

Lucid



S.D.Dillon

LUCID

B.D. Dillon

Copyright © 2007-2009 B.D. Dillon

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written consent of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The right of B.D. Dillon to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First Ebook Edition 2007

Second Ebook Edition 2009

Second Edition

All characters in this publication are purely fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

— *Briarwood Mental Institution, staff break room. October 20th 9:00 a.m.*

“... I hope that you will make Dr. Gabrielli feel welcome.” Doctor Otto Laberenez addressed the staff who were sitting at the long tables and lining the wall spaces between vending machines. “He will be taking over for my colleague. We dearly miss Dr. André, who dedicated his life to the profession, and this institution. But I know he would be the first to say that new blood needs to be infused every now and then, and Dr. Gabrielli has an impressive background. He has worked abroad as well as in the states, becoming a recognized and respected clinical psychologist, advancing some of the most exciting new behavioral fields...”

Anthony “Tony” Gabrielli half-listened to the inflated introduction by the director of the institution. There were more than generations separating himself and the

esteemed Dr. Laberenez, with his white beard and close-cropped hair, impeccable blue suit, silver tie and lofty mind. Otto Laberenez was old school, one of those "sixties bachelors". The type of man who was embraced early for his near-genius mind, and never suffered being labeled a "nerd" in his generation. You could always spot the type. Behind those wire glasses and intense blue eyes lay a mind as vast as a university library, yet a man more comfortable with his academic friends than he was with anyone of the modern age and culture.

Dr. André had been hand picked by Laberenez. Tony, as he would later introduce himself to the staff, was sent by outside powers to fill the slot left open by the doctor's death. From the moment they had met, Tony knew Dr. Otto Laberenez wished he had acted faster to appoint the replacement himself.

Following the introduction, the director left the room. Tony spent some time talking to people. He got a

weak coffee from the vending machine. Feeling eyes on him, accessing and curious, he smoothly answered any questions, slightly less egotistic than the director had presented. An hour later he stopped by the receptionist center and requested the patient files be sent to his office.

A woman with attractive face and figure looked up from a computer screen. "They're already in his...I mean, your computer. All you have to do is type in the name." The woman eyed Tony indecisively and handed him a list.

Offering a wry smile he took the sheet, heading down the hall and to the left, through a slick wood door. Tony paused at the door, running his fingers across a bare spot where a nameplate had resided, now waiting to be replaced with his own. He looked out the window, which was most of the wall, setting aside the paper in his hand to open it. Immediately a crisp autumn scent, earth and wood—freshness replaced the smell of carpet dust. A

mixture of gold, red and yellow came into focus. He liked fall well enough, would rather be outdoors in any season, but this month was always a bad omen for him.

Superstitious or not, he could do without October, in particular Halloween.

Sliding his hands into the pockets of his khaki slacks, he mentally laughed at the look Dr. Laberenez had given him. Not only did he dress as casual for work as he did in his off time; Tony never wore a white coat or a tie. He believed staunchly the site of that white coat was more of a hindrance than a help to patients. In many, it inspired fear instead of trust.

So there he was, shaking the old doctor's manicured hand, wearing his khakis, green chambray shirt and tennis shoes, only later in the restroom noticing his wavy black hair in disarray from the wind and grime on his palms from the flat he'd changed on his truck that morning.

Tony grunted and turned, sliding out the plush chair, absently glancing at the walls with their blank spots awaiting his own licenses and awards. The office was wood paneled, with deep burgundy carpet and two small leather settees, as well as a comfortable gray chair across from the wooden desk. There was a tall plant in the corner, a cabinet, and a graceful-legged side table with business cards and pamphlets. Rounding off the room was one wall of bookshelves holding the required reference materials.

It fit Dr. Laberenez and likely Dr. André too. It mocked him however. The sanitized room conjured images of himself thirty years from now, white-haired and wearing suits, referring to every patient in textbook terms and rushing out to give lectures, reading *Psychiatric Times* magazine instead of his usual sports page.

Tony shuddered.

He turned on the computer and glanced at the phone, seeing access to the main desk and staff rooms, but no quick dial to old Laberenez.

Picking up the list, he began to type in names, skimming over files and notes, yawning now and then at the rambling tendencies of his predecessor. He did this through the first eighteen, and then typed in the name Lane Sheridan...

Sitting back, Tony scrolled down the page:

Transferred from county hospital after suicide attempt following the drowning death of husband.

He looked at the date of admittance and frowned. Five years? Under most circumstances, or in instance of a breakdown brought on by grief, such an act was one of temporary desperation and may require some counseling, outpatient care, possibly a low dose of sedatives...but five years?

He clicked through the file in search of Doctor André's notes. Unlike the others, there were only brief updates, weekly reports by the nurses on duty, observations, a list of questionable medications, and no mention of therapy.

Tony tried to loosen his furrowed brow as he left the office and headed up to the main desk.

"Excuse me..." He looked at the woman's name tag, "Janice, is it?" He smiled. "I'll be making my rounds now."

She blinked at him. "Very well, Doctor. " She looked toward the moon-shaped curve of the desk where several staff members were seated, talking and doing paperwork. "Gina, Dr. Gabrielli is ready to make his rounds."

A tall woman in her thirties with black hair and light blue eyes detached herself, grabbing a white coat off a rack and putting it on over her white silk blouse and blue trousers. She collected a clipboard and other items then met him on the other side of the desk.

Tony offered his hand. "I'm Dr. Tony."

She smiled, accepted his handshake and nodded toward the double doors. "This is your ward here. All except for Mr. Krosher, who is in 24-hour watch."

They went through the doors. "There's a monitor in the main hall and one in the blue room. You can view it from your desk computer should you wish to observe. You have six who are on the transfer list, having made good progress with therapy. I'm sure Dr. André left notes..."

"Blue room?"

"Isolation. Mr. Krosher is periodically under suicide watch. He attempted to swallow his sleeve a week ago."

The ward was all too typical. The intent was to deprive patients of stimulation and create a calm and clean atmosphere. It was sensory sterile, with green walls and locked rooms with prison-like doors. There were murmurings and mumblings, humming sounds that echoed up the hall.

In the last place he'd worked clinical, there had been a country club-type setting. Patients wore everyday clothing and were allowed various activities. But Briarwood was set up for long-term, the patients suffering severe mental illnesses, which made the prospect of six transfers, likely to halfway houses or private care, encouraging. But it also made Tony anxious to discover why Lane Sheridan was placed here... *and was still here after five years.*

Orderlies passed by them as they looked in on the patients. Tony nodded, went through a brief discussion with the nurse about each one, and then moved on.

At Lane Sheridan's room, he stood in the doorway, barely hearing the nurse telling him the same sketchy background he'd read in the file. He saw a woman in her thirties, petite and wearing a sack-like gown, cotton booties. She had deep red hair. As he walked toward the

bed, he noticed the breakfast tray still untouched.

Crossing his arms, he observed the sleeping patient.

Experience told him she was heavily sedated, and there was nothing healthy about her pallid skin and bruised eyelids. Her lips were chapped and cheeks somewhat sunken.

“What medications is she on?”

The nurse, who was leaning out the doorway joking with an orderly, gave a distant reply. “Olanzapine.”

Tony paid no heed to her indifferent demeanor. He searched in his pocket for his light and leaned over, lifting the woman’s lids. He frowned and lifted her hand, checking her pulse, which was shallow. Turning over her wrists he saw a very faint, short pink scar on the right one.

“Has Mrs. Sheridan participated in any therapy here?”

“That would be in the files. Dr. André had his own personal nurse, Gloria, who retired when he died. We’ve been assigned the floor since then, taking turns on our shifts.”

“Of course.” He studied the pale face again seeing images in his mind of another female, another time in his life that he’d rather forget. “I want her dosage reduced. She’s far too heavily medicated for anything to penetrate. We’ll wean her slowly.” He turned and looked at the nurse who was writing on the chart.

Tony finished his rounds, getting acquainted with the patients who would be under his care. He had not gotten where he was today by accepting secondhand diagnosis. He’d study all the case files and notes, meet with every patient and observe them. He respected the profession and men such as Laberenez and André, but he never forgot they were from the generation that practiced electroconvulsive therapy, performed lobotomies, and

other arcane treatments on the mentally ill. He'd seen his share of over-medicated patients who had no cognitive response to therapy, simply because they were easier to manage long-term. It was an era of psychiatric medicine he'd worked his entire career to erase.

— *October 21st*

The following day, Tony made his rounds, stopping at Lane Sheridan's room last. He pulled up a stool and seated himself beside the bed. Tony checked her vitals and looked at the nurse standing by the door, this one different than yesterday, a second shift nurse by the name of Mary.

"Who administered Mrs. Sheridan's meds last night?"

She looked at her notes. "I can't read the initials but I can find out."

Tony stood, refusing to conceal his ire. "Do that. And make sure my orders are followed next time. I want her meds reduced. I wrote the dosage myself and left it at the front desk."

"Yes, sir." She backed out of the doorway.

"Go. Now." He stood in the place she vacated, eyeing his patient who looked worse than the day before. Malnourishment and a dry, chafed pallor did their best to hide the fact there were good bones underneath. He didn't like it.

The nurse was back in moments, flushed and out of breath. "They said nurse Hanks administered the meds. She's out for the next week though, with the flu."

His hackles rose. "I want blood drawn from this patient and a complete lab report on my desk as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

He left the room and strode up the hall. Through the doors, and he headed to the main station. Tony barely noticed the half dozen people there as he said loud enough to be heard by them all, "Lane Sheridan is my patient. When I give instruction on anyone in my care, I expect it to be followed. I have ordered a complete blood

work done...and I want her medications reduced to..." He reached over the desk grabbed a paper and wrote the prescribed dose. He slammed it down. "I want the full name, not initials, of every nurse who administers her medications."

Turning, he headed for his office while their eyes were still on him. He let the door slam before he walked to the open window. Incompetence was nothing new, but he hated that inner radar that alerted his suspicions, It was too often right, and too often something he wished he'd never discovered.

Sonofabitch. He hated October.

As Tony stared out the window at Briarwood's obligatory garden, a growling in his stomach reminded him he hadn't yet eaten lunch. Deciding his body could wait a bit longer to be refueled, he stormed off to pay a visit to Dr. Laberenez.

Tony reached Laberenez's office and, noticing the door slightly ajar, poked his head in.

"Dr. Gabrielli." The man waved him in.

Tony ground his teeth while Laberenez finished a call.

"What can I do for you?"

Calming his temper, knowing it would flair twice as high if Laberenez pulled his benevolent mentor/God act to his accusations, he laid it out in factual terms.

The elder man, elbows on the table, fingers steeple, merely listened. Then he leaned back and eyed Tony. "I'm sure there is some reasonable explanation, human error perhaps. Miscommunication often happens in an institution this large. I don't have to tell you how stressful it is for the staff no matter how professional they are. In any event, we have no record of staff misconduct or even accusations for that matter. Indeed, we have only let go

three people in twenty years for a series of infractions, none of them life-threatening to the patient.

In other words, you think I'm exaggerating, full of shit, or threatening your image of perfection here. You didn't like me when we met, Dr. Laberenez, and you like me even less now.

Tony chose his words carefully, trying his best not to blurt out what he was thinking. "I thought I should bring it to your attention, serious or not. Thank you for your time, sir."

The director raised and offered his hand. "Quite right. I'll speak to the staff myself and iron this out. It sometimes takes awhile for a new doctor to fit in, flow smoothly into the schedule."

Bullshit. Tony gave Laberenez a deliberate strong handshake before leaving.

Tony stayed in his office until almost midnight, watching Lane Sheridan's room on the monitor. She

rarely moved. Finally, an unfamiliar nurse entered Lane's room. He scrutinized the monitor, grinding his teeth that little effort was made to rouse her aside from lifting her head and urging her to take the meds.

"Working late Doctor?" The cleaning woman poked her head in the doorway of the office.

Tony looked up from his desk. "Yes. I'll be awhile."

"I'll just move on then."

He waited, watching the screen until the nurse left Lane Sheridan's room. He slid out the top drawer and removed the vial and needles for drawing blood. As soon as the wardroom lights went off and the hall lights remained, he slipped out of the office and headed to her room.

* * * *

Nervous fingers punched in the number, breaths bouncing off the stairwell walls and eyes staying fixed on the exit door.

"Hello."

"He's arrived. Dr. Andre's replacement. And, he's taken great interest in one of his patients, Lane Sheridan."

"Shit, shit!"

"He's ordered her meds reduced..."

"No. No. You have to keep her out."

"What am I supposed to do? She's bad. She looks malnourished. Dr. André had her on an IV. I managed to unhook that and change the file..."

"Goddammit! You'd better find a way around this..."

"I'm doing the best I can. This guy isn't like André and Laberenez. He's one of these 'save the world one patient at a time' assholes. He's persistent, and I can tell he's not going to turn a blind eye to..."

"Don't give me that 'doing the best I can' bullshit! You've managed for five fucking years! If you know what's good for you, you'll shut it with your damned excuses and take care of this problem!"

A short breath of anger sounded on the line. "He's ordered blood tests. You know what that means? It means he can keep track of what's in her system."

"Use your fucking brain. You've got access to the lab."

"You're not listening to me, Dammit! This guy is smart. He knows who has access to the ward, and it's only a matter of time before..."

"No! You're not listening to me! I don't care if you have to bribe, fuck and blackmail every last warm body in that building. You're being well compensated for your services, and I don't have to remind you of the prison time you could get for what you're doing. And trust me, if you fuck this up, I'll make damn sure your ass never again sees the light of day. Now shut your fucking mouth and take care of it!"

Hesitation, then the uncomfortable sound of a throat clearing can be heard. "Alright... But this is going to

Lucid - B.D. Dillon

cost you. I'm not sure how much more she can take and live."

Silence... "It may turn out to be the only solution."

— *October 22nd*

Tony felt the wind flapping his coat, a mist of rain in the air as he walked toward the doors of Central Laboratories. He went to see an old friend, Mas'ud, who was, as usual, hunched over a lab table.

"I need these samples run. Blood gasses, everything. "

"Tony." The man looked up, then grinned and shook his hand, taking the vials and eyeing the name on them. "I thought you were working at Briarwood? They have their own lab techs and a pretty impressive staff of—"

"I am, and they do." He knew he was scowling. He checked his watch. "I want these sent to my home address...not the institution. Keep it between us."

Mas'ud's brow rose. "Sure."

Tony clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll explain everything later."

He left and got in his truck, cursing as he reached in the glove box for a cigarette and lighter. He lit the cigarette and savored the smoke, then glanced over at Kirby's Tavern as he passed. Kirby's had become his favorite off-time brooding spot, and Tony found himself wishing like hell he could knock one back before heading to work. He couldn't. So he picked up an old vice, tense in the gut, wondering how much of a risk he was taking, how far over the line he was going to go—to possibly save Lane Sheridan's life.

He had read the file again and again, and there was too much missing--too much of nothing to justify the type of medication, the dosage, and the absence of therapy notes. Unless, of course, you could call absence of therapy due to being kept in a near comatose state for almost five years "justified". Why? The other patients were correctly diagnosed as far as he had observed their

medications appropriate except for minor modifications he wanted to try.

Laberenez had already shown his true colors. Any true care or concern he'd ever felt for patients had been lost long ago. To him, patients were an opportunity to be published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Tony didn't bother confiding in the other four doctors who came in twice a week. They had twice the patients he did. Besides, he was well aware that he didn't fit in with the Ivy League intellectual crowd. He didn't have the upbringing or background, and he'd entered the profession for an entirely different reason.

He was known in his past to not make friends with staff, but to keep his work and life as separate as possible. His blood was blue collar and people were still human to him. Patients weren't labels in a textbook.

Okay, so he didn't, by nature, trust everyone. He was good at his job though, and he had good instincts. He

hadn't wanted the damn job at Briarwood, swore he'd never work in another institution. But private practice was worse, it wasn't for him. Consulting had been okay and he'd taken a couple of years to travel around, work with some of the most noted physiologists in the field, but hell...he didn't know why he'd taken the job.

A mental picture floated through his mind, a girl with Lane Sheridan's hair, freckles—cuffed to a bed. As a kid, he used to look through the window horrified and curious, and imagine he could free her.

"She hurts herself," his dad explained. "They do it to protect her, not harm her."

The girl's dad was a cop. He recalled overhearing an argument between the guy and his wife.

"I won't have no stigma attached to my family, Doris!"

"She needs help, Howard. Professional help."

"No. No shrinks. You got a crazy kid. People think she got it from you."

"She did. Howard. Your mother—"

"Shut up. You don't know nothing."

"I do. I remember—"

"Just shut. Shut up Doris!"

The woman was crying. "But she's chained like an animal."

"Better that than she kills someone. Kills us in her sleep."

"Something ain't right with her, Howard. Maybe they can fix it."

"No."

He'd heard the door slam. Saw the father leave, probably going to the local bar, like his own dad did after a fight. Through the window he saw the woman sitting at the kitchen table weeping, a cigarette burning in the ashtray, the smoke wafting up in an arch of autumn sun.

It became an obsession with him. Wanting to know what was wrong with the girl. He saw her so-called fits, watched through the glass and heard her eerie howling and screaming, which the parents tried to drown out with music. Everyone in the neighborhood knew, but no one said anything.

Then, one Halloween he was out playing tricks with kids up the street. Tame stuff, just egging cars, papering lawns, and putting dog shit in mailboxes. But then one of the guys started talking about the girl, making fun of her. The whole gang said she was possessed by demons. It went on to she's a witch, and things of that nature. They said she cast spells and that whoever died in the neighborhood did so because she willed it.

It was a full moon night. Most of the kids were already inside because of curfew, but he hung out eating candy at the old park with his friends, who were doing pranks, trying to scare each other. Truth was, they were

all scared of the girl. All except him. He wanted to free her, but not because of the things they said. He wanted to free her because he felt sorry for her. Even though he had sat up in the window listening to her screams and howls, he knew there was a person inside those screams.

It happened around midnight. He went along because...well, he thought he could help her, maybe. He wasn't really listening to their stupid talk and jokes by then. One of the boys broke in and went to her room, opening the window for them.

He could barely make out her white face as he undid the cuffs, but the snarl she let loose sent them diving through the window. Everyone except Tony.

She grabbed him by the hair and wouldn't let go.

His friends left him there. Screaming, they tore off through the neighborhood. He didn't recall what he blubbered, something about trying to help her, free her, and be her friend. He helped her out the window. He was

thinking he'd take her to his mother, and his mother would help her, get her one of those head shrinks. But she jerked away from him, screamed so loud the front door of her house opened.

Her dad stood there in his boxer drawers and T-shirt. Now it seemed like his body was frozen, his breathing too loud and blood pumping overtime. She grabbed something, a rake left beside the house. The echo, as she broke the tines off, on the end of porch, sounded like gunfire.

She ran at her father, his eyes wide and bewildered—and impaled him with the handle.

Tony wanted to turn and run. He could hear dogs barking, knew lights were going on inside the houses. The mother was screaming hysterically. The girl came down the steps so calm; looking...normal, just like any kid of eleven or twelve. He recalled her serene gray eyes as she looked at him for long, drawn out moments.

A siren was wailing and people were filling the lawns. Somewhere his own father's voice was yelling for him to get away and run. But he stood there, turned as she walked into the path of a cruiser—and bounced like rag doll upward, off the bumper and hood, lying lifeless and peaceful with moonlight shining down.

* * * *

Tony pulled into the hospital parking lot, seeing the drizzle thicken and eyeing several Lincoln town cars in the reserved spaces. He'd keep his truck, thanks. Status was another thing that turned him off.

People were standing under the overhang smoking and drinking hot coffee from the machine. He half raised his brief case in acknowledgment, having his other hand full of his own cup and thermos. He needed something more than piss water to get him through the day.

Once settled in the office, he went to see Lane Sheridan.

She moaned and swatted his hand when he checked her eyes.

“Mrs. Sheridan. I’m Tony. Can you hear me?”

She moaned again and tried to open her mouth.

He looked around. “I’ll be back.” Tony went to the vending machine, got water and took it back to the room, along with a paper towel. Stopping by a supply tray he grabbed oral swabs. He wet the towel and dabbed at her lips. Lifting her head he helped her swallow, and then swabbed her mouth. It was in bad shape, which angered him further.

“Can you hear me? I’m here to help you, to listen and help in any way I can.” He kept his tone soft and soothing. He touched her hand, glancing at the track marks, then back to her face. She was licking her lips. He gave her more water.

Watching her lids, Tony could tell she was struggling to come out of the fog, to communicate.

“That’s right...you have a friend, Lane. Someone you can trust. I promise you.”

For a moment her face muscles flexed as if she would cry, but she was so listless and weak that he knew the medications hadn’t worn out of her system yet. He stayed a while longer, talking to her, giving her water, and then he left and saw his other patients. Returning to his office and desk, he spent two hours writing notes on his observations and findings, well aware that Dr. Laberenez could likely access any files in the system.

* * * *

The doctor stayed late. It was nearly dawn before Lane’s room could be entered and the drugs could be administered. With the blood already taken, it wouldn’t show up. This time was more difficult. Lane Sheridan’s moss green eyes opened wide. She looked dead-on at her assailant, a stark anger emanating through the glassy fog. She tried to reach and claw, to fight. But as her

mouth was held closed, the medication dissolved, finding its way into her once vital, now emaciated body.

* * * *

He was peeling wet leaves off his windshield when his cell rang. Tony lifted out of the hip pouch and flipped it open.

“Yeah?”

“Tony, it’s Mas’ud. I have the lab report.”

As Mas’ud started reading, Tony got in the truck and turned the ignition, staring blindly out at the traffic.

— *October 23rd*

“They don’t match our lab results.” Tony leaned forward, laying the list on Laberenez’s desk. “Human error is pretty widespread here, wouldn’t you say?”

Laberenez didn’t show any emotion. He viewed both reports and then set them down. Leaning back in his chair, he chewed the end of his glasses a moment, regarding Tony under white brows.

“You must consider that this is the first time anything like this has happened. That no one else on the staff ever had a problem with the lab.” He slipped on his glasses and scooted forward, steepling his fingers. “I’ll speak with the head of the lab...”

“Fine. I want Lane Sheridan transferred.”

Laberenez’s brow rose.

Tony held his gaze. "I want her out of here, for her own safety. No matter what the reports say or what faith you have in the staff. I want her out of this hospital."

"I can't recommend a transfer on such flimsy—"

Tony stood, leaning until his palms smacked the top of Laberenez's expensive desk. "You've read her file. I don't doubt you've read every file of every patient here. How many grieving widows take an overdose or do some other desperate act after a funeral? How many end up in psychiatric hospitals for five damn years! Something is not right here."

"I understand your deep concern for your patients, Anthony. It is admirable. But you are taking minor incidents and blowing them out of proportion."

"I want Lane Sheridan out of here. I'll arrange everything. I have a friend who is well respected in the field..."

Laberenez opened his mouth, and then closed it. He nodded. "I'll make some calls. Speak to the staff and get..."

Tony walked out before he finished. He ignored the heads that turned and looked at him. He kept going until he reached his office. Before he could click for an outside line, his phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Tony? Hey, it's Brad. Bradley Houtman."

"Brad? Are you kidding me? I was just about to call you."

"Wow, that's Ironic."

"So, why are you calling?"

"I heard you were in this neck of the woods, working at Briarwood, so I thought I'd give you a ring, see if you wanted to get together for drinks one night. How are things?"

Tony took a deep breath, then laid it out for Brad, talking for nearly an hour while his friend listened.

When he was finished, Brad said, "I'll do whatever you need."

Running his hand through his hair Tony confided, "I could lose my license. Hell, I could... I'm not imagining this, Brad. There's something about this woman. I need her background information, her husband's. I can't find anything on who took her to the hospital after the funeral. It all smells dangerous."

"I agree. I work, as you know, with post-traumatic children. I have had a couple of cases like Lane Sheridan but none of them had long-term mental illness."

"Yeah. There's a Kempler Foundation on the list in her file. They cover her medical bills. I'm going to look into it. But if I get her out of here. I need someplace she can stay."

“Of course. You get the transfer and I’ll see to the details.”

Tony hung up after talking a while longer. He did his rounds, checking on Lane and finding her deeply sedated. By now he couldn’t work up anger, only fear, and a gut tight fear that had his mind scattering from conspiracy of the whole staff to one who was the culprit. He barely spoke to the nurses as he left.

He came back during the night shift and drew blood. He called and awakened Mas’ud to pick it up from his apartment on his way to work that morning.

He sat at the computer and went through the documents until he found his patient transfer list. They were signed by Laberenez. He erased one of the names and filled in Lane Sheridan’s information.

He got online and researched, discovering Lane’s wedding announcement in the archives. The social pages said she’d wed at twenty-six, that she was an

investigative reporter for the *Collettesville Journal*. Her father was a magazine editor and philanthropist, her deceased mother, a scientist who had died of brain cancer.

From the write-up, Tony drew a mental picture of a well-educated woman who had worked from the age of fifteen. Practical, well-liked, not your typical society woman, but a girl who had a close relationship with her father, yet moved out and built her own career, which had been her focus until she met Sam Sheridan.

Sam was an up-and-coming research psychologist at a privately owned medical research laboratory.

Tony skipped over the page looking for a death announcement five years past. He found it: Lake Serenity drowning. It said that Sam Sheridan along with his wife and friends were celebrating Lane's birthday at the Briscoe family lake house, a home built in the forties by Lane's grandfather. Sometime at night Sam had tripped

and fallen overboard. His body had never been found. A few days later, there was a small piece on Lane Sheridan's unfortunate breakdown.

There was something he wasn't seeing.

Tony skimmed through all the pieces and searched. He grabbed a legal pad and started writing down names. Again he saw the Kempler Foundation. He also found that her father had died right after her admittance to Briarwood, of a massive heart attack. The spokesman for the foundation was a lawyer by the name of Gerald Holland.

Sam Sheridan had died on Halloween.

Dammit! Tony sat back and chewed the end of his pen. He clicked back to the transfer and hit the print button, trying to bring his thoughts to order. Lane knew something? She had been sent here, kept here, because she knew something dangerous?"

He went back to search the paper she'd worked for, looking at her articles, the last she'd written. There were some pieces that ranged from investigation of local corruption to international stuff. Anything could be a smoking gun and he was no detective. Yet he wrote it all down and made lists.

He took the transfer with him when he left, putting a copy in the glove box and stopping off at Kirby's tavern. There, the noise from the locals hardly penetrated. He sat in the corner, brooded and smoked and watched the rain start to pour down outside. Urgency gnawed at him. He fought to keep his focus on Lane, the background information, and weed through it. But the flashes came anyway.

There were names and faces, people in his long career who had thrown themselves out windows, overdosed and disappeared. His failures. It didn't matter how many he helped. He could hardly recall their names—

Faces in the morgue though, yeah. He could recall their eyes, the sounds of their voices. He stopped scheduling patients on Halloween. It was never accepted among those in his field that anything different happened that night than any other time of the year. When dealing with mental patients you were treating a mind that was wired differently. Yet all of them had died on Halloween.

Tony paid his tab and went out to his truck, feeling drops of cold rain smack at his shoulders. He sat there, window down, cars hissing by and headlights blurring. He smoked conscious of the transfer papers in the glove box. He didn't know anything about Willow brook Asylum, but then, he didn't intend to take Lane Sheridan there. He should get out of this profession. If he believed in telepathy or some shit like that, he'd almost believe he was destined to witness a death on Halloween. Or that people who came into contact with him... Ah hell. That was crazy thinking.

Brad was someone he knew. If he trusted anyone, it was Brad. He'd worked with him for a year, they had hung out at the sports bar, been regular guys, rarely discussed work. But Brad was his age, his peer. He may not like doing anything unethical, but who else could he call and voice his suspicions to and be taken seriously? Who else would trust him that much?

The following morning, after Mas'ud picked up the blood work, Tony went to work and stopped by Laberenez's office. He didn't sit down. The director had his steaming coffee at his elbow, reading the Wall Street Journal.

"I've filled out a transfer for Lane Sheridan. Your signature is on it. I've kept a log of my actions regarding the patient, and the things I brought to your attention. Lab reports and copies of the independent tests I had run."

Tony met the man's gaze. "If you want to keep your reputation and that of this institution—enjoys, all those perks, if you're the egoist I think you are, you won't want to retire with any shadow hanging over your head. It's obvious you choose to stay blind to the situation. Fine. Just don't interfere with me or anything concerning patients under my care." He went to the door and out, his breathing tight and ulcer burning.

At the nurses' station, he paused, seeing the usual six or seven who did the administration and scheduling. The smell of eggs and coffee from their drive-thru breakfasts nauseated him. He looked at their faces, middle aged to twenties, trying to see something sadistic or sinister. There was nothing of course, just ordinary people. He found himself doing the same of the orderlies and maintenance crew. Faces and eyes, they warped and stuck in his vision. He'd hate to diagnose his own psychosis right now.

He checked his patient.

It had been a long time since he'd done it, but he tended her himself, washing her and then setting up an IV. He sat with her, and then paced her room, hearing the nurses pass by, seeing them look in the room, watching the orderlies going down the hall, nothing out of the ordinary, yet he felt like a guard dog trying to protect some helpless victim against attack.

He stayed in the office that night and called Mas'ud first thing in the morning. The large amounts of Olanzapine and Valium didn't surprise him...the presence of Sodium Pentothal did.

"What the hell is going on down there?" Mas'ud asked.

"I can't talk about it now. But meet me at Kirby's tonight. Do you know Bradley Houtman?"

"Yeah, I know of him."

"I'm asking him to join us."

“Sure. ” Mas’ud laughed. “What is it with this time of year?”

“I don’t know.” Tony made his tone wry. “I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Listen, Mas’ud...one more thing.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“The Sodium Pentothal in Lane Sheridan’s system. Why would anyone give her that? I mean, I know it’s used in psychiatry—to try and bring forth suppressed memories, induce comas, all that great stuff. But why would somebody administer it to her while at the same time prescribing enough of her other medications to keep an elephant knocked out?”

Mas’ud was quiet a moment, and then responded, “I’m not sure, Tony. But, as I’m sure you’re aware, Sodium Pentothal has also been dabbled with as a sort of ‘truth serum’. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Tony was barely conscious of Mas'ud hanging up the phone. His mind was racing by what Mas'ud had said...*truth serum. Truth serum, combined with a semi-comatose state. One could possibly extract specific information, yet keep the person from being coherent enough to remember other things...or have any control over what was being done to them...?*

Tony hung up and called Brad. His friend had taken some time off. His wife Mandy, who was also his partner, would see his patients. They discussed where best to take Lane Sheridan, agreeing on the likelihood that she alone had the answers. The initial hurdle would be successfully, and safely, weaning her off the drugs, which had been pumped into her body for five years.

"Brad, I did some homework. The Kempler Foundation was something her father and mother started when her mother's illness was progressing. I haven't had

any luck tracking down names or details, but the lake house is still hers and there is a trust.”

A pause then, “What about the dead husband?”

“They were married two years. His reputation did a lot for the foundation and his name was on the board. I imagine in family like that, her mother being a scientist, it makes sense. Though the foundation is connected to more things than I can recall, Sam Sheridan’s background in medical research is likely how Lane met him during those social gatherings and fund-raisers.”

“She was an investigative reporter. They don’t make a lot of friends.”

“Yeah. But she was respected. I know there’s a predisposition of those overachievers and creative types being more prone to a variety of illnesses. Her parents fit that profile more than she does. She seems to have been an average student, worked through college, focused on

career but not overly ambitious. She paid her dues.

There's nothing that jumps out at me."

"She tried to kill herself."

Tony mentally nodded. "Apparently. Listen, Brad, I'll see you tonight."

"Sure thing."

Tony met with Mas'ud and Brad at Kirby's. He had two beers before he started talking. He had more drinks as the evening progressed and he confided his suspicions.

Mas'ud was quiet, he nursed a whiskey and mostly listened to Tony and Brad. Brad who was chain smoking Camel lights, sipping beer, his hazel eyes on the table and his smooth deep voice asking questions now and then. He was in a denim shirt and pants, his wheat brown hair and sun-kissed complexion made him one of those people whom you couldn't quite tell their age simply by looking at them. Mas'ud, neat, clean cut, wearing a light blue dress shirt, tie and dark slacks, was only five foot six.

Both Tony and Brad were six-two, honed from racquetball and jogging, the usual sports you took up to keep from falling apart in your thirties.

Tony and Brad laid out a plan for the weekend. He would take Lane out of the hospital himself. Brad thought it better to alter the transfer to a halfway house that didn't exist. He would do that as soon as he returned to Briarwood. Other details were worked out and they left. Tony felt the effects of too many beers as he got in the truck and started it. He wasn't going to let that demon ride his back again. It was just a tense time, the worst time of year.

— October 24th

"He's filed a transfer," the voice sounded panicked on the line. "I told you it wouldn't work. He won't let the staff near her. Everyone thinks he's weird but they've heard the whispers, they're watching each other. "

"She can't get out!"

"She's going to. I can't do anything else."

"Do something about it!"

"Fuck you! "

"There's a way. You find a way. "

"You do it! I'm in deep enough. Why don't you just kill her?"

"...Fifty thousand dollars. That's all I can pull. A ticket out of the states..."

* * * *

There was a skeleton staff that weekend. Tony sat in his office and watched the hall cameras for long time.

Laberenez had taken a week off. He didn't have to guess why. The man was too predictable.

Lights were out, the halls quiet except for those background sounds Tony had learned to ignore years ago. He had a carryall in his hand as he went to Lane Sheridan's room. It was dark except for the hall light shining in where he left the door open.

He went through the tasks with half an ear toward the squeaky sound of shoes on the concrete floor. He unhooked the IV and stripped off the gown, putting her in the clothing he'd picked up. Even the small size he'd guessed was loose. The sweatshirt swallowed her. The denims needed a belt, but there was nothing for it.

Someone had braided her hair and washed it. It was likely that volunteer he'd seen walking around the floor, a grandmotherly type who did everything from feed the patients to read to them. Lane's braid started high

and went down to mid-back. Still, it wasn't healthy hair because of her overall physical condition.

Dressed normally, he eyed her, reminding himself she was only thirty-three. He flashed back to that wedding photo of a fresh-faced woman; her eyes enhanced with make up. Yes. She'd been attractive.

Still, it was too easy to pick up her five-foot-four inch frame and carry her out. He had the bag in his hand and went through the doors. Near the nurses' station, Tony stayed against the wall until the woman got up to adjust one of the monitors. He passed by and headed toward the exit.

Fear was there, all the signs of increased respiration, sweat under his arms, as he took her to the truck. There were figures in the parking lot beyond the security lights, probably a maintenance crew or orderlies. But he couldn't stop now. He got her in and buckled her, body lax and head forward. Tony gently nudged it back so

the seat supported it. He left the windows cracked and went back inside.

"Dr. Tony." A tall orderly held the door for him. The man was in his twenties, thick glasses, and oily brown hair.

"Randall." Tony thanked him, recalling passing him in the hall.

"You smoke?"

Tony reached in his pocket, handed him a cigarette.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

Still holding the glass door wide the young man lit the cigarette, drew and blew out the smoke. "You got Dr. André's patients?"

"Yes." Tony wanted to get to his office, gather what he'd need and leave.

"I liked him okay. He was mostly in Laberenez's office. They played golf together and both left kind of early."

Tony tried to be polite, but was unable to think of anything except getting the hell out of there. "Some patients are beyond anything but stabilization, keeping them calm and safely monitored."

"Yeah. I'm used to the ones who go off now and then. Some of the crazies are funny. You know? They still have a sense of humor."

"Yes." Tony grinned tense, thinking of times his patients cracked jokes and made him laugh.

Suddenly the man looked toward Tony's truck, the red paint dewed under the edge of the security light. He drew on the cigarette, staring at it. "He was different with that one..." The man's tone changed, lost its easy-going flow and became more serious. "He avoided her, didn't

see her on his rounds. She made him uncomfortable... nervous."

Tony eyed him and moved more toward the outside, lighting his own cigarette. Randall had obviously seen him carry Lane Sheridan out. "Why do think that was?"

"Dunno. I asked one of the nurses who hangs out in the break room sometimes. She said Mrs. Sheridan was bi-polar something. You learn the lingo when you work here."

"Yeah."

"Anyway. " The man flipped the cigarette into a water puddle. "They said she was a risk for suicide. Still seemed strange to me—the way she was treated."

Tony felt as if he were trying to probe into the man's mind. Randall wanted to say more, but wanted him to ask, instead of volunteering the information.

Aware he had to get Lane to the little house Brad had rented, he said casually, "Dr. André was here so long. He had paper files ... information gets overlooked; when you upload data... the paper ones would have been destroyed."

The younger man scratched his neck. He opened the door. As they were going in, he said barely audible. "Old Mr. Reiner on the maintenance crew has been here over thirty years. He's got back trouble from carrying those file cabinets to the freight elevators. Says the bowels of this old building give him the creeps. There's a holding morgue down there. Shit... all kinds of storage rooms. You never know what you might find..."

Chills raised the hair on his arms. But Tony finished what he started. He went to his office, doctored the transfer again and printed it off, slipping a copy under Laberenez's door. He got some items from his office and left.

— *October 25th*

Everything was difficult, like swimming mentally through thick gray smoke. She ached and felt queasy. Lane Sheridan heard the voices, two distinct male ones, one was smooth and deep, the other even and calm, yet sometimes so gentle she wanted to cry.

If only she could. The pain in her muscles was excruciating. Her head pounded. Thirst was constant. It was a battle to block one out to focus on the other. She vomited finally, and then trembled so violently her teeth clattered together.

She remembered sounds, female voices and distant laughter and shouts. Hands touched her hair and arms, feelings and disjointed dreams that were somewhere in the past. Time wasn't a conscious thought, senses were what stood out in long black spaces.

Something that interrupted the fog and heaviness, a blip inside the tunnel that occurred when voice or scent or touch occurred, it was those senses that replaced the concept of days and hours and time for her. And it was that which seemed familiar—when she could eventually focus her eyes.

The ceiling was a flat, chalky white, and the light fixture was a flared square with dust settled in it. She laid there moving her gaze as far as she could, across the surface, feeling nerves tic in her fingers and feet, jerking and spasms as she thought of lifting her head.

Muffled sounds came from her right, traffic and horns, a young voice. She thought there would be a window there. Lane lifted her head, gritting her teeth at the pain and nausea, the sore muscles and trembling weakness.

At rest, on her elbows, she closed her eyes to the aching behind them; shards of it pinpricking her head and

neck. But she made herself open the lids, and look around a room that was painted dull blue. It was a small bedroom. She could see no door on the entry. There were two windows with dusty sheer curtains, through which she could make a rickety privacy fence and trees.

An IV in her hand was stinging. She pulled it out.

Lane held her breath and pushed herself all the way up, grabbing at her legs and moaning. *It hurt. It hurt.* But she got herself moved around, feet on the dark brown carpet and hands clutching the edge of a mattress.

There was a bedside table, a bedpan and wash pan with a damp cloth in it. On the floor was a white box filled with medical items, IV bags. She tried to stand up and fell to the floor.

Lying there awhile, breathing heavy through her mouth, waiting for the wreathing torture to stop. She could see the doorway, a shaded living room with some kind of throw over a couch, in front of a picture window. A

seventies-style coffee table with stuff scattered on it. She grunted and pushed herself up on her knees. Dragging them more than lifting, she made it to the doorway.

A front door with triangle window, a recliner and some boxes. She saw a shallow hallway, a bathroom. She drug herself out into the room, seeing a kitchenette connected. But she focused on the bathroom, getting herself there in a haze of pain.

The room was small, the tile worn. There was a toilet inches from the tub and a sink opposite, with a medicine cabinet above. In the corner lay a stack of towels and a pack of soap.

She used the sink, feeling her arm tearing apart as she got up high enough to lean on it. Her clumsy fingers barely turned the tap the first few tries, but she had flowing cold water. She cupped it and drank, wiped her face over and over with it, holding it to her eyes.

It felt so good, she wanted to push it inside her head, to soothe the pain and clear the fog. Water dripping still, she raised her face and met her image in the mirror.

For a long time she stared, fighting to recognize who it was. Face thin and white, the eyes almost blacked underneath, the semi-full lips tense and dry. She wet her lips over and over, leaned down, and drank more, spitting mouthfuls out and running her tongue over her teeth. She knew who she was, but she didn't know who *this* was. She couldn't think anything coherent.

She let her legs relax and lowered herself to the floor, sitting there and rocking, rocking, because everything hurt and everything was confusing.

When the front door opened, Lane didn't know how long it had been. She heard keys, heard the footsteps and then saw a man walking toward the bedroom. When he turned and saw her, she was too weak to even keep her head up.

"Lane?" He squatted in front of her, cupping her head, looking in her eyes with his own. "I'm Brad Houtman. Do you remember?"

She remembered his voice, his hands. She nodded.

"Good." He lifted her up, easily carrying her back to the bed. "I've stocked the kitchen." He propped her on the pillows. "I'll be right back." He was gone.

Lane rested, she just lay there hearing his voice, likely speaking on a phone. Brad came in later with strong coffee and soup, patiently helping her get both down.

It registered somewhere in her mind that he was well built, handsome, in his thirties. She heard him talking to her; telling her he was there to help her, that she was going to be okay and they would talk later. She fell asleep, awoke and ate again whatever he fed her.

—October 26th

The next time she opened her eyes, another face was there. His voice was familiar as he sat on the edge of the bed holding her wrist, talking, taking her pulse. When he lay her wrist down she looked at his face—a masculine face, fresh shaved, strong features, black brows and lashes. His hair was wavy, almost curly and ruffled at his brow. His eyes were deep brown.

“I’m Dr. Anthony Gabrielli. But I prefer Tony.” He smiled. Lines fanned at the corner of his eyes. “Do you remember me?”

She wet her lips. “Voice.” her throat sounded raw and hoarse.

Tony studied her face, a map of mystery and vulnerability. “You recognize my voice?”

Lane’s weak, yet certain nod elicited a smile from Tony. “Brad tells me you’re eating well. The IV we gave

you, vitamins, good stuff, I promise.” He grinned again and almost subconsciously smoothed her hair back. “The pain you’re feeling is from withdrawals. You are also suffering from muscle atrophy.”

Tony didn’t bothering mentioning the bedsores scattered throughout her ravaged body. He had the mind of a doctor, but still possessed the heart of a man. He was sensitive to a woman’s needs, and knew all the reassurances in the world that she’d heal wouldn’t keep a once-vibrant woman from feeling self-conscious. She was probably already aware of them anyway.

“It will get better. You just have to give it time.” He dropped his hand and studied her a moment, trying to decide whether to delve further. “Lane, how much do you remember? Do you know who you are?”

“Yes.” she swallowed. “Some parts...I’m confused.”

“But intelligent.” He winked. “If you feel up to it, I’m going to leave some things. Newspaper articles,

names, pictures I downloaded." He reached in his pocket and extracted a cell phone.

"My number is on speed dial. Right here." he showed her. "If you get scared or confused, you call me." He rose and was gone awhile, then returned with food, strong coffee. She ate, then passively let him brush her teeth while she spat in the pan.

"This is a walker." He pointed to it by the wall. "Use it and walk through the house. Do whatever you think you can manage."

She nodded. "Where am I?"

"In a house. Rented, on Valdeen Street."

"Why...how?"

He got up and walked to the window. After moving the curtains, he opened it. The distant noise filtered in, along with crisp autumn air. It was welcome and tinged with wood smoke and nutty earth.

"You were in Briarwood. Do you know what that is?"

Lane had been watching him, registering his height and strong build. He wore a soft blue flannel shirt and Levi's, some sort of boots in soft leather. His hair was neat cut at the back, fuller at the top. He was rubbing his neck and looking out.

"No."

"It's a mental institution."

For a space her mind shut off. It clicked like a light switch into darkness. She foundered her way back enough to rasp, "Why?"

"You tried to kill yourself after your husband died. He was killed in a boating accident."

She wanted to react, yet it seemed detached to her, like words with no meaning.

He turned slightly. "I've left what I downloaded from the papers. I want you to read it. Study it. Try to remember."

"Yes." She said whatever seemed appropriate.

He turned, walking over to close the window.

"Leave it...please." she whispered. "I haven't... I want to hear."

His look was compassionate. He nodded in silent understanding. Standing by the bed, he said, "Food is prepared in the fridge, coffee, anything you might need. There's a tablet by the bed. You write down whatever you want. Questions, memories, whatever springs to mind."

"Am I crazy?"

"No." His gaze held hers. "No, Lane. You aren't crazy."

She wiped her hands over her face. "You're a shrink? You and Brad?"

"I'm a clinical Physiologist. I'm licensed to practice psychiatry too. Brad's background is diverse, research and various specialties. At the moment he works with children and teens. But yes, I was hired on at Briarwood to take over Dr. André's patients. You were one of them."

"You got me out. Brought me here..."

"Yes." He thought a moment. "You didn't belong there. I'm not sure why you were kept or even sent there. I don't know much, Lane. Except that... your life may be in danger."

"In danger."

A tense grimness filtered across his features. "I hope I'm wrong. But if I am, your memory is the only thing that can prove it. I need to know what happened the day you cut your wrist—"

She looked at her wrist, touched the scar.

"I want to know about the day of the drowning. Who took you to the hospital afterwards? Why Dr. André kept you, or rather ignored the fact that you were there. I want to know why someone at Briarwood has been making sure you only got worse... not better."

She struggled to process what he said, piecing it together with the senses and sounds, the thick fog and tunnel and voices and touches.

He took her hand a moment. "Read through what I brought. Go through the day as normally as you can. Do whatever you want. But don't leave this house."

She nodded, preoccupied when he left.

Hours passed and she made it to the walker. She shuffled to the kitchen, drank the cold coffee and then used the restroom. Looking around, she shuffled back, finding clothing, unfamiliar but new.

In the bedroom, she ran a bath and grimaced at the hair under her arms, on her legs. She then looked with disgust and indignation at the bedsores robbing her of the opportunity for a decent shave. Bathing herself was more exhausting than she'd expected, but she meticulously cleaned herself, ignoring the burning in her muscles, the

ringing in her ears. Using the walker, she carefully exited the tub, then wrapped a towel around her shivering body

Later, after she had dressed and managed some soup, she was lying on the bed looking at the window, listening to sounds as the curtains fluttered. Her mind began to wander, dark thoughts fighting to flood her brain, intermingled with thoughts of the kindness she had been shown by her new friends. She jerked as she heard the front door open.

Brad appeared in the bedroom doorway. He smelled of the outdoors, with brown shirt and jeans, wind-blown brown hair looking fresh and healthy. "You've had a busy day."

"I can't remember anything. I mean, I see flashes... images, but they mean nothing."

His hazel eyes were intent. "It will come." Talking about his wife and two kids, the little league team he coached, he made fresh coffee and ask her about her

conversation with Tony. She told him, admitting that nothing rang a bell. He looked through the things Tony had brought her to read.

She watched his face and wished her focus were sharper. It was too murky and dull to register whatever it was she should do. Questions, conversation. It all seemed stuck behind some gray wall.

— *October 30th*

Tony avoided Laberenez. He saw his patients, made his rounds, sometimes passed Randall in the hall and nodded, but he kept to his routine and kept in touch with Brad. Part of him was anxiously awaiting her phone call, hoping it would come back like a flood. But the doctor in him knew how difficult it could be for her if that were to happen.

The notes, words on a page, they were good signs. She had recall of the woman and man, had a detached sense of knowing them. Some of the writing was about the voices, the touches, which he knew were memories of the hospital staff, likely doctor André. But she was purging through them, going back. He watched her health improve, her strength improve. She was determined woman now too, and that helped.

Finding a cup for an ashtray, he rolled his office chair over to the window, opening it and lighting a cigarette. He wanted to push her, to jar her memory and maybe hypnotize her. But he knew he could damage her if he did things too fast. What was in that head? What lay behind those eyes?

He couldn't think of much else. He'd always eschewed the term "crazy", but that's just what the situation was... crazy. How did he get here? Was he jeopardizing his career, possibly his life, too much for this person he really knew nothing about?

He recalled his short stint working with the criminally insane. He'd had nightmares, vivid images of dark crimes they committed. Though he observed while a specialist in the field did the hard stuff, he had found himself in that darkness awhile, marveling at the power of the mind, wondering at the extent of evil which some were capable. He found himself thinking of the victims,

the fear and terror. He had patients who survived various cruelties, whose minds had snapped from self-preservation.

But once you know the capabilities, you can never forget what exists in the world. Once you delve into it, see it, you don't see bodies walking down the street, people standing in line at the grocery store. You look in the eyes as if to probe the brain, and the soul... both capable of the unimaginable.

He saw Lane Sheridan real enough, though. Saw her through knowledge of what she had been, where her life had been. She was recovering physically and he never assumed anything about the process of memory, particularly with people like her. In her profession she would have been a logical thinker, a woman of common sense, one who could work different angles of a puzzle. That kind of mind would be hard to erase.

* * * *

Lane had nearly used up the notebook. Her mind wouldn't seem to shut down now that she'd forced open doors. It came back in blocks, but the things that remained fuzzy frustrated her.

She recalled her father, her mother, the wedding, and her husband, even working at the newspaper. What wouldn't come was order. She wanted to remember trying to kill herself. It seemed abhorrent to her, so alien to her thinking. She tried to remember the feeling of cutting her wrist, of going to Briarwood, but there was nothing.

Finally, Lane called Tony. "I want to go to the lake house."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm going in circles here. I've remembered all I can from the pictures. I do remember the lake house. I want to go there. I have to."

"I don't want you pushing yourself too much. But if you insist, I'll arrange for you to get the lake house. Brad

can meet you there. I've got something to look into but I'll be down as soon as I can. "

"Okay. Okay. I'll be all right. I need to do this, Tony."

"I know."

She ended the call and sat on the lumpy sofa and cried. It felt good to cry and know why she was doing it. She cried a long time.

— *October 31st*

“You sure you can drive?” Brad handed her the keys. “This is my wife’s car. She’s picking me up. I’ve got an emergency,”

Lane took the keys. She knew where the lake house was. Earlier she’d thought about it... only it and she remembered all the years her family had gathered there. She knew she could drive.

“I can drive.” She’d packed food and bathed, changed into an Ohio State sweatshirt, running shoes and jeans.

Brad looked at his watch. “I’ll be an hour behind you.”

“Fine”. She was anxious to go. She didn’t care about anything at the moment but getting there and remembering.

Brad left when his wife pulled up in a Mercedes. Lane got her things and went out to the late model sedan. She started it, pulled out, driving as if she'd never stopped.

A few things were different, but streets were the same. Her mind was so determined it was guiding her hands and eyes. She turned off the main road, onto the stretch of two-lane, passing a sign that read "Lake Serenity, twenty miles".

Her skin was tight, tingling. She let the window down, eyes stinging at the beauty of fall bathing the trees on the side of the road. Five autumns had been stolen from her. Five years she'd been locked away.

Her mental flashes made the miles pass swift. Before long, she had turned off to the lake road. It had changed some, camp areas leading off the two-lane and some parts closed off. Changed...she frowned into the setting sun, slowing and trying to find the right road.

Her nerves and anxiousness increased. She swung the car down a lane that looked somewhat familiar. The weeds were grown up and the road bumpy. It became obvious she was in the wrong place. Lane went through a mud hole and heard the car bog, the tires slipped. She gunned it. And, found herself stuck.

“Dammit.” She unbuckled the seatbelt and opened the door, looking down at the tan mud and water. She got out, peering above the tree line, then distantly at the sunrays hitting a roof. She turned toward the way she’d come and cursed again.

She tried the cell. No signal. She jammed it in her pocket. She could use a phone somewhere ahead. The house didn’t look that far. If someone was home she could get directions.

Shutting the door, she took off walking, smelling the weeds, hearing the night creatures in the distance. The lake was near. She could smell the water and fishy

mud, the familiar scent of it. The sun sank further and she walked faster. Her strength wasn't up to par. It became a matter of putting one foot in front of the other.

By the time a night breeze replaced evening air, she could see the house, dark at the moment, with only a weak light on the porch. From the outline it was more modern than her grandmother's home, a fairly new structure. She should have realized five years would change things.

Lane saw the lake, with the moon hanging over it, turning it a blackish blue. The circular yard in front of the house flowed down to a dock.

Standing still, catching her breath, she tried to orient herself. Summer, fall, they were seasons she knew at the lake house. She and Sam, they had lived in the house while their townhouse was being renovated.

Oh god. She squatted a moment, arms around her middle when the pain of remembering hit her. She saw a

clear picture of him, his handsome face smiling, gray eyes and dark blond hair. He was leaning against the wall in the gutted townhouse, his suit jacket over his shoulder, teasing her, waiting to take her out to dinner after she consulted with the designer.

Lane covered her face with her hands, then brought them down and looked at the lake. Yes. The smell, the night air, they all brought back memories. She stood and drew long breaths, going toward the house, up the steps. She could tell no one was home. She stepped off the porch and went around. A back deck faced the woods. Lane went up the stairs and stood at the glass doors, trying to peer inside.

Plush champagne carpet, a café table and two chairs. She tried the handle and the doors slid smoothly open. Feeling like an intruder, she slipped off her muddy shoes, eyes peering through the murk as she went in, searching for a phone.

Lane saw the kitchen area on her left, a smooth bar with stools dividing the space. Whispering an apology, she went to the fridge and extracted a cold water, took sips and headed past the main room in search of a bathroom.

It was large, blue tiled and sleek. She blinked at the light glare and used the toilet, washing her hands and glancing in the mirror. She looked better, more color, more flesh, but still too thin. She dried her hands and turned to go, but something held her still.

Lane looked around the room, the hairs on her body raising ever so slightly. She inhaled, brief at first, then took in the air with intent. *The scent of cologne. Sam's cologne.* She opened the medicine cabinet. There it was. She shrugged off her silliness... *any male could use the same cologne as Sam.*

She made as if to close it, but instead opened it wider, scanning the contents. Everything was Sam's brand, right down to the headache capsules.

She closed it fast. *They were common brands. It was logical for anyone to have them.*

Lane walked out and turned left, into a bedroom. The cologne smell was so strong that memories warped through her mind. If she weren't crazy already, thinking like this would make her so. She walked over to a bedside lamp and switched on the subtle lighting. There was a phone and answering machine. She sat on the big bed a moment, trying to control the adrenaline and trembles ripping through her body.

She could explain everything that was triggering it, yet her hand went out and pushed the button beside the blinking light.

"This is Greg Abernathy. I'm not able to answer at the moment, please leave a message."

It was Sam's voice. *Sam's voice. Sam's voice.*

Trembling and nauseated, she shook her head, pushing the button over and over, muttering to herself that she was imagining it.

Tears dripping from her eyes. She fell back on the bed. *Between the cologne, the voice*, she questioned if she was insane? It simply couldn't be. Her husband died. He drowned. She'd tried to kill herself because of it.

Lane wiped her cheeks and sat up. The room seemed hollow now, the scents distinct, and the muffled sounds of night from the open doors more intense.

She pulled open the nightstand drawer. There was a pad of personal stationary. She deflated with relief, seeing the name Greg Abernathy, an address and landscaping logo under it. Sam was a businessman, a professional whose field was medical research. He was handsome, strong, but thrived on intellectual and scientific challenges. She never even recalled him owning a houseplant. He hired someone to mow the lawn.

No. It wasn't Sam.

As well as she convinced herself, calmed herself, Lane was so untrusting of her own mind that she went through the house looking for photographs.

In the great room, there was a fireplace, a mantle with snapshots. She was afraid to turn on the main light. A mental patient breaking in a home could hardly defend herself.

She took one of the photographs to the kitchen area, used the fridge light to view it. The man had walnut brown hair, styled differently, dark blue eyes. The nose was different, the hair, eyes... but something reminded her of Sam.

Lane studied the picture. Wearing khaki cargo slacks and a short-sleeved dun shirt, the man was tanned, tall, and healthy. And his face... she knew they weren't the right features, *but underneath, something subtle.*

Going back to the mantle, she picked up another, this one in front of a truck with a landscaping logo. His face was clearer in the picture. And though all the features didn't match, there were enough subtleties for the man to have been Sam's brother.

"I've got to stop this," she muttered, closing the fridge, taking the pictures back. "I'm making myself crazy."

She went to the bedroom and dialed Dr. Tony's number.

"I've just stepped out. Please leave a message."

"It's..." she hesitated then said simply, "I took a wrong turn. The car is stuck. "

She hung up and called Brad.

"Where the hell are you?"

"I don't know. I took a wrong turn. The car got stuck."

"I'm on the main road, can you direct me?"

"You can't get past the car. I'll walk out. Come about six miles past the turn off, just wait for me there."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in someone's house. The cell didn't pick up at the car. I should have tried again near the house... I... I didn't think."

"Don't get upset. "

"Brad... there's something else. This house, it smells like Sam. I mean the perfume. And all the brands he uses, headache capsules, toothpaste, it's all in the cabinet. There's this picture..."

"Lane. Lane. Listen to me, now. Calm down. Breathe. All of that is coincidence."

"I know. The hair and eyes, the nose even, it's not him. And Sam wouldn't know how to landscape. But I still feel something...."

She could hear him curse. "Hold on a moment. Tony is calling."

"I called him, I... Look, I'm going to walk out to meet you."

Absently he replied. "Be careful."

She hung up and stood, intending to leave but frowning as a distinct memory came to mind. Lane raced to the fridge. His water brand, soda, the red wine, in the freezer the yogurt pops he ate. Reminding herself what Brad said, she mentally tried to shrug it off, even as her feet carried her to the closet.

It was a walk-in; organized with an overhead light she switched on. She perused the uniform shirts, boots, a few suits and two pairs of dress shoes, coats and jackets. On the top shelf rackets and tennis balls, caps, normal things a man might have. She stared at a lidded box. She kept telling herself to stop. All she was doing was upsetting herself over sheer coincidences. But the urge was stronger than common sense. She reached up and

pulled down the box, kneeling on the floor and lifting the lid.

Lane's fingers trembled as she lifted the clipping. It was the wedding clipping. Under that was the drowning, with photos of divers dragging the lake. The next was her father's death, and Lane pushed down the pain to keep searching. Articles she'd written were there, but as strange as that was; it was the six-by-nine yellow envelope in the bottom, which drew her attention.

She opened the flap and let the photos spill into her other hand. "No...no...no..." She dropped them in the box and put the lid on, shoving it back to the top shelf. Numb, she cut the light off and went to the phone.

She dialed Tony.

"Dr. Gab—"

"He's alive. My husband is alive."

"Lane! Where are you? Brad is going crazy looking for you."

By now, she was heaving through tears and nausea. "My husband is alive..."

"Lane. What the hell—"

"This house. I knew it. I was lost and the car got stuck. I needed a phone. The cologne and food in the fridge... everything. So I went to the closet..."

"Lane, please. Slow down. Now, where are you?"

"His house. I'm not crazy. I know I'm not crazy."

"Jesus Christ, Lane. Get out of there now. Get out!"

"I have to know. I want to know what..." She sobbed.

"I'm on my way to the lake. I'll meet you at the old house. I've given Brad the directions. But for God sakes, get the hell out of there!"

She slammed down the phone while he was still talking. Confused, she stood a moment, almost hyperventilating. She finally ran toward the door and shot

down the steps. The darkness shadowing the last one, she fell hard to her knees.

Lane got up and ran across the yard, her mind a tangle of conflicts. She wanted to know. She had to know. She didn't want to run.

The road was uneven, muddy and dark. Her breathing was too painful. Lane held her side, walking and having little sense of what she was doing. *Sam is alive...* *Sam is alive*, kept chanting through her brain. When she finally came upon the car, she collapsed against it, tears flooding her vision.

The flash of headlights lit the area. She jerked up, for a moment so scared her knees shook.

Brad leaned out the window.

"My husband is alive."

"Tony called me. Get in the car, Lane. I'll bump it out of the rut. You put it in reverse and back out."

She did it. She was separate from her actions, obsessed with her thoughts. Starting the car, feeling the bump, going forward, and then swiftly back, almost flooring it, almost running into Brad's car as he was backing to the main road.

Tires squealed as he turned, waiting ahead for her. She did some sliding. Mud flew up from the tires, but she followed him, muttering and seeing those pictures in her mind.

The turn off was only a mile down. The property was cleared more and the boathouse down by the pier distinct. A black pain pierced through her head as she saw the white house, with its long, low, screened-in front porch. There were five acres cleared around it and even in the dark she felt the familiarity.

She followed Brad to the back, parking by a tool shed and getting out.

"Are you all right?" He embraced her. "You scared the living shit out of me."

"No. I'm not all right." She sighed, then for a moment relaxed in the comfort of the embrace. "It was Sam's house. I don't care what name he uses. What he goes by. He didn't drown out here."

"All right." He stepped back and smoothed her cheeks with his hands, gazing at her in the moonlight. "Do you remember anything else? The day of the drowning, before that."

"Not yet..." She pushed away and went toward the back porch. The screen door opened and shadows met her, cane rockers scattered, an old crock, and various shapes that were familiar. There was a key under the mat. She opened the back door.

"There's no electricity."

She glanced at Brad. "There never was much. And every storm could blow it out." She could smell dust,

damp, and a closed up scent. "There should be lanterns and utility candles."

"This may not be safe." He watched her slide out a chair and reach upon the board shelves for lanterns, candles and kerosene. "We should leave."

"I'm not leaving. You can." She lit one of the candles, used it to fill the lanterns and light them. "I'm not crazy. You and Dr. Tony don't have a mental patient." She looked at him in the ochre glow of the lantern. "Simply one who needs to get her memory back."

He sighed and looked around the room.

Lane did the same. An old-fashioned kitchen with smooth board floors and hand hewn table. There was pantry off from it, and a wash room. She carried the lantern into the long front room, glass doors leading to the low front porch. The windows were tall. Dusty white sheers hanging, but not obscuring the moonlit distant lake. She left a lantern there and explored the three back

rooms, the bathroom with a claw foot tub and corner shower.

Brad was behind her, not speaking but touching her shoulder now and then when she held the light aloft and it lit on beds and dressers, photos and mementos.

A small room was the last she looked in, obviously an office. It had a big window, the rest of the wall shelves of books and a desk.

"There was a computer there."

"Probably vandalized." Brad said.

She went to the desk and set the lantern down.

"Why would they take that and leave everything else.

Look... the drawers are open. Father's collection of letter openers." She held one up. "This is fourteen carat gold."

"Who knows? Kids. Teens likely. Maybe your father took it out before he died."

"Maybe." She looked at him. "There are some things in the car. Water, soda, some snacks."

He nodded. "You going to be okay?"

"I don't know. I want to be alone a moment."

He left her and she listened to his tread fade. Lane sat down in the desk chair, staring out the window. She heard her father's voice, the soft laugh of her mother. She saw herself sitting there, writing, as the sun was pouring in and the smell of cooking filtered back from the kitchens.

There were memories in this room, hundreds of them. She got up and took the lantern to the front bedroom, eyeing the brass bed frame, the red quilt and circular rug on the smooth board floors. Prints hung on the wall, fishing and boating scenes. She walked to the bed and ignored the musk from disuse. Setting the lantern on the nightstand, she lay back—remembered herself there—with Sam.

It washed over her, through her mind like a floating ribbon. She saw him clearly, every bare inch of skin, with

his familiar half-grin in place. Intimate scenes coupled with others, lying in the bed watching him dress, of sharing coffee with him, and lingering there when they had friends down, smelling breakfast cooking and hearing the screen door slam, but lingering—because their lives were so busy they rarely had time together.

Sam was always busy, and she had picked the townhouse hoping that it would be a mutual base for both of them. But he traveled and did work for the Kempler Foundation. He attended seminars and lectures, worked on projects. He had risen to the top and was highly regarded in his field, supervising and writing articles on his research. She was lonely... Lane realized. Her job was demanding too, but she made her marriage a priority. She had wanted a baby.

Lane could feel the tears. She knew then, why they had been at the lake... why her birthday celebration was more than just that. Sam had agreed. He'd changed his

schedule for the next year. They were going to try for a child.

She arose off the bed and walked out into the great room.

“How do you make coffee in this thing?”

She walked into the kitchen to find Brad fumbling with a camp pot.

Lane went to the pantry and checked the propane tanks. She got the camp stove working on the back porch, and filled the pot from the hand pump outside.

“You’re good at this.”

“I loved it here.” Lane found cups, washed them and waited for the pot to perk. “My best memories are of my mother. She was very busy but this house had been in her family for years, and all our vacations were here. When she became too ill to work, my father dropped everything, and we came, stayed, lived as if it was a vacation until she died.”

He sat in one of the rockers. They both looked out at the lake.

Brad glanced at her as the coffee hissed. "What has you convinced that Sam is alive?"

"Too much coincidence to begin with," she murmured. "But there are pictures of him there, in that house. Pictures of us. And... pictures of a woman too."

"A friend?"

"I don't think she was my friend," Lane's tone was strained. "It seemed insignificant to the shock... the evidence that he exists, that he didn't die. I assumed he might have had an affair —that last year—blamed it on distance, our busy lives, myself, my own loneliness. "She got up and poured the coffee.

"Careful. It's hot, and strong." She handed him a cup. "I'm walking to the pier. Alone." She headed in that direction.

* * * *

Tony had experienced real panic between Brad's call and Lane's. He blamed himself. *She was in no shape to be driving. She shouldn't have left alone.* His anxiety doubled over her adamant declaration that Sam Sheridan was alive.

He was rushing to leave when he u-turned and went to Briarwood. Brad was with her. She would be safe until he got there.

Tony swung into the lot and cut the engine, he exited, heading toward the doors. *He had to see those original files. He had to know more.*

"Randall."

The man looked up from the vending machine.

Tony had the door pushed open. "Are those lower rooms locked?"

The man shook his head.

He let the door close and headed that way. *Talk about eerie.* The floor slanted, concrete surface

descending down until he came to the boiler room office.

Tony barely looked around the dusty place. He went back out. He pushed open a heavy door to the right.

Entering darkness, he tried the switch and saw a blink before one long bulb glowed overhead. The area was long and sectioned by arches, cold and musty. Against the walls, everything from crates to broken gurneys and rotted lounge furniture.

He moved into the space, walking and looking side to side, knowing he was underground from the coldness and smell. He didn't like these kinds of spaces; they reminded him of crypts and tombs, of being trapped alive under the earth.

"Get with it, Gabrielli," he muttered and kept walking until he spied the rusty green file cabinets pushed against the left wall. There was a leak somewhere and his shoes splashed in water. He should have brought a flashlight. His lighter served while he scanned the system.

The faded letters were hard to read, but he soon found the "S" files. He found them unlocked and the files damp. He hoped they would be legible.

He thumbed through and found Lane Sheridan's file. It was conspicuously thicker than the others and seemed newer than the rest. Tony hurriedly stuffed the file under his jacket and rushed back up to the main level.

Outside he dashed to his truck and flipped on the overhead light. He scanned the pages of Lane's file with frantic intensity, a look of realization and horror gradually intermingling across his visage.

"Oh—God. No."

* * * *

The whippoorwills and screech owls cried smooth across the lake. Lane shivered at the once comforting night calls; frogs and crickets, the low chatter of something in the weeds joined it. Her nerves felt raw and sensitive, passing the boathouse, she reached out and

touched the red skiff propped against the side. *Her father had rowed out in it many times.*

With the mug warming her palms, she went to the edge of the pier and gazed at the lake. Ripples appeared now and then, delicate and wavy. Leaves floated where they dropped from the trees, riding the water.

Why would Sam fake his death?

Lane sat down, folding her legs under her as she gazed across the shimmering water. How could something so peaceful stir up so many questions, so many painful memories? Her mind was bombarded, the only solace she could find lay in the warm mug she clutched as if her life's blood.

"Hello Lane."

Lane's body stiffened into near paralysis, as the calm, familiar voice intoned behind her. For a moment, she couldn't move at all. In her half panic, she considered

that her only escape from what waited behind her was the lake, which suddenly seemed cold and unforgiving.

Cautiously she got to her feet and stole a deep breath. She turned. Lane could not control the gasp that escaped when her eyes met Sam's.

"You always were stubborn and difficult." Sam's voice was even, yet his look was icy and determined.

"I don't understand, Sam. Why?"

Sam peered out across the water. "Why? Because you just don't know when to quit, you and your little 'investigative reporter' charade. You never had to lift a finger your entire life, you didn't need a job. But no. You just had to have a career. You just had to go digging. You brought this on yourself, Lane. It's all your fault."

The fear and sadness became lost somewhere deep within her while Sam's words stabbed through her ears.

All your fault—as if she had deserved to be buried alive in that asylum. Sheer rage went boiling through her fragile

veins. A scream she was scarcely aware of loosening from her tight chest. She drew back the mug and shattered it into the side of Sam's head.

He clutched the side of his face, blood streaming between his fingers. "You bitch!"

Blinded by uncontrollable anger Lane leapt at Sam, clawing at his eyes and beating wherever her fists would land on. *For five years she had been a dead woman, a drugged and incapacitated vegetable.* Now she was released and the palpable, utterly cruel impact of what her husband—this man she trusted, loved—had done, was more than she could endure.

Having reached up with his other hand, grabbing her by the hair, Sam brutally flung her onto the pier, straddling her, he shifted, pinning down her arms with his knees while he clasped his hand to her throat.

Lane tried to turn her head as drops of blood fell from Sam's face into her eyes.

Panting from his exertion and rage, he snarled "Listen to me... I tried it the nice way, Lane, but *you've* fucked that up! I'm only going to ask you this once. Where are your files on the case—the illegal organ harvesting?"

Amid her ire and terror, both confusion and clarity now found a place in her mind. *That case? All this? About that case?* Then some horrible possibility hit her like a blow to the stomach.

"What have you done?" Lane rasped on the sparse oxygen Sam's tight fingers allowed.

"Just tell me where it is. Tell me, and I'll let you live."

Although her mind had given up complete comprehension, Lane was positive that Sam had no intention of letting her live. He said the words but there was death in his eyes, utter coldness in his tone.

She offered, "Let me up. I'll take you—"

Before she could finish, Sam drew back his hand, bringing it down with stinging fury across her face.

Moaning from the impact Lane tasted the metallic trickle of blood that poured down the corner of her mouth.

He Growled, "Tell me now, you stupid bitch!"

She flinched in preparation of his next blow. But their gazes snapped toward the cabin as headlights came rushing at them.

Lane began to struggle. *Tony. Oh God... Tony hurry!*

As Tony dashed from the truck toward them, Sam released his grasp on Lane. With survival instinct, Lane brought her knee up, burying it into Sam's groin. He bellowed, heaving enough to allow her to slip from under him just as Tony reached the pier.

Sam scrambled to his feet, his vertical stance only momentary, because Tony tackled him with the sheer impact of his body. His punches landing hard on the man, Tony yelled "Get it the Truck, Lane! Lock the doors."

Lane started for the truck, but stopped and turned toward the combatants again. She caught a glimpse of something shiny amid the struggle. "Tony! He's got a knife!"

The words came too late. Sam heaved himself up, his bloody face and horribly battered and hideous in the night. He brought the weapon downward, falling with it as the blade buried in Tony's shoulder.

Tony bowed in pain, yelling a curse as he rolled, forcing Sam with him. Both men grunting, Sam withdrew the blade and threw Tony off him.

Certain that Sam would kill them both; Lane's gaze darted to the boat. Running with fire in her eyes and fear choking her she reached the skiff, retrieving an oar.

Tony lay at Sam's feet. Sam had just grabbed Tony's shirt with one hand, raising the knife with the other. Tony closed his eyes as the glistening blade came toward him.

But nothing came—except a loud thud, followed by a splash.

Tony lifted his lashes to see Lane staring out at the water, holding a broken oar. She dropped what was left of the oar, and then fell to her knees beside Tony.

"Are you okay? How bad is it? Let me look."

But urgency streamed from Tony's voice. "Where's Brad?"

"I'm right here."

Lane's head jerked around, to see Brad step out from behind a tree. He began to stride down the pier.

He was holding a gun.

"It's okay, Brad. Sam is dead...for good this time."

Tony's voice rasped frantically. "Lane. It was Brad. All your hospital papers... everything... all signed by Bradley Houtman."

There was no voice in her to ask why. She slowly rose to her feet, legs trembling as attempted to shield the injured man as Brad reached them.

Brad sounded almost conversational, suddenly looking as cool and callous as Sam had. "I guess I should thank you for taking care of that piece of shit husband of yours. I thought he was shrewd, intelligent; we had a good thing going. Until he came up with this idiotic scheme to find out where you'd hid your sources and notes. I tried to tell him if the evidence hadn't been found by now, it never would. He fucking panicked, like always." He shook his head as if mildly disgusted. "You know—Lane—what it all boiled down to, was that he just didn't have the balls to kill you from the start."

Brad motioned with the gun for Lane to move out of the way.

Terrified, Lane shook her head *no*. She was rewarded with a stiff blow to the temple with the butt of

Brad's gun—which dropped her like a stone to the pier. Fighting to retain consciousness, she again recognized the taste of blood upon her lips from biting them, struggling to focus through blurry eyes, and yet clarity escaped her.

Wrestling nausea and the incessant throbbing of her temple, Lane turned her body, one that suddenly weighed too much for her bones. She could see Brad and Tony. She fought against the haze to hear, at the same time willing herself to do something, *to get up*.

"Why Brad? I trusted you." Tony asked.

"It's nothing personal, my friend. Just business. All of us weren't destined to be the good guys. You find the finer things in life can be expensive. Gaining what you want can be a little—messy. Unlike you, Tony, We can't all be savior to the world's downtrodden." Brad leveled the gun between Tony's eyes.

"Noooooooo!" Lane screamed through tears, deaf to the gunshot that pierced Serenity Lake at that same moment.

The echo was still fading as a male voice called out, "Doc, Mrs. Sheridan? Are you two okay?"

Fervently wiping the blood and tears from her eyes, Lane looked swiftly over to Tony. He was propping himself up on one elbow...the body of Brad Houtman lying beside him—in a growing pool of blood.

The man approached at a half jog and halted to catch his breath.

"Randall?" Tony squinted his eyes.

The gangly orderly kneeled down to check on Lane.

"I'll be okay." She insisted shaking her head "Tony's been stabbed."

The man patted Lane on the shoulder, then arose and moved over to Tony. Who said again, obviously puzzled, "Randall, what in the hell are you doing here?"

He shot him a reassuring smile then looked with seriousness at Tony's wound. Finally, he supplied, "Actually, the name is Patrick. Agent Patrick Sommers. I work undercover. We've been trying to bust those two for a long time, but haven't been able to get enough evidence for a charge. That is, until you came along."

"Evidence of what?" Tony cringed as Agent Sommers ripped his shirt open to inspect the stab wound.

"I think I can help explain." Lane took a deep breath feeling as if she were walking out of a tunnel. It was painful in more ways than physical, and yet, she was Lucid. "At the time of Sam's drowning, I was investigating alleged illegal organ harvesting, involving the research lab where Sam worked. One of my sources claimed mental patients were being murdered for their organs. I made the obvious, near-fatal mistake of going to Sam, asking for help in uncovering who was involved."

Agent Sommers nodded. "Yes. There were others involved to a degree, including a nurse at Briarwood, but the whole operation was masterminded by those two."

"I can't believe it. Brad was my friend? He was one of the few people I considered ethical."

Lane placed her hand on Tony's chest. "You were blind because you're a good person, you trusted people, just as I did." She searched his face. "You saved my life."

"Not only your life, Mrs. Sheridan. Dr. Tony here has saved the lives of countless others. If he hadn't come to Briarwood, It is doubtful we'd have ever caught Sam. In fact, when Tony arrived, I had to put my ass on the line with my boss to give me more time. I was about to be pulled off the case. Sam Sheridan and Bradley Houtman were very ingenious; shrewd in what they were doing. They had a tightly run, and very lucrative, operation going."

Tony shook his head, lowering his eyes to the ground, and then returned his gaze to Agent Sommers. "I still don't understand why Sam went to so much trouble; faking his own death, having surgery to alter his appearance. Why?"

"To ensure he didn't spend the rest of his life in prison, if their deal was ever exposed. You can't convict a dead man. And I had my suspicions if he was, because of the timing. I'm sure Sam figured if Lane kept digging, his name would eventually come up.

What he didn't realize is we were already investigating him, and the lab, before Lane ever started her investigation. I'll tell you why I never believed Sam Sheridan was dead." The man looked around then back to Tony. "A person doesn't drown in a lake this size without a body turning up."

"Well, you'll be finding a body this time. I guarantee it." Lane managed a hard, cold, laugh.

Sirens sounded in the distance, moving closer.

. "Everything will be okay. When you left the hospital, I followed, and called for backup, an ambulance, once I had the location." Agent Sommers looked down at Tony. "They'll have you patched up in no time."

Tony nodded and gave Agent Sommers a weak smile.

"So, Mrs. Sheridan, do you remember where you kept the information on your investigation?" Agent Sommers then turned his attention to Lane, all inspector and professional. "Sam and Brad may be dead, but it could prove helpful in convicting the others involved."

Unable to control her emotions longer, she closed her eyes, inhaling deep but tears fell anyway. "I kept it all in the one place Sam would have never looked. It's in the one thing he hadn't opened since the day we were married. Everything is in our wedding album, wherever it is now."

Agent Sommers gave Lane a sympathetic look, and then walked out to meet the approaching vehicles.

Standing there, Lane had her final vivid thought from all those memories of Sam. She suspected he had wed her for money, position, and for greed. *Sam never loved me*, she mused somewhat distantly. He needed me, needed the family connections...there was probably a Swiss account somewhere... God only knew what he and Brad had done...

She shivered, wondering, if she had never done that investigation, Lane would like to think that eventually she would have caught on... still, it was there, in her mind, that Sam would have eventually rid himself of her...

Tony's eyes met Lane's. He said the one thing that mattered to her, the affirmations she needed. "You didn't try to kill yourself. You said all along you weren't that type of person... and you were right."

Lane laid her head on Tony's chest. He reached up hand that was battered and knuckles swelling, stroking her matted hair.

She managed a watery smile as she rasped, "Thank you, Tony Gabrielli. Thank you for that."

His shoulder burned, his stomach churned from Sam's punches. He was pretty sure he'd lost enough blood to cause the lightheadedness trying to overtake him. But Tony had a near smug smile spread across his own lips... *It was Halloween. And on this night, for once, he'd saved a life.*

The End