

CHASING THE WIND / Beishir 1

CHASING THE WIND

A NOVEL

BY NORMA BEISHIR

AND

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No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied;

No matter how much we hear, we are not content.

History merely repeats itself; nothing is truly new;

It has all been done or said before....

It is all foolishness, chasing the wind.

What is wrong cannot be righted; it is water over the dam,

And there is no use in thinking of what might have been....

Everything is appropriate in its own time.

But though God has planted eternity in the hearts of men,

Even so, many cannot see the whole scope of God's work

From beginning to end....

All things are decided by Fate; it was known long ago

What each man would be....

Ecclesiastes

Chapters 1-6

In order to be a realist you must

believe in miracles.

- David Ben Gurion

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For the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit....

Book One

If you are a woman with a husband who is not a believer,
but he wants to live with you, hold onto him
the unbelieving husband shares to an extent in
the holiness of his wife....

This might bring your husband back, not only
to you but to God....

—1 Corinthians,
Chapter 7

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August 22nd, 4:57 pm
Kansas City, Missouri:

The woman was hysterical.

Her husband wasn't in much better shape. He could barely talk, struggling to answer the police detective's questions in fragmented sentences. Their six-year-old daughter had been abducted from their backyard that morning. There were no witnesses, and an exhaustive search of the neighborhood turned up nothing.

"I don't understand how this could have happened," the child's father said, choking on every other word. "She only let Mandy out of her sight for a minute."

He looked over his shoulder at his inconsolable wife, being tended by a neighbor. "She's always been an overprotective mother," he said, lowering his voice. "Mandy's our miracle baby."

"How so?" the detective asked, taking notes.

"We'd been trying to have children for years, almost as long as we've been married," the distraught father went on. "We both come from big families and wanted kids of our own, but it just wasn't happening."

"Is your daughter adopted?" the detective asked.

He shook his head. "No, no," he said. "She's ours. We went to a fertility clinic when we couldn't conceive. It took everything we had, all of our savings, but Mandy's worth it."

"You had difficulty in having a child," the detective said slowly. "Who was at fault?"

The man was at first puzzled, then angry. "What kind of question is that?" he asked. "What has it to do with Mandy being missing?"

"Probably nothing, maybe everything, depending on the circumstances of her birth, sir," the detective said. "Did you use a donor?"

The man shook his head. "Neither," he said. "Mandy's ours, one hundred percent. She was conceived by in vitro, but we used our own...you know."

"I had to ask," the detective apologized. "If your daughter were not biologically yours, then we would have to consider the possibility that the biological parent might have taken her."

"We're her parents, no one else," the man insisted. His face reflected his

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deep fear for his child's safety. "Please bring our baby home. Please."

September 1st, 4:30 pm

Seattle, Washington:

"I only turned my back for a moment," the distraught teacher repeated over and over. "I never left the schoolyard!"

A six-year-old boy had been abducted outside a prestigious school for gifted children. No one saw it happen, even though there were several children in the schoolyard, being picked up by their own parents. Everyone was being questioned.

"We understand, Mrs. Harwood," one of the police detectives said in an attempt to calm her.

"I *don't* understand!" The emotional outburst came from the child's mother. "You were responsible for him! You were supposed to be watching him!"

"I *was* watching him!" the teacher attempted to defend herself. "I was watching all of them! I only turned away for a moment!"

"Long enough for someone to take my son!" the angry mother shot back at her.

"Easy, Mrs. Wyndham," one of the detectives urged. "She won't be able to remember anything if you keep attacking her."

Charlotte Wyndham turned to the window, hugging herself tightly as if trying to shield herself from the chill of fear that threatened to consume her. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She wished her husband were here, but he would not be back in the States until tomorrow. He was in Paris on business. He'd booked a flight as soon as she called him, but he could not be here before tomorrow morning.

How do I endure this nightmare without him?

They'd only had each other, until Noah was born. That was part of the reason the bond between them was so strong. Neither of them had any other family, and they both wanted children. When they couldn't get pregnant on their own, they sought out the experts. It had taken them three years and thousands of dollars to have Noah, but he was worth every penny. Their beautiful son was a genius. But they would have loved him no matter what.

If anything happened to him....

October 11th, 1:15 pm

Titusville, Florida:

The woman's body was found in her car, parked in the driveway outside

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her home. She was still in the driver's seat, her seatbelt still in place. She'd been shot in the head at close range. Her five-year-old son was missing, presumably taken from his car seat.

Her husband was questioned at length. He was frustrated by the endless probing. Couldn't they see how he was suffering? His wife was dead, his child was missing. Why were they wasting time questioning him?

"She had no enemies," he said irritably. "None. She got along with everybody. I always envied that about her. She was the peacemaker. I was the loose cannon."

"Were you a loose cannon with her, Mr. Reynolds?" the detective asked.

"No, of course not." Roger Reynolds didn't miss the implication. "What are you asking me?"

The detective was cool. "Only if there were any problems between the two of you."

"You think I killed her?" Reynolds asked incredulously.

"Did you?"

"No, of course not!"

"What about your son?"

"What about him?"

"Were there any problems regarding the child?" the detective asked.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Reynolds snapped. "Our son was perfect. *Perfect.*"

November 25th, 5:01 pm
London:

Dear God, how long has it been? Lynne Raven wondered. She stood at the window in her hotel room, looking at the city below as if she'd just landed on another planet. I'd almost forgotten what living in the civilized world is like.

She was a field archaeologist. Home was wherever she happened to be excavating. The only people she saw on a daily basis were the members of her team. Restaurants, theaters, shopping—all were rare luxuries. Her wardrobe was simple and functional, much like everything else in her life.

She looked at the royal blue tunic she planned to wear tonight. She hadn't worn it in months. It didn't fit her normal lifestyle. *Too feminine for a dig.*

Now that she thought about it, she couldn't remember the last time she'd made the effort to actually look like a woman. She couldn't remember the last time she'd *felt* like a woman, the last time she'd *wanted* to feel like a woman. Feeling and acting like a woman always seemed to get her into trouble. She had discovered long ago that she got on better with people who'd been dead for a thousand years than she did with those in the present.

Turning, she caught sight of her own reflection in the mirror over the bureau. At forty, on the good days she could still pass for thirty. There were fine lines around her eyes—"archaeologist's squint," an occupational hazard more

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than a sign of aging. Her long, dark hair was threaded with strands of copper from being out in the sun for long hours each day. She knew she didn't look her age. *Good genes and divine mercy*, she decided.

Good genes, from her own parents. Genes that she hadn't been able to pass on to any children of her own. The thought of the children she'd never have and the family she hadn't seen in a year brought a wave of unexpected sadness. It was Thanksgiving in the US. How many years had it been since she'd gone home for Thanksgiving or any other holiday? She told her parents she was too busy, but the truth was that it was too painful to see her three sisters with their children. *Seeing what I'm missing*.

Still, she believed this was the path God had chosen for her. She could never have been satisfied with the life her sisters led back in Missouri, no matter how desperately she wanted children. Taking the easy route had never been her style.

As for London, she hadn't planned to be here. Three weeks ago, she'd been working on her dig in Egypt when the call came, asking her to do a series of lectures in Britain, to replace a colleague who'd been injured in an earthquake in China. The request surprised her, since it came from someone she not only didn't know well personally, but had been at odds with professionally. What was it Dr. McCallum had called her? *Too much of a dreamer to ever be a serious archaeologist*. Whatever the reason, she wasn't about to debate the merits of his request. It had been so long since she'd taken any time off from her work, for any reason...and as much as she loved it, she'd been feeling the need for a break for a long time now. It was a feeling she'd never had before, one she was at a loss to explain, even to herself. Work had been her whole life for...how long? *Ever since the divorce*. She was giving serious consideration to adopting a child, maybe two. *There are lots of kids in the world needing parents. It doesn't matter if I give birth to my kids or not*, she told herself.

She forced her focus back to her work. Being in London would also provide her with an opportunity to seek the funding she needed to continue the dig. Time was running out and she'd been already been rejected by the three private foundations that had funded her previous digs. *God, I need a miracle*, she silently prayed. *That's what it's going to take if I'm to continue my work—your work*.

6:30 pm:

Lynne saw him as she entered the crowded lecture hall. He was hard to miss. He looked so out of place in the sea of conservatively-dressed attendees—but it didn't seem to bother him. He wore faded jeans and a beat-up black leather jacket. He was with a young woman, a petite brunette who looked as aristocratic as he was scruffy. His light brown hair was in desperate need of a comb. His boredom was evident in his body language, the way he shoved his hands down into the pockets of his jacket.

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I've lost my audience before I even step up to the podium, Lynne decided.

"I fail to see why you couldn't have come to this event alone, Sarah," he said, annoyed. "You know quite well that I've no interest in spending the evening listening to a decrepit old man talk about life in some desolate outpost of Hades, digging up the pathetic remains of people who lived in another millennium."

The woman shook her head disapprovingly. "If you had even bothered to read the brochure I gave you, you would know that Dr. Raven is a *woman*," she told him.

"No difference," he said with an offhanded shrug. "Frumpy, gray hair in a schoolmarm's bun, sensible shoes, no doubt." He looked at his watch. "I'm going to need a pint—or two—to get me through this evening. I'll be back. Eventually."

He turned to leave the lecture hall and was instantly face-to-face with Lynne. He smiled, and his whole face seemed transformed by it. His eyes, blue and intense, instantly softened. "Hello," he said in a low voice.

The woman was behind him now. "*This* is Dr. Raven," she told him.

He extended his hand to Lynne. "Connor Mackenzie," he introduced himself, his Scottish brogue unmistakable. He didn't introduce his companion.

"Lynne Raven." She shook his hand. "I left my sensible shoes back at the hotel," she said, feigning regret.

He looked embarrassed. "You heard that?"

Lynne nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't be." She smiled. "I get it all the time."

"I'm not surprised," he said. "You certainly don't *look* like an archaeologist."

She laughed. "Having heard your description, I'm relieved to hear I *don't* look like one to you," she told him.

His eyes met hers. "I think you're quite beautiful," he said with startling honesty.

Lynne felt her cheeks flush. She couldn't remember the last time a man had made her blush. Maybe her ex-husband, but that was another lifetime—one she preferred not to remember. "Good save," she said, a bit unnerved by the intensity of his stare.

"Are you enjoying your stay in London?" he asked, an awkward attempt at small talk.

"Very much," she answered, grateful for the change of subject. "I spend most of my time on excavations. This has been heavenly."

"Where will you go when you leave?" he asked.

"Egypt," she said. "We're digging in the Sinai, near the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God."

He looked amused. "You don't really expect to find stone tablets—" he started.

Lynne shook her head. "The tablets were taken to Israel in the Ark of the Covenant," she explained. "They were still in the Ark when it disappeared from Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. It's been rumored that the Ark's now

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somewhere in Ethiopia, but no one's been able to prove it. Much as I would love to be the one to find the Ark, we don't expect to find it in Egypt. We're searching for evidence of the Exodus."

He laughed. "Have you found the secret to parting the Red Sea?" he wanted to know.

She was nonplussed. "Yes. It's called faith."

"I've heard archaeologists are now using modern technology to aid their work," he recalled. "Computers, satellites—"

"We do." She drew in a deep breath. "Unfortunately, it hasn't helped in this case. We haven't found anything significant yet. This has turned out to be a long-term project, which means it's been costly. My funding's been cut off, and other sources I've used in the past have already turned me down. I have to find a new source of funding ASAP. Time is running out, if I'm going to continue my field work." She glanced toward his female companion, who was watching them intently. "I think your girlfriend's getting the wrong idea."

"She's not my girlfriend," he said. "She's my sister."

Only then did Lynne realize that he was still holding her hand. She withdrew it slowly.

"Have you eaten?" Connor asked.

She shook her head. "I'm beat. I thought I'd just get some Chinese takeout after I'm finished here and call it a night."

He laughed. "A rare trip to the civilized world and you plan to spend the evening in your hotel room? That's unacceptable," he said. "Come have dinner with me."

"I don't think—" she started.

"I may be able to save your project," he suggested.

Lynne was skeptical. "How?" He didn't look like he had enough cash to pay for dinner. Except for the watch. The watch he wore looked *very* expensive. *He probably stole it*, she thought. *Maybe he's going to pawn it.*

He winked, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "My trust fund," he told her.

She nodded slowly. "Right."

He wasn't about to give up. "I could surprise you. What have you to lose by hearing me out?" he asked.

She hesitated for only a moment. "All right," she said finally. Even if he didn't have the means to save her excavation, there was something so compelling about him, she couldn't refuse. She didn't *want* to refuse.

God help me, she was thinking.

8:45 pm:

Connor came up to the podium while she was talking to a small group of academics after her presentation. He edged his way into the group and leaned in close enough to whisper in her ear, "I'll be waiting for you outside."

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She nodded. "I'll only be a few minutes."

He strode off with a swagger that inspired thoughts she didn't want to be having, especially about a man she'd just met. She watched him leave the lecture hall, only half-listening to the aging paleontologist from Oxford who was rambling on in a monotone that would have put her to sleep, had her thoughts not been elsewhere. As soon as she could graciously extract herself, she grabbed her coat and headed for the exit.

She had no trouble finding him. He was standing next to a Harley Davidson, two helmets in hand. "Here," he said, tossing one to her. "Put this on."

She was speechless. "I don't think so," she finally managed to say.

He laughed. "Chicken?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, indignant.

What did he have in mind? She wasn't about to ride off on a motorbike with some man she'd just met, not even this one.

"I said, are you afraid to ride with me?" His blue eyes were taunting. "You needn't be. I'm quite a safe biker. At least I am when I have a passenger aboard."

"Oh, I'm sure you are," she said, unconvinced. There was a chill in the air. She glanced toward the security guard near the doors. The man regarded her with a look that left no doubt in her mind that he'd gotten the wrong idea about what was going on between them.

"Then get that bloody helmet on and come on." He put on his own helmet and gestured to her, his impatience clear.

The man was challenging her! He had nerve, she'd give him that. Impulsively and against her better judgment, Lynne rose to the challenge, tucking her hair behind her ears as she pulled on the helmet. She climbed aboard the bike with him.

"Where's your sister?" she asked, remembering he hadn't come alone.

"Sarah? She brought her car. She had to go back to the station."

"Station?" Lynne asked.

"She's a television journalist."

"Do you really have the means to help me get funding?" she asked then.

"Or are you just coming on to me?"

"Both." He started the engine. He said something else, but she couldn't hear him above the Harley's roar. She hung on as he raced the bike through the streets of London, wondering what she'd gotten herself into.

She felt like a moth who'd flown dangerously close to a flame....

9:15 pm:

He took her to a small, casual Chinese restaurant near Regent's Park. "You mentioned getting takeout," he said, holding the door for her. "I hope not being able to eat out of the cartons won't be too much of a disappointment."

"I think I can live with it," she said as they made their way to a booth at the

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back of the dining room that came as close to privacy as the restaurant afforded.

He slid into the booth across from her and picked up two menus. She took the menu he offered her and scanned it quickly.

“Do you know what you want?” he asked.

Her cheeks flushed. *He’s talking about food, you idiot.* “Yes,” she said, her gaze fixed on the menu. “I’ll have the cashew chicken.”

She noticed a folded newspaper lying on the seat next to her. She picked it up. It was folded, a story on stem cell research facing out. She shook her head.

Connor regarded her with curiosity. “What is it?” he asked.

She showed him the newspaper. “You’re opposed to medical research?” he asked, surprised.

“Not at all—but they won’t be satisfied with that,” she predicted. “They’ll want to clone human beings. Man has always had a yearning to play God.”

“Do you not think it’s possible that this could benefit mankind?” he asked. “Science is on the brink of eradicating illness, improving mental ability and physical prowess. Is that not a good thing?”

“No,” she answered without reservation. “We don’t have the power or the right to artificially create life.”

“Obviously, we do,” he disagreed, taking the paper from her. “Science is going to change the world, you know.”

Lynne shook her head. “Then maybe we need to change the scientists,” she suggested.

He regarded her with curiosity. “Change the scientists?”

She nodded. “They may be able to create the physical body, but they can’t create a soul,” she maintained. “Are you at all familiar with any of the ancient religions?”

He pursed his lips as if considering the question. “No. Can’t say that I am.”

“According to the ancient Jewish mystics, the Guf—the Hall of Souls—holds a finite number of souls,” she explained, toying with the salt shaker absently. “When a child is born, the soul descends from Heaven to enter the physical body. In the case of a stillbirth, no soul comes. The mystics believed when the Guf is emptied, the Messiah will come. Each birth would bring the Messiah’s arrival closer.”

He looked amused. “And do you believe this also?” he wanted to know.

“I believe there’s some truth to it,” she acknowledged. “I believe the Messiah will *return* when the Hall is emptied.”

“Perhaps your God intended us to create bodies for those souls waiting in the well,” Connor suggested in a mocking tone. “Heaven could be outsourcing.”

He waved to the waitress, who came with water and took their order, then made a quick exit. Lynne took a deep breath and approached the topic she really wanted to discuss with him. “How can you help me get my funding?” she asked.

He smiled. “You get right to the point, don’t you?”

“I can’t afford not to,” she said honestly. “The clock is ticking. I don’t have much time. If I’m to stay in Egypt, I have to do something yesterday. If you’ve been putting me on—”

“I haven’t,” he assured her. “My stepfather is founder and chairman of

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Icarus International. Ever heard of it?"

She nodded. "Computer software."

"Actually, that's how his empire began. Now Icarus dabbles in everything from software to black magic." There was unmasked sarcasm in Connor's voice.

"Black magic?" *That has to be a joke.*

"Edward would very much like to rule the world," Connor said, taking a deep breath. "But he settled for creating Icarus—and the Phoenix Foundation, twenty years ago when he was in a rare philanthropic mood."

Lynne managed a smile. "Sounds like your father has a thing for mythology," she observed.

"He's my *stepfather*," Connor said with emphasis, "and yes, I suppose he does. Phoenix gives millions to various worthwhile projects every year. I plan to persuade him to fund your work for the next five years."

"Why?" she wanted to know. *There has to be a catch.*

He leaned forward and grinned. "Why not?" he countered.

She took a drink, stalling while she searched for a diplomatic way to say what she was thinking, just in case he really was sincere. "You don't give me the impression you even believe in what I'm doing in the Sinai," she said finally. "Why would you care if I can continue my work or not?"

"Consider it a challenge," he said. "You believe, I don't. Prove me wrong."

She shook her head, amused. "You'd be willing to risk all that capital to be proven wrong?"

He shrugged. "For one thing, it's not my money. And for another, I think this might prove a most interesting experience."

A rich man looking for a diversion, Lynne decided. Well, if he's willing to provide it, I'm willing to take it. I can't afford to be proud. It's not like I have any other options. Aloud she said, "Right. You just surprised me, that's all. I need to submit a proposal—"

"That's not necessary," he said. "You have me to present your case."

"It can't be that easy," she said, unable to believe she could leave London with funding for the next five years, just like that.

"It is. Edward will do this if I ask him." He put his hand on hers. His touch made her feel odd, but not in a bad way. There was something strangely familiar about it. *That makes no sense at all*, she thought, disturbed.

"Why?" she asked again. "Of course I'm grateful—"

"Grateful enough to put up with me for a time?" he asked, his eyes meeting hers.

"Put up with you?" she asked, immediately suspicious. *There it is. I knew there would be strings attached.* "What, exactly, does that mean?"

He leaned back and regarded her in a way that made her feel as though she were being appraised. "I'm interested in what you do. I'd like to see it firsthand. Is that so hard to believe?" he wanted to know.

"Would you be coming along to oversee your stepfather's investment, then?" she asked, bracing herself for an ultimatum she was pretty sure she wasn't going to want to hear.

"Not at all," he assured her. "Call it curiosity. It would only be for a brief

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time.”

She hesitated momentarily. *Confession time*. “The Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt doesn’t know why we’re really there,” she reluctantly confessed. “The Exodus is a touchy subject. To prove that it actually happened would be to reinforce Israel’s claims in the territory.”

“Are their suspicions not aroused by the location of your site?” he asked.

“No.” She took a deep breath and went on. “You see, the reason no proof has been found so far is that the so-called experts have the dates and locations all wrong. Traditionally, it’s been believed that Moses’ royal adversary was Ramses II—but I’m part of a very small minority that believes the Pharaoh the Bible actually refers to is Ahmose I—who reigned two hundred years *earlier*. I’ve been studying the Exodus for most of my professional life, and all of my research points to Ahmose. I believe I’m on the right track. My benefactors think otherwise. So when we failed to make a find, they pulled the plug on me.”

Connor lit a cigarette. “But the mountain, surely.”

“They had the wrong mountain,” Lynne said confidently. “I believe that the actual mountain of God is the Jebel Hashem al Tarif—it’s right on the main Sinai highway, forty-five kilometers from Taba. It fits all the information provided in Scripture much more closely than does the Jebel Musa.”

“And the Red Sea?” he asked.

“Mistranslated. *Yam Suf* in Hebrew means *reed sea*, not Red Sea.” She paused. “So we got our permits to dig under false pretenses. We told them we were looking for artifacts relating to Ahmose’s reign. Even then, it took us a year to obtain them. We’ve had to be cautious. There’s a military installation close to the mountain. I feel like they’re always looking over our shoulders.”

“I see.” He was silent for a moment. “Well, I’m still willing to secure your funding, if you agree to my terms.”

She still had reservations, but he was her only hope of saving the dig now. “You have a deal, Mr. Mackenzie,” she agreed.

“It’s Connor,” he said as the waitress returned and placed their plates in front of them. He reached for the cellophane-wrapped fortune cookie. “Let’s see what the future holds, shall we?” He removed the wrapper and broke the cookie in half. He stared at the small slip of paper for a moment, then started to laugh. “It looks as if I have no future.”

Lynne took it from him. It was blank. “Maybe,” she started, “it means your future can’t be revealed to you yet.”

November 26th, 9:30 am:

“*Egypt?*” Edward Rhys-Williams asked, unable to hide his surprise.

Connor shook his head. “We’re realists, Edward, you and I,” he said calmly. “We both know if I stay here, it’s only a matter of time before they find out about me. If you don’t want to provide the funding, I’m perfectly willing to do it

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myself. But it will look more legitimate if it comes from the Foundation.”

“It’s not that, Andrew.”

“It’s *Connor* now, Edward,” he reminded his stepfather. “We have to be careful about this.”

“That identity was only created to bring you safely home.”

“Perhaps, but you knew I’d have to use it again.” Connor stood at the window in Edward’s office, oblivious to the panoramic view of the city it afforded. “This is the perfect solution,” he insisted.

His stepfather, a robust figure for a man in his late seventies, shook his head. “I suppose,” he conceded. “But to leave now, to go off and live in some desolate place, far removed from civilization—”

“They, too, are staying beneath the radar. Out of necessity,” Connor revealed. “Dr. Raven got her permits from the Egyptian authorities under false pretenses. Apparently the last thing the Egyptians want is proof that Moses actually did outwit their ruler.”

Edward looked unconvinced.

“I’m doing what I have to do,” Connor maintained. “It will be the last place anyone will be looking.”

“How long?” Edward asked. “How long will you stay there?”

“As long as is necessary.” Connor picked up a news magazine lying on his , stepfather’s desk and studied it for a moment, frowning. It was opened to a story on a racetrack scandal involving a genetically engineered horse. He waved it at his stepfather for emphasis. “It’s become a witch hunt, Edward. A bloody witch hunt! If they’ve become this fired up over a horse, can you imagine what they’d do if they knew everything we’ve accomplished?” he asked, throwing it back down on the desk. “If anyone were to find out about me—”

“Sarah rang me up earlier. She seems to think you have certain ideas regarding the archaeologist,” Edward commented with mild amusement.

“I may need to stay for some time. I might as well make the best of a difficult situation.” Connor’s smile was suggestive.

“Are you sure that’s all there is to it?”

Connor turned toward the windows and chuckled at the thought. “Have you ever known me to lose my head over a woman, Edward?” he asked.

“Leave it to you to find a way to mix business with pleasure,” Edward observed, lighting his pipe. The scent of his expensive imported tobacco filled the room.

“You’re not going to fight me on this, are you?” Connor asked, turning again to face his stepfather. He folded his arms across his chest. “If you have a better solution, I’m willing to listen.”

“No. I don’t,” Edward reluctantly conceded as he drew his pipe from between his lips.

“What about the funding?” Connor wanted to know.

“Whatever you want. I’ll give you a blank check,” Edward surrendered.

Connor nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’ll stay in touch?” his stepfather asked. “We do have deadlines, people to answer to, you know.”

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“Of course,” Connor said.

“And you’ll put everything on hold?”

Connor nodded. “For now,” he said. Then he grinned. “Can’t have anyone uncovering the truth before we’re ready now, can we?”

10:45 am

Washington, DC:

“Three of them?”

FBI Special Agent Caitlin Hammond walked down a corridor at the J. Edgar Hoover Building with one of her superiors. Two men stopped in their tracks to watch her pass. Caitlin ignored them. She was used to the looks she got, even from colleagues. Tall and blond, she didn’t quite fit the stereotypical description of a hard-nosed, by-the-book agent. She looked more like a model than a cop. That was part of the reason she was so effective at her job. No one ever suspected her when she was undercover.

“One in Kansas City,” Randall Baker told her. “One in Seattle, one in Florida. There’s a potential connection to thirteen other child abductions as well.”

She regarded him keenly. “Connection? I don’t mean to sound insensitive, Randy, but kids are abducted every day. If you want to talk numbers —”

His jaw tightened. “This is different, Caitlin. These particular cases are different,” he insisted.

She gave him a puzzled look. “Different how?”

“All of the children in question were conceived by in vitro fertilization,” he said, pushing open the door leading to his office.

“Coincidence,” Caitlin stated more than asked.

“Too many so-called coincidences,” Baker maintained.

“Did they all conceive through the same clinic?” Caitlin asked.

He shook his head.

“Then what makes you think they’re connected?” she wanted to know.

Baker sucked in a deep breath. “Think about it, Caitlin. It’s too much of a coincidence for *all* of those kids to be test-tube babies. They have to be connected somehow.”

“You’re talking about three abductions in three states at three different clinics here.” Caitlin considered the possibility. “It doesn’t make any sense. Even if you’re right, even if there *had* been some kind of tampering with the embryos, what reason could there be for all of the kids to be abducted?”

“Destroying evidence, perhaps?”

Caitlin was surprised by the suggestion. “You think these kids were taken so there would be no proof of illegal tampering?” she asked. “What do you suggest they’ve done with them—you think they’re *dead*?”

“Desperate measures,” Baker reasoned. Out of habit, he reached for the

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cigarettes he'd given up a month earlier, frustrated when he found his pocket empty

"I don't know, Randy—murder to cover something that would be in itself a much lesser charge?" Caitlin wasn't convinced, but if there was a link, she would find it. "Where's Goober?" she asked then.

"Screening room. He's got a lead on Marshall."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Another one?"

"He's obsessed."

Caitlin shook her head. "He's starting to worry me, Randy."

12:05 pm:

Agent Jack Farlow leaned back in his chair, staring at the monitor in front of him thoughtfully. In his mid-thirties, he was tall, lanky and boyishly handsome, with thick brown hair and blue eyes that made all kinds of illicit promises to the women who came within his orbit. At the moment, however, those eyes were trained on the image on the screen, and the boyish smile was gone, in its place the look of barely contained rage.

He'd run the tape half a dozen times now, and there was not the slightest doubt in his mind, even though the image was less than high quality and the face was blurred. *So, we meet again, compadre*, he thought, trying to stifle the rage that still rose within him at the sight of that man, even after all these years. The face of the man who'd nearly cost him freedom—and his life. The man he'd vowed to bring down, one way or another.

Had it really been ten years since the day Julian Marshall had set him up to take the fall for one of his heists? Jack would never forget that jail cell, the sentence that hung over his head—until his partner came to his defense and proved his innocence.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door behind him opening. He looked up to see his partner enter. "Hey, Blondie," he greeted Caitlin Hammond, forcing a cheerfulness into his voice that he didn't really feel. Julian Marshall could take the sun out of a summer day.

"Hey, Goob."

"Close the door, will ya?" he said, gesturing toward the door she'd left open. "It's hard enough to make out anything on this substandard tape without the light glaring on the screen. You'd think they would have gone digital by now."

Caitlin hesitated, then pushed the door shut. He looked up. Her breathing was labored.

"Take a few deep breaths," Jack told her. He knew what was happening to her. Caitlin's claustrophobia was a problem he'd been dealing with as long as he'd been her partner. Years of therapy had helped her to deal with it, but had failed to completely free her of it. She still hated confined spaces, even if she no longer had full-blown panic attacks.

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Caitlin and her father had both been with the NYPD on 9/11. They'd both been in the World Trade Center's North Tower. She got out, he didn't.

She pulled up a chair next to his. "Anything interesting on those surveillance tapes?" she wanted to know.

He nodded, his expression grim. "It's Marshall. I'm sure of it."

"Did Baker fill you in on our next assignment?" she asked then.

He nodded, continuing to stare at the screen.

"We've got our work cut out for us," she said with a heavy sigh.

"You usually love the hunt," he reminded her.

"Maybe I'm just losing my enthusiasm for the job," she said.

"Did he tell you his theory?"

"Yeah. I think he needs a vacation." Caitlin took several deep breaths.

"I don't know. He could be onto something." Jack pulled himself upright.

"Think about it. The FDA shut down a lab near Boston a couple of months ago. They were doing all sorts of illegal experiments there—accelerated growth hormones, genetic manipulation, cloning. They did some tweaking, turned an average Thoroughbred into a bionic racehorse—nothing on four legs could beat him. Had they not been caught, who knows what they might have done with human beings." He patted her knee. "C'mon. Let's go grab some lunch. I'll buy."

She looked at him, her expression sober. "You'll buy? Is the world about to end or something?"

He laughed. "Insulting me won't get you fed, pardner," he drawled.

"Let me guess." She stood up, anxious to get out of there. "The hot dog stand again?" she wanted to know.

"I like hot dogs," he defended himself.

"You live on hot dogs, Goober."

"C'mon, it's a beautiful day. And you look like you could use some fresh air." He held the door for her, turning back to glance at the image still frozen on the monitor.

Soon, he thought. Soon, you bastard....

1:15 pm:

"If you believe in God, boy, how can you say you also believe in UFOs?" the old man challenged the young preacher in a group discussion on the Mall. It was unseasonably warm for November, and the people gathered had shed their coats.

The young preacher grinned. "What makes you think the two are exclusive of each other?" he wanted to know.

"The Bible says nothin' about little green men!"

"Means nothing," the preacher maintained. "The Bible is God's word to the people of *this* planet. If he created life here, then who is to say he didn't create life on some other world? How are we to know there isn't a race of men—*men*,

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not little green creatures—somewhere out there? And how are we to know God didn't create them millions of years before he created us?"

"You're talkin' weird, boy," the old man scoffed.

"How do you account for the dinosaurs on this planet?" a disbeliever in the group wanted to know.

The young preacher smiled patiently. "Like I said, the Bible only accounts for *human* history and man's interaction with God," he said. "There's nothing to say the earth wasn't around long before man—in fact, we know that it was—or that God didn't play around with his design before he got around to creating us. There's a passage in the Bible about the Tower of Babel—how God created different languages so we couldn't communicate with each other. Has it ever occurred to anyone that he might have been doing so to separate people of different *planets* as well as those of different *nations*?"

"The Bible says six days! The world was created in *six days*!"

"Six days in God's time is probably like six billion years in ours," the preacher said. "God is infinite, remember? He always was and always will be."

"What makes you think you know so much?" a young woman challenged.

"I don't claim to have the answers," the young preacher defended himself. "These are only my personal theories. I don't happen to believe faith and science have to be exclusive of each other."

"Makes sense."

"You're sure not like other preachers I've heard, boy."

"Are you listening to this crap?" Caitlin asked, positioning herself on a nearby bench as Jack paid the vendor for the hot dogs and drinks. "Now I've heard everything."

Jack sat down on the bench next to her and unwrapped his hot dog, inhaling it at length before taking a bite. "I don't know what it is about eating hot dogs cooked outdoors, but they taste so much better," he observed.

"Can't you think of anything but your stomach?" Caitlin brushed her hair out of her face. Her dark glasses hid her eyes as she continued to watch the group. "That preacher—he looks more like a hippie than a real preacher."

"I didn't think you considered preachers to be real." Jack popped the ring on his soda can.

"You know what I mean," she said, annoyed. The breeze kept blowing her hair in her face. She got hair with every bite she took. *Of all days for him to want to eat outdoors.* "This guy's claiming God made aliens and sent them here to populate the planet."

Jack shrugged. "Maybe God is a Scientologist."

Caitlin shook her head, finishing her hot dog. "Or maybe he's a fraud."

"God didn't kill your father, Caitlin," Jack said, watching the young preacher continue to mesmerize the crowd.

"How could he?" Her voice was cold. "He doesn't exist."

Jack turned to look at her, puzzled. "How can you be so angry at someone you don't believe exists?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and let it out forcefully. "I'm angry at the lunatics who kill in his name," she said, crushing her soda can in her hand. The remaining

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soda inside gushed out, spilling over her hand and her white slacks. She muttered an expletive and slammed it to the sidewalk in frustration.

Jack said nothing as he picked up the crushed can and tossed it into a trash can. He knew who she really blamed for her father's death. She blamed herself.

November 28th, 3:42 pm

Cairo:

"Have you ever been here before?" Lynne asked as she and Connor stood in line in Customs.

He shook his head. "Never. How far is the excavation site?" he asked, handing his passport to the customs agent.

"A little over two hundred kilometers—on the eastern side of the Sinai peninsula," she said. "We're just south of the Jebel Hashem al-Tarif."

He opened his carry-on, allowing the agent to inspect the contents. His passport was stamped and he was allowed to move on. Lynne took out her passport and presented it, automatically unzipping her small carry-on for inspection.

"We're not going to be living in tents, are we?" Connor asked.

Lynne shook her head. "Nothing that luxurious," she deadpanned.

Connor looked at her, not sure if she was joking or not.

Once they were finished, they made their way to the baggage carousel to retrieve their checked luggage. "That one's mine," Lynne told him, pointing to a large bag coming their way on the conveyor.

As Connor reached for it, his hand collided with that of another traveler, a young woman who appeared to be in her mid-twenties, attractive, casually dressed. Connor recoiled, his eyes meeting hers. What he saw there unnerved him.

"Sorry," he said uneasily.

"I am sorry," she responded in heavily-accented English.

Lynne saw the look on his face. "What's wrong?" she asked as he passed her bag to her and scanned the carousel for his own.

He shook his head. "Nothing." He retrieved his bags. "Which way to the taxi stand?"

He couldn't tell her. He couldn't tell anyone. He couldn't call attention to himself, couldn't risk exposure. But the young woman he'd touched had a secret. There were explosives in her suitcase. She was on her way to New York, and she was carrying a bomb. He didn't know *how* he knew it, but he knew. He was sure of it.

But he couldn't tell anyone....

4:55 pm:

They checked into a small, seedy hotel in the heart of the city for the night. Connor took one look at the yellowed, peeling wallpaper and stained carpet and said, "You should have let me make the hotel reservations."

"I've been on a nonexistent budget," she reminded him.

"Not anymore."

When she suggested they have dinner at a pizza parlor on Tahir Square, Connor thought she was joking. "Pizza—in Egypt?" he asked.

"Egyptian pizza," she told him. "Much better than the American knock-offs you might find here." She looked at her watch. "I have some calls to make. We can meet in the lobby in an hour."

"Sure."

He went to his own room, not bothering to unpack. Normally, he would have made sure everything was on hangers in the closet or neatly folded in the drawers before he'd even go to dinner, but here he didn't want to remove anything from his luggage unless it was absolutely necessary.

The bugs he killed in the tiny, antiquated bathroom were bigger than any he'd ever seen before. The bed linens were threadbare and the wallpaper splotted with brown stains. Room service was nonexistent. It was a far cry from the accommodations to which he was accustomed.

It would seem things are getting off to a questionable start, he decided as he shook dust from a battered pillow, one of two on the bed that were nearly flattened and smelled of sweat. He was nearly choked by the stench.

He placed a call to Edward and told his stepfather everything he had experienced at the airport. "You have to alert the authorities," he insisted.

"And tell them what?" Edward asked impatiently. "That I know there's a bomb on that plane but I can't tell them *how* I know? Do you have any idea how they'll respond?"

"If that plane takes off, two hundred people will die when it begins its descent to JFK!"

"There's nothing we can do," his stepfather maintained.

"You think it's the seizures again, don't you?" Connor asked, frustrated.

"How would you explain it?"

"And if I'm right?" Connor demanded.

"Let's hope you're not."

6:05 pm:

Lynne was waiting for Connor in the lobby when she was approached by a well-dressed, middle-aged Egyptian man unwilling to take no for an answer. She

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tried to ignore him, but when that didn't work, she took a firm stance. "La-a," she kept repeating, to no avail.

"*Imshee!*"

Lynne turned to see Connor coming toward them. "Sorry I'm late, darling—the overseas telephone service is deplorable," he said, slipping an arm around her waist. He kissed her deeply, taking her completely by surprise. She couldn't say anything, couldn't pull away with the other man watching them. Was Connor out of his mind?

Finally, the man turned and left them alone. Connor released Lynne, smiling. "Think he got the message?"

"I'm sure he did," she said, "but you goofed. Big time."

"How?"

"You've mastered the language, but you've got a lot to learn about the culture," she told him. "That sort of intimacy in public is considered immoral in Arab countries."

"At least it got rid of him," Connor pointed out. "How was I, by the way?"

He was clearly enjoying her discomfort. She rolled her eyes heavenward, determined not to let him see that he'd gotten to her.

"Convincing. Let's leave it at that."

6:35 pm:

"It's called *fatir*," Lynne explained over dinner. The Egyptian pizza, made of sauce, cheese, vegetables and meat on a flatbread that resembled filo dough, was delicious and filling. "Tim—my partner—will send someone to pick us up around noon tomorrow," she went on.

"Partner?" Connor asked, concerned.

"Professional partner," she said. "He's also an archaeologist."

Connor nodded, relieved.

"The team—with the exception of Tim's family and I—live in Taba," Lynne explained. "Tim and his wife, Isabella, have three kids, so space is at a premium at their place. You can get a hotel room at Taba Heights, or you're welcome to use my spare room." Even as she made the offer, she wondered if it was a bad idea. *He's saving the dig*, she reminded herself. *Whatever his reasons, we need him.*

"How do you get electrical power out there in the—what did you call it?" he asked.

"Hashem al-Tarif," she said, reaching for her drink. "We use propane generators for everything."

"Why not just find accommodations in the nearest town?" he asked.

"Would that not be more practical?"

"I need to be near the site," Lynne explained. "It's a pretty remote area, almost an hour's drive from Taba."

"How long have you been there?" he wanted to know.

She took a bite. "A little over three years."

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“That’s a long time to be living in the middle of nowhere.”

She shrugged. “Most of the time, I welcome the solitude.”

“Something we have in common.” Connor took a drink. Then: “Think you’ll want dessert?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I *want* it, but I’m not sure I should *have* it.”

He looked at her oddly for a moment. “Are you always in the habit of denying yourself the things you really want?” he asked with an easy smile.

“I’m used to deprivation,” she said, taking a bite. “I live on excavation sites.”

“Do you ever miss not having a normal life?” he wanted to know. He took his cigarettes from his pocket and lit one.

“I have my moments,” she confessed, “especially when I start thinking about things like family holidays, vacations, having kids—but I love my work, in spite of the obvious disadvantages. It’s hot, dirty work in remote locations, living in cultures vastly different from our own. It’s extreme climates, often primitive living conditions, and all too often, spiders, scorpions and snakes.”

“Sounds charming.”

She watched him with curiosity. “It’s not for everybody.”

“You mention regret at not having had children,” he said, plucking an errant piece of crust from his shirt. “Another of those things you wanted but denied yourself—or was it beyond your control?”

She frowned. “My only real regret,” she admitted. “I’m forty now and I’ve been divorced for almost fourteen years. It’s not in the cards at this point. I’ve accepted that.”

“It’s not uncommon for a woman to have a child at forty or later these days,” he pointed out. “And it was never all that rare for a single woman to have a baby. My mum wasn’t married when she gave birth to me. The husband came later.”

The waiter interrupted them, bringing Connor the coffee he’d ordered. Lynne was grateful for the interruption. “Takes a bit of getting used to,” he commented after tasting it.

“You can always get western coffee here,” she said, “but if you order the Arab version, be forewarned, it comes in three degrees of sweetness: no sugar, just right, and *sukkar ziyaada*, which comes with a year’s sugar cane harvest in every cup.”

He grimaced. “Sounds delightful.”

“It could put a diabetic in a coma, Merlin.”

“*Merlin?*” He laughed at that.

“It fits,” she said, taking another bite. “You seem to be something of a wizard.”

“How so?”

“You got me funding I’d been unable to find no matter how much I’d begged. You managed to get on my flight at the last minute, *and* got us upgraded to first class,” she recalled. “We didn’t have to share a taxi from the airport after your little chat with the driver—who actually took our bags from the trunk *and* carried them into the hotel for us. Normally, I’m lucky if the taxi stays at the curb

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long enough to let me remove them myself. You bribed them, right?"

"I'm not going to tell you," he answered. "I prefer to make myself indispensable to you."

"You've already done that."

Connor only smiled.

11:30 pm:

"Last chance to bail out before we enter no man's land," Lynne joked when they returned to their hotel that night. She fished her room key from her pocket.

He took the key from her and leaned past her to unlock the door. "I'll check your room, make sure it's safe," he insisted.

"You don't have to—" But before she could finish, he was in the room, checking the closet and bathroom.

"Everything seems to be secure," he said, depositing the key in her hand.

"Thanks—and good night," she said. "I would say don't let the bedbugs bite, but given the size of the bugs in this place, I doubt they'd bother with biting. They'll probably just move you to another location to eat you."

He laughed. "They might, at that."

She turned to put the key on the dresser. When she turned back, Connor's face was only a few inches from hers. She took a step back. "I just need room to maneuver in case I have to shove my knee into your groin," she said.

"I'll take my chances." With his fingertips, he raised her face to his. He nuzzled her mouth lazily, then kissed her. "Are you sure you'll be all right here alone?" he whispered in her ear, his lips lightly tugging on her earlobe. "I could stay—"

"No," she said quickly, almost too quickly. "You're going to be trouble, aren't you?"

"That would depend upon your definition of trouble, I think." He released her and walked out, not looking back.

If records are being kept for this sort of thing, we must have broken several here tonight, Lynne thought as she locked the door behind him. The ink's not even dry on the check, and already he's hitting on me.

Yep, he's definitely going to be trouble.

November 29th, 3:15 am:

Connor was still wide awake. He tried to tell himself it was simply a matter of the time difference between London and Cairo, that his body was still on

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London time, but he knew that wasn't the case at all. He stood at the window, staring into the night. He wasn't alone. He was never alone. There were the voices, and they never left him alone, always there, always trying to control him.

He reached for his cigarettes. "You knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what?"

"You knew about the explosives that girl was carrying. You know what's going to happen."

"Of course. It was my idea. Brilliant, don't you think?"

"Brilliant?" he asked. "Two hundred people are going to die!"

"You could always warn them."

"And they'd arrest me," Connor predicted. "Is that your idea as well?"

"We all have choices to make. Your freedom or the lives of those people you don't even know. What's it going to be?"

"You know bloody well I can't come out of hiding!"

"I didn't think you'd be so noble. You'd never risk your life, your freedom for anyone...."

6:45 am

New York City:

An airliner en route to New York City from Cairo went down over the Atlantic Ocean less than ten miles from JFK International Airport. Reports from ships in the area at the time indicated an explosion had taken place aboard the aircraft. Coast Guard ships searching the debris field held out little hope that any of the twelve crewmembers or one hundred eighty-eight passengers could have survived. According to worldwide media reports, Al Qaeda was taking credit for the disaster....

8:45 pm:

Hashem al-Tarif, Egypt:

Traveling from Cairo to the Sinai was like arriving on another planet. It was the most barren place on earth, desolate, much like photographs Connor had seen of the surface of Mars. The first thing he noticed about the desert was the light, brilliant white light that seemed to bleach out the horizon as it bounced off the quartz in the sand. Bushes bent in the wind as it blew across the ground. As far as he could see there was only barrenness: rocks, sand and mountains. As they traveled further into the interior, the only signs of life he could detect were the occasional black tents of the Bedouin camps amid jagged rocks, drifting

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sand and a wind-scoured landscape that seemed to stretch on forever.

No one will be looking for me here, Connor thought with certainty.

It was a four-hour drive from Cairo to the excavation site, and by the time they arrived, Connor was fighting off sleep. He hadn't slept the night before, and right now he wanted nothing more than a shower and a soft bed.

Lynne's trailer was larger than he had expected. There were three bedrooms. One had been converted into a small office. The only furnishings in the room were a long table and two standard office chairs. There were two computers, a printer and a scanner/fax on the table. Their phone and internet service was obtained via satellite. Stacks of books lined one wall, and the open closet held miscellaneous equipment.

"And this is your room," she was saying. He turned. The door across the hall was open. It was small, simply furnished, and looked reasonably comfortable. "Your bathroom's through that door," Lynne said, pointing to the closed door on the other side of the bed. "There are towels and sheets in the linen closet, and we send someone into town a couple of times a week, so if there's anything you need, just make a list."

He put his bags down next to the bed. "How far is Taba?" he asked, wondering just how far they actually were from anything resembling civilization.

"Forty-five kilometers," she said, leaning against the door frame. "They have a bank, a post office, even a small hospital—but if you get really sick, it's better to make the trip into Cairo."

He grimaced. "If you live that long."

She laughed. "The bakery in town is decent. So are the restaurants. We get most of what we need there, but we still have to go all the way to Cairo a couple of times a month."

He unzipped his garment bag and started hanging clothes in the closet. "How do you get water here?" he wanted to know.

"We have the water brought in by truck. We've got tanks that have to be refilled, so we have to be frugal with water usage." She paused, a look of concern on her face. "This has been an expensive project, I'm afraid. Had you not come along with your very generous offer, we'd be closing up shop and heading back to the States in another few weeks."

"Glad I could be of service." He opened the bureau's top drawer and started to unpack his bags.

"You must be tired," she said then, glancing at her watch. "I'll leave you to settle in. If you're hungry, I can make some sandwiches."

He shook his head. "I think I'd just like to get some sleep," he said. "Didn't get much last night, and it's catching up with me. I'm afraid I'm still on London time."

She nodded. "See you in the morning, then." She started to walk away, then came back to the doorway. "Anything in particular you'd like for breakfast?"

He gave her a dismissive wave. "I don't expect you to look after me."

"I'm going to be cooking anyway," she said. "Besides, I'm guessing you've never set foot in a kitchen."

"As it happens, I *have* had occasion to learn to cook," he said, amused by

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her assumption. “My stepfather has servants. I’ve never had any myself. I dislike having employees in my home. And since we’re already on the subject, I thought we might share household responsibilities as long as we’re going to be roommates.”

Lynne looked unconvinced. “This should be interesting.” She stifled a yawn. “Good night, Merlin.”

He smiled. “You too.”

He waited until he heard her go into her own bedroom and close the door. Then he retrieved a small leather zippered case from the bottom of the carryon. He glanced toward the door before he opened it and took out two prescription bottles. He paused again, listening. He could hear her shower running. Satisfied she would not be coming back, he took a pill from each bottle, then went into the bathroom and filled a paper cup with water. He popped the pills into his mouth and chased them down with the water.

He took a deep breath, went back into the bedroom, tucked the prescription bottles in the carryon again and stashed it at the back of the closet.

“Go to the mountain. Hear the voice of God. You are here to find your destiny—embrace it. Find God. Find yourself. Go to the mountain.”

“Leave me alone,” he grumbled as he continued to unpack.

“Go to the mountain and you will find the truth....”

Connor tried to shut out the voice in his head, but it refused to be silenced. “I’m not climbing any damned mountain!” he snapped, unable to take it any longer.

November 30th, 6:10 am:

Lynne rolled over in bed and opened her eyes, vaguely aware of an unexpected aroma in the air. As she emerged from the fog of sleep, she realized what she was smelling and got out of bed, padding barefoot to the kitchen.

She found Connor standing at the stove, wearing jeans and a blue work shirt. He had a dishtowel draped over one shoulder and a frying pan in hand. He was heaping scrambled eggs onto two plates that already held bacon and fried potatoes.

He glanced over his shoulder when he realized she was there. “Good morning, Raven,” he greeted her cheerfully.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Proving I can cook.” He put down the frying pan and moved the plates to the table. “Toast?”

She shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

He popped four slices of bread into the toaster. “Juice?”

She nodded. “We have orange and grape—but I can do that.”

He shook his head. “This is my show. You sit.” Then, turning to face her, he smiled appreciatively. “On second thought, don’t sit. Nice legs.”

She realized she wore only the three-sizes-too-big St. Louis Rams jersey she’d slept in. Living with a man platonically was going to require a major

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adjustment on her part. "Enjoy the view all you like," she said. "Just so you know the trail never goes any further north."

He looked amused. "Not even for special tours?"

"There are no special tours in this country," she assured him, seating herself at the table. She tucked her legs beneath it in a way that shielded them from his view. "If you like, after breakfast I'll give you a tour of our little venture here."

He nodded. "I would indeed like that." He sat down across the table from her. "Do you have a working lab here?"

"We have a lab in Taba, but it's in need of equipment," she admitted.

"Take me there this afternoon and we'll see what we can do about that," he said promptly. "I should mention that I've arranged to have one of my motorbikes shipped here. I'd be lost without it."

"Ride a lot, do you?" she asked.

He gave a deep sigh. "My bikes are my therapy," he said. "I'm not good at talking out my issues, so when I need to deal with things, I just go off on my bike for a time."

"Does it really help?" she asked.

"For the most part. Some things have no resolution."

"You'll want to stick to the paved roads here," she cautioned. "There are still land mines here in the Peninsula. I wouldn't want to see you get blown up."

9:25 am:

"We have fourteen graduate students and at least sixty volunteers working on the site at all times," Lynne told Connor.

"Where do you get your volunteers?" he asked.

"Mostly people who sign up to work here as part of their vacation, students looking for extra credit, Indiana Jones wannabes, mostly."

"What about the lab?" he wanted to know.

She shook her head. "We improvise."

"I'd like to bring in some people to staff it," he decided.

"Optimism. I like that," she told him.

Two Egyptian fighter jets flew directly overhead as Lynne continued the tour. "This is a military zone," she told him. "I feel like they're always watching us, waiting for us to expose our true intentions." She shoved her hands into the pockets of her faded jeans. She wore a tan fedora that shielded her face from the sun.

"What would they do if they did find out?" Connor put on his sunglasses.

"Kick us out of here," Lynne answered with certainty. "They've managed to keep us off the mountain for the past three years."

"And you would like to climb that mountain," he concluded.

"Of course."

"Because it's there, I presume."

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She shook her head. “Because Moses climbed that mountain. Because he saw the face of God there.”

“So...you really do believe in all the hocus pocus, do you?” Connor was intrigued. “You’re not just looking for a prize?”

“If I didn’t believe, I wouldn’t be here,” Lynne said. “In archaeological circles, I’m what’s called a maximalist.”

Connor cocked an eyebrow. “A maximalist?”

She nodded. “An archaeologist who uses the Bible, literally, as a guidebook,” she explained. “I walk this land and I can imagine Moses leading the Hebrews across this same spot. I can see Joseph and Mary with the infant Jesus, fleeing Herod’s death warrant as clearly as I can see you now.”

“But you’ve been here three years and haven’t found anything.” He stepped past a woman in a wide-brimmed hat, sifting soil.

“Whatever is here has been lost to us for over three *thousand* years,” she pointed out. “Eventually, we’ll find it.”

“You sure about that?” he asked.

“Tim and I did our first dig ten years ago in Megiddo,” Lynne went on. “I’ll never forget how I felt when I unearthed artifacts confirming King Solomon’s reign. I knew then that was my calling, to verify events in the Bible with independent archaeological evidence.”

“You and Tim—you’ve known each other a long time?”

“Since college,” she said with a nod. “We’re like siblings.”

“You’ve never been involved?”

She laughed at the suggestion. “No, he’s been with Isabella since high school. They decided they wanted to get married when they were still kids. He and I, we’re best friends. We never saw each other in any other way.”

“What made you decide to become an archaeologist?” Connor asked as they paused at a cooler to pick up two bottles of water.

“My uncle, my father’s brother,” she said. “He was an archaeologist. I was just a kid, and I thought he had the most interesting life. He seemed to have been everywhere. I was completely infatuated with it.”

He looked around, taking it all in. “If you believe God is real, then you must also believe Satan is real,” he said.

Lynne was surprised by his statement. “Unfortunately, he is,” she said. “Satan’s strength lies in the fact that most people either don’t believe he’s real, or they believe he is but think they can stand up to him on their own.”

“You don’t believe that’s possible?”

She frowned. “You can’t fight a supernatural war with the weapons of this world,” she said. “It would be like taking on Godzilla with a pea shooter.”

Connor chuckled at the mental image that prompted. “So you don’t believe bad things just happen, that we’re programmed either by DNA or by our environment to do wrong?” he asked.

“No. We all sin—that’s one thing. It’s quite another to look into the face of true evil,” she answered. “To forgive, we have to be able to understand what we’re expected to forgive. How do we begin to understand true, absolute evil?”

“And how would one define absolute evil?” he challenged her.

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She gave the question some thought. “9/11. The Holocaust. Darfur,” she said. “Mothers who murder their children, but afterward can’t explain why they did it. Actions that are indefensible. Satan is a real charmer, a master manipulator. He whispers in your ear, enticing. Evil is easier than good. More fun, some would say.”

“Do you believe Satan—or God, for that matter—speaks to the individual?” he asked then.

“Sure, absolutely,” she answered without hesitation.

“In an audible voice?”

She removed the cap from her water bottle and took a long swallow. “Sometimes,” she said, “but usually it’s a voice that comes from within.”

“Like schizophrenia?”

She shook her head. “Throughout recorded history, those who heard and saw what others couldn’t were automatically labeled mentally ill,” she said. “Sure, there are some who actually are, but consider what made them ill.”

“The voices,” Connor said. He knew only too well. “But who decides what’s true evil? Does one get labeled evil simply by being different, outside the established norm? Wasn’t that how Hitler justified the killing of millions of Jews? Isn’t that bin Laden’s excuse for turning commercial airliners into weapons to commit mass murder? He claimed, I believe, that the West is decadent, populated by evil individuals?”

She gave a little laugh. “You should be a sociologist,” she said. “What did your father—your biological father—do?”

Connor’s mood turned abruptly dark. “I have no idea who my father was.”

2:05 pm:

“So, am I going to have to call him sir?”

This came from Lynne’s longtime partner, Tim O’Halloran, a tall, thin, bespectacled African-American. She and Tim had been friends since their days at the University of Utah, and professional partners for the past ten years. Theirs was the kind of friendship that allowed them to be totally uncensored with each other, as Tim was now.

“No,” Lynne assured him, wiping her face with a handkerchief.

“Is there going to be a problem?” he pursued as he reached for his tool box. “Is he going to override every decision we make? Do we have to consult him on everything?”

Lynne rolled her eyes. “He’s not going to pull rank,” she said, checking the fixed GPS receiver. She decided not to admit that she’d initially had the same reservations. “When I met him, he sure didn’t look like a billionaire’s stepson. I don’t think money means all that much to him.”

Tim adjusted the harness on the GPS rover unit worn by one of their team members. Using global positioning, which relies on US military satellites, they were able to map out the site and create a contour map of the area. He grinned

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at Lynne. "It sounds like you spent a lot of time looking at him," he said.

"Tim!" His wife scolded him gently. Isabella was a photographer who documented their work on film. She was tall, reed-thin, with a mass of tight black curls framing her heart-shaped face.

"There wouldn't be anything wrong with it if she did, babe," Tim defended himself. "She's been alone way too long. It's about time she met somebody who can make her see all men aren't like that jackass she married."

"For the record, Connor and I are strictly business," Lynne interjected. "Mixing business and pleasure would be a very bad idea."

Tim made another adjustment in the harness before sending the rover out. "Yeah," he said, unconvinced. "That's why you let him move in with you. Talk about sending out serious mixed signals."

"He needed a place to stay," Lynne said with a shrug. "He won't be staying very long."

Tim turned to Isabella with a look that indicated they had been speculating about how Lynne had managed to obtain the funding so easily. Then he turned back to Lynne. "I say go for it. You deserve to be happy."

"You just met Connor. For that matter, I just met him," Lynne said, parking herself on a large wooden crate. She wiped her hands on her jeans. "How would you know if he could make me happy or not?"

"I don't," Tim conceded. "But I've been there with you through David Masters and that bonehead Darcy. I watched you get kicked to the curb by both of them. This is the first time since the divorce I've seen you look at a man like you gave a rat's ass. Maybe it'll happen, maybe it won't, but you won't know if you don't take the chance. You like the guy. Why don't you want to admit it?"

Isabella spoke up. "It's possible she doesn't want *you* sticking your nose where it doesn't belong," she guessed.

"Funding for five years, and you didn't even have to submit a proposal," Tim reminded Lynne. "Even if you don't have ideas about him, I think it's pretty clear he's got ideas about you."

"You cannot seriously believe he'd put out that kind of money for—" Lynne couldn't even say the words. It was ridiculous.

"He's not here for the ambience," Tim reasoned, pulling a bottle of water from a nearby cooler.

Lynne shook her head. "There's nothing between Connor and me and there's not going to be," she said firmly.

Tim grinned. "How long do you plan to maintain that vow of celibacy?" he wanted to know.

Pam Hill, the team's botanist, spoke up then. "Connor can move in with me," she volunteered.

"You only have one bedroom," Isabella pointed out.

Pam put down the tools she'd been digging with and wiped her brow with the back of her hand. Her blond hair escaped the cloth headband she wore, spilling across her forehead. "We'd only need one," she said. "If I had a man who looked like him under my roof, I'd be all over him like a bad rash."

"If you got all over him, he'd probably end up with a bad rash," Tim said,

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only half-joking. Pam had a reputation for promiscuity. It didn't matter if the men were married or single. A wedding ring didn't stop her.

"Hey, Connor!" Isabella called out. He was heading toward them. She raised her camera to get a shot of him.

"No photographs!" he shouted, waving her off.

"This is just for—"

"*No photographs!*" This time, there was anger in his voice.

Isabella and Tim both looked at Lynne, perplexed. She shrugged. "He's very private." But to herself: *Is that all it is?*

December 15th, 4:42 am:

"You have contacts, Edward. I'm sure there's something you can do," Connor pressured his stepfather. He was outside the trailer, keeping enough distance to make sure Lynne didn't overhear the conversation.

"You give me too much credit."

"All right, then, *Nicholas* has contacts," Connor conceded. "His eyes and ears seem to be everywhere. I'm constantly being told how indispensable I am to this project. Tell him I want him to prove it. I need to keep a low profile for as long as I'm here. That means I need the Egyptian military to keep their distance."

"Nicholas does not always listen to me, Andrew," Edward reminded him.

"*Connor*," he corrected. "Why must I keep reminding you?"

"Connor. I will try to remember in the future." There was a pause.

"Perhaps you've chosen the wrong place to hide."

"That may be true, but I've chosen it, and if Nicholas and his cronies wish my work to be completed, they'll do as I ask." Connor raked a hand through his hair.

"I'll speak with him."

"You do that, Edward." He paused. "I'm going to take over their field lab here. I'll be requesting equipment and personnel. I can resume my work here until it's clear to return to London."

December 15th, 3:15 pm
London:

"How long will he have to stay there?"

The question came from Nicholas Dante, CEO of Icarus International. He was a tall, intimidating man in his fifties, dark, with an athletic build and eyes so dark they appeared to have no pupils. He'd worked for Edward for over thirty years, but with the passing of time, Edward found himself wondering who really worked for whom. Too often, he found himself taking orders from Dante, rather

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than the other way around.

Aloud he said, "I have no idea. I suppose until the furor dies down. He mentioned needing equipment and personnel. He said he would work there for the time being. At any rate, he feels the presence of the Egyptian military poses a risk."

Dante was silent, seeming to give the matter some thought. "I'll see what can be done," he said finally.

"Thank you."

Edward didn't doubt for a moment that Dante would do more than "see what could be done." He was certain the Egyptian military would discreetly begin to keep their distance from the excavation site. The influence of the international cartel Dante represented seemed to have no limits. In the beginning, Edward had been able to look the other way, to take whatever they had to offer him and not question from where the resources came. With the passage of time, however, the unanswered questions had become quite troubling.

But now it was too late.

December 16th, 4:30 pm

Hashem al-Tarif:

Connor was on his laptop, ordering equipment for the lab, when Lynne came in with a small cardboard box with holes poked in the lid. "What have you there?" he asked, nodding toward the box.

She sat down next to him. "My patient." She lifted the lid so that he could see what was inside. Huddled in one corner of the box was a tiny bird with one wing askew. "He's injured his wing," she explained.

Connor looked at her. "What are you going to do, put a splint on it?" he asked, amused.

"Hardly. I just have to keep him quiet and make sure he gets enough nourishment until he heals. Then I send him on his way."

"And how will you know when he's well enough to be set free?"

"I won't. But he will." She placed the box on the table in front of him.

Connor studied the tiny creature for a long moment. It brought back a sudden rush of memories from the distant past, of all the injured creatures he and his mother tended when he was a small child. "*They're God's creatures, just as we are,*" she would tell him. "*We are responsible for them. We must take care of them. We have been given stewardship over all the creatures of the earth.*"

"Then why do we eat them, Mummy?" he asked. It didn't make sense.

She smiled patiently. "We're allowed to kill only for food," she explained. "One day you will understand. But you—you have a gift, and a responsibility to use that gift to make this world a better place."

"What gift, Mummy?" he wanted to know.

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"You're a healer," she told him, extending her hand to him. She was holding a bird that had crashed into their window. It looked to be near death.

"He's dying," Connor remembered saying. The pitiful creature was barely breathing. His heart broke for it.

She shook her head. "He's hurt, but he's still alive. You can heal him."

"But how?" He didn't understand. "What can I do?"

"Touch him. Stroke him," she instructed.

He did as his mother said. He always obeyed his mother without question. He stroked the bird's tiny body with timid fingers, and almost immediately, its wings started to flutter. His mother released her hold on it, and it flew away as if it had never been injured.

"If I can heal animals and birds, Mummy, why can I not heal you?" he asked.

She looked surprised. "Why would I need healing?" she asked.

"You're hurting," he observed solemnly. "I can see it in your eyes."

She hesitated. "There are different kinds of hurting," she tried to explain.

"Some hurts only God himself can heal."

"Why doesn't he, then?" Connor challenged.

"In his time, he will," she assured him. "There are things we must accept without question." She hugged him tightly.

He had never been able to accept the things she'd done....

December 17th, 5:55 am:

Connor was up early the next morning, working on his laptop again. Almost as an afterthought, he decided to check on the bird. He lifted the lid on the box slowly, trying not to startle it or allow it to escape. *Not that it could, weak as it is.*

It wasn't moving. It lay on one side, its tiny legs stiff. *It's dead*, Connor thought. He decided to dispose of it, but when he reached down to pick it up, it jerked as if startled and hopped to its feet, its feathers ruffled. It looked up at Connor, as surprised as he was.

"Little bugger," he growled. "You sure as hell looked dead."

"That's odd," Lynne said, coming up behind him.

"What?" Connor asked, still baffled by what had just happened.

"The bird," she said. "Last night, he wasn't doing very well. I was starting to think he might not make it."

"They may look fragile, but the little bastards are actually quite resilient," Connor said with an offhanded shrug.

"I think he wants to go home," Lynne said, observing the bird for a long moment. It looked up at her expectantly. She took the box and went over to the door. Connor followed, watching as she opened the door, then lifted the lid from the box. The bird didn't move. It seemed to be waiting for instructions.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Connor asked. "You've worn out your

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welcome. Go!”

The bird took off, flying confidently westward until they could no longer see it. Connor put an arm around Lynne, noting that she didn’t push him away.

She turned to look at him. “Did you ever have a pet as a child?” she asked.

He thought about it. “When I was very young, I had many pets. All of them temporary,” he said. “My mum used to say animals had the ability to see evil. She said they could predict the weather, foresee disasters and see demon spirits.”

“They can,” Lynne said quietly.

“Any stray that came to our door was fed what crumbs we could manage,” he remembered. “The lost tend to stick together, it would seem.”

12:44 pm:

“Have you been taking your medication?” Edward asked when Connor checked in by phone.

“Yes!”

“There haven’t been any incidents since Cairo?”

“No, not that I can recall,” Connor lied. He decided not to mention the bird.

“That’s not amusing,” Edward reprimanded him.

“It most certainly is not,” Connor agreed. “Nor are your attempts to keep me under your thumb.”

“I *am* concerned,” Edward defended himself. “You’re valuable to us.”

“I’m touched,” Connor said harshly. “Not ‘I care about you,’ just, ‘you’re valuable to us.’ It would seem I’ve become an unlisted asset of Icarus International.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Only too well. You’ve reminded me every day of my life.”

February 20th, 12:37 pm

Taba:

“What do you think of the changes I’ve made?” Connor asked as he escorted Lynne into the lab.

She looked around. The equipment he’d ordered had arrived, and the place looked like something out of *Star Trek*. There were half a dozen lab techs in white coats, checking over everything.

“I barely recognize it,” Lynne said. “This is so high-tech—what are we going to do with all of this?”

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He smiled. "That's up to you."

"Me?"

"We're going to need something to work with. Find us something." He regarded her with amusement. "Consider this a challenge."

She walked around, taking it all in. "I don't even recognize some of this equipment." She turned back to face Connor again. "You could always create Frankenstein's monster if you get bored."

He leaned back against one of the counters, folding his arms across his chest. "You're used to operating on a shoestring," he observed. "That's now at an end. If you want to make history, you have to gamble."

"Are you a gambler?" she asked.

"In most things, yes."

6:45 pm:

The nights in the Sinai could be surprisingly cold. Most evenings, Connor would return from the lab, Lynne would come in from the site, and whoever got home first made dinner. Afterward, they would finish up their paperwork, then settle down with coffee or hot cocoa and unwind. Connor found, to his surprise, that he genuinely enjoyed being with her. He was comfortable with her in ways he'd never been with anyone else.

He was going to miss her when the time came to leave this last outpost of hell and return to London. *A shame, really. If circumstances were different, I'd take her with me.*

"You want whipped cream?" she asked as she took the mugs from the cabinet.

"Sounds good. Need any help?"

"To make cocoa?" She laughed. "I'm not that pathetic in the kitchen."

Connor sat on the couch. He noticed a photo album lying atop a stack of books on the floor and picked it up, leafing through the pages. He saw that most of the photographs were of children. Boys, girls, all ages and sizes. Some were recent, while others appeared to be old photographs. He found it interesting that she kept a traditional photo album, rather than putting all of her photos on her computer. *A bow to traditionalism?* he wondered.

"Family photos," Lynne said as she came into the room, carrying two mugs. "I don't get home very often, so I bring all of them with me."

"The black-and-white shots—you and your sisters?" he asked.

She settled down beside him, handing him one of the mugs. "Fraid so," she said. She pointed to one of the group shots. "That's me at seven. I looked like an ugly little bird."

He smiled, sipping his cocoa. "I find it hard to believe you could ever have been ugly."

She tapped the photo lightly with the tip of her index finger. "The evidence speaks for itself," she told him. "I had to grow into this face."

He looked at her for a moment. "You've succeeded." He turned back to

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the photo album. “Your sisters are all in dresses. But not you,” he noticed.

“I was always a tomboy,” she said. “I was as different from my sisters as I could be. Mom said I was nothing but trouble, right from the start. I surprised her and arrived three weeks early. She and Dad were at a prayer retreat near Kansas City, and she went into labor right in the middle of morning prayers. Twenty-one hours later, I arrived—red-faced and screaming, or so I’m told.”

“Prayer retreat?” he asked.

She nodded. “My father’s a preacher. He has a small church near St. Louis,” she said.

He chuckled softly. “I warn you now, you’ll not make a convert of me,” he said. “I’m a lost cause.”

“There’s no such thing,” she said, turning her attention back to the photo album. “My sisters were all sweet, calm babies. I, on the other hand, was a difficult child who wanted to walk before I could crawl and had a temper, even in the crib. My mother said I would become frustrated and scream until my face turned red when I was unable to do anything I wanted, even minor stuff.

“I was always the odd one. I was the only one to leave Missouri, even to attend college. My sisters all married local men and stayed there. They all managed to stay married and have families. I’m the only one who failed as a wife.”

He finished his cocoa and set his mug aside. “You’re quite a paradox, Dr. Raven,” he told her. “You’re an accomplished professional, an independent woman, but you want the fairy tale. You want what your siblings have, but you took great pains to distance yourself from that lifestyle. You want children, yet you’ve put yourself in a position that makes motherhood an unlikely prospect.”

Lynne didn’t respond.

“Could it be your expectations are unrealistic?” he asked then.

“Meaning?” she asked carefully.

“That perhaps you need to rethink your priorities, reconsider what’s most important to you,” he suggested. “Having children doesn’t require a husband. My mum didn’t even know who my father was.”

Lynne put her mug down. “I was brought up to believe you had the husband first, then the kids,” she said, avoiding his eyes. “I had the husband, he didn’t want kids. I left him, end of story.”

“So if you had the opportunity to have a child without a husband, you’d refuse?” he asked, genuinely interested.

She exhaled reluctantly. “We shouldn’t be having this conversation.” She obviously didn’t want him to see just how painful the topic was for her.

He wouldn’t leave it alone. “There’ve been so many advancements in fertility treatments,” he continued. “Have you had fertility tests?”

She stiffened. “Connor—”

“Have you?” he repeated, undeterred.

She avoided his eyes. “I’m still fertile, though not as much so as I would have been twenty years ago,” she admitted finally.

“There are means of enhancing fertility, but in your case I’d think that would be risky,” he told her. “Fertility treatments too often result in multiple births.

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Given your work, your lifestyle..." He shrugged.

She shook her head in resignation. "I've heard it all before."

"You've considered artificial insemination, I assume," he went on.

She nodded slowly. "It didn't pan out."

"If you're serious about having a child, I could help you," Connor suggested.

"Connor, I don't want to talk about it, okay?" she snapped, getting to her feet.

He backed off...for the moment.

11:45 pm:

Connor stared at the monitor for a long moment, rereading the e-mail he had just completed.

SHE WANTS A CHILD BUT HAS LOST HOPE. WE DISCUSSED ALL OPTIONS. SHE HAS ACTIVELY PURSUED THIS. SHE IS QUITE SERIOUS ABOUT IT. I HAVE OFFERED MY ASSISTANCE. SHE IS RELUCTANT, BUT I BELIEVE SHE WILL EVENTUALLY ACCEPT.

He took a deep breath, then hit "Send."