



LAURENCE MACNAUGHTON

CONSPIRACY
OF ANGELS

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A debut of a new talent well worth exploring deep into the night."
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ONE

When Mitch heard the crash in the back yard, he thought about getting his .45, and then remembered it was all the way upstairs in his bedroom. He set down the plate of barbecue ribs on the kitchen table and picked up the big steel spatula Bryce had given him as a parole gift. As quietly as he could manage, he crept over to the back door and peered outside.

The back yard was knee-deep in weeds, the leaves shaking in the cold Colorado rain. A big tree limb had busted off the apple tree just inside the wooden fence. Bare splinters of wood littered the ground. As he watched, a girl climbed out of the branches, trailing leaves. She had straight black hair and eye shadow he could see from across the yard. The rest of her was lost inside an old black overcoat. She looked young, barely out of her teens. About the age Jocelyn would've been, if she were still alive.

She spotted him through the clear glass door, so he slid it open and stepped out onto the chilly back patio. As she brushed off the leaves, she never took her gaze off him. She had eyes that were older than her years. Tense, but not scared. Her breath steamed in the cold air.

Mitch had the impression she was sizing him up. A sleepy-eyed ex-con pushing fifty, sandy hair edging toward gray, arms thick from killing too much time lifting weights. She didn't look too impressed.

She brushed long strands of wet hair out of her face. "Your name Mitchell Turner?"

He walked out to the grill, ignoring the rain, and shut the lid. He leaned on the warm handle, suddenly conscious of the fact that he was still in his bathrobe in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon, when ordinary decent people were at work. It embarrassed him a little. "Tell you what, kid. First, maybe you should explain to me why the hell you're trespassing in my back yard."

She came closer, her chin thrust out, trying to look mean. Like maybe she didn't trust a big, half-dressed ex-con who was old enough to be her dad. Of all things.

Her gaze went to the open door behind him, checking it out, then back to him. That seemed more than a touch suspicious. He didn't know what she was planning, considering she was half his size. Maybe she had friends out front. Mitch straightened up.

Quietly, she said, "Are you Jocelyn's dad?"

It caught him off guard, this punk kid bringing his daughter's name back from the dead, like it was no big deal. Like maybe Jocelyn had just run out for cigarettes and she'd be back any minute now.

Sometimes, he felt like that. Like she would just walk in, the door would bang, and she'd be home. Mad at him for something or other.

But she wouldn't. She was dead, four years now, died in a hospital in some mountain town he'd never heard of. He'd been called out of his cell and told by a counselor. He'd had to use the grimy prison phone to arrange the funeral.

"Hey, *hello?*" The girl waved a hand in front of his face. "Are you Jocelyn's dad or not?"

He cleared his throat and looked down at the girl with the eye shadow and black lipstick. "Jocelyn's passed away. I'm sorry."

"But you're Mitchell Turner. You're Jocelyn's dad. Yes or no?"

He gave her a closer look. "You knew my daughter?"

"I'm the one asking the questions here."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

Mitch felt his temper lighting up. "Look, what the hell do you want, kid?"

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“I want to know what they told you. About Jocelyn’s death.”

Mitch wanted to ask, *What who told me?* But he felt himself going into a slow boil. “Listen, kid. Whatever business my daughter had with you, it’s finished. It’s done. Now get the hell out.”

“It was your project that killed her. It was your *fault*.”

“You turn around and get the hell out of my back yard. Better yet, how ‘bout I throw you over the fence myself?” He took a step toward her, went to grab her by the arm.

She stepped back out of reach, quick, and brought up a chunky black pistol in both hands. “Don’t even.” She didn’t blink. The pistol didn’t shake. She aimed it right at his chest.

It made Mitch hesitate.

He held his hands up slowly. This changed things. But he figured that as long as she kept asking questions, she wouldn’t really shoot him. Not yet, anyway.

“Drop the thing,” she said.

“What?”

She pointed with her chin. “The *thing*.”

The spatula. He was still holding it. “All right, fine.” He reached over to set it on the grill.

“Drop it. Now.”

“Take it easy. This is my favorite spatula.” He set it down gently.

“Whatever.” She glanced at the open doorway, then back at him. “You know, you don’t look much like a scientist.”

This kid just kept getting weirder. “Science wasn’t my best subject. But I’ll tell you what. I’ll say ‘billions and billions’ a couple times. How’s that?”

She didn't even hint at a smile. Probably didn't get it. And she was still aiming that funny-looking gun. Mitch didn't recognize it. He figured maybe it was one of those plastic guns, the kind that fooled metal detectors.

He tried a different tactic. "Honey, look. I just got out. Okay?"

"Out?"

"Of *prison*. You obviously got me mixed up with some other Mitch Turner. There's a lot of us in town. Just look in the damn phone book. I'm not a scientist. I'm not anything."

"Yeah? Well, I'm not your honey."

"Okay, fine. Long as we understand each other, you can put the gun down, huh?" He waited. "No? All right, listen, why don't we get in out of the rain, at least?" That way, Mitch figured, maybe there was a chance Bryce would pull his head out of the computer long enough to hear them and do something. God only knew what. Hopefully not call the cops. That was the last thing he needed, giving the cops an excuse to crawl around his house and find the guns he'd just bought.

She didn't budge. "I want to know why you started Project Archangel."

"Project what-what?"

"Don't play games with me. You're Jocelyn's father. You were in charge of the program."

"Honey, I never been in charge of anything. And that's a good thing. A guy like me takes charge, things get a habit of turning all screwy."

She started to look a little unsure of herself. She glanced back over her shoulder, the way she'd come in. But with the tree limb busted off, there was no climbing back out. She was stuck here.

"So what's your name?" Mitch said.

She looked all around, like she was weighing her options. "Geneva."

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“Geneva. That’s a place.”

“Ha. Ha. No, really, I’ve never heard that before.”

He shrugged. “I’m going inside. You want to come in, you better put the hardware away. You like barbecue ribs?” She didn’t answer, so he stepped inside and leaned on the door handle. As she walked by, he got a good look at the gun.

It wasn’t real.

It was made out of plastic, for one thing, and a little green light glowed near her thumb. The barrel didn’t end in a hole, but a lens, like one of those video game guns Bryce kept up in his room.

Mitch let out a long breath. Every muscle in his body seemed to unclench, and he felt like bursting out with a laugh. At least now he knew what he was dealing with. Some nutball kid with a toy gun.

She looked around the kitchen. “Nice place.” The sarcasm was obvious.

He went around to the table and sat down. “Yeah? My brother kept it up while I was inside. All the comic book stuff, the Nintendo in the living room, that’s all his. Don’t touch it.”

“So. Prison. What did you go for?”

“Breaking into people’s houses and asking them stupid questions.” Mitch picked up the biggest rib on the plate. The steam coming off of it made his eyes water. It looked so good, so charred and spicy and perfect, he had to swallow before he opened his mouth. “I been waiting five years for this rib. You know that? Five freakin’ years.”

He sank his teeth into it, and for a moment his mouth was overloaded with sensation. It was every bit as good as he hoped. Spicy, but not too hot. Tangy, with a touch of smoke. When he opened his eyes, the girl was still standing there, glaring with eyes thickly lined in black.

Still chewing, he pointed at the plate. “You want one?”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Project Archangel.”

“Oh, for the love of ...” Mitch put the rib down and wiped his mouth. Damn, it was good. And she was ruining it. He talked around a mouthful of barbecue. “Look. I’m going to say this one last time. And that’s it. So listen. I’m no *scientist*. I don’t know any *angels*. And no amount of you standing there giving me the Morticia Addams is gonna change anything. You got that? So you can either get out of here, or sit down and have a rib. Either way, shut up and let me eat. That’s the deal.”

“Nice performance,” she said, a hint of fake sweetness in her voice. “You get an Oscar.”

Mitch hung his head. This kid was going to give him indigestion.

He heard Bryce come out of his bedroom and come thumping down the stairs. Please, Mitch prayed, let him be dressed. The last thing he needed to add to this mix was his three-hundred-pound brother walking in wearing tighty-whities and a Superman shirt.

Bryce stopped midway down the stairs. He was wearing pants, thank God.

Bryce looked at the kid, then Mitch. Mitch figured Bryce couldn’t see the toy gun from the stairs, not with the way she was holding it down by her hip.

Bryce looked completely at a loss. Not used to visitors. “Who’s this?”

“Bryce, this is Paris.”

“Geneva,” she said.

“Whatever. She was just leaving. You wanna get the door for her?”

She squared her shoulders. “I’m not going anywhere until I get some answers.”

“What are you gonna do? Change my channel?”

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“You don’t want me to shoot you.”

“Oh, yes I do. Go ahead.” Mitch held his arms open wide. “Come on, you can’t miss me from here.”

She brought the plastic gun up in both hands.

Bryce gripped the banister like it was going to fall off. “Dude, she’s got a gun!”

Mitch sighed. “It’s not a gun.”

“That’s right,” Geneva said. “It’s a pulse weapon. Just like the one your people designed. It’s the only thing that can hurt the Archangel. But it can’t kill it. And that’s what I need to know.”

“You lost me in the middle there.”

Slowly, she said, “How do I kill the Archangel?”

Mitch turned to Bryce. “You see what I’m up against?”

Bryce’s forehead wrinkled up. “I think she’s serious.”

“Oh, for the love of God. You.” Mitch stood up and came around the table. “Get the hell out of my house. Right now.”

She backed up, the gun aimed steady at him. “Don’t make me do it.”

“You know, this was funny for a little while. Now you’re pissing me off.” He grabbed her arm.

The world went instantly white, like an insanely bright flashbulb had gone off with him in the middle of it. A bolt of lightning scorched through his body. Time stopped. All of his thoughts crashed into each other in a mad jumble of white heat. His body hung in the air, suspended in the blinding light. Behind him, glass exploded into ghostly crystalline whispers.

Then the spell was broken. He hit the floor. His whole body prickled with pins and needles, as if every part of him had gone to sleep at once.

Bryce shouted his name.

The front door slammed.

Then he realized he was lying on his side, staring at the bottom corner of the movie shelf. A dusty DVD case said *Keanu Reeves* and *SPEED* in big orange letters. A thin whine filled his ears.

He couldn't feel his hands. Or his legs. Nothing but the vibration of Bryce's feet thumping across the floor, from a million miles away. He wanted to sit up, but he couldn't move.

His view of the movie rack tilted, and he realized Bryce was trying to pick him up, trying to drag him.

The hallway crept past his eyes, and then the living room, and the big rain-dotted front window. An old black muscle car tore away through the rain, braking hard at the stop sign at the corner. A Denver police cruiser rolled up behind the car, and for the first time ever, Mitch wanted to yell out to the cops, call for help.

The old black car signaled a turn, one of its taillights lighting up in three segments, from the center to the outside, *blink-blink-blink, blink-blink-blink*.

Mitch kept waiting for the cop to turn on his lights, pull the car over. But it just sat there as the car turned the corner and disappeared into the rain. Then the cop drove off straight.

Just once, Mitch thought, they could've done something good.

Bryce's big face drifted down into Mitch's vision, all red and blotchy, breathing hard. "Mitch?" His voice sounded burbly, like it was coming from underwater. "Mitch? Hey! Wake up!" He shook Mitch's shoulder.

Then Mitch came out of it all at once, like he'd broken the surface of a swimming pool. All the sound came rushing back to him. He got up on his hands and knees, fighting down the greasy feeling in his stomach. The living room spun around him.

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Bryce plopped down on the couch, wheezing. “What’d she do to you?”

“Don’t know. Must’ve been a stun gun. Something like that.”

“It blew up the TV.”

“What?” Mitch turned around. The screen of the old tube-type TV was just gone. It was hollowed out, like a jagged little cave. Pieces of gray-green glass sparkled across the carpet.

A little pair of black metal goggles lay on the floor nearby. He picked them up. They felt heavy for their size, the frame made out of metal. Thick lenses. “Looks like she dropped these.”

“Too bad she didn’t drop her laser gun.” Bryce’s wheezing got worse, turned into a high-pitched squeak in his chest. “Could put that on eBay.”

“Hey. You okay?”

Bryce nodded. He fished an inhaler out of his pocket, put it to his mouth and squeezed. Nothing happened. He frowned at it, shook it and tried again. Nothing. “Shoot.” Bryce leaned forward on his knees, fighting to breathe.

“Hey, Bryce? Buddy? You okay?”

Bryce nodded, lifted one arm like it was an effort. Pointed upstairs.

“You need a new inhaler?”

Bryce nodded again. The squeaks in his chest came short and quick. His face started to turn purple.

Mitch got to his feet, ignoring the rubbery feeling in his legs. “You stay put. Calm down. Just breathe. Okay? Through your nose.”

Mitch stumbled up the stairs into the bathroom. Under the sink, he found disposable razors, hair gel, Q-tips. No inhalers.

He ran down the stairs. Bryce had his eyes closed, slumped over on the sofa, taking little high-pitched breaths.

“Bryce?” Mitch grabbed his face, patted one stubble-scratchy cheek. “Hey, buddy, where you keep that stuff?”

Bryce didn’t open his eyes.

Mitch swore and ran back upstairs, into the spare bedroom Bryce had filled up with his computers and his fourteen million comic book toys all standing on shelves. Mitch dug through the desk, throwing CDs and computer manuals on the floor, knocking down toy aliens and soldiers, dumping over stacks of books.

He stood in the middle of the room, looking around and around. He knew he wasn’t going to find it.

He charged back down the stairs, starting to feel that edge of panic, that closed-in feeling he got when the cops were closing in and he had nowhere to go.

He ran around to the garage, got the door rumbling open, squeezed himself into that goddamn silver Toyota Camry he’d bought for Jocelyn. He backed the car out too fast, scraped the mirror on the edge of the doorway.

He drove over the lawn, right up the front walk, keeping two wheels on the concrete so he didn’t get stuck in the wet grass. Left the passenger door open to the rain and sprinted inside.

Bryce was still breathing, barely. He was too heavy to pick up. Mitch got him beneath the armpits, heaved him off the couch. Dragged him, limp and heavy, outside to the Toyota.

It took him three tries to get Bryce into the car, banging his brother’s head on the door frame the last time. He got Bryce’s legs in, had to roll down the window and pull Bryce’s arm through it just to shut the door.

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Then he got in and gunned the engine. Slew around backward, remembered too late that the goddamn car was front-wheel drive, slid the wrong way on the grass and clipped the neighbor's old pickup at the curb.

He straightened the car out and floored it, drove over the sidewalk, scraping the underside on the curb. He hit the street and kept going.

He got two blocks before he figured out how to turn the windshield wipers on, got them slamming back and forth in the pouring rain.

“Hang on,” he said, gripping Bryce's big hand. “Hang on, buddy.”

He lay on the horn and tried to remember the fastest way to the hospital.

TWO

Geneva knew, way back before she decided to do this, that they might kill her if they found out. She just never thought she would screw up this badly.

She kept the radio off on the highway, nothing around her but the sound of wet pavement beneath Brutus's tires. Squeaking windshield wipers. The steady growl of the engine.

She coasted down the exit ramp. At the bottom, she turned back under the highway and bumped over the railroad tracks. When she finally got to a stoplight, she let everything out at once, shouting obscenities at no one, grabbing the horn ring and letting the noise blast out over the warehouses and rail yards, into the gray sky.

Then she sat back in the seat, breathing deep. Trying to stay cool. Stay focused.

She patted the dashboard. "Sorry, Brutus."

She stared at the red traffic light, thinking. Trying to figure out how she could have gone so wrong. What was this guy's game? It had hit him hard when she said Jocelyn's name. Didn't he know that the Archangel had killed her? Why was he lying to her? What did he have to gain?

Or was he only repeating the lies he'd been told?

He claimed he'd been in prison all these years. But if that was true, the Conspiracy would have gotten to him by now. They would have killed him. Unless he was one of them.

None of it made any sense.

The light turned green and she hit the gas. Brutus rumbled through the intersection. She glanced down at the fuel gauge and her heart sank.

She'd used almost a quarter tank on this trip, and Michael would want to know why. He'd ask her where she'd been.

Oh, nowhere, Michael. Just trying to find out just how deep your lies go. Trying to find out if you've been using me all these years to do your dirty work. Doing what you always taught me: research the target.

Only this time, Michael, the target is you.

She shook her head. She had to concentrate on the here and now. She had to cover her tracks.

She wasn't supposed to fill up at the same gas station twice. Michael had always been strict about that. They had cameras inside, when you went to pay. They could track you that way.

She'd told him, "Why don't we just use debit cards, pay at the pump? There's places you can get debit cards for cash, they can't trace you."

He'd just put his arms around her shoulders and squeezed, the way he did when he thought she was being naïve. "Genie," he'd said. "Just trust me, and we'll all get out of this alive."

But the only gas station between here and home was a Conoco she'd been at a few days before.

She watched the red-and-white sign grow closer. Thought about turning around, getting back on the highway to find another place. Thought about red-bearded Raph always cleaning his guns, the way he watched her that made her skin crawl. He'd wanted to kill her for a long time now. If Michael found out she'd betrayed him, he might stop protecting her. And the first opportunity Raph got, he'd make her disappear.

She was almost past the Conoco. She could turn back, hope to find another gas station.

Screw it. She turned the wheel and pulled up to a pump.

There wasn't anyone else there. Just a guy in the garage putting tires on a gold Saturn, impact wrench rattling.

She was careful not to put too much gas into Brutus, just enough to make it look like she'd only gone to the store like she'd said.

She went in to pay and the guy came in from the shop, trying hard to look cool in his Buddy Holly glasses and sideburns. The name Ruben was stitched on his shirt. He wiped his dirty hands on a red shop towel and nodded his chin at Brutus. "Nice Cougar you got there."

"Yeah. Thanks." She dug money out of her pockets, uncrumpled a couple of bills.

"1967?"

"It's a sixty-eight."

He nodded. "Cool."

"Yeah. Um, Ruben, you want to take my money, or what?"

She paid him for the gas and bought a Gatorade. She was halfway back to the car when she heard his voice from the doorway.

"So where'd you get it painted, anyway? That's funky."

The sun had broken through the clouds while she was inside, and it sparkled on the stealth nanofabric that Michael had used to cover every inch of Brutus's body. From here, it just looked like black paint with some kind of oily shimmer.

Without breaking stride, Geneva looked back over her shoulder. There was an old car parked behind the building, long peeling turquoise fins and new tires. "That your car back there?"

"The Studebaker?" Ruben shoved his hands into his pockets. "Yeah. Bought it a couple months ago."

"Is it fast?"

“It will be. Once I get the engine done. Gonna drop in a Chevy 327, best engine Detroit ever made. No offense, now, to your Cougar.”

She had to smile at that. She gave him a thumbs-up.

The guy looked like he was going to ask her something else, so she got back into Brutus, gunned him to life, and laid down a couple strips of rubber without really meaning to.

She saw Ruben in the rearview mirror, walking out into the street to watch her drive away, his glasses dark on his face.

By the time she got back to the hideout, she was so worked up about trying to stay calm, her stomach was clenched in a knot. She tried to breathe easy, in and out, be cool.

Home, at least for the moment, was a boarded-up concrete building with six numbered garage bays. Geneva pulled around to the back and waited a minute with the engine running until the door rolled up. Gabe in his tidy black turtleneck appeared, pushing up the door with a two-by-four. In the shadows of the garage, she could see a crouched black shape. That would be Raph, with his AK-47, making sure she wasn't being followed.

She thought about turning on her headlights, putting the bright beams on him, just to show him. But she didn't. Just pulled in, the sound of the motor echoing back at her off the concrete walls.

She turned off the ignition and got out, almost forgetting to get the bags out of the trunk. Behind her, Gabe rattled the garage door shut and screeched the lock closed.

She carried the plastic bags into the kitchen, a big long room where they'd rigged a microwave and a fridge. She put the bags down on the table where Michael was working on his laptop. The screen showed a picture of a big warehouse with an empty flatbed truck out front, and what looked like a schematic of a security system superimposed over the building.

Michael looked startled when she walked in. Not much, just a little twitch that likely no one else would have noticed. But she knew him. Knew when he was trying to hide something. He clicked a button and the picture vanished.

“What’s that?” she said.

Michael didn’t answer. He laced his fingers together behind his head, leaned back in his chair and studied her. His cheekbones stood out in the light of the laptop’s screen, making him look even thinner than he was. He kept his black hair slicked back these days, wore tight black T-shirts that showed off his chest, as if he was trying to prove something.

His gaze made her nervous. It was like he knew everything she was thinking.

Geneva started emptying the bags. “Whatever. I got the wires and the power supplies. They were all out of regular duct tape. I don’t know how we used ours up.” She dug out a plastic-wrapped roll of black tape. “But check this out. Black duct tape. How cool is that?”

“Leave it. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“‘We’ meaning you and Gabe and Raph. And not me.” She threw the roll of tape down on the table. “You know, I’m getting sick of all this sitting around, you and Gabe acting like you know something I don’t, Raph sitting out there in the dark about ready to go postal.”

Michael pursed his lips. “Genie, love, do you think you could perhaps be a bit more difficult?”

She finished unpacking the bags, slamming down packs of batteries, putty, spools of cable.

“You do know that Gabe and Raph are like family. This mission has been their life ever since we came here. Now that we’re getting down to the wire, it’s a bit hard for them to share.”

She gave him a cautious look, hoping he'd mistake the fear in her eyes for something like hurt.

He smiled. "Sooner or later, we're going to catch the creature. Believe me. It's going to happen. We're very, very close. And when it does, we'll be able to do things the way that others before us should have. And when this part of the mission is over, it will be hard for them to move on, even knowing we've all done such a good thing together."

Geneva kept watching him. "We are going to kill it. Right?"

"Beg pardon?"

"You said *catch* the creature. You mean *kill* it."

"Yeah. Catch it. Kill it. When we're ready."

"I'm ready right now."

"Absolutely. That's what I love about you. But there are certain things we need to learn from it first." He folded his arms and studied her. "If I didn't know you better, I'd say you don't believe me."

"No." She tried to look honest. "I believe you."

"Then I can count on you, when the time comes. You don't have any doubts."

"No."

"Good. I'd hate to think you'd want to murder me in my sleep." He closed the screen of his laptop. "At any rate, we're all stretched a bit thin. Give Gabe and Raph a little room to breathe. They don't have anything against you personally. You'd think by now they would, but no."

Geneva came around the table, sat on it close to Michael, looked down into his eyes. "Raph is a creep."

Slowly, Michael said, "By 'creep' I assume you mean efficient. Raph does what he does very well. He's useful that way."

Soft footsteps came in from the garage and stopped in the doorway behind Geneva. She got that creepy feeling on the back of her neck she got whenever Raph was staring at her. She didn't turn around.

Michael looked past her, the expression on his face going serious. "Yes?"

Behind her, Raph's gravelly voice: "It's just like you said."

Michael nodded. "Take care of it, then. You and Gabe."

Raph made a low sound, like a grunt, and then his footsteps slipped away into the garage.

Geneva kept watching Michael's face, trying to see what was going on beneath the surface. Then the moment was gone, and Michael gave her a warm smile.

"Don't worry, Genie." He patted her leg. "Raph and Gabe just have to run an errand."

"I thought I did all the errands already."

He just kept smiling, but she could see the look in his eyes, like he was thinking fast. It scared her, seeing it up close, and it pissed her off, too. She knew he was lying. She could see it.

She pushed his hand away and got up. Without any particular plan in mind, she grabbed a pack of lightbulbs from the bag and went down the hall toward Michael's bedroom.

"Genie?" His chair scraped as he got up. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Just going to fix that lamp in your room."

"No, it's fixed. It's done. Genie?" He trotted down the hall after her.

Someone had put a shiny new deadbolt on his door. On the outside.

"Geneva?" All the warmth was gone from his voice. "Don't do anything rash."

“Like finding out what you’ve been hiding from me?” She turned the deadbolt knob and pushed the door open.

All the furniture had been taken out of the room, leaving only the bare concrete floor. In the middle of it sat a fat gray-haired man in a white collared shirt spotted with blood. He was duct-taped to a wooden chair, a rectangle of silver tape over his mouth.

In his eyes, she could see terror. He tried to talk through the tape. He fought against the chair, scraping across the floor toward her.

“Oh, God.” Geneva backed out of the room. “Michael? What the hell is this?”

Michael reached past her and closed the door, blocking her view of the man. He turned the lock knob, and metal scraped. He leaned down close, so close all she could look at was his dark eyes.

“This,” he said softly, “is part of the mission.”