian's girlfriend, had taught Kate to enhance her hearing. It was a gift only the girls could do for some reason. Kate said it wasn't in men's nature to listen and that kept them from picking it up. Father Francis, the head master at Kate's Catholic

high school, had passed on the ability to discern when someone lied and what natural talents they may have.

Henry and Frankie, brother sister twin alum from the same school, who helped them organize and improve their skills, were telekinetic as well. They also had the ability to read people's minds. It was very similar to telepathy except that it could be more covert and one sided. Even with telepathy, they sometimes heard thoughts from people who didn't realize they were sending them out. With mind reading Eric could probe into someone's psyche and glean more.

Chris, another friend of Kate and Greg's, was able to mimic people's appearances. Brad, another friend of theirs, didn't really have a fully developed skill but he had a strong mind for singular focus. This helped keep others from tampering with him. It gave Eric the edge to break through the barrier of using some of the skills that took more concentration. From some unfriendly people they had learned speed and invisibility.

There were some limitations on many of the skills. For one, Kate had so many rolling around in her head that at times she couldn't stop them from happening on their own. When she had a bad case of stage fright she disappeared until Eric ordered her to show herself and do her job. Eric had been lost to the skills as well, usually when he was too mad to stop himself.

Most of the skills took an amount of focus and some were harder to mix in with others. Deterrence, the power to stop others from using their skills, was the hardest especially if you tried to block only one person rather than the general area. He had recently started to use it in conjunction with other skills.

Seeing through people's eyes was very limited to only people that you truly loved. It was an odd skill. The person who you saw through would initiate it if they concentrated on you or in times of extreme emotions. The advantage was that distance wasn't a problem for that gift. Telepathy worked for miles but even Santa Barbara, only thirty minutes away from their hometown Santa Katrina, was too far for telepathy. Eric had seen through Matt and Kate. He suspected he would be able to with anyone in the family.

Zeus started to run out of steam at the quickened pace. Eric stopped at a bench to let the dog rest. He pondered his two enormous dilemmas.

The lesser concern was his grandmother on his father Ron's side. She was a wicked woman without an ounce of kindness. It had been a tradition in the family to have only sons. This was controlled by telekinesis but Eric never understood how. It wasn't a custom he cared to continue. When Kate was born Gran, his mean grandmother, knew she wasn't his dad Ron's daughter but lived with the lie. It was almost two years earlier that the truth had been uncovered. To add injury to insult, Ron was gracious. He kept Kate part of his family and accepted her genetic father as a close friend. Gran went on a rampage trying to hurt Kate and his mother Sandy.

It had been about a year since her last attempt at mayhem thanks to her husband, his grandfather Morrie. The family had relaxed believing it was over. They had recently discovered that she had placed a spy at Jim's office. Jim was Kate's biological father and a respectable guy. Gran was fishing for more information and help. Someday she would take up the crusade again. They were much stronger than before and it was more an annoyance than an outright fear.

His greater problem was a man named Tyler and his sister Deborah. They were related to Greg on his mother Margo's side. Margo had been out of his life since he was two. His uncle and aunt found Greg in hopes to illicit his assistance in getting the leader of their gang of metaphysical miscreants out of prison. It didn't take too many encounters for them to learn that Greg had his own crew of support and their ideas expanded.

For a while they considered asking or forcing Eric to join them. In an audacious maneuver Tyler kidnapped Kate. A spy for Gran had passed on the secret that Kate was able to share gifts and Tyler wanted her to enhance their skills. Tyler had changed his plans from releasing Guido, their leader, to higher aspirations of taking over. He would need more than the ability to black out people's sight and hearing for the other gang members to follow him. Kate was his solution.

When Kate was stolen away Eric erupted in a way that alarmed even him. After an hour of driving aimlessly he pulled over by the coast. So much power coursed through his body that he was able to turn the tide and sand whirled around him at incredible speeds. Still he seethed with uncontainable fury.

It wasn't anyone's fault but Greg was with her when she was taken. Eric foolishly hit Greg full force with massive speed behind his blow. If they used their skills in conjunction with each other they increased their potency. That night Eric had done it alone. Frankie guessed it was out of pure anger.

He worked with Greg to rescue Kate the next day. After that his boiling point was near explosion almost constantly. Leaving Kate's sight killed him. His fears fed his emotions and his emotions fed his skill levels. Even when they were separated he kept a mental feeler on her unwilling to allow a repeat occurrence. When he returned to University of California, Santa Barbara for classes he discovered he was able to transcend the distance and sense her. He kept that to himself. Matt probably knew. They didn't have many secrets from each other.

Zeus was rested and they headed for their house at a slow trot. Kate had a tennis match that most of the boot camp crew would attend. They formed the group with the help of two of Father Francis' former students named Frankie and Henry. They were fraternal twins.

Frankie and Henry built up tactics and skills for them. The team included Eric and his siblings were Greg, Meg, Dave, Brad and Chris. They were all good people. Eric was closest to Greg after they got over their initial contempt for each other. Greg was a cheeky jerk when he first chased Kate.

Frankie and Henry analyzed and tested the group. They had learned a lot from their weekend boot camps watching the kids and the kids had increased their talents in return. Frankie and Henry were naturally clinical and that helped in the assessments but made it hard to get close to them as friends. Eric and Kate had made some progress and the others were following.

Or he was making progress until he lost his temper at the beach. It was during their second and last date. Frankie put a good deal of distance between them after that. She even tried to keep him out of searching for Kate. She was worried that he would take things too far and do something he'd regret. He was capable of killing Tyler but he wasn't sure how much he would regret it.

He damaged his chances further with Frankie when he challenged her motives for not seeking out Tyler before he struck again. Eric asked Frankie if she was torn because she was once involved with Tyler. The fact that she had dated Tyler was something she kept a secret and he outed her. She hated being so vulnerable around so many people that could read minds and she shut down completely to him after that.

Eric sat on the steps to the house before cleaning up and getting breakfast. It was a dewy April morning and he looked up at the cloud cover hoping it would burn off for the tournament. Kate was playing and they were going to watch for encouragement and to check out her new teacher that she didn't trust.

He couldn't remember the teacher's real name and referred to her as Miss Blackberry. The kids made fun of her for her constant attention to her electronic helper. Eric didn't know what to make of her. She had appeared just days before Kate was taken but didn't seem to be in allegiance with Tyler or Gran.

Unfortunately she had set off some alarms in more ways than just the timing of her arrival. She knew how to keep people from reading her mind. Anyone could do the same by having a forward mental monologue constant at all times. However the average American wouldn't know there was a need to resist mental probing. Kate told him that her teacher mentally recited poetry making it hard to pick up insights.

Another unsettling habit was that Miss Blackberry seemed to know who was gifted and even detected Kate when she was invisible. Kate shouldn't have been spying on her. Eric had strictly forbidden her to get too close. She had long given up listening to his every command. He missed those days. They didn't know how Miss Blackberry could tell Kate was there given that she was transparent and hiding her presence from metaphysical sensors.

Finally, Miss Blackberry had attended to a meeting of women with paranormal skills. Frankie and Kate had crashed the party to find the connection between Gran and Tyler. Probably one of Gran's friends from the group had tipped Tyler on Kate's ability to teach and learn gifts and that was the reason for their abduction of her. Gran was too uppity to associate with known outlaws directly. Frankie didn't think Miss Blackberry was the leak between the two teams.

There were some signs that Miss Blackberry was benign. Like when she lied about what gift she had at the meeting. She claimed to have the ability to detect lies. Kate recognized it as a lie. Eric was an expert deceiver and therefore had an exceptional understanding of why people would lie. Her pretense about her skills was a sign that Miss Blackberry didn't trust the group or Gran. If anything, Miss Blackberry was a nosy lady who wondered about other people like her.

They still hadn't discovered her hidden talent. She knew too much to assume she was skill-less although it was possible. It couldn't be deterrence or a self-defense of others because Kate could read her mind even if she didn't pick up anything other than Robert Frost or Walt Whitman. The fact she pinpointed Kate when she was invisible made Eric think she could empathize. They used it like that often. Kate said she was blocking her presence from detection so it wasn't a definite conclusion. Chris guessed

she could have enhanced smell. Dogs could tell if there were invisible people around and it wasn't a bad guess. Eric mostly dismissed it because it sounded farcical.

Frankie had deemed her harmless. Father Francis had hired her without picking up any lies or gifts, which would be hard for even the most talented to pull off. Gerard, his mother's father who taught at the school as well, also approved of her. He was the oldest in the family with empathy and skills got stronger with age.

Kate was extremely skeptical. Her larger suspicion was another plant by Gran. She had put someone in Jim's office earlier that year but Kate sniffed the spy out quickly. Sadly it was after she had learned more information on their skills and how they shared them. The same information that eventually made its way to Tyler. And before Holly worked for Jim, Gran had her friend Marie befriend Eric and Matt in an attempt to cause strife.

Eric hoped he would be able to learn more information to shed a light on the mystery of Miss Blackberry. Kate believed that Miss Blackberry had clued into the fact that she was the same woman that pretended to be Frankie's twin at the meeting. He wanted to think Kate was overreaching but the idea terrified him.

They were all on pins and needles after her kidnapping. Kate had taken it too well. It wasn't long before that Kate was so introverted that anything could shake her composure. After so many close calls and the fact that she was the most gifted, she had built up her courage. That didn't mean she couldn't get a false read on someone innocent in an attempt at early detection of harm.

He prayed that Miss Blackberry was a false read. He didn't need a new problem creeping up with two larger ones still unresolved.

The Mysterious Miss Blackberry

Matt drove Eric and Brian followed behind to St. Iggy's, Kate's school, where the tennis tournament was held. He had invited Frankie and Henry along as a peace offering but they declined.

Eric didn't blame Frankie. He was awful. He was determined to repair the damage regardless if it was fruitless. It aggravated him to think it was all lost so quickly after he had finally made some solid progress. For months every time he was interested, Frankie backed away and when he lost interest, she turned on her charm. Their second and last date was the first time that both allowed the interest to be shared mutually.

"Honestly, she wasn't a good match for you." Matt said aloud knowing what was on Eric's mind.

"Doesn't excuse my behavior." Eric knew Matt wasn't trying to ease his grief. Eric thought Frankie was perfect – except for her clinical nature but a bit of romance could fix that. Some other lucky guy would figure it out down the road.

Matt pulled their Accord into the gates of the once mansion that was converted for the private institution and found the court where Kate's first match was scheduled. They had sixteen courts total and all were kept in top condition. Eric had attended the public school in their old town and there was some envy that Kate and Brian had a more elite education. It showed.

Brad, Chris and Greg were seated and talking about baseball. It was their favorite topic. The brothers joined them and started surveying the area.

He immediately recognized Miss Blackberry. There was the six-foot tall honey blond. They grew them in California. This one was on the court and playing with her blackberry. He had spotted her at Kate's school play. She had her electronic toy out then as well. He reached out to read her mind and got poetry. Frustrated he planned to chat her up after the matches.

There wouldn't be a need. She walked over to them with a broad smile on her open face. He couldn't see her eyes behind her dark Oakley glasses. If she had empty sockets she would still be prettier than most women. Eric's type was a petite woman with dark hair but she could persuade him to break the partiality. Frankie was easily half a foot shorter with darker hair and more curves just the way he liked them.

“Hello. You must be Kate’s brothers. I’m Lori Becket the new math teacher.” She had gone out of her way to meet them. It wasn’t a good omen. Kate wasn’t close enough to her that she should feel the desire to meet her family. Eric tried to conjure innocent motives that could justify a forced interaction.

“I’m Matt. This is Eric and Brian.” As usual Matt made the introductions and pointed to his brothers in turn.

Eric kept reading her mind as his twin managed the social pleasantries and only got Shakespeare. He hid his annoyance. He could see how it would put Kate on edge. The only thing more distrustful than getting purposely misleading thought would be an overt antagonistic intention.

“Kind of young to be a teacher.” Matt commented. She couldn’t have been older than twenty-five and was more likely closer to twenty.

“I’m fresh out of college. I’m not sure if this is the right career for me but it’s a great experience and very rewarding.”

Two things happened. First, Eric sensed she wasn’t being honest although it wasn’t as strong a feeling as a proper lie. And second, her guard was let down. He didn’t know why at first. Then he learned she found them attractive. Her actual thought was, *they didn’t have guys like them at Cal.*

“Berkeley?” He tilted his head and gave an innocent smile.

“That’s right. How could you tell?” She blushed at his attention.

He kept from grinning harder with self-satisfaction. She checked to see if she had a telltale sign on her person. Then she figured it might be because she was a math teacher. It was as good an excuse as any. “You’re a math teacher Miss Becket.”

The two of them is too much. She reached for her blackberry. *I wonder what they measure.*

Eric didn’t follow her meaning.

“Please, call me Lori.” She said out loud. In her head she said to herself, *Lorraine, stop flirting.*

Eric stifled a laugh. “Short for Lorraine?”

“Yes.” She spoke but thought that he registered as high as Kate. She remembered his reading from the night of the play. “Kate is my best player.”

“She is very talented.”

I'll say she's talented. Never seen the meter read that high in so many areas. Lori's mind revealed.

Eric realized she was measuring them with her gadget that probably wasn't a blackberry or at least not an ordinary one. He glanced at the court and the red head that had tormented his sister the previous school year entered with a group of other tennis players. Forgetting his undertaking for the moment he turned to Greg. "Why is she here?"

Lori glanced over her shoulder at the other team. "The tournament is for several groups and not all are from schools. She must be here with the country club's team."

Eric told his brothers that one of them would watch Stacey's game at all times. She would not cheat. Stacey was the source for their talent for speed. She used it to win at tennis.

Strange reaction. Lori wondered in her head. *Let's see how she reads.* She turned with her blackberry to Stacey. *Nothing compared to Kate. Odd that she would worry him.*

"Gadgets are a blessing and a curse." Eric kept his eyes on her holster where she had tucked her device.

She turned red and he only heard poetry. Her wall was back up. "My friends tell me I need to unplug more often. It was nice to meet you." She walked off realizing Eric was on to her.

Eric wanted a closer look. He used telekinesis to pick her blackberry off her waist. He only got a brief moment before her hand flew down looking for her security blanket. He quickly floated the blackberry to the bench below them.

"Hey you dropped this." He made a show of picking it up.

"Thank you." She held out her hand and tapped her peeved foot.

He had a talent for getting to people. It wasn't metaphysical but he found it functional and amusing. She wasn't reciting poetry. She repeated *I want it back* over and over again in her head.

"I've never seen this model." He pushed his luck.

"It's a prototype." She lied as she mentally chanted for its return.

"How does it work?" He was in a position of control and he loved it. It was a homecoming for him.

"I really don't have time right now to show you." She almost snapped.

“Perhaps after the game over a cup of coffee.” He was sure she would shoot him down. She didn’t like that he stole her toy.

“If we win.” She smiled as she surprised him. *Now give it back!* It was the closest thing he had ever heard to a shout when reading someone’s mind.

“You will.” He said confidently. Kate was expected to win the tournament. She was the best tennis player in her school. He gave Lori her toy.

Lori walked away. He watched her carefully. She had caught his eye and he was determined to solve her riddle. His fears that she was dangerous were almost completely erased. After the match, he put them and Lori aside for good.

“It isn’t a blackberry. It’s a meter. She’s using it to read who is gifted. I don’t think she has any skills.” He told the others as he noted her long shapely legs.

“How did you know she went to Berkeley?” Greg asked hoping Eric had read her mind.

“She was distracted.” Eric’s blood rushed to his face. It was rare that he blushed. He had been out of the romantic game for too long to keep it hidden that he was flattered.

Greg rolled his eyes. “So you’re going to seduce her for more information over coffee.”

“Unless I can convince her into a real drink. That would make it easier.”

“And what about Frankie?” Matt didn’t mind if he was giving up the chase but wanted to make sure. He thought Eric had spent enough time working Frankie that it was long due for him to move on.

“This is a mission. Not that I have a chance with Frankie now.” Eric had written that option of his list. He would try to repair the friendship and would be willing to rekindle any romance. Friendship was looking to be too lofty a goal to achieve and romance seemed unreachable altogether.

“She isn’t even your type.” Matt teased as the tall blond gave her girls a pep talk before the match started.

“True but she doesn’t know that and I’m her type.” He pulled out his patented mischievous grin.

Eric enjoyed the tournament. It was the first day he felt somewhat relaxed since Kate was safely home. He kept reading Lori’s mind but didn’t get anything helpful. He did get *stop it* a couple of times and once a very exacerbated *Ugh*. If it was a game he was winning.

Kate looked like a pro in her tennis outfit. She was getting taller every year. Greg, Chris and Brad were all in love with her on some level, in some way and they kept a close watch. It bothered him because he was a protective monster but they were all good kids.

Kate's first two matches were easy wins. Her last was against Stacey and she had to work for the victory. Eric was impressed that Kate didn't succumb to the temptation to use any metaphysical assistance. She beat Stacey six-two, six-one in a fair match. Stacey fumed. He had always enjoyed it when he had the upper hand. He revealed even more as he vicariously lived Kate's championing her rival.

When the games were over Eric went to confirm his appointment with Lori. "Are you still up for a chat?"

"Sure." She smiled. "Your car or mine?"

"Mine." Eric didn't have the keys. He would get them from Matt. Brian could drive Matt home. "I have to congratulate Kate first."

His siblings were walking out of the court with Kate's men and her best friend Meg. "Hey."

"Why are you talking to her?" Kate gave him an unyielding look. She didn't trust Miss Becket. Kate believed she was hiding something by keeping them from reading her mind. She didn't give any allowance that mind reading was invasive and rude on some level.

"I'm on a mission." He turned to Matt. "And it would help if I did the driving."

Matt handed the car keys over. "You're such a control freak. Why can't she drive?"

"Because I'm a control freak." He hugged Kate. "Great game."

When he returned to Lori she was talking with Father Francis. "Eric." The priest said pleasantly.

Eric heard Lori repeat his name in her head. She couldn't remember which twin he was. He snickered. They relished that they were so identical.

"Can you tell them apart?" Lori asked the priest.

"Sure, Matt's the good one." Father Francis made the easy jab at Eric's expense.

"Not true." Eric corrected. "The priest is showing off because few people outside the family know which is which." Referring to Father Francis as the priest was his little joke.

"So you aren't the evil twin?" She ribbed him.

“You aren’t going to back out on me?” He held his palm to the top of his chest as if his heart couldn’t take the let down.

“Not at all.” She said but thought how adorable he was when he smiled.

It was too easy to play poker when you could see your opponent’s cards.

Father Francis cocked his head and Eric reached out to him with telepathy. He told the priest that he planned to investigate the new teacher. Father Francis liked the idea but wanted him to be cautious. He left to chat with some students.

“I was thinking that coffee seems anti-climatic after your big win.” Eric tried to upgrade their date. They walked out to his blue Accord that he shared with Matt.

“We could grab dinner.” She agreed easily. It was almost six o’clock. “I’m not really dressed for it though.” She was in a tennis skirt and Eric thought it was a great outfit.

“Dinner sounds good. Any suggestions?”

“Anything is fine with me.” She was giving him all the room he wanted.

“How about Korean barbeque?”

“I love Korean barbeque.”

He sighed wishing she wasn’t someone that had to be dealt with. And it would help if she were shorter. He only had two inches on her and he wasn’t use to escorting such a giantess.

Korean Barbeque

Parks' Barbeque was Eric's favorite restaurant in Santa Katrina. When the waitress took their order he quickly asked for a beer to give Lori the hint. She followed and got a lite.

Welcome to my parlor. He enjoyed a good game.

She was proficient with the food. The eatery had grills in the tables and brought out plates of raw meat for the patrons to cook. Lori kept a good pace of cooking with their appetites.

"What do you do for a living?" She asked as she passed more meat to Eric's plate.

"I'm at my last semester at Santa Barbara. Not sure what I'll do after. We have three options. Working with our dad at his business consulting company. And two family friends said we could work with them. Or we can look for something else."

"Options are nice." She was impressed.

"Until you pick one and worry that it wasn't the best the choice."

"Why worry? Just switch down the road." She shrugged.

"Good point." He liked her outlook. It was clear why Gerard approved of her and why she wasn't a perceived threat. Still he needed to be absolute. Eric read her mind. Lori was recalling the opening dialog to *Swingers*. Funny stuff but frustrating. "So how long have you lived in Santa Katrina?"

"I moved here for the job." Lori spun her beer around in circles on the tabletop and leaned on her arm holding her hand behind her neck. She was fidgety. "It's a nice town."

"We moved here a couple of years ago. I like it."

She pulled her hair behind her ear. Lori smiled awkwardly.

"Are you making friends?" He flirted shamelessly. He wanted her wall down and his objective was to charm his way through.

"Some. It was easier to do in school."

"Too bad it has to end." He smirked to indicate it was a joke. His amorous attention worked. Her mental guard vanished. She was thinking about how cute his smile was. It was like taking candy from a baby. Eric got to his business. "So what is that thing you have?"

Lori hadn't touched her blackberry during the meal. "The usual communication device."

He gazed deep in her green eyes and had to stop himself from mentally communicating with her. Eric spent most of his time with people that he could use his telepathy freely. She was not one of them. Dipping his eyes he said, “If you don’t want to tell me I understand.”

“Why don’t you begin by telling me what you know?” She started reciting Homer in her mind. Her mental guard shot back up and he was locked out.

Neither of them wanted to be the first to start the conversation they both wanted to have. “What do you mean?” He caught her beautiful green orbs and flashed a grin.

“We aren’t going to get anywhere with this.” She concentrated on her beer to hamper him from distracting her further.

“It measures something.” He gave the first concession as a truce. He revealed something he had deduced rather than divulging new information.

“It does.”

“What does it read?” He kept probing her inner mind despite positive results.

“How about I tell you have the highest rating?” She gave an easy hint he would get. It was also a fact that made him exceptionally mystifying to her.

“Can’t be right. Kate would be higher.” He had seen Lori use it on Kate. Kate was the center of their group and the most skilled.

“She ties you. Matt is slightly behind – enough that I can tell you apart. Followed by Brian and Greg. Then Brad and that other boy from today behind them. And Meg, who seems mediocre in comparison to you guys, would be the strongest I had picked up if you seven were excluded.” Her eyes stared him down waiting for his next move. Lori had a good poker face.

Eric realized it wasn’t a game of poker but of chess. It wasn’t enough to know what pieces she had on what square. She had strategy and predicting her next move wasn’t easy. “Okay. We both know what we’re talking about. How does it do that?”

“What are we talking about?” She demurred.

“Don’t play dumb with me. It isn’t becoming.” He glanced down. Playing his advantage he smiled hoping to dazzle her into dropping her guard.

You want my cards on the table?

"Of course, who wouldn't want that?" He answered and peaked up at his date.

"I didn't say anything, well, not out loud." Lori floated her eyes upward as she explained her trap.

He scowled. "Clever." She had out flirted him.

She dropped her arms one over the other on the table and leaned forward. "Why don't you stop reading my mind long enough that we can have a mutual conversation before I get to the end of the Iliad?"

"Fair enough." He didn't. She didn't have any skills to detect him.

"Now who is playing dumb? And it isn't becoming." She put the blackberry face up on the table.

"I'll leave this here. If you start to do anything and I miss it, it won't."

He stopped reading her mind and two of seven blue bars shorten on the screen. "See, I'm being good." He forced a smile. She had gained some control.

"It measures electronic waves in people."

"Electronic waves?"

"Your brainwaves are different because you can do these things. How many things can you do?"

Usually there is only one or two bars but you have high activity in all six areas."

"It can't tell you what I do?" He was glad to have some secrets left. He felt over exposed.

"Mind reading and invisibility." She scrutinized him. "Is this how you really look like?"

"Why would you think that?" Then Eric remembered that Kate was disguised as Frankie's twin at the meeting they snuck into a week earlier. "Yes, I really look like this."

He heard her think *good*. She hadn't noticed and her device didn't change shape. He must have picked it up with telepathy, which meant she subconsciously wanted him to hear. The corners of his mouth lifted.

"And you're telekinetic." She had figured it out when he stole her machine.

"Enough analysis." It was her turn to start spilling information. He was annoyed that he couldn't woo her to his will. His smile was useless if he couldn't read her mind and he couldn't with that infernal machine on the table.

"What I don't understand is this seventh bar. It should be the same size as the longest of the others. It is an overall reading and on a second axis. The graph is designed to keep it level with the most developed reading. Looks like that has to do with movement of some kind, probably telekinesis and

something else. But see.” She held up the screen to Eric. The bar she had been explaining was the longest. “You do something unique, more unique than normal unique.”

“According to that thing, I could be Kate in disguise right now.”

“No. If you were in disguise one of these two would move. And Kate’s strongest skill is communication. She’s better at that and you’re better at movement.”

He was intrigued. He didn’t want to admit it. There was a voice in his head telling him to shut up. It was a natural instinct for people like him to conceal these things. Since she already had too much his concerns lost out to his yen to learn more. “What do they each mean?”

It pleased her that he was being cooperative. She pointed to the first bar on the screen. “This is for movement skills, like telekinesis which is the most common of all. Levitation and speed will register there as well.”

“Levitation is telekinesis.”

“Sort of but it’s only a partial skill.” She pointed to the next line. “This will read if you can change appearances of yourself or others or things. So if you could make this beer look like a glass of wine, it would register there. The next one reads if you change my perception. So let’s say you can’t make the beer appear as wine to everyone but just to one person. It would register here because you’re changing how I see it and not how it appears to everyone.” She paused to see if she was making sense.

“Go on.” He unconsciously nodded that he understood.

“This one is mental communications like mind reading or telepathy, mind reading being a partial of the other.” That was the bar that had shortened when he stopped reading her mind.

“You know other mind readers. That’s why you know how to put up false reads.” It was a revelation and not a question.

“Yes. I can usually feel it even without this.” She wiggled her toy in the air. “Having a friend who is a gifted mind reader, I wanted to keep some of my opinions private.” She pointed to the next bar. “This is interference, although I should really split that as well. Some people can interfere with a general area and some can only interfere in a persons mind. If that were your only skill, interfering with another’s mind so they can’t do something, there would be some readings here and on the perception bar. This last

one is enhanced abilities and speed would mostly register here but also on the movement bar. Hearing, sight, smell, feeling and taste can all have boosters.”

“How did you find these things out?” He reached to pick up the meter. “May I?” She handed it to him. The bars reacted when he slid the soy sauce on the table.

“It started with a roommate at college and I expanded from there.” She watched how effortlessly he moved the condiments.

“You’re lying.” He said casually. “Hey the mental communication bar just bumped up.”

“Yes. You detected a lie.” She sounded irritated.

“What was the lie?” He glanced up at her. She was uncomfortable. Finally she was exposed for once.

“It wasn’t a roommate. It was my fiancé.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” He felt bad. It wasn’t important to his cause and she was uncomfortable. He wanted to keep her comfy to ensure she stayed open in the event that he needed to read her mind again. He had a better chance with the device in his hands where she couldn’t see the graph change.

“It is my own hang up.” She stared at him curiously. She wanted to ask him something but wasn’t sure if she should.

He tilted his head left and right a few times. “Either ask the question or I’ll be tempted to read your mind.”

Keep your wits about you. She mentally told herself but he overheard. “Please don’t. This is hard enough as it is.”

“Hard for you? Do you understand that people like me don’t like others to know and you’re out there measuring us?”

“I know that.” She bit her lip. It looked kind of cute.

“You’re question or I mind read.” It wasn’t a serious warning.

She sighed. “Are you related to Father Francis?”

“I’m not even Catholic. Why?” She didn’t need to answer. Eric realized she had pegged Father Francis as a truth detector. He didn’t want her to know they could learn new tricks from people and he handed her a big hint.

“There’s something much bigger going on here than I’ve ever seen. All of you have huge readings in all areas. And it seems coincidental that you can identify lies and aren’t related to Father Francis. I’ve never met another lie detector and now I meet two.”

She was getting too close for comfort. He came to his senses. He placed her blackberry on the table. “Why do you do this?”

“Academic curiosity.”

“Lying.” He spoke in a singsong voice.

“I want to know why some people can do these things and others cannot.”

“Partial truth.”

“This is suppose to be a mutual conversation and your lie detector needs to be shut off.” Her composure was slipping. Mad looked good on her or tormenting amused Eric.

“I don’t know how.” He hadn’t ever tried but he sure wasn’t going to make the effort for her. Thankfully she couldn’t detect his lies.

“Convenient.” She doubted his sincerity.

“I’m not complaining. Why do you do this?” Eric was thinking about Kate being off the charts. Whatever Lori’s interest was, Kate would be a prize subject. Kate needed another stalker like a zebra needed a bicycle.

“Tell me all your skills including any that don’t fall into these categories and I’ll tell you.” She was enchanting him.

Eric realized that knowing she found him attractive didn’t turn off her allure and probably improved it. He regained his focus and pulled out his wallet. He paid in cash. She lulled him into a false sense of security. He wasn’t going to give her more time to take him further down the primrose path. “Not going to happen. You know too much.”

“Then we’re at an impasse.”

He nodded and leaned across the table. "I need to know two things and you're far safer answering than declining."

"Is that a threat?" She was offended.

Eric shook his head. It was a mild threat but she would answer correctly. "They aren't hard and you'll do fine. It's for affirmation. Do you know Gran Thomas?"

"I've met her. How do you know her?"

"Ran into her once." He fibbed easily and was grateful it wasn't a talent that took any special electrical charge for her graph to change shape. "Do you know Tyler Jones?"

"I don't think so. Should I?"

"He's bad news. You're better off never meeting him."

They walked out to the car. "Why did you ask me about Gran and that guy?"

"They aren't friends and I wanted to make sure you aren't colluding with them."

"Did they hurt you somehow?"

He held the door open. "No." He answered as she got in.

"What did they do?" She said when he got into his seat.

"Nothing." He had forgotten the most important question. "Your interest in Kate is purely academic?"

"Did they hurt Kate? I would never hurt her or any of the kids." Lori worried. "Even without the meter, you guys stand out and Kate's amazing. She's smart and strong. I wish she wasn't reading my mind all the time. It's hard enough trying to explain complicated math without reciting poetry in my head. She doesn't like me much. She's quite difficult in class." She was a talker.

He noted that she didn't answer the question but her statement was completely genuine. "You should keep your distance. She doesn't trust you and she can be trouble if she wants to be."

She accepted his warning. "I want to see you again. I have a lot of questions still."

"That isn't a good idea." He had shut down and wasn't going to open up.

"What can I do in return?" She negotiated.

"Stop using that thing at school. It makes my sister nervous."

"If I do that will we talk again?"

It was tempting. He didn't know why she wanted to measure people but if she wasn't part of his problems it wasn't relevant. "Now isn't a good time for making new friends. And I have a girlfriend." He was thinking about Frankie. She would cringe to hear him refer to her that way but he was very fond.

"Fine." Lori quickly said but didn't mean it. "It wouldn't be like that but if you aren't going to comply then there isn't anything I can do to change your mind."

He groaned. "I can't. I was more honest than I should've been already." He had pulled up to her car in St. Iggy's parking lot.

"Dinner was nice." She meant it. "And you were the most open conversationalist I have had with the few exceptions of some friends. With all your skills it shouldn't shock me that you fished me out."

"It's nothing personal."

"Sure. It's just that I'm not like you."

"I don't care about that. This stuff is messy. Being involved can have a down side." Everyone that got close to his family got tangled in their mess. He didn't need to pull her into their sticky treacherous web. If she understood, she would know he was doing her a favor.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for dinner. You're a lot of fun despite your stubborn streak." She hopped out.

"She's a nosy nuisance and I feel guilty for not wanting to talk again." He mumbled as he waited for her to pull out of the lot first.

He got home and went out to see Zeus and his parents' dog Katja. They were growing up fast. They were excited to see him and better than that, they didn't ask him any annoying questions. "Why can't women be more like dogs?" He joked. "Then again, they do have some assets." Like her eyes and her smile and her legs. And she was the sweetest lady he had spent time with in years. "Don't fool yourself. She flirted for a purpose and it wasn't to get acquainted."

Eric sensed Matt coming home and going to his room. He needed to give him an update so he moseyed up to chat.

"How did it go?" Matt was doing homework at his desk. He had a general impression but wanted details. They were too close to not have an almost constant connection.

“She isn’t in cahoots with Gran or Tyler. I don’t know what her motive is but she’s harmless.”

Eric concisely updated.

“What happened?”

He sat down on the bed. “She has this meter that reads electronic waves that are different for people like us. It’s probably just curiosity. She wants to know why we have it and she doesn’t.”

“Why so glum?” Matt asked. “You achieved your objective.”

“I feel bad. She divulged all and I didn’t. I feel like a con.”

“Like it’s your first time.” Matt recalled the many times they had worked people to their purpose in the past. And they weren’t going to stop in the future.

Eric dropped back on the bed and stared up. “True. Since she wasn’t in allegiance with Gran or Tyler, I just feel like I shouldn’t have even started. What did we gain from this?”

“We know she isn’t in allegiance with Gran or Tyler. That’s a relief.”

“How come you are so much wiser than me?”

“Because I’m older.”

“Ten minutes.” Eric hated when Matt said that.

“A lot happened while we waited for you to find your way out.”

He threw a pillow at his brother.

Matt karate chopped it down before impact. “Did you have a nice time?”

Eric sat up surprised by the question. “I guess. She’s wicked smart. Trying to outthink her was fun.”

“Wicked hot too.” He had a far away look. “I’ll take the next mission if we have to re-question her.”

“No way brother. This inquest is mine.” He didn’t have any plans to see her. Then he realized she would probably be at his sister’s graduation ceremony in a month.

One Problem Solved

They met at Frankie and Henry's the next day. Frankie, who was just the right height with brown hair and eyes, gave Eric the cold shoulder treatment.

"What happened yesterday?" Kate asked as soon as she was through the door.

"Lori isn't a problem. She's just an observant non-skilled spectator."

"Lori?" Kate sneered. She didn't like him calling her by her first name. It humanized her creature teacher. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent. She's very impressed with you."

"She was buttering you up. She obviously likes you."

Frankie suddenly paid closer attention to the conversation.

"I can tell when people lie." Eric shouldn't need to remind her. She had passed the gift to him from Father Francis.

"Oh yeah." Kate had forgotten. "Did she let down her mental guard?"

"Not really."

"What does that mean?" Frankie couldn't resist. She had met Lori and decided she was harmless as well but she didn't get past the constant recitation.

"She made me promise to stop reading her mind." Eric felt like he was caught cheating.

"So, if she can't do anything how would she know?" Frankie wondered why he gave up the ghost so easily.

"She can feel it somehow." He decided not to mention her gadget that could confirm if he bypassed her natural senses.

"What about that blackberry? You said it measured us somehow." Greg asked to his annoyance.

"It does. She can tell if people are gifted or not. Something about electronic waves being different." He regretted revealing her secrets. They only needed to know she wasn't a problem. Her interest would not be welcomed regardless. He didn't want Lori to be added to the enemies list. She didn't belong on it.

"Really?" Henry was awed. "I would like to learn more about that."

“Give her a call. She’d love to talk to someone else with skills.”

“Let’s forget about her.” Frankie was jealous.

Eric felt a small flicker of hope.

“Frankie, it could expand our research.” Henry tried to coax his sister.

“Then you should ask her out.” Frankie punched the word *you* to make sure he did the calling.

She was definitely irked that Eric had gone out with someone else. “Can we get started now?”

Maybe Eric wrote Frankie off too quickly. He had noticed that Frankie didn’t like to lose his attention. He never dreamt that giving some to another woman would stir the green-eyed monster within. She was so reserved he didn’t think she was the type to be threatened by another pretty face. It showed vulnerability and Frankie hated feeling vulnerable as much as she hated showing it.

They went to the backyard to do some drills. About an hour in Henry’s phone buzzed. It was Joe, his friend on the police force. When Henry returned he was pale as ghost. “Guido escaped last night. Tyler is dead. His body was found outside Bakersfield. A bullet to the head.”

Everyone froze.

“And Deborah?” Greg asked.

Eric didn’t think he was concerned for her life so much as the connection she left. If they were both dead, there were no ties left to Greg or any of them.

“She hasn’t been found but Guido will kill her as well. He doesn’t take betrayal lightly.”

“I wish it ended in a more civil way but at least we’re free of one concern.” A weight was lifted off Eric’s shoulders. There was a moment in time when Kate was first kidnapped that he could’ve remorselessly killed Tyler. He was glad that it didn’t come to that.

Matt didn’t seem worry free. Something about the news wasn’t conclusive enough.

“You’re right.” Frankie agreed. “It isn’t happy news over all but it does seem to sever any ties in this direction.”

She didn’t have a stronger reaction to Tyler’s death. She admitted to dating him but said they were using each other to get information. There was no real love loss. It was clear that was true.

“And we didn’t need to hunt them down.” Frankie shot a glance to Eric.

"I'm fine with that." He smiled. "You were completely right." She wasn't. They had no guarantee that a bigger threat would kill off their smaller trouble. He wasn't going to debate a moot point, not when she may have some feelings for him after all.

"We'll need to stop these meetings." Henry was somber.

"Why?" Brian asked. It was how Henry spoke that confused him. The meetings weren't important if Tyler wasn't going to seek them out.

"Guido isn't your problem but he may come looking for Frankie and me. We helped put him away. You kids don't need to be in the line of fire."

"What a second." Matt stood up. "We aren't really out of trouble?"

"You are. We aren't." Henry pointed to his sister.

"So we're still in trouble." Matt was being purposely obtuse. "What's the plan?"

"We're going to help." Greg said and the others started echoing the sentiment.

"Don't be ridiculous." Frankie ordered. "You're out of this now. It's our problem."

Eric heard Kate's thoughts. Frankie had proven they were lab rats to her. She didn't care if Frankie treated them like that. She had grown to care for them and didn't want them in danger. Kate was determined to help.

"Frankie is right." Eric said mostly to Kate. "The kids are out but Matt and I are in. We need to think of careers. I like the sound of metaphysical police." He didn't have any strong aspirations to follow. It wasn't a real option but he would put out the effort without an immediate alternative.

"You're only four years older." Kate protested.

"And I can fight for my country and vote and drink. You can't."

"And I can do anything you can metaphysically."

Eric tilted his head with a sarcastic look. He hid the memory of Lori's machine where Kate ranked as high as him in case he slipped something to her via telepathy. She was an asset. Kate had demonstrated it many times but he couldn't let her put herself willingly in jeopardy. She couldn't get near a man like Guido.

"I'm in too." Chris said and the others joined for another chorus of "we're a team."

"This isn't open for debate." Frankie put her foot down. "Henry, tell them."

He bobbed his head. "The twins are more powerful than anyone else we know. Do you really want to decline their offer? Guido is going to be harder to catch a second time."

Eric and Matt smiled at each other. They were invincible.

"And if they're in we're in." Kate demanded.

"No, you're not." Eric countered. "I couldn't handle if something even close to what happened to you last time repeated."

"And you think I can if the positions were reversed?"

He stared at her. Of course she would be as angry as him. "No." He said without a better retort.

"You're not the boss of me." She snapped at her favorite brother.

"Very mature. You've proved my point. No." Eric commanded.

The meeting was over for the day and everyone piled out of the house and into their cars. Henry pulled Eric aside. "Joe is coming over at six. If you guys want to stop by, I'll deal with Frankie."

"We're in. Thanks for letting us know." He liked Henry. He was far more approachable than his sister. Too bad he wasn't her identical twin sister instead of her fraternal twin brother. "So is it beyond repair with Frankie and me?"

"I thought so but she didn't like that you went out with that other girl. You were doing well. Slow and steady wins the race with her." He paused thinking how to give the next piece of advice. "I'll be honest, you aren't the only guy she has gone out with lately. She likes you better but you scare her because you can see inside. This other guy is some cube dweller that works in Silicon Valley. If you want to win, you have to give her room and curb your temper."

He suspected that other men were interested but he didn't know Frankie had spent any time with someone else. They didn't see each other often. Eric was forced to accept that they were a small part of each other's lives. He rolled his eyes. "If you know the secret to controlling my temper, let me know."

"We understand it some. It isn't like you blew up because someone stole your parking space. And I'll be fair, I don't know if I would handle it much better if Frankie was taken against her will."

"With Kate, it wasn't just that. She was almost drowned, trapped in a falling elevator and shot before that even started. Do you know how hard it is to be able to do all these crazy things and you still can't protect the ones you love."

“Love, money, world domination, it all comes down to power struggles. Even before you started expanding your talents you were more gifted than most. There is more than personal psychology behind these things. There is a societal psyche. Others will want to use you or eliminate you. It’s that underlying desire that creates the tendency to hide what we do.”

Eric’s mind flashed to Lori’s machine. It could detect reality through facades. It could be a dangerous aid against them if Guido had it. “What do you make of Lori’s curiosity?”

“She isn’t the first I have heard about that wanted to learn more. I would love to see her gizmo. You think she would be open to it?”

“Definitely. And she’s extremely attractive.”

“You didn’t mention that part.” Henry liked the sound of it.

“Would you in my position?” Eric liked to see a little jealousy in Frankie but fanning an open flame could be explosive.

“Do you have her number?”

“Father Francis might.” Matt revved the engine as a subtle hint for Eric to hurry. Eric rolled his eyes. “Isn’t it great to be a twin?”

“The joy has no equal.” Henry called out as Eric ran to the car.

“What were you two talking about?” Matt asked when Eric buckled up.

“He wants us to come back at six. Joe will be here.”

“Good of him to include us.” Matt sped down the road.

“And he wants to meet Lori.”

“I get that. His analytical brain couldn’t resist her meter.” Matt glanced over to his brother. “And you’re okay with that, right?”

“Yeah.” Eric said looking out the window.

“Do we tell the parental units we’re helping Henry and Frankie?”

“No. Only Brian will have a clue and that’s if he figures it out.” Eric wanted to lay low.

“He will. That boy is practically psychic. And what about Kate?”

“She doesn’t know what we do most of the time.” Eric didn’t want her to be tempted to interfere.

“You underestimate her. She won’t sit idle.”

“She’s seventeen. Her life isn’t an abundance of freedom.” Eric shook it off.

“And the fact that she can move things, turn invisible, just about anything short of pulling a rabbit out of her bum doesn’t negate that?” Matt didn’t agree with Eric.

“In the end, she won’t go against us.” If anyone had influence to control Kate it was Eric. She may resist at times but in the end he could manage her.

“You mean against you. I lost that control a while ago and brother, I don’t know how much longer you’ll be able to hold on to it.”

“You’re harshing my mellow.” Eric half joked.

“Sorry.” He wasn’t.

Officer Romero

Frankie's face dropped when Eric and Matt were back at her door for dinner. "Did Henry tell you to come?"

"We want to be part of the solution." Matt dropped business school lingo.

"Let them in." Henry hollered from the kitchen where he fixed Mexican food for dinner.

"You do the cooking?" Eric blurted out. It was a sexist idea but he hadn't pictured Henry as a culinary master.

"Only when he doesn't want me to know how many people are really coming." Frankie glared at her brother.

"Weren't you going to smooth things over before we came?" Eric reminded him.

"I meant after she found out." Henry hid his face from his sister's strict stares.

"How'd she not know?" Matt whispered to Eric. It would take a good deal of effort for one of them to hide something from the other. And if they concealed anything, the other would know there was a secret being kept.

Eric shrugged and walked over to Frankie. "You look nice." She had on slacks instead of her usual Levis.

"Thanks." She rolled her eyes. "And thanks for coming. We do appreciate it but Guido is very dangerous. More than Gran and Tyler put together." She was secretly glad they were there.

"That's why we want to help." He put his hand on her arm. She didn't move away. Baby steps he told himself.

Officer Joe Romero looked like the typical LAPD. He was about Henry's height, five eleven, with dark hair and eyes and a moustache. He was in his forties and had a hint of chub in the belly. The most prominent characteristic was a jovial mind-set and it was contagious.

"You made Mexican food?" He joked. "You're a brave man to serve that to me. You would have been safer with Chinese." Joe was Mexican and knew what true Mexican food should taste like.

"Give it a chance. You taught dad everything he knows and he taught us. You'll be pleasantly surprised." Henry promised.

“At least you have Dos Equis. Everyone thinks we all drink Corona twenty four seven.” He poured his beer into a mug and took a long drink.

“Let me guess. You’re Canadian?” Eric liked the guy.

“Cute gringo.” Joe wiped a thin line of beer fuzz off the end of his moustache.

“Should we call you Jose?”

He laughed. “My family dates back to California before it was part of the United States.” Even so, he had a slight accent.

“Eric, can you behave?” Frankie sounded like his sister when she asked the same thing. It never worked with Kate.

“She’s always so serious.” Joe said lightly. “Of course, we have some grave issues to discuss.”

“Eric and Matt are very good at many things.” Henry bragged.

Joe’s eyes widened. “Do tell?”

“Telekinesis, telepathy, empathy, deterrence, blacking out sight and sound, invisibility, talk to animals, share dreams...” Henry rattled off.

“Deterrence? You mean they can stop others from doing things?”

“Precisely.”

“And what do you do?” Matt questioned.

“Just shoot people but if you can stop Guido from multiplying so I know where the real one is, that’s enough.” He aimed his finger at his beer and shot.

Eric clicked his beer to Joe’s. “A match made in heaven.” They took a swig in unison. “Good beer.”

Joe rolled his eyes. He didn’t need a gringo telling him what’s a good beer.

“I meant thank you for introducing the beer to me.” Eric answered his thoughts.

“They’re good.” Joe deduced. “They’ll be helpful to bring Guido down.”

“Is that what it will take? Will we have to kill Guido?” Matt felt it was probably the best solution but wanted to know if there were other options on the table. He was glad that Joe would deliver the bullet.

“If we do, we do.” Joe said flippantly. “He’s a dangerous man and he has killed.”

“Last time you arrested him.”

“And he escaped. We can go after him on our own and if we need a cover up to avoid explaining all the funny things you people do, we have ways. But we need to prepare for the worst.” He took a bite of his burrito. “This isn’t half bad.” He smiled at Henry before turning back to Matt and Eric. “How is it that you have so many gifts?”

Eric was preoccupied. He realized he had lost Kate. He kept a near constant feeler on her and it wasn’t returning the usual positive on her whereabouts. He sent out a mental ping and waited for a repeater.

“We have a sister that can pick up and share gifts.” Matt answered seeing that Eric was inattentive. “We can too but she’s much better.”

“Kate?” Eric said. They thought he was telling Joe her name but he was looking for her. There were only two reasons she would vanish off his radar. She was either unable to or she was spying.

Matt picked up his intentions and scanned around the room. “Where are Buster and Connie?” The dogs would find any invisible party crashers.

“Outside.” Frankie answered. “We didn’t want them begging for food.”

“Can we let them in?” Eric wanted confirmation. “Unless you want to reveal yourself.” He said to the open room.

Kate walked in from the foyer.

Eric got up and hugged her. “Don’t do that. I thought, well you know what I thought.”

“I will not allow this. Either we are all in or none of us.” She didn’t veer off her linear thinking.

“Que linda.” Joe said.

Kate peaked around Eric at Joe. “Hello, I’m Kate.” She shook his hand.

“The same sister you mentioned.”

“She’s our one and only.” Matt stated. “Thank God.”

Kate stuck her tongue out at Matt.

“And she’s too young.” Joe could see that she was a teenager.

“I’m as good as they are.” Kate ignored her brothers.

“Mija, this man is very evil.”

“I have dealt with evil before. I have a wealth of experience with evil.”

He glanced at Frankie and Henry. “She’s the one Tyler and Deborah kidnapped.”

“That’s right.” Kate spoke first as if it padded her resume.

“Sit down and grab a plate.” Henry invited.

“Staying for dinner is not the same as being involved.” Eric’s eyes narrowed on Henry. He wished he hadn’t invited her to stay. It only fed her delusion.

“I’m not the only one that wants to help you out Officer Romero. There are six more but some people think we’re useless.” She threw Eric a dirty look.

“We don’t think you’re useless.” Eric rolled his eyes. “Deborah is still alive and she may tell Guido about you in exchange for her life.” It wasn’t a strong belief but it was an underlying concern of his.

Frankie reached for his hand to comfort Eric. His temper didn’t subside but it was sidetracked. Her warm soft hand felt nice in his.

“She’s in hiding.” Kate shrugged it off.

“They took her because Tyler wanted to steal Guido’s gift and take over the gang.” Frankie explained to Joe.

“All of these children can stop other’s from using their gifts.” Joe was tempted with their abilities.

“Hey Jose,” Eric scolded, “they aren’t going.”

Frankie gave his hand a warning squeeze. He was getting close to losing control.

“We can and when we’re all together we’re stronger and faster.” Kate disregarded Eric.

“How close do they need to be to do this? Couldn’t they be at a safe distance and not involved in the front lines?”

Eric jumped up. “No.”

Joe wasn’t expecting such an abrupt response.

“Eric’s overprotective. It will pass.” Kate said unfazed by Eric’s melodramatics.

Sit down. Matt ordered Eric.

“And Meg and I can hear things from far away. We’ll be able to update you of any plans they make. That something that they can’t do.” Kate snidely jabbed her finger at Matt and Eric.

“You weren’t much older than her when you first helped us out.” Joe said to Henry.

“We weren’t after such a large and metaphysical gang at the time. Plus, Eric’s right. If Guido knows about Tyler’s plan, he knows there’s someone that can learn and share. It wouldn’t take much for him to pick Kate out as the key. We have to keep her far from him.” Henry would have liked for Kate to work with them but she was too young and too enticing for the opposition. He also sympathized with Eric when she was gone.

“If he got her, he would learn all she knows?” Joe understood the potential danger in creating a metaphysical militia.

“Unlikely. With one weak exception, older adults haven’t been able to learn. But he would still try.” Frankie meant Angela. She was married to Greg’s father Andy and wanted to learn telepathy as a safety precaution. “And even with younger people, Kate needs to be able to feel close to them, to share anyway.” It was a lack of closeness that kept Kate from sharing with Frankie who was always so cold and clinical with her.

“So what’s our plan?” Kate asked pretending she was included.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Eric barked. “Absolutely not.” His beer bottle broke on the table.

“Eric.” Frankie stood up to mop up the mess with napkins.

He grabbed some paper towels off the counter. “I’m sorry.” The pieces of glass lifted and threw themselves into the trashcan at his will. The liquid flowed against gravity making the clean up quick and simple.

“There are a couple of set backs. First, some times they can’t control their skills when they don’t mean to use them.” Frankie shot Eric a nasty look. “And secondly, Eric has a bit of a temper and it’s usually triggered when said sister is in trouble.”

“That isn’t fair. Eric isn’t a hot head.” Henry surprisingly spoke out. “Even before Tyler learned about Kate, she was tormented by their grandmother. It was a family squabble but the attempts on her life were enough to set off even the most pacified man to his limits.”

“Eric is hardly the most pacified of men.” Frankie huffed.

“How did Tyler learn about Kate?” Joe wanted the whole story.

“He was seeking out Greg, her boyfriend,” Eric hissed, “and found all of us.”

“And she’s the most gifted?” Joe surmised.

“We’re tied.” Eric said. “With Matt close behind. Then Brian and Greg followed closely by Chris and Brad.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” Frankie contradicted.

Eric stopped himself before countering that he was sure. Lori’s meter had paced them just as he listed.

How do you know that? Kate asked Eric mentally. *Was it Miss Becket?*

Keep her out of this. Anyone who gets involved is put in danger.

Serves her right for meddling. She got the last word of their mental spat. It must be a youngest child thing to get in the last word because Kate was the princess of last words.

“We need to find where they are before we call in reinforcements. Let’s start there and then we can discuss strategy.” Joe changed the topic. He would worry about the kids’ assistance at a later time. “We know they’re in Ojai. We can take teams and drive around trying to sense their hideout.”

Frankie and Henry would start the next day. They couldn’t decipher gifts as well but they could pick up enough to narrow down a location. Eric and Matt would help the next weekend. Kate drove off in her VW Bug.

“I told you Kate was a force to be reckoned with.” Matt drove them back to Santa Barbara for college.

“I blame Greg. She wasn’t like this before she started dating.” Eric tried to joke.

“Whatever, we need to keep her away and she isn’t going make that easy.”

To be safe, Eric pulled Greg into his dream that night. He sat in the misty version of his room. He didn’t know why the room was always misty but that was how it worked. “Your girlfriend crashed our strategy party this evening.” He said as Greg walked into the dream.

“She did? When?” Greg didn’t know what she’d done.

“Henry asked Matt and me to go back later to talk with Joe and she popped in. Well, not until we called her out because she was invisible and hiding.”

“She doesn’t want you guys in danger and she’ll fight with you rather than stay out of it. It’s probably the only thing she’d fight you on.”

“You have to change her mind.” That was the best alternative and Greg’s persuasion would be pivotal. She was too skilled and head strong for her own good.

“I’ll do my best but the only reason I don’t insist on helping is because I know there’s a better chance she’ll stay out if we all do. I would rather be with you.”

“Even without Kate, I don’t want you guys getting involved. We aren’t much older but we do have a few extra years.” He was calming. “By the way, your eye looks better.”

Greg got stitches after Eric’s blow when he lost his temper. They were out and the scar was barely visible. “I’m not saying you can hit me whenever you want but I get it. We were all stretched past our limits. You’re just quicker tempered than the rest of us.”

“Yeah. I’m a hot head and I have a crush on the ice queen.” Eric remembered breaking the beer bottle without meaning to. That was yet another set back. He needed to regain a steady composure.

“Well, she must be warming up if she had you over for dinner with Joe.” Greg wanted to be a supportive friend. Eric had been there for him when he needed help.

“She didn’t know until we arrived. She did lighten up some until I broke a bottle. I have a long way to go still.”

“You’ll get there.”

It was Eric’s fault he was so far behind. He didn’t know if he could have stopped himself from striking Greg. He was beyond lucky that Greg was so forgiving. “I can’t tell you how much I regret hitting you.” It wasn’t the first time he apologized but it was the most heart felt.

“Your dad thinks I’m healing so fast because of the telekinesis and I got that from you.”

“He does?” Eric didn’t know that. “Makes sense.”

Cat and Mouse

Eric woke up and took Zeus for their morning run in Santa Barbara. They ran along the beach in the foggy air. Kate was so much like him but she was younger and in far more danger because they wanted something that she had. Eric and Matt could share gifts with each other but only Kate had taken it to new levels. Even Brad, who didn't have any genetic glitches in his head, learned talents because of her. If Guido had her skills at his service he could make an army. He would be unstoppable.

Eric was undecided on how fast it would take to find Guido's place in Ojai. It was a simple task. If someone was in a city, he could find them by driving around town in no time. But it couldn't be that simple for Guido. He had two people that kept Kate from reaching out. They could just as easily hide Guido. They had to switch after a couple of hours when keeping Kate under constant watch. Maybe it would be wiser to search at night when their guard might be down.

It was his last semester at school and his schedule was light with free days on Fridays. He was getting a business degree but didn't have a clue as to what he'd do after school. There wasn't a rush but his father would eventually kick him out of the nest to fly on his own. They had agreed to give up the condo and move back home until they had their own place. Brian and Dave would live in the condo for the remainder of their time at UCSB.

He had choices. Jim and Andy had both offered the twins to work with them with no limits. Jim had a software company that made games and educational tools. Andy had a furniture store and made much of his own stock. Greg helped out as well. Eric liked the idea of making things. Either job would be interesting and useful. Both men were sharp and role models for him.

Eric would first see to it that everything was sorted out with Guido and Gran. His father would want that as well. They would have to be forthcoming on how involved they really were and their dad may have some concerns. On the other hand, Ron may want to help out. He was skilled at telekinesis and would be a plus to have along for any confrontations.

One of Eric's teacher's assistance invited him and his brothers to a bar for Cinco de Mayo. It was called Rudy's Grotto and served a mean margarita. The place would be closed for invitees only and the food was on the house provided they paid the cover charge. Eric was excited until he found out that Matt

was bringing Joann. Joann was a petite blond Matt dated fairly often. She was cool but he didn't want to be the odd man out. Brian and Dave would join them. Even if Dave chased some skirts, Brian would keep Eric company. He dated Meg who had another year of high school. He must be crazy about Meg because Brian kept his head when confronted with the more aggressive college huntresses.

On an impulse he called Frankie to ask if she would want to join them after her day in Ojai. She gave him a definite maybe. "Better than an absolute no."

He checked his image over for a final appraisal. He had dark wavy hair and dark brown eyes. Pretty average in his estimation but they got plenty of attention from the fairer sex. It was their height. Women loved tall men and they were six foot two. His face was stubbly. He decided he'd skip shaving another day.

He grabbed his jacket. The nights by the ocean could dip down into lower temperatures. He was the last to arrive and joined his brothers and friends in a corner booth. It was an ideal spot where they could see everything that was going on. The place was packed wall to wall with reveling students.

"How did you get this table?" Brian asked Eric when he sat down.

"I didn't get it." Eric ordered a jumbo margarita on the rocks. It was kind of a chick drink but blended would have been too girlish for him.

"It was reserved for us." Matt told him. "You said one of your TAs gave you the invitation."

"Yeah. It was Reid from Macroeconomics. He's pretty cool. Smartest stoner I ever met."

"He's a connected stoner."

"We're important people. Does it make you wonder that someone would want to impress us?"

"You made it." Reid walked up. He was the image of a straight-laced student down to his navy blue sweater.

"We were just saying how great this is." Eric spoke over *La Bamba* that was blasting through the speakers and half the bar was singing along. "This table is prime real estate."

"I'm glad you like it. I know the owners. There's a smoking patio outside if you want to get more relaxed." He winked at Eric.

"Maybe later." Eric had been stoned before. It was a tempting proposal.

“Come find me when you’re ready.” He slapped the tabletop and waved good-bye as he surfed through the crowd of dancers to get another drink at the bar.

“Nice guy.” Dave commented.

“Most stoners are good people.” Matt said.

“Can’t be that numb that often and a stress puppy.” Joann added shrewdly.

After a couple of margaritas Eric saw Reid heading to the smoking patio. “I’ll be back.” He swam against the tide of people to get to the door.

The patio was covered with a sheer canopy and surrounded by a tall raw wood picket fence. Reid waved him over. He pulled out a joint for himself and another for Eric. Eric didn’t need the whole joint to get high but a career stoner like Reid couldn’t get a good buzz from half a smoke. Leaning into Reid’s lighter he took a long puff.

“Be careful.” Reid warned. “It’s from No Cal and it creeps up on you.”

“Thanks.” Eric said as he held smoke as long as he could. His experience was limited but he could tell it was better than any marijuana he tried before. It even tasted good.

Eric was half way through his when Reid’s took his last toke. “Do you need some more?” He held out his half bud to his TA.

“I’ll take another hit or two.”

Reid’s description of the drug was accurate. A good high slowly snuck up on him. It was relaxing. “You have no idea how good this feels.” There wasn’t a tense muscle in his entire body. He felt like a jellyfish drifting in the ocean.

“Stressed about graduating and facing the real world?” Reid’s eyes were blood shot.

“The real world.” Eric repeated.

“Do what I did. Go to graduate school. It’s a stalling tactic but it gives you time.”

“Maybe in a couple of years. I need to figure out what to do when I grow up.” They laughed too hard and Eric loved it. He needed to laugh.

“I remember when graduation was nearing at Cal. We were all going nuts and there’s a lot more pressure up there.”

Eric’s face dropped as he tried to think. “You went to Cal Berkeley?”

“For undergraduate school.” He nodded. “That’s how I get the good stuff. I still have friends that know friends.”

“Marijuana is decriminalized up there.”

“It’s almost a mandate to get stoned at least once a year.” UC Berkeley was notoriously liberal on all matters, most notably drugs.

“You’re a good guy to set this up for us. I’ve been kind of uptight lately.”

“It shows. You need to go find a girl and get some tension release.” Reid jabbed his fist back and forth in the air.

“I had asked one to come but I don’t think she will.”

“Maybe she’s here already.”

Eric shrugged. He didn’t feel Frankie. She wasn’t there. He didn’t feel much. He checked on Kate and sensed her in a distance. She was safe. “I better get back. Thanks.”

Reid shook his hand and passed him another joint for later. “Take care of yourself. It’s just school.”

Eric moseyed into the pub enjoying his pleasant high. His mouth was dry from smoking and he went to the bar for some water. Matt and Joann were dancing on the floor. They were a good couple. Brian and Dave were at the table looking smashed. They were rookies.

“Hello.” A pleasant voice chirped in his ear from behind his shoulder.

Eric swiveled slowly and found Lori. She was wearing a jean skirt and a green spaghetti string tank top. He smiled too broadly in his buzz. “Hello there.”

“I didn’t think I’d see you again so soon.” She was tipsy.

He glanced down at her waist. “No blackberry tonight?” It was an excuse to check her out.

She raised her hands and twirled around. “I’m electronically naked.”

Eric was candidly enchanted by her spin. “You look good naked. I mean without your blackberry.” Some blood rushed to his face.

She examined his eyes. “Are you stoned?”

“Ssshhh.” He patted the air for her to keep it down.

“I don’t think anyone heard or cares.” She rolled her eyes. “Are you Matt or Eric?”

“Does it matter?” He was already committed to using the false identity.

“You’re Eric. Unless Matt is just as difficult.”

“We’re well matched and I’m Matt.” He fabricated.

She scrutinized him with uncertainty. “So that’s Eric’s girlfriend?” She pointed at Joann who was dancing with Matt.

“He loves blonds. I am partial to brunettes.”

“So I don’t have a chance.” She flirted with a flip of her hair. “Want to dance? Maybe I can change your mind about us.”

She could do it if he gave her the chance. “I am not coordinated enough at the moment.”

“I’ll dance with you.” A guy said sitting behind Eric. He was a big man – and if he wasn’t on the football team he should be.

“Another time.” She rebuffed.

Eric leaned into her ear. “Beating them off with a stick.” She got goose bumps and he delighted in the knowledge he could affect her so easily.

She put his glass on the counter. “Come on.” She took him on the floor and they danced in each other’s arms to a Frank Sinatra song. “This is nice.” She whispered in his ear. “Except you’re reading my mind.”

“I’m not picking up anything.” He was sure he hadn’t done it. “Are you thinking about absolutely nothing?”

Lori pulled back to look him in the eyes. After a couple of seconds she went pink. “It wasn’t you.” She turned towards Matt. “Must have been him.”

“And what did you think to test me?” He was fascinated. It was something embarrassing.

She hid her head in his shoulder. “Nothing.”

“Liar.” He pulled her hair back trying to see her face.

“Forget about it.” She peaked out at him.

He dropped his arms to her waste and swayed to the music. “We’re lucky it’s a slow song. I’d fall down if I had to be creative.”

She laughed. “Be honest. You’re Eric.”

“Nope.” He fibbed again. “Why do you keep asking that? Do you have a thing for him?”

“It’s just...” She didn’t finish. “I don’t play with other girl’s boy toys.”

Eric had forgotten he told her he was dating. Frankie was a no show and that was another sign in a long list of signs that his window of opportunity had closed shut and hermetically sealed itself for good. “How’s the new job?” He didn’t want to think about Frankie. It ruined his buzz.

“Except for your sister still reading my mind all the time, it’s going well. I like it more than I expected.”

Eric hadn’t been on a real date since Marie and Marie didn’t count since she was a spy for his grandmother. Frankie and him had gone out twice but they didn’t count for much other than he adored chasing her. The first time was a double date with Kate and Greg. The second was called short when Kate was kidnapped. His best date in the last year had been the fake dinner with Lori.

Dancing with Lori wasn’t a date either but it seemed damn close. Even being too tall, Lori felt good in his arms. She smelled like cherries. He put his cheek next to hers until the music changed to a quicker tempo. “I better get back to my table.”

She gave him a long look. “Not until you admit you’re Eric.”

“If it’ll make you happier to think I’m him.” He enjoyed that she wanted him to be Eric.

She scrunched her face still confused. “I’ll see you later.”

“You’re not so bad when you aren’t grilling me.”

Pecking his cheek she walked off swaying her jean clad hips.

“Where were you all this time?” Brian asked when he returned to his table.

“I got stoned, drank some water, danced.”

“You the man.” Dave gave him a fist bump. “Was she hot? Did you get her number?”

“She was and no.” He let them think he made a move on an unknown and didn’t mention it was Lori. How odd that he would bump into her there. He wondered if she knew Reid if they both went to UC Berkeley. It was a crazy idea considering how large the campus was. Or was it?

It was too coincidental. He looked around the restaurant and found Lori with an Asian girl friend. Her friend caught him looking at their table and motioned to Lori. She peered up and waved innocently at

him. He waved back and reached out to read her mind. *I'm sure it's Eric.* He heard and then it flickered to Shakespeare.

His wicked grin flash across his face and he probed her friends mind. *Wow, he is cute. I wonder why she didn't talk to him longer after dragging me out to find him. And he's taller than her. That isn't easy to come by for the fifty-foot tall woman. He's still looking. He is so hooked.* He winked at Lori and she blushed and pulled her hair behind her ear in a nervous gesture. It was good fun.

Dave and Brian headed out as soon as Matt and Joann returned. Brian had over done it and needed to walk off the booze.

Did you know Lori was here? Matt asked mentally.

I bumped into her. Do me a favor. If she approaches you, pretend to be me and this is your girlfriend. Eric excused himself to use the restroom. He walked into a stall and vanished. He waited for the door to open before going back into the hallway. The barroom was too crowded to successfully navigate without bumping into people. Luckily Lori walked his way with her purse in hand. Surely the blackberry was in there. She entered into the girls' restroom and he followed and tapped her shoulder.

She twirled around and Eric reappeared. "You scared me." She spoke in hushed tones through gritted teeth.

"This is a set up. You knew we'd be here."

"Get out." She pushed at his chest with her palms.

"It's nice in here." He noted not budging.

"Is there a guy in here?" A girl called from a stall.

"It helps that there aren't urinals along the wall. Now go!"

"Meet me out front when you're done."

She glared at him as he left. He went back to his table and put on his jacket that still smelled a bit smoky from the patio. "I'm leaving."

"I'm glad you came." Joann gave him a half hug from her seat.

Lori was saying good-bye to her Asian friend who was sitting with Reid. He gave Reid a head nod. Lori walked through the crowd looking stunning. Many men were watching her and even Eric enjoyed the view while it lasted. The guy from the bar had accosted her and blocked his line of vision.

Are you all right? He asked mentally.

Not really. She answered.

Eric rushed through the partygoers. "She's with me." He said when he was next to them.

The guy had his fingers wrapped around her upper arm. "We're going to dance." He was wasted.

"You have plenty of girls to pick from. You don't need mine."

"Back off pencil neck."

I'll dance with him. Don't fight. She mentally told Eric.

It won't escalate to a fight. He assured her. Then he told the guy, "We're late for another engagement. You understand."

"If you're already late, a few more minutes won't matter." He jerked her closer to him and she stepped forward involuntarily. He put his free arm around her waist.

"Everything all right?" Matt was on Lori's other side.

The guy let her go confused by the sudden appearance of a second Eric.

"Are you those twins everyone talks about?" He slurred.

Eric pulled Lori behind him. "We are. It was nice meeting you."

"I didn't get my dance." He noticed his treasure had been taken from him and he swung at his challenger.

Eric easily dodged the incoming fist as Matt followed up with a quick jab to the guy's gut. He slumped over. They walked him over to the bar and slung him on a stool.

"Sorry about that but I really am a territorial bastard." Eric said in his ear.

Which is Which?

Eric took Lori's hand and walked her out of the bar. Matt and Joann were right behind them.

"You should learn how to turn it off." She was a little shaken and he wanted to comfort her.

Lori frowned. She didn't like his comment. "I didn't encourage that." She reached for her purse.

"Leave it." Eric ordered.

She wanted her meter that could distinguish which twin was which. "Who's who?"

"I'm Eric and he's Matt." Matt lied on cue.

She looked back and forth at them. They were in different clothes and she could tell which she had danced with. "Sure." She said. Eric tried to read her mind. She wanted him to be Eric but wasn't sure.

"You guys go ahead. We're going to get coffee before someone drives home." Eric offered.

Matt and Joann started to leave.

"Eric?" Lori called to Matt.

Matt turned back. "Yes."

"Thank you both for helping me in there."

He smiled at her and his twin. "Anytime." He walked Joann home.

"Believe me now?" Eric dared her.

"She looked confused when he said he was Eric." Lori pointed to Joann.

"Don't worry about it. Interesting that you were with Reid tonight."

"I know him from school. If he's Eric how come he barely spoke to me?"

"Because he thinks you're meddlesome and he doesn't know what you're up to. Kind of lucky that you happen to run into us tonight."

Her jaw clenched. "It may not have been accidental. He didn't have a good time at dinner?"

"He had a good time." Eric was abstracted from proving she had arranged the encounter.

"Doesn't sound like it. Those aren't good time commentaries." She was hurt. "I thought he trusted me. He doesn't?"

“He also said you’re very smart. And that you were a lot of fun.” He glanced down at her mouth.
“And very pretty.”

“It doesn’t matter who is who, does it? For all I know it could have been Matt pretending to be Eric the other night. And I have no way of knowing when you’re speaking for yourselves or pretending to be the other.”

“Eric took you to dinner. It was great for him. He needed a break from his daily worries. He almost wished the timing was better.” It was the most honest statement he made to her that night. His eyes dropped to her mouth again. He considered kissing her.

“You took me to dinner.” Lori said as she picked up his signals. She timidly licked her lips in anticipation.

Eric was amused keeping her guessing but he was going to kiss her. He wanted her to know who he was before he did. He leaned forward and opened his mouth to confess his true identity but before he could speak a simple yes he was interrupted by his own image. It wasn’t the first time he saw through someone else’s eyes but it shocked him. Putting the image aside, he closed in to confess his true identity but was interrupted again.

Without warning Reid barged out of the bar with Lori’s friend. “We saw the commotion. You two are slick. That guy doesn’t know what happened.”

The romance was lost. Lori had arranged to run into them and Eric didn’t like being used. She was scheming and he didn’t know why. “Hi Reid.” Eric’s flipped his charm on and hid his aggravation.

“Are you okay?” The girl asked Lori.

“Sure. It was over before I even got anxious.”

“Did you guys all go to Berkeley together?” Eric asked.

“Just Lori and me. I was an econ major.” Reid answered.

“I was math.” Lori jumped in. It was a lie.

Why lie to me? Eric thought to her. At the same time he read Reid’s mind as he tried to understand why she didn’t admit to being in the school of journalism.

“Hi, I’m Sue.” Reid’s girlfriend held her hand to Eric.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Matt.”

The hell you are, Lori thought.

Reid was confused. He thought he had lit up with Eric.

“Do you want to join us for a cup of java?” Eric figured he could fake a call from Matt and leave before they got to the nearest Starbucks.

“We really can’t.” Sue threw a serious look at Reid. “My dad owns the place.”

Lori mouthed a *thank you* to Sue.

“Shall we then?” He concealed his irritation and held out his arm.

Lori accepted it and waved her friends adieu.

“So, journalism school. Is this all about an story?” Eric said casually as they walked along the boulevard. She was exploiting him to get details for her personal ambitions.

She quickly figured out he read her friends’ minds. “I have to teach them how to keep their thoughts private.” Lori tried to look back but he tugged her arm to keep moving.

“I had to read their minds. You were quoting Shakespeare and all that iambic pentameter was giving me a headache.”

“I’m sure it was all over your head.” She rolled her green eyes. “Yes. I went to journalism school.”

“This ends now and no more questions.” He held his right hand over hers so she couldn’t slip free.

She didn’t try to sneak off. She was glad it was out. “I won’t use any names.”

“We don’t want to be a part of it.”

“Did you mention it to the others?”

“You don’t want me to. No one would want to be the subject of a paranormal tell-all.”

“It took me a while.” She adeptly changed the subject throwing out a persuasive hint of an idea.

“For what?” He followed her lead willingly knowing it was another set up.

“You’re only Kate’s half brother. There were two sets of parents at the play. Your last name is Thomas. How is Gran Thomas related to you?” She was proud of her deductions sure they were accurate.

He was pissed. She was in dangerous waters. “At least I know why you’re so nosy.” She was on his last nerve.

“Come on. This is interesting stuff and you guys are the most interesting of the most interesting.

What harm is in it?”

He stopped walking and faced her. She glanced down at his lips thinking he was going to kiss her.

“What does it take to shut you up?”

She flushed from her mistake at on coming romance. “You’re prehistoric. Is that a side affect from all your funny genetics?”

“Women are better seen than heard.” He wanted to rile her up.

“And brunettes are better than blonds.” She was irked.

“You aren’t doing a good job of convincing me otherwise.”

“Eric, please.”

“I’m Matt.”

She smirked. “So you’re a free man?”

“Free as a bird.” He stayed in character.

“Let’s hook up. No strings attached.”

“That’s a lie.” *Tempting but a lie.* “Why do you keep lying around us?”

“You aren’t being honest with me.” She challenged.

“I am the most honest guy in the world. “

“An honest guy is an oxymoron.”

“Nice.” He tried to stare her down but she held her ground. “And what about you? You’re playing me for a story.”

“I met you because of my story. I haven’t played you.”

“You set up this encounter and you’ve been flirting information out of me since the first minute we met.”

“Something you would never do.” She said sardonically.

After a long pause he asked, “Do you need a coffee? Can you drive?”

“I can use a pick me up.”

“Lie.” He started walking again.

“I want to talk more.”

“You talk too much.”

She reached for her purse.

“Leave it alone.”

She didn’t obey him that time. She pulled out her gadget and turned it on. Eric reached for it and she held it out from him. Being almost his height she had the arm span to do it.

“Another good reason to date short chicks.” He said as he let go of her arm to move around her.

She spun to keep it behind her back. “It isn’t fair if you’re going to use things like lie detecting and telepathy.”

“Telepathy was your friend tonight.” He had his arms around her trying to get the device. He tugged gently at it with his mind. If he pulled too hard and she didn’t let go she’d get hurt. “It’s how you told me to help you and how I called my brother over.”

“Stop it.” She tried to hold on against Eric’s telekinetic force. They were dangerously close and her soft lips fluttered at the corner of his as she spoke. *Please be Eric.* She hoped.

It turned him on and he couldn’t resist. He kissed her. He pulled back to see her reaction. The small smile on her face was his green light and he closed the distance for another. He got the meter and her arms were liberated to wrap around him. He didn’t stop kissing her. Holding the meter up behind her back so he could see he whispered, “How do I shut it off?”

“Don’t.” She said breathlessly into his ear.

He moved his face to kiss her again. He felt the buttons, turned it off and put it back in her purse.

“You have to trust me.” His full attention was free for intimacy.

“You’re definitely more fun. Eric was such a bore at dinner.”

Eric stopped kissing her.

“You weren’t.” She proved he was Eric.

He held her debating the pros and cons of their situation. “You have class tomorrow.” He let her go.

Lori curled her bare arms around her torso feeling the sudden chill of the night after the warmth his body had given her.

“Here.” Eric took off his jacket. It was loose but fit her well in length. He zipped her up. She looked adorable in it.

“Thanks.” Lori tucked her hands into the pockets and pulled out a joint. “And what have we here? Are you trying to frame me?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re a lot of trouble for a broad.”

“Let’s pretend it’s a peace pipe and smoke it.” She had a devilish gleam in her eyes. “I haven’t been stoned in ages.”

“I’m trying to sober you up to drive.”

“You weren’t doing a good job.” She teased. “So I’ll wait an hour or two. I promise to behave.” She snapped to attention and put one hand on her heart and held the other in the air. “I do solemnly swear.”

His buzz had worn off and he missed it. It was a relief after the weeks of worry. “On two conditions. No kissing and no questions.” He pointed a finger at her.

“You’re the boss.” She flashed her pearly whites.

I Get High with a Little Help from my Friends

At the condo Eric called to see if Matt was around. “Hello?” He wasn’t home. He felt for Matt and realized he was at Joann’s in a coital moment. Embarrassed he said, “He’s still out.”

“You’re blushing. Do you know what he’s up to?” Lori’s eyes widened.

“It’s so weird because that sounds like a question.” He turned on some music.

“Sorry. No questions and no kissing.” Lori repeated his rules. “The spirit is strong but the flesh is weak.” She rolled her eyes and bobbed her head left and right.

Eric opened the sliding door to the small back yard as she plopped down on the couch. Zeus bounded in and hopped on the cushion next to her.

“Hello.” She cooed. “Aren’t you a sweetie?”

Eric got a couple of glasses of water and matches. “You first.”

She took out the joint and put it in her lips. He watched them puff as he lit it for her. They took turns until it was just a nub.

“That’s Zeus.” Eric patted the dog’s head. The high was creeping back into his brain and he was in his happy place again – loose as a goose.

“As in the god of the gods?”

“He’s the dog of dogs.” They laughed. He got up to turn down the radio low enough for ambiance. Waving Zeus off the couch he sat closer to Lori.

“I really shouldn’t get stoned. I’m a high school teacher.”

“At a Catholic school no less.” He reclined all the way back and let his head rest on the sofa cushion. He looked at Lori who was staring at the roof in a similar position. “Why do you want to write about something no one will believe?”

She rolled her head to face him. “Not only is that a question but a forbidden topic.”

He smiled. “You’re always one step ahead.”

“A girl can’t let down her guard.”

He wondered if her guard was down. It was worth a shot to probe a little while she was under the influence. Her mind was pondering potential topics that weren’t taboo.

"I can feel that." She stared up at the ceiling again.

"How?" He stopped probing.

"Another question and same forbidden topic." If she had to obey rules, he had to.

"Thanks for keeping me convicted." He sassed. "How old are you?"

"Twenty two."

"That's a lie."

"I'll be twenty two in July." She rocked her head gently.

"Isn't that young to have gone through graduate school?"

"I skipped a year and finished college in three."

He was impressed. She was super smart. If he didn't figure it out on his own, her little meter was hard evidence. "Tell me more." He requested.

"With your disruptions every time I round a number up or don't want to admit something. I don't think so." She faced him again.

"Tell me the truth and it won't happen."

"Okay Matt." She laughed so hard she fell on his shoulder.

"I'm Eric, the same one who took you to dinner. You know that. How did you know that?"

She peered into his eyes. "It felt like a continuation from our dinner and not like I was meeting someone knew."

Made sense. He was a little disappointed. It was nice to think she wanted him to be Eric. "More about you, please?"

"I'm a Cancer or moon child as some people call us."

He snickered. "Something serious."

"We're stoned. We don't want to waste that on something serious." She held on to his arm.

"What do we do then?" He asked trying to think of an alternative to kissing. He brushed some hair out of her face that had fallen forward when she fell on him.

"At Berkeley we read lyrics or poetry. Pink Floyd is especially profound when stoned. If you have a copy of the *Wizard of Oz* and *Dark Side of the Moon* we can watch the *Dark Side of Oz*."

"What?" He knew the movie but she lost him after that.

She lifted her head a little excited to explain. “You play the *Wizard of Oz* without audio and turn on Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon*. They synch up. Like when the tornado hits *Great Gig in the Sky* is playing. And when Dorothy goes to the fortuneteller his sign says past, present and future and the song *Time* is playing. And when she opens the door to Oz and the film changes from black and white to color the song *Money* starts up.”

“I don’t have either here.” He was bummed. It sounded mesmerizing and perfect for his high.

“So no questions.” She scanned around the room. It was a nice condo. She figured their mother must have decorated it for them. The décor wasn’t feminine but it was too polished for college boys.

“And no kissing.” He watched her.

She turned to him. “I wasn’t going to kiss you.”

“I was reminding myself.”

She sat up. “You mentioned you had a girlfriend.”

“That wasn’t completely true.”

“See how this isn’t a fair exchange without my meter?”

“It can’t tell when I’m lying only if I can tell if you are.” He repeated the sentence in his mind to see if he had said it correctly. He did.

“So you aren’t involved?” She asked hoping that he wasn’t.

“There’s a girl that won’t have anything to do with me.” Eric found it easy to talk to Lori. She was like an old friend that just happened to have gorgeous eyes and a soft inviting mouth.

“Why? You’re a good looking guy and sometimes even fun to be with.”

“I lost my temper a few weeks ago. I mean really lost it.”

“Did you hit her?”

“No!” He was appalled at the accusation.

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Because it has to do with your stuff.” She waved her fingers in the air.

He grabbed her hand and put it in her lap. “Yes but even so, I wouldn’t want to talk about that.”

He intertwined their fingers.

“You can’t tantalize me and then leave me high and dry. Let’s not talk about it but I’ll drop hints to make it all the more alluring.” She scoffed.

“We’re friends now let’s not argue.”

“Getting stoned together doesn’t make us friends.” She kidded.

“What about the fact that we kissed?” He held her gaze. Why did he make that rule? He wasn’t going to obey it.

“No.” She whispered afraid to look away.

“What about that I want to do it again?”

Lori gulped. “To shut me up?”

He shook his head and leaned in. She held him back. “It was your rule.” She added that she wished it wasn’t in her head. He waited for a reprimand but she didn’t tell him to stop reading her mind.

He picked up the charm around her neck. It was a silver Celtic cross. “Irish Catholic?” His hand touched her skin lightly as he held it. They were face to face. He would get another kiss. It was only a matter of time.

“Yeah. My grandparents immigrated from the mother land to New Ireland.” She tucked her chin down to see the cross.

“Where’s New Ireland?”

“Boston.”

They laughed. Eric twisted the clasp of the chain around her neck. “There.” He was poised for another kiss.

Don’t fall for him. She mentally cautioned herself. It must have been unintentional telepathy. He had to be careful. If he could pick up her ideas, she may hear his. She leaned back in the couch and away from him. “Can I ask why you are so secretive? Everyone is that has these things.” She snuck in a small question.

“It’s self protection.” It was safe knowledge to share.

“So if I already know, why are you still unwilling to talk?”

“I don’t want to be part of your story.” Eric leaned back watching her stare at the ceiling. They were going in the wrong direction. Her long neck was tempting to touch – with his mouth.

“I can’t even know for my own curiosity?” She turned her head towards him.

“We’re wasting a high on serious conversation.”

“Let me in.”

“We call it the inner circle. And Kate is the key to be accepted.”

“Why?” She was asking too many questions.

“I don’t know but we’re all connected to her in some way. Henry pointed it out.”

“Who’s Henry?” There was some recognition in her face.

“Henry and Frankie are friends of Father Francis.”

“And they got into your circle because they’re close to Kate?”

“Father Francis is. Henry and Frankie are getting there.”

“So there are exceptions?” Lori was hopeful.

“Yeah but they have their own skills so there is a mutual desire to keep things hidden.”

“If I had a skill, would you open up?” She meant if she had a skill would he like her.

“Why do you want to write about this stuff? There’s a lot of angst that goes with our story.” Eric waited for her to shoot down his question again.

She didn’t. “If you must know, I don’t care for journalism. All the big stories are about pain and destruction. So I wanted to write about something fascinating that wasn’t driven by personal drama.”

“Then we aren’t topical for your purposes.” His statement sunk in.

She nodded her head. “Can I be honest with you?”

“You don’t really have a choice, do you?”

She grinned at his all too truthful joke. “I don’t think I’ll make it as writer either.”

“Why?”

“I’m more interested in discovery than disclosure.” She shrugged. “Of course, if I change my mind about my career one more time my mother will kill me.”

He laughed.

“I already have enough to fill a book or more and yet I haven’t written a single word.” Sheepishly she looked away from him. “If I ever get around to writing anything and you don’t want to be part of it –

I'll honor that. I mean, I'm not asking about you because I'm some driven woman blind by her ambition.

It's just very fascinating. You're very fascinating."

"We're breaking the rules." And he had a better rule to break.

Lori took out her meter. He gave her a stern look. "I'm not asking any questions and it won't tell me anything new." It hummed to life.

He leaned over touching her head with his. The graph filled in as it read his skills. He reached out to Zeus and watched the lines react. Then he lifted a book off the coffee table and the graph adjusted.

"You do more than telekinesis in movement don't you?"

He shook his head that he didn't want to discuss it. His forehead rubbed against hers when he moved causing her to mirror his actions.

"What do you do that doesn't fall into these groups?" It was the burning question, a new mystery in the paranormal world that had captivated her.

He cupped her face and pressed his lips against hers. "If you keep asking questions, I'm going to break the kissing rule."

"It's your rule." She whispered.

"You could've argued against it." He stowed her toy away and put her purse on the floor as he leaned her back on the couch. They pulled closer and were smile-to-smile. He felt like a teenager again unable to stop grinning and her lips were kissing his teeth. With some focus he managed to wipe the smirk off his face so he could kiss her properly.

He slid his hand up her back and moved it forward. She adeptly blocked him from second base. He had to try but he didn't mind. Eric could kiss her all night and not get bored. They ran out of steam after what felt like hours. It was probably not that long but his time perception was altered.

He held her and she traced her finger along his jaw and down to his Adam's apple. "You're scratchy."

Eric gently rubbed his cheek against hers.

"I like it. It's kind of rugged."

He snuggled in close. All his worries were gone and he didn't have any urge to get back to them.

Opening his eyes to a misty version of his den in the same position with the same incredible lady in his arms he realized they were in a joint dream.

She blinked as she looked around. "Are we awake or is this a dream?"

Running a hand through her hair he kissed her right eye closed and then the other. "We're at my apartment." She cuddled into his shoulder and her hair felt soft against his face. Did he always like the smell of cherries? He leaned his head gently on hers and faded away.

"Eric wake up." Matt shook his shoulder.

"I'm up." His voice was rough and dry. Lori was still in his arms on the sofa.

She stirred and blinked just as she had in their dream. She rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Five in the morning." Matt chided. "And you have to go teach our sister calculus."

"Shoot." She bolted up shaking her head in shame. "Um, where's the bathroom?"

Matt pointed and she went to freshen up.

"Five? Where have you been?" Eric asked. It was the first time Matt had stayed at Joann's all night.

"You just had sex with Kate's teacher. Let's forgo the moral judgment."

"I wasn't judging and we didn't sleep together. We got stoned."

"So much better. At least sex is legal." His teeth were clenched. "Get up."

Eric rolled his eyes as he stood up. Matt had been stoned before. He was only upset because of Lori and perhaps because he didn't share his pot with him.

Lori popped back into the room looking remarkably well put together all things considered and grabbed her purse.

"Take my jacket. It's cold out." Eric held his coat as she shrugged into it.

"Thanks." She smiled at him. "Nice to see you again Matt."

"Yeah, yeah." Matt held his hands up in surrender.

The sky was gray in anticipation of a new day. Eric walked her to her car at a loss for words.

"Is he very mad?" She asked.

"Yeah. At me."

She rolled her green eyes. "I'm sure I get a fair share."

"If you get any, it won't be a fair share." He kissed her cheek. He had morning breath and didn't want to get too close.

She opened the door to her blue VW Tiguan. "I'm really confused." The words tumbled out gracelessly.

"Me too. We'll figure it out later."

When Eric returned to the condo Matt slammed him against the wall. "Are you shitting me? Kate's teacher?"

"I was confused." He didn't fight his brother back. It was all for show and Matt needed to get it out.

"Don't blame the pot."

"No! Not from the pot. Everything." Eric wiggled and Matt freed him from the wall. "It was escapism."

"You couldn't wait a month until Kate graduates?"

"It was just one of those things."

Matt was overreacting. "No one finds out about this and you keep your pecker in your pants until she isn't Kate's teacher."

"Come on. You know I am hung up on Frankie. This isn't going to happen again." Eric walked to the kitchen to get a bowl of cereal. He was famished.

"Are you sure about that?" Matt glared.

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"It means you were having more fun last night than you've had in a while."

"Are you telling me to go for it or stay away?"

"I'm telling you to wait and then go for it." Matt shook his head. "Kate is going to freak."

"She'll never know."

Matt thumped Eric in the back of the head.

"Ouch!"

"When was the last time you kept something from Kate?"

"Lots."

“Lately? How about how she didn’t know we were meeting Joe the other night.”

“This is different. First, it happened once. Second, I don’t like Lori like that. Third, it isn’t a big deal.”

“And Lori isn’t going to slip in front of Kate?”

“She won’t say anything.” Eric dropped his spoon in his bowl making a milk splash. Kate could read minds. She had been trying with Lori since she started teaching.

“On purpose.” Matt finished.

“She knows how to block mind reading.” Eric picked up his spoon and returned to his meal. Lori had been successful up to that point. It was pointless to think she would slip up because they made out.

“And I’ll get blamed too. Guilt by association.” Matt paced the kitchen floor thoroughly perturbed by his twin.

“Look, I don’t like her. She’s too tall and too blond.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“My asshole twin brother.”

“Eric, you can lie to yourself but you can’t lie to me. If you weren’t interested you wouldn’t have been necking with Kate’s teacher in our condo.”

“Are you watching Nick at Nite or something? Who even says necking anymore?” Eric joked in a failed attempt to get Matt to relax.

“You like her.” Matt didn’t accuse. He was informing Eric. “Look, I’m all for it. I suspected as much after the other night but I didn’t think you would move this fast. Kate doesn’t trust her and she’s her teacher for four more weeks.”

“Even if you’re right, and you’re wrong, Kate will cope.”

“Of course she will but it’ll upset her in the meantime. She needs that like a bullet in the head.”

“Hey.” Eric didn’t like that expression used on Kate.

“Just eat your cereal and save me the lectures on how to treat our sister.” He left to shower up.

Can't Live with 'Em

Eric took a short run after breakfast. His mind spun at supersonic speeds as he processed the evening's events. Matt's minor eruption didn't help. It was unlikely that anyone would find out. It was just one night. The pot didn't help. It contributed in two ways. It slowed down his mind and it gave him opportunity. Why did he ever agree? The high was nice, that was most of it but he didn't want her to leave anymore than she wanted to. And the romance was cathartic. For one night he was his old self and it felt great.

He drove his brothers home for the weekend. It was a quiet ride. Brian was hung over in the back and Matt stewed in the passenger seat. Their mother had a big lunch prepared. She fed them well and after four days of college food, they dug in hungrily.

Knowing his brothers weren't in good conditions, Eric volunteered to help clean up.

"Don't you have something better to do?" Sandy spoiled them.

"Mom, I can help." He rinsed off the dishes and loaded the washer. It was his father that had instilled the good behavior to help out without being asked. Occasionally his mother helped at his office but she had been a stay-at-home mom since the kids were born and never complained about the mundane chores. Ron made it crystal clear to all his children that she was not to be neglected.

"You need a hair cut." She ran her fingers through his shaggy head. Maybe it wasn't spoiling so much as babying.

"I'll get one today." Eric promised brushing her hand away like a child.

"You're in a better mood."

How did she come by that conclusion? He had a guilty conscience about his tryst. "How so?"

"Lately you've been so agitated and you're calmer today." She smiled. "A little sad but that's understandable. Things were scary for a while."

"I'm just tired. Too tired to be mad anymore."

"Whatever it is, it suits you." She gave him a hug. "I'll start the washer. Go get a hair cut."

"Yes Mom."

Eric took her car in case Matt wanted the Accord. Matt was already upset and he didn't want him getting more pissed if he was left without wheels. After getting his trim and still wiping away the hundreds of remnants of shed, he walked around the pier with nowhere in particular to go. It was a beautiful day. It was always beautiful in California but he hadn't noticed for so long it was like new.

There were tons of school kids as usual and he sensed Kate's presence nearby. He considered avoiding her. He didn't want to give anything away about what had happened between him and the one teacher she didn't like at school.

She must have sensed him too because she came around the corner hand in hand with Greg. "I knew you were here." She greeted in a frivolous mood.

"Hey there. How are you guys?"

"Good. Staying out of trouble." Greg answered.

"But not Miss Becket. We think she got busted." Kate said gleefully.

"Really?" Eric hid his interest. Even a cool priest like Father Francis wouldn't want to know one of his teachers got stoned. "What happened?" *Please don't be about the pot.*

"She hasn't played with her meter all week." Kate's smile was at full force.

Eric relaxed. "That's good."

"We don't know if she was told not to use it." Greg suggested that Kate was reading into clues that meant nothing. She was. Lori had stopped because Eric made the request.

"We can ask but let's not. It might kill my buzz." Kate enjoyed the idea that Lori was lectured.

"Lori's not that bad." Eric hated to see his sister be so unkind about his friend.

"Miss Becket," Kate insisted, "is horrible. She still keeps up her guard."

"Because she can tell you're reading her mind." Greg countered.

"If she weren't hiding something she wouldn't need too. She must have run out of poetry because she was singing all morning."

"Singing?" Eric withheld a smirk. He was the reason for her exuberance. "How do you sing in your thoughts?"

"Like this?" Kate started singing one of her songs from the play in her head.

She was right. Eric heard it as if she sang instead of spoke. “Why was she singing songs from the *Pirates of Penzance*?”

“She wasn’t. She was singing *Hit the Road Jack*, *Love Stinks*, *You Ought to Know*, *You Give Love a Bad Name*, *These Boots are Made for Walking* and some country song about men and how you can’t live with them and you can’t shoot ‘em.”

His stomach clenched. “Odd selection.” Those weren’t the kind of songs you wanted to hear were sung by someone you kissed. Even if it was a one-night stand.

“Maybe she had a bad date.”

“Miss Becket was messing with you. She was in a good mood.” Greg assessed.

“She was faking it. Why would she sing about bad love?” Kate frowned at him. “Let me have my moment of Zen. I bet she got dumped. Who would date her anyway? She’s lucky she had someone long enough to get dumped.”

“Kate, that isn’t nice.” Eric hated to see Kate acting catty let alone about Lori.

“You’re just soft on her because she adores you.” Kate overstated.

“She was using me to get information. That hardly qualifies as adoration.”

“Because she’s evil. We don’t know why she wants this information anyway. She may be the leak to Tyler or Gran.”

“She isn’t. Darn it Kate, she’s your teacher. Can you be nice for another month?” Eric pleaded. It reminded him of Matt’s scolding and his guilty conscious surged.

“Why?” Her eyes narrowed on his.

He tensed waiting for her to put the pieces together.

“Because you have bigger axes to grind.” Greg spoke out and saved Eric unknowingly.

“You two are ganging up on me. And to think I was glad when you stopped fighting amongst yourselves.” She pouted.

Greg gave her a peck on the cheek. “She always says that when she knows we’re right.”

“Have you heard from Frankie or Henry lately? Did they find Guido’s place?” She got serious realizing that neither man in her life was going to let her relish Miss Becket’s angst.

“I haven’t. I’ll call.” Eric was glad they moved away from talking about Lori.

“Why not stop by with some flowers?” Kate batted her eyes as she made the suggestion.

“You don’t have to pull out the pleading look. I’ll do it.” When did that start to happen? When did Kate take control of Eric? Flowers wouldn’t make a difference but it was a nice gesture and wouldn’t kill him.

On command, he picked up a bouquet of different colored gerbera daisies because they were bright with open faces. Roses seemed presumptuous. It was an act of repentance after all and not foreplay. Looking like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, he knocked on the front door with the bunch clutched behind his back. Frankie whipped it open, purse in hand and ready to leave.

“Eric?” She said coolly. “We weren’t expecting you. I was just going to the market.”

He handed her the flowers. “Not a problem. I wanted to get an update and bring you something to brighten your day.”

She was flattered. “Thank you.” She let him in and put the flowers into a vase. “Henry is in his office.” She left without another word.

He didn’t know what to make of her aloofness. He took three steps back without any forward progression. He should’ve read her mind but the truth was he was afraid what he would hear. She often kept challenging ideas forefront and he didn’t want to hear something bad, true or false. He wouldn’t be able to discriminate in the frigid atmosphere and it wasn’t something he made a habit of doing.

“Henry?” He called as he poked his head into the room.

“Eric, how are you?” At least Henry was happy to see him.

“Good. How are things going?”

“No luck so far. Guido may be using those girls that make that one-way force field to hide.”

“What about going at night? I bet they sleep. Sensing him while he is asleep would be harder but unless they are guarding him around the clock, I bet it’ll work.”

“We’ll try that. Are you guys joining us this weekend?”

“We are.”

“I should tell you that Frankie wants you to go with me and she’ll go with Matt.”

“That explains the cold reception?” Eric sighed. “I thought I was making headway but I guess the fact she didn’t stop by yesterday was a big hint.”

Henry's head sagged. "About that. She did. The cold reception has something to do with you being cheek to cheek with a tall gorgeous blond."

Eric couldn't believe his rotten luck. "It was one song. We ran into Lori. She was playing games to get me to talk." He kept it to himself how he got her to stop talking.

"I don't blame you. You've been more patient than I would be in the same circumstance. But Frankie's jealous." It amused Henry. "Maybe it will prompt her to fire or clear. Speaking of your teacher friend, she wasn't open to talk to me."

"Really?" Eric figured Lori would love more subjects to quiz for her implausible narrative. Even if Eric forgave her all her other shortcomings, which really weren't important in the scheme of things, that stupid story would always be a thorn in his side. Just because she hadn't gotten around to putting her ideas down in words, didn't mean she wouldn't some day.

"Well, she didn't want to meet me alone. She doesn't trust a stranger calling her out of the blue. So I casually dropped your name as a friend and suggested that you could come with us. She agreed if you went."

That didn't make sense. Eric didn't think she would want to see him again after hearing Kate's list of angry love songs. "When did you talk to her?"

"Tuesday. She didn't mention it to you?"

"Nope." Would she still be willing after what happened? Clearly she didn't want a second date. He had promised Matt it was a one-time event. He didn't mind the idea when he thought he was making the choice. Hell, he didn't even ask for her number. But it never feels good when you're the one being rejected.

"She's being careful. She's comfortable with you." Henry eyes lit up with a new inspiration. "Why not make it a double date? We'll bring Frankie along."

"No way." Eric blurted out. "Frankie is already livid that I danced with her." Plus it would be unbearable for him to have both women together when things were so murky.

"She'll see that you aren't interested. She'll go for the good cause. Seeing how her gadget works will be really helpful."

For such a short fling, Eric was having a bad day after. "I'll go if you want but not as a double date."

"Could make Frankie more suspicious but okay." Henry let his words sink in.

"Fine, whatever." Eric could live through a bad dinner for the greater good.

"Excellent." Henry picked up his cell and found the number. "Hello, Miss Becket. It's Henry again... Lori it is... Doing well and yourself..." He held his hand over the mike. "She's so sweet." He returned to the phone. "Eric is up to join us if you're still willing... I sure did. He's right here..." He held the phone out.

Eric picked it up and his stomach lurched in nervous anticipation for a telling off. "Hi Lori."

"I didn't know if I would hear from you before graduation. Henry must really want to talk to me." She didn't sound upset. If anything a bit humored.

"He does." Upon hearing her voice, Eric wanted to see her again and put their stoned make out session in the past. There was only one friend in his life that wasn't part of his turmoil and knew about his skills. She was a nice haven for a reprieve.

"Then tell me why he wants to talk to me when you shoot me down the second I so much as mention metaphysics."

"Henry will be another person to interview." He dropped a clue that he couldn't be straightforward.

"You can't talk openly. He's there." She caught it. "Tell me if I hit the right answer. He wants to tell me to back off? He doesn't have the same sense of secrecy as you? He wants to know what I know?"

"Sort of."

"The meter, he wants to know how it works."

"So you're in?"

"I'm not going to tell him, not without more information than you gave me."

"He needs to talk to you to arrange a time." He handed the phone back to Henry.

"So we're set to go... How about this weekend..."

Eric's stomach tensed again. He was going to burn a hole in his gut. Considering he had been the most relaxed in weeks only the night before it was a one eighty.

"Tonight is perfect... Great... The fish house on the pier at seven... Shall I bring my sister? She's like me... Okay, it's a date."

Eric wished Henry didn't end it on that note. It wasn't a date. He frowned.

"What's wrong? Tonight doesn't work for you?" Henry saw his frown.

"She just wears me out."

"I wouldn't mind be worn out by a tall gorgeous blond." Henry made Lori sound like a piece of meat.

"At least we'll get it over with."

Expert Advice

Eric took a rare afternoon run. He needed to unwind knowing he was going to be rewound tightly that night. Why would he agree to go to dinner with both Frankie and Lori at the same time? He drove to his grandfather's house to run in his backyard, which was much larger than theirs. Eric could safely use speed away from prying eyes.

"Hey grandpa." Eric gave Gerard a hug.

"You don't have to call before you come over. You can let yourself in when ever you want."

Eric didn't have a key but he could open locks with his mind. "Thanks."

Zeus and Katja were with him and he led them out to the back where Socrates, his grandfather's dog, was already jumping with gusto. They were from the same litter.

The dogs chased after him for a couple of laps but, unable to keep his pace, they started playing on their own. Eric lost count of how many laps he ran and was drenched with sweat when he finally felt spent.

"Keeping up with the training." Gerard had lemonade on the patio for him.

Eric drank a full glass in one sip and poured another. "Yeah and I have some extra energy."

"Isn't Tyler a moot point?" Gerard hated to think of anyone being murdered even if it was deserved.

"But Guido is a problem for Frankie and Henry. Matt and I may help them with that. We'll be careful." He promised before Gerard gave him a needless warning. He understood it was dangerous.

"What do your parents think of that?"

"We'll tell them if we have to do anything. Right now we're only looking for their hideout. Joe, their cop friend, is helping us and they have some other people to call in when the time comes."

"You can count me in." Gerard was a brave man. He could hinder people's gifts and shoot. More than Joe could do.

"I'll tell them. Dad will feel the same. If not, I hope he won't freak out if we help."

"Is it because you are worried about Frankie?"

"Both of them, but I like her." It showed and there wasn't a point in hiding it around empaths.

"She's pretty disappointed with me right now."

“Another reason to expend excess energy?”

“Maybe.”

“What happened?”

“I kind of blew it when I hit Greg.”

“That was stupid but Greg is over it.”

“And then I may have blurted out that she wasn’t being more helpful because she once dated Tyler.”

“And were you right?”

“No. She was using him to get information on Guido and he was feeling her out as a potential recruit.”

“Doesn’t mean they didn’t have feelings for each other. Often people hide behind seemingly innocuous pretexts to be close. When I met your grandmother, she was dating this super jock. I pretended to need tutoring to get some time without the meathead around and it worked. She married me.”

“Grandpa, you sly dog.” Eric laughed. “If it was more, it ended before I met her.”

“She’s a confusing lady.” Gerard mused. “That isn’t a tough question if there’s nothing to hide.”

“She gets a little weird that she doesn’t have any personal space and I violated it.”

“Hopefully that won’t stop her for long.” Gerard paused. “There’s more.” He could read feelings better than Frankie could read minds.

“This is just between us and the dogs.” Eric joked.

“I can keep a secret but I can’t speak for them.”

“She caught me dancing with another woman at a bar.”

“Just dancing?”

Eric had committed a greater sin too but Frankie didn’t know. “She just caught us dancing.”

“Another harmless offense. She’s looking for reasons to hide from you. Could be she isn’t interested. Could be she’s scared that she likes you too much.”

“At least we have it narrowed down.” Eric chuckled at the lack of help his insights were. “The anger is a very firm reason to stay clear of me and the other only compounds it.”

“You shouldn’t have hit Greg. I’ll never say otherwise. But your temper isn’t as bad as you think.

We are a close family and Kate is our baby.”

“She’s all right.”

“And this other woman, who is she?” Gerard didn’t miss a detail.

“Remember, this is between us.” After getting a confirmation nod from Gerard he continued.

“You know her. She works at St. Iggy’s. It’s Lori Becket.”

“The new teacher that Kate thinks is helping Gran?”

“She isn’t.”

“I never believed it. I may not be able to read minds like you kids but my empathy gives me a good ability to gage people. She’s rock solid.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” He thought about her dreaded story.

“Why were you dancing with her if you don’t like her? Or do you?”

“She was using me to pick my brain to see what we can do.”

“And you were using her to find out if she was working with one of your enemies. People make up the darnedest rationalizations to spend time with each other.”

“I’ll reconsider her if Frankie falls through.”

“She isn’t the kind of woman to be a consolation prize.” Gerard said sagely.

“True. She couldn’t walk through the bar without being hit on.”

“She’s a good looking woman. If I were fifty years younger...”

“Grandpa!”

“You have a good problem. Too many woman is like being too rich or too thin.”

“Thanks for the use of your yard and lending me your ear.” Eric got up. “I have a date with Frankie and Lori.”

“You’re just getting greedy now.”

“Henry will be there and I don’t think I’m getting so much as a hand shake from either.”

Too Poor & Too Fat

Eric decided to stay casual and wore his 501s. He wanted to be as common as possible and blend into the background. His goal was to be as close to invisible as non-metaphysically possible. He put on a light blue oxford shirt and went to get his jacket. It wasn't there because Lori had it. Matt had the same jacket and he went to borrow it. Sharing clothes was one of the many advantages of being exactly identical.

"Can I borrow your jacket?" He went to the closet ready to take it regardless of the answer, which would either be yes or something wise-ass.

"If you tell me which one you're seeing tonight. Frankie or Lori?" Always trying to keep each other on their toes, Matt went with a light mixing of permission and sass.

"Both." Eric braced for more medicine coming his way.

Matt roared with a hearty chuckle. "Back to back or at the same time?"

"Same time. Henry wants to talk to Lori and it was his idea." At least his brother was enjoying his misery. It was better than being slammed up against the wall and he would do the same or worse.

"And you couldn't argue because no one can know." Matt's eyes started watering from all his laughter.

"Come with us." Eric didn't know why he didn't think of it earlier.

"Uh, no." Matt declined. "Keep me out of this mess. Wait? Does Lori think she hooked up with me last night?"

"We only kissed and no. She didn't buy that I was you."

"She can tell us apart? Good." Matt was impressed. There were a few outside of the family but most had empathetic abilities.

"If you go, you'll have a front row seat."

"But I don't have a jacket."

"I'll go without."

Matt considered it. Slowly his mind changed. "I shouldn't do this but you are my brother and it's tempting to see the grave you've dug for yourself." That wasn't his only temptation. He was dying with curiosity about Lori.

"I'll owe you."

"Damn straight." He got up and changed to match Eric's attire but not perfectly. "And you're picking up the tab."

"Fine. You can even order the lobster."

"I'm getting the steak and lobster with all the trimmings."

When they walked up to the pier they found Frankie and Henry waiting outside the restaurant.

"You look pretty." Eric said to Frankie who was wearing his favorite black dress.

"Thank you." She threw him a warm smile.

"I didn't know you were coming." Henry said to Matt. He was annoyed that their foursome had a spare wheel. "I'll go let the hostess know there'll be five."

Eric sensed Lori pulling up to the garage. He was surprised how attune to her presence he had become after one evening. He had only started using his empathy in the past months and she was the first girl he had kissed since. It must have left a more prominent impression on him because of the context.

Matt gave him an odd look. He was picking up Eric's awareness.

Lori walked up in a dark blue skirt and light blue scoop neck blouse.

You dressed alike. How cute? Matt teased mentally.

It'd be grand if you helped me through this and saved your taunting until later. Eric would have liked to skip it completely but that was too much to ask for.

That isn't why I came. Matt had a wicked grin on his face.

"Tell me that's her." Henry had returned and was ogling Lori.

Eric smiled. She did look great. "She's taller than you."

"I'll live with it." Henry beamed. It wasn't more than an inch.

"Hello." Lori waved at her dinner dates. She recognized Frankie immediately from the women's club where Kate doubled as her fake twin.

“Lori.” Eric stepped forward and put his arm around her urging her forward. “You know Matt. This is Henry and his sister Frankie.”

“Nice to meet you.” Henry shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you.” She smirked at Frankie. “And we’ve met. No twin today?”

Frankie glared at Eric. It wasn’t his fault but the night would follow that pattern. “Henry is my twin.” She answered.

“You look different than I recall.” Lori joked to Henry who immediately blushed.

“Yes. You’re very clever. That was Kate but you figured that out already.” Eric hoped it would help the tension. It didn’t.

Frankie and Henry walked into the fish house, arctic weather clearly in the forecast for the evening.

“You don’t need to stay.” Lori said meekly to the twins. “I’m fine if you want to go.”

Eric figured she didn’t want to see him. He didn’t blame her. It was clear he wasn’t planning on calling.

“Nonsense. We’re glad to be here.” Matt answered. He meant it as support to Lori and didn’t give Eric the chance to escape. *She wants us to stay. You’re okay with that?*

Yeah. Eric was. *You just want to size her up.*

That too. Matt admitted. They didn’t meddle in each other love lives but after dinner and the night at the bar, Matt wanted to see what powers Lori had over Eric. It was one of the many disadvantages of being exactly identical twins.

Matt held the door for them and Lori walked in. He stopped Eric before he passed. “You don’t owe me anything. I can already see I’ll have more fun tonight than anything you can do in the future will ever match.”

Eric mugged a plastic smile. “Just moments ago I was so happy to be a twin and now I wish I was an only child.”

“I love you too little brother.” He let him pass on that irritating note.

The distraction of both women, neither of which was happy with him, was too much for Eric. Matt was thinking sharp as a knife. They had a knack of working people to their purpose in a social

situation and Eric was the victim of that knock. Matt had ensured he was between the two ladies when they sat. Matt sat with Henry to his right, Lori to his right, Eric to her right and Frankie between Eric and Matt. Eric waited for a safe moment to glare at Matt who wasn't receiving any telepathic messages at the time.

Henry had asked for a private table that was in the corner and overlooked the pier and the Pacific. They wouldn't be overheard.

Matt glanced over his menu. "Eric, you're picking up the tab."

"Yes. It's on me." He didn't care.

"You're extra pleasant tonight." Frankie commented as Matt held back a small giggle.

"It's nice to get out with friends." He smiled innocently at her. Neither twin ever pulled out an innocent look unless it was to cover up something sinful.

"So Lori, are you new to town?" Henry questioned.

"Yes. I grew up in San Diego."

"Nice area."

"And where are you two from?" She asked shyly.

"Santa Katrina."

"Of course." Lori said. "So many skilled people are drawn to this town."

"We've noticed that. Is that why you moved here?" Henry was mesmerized.

"Partly." She glanced up for the first time, only for a moment. "There are other places but this is such a nice community."

"You're lucky to get a job at St. Iggy's, especially since you're so young." There was an edge in Frankie's tone.

"Well, Father Francis must have seen something worthy in me." Lori was on the defense picking up Frankie's critical attitude.

"He's a good man." Henry commented.

The waitress took their orders and brought their drinks. "What's the matter Eric? You only got a water?" Matt inoffensively asked as he filled up the wine glasses for the others.

“Still drying out from last night.” Eric smiled at Frankie and Lori who had both glanced up when he answered. *You’re a dead man.* He mentally thought to Matt. Matt had his wicked grin plastered on his face.

That’s assuming you live through the night to kill me.

“Eric, you got your haircut. It looks good.” Lori said almost raising a hand to reach out.

Frankie huffed.

“Thanks.” He ran a hand through his short hair thinking it would take a week to lose that fresh-cut appearance.

“Without me.” Matt lost his constant smile for a moment. “I’ll have to go tomorrow.”

“Is that bad?” Lori said but got it an instant later. “Never mind. You like looking alike. Well, it makes it easier for me after you guys tried to switch places.” She was a good sport about it.

“When did you do that?” Frankie asked Eric pointedly. “Last night?”

“It’s a funny story. We ran into each other at a bar in Santa Barbara.” Eric wasn’t sure he would be able to get food into his ever-contracting gullet.

“Did you have a good time?” Frankie pressed.

Eric stiffened unsure how to answer. If he said yes, Frankie would be mad. If he said no, Lori would be wounded.

“It was a Cinco de Mayo celebration. I had a little too much fun.” Lori admitted staring too hard at her wine glass.

Eric’s eyes darted to Lori. She meant it and she wasn’t mad. To his surprise, he was relieved. The songs were just an inside joke that she planned would get back to him. It was amusing now that he knew. He grinned.

Frankie simmered.

Why is Frankie mad? Matt asked Eric on the telepathic down low.

Frankie stopped by Rudy’s last night and caught me dancing with Lori.

Matt couldn’t hold back an audible laugh. “Sorry. Just remembered a joke someone told me at school.” He lamely excused for his outburst.

Henry was giving Frankie a fretful look. He didn’t want her being difficult all night.

Their food started to arrive and the awkward conversation was given a temporary lull while they ate their salads.

“Um, Lori,” Henry asked as his salad was replaced with his main course. “I hear you have an interesting device.”

She pulled out her meter and handed it to him. She leaned in to show him and described how the bars worked. Eric shifted in his seat as he watched the two head to head. He was in a similar position the prior night when they were playing with the same gadget right before he retracted the no kissing rule.

Matt smiled at him as he craned his neck to get a better view of the screen. *Jealous much?* He ridiculed.

“See what happens when I point it at Eric.” Lori positioned the meter for the best read. “What’s odd is this line isn’t suppose to be longer than the rest unless he does something that I haven’t programmed in yet.”

“Of course he does.” Frankie said. “Or it would show up.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I do.” It was a statement meant to express that she would not share the information with Lori.

Lori’s eyes darted to Eric and quickly away. He didn’t need to read her mind to know she had put two and two together that Frankie was the girl he mentioned.

Unfortunately Frankie was picking up on their unspoken exchange. Hoping that Lori had her usual protective wall up, he blocked his own mind to keep Frankie from reading anything incriminating.

“Eric, do something telekinetic.” Lori requested.

He slid the saltshaker across the table to her.

“See how these lines lengthened. There’s always a reading but when he uses one of his talents it’s like flexing a muscle and shows stronger.”

“Amazing. And this can’t be fooled if he tried to block it.”

“No. That’s how I found Kate even though she was invisible. It actually read higher because she was using her skills but she lights it up regardless.”

“How did you make this?” Henry flipped it over but the back didn’t give him any insights to how it worked.

"I met a guy in college who read minds. Really annoying but I started wondering why. It had to register somehow and the idea was the genesis of that." She pointed to her meter.

"You're very smart." Henry was intimidated.

"She went to Berkeley." Eric bragged without thinking.

Frankie glared at him and then at Lori who had looked down a split second earlier.

"Wow! Berkeley. Not bad." Henry ignored his sister sensing the cooperation was out of the question. "Tell me how you do it."

"I'd rather not."

"We can share research."

"That isn't a good idea." Frankie warned him.

"I agree." Eric added.

"I'd be open to an exchange of information." Lori gave her full concentration to Henry.

He reddened from her attention. "This would be helpful. We would have an idea of what we're dealing with."

"What are you dealing with?" Lori glanced up to Eric wondering if had to do with his temper tantrum and his vague omens of foul play.

"Henry, we should talk about this later and get back to Lori." Frankie said strictly.

Disregarding his sister Henry offered a broad explanation. "The short version is there are some people that are looking to cause us trouble because we won't assist them."

"Some use their skills for the wrong reasons. I had wondered why I mostly met kind people who could do these things." Lori said thinking back on several hints from Eric on the topic. "Well, except for Gran. She's bad?" She looked at Matt and Eric.

"She is." Matt confirmed.

"You know her?" Frankie sneered.

"I met her twice."

"Twice." Eric almost spat out food when he spoke.

"Yes. Frankie was there when I met her the second time."

"That was your second meeting?" Frankie said. "You acted like a first timer."

“No, some of them didn’t recognize me with blond hair. I’m naturally a brunette.” She had a half smile and avoided Eric’s eyes. She tucked a tussle of bottle blond behind her ear.

Eric gaped at her. Then he pulled his eyes back into their sockets and down to his meal before Frankie got any more possessive.

Maybe she isn’t as tall as she pretends either. Matt sent another mental taunt to Eric. He wasn’t visibly laughing, not even a slight shake from a stifled giggle, but Eric could hear it in his head.

Matt wasn’t doing anything he wouldn’t in the same situation. It helped on some level but there was a larger disturbance that negated the positive affect.

“When was the last meeting?” Frankie had forgotten about her romantic rivalry. She had a theory to prove. Her lab coat was on and her clinical nature overrode her jealousy.

“In January.”

“Was there a woman named Deborah Jones there?” Henry’s eyes stared into space.

“There was a Deborah but I don’t think her last name was Jones. I can’t be sure. There were a lot of people. I can check.” Playing with some buttons on her meter she found her notes. “Smith.” She answered thinking, as they all did, that sounded like an alias.

“And did she talk to Gran?” Frankie was on the edge of her seat anticipating the answer.

“For a long time. They left together with those other two women that were with Gran and three other ladies that weren’t there last time.”

“That’s the leak. It was December when Holly showed up at our house and spied Kate teaching us. She is how Tyler learned she could share gifts.” Frankie blurted out.

Eric dropped his head and then glared at Frankie.

“What?” Frankie didn’t grasp she was the one that gave away their biggest secret. “We know they have contact.”

Lori didn’t speak. Eric hoped she had misunderstood Frankie’s meaning. It was a fleeting fancy.

“Do you think Deborah still has contacts with her?” Henry wondered.

“She hasn’t turned up dead. She would divulge anything to save her miserable life.” Frankie theorized.

Lori's eyes darted back and forth as the conversation left her behind. It frightened her that they were talking about someone's potential murder so casually.

"That means Guido..." Matt started to speak but stopped when Eric mentally told him to shut up. He was worried that Guido knew about Kate.

"Can I get the check, please?" Eric asked the waitress. The idea that Guido could be aware of Kate petrified him. It outweighed his anger at Frankie's careless slip and both erased his discomfort from the dinner party.

"We're leaving?" Frankie didn't understand what changed Eric's demeanor. He had meekly sat through dinner and then suddenly took charge.

"We are. You guys can discuss exchanging information later. Matt and I aren't needed."

She furrowed her brows at him and turned to Henry. He had a pale expression. He had replayed the conversation in his head and found the misstep. There was only one thing that forced Eric to claim his leadership role reflexively and that was anything compromising for Kate. Frankie must have read his mind because her face dropped.

"Wow! Y'all just shut down in record timing." Lori was ill at ease.

"I'm sorry." Frankie said as if to the group but tilted her head slightly towards Eric. "He's right. We have taken up enough of your time."

Lori lingered as the others started to get up and Eric signed the bill.

"What just happened?" She whispered to him.

"Nothing. I didn't want you hearing about how dangerous this stuff gets." He didn't look up as the others waited at the entrance to the next room of tables.

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"Then there's more to it than that."

"It's not safe. You should be careful before you start plowing into this stuff without understanding the consequences."

She put her hand on his arm. "Okay. I'll stay away. No story." She promised.

His eyes shot up to hers. "You're not lying."

She bobbed her head and rolled her eyes. “First time you accused me of that. Truth is I’m having more fun teaching.”

Just When You Think You Know a Girl

Even though Lori was being honest, Eric saw that there was more to why she was leaving writing behind. She had lost interest because she had a new interest – him. “Come on. I’m in enough trouble as it is.” He stood up and held Lori’s chair.

“She’s the one you’re holding a torch for.” She gently pointed with her chin at Frankie.

He raised an eyebrow not wanting to discuss it.

“It’s okay. We were stoned and stupid.” She lied.

He gulped. “I don’t know what it was.”

“But it was just that once. I get it.”

They couldn’t continue when they reached the others. Frankie moved to Eric and gave him a hug. “I’m sorry. I committed the unforgivable sin again. Don’t mess with Kate.” She whispered for his ears only.

It isn’t a big deal. Lori isn’t our enemy. He assured her mentally. As much as he hated for the secret to spread, he had faith in Lori.

When Frankie released him she added, “And thanks for the flowers this afternoon. They were perfect.” It was for Lori’s ears.

Eric winced. Matt’s shot a disgruntled look at Frankie. It was too aggressive a response and Matt didn’t like that she pulled out such a dirty trick.

Lori was stoic and kept her smile. Spinning on her heel she led the way to the exit. Once they were outside she turned around. “Eric, I have your jacket in my car if you want to get it now.”

Eric dropped his head as he tried to grin and bear it. “Sure.” Frankie wouldn’t like him walking off with Lori but he was close to blowing up at her accidental slip. He would take the heat for it later rather than risk a more irrevocable error of his own.

“I’ll meet you at the car.” Matt told him and they all parted ways.

Eric walked with Lori to the top level of the garage. “You had to mention the jacket at that moment?” He tried to look fierce but he was depleted from the evening.

She waved her hand to the side of her head. "Like the 'thanks for the flowers' comment wasn't for me. Not that you care but I don't like her."

"Of course not. She was contemptible all night."

She stopped. "And that's because she's jealous. If she's so jealous why aren't you dating?"

"Do you have the manual on how to understand women because I'll buy it off you for a million dollars if you do." He snapped.

She started to smile and then laughed. "That was wrong of me. I'm sorry. I may have gotten a tiny bit territorial." She squinted at him. "You bought her flowers after last night. That makes me the other woman." Her eyes watered and she quickly blinked to keep any tears from falling.

Eric's heart jumped into his throat. "I don't think of you like that." He meant as the other woman. Frankie didn't have a claim on him.

"That doesn't make me feel better." She started walking again. She took it to mean he didn't think of her romantically.

"I didn't mean it that way either." He jogged to catch up. She had long legs and a quick pace.

"You did and didn't." She called back not slowing.

He caught up to her as she reached her passenger door. "I don't know what to make of last night especially when I run into Kate. She told me you were singing sad love songs all day. One about not living with men and not being able to shoot them."

She snickered. "That didn't even take twenty four hours to get back to you."

It was an inside joke. Eric would have laughed if he didn't feel so bad. "Lori, I'm really sorry."

"Sorry about last night or for hurting my feelings." In her mind she wished for him to answer for hurting her feelings.

"Hurting you, mostly." The other night shouldn't have happened. He should've kept his distance.

She opened the door of her Tiguan and gave him back his jacket. "Kate can share skills? Is that why you have so many?"

"You shouldn't have heard that." Eric had Frankie to thank that Lori knew.

"Could she teach me?"

“Is that what you want?” He was getting mad. She claimed she was going to leave them out of her story. She was using him again and after she promised not to.

“Passing these things around has got to be the rarest thing I’ve ever heard.” She said audibly but added in her head that maybe she would have a better chance if she had some skills. She figured Eric wasn’t interested because she was normal and bland.

Eric tried to overlook her thoughts. He didn’t care if she couldn’t do anything abnormal. The fact that she was completely untapped into the metaphysical realm was welcoming to him. And the word bland couldn’t be farther from the truth.

He was too tired and upset and he felt his temper boil. “Kate can’t with you. She doesn’t trust you. Even if she tried she couldn’t.” Kate had difficulty sharing with Frankie. She liked Lori even less.

Thinking back on his other girlfriends, Kate never liked any of them. It was a bizarre epiphany to have in the middle of garage in the middle of an emotional eruption. It was like he had been standing too close to a Seurat painting and didn’t see anything but little dots. Then stepping back he saw a lovely afternoon in the park.

“So tell her I’m all right. You’re her big brother.” Lori woke him from his reverie.

Eric finally erupted. “Don’t you get it? Tyler, Deborah, Guido and Gran are bad people and have all tried to hurt or kill some of us in the past. Very often that someone has been Kate. I don’t want you any where near them. I spend all my time trying to get us uninvolved. You probably think that will make your story all the more dramatic but it’s damn hard to live with.”

“You think I give a rat’s ass about a story when you just told me that people have tried to kill your sister?” She slammed the door and walked to the driver’s side. “I told you I would stay away!” She yelled at him pulling out her meter and putting it in his hand. “Eric Thomas, you’re an idiot and I don’t ever want to see you again.” She got in the car and drove off.

Eric stood dumfounded in the parking lot holding the electronic device. What the hell just happened? For one, she really meant to leave it, and probably writing, behind. For another, she got very upset hearing that Kate was in danger. And finally, she thought he was an idiot and he was.

You better not be making out with Kate’s teacher. He heard Matt’s joke in his head. He knew he wasn’t.

Eric walked down to their car. He put on his jacket and it smelled like cherries. He opened the passenger door and got in.

“No good night kiss?” Matt teased.

“I’m not a second date kind of guy.” Eric was still astonished.

“Frankie was pissed you walked off with her. It was offset by her guilt. I can’t believe she slipped that Kate could share gifts. Do you think Lori caught it? I do.” Other than wishing she hadn’t learned about Kate’s secret bonus talent, Matt had a good impression of Lori.

“She did.”

“Can you seduce it out of her memory?”

“No. It doesn’t matter. She isn’t going to do anything. She’s staying away from her story and me.”

“Her story? Was she going to write a book?”

“I don’t know. She’s a journalist.”

“Who subs as a teacher where the real money is?” Matt mocked her plan.

“She came here because there are so many people like us and taught in a high school because that’s were it manifests.”

“And after this dinner she’s walking away from her dream?” Matt didn’t think that was a credible result.

“She said she would.”

“You didn’t fall for that?” He stared at Eric as he waited for a traffic light to change. “You did. When did a pretty girl turn you into a gullible fool?”

“She was telling the truth.” Eric stared at his brother.

“Sure she was. Wait, you mean you KNOW she was telling the truth.”

“Yes and it’s green.”

Matt accelerated before the impatient driver behind him honked. Californians don’t give you a lot of grace on the open road. “How did you talk her out of that so fast?”

“I told her it was dangerous and she should stay away.”

“She listens to you and you’re in love with Frankie. Brother you need some serious therapy.”

“She also told me I was an idiot and never wants to see me again and meant that.” His lie detector didn’t register a speck of falsehood.

“You aren’t an idiot. Well, going to dinner with both of them was pretty dumb.”

Eric rolled his eyes. It was one of many mistakes that night alone. “But you had fun.” He didn’t mind that much. It wasn’t a big deal.

“I did. I like her. She’s good for you.”

“Let’s drive home in silence.” Eric sighed.

Matt nodded and drove without another word.

Territorial

The next evening they met Frankie and Henry to scope out Ojai. Frankie had changed her mind on the arrangements and Eric was her partner for the evening. He drove her in their Accord. They had divided the area for the hottest spots.

Eric cruised down the 101 following their planned route.

“You know, I originally wanted to pair up with Matt for this.” Frankie confessed.

“Why did you change your mind?” Eric believed it was jealousy. Lori had made a good call the night before that Frankie was getting possessive.

“I was too hard on you.” She didn’t want to admit she was threatened. It was a sign of weakness.

“You had a right. I hate to even remember how awful I was that night.”

“Kate’s safe now.”

“I’ll feel better after we deal with Guido.”

“Me too.” She turned on the radio for some music. After surfing around the dial she chose a blues station. “I can’t believe I messed up last night.”

He expected she would get around to that error. It was something he would rather gloss over since he didn’t know how to hold back his opinions in his edginess. “It’s in the past. Let’s leave it be.”

“Can you do that? It was so amateur and after I scolded Henry for saying too much.”

“Lori isn’t going to harm Kate.” And that was the only fact that kept him from snapping for the slip up.

Frankie stiffened when he said Lori’s name. “She’s very charismatic.”

“We’ll let that pass as well.” He gripped the steering wheel tightly and his knuckles paled.

“It’s just, can we be sure she isn’t up to something devious?” Frankie was trying to make Lori into a villain after she first declared her harmless.

“Even if she were, she would still only place fourth on our enemies list.”

“Right. We have to find Guido.”

“And Deborah. If we find Deborah and she can confirm that Guido doesn’t know about Greg or Kate, we’ll be better off.”

“We’ll find them.” She tried to convince both of them.

They drove through the streets of Ojai at a leisurely pace. It was eleven at night and there were few cars in the quiet neighborhoods. Knowing that Kate had smelled oranges when she was in the basement they were surrounded by groves on both sides. The car was filled with citric aroma. It was a clear night and Eric had the sunroof open. If it weren’t for the task at hand, it would have made for a beautiful tender scenic drive.

After two unproductive hours Frankie suggested they head home. Henry and Matt said they wanted to make another circuit.

When they got to Frankie’s Eric sat on the couch as she got them water and turned on some jazz music. He flashed to the evening at his condo with Lori. She was making the moves on him.

“What’re you going to do after you graduate?” She had never asked him many personal questions before and he was taken aback.

“Not sure yet. Whatever can wait until some things are sorted out.”

“Henry likes your friend Lori.”

“I could tell. He was really impressed with how she made the meter.”

“He’s working out some ideas he got from that. He’ll figure a way to do the same. He can be very determined. But I meant he is enamored by her.”

It was obvious that was her meaning and that Henry was smitten. It was a test to see how he would react. “Maybe it’ll work out.” He used extra effort to sound apathetic.

She ran her fingers in his hair. “You do look nice with a fresh cut.” She wished she had said it first.

He loved the sensation. He stared into her brown eyes. “Does this mean you’ve forgiven me?”

“It’s on the agenda.” She wrapped her hand around to the other side of his head and put hers on his shoulder.

“It really seems like you aren’t mad at me.” Eric didn’t know if he could trust her sudden warmth.

“You’re a fiery man. It has a scary side but it’s one of the reasons I find you attractive.” It was the first admission that she had any interest for him.

She wanted him to kiss her. He wanted to kiss her. He just didn't. The change was too sudden and the reasons weren't ideal. Instead he leaned his head on hers and held her free hand. He wanted to trust it wasn't an involuntary reflex. Another icy reversal was too painful for him to risk.

Sliding her hand from his she ran it up his arm as she pivoted her face to meet his. "If you don't, I will."

"I'd be lying if I said you didn't have me more than a little puzzled." His lips softly touched her cheek as he spoke.

She closed her eyes and kissed him. "I wish I hadn't been so harsh." She gently said in his ear.

"I could be persuaded to forget about it." He kissed her but prepared himself for another about face. Too many times he had started to run free only to be yanked by a leash on his neck. He didn't care for it.

She gave him a long hard kiss. *I'll help you forget more than that.* She thought.

Lori was what she wanted him to forget. It would be easier if she hadn't brought her up. He tried to clear his head. There were enough thoughts swirling around his mind without having hers mixed in. He wished they were drunk or stoned so he could enjoy their intimacy. Chemical distractions would have been handy.

I wonder if she kissed him. He heard her pondering the competition. *Doesn't matter. Eric is kissing me now. And it's wonderful. I wonder why I held back for so long.*

"This is nice." He whispered between kisses hoping she would stop thinking about Lori so he could.

She hummed an agreeing sound. *Better than her.* She hoped mentally. *She must have kissed him. She had him following her to the car like a puppy.*

Eric pulled back. He went to the car to get away from the anxiety that Frankie had created from her jealousy and careless mistake.

"What's wrong?" She kissed him and he resumed his position. *What if he's thinking about her? Stop this. Enjoy the moment.* She thought to herself. Leaning him back into the couch she took his hand and placed it by her breast.

He didn't need more prompting. Pulling her shirt out of her jeans he ran his fingers over her sides and her belly. He took his time and enjoyed brushing her bare flesh. Frankie pulled his shirt out and started raising it.

"We are going pretty fast." He leaned up and kissed her. He didn't want her rushing only to regret it in the morning. Trust needed to be rebuilt.

"You'll keep up." She said aloud but added mentally, *Did he use the same line on her? It's my fault he was so deprived. She probably got him into bed in record timing.*

Eric couldn't shut it off. Mind reading wasn't the type of gift that got stuck in the on position. It wasn't like lie detecting or telepathy. He stopped her from removing his shirt. He wasn't reading her mind. She was thinking ideas she wished she could speak out to him. It was coming through in telepathy.

"Do you want to have lunch tomorrow? Just the two of us?" He asked. He wanted to get to know her better. They had spent most of their shared moments with the whole group. It was only the second night they had been alone.

"I can't. We're going to see Joe." She sat up. "You aren't in the mood?" She assumed it was because of Lori.

He wished she would stop agonizing about Lori. "Frankie, you kind of went from reverse to full throttle forward."

"You chase me for months and now you are holding back?" She was perplexed.

"I am holding back." He moved to kiss her but she moved away.

"Fine." Her humor was frosty.

"And back to reverse." He shook his head feeling the euphemistic slap in the face. He could sense Matt getting close. "Do you want our brothers to find us undressed?" He sat up and tucked in his shirt.

"Don't worry. That isn't going to happen now." She did the same. "It's because of Lori, admit it. You like her."

"I don't want to talk about Lori."

"Who was she dancing with at the bar?"

Eric realized she didn't know if it was Matt or him. It crossed his mind to tell her it was Matt. It wasn't fair to Matt and he didn't feel like lying. "It was a dance."

"She told you that you were going to get lucky."

"She did not."

"She was thinking it."

For a brief moment when he was dancing with Lori she felt someone reading her mind. She must have imagined something racy to prove it was Eric. "She could tell someone was reading her mind and she assumed it was me. She tried to think something that would provoke a reaction."

Frankie turned red. He couldn't tell if she was mad or blushing. "So nothing happened?"

He dug a deep hole. He had to lie or be evasive. The truth wasn't an option. "You weren't even talking to me. We aren't in a relationship and all signs pointed that I would be lucky if you ever considered me so much as an acquaintance." He couldn't take the back and forth any longer. "What would it matter if we screwed to the break of dawn?"

Eric, shut it down. Matt sent to him. *We're close enough to hear things and Henry has a weird expression.*

He ran his hand up his forehead and through his hair. "Think what you want. What did or didn't happen isn't your business." He didn't care if Henry and Frankie both believed they were lovers at that point. He preferred if Henry did.

How far are you? Eric asked Matt.

Two minutes. Perhaps less since he's speeding up.

Eric stood up. "If you want to spend some time together alone we can. But if you don't, you don't." Frankie was speechless. He wished he could perform the same miracle on Lori. He walked out the door as their brothers pulled up.

Henry jumped out of the car. "What's wrong?" He contemplated hitting Eric.

"I pissed her off."

"How?"

"The same reasons or new ones. I can't keep track anymore. You can hit me if you want." Eric braced himself for an impact, just in case he took the offer.

Henry's face twisted as he considered the enticing proposal. "It's tempting but I'll give some credit to Frankie on this one."

"I wouldn't hit her if I were you." Eric joked. "She could take you. She is really pissed off." Eric gave a small smirk to test the waters.

"Get out of here." Henry relaxed but he was irked.

Matt drove them home. "What's wrong with you? Do you think we don't have enough worries that you want to add to them? First you risk upsetting Kate and now Frankie and Henry."

"I don't want to talk about it." Eric groaned.

"Not tonight. You used your get out of jail free card last night."

"You can be a real pain in the ass."

"Me?" Matt mouthed off.

Eric started telling Matt what happened. "Frankie comes on to me but all the while she keeps thinking about Lori and what we did or didn't do."

"Which was more than dancing."

"Do you want to hear what happened or commentate?" Eric challenged.

"Go on." Matt waved his hand in the air.

"I didn't want to hear it so I try to stop reading her mind until I realize I wasn't mind reading. She was sending out telepathy subconsciously. She wanted me to hear on some level."

"Yeah, that would kill the mood." Matt agreed.

"Any luck with you guys?"

"He didn't kiss me all night." Matt kidded to lighten the atmosphere. It was their way.

Glad to move on to less stressful tones Eric responded, "Too bad if he is half as good as Lori."

"You mean Frankie." Matt corrected with a wicked smile.

Eric shut his eyes. "Other than not getting to first base, did you get lucky?"

"We found a likely prospect. It's down a long road and they'd see us coming miles away."

"Unless we were invisible."

"Well, yeah, not then but how do we get everyone else down the road."

"Good point."

“So, was it all that you hoped for and more with Frankie? I mean until the end.”

“I don’t know. She was thinking about Lori more than she was thinking about me.”

“Sounds like you were too?” Matt watched as Eric flinched. “So, if you have to repeat tonight or Cinco de Mayo, you would pick Cinco de Mayo?”

Eric remembered what Gerard said about it being a good problem to have too many women. Did he call that one wrong? “Cinco De May is off the table. They both are.” What was odd is he hoped that Frankie didn’t take him up on his offer to spend time alone.

Compulsive Flirt

Eric woke up late after their long evening in Ojai. He took the dogs running with him for his morning routine. He should have been thinking about Guido but his mind was stuck on Lori and Frankie.

Frankie and him were out of synch. When he zigged, she zagged and they couldn't find a mutual rhythm. She was his ideal woman; strong, smart, beautiful, independent and she understood his glitches. Him, she misunderstood.

"But how do you catch someone that isn't interested when you are and is when you aren't?" He asked Zeus and Katja.

They didn't have any advice. They wanted to smell the trees at the park. It's a dog's life all right.

"My problem is I like a challenge and she's a challenge." Eric told them. "I need to figure her out or get over it."

He liked Lori as a person. It would be great if they could make up and be friends. It wouldn't take more than apology. She was too easy going to hold a grudge. If only she were his type but she wasn't a challenge. That wasn't fair. She kept him on his toes. She understood him too well. That was an understatement. She had his number. She played him like a fiddle and he just let her play on.

Eric was culpable. He enjoyed the ride. Getting stoned was a bad idea. No, getting stoned with HER was a bad idea – well bad and good.

It was the easiest solution for him to avoid her. He would only have to see her at Kate's graduation and never again. Kate and Frankie would be happiest in that scenario.

But it was wrong for him not to ask for forgiveness. He was unfair to her. A penitent act was needed. He could send her flowers. Maybe not. She could read too much in it. Plus it could remind her of the flowers he got Frankie the day after they kissed. One thing was sure – he had to draw a line in the sand that they had already crossed.

He would be at school for the next four days and he hoped he would come up with a better resolution that would make everyone happy in that time. A stop by St. Iggy's after school on Friday to correct things with Lori was his best plan. That was safe. They could be alone and no risk of any contact.

For enjoying Eric's grief, Matt was awfully silent on the subjects of Frankie and Lori. Eric needed the space and he gave it to him.

It was Tuesday before Eric ran into Reid.

"How did things go with Lori?" Reid gave him an eyebrow flash. "It was you that took her home. You were just pretending to be Matt."

"It was a prank and she saw right through me. We had a good time." Eric couldn't help but smile. "She's one interesting lady."

"And legs that go up to her neck and there isn't a thing wrong about that and everything right." Reid mused. "Are you going to see her again?"

"I don't think so. It ended poorly."

"Define poorly."

"The last thing she said to me was that I'm an idiot and she never wanted to see me again."

Reid snickered. "She didn't mean it."

Eric shrugged. "I was an ass."

"Did you push things too far?"

"That wasn't it."

"Well, if you do get past being an idiot, go slowly with her."

Eric nodded. She had been clear on her signals that night. She was interested. He didn't push it. Well, the once but she stopped him and he accepted her limits.

"Guys hit on her all the time. But she doesn't get involved easily. I don't think she has kissed a guy since she called off her engagement."

She's kissed a guy. "When was that?"

"Over a year ago. You're the first guy she has asked about since."

"She isn't interested in me. I'm a source for some ridiculous story she wants to write."

"Of course. How could I be so dumb? She wanted me to make sure you were invited and then she said she was in math at Cal. I didn't understand what that was about. I figured she was trying to make you think she was smart. Which made no sense because she is the most intelligent person I know." Reid's eyes were opened.

“And I don’t believe she hasn’t kissed anyone either. She’s doesn’t want you to know. Maybe she likes you.” More likely she was a compulsive tease.

“I’m with Sue.”

“Maybe she likes forbidden fruit?” She flirted shamelessly with Eric even after he told her he was involved in someone else. And there was something tempting about a challenge. He understood that.

“She isn’t like that. She shies away from most guys. Anyway Sue’s her best friend and we’re engaged to be married.”

Eric lifted an eyebrow. Reid had his attention. “Why didn’t it work out with her fiancé?”

“You don’t want to know.” He said but Eric was reading his mind. Lori’s fiancé had hit her.

Eric’s blood boiled over. “He’s a fool to lose a girl like her.” He tried to recover. He didn’t want Reid to see his anger blow. It was a perfect example why he shouldn’t read people’s minds.

“I don’t know why it lasted as long as it did.” He said. “She never trusted him. And she never slept with him. That should have been a clue for her. Of course that was his excuse when she caught him cheating.”

“Is that when she left?”

“It was the start of the end.” Reid gave him the once over. “You like her.” He evaluated. “Of course you do. Who wouldn’t? Are you sure it isn’t reciprocated? Are you the only person she can interview or are you the only one she wants to interview?”

“I’m the easiest to manipulate.”

“I don’t know why she wants to be a journalist anyway. Living off other people’s misery. Who wants that?”

“Doesn’t really suit her.” Eric agreed.

“She almost dropped out of school but her mother put on the pressure. Too bad. She can do anything she sets her mind to.”

“You’re wise beyond your years.”

“Here’s a bit of wisdom for you. Say you’re sorry and tell her that you don’t want to be interviewed. If she’s still there, she likes you.”

Eric nodded feebly.

“Good luck my friend.” He left to his next class.

Eric felt worse than ever. He figured Lori flirted with everyone. Looking back she didn’t with Henry or Matt and she shut down the drunk in record timing. If she was truly attracted to him, he used her. Even if she was a flirt he used her to forget about Frankie for one spontaneous night. He wanted to apologize more than ever. He also didn’t want her to ever look at him after he did. He was worse than an idiot and he had led her on – even if it was unintentional.

Thursday night he tried to study but couldn’t focus. He still didn’t know what to do to apologize to Lori. His heart was telling him to stop by St. Iggy’s and make amends. His feet were colder than ice. He fell asleep in his bed with his textbook still opened. The room had changed to Kate’s and it was misty. She was at the brink of tears.

“Kate? What’s wrong? Did something happen?” He started thinking the worst. Had Guido found them? Had Gran?

“I got JUG.” She ran into his arms and gave him a big hug.

“What’s that?”

“It stands for justice under God and I’ll have to copy lines from the Bible and do manual labor.”

Eric knew that. Greg had gotten it once. “What did you do?”

“Miss Becket gave it to me because she says I didn’t do my homework.”

“Why didn’t you do your homework?”

She scowled at him for doubting her. “I’ve been busy and it isn’t like she collects it.”

“Then she can’t know if you did it or not?”

“I do the word problems when she asks me to.” Kate sniffed. “She hates me. It’s so clear it’s personal.”

“I don’t believe she hates you. She said you’re amazing.”

“She calls me every day to do a problem. She doesn’t do it to anyone else.”

She was probably getting back at Eric through Kate. Lori knew there was a short telegraph line from Kate to him. Her obnoxious songs about bad relationships had tested it. He fumed. He deserved to be punished but Kate was an innocent bystander. “I’ll talk to her for you.” Kate wasn’t collateral damage from his wrecked love life and he would make that point clear.

“Would you?” Kate smiled knowing that he would the moment she told him.

“Sure.” It gave him a dual purpose to see Lori one last time.

Eric the Fiddle

If Eric hadn't promised Kate to talk to Lori, he would have backed out. He felt like a cad. He drove up to St. Ignatius' and pulled into one of the guest parking spaces. Kate and Greg were on the steps when Eric walked up to the entrance.

"You really shouldn't do this." It was a rare instance when Greg didn't back Kate.

"It isn't fair." Kate warned him.

Greg rolled his eyes. "He can't rescue you from every mess you get in and JUG isn't a big deal."

"It is for me. I have a perfect record." She steamed. "You said you wouldn't interfere."

Eric reached out to Greg. *I promised not to discuss it with you.* Greg answered. *And it won't matter. You aren't going to change Miss Becket's mind.* He gave a half smirk on the side of his face that Kate couldn't see.

"I'll see you later." Eric walked into the school and down the stairs. He forgot to ask where to find Lori so he followed her presence. Eric's empathy was hyperaware of Lori. The bottom floor looked like a typical school. It was a stark contrast to the grand foyer that was in the same impressive state it had been when it was a mansion.

Lori stood at her desk mumbling to herself and getting ready to leave. She wore a pink blouse and a straight white skirt. It was a nice look for her.

"Hello." He startled her.

Lori flushed at the sight of him. "Hi." She scrutinized him probably already figuring out one or both of his reasons for being there.

"I, uh, owe you an apology." He stayed by the door.

She clenched her fist and held them to her chest. "No, I overreacted. You guys got me so nervous with all the danger and then shutting down so fast. I felt left out in the rain with an unseen storm approaching."

"I'm sorry, Lori. It's that anyone that finds out about this stuff seems gets ensnared in our mess."

She laughed. "You have me looking over my shoulders for monsters."

He walked over to her. "I'm sure you're safe."

Lori held out her wrist with an oversized watch. "I have my ways of watching out for myself."
She wore the face on the inside of her arm.

He took her hand to inspect the watch. The face wasn't a clock. It was two half circles. One side was brightly lit yellow and the other was a dim blue light. "What is it?"

"It isn't as sophisticated as my meter but it tells me when people like you are around. That's why it's lit up now."

"What does the other side do?"

"Read my mind." She dared.

He did expecting poetry. He heard her tell him to look at the watch again. The blue side was lit.

"It tells me when people are changing my perception or touching my mind in anyway. To do it you're triggering a dormant side of my mind." She gently tugged her hand to be released.

"You're a genius." He let go.

"Not really. I should have put a level indicator. It's off the charts all the time in this place."

"The next model."

"You aren't mad that I built another meter?" With all his self-professed anger management, she had expected to see some of his hot-headedness.

"You can have your old one back. I don't know why you gave it to me."

"To emphasize my point. I thought you would have turned it over to Henry or Frankie." She tensed as she mentioned Frankie.

"Miss Becket." Father Francis walked in. "And Eric, how are you?"

"Good. And you? Added to your fleet of unmarked vans?" Eric loved to know that fact about Father Francis. It was deliciously ironic that a priest had something illegal.

"No, we just have the two?"

"Two? You have to tell me, where did they come from?"

"One of the gardeners brothers was involved with importing."

"Drugs? Guns?" Eric was more amused than ever.

"People." He winked. "But they aren't used for that now."

“People? You mean they were used to coyote over illegal aliens. Aren’t there any commandments about that?”

“Not that I recall.” Father Francis enjoyed bantering with Eric. “I don’t think the word coyote is in the Bible.”

“I like you more every time we talk.”

“It’s good to know my sinful side endears me to you. By the way, I owe you a heartfelt gratitude.”

“What did I do?” Eric was more than willing to receive praise he just didn’t know what for.

“Miss Becket has accepted a full time job here at St. Ignatius’.”

“Aren’t you full time?” Eric turned to Lori.

“I was here on trial until the end of the year.” She blushed.

“And how did I help?” Eric’s eyes darted between them.

“Talked her out of some less rewarding career.” Father Francis answered.

“No more journalism?” He asked her.

She stared down at her desk picking up items to shove into her bag. “I realized only bad news sells and I don’t want to do that. So I’m staying in town for a while.”

“Good.” Eric was elated.

“Well, I wanted to tell you I would be here tomorrow if you didn’t want to monitor JUG. The punishment is for the students not the teachers.” Father Francis had come to let her know she didn’t need to give up a Saturday.

“It’s fine. I don’t have any other plans.” She was new in town.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.” He put a hand on Eric’s shoulder. “It’s always good to see you.” He left them.

“And that’s the real reason you are here?” She accurately surmised. “To get Kate out of JUG.”

“Well, it does seem like a small infraction. I mean, she isn’t having any problems in her other classes.”

“She isn’t doing her homework. And she acts out during tennis as well.” It was another class that Lori taught.

“You don’t collect it, how can you know that?”

She huffed. "Because each day that I call her to the board she has to take the text with her because she hasn't done the work."

That was why she called on Kate every class. "But..." He tried to think of a defense. There wasn't any. She was being just. "Is it really needed?"

"Once or twice but she never does it."

"Is she passing her tests?"

"We have rules here. Geez, she plays you like a fiddle." She rolled her eyes.

Eric felt more like a fiddle every day. "I'm talking to the wrong person."

"Don't worry about it. She has JUG. That's her penalty."

Eric would speak to her. It was unacceptable that she purposely misled him. "Are you sure about teaching instead of journalism?"

She glared at him wondering why he was asking.

"I'm glad to hear it." He was. He was even happier that she would stay in town.

"Despite what your sister may think, I'm actually pretty good at this."

"The math major helps." He teased her.

She laughed at the reminder of her ruse. "That night feels like it was years ago."

"I was a jerk."

"You weren't." She rebutted as she grinned ear to ear. "You were a lot of fun."

"I don't get that a lot these days."

"You were fun with me." She glanced up at him and then out the window.

"It was all you." He put his hand on her shoulder. "I was going with the flow." Reflexively from curiosity he read her mind. She was telling herself to keep her head.

She held up her wrist and the blue side was lighting up again. It was a sign that she was on to him.

"You weren't thinking about poetry." That pleased him for some reason.

"Are we done here?" She was shutting down.

"I miss you." He did, not that he admitted it to himself until then.

"No, you don't. I'm not part of the problem and you miss that."

“You’re a whole new kind of trouble.” He tried to get her to smile. She didn’t. “I didn’t know you were fresh from being hurt.”

Her head snapped up. “Did Reid or Sue tell you that? Or did you read their minds? It isn’t right that you do that.”

“Whoa? Where is this coming from? Reid mentioned it. He was giving me advice on how to make up with you.”

“Sorry. It’s just my last relationship was with someone that could read minds. It became a problem.”

“What happened?” He wondered if she’d tell him the whole truth. Then He wondered if he wanted to hear it.

“At first it was so fun and exciting, like with you.” She turned away from his gaze. “And then it got controlling and he’d read everything all the time and he never trusted me. Every thought was constantly exposed.”

“The problem was the lack of trust not the mind reading.”

“I know that intellectually.”

He wanted to comfort her. He knew where the story was heading. He didn’t want to hear the rest. He could feel his blood simmering. He shouldn’t have asked.

Unaware of his temper she went on. “Then he hit me, just a soft slap on the face. I didn’t like it but it seemed so trivial somehow. It didn’t hurt but it was humiliating. He said he was being playful. Then he started doing it more often.”

Eric was ready to blow. Good thing her ex wasn’t in the room. He would have been at his throat. “So you left?”

“First I told him to stop. It wasn’t the slapping so much as why he did it. It was to scold me if he thought I was flirting with other men or for not telling him where I was every second of every day. And if I tried to hide my opinions it was even worse.”

“Please don’t tell me it escalated?” An eruption was building and he had nowhere to release the pressure. Father Francis didn’t need to spend school money repairing windows if he broke any – which was about the only thing that came to mind as a release.

“He stopped for a while when I asked. Maybe it was more like an ultimatum. I said to stop it because I wouldn’t take it anymore. Then one night we were at a party and this guy was hitting on me. I couldn’t get him to leave me alone.” She couldn’t walk around a room without a man trying to catch her attention. “He didn’t help me at all. That night he accused me of leading the guy on by being too friendly and when I said that wasn’t true he hit me hard.”

“And you left?” Eric hoped that was the end of it.

“I sure as hell did but not before I clocked him and told him never to hit a woman again.”

Eric laughed in relief. His urge to comfort her overtook him and he gave her a strong embrace. She smelled like cherries.

“It was a long time ago.” She didn’t mean to stir up his sympathy.

He turned his head and pressed his lips to hers. It reminded him of their first kiss and it was just as sweet. Her lips were just as soft. And all his worries were just as forgotten.

She responded at first and then shoved him away. “No. You don’t do that if you don’t like me. And you don’t like me.”

Eric had used her again. “I’m sorry. I forget myself when I’m with you. I know I’m a story to you but when you chased me, it was nice. It’s flattering to feel wanted.”

“I chased you? Who kissed who? I didn’t put on the romantic music. I didn’t play with your necklace. And not only did I not make up the no kissing rule, I wasn’t the one who broke it. I may have liked it but it wasn’t a one way pursuit.”

Her perspective was so different.

She grabbed her bag. “I’m the idiot. Letting myself be your remedy for your stupid broken heart from your stupid bitchy girlfriend.” She rushed out the door.

He pursued her. The school was empty. “Lori, stop.” He begged.

She sped up her pace and walked out the front door to the teacher’s parking lot.

He resorted to his metaphysical gifts. He stopped her from opening her car door.

“Let me in.” She tried in vain to pull it open.

“Wait.” Eric stood by her side. “At least let me help you.”

“I’m fine.” She dropped her bag and tugged with both hands.

“I don’t want you looking for monsters.”

“It’ll pass. It’s a natural side affect from hearing monster stories.”

“Kate’s not the only one that can share a gift with you.”

She stopped yanking on the door. He had found her weakness. The notion was too intriguing. She had done too much research to not want a sample.

“Let me try to teach you telepathy. That way if something happens you can reach me.” He didn’t know where the idea was coming from. He was making it up as he went.

“I’m not in danger.”

She wasn’t. He shuddered to think if Guido learned she could build machines to measure different skills. “It’ll make me feel better.” He put his open palm on his chest. “I think everyone I know is in danger. It gets to a guy after a while.”

“Everyone else you know is in danger.”

He empathized with her. “Can you feel that?”

She held up her wrist to show it was working.

He grabbed her hand and held it to his shoulder. *This is going to be harder because we don’t have another person to confirm if it’s working.* He sent to her mind.

“I hear that.” She had only heard other’s thoughts in her mind once before.

He put his finger on her luscious lips. *Just think it.*

Like this.

He nodded. *Can you tell what I am doing?*

Sort of.

I’m going to let go of your mind. Try to reach mine. He disconnected and waited.

“It’s not working.” She said after an unproductive trial period.

“Don’t freak out. I’m going to black out your senses. It has helped in the past.”

She nodded and he blacked out her senses. *Try again.*

He lost his sight. “Stop.” He may have shouted. He couldn’t hear anything.

“What happened?”

“You blacked my senses.”

"I did?"

"Try the telepathy this time. Think something for me to hear."

Thank you. He heard in his mind.

She could see from his open smile that it worked. *That was amazing.* She thought to him.

"No one messes with you or they answer to me. And if anyone hits you, I'll rip them apart."

She bobbed her head left and right and rolled her eyes. "I hit him back."

"I'll hit him harder." His eyes dropped to her mouth and he was weakening. "Get in the car before I kiss you again."

She obeyed and drove off. He was mad at Matt for pointing out she listened to him when the other women in his life were so obstinate. He was mildly ticked off that she listened to him that time. Speaking of stubborn woman, he had a date with Kate for follow up.

"Still investigating my new teacher?" Father Francis had walked out of the school.

"No, she isn't evil."

"She isn't." Father Francis agreed. "Kate doesn't seem to accept that."

Eric rolled his eyes at the irony.

"Are you falling in love? I only ask because I always seem to see you with her lately and I'm not blind."

"No." Eric shook his head mechanically.

Father Francis smiled. "She's fabulous with the kids. I can't thank you enough for giving her a reason to stay in town." His implication was clear.

"She's Catholic and I'm not. Don't you guys insist on sticking with your own kind?" Eric figured it wasn't a rule that Father Francis adhered to with any extreme level of conviction.

"Maybe she'll convert you for me."

"Missionary dating?"

"Or maybe I can accept that I can't control everything."

"Yeah, you and me both."

He laughed knowing what a control freak Eric could be. “We had a long talk this week. She was honest and revealed more than I needed to know. That was when I told her I wanted to keep her on and she accepted.”

“I need to talk to Kate. She won’t listen but I have to try.”

Father Francis wished him good luck. He’d need a lot more than good luck.

Reasoning with Mini-Me

He drove to Kate's resolved to tell her off. Every mile it subsided and by the time he was home it had vanished. She shouldn't have played him but he couldn't stay mad at her. She was his Achilles heel from the day he first met her.

Jim's house was practically a second home and he let himself in. Kate was watching television. "Shouldn't you be doing homework?" He asked paternally.

"She turned you against me." Kate knew immediately.

"A month without doing homework? If that isn't true, I'll go right back."

Kate opened her mouth to protest. It was pointless. He would know if she lied. She chose another defense, "We have so much to worry about right now."

"Like watching the *Ellen Show*?"

"Oh!" Kate was frustrated. She turned the television off. "If she were ugly I wouldn't have to go tomorrow."

"Or you could've done your homework."

"Dad already lectured me." The instant the words left her mouth she realized she said too much.

"Another detail you neglected to mention?" Eric raised an eyebrow. He sat by her on the couch. He should've asked what Jim said about it before he agreed to see Lori. He might've if he didn't like the excuse to see Lori again. "You aren't being fair to Lori."

"Miss Becket to you."

"No, I'm pretty sure she's Lori to me. She said you act out in tennis as well."

"You were supposed to defend me. I'm your sister." Kate pointed at her chest as she needlessly reminded him of their relation.

"Kate, she isn't working with Gran or Guido. Why don't you like her?"

"What does it matter? There's less than a month left of school. I'll survive."

It was a bad time to be honest with Kate. However the timing was only going to get worse if Kate didn't retreat from her current path with Lori. He decided to reveal a partial truth. "We're kind of getting to be friends."

“No, Eric. Please. You’re saying that to scare me straight.”

“It’s true and I’m saying it so you will be nicer to her. Will you do that for me?” She would kill him if she learned they kissed.

Kate went rigid. “I’d do anything for you. Like you would do anything for me. What I want in return is for you to not be friends with Miss Becket.”

“I didn’t like Greg at first and I got over it for you.” That may have been a bad example. She might read too much in the comparison.

“That was different. We liked each other and you were wrong to distrust him.” She was being very careful in her words.

“Let’s find out if you’re right before we add her to the ten most wanted list.”

“We can do that. It isn’t like you guys have kissed or anything.”

Eric kept his composure. He wasn’t going to show that was a done deal on more than one occasion. If she learned he kissed her that afternoon she would blow up even if he went to see Lori on her behalf. And it would be far worse if she found out they made out in a stoned stupor and she spent the night. “So, you’ll be nice and do your homework.”

She hugged him. “I love you Eric. I’ll do anything for you. And I know you would never go for a woman like her.” She sat up again. “I better get ready.”

“Big date with Greg?”

“Only our senior prom.” She cooed. “Don’t worry. It’s in town and he wanted to get a limo but I said we shouldn’t. And not only is Jim chaperoning with Olga but mom and Ron and Andy and Angela. And grandpa and Father Francis will be there.”

Eric tensed up. It had been at a dance when Gran had tried to drown her and Guido was on the loose. “That’s cool. Somewhere nice?”

“At the Oak Street Hotel.” It was a landmark building that was used locally for many special occasions.

“Have fun but not too much.” Eric shivered to remember his prom. He had lofty goals for his date. He got drunk and passed out before midnight.

“Stop. Greg’s too Catholic for that.” She seemed annoyed.

Eric made a mental note to thank Greg for his prehistoric ideology. “See, I was completely wrong about him like you are about Lori.”

“Miss Becket.” She oozed with disgust when she corrected him.

Rooftop Bar

Eric walked home hoping that Kate would go easier on Lori after their talk. *Matt, what are you doing?* He reached out to his brother.

On the phone with Joann.

If you plan to see her tonight, have her come this way. It's Kate's prom night. Oak Street Hotel. We'll have drinks on the rooftop bar.

On it.

His phone rang. It was Henry. "Hello."

"Are you guys up to go to Ojai tonight?" Henry asked.

"Can we wait a day? It's Kate's prom and I want to stay close."

"We can go tomorrow."

"If you want to join in on the babysitting, we're having drinks at the rooftop bar at the Green Street Hotel."

"I'll let Frankie know."

Eric flopped down on his bed. He had a couple of hours before it was show time.

Hello? He heard Lori's voice in his head.

Hi there. He smiled as he replied. *What are you doing?*

I'm eating ice cream and playing footsy with a very cute curly haired male.

Is it Matt? He's a good-looking guy.

It's Mojo my dog.

Any monsters in the area?

Other than Mojo? No. He is going to mess up my toenails. I just painted them.

Lucky dog. Eric realized she probably heard that cross his mind. He was glad she couldn't see that he was embarrassed.

I wanted to test out my new telepathy toy and he was tired of me.

Mojo?

Yeah. He has been asking for treats like crazy now that he knows I can understand him.

You're spoiling him. Eric teased.

I won't. I black out his senses when he gets too insistent.

Glad you're having fun with it.

I didn't mean to disturb you. I didn't know anyone else I could suddenly start talking to with telepathy. And I wanted to see how far away it could go.

It's fine. I'm glad to hear from you. You could try Henry if you need another guinea pig.

He called. He wants to talk again.

Eric sat up. *That's cool.* It wasn't really. Henry was using it as an excuse to be closer to Lori.

I'll let you go. Mojo needs a walk.

Eric sank back into his pillow. He did like that she wasn't part of his problems. It gave him a place to hide and be normal. He couldn't risk getting close. He couldn't handle another person he cared about in peril. Even seeing Henry could put her in danger but there was more to it that irritated him.

Eric, Matt and Joann were at the bar before the prom started so Kate wouldn't know they were there. Eric would block both of them from Kate and Matt would feel for danger. They sat at the edge of the four-story building watching people arrive for the big event.

Their dad's Mercedes pulled up and Ron and Sandy stepped out looking great. Behind them were Jim and Olga with Andy and Angela. Eric laughed thinking they probably went to their own prom together way back when. He sat up to attention when a blue VW Tiguan pulled up to the valet.

Lori stepped out in a royal blue cocktail dress and fixed her hair in her side mirror as she waited for the valet. She had it up in curls. She was magnificent.

Hey there. He reached out to her mind.

She smiled not realizing he could see her. *Are you bored?*

Not at all. What about you?

I'm about to be very bored.

Is Mojo behaving? He didn't want her to know he could see her.

Are you checking up on him?

Checking up on you.

She smiled. *Whatever you did to me is making my wristband go nuts on the blue side. It never dims now.*

Henry approached her. He must have parked on the street. Maybe he was why Lori smiled. Eric watched them walk into the building together.

Matt kicked Eric's feet under the table. He turned around as Frankie came up to their table. She was a vision in a hot red dress.

"Hi. I lost Henry. He has chosen to upgrade." She greeted.

Eric had never seen her looking so sensual. "Wow, that's some dress." He complimented.

"Thanks." She spun from side to side. It was the most feminine maneuver she had ever performed in his presence.

Matt reintroduced her to Joann and they toasted a slow and hopefully uneventful night.

Dude! He heard Greg's voice. *Are you guys here?*

We're on the roof. Does Kate know?

She must. Henry just walked in with Miss Becket on his arm.

Eric's jaw clenched. *He wants to learn more about how she built that meter.*

He wants more than that. Greg observed to Eric's exasperation.

"Eric, who are you talking to?" Frankie whispered.

"Greg. Henry just walked into their prom and he figured we were here."

Eric. Kate called to his mind.

He was going to get a headache trying to keep all his conversations straight. *Hey little sis.*

Are you here?

Yes, with Matt, Joann and Frankie.

Huh! Kate was excited. *I want to see Joann. Where are you?* Kate had only met Joann once.

Matt was smarter than the rest. He kept his dates away from the family and ergo their problems.

At the rooftop bar.

Kate and Greg walked up minutes later. She was beautiful in a champagne dress. Standing next to Greg in his tuxedo, Eric could envision them getting married. The only difference was her dress would be white and grander. Eric felt like an old man seeing the two teens in prom outfits.

“Hi.” Kate happily greeted Joann.

“If it isn’t the famous Kate. We meet again.” Joann smiled.

Watch out. Greg warned Eric. Kate’s mad about something. She’s hiding it from me. I’m almost certain it isn’t because of me but it could be you or Miss Becket.

Eric thanked him for the information. She must have picked up more from their talk than he perceived.

“Frankie, you’re so sexy tonight.” Kate said.

Frankie blushed feeling that her efforts were too transparent. “I wanted to keep up with the kids.” It wasn’t for the kids. She wore the dress for Eric.

“Eric wins hottest date award.”

Eric gulped. Kate wasn’t the biggest Frankie supporter but she clearly preferred her to Lori for him.

“Henry would disagree.” Frankie joked.

“I didn’t know he even met Miss Becket. They look so good together.”

Eric shifted in his seat. Kate did know something. She wouldn’t give Lori a compliment without an ulterior motive. And she was talking about Henry to let him know Lori had other men after her.

“It wasn’t planned. We ran into her.” Frankie admitted.

“He likes her. I can see that.” Kate smiled too hard.

Eric Thomas. It was Lori’s voice in his head.

Hi again. He replied back trying to keep everything sorted.

You’re here. She accused him.

I am. You look fantastic. Blue is a good color for you.

Don’t change the subject. How did you figure it out? Did Kate tell you so you could set me up with Henry?

No. He wouldn’t do that. It didn’t even cross my mind you would chaperone. How wild are these Catholic kids anyway? Half my family is there.

More than half.

Are you having fun? He hoped she wasn’t.

This is so much better than when you read my mind. It's so reciprocal. She meant telepathy.

He smiled and got a strange look from Kate. *I'm glad you like telepathy. I meant are you having fun at the prom.*

Oh. It isn't that bad. I feel out dated.

Do you like Henry?

Why do you ask? She figured he was pawning her off to lessen his guilt.

Just curious. It was a lie and he followed it up with a bigger one. *I hope you hit it off.*

She abruptly disconnected.

"We better get back before we're missed." Greg nudged Kate.

"We'll see you later." Kate waved at the table.

Matt had a strange look on his face. Joann and Frankie took a powder break. If they hadn't Eric would have had another mental conversation started with Matt and he was at his limits of keeping things straight.

"I told you that Kate would figure things out."

"Relax. I told her that Lori is a friend and that she should try to be nicer to her. Did you know Kate got detention for not doing her homework?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "Lori gave Kate detention. Oh, yeah! She'll be nicer now."

"It was a good brother sister moment. She listened to me."

Matt was incredulous. "Then what was all that about how Henry and Miss Becket being a cute couple. She was gushing."

"She made a snide comment."

"It was several comments. She gushed and you missed it because you were mentally flirting with your other girlfriend. And I wasn't the only one that realized you were missing her jabs. Kate's on to you."

"I'll talk to her again." Eric sighed. It was imperative that Kate eased up on Lori.

If It Makes You Happy

Frankie scooted her chair closer to Eric. There was a small band playing oldies music and Matt took Joann for a spin on the floor.

“I like Joann.” Frankie admitted.

“Me too. They’re getting pretty serious.”

Sorry for dropping the connection earlier. He heard Lori’s voice in his mind.

Not a problem. He didn’t expect it was because of him and it was only a matter of time before they talked again. *I know how it is when other conversations pop up.* He was setting world records that night alone.

She laughed. It sounded nice in his head. *That wasn’t it. I got embarrassed. I don’t think I like this lie detecting thing.*

“Are we better?” Frankie asked wondering why Eric was so silent.

We’re good. He said mentally instead of out loud.

We are. I’m just confused. Lori answered.

“We’re good.” Eric said out loud for Frankie. He needed to stop his mental conversation but he wanted to know what Lori meant. *Lori, I didn’t teach you how to detect lies.*

It seems to be working. She replied.

“I hope Henry isn’t too beguiled to forget his purpose.” Frankie put her hand on Eric’s.

Were you really talking to Mojo? Eric realized she shouldn’t be able to do that either.

Yes.

Frankie put her head on Eric’s shoulder. He leaned on hers. It was the best way to keep Frankie quiet while he chatted with Lori.

And you blacked out his senses?

Definitely. Lori laughed again. It was like a light tickle in his mind. *He didn’t like it.*

Frankie squeezed his hand.

Wow! That doesn’t make sense. He continued with Lori.

Why not?

Because we've only successfully taught people one trick at a time but you're doing things I didn't show you.

Frankie picked up his arm and draped it over her back. He pulled her closer.

And you could tell I was lying? About what? Eric couldn't remember what he had said to whom by that point.

Lori got self-conscious. *You said you wanted me to have fun with Henry. I started blushing and had to hide it. Henry thought he did it. It kind of got uncomfortable for a while.*

"Is this okay?" Frankie asked.

This is nice. He messed up again and sent a mental message to Lori instead of an audible one to Frankie. He repeated it out loud for Frankie.

It is nice to know it's mutual. I suspected as much or we wouldn't have... She trailed off. *I had a good time.*

She was thinking about the night in his condo. *We both did.* He wanted her to know she was a good friend. He ran his cheek on top of Frankie's head.

There is a part of me that keeps trying to forget about the other night especially since you are in a complicated place. She paused. *I wish you wouldn't keep kissing me. Well, not really but you know what I mean. It's nice but it makes it hard. I've never liked anyone so quickly and so much. It's scary.*

He didn't answer afraid of speaking or thinking in the wrong direction. He could feel his body warm up hearing Lori's words. Eric savored it.

Frankie felt the electrical sensation and assumed it was from her. She kissed him.

He lost his concentration and broke the telepathic connection.

Eric, are you there? Lori asked.

"Frankie, I'll be right back." He got up and went to the men's room. He needed to focus. *I'm here.* He said giving his undivided attention to Lori.

I didn't mean to get all heavy on you. Henry is headed up now. Do you think you can come down later? I may be paranoid but I think I am seeing monsters.

Meet me in the hall. He ran down to the first floor with the ballrooms. Lori looked glorious waiting for him. Father Francis was at the doors leading to the event. He winked at Eric and walked back into the ballroom.

“What’s wrong?” He panted.

“There was this guy here but he left. He didn’t vanish in front of me but when I followed him and turned the corner, he was gone.”

“A guy?” They only knew of one person that could vanish and it was a woman. That didn’t mean that others couldn’t do the same.

She nodded. “It was weird. He didn’t register at all.”

He picked up her hand to look at her wrist. Both lights were shining.

Kate walked into the hallway. They had stopped blocking their presence and she sensed he was nearer. She caught his eye and glared as he held Lori’s hand. Lori’s back was to her. Kate stomped back to her prom.

“Shit.” He tried to reach Kate but she wouldn’t have it. He couldn’t go barging into the prom to explain why he was with Lori.

“What does it mean?”

“Not that. Kate just caught us.” He dropped her hand.

“You mean she got tired of telling Henry to dance with me.”

Eric rolled his eyes. “Could it be that this guy didn’t have any glitches to read and you didn’t see where he went?”

“It’s possible that I didn’t see where he went but anyone should show a sign. Even if they don’t have a fully developed gift, everyone has something. See.” She pointed her watch at a bellboy and sure enough there was a dim light. “I wish I had the meter with me. It would be easier to be certain.”

“What did he look like?”

“He was kind of stocky about five foot eight. He had dark hair and a beard.”

That wasn’t helpful. It was too general and the beard could be a disguise if it was someone dangerous. “It was probably nothing.”

“You’re lying. You’re worried.” And there he had proof that she could decipher lies.

"I'm always worried." He ran a finger along her temple and pulled a curl back from her eyes. It stubbornly sprung back.

She watched him play with her bangs. "Are you having a nice night?"

He laughed. "No. I have too many conversations going on around me. I can't keep track of who I'm talking to about what."

Greg and Brian walked out of the prom. Eric eyed them as they made a beeline to him.

Lori looked over her shoulder and realized it was her signal to leave. "Have a good time." She passed them as she returned to the dance.

"We don't have long." Greg jumped to the point. "Let's go to the bathroom or she'll know that isn't where I went. And block yourself so she doesn't know you're with us."

After waiting for a couple of guys to clear out of the restroom Eric asked what was up. He knew.

"Kate came back in way too short a time and said you were a liar." Brian started.

"She knows that." She often bragged Eric could lie better than tell the truth.

"What happened?" Brian asked.

"It may be nothing but Lori saw a suspicious guy. Did you see a man with a beard?" He avoided their real question.

"I don't remember." Greg said sidetracked.

"I did." Brian frowned. "When we came in."

"Keep it under your hat."

"That doesn't explain why Katie's mad." Greg pressed.

"Is she still?" Eric didn't know why he asked. If she wasn't mad she was livid.

"She's pretending to be fine and has been all night." Greg hit Eric's shoulder with the back of his hand. "I knew you guys would ruin our prom. What're you hiding?"

"I can't tell you something you have to keep from Kate."

"I can keep secrets from Katie. Spill."

"I'm falling for Lori, okay?" He couldn't deny it any longer. Even in the hallway he was thinking about kissing her and more.

Greg started laughing.

“She’s cool.” Brian didn’t seem to mind.

“And I worried you weren’t going to take this well.” Eric said sarcastically to Greg hadn’t finished enjoying a good chortle.

“Man, I never dreamed I would see the day you fucked up this bad.” Greg could barely speak through his spasm. “If Katie ever gets mad at me I’ll just remind her how you fell for Miss Becket. I’ll never be in the dog house again.”

“At least someone will benefit from this. Can I go back to my group so I can get out of my quasi-date with Frankie now?”

“You like her over Frankie?” Greg’s face fell to a deadpan.

“I never got you and Frankie anyway.” Brian admitted.

“Wait. You and Miss Becket?” Greg repeated. “How serious are you about this? You can’t seriously be thinking about dating her?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s all very twisted.” Eric wasn’t sure what he wanted.

“You’re twisted. Katie must be going nuts. She hates Miss Becket. You didn’t see her when she got JUG. I started blocking Katie in case she did something stupid. And by stupid I mean along the lines of this.” Greg pointed to his scar from when Eric pounded him.

“Kate got detention?” Brian asked.

“From Lori.” Eric frowned.

“What did she do?”

“She didn’t do her homework for a month.”

Brian shook his head. “What’s she thinking?”

“That no woman’s good enough for her big brother.” Greg answered. “This isn’t going to work. She’ll never approve of her. It will make your opposition to me look like child’s play.” Greg promised.

Eric left on that sour note. When he got to the table Matt was paying the bill and talking with Henry. The girls were gone to the restroom again.

“And there he is now.” Henry stated flatly.

“False alarm. Sorry.” Eric said.

That wasn't what he meant. Matt warned Eric telepathically. Lori told him she's hung up on some other guy and he suspects it's you. And he's right.

Is this our record? Eric asked his brother.

Of pissing off the most people in one night? What's the count?

Kate, Greg, Frankie, Henry, maybe Lori. If it helps, Brian didn't seem to care either way.

Nothing upsets Brian outside of murder attempts on the family. Geez, if I didn't know which of us wasn't a full sibling, I would put my money on him.

"Are you done yet?" Henry could tell they were chatting without him. "Let's go."

"Do you hate me?" Eric asked Henry.

"No. But I can't speak for Frankie."

"Does she know? Did you tell her?"

"Yes and no." He answered in order.

Frankie and Joann waited in corridor. Frankie was neither cold nor warm.

Pleasant Dreams

Eric crawled into his bed glad that he survived another double date. At least he admitted he had true feelings for Lori. He wasn't sure he was over Frankie. Both routes seemed unlikely to pan out.

He fell asleep and sat up in his misty room. Lori cautiously walked in wearing her dress from the dance. He was under her spell at first sight.

"What is this?" She asked. Everyone could sense it wasn't a typical dream when they were first pulled in.

"We did this before. It was on accident then. We are sharing a dream. The gift we have that isn't on your meter."

"Where are we?"

"This is my room in Santa Katrina." He felt like a child bringing her to his bedroom at his parents' house.

"Oh." She took it in. "It looks familiar."

"Here." He picked up her meter. "You should have this back. Brian saw the same guy you did."

"I can get it later."

"No need. You'll have it in the morning." He put it in her hand.

"Really?"

He nodded.

She stared at her meter impressed that it could be returned through a dream. Then she got frightened.

"What's wrong? Don't you want it back?"

"You're giving me this because something bad is coming." She wasn't a fool.

"And this will keep you safe from it."

She shook her head. "You're not sure."

"If it registers anything from anyone you get a bad vibe from get away and let me know."

"And what happens to you?"

"Nothing. I am equipped to handle these things. Remember?"

She nodded. Her fears remained.

He held her. “Don’t worry?”

“I’ll be fine.” She pulled away. “How mad is Kate?”

“I don’t know. She isn’t talking to me and she called me a liar.”

“Can’t she tell when you are telling the truth?”

“I was careful not to lie in front of her?”

“Or think anything?”

“We don’t use mind reading on each other. We prefer telepathy. I only used it on you because you might have been involved with Gran or Tyler.”

“But she could read your mind if she wanted to.”

“I don’t think she has. I lie all the time and she doesn’t know.” Actually it had been a while since he needed to.

“Can you tell if she were reading your mind?”

“Not with automatically. You should show me how to do that.”

“What would you do if you wanted to know something that you didn’t think someone would tell you about openly?” Lori was making a point.

“Kate didn’t read my mind.”

“Humor me. Would you ask the question anyway knowing the answer would pop into their mind regardless of what they said? Like when you asked Reid about my major?”

“That was different.”

She tilted her head unconvinced.

“I told Kate we were friends. She asked me to stay away but she owes me after Greg.” His face dropped. He tried to remember the talk better – exactly.

“Did she ask you if anything happened between us?”

“Kate was being careful but she always is when she’s caught. She did mention that it wasn’t like we kissed.”

“And you remembered the other night?” Lori felt her point was made.

He shrugged. It was possible but she wouldn't keep her opinion from him. She would have scolded him. "Trust me, if she heard a word I would know. She wouldn't have kept quiet."

"Tempers run in the family."

"A little. We don't have a lot of secrets."

"And you think you've kept this one?" She rolled her eyes. "You're only argument against it is she can't keep a secret from you. Either you have kept it from her or she's keeping that she knows from you. And if she knows, as you suspect, and you don't know how she knows, there's already one secret she has kept."

Eric opened his mouth for a rebuttal argument but nothing came to him. He processed the confusing logic in his head looking for the loophole. "When did she get better than me?" He had been so fixated on his convoluted love life that she could've worked him and he didn't notice. Lori had made an excellent point.

"She learned from a master." Lori smiled.

In another situation he would have relished the compliment. "Which brings me to another reason I wanted to see you. You were talking to your dog and blacking out his senses."

"Yes."

He took the meter back and powered it on. Pointing it at Lori it started registering in all bars and they were inching up. She stepped closer to see for herself and they leapt some more.

"It makes sense. You shared with me, right?" She was transfixed on her new readings.

He shook his head. "I only shared telepathy. Look, you're registering in movement."

"What does it mean? I can move things?"

"I'll ask Henry."

"Or his sister." She leaned back when she spoke. "She was with you tonight at the hotel?"

"Did Henry tell you who was there?"

"Kate told me."

"She's getting very manipulative." Eric didn't like it. "I was with Matt, Joann and Frankie. Henry was there at the end."

"Did you kiss Frankie?" It was the slowest question she ever asked him.

He was caught. He didn't need to answer. He wasn't in the habit of throwing up false fronts and the answer had already passed through his mind. "Once." He finally said and closed his eyes. He didn't mean to. Lori was in his head at the time telling him she liked him. He forgot who was really with him and who was talking to him via telepathy.

Lori tilted her head. She kept moving her lips as if she was about to speak but nothing came out. Finally she recovered. "How do I get back?"

"I'll let you go and this will fade away."

She waited. Nothing happened. She got uncomfortable. "Eric?"

"I didn't do it yet."

"I don't like this. I feel naked."

He didn't need that word conjuring up mental images. He started thinking about baseball stats in case she was still reading his mind.

Blood rushed to Lori's face. "I stopped reading your mind. I can see why you don't do it. I know how annoying it is and yet I did it."

"It's okay. At least you know why I kissed her." He wanted to tell her how he felt but she was so stiff and uncomfortable. He didn't want the moment to be mixed in with so much emotional chaos. The meter was still in his hand and he gave it back to her. She needed to have a heads up.

It reminded her of the impending threat and that he wanted her to watch out for herself. "What happened when you lost your temper? What caused it and what did you do?"

"Not now. I'll tell you later." He knew he had to tell her the story so she could make up her own mind. It was why she was scared and after her last boyfriend, she wasn't going to take the news well. "I would never hurt you. I would never hit you." Why did he say that? It only sounded more plausible.

"But that's why you all have tempers. A situation happens that you can't control and you lash out."

It was true or partially true. "Usually we start breaking things without meaning to. Except for that once."

"The time you won't tell me about?"

He sighed. "How about Matt tells you? I hate to even think back to that time. I'll understand if you don't trust me after that."

"You wouldn't hit me, ever."

"I wouldn't." He echoed.

She moved closer and hugged him. "I trust you. I'm not asking for validation. I want to know because it seems so important to you and I want to understand."

He patted her soft curls with his cheek. "How did you do this to me?" He asked.

"What did I do?"

"You snuck up on me. Like Reid's weed."

"I tell you I trust you and you tell me I am like pot?"

He whispered in her ear, "You make me forget my worries. I laugh more with you. I relax. Sounds like weed to me." He took a deep breath to remember the cherry aroma.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting a buzz before you leave." He pulled his lips to hers and kissed her.

She allowed one long intense kiss. "We should wait three weeks."

"What happens in three weeks?"

"I won't be Kate's teacher. I know it's a risk." She figured Frankie would use the time to her advantage. She might.

He stepped back and ran his hands down her arms until he held hers. It wasn't really that simple. Kate would have to change her mind about Lori before they could pursue a real relationship. But he had three weeks to work on her.

"You'll be happy to know I let Kate out of JUG."

She shouldn't have done that. "Kate needs to pay for her mistakes."

"In tennis, it isn't so bad. I send her and Meg to a remote court. I can't in math and she's confrontational. The homework is symptomatic. She promised she would do it going forward." Lori said.

"She will. She made me the same promise and she wouldn't go back on it."

"Then it doesn't really matter."

Eric wasn't sure about that.

Clearing out Distractions

The next day Kate stopped by for dinner. Jim was with Olga. Greg was at Dodger game with his family. Matt and Brian were on dates. After dinner Ron had some work to do. Sandy, Kate and Eric decided to play cards. Their favorite game was cribbage. After a couple of rounds with one playing out, the doorbell rang.

Frankie had stopped by. She was dressed in her usual jeans and blouse. She gave Eric a big hug and he invited her in. When Matt returned they would go with Henry to see the likely prospect for Guido's hideout. He was glad she stopped by. He wanted to spend time with her that wasn't centered on boot camp or an inept date.

Kate was even happier and insisted that Frankie join them to make teams of two. Kate might have arranged the visit. It wasn't a bad idea even if the motives were perverted.

Cribbage was new to Frankie so they gave her a run down of the basic rules. It wasn't a hard game to learn but strategy came with practice. Eric was on her team and won most of their points.

She's a nice girl. Sandy mentally commented to Eric.

Are you trying to set me up? He asked back.

I'm just making an observation that she's very attentive to you.

Eric grinned and shook his head. *She's only interested because I was losing interest.*

Was? Sandy smiled as she played a card. *Sometimes people don't realize what they have until they are scared they could lose it.*

Or have to go on a three-week hiatus. He kept that idea from his mother.

Maybe she likes to take it nice and easy. Sandy suggested as she hummed the tune of the same name.

In the meantime I get strung along. He cocked an eyebrow at his mother.

Do you have other options? She was worried about him. He hadn't mentioned any girls since Marie.

I'm thinking of becoming a priest. Father Francis seems pretty happy without a woman in his life.

Sandy huffed. They weren't religious. *I'll miss you when your father kills you.* Ron hated religion. Father Francis had softened his staunch stance but Ron considered him as the one and only exception. They all did. *I like Frankie. She's very pretty.*

She is. There was no argument against her looks.

And Kate adores her.

Kate hadn't liked Frankie at first. Adores was still too strong a word. The fact was that Kate hated Lori. Frankie was her best alternative to steer him away. *Why don't you and Kate work it out for me and let me know when I have to show up for my wedding.*

Kate was being very pleasant with Frankie and giving her tips on her hands. She shuffled the cards for her turn to deal. "Do you know Miss Becket?" Kate feigned innocence as she asked Frankie.

"I've met her a couple of times. At the meeting and with Henry once."

"She was at the meeting? You're new teacher from school?" Sandy hadn't known. "Is she involved with Gran?" Sandy knew Tyler was a no longer an issue but not realize his death upgraded their arch nemesis to a higher threat level.

"No Mom." Eric picked up his cards. It was an easy hand with three fives. He would win most of the points and end the game.

"I don't trust her." Kate eyed her cards.

"Well, she had Henry eating out of the palm of her hands." Frankie put a card in the crib.

"I don't like that she was at the meeting." Sandy got anxious.

Trust me mom, she's okay. Eric told her mentally. He didn't want to start a debate with Kate and Frankie taking the counter position.

Sandy relaxed a little. Eric wasn't careless about Kate's safety.

"Did Henry have a nice time with her?" Kate continued. "They looked good together." The last comment added for Eric's benefit.

"He had fun but she isn't looking for a relationship right now. There's some other guy she likes." Frankie concentrated too hard on her cards.

Kate fumed and mislaid a weaker card. She guessed who was in Henry's way. The idea that Lori considered Eric as a viable option ignited her furor.

“That surprises me.” Sandy added. “They were dancing all night. I assumed they were a couple.”

Eric shifted his position. The discussion was growing pricklier by the minute. His mother peeked at him and he blocked himself from her empathy.

“She tried to give me JUG but it didn’t stick.” Kate sneered. It was a twist on the truth. Lori had willingly released Kate.

Kate, that isn’t true. Eric warned telepathically.

“What’s JUG?” Sandy wasn’t familiar with St. Iggy’s nickname for detention.

“Justice under God.” Frankie was an alum and defined the term for Sandy. “It’s like detention only they have it on Saturdays. You have to copy passages from the Bible and do chores around the school.”

“That’s archaic? Bible verses and manual labor.” Sandy had fooled herself into thinking she was tolerant of religions but after two decades of living with Ron she had adopted a contempt for organized faith. “I suppose that’s all they can do since whipping and torture are outlawed.”

Eric laughed. He wasn’t going to let Kate upset him. It was dealt with for the time being. She couldn’t continue down that road without him giving more details on what she had done to be disciplined in the first place.

“She claimed I didn’t do my homework but she doesn’t collect it. She wanted to make a point that she recognized it was me at the women’s club meeting even though I was disguised as Frankie’s sister.”

Eric’s humorous mood dissipated. She had worked that line well. Got out her version of the offense, her defense and made Lori look like the instigator. She was reading his mind. He blocked himself completely from all the ladies in the room.

“You went to the meeting? Gran was there!” After the mother expressed her first concerns she moved to the next. “Miss Becket knows you were there? Does she know about us?” Sandy stared at Eric.

That was a bad sign. His mother was associating him with Lori and she had no reason to do that. She was picking up on unsaid details. “Mom, she’s okay.” Eric repeated.

“Not if she knows about us she isn’t.”

“She doesn’t have any skills.” Frankie told Sandy. “She has a meter that registers different qualities of different skills. She only has a vague idea.”

“A meter? Couldn’t she use that to get more information for Gran?” Sandy would not forget that Gran killed her sister and tried to kill Kate several times. No one would. Any potential connection, no matter how tangential, was unacceptable. “What do you make of her?” Sandy relied on Frankie’s opinion to break the tie between her two children.

“I’d rather she didn’t know anything but Henry thinks her meter can help us. He is enchanted with her brains.”

“You mean her beauty.” Sandy hissed as if beauty was a nasty quality.

Stop stirring up trouble. Eric told Kate via telepathy. *She let you off the hook.*

And how would you know that? Kate returned to him. She was madder.

You said you would try for me.

Did she tell you last night? Did you kiss her again? Are you pulling her into dreams? Kate jumped to the right conclusions faster than Eric could recall the events.

“And she was at that meeting that Margo told us about? What if she goes back?” Sandy’s opinion was set. Lori equaled toxic.

“She can’t. After three meetings you have to prove your worth and she doesn’t have any skills.” Frankie informed her.

“Mom, she isn’t involved with Gran or Tyler’s gang. She’s merely a curious onlooker.” Eric appeased his mother’s overreaction. If he couldn’t stop Kate from causing trouble he would let his opinion be known.

“We don’t know that if she goes to those meetings.” Sandy had creases in her forehead. “Why does Father Francis keep her on? Can’t he make up an excuse to let her go?”

“I wish.” Kate commented with a wishful twinkle in her eye.

“And why would she pick on Kate if she wasn’t involved with Gran?” Sandy challenged Eric.

“Because Kate didn’t do her homework for a month.” Eric blurted out.

Kate’s eyes narrowed. *Tattle!*

“I don’t believe that.” Sandy shook her head. “She may want to get Kate alone so they can make a move on her.”

Eric, are you there? Lori reached to him mentally.

Now is a really bad time. He learned his limits on multiple conversations.

Kate glared at Eric. “That’s possible.” He didn’t refute his mother’s statement and she was more than happy to add to the poisonous mix.

“It isn’t.” He said to his mother.

I just saw that guy again and he doesn’t register again. It’s as if he isn’t there. Lori told him.
I’ve never seen this happen before.

Eric sat up. *Are you at home?* He was ready to go to her if he had to. He sent out sensors to find her presence.

“If she tries to give you JUG again, you let me know.” Sandy ordered Kate.

No. I’m running errands. Lori was vague.

That was probably a good sign that she wasn’t at home. He wasn’t looking for her. The man may be looking for Greg or Kate. *Are you by school?*

No. I’m on the other side of town.

Eric had found her. He felt better. *Maybe he has a way of blocking his wavelengths.*

“Don’t worry mom, she won’t be giving me JUG again.” Kate was absolute.

Eric didn’t like the way she said it. There was a spiteful tone in her voice. She believed she was untouchable.

If you’re sure. Lori was shaken.

Thanks for telling me. Eric didn’t feel completely satisfied that she was okay. *Is he still near you?*

No, but I saw him in two places. It scared me. She answered. *One time he was gone by the time I took a second look.*

Let me know if you see him again. They disconnected.

“There will be no need for further punishment.” Eric scolded Kate.

“If she so much as tries, you tell me or Eric.” Sandy finalized the plan.

“I will Mom.” Kate promised playing the victim nicely.

“Eric’s probably right. If she was talking to anyone we didn’t want her involved with, she wouldn’t be going to see Henry tonight.” Frankie picked up the cards for her deal.

Eric went rigid. That was why Lori was being evasive on her exact location. Henry would use the three weeks to his advantage. Kate picked up his tension and stiffened in response.

“It’s just a game.” Their mother read their postures to mean they were getting competitive. “At least she can’t hide things from Henry. He reads minds.”

“Actually she’s very good at hiding things.” Kate informed Sandy. “Miss Becket blocks people from reading her mind all the time. I don’t know how she knows when we do it. She even knew where I was when I was invisible.”

It was too much for his mother to set aside as simple coincidence. Sandy put down her cards. “What is wrong with you?” She almost yelled at Eric.

“Nothing.” He didn’t know why she turned on him. His presumption was she could tell he liked Lori or Kate was telling her more than he heard.

“Why aren’t you all over this?” She expected Eric to be protective as he always was.

That explained the misdirected anger. “The only offense she has committed is that she gave Kate detention for not doing her work. That’s hardly a blip on our radar of troubles.”

“Bullshit.” Sandy only cussed when she was frightened. “When did you get so lenient about Kate?”

“He’s friends with Miss Becket.” Kate sold him out.

Frankie stared down at the table. The conversation sailed into rocky waters.

Sandy took in every aspect. “Eric, is this true? What kind of friends?” Eric didn’t answer but Kate must have mentally. Sandy’s eyes darted to her and then back to Eric. “You kissed her? She’s Kate’s teacher.”

Frankie was beyond uncomfortable. She had suspected worse but hearing confirmation that there was some physical contact was too much.

Eric scowled at Kate. She was so intent on getting Sandy upset that she hurt Frankie’s feelings. “What do you want me to say, Mom?”

“This wouldn’t be the first time Gran sent a woman to infiltrate by seducing you.”

“This isn’t the same.” Eric was quieter. Frankie shouldn’t be there. “She isn’t working with Gran. I swear it.”

“How inappropriate that she would go after a student’s family member. What a tramp?”

“Mother.” It was a one-word warning.

“Don’t you mother me. She spent the night! You’re not thinking with your brains.”

Kate didn’t smile but had a satisfied look.

“I guess we aren’t going to play cards.” Eric threw down his hand and stood up.

“What’s going on?” Ron had entered. Sandy must have sent for him.

“I’ll go.” Frankie said.

“Stay. We’ll be back.” Sandy got up.

Eric followed Ron to his office with Sandy bringing up the rear. It had been a long time since he made the march of shame to an official reprimand.

Sandy filled Ron in on the details. Ron’s newfound balance was being tested. Eric prepared for the worse but hoped for the best.

“Eric, you say she’s okay?” It was a good sign that he didn’t blow. Sandy had angled the story as if it came straight from Kate’s mouth.

“He didn’t know Marie was working for Gran.” Sandy reminded Ron before Eric had a chance to answer.

“But Marie could cloud people’s judgment.” Marie had tempted Ron before the twins were born.

“She’s not involved with anyone like that.” Eric vowed.

“And she doesn’t have any skills?” Ron asked Eric.

“Not that we can pick up.” Sandy interrupted again.

“Grandpa Gerard likes her.” Eric sounded feeble as he eluded the question. Lori didn’t have any skills until he taught her. They couldn’t know that.

“Sandy, I trust Eric.” Ron did a surprise about face on his wife. “Gerard and Father Francis work with her. If she was harmful, they would have picked it up.”

“And you’re fine with him being involved with Kate’s teacher? She spent the night at the condo.”

Eric let his head fall back. That wasn’t going to fly with Ron.

“No, I’m not fine with that. How serious is this?”

“It isn’t. We fell asleep on the sofa that was all. We talked about seeing each other after school’s out but right now we aren’t anything but friends.”

“Not even then.” Sandy commanded. “I can’t believe you’d even consider a woman that Kate didn’t trust.”

Ron turned to Eric. It was an inquiry he had as well.

“You know I wouldn’t. I was hoping that Kate would give her another chance.” He was until that evening.

“That’s unlikely.” Sandy had seen Kate’s face that night. It was nonnegotiable. “If she was really not part of the problem you would bring her in to help.” Sandy challenged.

“The hell I’ll bring her into this!” Eric wouldn’t let Lori near their problems. He was already so worried about Kate and everyone else that his temper was on the verge of explosion most of the time.

“Watch it.” Ron warned.

Sandy stared at Eric with a look of disappointment.

“Fine. I won’t see her again.” Eric felt empty hearing his words. It was better for Lori to stay away from his danger prone family. He stormed out of the office to let his parents argue without him. He went back to Frankie and Kate.

“I better go home.” Kate didn’t look at him.

“I’ll walk you.” He offered. “Frankie, I’ll be back and then we can go meet Henry and Matt.”

“Where are you going?” Kate wanted to know what they were up to. She didn’t want them making any moves without her.

“Getting some information. We aren’t ready for anything else.” Frankie assured her.

Eric opened the door for Kate and they walked to her home.

“What happened?” Kate asked softly. It was a risk to mention it but she needed to know she was successful.

“I promised not to see Lori again.”

“Good.” She was happy and mad at the same time.

Kate gave him a hug before going into her house. She wasn’t sorry but she wanted him to know that she was still his sister who cared about him too much to let some succubus ensnare him.

Finding Trouble

When Eric returned home Frankie waited by the car.

“I’m sorry you were here for that.” Eric didn’t think she needed to see his family’s bout especially since the topic was a sensitive one for her.

She didn’t meet his eyes. “You didn’t mention that you had kissed or that she stayed at your place.”

“You already imagined we had slept together.”

“You didn’t though?”

“We didn’t. I barely know her.”

“But you are sure she isn’t a spy.”

“Would I let her near Kate if I had even a doubt of that?” He wanted to yell but held his temper.

“No, you wouldn’t.” Frankie knew it was true. “Do you like each other?”

“I won’t ever find out. I am forbidden to see her.” That was a lie. He already knew. There was an undeniable attraction that neither Eric nor Lori could fight.

Frankie was relieved by his words. She hugged Eric. “Does that mean I get a second chance?”

He didn’t know.

His silence made her uneasy. “Too soon.” She whispered in his ear and kissed his cheek. “Let’s go.”

They took Henry’s car to Ojai and found the farmhouse that Matt had mentioned. Eric and Matt disappeared and hid their presence from possible sensing skills from any of the inhabitants. Frankie and Henry could only fade and not vanish completely so they stayed by the car. The twins got near the house when a floodlight came on. They stood still.

Someone came out to investigate. It was one of the guys that had jumped them after football game in September. After he was sure there wasn’t a soul in sight he walked back into the farmhouse announcing that it must have been triggered by some animal.

Eric and Matt ran back at full speed to Frankie and Henry.

“It’s the right house.” Matt said.

Eric nodded. "But we triggered lights."

"They're probably heat sensitive." Henry guessed. "But we know where they are."

"Let's call Joe." Frankie added.

"So we surprise them?" Eric didn't want to wait for another move from them. The next time, he wanted to pick the time and place.

"Yes." Henry was grim. "I wish we knew what we were up against and how many. Too bad we haven't had a chance to build on the meter."

"Are you sure we should try to catch them here?" Frankie asked. "We know they will come to us. It might be better to let them make the next move on our turf."

"And use Kate and Greg as bait." Matt snapped.

Eric was glad he said it first.

"I didn't mean it that way." Frankie back peddled.

"We'll talk to Joe but I think he'll agree that we come to them." Henry walked off to have a quick phone call.

Eric paced. His worries had been diverted but had returned with renewed intensity. He ran his hands up his face and held his head.

"Eric, we'll finish this." Matt pledged.

"I know."

"Joe's coming over for lunch. We'll talk then." Henry updated.

"We'll be there." Matt said.

Frankie and Eric sat in the back seat as Henry drove home. She got tired and curled up on Eric's shoulder. He put his arm around her to make it more comfortable for both of them. It was nice but it wasn't the same kind of chemistry he had with Lori.

Once they were in Santa Katrina and Matt was driving to their house he asked Eric, "What happened earlier?" He sensed the disturbance. "When you were with Mom, Kate and Frankie and then with Dad." He had seen the images.

"Kate has mom thinking Lori is using me like Marie did and I can't see her again."

"They told you that?"

“I promised.”

“Bummer.” Matt didn’t push for more information.

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

Eric took an extra long route for his morning run. His mind strayed to Lori for a moment wondering when to tell her that he wouldn't see her again. He should do it right away but he wasn't ready. He didn't know what to say or how to explain it. And mostly, he didn't want to do it.

It was a fleeting thought as he remembered the farmhouse. They found the right location. His stomach contracted as he worried about the upcoming confrontation. He didn't want Kate or Brian or their friends involved but they would be more helpful than anyone else. They were exceptionally skilled and when they worked as a group their powers grew exponentially. They couldn't go. He couldn't cope with that much risk.

Dripping with sweat Eric hopped into the shower. He let the warm water refresh his tired muscles. He walked into the kitchen and found his dad at the table.

"Do you have to leave yet?" Ron asked.

"Not yet." Matt must have told his father they were helping Frankie and Henry with Guido. He waited for a potential lecture on safety.

"I'll go when you have a plan." Ron offered. He wanted Kate and the family protected.

"Thanks." Eric had a small grin glad that things were as tight as ever.

"Sit." Ron invited.

Eric expected a gentle reminder of his promise from the night before.

"I had a long talk with Matt and Brian this morning."

"I can tell."

"They said a lot of good things about Lori."

Eric didn't expect his dad to say that or for them to talk to him about her. "There are a lot of good things about her."

"You shouldn't have agreed to stay away so easily."

"Kate isn't going to accept her."

"Kate is scared right now for a lot of real reasons. They are blending into false fears."

"Same end results."

"I can't tell you what to do but if you want to reconsider your position, I'll talk to your mom."

"Thanks." It was appealing. "She isn't the only fish in the sea."

"No." Ron said casually. "But they think she has been a good influence on you, and those kind of fish are scarce."

"Do I have to decide today?" He wanted to stay focused on Guido.

"You didn't agree to not see her again for Kate. You did it for Lori." Ron decided the night before.

"Same end results." Eric sighed. "Anyway, there was a big hurdle that I'm not sure I could pass."

Ron tilted his head waiting for more details.

"Her last boyfriend hit her. She isn't going to like to hear I blew up and hit Greg."

"Does she have to know?"

"She knows that I lost my temper. I told her that Matt would explain it because I hate to even remember that night." It shamed him that he did it and more that he wasn't brave enough to tell her himself.

"Keep me posted." Ron had an odd smile. "Don't let go too easily."

Matt and Brian ran into the room. "Come on. We need to go."

"You're coming?" Eric asked Brian.

"Don't tell Kate."

"She's mad enough at me. You can take all the heat for this."

They drove to their lunch appointment. Joe was pleased to meet Brian. The more help the better. Eric and his brothers mostly listened. They discussed calling in friends from other states. That would take weeks or more to coordinate. It was going to be a long wait.

The biggest concern was the numbers and the skills they would face. They were big variables in the equation. Joe counted the brothers as double because they were exceptionally talented but didn't know if that would be enough.

Eric. He heard Greg call him mentally. Deborah is at my house.

What?

She's here with Margo. Can you get Frankie and Henry?

We'll be there soon.

They arrived and the whole group was together for the first time since Kate was returned safely; Ellen, Gerard, Father Francis, Ron, Sandy, Jim, Andy, Kate, Greg, Dave, Meg, Brad and Chris. Only Angela and Ian were missing and that was for Ian's protection. Margo, Greg's estranged mother, sat by her sister Deborah who looked like she had been crying for days.

When Eric saw Deborah he wanted to slap her. She had kidnapped Kate and she sat there in Greg's home as a safe haven. He had cooled. If it had been the week Kate was taken Deborah would have gotten a hit or worse. And given the company in the room, Eric may not have been the first to get to her and that was saying something.

"Okay Deborah, you need to tell them everything." Margo sounded more like her mother than her sister.

Deborah glared at Joe, Frankie and Henry. She didn't like them. They were part of the sting when Guido and much of the gang were arrested. She was spared but barely.

"Think it if that will be easier. We'll hear it." Frankie offered in a smarmy tone.

"I don't need your help." Deborah didn't hide her disgust.

"Really? So Guido isn't after you too." Henry wasn't much softer than his sister.

She started to sob. "He knew. He knew we didn't really care if he got out. The guard we hired turned on us. Guido killed Tyler on the way back from jail." The woman that was so confident when she taunted Eric about being the leader and his skills was scared like a little girl with a ghoul under her bed.

"How did you get out?" Frankie probed.

"One of the guys that went to spring him warned me in a text message and I ran. Everyone would align with Guido, half out of loyalty half out of fear." She spoke through her tears. "I don't know how I did it but everyone around me lost their sight and I ran to the car and drove." Any strong emotion could enhance skills in a dire need for survival. "I didn't know where to go. I eventually went to Margo's in Long Beach."

"That was last night and I knew we had to come here." Margo finished.

"Good idea. He may be checking there regularly." Henry stated. "Where are they and what skills do they have?" It was sharp for Henry not to reveal all.

She gave them the address they already knew. “There are light sensors around the house and it sits on ten acres of orange trees. There are nine people with him. Two can block out powers but only in one direction. Two can move things. One can send out electrical currents and shorts out lights, computers, whatever when he aims. Another can see far away. There’s one that can sense people and what they are doing if they have any powers. One guy can teleport himself within a few yards. And one disguises himself to look however he wants, even like a woman. He can also mind read and that’s how Guido learned about Tyler’s plot.”

Frankie took notes as she spoke. “That leaves ten. Smaller than we feared.”

“Can he read your mind now?” Henry asked. Eric had never considered the distance needed for that skill. The range would probably be shorter than telepathy since it was a one person at a time skill. Those usually took a visual subject.

“He was always sneaking around when we had meetings with the guard, so I guess he had to be close.”

“And the guard. Is he there?”

“Yes. But he was the one that can see far. He had a friend with him but I don’t think he can do anything.”

“So that’s eleven.” Frankie tallied. “And they’re all armed?”

“There’s a large armory at the safe house.”

“We need to move fast.” Henry was dead serious. “He’ll be after us before long.”

“And the girl.” Deborah whispered.

“The girl? You mean Katie?” Greg gasped. “Why do you think that?”

They all looked at Kate. Eric was paralyzed.

“He knew we wanted her to steal his power. He wants her to teach him everything she knows and everything she can learn from the others.”

“She couldn’t teach him. He’s too old.” Frankie explained. “And that’s just for starters.”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to convince him.”

“Do they know where to find her?” Henry asked Deborah.

“They know where the school is and the party. That’s all.”

“That’s enough.” Sandy frowned. “And they may know more by now.”

“Do any have beards?” Eric asked afraid that Lori’s suspicions were more valid than he let on.

“No.” Deborah answered.

He relaxed.

“We have time.” Joe said. “They won’t move until they have a new location. If they know Deborah is alive they must realize we could learn their whereabouts. As long as they don’t leave, they won’t make a move.”

It was an excellent point. They had time and a sign to look for if it ran out sooner then they could fully prepare.

Margo and Deborah went to a local motel in Santa Katrina. They couldn’t go home with Guido on the loose. Turned out Matt and Henry had two fugitives stowed there already. Matt had taken in Tyler’s girlfriend and son without telling Eric. Officer Joe had the placed under surveillance.

Greg was worried about Margo. He always insisted that she was nothing to him because she left home when he was two but when things got dicey you started overlooking small things like rash abandonment.

“What’s the plan?” Kate asked.

“That you stay out of it.” Jim ordered. Jim was usually such a softy for a parent. His tone was eerily like Sandy’s.

“We’re stronger together.” Kate refuted.

“You’re not bait.” Frankie said remembering the scolding Matt gave her the night before.

“I can do anything they can.” She pointed to her brothers.

“Next time we have to go after a murderer you can lead the way.” Eric kidded.

“We need to move fast.” Joe said. “We need to start making calls.”

Henry agreed.

Everyone dispersed. Eric laid on his bed glad the wait was over and more scared than he had ever been in his life. There was an urge to check on Lori. He fought to keep his promise. She was safer the less contact she had with him.

Frankie and Henry called to say it would take a month to get their friends to California to help. It would be a long wait.

Eric was a zombie at school. He went through the motions glad his grades were solid and that he could pass his exams easily. His morning jogs were longer as he tried to keep a mental balance.

When Reid ran into him he gave him another joint. He saw the tension and it was a cure. He joked medicinal marijuana was legal in California. Eric stowed it for later. He couldn't let his guard down. Being in Santa Barbara was killing him. Kate was walking around Santa Katrina in places and with people that Guido had in his scope.

Joe was right. Guido wouldn't make a move without relocating first and Joe had ensured there was a constant watch on the farmhouse. He called in a lot of favors to make it happen.

Truant

As soon as they had their last class on Thursday, the brothers went home. They had barely crossed the threshold when Sandy mentally called for them to meet her at Jim's. Jim and Sandy were arguing in the kitchen with Kate pouting on a chair at the table.

"Eric, your friend has given Kate detention again." Sandy was furious.

"Mom, we have bigger things to worry about?" Matt was tired of the Lori bashing.

"Even more reason for her not to go."

"What do you want me to do? I'm not allowed to see her?" Eric didn't think he should have to remind her of his promise. "I can't control her anyway."

Matt gave him a look. He believed he could on some level. She listened to Eric.

"She's going this time." Jim barked.

"Now? With everything that's going on?" Sandy overpowered his temper easily. She had lived with Ron and her sons long enough to learn how to throw her weight around.

"Father Francis said it was justified. And she won't be alone this time. Greg, Brad and Meg will be serving their time as well." Jim fumed. "She got them all into trouble."

"What did you do?" Brian sat across from Kate.

"We were late." She said simply.

"I don't know how you can know when class starts without a warning bell." Sandy huffed out. St. Iggy's didn't have bells. The school sounded ridiculous.

"She has a watch." Jim snapped back.

"How many times?" Eric knew it would take more than one late arrival to get Lori mad again.

Kate stared at him with cold eyes.

"Today made four straight days." Jim answered.

"This is so unfair." Kate blurted out.

"You're going this time. I'm not calling in any favors." Eric was pissed. She was challenging Lori's authority in class. It was a stupid thing to do with everything that was going on. Maybe it was

because of all the real danger that Kate was acting out. The cause and effect blurred in Eric's head as he pondered the dilemma. Horse – cart – cart – horse. Which went first?

“Don't call in any favors.” Jim glared at Kate. “She didn't tell you the whole story.”

“Do I want to hear this?” Eric closed his eyes.

“Tell him, young lady.”

Eric opened his eyes. Kate was scared to speak. He didn't want to read her mind to find the answer. He didn't want to know. Whatever it was would cause a temper explosion.

“She almost got Miss Becket fired.” Jim bellowed.

Eric's eyes darted to Jim. “How?”

“Said she got stoned with you.” Jim didn't care about the pot, only that Kate had tried to use the information for such a spiteful act.

“Eric!” His mother shouted. “Tell me this isn't true.”

“It's true.” He would deal with his mother later. He leaned with his hands on the table. “You blackmailed Lori.” That explained why Kate believed she was untouchable when she promised she wouldn't get detention again. It wasn't an admission of good intentions.

“You're grounded.” Sandy snapped at Eric.

“Fine.” He walked back to his house. He went to the yard to play with the puppies. *Lori*. He had promised not to contact her but after what he learned he needed to talk to her.

Two hours. He heard.

That's how long since you gave Kate JUG?

Close. Since she found out her threat didn't work.

Where are you?

Home.

Can I come there?

I don't have a problem with it. She had an odd tone.

Eric drove to Lori's. He wanted to hear the story in person. She lived in a quaint apartment building by the sea. She answered the door and he wanted to hug her.

“Tell me what happened.” He requested without an embrace.

“You want my side.”

“I want the truth and Kate is peculiarly quiet right now.”

“Are you allowed to talk to me?”

Kate had a big mouth. “Start from the top.”

She let him in and he sat in a chair as Mojo inspected his feat. He was a small indoor dog with black curly hair.

“They missed half the class today.” She started as she sat on the couch curling her legs under her. “I gave them two warnings already. I spoke to Father Francis first and he said there were no free passes this time. I pulled them aside at lunch and Kate just smiled this wicked grin.”

“I may know which one you mean.” It ran in the family.

“I’ve seen it somewhere before.” Lori smirked at him. She was charming trying to be clever. “At tennis she told me that I would need to rethink my punishment and I told her I couldn’t.”

“And she dropped her little bomb about the pot.” Eric guessed.

“Not at first. She asked if I had heard from you lately. I said that was something she could discuss with you. Kate said she had and that you would not be seeing me again.”

“That’s a partial story.” Eric sighed as Mojo scrambled into his lap for more affection.

“I understand. Don’t worry about it. I would’ve expected you to tell me but then maybe you weren’t even permitted that much.” She had a sad look.

“There are some other things going on right now and I didn’t want to say it. Things are changing every minute.”

“She got to me with that.”

Kate had gotten to him with it as well. “Go on.” He encouraged.

“She told me that I would have to think of something because she didn’t think Father Francis would let me stay on if he heard I got stoned.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. She read my mind.” He didn’t know where he slipped but that was the only explanation. “Oh, I’m grounded for that by the way.”

“So there are two reasons why you shouldn’t be here?”

“They don’t out weigh the reason why I am here.” Eric thought about where her story was going.

“You called her on it, didn’t you?”

“I marched her right to Father Francis office and told him everything. I’m on probation.” She snickered. “A probation without any documentation and just between us.”

Eric moved to the couch and put his arm around Lori. “I’m so sorry.” The words were completely inadequate. He had hurt her again.

“It was worth it.”

“What would make this worth it?”

“You should’ve seen the look on her face.” Lori smiled. “I wasn’t going to let her get away with that kind of behavior.”

He laughed. “She deserves it.”

“Then Father Francis excused her and he scolded me. He was more upset that a student found out than the fact that we got stoned.”

“Doesn’t surprise me?” Father Francis was about as cool as a priest could get.

“He asked me about you.” She smiled awkwardly. “No secrets with you guys.”

Eric already knew the priest approved. He also assumed that Kate was eavesdropping. Before that day, it wouldn’t have crossed his mind. “She probably heard. Enhanced hearing.” He explained.

“Great.”

“What did you say? I’m just wondering what Kate heard.”

“That I was confused but we liked each other.” She called Mojo over to avoid eye contact with him. “And that I should’ve seen it coming and it was my fault. I told him we were waiting until school was out.” She tried to smile but only a twist manifested. “He said I couldn’t do any better.”

Eric’s guilt consumed him. She could easily do better than someone as hot headed as him who attracted danger like a magnet attracted metal. Or she could find a man that didn’t have a sister who threatened to get her thrown out of her job. “Kate thinks I broke my promise and was stalling for more time.”

“You were. Weren’t you?”

“Dad already released me from that sentence. Matt and Brian spoke up for you.”

“What happened?”

“Kate played her hand well. She got mother worried about you because you went to that meeting.”

“She isn’t going to accept me and you.” She understood that he couldn’t bear it for long if he tried.

“Right now, we’re in the middle of something much bigger.” He spoke slowly as he explained things as vaguely as possible. “After we are past it, I was going to see if she softened.”

Lori frowned. “That isn’t going to happen.”

“The outlook is bleak.”

She sat back. “It would have been nice.”

“I feel like we’re breaking up and we never even dated.”

“We are.” She tried to hold back tears but a couple trickled out.

He wiped one away. It was a mistake. He couldn’t resist the draw. He gave her a long hard good-bye kiss. “I was falling in love.”

“I’m losing my powers. You should’ve been in love weeks ago.” She teased.

He was. He got up. “Do me a favor. Keep those meters on you and call me if you ever need me.”

“Are things escalating?” She worried.

“No.” He lied even though she would detect it.

She bit her lip as the dread sunk in.

He left. Eric had never had the urge to rebel against his family’s wishes more in his life. He drove home slowly.

“And where were you?” Sandy asked as soon as he stepped in the door. “I grounded you.”

“Ground me some more.” He walked up to his room and threw himself on the bed covering his head with the pillow. He was on the verge of tears.

The Cooler Brother

Brian knocked on Eric's door before walking in. "You left too quickly."

"What more could happen?" Eric stayed reclined with a pillow over his head.

"Matt told Kate off."

Eric removed the pillow and sat up. He couldn't image it. "Why?"

"He was pissed."

That was obvious. "But why bother? She isn't going to change her mind."

"He had her rethinking things." Brian was shocked. "He said Lori was great for you and Kate was too immature to let you find out if she was anyone special."

"I had time. She is. We broke up."

"You weren't dating."

"It still sucked to do."

"He had her in tears and didn't even try to comfort her."

"This is a mess. Why didn't I stay away?"

"Don't do this to yourself now. She needed a good telling off. She's raging about Guido and taking it out on your girlfriend." He corrected himself by adding, "Would be girlfriend."

Eric was too tired to talk to Matt or Kate. He was emotionally drained. He would wait until they came to him. "Thanks for telling me."

"Take care." Brian left him to process.

He started to fall asleep but his phone brought him back to an alert state. It was Frankie. "Hello."

"Hi." She must have heard something in his voice. "Are you okay?"

"Just woke up." He lied.

"Want to go to dinner?"

"Can't. I'm grounded."

She laughed. "Really?"

He laughed too. It sounded ridiculous for a twenty two year old man to be grounded but he lived on his parents' dime and it was an unspoken rule. "We had a blow up over here. Kate and I hashed some things out and neither of us will see the light of day for a few weeks."

"You and Kate? I find that hard to believe." She said. "Unless it was about Lori?"

"She tried to get her fired today."

"And I thought Kate gave me a hard time." Frankie wasn't glad or mad. "What did Kate do?"

"Told Father Francis that we got stoned. Well, she threatened to and Lori called her bluff. Kate has JUG tomorrow and Lori is on probation and we're both grounded."

"You got stoned with her? Is that how you got together?" Frankie hoped it was the drugs that had enchanted Eric and not Lori.

It wasn't. "It helped things along."

"You really like her."

"I do. I don't want to but I do." He would give anything to make the pain go away or take on a double dose if he could spare Lori the same angst. And there he was pouring out his broken heart on the last object of his affection.

Frankie reverted to her clinical side. "Well, it'll work out if it's meant to."

It wouldn't. Even if Kate realized she was wrong about Lori he didn't see any hope of her admitting it. She had invested too much into the anti-Lori movement.

"We'll talk later this weekend." They ended their call.

Eric realized they had somehow made it to friends. Matt popped his head in before Eric could fall asleep. He wondered if he would ever escape to unconsciousness.

"I heard you told Kate off?" Eric raised an eyebrow.

"She deserved worse. If it was you I'd have hit you – hard."

"And you talked to dad?"

"Like that matters anymore."

"Aren't you going to get tired cleaning up my messes?"

"Never." Matt smiled. "I'll catch you later."

Eric realized Matt knew about his talk with Lori. Either he saw it, sensed it or Brian gave him the details, probably all of the above. Eric was lucky to have his family, even Kate who was acting like a spoiled child. He drifted off to sleep and walked into Kate's room, which was all misty as it always was in their shared dreams.

"I'm sorry." She said in tears.

He hugged her. "Don't. This isn't important. We have Guido to worry about."

"I'll give her another chance."

"No you won't. It's okay." He was lying up a storm. It was for himself.

"You'll thank me if I'm right."

"Thank you." He wasn't going to argue about something he needed to put in the past.

She started crying harder. "I'm a horrible sister."

Eric pulled her in tight. "You're the best sister ever. I love you more than is possible. No one, male or female, could ever come between us."

"You're letting me off easier than Matt."

"That's because I'm the cooler brother of the two of us." His biggest lie yet. Matt was the best brother ever.

She laughed through her wet face. "I'm so sorry."

"Stop saying that." He ordered and she obeyed.

Eric drove to Gerard's house to run at full speed early the next morning. He didn't take the dogs with him. The tension eased as he wore himself out. Whatever happened with Guido, he just had to wait until they were ready to move. They didn't want to rush in without full support. The showdown loomed on the horizon. It was good that it had an expiration date. He wanted to be free of the worry. The next few weeks as they waited to rally the troops would be hard.

He wasn't foolish. There was danger for everyone involved. They had trained and had many different skills at their disposal. If they surprised Guido, they had better chance of victory. Everything was set into motion and he would fill his role. He was prepared for the battle.

He ran for over an hour. It wasn't enough.

"Do you need something to eat?" Gerard asked.

“No thanks.”

“How are things going?” Gerard’s voice gave away too much concerned interest.

“You know about Kate and Lori.” Eric accurately deduced.

“It’s a small school.”

“It was already over. Kate took care of that last weekend.”

“How?”

“She got Mom riled up against Lori. She forbade me to see her and I promised.”

“So it is all over.” He sounded purposely flippant.

“Grandpa, what can I do?”

“Some things are worth working for.” Gerard glanced at his watch. “Speaking of work, I have to get going.”

Eric went home. He was working on his last term paper when Sandy stopped by his room. “Can we talk?”

It would escalate to more but he nodded.

“Drugs are illegal.” She stated.

“So is faking your death and taking your twins place.” Eric’s criminal act was far less severe.

Sandy swallowed loudly to be called on her infraction. “My intentions for that were not to get into bed with someone.”

“Mom, are you here to tell me I’m not grounded or to lecture me.”

“Both.”

Eric shrugged. “If it’s all the same, can we skip both rather than the alternative.”

“Then I have only one more agenda item to cover. How certain are you that Lori isn’t a problem?”

“Absolute.”

“How?”

“I asked her flat out.”

She knew lying to Eric was impossible. “Matt has really put out the good press for you lately.”

Eric laughed. Matt wasn’t tired of cleaning up his mess. “Gave you an earful, did he?”

“Two at least.” Sandy rolled her eyes. “In time after all this is in the past we can talk to Kate.”

“Lori isn’t going to wait for me.”

“She doesn’t love you back.”

Eric’s heart jumped into his throat. Matt told her he was in love. “I don’t know if we made it that far.”

“Then she’s a fool.” Sandy couldn’t see how any woman could resist her sons.

“She’s better without me and safer away from all this.”

Paroled for Good Behavior

Frankie stopped by in the late afternoon. “Hello.” She said walking into his room.

“Hey there.”

“I came to break you out of jail.” She smiled. “You need a night out. I was thinking a comedy.”

After months of knowing her she had finally let her guard down around him. “I’m not good company.”

“I’ll survive.” She pulled at his hand. “You’re mother said she’d allow it.”

Eric acquiesced. Frankie treated for the ticket and the popcorn and they sat in the middle third row. Their timing was perfect. The lights dimmed as they took their seats.

The summer blockbuster trailers ran back to back. Every movie he saw there seemed to be more trailers and less content. It was a silly movie about a woman that took a job under false pretenses and fell in love with her work rival. They were an hour in before Eric let out an audible laugh.

They had made the last twilight show and the lines were much longer for the next audience. Frankie walked over to say hello to a friend she had gone to school with. Eric stayed back not in the mood to be social.

Greg, Brad and Chris were leaving the theater after seeing the latest comic hero movie. It was good to see they were doing normal teenage activities.

“Are you following us around because Kate’s grounded and you can’t break that habit?” Chris asked.

“You can’t let skills like that go to waste.” Eric joked.

“You’re sister got us JUG.” Brad grimaced. “Like we needed that our last weekend of high school.”

“Why would you all be late?” Eric took the adult role.

“She played on their senioritis.” Chris gave them a silly face.

Greg nodded. “She was so convinced no one would care and she got so annoying in math it was easier to go along than fight it.”

"I heard that Miss Becket almost got fired. Do you know what happened?" Brad looked at Eric and Greg for full explanation.

"I don't even know the answer to that one." Greg glanced at Eric.

Eric was readied for being read and started thinking about the movie. He wasn't going to slip again. "It isn't important." Eric didn't want them thinking badly of Lori for getting high. He sensed Lori pulling up to the garage. He rolled his eyes not needing a run in. Frankie was still talking to her friends.

"I can't believe Kate would be antagonistic to a teacher." Chris had only seen Kate's docile side.

"It's chick warfare." Brad said. "She's good at all the things Kate is; tennis, math, she's drop dead gorgeous."

Greg hit Brad's shoulder. "That's my girlfriend."

Chris was about to echo Brad's sentiment but Eric cut him off. "And my sister."

"Why didn't she go to her last class?" Brad asked Greg.

"Kate ditched school today?" Eric worried she was still rebelling.

"She didn't ditch. Mr. Sanchez gave her permission to skip." Greg answered.

Lori was getting closer. She must be going to a movie as well.

"Hi guys." Frankie had finally finished with her friends.

The boys all gave him a knowing look.

"Let's go." Eric tried to pull her to hurry.

"Don't you want to eat? I'm starved." Frankie put her hand over her stomach.

"Isn't that Miss Becket?" Chris pointed at Lori walking up with Miss Carter. "She is hot."

"Oh." Frankie realized why Eric wanted to leave.

"Come on. We'll just say hello." Miss Carter urged Lori as she walked over to say hi to her students and Chris. She knew them well from the play rehearsals earlier that school year. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Hi." The guys said to their teachers.

"Hello Lori." Frankie greeted with more kindness and sincerity than she had given her before.

Eric stared at Lori. She avoided eye contact. He enjoyed the glorious view.

"Hi Frankie. Do you know Emma?" She introduced Miss Carter ignoring his stare.

Miss Carter shook Frankie's hand. "And you're Kate's brother."

"I'm Eric." She didn't have a chance of knowing which twin he was even if she remembered their names.

"We'll be seeing each other all weekend." Greg joked to Lori. "What happened with you and Kate in Father Francis office?"

Eric immediately hindered any metaphysical skills in the area. Greg was fishing for information.

Lori's eyed her watch, which wasn't a watch. She smiled realizing Eric was blocking Greg.

"She'll let you know when she's ready to talk about it." Lori didn't look at Eric. Seeing him unnerved her.

You blocked me. Greg sent to Eric. Well played. Does that mean the old Eric is back?

With a vengeance. Eric flashed a wicked grin at Greg. It had always annoyed Greg when he did but it didn't then.

Stick around. That other guy wasn't up to par. Greg was glad Eric was snapping back to his old self. They all were.

Understood. Can you get the old Kate back?

Done. Greg didn't elaborate.

"We should get going before they sell out." Lori jerked her head to the box office window.

"Wait." Brad spoke quickly. "I'm sorry for being late all week. We were obnoxious."

Lori was taken aback. "Thanks for understanding." She felt guiltier. The only part of teaching that was hard was laying down the laws and consequential punishment when it was broken.

"Me too." Greg said.

"I wish I could cancel it but Father Francis won't let me." Lori said. They were truly remorseful.

"Stop that. You can't let them walk all over you." Eric stared at the guys. "They did the crime, they got caught and now they'll do the time." He glanced to Lori who was looking at him for the first time. She was beautiful.

"See you boys tomorrow." Lori and Emma went to their show.

"Can we eat now?" Frankie asked.

"Something quick." Eric agreed.

"Sorry we ran into Lori." Frankie offered as solace as they strolled the boardwalk.

"It's a small town. It's bound to happen."

"I don't even threaten her anymore." Frankie stated matter-of-factly.

"You weren't jealous either."

"I lost the war."

Eric stopped. "I had no intention of hurting you."

"It's part of the risk. If we hadn't happened after months before you even met Lori, it wasn't going to last anyway."

They ate at a diner. Frankie said that Joe would be over the next day for breakfast. Eric suggested a small café a mile from St. Iggy's. It was a paranoid habit. They would want to be near Kate.

Kate sat on the steps to Eric's house with her dogs Boris and Natasha when Frankie dropped him off.

Eric thanked Frankie for the movie and jumped out of the car. "What're you doing here?"

"We were taking a walk when I felt you coming home."

The dogs jumped up for Eric's attention, which he gladly provided. He sat by his sister. "You look better."

"It was a good day, all things considered." She hid behind a curtain of hair. It was an irritating habit of hers.

"Did you do something special? I heard you skipped some classes."

"I didn't ditch. Grandpa said it was okay. It was only his class and since it's the last day before finals next week it was only a review lecture."

"It's cool. I didn't mean to accuse you of playing hooky." It was his first thought but at the time he assumed it was one of her classes with Lori. "So, what did you do?"

"Miss Becket and I went to lunch." She let it sink in.

Eric felt like he was in a room that was running out of air and Kate just turned on the oxygen at full blast. "Really? You called a truce?"

"No. What has she done? I said I was sorry for acting like a bitch."

"You aren't a bitch."

Kate gave him a stern look. She had passed misbehaving miles ago.

“Did it go well?” He kind of laughed thinking how awkward it must have been. Or maybe it was the relief that even if it only went okay there was hope.

“It was the most awkward lunch of my life. I fought the urge to vanish through most of it. Not that she hasn’t already seen me do that.”

Eric hugged Kate. “Thanks. You didn’t have to do that but thank you.” Nothing would ever make Eric love his sister less. It was a mathematical impossibility. But her actions had actually increased his opinion of her. She was growing up and facing the hard parts of life, those that aren’t related to life threatening paranormal enemies, with grace.

Kate pulled free. “She loves you.”

Eric’s heart sank to hear those words. Kate wasn’t trying to tell him something he didn’t know. She was acknowledging it. Then he wondered if Kate was reading his mind. She must have been reading Lori’s to make such a proclamation.

“You should call her.” Kate suggested. “It wasn’t a fun lunch but in time, I’ll get to like her – some.”

Eric frowned. “It isn’t that easy. You know what happens when people get close to us.”

“Not always. Joann has been dating Matt for months and nothing bad has happened to her.”

“It helps that she lives in Santa Barbara. This may all be over in a month or so. If Lori hasn’t moved on then, we’ll see what I can do to repair things.”

“Why in a month?” Kate didn’t know they had plans to move on Guido’s location.

“Let’s not start that when we’re having such a lovely big brother little sister conversation.”

Kate struggled to let it go without pressing to be involved. “What does Miss Becket know about this stuff? She’s worried about you.”

“Were you reading her mind again?” Eric worried that Kate was losing herself to her abilities. That she would forget to check her ethical ruler before resorting to skills.

“No. It must have been picked up through telepathy because I wasn’t trying to hear.” Kate had a small grin. “She only thinks nice things about you. I like that.”

When they first met Frankie, Kate would read her mind and hear snide remarks about Eric. Frankie did this for Eric’s sake so that he wouldn’t know how interested she was if at all but Kate hated it.

It was the major roadblock to empathizing with Frankie. “I know.” Eric said. “You’re right, she loves me.”

“And you love her too.” Again, Kate was only acknowledging it.

“That’s why I have to stay away.”

“She hates that. That you’re in danger.”

“I know.” Eric said quietly.

“I do to. That’s why I think we should help.”

“I’m not going to get hurt. I promise.” Eric gave her his best reassuring smile. “Get home before Jim extends the terms of your punishment.”

Eric walked up to his room so proud of Kate for accepting that Lori deserved another chance. Maybe in a month after Guido was dealt with he would get another chance. His heart didn’t want to believe it. It didn’t want to stay open for more pain. It wasn’t hopeless. They were truly in love and a month wasn’t long.

J.U.G. (Justice Under God)

At breakfast, Eric wasn't paying close attention to all the chatter about the upcoming ambush. He'd get the details from Matt later. Joe brought along police files of the members of the gang. He even had Tyler's folder, which wasn't needed since he had been killed.

Matt perused the top file and handed it to Eric who glanced through it before handing it to Brian. They were talking about each thug in turn.

"This is Guido?" Matt had the last and thickest file in his hands. He lingered on his rap sheet taking in as many particulars as he could. "He's an ugly son of a bitch."

Eric, Lori called, I saw the bearded man again.

Where? He asked as Matt handed him Guido's file. He read it over with more interest knowing he was the leader. He was ugly.

On the corner when I was driving to school.

Near the school? That bothered him. *Is this the first time you saw him near school?*

Yes.

Where were you the last time?

On First and Maple. She answered.

He handed Brian the file unable to concentrate on it. *That's by Henry and Frankie's.*

I was going to talk to Henry at the time. She confessed. *About the meter.* She added out of guilt.

"That guy was at the prom." Brian said when he opened the file. "He had a beard though."

"He grew one in prison." Joe replied.

We're on our way. Eric promised Lori. *Stay away if you see him again.* He got up. "We're going to St. Iggy's." He told his breakfast companions and threw more than enough money on the table. Their food hadn't arrived.

Should I get the kids inside? Lori asked.

Immediately. His vision flickered to hers as she panicked. She hurried out of her classroom and through the halls.

"What's wrong?" Brian asked.

“That guy’s by the school.” Matt said. He was in Eric’s head.

Eric couldn’t warn Kate and panic sunk in deeper. She wasn’t mad at him anymore and he tried Greg and the others without luck. They were blocked.

He saw Lori run out to the front door and down the drive. *The gate’s closed.* Lori told him. *They never close the gate.* The wrought iron gates were indeed closed at the entrance of the school. *There he is.*

The bearded version of Guido stood inside the gate. Kate and her friends were in a circle on the front lawn. There was a pile of bricks and a partial brick path the led from the driveway to benches under large oak trees. It must have been their choir for the day.

He isn’t registering. Lori held out her wrist as she ran to the kids. She had a tennis racket in her hand. It would be like taking a knife to a gunfight. It was worse. It was taking a tennis racket to a gunfight. *It’s all I had.* She defended hearing his thoughts.

Another Guido walked onto the lawn and then another and then two more. Lori sped up as she ran down the long driveway.

It isn’t the real Guido. He told her. *He can project images of himself.* It made sense that he never registered.

Eric, Matt, Brian, Kate reached out to all of them at once. It was a very weak signal. *They’re here.*

Where’s Father Francis? Eric heard Brian ask.

She couldn’t answer. The block was reinforced.

“Are you seeing this?” Matt must have seen the same scene from Kate’s viewpoint. He ran a red light.

“Yes.” Eric gripped the dash as Matt took a turn without slowing. He put away the terror and left only his raw rage.

Lori saw the kids and there were twelve Guidos surrounding them. *He’s asking for Kate.* Lori mentally informed Eric. *Why aren’t the students doing anything?*

One-way force field. Eric explained. He tried to reach Kate but couldn’t. Lori hadn’t crossed into the force field barrier.

One way? She repeated. Lori was on the lawn and Eric couldn't hear her but he could still see her vision. She had entered the shield's boundary.

Matt skidded to a stop in the driveway. They couldn't work telekinesis on the gate. It wouldn't open. Guido's gang must have split the force fields to cover both groups. They jumped out and ran to the gate that separated them from their sister and friends. Frankie and Henry pulled up behind them followed by Joe.

Joe ran up to the gate with his gun drawn and shot at a Guido but it wasn't the real Guido. He shook his head trying to refocus. "Someone is blacking me out." He said. His gun was taken from his hands and flew through the gate and into the bushes. The two telekinetic goons from the football game were both standing off the lawn on the driveway – one looking smug to disarm Joe.

The Guidos all turned to the gate and smiled knowing they were helpless. "Now, which one of you girls is Kate?" The Guidos asked returning to the trapped quarry. The twelve images kept a good distance from the kids.

Eric ran into the gate with his shoulder at full force. The chained lock gave enough flexible room that it didn't break. His shoulder was sore from the effort. Matt and Brian joined him and still the chain held tight. They debated lifting one over the gate but it was a long drop and they would lose their telekinesis at some point when they crossed the barrier. Since the gang was armed, it was a bad idea at best.

Lori was with the students. "Vanish." She commanded the kids. Kate disappeared first and the others a moment later.

"Where are they?" The Guidos all called looking around. Eric couldn't tell which was the real man.

"Can't find them." They heard from farther down the lawn. There were more of his people around than just the blockers and the telekinetic goons.

They tried to find a way to scale the fence. It had tall bars with some decorative iron curls but there weren't enough places to put your feet to climb over. And then there was the potential of getting shot if they tried. They were stranded.

The Guidos tightened their circle around Lori. They were all an arms distance away. “Show yourself or the pretty teacher gets it.”

Lori spun around holding her racket handle in her left hand and it’s head in her right. She was poised for a left sided backhand. “Wrong person to terrorize. They don’t care about me.” She turned trying to keep the Guidos back.

Kate must have escaped the force fields perimeter because the lock on the gate started to click.
I’m not good at locks. Eric heard.

“You’re doing fine.” He said quietly knowing she couldn’t hear his telepathy through the shield. He didn’t know how much time they had but he didn’t want to scare her. They had to get the kids and Lori away. She was the only prey Guido could locate. *Vanish!* Eric wished with all his might. She couldn’t hear him and didn’t know how to disappear.

Guido and his gang ignored the others behind the gate. He kept Lori trapped as his people tried to find the hidden kids with their minds or extended arms.

“Confusing isn’t it.” The Guidos all spoke in unison to Lori.

Lori stopped turning as she stared at one Guido. “Not really.” She was bluffing.

The Guidos didn’t flinch. They took a step closer. Lori let go of the racket with her left hand and adeptly shoved back with all her force on her racket head with her right into the correct Guido standing behind her. The images vanished as only one Guido bent over in pain. As she pulled the racket back she let it fly through her hold catching the handle with her right hand. Faster than was possible she spun around and whacked him in the head with the frame. He fell to the ground.

“Get her!” He screamed.

She stepped away but he caught her left leg and she fell on the lawn. Flipping over she kicked him in the head with her right sneaker. He let go and she raced up.

Two of his group had started mentally hurtling loose bricks at her. She tried to duck but one hit her over the right eye. She wobbled and then started to fall.

The gate unlocked and flew open as everyone pushed it. Eric vanished and ran to Lori. He grabbed her before she hit the grass and she disappeared when he caught her. He didn’t expect that but he

was glad for the advantage. He was low on the ground with her in his arms trying to move away from their last known location.

Guido pulled out a gun and shot where they fell. Eric wasn't fast enough and the bullet hit his arm. He kept Lori in his good arm as he put pressure on the wound with his mind and dodged the second shot. It was close. Guido stopped firing seeing that he hit lawn. Eric heard Guido wondering how Lori had found him out of his holographic clones. He was angered and enthralled that she knew the real man from the false.

"Eric!" Kate disembodied voice yelled. She sensed he was hit.

Eric's the leader. Guido's mind thought. He's good.

The gang lost the upper hand and they started to flee. Matt and Henry caught one of the telekinetic goons. Brian and Frankie caught the other. She lost her concentration and he broke free running safely once on the other side of the invisible force field. Kate and Greg caught one of the girls that could project the one-way force field. Brad and Meg started chasing someone down the hill until Brian told them to stop. He didn't want Meg out of his sight and they had no idea how many more were out of sight.

Father Francis had returned and parked behind their cars unable to get on the property with other cars in the drive. "Is everyone okay?"

Eric reappeared first and then the others. Lori's head was bleeding badly. She was barely conscious. Matt ran up to him. He took off his shirt and ripped it in half. He applied pressure to her wound and gave Eric the other half for his arm.

Kate and Greg blocked their victims' skills as Brian held them in place until Joe could get his cuffs from his car.

"Knife turned out to be kind of helpful in the gunfight." Lori muttered. Her racket was on the grass where the brick had hit her. It was bent from its well-served purpose. Eric kissed her forehead.

Joe cuffed the assailants. "Someone needs to come with me so they don't escape."

Matt picked up Lori. Eric didn't want to let her go. "We need to get you guys to a hospital."

"I'll show you were to take them." Father Francis offered. "I have doctor friends who won't ask questions."

“We need to get those two to the police.” Brad pointed to the thugs. “And them to a doctor.” He pointed to Eric and Lori.

“If we do we’ll be tied up all day with filling out reports.” Henry said.

Matt had Lori in the car and Eric was getting in on the other side of the back seat. “We can’t do that. We go to them tonight.” They had a small window of opportunity before Guido relocated and Eric didn’t want to wait long enough for it to close off.

“No.” Kate watched Eric. “Look at you?”

“It’s not bad. It didn’t hit bone.”

“Take them to your house. I’ll bring the doctors.” Father Francis ran to his car with his cell phone in his hand.

Matt drove Eric and Lori home. The others were in several cars close behind. Eric kept his wound covered with his mind as he held Lori with his good arm. He couldn’t believe she was injured even after he walked away. “Please be okay.”

“It’s only a flesh wound.” She mumbled.

“That’s one thick skull you have there.” Matt remarked from the front seat.

“I didn’t want you getting hurt.” Eric was whisper soft from fear.

“You got shot? You said you were equipped for this stuff.”

“How did you know which was the real Guido?” Matt asked.

She held up her wrist. “He’s the only one with a reading.”

Eric smiled. “You’re too smart for your own good.”

She closed her eyes from the pain and he gently brushed back her hair from her face.

Matt parked the car and lifted Lori up as Eric got out of his side. He was using telekinesis to do everything so he could hold his good hand over his wounded arm. The pain got sharper the more time passed.

“What happened?” Ron was home alone.

“We ran into trouble at Kate’s school. Everyone’s okay.” Eric said as Matt took Lori to the sofa.

“You mean everyone else.” Ron looked back and forth at Lori and Eric. He was shocked that his talented son was hurt. Then he evaluated the tall blond.

“Father Francis is bringing a doctor.” Matt answered before his father asked.

Nodding their father asked, “Is this Lori?”

Matt’s eyes darted to his father’s and then to Eric who was crushed to see the love of his life injured. “Yeah.”

Ron had to be curious who the incredible woman was that had enchanted his son even against his sister’s wishes. He smiled a little but frowned when Eric pulled up the shirt to see the wound on her head. “How bad is it?”

Lori opened her eyes and saw the older blonder looking man watching her cautiously. “I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you will.” Ron’s put his hand on Eric’s good shoulder.

The others from the school started rushing into the house with Jim and Andy mixed in. A couple walked in led by Father Francis.

Without further instructions they got to work. “You take her and I’ll take him.” The woman told her husband as she examined Eric’s arm.

“She needs stitches.” The man said opening up a medical bag.

“We’re going to need to x-ray to see the bone.” The woman said as she cleaned the top of Eric’s bicep.

“It isn’t broken.” Eric told her.

“It had to.” She carefully moved his arm upward and wiped away the blood. It stung to move. “It didn’t.” She confirmed finding an exit wound to the side of his arm. “Even with telekinesis that shouldn’t be possible.”

“I thought they didn’t ask questions.” Matt said to Father Francis.

“We’re off the grid.” Father Francis reminded the doctors. “Can you fix them?”

“Yes.” The man answered. “Everyone give us space.”

Eric and Lori were left with the couple. Slowly others arrived and moved to the living room where the non-wounded had gathered. They were reconvened except for Frankie and Henry who went with Joe to finish up with their two captives. Angela, Andy’s wife and Greg’s stepmother, was there without her son Ian. He was at his father’s that weekend.

Good Monster

Ron and Sandy checked on Eric and Lori. Sandy had brought shirts for them to change into. Peter and Tina, the doctors, were fussing over Lori who had managed to stay fairly alert albeit groggy. Eric watched from a distance feeling better after his painkiller. He pulled off his bloody shirt taking it off his bad arm last. He put a new one on the same but reverse order. Sandy had replaced Lori's ruined shirt with a fresh white tee. Eric wanted to stay with Lori but Ron convinced him there wasn't anything he could do and they needed to talk.

Frankie and Henry had arrived. Joe was still working on processing the culprits. They had some connections in the legal system to work around their secrets and make sure escape would be hindered.

Eric kept a feeler on Lori as the group went over the morning's events.

"It's safe to assume that Tyler isn't as dead as we believed." Frankie said. "Someone blacked out Joe when he was firing. And then mine." It was when she lost focus and the man escaped her grip.

The news wasn't received well. No one wanted to add people back on their litany of foes especially someone that they had mistakenly crossed off.

"Start from the top." Jim wanted to hear the whole story. He stood behind Kate with his hands on her shoulders. She was shaking in fear. It was odd since she was usually so brave in the face of danger but then it wasn't her who was hurt that time. Eric wondered why their mom wasn't next to her until he realized she was at his side. His lesion trumped Kate's age. Matt and Ron were off from the group. He could feel they were on the verge of a major meltdown. He wasn't as close to erupting. It was probably the painkillers.

"We were surrounded before we even realized we weren't alone. We didn't sense a thing." Greg started slowly after no one spoke up. "First we saw Guido and then images of him sprang out of the shadows. It was very chaotic and we couldn't do anything." It was the same frustration Kate had when she was held against her will. "Then Miss Becket came out with a tennis racket and I was thinking what is she going to do with that."

"It came in useful." Kate said. "She told us to vanish. Which made sense being that it was a one-way force field but how did she know that?"

“She asked me how come you weren’t fighting back.” Eric was both grateful and regretful that Lori was there directing the kids and buying them time.

“You hadn’t arrived yet.” Brad remarked.

“Telepathy.” They were going to be upset with Eric when they learned she had skills. Thankfully it was a two-way gift. They would assume he started the connection. He had some time before he had to make that confession but only minutes. It was unlikely they would recap the events and not realize Lori was doing a lot more than telepathy.

“Once invisible we slipped out of the force field.” Kate continued the storyline. “I worked on the lock on the gate but I was slow. We need to study that.” Greg nodded.

“Meanwhile the Guidos closed in on Miss Becket.” Brad shook his head. “I tried to push one back and it wasn’t the right one. I wondered if he was there at all. But Miss Becket knew. She pretended she had locked on the wrong one and when he wasn’t expecting it, she shoved her racket handle into his real solar plexus. There was only one Guido after that. She was kind of fast.” He added uncomfortably.

“She was great.” Greg covered up for Eric. He had suspected that Eric hadn’t been forthcoming with gift sharing and he knew it would be an upset for the group to hear.

“How could she tell?” Gerard asked.

“She has this meter that can read people like us. She made a wrist version and she was wearing it. The fake Guidos didn’t register.” Eric told his grandfather.

“Astonishing.” Gerard was most impressed.

Brad went on from where he left off. “She hit him again with the racket and he fell to the ground. He grabbed her and she kicked him hard in the head. She’s a fighter. But they were throwing bricks at her and one hit her right in the forehead.” Brad paused before he added, “She went down and vanished.”

“I caught her. I think she vanished because I caught her and wanted her to.” Eric admitted. When he hugged Kate and she was invisible before her play he started to vanish with her until he stopped it.

“Guido shot before I could get us away but it only hit my arm.”

Sandy held her hand to her mouth. She never believed the day would come that Eric was hurt. And she wasn’t the only one. Scanning the group he could sense that many were surprised he was hurt. He

got a faint mental message from Angela, Greg's stepmother that was particularly harsh on Eric after he hit Greg. *What was that?* He asked mentally. Her skills weren't well developed.

His connection cleared up her hazy reception. *I don't understand this group but thank you.* She told him telepathically. She was forgiving him. She hadn't reconciled why Andy wasn't more belligerent with Eric after his blow up. Angela considered Eric a monster after he hurt Greg. Seeing him use his powers to protect Greg changed her opinion.

I'm usually a good monster. He kidded.

She smiled.

"Guido shot again but only hit dirt. He ran off with his people behind him." Greg finished. "But we caught a couple."

"We have to go tonight." Matt was beside himself. "We can't risk them moving to a new location."

Tina walked in and went to Eric. "Lori is asking for you."

Eric wondered how the doctor knew which twin he was until he remembered his telltale bandage.

Lori was in one of the recliners facing the fireplace. Tina had cleaned her up and her hair was still wet. "Hey there beautiful." He tried to cheer her up.

She did not feel her most alluring. The gauze and tape kept her right eye half closed. It didn't conceal her twisted face as she reacted to his overstatement. "How are you?" She touched his shoulder lightly.

Taking her hand he kissed it. "I'm good. They doped me up."

"You're a light weight too." She teased.

Eric heard someone stop at the door when she said that. It was Sandy. It was the wrong joke to make. Ron and Jim were with her.

"How do you feel?" Jim walked in front of the chair so she could see him. He squatted opposite to Eric.

"I'm doped up pretty good too. They had to double dose me."

“All those years at Berkeley built up your tolerance.” Matt walked in giving his mother a reproachful look as he made his joke for her annoyance. In any other circumstance, Sandy wouldn’t have had as strong a reaction to hear that one of her boys had gotten stoned. It was a minor breach.

“Tell them I’m okay to go home.” Lori asked Eric.

“Is she?” He looked at Peter and Tina.

“Not if she lives alone. She has to be woken every two hours.”

“You can’t go home.” He ran his hand through her hair. “You shouldn’t be alone anyway. We’ll take care of you.”

“She can stay here.” Ron offered.

“We have more room.” Kate had walked in with Ellen. “I’ll wake her.”

Eric gave her a smile.

“We have a routine.” Ellen put an arm around Kate. “We’ve been through this before.”

“You’d have your own room and bath.” Jim tried to make it sound more persuasive for Lori.

“It’s settled.” Matt declared.

She shook her head but stopped when it hurt too much.

Eric flinched. “Please stay at Jim’s.”

“I want to go home.” Her cell phone rang to the tune of *Hello Again* by the Cars. She held it in her hand. Without reading the caller ID she pushed the button to stop the music. The name *Johnny* flashed on the screen as it went to voice mail.

“It’s the fourth time it rang.” Tina sighed.

Lori didn’t want anyone to hear her drowsy voice.

Eric tried to connect to Lori mentally. It was hard in her drugged state but she acknowledged him.

You have to stay with Jim. It isn’t safe to be alone.

She gazed deeply into his eyes. “Okay.” She finally agreed.

“We’ll get some of your things for you.” Sandy offered.

“Can I come?” Lori tried to sit up but Peter held her shoulder.

“You have to stay put.” Peter ordered. “You metaphysical types aren’t as impervious as you think.”

“We’ll ask you what you need when we get there.” Kate planned to help their mother.

“I’ll drive.” Ron wasn’t going to let them wonder around town alone.

“She needs to rest.” Peter stood up and spoke to Eric. He pulled out two bottles of pills and held up one. “Hopefully the regular dose will work going forward. If it isn’t enough, double but no more. This other one is antibiotics and she takes one a day until they’re gone.

“Got it.” Eric took the pills. Ellen was at his side knowing she would take over the night shift.

“Let’s move you to your new accommodations.” Matt gently supported Lori’s weight so she could walk. They took her to the car. It was only a block away but she was too weak to walk much but not too weak to argue that she wasn’t.

Wounds From a Friend

Everyone migrated to Jim's house. Matt helped Lori upstairs to one of the spare rooms. Eric followed but didn't enter. He felt horrible. Meg walked in with water. The boys were with her.

"It isn't bad." Greg looked at her bandage. "You can't even see mine now." He pointed to his scar, which was barely a cat scratch.

"You got that the weekend of the play." Lori remembered.

"Yeah. That was only a few weeks ago and it's all better."

"You're why Eric feels so guilty about blowing up." Lori's eyes closed as she fought back a throb of pain.

Greg didn't know what to say. He looked at Matt. Eric vanished not wanting to be seen. Greg glanced at him knowing he was there. "Sorry."

"You're right." Matt sat on the bed. "Eric hit Greg. He told me to tell you about it sometime."

"Why did he hit him?" Lori's voice was weak.

"Those guys that were at school, some of them found Kate at my party." Brad said.

"After the play? I was there. I don't remember seeing the twins."

"They weren't there."

"What happened?"

"One of them is related to me." Greg admitted. "He wanted my help to get that one that was duplicating himself today out of prison."

"You didn't, did you? I'll give you JUG if you did." It was hard to see that she was kidding since she had limited facial expressions.

He laughed. "No, but they found out about Kate."

"And how she can share gifts."

"Yes." Brian confirmed uneasy that she knew about Kate. "We thought they were going to try to take Ian to use him to force Greg's help. When we realized that we were in danger we went to get him but Kate's phone rang with Eric's name. It was part of their plan to get her alone. I stayed with her. A lot of good that did us. They tasered me and kidnapped Kate. It was more my fault than Greg's."

Lori started to sit up and her head spun. Matt tenderly pushed her down into the bed. "Careful there. You want to get me into trouble next?"

"That's awful. They took Kate?" Lori remarked.

"Still shouldn't have hit him." Meg remembered how bad Greg's cut was even if the evidence had healed.

"Back off." Matt snapped. "I'm tired of Eric getting beat up over that. If it I got there first, it might have been worse. I am not saying you deserved it." He told Greg. "It was just a really bad moment."

"You didn't hit him." Meg courageously challenged Matt but from a distance.

"Because he already had. We kind of take turns with some things." Matt informed them. "And God help us the day we both blow." He peered down at Lori. "That isn't the whole story. It isn't the first time Kate had been in big trouble and when she isn't in big trouble, she's knee deep in little trouble."

"Eric said something about you guys getting into danger and she gets the worst of it."

"He was leaving out a lot of details." Brian told her. "Aside from being kidnapped there was the chair that was thrown at her head. Once she was almost drowned. Another time she was pushed into an equipment shed and hit in the head with a bat."

"You forgot the elevator." Greg corrected him. "She was trapped in an elevator as someone tried to drop it. And then she was shot."

"Like Eric." Lori was trying to sort through all their stories.

"Well, he was hit. Kate wasn't." Matt said. "And so you know, there are three people, may be four if we count dad, that could take a hit from Eric that night. He was at full force fury."

"Hey." Brad was offended. "What about us?" He pointed to Chris.

"Please. You were fledglings at the time." Matt rolled his eyes. "Greg could take it." He turned to Greg, "And you could've defended yourself. It would've helped him calm down faster."

"He went too easy." Greg had neglected Kate's safety that night. "Next time, I'm fighting back."

"I can't imagine Eric hurting any of you." Lori slurred.

"He's wired to protect us usually. But you can't create a monster and then whine when he burns down the village." Greg smirked. "He has been there for me a lot more than that one time he lost it."

“You’re letting him off for all the times he tormented you when you started dating Kate.” Brian laughed.

“Oh yeah.” Greg mused about the good old days. “But he didn’t hit me.”

“What did he do?” Lori’s eyes slowly focused on Greg.

“Cheated at pool mostly.”

“Yeah, back then this was all fun and games.” Matt had forgotten. “And he almost hit you once then too but I don’t think it would have hurt as much.”

“When?” Greg thought back to his early days with Kate. Revelation hit. “When I first kissed Katie. I remember that. Katie was so mad at me too.”

“How did you get her back from those guys when she was taken? She was at school that week. I remember because she loathed me so much from day one.”

They were quiet. “I’ll be honest. I don’t know how much he has told you after that.” Matt admitted. “Do you know about the dreams?”

She gently nodded.

“He pulled her through a dream.”

“That’s amazing.”

“The whole family is some kind of freaky.” Chris commented. “They give the Addams family a run for their money.”

“She didn’t like me from the start.” Lori realized for the first time how a curious new comer would look to Kate. “It was my fault. She thought I was helping the bad guys.”

“You’re probably off the shit list now.” Matt patted her arm.

“Mojo is softening her some. He’s my dog. I think she said she would bring him here? Would she?” Lori must have been getting telepathic updates from Kate and Sandy about what to bring from her apartment.

“Of course she will.” Ellen walked in with her medicine. She didn’t see Eric as she passed through the door. “Here.”

Lori took her pills.

“She needs to rest.” She chided the kids and herded them out of the room.

“Greg, can I talk to you for a second?” Lori asked.

“I’ll be back in five minutes to clear him out if he isn’t downstairs.” Ellen wagged a finger at them and left.

“Coming little brother.” Matt asked Eric quietly in the hall.

“Not yet.” He wanted to see Lori after Greg left. “And you’re only ten minutes older.”

Matt began to leave.

“Hey. Thanks for that.” Eric whispered. “You made it sound forgivable.”

“No sin, no forgiveness needed.”

“Sure.” Eric sassed.

“Nothing you didn’t have more than enough brownie points in the bank to cash in.” He winked.

“Go in there already. She wants to see you.”

“You were with her. We look alike.”

“Not to her we don’t.” He went downstairs.

Greg sat on the bed in Matt’s vacant spot. “Thanks by the way. I don’t know if anyone has told you that yet.”

Lori smiled with her right eye half covered from white gauze. “It was my fault you were at school.”

“It was Katie’s, well all of ours.”

Lori seemed to be more lucid after the meds. “Did it hurt? He didn’t use anything to hit you.”

Eric hung his head. She wanted to ask Greg for more details. She was undecided. If Matt’s spin wasn’t enough to pardon him, nothing would.

“Just his hand. It hurt but you know, wounds from a friend.”

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.” She recited from memory.

Eric hadn’t heard the adage before and he didn’t understand it.

Greg wondered why she had pulled him aside. “Matt’s right, he wouldn’t fly off at anyone. I could take it and I had messed up. The friend wounds were going both ways.”

“He’s a good guy. I imagined that he had set you up with Kate since he likes you so much. But that wasn’t what happened.”

“Not at all. Still, he was nicer to me than Katie has been to you.”

“Maybe he wasn’t sure who Kate would choose if he pushed it too far.”

“She would pick him even today. But now I have Kate as a girlfriend and Eric as a friend.”

“I get most of it except why you think you messed up.”

Greg unconsciously touched his scar. “I promised to never leave Katie alone when we were in danger last summer when I first made that stupid mistake. It was my second offense.”

Lori took a deep breath. “I think he’s mad at me. I broke a promise.”

Eric didn’t know what she had done. Maybe it was a hallucinogenic side affect from the meds. She was perfect. She even listened to him when he told her to stay with Jim. He would have had to argue for hours to get any of the other women in his life to do the same.

“He isn’t mad at you.” Greg was certain.

“I think so. I told him I would stay away from danger and I ran right into it. I broke my word. He told me that it wasn’t safe to know these things but I persisted. And now I am staying at his sister’s house. He hasn’t come by to see me except for when I asked. I’d like to think he’s staying away because he promised Kate but that it isn’t it.” She looked sad at first. It changed to insult when Greg laughed at first softly but it grew.

He stood up and paced as he explained things to her. “Miss Becket if there’s one thing I could change about Katie to be more like Eric it would be her temper.”

Greg went overboard on damage control. No one would wish to have an ill-tempered girlfriend.

“You don’t mean that. Kate has a temper. You should have seen her when Father Francis laid into her for blackmailing me. She has a lot of people fooled but I’m not one of them.”

Greg nodded. It was true. “The problem is that Katie has a stealth temper. She can blow up with the rest of them and I have seen them break things without meaning too. But she doesn’t start there. She’s more calculating. Eric isn’t like that. You wouldn’t be sitting here saying you think he may be mad at you. You would know he is mad and why. No doubt. I’m living proof.”

He pointed to his eye. Greg sat down again. "It took me all night at the prom to find out why Katie was upset. I didn't even know if she was pissed at me. I'd still be wondering if Eric hadn't professed an act of contrition. I'd rather have just the bad mood without having to solve a mystery."

Lori laughed. "You're right. Then where is he?"

"The only reason he hasn't come to see you is he feels responsible that you got hurt. I've been there." Greg leaned in to tell her something Eric couldn't hear.

"He is? All this time? I don't feel him."

"It's the drugs or the bump."

"Eric?" She called.

He appeared and walked into her room.

"I was kind of getting use to knowing when you were around." Lori's face lit up.

"Before Katie gets back, I have to know. How much have you taught her?" Greg asked Eric.

"Does Kate suspect anything? She must have after a week of school. I didn't think that she would sense Lori had skills when I did it." It was a side affect he hadn't factored until after the fact.

"She doesn't. But she will soon enough. Brad and Meg are already wondering. And Chris knows but doesn't realize the implications of you sharing and who you chose to share with."

"I only meant to teach her telepathy and I accidentally taught her how to black out people's senses when I did it." Eric sat on the other side of Lori's bed.

"That it makes sense." Greg figured it would slide by without a major group debate on the pros and cons. "But she was speeding up at school."

"She picked up more. It's like she absorbed them all at once. She has talked to her dog, read minds and knows when I'm lying."

"She can tell when you're lying?" Greg was enjoying the concept. Eric was a skilled deceiver.

"Maybe because I studied this stuff for so long." Lori stabbed in the dark.

Here's Johnny

Mojo came running into the room followed by Kate. He jumped up on the bed and bounced all around Lori. Eric reached to get him down but Lori wouldn't have it. He propped her up on some pillows.

"I only needed cloths for one night." Lori said.

Kate floated in two suitcases. "You may need to stay longer, so we grabbed extra outfits." Kate flipped open the larger suitcase and started unpacking. "I got some of your school clothes."

"Did you get the pink blouse and white skirt?" Eric hoped.

"Eric, you said one night." Lori didn't want to extend her stay indefinitely.

"You have a better chance of convincing me to change my mind." Kate assured Lori. "We don't know when everything will be safe again and you can't be living alone on the other side of town. Mom said no." She made a face as if that were an absurd thought to contradict Sandy.

"She isn't my mother." Lori turned to Eric.

Eric was thinking about what Kate said. If they didn't catch Guido that night, they wouldn't know how long it would take. "Jim's okay with this." Eric was sure Jim was. When Matt and Eric were mad at each other he took in Eric without limits.

"She can stay as long as she wants rent free." Kate started hanging cloths in the closet. She had the pink shirt and white skirt.

Zuzu walked into the room to see what the new smell was. She jumped up the bed and made friends with Mojo. Being older and smaller than the German Shepherd puppies, Zuzu seemed to like him just fine.

Lori scratched Zuzu's head still processing the fact that she was being held against her will. "I want one night. Actually I don't even want that but I agreed to one night. You can't keep me here."

Kate spun around from the closet. "Yes we can."

Lori looked to Greg for help.

"I try not to argue with either of them and never with both." He shook his head.

"Eric, I'm not moving in with your sister."

"Guido saw you. Kate has a point."

Greg laughed. "They are agreeing again. Let me introduce you to the real Eric Thomas and Katie Graham."

Lori's mouth was agape.

Kate stopped unpacking. "Someone's here. I don't think he does anything. He says he followed your GPS on your phone. Who's Johnny?" Kate turned to Lori.

They could hear some commotion at the front door. "Johnny?" Lori called down.

Eric stood up tense not sure who Johnny could be. Greg followed his lead. Whoever it was, he obviously wasn't expected.

A tall man older than Lori walked in. He was at least six four with a muscular build. He had shaggy dark blond hair and green eyes. The first thing he spotted was the white bandage that had signs of blood seepage. He ran to Lori's bed. "What happened?"

She didn't know what to say. She couldn't tell him the truth. "I'm fine."

He glared at Greg who was plainly too young for Lori and then up at Eric. He was just the right age to be the source of her mess.

Eric wondered if he was her former fiancé that hit her. She said he was a jealous guy. His doubt kept him from a proper eruption. "Is this your ex-fiancé?" He asked Lori with a foul expression.

"Zack? You think I'm that asshole?" Johnny grew more upset when he said the name. "No, I'm her brother."

So much negativity released Eric practically slouched. "Nice to meet you." He held out his hand but Johnny just stared at it.

He turned to Lori. "Lorraine, you didn't answer your phone. I worried something bad happened." He looked at the bandage wondering how right he was.

"I hit my head and was too woozy. It would only scare you. I didn't want you to do something foolish like drive up here only to go right back home." There was nothing subtle in her hint that he didn't need to drive two hours to check up on her.

He glared at Eric again as he spoke to Lori. "You didn't tell me how you got hurt."

Eric was getting the idea. Johnny figured she had a new boyfriend that hit her. He held up his arms in a calming gesture. His right arm stung when he moved it too high. He squinted and recoiled into his shoulder from the sudden pang.

“Did you hit my sister?” Johnny stood toe to toe with Eric.

“No he didn’t! Sit down.” Lori commanded.

“You can’t talk to my brother like that?” Kate was revolted. She was about to shove Johnny away but Eric told her to hold back. He would handle it.

“Then why is he hurt too? You wouldn’t take a beating without getting a good shot in yourself.” He grabbed Eric’s sore arm at the elbow to show Lori.

It was a bad move. Eric flinched from the pain. Before Johnny knew what hit him Matt had him pinned against the wall. “You never touch anyone in my family again.” The threat was well delivered in an even steady sentence.

“Matt.” Lori called. “Please, he’s my brother. He just made an incredibly idiotic mistake.”

Eric gave Matt the okay to release Johnny.

Johnny was stunned that he was pinned. Without a doubt he didn’t lose the upper hand in a fight often if ever.

“Eric, are you okay?” Lori asked.

Eric tested his wounded arm. “You’re feeling this?” Matt rubbed his arm in the same spot.

“A little. That’s good. You’re probably healing faster.” If Matt’s body was sore and itchy it was going through recovery with Eric’s. Any process they shared sped up in results and timing. “Take a peek.”

Eric peeked. The wound looked days old rather than hours. “Looky there.” He showed Matt.

“Nice.”

Johnny didn’t care as he watched the bizarre exchange between the identical twins. “What happened to your head?” He asked his sister for the third time.

“I’m not going to tell you the details but they didn’t hurt me.” She pointed to others in the room. “Would I be here if they did?”

He stared at the twins. “Why are you here rather than at home?”

"I'm staying with Kate." She pointed to Kate who mugged a plastic smile for Johnny. "She's one of my students. I have to wake up every two hours and her family was kind enough to let me stay the night."

He looked at her two large bags. "One night?"

"Someone got over zealous when she picked up my things."

He looked at Kate again and then back to Eric and Matt. "They don't live here?" The resemblance was unmistakable.

"They're her half brothers. They live down the street."

Eric and Matt glanced up inoffensively. They were finished with the fascination of their healing powers.

He shot daggers at Kate. "She's the one that tried to get you fired."

"Hey there King Kong." Eric barked. "Relax. She's sorry and this is an act of penance."

He whipped his head at Eric taking note which brother had the wound. "Eric? My sister has told me only good things." He was skeptical but held out his hand and Eric gingerly shook it.

"Nice to meet you to." He said to Johnny. Then he sent a mental message to Lori that he wished he had heard about him up to and including the detail that he was approximately the size of Mt. Whitney.

She ducked her head giving Mojo and Zuzu a rupture of attention.

"What happened to my sister?" He asked Eric. It was a test.

"You don't need to know." Lori hissed.

"I want to hear what Eric has to say."

"Johnny, I'm fine and they're friends. That's the end results of the equation."

"I want the equation. Why are you hiding things from me?"

"That's fine coming from a man whose wife is in her last month of pregnancy, a fact I only learned about a month ago."

He grimaced. "That's your only ace up your sleeve. You want to use it now? So soon after you got it?"

"Yes." She smiled smugly.

"Fine. Do you want me to stay with you so you can go home?"

“No.” Eric said automatically. He shut his eyes and bared his teeth. He should have sent it mentally. He didn’t want her to be away from the group. She had entered into the danger zone and couldn’t be alone. He peered up.

Johnny pointed at him but looked at Lori with raised eyebrows. “And do you want to explain that?”

“Not really. And you have a wife that needs you at home so I’ll stay in Santa Katrina and you can go to South Pas.”

“Her mother’s visiting until the baby’s born. I can stay all week if you want.” He laughed. He was much friendlier looking when he smiled. “The only reason you wouldn’t tell me how you got hurt is if it would freak me out.”

“You’re so very smart. I’m fine and I’ll be all better soon.”

“How about I get you some food and we have a nice lunch. Have you eaten yet?” It was still early in the afternoon.

“She needs to rest.” Ellen was at the door.

“This is my brother Johnny.”

“Oh, I’ll permit it for you. The rest go.” She pointed out the door.

Eric flashed his eyebrows at Lori as they left.

“Kind of a protective jerk.” Matt said to Eric when they were more than half way down the stairs and they busted up.

“At least there’s only one.” Greg enjoyed seeing Eric get a good dose of his own medicine.

Making Plans

“Lori must be better.” Sandy said. The twins were smiling.

“She’s great.” Eric was relieved.

“Who was that guy?” Jim asked.

“Her brother.” Matt said. “Hot head.” They started laughing again. The irony was fantastic.

“We need to get to business.” Henry brought them back to the reality of the situation.

Ellen had managed to spontaneously rummage up enough food for twenty people in a home of only two. And more impressively, it was delicious. She took a couple of plates up to Lori and her brother.

“Who’s going?” Frankie took out her notebook.

After much reverb from the high school students, the declaration was that they would stay home, as would Ellen, Jim, Father Francis, Andy and Angela.

“We hit them right at dusk.” Henry said. “The motion lights are a problem but it won’t give them much advance notice.”

“Do we take one van? Would it be better to have two? There are nine of us.” Ron counted those that were in on the plans.

“There are more you aren’t factoring.” Kate muttered.

“I’m pretending I didn’t hear that.” Ron warned.

“One will be enough.” Joe said.

“Let’s meet at Gerard’s at seven.” Ron didn’t want the kids pestering them right before they left. It was going to be hard enough to stay in control when they got to the farmhouse.

“You three will vanish and get as close as you can without being detected. Find out what you can see.” Joe pointed to the brothers. “Sandy and Gerard will block. Stay as far back as you can while still affecting one of their men. For them to get to more members, one of you boys needs to block whoever throws up the one-way force field.”

“I got it.” Matt called.

“We also need to block Guido from multiplying. Without a shield most of you will know the real Guido from the shadowed versions but the rest of us can’t.”

“Guido’s mine.” Eric announced and no one argued.

“Anyone with telekinesis disarms any guns you see. I’m the only cop today. I couldn’t call in help that fast for something that’s going to be this outlandish.”

“We have guns for all of us.” Frankie added.

“They may not work when they are invisible.” Joe said. “There are much denser than cloths and they don’t touch enough of the body.”

“Let’s see.” Eric disappeared and Joe handed him a revolver. It was dimmer at the handle where he held it but very seeable. It gave away his location. He put it in his pocket and it faded but showed.

“We’ll have to go without.” Eric didn’t want to carry a weapon. It felt criminal. Not that they weren’t going to break some laws regardless.

“If we take away the two we got this afternoon and add in Tyler, there are ten.” Frankie read her notes.

“Then we have the advantage. The three of them are worth any six of Guido’s gang.” Joe was that confident about the Thomas boys. If anything, he was using a conservative estimate.

Eric was keyed up to get to business. It was a dangerous situation. He wasn’t fooling himself otherwise. But the adrenaline pumped through his veins. They had been preparing for months and once they faced Guido, lives could move forward unhampered.

Joe scanned the crowd. “We’re good. Am I forgetting anything?”

“Us.” Kate said.

“Hush.” Jim chided.

“Johnny’s coming.” Eric told them and they all tried too hard to look too casual.

Johnny walked into the room stunned by sheer the number of people. “Wow. I’m going home. Which one of you is Jim?”

Jim stepped forward. “I’m sorry about giving you a hard time at the door. I didn’t know who you were and, uh, we’re a little jumpy from all the morning’s disturbance.”

“About that, what did happen?”

“I’m sure Lori gave you all the details.” Jim wasn’t going to be tricked that easily.

“Not really.” He looked around stopping at Eric and Matt. The time for being clever had passed.

“Look, clearly there’s a lot more going on than you’re letting on. I want to know that my sister is all right.”

Father Francis walked up. “She’s in good hands. I work with her. I’m Father Francis.”

“The Head Master?” Johnny smiled recognizing another name from his sister’s tales of her new town. “Thanks for going easy on her. She isn’t a pothead or anything like that.” His eyes darted to Kate but he wasn’t as intense as before.

Sandy gave a nervous cough.

“We all commit an infraction once in a while. It’s job security. If everyone was perfect, I wouldn’t be needed.”

“You’re all right for a priest.” Johnny had a grin. “Take good care of Lori. She has a habit of trusting too easily.” He had an edge in his voice. Jim walked him out.

“And I thought we were a tall family.” Ron remarked.

Kate sprang up to go up stairs.

“Where are you going?” Sandy asked.

“To get Miss Becket.”

“No.” Eric said.

“But she knows and she was there. Now she’s in trouble because of us. She should be here.” It was a formula that had brought in Greg, Andy, Meg, Father Francis and Brad.

“No.” Eric said again.

“She isn’t ready for this stuff.” Frankie commented.

Matt’s eyes shot up to Eric. It was a good call. Eric shook his head.

“We’ll teach her like Brad.” Kate was ready to share her skills with Lori.

“No.” It was the third time Eric said it.

“It would still take her time to get accomplished enough to be of any help.” Henry added.

“Would you be able to teach her?” Frankie asked.

“Maybe not.” Kate frowned. “But Eric could try.”

“No. She isn’t going to be involved with this.” Eric spoke out. He felt invisible. He checked to make sure he wasn’t.

“She’s involved.” Father Francis said genially. “Not today but she’ll be here soon enough.”

“I said no!”

“We all agree not today.” Matt spoke out before things got louder.

Kate sat down. “Okay, after we take care of things tonight.”

“You aren’t going.” Matt and Eric reminded her in stereo harmony.

“Six more would put us well over the top on man power.” She smiled innocently. “It’s basic math.”

“No!” The twins were in perfect synch and pitch.

She shot out of her seat. “This is ridiculous. You know we’re as prepared as any of you and more than some. It’s, it’s...” Kate struggled for the correct word, “ageism!”

“Kate, I couldn’t take it if you got hurt after everything we’ve gone through. I would lose my mind.” Eric put his hand on her shoulder.

She threw it off. “Are you stark raving mad? You have the balls to stand there with a gunshot hole in your arm and tell me that you don’t want to worry if I get hurt!”

“I don’t care if it’s hypocritical. You aren’t going.” Eric smirked. The parents wouldn’t change their stance. He stared her down. She boiled. He could feel her temper rising and an oncoming explosion. “Shit!” He said as she blew out the windows on the double doors to the patio. The house shook as if hit by a precision quake.

“I just fixed the other door.” Jim moaned. Ron had broken one the day Kate was taken. “Why couldn’t you explode earlier when we were at Ron’s?”

“Fine. Get hurt. I’ll be the oldest.” She stormed up the stairs.

“She didn’t escape our temper problem after all.” Ron half joked.

“Let her cool off. I’ll talk to her after you leave.” Jim promised.

“Let’s get the van.” Henry decided. “We’ll see you later.”

Everyone left Jim’s but Ellen, Greg and the Thomas brothers.

Eric tried to go up to see Kate but she had an invisible wall blocking his passage. “Come down here.” He heard nothing. “We’ll leave without saying good-bye and if one of us doesn’t make it you’ll regret it later.”

The house shuttered as another loud crash rang out. It was her bedroom window.

“Kate, what was that?” Jim yelled.

“A tremor.” She answered.

“Not funny.”

“Get down here!” Eric screamed. “Now!”

“Go away and die. Have fun.” She called back.

“If it isn’t funny when he made the joke, it’s even less funny to hear it from you.” Brian shouted.

The house shook.

“You should go before she tears down the building.” Jim suggested.

“I’m going up.” Eric was about to fight her telekinetic barrier.

“Eric, you need your strength. Leave it.” Matt held his good arm.

“I want to see Lori.” Eric called up.

“Don’t step near my door.” Kate allowed it.

Her invisible wall ebbed. Eric walked upstairs to the room past Kate’s. She had only left him a narrow margin between her door and the hallway. He had to squeeze through for passage. Lori was asleep. He sat on the bed and watched her looking peaceful. Mojo was curled at her feet. He rubbed his curly haired belly.

Lori stirred. “Did we have a quake?” A mirror hung crooked on the wall.

Eric slide into position without getting up. She had slept through their quarrel. Good pills. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“Liar.”

“I’m going. Are you okay here with Kate and Jim?”

“Sure. What time is it?”

“About four. Did you have a nice lunch with Johnny?”

“After he stopped pestering me about what happened.”

“I’d never be like that with Kate.”

She rolled her lopsided eyes. “I don’t even need to resort to lie detecting to know that was a whopper.”

"I was terrified when you got hit." He ran his fingers gently along her forehead.

"We're fine now." She closed her eyes with pleasure as he touched her. "Will they try again?"

"Ask me tomorrow."

"Will you stop by? After all you're grounded, you promised never to see me again and we broke up."

"That won't stop a rebel like me." He kissed her softly.

"Was that a hint to stop talking?"

He kissed her again. "Maybe."

"Why tomorrow?" She had a lot of questions about the whole mess she stumbled into.

"Because I'm tired and need to get some rest myself." It was true. He was omitting his planned excursion to confront dangerous men that would be armed with lethal weapons. He leaned on his elbow as he played with her golden locks.

"You lead an adventurous life." She smiled.

"It isn't well suited for everyone."

"I'll learn to live with it." She reached up to kiss him.

"Would it be all right if I took this for the night?" He pulled at her wristband.

"It's a little girlie for a big strong guy like you." She took it off and gave it to him. "Henry wants to see it?"

"You know how he is." Eric kissed her nose.

"Eric." Matt called from downstairs.

Eric closed his eyes. "Get some rest."

"You too."

He left.

Greg was at Kate's door or as close as the invisible wall would allow. "Katie, it's me."

"That once brother of mine is there."

"I'm leaving." Eric promised and walked home with his brothers.

Looking for Trouble

Eric stretched out on his bed. His arm stung when he moved it but he had full range.

He worried about Kate. She was out of control and for good reason. Her skills were stronger and she was braver than most. Life had given her too many opportunities to build both up. Maybe he was a chauvinist. He would go ballistic if one of his brothers or anyone in their family circle was hurt. Why was Kate different? She was only a little more than a year younger than Brian and he was going. When he thought of it like that, he wished Brian would stay home as well.

The most disquieting concept was what would Kate do. If he was told to stay behind he wouldn't. He was a born rule breaker. Kate always toed the line until recently. He was glad Jim would be home to keep her from following them.

He tried to talk to her via telepathy but she didn't accept it. Instead he reached for Greg. *You'll keep an eye on Kate?*

Will do. She's up to something.

No doubt. She is our sister. Just keep her from doing anything stupid.

Like going after Guido and his gang.

Are you trying to scare me that she'll try to come or are you telling me I'm stupid for going?

Both. If you go, we should all go.

Eric was tired of hearing the kids say that, partly because it was true. *Why are you kids so eager to go into the belly of the beast?*

We're eager to stick together, in or out of the belly or the fires of hell for that matter.

Melodramatic Catholic Eric thought to himself. *This is far worse than Gran or Tyler.*

Are you trying to prove my point or dispute it?

Dispute it. Eric was annoyed.

Be safe. Getting out safely is more important than getting Guido.

Eric disagreed on some level. *We'll get him and come home.*

Do me a favor. Don't get shot again.

He slept for a couple of hours. As he got dressed he picked up Lori's wrist meter. It was a clever invention. She would have to make more and some that weren't so feminine looking.

When they met at Gerard's everyone was dead sober. They piled into the van and drove to Ojai. The atmosphere was stressful. Ron had an arm around Sandy as she held his hand. They weren't always in love but they had found their way. It was a crooked path to travel to get there.

A scene flashed in Eric's mind. It was a foggy bathroom mirror. A hand wiped away the top half and Lori's face appeared. He was seeing through her eyes. He was about to warn her that he could see but she was in a towel. It wouldn't be that awful if she weren't. After all, he was only seeing her because she was thinking about him. She wasn't in any peril and that was the only other time that gift was activated. He felt closer to her than ever.

She leaned closer to the mirror and checked her stitches. The bandage was off. Peter and Tina had done a nice job to keep the stitches small and close. She frowned. She combed through her hair and played with it to see if she could cover it with her wispy bangs.

Matt kicked his foot. "Stop that."

Eric blushed. "Did you see?"

"I know what you're thinking about."

Not far from the dirt road that led to the farmhouse was a good location to park. It was close enough that Sandy and Gerard could block and stay with the van. They made sure they couldn't see the house knowing that one of the men had enhanced vision.

The rest walked to the start of the path. Frankie and Henry were armed. They had police issue holsters and weapons.

Joe handed a gun to Ron. "Can you shoot?"

"Yes." Ron examined the gun with a fair level of comfort.

"And put this on." It was a bulletproof vest.

"What about the boys?"

"It won't work when they disappear, too dense." It was the same problem as the guns.

"Ready." Henry asked the brothers.

"Let's go." Matt answered and they disappeared.

They hid their presence from any potential empathizers in the group. Eric hated not being able to see or sense his brothers. He got closer than before without triggering the lights. He went off to the right knowing Matt would go to the left and Brian would stay on the straight path. The house sat in open space about fifty yards wide with trees down the perimeters.

A floodlight came on to the front left of the house. Either Matt or Brian set it off. Guido walked out front with one of the ambushers from the school. It was only an image of Guido. The man took out some binoculars and scanned the yard. Eric stayed behind a tree for cover in case it had a thermographic lens.

“I don’t see anything.” The man said after a couple of minutes.

“Stay out here and keep watch.” The fake Guido disappeared. They were on high alert after their failed attempt at the school.

Eric read the watchman’s mind thinking it was a waste to stand there when they needed to leave for Los Alamos. He searched the house mentally. There were nine people. Tyler was one of them. Eric found Guido.

Another light flashed on the back of the house. Eric didn’t know how Matt could move back that fast without setting off other lights or showing on the binoculars.

Matt, do you have the force field shut down? He asked telepathically.

I think so.

An image of Guido appeared. “Nothing?” He yelled at the guard. The second light made him more vigilant.

“It’s probably coyotes.” The guard answered.

“Good point except that you don’t see any animals either.” The Guido disappeared.

Eric pondered setting off the sensors with telepathy. He decided against it. What he needed was a non-threatening scapegoat to blame for the sensors.

The guard grabbed his walkie-talkie. “See anything back there?” Another light came on at the back right of the house and then the one that was closest to Eric. The guard had his gun ready.

“It’s a pack of coyotes.” The voice on the walkie-talkie said. “It’s a huge group. I’ve never seen so many. There must be twenty.”

“Tell Guido to relax.”

“The hell I will.” The real Guido walked out with a woman and a man. He snatched the binoculars.

All sensory lights were set off by then. The landscape was brightly lit.

Eric? Where are you? Lori’s voice popped into Eric’s head.

He didn’t have time to talk. *Later.* He shut her out without explanation.

“Surround the house.” Guido barked to the lady.

“I can’t hold it long.” She was one of the one-way blockers. Size of the shield must deplete her power faster.

“Tyler?” Guido got on the walkie-talkie. “Get everyone up here.”

They spread out on the lawn as six more joined them. Tyler hung back. His face said it all. He didn’t trust Guido and he didn’t want to be there.

“What do you feel?” Guido asked the other woman.

“No one.” She was confused.

Guido glared at her. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t feel you either.”

Brian had shut her down to give Joe and the rest a chance to sneak up.

“Shit!” Guido pulled his gun and multiplied into twelve.

Eric hindered him and the false eleven faded.

“Get the cars out.” Guido ordered two men who ran off to the garage. “Come out!” He yelled at his invisible foes. He walked around the circumference of his people.

Eric yanked Guido’s gun from his hand and over the top of the house where no one could reach it. The others started losing their weapons as well.

“Into the house.” Guido shouted. He turned to his people but lost his balance when Eric blacked out his sight. “Why are they getting through your field?” Guido snapped. It was meant for the woman that usually protected them. He wasn’t use to losing that competitive advantage.

One of his men pulled a gun and shot down the road where the others from the van were approaching. It hit Ron and he fell back on the road and was out. Eric dragged Ron to the trees with

telekinesis. He wasn't dead but he couldn't stay in the open for another bullet to hit and miss the vest. His temper flared but he didn't let it overtake him.

Frankie tried to pull the gun from the man's grip. He was waiting for it and held on with both hands. He was pulled up with the gun. It was too much weight and he fell to the ground still readily armed.

Eric didn't realize he let Guido's vision go until they were scurrying into the house. Seeing his father shot was too much to do both. A more persistent plea came from Lori trying to break through. *I can't now.* He scolded and cut off the transmission.

She may have seen his vision in her mind. Eric didn't have time to explain and tried to get Kate to check on her. She wasn't answering him still from their earlier spat. Lori would have to cope on her own for the time being.

They're going for the back of the house. Matt sent to everyone.

Eric started to move and heard two gunshots. He ran at full speed. No one was hit or he would know. At the back of the house were two large off road vehicles already half loaded with people. Guido and three men stood by the cars. They had guns held with two hands.

"Cowards!" Guido yelled at the emptiness. Suddenly there were eleven more Guidos all saying, "About time you got that working again." His brothers lost their focus when Ron was shot and the shield was up. The Guidos started shuffling around to confuse where the real man was among the false images.

Eric couldn't stop Guido behind the shield and he had lost the real one among the phantoms. He raised a gun from the ground and revealed himself. He walked into the open with his a steady arm aiming at various Guidos.

"Eric?" Guido guessed. It was the only name he heard at the school. All the Guidos had him in their aim. "You fought a good fight but I can't stay. I really don't want to kill you."

Matt appeared with a gun pointed at Guido. "Then don't."

"I got him." Two of the men said ready to shoot Matt.

Eric found the real Guido using the meter and once he knew the others did too.

“He doesn’t know which is flesh and which is fantasy.” All the Guido’s told his men. “Only the blond knows that and she’s probably still recovering. And I really hope she makes it. I’d like to know how she did that.” He taunted Eric.

“He’ll know the real Guido if you shoot.” Eric flashed his wicked grin to hide his fears that Guido mentioned Lori.

It was a stand off.

“More are coming.” A woman called from one of the cars.

All the Guidos pulled their triggers but only one real bullet flew at Eric. Matt shot Guido a split second later.

Eric vanished and moved in time. He was charged and with his brothers there he was faster than ever. If he didn’t know where the true bullet had came from it wouldn’t have given him enough time.

Guido was hit in the shoulder. The other two men shot where Matt had stood but only a gun laid uselessly on the ground. Guido held his bloody shoulder as he tried to get his gun up to fire. It blew up in his hand and Guido howled in pain.

In turn, guns started to explode in the gang members’ hands. They shook their hands that were burnt and bloody.

Frankie, Henry and Joe had their weapons pointed at Guido and his men.

“Frankie and Henry.” Guido smiled. “You’ve traded up in friends. But you still haven’t lost the Mexican Gestapo.”

Eric and Matt reappeared with guns again.

Suddenly there was an explosion from the basement of the house. Reflexively they let down their guns as they ran for cover expecting more. Guido and his men got in the cars and drove off. The force field protected them.

The house started burning from the basement. “Help! Can anyone hear me?” Someone screamed from inside. There was another blast from the basement.

“It’s Tyler.” Frankie recognized his voice.

Eric and Matt ran into the house tearing the back door off its hinges. Tyler was in the front room bleeding in both legs.

They picked him up with telekinesis and started running to the front door. They heard a popping sound as metal expanded and another explosion blew. Flames shot up from a door that led to the basement. They dropped Tyler and he screamed in agony. The floor they just removed Tyler from was burning. Eric pushed open the front door as Matt pulled Tyler again. There was more popping signally another explosion. With all their speed they ran out of the house as another fiery blast erupted.

They were on the front lawn gasping for fresh air. Brian ran up. Ron walked slowly behind him holding his lower chest where the bullet hit. Tyler knees had been shot off. He writhed in anguish.

Gerard and Sandy were driving down the road with a second van behind them. Brad was driving. The kids had come. Eric was too relieved to get angry. He would save it for later.

Kate jumped out first followed by Greg, Chris, Father Francis and Ellen. Brad parked and got out.

“We’ll take him to the hospital.” Joe put his gun away. Frankie and Henry moved Tyler into the back of a van.

“Dad?” Matt panted too heavily to speak so he pointed at the vest.

“I’m fine. Sore but fine.” Ron pulled his hand away and there was a silver dent in the armor where the bullet made contact.

“Let’s get home.” Eric was exhausted. Guido got away but they were safe.

Ron and Sandy went with Joe, Frankie and Henry to the hospital with Tyler. Gerard drove Father Francis, Ellen and the kids home in the other van.

“Weren’t you going to stop her from doing anything stupid?” Eric calmly said to Greg as they drove home.

“The warrior princess had me out voted.”

“We were helpful.” Kate rebutted.

Eric rolled his head in the seat. “The coyotes were sent.”

“They were.” Ellen had called for them.

“And the guns exploding was Kate.” Chris added. “Ingenious.”

“We all helped. I just did the research on line.” She admitted. “It was hard having to explode them using other people’s visions. And we only tested on bullets and weren’t sure what would happen inside a gun.”

“Does Jim know you’re here?” Brian was annoyed she snuck out.

“He does now.”

“What is that?” Brad asked.

Eric’s wrist was glowing brightly from all the metaphysical presence. “It’s Lori’s meter.” He needed to talk to Lori. He tried to reach her. She told him Kate was missing and then went silent. He wasn’t surprised after the way he treated her attempts to talk to him earlier.

“Lori isn’t home.” Kate informed him. “Jim said she was gone too.”

He tried to reach her again. *Where are you?*

Later. She sent back. *Kate snuck out.*

She’s with us. Eric told Lori and lost connection again. It was maddening. “She isn’t answering me.”

“Don’t worry. Guido’s on the run.” Kate reminded him.

Eric tried to see through Lori’s eyes again. It wasn’t working. The person who was being seen through needed to initiate. She had tried to tell him that Kate left. He figured she had gone looking for the kids. She needed to get back to Jim’s and stay put.

“You didn’t try to stop them?” Matt asked Father Francis.

“They could have taken the van without me. And they promised to stay away from the front lines.”

“They wouldn’t have if things got worse.”

“When Ron was hit, they were going to rush in but Sandy found them and told them to get to her and Gerard immediately.”

They cruised down the freeway. Eric’s arm throbbed in dull pain. He scratched his head. It was itching from sweat. He wiped it with his sleeve. It still itched.

Matt stared at his twin. “Are you all right?”

“Just a long day. But we’re all okay.” He had a small smile.

“I was going to kill you when you appeared.”

“I couldn’t read the meter if it was invisible.”

“That eventually crossed my mind. That was why I figured a second target would help the situation.” Matt was the good twin.

“You shot a guy.” Eric was impressed with his brother.

“He shot you first.”

With Us or Against Us

Everyone was safe. Eric focused on that rather than the fact that Guido got away. When Ron was shot he could have blown up and lost it if he didn't have the empathetic ability to know his dad wasn't seriously hurt. Or maybe Eric was learning to control his bad moods. Perhaps falling in love with Lori had changed him profoundly on a molecular level. He felt exactly the same and yet completely different.

They cruised down the freeway headed to Santa Katrina and Eric shut his eyes. A light sleep fell on him and he saw the Plaza Pacific hotel registration desk. Gran was standing in the hallway. He remembered the night Gran had found Kate there and chased her to the pool where she tried to drown her. He watched Gran's back as she walked to the elevators. She pushed the button chattering about something but he couldn't hear. Her dark eyes and cruel face were more animated than usual. The doors of the far elevator opened and Gran stepped in. When the mirrored back wall of the elevator came into focus Lori's reflection stepped into the elevator. Her bangs had been cut thicker to conceal her injury.

"We have to go to Santa Barbara." Eric jerked upright in his seat. "Lori's at the Plaza Pacific with Gran."

"Why would she be there?" Matt asked.

"I don't know. She isn't talking to me." He reached out for her again.

I can't right now. She replied.

You're with Gran? At the Plaza?

I'll explain later. The connection was cut off.

They were only ten minutes away. Gerard took the exit and they pulled into the parking lot.

"Stay with Kate." Eric said to Greg. "Matt and Brian come with me."

"No." Greg said before Kate could protest. "We all go."

Eric rolled his eyes. "Fine." He didn't have time to debate. They went to the elevators. Lori was in the restaurant on the top floor.

"How did Gran get her and why would she bring her here?" Brian asked as an instrumental version of *Via Con Me* played for ambiance.

Eric scratched his head. "I think she came here to meet her. What was Jim doing? Holding the door open and telling you guys to have fun tonight?"

"She came here on her own will? Is she helping Gran?" Brad worried.

"She isn't." Kate was sure. "If she was with Gran why save us earlier. It isn't like Gran cared who killed me."

Chris gulped. "Unless she needed you alive to trap your mom." It was fear speaking.

"No." Gerard had put his trust in Lori and wasn't going to take it back until there was hard evidence. Not after her heroics at the school. "But maybe we shouldn't go running in to the rescue."

The doors opened. Eric led them away from the restaurant so they could plan. Lori was nervous. She didn't want to be near Gran. He had no doubts. Gran had taken her to a private dining room. Marie and Holly were with them. Then the connection lost its strength until it fully faded.

"Grandpa, what're you thinking?" Matt asked.

"Would she come here to find out information?"

"Without telling Eric? That would be foolish." Brian tried to think. "Or did she and you couldn't listen."

"She was trying to reach me and I shut her out." Eric got some disapproving looks from Greg and Kate. "I assumed she was safe at home with my sister."

"Why would she call Gran now? When she's hurt?" Greg tossed out.

"Gran may have contacted her. She's an elder in the club. After two meetings they reach out to members of their choosing that they would like to extend offers for full membership. The timing could be coincidental." Kate hypothesized.

"Couldn't she tell her she wasn't interested or reschedule?" Ellen wanted to believe it was all happenstance.

"Not with them." Kate shook her head. "It would raise red flags."

"We should be cautious. If Gran knows we're here things will get ugly." Father Francis glanced at Kate wishing she wasn't with them.

"She's scared. I could feel it." Eric told them. He would wait but they needed to know Lori was alone.

Matt put his hand on Eric's shoulder. "We've got her back. Gran isn't the challenge she once was."

"Marie and Holly are with Gran. We have them out numbered." Eric told his crew trying to assure himself at the same time. "Assuming there aren't others. Kate, she's in the private dining room on the far side of the restaurant. Can you hear them?"

Kate strained to hear. "Sort of."

"Let's move to the bar." Greg suggested.

"Vanish and we'll go in." Gerard held out his arm for Ellen. Father Francis followed with a parade of invisible kids.

There was a booth in the corner that was big enough for eight that had just been vacated. Empty glasses and wet napkins were strewn over the tabletop. They sat with unseen kids squeezing them in tightly.

"What can I get you?" A waiter checked as he bussed the table.

"A pitcher of margaritas with six glasses. We're waiting for some friends." Gerard requested. It was a good way of keeping the table. There were smaller tables available and he didn't want to be asked to relocate.

"I can hear well now." Kate told the table when the waiter left. "They must be eating dessert. Lori said the tiramisu was decadent."

The waiter brought some bread and butter and the drinks. Father Francis brushed away Brad's invisible hand when he reached for a glass.

"Gran is asking if she's happy in Santa Katrina. Lori said she just moved there. Gran asked if she knew any people before moving and Lori replied that she didn't. Lori said she wasn't expecting them to call her that she hadn't made a good impression. Gran says she underestimated her."

"Gran thinks she held a gift back." Matt guessed. "She knows she works at your school. She wants her help to get to Kate."

"I bet she heard about what happened this morning." Father Francis speculated.

"You're right. Gran asked about her job at St. Iggy's." Kate affirmed.

"St. Ignatius." Father Francis automatically corrected.

“Lori told her she isn’t sure she’ll make it until the end of the semester. She’s on probation.”

“Father Francis won’t fire her.” Greg blurted out.

“Of course not.” He vowed. “She’s a natural.”

“She wants to appear less useful.” Eric guessed.

They huddled over the table keeping the conversation low. The waiter looked their way. Gerard poured drinks and those visible sipped for show.

“They asked about me.” Kate continued her play-by-play. “She said I’m why she’s on probation. Gran wants to know what else she can do. Lori isn’t answering. Gran told her it’s all right to speak freely with her and that she can do more than detect lies. Lori asked how and Gran said it’s a hunch. Lori just called her a liar.”

“She does that a lot.” Eric and her called each other out for lying all the time.

“But why piss Gran off.” Brad thought it was too brazen.

“Lori sounds kind of slow. It’s harder to hear her voice.” Kate was worried. “Gran asked again for her skills. Lori is saying telepathy, blacking out sight, hearing animals thoughts, speed, mind reading and she saw through her boyfriend’s eyes.”

“That’s too many.” Chris said. “Gran will know she’s conning her.”

Eric tensed. It was a real list.

“Maybe she wants them to think she’s exaggerating to hide her real talents.” Brad thought it was an obvious con that still gave her wiggle room.

“Possibly more but she doesn’t know yet.” Kate’s voice dropped a decibel as she continued.

“Gran is asking about her boyfriend. She wants to know what he’s like.”

“Shit! Marie is clouding her mind.” Matt realized.

Don’t answer. Eric sent to Lori. *Stop talking.* It was reflexive. If he couldn’t hear her, the chances were she couldn’t hear him.

“Lori told her that she doesn’t want to talk about him.”

“Should we stop Marie?” Brad offered.

“Gran will feel it too.” Brian said. “She can’t affect just one person at a time.”

Behind the shield, they wouldn’t be able to if they wanted.

“Now she’s asking how Lori got hurt.” Kate paused waiting for Lori’s answer. “Lori said she was helping some students. Gran asked if it was the same troublesome student she mentioned before. Lori said yes.”

Get out of there. Go to the restroom. Eric pleaded with Lori.

“Lori asked where the bathroom is. Gran said to use the one connected to the private room.”

She must have heard him. Eric wanted her out completely. *Is there a way out?* He didn’t get an answer back. Slowly her vision started to return to his mind. She pulled out her painkillers and took three. *What are you doing? That’s too many?* She looked around the room. *You can hear me? Why can’t you talk to me?* She pulled out her meter and pointed to the interference bar. *We’re here. Kate can hear what’s going on.*

She winked in the mirror and went back to the dining room.

“Someone’s interfering.” Eric updated the others. “It must be one-way. She can hear me but I can’t hear her.”

“She’s doing fine.” Matt encouraged.

“She just took a big dose of painkillers. That’s going to make it worse.” Eric wanted to get her out without Gran knowing they were there with Kate.

“Gran said Lori drinks like a fish. She’s pouring another.” Kate spoke.

Eric saw her pick up a glass of white wine and toss it back. *Stop drinking.* Eric begged.

“Lori says the wine helps her think. Gran ordered a second bottle. She’s asking if Lori has a reason to drink so hard. Lori says her boyfriend can be jerk at times. That he went off without telling her where. Gran wants to know what he’s like. Lori said he’s okay. He isn’t as good looking and kind of dull compared to most of the guys she has dated but he kisses better so she gives him some leeway.”

“She’s joking. She knows we’re listening.” Matt concluded.

“She better be.” Eric muttered. She threw back another glass. Maybe it was helping. He hadn’t lost her vision. That could slip past the force field. It had with Kate. If he was still able to see the room, something had changed from before her bathroom visit. Marie’s clouding wasn’t as affective.

“Gran asked for his name. Lori said he’s just some guy she met recently, a real control freak. Gran asked about what happened when Lori got hurt. Lori asked if she knows a man named Guido.”

Don't mention him. Eric didn't want Gran thinking Lori was fishing for information. He scratched his forehead.

"Gran said no. Asked if he was her boyfriend." Kate commentated. "Lori said no." Kate stopped talking.

"What is going on?" Matt urged.

"Nothing." Kate answered.

"She's staring Gran down." Eric could see her looking at Gran. Gran's expression was stony then she relaxed and shrugged.

"They aren't talking." Kate said. "Wait, Gran said yes she knows of him and she knows what happened at the school. Lori said that means she knows how she got hurt. Gran said yes and that's why she knows she can tell fact from fiction is bigger than discerning lies."

"They think that's how she knew where the real Guido was. They think it's a skill." Brian stated.

"Lori asked why she had to see her today. Gran said that she wanted to ask for her help." Kate exhaled waiting for Gran to ask Lori with her vengeance.

Do we need to come get you? Eric asked Lori. *Send me a clue.* The vision of the room rocked back and forth as she shook her head. *Okay, if you need me, pull out your meter.* The room moved up and down.

Kate went on. "Lori wants to know what kind of help she needs. Gran asked if she knows about my twin brothers. Lori said she has seen them around."

Eric was out of the table and running to the back of the restaurant. Matt followed. "If Gran knows about what happened at school then she knows Lori's lying." Eric hissed back as they swerved to avoid bumping into people that couldn't see them. He saw Gran stand up through Lori's eyes. Her face was stern and red with anger. The waiter was leaving through the swinging doors after delivering the second bottle and they slipped in undetected.

Inside the Lion's Den

As soon as they were inside Eric's mind was numb. If they weren't already invisible they wouldn't have been able to turn it on. As it was, it took all their effort to not lose it. They moved along the sidewall. The room was equipped for a party four times larger. He tried recalling stats to clear his mind. It didn't stop the full affect of the clouding but it helped.

"What's wrong?" Lori's slurred.

"Weren't Eric and Matt there this morning?" Gran glared down her nose at Lori.

Lori had a dim face. "They were. There's a third brother too."

"That's right. How well do you know them?"

"I met them a couple of times." She scrunched up half her face as she tried to think through the many things dulling her mind. "Matt's the cute one."

"Matt and Eric are identical." Gran was snippy.

Lori leaned forward dropping her arms clumsily one on top of the other as she looked at Gran.

"How do you know them?"

Gran put on a poker face. "That isn't important."

"Isn't your last name Thomas." Lori closed one eye thinking harder.

"They're my grandsons." She admitted slowly. "And they're very handsome." Marie nodded unconsciously. Gran shot her a dirty look. "Don't do that."

Lori scooted her chair right up to Marie's side. "Do you know the twins?"

"Sort of." Marie said nervously under Gran's harsh glare.

Eric's stomach clenched.

"Hey if you're their grandmother then you're Kate's grandmother." She had an open face of a drunk that made a conclusion through a happy buzz. "She tried to get me fired."

"She isn't my granddaughter. I'm their grandmother on their father's side." Gran curled her lip in disgust. Her temper was getting the better of her. "Why don't you have another glass? You haven't made a big enough ass of yourself."

Lori had a sharp eye on Gran but she poured another drink and gulped. “Mmm. This is good stuff. You haven’t even touched yours.” She eyed the three full glasses from the first bottle on the table.

“So did you kiss the twins?” Lori cocked an eyebrow to Marie.

“No.” Marie answered.

“That’s a lie.” Lori laughed.

Eric wished that fact hadn’t been uncovered. He shook his head and kept thinking of anything that would help keep it clearer.

“Are you going to help me?” Gran stepped forward.

“I don’t want to hurt Kate.” Lori shook her head.

“We won’t.”

“Good. She’s a nice kid.”

“She tried to get you fired.”

“She did. I’m on probation.” Lori looked sadly at her empty glass. “She’s misguided.”

Gran poured a fresh one. “How did she do that?”

“She found out I got stoned with Eric.” Lori had a big smile. She whispered to Marie, “I kissed him too.” Her eyes danced around the room and landed momentarily on Eric’s. She had sensed him come in. The clouding wasn’t affecting her as much.

Gran’s jaw tensed. “Is he your boyfriend?” She had beaten around the bush for too long. It was time to get a real answer.

“Kiss buddy.” Lori flipped her bangs out of her eyes. “And he isn’t going to be kissing Marie again.”

“I don’t know if this is going to work out after all.” Gran couldn’t make heads or tails of Lori.

“You’re drunk and not thinking straight.”

Lori tilted her head until it was only an inch over her shoulder. “I can hold my liquor.”

“No you can’t.” Gran observed.

“I get tipsy. What’s the fun if you don’t get a buzz?” Lori’s expression got very sharp. “I know how to think through the booze and it helps weaken any, let’s call it, mind numbing affects from unwelcome sources.”

Marie froze.

“Turn it off.” Gran ordered through gritted teeth. “I can’t do anything with it on.”

Eric’s mind was clear.

Lori staggered to her feet. She held on to the back of the chair for support.

“Drop the smoke screen.” Gran said. “What do you know?”

“You’ll need a couple more bottles before I’m drunk enough to tell you that.”

The bottle of wine flew up at Lori’s head. Eric pushed it off course and it smashed on the floor.

He was on the inside of the one-way shield.

“You didn’t mention you were telekinetic.”

“A girl needs to keep some secrets.”

The waiter walked in. He heard the breaking glass. “Did you want another bottle?” He asked as he swept up the mess.

“We’ve had enough, thank you.” Gran said. “We’re done here.”

He put the bill on the table and left. Kate, Greg and Brian snuck in and stood on along the other wall.

Stay hidden. Eric mentally told Kate. *Gran can’t know you’re here.*

“Of course, we can’t let you walk out of here knowing that you will report directly to Eric.” Gran put on her poker face again.

“I won’t tell him.” She giggled thinking it wasn’t needed since he was in the room. “Besides, he has you pegged.” She pointed a finger at Gran.

“Just like their father. A pretty face and they fall for any trashy women that comes on to them.”

“I think it goes back another generation assuming you were pretty once.” Lori smirked. Gran lost her temper. Lori flew back but Eric caught her. She landed softly against the wall by a counter that had water and sodas stocked for the room. She rolled her eyes around. All the shoving, drinking and drugs made her dizzy. “This is kind of crazy.”

“Patty, zoom in.” Gran called out.

Eric didn’t see anyone else but someone had a one-way force field up. He tried to find the person. She had to be behind the field as well because he couldn’t find her.

Lori's hand flew up to her chest. Gran was stopping her blood flow to her heart. The force field had contracted. They couldn't reach Gran to stop her but Gran could hit them. Eric had to run at Gran to stop her from killing Lori. *Matt get Marie and Brian get Holly.* He sent but there wasn't a need. Lori picked up a can of coke and hurled it Gran. It broke her concentration when she dodged the incoming projectile that would have hit her smack center of the face. She had a great throwing arm. Lori's blood flowed freely. "I'm tired of people trying to kill me today." Lori's anger cut through her buzz.

Eric ran forward and as soon as Lori was in his arms she vanished with him.

"Where are you?" Gran called.

Matt pulled the emergency tab on the sprinkler and set off a rainfall in the room. The waiter ran in and they ran out as the door swung back and forth. They grabbed the others and hurried to the cars.

Lori's Adventure

Eric drove Lori home in her SUV. "Why did you go there?"

"Are you mad?"

He thought about it. "Confused."

"I tried to tell you but you were out getting shot and running through burning buildings." She sassed. "That's why you wanted the meter."

"It helped. We had to move before they changed hideouts. Guido got away." Eric glanced at her. "That's the abridged version."

"I was scared." She ran her fingers through his hair.

He grabbed her hand and kissed it. "Now tell me what happened."

"Gran called. She was lying up a storm. She insisted on seeing me and I asked if we could make it another time. Then she asked about Betty. Betty took me to the meeting and I didn't want her getting hurt."

"Did she threaten to?"

"It was implied."

"Betty's your friend."

"I don't know her very well but I couldn't have that on my conscious. I got ready and weighed whether I should tell you."

It was then that Eric must have seen her in the bathroom after her shower. He squeezed her hand for reassurance.

"I wasn't sure I could sneak out with Kate in the next room. So I went to talk to her first and get her advice. I called through the door but didn't get an answer. Zuzu was scratching wanting to get out so I picked the lock."

"With your mind?" He expected she had all his skills.

"No, a bobby pin."

"Talented." He laughed.

“Very.” She smiled. “When I realized she was gone I told Jim and he went to Andy’s to find Greg. I made an executive decision and walked down to the main road and called a cab to get to school. My car was still parked there. I tried to reach you to tell you about Kate but you said later. I could see you were outside surrounded by trees.”

“I needed all my focus.”

“I only bothered you again because your dad got shot.”

“He’s okay.”

“I know.” She sighed. “That happened on the way to the hotel. I was already nervous enough but I started wondering if there was more to the timing. When I got to the hotel, you started trying to talk to me but I was so scared and didn’t want to take you away from whatever you were doing.”

He pulled her arm and she leaned over the partition. He kissed her head. “You should’ve told me.”

“Once I was with Gran I didn’t know what to expect. I started reading her mind and then you tried to reach me again and I couldn’t keep both straight. She had a plan. She wanted to know what I could do, if I was involved with you and if I would help her get to Kate. It freaked me out.”

“Why would she think we’re involved?”

“She heard about what happened. Her friend Patty has two daughters that are involved with Guido.”

“The one-way hinderers.” It made sense. Traits were inherited.

“Patty had heard what happened. Gran connected the dots that I was the same person she met at the club. Working at the school was tempting for her. And I had endeared myself to your family that morning. If I helped her, I was already on the inside. But she worried I was already too close to you. She knew I told Guido that Kate didn’t care about me but she also knew you ran to me as soon as the tide turned. That made her wonder if we were together. At least she figured it was you because Kate had called out when you were shot.”

“I was saving you.” Eric said.

“But you didn’t go to Kate first.”

“Okay, I can see how she would make that assumption.”

“She wasn’t sure and she wanted me to use my womanly wiles on you if you hadn’t already used your machismo on me. She thinks you’re the leader of the pack and the biggest block to getting to Kate.”

“I am.” He scratched his head. “But Matt and Brian are just as much trouble and they would step up even if she eliminated me.”

“She tried with Marie and it didn’t work out.”

He blushed. “About that...”

“Forget about it. By the way, you were Marie’s favorite assignment from Gran.”

He gulped in embarrassment. “What happened once you were in the room?”

“I knew what I was walking into because she was going over her plan in her head. There was a one-way force field to keep me from reaching anyone and Marie would cloud my mind. She didn’t know what I could do and was preparing for several options. I was scared at first until she started repeating everything to make sure she didn’t lose train of thought. I figured the clouding was going to stop her from doing anything too fancy.”

“These things do take some concentration.”

She nodded being new and overwhelmed to his world. “So we were in the room and they’re being civil until they had a couple of drinks in me. But I realized the drinks were keeping the clouding away.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The more I drank the less numb my mind was. Then she started asking about where I live and school and then Kate. She got me singing like a canary. The clouding was too much. When she asked about you I heard you telling me to stop talking. So I did and you didn’t even have to kiss me to shut up.”

“I don’t mind the old way.”

She puckered up.

“I want to hear more first.” And he needed to keep his eyes on the road.

She feigned a pout. “Then you told me to go to the restroom to get out but they had one in the private room. After that you seem to know what happened.”

“You should’ve played dumb.”

“I had two ways out, either help or fess up.”

“So you went with confession?”

“What’s a good Catholic to do? And you were there by then.” Lori had absolute confidence in him.

“I wasn’t much use.”

“I was safe. You had an army against a little old lady.”

“That little old lady is dangerous.”

“Tell me about it. She tried to stop my heart.” Lori furrowed her forehead and then flinched because of her cut.

“I was about to run at her until you threw the coke.”

“Are you sure you have a temper?”

“Would you like a spanking?”

“Sir, no sir.”

Eric pulled into the driveway at Jim’s. They were the first back. Jim was at the door before they knocked. “I’m useless as a guardian against you kids.” He was frustrated.

“Kate did well. She knows how to blow up guns.” Eric told him.

“I heard.”

Eric and Lori crashed on the couch. She was out like a light. He held her close.

“What were you two thinking?” Jim yelled at Kate and Ellen when they arrived.

Eric woke up with a jolt. Lori repositioned in her sleep.

Kate made her apologies to Jim in the foyer and walked into the den. “We’re meeting at your house for breakfast at ten.” Kate informed him. He nodded and Kate ran upstairs.

Eric jostled Lori. “Come on sleeping beauty.”

She squeezed him.

“Do you want me to carry you?”

“No. Your arm’s hurt.” She rubbed her eyes.

He could use telekinesis but he let her walk. He helped her up the stairs and stopped at the doorway. He ran his hand through her hair. “Don’t go anywhere this time.”

She gave him a long kiss.

“Are you trying to shut me up?” He asked.

“Thanking you for saving my life.”

“I count two saves.” He kissed her good night. “I’ll stop by tomorrow.”

Ellen came out of her room. “I’ll check on her every two hours.”

“Thanks and thanks for the coyotes.”

“Next time just include us from the start.”

“Next time you guys can go without us.” Eric winked.

Inside the Circle

Matt woke Eric up the next morning at nine. “How’s your arm?”

Eric pulled up his sleeve and removed the wrapping. He rolled his arm and stretched it out.

“Getting better. I should get up and run before everyone gets here.”

“Skip the run this morning.” Matt ran often but usually stayed indoors on treadmills where he could read measurements.

Eric rubbed his forehead. “I’ll keep it short.”

“All right but your sister and girlfriend are downstairs with mom.”

Eric jumped out of bed and took a shower. He was downstairs in ten minutes. He walked into the kitchen where the women in his life were preparing a large breakfast for the guests. They all lit up at the sight of him. Matt sat on a barstool picking at some sweet bread.

Sandy ran her hand lightly down Eric’s hurt arm. “How are you doing?”

“Great.” He picked up a piece of pan dulce. “How are you ladies?”

Sandy and Kate waited for Lori to answer. They weren’t hurt. Lori pulled up her bangs to show how much it healed. “It feels better. I was worried when I took out the stitches last night.”

“Why did you take them out?” Eric frowned.

“It was too obvious.” She didn’t want to look weak or ugly or both.

“Lori was just about to tell us about how you two got together.” Kate stated cutting up potatoes into quarter circles for her mother.

“You don’t need to tell them.” Eric got equal scowls from his mother and Kate.

“It’s fine.” Lori was very easy going. “I saw your family at the play. I noticed all of you. Eric caught my eye because he read the highest. Of course, he was the only one I got a clear reading on because you were always bunched together. Later he started talking me up at the tennis match I could feel him reading my mind. And when he stole my meter I knew he was on to me. I agreed to talk with him to see how much he would reveal which wasn’t much.”

“I only needed to know you weren’t involved with Gran or Guido.”

“He grilled me like a cheese sandwich. It was still a lot of fun. I tried to find out what he did metaphysically and he wanted to know how the meter worked and why I had it. I got distracted a lot.” She rolled her green eyes. “And then he said we couldn’t meet again and that he was seeing someone. I felt he trusted me so I asked some friends at Santa Barbara if they knew him and one did. The twins are quite famous on campus. Reid, my friend, invited him to a Cinco de Mayo party at a local bar. I wanted another chance to see him. I hoped knowing his flirtations were meaningless would keep me from getting sidetracked. I got all confused again and learned absolutely nothing.”

Eric blushed. If he hadn’t started kissing her he would have told all. “You got a good bit more if I remember correctly.”

We broke the no kissing rule more than the no questions rule. She thought to him then she returned to Kate and Sandy. “I was already hooked but he didn’t ask for my number. I didn’t expect to see him until Kate’s graduation and figured that was best considering she’s a pupil. Then his friend Henry wanted to meet me. I was reluctant to meet someone I didn’t know so he suggested that Eric would come along. Frankie and Matt came too.”

“You all went out together?” Kate was shocked. She couldn’t imagine the discomfort of having both women with him.

“It was the dinner from hell.” Eric admitted.

Lori nodded. “I didn’t realize until half way through the meal that Frankie was the girl he had mentioned. I had seen them together at the play but I didn’t think they were an item. They stood so far apart. That night she made it clear that I was to stay away.” Lori said awkwardly. Frankie was closer to the family and she thought she came off as an aggressive woman.

“It was hysterical.” Matt chipped in.

“It was awful.” Lori frowned. “I wanted to cry when Frankie thanked Eric for her flowers. It was the day after we kissed and I felt like a mistress.”

“That’s horrible.” Sandy was at the stove getting pans out to cook the bacon and eggs. She gave Eric a dirty look. “What were you thinking?”

“That I wouldn’t see Lori again and I was trying to mend things with Frankie.” Eric defended. “I sure didn’t think we would be having a group dinner.”

"I saw what was going on and you did very well." Matt told Lori. "Henry was being extra friendly with Lori. Frankie tried to stake her claim on Eric. Lori was working out the dynamics and this airhead watched her like a hawk trying to keep a respectable distance." Matt remarked to his mother and sister. "I knew Eric was in love with you since your first dinner."

"Bullshit." Eric interrupted.

"Okay, I only suspected after the first date but after the bar it was for sure. Remember, I found you two passed on the couch and brother, even in your sleep you looked pretty damn content. I didn't know Lori felt the same until that night."

Lori cocked her head. "I didn't even know until later when he told me he couldn't see me again."

Sandy went pale. "We shouldn't have done that."

"It didn't last long," Lori pulled her hair back, "but it hurt more than it should have and I just knew why. How did you know after that ghastly dinner?" She glanced at Matt.

"Aside from the overt sexual tension?"

"Matthew!" Sandy reprimanded as she shot a worried look that Kate was hearing too much.

Matt considered his answer. "Two things convinced me. When Frankie marked Eric as hers with her flowers comment you came right back with the jacket line. You weren't going to be scared off. Then later, when Eric told you to stay away for your own safety, you agreed without an explanation. You trusted him implicitly."

"I didn't want to hear the details because they would only frighten me more. He had already scared the crap out of me." Lori admitted.

Eric examined her head. "Didn't help much did it?"

"It was my fault you even saw each other again." Kate realized.

Matt laughed. "Yeah. It may have ended there if you didn't send him to get you out of detention. That didn't pan out the way you intended."

"And I'm why you got hurt. You were going to stay away and I pulled you back in when you had to monitor detention."

"No. It's Guido's fault." Lori put her hand on Kate's arm. "And I don't know if I would have stayed away for long."

"I'm glad you were there at school. You're a challenging opponent." Matt absent-mindedly nodded his head. "Fighting off fiends with tennis rackets and coke cans."

"Coke cans?" Sandy started frying the bacon that smelled great as it sizzled.

"We'll go over that later." Matt shook his head smiling.

"I'll stop by after we have our meeting." Eric told Lori.

"I brought her because she needs to be here." Kate remarked.

Matt shook his head at Eric. Eric's eyes widened as the epiphany hit him. She was in. Kate accepted her. She was his only chance he had to keep Lori out.

Ron answered the door as people started to arrive. Andy and Angela were the only absentees.

"Dad and Angela will help in anyway they can but they wanted to stay home with Ian. Margo will help if we need. Even Deborah offered hers and Tyler's assistance. Like we would take it." Greg informed.

"Tyler isn't going anywhere for a long while." Joe said. "He'll be in our custody for a while even if he plea bargains. The doctors say they can fix one knee but the other is pretty bad off. He'll need a cane the rest of his life."

"It's better than being dead." Father Francis commented. "How did they fake it?"

"The body was beyond recognition. They planted Tyler's ID on it. Tyler said that Guido wanted Deborah to tell us. He hoped we would show up weeks ago. He had Tyler under constant watch and threatened to hurt Deborah if he didn't cooperate." Joe informed.

They recapped the night at the farmhouse. Kate explained how she researched guns on the net. She had started to read up on locks but then wondered what would happen if a bullet were exploded in a gun that wasn't able to shoot out the barrel. It took speed and telekinesis to set off the explosion but she could trigger several rounds at once.

"That's outstanding." Henry was awed. They all were.

"Hey vato?" Joe looked at Eric. "Weren't you the one that didn't want her helping?"

"What's vato?" Eric asked not sure he was insulted.

Joe laughed. "It's a good term. It's like my friend."

“Okay.” He wasn’t really offended. “Ah yeah. I was wrong. Kate can lead the next battle. I’ll stay home and watch TV.” He winked at his sister.

Kate smiled. He had come a long way.

“She will not.” Jim demanded.

“He’s only kidding.” Joe diffused the situation before they argued.

“We’re back at waiting for them to make a move and reveal themselves.” Ron was frustrated.

“Wait, there was more that happened last night.” Gerard wanted to dissect their adventure with Gran. “We ran into some excitement on our way home.”

Lori told the team about how Gran contacted her to meet at the Plaza Pacific. She sat in a chair at the table far from Eric. When Lori recapped Gran’s plans that she mind read everyone tensed. An old problem was resurfacing.

“You can read minds?” Frankie looked at Kate. Kate had trouble sharing with Frankie because she was hard to empathize.

“I taught her.” Eric admitted. Matt and him were able to teach things back and forth between themselves. Even Brian had shared with Dave. Kate was the best and did most of the teaching because she could empathize better.

Frankie was stung to learn that but she hadn’t want Eric to teach her. She didn’t like his forwardness and opted for Kate as the better source for new talents. “What have you picked up?” She didn’t look at Eric.

“Well, I’m not sure. He only showed me telepathy but...” Lori started.

“She started doing things I never even did in front of her.” Eric finished.

Gerard wasn’t surprised. He had learned telepathy from his wife. “What have you done so far?”

“Telepathy, blacking out senses, detected lies, mind reading, talked to Mojo.”

“Try moving this.” Gerard put an empty cup on the table.

Everyone stared at Lori as she stared at the object willing it to move. Nothing happened. “I’m too self conscious.”

“Imagine your finger is pushing it.” Chris offered.

The cup slid on the table. Lori was pleased.

“Eric, you move the cup and Lori, try to stop him but not by pushing it.” Gerard made a second request.

The cup spun in a tight circle and then stopped. “She did it.” Eric confirmed for the group.

Henry was intrigued. He put eight cups on the table. He pointed to several and asked different people to move one of the cups. “This time, stop every cup but Eric and Matt’s.” The cups started dancing on the table. Lori tried again and six cups stopped moving while two, Eric and Matt’s, spun in their circles. “Keep trying to move the cups.” Henry wanted to test her stamina. It was a gift that had proven the most trying for the others.

After several minutes Lori thought to Eric. *How long does he want me to do this?*

“She just used telepathy.” Eric told Henry. It was something they had trouble with when deterring others from using their skills. It took weeks of boot camp to overcome that limitation.

“Lift the flower arrangement off the table to the counter and black out Father Francis’ eyes. Everyone else keep up their own tasks.”

The flowers floated to the counter and Father Francis shook his head as the blackness kept him from seeing. A minute later all the cups started moving again.

Henry held up his hand before anyone spoke. “Why did you stop?”

“I lost my concentration.” Lori answered.

“Why?”

“You’re thinking I shouldn’t be able to do this.”

“You stopped six different people from telekinesis while using telekinesis, blacking out Father Francis’ and reading my mind?”

She nodded. “I don’t know if it was mind reading or telepathy.”

“Can I see the meter?”

She had it on her belt.

Henry read the data. “Look at this.” He pointed the meter at Eric and then at Lori. Their bars were equal. “She’s a mirror of Eric.” He aimed at Matt. “He isn’t even exactly like Eric.”

“But why could she do so much more so quickly?” Greg wondered.

“Because Eric can.” Gerard guessed.

“Can I see that thing?” Joe took the meter and examined it. “Could you make a bigger one?”

“To use to find their hideout?” Lori followed his lead.

“Would it work?”

“If we made one that had a wider range. That one reads one person at a time.”

“What about the wrist one? Can you make more and some that don’t look so girly?” Matt asked.

“Only if you let me make you a pink one.” Lori smiled. Then a thought crossed her mind. “What is Matt’s reading right now?”

Joe pointed the machine at Matt. “Not a bar is lit. You’re blocking him.”

“If I can learn these things when I wasn’t born with any than I wonder if we could take it away from someone that was.”

“Is that possible?”

“I’m thinking out loud.”

“We’ll work on these meters and that theory.” Henry pointed to Lori.

“I’ll help.” Gerard offered. He had the best scientific mind in the group.

“What if they come back before then?” Sandy worried.

“Guido has a bullet in his shoulder and he thinks he’s hidden. He’ll take time to make a better plan.” Joe assessed.

“But he’ll come back.” Sandy was reliving old nightmares amplified.

“Yes.” Joe said sadly. “We’ll need someone that they don’t know to scout out Los Alamos.”

“I’ll go with Andy.” Jim offered. “They haven’t seen us.”

“Can you keep a low profile?” Joe asked.

“They know how.” Father Francis smirked. Jim and Andy had been a handful in high school.

“Kate, did you pick up anything new last night?” Eric hoped she learned how Guido duplicated himself.

“I wasn’t close enough and I was keeping tabs on you guys.”

“How fast can you learn and share?” Lori asked.

“Pretty fast. I learned speed in less than a minute and passed to Eric about as fast.”

“You use empathy to do that?” Lori didn’t wait for confirmation. “What if you were connected to both the teacher and the pupil at the same time?”

“What are you thinking?”

“That if Guido duplicates around Kate that you all start duplicating shortly after. Can you teach more than one person at a time.”

“Already have.” Kate answered easily.

“That would be excellent.” Chris had a weird smile. “And if we all looked alike even better.” He turned into a third twin.

“Why does Guido always resort to twelve images?” Matt asked.

“We think after that they start to look less substantial.” Frankie answered.

“There are ten of us that could potentially pull this off. There would be 120 images surrounding them.” Matt smiled at the idea of 120 images of himself. “You’re going to seem so inadequate afterwards.” He teased Eric.

“But if they shoot the right one you’ll be...” Frankie worried it was far too risky.

“Once the guns are drawn they’ll explode.” Joe explained.

“How independent is a duplicate?” Eric asked. “They seem to stay close and act and speak as one.”

“We’re not sure.” Henry answered. “We guess that he has better control the fewer he’s using. But they can still act independently.”

“I’m going to have to get some other police involved.” Joe admitted it was too much for him alone.

“Let’s reach out to the Santa Katrina force.” Father Francis said. “I know an alum that works there and he’s telepathic. He’ll understand these things and may know of other honest skilled cops.”

“We stay close.” Jim’s fears were high. “We need to watch ourselves.”

“Good point. Especially Kate, Greg, Brian, the twins and Lori.” Gerard said.

“Me? I just got here.” Lori was surprised to be added to the short list. “They don’t know much about me other than bricks are harder than my head.”

“Guido will after he gets an update from Gran’s friends.” Matt reminded her. “And he mentioned you last night wondering how you knew where he really stood. You’re the girlfriend of the leader of the pack and he knows it.”

“I’ll put you guys on my speed dial.” Lori stated firmly.

“You’ll stay with us.” Kate had called it the night before. If things weren’t settled Lori couldn’t live alone.

“We’ll see.” Lori mumbled.

Joe cleared his throat. “Father Francis and I will get more cops. Henry and Lori will make more meters including one that can read larger areas to find the hideout. Jim and Andy can go and find them in Los Alamos incognito. In the meantime, Lori needs to get up to speed on her new skills.”

Not Playing Fair

Everyone but Lori left back to their normal lives. Eric took her to his room for some privacy. “Maybe we could go out to dinner?” He wanted a proper date where they weren’t trying to pump each other for information.

“I’m going to see Johnny for dinner. You could come. We’re meeting in valley.”

“I’ll go.” Eric didn’t think Johnny liked him but he wasn’t going to let Lori wonder that far off the grid and he didn’t want to keep her from her life.

“Excellent.” She beamed at his great idea as if she hadn’t played him. “Bobby will be there too. He’s my little brother.”

“I’d like to meet him.” Eric started feeling anxious.

“He’d like to meet you. And my parents are going.” She was dropping one detail at a time.

Eric bit his lip. “Anyone else?”

“Johnny’s wife.” She tried to sound casual to ease his apprehensions. “I’ve met all your family and you don’t have to come if you’re not comfortable with it.”

“I want to go.”

“Liar.” She knew better. “I need to get back and pack. I don’t know what Kate was thinking.” She kissed him and started to leave his room.

Eric wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back. “Not so fast there speedy.” He held her from behind and hooked his chin over her shoulder. “We need to talk about that.”

She turned around in his arms. Her face was an inch from his. “You know I need my personal space.” She glanced up with her green eyes.

“It’s not about that.” His focus wavered.

She nibbled on his earlobe. “It’s only a few miles from here and I can send for you if anything happens.” She kissed down to his Adam’s apple. “You know I can take care of myself.” She kissed him on the lips.

He forgot what they were talking about and returned her advances. He shut his door with telekinesis. His mother wouldn’t like it but she wouldn’t intrude.

“I have to go.” Her words blew gently into his ear. She started walking backwards to the exit as he shadowed her closely. She bumped the door and reached to turn the knob. She had a victorious grin on her face.

His hand shot down to hers, pulled it away and pinned it to the side of her head against the door. She was taking advantage of him. He kind of liked it but for another time. “You don’t want me to worry.” He kissed her neck. She closed her eyes as he traced his lips up to her ear using her tactics in a counter attack. “And you’ll have your space.” He kissed her cheek. “Jim and Kate aren’t going to smother you.” He kissed her nose. “And what if something happens to me and I need you?” He gave her his best kiss. He smiled feeling her knees give a little.

“I have a life of my own.” She said breathlessly. He was winning.

“Clearly.” His lips fluttered over hers when he answered.

“This could go on for weeks.”

He kissed her again and she swooned. If she didn’t give up soon he was going to forget to keep talking. “You can stay with us in Santa Barbara or we could take a trip after school’s out.” He ran a finger gingerly over her cut.

She opened her eyes. “You’re so not playing fair.”

“If you want a sympathetic ear, I’m sure mom and Kate are happy to give you more warnings about me.”

“Too late.”

“And you’ll stay at Jim’s?”

She bobbed her head and rolled her eyes. “Yes. I need to go to my apartment. Kate missed some things, like the kitchen sink.”

“Let’s go.” Eric drove her car to her apartment.

Lori got a tote bag and put in a leash and some dog toys for Mojo. She went to her closet and threw in some more items. Eric sat on her frilly bed. She fetched a brush and some make up from her bathroom. The items were added to her bag. “Can you wait in the other room?”

“Why?”

“I wanted to get some personal garments.”

Eric grinned. "I don't mind. I'll be the decider if you have an iffy prospects."

She kissed him. "Please."

"This didn't work last time." He was glad to have her try again. Eric hugged her and pulled her on to the bed and trapped her. He ran his hands up her side and she didn't block him. He must have triggered her more animalistic instincts because she took off his shirt with a sense of urgency. He unbuttoned hers. It wasn't long after that they enjoyed the afterglow of their first time together.

"We can't do that at Kate's." Lori snuggled next to him face to face under her sheets.

"That's your best argument yet." He swept back her hair from her shoulder and kissed it. "I love you."

"Matt told me."

"Blabber mouth." Eric was in heaven.

"I love you too."

It was true. He saw images of his own face through her eyes. "We better get back."

"Not yet." She closed her eyes and kissed him reigniting the flame.

He took a run when he was home and his legs were weak from his earlier vigorous activities. It had been a couple of years for him. He was in a serious relationship that turned out to be all wrong at the time. Lori didn't have any past experience. Even so, she wouldn't regret it. Greg had a theory that Kate and him were destined because he saw through her eyes. Eric understood after feeling the sensation for himself.

It was overwhelming to think in those terms. They had only known each other for a month. He loved her and she loved him and that was all that mattered. Only time would prove if it was everlasting love but the odds were good.

Eric was ready thirty minutes early. It was out of trepidation. To unwind he stopped by Matt's room.

"You look nice. Are you taking Lori out to dinner before we go back to Santa Barbara?" Matt was on his bed with a book propped up in his lap.

"I'll have Lori drop me off. She's going to dinner with her family and I'm tagging along."

“About time you met the in-laws after what you did this afternoon.” Matt joked. “I wasn’t spying. I was going to see when you wanted to head back. Boy did I not expect you to be doing THAT.”

Eric flushed from embarrassment. “We didn’t plan it.”

“But you were careful.”

“Yeah. I had condoms with me.”

“Then you planned it some.”

“I’ve been carrying them around since my last date with Frankie.” He rolled his eyes.

“Dad will get around to telling you but you can stop from getting her pregnant with telekinesis.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s like mental spermicide. It’s how they always have boys. They just hit the girl seeds but you can hit all and no chance of getting a girl pregnant.”

“Why did he tell you and not me?”

“Because I have been dating Joann for a few months.” Matt had a mischievous smile. “Did you enhance things at all?”

Eric went red to the tip of ears. “The second time I may have used a little metaphysical speed. I couldn’t help it. She was using telekinesis all over me. It was like she was everywhere at once.”

“I need to teach Joann some of this stuff.” Matt liked the sound of that.

“I highly recommend it.”

“Eric?” Lori found them in Matt’s room. She blushed at the sight of him. “Hi. Hi Matt.” She pulled her hair behind her ear figuring that Matt knew or suspected what they had been up to.

“I hear you’re taking him to meet your family.” Matt kindly smirked.

“I’m sure it’s a mistake but I had a feeling he’d follow me anyway.”

“Can I do that and not eat with you guys?” Eric figured if she didn’t mind he could watch her and escape a family visit. It was too soon.

“No.” She scrunched her nose at him.

“Nice try.” Matt said. “I’ll see you at the condo.”

“What’s your family like?” Eric cruised down the road in Lori’s Tiguan.

“Normal and boring unlike yours.”

“Is there a special occasion or do you do this often?”

“Dad’s birthday is next week and we chipped in to get them a cruise. This is our chance to have a birthday dinner with him.”

“That’s nice.” He wished it were a normal dinner. He would be imposing on a private celebration. One the bright side, it wasn’t going to happen every week.

“You’re worried about meeting them?”

“I didn’t get a lot of time to psych myself out for it.”

“They’ll love you.”

It was a partial truth. He didn’t press the matter. Johnny wasn’t pleased to see him near Lori after she was injured and couldn’t tell him why. Matt throwing him against the wall wasn’t a good first impression. He had some bridges to repair there. Maybe karma was getting back at him for all the times he scared boys away from Kate. Stupid karma.

The In-Laws

They met at a Japanese restaurant in Calabasas. Ron was right. The Becketts were a family of giants. Lori was an impressive six-foot even. Her father, Roger, was six five with light brown hair and green eyes. Lori looked most like him. Johnny's six four seemed less intimidating next to Bobby's six and half foot tall stature. Bobby had light brown hair and eyes and was much tanner than the rest. Their mother was the only dwarf standing five foot three with dark brown hair and eyes. Cassie, Johnny's wife, was five six with medium brown hair and eyes. Her belly was swollen at eight months plus gestation.

"Johnny said you're bringing someone." Her father was excited to see his little girl as he critically examined her escort.

She hugged him. "This is Eric Thomas. Eric, this is my father Roger Becket and my mother Charlie Becket. You met Johnny and this is his wife Cassie carrying my first nephew yet to be named. And my little brother Bobby." The term little was lost on Bobby.

"Most of my friends call me Rob." Bobby allowed.

Eric wondered if that meant he should or that he shouldn't. He made the rounds shaking hands and telling them it was nice to meet them.

"Nice hair do." Johnny whispered to Lori as he kissed her cheek. He wasn't a dummy and knew she was hiding her scar.

"Be nice." She requested. It was like Kate asking Eric to behave.

The host sat them at a private grill and Eric sat in the corner between Cassie and Lori.

"Did you drive up from San Diego?" Eric asked Roger who sat on Lori's other side.

"No, we migrated north with the kids. Johnny and I have an architect firm in Pasadena."

"Nice area. I grew up in San Marino."

Charlie's eye brightened up. "That's a rich town. Why would you move from there?"

"The parents migrated to follow us." He tried to impress Mr. Becket by echoing his phrasing.

Charlie picked up that fact and considered it tacky. "Honey, what did you do to your hair? Thick bangs don't suit you."

"They'll grow out." Lori smiled awkwardly.

"I like them." Eric said.

"It isn't a current style." Charlie rebutted. "Although the honey blond does look nice. Are you going to keep it?"

Lori shrugged. "For now."

"Such a flighty child." Her mother remarked.

"So, Rob, are you in college?" Eric figured he was if he was younger than Lori.

"Two years left at USC."

"Good school." Eric had considered it when he applied to colleges.

"He's a genius." Charlie chirped.

"Lori's the smartest." Rob demurred.

"He's in business school." Charlie acted as if he hadn't said a word about Lori.

"Me too. At Santa Barbara. It's my last week."

"I got denied to UCSB." Rob shook his head. "It would've been great."

"USC is a better school." Charlie stated.

"True." Eric admitted it. "I picked Santa Barbara for the location."

"Nothing wrong with having fun, sun and school. It's on my short list for my masters."

"Are you going to continue your education?" Charlie practically dared Eric. Education was important to her if for nothing else – bragging rights.

"Maybe later."

"What are your plans after graduation?"

"We have three easy options and of course could go out on our own." Eric was about to tell them his choices but Charlie stopped him.

"We?" She had a quizzical look as she turned to Lori.

"Eric's an identical twin." Lori held his hand. He had spoken in plural out of habit. "When he says we, he means his brother and himself."

"Really?" Roger said.

"I've never seen two people look so much alike." Johnny took a sip of his beer. Eric wasn't registering any hostility from him but he could have checked it at the door for the dinner.

“And your easy options are?” Roger prodded.

“Our dad has a business consulting company. It’s small but expanding. He could use the help. And Andy, a good family friend, builds furniture and runs a store in town. And then Jim, my sister’s father, has a computer company that makes games and educational software. That’s the most tempting.”

“You’re sister’s father?” Charlie scrutinized Eric over her cocktail.

“She’s my half sister.” Eric got a bad vibe from Charlie.

“And you’re close to her father as well.”

“Jim’s like an uncle.” It was an odd extended family and it surprised people when they first heard. It was old news to him. He was happy with his life and usually didn’t care what people thought. But it was Lori’s mother and it bothered him that it might bother her.

Lori gave him an apologetic look.

He scratched his head and she did the same. Maybe his head was itching because of her wound. He didn’t have time to dwell on the idea.

“Lori, where did you get that cut on your forehead?” Rob had seen the scar when she rubbed.

Roger twisted to face his daughter better and pulled back her bangs. “Ouch.” He frowned.

“It’s nothing.” Lori waved her hand in the air dismissively.

“So tell us what happened?” Charlie challenged.

“Mom, relax. It doesn’t look fatal to me.” Johnny stated coolly.

Probably hit herself in the head with that damn racket. Charlie thought to herself.

Eric shouldn’t have read her mind but his instincts kicked in.

“That’s why you cut your bangs. To hide it from us.” Charlie accused Lori.

“I didn’t want it to show at school.” Lori whined reverting to a younger version of herself.

“So Eric, how did you two meet?” Johnny changed the subject.

“Kate, my sister, goes to St. Ignatius’.” Graciously his mind remembered the proper school name.

I hope she isn’t friends with that brat that got Lori into trouble. Charlie thought.

Eric tensed. Kate wasn’t a brat and regardless of her intent for him to hear, he didn’t like the idea being conjured.

“Isn’t that a little weird dating your sister’s teacher?” Roger said protectively.

“We meant to wait until Kate was out. She graduates this year. But fate kept pulling us together and Kate’s okay with it, so why bother.”

“You could get fired if your boss finds out.” Charlie scolded Lori.

Eric laughed and got a dirty look from Lori’s mom. “Father Francis isn’t like that. He’s a really good friend of the family. I don’t know a lot of priests but he’s okay in my book.”

She’s dating a heathen. Charlie thought.

“Anyway, Lori is too good a teacher. He was so excited that she’s staying on. He thinks I talked her into it.” Eric wanted them to know how much they appreciated Lori at school.

“You’re staying? You said you wanted to be a journalist this week.” Charlie sneered.

Eric let out a small “oops.”

Charlie was disgusted at the idea of her daughter being a humble teacher. *This boy has her choosing a poor career.* She mentally criticized them both.

Lori squeezed his hand. “It’s a great job and I’m good at it.”

“You’re good at everything you do.” Roger put an arm around Lori.

“Thanks dad.”

I hate it when he babies her. She’ll never grow up and she’ll always be a letdown. Charlie unkindly mused in her head.

“You’ve raised an incredible daughter.” Eric complimented. “My whole family adores her.”

“They’re easy to like.” Lori smiled at Eric.

Johnny rolled his eyes. He was thinking about Matt who jumped him.

“When are you due?” Eric asked Cassie who had been silent. What he really wanted to ask was how did she take the Becket family dynamics when she first met them. How long does the shock last? And most importantly, does it get any easier to deal with?

“Three weeks.” She had a dreamy voice as she cradled her engorged belly.

“It’s our first grandchild.” Charlie cooed. “I’m too young for anyone to believe I am grandmother.”

“He’s kicking right now.” Cassie had a wistful look as she held her hand to the spot on her body.

Lori leaned across Eric to feel the baby. “Eric, feel this.”

Look at her falling all over the boy. She's throwing herself at him. Charlie didn't have a supportive thought about her daughter.

Eric overlooked the comment. He glimpsed at Johnny for a hint of any issues with him touching his wife. Johnny had a proud fatherly expression. Lori picked up Eric's hand and put it on Cassie's stomach. He sensed a little flutter under the skin. "Wow!" He reached out to the baby with his empathy. He could feel a small person. He told Lori, via telepathy, to try the same and amazement crossed her face.

The chef arrived. They were packed and he apologized profusely for the delay. Charlie made a cutting remark and everyone ignored her. The show of watching their meal being prepared gave Eric a break from the small talk. It had always been a strong suit of his but not when he was blindsided by Lori's family. He had never performed under pressure and it was the first time that he felt obliged to win over his audience. Charlie made it increasingly difficult.

"You're the first boyfriend that Lori has brought to meet us." Rob told Eric.

Eric looked up at Rob not sure how to answer.

"We didn't even meet her fiancé." Charlie sneered.

"That's better for him." Johnny glared at his mother. He had already made his contempt known to Eric regarding Lori's former fiancé. Eric liked that about Johnny.

"I don't know why I don't do it more often when you bring up ancient dating history." Lori rolled her eyes.

Always so flippant. Charlie thought.

"I'm glad it didn't work out with him." Eric eyed Lori dotingly. "I'd have to break you up and that would have wasted a lot of time."

"You sound pretty serious." Roger sat up straighter. "How close are you?"

"Daddy." Lori stopped him. "We're just started dating."

Roger stared at Eric waiting. He wasn't blind.

"I'm enchanted." Eric admitted. "I've never been this happy in my life."

Lori melted at his words. Rob had a satisfied smirk. Even Johnny was smiling. Roger sat back. If it wasn't the best answer it was darn close.

"It's early. She can be a handful. I never met such a stubborn person in all my life." Charlie said.

“It has to be hard for Lori. She’s so much smarter than the rest of us.” Eric’s protective sleeping monster roared deep inside.

Probably bedded him. It won’t last. Charlie thought. Then she said in a snippety air, “And yet she’s settling on a teaching career, this week anyway. She’s an underachiever. The school psychologist told us that when she was eight years old.”

“True, but it was two years earlier than she planned on reaching that status.” Johnny joked.

Eric chuckled at the quick comeback. “Seems kind of young to be pigeonholed. What kind of goals does an eight year old have to strive for? Later bed time and a bigger allowance?”

Their laughter only pushed Charlie’s buttons. “The fact is she hasn’t reached her potential. She could be so much more than this.”

Eric couldn’t take it. “She’s perfect. And as for being a teacher, my grandfather, who teaches at the same school, is one of the most content people I know. She has chosen wisely.”

“You’re smitten.”

“You come off a little critical.” He shot back with a mild force.

“How dare you talk to me like that?” Charlie was aghast.

“You don’t give Lori much latitude.”

The table was on edge from his rebuke.

“Who are you to tell me how to treat my daughter?”

“Who are you to talk to the woman I love like that?”

Eric, don’t. Lori mentally asked him. *Let her blow off steam.*

Eric shifted in his seat and tried to relax. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude.”

Just put up with him for a little while. Charlie told herself mentally. *He won’t last. She can’t commit to anything for more than a few days. She’ll be back in school for medicine or culinary classes before the year is out the way her whims change. And this impudent boy will be gone.*

I’m not going anywhere. Eric answered back. Charlie’s eyes darted to him. He had accidentally sent the message telepathically. Charlie was confused if he spoke or not.

“Are you looking forward to the cruise?” Johnny asked his father.

“We are.” Roger put his hand on Charlie’s arm. She glared at Eric with her hard eyes. “Charlie’s already picked out activities for the whole trip. Haven’t you honey?”

“What was that?” She missed the question.

“I was just saying we’re looking forward to the cruise.”

“Yes. It’ll be lovely. I hope the baby doesn’t come early.”

“You’ll be back in plenty of time.” Johnny sighed. It undoubtedly wasn’t the first time that concern had been voiced.

Cassie looked down. Eric wondered if she liked the idea of Charlie missing the birth. She would be a nightmare in a hospital barking orders to doctors and nurses.

His eyes met Johnny’s briefly and he had a slight smile. Johnny was giving him a second chance at a first impression and it was going much better.

“Of course it would have been nice to have known about the baby sooner.” Charlie commented. “Usually you don’t have to hear these things through the grapevine. My manicurist told me of all the people.”

“Mom, we explained that we were being careful.” Johnny turned to Eric. “We, er, were engaged but not married. So we had to speed things up.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Love is love. There’s a tradition of eloping in my family. My mother and father did and her sister and they didn’t even need a shotgun.”

“That’s horrible.” Charlie disapproved. “Weddings are for the families. Your grandmothers must’ve been upset.”

“They had receptions afterwards. The marriage was just paperwork to my parents.”

“That isn’t very romantic.”

“Romance is about love not legalities and ceremonies.” He defended.

“Short courtships?” Charlie spurned.

“They were.”

“And you’re the same.” She had a sinister smirk.

“Mother.” Lori warned.

“Just asking questions. I’m trying to sort out how this relationship will proceed. I was hoping to have one proper wedding in the family.”

“No promises there. But we’ll send you a postcard from Vegas.” Eric jested.

“You intend to marry her. Lori, how do you feel about that?” Charlie was trying to expose weaknesses in their relationship.

Lori gulped. “We can discuss this later.”

“Of course.” Charlie derided thinking she was helping her daughter out of a bad situation. *This won’t last until the end of the week.*

“If you elope, call us. We’ll be your witnesses.” Johnny offered in their defensive.

“All right.” Eric agreed. “But Matt has to be my best man.”

“I’m not going to fight him for it.” Johnny shook his head with a silly grin. He guessed that Matt could take him in a fair fight. It wasn’t true. Matt would need to play unfairly to defeat a Goliath like Johnny.

Can we talk about something else? Lori asked Eric mentally.

“You can’t be okay with this.” Charlie confronted Lori.

“I can live without a fancy wedding.” Lori avoided the real question.

“I meant you can’t be serious about this presumptuous boy that doesn’t even have a job to support you. And you’ll need more than a teacher’s salary to live off.”

“We’ll work it out.” Eric picked up Lori’s hand and kissed it. “And I’ll have a job.”

“Working for daddy or a family friend?”

“They’ll expect me to pull my weight. It isn’t a blank check.” Eric preferred being the source of her scorn rather than Lori.

“Roger, aren’t you going to speak up?” She challenged.

Roger had been watching his daughter. “Does he make you happy?”

Lori nodded. “Very.”

“You always let her do whatever she wants no matter how big a mistake it is.” Charlie’s cruelty continued – no end in sight.

“Eric isn’t a mistake nor is teaching.” Lori rebuked.

“We’ll see how long either lasts. I bet neither will make it until Christmas.” Charlie was needlessly callous.

“I’ll take that bet.” Johnny backed his sister. She was in love. “On him, not the job. And Eric, don’t think this means you have my blessing. I’m accepting the fact that we’re going to have to get use to you.”

“Fair enough.” He grinned confident that in time he would get his blessing as well.

“I’ll be back.” Charlie excused herself. She shook with infuriation. “This is preposterous.” She walked to the ladies room.

“I better go with her.” Lori stood up. Cassie followed.

Karma Comedy

Eric hoped Lori wouldn't leave him alone with the men in her family too long. Johnny paid the bill. Eric offered to treat or help but he wouldn't have it. The Becket men had indecipherable expressions on their faces. Roger told them to go to the bar and he would bring the women over when they returned.

Johnny and Rob had Eric flanked on a barstool. It was reminiscent of a few times that Greg was stuck between him and Matt. Eric was trapped in a karma comedy.

"Three beers." Johnny ordered from the bartender.

"Won't they be back soon?" Eric asked.

"We have time." Rob assured him as he handed him a beer.

"Why did you do that?" Johnny stared at Eric giving no reading at all.

"What?"

"Why did you do that?" He wasn't going to let Eric play dumb.

"I'm tired."

"Why did you do that?" He wasn't going to take a lame excuse.

"She wasn't giving Lori a chance on anything." Eric snapped. "I couldn't just sit there."

The brothers exchanged glances and smiled. "I like him." Rob said.

"It's easier when his brother doesn't have you backed against the wall." Johnny shook his head and he took a swig of beer.

"He pinned you?" Rob didn't believe it. "Is he bigger than him?" He pointed to Eric.

"Exact same size. I didn't even see it coming."

Rob looked at Eric with new respect. "Good effort in there but it only makes it worse to compliment Lori. We learned that years ago."

"What's wrong with her?"

"She has some emotional issues. Gives us all a hard time but mostly Lori." Johnny answered.

"Is it hereditary?" Eric worried.

"Yes but Charlie's our stepmother. Our mother passed away fifteen years ago." Like Lori, Johnny still referred to their brother as Bobby.

"I should've known you guys were keeping quiet for a reason."

Rob put a hand on his shoulder. "She had gone too far. It isn't easy. We still don't know the best way to deal with it. Being nice doesn't stop it. Standing up to her doesn't. Once she is on a path of destruction we can do little more than watch and try to get out of its way."

"How did Lori get hurt?" Johnny had covered in front of Charlie. He deserved a real answer.

"She was saving my sister." Eric kept it brief.

"Is that how you got hurt?" Johnny persisted.

"Same time. I saved her."

"Saving her from what?"

"Some thugs came by the school when they were at detention and Lori was monitoring."

"The detention was from when your sister tried to get her fired?"

"His sister is the same kid?" Rob's mouth dropped open. "Don't let mom find out about that."

Eric nodded.

"That's why she's nice to Lori now." Johnny had wondered what caused the change of heart.

"Kate's usually nice. It was just some odd circumstances."

"She didn't like you two dating."

It was so much more than that but Eric couldn't reveal all. "We weren't but we liked each other. You know how it can be. No one is ever good enough for your siblings."

They shrugged at each other.

"It's all sorted." Johnny wanted to make sure things were settled.

"You met her. Kate loves Lori now."

"And you too?" Johnny approved of Eric on some level.

"Yeah."

"I'm good." Johnny clicked his beer to Eric's and drank.

"You'll get better at dealing with mom." Rob did the same.

They got to know each other and started a second beer before the others were back. Johnny gave Cassie a kiss. Eric picked up Lori's hand and she smiled at him. Charlie was stewing but more in control.

"It was good to meet you." Roger gave Eric a firm handshake.

"You too." He liked Roger.

Lori drove back to Santa Barbara. Her head hung low. She worried that Eric had seen too much too soon.

"You're brothers told me about Charlie."

"I didn't tell you because usually she behaves around new people. I expected that you would see a mild rudeness and I could explain later."

"I suppose it wasn't too bad except I kept reading her thoughts."

"Me too. It is always on, isn't it?" She figured it was but with the ability to read minds all uncertainty was removed.

"Are you okay?" He didn't know how she took it so well. It had probably been like that all her life. How awful for her never meeting her mother's approval.

"I'm use to it."

"I don't think I'll ever get use to her acting like that but I'll learn not to trigger it."

She smiled at him. "You sound like you're going to see them again."

"Won't I?"

"I won't force you."

"You deal with my problems. Only seems fair that I deal with yours. And we walked away without any scars."

"That we can see." She teased.

He didn't like the joke. "You really are the most amazing woman."

"You're just saying that because you love me."

"I love you because you are truly amazing."

"How was it with Johnny and Bobby after I left?"

"For a second I thought they were going to beat me up."

"No, I could tell Johnny warmed up when he diverted attention from the scar."

"Only until you left. He questioned me in the bar. I gave a vague explanation. He earned it."

"Did he freak out?"

"I didn't mention anything metaphysical or that the thugs were looking for us."

“What else did you talk about?”

“After they cross-examined me about you, sports, school, work, the usual.”

She held his hand all the way home. It was too late for her to visit and they had a long kiss good night and parted.

Lori Catches Up & Helps Out

Eric only had to go through the motions to graduate so school wasn't a time suck. He spent his days thinking about the horrible and wonderful weekend. There was so much tension release. Guido got away. That meant that things weren't ended. On the flip side they sent his gang running. Next time the kids would come. He still wished they wouldn't but they had proven themselves. It tilted the odds significantly in their favor.

They were ready and if they achieved any of their moderate goals, they gained more advantages. His expectations were they would get all their tasks completed; find the hide out, build meters for everyone and steal Guido's skills and use them against him. The danger wasn't erased but put into a smaller compartment.

As for Lori, things couldn't have turned so fast for the better if he had designed them. Kate was her biggest fan and even his mother had warmed up. He shouldn't have doubted it. She was wonderful. Best of all, his biggest mistake, hitting Greg in an uncontrollable rage, didn't even faze her. He didn't deserve to be let off the hook so easily but he wasn't going to fight fate if it chose to be gracious in his favor.

After constant interaction with Lori all weekend, he missed her terribly. It was the euphoria that came with a new relationship only multiplied by a thousand. He meant to give her space and let her reach out to him but by Tuesday night he couldn't take another moment apart. He pulled her into a dream.

"Hello." She gave him a warm embrace. "I've missed you."

"Me too." He kissed her. It was magnificent to kiss Lori whenever he wanted. Too bad she was tired. "Are you taking care of yourself?" He checked her scar with his index finger. It looked a couple of weeks old rather than days.

"It's fine. Hardly even itches anymore." She pulled his hand away.

He didn't want to tell her she looked fatigued. If she wasn't she would take it as an insult. He tried a less direct route. "Are you getting enough time to yourself?"

“Not at all. Between monitoring the finals, building meters with Henry, researching with Gerard on trying to pinpoint how these things work in our brains and Kate’s boot camp I don’t get five minutes.” She bobbed her head and rolled her eyes. “And you said I would have space at Jim’s.”

“Those are all important things.” Eric wished she could get out of proctoring exams but that was the only thing that was her life and he wasn’t going to suggest she stop. “How are things going?”

“We’ll have the meters ready in a couple of days. We need to make twenty or more and we’re adding number ratings on each side. Gerard and I are working on some theories as well. Jim let us scavenge for parts at his office to get what we needed for a scanner that can help find their location.”

“That’s great.” They were sitting on his bed and he was losing interest in the update as he debated other ways to use their time.

“And Kate has given me an education on all the skills. She’s incredible with them. It’s a relief that she doesn’t hold any resentment towards me.”

“She should always listen to me.”

Lori made a face but let him have his big brotherly moment. “She’s a drill sergeant.”

“You have some catching up to do.” He said but thought he should ask Kate to ease up.

“I do. And I told her not to go easy on me.”

He had given adequate time for an update and leaned her back into his bed. Even in her dreams she was exhausted and started to fade on him unable to match his enthusiasm. He nudged her awake. “You can’t sleep in here. You’ll cross over to my condo and won’t have a way home in the morning.” He kissed her head.

Lori yawned.

“I’ll see you this weekend.” He let her go.

When his misty room faded another replaced it. It was Kate’s room. She sat in her comfy chair.

“I hear you’re a drill sergeant.” He teased.

“I hate to do it but she insists. She’s doing great.”

“She looks like you did when you were overdoing it last year.”

“I know. She says her energy levels are lower than normal. She thinks it’s the medicine. They put her on antibiotics to ensure there isn’t an infection.”

Eric was on the same pills. They did wear him out. “How are finals going?”

“Seniors skip the last finals unless their grades are really sketchy and mine are solid.” She stated proudly and with complete honesty. “I did get a shocker today when I was working with Lori.”

“Really?” He said nonchalantly.

“Imagine my surprise when Lori said you have seen through her eyes.”

He nodded. “Yeah, that did happen.”

“And she has seen through yours?”

“That also happened.”

“You’re going to marry her?” Kate accused.

“That’s Greg’s theory.”

She stiffened. It was a theory Greg had applied to her relationship with him and it scared her to think in such long terms. Eric was glad. They weren’t even in college. Deep down, he expected Greg would be his brother-in-law someday. Deeper down, he knew that Johnny would be too.

“I wasn’t ready for that. She didn’t seem to understand how rare it really is.”

“Luckily.” He smiled. “And we aren’t sure that’s absolute.”

“I think we’ll end up that way.” She hated to say married.

“That wouldn’t be so bad. You still have a long way to go before you have to consider it seriously. Enjoy your carefree youth in the meantime.”

“What about you?”

“It’s only been a few days that we could even talk to each other.”

“It won’t bother me. I promise never to be so bone-headed in the future.”

Eric gave her a half hug. “It was over before it begun.” It was easy to be gracious since it had passed. It had felt like eons when he was forbidden to see Lori.

She let him go back to his dreams. Lori was still there but not in the same way as before. It was still quite nice.

Thursday afternoon Eric spent a few hours with just Matt, Brian and Kate. It had been a long time since it was just the four of them. It was like going home. They talked about how much had changed in their lives since their last kids only meeting. It was almost two years before that Gerard lost his wife, their

good grandmother. Eric barely met his grandmother and Brian and Kate couldn't remember her at all.

What a shame? It was her funeral that started a chain reaction of bringing in new friends and foes. They first met Jim and Greg that day. He couldn't imagine their lives without them after all that had transpired.

It was worth any trouble that also started from that day, namely Gran's murder attempts and then Tyler followed by Guido. If Kate hadn't moved to Santa Katrina and attended St. Iggy's, would he have found Lori? Kate and Brian found love there as well. Perhaps Father Francis was a secret matchmaker. He was another person they met at the funeral and another equally vital part of their network.

Eric thought back to the Mass they attended that Father Francis led. He was a good preacher. Even then Eric perceived something different about him. He never imagined that it would lead to the friendship that developed.

He imagined his grandmother Ann was smiling down on her grandchildren with pleasure that they were truly happy.

Eric met Lori for a real date. Lori was at Gerard's house finishing up details on the wrist meters. Matt dropped him off after their kids' time. He let himself in and went to the basement.

Lori stood over a worktable and Gerard was on a laptop computer.

"Hi." Lori's face lit up as it always did when she saw him. How did he ever doubt her interest in him? Or his in her?

"Eric, is it time?" Gerard wanted to keep working.

"I'm early." He lied.

"Let me show you what we've been up to."

The laptop had twelve little blips on a grid. Eleven were bunched up together and one was a little farther away. Gerard nodded to Lori and she pointed it at Eric. Gerard clicked on the far blip and a grid pop up in the corner that resembled the one Lori had on the larger meter. On the table half the watches were to her left and the other half to her right while she held the one she had aimed at him. They were programming them into the computer.

"We'll know everything." Eric was impressed.

"She's bright. A real keeper."

"I know grandpa." Eric grinned. "Can I steal her back?"

“Have a good time.” Gerard winked at them as they left.

Eric drove her car. “Where did you want to eat?” She was more refreshed than she had been in his dream.

“Let’s get take out and go back to my place.” She suggested.

Eric frowned. “You don’t want to go on a date.”

“My apartment.” She clarified.

Eric smiled. It was another of her brilliant ideas. They got some Chinese food and went to her apartment. She got out some candles and they ate on the floor leaning against the couch with soft music playing.

“You’re looking better.” He held her as she leaned into his chest.

“We’re done with the meters and finals are over.”

He pulled her hair back with his hand and kissed her neck. It wasn’t long before they were naked in her bed recovering from another round of ecstasy. She had her head on his shoulder as she traced her fingernail over his chest.

“We’re at my apartment and nothing bad happened.” She said timidly.

“You want to move back?”

“I can wait a little longer.”

“Good.” He kissed her. “I like knowing you’re safe.”

“It’s nice but I’m not use to having so many people around all the time.”

“You wanted to be in the inner circle.”

“And you warned me there were down sides to it.”

“They don’t mean to crowd you. My family can forget about personal space.” It was a symptom of their skills and the danger they had been in for too long.

“You’re mother’s so sweet to me.”

Eric figured any mother would seem sweet in comparison to hers. “She hasn’t tried to orchestrate an intervention.”

She shook her head. “Next time we get stoned, let’s invite her. Maybe she’ll lighten up after she experiences it for herself.”

Eric laughed at the idea of his mother getting high.

“I wish we could stay here tonight.”

He kissed her. “We don’t have to go just yet.”

Putting Out Fires

Eric took his morning run with extra energy. It was overcast as mornings often were. Henry's car was parked at Jim's house when he got home. After a quick shower he went over to see if there were any new developments.

He let himself in and found Jim and Henry in the kitchen. "What's the good news?" He asked in a cheery mood.

"We were going to look around Los Alamos today but Andy's mother got sick. He had to go to San Diego."

"Is it serious?"

"It's one of her kidneys and they are operating on it. It sounds routine but you can never know." Jim fretted. He had known Andy's family all his life.

"I'll take his place." Eric thought about Andy and slowly he was a middle aged blond man with a slight paunch.

"And we hadn't even started to think of a back up plan." Jim smirked.

"Let me show you how to work this thing." Henry turned the laptop towards Eric and gave him a demonstration how to read the software. Jim had given them parts from his research and development division to help build it. It had a gun like a store's scanner that you aimed. A map would shade in various metaphysical activity showing stronger levels in darker shades.

They took Greg's Bronco. Jim's Escalade stood out a bit much in some neighborhoods.

"Have you guys made any decisions about where you'll work?" Jim asked as they drove out to Los Alamos.

"Only that I think I would have more fun working on furniture or games." Eric admitted. "Dad's business sounds too dull. I hope he doesn't mind."

"He won't. He thinks it's boring too."

"Matt's going to work with him. He enjoys business more than me."

"Why don't you do half and half? Andy and I will give you the schedule to do it." Jim wanted Eric to explore his options.

"I'll take you up on that. Do you think Andy would still let me work with him?"

"Why? Because of what happened with Greg?"

Eric nodded.

"We had our scuffles when we were younger. He doesn't hold grudges."

"I can't think of anything I regret more in my life. I was worried that things would never be the same again with them and me."

Jim rolled up his sleeve and on the outside of his arm was a four-inch scar between his triceps and bicep. "See that."

"Andy?" Eric guessed.

"It was raining and we were changing a tire and there may or may not have been some beer involved. The tire iron slipped out of his control and he got me pretty good. It was after our prom and Sandy was pissed."

"You took Mom to your prom?"

"We only had a couple of dates in high school and that was the last one. She was already mad because we promised not to overdo it at the party. She had to drive home and she hated driving my car because she wasn't good at a stick shift."

Eric gave a sideways look at Jim. "Do you regret it? Everything that happened with Mom?"

"Never. I kicked around the what-ifs in my head but it always comes down to I have Kate. I don't love your mother like that anymore. Ron's better for her."

"When I first learned you were Kate's real father I was so determined to hate you. You stole my baby sister."

Jim chuckled. "You didn't bother to hide it. You boys and your father scared the hell out of me and I didn't even know about your telekinesis."

"We aren't that intimidating."

"You are. And you all loved Kate so much and were so protective. And you were the scariest of the lot." Jim believed that but he didn't know Ron before he found tranquility with Sandy.

"Now Kate's the boss."

They laughed. "She has grown into a bossy woman, hasn't she?" Jim surmised.

“Do I have to admit it?” Eric liked to think of her as his little sister.

“I won’t either.” Jim agreed. “And she’s already going to college next semester.”

“Santa Barbara is close. She’ll be back all the time.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears.” Jim prayed.

They were in Los Alamos and Eric started using the scanner. It was too easy. Within an hour they found a ranch house with vineyards on all sides. They drove back elated with their easy success.

“Lori has really outdone herself with that device.”

“She’s incredible. And to think we were worried she was going to be a problem.”

“You hold on to that one.” Jim advised.

“First no one wants me to see her and now everyone tells me that I have to keep her.” Eric was confident he would. He reached out to Matt to tell him the good news about Los Alamos.

Are you on your way home? Matt asked before he could tell him anything.

We’re about fifteen minutes away.

Go directly to Jim’s. Matt told him.

We are. What’s wrong? Eric expected Matt to want an update and he was only concerned with their ETA.

Everyone is okay. Don’t worry. Thanks to Kate.

Eric sat up making Jim nervous. “Something happened but everyone’s okay.” He told him quickly. Then he asked Matt what happened.

Kate will fill you in when you get home.

Eric tried to reach Kate. She must have been with Matt. She told to him the same thing and not to worry. It only made him worry.

Jim pushed the limits with speed. “You can change back to yourself.”

“Oh yeah.” Eric had forgotten he was disguised as Andy. They ran in and found Ron and Brian waiting in the entrance.

Ron walked up to them. “Lori is fine. She has some minor smoke inhalation from the fire.”

Eric’s heart sank. Lori was in a fire. Eric ran up the stairs sensing her presence. Ron, Jim and Brian followed him to her room.

Lori was in bed coughing. Tina gave her bottled water. “You need to drink lots of fluids. It will help ease the coughing.”

Sandy and Kate looked like sentry guards watching over each side of Lori. Matt sat at the foot of the bed.

“Hi.” Lori said to Eric. “How did it go today?”

“We found them.” His high from their success was gone. “How are you?”

“I’m fine now.”

“What happened?”

She coughed to clear her throat. “Kate and I were at Gerard’s house finishing up the meters. We started talking about how I developed the first meters and I said I had the information on my back up drive at my apartment. Kate and I drove over and she stayed in the car while I ran up to my place. I got the external drive and was about to leave but the door wouldn’t open. I tried to reach Kate and couldn’t.”

“They were waiting for you.” Eric panicked even though the story would end up with her safe in Jim’s house.

She nodded. “The phone rang. It was Guido asking me if I could meet with him. I told him no. He asked if that was negotiable and I said it wasn’t. Then the television blew up and the sparks started a fire. They must have put some accelerant in my apartment because it spread fast. Then the stove blew up and light sockets. The place was burning fast. There was so much smoke I closed my eyes and breathed through my shirt. I picked up the extinguisher. I was going to break the window with it but I couldn’t get close enough. The curtains were blazing. I passed out.”

Kate had a terrified look on her face. “I heard an alarm. I tried to reach Lori but couldn’t. I sensed some skilled people so I changed to look like Sister Rene. She was the first person I thought of when the idea struck. I found Lori’s apartment and pushed open the door. They couldn’t stop it both ways. I couldn’t see through all the fire and smoke so I felt for Lori and pulled her out. She was unconscious. By then I heard fire engines. Guido’s people were gone. I don’t know if they even saw me go up to her apartment.” Kate gave Sandy a blank look.

Sandy smiled with pride at her daughter’s courage.

"I was awake by the time the firemen came. They gave me some oxygen to breath and had the fire out in minutes. Everything's ruined." Lori finished.

"But we have the drive. Lori had it in her pocket when I pulled her out." Kate told Eric. He didn't give a damn about the computer equipment.

Sandy sat on the bed and put her arm around Lori's head. "You're fine. We'll take care of you. Maybe you should come to our house."

"Mom, I can do it." Kate protested.

They had changed their minds about Lori but it was unreal to see them fight over her care.

"She'll be fine." Tina answered. "She needs to rest, drink lots of water and I switched antibiotics. She'll be better after a good night's sleep."

Lori groaned. The antibiotics made her feel sluggish.

"I know you don't like them but look how much they helped your forehead. It's barely a scar."

Tina told them she would check back the next day and Jim walked her out.

"Can we have a moment?" Eric asked his family.

Sandy and Kate exchanged looks. They didn't want to leave Lori's side.

"Please."

"Come on. We don't need to be here." Ron scooted the family out of the room.

"I'm never leaving your side again." Eric stammered.

"You can't do that. I'll be more careful. It didn't seem like a big deal. Kate was with me."

"Thank God." Eric praised. "All the same, I'm not leaving you."

"I don't want that." Lori was very independent.

"Just for a little while. We found their hideout. It won't be much longer." Eric hoped.

"We can worry about it later." She didn't want a fight.

"Do you want to stay with us or here?"

"You don't have a spare room."

"You can have my bed." He offered.

"Eric, no. I don't want to kick you out of bed."

"I didn't say I wasn't going to use it too." He had a wicked grin on.

“I’m fine.” She said drearily.

She wasn’t. In one week she had three attempts on her life. “You rest.” He patted her arm and let her sleep.

Sandy and Kate were at the foot of the stairs when he came down. They were about to go back but he told them she was sleeping.

Jim offered for Eric to stay his last spare room. He accepted.

Apartment Hunting

Father Francis stopped by to see Lori. He told them that Joe and him had talked to four police officers from Santa Katrina to help when the time was ready. They were going to wait until Tuesday. A midweek ambush would be less predictable.

Lori was much better. She was not a hundred percent but she was up and about. The drugs were taking a lot of her natural energy away.

Eric wanted to get her flowers but was afraid to remind her of the bouquet he bought Frankie after they first kissed. He opted to have Matt take them for him. Lori saw right through it and thanked them both for the gesture. She sat on her bed with her laptop.

“Isn’t school over?” Matt wondered what she was working on.

“It is. Just surfing the internet for my own personal edification.” She closed the laptop and put it on the nightstand to give her full attention to her visitors.

Eric leaned over to open the computer. She was hiding something.

“Eric, please.” She tried to grab her computer but he was faster.

It was on an apartment search website. “Why are you looking for a new place?”

“They don’t have any openings at my old building and I’ll need my own place eventually. I’m staying here for now, but I can’t forever.” She added quickly.

Most of him knew she was right but there was a bigger part of him that liked her being safe with his family. “We can find a place together.” He blurted out without thinking how dumb it would sound.

Matt gave him a strange look. *Too soon.* He warned.

Eric ignored him. “Why not?” He tried to sound nonchalant. It wasn’t a big deal to him.

“We barely started dating. And I don’t want to give up my freedom.” She said gently.

“We’ll get there soon enough. Why wait?”

“Because our parents will think...” She didn’t finish.

“Let them think whatever they will.” He didn’t mention marriage either.

“I should go.” Matt got up.

“Wait.” Lori stopped him. “What do you think?” She wanted an ally.

"I see both sides." He was honest.

"What if we don't..." She didn't want to say they wouldn't make it.

"You'll last." Matt was sure.

"It's too fast." Lori felt horrible having the only vocals doubts.

Eric rolled his eyes. "We'll wait if you want. I'm not going to rush you."

"And you don't feel the same?"

"Not at all." He said flatly. "We could get married for all I care. It is only a formality."

"You've seen my parents. I'm not sure how I feel about marriage."

"You were engaged before." He challenged.

"And it was a huge mistake." She shouldn't have been with Zack at all.

"Because he wasn't me." He sat on the bed next to her. "I'm sorry I said anything. Whatever you think is best."

"It hasn't even been a month since we kissed." She was the only rational person in the room.

"Marriage is a big deal."

"No." Matt corrected. "Love is a big deal. Marriage is just something to state it publicly in front of your family and friends." He had the same opinions as Eric.

"You're really sweeping me off my feet." She joked. "I think we'll wait if it's all the same."

"It's not exactly the same but I'll wait." Eric teased.

Matt got up. "I'll see you tomorrow." Jim was having his Memorial weekend barbeque the next day.

"You can't really be so blasé about marriage." She put her hand on Eric's shoulder.

"I am not blasé about how I feel about you." He pulled her face to his for a kiss. "I'm not going anywhere no matter what you decide."

"You're trying to scare me." She was scared.

He rolled his eyes. "Of all the things I've ever said to you this was the first that was absolutely about security."

"Let's get passed this stuff and then enjoy some normal quiet dating before we make any life changing moves."

“Our lives have already changed.”

Sandy walked in to see that Lori took her antibiotics. “How are you doing?”

“Better. Can we skip the pills?” She gave a forced smile.

“Tina said you are to take them until they’re gone.” She tapped out a pill and gave Lori a glass of water.

“Why don’t you tell your mother about your idea?” It was a cruel prank but Eric couldn’t be so cavalier with his doting mother in the room.

He had a wicked grin. He didn’t mind. It was a risk at a lecture but he took it. “I was saying that since Lori needed a new apartment that we should move in together.”

Sandy’s face went blank as she pondered his idea. “You could move into our house until you found something permanent.” She offered without much resistance. “That way you can save up for a home.”

Lori’s was aghast. “It was only two weeks ago that you didn’t want us to even see each other.”

Sandy giggled. “A lot has happened in that time.” She pushed Lori’s hair out of her face and eyed her cut. “It’s not important. We’ll be happy as long as you are.”

Even Eric was shocked. He had expected a sermon and definitely not a recommendation to house hunt. Pleased to have his mother’s full support he grinned foolishly at Lori.

“We’ll toss the idea around.” Lori didn’t want to admit she was the one that was reluctant.

Sandy was serene. “Okay.” She kissed Lori’s forehead and gave Eric a hug. And then she let them have their time alone.

“That was weird.” He observed.

“I knew it. She isn’t really okay with it.”

“I meant it was weird because she was okay with it.” His eyes darted back to Lori. “Should I get a ring? Shall we call your parents?”

“No.” She snapped. “You’re more than willing to ask Johnny on the condition that you don’t use any metaphysics to fight him off when he beats you to a pulp.” She made an empty threat.

“You would want me to take a beating?”

“It’s not fair for him if you use your skills.”

“And it isn’t fair to me if I don’t. He’s a mountain.”

She laughed. “We’ll get there when we get there.”

“We are there. We’ll make it official when you accept it.” He was cocky.

No Boundaries

Jim always had a barbeque on long weekends and it was planned for Sunday of Memorial Day weekend. He kept the list short with only the neighbors, their inner circle and Olga. Olga was the dance teacher at Santa Katrina High and had been seeing Jim for a couple of months. She was a few years younger than Jim and cute as a button. They were well suited. Kate was pleased.

Eric hadn't seen Greg's little stepbrother since the play but the kid was growing. He was also less nerdy. Greg was a good influence.

Johnny and his wife Cassie came by as well. Thankfully there wasn't a telltale sign that Lori had been in a fire. Sandy was attentive to Cassie who was larger than the last time Eric met her.

"It's such a miraculous thing to give birth." Sandy cooed.

"Miracle or not, this boy needs to come out." Cassie sighed in her weakness.

"I remember it too well. Especially the first time with the twins." She looked up at Eric and Matt who were chatting with Johnny.

"We were worth it." Matt smirked.

"Most of the time I feel that way." She jabbed. "Are you excited to be an aunt?" She asked Lori.

"I am and I know Johnny will be a great father."

Johnny blushed and gave his sister a wink.

"Kids are such a blessing." Sandy loved having Cassie there. She was probably wondering how long before her children would start having babies.

"Let's go in and play some pool." Matt suggested getting away from all the girl talk.

They played with Johnny and Lori for a while. Johnny was a good guy. Eric toyed with the idea of hinting that they would move in together. It would be fun to watch Lori squirm but Johnny was imposingly tall. Eric wasn't sure how he would react to even a joke.

Johnny had to leave early. Cassie was too tired to party for any length of time and they had a long drive back to South Pasadena.

Greg and Chris joined Matt and Eric and they paired up for doubles. Greg and Chris got into a debate on where the Dodgers were in the standings. It was a pointless difference to argue over whether they were two games ahead or three in May but they couldn't let it go.

"I'll go find out." Matt said to end the dispute. He went up to check on Kate's computer.

Brad and Chris started a game and Eric sat with Lori. She gave Eric a kiss.

"What was that for?" He didn't care.

"For having such a wonderful family. Johnny and Cassie had a nice time."

"Mom is in love with the baby already."

"Everybody loves babies." She teased.

Eric wasn't sure about that. Suddenly he realized he might find out sooner than he expected.

"Greg, let's go to your house."

"Why?" Greg said as he sunk a solid.

"Now!" Eric pushed him out the door and they went to the gate in the fence that connected the two properties. Lori trailed behind. "You need to stay away from Matt." Eric told Greg.

"Why?" Greg was lost.

"He knows." Eric widened his eyes.

"What?"

"He saw Kate's computer. She had a gestation website up." Eric thought it was obvious. They were in Greg's den.

"Kate's pregnant?" Lori read the clues.

Greg laughed. "Not unless it was another immaculate conception."

Eric rolled his eyes. "Greg, it's okay. I'm not going to blow." He wasn't. "Matt may. He's pissed."

"Damn straight." Matt barged in and walked slowly at Greg who backed up. He had been on the receiving side of Eric's anger and Matt was as intimidating if not worse. Matt tried to push Greg up against the wall but Eric blocked him mentally and physically.

"Now let's keep our heads." Eric held his hands to stop Matt from advancing. "What's done is done."

“Katie isn’t pregnant.” Greg insisted.

Matt glared back only agitated to hear the denial. “Let me go.” He barked at Eric.

“No. You don’t want to hurt him. He’s going to be your brother-in-law.”

“Hey, stop saying stuff like that.” Greg pleaded. It made him uneasy.

“You had sex at the prom, didn’t you.” Matt had suspected it was bound to happen. Eric had too.

“We didn’t.” Greg got angry defending himself. “She wanted to and I said we had to wait. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Liar.” Matt was irate.

“No, he isn’t.” Eric’s lie detector sensed he was being honest. He dropped his hold on Matt.

Matt thought about it. It wasn’t a lie. He got a confused look on his face. “Why would Kate be on that website?”

“Because she met Cassie.” Lori suggested.

“I checked the history, she had gone there earlier this week.” Matt tried to believe he had made a judgment error.

Brian, come over to Greg’s and don’t let anyone see you. Eric sent telepathically to the youngest Thomas brother.

“Could it be one of you guys?” Greg gently hinted.

“Not Joann.” Matt would know before Kate. He peaked at Lori.

“No way.” She was adamant.

“But you’ve had sex.” Matt accused.

Eric turned red from embarrassment. “We were careful.”

Lori was red with anger. “We really need to redefine boundaries in this relationship.” Things were too open for everyone to add their input.

“Sorry.” Eric grabbed her hand and pulled her to him.

“So it isn’t you two?” Matt asked again.

“You would know before me if that was possible.” Eric wouldn’t be able to tell another person before Matt sensed the news and probably Kate and Brian as well.

Matt turned to Lori wondering if she hadn’t gotten around to telling Eric.

She glared at him. "I'm not pregnant."

Matt's lie detector didn't go off. It was true.

Brian walked in. "What's wrong?"

"Could Meg be pregnant?" Matt was clearly less offended by that idea.

"Meg is the same age as Kate." Greg was disgusted by the suggestion.

"In theory but I don't think so." Brian admitted.

Greg fumed. He didn't want to hear about his cousin's sexual escapades.

"Are you sure?" Matt pressed ignoring Greg.

"I haven't heard about it. And besides, Dad explained things to me. Why?"

"He told you too?" Eric was the only son that hadn't received the lesson on birth control.

"I found Kate's computer on a pregnancy website." Matt told Brian.

"If she's thinking about sex, she may be doing research." Lori suggested it was a wise thing to have the facts.

Matt snapped his head to her. Even the idea of Kate thinking about sex was too much for him.

"Greg, is that possible?"

"Yes." He said reluctantly and kept his distance. "We've talked about it some."

"And you haven't succumb?" Matt found it hard to believe. Eric did too but Greg was truthful.

"I don't want to have this conversation with you two." Greg hissed. "I'm dating Katie and not her brothers."

Lori slapped her head. "We're so stupid." They waited for her to explain. "It's so obvious.

Sandy is pregnant. She was gushing over Cassie."

Eric's head darted back and forth at his brothers. It made sense.

"She has been in maternal overdrive lately." Brian admitted.

"I thought it was because of all this craziness." Matt started replaying events in his mind. Lots of little clues added up. And if anyone could keep a secret, it was their mom. She had kept a bigger secret than that for years.

"We know it isn't us." Eric pointed to his brothers. "She probably told Kate first."

"She'll let you know when she's ready." Lori sighed.

"Is that okay?" Brian had a worried look. "Isn't she kind of old to have another kid?"

"She's in her forties?" Lori guessed.

"Late forties." Matt told her.

"It happens. There are more risks but they can be managed." Lori didn't really know when things got dicey but women in their forties had healthy children.

"This is good. They're having one for themselves." Eric liked the idea. He just wished they weren't in the middle of a bad situation. His mother didn't need that stress while carrying a baby.

His statement confused Lori. Even Greg didn't know the whole story.

"We were kind of a favor to her twin sister, Ron's first wife." Matt explained. "Mom switched places with her to have us because she couldn't have kids of her own."

"Like a surrogate?" She still didn't understand. Or she did but hoped it wasn't so strange.

"Not like a surrogate." Matt spoke slowly. "Dad didn't know about it. None of us did until after Kate was born. She was Jim's. Sandy was married to him at the time."

Lori sat down on the couch. "How could Ron not know?"

"Would you know it wasn't me if Matt showed up saying he was me and you didn't know I had a twin?" Eric asked her tenderly.

Matt winked at Lori and held his hand up like a phone receiver. He mouthed, "Call me."

"Where is her twin?" Lori hadn't met her.

"She died. Gran killed her thinking she was eliminating Kate and Ron's cheating wife. Mom decided to take Sara's place." Eric put his arm around Lori.

"And Ron knew that Kate wasn't his."

"He knew she wasn't because she was a girl. His family has used telekinesis to always have boys." Brian told her. "But we didn't know the whole story until our grandmother, Gerard's wife, passed away. We met Jim at the funeral and the skeleton tumbled out of the closet."

"Wow." It was all Lori could think to say. "And that's why Gran tried to hurt her."

They nodded.

"Are we done?" Greg wanted to go back to the party.

"Sorry about that." Matt said to Greg.

"You always said you wouldn't let me off easier than Eric. Of course, I always expected he'd be the one to kill me when Katie and I sleep together."

"I owed you a save. This isn't a green light." Eric warned.

Greg laughed. "When it does happen, none of you can complain. I have the full scoop."

Eric rolled his eyes.

They returned to the party.

"I know she's your baby sister but really, is it that big a deal? It's natural to be curious and she loves Greg." Lori told Eric and Matt as they walked.

"She's too young." Eric said automatically.

"True but she's too young to have had her life threatened so many times. At least this isn't abnormal."

"Stop trying to make me feel better." He requested.

"You really are prehistoric." She rolled her eyes and kissed him.

"Where did you go?" Kate asked as soon as they returned.

"You don't want to know." Greg told her.

"Lori, did you take your medicine?" She scolded.

Lori frowned. "Oh goodie. It's time again. I was starting to feel better." She walked off with Kate to take another antibiotic.

Eric sat with Matt and Joann at a table looking out over the ocean. Jim's back yard had a great view.

Sandy walked over and gave Eric a hug from behind. "How are my handsome boys?"

"We're good." Eric answered.

"No love for your favorite." Matt joked.

"Of course." She gave him a hug. "Joann, are you having a nice time?"

"Yes, thank you." Joann was shy in front of Sandy.

"It's so nice to see you. You'll have to stop by more often." Sandy let go of Matt. She checked Eric's wound that had healed to a small scar. "Looks better." She kissed his forehead and left.

She is acting weird. Matt thought to Eric.

Lori returned drinking water. "I can't wait until I am done with those antibiotics."

"Not helping you feel better?" Matt acknowledged.

"They have their purpose. I just feel so tired after taking them. And Kate won't let me drink because you have to obey every sticker on the prescription."

Eric put an arm around her. He hated that she had gone through so much the last two weekends. When the brick hit her his heart stopped. His guilt was so great he couldn't even bring himself to see her. It wasn't until Greg called him out that he went to her. "What does wounds from a friend can be trusted mean?" He asked. He didn't understand what they were talking about.

"Just that open rebuke from a friend is better than false kindness. A true friend can confront you and you are better for it. And conversely, they can do you wrong and you'll forgive them."

"It's from the Bible?" It sounded like something religious.

She smiled. "It isn't all kumbaya. God put in some practical stuff too."

"I should probably read it some day."

"Did Tina and Peter see you both?" Father Francis walked up with a Dos Equis. Eric and Matt had brought a couple of cases in honor of Officer Joe.

"Are you supposed to be drinking that?" Eric jerked his head to the beer.

"What are you going to do? Call the Pope on me?" Father Francis sassed taking a rebellious gulp. Even when making a sarcastic comment he sounded tranquil.

"We saw Tina and Peter and I'm still taking antibiotics to make sure I don't have any energy to get hurt again." Lori answered.

"They're good doctors." Father Francis smiled. "And I'm glad you're healing."

Eric laughed. "Who are these doctors that don't ask questions? Some of your gardener's friend's imports?"

Father Francis sat down. "You aren't going to rat me out to the Pope?"

"No, your secrets are safe with us." Matt was eager to hear the priest's newest tale off the narrow path.

"I told them I could get them a free pass into heaven if they kept quiet."

"Stop it." Lori giggled. If she hadn't reacted, Eric might have believed him.

“They’re related to me. Tina is my cousin.” Father Francis confessed. “I’m sorry I couldn’t keep up my scandalous reputation with you boys.”

“You could rob a liquor store on your way home to get back in our good graces.” Eric suggested.

“On it.”

“I hate to end the evening early but I have to get going.” Joann said.

“I’ll walk you back to your car.” Matt took her away after she made her rounds.

“You too seem extremely happy.” Father Francis was pleased that things had worked out for Eric and Lori. He knew they would.

“Aside from the eminent life threatening danger, we don’t have a complaint in the world.” Eric bobbed his head up and down.

“Won’t it be nice when it passes.” Father Francis pulled at his pant legs. “I’m wearing out holes in my knees with all the extra prayer to protect your family.”

“We’ll buy you some extra slacks.”

Final Prep

It was a good call to have the barbeque on Sunday. Monday was overcast with no signs of clearing. Eric took his morning run. He fantasized about moving in with Lori.

Guido was an outer disturbance. Joe had his new hideout under surveillance. They planned to go the next day. They were at end game. Eric was ready. They all were.

Eric got home and dressed for the onslaught of guests. The usual suspects were due for lunch for a final rundown of the plans. Lori knocked on his door.

He kissed her hello. "I don't suppose I can talk you out of going tomorrow."

"Come on you big coward." She pulled his hand.

Everyone sat around eating except for Officer Romero who called and said he was running late. They chatted happily as if it were a party and not a war room.

Ron answered the phone and left to talk privately. When he came back he had bad news. "That was my father. Gran has left. He doesn't know where but she took a large sum of money with her."

"We can deal with her easily enough." Matt shirked it off in the shadow of their oncoming siege.

"Unless she gets help." Frankie said. "Or she maybe going to help Guido."

"I doubt that." Ron shook his head. "I don't see her aligning with criminals. Hateful people like her have too many prejudices. And Morrie is angry. He'll help this time."

The party atmosphere was lost.

"We'll worry about her on Wednesday." Gerard took the opportunity to get to business. "Let me show you the wrist meters." He pulled out a box and poured out a couple dozen meters on the coffee table and an equal amount of earpieces. "Take one of each and let me know what number you have."

They each read out their numbers as Lori input their names into a laptop. Joe finally walked in and grabbed five meters, earpieces and some food. He needed the extras for the cops friends.

Gerard demonstrated how to point the meters to read one person at a time. Lori gave a preview of how the computer displayed the readings. The earpieces were in case they lost telepathic communication with each other.

Kate explained how to blow up guns. Frankie and Henry weren't sure their speed skills were powerful enough to give the added push needed. That still left ten people able to destroy guns.

Joe wasn't his usual jovial self. He sat in the back waiting impatiently for his turn to speak. Once they were done discussing the mechanics of guns he was up. "They have a secret tunnel out of the property. We didn't know this until last night. Guido broke out six of his old gang from prison and our men on the scene never saw them leave the premises. There are still four others and we're worried they may go back for them or the two we arrested last weekend."

"So there are fifteen now." Frankie did the math as she read her notes.

"At least." Joe frowned. "Is it possible to cause a cave in if you don't know the exact location of the tunnel?"

"With telekinesis?" Henry was daunted. "I'm not sure."

"I could." Ron said confidently. He was the oldest telekinetic in the group and as powerful as any other.

"That's your first concern when we go." Joe trusted he wouldn't fail. If he did, their quarry would have an escape. "We'll need to keep people in a van with the computers. Best to have those that aren't telekinetic."

"Sandy and I'll do it." Gerard could deter people from the van.

"And us." Jim pointed to Andy and Ellen.

"I get to go this time." Ellen was glad to be included.

"Mom, would you stay if I said no?"

"Of course not. But now I won't need my ninja outfit to sneak in."

"I'll be there too." Father Francis added.

"Good." Joe smiled at the cohesive team. "We should probably leave a couple of others as well."

"Meg, you should stay." Brian gently offered. It wasn't just worrying that made him feel that way. Meg was strong but the weakest of the others. There was a strategy behind it.

"Okay." She agreed easily.

"And Lori." Kate suggested. Eric liked the idea immediately. "She knows the computers the best."

“Good point.” Sandy echoed.

“It isn’t that hard but I get it.” Lori knew she wasn’t up to snuff.

Joe liked that the team fell into place. “We found four police officers to help. And we’re lucky. They all have something to bring. One is telepathic. Another is telekinetic. Another can jam equipment. Probably like the guy on Guido’s gang but it isn’t an electrical charge that causes explosion. He’ll be able to kill phones or walkie-talkies on the other side without jamming ours. And the last can erase memories, so no matter what happens, only our version of any accounts will survive.”

“And they’re all honest people?” Matt asked. “Not like the one that helped Guido out of prison?”

“They are.” Father Francis had personally checked them out. “We asked very direct questions and all were upfront and honest.”

That was enough for the group.

Joe continued. “Kate, you need to be close but not interactive with the gang. You should focus on empathizing and sharing gifts as soon as you can learn them. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” She was ready.

“We should have a couple of people keep an eye on her. They know what she can do and if they don’t try to take her again, they may try to take her out especially if they realize she’s stealing their gifts and passing them around.”

“We’ll do it.” Matt offered pointing to Eric.

“Not you two. We need you up front.” Joe shook his head.

“What about me?” Brian asked.

“I’d rather you be with your brothers.”

“I can do it.” Greg wouldn’t let her leave his side anyway.

“Me too.” Dave wanted to stay with his cousin if he couldn’t be with his sister Meg.

“That will work.” The plan was falling into place nicely in Joe’s opinion. “Stay invisible and hide your presence. They have a sensor. And move around but stay back.”

They got it.

“That leaves the brothers, Chris and Brad that can vanish and the rest are either telekinetic or cops. We start the same as last time. The five will approach undercover and we’ll be as close as the grounds will

allow. They won't likely gather in one location like in Ojai. We'll have thirteen to their fifteen without counting on our back up of blockers and Kate's team."

"Let's go tonight." Eric exclaimed. "We're ready."

"I'm in." Greg said a second before Matt.

"Everyone okay with tonight?" Joe scanned around and everyone wanted to get it over with.

"Let's meet at the school at nine."

Gadgets

As the crowd filtered out of the house Eric pulled Lori aside. "I'm glad you're staying in the van."

"I may have caught up on skills but I don't know any of your strategies."

"That's not why I'm glad."

"And Kate? She'll be up close and personal." She expected he would have disputed that plan.

"If we could replace her role, I would. But Greg will watch her as closely as I would." He had absolute faith in Greg. "I wish we could talk mom out of it. But she hasn't told us she's expecting and I don't think it would matter if we tried."

"I'll watch out for her." She ran her hand down his face.

"Lori, I wanted to thank you for the back up drive." Gerard interrupted.

"Was it helpful?"

"I think so. Do you guys have some time?"

Eric and Lori drove behind Gerard to his house. In his basement workshop he booted up his computer. "It's really diminutive change in how the brain works that taps into these things." After the computer was running he clicked on three-dimensional diagram of a transparent human head. He zoomed into the brain and then on the middle of the back just behind the spinal cord. "There's a small part of the brain that connects the potential ability to the reality. When we block it..." he had animation for demonstration, "it's temporarily disconnected."

"Really." Lori pulled out her meter. "Eric, block the general area for me." He obliged and she scanned herself, Gerard and then Eric. "Now just block Gerard." Again he complied and she scanned. "Interesting. When you block the area, we still have some readings but they are all muted to normal non-skilled human levels. And you register higher on the interference bar but when you block out just Gerard, everything was erased and you had higher readings on interference and telekinesis. You're affecting that specific spot on his brain."

"Without knowing it." Eric didn't know how most of his skills worked but they were making changes on his mind and body often.

“It’s intuitive knowledge in your genetic make up. Technically, anyone with telekinesis would be able to do the same if they could find the right spot.” Her eyes widened in wonderment.

“So we’re doing temporary brain damage.”

Gerard nodded. “But it isn’t a vital function of the brain. It doesn’t drop your IQ or stop your body from doing fundamental tasks like breathing or pumping blood.”

“So if it were severed permanently someone could lose their power for good.” Lori concentrated on the screen. “I wish we could test this but even if we were right, it would most likely be irreversible and if we didn’t hit the right spot, we could destroy someone’s mental health.” It was a good idea but too risky.

Lori was quiet on the way home as she tossed ideas around privately. They went into Jim’s house and Kate stood in the foyer perturbed.

“And where did you two go off to?” She demanded.

She was turning into a guard dog. “Grandpa’s.” Eric told her.

“I was worried. You’re late for your pill.” She glared at Lori.

“I’ll take it now.” Lori held her stomach.

“Are you okay?” Eric asked. She was green around the gills.

Kate had an odd expression.

“Nervous about tonight.” She admitted.

“Take your pill and maybe a nap would be a good idea. You’ve been through a lot lately.” Kate was concerned.

Lori nodded and went to her room to follow Kate’s instructions.

“Getting kind of bossy. She is your teacher.” Eric kidded.

“Not after Wednesday she isn’t.” Kate was happy to graduate. “And it’s for her own good.”

“I know and it’s good that you like her now.”

She was embarrassed. “I was so wrong.”

“I believe I told you that.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re omniscient.”

“May I see the patient before her mandatory nap?” He bowed before the warden.

“Yes you may.” She accepted his mock humility with mock grace.

Lori sat on her bed rubbing her stomach. "I don't think lunch went down so well."

Eric sat next to her and pulled her into his chest. She smelled like cherries. "You'll be in the van away from the excitement. And I'll be extra safe. We'll all be fine."

She ran her face along his stubble. He hadn't shaved that morning. "I like the rugged look. Reminds me of Cinco de Mayo."

He kissed her. "That was a good night." He telekinetically shut the door and snuggled with her on the bed. "If you aren't up to going, we'll understand."

"You'd like that." She smiled at him. "I love you."

He kissed her. "I love you too."

"Do you really want to move in together?"

"I do."

"Okay."

He pulled away to see her full face. She was petrified but happy. "Really?"

"Really." She confirmed. "It's scary but only because I am ready, not because I don't want to."

Kate knocked at the door. "She needs to sleep Eric."

He held Lori tightly. "We'll talk about it later." He got up and opened the door. "You should take something for your stomach."

"I'll call Tina and ask her what to take. Make sure it's something we can mix with her other pills." Kate quickly offered.

"I'm fine." Lori promised. "I'll see you later."

Eric walked home and stopped by Matt's room. He was getting off the phone with Joann. "I love you too." He shut the cell off.

"Worried?" Eric asked.

"Yeah. I wish Mom wasn't going."

"I don't know how to stop her. If we tell we know she's pregnant it will make it worse."

"I had the same thought." Matt agreed.

"At least she'll be in the van."

"How are you about Kate?"

“Scared shitless.” Eric admitted.

“Yeah, but she’s too powerful. With all of us together, they won’t have a chance.”

“It’s true and yet I worry we haven’t considered everything.”

“We could tell dad, about mom. He would stop her.”

Eric shook his head. “But that means he doesn’t know and we can’t break the news. Mom would kill us and then they will be down two men.”

“It would be for her own good.”

“It’s kind of weird to have a new baby brother or sister now.”

“Yeah, and what if she has twins again.” Twins ran in the family.

“She may only think she’s pregnant. Maybe she just skipped a period or something. It isn’t like they were trying. At least I don’t think they were.” Eric speculated.

“Nothing is fool proof except for maybe telekinesis and I doubt Dad is bothering with that. We’re sure it isn’t Kate, right? I mean, I wouldn’t blame Greg if they were, you know.” Matt only implied what he couldn’t bring himself to say. “We are. It’s hard with the mess we’re in to not want to be closer to the people we love.”

“Greg was telling the truth and why would mother know that Kate is pregnant before him or us.” Eric answered. “And if she did, she wouldn’t allow her to go at all let alone be in the midst of battle.”

“What about Chris and Kate?” Matt knew it was next to impossible.

“Kate wouldn’t do that.”

“Brings us back to Meg and Brian wanted her out of the line of fire.”

“And why not one of us?”

“It isn’t Joann. She’s on schedule so to speak. And you guys haven’t had enough time to get pregnant. Joann said it takes a couple of weeks before a test would even register.”

“Brian says they’re careful.”

“So it has to be Mom.” Matt returned their only option.

“It could be Jim and Olga or Andy and Angela and mother is reacting to a vicarious experience.”

“I still wish mom and Kate would stay away.”

Adios Pendejo

They met at the school as arranged. There was a quiet adrenaline pulsing through the team and their powers were stronger than ever. They loaded the two unmarked vans and headed to Los Alamos.

Eric sat next to Lori. She was far away in thought.

“What’s on your mind?” He whispered.

“Why don’t you just read it?” She batted her lashes.

“There isn’t a need.”

She leaned on him. “I’m looking for weak spots.”

“Find any?”

“We’re pretty well covered if we can render their guns useless. Takes away the biggest risk of any irreversible damage.”

“When we get there, just focus on my mom.” It came off with a hint of a threat.

“I will. And you take care of yourself.” She requested.

“Always.” He promised. Lori ran her hand on his upper arm over his scar. He kissed her.

“Won’t happen again.”

They found a place to park without being in view of the building but close enough that those with the skills to deter to use them effectively on the inhabitants.

“You guys surround the house. Watch out for the binoculars.” Joe sent Eric, Matt, Brian, Brad and Chris forward.

They vanished and worked their way to the house. Eric could sense fifteen people inside the home. “Father Francis, can you tell what new tricks we’ll face?” Eric used the earpiece so everyone would hear.

“Mind clouding, telekinetic, levitation, invisibility, two can do that and one that can stun.” He answered.

“Stun?” Joe asked.

“I think he can knock people out. Don’t know if it will work well on this group.” Father Francis added.

“Okay. Kate, we need you to get closer. Are you guys ready?” Joe checked.

"I'll go in place of Dave." Lori announced.

Eric, tell her no. Kate mentally commanded.

He wanted Lori in the van but she must have a reason. *Kate, she's stronger than Dave.*

Eric sensed a strong and strange reaction from his twin. *Matt, what's wrong?* He was too close to speak out loud and sent it telepathically.

Nothing. It was a lie and he was withholding from Eric. Whatever it was must be a distraction and unimportant to their situation. He'd wait.

"Lori, we shouldn't change the plan." Sandy scolded over the transmission.

"I'll be fine. Dave, are you okay with staying here?" Lori asked.

Dave was split between helping his cousin Greg and his sister Meg. "Yeah. I'll stay with Meg."

"Go on." Joe ordered.

Eric could see the monitor on the laptop through his mother's eyes. Three blips moved away from the van towards the house.

"The rest of us stay hidden. They have thermographic binoculars and someone with enhanced sight. Ron, can you find the tunnel?" Joe turned to Ron.

"I've got it." Ron replied.

Eight more blips moved out from the van. Gerard hovered the cursor over various dots and names popped up in the corner of the screen showing everyone's locations. Brad was the closest to the house and no lights had gone off. He had the advantage of landscape. Matt darted to his next best local and the first floodlight was triggered.

Three men walked outside. They kept their guns holstered. One of them had scabs on the inside of his right palm. He had been holding a gun that the kids blew up at their last confrontation. A lessoned learned. They kept their weapons concealed. A phantom Guido appeared. "They found us." He held his shoulder. There wasn't a visible bandage but it had to be fresh after only a week.

"Can Tracey feel them?" The man with the burnt hand asked.

"No but she couldn't last time either. We need to move out."

There was a rumble in the ground.

"What's that?" A man on the porch shouted into a walkie-talkie.

“We’re checking the tunnel.” A voice squawked.

Another reached for his gun but the man with the bad hand stopped him. “Don’t. Wait until we know what’s going on.” He pulled out gloves. The others geared up as well.

The walkie-talkie buzzed again. “The tunnel caved in.”

“Anyone got the blocker?” Frankie spoke to the team.

“Got her.” Brian whispered.

Dad, start tearing down the house starting from the back. Eric sent telepathically. *We’ll help.* Perhaps they could flush them out into a group.

With the help of the others in the front lines and Ron, Eric started ripping support beams in the back of the house.

The gang congregated on the front lawn as the back of the house collapsed. Twelve Guido’s walked out. Someone must have hindered him because the phantoms faded a moment later. “Find them. They can’t all disappear!” He barked at his crew. “You three stay with me.” He told two men and a woman. “And Tracey, get your shield up.”

Six men fanned out down the yard.

“Over there.” A man turned to Guido pointing in the direction of trees that Ron hid behind.

“Take me.” Guido and his three guards linked arms and they vanished.

Allowing only his wrist to show for a moment Eric checked his meter. Nothing. They were gone.

“They teleported.” Kate said into her speaker. “I got it.”

Guido appeared in front of Ron and hit him in the face with a right jab. When Ron staggered back Guido seized him around the back.

Eric and Matt were there in a second using teleportation. Matt hit the teleporter and he was on the ground. Eric pulled Guido off with telekinesis and gave him full force of his fist. Guido was tough and didn’t fall. Ron stumbled at his release and disappeared when Matt grabbed his arm.

The man on the ground saw an indentation in the un-mowed grass and swung his leg knocking Eric’s out from under him. He fell hard almost reappearing.

Guido pulled a knife and jumped on him. Eric rolled missing the blade but was pinned by Guido on the ground. The blade was between his meter and his wrist. He pulled free and threw Guido off him. He teleported to the porch.

The gang members were tense without obvious courses of actions. Most of their battles were against non-metaphysical people. Eric stood motionless to avoid any noise or creaks that could disclose his position.

“Look.” The lady sensor pointed to drops of blood on the porch.

Eric had been cut. He held the back of his hand. His meter was missing. He teleported in time to see a man rush the spot his drops betrayed.

You’re hurt. Lori said telepathically.

Not bad but Guido has my meter.

Guido was back with his people looking at the meter. “The blond had one of these on her at the school. And Eric had it last time.” He recalled. “Is the shield up?”

“I think so.” Tracey said nervously.

“You, hide us.” He ordered a man and they both disappeared. Tracey vanished a second later.

Eric watched the screen through his mother’s vision. They walked directly to Kate, Lori and Greg. *Move!* He yelled mentally to them. He tried to stop Guido but the blocker was protecting him.

Eric ran to them but was hit by something that knocked him down. The stunner must have seen his footprints. Matt got him and hovered their bodies above the ground so that they left no tell tale signs.

The stun didn’t last long and Eric was ready seconds later.

Guido stopped. He couldn’t see the meter when vanished. He let go of the invisibility to reread. “Start shooting.” He told his people and they drew their guns and shot aimlessly around the yard.

It was misdirection so Guido could pursue Kate. Guido walked around with the meter. On the porch the mind reader tapped the stunner on the shoulder and pointed out in the yard. The stunner sent a zap in the general direction.

All the while guns would explode. Their gloves protected their palms and they had back up equipment to start aiming again. Eric dodged bullets, blew up guns and watched the blips. Then his mind went cloudy.

I'll get the clouder. Brad said. He had a natural immunity to those things. The minds cleared up.

We lost Lori. Greg told Eric.

I got the stunning thing. Kate added.

Guido's blip neared Lori's. Eric panicked. Guido vanished again once he had Lori in his arms. The blocker had caught up to him and the three moved back to the house.

Lori? He tried to reach her but didn't get a response back. Her vision flickered into his mind and then out again. The stun had hit her.

"Stop!" Guido yelled and the shooting slowed and then ceased. "Let them see us." He growled and twelve images of Guido and Lori appeared. They all had his left arm hooked tightly around her neck. She fought against the pain to keep her eyes opened.

"Stings when you get stunned, doesn't it?" The Guidos hissed into Lori's ear. He was pleased it was the same blond from the school. "You said they didn't like you very much." Guido squeezed tighter and Lori's eyes shut. "Show yourselves." The Guidos called out to his opponents.

Eric appeared first, then Matt and slowly they were all standing exposed around criminals. The others looked like the twins.

"Looks like we're at a stand still." Guido was safe from an attack with Lori in his hold and behind the one-way force field.

Eric, it's Lori. Matt sent to him on a private connection.

I know. Eric snapped back mentally. It was needless telepathic energy.

Lori's pregnant. That's why Kate and Mom are fussing over her all the time.

Eric froze.

I got it. Kate said telepathically and multiplied into twelve more. They all followed her lead.

"You're the one I've been looking for." Guido gave a menacing leer to Kate. "You forget, I can tell the real ones apart now too." He held up the meter.

"But they can't." Kate had a wicked smile on. It was hiding an explosion of earth-shattering levels. It wasn't only Lori that had Kate concerned.

“You’re too valuable to shoot but what about him.” He pointed the gun at Eric. “I’m only choosing you because you hit me.” He said as if he just needed a victim and he was easy to pick out of the crowd. Eric was distinguishable because his bandless wrist was bleeding from the knife.

Eric was helpless. Nothing could reach through the barrier. If he ran for it Guido could hurt Lori.

“Break their meters.” Guido ordered to the same man that started the fires in the farmhouse in Ojai. Eric heard electrical zaps as meters were broken. Blips disappeared from the computer image one at a time. The one blip that Guido held remained. Eric knew where the real man stood. “And you do your thing.” He ordered another man.

The clouding returned. They could think through it but it made things much harder and anything metaphysical next to impossible. The phantom twins vanished and everyone slowly turned to their own appearance.

Guido still had his aim on Eric. “So you’re one of the twins. Good. Who needs two anyway?” He tugged on Lori’s neck again. “We’ll be leaving with this one now. She has things to do for me and I have some thing to do to her.”

Lori struggled but he pointed the gun at her head. “Don’t. I’m looking so forward to getting to know you better.” She closed her eyes and the phantom Guido’s vanished. “And undo that.”

“Can’t undo that one.” Lori whispered with a rough voice through his chokehold.

Eric tried to clear his mind. His felt a sensation of rage. It wasn’t from him – or there was one much stronger. Kate was blowing up in a way that outshined the night he lost it on the beach. “Shit!” He said feeling the power coursing through her and then himself. *Kate, watch it. He has Lori.* It would be easy for her to accidentally do something harmful without weighing all the consequences.

Matt’s temper was past his and equal to Kate’s. They were two loose canons.

The mind clouding stopped. Kate was stronger than the force field, which she took out next.

Lori could tell the field was down and she started breaking their minds to stop their powers for good.

“Stop it now or I shoot your friends.” Guido aimed at Eric again. “Okay.” He shot and the bullet fell to the ground not a yard away from Guido’s feet. Then his gun exploded. He shook his gloved hand in pain. He grabbed Lori with both hands.

Joe walked up with a gun pointed at Guido's head.

"Office Joe Romero. It's been too long." Guido shifted Lori to protect himself. "You make it an official Mexican stand off. I'm not going back to jail."

"I'm not going to arrest you." Joe didn't lower his weapon.

"Stun him." Guido yelled.

The stunner fell to the ground hit by his own skill.

"Oh, you meant for him to stun us." Kate mouthed off.

Eric tried to pull Guido off Lori but his grip was unyielding. Lori groaned as Guido's hands and arms were tightened by the telekinesis.

"I'll break her neck." Guido warned as he clenched his arm. She was turning blue unable to breath.

You get the left hand Kate, I'll get the right and Eric push him back. Matt told them. Working together they peeled Guido off Lori as she fell to her knees, grabbing her neck and panting for deep intakes of fresh air. Eric teleported to her, they vanished and teleported behind Matt.

Matt and Kate were ready to tear Guido in half. His arms were outstretched and he howled in pain that was enhanced from his shoulder wound.

"No!" Brian hollered sensing their uncontrollable rage. Matt and Kate let go at his command realizing they were losing themselves to their anger.

Guido's arms snapped back and he stood up grabbing a gun from behind his back. He pointed it at Joe and they shot. Guido's bullet dropped harmlessly to the ground. No one stopped Joe's. It hit Guido in the head. He fell dead.

"Adios pendejo." Joe sneered.

The gang was rounded up and Lori broke any remaining powers permanently.

"We'll be calling you in for that trick again." One of the Santa Katrina police assured her. He was the memory eraser.

"Anytime." She held her bruised neck from Guido's stranglehold.

The officer started clearing out the riff raff's memories of the evening. The truth would be hidden.

Eric pulled Matt aside. "Why did you say that Lori is pregnant?"

“Kate thought it. I read her mind.” Matt was abashed. They didn’t use mind reading on each other. “When she was arguing about Lori leaving the van.”

“It’s barely been a week.” Eric didn’t know if you could tell that quickly. What if Kate had sensed the life inside? He reached out to Lori to feel if there was anyone in her womb. He felt a flutter but people surrounded her so he couldn’t tell what it was if anything. “Kate, can you come here?” He called.

“We need to get home.” Kate declined wanting to avoid him.

Eric was going to insist.

“Not now.” Matt stopped him.

They drove home and Eric held Lori. He was terrified to reach out again for a child within. It was one in the morning when they got home. He took Lori to her bed.

“How’s your cut?” She examined the back of his hand. There was a two square inch of missing skin but it wasn’t deep that was hidden under bandages. “Does it hurt?”

He shook his head. It may have but he didn’t feel it.

“It really is over.” Lori told him. “You haven’t said a word since we left.”

“Marry me.” He blurted out. He didn’t care if she was or wasn’t pregnant. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

“Someday.”

“This week.” He kissed her with all his passion.

“You’re making it hard to resist.” She said breathlessly.

“Don’t.”

“I just agreed to move in together and now you are pressuring me into marriage.” She tried to sound casual but her voice shook with panic. “What’s next?”

“The rest of our lives.” He smirked.

“We’ll get married.” She didn’t qualify a time frame.

“Go to sleep.” He got up and went to find Kate. She was in the kitchen with Jim and Greg. “We need to talk.”

Kate bit her lip. “It’s so late. Can it wait?”

“Are you sure?” He asked without further details.

“Yes.” Kate gave him a big hug.

He was dazed with joy.

“What?” Greg and Jim asked.

“Eric and Lori are expecting.” Kate informed them. “But she doesn’t know yet.”

“How can you know?” Jim asked.

“Empathy.” Greg stated simply realizing where all the peculiar puzzle pieces fit in hindsight.

“Already. You just started seeing her.” It was unexpected good news.

Eric blushed. “Last weekend. We used protection.”

“Are you ready for this?” Jim was kind. He wasn’t going to lecture Eric.

“I kind of like the idea.” Eric admitted.

“Great, we’ll have an Eric junior running around.” Greg teased.

“Is it a boy?” Eric turned to Kate not sure if the fetus was old enough to detect gender.

“Girls.”

“Twins?”

She nodded.

Greg chortled. Eric grinned bigger and bigger as the news sunk in.

“If you need any help telling your parents, call me.” Jim offered.

“Mom knows. She’s excited.” Kate told him. “She didn’t even get angry for a minute. I had to tell Tina when she was treating Lori after the fire. Mom was there. And we changed her antibiotics to something safe while pregnant.”

“You knew then?” Jim was amazed.

“I felt more than Lori’s presence in the apartment. When I got Lori out I realized no one was in the building. It took me a while to make the connection.”

“How am I supposed to tell Lori?” It was usually the mother of the child that got to break the news.

“Don’t worry about it today.” Jim gave Eric a hug. “Congratulations.”

Greg hugged him too. “I can’t believe you’re going to be a dad.”

“And you’ll be an uncle.” Eric teased.

Greg smiled. He liked the sound of it and was ready to spoil the girls rotten. Kate squirmed a little.

A New Becket

Eric spent the night at Jim's house as he had all week. He woke up for his morning run with nothing on his mind but Lori and the babies. He took a shower at his home. Matt ate breakfast when he got to the kitchen.

"I have to get a ring."

"A little late for that." Matt teased.

"So you know." Sandy walked in and gave Eric a hug. "I'm so happy for you."

"No homily that I'm too young?" He tested.

"I'm not going to make the mistake of telling you how to run your life again. And besides, who am I to talk." She had some remorse for the ruse Sara and her pulled on Ron and Jim. "Come on. I'll get a ring with you."

Sandy drove. Eric felt like a child being driven by his mom like they were on their way to soccer practice. To his surprise, she pulled up to Gerard's home.

"What are we doing here?"

"Get out." She commanded.

Gerard was at the door. He could always tell when they arrived. "Good morning." He was exceptionally cheerful after dealing with their impending doom so well the night before.

"Hi Dad." Sandy gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Eric is going to ask Lori to get married."

"I already did. She said yes last night." He updated.

"We need a ring and before we shopped around..."

"He can use Ann's ring. She would like that." Gerard showed them in.

His words warmed Eric. "How will Dad react?"

"He'll be happy. He may give you a lecture. It won't be too severe." Sandy half promised half hoped.

Gerard pulled out Ann's jewelry and handed her engagement and wedding rings to Eric. "If you'd rather get something more modern, I'll help you pay for anything you want."

It was a simple ring with decorative markings in the band and a large diamond in the center. “It’s perfect.” Eric loved it. “Are you sure you want me to give this to Lori? I’m not your only grandchild.”

“Lori has earned it.” He embraced Eric harder than he ever had before. “Be as happy as your grandmother and I were.” A tear of joy dropped from his wise eyes.

“Thanks.”

“Shall we see Father Francis next?” Sandy closed the car door and buckled up. At the rate she was going they would be at a wedding coordinator’s office before he even saw Lori again.

“Lori didn’t really commit to this week.”

“She doesn’t like the shotgun on her?”

“I didn’t tell her about the babies. I only found out last night.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sure he’ll be able to squeeze you in quickly if you need.”

Eric nodded. Father Francis would break rules to help him and just say some *Hail Mary*’s or whatever later.

Eric showed Matt and Brian the ring.

“I should’ve knocked up Joann first.” Matt was a little jealous.

“We’ll go halvesies.”

“Three ways. I got screwed here too.” Brian kidded.

“I hope Dad doesn’t blow up when he hears.” Eric was worried that he wouldn’t be as forgiving as their mother.

“He won’t. It’s his fault for not giving you the speech.” Brian made an excellent point.

“Yeah. I was thinking about it. I bet that condom didn’t have a chance if you were speeding things up.” Matt had figured it out after learning that Lori was pregnant.

“You were.” Brian’s eyes widened.

“You haven’t?” Eric reddened from the topic.

“Maybe, some.”

Eric snapped the jewel case shut. “Lori’s here.” He put it in his pocket.

“Hello.” She said brightly to the three brothers. “What are you all up to?”

“Guy talk.” Matt answered easily looking innocent.

“How are you feeling?” Brian asked unable to conceal as well as the twins but keeping an unreadable expression.

“Tired, which is odd because I am off the antibiotics.”

“And your neck?” Eric stood up and she leaned her head back for his examination. It was red and raw. “Does it hurt?” He ran his fingertips gently across the sore area.

“It’s a little tender.”

He stopped.

“It felt nice.” She smiled. “I have to go to Pasadena.”

“To see Johnny?”

“Cassie went into labor this morning. Johnny called that they are on their way to Pasadena Memorial.”

“Let’s go.” Eric was excited.

“You don’t have to go. It could be hours or a false alarm.”

“Nonsense, I want to go.”

“You mean that.” She could tell he wasn’t lying. It made her happy.

“We should hurry. She may not wait for us.” Eric pulled Lori down the stairs and out the house.

“I suppose you want to drive.” Lori handed him her car keys.

“Only because your driving scares me.” That wasn’t it. He was a control freak. He held her door for her to get in.

She held her hand to her lower torso. “Ouch.”

Eric panicked. He reached for the babies and they were fine. His panic turned from concern for the babies to worry she was going to realize she was pregnant.

She eyed him wondering why he didn’t ask if she was all right. “It was only a cramp. PMS.” Lori said carefully not knowing how comfortable he was with woman issues.

“It’ll pass.” He said as if they were chatting about the latest sporting news. She got into the car.

He pulled out of the driveway and headed for Pasadena Memorial. Lori was unusually quiet.

“Excited to be an aunt?”

“I am an aunt. I’m excited to meet my nephew.”

He could feel her stress. "It'll be fine. Babies are born every day."

"That isn't it. They're so young. They had plans to travel around Europe and that isn't going to happen now."

"So they go in ten years, or twenty, or thirty."

"Just seems like their options were constricted prematurely."

"Do you think they only got married because of the baby?" He tensed a little in his seat.

"No but the timing was forced on them."

"Johnny doesn't seem to mind." He held her hand. She wasn't going to be glad to hear their time was even shorter.

"He doesn't." She ran her hand through Eric's hair. "I know you want to get married but what's the hurry."

"Why delay?"

She sat up straighter. "You really want to get married this week."

He didn't really care for himself. It was for the sake of minimizing needless gossip and for the girls. "We can talk about it later."

"Why delay?" Lori challenged.

"You want to spend the rest of your life with me, don't you?" When he started the question he was sure it was an easy answer. By the end, he wasn't so sure what she would say.

"I do. Why does the rest of my life have to start this very instant?" She glared at him.

He pulled off their freeway exit. "Then when. I'll be there whenever you're ready." It was meant to be a reassuring comment but he sounded disconcerted.

"You're right. We can discuss this later." She fumed.

They walked into the hospital and found Rob sitting in the waiting room. "Thank God you're here." He said.

"What's wrong?" Lori forgot about her spat with Eric seeing Rob's white face.

"Johnny came out with an update. They're talking about having a cesarean."

"They want to cut the baby out of her? Why?" Eric didn't like the idea.

"I don't know. He left before he could explain."

Lori and Rob embraced and prayed.

Eric reached out to Johnny with his mind. *Johnny, why can't Cassie have a natural birth?*

Is that Eric? Johnny was confused to hear Eric in his head.

I'm telepathic. What's happening with Cassie?"

The baby is breach, feet first and the umbilical cord is around its neck.

Stop them and get Lori in there. Eric told him. *She can fix it.*

These are great doctors. I'm not going to challenge them. This is my wife and child. Johnny was on edge for good reason.

Lori can fix the cord and turn the baby. Just get her in there.

How can she do that if the doctors can't?

Trust me. She's telekinetic.

She isn't. She just likes to read about that rubbish. Leave me alone. He tried to stop the communication but Eric didn't allow it. Johnny didn't start the connection and he didn't have a way to halt it.

Dammit Johnny. We're having this argument from two separate rooms. Do you really need more proof? Why not give this sort of trash a chance before they cut Cassie open.

Asshole. Johnny thought.

"Eric?" Lori put her hand on his arm. He was solid stone.

"You're brother is a stubborn jerk." He snapped.

"Hey." Rob assumed he meant him.

"Johnny." Eric corrected and Rob boiled.

"Why don't you let us get through this in peace. You aren't part of the family yet. If you make it." Rob stood fully erect an intimidating six and a half feet tall. If Johnny was Mount Whitney, Rob was Everest.

Eric had to look up to meet his eyes. He braced himself telekinetically in case he struck.

Lori stood between them. "Stop it. We need to be here for the baby."

If Johnny wouldn't stop the doctors and let Lori help, Eric would do it himself. "I'll be back." He was going to find their room.

“Stay away from them.” Rob shoved Eric back.

Eric pushed Rob aside and walked past him following Johnny and Cassie’s essence.

Rob yanked Eric’s shoulder and punched him hard in the jaw.

Only Eric’s head moved. He stood his ground thanks to his preparation.

Rob was stunned and poised to hit again.

“Guys.” Lori put a hand on each and tried to create space. Neither moved back.

“Lori Becket?” A nurse came out.

“I’m Lori.”

“We need you to scrub up. Your brother insists you go in and see them. He won’t let us proceed until he speaks to you.” She turned to lead Lori down the hallway.

“What can I do?”

Eric grabbed her shoulders and spoke softly so the nurse couldn’t hear. “The baby is coming out feet first and the umbilical cord is around his neck. You need to remove the cord and turn him around. You can do that.” He stared in her eyes.

“How?” Rob challenged.

The nurse walked back. “Are you coming?”

“Feet first.” Lori repeated. “That isn’t right.”

The nurse confirmed it. “It’s a breech birth and they’re preparing for a cesarean now.”

“I’m coming.” Lori followed the nurse.

“How did you know that?” Rob gave Eric some space but he was still upset.

“Johnny told me.” Eric stared at Rob. “I’m telepathic and telekinetic and now so is Lori. She can turn the baby around. It’ll be fine.”

“You’re feeding her fantasies.” Rob had heard of Lori’s idea for her story and didn’t believe in paranormal powers, as Johnny hadn’t, probably still didn’t.

Eric glanced up at a security camera pointed at them. He pushed the angle to one side of the waiting room and pulled Rob to the other. There was an empty soda can on one of the tables. “Watch the can.” It crushed on itself.

“It’s a magician’s trick.”

“Think of something, anything.” Eric dared him. “Something other than I’m an asshole. You’re thinking about your parents and wondering how fast they’ll get her. Their boat docked an hour ago. Now you’re wondering how I am doing this.” He started to laugh.

“Ran out of answers.” Rob was convinced he proved Eric wrong.

“It’s just that you were thinking about the Gettysburg address. Lori use to always recite things when we first met to keep me from reading her mind.”

Eric. Lori said mentally. *It’s working.*

Of course. He grinned. “Everything is fine.” He told Rob.

“Really?” Rob sighed in relief. He didn’t believe Eric completely that he had inexplicable gifts but he believed that something changed for the better.

“Rob!” Charlie hollered down the hall. A nurse gave her a warning to keep it down and she ignored him. Roger was at her side. “What’s happening? Is the baby here?” She glared at Eric. They were tan from the recent vacation and wearing clothes ideal for the lido deck.

“Soon.” Rob answered.

“Where’s Lori?” Roger expected her to be with them.

“She’s with Johnny and Cassie.” Eric replied.

“Why are you here?” Charlie wasn’t pleased to see him again and at such a momentous occasion for the family.

“I’m in it for the long haul.” Eric said as a small smile crossed Roger’s face.

“Mom, he’s staying.” Rob cautioned her gently.

“He doesn’t belong here.”

“Let’s get some coffee while we wait.” Roger held her arms. “Decaf.”

Eric and Rob sat down as Lori’s parents went for some caffeine-light refreshments.

“That stuff you were saying is for real?” Rob was slowly accepting it.

Eric nodded. “How else could I take that hit you threw? I wouldn’t have said anything but I didn’t want them slicing into Cassie.”

“Good call.” Rob was grateful. It seemed like a pretty routine procedure until it was about to be performed on his sister-in-law and nephew.

Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da

They waited impatiently. Charlie stared at Eric regularly as Roger held her hand. After ninety minutes and countless loops of the top stories on the cable news station playing on the hospital's television Lori came out. "He's fine. They're both fine." She cried tears of happiness and relief.

Eric hugged her. He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry for bickering in the car."

She kissed him. "I'll marry you whenever you want."

"What?" Charlie screeched.

"I'm getting married." Lori wiped away a teardrop.

Rob embraced her. "Congratulations."

Roger shook Eric's hand. "You could have given us more time to get to know you." He tried to keep it light.

"Roger?" Charlie was appalled.

"We have plenty of time for that." Eric pulled Roger into a hug. "I'll take good care of her." He turned to Charlie with open arms.

She turned her back to him.

Lori had moved from Rob to Roger.

"Oh, I forgot." Eric dug the box out of his pocket. "Here." He got down on his knee and popped the lid open. "Let's make it official."

"You have a ring?" Lori held her left hand to her heart.

Eric stood up and lifted her hand. He slid the ring onto her finger. It was loose but perfection in every other way. "I want the rest of my life to start immediately."

"It already did. This is just paperwork." She cried and smiled at once. She kissed him with all her emotions.

"Did I miss something?" Johnny had come to let his family know they could see Cassie and the baby.

"Lori is getting married." Rob announced. "We're going to have to get use to him a lot faster than we planned."

Johnny gave Eric the once over. "Cassie's in the third room on the right." He told his parents to excuse them. They left immediately. "Why now? Why so fast?" He stood inches from Eric who prepared for another potential incoming fist.

"Johnny, it's because of him that Cassie didn't have to have surgery." Lori tried to calm her brother.

He ignored her. "Is my sister pregnant?" It was why he rushed into his marriage.

"No." Lori demanded looking at her brother's face that went pale despite her objection. She turned to Eric. He had a gentle smile of pure ecstasy on his face.

Johnny grabbed Eric and gave him a strong embrace, "I'm not in a position to take the high ground."

"I'm not pregnant." Lori whispered again. She held her hand to her womb and sensed the two small lives within. "Twins?" She fainted.

Eric felt it coming on and caught her before she hit the ground. "Actually, she didn't know yet. Wasn't sure how to mention it to her or if it was better to pretend it was news when she finally learned but, the cat's out of the bag now." He placed her on a chair.

"If she didn't know..." Johnny gave him a perplexed look.

"More family secrets, which by the way, all this stuff is."

"We won't mention a thing." Rob vowed. "No one would believe it. Hell, I'm not sure I do even now."

Lori came to. She looked around the hospital waiting room and then at her hand. "It wasn't a dream?"

Eric telepathically apologized. *We got screwed out of time. My bad. Speeding up things in the heat of the moment may have rendered the condoms less effective.*

She pulled her hair behind her ear in a nervous gesture. "We're going to get married and have twins?"

"Girls." He nodded with an asinine grin.

"I'm going to be a great grandmother?" Gran's shrill voice cracked through the sterile hospital air.

Eric stood up to face her. Rob and Johnny went to Lori behind him. Instinctively they went to protect her reacting to Eric's posture.

"Don't go soft on him now." A woman in her fifties entered from the other side of the hallway. "He's the leader and why my daughters are in prison." She had a small pistol in her hand. She held it close to keep it from being seen by security cameras. It was Patty, the mother of Guido's two one-way blockers.

"They're in prison because they broke the law." Eric rebutted his eyes on the pistol that was pointed at him. He tried to explode the gun but it was safe behind Patty's shield. He prepared to break through but his thinking went numb. Marie was there.

Gran hadn't moved. "Put it down." She ordered Patty.

Patty turned the gun on Lori. "He took my daughters from me, it only seems fair I take his." She was going to shoot.

Patty's finger pulled the trigger as if in slow motion. He would have thought he was speeding up but he couldn't clear his mind to do anything that fancy. Patty's hand started to open. She struggled against an unseen force and lost. The revolver fell to the floor. Eric looked at Gran but she was as shocked as he was.

The gun folded in half as if it was made of tin and an invisible hand smashed it.

"Hello Eric." Morrie came up behind Patty.

"Grandpa Morrie. Good timing." Eric said dumbfounded but glad for the assistance.

Matt, Kate and Brian were behind him.

"Holly? Marie?" Morrie called out without results.

"Allow me." Kate offered. Marie and Holly appeared in chairs in the waiting room. Holly must have been keeping Marie hidden.

"You really do make me regret that no girls rule." Morrie smiled down at Kate with respect.

"Now what to do with these meddlesome women so that they stop assaulting the family."

"We can make it so they can't use their skills anymore." Eric glanced back at Lori who was ready to perform her trick.

"That would drive them to madness." Morrie wasn't sure that was a viable solution.

"They won't remember they can do it." Matt told him. Kate had learned to erase memories from Officer Tim.

"No." Gran blurted out. "Don't." She started to run.

Morrie stopped her. "Come back her you old witch." He kept an eye on the camera as he forced his wife to turn around and walk. She looked like a marionette puppet but it was less obvious than floating her back. "Do it."

Lori removed the abilities as Kate erased their memories of their skills.

"Daughters?" Morrie asked Eric. "Patty said you have daughters?"

"That's right." Lori picked up Eric's hand.

Morrie glanced down at the ring and smiled. "So it's official. The sons only tradition has ended." He considered it. "It's about damn time." He gave Eric a hug and then his other grandchildren including Kate. "Welcome to the family." He embraced Lori last. "I'll get rid of the rubbish." Gran and her three friends followed Morrie with blank expressions on their faces. It would clear up after time but their memories of that day or their powers were lost forever.

"Hi Johnny." Kate waved at him.

"Hi Kate." He shook her hand and then Matt's. "And you are?"

"Brian."

"Nice to meet you. This is Rob." Johnny introduced and Rob greeted Eric's siblings. "Come on Rob, you have one more person to meet. We may name him Roger Eric Becket." Rob winked at Eric and they left to see Cassie and the baby.

"Go on." Eric told Lori who followed her brothers to see her nephew again. Eric turned to his family. "How did you know to come?"

"We were eating lunch when I saw you get hit by Rob." Matt informed him. "When we got closer, we sensed Marie and we figured she was with Gran so we called up Gramps. He was more than happy to find his wayward wife."

The next day was St. Ignatius' graduation. Kate, Greg, Brad and Meg received their diplomas and Greg was the valedictorian. They had a big celebration at Brads with all the family and friends. It was completely free of any metaphysical disturbances. The day after that, Matt and Eric walked to get their

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degrees at UCSB and it was followed by a smaller but equally pleasant celebration. On Friday, Eric married Lori and it was by far the most joyous celebration of them all. Morrie came without Gran.