

## Lesser Pretender

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# Lesser Pretender

by [Serena Walken \(SerenaWalken\)](#).

## Summary

A pretender can become anyone they want to be. A lesser could become someone that anyone chose them to be. Jarod didn't know he knew a lesser, until he learned what happened in his missing days when he died. (Jarod/Parker Romance.)(Complete)

## Notes

Trigger: If you are susceptible to anything you read from death to abortion, read cautiously and stop if you feel you should. This fic does not go into huge detail of hard events, but sounds themselves trigger Miss Parker. No canon characters from the series die in this fanfiction.

Happy Ending story. Jarod/Parker Romance. Vulgarity, no nudity. Everything else you can discover for yourself so I don't spoil you.

## Visiting Day For Oliver

Sydney's phone rang at an inconvenient time, which usually meant Jarod. Three in the morning. "Sydney."

"I'm having nightmares again," Jarod revealed. "I know that they tried to kill me, Sydney. They stopped my heart. Lyle and Raines. October 1995."

"Yes, I know," Sydney agreed. "I was away in Europe. I remember, Jarod. You're dreaming of it again?"

"It's longer now. It's more complicated. Before I die, I'm in my apartment. I'm crying out. I can't make out what I'm crying out but I see her."

"See who?" Sydney asked.

"I see her. Miss Parker," Jarod said. "She was there the day I died."

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The grind. Again. This time? The grind was harder. Raines threatened to have The Centre kill her if she didn't bring in Jarod. With her father now gone, a weird mind and heart confusion on Carthis, and Raines in charge? Her mind felt like jelly. It was now January 2001 and she was back in the office. Looking for Jarod. Again.

"Miss Parker?" Sydney grabbed a chair and sat down right next to her. Right next to her, almost in a breathing position down her neck. "I have a question for you."

"Good for you," she said with a sneer, "and why are you this close to me, like I'm an evil witch you're trying to corner?" Did Jarod tell him about her little weak moment? Putting things together, and almost? No. Not that soon. "What?"

"Where were you the night Jarod almost died?" Sydney asked her.

"He's outrun the gun I don't know how many times. Be more specific." And she'd be nicer if he'd give her some space. What was his problem?

“The night Lyle and Raines stopped his heart. October 1995. Where were you?” he asked again.

“I don’t know. Selling girl scout cookies, how the hell should I know some random date in 1995?” Geez, that was six years ago. “Why?”

“Jarod.” Sydney gestured to her. “He sees you in his nightmares.”

“Visuals are mutual, we must travel the same dream plane,” she said back. “I don’t know where I was, but I wasn’t killing Jarod. I had better stuff to do. Like live my life,” she said.

Sydney still didn’t back off that day. She didn’t care. Jarod’s brain was just getting twisted. Everything was just twisted.

To keep herself on schedule though, she kept all of her activities the same. Same eating time. Same waiting time. Same everything. Except? She wouldn’t have a wish daddy goodnight time. Not that he was even there usually, but she would wait in front of those big beautiful doors to his office and just whisper goodnight before heading off to home.

She rubbed her eyes and stuck with sorting a few things.

“Miss Parker. Aren’t you going to come upstairs and say goodnight to your daddy? Angel?”

*Don’t. Glare.* She glared anyhow as she saw Raines waiting by the door. “What do you want?”

“It’s the fifteenth? What else?”

She felt something strike her arm.

9:00 PM

*I did it. I did it. I knew I could do it.* Oliver looked at his work. It was a little higher than his normal load, but he was a growing boy. He was born on the Fourth of July, 1996. Gil wanted to name him July or maybe Independence. Momma already had his name picked out though. His dad picked it. He sighed, waiting for her. He’d done the extra long work for that day. While other children ran around and played, he was a special child. He couldn’t have too much stimulation so he lived in a quiet room of white. He could choose to do nothing all day, but he always tried his best to do the work given to him by Gil.

Because when he did good, he was always rewarded. If he did good overall, every fifteenth of the month, he would get something incredible. He even made some planet shapes, fifteen in a row, that he would take on and off the wall, to keep track of time. *She should be here.* He was on the end of his apartment, almost even to the door. Waiting for her pretty face. While he waited though, he also knew he wouldn’t see it yet. He couldn’t feel her near yet. Not yet.

Then? He felt her. He didn't need to wait for the window, he rushed over to the door, knowing she was coming. He could hear the door open and there she was!

She was the most beautiful woman in the world. To him, but he'd overheard Gil say it too. That she looked just like her own mother. His grandmother, Catherine Parker. Although, he wasn't supposed to use last names. Those weren't for lesser pretenders.

"Oliver?" Her soft voice was heard as the door opened. Then, her brilliant smile lit up her face. "Hi, did you miss me?"

Oliver ran to her and hugged her with all his might. He'd only get one hour with her and only once a month. He made it count as much as possible. "I love you!"

"I love you too," she said, holding him so tight. She picked him up and held him in her arms.

From the outside, Oliver saw the man with the oxygen tank and Gil. The man with the oxygen tank was his grandpa, but he never called him that. He'd rarely ever said one nice thing to him. He waved at Gil. "I did six!"

"Your father did twenty a day at your age," the man with the oxygen tank said. "You'd be useless if you weren't my grandson." He was never a very nice grandpa.

Gil on the other hand was always nice. "He is growing up fast, Raines. Last month he did five, and before that he was averaging four."

"Then maybe he is getting more propped up," the man with the oxygen tank said. "Still. Nothing to get excited about. Miss Parker is starting to become a bother too. She can't seem to do her job anymore."

"Does that mean she can come back?" Gil asked. "Can Mary come back?"

"I'm thinking about it. A little birdie in a car made it sound like Jarod and her got close. Too close. If that's the case, this project failed."

"What project?" Oliver asked.

"Nothing, Oliver," his mother said. "Nevermind them. This is our time, remember?" She took him further away from their conversation. "Our time. This is our time." She pulled out a picture of Jarod. "Not to keep. Just to see."

Oliver's eyes lit up as he stared at a picture of his dad. "He is in a CIA uniform."

"Yeah. Daddy loves to pretend," she said weakly. "You can thank Gil for the extra look. And Mister Raines."

Oliver studied the picture. "He's really tall. He's really brave."

"That he is." She took the picture away again, but it was okay. Oliver definitely put it into his memory banks. His daddy changed and grew just like him. Every picture was always different, making it always worth the reward. Although his room was always white, he had a

small area of stimulus he was allowed to have. That's where he put his rewards he'd earned. He'd been earning them even before he knew how he earned them. Besides the planets, he had DSA's. Three of them, of his dad in The Centre. He had to earn so many sim points to get a DSA. It was hard to accumulate though because he could earn a picture for only twenty simulations and that number didn't fluctuate. He decided to try and split up his points between them. That way he could accumulate his dad's modern day pictures, and his old DSA's to see him. Hear his voice. Watch him move. One day, if he got really good? The man with the oxygen tank said he'd get to meet his dad. But he'd have to get really, really good.

"I'm going to earn the picture too next month. I'm going to do seven simulations a day," Oliver declared to her. "Will that make him happy?"

"Honestly? No," his mother said. "Makes The Centre happy, not Jarod." She looked back a moment at Gil and the man in the oxygen tank. "What I mean is, you do good work for your reward. Daddy doesn't care how many you do. As long as you do your best. Okay?"

"Okay." He hugged his mom. "Can you sing me a song, momma? Before you have to go? Something that I can sing when I miss you?"

She closed her eyes and held him so tight. It wasn't fair. Life was never fair. As much of a genius as Jarod had been, he still hadn't figured it out. He didn't even suspect anything. It was a shame. "Next time, Honey. It's only a day away." That's what it felt like. One hour every month. The rest of the time, unable to know what was happening. She would just find herself back in her room with Gil and Raines, ready to see her son for one hour. Then the next month on the 15th. Then the next month on the 15th. She didn't remember to eat, shower, or anything else. She would just come in and spend time with her son and that's all she got. When she tried to stop and take two seconds to ask Gil, it always ended bad because Raines was there.

If the conversation they were having was true? If they were letting her come back and stay? It would be so nice.

It would be soooo nice. While she told Oliver to not listen, she was spending every minute trying to appreciate Oliver while listening to Gil and Raines. She wanted her life back.

Miss Parker did not deserve it. She deserved it. She rocked Oliver quietly back and forth, letting him enjoy the time that most children took for granted. She knew he wouldn't. He'd memorize as much about that moment as possible, as well as the humming of a new song. Oliver liked it. He worked hard. He worked so hard for such little things. He deserved to see her more. He deserved to see her fifteen minutes through the panel everyday, and spend time with her for one hour per week again. Not one month.

After the hour was up, she wished him goodnight, and tucked him into his bed with a hug and a kiss. "Goodnight, Oliver. Pleasant dreams."

"Pleasant dreams, momma." He sighed contentedly as he closed his eyes. Ready to put the day away so late.

She left the room, hearing the sound of the stiletto heels she'd always found herself wearing. She closed the door and heard the security bell sound that the room was safe and secure.

"Mary?" Raines addressed her. "Miss Parker has outlived her usefulness. Gil and I think it's time you get to come back."

She held her breath. The words she had been waiting to hear for so long. Ever since September 1996. She hadn't even said a word, but she could feel tears forming in her eyes. "More than an hour, once a month? I could? Live again?" she asked. "Please?"

"One more try with Jarod," Raines said. "Using you. Miss Parker gets two total shots. If she can lure Jarod to The Centre, we'll get him."

"And if he doesn't?" Mary asked timidly, knowing that so far Jarod had outwitted The Centre at every turn.

"Then I guess welcome home," Raines said sourly. "Gil will take care of you again like he's been taking care of Oliver."

"Thank you. I appreciate it greatly." She bowed down her head graciously, trying not to make a big deal of it. She couldn't let her emotions get out of control. "If Jarod is brought back to The Centre? This time? *Can* he know about Oliver?"

"Oh fine," Raines said to her. "If he is officially here again, fine, but Jarod won't care. He'd find him a disappointment. Oliver is a low rated pretender, lower than even Eddie. He's not even worth experimenting for."

While he was saying terrible things, they were good things to hear. The lower her son had been to him, the less Raines felt any interest in him. Still? Something slightly boiled inside her. An irritation.

"Another doctor might do him better," Raines added. "He's the only pretender left in The Centre right now, he should be kept at his best."

"You mean Sydney would take him on?" Gil asked.

"There is more than one doctor. We'll see. Don't make waves, Mary."

10:00 PM

"Saying goodnight."

"Excuse me?" Miss Parker stared at Raines. "Why would you ever say goodnight?"

"If a daughter can't say goodnight to her father, then the father should come say goodnight to her," Raines said, sending a small crawl up her spine. "Goodnight, Angel."

*I hate you. You have no right to use that name.* She picked up her things, looked at the time and started to head out. Except something was different this time. Parting from the office, she took another path down to the front to get to her car from her father's office in the past. She had always ended up top and went down. It should be no big deal, except some office doors were open and she saw something. She didn't notice it at first. Just one lone clock in the darkness barely even peeping through. As she moved though, she saw it more and more. "Impossible."

She checked her watch. 9:00. She checked her phone. 9:00. It didn't make any sense. She found herself now peering into the dark offices. None of the offices were ever left opened before to peer in on. *Unsettling. Your paranoid. Your just back from losing dad and losing . . . and almost catching . . .* She couldn't even process her thoughts. She went out to her car and turned the ignition to start the car. The time blinking back was 9:00. "That's the time." It was the time. Still? She yanked out her phone and called Sydney. "Syd? I know this sounds strange. What time is it?"

"Look at a watch." Sydney was still mad about earlier. Her in Jarod's dream, like she was there watching over his death. She did a lot of things in her past, but she'd remember standing around and watching Jarod be put to death.

"My watch, my car and my phone say 9:00," she said. "The offices in The Centre that weren't closed, most of them say 10:00."

"It's 10:00, Miss Parker."

"But all of my things say 9:00. I have to go home, Sydney. I have to check my clocks at home." She hung up and drove the short way home.

She checked all of her rooms. She checked her stove. She checked everything. She dialed Sydney back up. "Every single clock says nine something, not ten something."

"It's 10:15 Miss Parker." Now Sydney started to sound concerned. "Are you okay?"

"I get ready to leave The Centre at 9:00," she said. "Unless I have extra work, it's 9:00. I'm always there past the sun, always. I go up and I tell. I told my Daddy goodbye. I'd walk out. I didn't have him to say goodbye too." She wiped away a tear. "Raines came down to say goodnight to me. That was about twenty minutes ago, Sydney. How can it be past 10:00 when it was past 9:00."

"Okay. I think you need to relax, Miss Parker," Sydney encouraged her. "It's been a difficult time."

"Difficult, nothing, Sydney. Every clock in my house says just past 9:00. My car. My phone. It's all past 9:00. Nothing said 10:00 except The Centre clocks. Offices, the offices are always closed. I went a different way, it was faster." She kept looking around her house.

"It's past 10:00, Miss Parker. Every clock here says just past 10:00."

"Then where the hell is my missing hour?"



## The Centre

“There, what is that?” Miss Parker pointed to the recording with Broots. She had him look into her missing hour first thing that morning. “What’s that glitch, Broots?”

“Between when he says ‘What else’ and ‘saying goodnight?’ I don’t know, Miss P.” She knew Broots was trying his best to help. A missing hour didn’t just happen between a conversation. Everything was almost the same, but. “You’re shifted too much, so is he. Right there, between those lines.” He made the simple transition movement loop between ‘what else’ and ‘saying goodnight’. “Your whole body jumps slightly to the left.”

“Then this was cut.” Miss Parker watched Sydney come in. “I wasn’t crazy. The recording, it’s already been sabotaged since last night.”

“Since last night.” Sydney came over and Broots showed him. “This is a fresh recording.”

“Yeah, exactly. What is going on?” she asked more to herself, watching the jump over. “This is fresh footage, straight from the recordings. How is that possible?”

“Someone was there when it was cut for records,” Broots said. “I need to be directly into the recording room, into the live recordings itself to see if I can find out what that glitch is.”

“No can do,” Lyle said from the door. “You need to be working on Jarod. Or, you know, die? Did you think Mister Raines was joking about that?” He looked toward Miss Parker. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’m sure if you die, I won’t miss you,” Miss Parker said. “I won’t even pay anyone to put a flower on your grave.”

“Warm tidings, straight from the heart,” Lyle said. “The battles already won. You just don’t know it yet. Next time, you really need to check for, I don’t know, recordings inside Centre cars?” Then, he was off.

“What was that about?” Broots asked. “Man, he’s a strange one.”

“The world is all kind of weird right now,” she agreed. “Broots, do what you can. I’m going to go bug a family member to see if he knows what’s going on.” And by bug, she meant torture.

“Okay.”

Broots and Sydney waited.

They continued to wait. They chatted about her. Broots left to look for her while Sydney worked on Jarod’s whereabouts. Sydney left and helped Broots. They resigned themselves to asking Mister Raines about her.

No one knew where she went.

Broots got into the recordings as soon as possible, trying to get in the exact room with Sydney. Once he lured the guard out, he went in to make a fresh copy of her way to Lyle, and of last night.

They snuck out before they were spotted again and ended up back in the office.

“I hope this isn’t a goose chase just to make me work faster,” Broots said as he checked the fresh recording. She had walked out of the office toward Lyle. They talked and she disappeared with him someplace. “She’s with her brother.”

“The missing hour, Broots,” Sydney insisted. “What happened in that missing hour?”

Broots watched her up until the point of the glitch last time. “Whoah! Hey. Someone was waiting behind her, Syd.” They watched her get carry off, and Lyle came around the corner with a sweeper too. They all left the area. “Oh no. She’s right, this is bad. Raines took her for an hour. She’s somewhere in The Centre. He fast forwarded about an hour ahead, watched her being placed in almost the same spot and people working to change any clocks. “I used to have nightmares about people doing that when I was a kid. Just, changing time so I’d be late in the world to everything. For her, it’s true.”

“Where did they take her to, Broots?” Sydney insisted. “Find that out.” Then, he saw a strip of handwritten paper on the desk next to the computer. In the style of Miss Parker.

*There was always something missing in my life. I’m going to go and find it.*

*Miss ???? Parker*

# Truth Or A Lie?

Two months later . . .

“Hello?” Miss Parker answered her phone.

“What are you doing? You’ve been missing for months from your comrades. It took forever to track this number down.”

“Ah.” There was the call she was waiting for. “What’s wrong, Jarod? Didn’t you always want me to leave The Centre? Wish come true.”

“As great as that would be to believe, I can’t,” he said.

“Believe it or not,” she said. “It’s happening. I took my life savings out and I am escaping for good.”

“To where?”

“No, not for temporary with some conversations here and there with you giving me riddles about my past,” she said. “For good. I’m going somewhere that’s sunny and perfect and not a business trip. Also, just a stepping stone for getting out of America. Retire on a foreign beach somewhere.”

“You really . . . did run from The Centre. What about the note you left?”

“Something simple for The Centre. Everyone leaves riddles,” she said as she turned on her blinker and turned. “I’ll be out of reception soon, so I’ll make this quick. I don’t like to play games or riddles like you, so be thankful I don’t say ‘The secret is on SL23’ or something like that.” She took off her shades. “I’m not the Miss Parker you think I am. I found my mother’s unfinished business she left. Has nothing to do with the list of seven children. Makes sense, everyone’s pretty much grownup by now.”

“I thought you said you’d make this quick?” Jarod quipped.

“Just be nice. I’m trying to be nice,” she said as she stared at her new future. “The past we have together, is not my past. I don’t know how they did it. I don’t want to know how they did it. If they could make you forget a day. I guess they could do more.”

“What?”

“I. I don’t remember it. I tried to remember it,” she said. “I wanted to remember it. I wanted to know how I used to be so different. Now I know, and now I can finally start . . . living. You were close, Jarod. Benjamin Thomas Miller. Does he ring a bell?”

“Maine.”

“Yes, you’re famous little goose chase. You chased the goose, but you didn’t go down far enough. You should have, the goose would have laid a golden egg. It also would have saved her more time. Ah, ah, don’t start talking, just let me finish this out. You were right, momma did have a baby with Benjamin Thomas Miller, but it wasn’t me. Yeah for another new sibling discovery.”

“You had another sister?”

“Oh yes, and you met her.” She sped up more, moving onto the freeway.

“Faith is your biological sister? Parker, how do you-“

“Shut up. I told you I am talking, didn’t I?” She warned him. “I didn’t go down to see you much, Jarod. I’m sorry. My name is Miss Parker, but I’m not *The* Miss Parker.” She shrugged. “I always wondered how I could be dainty and sweet and then a bitch on high heels. It’s because I can’t be. I am just a bitch in high heels. I always have been.” She waited for him to catch up. “You can talk now.”

“I knew you and your sister? Is that what you are telling me?”

“I’m not even playing clues, Jarod, and you have to question?” She complained. “I had decent access in The Centre. Enough to move around and see Faith. Enough to get down and see the bunnies. But actual access, to you, via a sim room?” She sighed. “Why would I even care to be a part of any sim with you? Occam’s razor. I wouldn’t. It wasn’t me.” She smiled. “It’s terrible, but it’s good. I feel a sense of relief now. I found what she wanted me to find. Now, can you get her out? Jarod?”

“That’s . . . that’s why you never . . .”

“Good luck. Floor 2 of The Centre. She’s hiding there somewhere, in plain sight. Even Broots has access to that floor. I found her picture,” she said. “We could have been twins. It’s scary how alike we look to our mom. That’s all I have, Jarod.” She smiled. “I am going to get Broots to stand around there all day to see what’s going on. Hopefully, I’ll be able to get her later. Parker out. To you. Forever. Don’t bother asking Broots or Sydney for my number or I’ll just change it.”

“Wait, Parker!”

She hung up the phone. A facility that held so much grief. For years, trying to figure out all the answers. It was time to move on. She was at her brink of youth and she knew it. Somewhere out there, was someone who could love her for the bitch that she truly had been. Someone besides Broots. Someone like Tommy. Someone she could grow old with and maybe have children possibly. Maybe.

Maybe.

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“Mary.”

Mary turned to look down toward the door as it was opened. Gil stood there, firmly.

“Hello, Mary,” he enquired. “How are you today?”

“I feel great,” she said. “How is the weather?”

“Why are you asking that?” He went in to see her closer as he got a paper and pencil. “You never go outside.”

“I read that it was a nice way to greet people,” she said. “I haven’t greeted you in some time, you’ve just always been there. Can I see anyone new today?”

“No.”

“Can I see Oliver?”

“Not yet,” Gil said. “Give it time. It’s been some time since you’ve felt control over yourself.”

“Since I got control back. It’s been so long.”

“No, since you’ve felt like you had control,” he corrected her. “You are not a separate person. If it weren’t for The Centre, you would not have this separation. We will look at him together later.”

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Gil kept walking through the bell curve of two doors before hitting the main door. When he went through, he saw someone never hanging out on that floor.

“Oh. Hi.” Nervous man. He knew what those looked like. He was always nervous himself.

Gil nodded politely and locked the door behind him.

“Thought that was a painting,” the man said. “I mean, that was scary.”

Gil turned to take notice of the man more. “It is an interesting entrance way.” He didn’t want to leave though with such a strange looking man right there. *Now, Gil, Mary’s room is all sealed up.* The Centre always kept her safe and sound.

“I haven’t seen you around before.” He seemed polite now. “I travel different levels all the time. Mostly sublevels. I’m Broots. I’m in charge of the computers.” Polite nervousness. “You?”

“Gil. Hello.” Perhaps this man had some kind of visual problem that caused his nervousness? Perhaps the lack of lights that late at night was getting to him. The second floor didn’t keep

bright lights down on the edges as much. Or then again, maybe this Broots didn't often work nights. Most at The Centre worked days. He nodded politely and moved on his way. Nervous people made him more nervous, and he was always nervous.

Broots dialed up Sydney. "So, I got something interesting. You know those corner paintings on the sides with like the staircases? Apparently, the painting, at least one anyhow, is one huge door and when it opens, it looks the same. Like, they are those same winding staircases." He looked back the other way. "I think there are four on this floor? Maybe Miss Parker's sister is behind one of those."

"How long ago?"

"Huh?" That wasn't Sydney's voice. "Uh? Jarod?"

"Yeah, how long ago?"

"Not very," Broots answered. "Apparently the one I met, that came out of the doorlike paintings is a night worker. It's like 9:00 in the morning and he's leaving for the day. Uh? He seemed nice." There wasn't an answer. "Okay." Normally he'd tell Sydney goodbye. "Is Sydney there?"

"Yes, Broots." Sydney's voice. "Good work. So the staircase paintings actually represent staircases behind huge doors. Fascinating. Did you get the name of who came out?"

"Yeah, he said Gil. Not Mister Gil, just Gil," Broots said. "I guess we are on the right track? I'll check out the check out information tomorrow on him."

"Don't wait," Jarod answered. "Go. Now. It's early, you should be able to get it done."

Oh. "I really wanted to get back home," Broots said. "I've been here all night, again, scouting. I already have to pay the babysitter over hours. I need a few hours sleep."

"Nevermind, Broots, just get home, hm?" Sydney's sympathetic voice was back. "You did great. We'll look at things this afternoon. Get some rest."

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Jarod heard Sydney hang up the phone. Waiting. Now he had a place to start. "Doctors work nights over there." It could be how they kept her so quiet. If she was there.

"Jarod?" Sydney suggested. "We will find out more tomorrow, and I will let you know what we discover."

"What do you remember about her, Sydney?" He questioned him. "Who set up the sims between her and I?" He rubbed his mouth. "Is she the girl I had my first kiss with? Or are you sure she isn't Miss Parker?"

“Collaboration between Pretenders back then? There used to be someone prevalent there. I don’t remember his name. He didn’t work as often with others.” Sydney paced slightly. “He preferred small group working. He had a sort of disorder, didn’t like many people. But was his name Gil?” He stopped pacing. “I don’t know, Jarod. As for the other? I don’t believe that.”

Jarod held a pencil, dribbling it between his fingers “Always wanted me. Really good way to keep me around looking. I need to find this girl, get the DNA, and find out for sure. I should go check out the hours. Find out where he lives.”

“Jarod,” Sydney said. “He could just be a regular worker of The Centre.”

“Or he could be holding a woman up there hostage, forcing her to do sims. Forcing her to live in a single room without any outside air.” Before he knew it, he found he broke the pencil in half. “The girl I knew.” He dropped the pencils. “Or, he could be in cahoots. Hiding Miss Parker up there. The whole lot of them, trying to catch me once and for all.”

“I can’t imagine it’s easy,” Sydney agreed. “It’s easier to accept that The Centre changed her, but she was still safe and sound. That one day, maybe she could even come around to stop working for The Centre. That’s what you were trying to achieve with Thomas Gates, was it not?” Jarod didn’t answer. “We’ll find her. Or.” He sighed. “We’ll find out if it’s a trick. Miss Parker doesn’t include Broots and I inside of tricks.”

“Well, that was before the whole scrolls and only one winner survives thing,” he reminded Sydney. “Only one team survives.”

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As Gil went in for work, he noticed someone new over by his area. He was sitting down with a paper. Most likely, he would be heading home soon. He made his way to the door, unlocking it.

“Lovely night,” the man said. “It’s been awhile since we’ve bumped into each other.”

He turned around and looked at him. About his age, perhaps slightly older. It was Sydney. “I’m horrible with faces,” he lied.

“Sydney,” he smiled.

“Sydney. Oh. I remember that name.” He gestured toward him “You are highly regarded around here. What are you doing in my little area?”

Sydney folded the paper and stood up. “Oh, I’m not that highly regarded anymore. I mostly chase down the Pretender I was working with.”

Jarod of course but he’d play dumb. “Eddie?”

“No,” Sydney corrected him, picking some lint off his suit for him. “Jarod.”

Gil moved away a little. Sydney must have been one of those clean kind of guys. He knew Jarod though, so he was going to have to answer. "Still missing. I'm sorry." That must hurt. All that overstimulation to the poor Pretender's senses.

"Yes, but confidentially we will be getting him back soon. I wanted to ease him back in by having some collaboration with another Pretender." Sydney sighed sadly. "Sadly, his collaborations haven't been around, and I don't know of any new ones to try. I don't suppose you are working with a Pretender? I'm afraid I don't remember."

Of course he didn't. Sydney and him didn't fly in the same kind of circles. *He must be talking about Mary, but it's too early.* Raines would be watching. "She can't help I'm afraid," he answered. "They haven't collaborated since they were children." Huh. For a second, he thought he saw a twinkle in his eye. "I should get going."

"Once he readjusts, he would be quite suitable to befriending another Pretender," Sydney still tried. "Perhaps she would even influence him to understand and accept The Centre again? Being a woman, maybe he would feel less threatened and more receptive?"

Or, he would teach her not to accept The Centre's security and knowledge. Things were bad enough for Mary because of Jarod. He was still uncertain whether he wanted that pretender involved at all even after the trial run. *Now, now, Gil. Not his fault. Not Sydney's fault. Everyone shares in the blame.* "Um? Sydney." He had to make it clear. "I know that you are trying your best to find someone for your Pretender. You are here at two in the morning, when I assume you work days. Do you work days?"

Sydney sighed and shrugged. "I believe that Jarod had a difficult confrontation with an ex-Pretender, and it hurt him. Deeply, enough to instill the need to run away. If Jarod could build a trust, even a small trust with another one? It could bring him back around, for good."

"Let me ask you something," Gil said. "Do you remember who mediated between us? O-or do you assume that we've actually met?"

Sydney touched the tip of his index finger to his thumb and rubbed them together. "I am getting down to the nitty gritty I suppose. I've been here for some time, but I don't stay up with every person in The Centre. Especially someone who works such odd hours."

"I like my hours," Gil insisted. "I like my work at The Centre as well. I feel as if getting our duties together would be something that would need a strategy. Perhaps?" *Raines won't care within two weeks. Two months?* "In two to three months?"

"Well, yes, I am willing to work on a strategy," Sydney insisted, "but two months is an excessive time. I want Jarod to feel at home faster. I would even move my hours, and Jarod's hours, to meet yours."

"Mary is not working with another pretender that fast." Gil sighed. "It is not just about Jarod's influence. The Centre wanted her to collaborate with Alex." Yes, he should let him know that much. "She had a bad experience with him."



“Alex was more troubled,” Sydney tried to reason. “Jarod has held his own out there. The Centre is needed to help him master his best abilities and skills, but he has survived out there just fine.”

“You don’t get it. Mary is a *very* beautiful woman,” Gil said, trying one more time. He was not good with people, let alone Sydney who he’d been ignoring all those years. Sydney did not even know him, but he purposefully walked down different halls so he couldn’t even come across him. He adjusted his glasses. “When you take a pretender, who has had little social time with others, let alone little social time with the opposite sex? Then as adults, there is a deeper problem.” He swallowed. “Just. I can’t let anyone hurt Mary again.”

“Jarod’s been exposed to several grown women. He’s been out there for years. He would be the best candidate for her,” Sydney said. “Was she traumatized by what happened?”

“Greatly.”

“I do remember Mary was a nice girl,” Sydney said. “She did get along with Jarod. Would she still remember him?”

Gil held his head. When would he get the hint? *Not yet.* “I am sure she probably still remembers him. She hasn’t seen more than a handful of people in her life, of course she’d remember.” He turned to his door. “I need to go.”

“I suppose I can’t get you to change your mind right now,” Sydney finally reasoned. “We should talk later again about this. Maybe after you meet Jarod. By the way, who did mediate between Mary and Jarod?”

“Oh.” Years ago. “That was so long ago. It was Fenigor I think. Or maybe Mister Parker himself? I think she was very close relation.” He opened the door and closed it. He couldn’t even risk goodbye. He hated having to say no to people, especially those he didn’t know. He headed up the stairs to see Mary, unlocking all of the doors on his way up.

Sydney pulled his collar closer against his mouth. “Did you get all that, Jarod?”

“Mary,” Jarod’s voice echoed from the small area. “Her name is Mary. If she’s not Miss Parker. Did you get it?”

Sydney looked at his hand, where he had taken some of the ‘lint’ off of Doctor Gil. “If it’s her, we’ll know.”

“If it’s her?” Jarod was quiet. “It’s going to be a long time before anyone catches up with me Sydney. She has pushed way too far with this one.”

“If it’s her?” Sydney nodded. “I agree with your action, Jarod.”

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The Centre, The Next Night: 1:00 AM

“Angelo?” Jarod called through his favorite tunnels. Finding anything on Mary Parker was nearly impossible. Her doctor worked with her at varying times from 12:00 AM -9:00 AM. He couldn’t find a single DSA except for the small sims he ran with her as a child. She was in a place with a multiple key scheme that would be hard to break. His best chance was to find her through Angelo’s tunnels. More and more she looked like just a ruse. “Angelo?”

“Jarod.” Angelo smiled as he came toward him. “Come to see Angelo.”

“Yes. I need help, Old Friend,” Jarod insisted. How to put it into words for him? “Have you heard of another Miss Parker before? A Pretender Miss Parker?” No. He was shaking his head. Kept secret from even Angelo. That was tough. “Are you aware of Miss Parker’s biological half-sister?”

“Miss Parker have sister?” Angelo seemed as surprised as him. “Where?”

“Floor 2.”

“Jarod know Miss Parker’s sister?” Angelo asked curiously.

“Maybe, but I don’t know how much.” Jarod sat down in the tunnel. “If she exists. I need to get her out of here.”

“Taking to family? Taking her to Miss Parker?” Angelo asked.

“Eventually. I won’t keep them from each other.” *If she exists.* “Half the time I spent with Miss Parker, I was supposedly with someone else. I don’t know how to feel about that after all these years.” He always thought he only had one person there, who understood his world. He could have had two. Could have. He hated that word could right now. Not knowing.

“Jarod lost,” Angelo sat next to him. “Jarod saving a ghost.”

“Catherine didn’t even know about her. She must have suspected it though. Miss Parker found the connection, found her unfinished business.” Jarod sighed. “Erasing her existence.”

“Then having Miss Parker?” Angelo asked.

“Immediately after. Like they were disappointed.” Jarod hugged his knees like he was young again. “It. It always hurt, Angelo, knowing Miss Parker never wanted anything but to hunt me. Then, when she finally . . .” He closed his eyes. That ‘could’ couldn’t go away. “I don’t know if it was a good thing or a bad thing she refused to come with me.”

“You invite her to come with you?” Angelo asked. “Stop hunting Jarod?”

“Yeah, I did.” He wiped his eyes. Great, now he was breaking down. “Now, *this* might be the one I cared for as a kid. If she exists.” He almost ground his teeth. “But there is nothing on her. I just.”

“Jarod love ghost. Jarod don’t love ghost.” Angelo shrugged. “Angelo feels for Jarod. Not knowing.”

“It’s going to come to an end,” Jarod insisted. “One way or the other. You haven’t heard anything about it at all?”

“Angelo all around The Centre,” he said. “Reach everywhere. Don’t know. Angelo sorry. You think Pretender Miss Parker will be Angelo’s friend too?”

“Maybe. I don’t even know if she’s Jarod’s friend.” No one ran over his heart harder than Parker. Their past. Finding out all about hers. The pain of theirs intertwined them. He even almost kissed her. “I feel like someone’s just been playing me for a fool in a game.” Jarod looked down the tunnels. But whose game? “I have to find the way to her.” Jarod heard his phone go off.

“Broots found something. A Pretender that looks greatly like Catherine Parker. While we can’t find her DSA’s or existence, we have found her on *another’s* DSA, Jarod. Alex.”

Ooh. “Send what you have.”

“I can’t send it if Angelo is there. It is rough.”

Jarod nodded. “I’ll call you when I’m ready for it.” He nodded to Angelo. “I’ll be back.”

### Jarod’s Current Hideout

Jarod booted up his computer and called Sydney back. “Okay, send it.” He drummed his fingers, waiting for it. What was she like? What was her name? What did she look like? How did she sound?

Since it was Alex’s DSA, he was right there. Just, staring ahead. Just waiting for whatever The Centre wanted. Jarod used to have that same vacant look on him. Then, his expression changed as he glanced to the side.

*There.* There she was. Fully grown, and her hair was now long and feathered. Her outfit wasn’t anything like Parker wore, she had on a simple white dress. Simple. The Centre was always about simple. Still. *That looks incredibly like Parker.* Everything but the hair and the clothes. His heart sank just a bit. Hope dashed just a little more.

“Mary. Say hello,” a voice he didn’t know requested from the side.

Mary moved closer to Alex and smiled. “Hello. I’m Mary.”

“Aren’t you just.” Alex’ eyes weren’t glazed over anymore. He was looking over her unabashedly. He licked his bottom lip and shifted. “I didn’t know there were still girl Pretenders.”

“Not a Pretender and not a girl. Woman,” she corrected him. “Like you’re not boy. You’re a man.” She got quiet again. “You’re name?”

“Alex,” he said. “Why don’t you come closer? Regular conversations take place closer?”

“Gil wants me around here,” she answered. “When I talk to others, it’s always back here. I’m older and a female so it bothers him to have me too close. He was very opposed to this meeting.”

“Mary,” a voice came from the side.

“I’m sorry, I was being too honest again.” She winced like she made a faux pas. “What do you like to do when you aren’t simming?”

“Aw.” He smiled at her, bowing his head. “That’s not your concern. You look like somebody I know. You have a sister?”

“Let’s not go deeply into family.” Doctor Gil showed up next to her and whispered to her. She nodded. He moved away from the cameras again.

“I do, I had a mom when I was younger,” she said. “I never saw her though before she died. I heard she was nice.”

“Yeah. My family left me here too,” he said. He shook his head and closed his eyes, with a small smirk. “It hurts terribly. Knowing they are out there, yet not being able to do anything.”

Jarod held the desk the computer was on tightly as he watched the commotion. It was quick, but it would have set Angelo off alright. She had felt safe enough to approach closer, Alex had lunged for her, pinned her to a wall, stole a kiss, and fought off two sweepers to try and keep her. Fortunately, their instructors also had more sweepers, enough to take down Alex. Although. *I recognize that technique*. She was trying to break free herself, her cute charade over, Parker’s eyes fiercely fighting back.

Before Alex was thrown out, Jarod heard Doctor Gil clearly.

No Pretender would ever come near Mary again.

“At this rate, probably not.” How could she? How could she go that far with a Centre trick? Involving Sydney and Broots now too?!

Sydney would have the definite proof soon. After that. *I can’t. I just can’t, no more with her!*

# Broots' Discovery

## Special Room in Medical

Mary watched as Raines and Lyle came into her room, accompanied by Gil.

“Does she have to?” Gil asked. “I thought Mary was done with this experimenting.”

“Relax. It’s just a phone call.” A man similar in height to her bent down and stared her in the eyes. “Hi, I’m Mister Lyle, remember me? We are going to need you again. Once your Gil backs off.”

“If you don’t knock it off,” Raines said, “she’ll be reassigned again.”

“Please don’t. I am on my pills. I have gone through everything you have asked from me. Oliver has been kept safe. I am here to take care of her, fully.” He looked toward Mary. “We need to take another trip down to a medical room. This won’t take long, I promise. Let’s get your pretty outfit on.”

“Nope, not that one. Dead giveaway.” Lyle smiled at Mary. “I love the hair, it’s so pretty. I can’t believe he’s falling for this. Need to thank Alex’ thoughtfully creative mind in The Triumvirate’s grasp. Well then, pray either up or down for him.”

Mary had no idea what he was talking about. She stood up and followed them out. Ahead there were sweepers, like they were watching the perimeters. It was freaky, and yet exciting whenever she got to leave her room. Didn’t happen so often. She went into the elevator, staying close to Gil.

“Are you okay, Mary?” Gil asked her. “Are you?”

“I’m fine. I’m okay, Gil,” she assured him. She tucked her hair backward. She followed the men toward the medical area. She noticed the one called Mister Lyle snickering for some reason. It didn’t look like someone whispered a joke. Odd. She moved through medical with them, and followed another doctor into a back room.

In that room, they had her lie down on a bed, with her back bent up. The doctor bent her knees slightly, and then gave her what resembled to be a video game wheel again.

“Are you sure this isn’t too much stimulation this time?” She looked at the wheel. If it was like last time, they were going to put a video game on the screen for her to play.

“No, no, we are studying the movements you make.” He attached some sensors to her head. “Everything is okay, we are watching and monitoring you. Just play the game as it starts.

We'll be in the other room."

Mary listened and watched the game come on. As soon as the game was done, she could go back to Gil. She didn't like to leave him alone for very long.

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### **In the Next Room Over**

"Cue the light sequences," the medical doctor said as Raines and Mister Lyle watched from their place. "Five to ten minutes. Give it time."

"I got a call today," Lyle said to Raines. He stroked his missing thumb. "Tommy Tanaka heard she was 'back in College' again. Would be stopping by in a couple of months." Bastard even had the nerve to call him.

"We stay friendly to the Yakuza," Raines said. "Not only that, Tanaka did well with Miss Parker."

"You know? For being such a caring dad, I don't see how Mister Parker ever did this to her," Lyle pointed out.

"Safe. Sound. She'd never run away like her mother," Raines said. "Highly a logical move."

"Uh huh." Lyle chuckled. "He prostituted my sister."

"No. Mister Parker let them visit, with extra watch," he told Lyle. "Even father's know daughters can't be isolated from a man's touch. It would interfere with her psyche as she developed. She'd want to escape. Whether anything happened or not, was her prerogative."

"I don't think anything would have been her prerogative if she knew." Lyle stared. "Such power over the mind. Especially her mind. It's incredible. Like night and day between her two sides."

"Pretenders are created to breathe their sims to life. Mister Parker simple turned her life into a sim. A Lesser," Raines said. "Until Jarod got out. Even with her after him, he couldn't be caught."

"Distracted him though. He loves to torture her about family secrets," Lyle said. "So much fun. Thanks to him, I got to show up again." Only thing he could thank him for. Jarod was the reason the yakuza took his thumb in the first place. Damn Yakuza. "At least make Tanaka pay a high price to see her."

"No. Jarod messed up relations enough," Raines insisted. "No price at all, just a one time greeting since he'll be in the US anyhow."

"You trust Tanaka with Jarod's ticket back into The Centre?" Lyle really didn't want to just be nice after all that.

"She is watched when it counts," Raines said again. "Like now. Quiet and watch."

“Okay, okay.” Lyle put his hands back in his pockets. “She was a wild thing back in college, I know that. I’m just saying-“

“We aren’t controlling Parker anymore, we are controlling Mary. Tanaka is special, Lyle,” Raines warned him. “Soon, Miss Parker will be nothing. Just the will that needs to be let loose to tighten the screw sometimes again.”

“She kind of wasn’t happy with that other guy according to earlier reports. Name. Michael? He’s not coming back is he?” Lyle asked. “Do I get a list of names that get to do her? Should I get a pimp hat?”

“She isn’t away at College anymore. Only Tanaka, with the right sim scenario.” Raines watched her. “Maybe I can marry her out as the obedient Mary, get her and my ridiculous grandson out, and gain a real blood relationship with the yakuza. Hm. That would put her to some use.”

“She never caught Jarod though,” Lyle pointed out. “Not even close. After how many years?”

“She failed me in the end. She wasn’t the best,” Raines said. “Neither are you,” he pointed out just as well. “She was only taken in so that Mister Parker didn’t have to worry about her, not for The Centre’s benefit. We involved her in small sims she couldn’t mess up in. They went to her and weaker pretenders. They were called Lessers in fact, not good enough for the word pretender. Kept them in line.”

“Then why’d you bother killing the boyfriend guy?” Lyle said. “Uh. Thomas. Should have just brought her back here instead of all that police involvement and sad feelings.”

“Her father liked her on the outside. Saw how well she adapted. He was proud of her,” Raines answered.

“Then why are we putting her back in?” Lyle asked.

“Because her *real* father likes her on the inside. He saw how well she adapted too.” He glared at Lyle. “He wasn’t proud of her.”

Lyle looked away. No more questions. Or he might end up the same way his sister had ended up.

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Miss Parker opened her eyes. How far had she gone away from The Centre now? Thousands of miles at least. She was in a different country. Yet, it still felt so close. Maybe it would always feel like that. Maybe until she had someone to run away with? *Broots*. She should call him. She picked up her phone and dialed his number while she watched the beauty of the stars in the night. Hm. It took him some time to answer back. “Broots? Anything on my sister?”

“Uh? Are you in Japan or something?” Broots asked.

“I told you, I wasn’t sticking around America,” Miss Parker said. “Why?”

“It’s about 3 in the morning.”

“Well, wah wah for you. You can go to bed after you answer me. Did you look into Floor 2?”

“Yeah. There was a doctor that came out of a painting door.”

What? “A doctor came out of a painting door?” She rubbed her head. “Come on, Broots, what the hell does that even mean?” He tried to explain the paintings on the sides of it. She barely noticed them. The Centre was always full of weird details everywhere. “You got a name for this doctor?”

“Doctor Gil. He works nights. That’s all I have so far, but I promise we are looking for him. Even Jarod is helping.”

“Yeah, well, sure.” Cute little innocent girl he knew that was probably never a bitch like her? Call in the troops. “Birth certificate yet? Angelo know her? Anything?”

“No,” Broots said. “I mean. If she is that guy who lives in Maine’s daughter along with your mother? Well. You already played that game with Jarod. It was possible. Oh! Sydney did find out her name. It’s Mary.”

“Mary.” Nice name. “Sounded like something mom would have wanted to call a little girl.” Well. “I better get going Broots.”

“You bet. Miss Parker? You’re out there digging out clues, aren’t you?”

“On the sister I didn’t know about, that’s more of a ghost than a real live person anyone can find? Yeah, I am digging up anything I can. Jarod doesn’t need to know that though. He’ll just try and interfere.” Ugh. “This heat is so annoying right now. Not a breeze in the air.” She sighed. It felt hard to breathe like that. Then, she finally felt some wind. Good. “I better keep going. Let me know if you find her. And warn Jarod, I have dibs. One brother is a psycho killer cannibal and the other he completely took away from me. He can’t have my sister. She’s not his.” She shut off the phone and stared at the sky. Strange. It was starting to beat a strange array of colors in the distance.

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“How could you forget to turn on the fan system?” Raines chewed out the medical doctor. “There isn’t much to this, but if you throw her off, she’ll fall out of the sim!”

“Sorry, Raines, Sir,” he apologized. “She took it as a still night. It’s fine.”

“Hm. Let’s just get her back to Doctor Gil,” Raines said.

“That guy is not happy about sharing Mary still,” Lyles noticed. “If this works, don’t you think he’s going to tell Sydney that we take her every once in awhile to medical, without him being allowed in?”

“No,” Raines said. “Doctor Gil started out with an acute case of social anxiety. He doesn’t like confrontation, and he won’t reach out to a stranger for help. That’s just more



confrontation. He's only gotten worse over the years with all the hours and work he put in." He smiled as he wheezed. "Or maybe it's just his mislabeled medication that keeps raising his anxiety."

Mister Lyle chuckled at that one. "The world will never know. So you really going to marry her off to Tanaka?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I have to think about my options. There's not much left to do with her, but killing her is a waste of Centre resources. Too much work was put into her. The only thing she ever gave us was a lesser pretender."

"Yeah, but if it wasn't for my little nephew, The Centre wouldn't have any sims done anymore," Lyle pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. How sad is that?" Raines muttered. "Until Oliver outlives his usefulness like her, The Centre will keep taking care of her."

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Broots waited for Sydney to come in. "Sydney. You won't believe what I found." Sydney didn't look good though. "What's wrong?"

"I picked off some hair from Doctor Gil," Sydney said slowly. "I had it tested. I gave the results to Jarod." He put his hands in his pockets. "It's Miss Parker, not her sister. We will not be catching up with him anytime soon."

What? "Sydney. Miss Parker wouldn't involve us in a scheme like this. We're her partners."

"Removing Mister Parker from power has eschewed her sense of . . ." Sydney didn't even finish the line. "Unless Doctor Gil has been hanging out with Miss Parker recently? A man who works nights, and in an area she would never inhabit?" Sydney shook his head. "I feel a sense of betrayal myself. For falling for it." He strolled across the floor. "For wasting time on it. For even involving Jarod in it beyond that phone call. I!" He rubbed his hair backwards. "I should have waited for this moment, this test, to let him know."

"She. Wouldn't." Broots couldn't believe it. There had to be more to it than that, she'd never hurt him or Sydney like that. That was too far out. Yes, she was rude and crabby sometimes but she would never do that. DNA couldn't be denied though. "Maybe someone planted it on him?" He saw the look on Sydney's face. That was too farfetched.

There was no Mary. It was Miss Parker. Trying to catch Jarod by making him come to her. Except. "It doesn't matter. You need to see what I found, Sydney."

"Oh, I don't want to look at anything regarding this right now. Don't send anything to Jarod either. Leave it all be." Sydney left the room. "I am going to go work somewhere else today."

But? But they needed to see. *No. It's not enough.* They felt genuinely betrayed. If Sydney said don't bother Jarod, he wouldn't. Until he had enough proof. Enough of what he needed.

To prove an incredibly terrible theory.

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## **Corporate**

Broots jotted down a few more notes as he visited some people where Miss Parker used to work at. Internationally, before she got called back to catch Jarod. “Hi?” He showed his Centre pass. “I need some information on Miss Parker?”

“It’s on the computers,” they pointed out.

“No, um, face-to-face,” Broots insisted. “Call it strange, but Miss Parker left here just a few years ago. So far, no one who is actually still here can say they’ve met her. Have you met her?”

“Mister Parker’s daughter? No,” the woman said. “I’ve worked here ten years. She probably worked on another floor, in a special office. Excuse me.”

“But I’ve checked the other floors. All of them,” he insisted. “I need one person, just one, to verify she was here? Anyone?”

Nope.

He wasn’t happy to be right. He marked down more notes.

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## **One Week Later**

“You took Mary again?” Gil said as he came back toward the painting, only to find Mary being trugged over. She looked disheveled. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Lyle said as he handed her back like a sack of potatoes. “I think we might be shipping her off soon.”

Shipping her off? “What do you mean shipping her off? To where?”

“Japan, maybe, I don’t know. Africa? The Centre doesn’t have much value left for her here. Jarod thing failed,” he said.

“Her son does a great job at what he does though,” Gil reminded Lyle. “He does that for the reward of seeing her. H-his workload will change if you separate them.” A last resort piece. They couldn’t just give her over to someone else.

“Good point. I’ll look into that. Maybe they’ll move together?” Lyle recommended. “Night.”

*Moving. They were wanting to move her.* He took her hand gently and went beyond the painting and up stairs.

“Gil? Are they really separating us?” Mary asked. “I need to stay with Oliver. I want to stay with you too.”

“I know, I know.” This wasn’t good. All these years of getting her back and now they were ready to toss her out like garbage.

Mary’s Apartment.

Mary’s voice trailed off. “I missed so much time, Gil. I get so scared they are going to take it all back, but now? They might take Oliver away.”

“It’s okay.” He went over and hugged her. “It’s okay, Mary. I am here now. No one can do anything. Okay?”

“It was . . . a month. They only let me see him once a month. Now that I am back, can I see him more again?”

Gil looked on the other side of her room, through the door panel. Oliver was reading his manual. The way Lyle sounded, he should push for as much time as possible. It might be their last times together. “Maybe I can push for half visits once a day, and a full visit once a week if he completes certain simulations.” It was never easy keeping those two apart. *What would losing him do to her? Completely?*

Oliver glanced up to Gil. He waved excitedly and moved over toward the little door panel. “Hello, Gil. Hello.”

“Hello, Oliver,” he greeted the boy. “How are you?”

“I feel fairly convenient and adaptable to changes of positive or negative behavior,” he said to him laughing. “That’s what my dad said once on his DSA. I’m fine.”

“Do you want to see momma?” He asked. He didn’t have to wait long for Mary to come over.

“Hi, Oliver.” She touched the panel.

“Hi, Mom.” He touched the panel. “When can you visit me again?”

“Gil is working on it.” She placed her forehead against the panel.

“More visits?” he asked. “Can? Can I see my dad yet?”

“He is well and he is fine,” Gil answered. “Here is another picture I’ve been allowed to have of him. If you did twenty simulations this month.”

“I did nineteen, but I promise I’ll stay up and do the last one!” Oliver exclaimed. “Please?”

Gil unlocked the door with his key card. As long as he got it done, it would be fine. “Here.”

Mary moved below Gil, long enough to wave at Oliver. Oliver waved back. “Hi, Precious. Enjoy the pictures.”

Oliver grabbed them like they were treats. “My dad!” He held them up with pride. “My dad, Gil.”

“Yes, your dad.” Gil moved back outward, locking the door. “That will keep him happy.”

“As happy as we can be.” Mary stood up and moved over toward Gil. “Thank you for the small half visit. The pictures too. He really liked them.”

“Yes. He did, didn’t he?” That guilty feeling was starting to sink back in again. *I can’t do this anymore. I have to let Sydney know, no matter what the cost now.* Although Mary couldn’t see him very often, and could not do much physical contact too often with Oliver? They were still there, next to each other. Each of them enjoyed that. Oliver even said he knew when she was there, and when she wasn’t. He was quite correct, especially with all of the missing dates when he couldn’t have her. Because she was on the other side of her roller coaster life.

He always kept his promise though to her. If anything happened, he always watched Oliver. It was part of The Centre contract made for him. It would be tough to take him, and also not high on their priorities.

“They took me again.” Mary said as she came back over. “My clothes feel even stranger, like they aren’t on right.” She picked up some paper from the side of her room. “I am getting worse not better, Gil. Look at this? This is filled with all kinds of forbidden things I’m not supposed to do. Look at the vulgarity.”

Doctor Gil took the paper. *Escape isn’t vulgarity.* What was happening to Mary again? *She must have known before this night. She is collapsing, and she is drowning.* No. He couldn’t risk it. *I hate talking to people, but Mary and Oliver.* They were like his own family. She felt almost like a daughter and Oliver? He was like a son he never had, he was even there the day he was born. He was literally his father. *What is best for my duty?* Keeping quiet, being good, and letting Oliver and Mary go the respective ways the Centre dictated. *What is best for my loved ones?*

To speak up. It was time to speak up. “I am going to cut our session short today, Mary. I have to talk to someone.”

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Doctor Gil found Sydney. He was much further away in The Centre, and he had to get there in the middle of the day. Not something he liked either. He just concentrated on the way to

his office. *Sydney. He is very respectable. Maybe he can stop these decisions somehow?* He knocked on his office door. He watched as Sydney answered.

He didn't seem as happy to see him this time. "Doctor Gil."

"Hello. Doctor Sydney." Deep breaths. He reached into his coat pocket and gave Sydney some of Mary's scrawlings. He'd worked with her when she was out as Miss Parker. Maybe he'd recognize something in there. "Can you help me with something?"

Sydney looked at it briefly, but uninterested. "A little scrap of paper."

"Well, she wrote some things against the rules. I got rid of most of it," he said. "Uh? Mary is a complicated woman. I. I am happy to have her back, but I um. I'm afraid that The Centre leaders might take her away again for terrible acts. I don't have the strength to see Mary go through it all again."

"Doctor Gil. I suggest you take a little extra time on your medication before reaching out for anything." Sydney shot him down. "I was wrong about Jarod, we no longer are close to capturing him. Our association is now over."

Ow. It was hard to trust, and Sydney just? "M-my fault." He grabbed the note at the very edge to pull it away from Sydney. He almost bumped into someone else. "Sorry. S-sorry. Going."

"Hang on." Broots looked at it. "What's this?"

"Nothing, n-nothing, it's nothing." He grabbed the note and left in a hurry. He needed to go home, relax, and do some exercises out of his self-help book. That didn't turn out good. Not good at all.

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Broots looked back toward Sydney. "Sydney? Did he want to talk about . . ." Sydney was glaring at him. Nope. Still no. *Doctor Gil came to us.* He recognized that nervous look. He had problems sometimes too. Trusting people. When he was younger, he had even been on medication. He turned back around and went back to Doctor Gil. If Doctor Gil came all the way to their office, he must have something to say.

Gil was heading quickly away. Yeah, he was about to beat it. Sydney wasn't in the mood to speak and rejected him. "Doctor Gil?" Broots called out for him. "Hi?" He stopped as Broots caught up. "I work with Sydney. Remember me?"

"Yes," he admitted. "You were there at the foot of the entrance to Mary's room."

"Yes. Yes. Um? Sydney's gonna regret later not listening better," Broots said, already knowing he got turned away. "I can listen for him. I want to help Mary." He bent closer to him. "I want to help Miss *Mary* Parker." Oh, he looked like he wanted to bolt right then. "I know it's not easy to trust, and I-I can tell? You, um. Have problems with people. I did too. I

don't anymore, but I did," Broots said. "Really helped pull things together for me. Talking to someone." There. Relatable. "I don't want to push, but I want to help too. Eventually, more will. One is a start?" He held his hand out for the piece of paper.

Doctor Gil pulled out the paper. "One is a start. We could. Go. Look. At ducks?"

"Yeah. Let's go look at some ducks," Broots agreed.

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## Duck Pond

Feeding ducks. Tranquil. Fun. Mind-blowing. Broots remained calm. "So d-do you have DSA's of, uh, Oliver?" Broots asked. "I really need to see them."

"No. No, no." Doctor Gil fed the ducks near The Centre. "No."

"Then, that time? Jarod needs to see it," Broots said. "I mean, Sydney needs to see it for Jarod."

"I tried." Doctor Gil shrugged. "Little Oliver is a growing intellectual boy. I think they will remove him from me soon and either give him to Sydney or send him away. With his mother or not, I don't even know. I'd rather not separate them, his mother's right beside him."

"Look." He tried to keep his breathing under control. "Just, *one* DSA. One. Just one with Jarod and Mary. That's all I'm asking."

"I planned on giving what I have to Sydney," Gil said. "I?"

"Sydney's upset about Jarod, but give me two seconds. Please? I can reach him with the DSA's? I'm his partner. I can get him to trust me, and he'll come to you?"

"Oh? I see. Oh, alright. I'm? I'm desperate. Come with me."

## The Painting.

"Poor dear, again being woke up," Gil said about Mary as he undid the first door that looked like a painting. "I will try to find one."

*Screw the DSA's, he's taking me in?!* Broots was about to go up. As soon as the door was open, he snuck in. Gil really had no idea what a treasure he had. Broots followed him all the way up the stairs until the stairs were pulled back. *Miss Parker*. She was there. Calm and

content. He went in and couldn't help but stare at her feathered hair. He didn't think she could look any more dreamy. He was wrong. "Your hair is beautiful."

"Hello," she said politely. "Thank you. I appreciate that comment." She touched her hair. "Gil cuts our hair."

Broots watched Gil move around the room, but noticed the next door. *Bingo*. He went over to the door and opened up the panel.

A little boy, fiveish, working on something with a pen and pencil.

"Excuse me, No?" Mary said from behind him. "Excuse me, Gil? Excuse me, No?"

"Oh! Oh, yes." Gil closed the panel to Oliver. "Please stop, you're making Mary nervous. You wanted the DSA's I have. My office is this way."

Broots swallowed, still happy he took the dive. That boy definitely had some of Jarod's appearance, but he was definitely not a clone. It sounded, and looked, like it was real. *I shouldn't be here. Sydney should be here. No, Jarod should be here!* As he moved backwards further, he found Doctor Gil's office and him coming out of it.

"Four DSA's. Covering some of October 1995. That's all from that time." Gil gave it to him. "Be careful with them. It's all I have left. I don't know what else happened to the rest."

## 4 Recordings of October 1995

### Outside Hollywood, California

Jarod lowered his shades briefly to look across the street before crossing a lonely road. He marched across it and saw Sydney. He had something he wanted to give him, but not over the computer. A part of him didn't want to come. He was still getting over the betrayal of Parker, but Sydney knew that. So, it was probably pertaining to someone else. At least he hoped so because he was getting closer to writing out The Centre forever. As Jarod came closer though, he noticed Sydney didn't look quite like himself. He was staring out toward the sunset, waiting for Jarod, but not watching for him. Almost dazed. Like he was about to tell him someone died.

Oh no. No, no, no. His heart started to race. He hardly had his family, and he could hardly hold onto being able to see them. Had he found out one of them died? *Please*. His dad? *No*. Emily? *I just met her, no!* Ethan. *A baby brother I barely managed to save from Raines!* No, no. *Mom? I never even met her.* As he got closer, his heart was turning circles. What placed such a look on Sydney's face? It was going to be bad news. "Sydney?"

"Jarod."

Oof, he reaked of whiskey. Sydney didn't partake in it that often. "How are you?" Gentle. He couldn't let his imagination get away from him. He would tell him in due time.

"Not, um. Not very good I'm afraid. I have some disturbing news to share with you," Sydney admitted. "You won't like it."

"Just." Jarod closed his eyes briefly. "Just tell me? Is someone . . . is someone that I care about dead?"

"No," Sydney said.

Relief one, but there was more. "Is someone dying that I love?"

"No," Sydney answered again.

*Thank goodness.* His heart started to slow down, and his nerves started to get better. Someone close to Sydney must be hurt or gone, but it didn't pertain to him. Still, it wasn't like Sydney to do this. He knew Jarod had his own Pretends going, not something he could just stop, up and leave at anytime for. "Then what is it?"

"Miss Parker." Sydney pulled out a DSA.

Jarod slumped. Really? He just put him through all that anguish, just made him catch a plane and fly all the way down there for her of all people? For what, A DSA? He could have mailed it to him, later, if he thought it was that important. He wasn't in the mood to play family



secrets with Parker right now. He wasn't in the mood for anything right now. Sydney didn't say anything, just holding out the DSA. "No." Sydney didn't change his stance. "No."

"The missing three weeks of your life in October 1995? You only knew one day." He held out the DSA again. "Here is another."

Okay, Jarod was interested in that. He snagged it.

"Broots won't tell or give me anything else, until I promised to get that to you," Sydney said. "I've seen enough to know that whatever happened, this isn't good."

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*Recording: October 8, 1995*

*Jarod sat in his white armchair, reading something when his door flew open and a woman was tossed right in front of him. It was so bizarre; he didn't even know how to react and just watched his door shut close again. He put down the book and moved to assist her. "Wait." He let go. "Miss Parker?"*

*"Mary please," she insisted as she stood up. She looked around the room and then took a seat on his couch.*

*Jarod just gave her a funny look. "What'd you do? Make Daddy too mad he locked you up for a weekend?" he teased her. She didn't really respond to the tease. "Hello?"*

*"Hello, Jarod."*

*"What's wrong with your eyes?" He moved in closer. He looked back at the door. "Sydney's gone for three weeks. What are they doing now?" He moved back toward her. Observing her. Not speaking.*

*She didn't speak.*

*"Okay, what are you doing here?" Jarod asked seriously.*

*"I am here for three weeks," she said. "Afterwards, I will return back to Gil."*

*"Who's Gil?" Jarod asked.*

*"Doctor Gil. He takes care of me."*

*"Are you sick?" He touched her forehead. Her arms. Checked her reflexes. "Where's Mister Parker?"*

*"Pardon?"*

*"You're Daddy," he said mockingly. "Where's your Daddy?" His door opened again and Mister Lyle walked in along with Raines.*

*"No, no, no. That falls under list of words you can't say," Lyle said. "Real short list."*

*"You say it. You pay for it," Raines said. "You know how you pay for things, don't you, Jarod?"*

*Jarod tightened up. He saw the words. "Yes, Sir." He glanced at Mary. "Why is she here then?"*

*"Social experiment. We are hoping this one turns out better," Lyle said. "Just get along for three weeks. It won't be hard. She is the tamest dame around. Bye."*

*"Social experiment?" Jarod glanced back at her again. "Well, I've had worse." He moved in front of her and studied her some more. "Who did your hair? It's different."*

*"Doctor Gil," she said.*

*"Who's Doctor Gil?"*

*"He takes care of me."*

*"Can you add more than that to your previous statement?"*

*"Doctor Gil is the assigned Doctor that takes care of me due to the inability to take care of myself."*

*Jarod actually chuckled. "You can take care of yourself." He looked down at her hand and intended on banging it. She would easily stop him.*

*But she didn't stop him and yelled slightly as she waved her hand from the pain. "Could I trouble you not to do that, please?"*

*Now Jarod was really staring at her. He stared at her a good five minutes before getting up and walking around. He was inspecting her heavily. "Do you know who this Miss is of the Parker's?"*

*She remained seated. "I am Mary."*

*"You are the Miss of the Parker." He kept darting around her, watching her.*

*"Is your Doctor out too?" she asked. "Doctor Gil is gone three weeks in Europe ."*

*Jarod just tapped his foot. "Open your mouth." She took a second and then opened her mouth. "I recognize the inconsistencies in your dentals you always assume are perfect. You are Miss of the Parker family. Admit it already."*

*"I can only admit to being Mary," she said. "I have no permissions for the rest."*

*"My conclusions are final," he said. "Do you deny them?"*

*"I can't deny or accept," she said. "Without authority present."*

*"Go ahead and tell him," Lyle shouted from outside the door.*

*"I am Miss Mary Parker," she said.*

*"What is this simulation?" Jarod stood up. He went back to the window of his apartment door. "Hey? You know, I do better when I know what's going on."*

*"It doesn't matter." Lyle opened up the door to see him face to face. "She needs a place to chill for three weeks while Doctor Gil is out."*

*"Parker isn't taken care of by any Doctor Gil," Jarod said clearly. "What is going on?"*

*"Split personality, if you want to call it that," Lyle said. "Or, uh, forced split personality? I don't know which term you'd use. Anyhow, she's Mary. Now be a good boy and accept a roommate for three weeks."*

*Jarod looked between Lyle and Mary. "She doesn't have any place else to go? I have work to do, I can't babysit her."*

*"Sure I get it. You're a busy man," Lyle said coming in. He had a sinister look on his face and approached Mary. He bent down. "Jarod likes his space. He's a busy guy, no time for you. So? We're going to go have you hang out with Alex again."*

*The calm demeanor on her suddenly got taken over with fright. "No, please! Not Alex! There was a contract! Signed, Gil!" She grabbed his hand. "Not Alex, not Alex, not Alex! Eddie!"*

*"Now, now. Straighten?" He pulled her arm back. "Up!"*

*Jarod was stopped by several sweepers that invaded the room as Lyle hit her and punched her in the gut. He yelled while all she did was call for 'Gil' over and over.*

*"Now be a good girl and get up." Lyle dragged her to her feet. "Go over to Jarod's feet and beg him to let you stay. Maybe he'll change his mind."*

*"She can stay!" Jarod yelled. "She can stay as long as she needs to."*

*The sweepers left the room, with Lyle standing.*

*"Three weeks. She'll be fine," Lyle said like he didn't just beat someone up in front of him.*

*"Like I said? Mary is tame. Just, don't awaken the Miss."*

*Jarod went to the ground and helped her back up. "Are you okay, Mary? Here, up." He helped to carry her back to his couch.*

*She touched her nose and wiped some blood away. "Sorry, Jarod. I won't be a bother, I promise."*

*"Be a bother. You'll be okay. I? I have to finish a sim up." He stood up but looked back at her again.*

*He ran his sim through the evening until it was light's out. He went to his bed but looked back at her. He went over toward her again. "You want the bed?"*

*"The couch is fine, Jarod," she said.*

*His eyes lingered on her longer again. Then, he quickly acted like he was going to hit her, but this time, didn't, stopping at precisely the right moment. She flinched and curled, she didn't block like Miss Parker would. "Sorry, I just needed to see something. You have no fighting skills."*

*"No," she admitted. "I'll take the couch."*

*"I don't even have an extra pillow," he apologized. "I have an extra blanket."*

*"Thank you, I appreciate this." She took the blanket.*

*"Your welcome." Still. "Do you know what any of this is about? Why you're in here three weeks?"*

*"Interaction," she said. "The Centre wants to see how I interact with different pretenders in their controlled setting over a period of time."*

*"Alex reacted bad?" Jarod asked. "Your whole body convulses when I say his name. Why?"*

*"May I please just get some rest upon your couch?" she asked.*

*"Yeah. Rest." He stood back up. "Miss Mary Parker."*

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## **Broots' House**

Back door knocking. Jarod didn't want to play twenty questions between Broots and Sydney, he wanted answers right away after seeing the DSA. When Broots answered, Jarod came straight in. "Sydney said you know more," Jarod insisted. "What else do you know?" He held up the DSA. "Do you have more days?"

"Well. Yes. I didn't want to risk you being too mad and trashing them. Plus, Gil wants them back." He was noticeably nervous. Jarod had met him personally before, twice. Once as a mole, and once that he had to deal with him in the middle of a pretend. Either way? He was super nervous for meeting him again. *What are you hiding?*

"Doctor Gil had more," Broots answered. "His office is behind. Uh. Mary. So you saw it?"

"Yeah," he answered as Broots fetched the three DSA's for him.

"These are what Gil could find. So? W-what'd ya think?" Broots asked.

"She's got split personality." Jarod said as he took the DSA's. "Some kind of forced split. She can leave The Centre as Miss Parker, but she's tethered as Mary. What happened with Alex?"

"Oh. I don't know." That one was honest. "Nothing good. He must have hurt her."

Really? Could he feel nothing from that look on her? The yells? The begging?

"He must have really hurt her," Broots said, indicating he wasn't taking it lightly.

"So he took you to his office," Jarod asked. "What else? Did you see her?"

"Yeah. She had a haircut. You knew that. Just, she looked fine. Except, um."

Yeah, there was that nervousness again. He was hiding something. "What?"

"Well, it could be a Centre trick," he babbled. "I don't want you to get mad at me. Sydney regretted involving you too early. So, um? Maybe you should just try and get in there yourself. Then. Uh. You'll find out yourself? Gil doesn't really understand what he's got in there. Honestly, Sydney could probably get you in," Broots admitted. "He comes at night and he's there 'til 9:00. Be careful. Oh, and he has a disorder. Not good with many people."

"Makes him the perfect person to spend all day with one person," Jarod said. "Don't worry. I'll be gentle. Thanks."

"Just."

There was something else again.

"Just. No. You should see for yourself."

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### **Jarod's Current Apartment**

Jarod pushed away his glass of chocolate milk he just finished as he started his DSA player. He grabbed his new three DSA's. Every little bit he could know about that missing time was worth it. He placed them in his DSA player.

*Recording 2: October 9, 1995*

*"I never eat breakfast with anyone," Jarod said, looking toward Mary that morning. "This is nice."*

*"Certain company is nice," she admitted. "This does feel strange. Your environment is different than mine."*

*"How so?" He asked as he started to drink his tomato juice. "Is it as white?"*

*"Yes, but, you have more room. It's spacious," she noted. "Feels . . . big."*

*"Big. Interesting word from you. So, Mary?" He sat his drink down. "Do you hear Miss of the Parker?"*

*"It's hard to explain," she said. "Especially to someone of your caliber."*

*"Did you just pay me a compliment?" He smiled. "Not used to that from you at all. Thanks."*

*"It's not really a compliment, It's just a well worn fact." She smiled. Radiant smile. "I have restrictions on my memories and my emotions. The Centre makes sure I can't pull certain things from my head," she said, "unless I feel an emotion."*

*"Do you know why they would purposefully do that?" Jarod asked.*

*"I'm a lesser. I have nothing to provide for The Centre. They felt I should contribute." She looked at her tomato juice.*

*"A lesser? I don't know what a lesser is," Jarod admitted. "I've never heard of that."*

*"I don't have the skills of a pretender, or the intelligence at all. I have the mind of a normal person, but I can't be broadcasted to too much stimulation. I still live the same way. The Centre still feeds, shelters, and provides care for me." She sipped on her tomato juice again. "Therefore, they found a purpose for me. Gil doesn't like it though, he can usually stop them."*

*"Well, what is the purpose?" Jarod asked curiously.*

*"You are very curious," she noticed. "That never runs well at The Centre, Jarod."*

*"Yeah, I know," he admitted. Still, he asked again. "What is the purpose?"*

*"I . . . Mary . . . I'm obedient. I follow directions. I am a calm, secure individual."*

*Jarod swirled his hand in the air. "Just keep going. The more you talk, the more I pull things together."*

*She nodded. "All of my outburst and rage and unseemingly bad qualities I would normally develop are pulled away." She scooted away her tomato juice. "When I become the Miss of the Parker, I am everything that was pushed away. Gil said, they are trying to create a perfect person. One that can be obedient and calm, and the other that can be a die hard enraged soldier at will for The Centre. Depending on the action they-."*

*"Stop, I got it." Jarod bit his lip. "You weren't born that way, they are creating you to be that way. I wish I could look at your brain." Then, his eyes went wide. "Sorry, that didn't sound as polite as I figured in my head. My social skills are limited," he admitted.*

*"I think you are very good," she said. "I imagine my brain would be an interesting thing to see."*

*"Does Gil like you talking like this? About yourself as two people?" She shook her head. "I didn't think so. I think it can be reversed. A middle ground inside of you could bond back together. You're only separated by emotion and The Centre's tactics on memories."*

*"I don't know. I am good. She is evil," Mary said. "Even you treated me that way when I first came."*

*"I was wrong to do that. I didn't understand it." Jarod pushed his tomato juice and wheatgrass away. "Gil is right, you should never think that way. The Miss isn't evil, she is your freedom. When something happens to you that doesn't fit what The Centre wants, they*

*put you under a mind wipe, but another part of you remembers. That's Miss Parker. Nothing ever fully disappears."*

*"Everything hidden inside of me, is Miss Parker?" Mary asked. "She isn't just rage?"*

*"No, she's you, with full knowledge of everything that happens to you." Jarod stared at the table. "At least subconsciously. I don't blame her now. I think I would be mad too if The Centre kept trying to perfect my memories."*

*"She doesn't remember though, Gil said that," Mary said. "He's asked her. Tried to ask her several times about what she remembers. She's just hot blooded rage with hardly any memories. She remembers her childhood. She remembers college, which is quite impossible. She could never leave The Centre."*

*"What did Gil say to that?" Jarod asked. "College? I know you went."*

*"Gil experienced some problems himself and he lost contact with me during the college time," Mary said. "We are both clueless as to what happened. Do you really think she left The Centre?"*

*"Do I really think you left The Centre." Jarod gestured toward her. "Try and follow Gil's teachings, not those that have you right now."*

*She nodded. "Jarod. I don't remember Alex. I remember ten minutes," she confessed. "Meaning either the Miss came out or they erased my mind again. So. Don't ask about that, okay?"*

*"I understand," Jarod said. "The Centre can do all they want, they can't hide it from this side of you either. I don't need to ask about him." He touched her hand on the table. "But if you ever want to talk about it, I'm here."*

*"Only Gil remembers. He told, but I don't want to share it. At least not yet." She noticed his odd look.*

*"Miss Parker. Angel. Little Miss Parker. Miss P. See? Nothing. That list of words is nothing, that man was just trying to convince me too." He held her hand affectionately. "Just stay strong, and listen to your Gil, just like I listen to my Sydney. They see things and know things that we aren't allowed to know or see. I agree with your Gil about what they are doing. I don't agree, that they can ever make it happen."*

*"You don't think so?" Mary asked. "They seem to have."*

*"No because the self with all those hard emotions is no different than you now. You can feel. You can be tender. I've seen it. I know it. You can never be a soulless soldier, as hard as they try. Just believe in yourself. Always."*

*"True. She could be." Jarod had seen that break within her, and almost fully cracked her on the island to leave for good. "Everything she wasn't. Like trusting The Centre." Their biggest*

hold on Miss Parker was that she would never leave The Centre. Ever. He looked at the next DSA.

*Recording 3: October 14, 1995*

*"Rise and shine weird little lovebirds," Lyle said as he came in with breakfast. He looked over to Jarod and Mary sharing the same bed. Mary got up first along with Jarod. "Really? Sleeping together in a bed with the clothes on? Come on, she isn't going to be here forever. Make some effort."*

*Mary ignored him as she sat down to eat.*

*Jarod should have ignored him, but he didn't. "We are locked away from society and rarely touched. She had a hard day yesterday, remembering things."*

*"Ooh, don't play doctor," Lyle warned him. "Mary is a good girl, you start playing fuse together, you're in for some trouble."*

*"You shouldn't have left them together and you know it," Jarod almost growled at him.*

*"Interactive simulations. We get all kinds of results from you little social awkward monkeys. Like? Alex was braver than you. And you? Turned her into a teddy bear, how sweet. Wonder what Eddie will do later? Anyhow. Breakfast."*

*"She's Mister Parker's daughter, how could you just leave her?!"*

*"Whoah, we don't interfere in simulations. Anyhow, she's more of The Centre's right now in general than just to one man." Lyle moved away, adjusting his tie. "Just enjoy your breakfast." He left.*

*Jarod sat down for breakfast but he was still angry. He held Mary's hand over the table, a lot more firm than in the last recording. "I am going to let Sydney know."*

*Mary nodded but looked at her breakfast. "I . . . don't . . ."*

*"Come on," Jarod urged her. "Come on, Miss Mary Parker."*

*"I don't like that man who comes in here, or Raines. I don't like being handled," she said. "I don't want to be here."*

*"Right." Jarod smiled at her and patted her hand. "Progress. One day, I'll get out and I'll get you too."*

*"What if I'm already out? What if the Miss does get to leave? Without me."*

*"Then, I'll help you find yourself when I'm free. I won't leave any part of you here."*

*"It's a pretty dream," she said. "It's a pretty dream." She touched her wheatgrass lightly. "I've tasted better. I know I have. I just wish I could recall."*



*"Yeah," Jarod said. "You have, I know you have. One day, you'll get yourself together again." He finally let her hand go. "Thank you for coming to my bed. It made me feel better. To know you had trust in me."*

*"You're like no other person, Jarod," she admitted. "I could never do it for anyone else." She smiled. Radiant again. "Thank you. You're a real friend."*

*"So are you," he said bringing his breakfast back over. "Miss Mary Parker."*

Jarod watched it carefully. He was already close friends with Mary in a week. "It couldn't have been easy to let her go." He looked at the date on the last segment he had. "The day I died." He twisted the DSA in his hand. He was messing around with Miss Parker's mind with information he shouldn't have. "At least I know why she's in my nightmares now." Maybe that's why he was sent in for a death simulation that plagued his nightmares for so many years?

*Recording 4: October 31, 1995*

*Lyle went in to see him again, but Jarod was guarding his bed. "Whoah, big fella. I need the pretty girl behind you now."*

*"Forty a day," Jarod insisted. "I'll do up to my limit, every day, just don't take her."*

*"Bargaining? I didn't see that result coming, interesting." Lyle approached closer. "Move, Pretender."*

*"200 a month then, just leave her alone!" Jarod wasn't giving up. "You can't have her. I'd rather die than let you have her back."*

*"Now that is some irony." Lyle snapped his fingers and sweepers with a cleaner came in. "Come on, say goodbye. We have to get her back to Gil today. He arrived back early and he's not real happy she wasn't in her room."*

*"Just, promise then. Promise me you won't put her with another one of us," Jarod said. "No one but me. I trust none of them."*

*"Ooh, do you hear yourself? The other brainiacs, they aren't good enough to spend time with her?"*

*"Right!" Jarod agreed with him loudly.*

*"Lyle." Raines came into the room. "Just collect her."*

*Lyle took a step forward. "This can be hard or easy."*

*Then, Doctor Gil came in. "Oh, Mary. I'm so sorry. We need to go back to your room. You can't stay with a pretender."*

*"Jarod." Mary moved from the bed. "I have to go back with Gil. He is my Sydney. If I lose him?" She hugged him tenderly. He tightened the grip and the embrace before kissing her.*

*Jarod barely managed to let her go as she tried to quietly go. He still tried to stop her from leaving anyhow, but was quickly grabbed by The Centre team.*

*"Jarod!" Mary yelled, but she was grabbed by Lyle.*

*"No, no, don't!" Gil went over to Mary. "Let go, I can take care of her!"*

*Lyle let go while the Doctor took over.*

*"Obedient and calm, obedient and calm or you know what will happen," Doctor Gil tried to warn her. "Obedient and calm. He will be okay if you come with me." Mary sank her head into Gil's arms as he took her out of sight.*

*"Mary!" Jarod yelled.*

*"Now come with me, Lover Boy," Lyle said gesturing with his finger. "We've got one more thing to do before all this goes away forever. If it makes you feel better? At the end of this next simulation, bad or good, this won't be an issue anymore."*

Jarod just stared at the video. He ran it through again and again. So many days missing between. So many moments he didn't know, but one thing was clear. He was close enough to offer anything to spend his life with her. "This is why." It was why he kept having feelings for Parker no matter how much she tried to chase him and take him away. No matter what she did or tried or said. It was why on the island they connected so quickly once it was just them. Just like in his nightmares, it was still in there somewhere. In his mind. "I have to see for myself."

He had to trust Broots' instinct. He had to get in that room.

# Don't Hug Him Back

Late Night: Centre

“This is so dangerous, Jarod,” Sydney warned him. Jarod kept in the shadows, with handcuffs on. He wanted to see firsthand what was going on. Gil was kept out of the loop enough, that with what knowledge he had, there was a good chance he could get in with nothing more than Sydney’s help. From a past shared point of view, Gil eased up with Broots enough to agree to see Sydney. If it backfired, he had a way out, but he wanted to try.

As Doctor Gil walked up, Sydney apologized right away.

“Gil, I am very sorry about what happened days ago with us,” he said. “I was in a terrible mood about Jarod. We were close to nabbing him and I thought I had lost him. It’s alright again though, he’s back. Now, you’ve been trying to tell me something?”

“Oh. Yes. Did Broots give you the DSA’s?” Gil asked.

“Yes, yes. It made Jarod feel much better,” Sydney said. “I have him now, it turned out alright in the end. He is anxious to see Mary again. Do you think we could arrange a *very* quick visit?”

“Well? Yes. Um? Things are desperate enough, I think we should do that,” Gil said. “You need to come up to my office. I need to show you something and get your opinion of it first.”

“If you don’t mind.” Sydney gestured toward the darkness and Jarod emerged. “We would love to.”

“Oh. You brought him?” Gil was getting nervous now. “Already? Oh. I wasn’t prepared for that.”

“Three weeks were stolen from me,” Jarod said to him. He knew he needed to be tender and gentle as possible. Most likely The Centre was messing with his medication to keep him under their thumb. “I want to know the Mary I saw on the DSA’s. Something. Good. About The Centre. Most likely, they won’t grant permission. Please.”

“This makes it harder, not easier to give you access. We should have talked without him, Sydney. Still?” He touched his chest. “My heart is too soft for my lesser. She always wanted to be the one to explain.”

Gil opened the doors. Awake in the smaller setting than Jarod's room was Parker. Very white. No stimulation.

She looked toward him with no rage or anger. Serene and calm. "Hello, Jarod."

"Hello, Mary," he greeted her. "How have you been?"

That radiant smile on the DSA's did not do her justice. "Much better. I am always better with Gil." She looked at Gil.

"He does not remember either," Gill said quickly to her. "Be careful of your words. You may open the panel when you are done. I am not far. Sydney, my office is this way. Our lesser and pretender need a few minutes to talk privately."

Jarod watched her, finally alone. Which would be the better way to go? Anger Mary or calm Miss Parker for the future?

"During October of 1995, Gil left to Europe for three weeks with your Sydney. During that time, we were close." She looked awkward. "We don't remember it."

"Of course not. The Centre takes everything," Jarod said.

"You don't know how true that statement is." She gulped lightly. "Over the last few years, I've only had hours as myself each month."

Wait. They were *still* bringing Mary out during the time Miss Parker chased him?

"I can't believe you never told me about any of this!" Sydney was livid as he came back out. "Yes, I know about contracts and how you wanted to protect, but this was not right!" He looked at Jarod, his eyes filled with worry. "Are you okay?"

"Why?" Jarod looked at Mary. "What?"

"Doctor Gil made a contract. Oliver is his to watch without interference of a pretender."

Oliver? "Who is Oliver?"

"Well?" she said, a little fidgety. "According to the archive that Doctor Gil cannot find anymore, we were mutually sexually active."

"You didn't know about protection yet, Jarod," Sydney muttered.

Jarod stayed still. "What?" He watched Mary move toward the door on her side and open the panel.

She smiled into it and waved, then looked back at Jarod. "Oliver is our lesser pretender son."

Jarod didn't even think about the name of lesser pretender just the word *son*. He went to the panel and looked inside. There was a little boy, who had apparently been waving at Parker for

attention, now excitedly waving at him. He came running over while Jarod was memorizing everything he could about him.

“Hello, Jarod!” Oliver was happy to see him, trying to jump up closer to the panel. He reached in his pocket and showed him a picture of him. “Hello!”

Jarod waved once, as his mind pulled it all together. He stepped away from the panel and looked at Sydney. “Sydney? I have a son.”

“Yes. The.” Gil was quieter now after Sydney’s outburst. He still held out some of his papers. “The DNA testing is there. The, uh-“

Sydney snagged all of the papers as Gil found his place in talking, while Jarod snagged the DNA testing one specifically from him.

“-the uh, acute intelligence rating is there. Nothing significant. Enough that Mister Parker wanted him taken care of and doing minor simulations unless he improved significantly.” Gil didn’t know what else to say. “It’s there.”

Jarod had to bend his hand at a hard angle to read until Sydney straightened it out in his hand.

“He is at a lower pretender range,” Sydney said. “Meaning even if he was your son, he was of no use to them.” Sydney glared at Gil. “I think Jarod would like to see the boy.”

“He could start seeing him? Gil?” Mary asked. “He could see him on the fifteenth’s too?”

“What time on the fifteenth’s did you see him?” Jarod said approaching Mary closer. She took a step back.

“Jarod, your excitement may be too much for her,” Sydney reminded him.

“I just want to know the times.” Jarod tried to sound flat. “From when and what time?”

“Um?” She bit her lip and looked at Gil. “I found myself in my room between 9:00 and 10:00 every 15th. I. But it was worth it,” she smiled. “It was worth it, I got a whole hour with him every month and I loved it. Yet, I used to get once a week, but I don’t know what else happened.”

“They were pulling her away for one day a month for an hour,” Jarod said straight to Sydney. He looked back toward her. “Why? Why would The Centre bother with caring?”

“Uh?” She was uncomfortable with that question. “If he does terrible on his simulations, I’m not allowed to see him.”

“Of course,” Jarod muttered. “Of course!” He stalked around the room slightly, going back to the panel. The boy was still there, staring. “I want to see him now.”

“Um?”

Jarod yanked Sydney away with anger and desperation. He grabbed onto his jacket tighter. “Sydney? *Please?*”

Sydney patted his hand and approached Gil. “I think, considering how long the boy has been alive and how little Jarod knew, he should be able to see the boy a few minutes?”

Gil was jelly, but he also? “No, Sydney. No. He can see him from the panel.”

Jarod wanted to get the clearance from Gil and get in there already! *I’ve been going everywhere trying to find my family, and they had my own son right here! No one told me, no one breathed a word about him!*

“Gil.” Mary went over to him. “I don’t remember. I know you do. But? Jarod isn’t Alex.” Mary gave him a gentle pat on his hand. “He won’t hurt him. I don’t remember the three weeks, but I saw the DSA’s and I remember him from childhood. He would never hurt me, so he would never hurt him.”

“We should have discussed this alone, Sydney,” Gil insisted. He looked toward Mary. “A few minutes. If Raines knows about this, it is going to get ugly so please promise not to talk? We have no cameras in here.”

“None at all?” Sydney asked. “Not even minor?”

“None,” Mary assured him. “I’m not worth watching.”

Jarod banged against the wall, hearing her say that. *Only when she can be used as Miss Parker.* “She’s right.” Still, he had to be polite. He wanted to see him. “Please? I just want to see him, I’d never hurt him. I’d never hurt anyone.”

“You watched those DSA’s. Jarod’s a good pretender,” Mary insisted again.

“He’s been gone from The Centre for years, overstimulated, and has already tried to overrule on Sydney,” Gil said.

“Only because he found out he is a father,” Sydney said in his defense. “Jarod has been very good. On my oath, Jarod would not hurt Oliver.”

Gil looked at Jarod and his cuffs. He looked at Mary. He reached in his pocket and grabbed his clearance key. “The boy can touch him but he can’t touch the boy. This is so much further than I should be going yet, I know it. We haven’t even discussed Mary or Oliver’s futures yet.”

When the door opened up, Jarod was right there along with Mary.

It took seconds for Oliver to see them before he took off to him.

Jarod felt the boy hugging his legs. He bent down but remembered what Gil said. He couldn’t jeopardize anything.

“I have pictures of you!” Oliver said excitedly. “Did I finally get good enough to see you?”

*I hate The Centre, I hate it so much.* “Yeah,” Jarod said. He looked at the surroundings. Like his, but smaller. He had planets on the wall, fifteen. *Countdown to be with his mother. Who lives right next to him.* He saw pictures of himself, but not from The Centre. Apparently, any pictures they did get of Jarod from his pretends for his passports and licenses became something to give Oliver too. He looked back down at him. “I . . . wasn’t able to see you. I’m back now.”

“Gil is going to try and let him see you on the fifteenth’s too,” Mary said. She brought him over closer to them. “Do you want that, Oliver?”

“Yeah. Hi.” The excitable boy now didn’t know what to do. “I don’t know what to say to you. Except, Hi.”

“Hi.” Jarod almost choked. “Hi is a good greeting in a pinch.”

“Hi. My name’s Oliver. Um? Uh. I like blue.”

“Good. Good, blue is a good color.” Nervous, but not rattling off scientific facts. “My color is red.”

“Compliments. We like compliments.” Oliver looked at his mom. “We like complimentary colors.”

“Your name is a good name.” Jarod kept the conversation at his excitable level.

“Heh! I knew you’d like it. You named me,” Oliver said.

“I named you?” Jarod looked at Mary. “How could I name him?”

“Oh. Gil?” She pointed out.

“I used to have the whole three weeks,” Gil said to Sydney. “I wish I could have . . . anyhow, in their many conversations of wishing to be free, like any other human. Futures were discussed that could never happen. And-“

Oliver didn’t like the slowness of the explanation. “Oliver sounds like I love her. You never wanted anyone to forget it no matter what happened because nothing’s ever certain in The Centre.”

Jarod felt like he had the breath knocked out of him. *I wasn’t wrong on the island, I knew it. We even talked about the future, past The Centre.*

“Don’t you think this is long enough, Sydney?” Gil asked Sydney. “Over stimulation isn’t good on a pretender or a lesser.”

“Don’t you think either of us is to blame for *never* covering protection for our duties?” Sydney shot back at him. “A few minutes more won’t kill you. Does he have cameras in here?”

“No, he hasn’t been worth their technology in here either,” Gil said. “I do however. I have some regular recordings from special occasions.”

“Want,” Jarod said, still staring at Oliver. *My son. I’m cuffed. I’ve been forbidden from holding my own son!*

“Oliver, come here,” Mary said reaching for her boy. “Why don’t you give us each a hug?” She took a moment to hug him. “Jarod, can you bend lower? He’s only five.”

Jarod bent all the way to his knees. He raised his arms higher as Mary helped Oliver figure out how to hug him. Feeling the loose strength of youth, yet the tight embrace of a child that longed for his family, he was losing it.

“Jarod won’t run, I promise,” Sydney promised Gil as he took out the handcuff key from his pocket. “He just wants to hug his son. Can’t you see that?”

“Please, Gil?” Mary asked. “I promise. It *will* be okay. I know it will be. You are being incredibly brave today, and I thank you for that. But this is their first meeting. Sydney promises.”

“I have broken so many rules already,” Gil said. “We still need to discuss them, Sydney.”

“Then we can discuss them out there.” Sydney took Gil back out, giving Jarod privacy and time to think.

At least, that’s what he thought. “Gil just got a call from Lyle, they are coming to get Mary. Jarod, we need to go for now.”

“She won’t go anywhere yet,” Gil said. “There are no transports set up.”

“Don’t make Oliver nervous,” Mary said to Gil. “I mean? Sorry. Just. Please be careful around Oliver.”

His son. With Parker. *I didn’t even know of your existence, and now I just can’t let go.*

“Jarod, Lyle! We have to come back later,” Sydney said. “If we get caught here, it’s over.”

Jarod took a deep breath. “Oliver? I’m coming back. Understand?”

“On the fifteenth?” he asked excitedly.

“On the fifteenth, but you need to be quiet. Don’t tell anyone you saw me. Okay?”

“Okay, Jarod.” He nodded. “Thank you for visiting me.”

“Thank you for . . . accepting my visit.”

“Jarod!” Sydney scolded him bringing him up. “Now!”



Jarod knew he was taking too much time. Even Sydney was getting rough. He hurried out the door, down the stairs, and out the painting with Gil's card. "I am coming back, we are coming back," Jarod insisted.

"I hope so," Gil said to him. "We need to work out a use for Mary or she's either going to Africa or Japan."

"What?"

"No time, come on," Sydney insisted. "Move, we need to move."

Jarod drug Sydney into the darkness with him as Lyle and Raines started to come.

"Gonna need Mary again," Lyle yawned as he caught Gil coming out. "An old friend from College wants to see her. Remember?"

"Mary never went to college," he said bravely. "Remember?"

"I know." Lyle chuckled. "It was a joke."

"Stop joking," Raines scolded him. "Kids." He looked back at Gil. "I need Mary. Now."

Gil swallowed. "We haven't even talked about moving them. I thought you would wait longer into the night to take her. I haven't even woken her up yet."

"No. She's got a date as Miss Parker now," Raines said. "Possible future. We'll see."

"Possible future of which?"

"Just get Mary." Sweepers and cleaners both stepped out more into the light.

Gil nodded and opened the door. He came back down with Parker. "Be careful. May I come this time?"

"No."

"Will she be back soon?" Gil asked.

"An hour or two probably," Lyle said, "Dad."

Gil watched them leave and then turned to Sydney. They were both already gone.

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"Okay, Jarod, far enough," Sydney insisted as they stopped in the middle of a Centre hall.  
"Jarod."

“I have a son!” Jarod yelled at him. “You never even knew, Sydney!” He palmed his face, trying to concentrate.

“Yes, I know how you feel,” Sydney said. “When I discovered Nicholas, it wasn’t easy. Oliver though, he is still young, and he sees you as a father. Even if he’s . . . never actually seen you.”

“Five years old. I’ve been out there, looking for my mom and dad,” Jarod reasoned. “My sister. My brother. I lost my brother. I found a new brother. Even my clone, everyone. And this whole time?” He tried to take several deep breaths.

“Had his intelligence been as much as you, I’m sure we would have heard of him,” Sydney reasoned.

“No.” Jarod shook his finger. “I don’t care about any of that. He was my son. Why did they . . .” He looked to the wall. “They use everything to get me. They always use everything.”

“Well? Contrary to how bad it sounds,” Sydney said gently. “Mister Parker must have been watching over them. And, like it or not? His grandfather is Mister Raines. It is family, and he may want to preserve that line.”

Jarod leaned against the wall. “Everything you taught me, Sydney. All of the skills and abilities you pressed into me.” He glared at him. “And you never once thought, hey, why not teach him about protection? Oh no, no, because why would I ever end up in that kind of situation in The Centre!”

“I didn’t know,” Sydney defended himself. “I didn’t ever think that . . . I have nothing I can say for it,” he responded. “You were isolated and alone. You barely knew about women. I did teach you how babies were made.”

“Sure all the different ways from in vitro to artificial insemination to- you never got down to it!” Jarod still had trouble controlling his rage. “Oliver. I have a boy named Oliver. I don’t even know what day he was born.”

“I still have the papers.” Sydney looked through them. “July 4, 1996.”

“Right before Damen. Right before Eddie, Alex and I got out.” Jarod walked the lone halls. “I had a chance, it was my chance and Gil never told me.”

“He never told me either,” Sydney reminded him. “As I said before, because of Oliver’s relation to the Parkers. Being a Parker. They probably didn’t want to risk him in any scheme. Even Mary, no one knew anything until Raines came to power.”

“I knew,” Jarod reminded him, “and I had my heart stopped after it.” He took a deep breath. “Out. I have to get him and Miss Parker out of here.”

“We’ll have to overthrow Gil,” Sydney said. “That’s not good for his psyche.”

“He’s going to have to learn to deal with what happens. Get therapy, get help and get away from The Centre. I’ll even set him up afterward to make sure he’s okay,” Jarod said, “but he’s

going down tonight. Oliver and Miss Parker. They are coming out of The Centre and with me. Not one more day,” Jarod warned him. “Not one extra hour. Nothing.”

“Mary out there though. If she becomes Miss Parker, things will get tough, Jarod,” Sydney warned him.

“No. I have to try and get them both to emerge. I expect it to get hairy, it is how I get her better,” Jarod said.

“Your avenging pretends will have to be put on hold,” Sydney pointed.

“My son, five years old, trapped in The Centre. Miss Parker’s mind divided into two by The Centre. Gee, let me think if it’s worth it,” Jarod practically growled with a glare.

“Easy, Jarod. I know. I know,” Sydney tried to calm him. “Very soon? You will be able to hug your own son.”

“His little arms,” Jarod looked at the cuffs still on his hands as Sydney reached in for the key. “Weak but strong. You know? You could feel how much effort they were putting into trying to hug their dad.” He was starting to break down. “I know, I did that too. But my hands weren’t half as small. He’s so small.”

“Yes. He is,” Sydney said as Jarod’s hands were freed, “and you are going to make a great dad, Jarod. Now. Let’s not go too far. As soon as the coast is clear? We’ll take Gil and get your family out.”

## Nobody Messes With Mary

“Okay. So, the lightshow, huh?” Broots felt nervous but getting behind a keyboard always made him feel in his element. He could see what was going on in medical right now. “Bring out Miss Parker. Seal off Mary for now. Get her out. This should work.” He had been planning it for a week already. Watching and waiting. He couldn’t depend on Jarod taking action soon enough and the more time he talked with Gil, the more concerned he became. He stayed every night until they eventually took her again. “Cool blues. Intense reds. Sim for obedient wife? Uh, no. I don’t think so, Miss P.” He waited listening to the audio in the room he tapped. “Africa or sell her to the yakuza? Final decision? Oh, Miss P. is not going to like either of those.” He didn’t hear her yet. But as soon as he did? “I can do this. I’m just switching out signals in the brain that could drive her insane.” No. No. “She can’t live like this and she won’t escape as Mary. I am really sorry Miss P., we’ll all get through this. I’m sure.” Nervous. No one escaped The Centre, and even Jarod was always tracked. What would she do? “No, I can’t dwell on that. She isn’t anything to The Centre. Gil said that, even the kid isn’t special to them. They are a lost cause, that’s why this is happening in the first place. Don’t even waste cameras, they won’t waste much on them escaping. We can do this. Okay, okay, okay.”

Deep breath. He was only going to destroy or free her mind. “Lights and the pretender brain. The sim. I have to.” He swallowed and hit it.

He tore the lights into two different shades and then hit her with a burst of white, then red.

Mary looked around her, seeing herself in a red room. Before her was somebody she didn’t know. *This guy. I know him. He must be the one they are thinking of sending me to. Sending me to, like an effing present. They. Think they. Can just send me. Like an effing present!* Anger. She felt something new. Something fierce. No, not just anger. Determination. Justified enragement! She stomped forward to him, stole his gun and held it at him. All the fighting abilities she knew she had in her head locked away? Were opened to her. “Open up or he’s dead!” When medical opened up, she still used him as a piece of meat as she saw Raines and Lyle hiding behind glass. “You two!” She shot out the glass, causing the alarms to go off. They both took off like the cowards they were as she pushed out the glass and went through it. Her mind was racing as weird thoughts poured into it. All she knew, was that she was in trouble. Which meant Oliver was too.

“Take away my son, I don’t think so.” She broke into someone’s office and looked around. Everyone in The Centre should have a gun. They were all predatory. Fully loaded, she made her way up to floor 2. She went to the familiar painting and put in the code. “I’ll show you what Mary can do,” she muttered as she went inside. She banged on the clearance door that would lead to her room. “Doctor Gil, please! It’s Mary! Help me!” When he answered she

took his clearance card and punched him. *You deserve that you weakling! You couldn't protect worth shit!*

While he bled with his bloody nose, she went up toward her son. She opened the clearance door and saw him. Working on sims. "Oliver. Here. Now." He came over, delighted to see her and hugged her. "Not now, we'll make nice later." She picked him up and headed out. "Cover your ears and trust mom." When she saw Gil coming back to her, she banged him against the wall again. She had no time to deal with him right now. Raines would be-

"Miss Parker, stop right-!"

She shot and almost got him as she sailed down the stairs. She wasn't even going to give quick quips, it was a rescue mission and there was no time for the little things. She nailed Lyle in the leg as he ran over. Sweepers would be coming. "Hang on, mom's going to run."

She ran into The Centre parking lot with no idea what to do, but she'd be damned if she'd die in The Centre. It was worth trying to fight to survive.

Someone stopped with a different looking car, gesturing for her with kind eyes. She ran toward him, starting to hear gunshots behind her. *Alright, other side ran my life all the time.* "What's my name?!" She demanded. When he yelled Parker, it was close enough. She got in the back, put Oliver to the other side, buckled him up and pointed out the window behind her as the man drove. *Wait for it . . . wait for it . . . there!* She blew out one of their tires at a correct angle that would make that car curve away from them. With luck, it would hit another car. Just not theirs.

She ducked her head back inside and looked at Oliver. *My mind is melted fudge in the microwave.* Who did she call when her mind was melted fudge in the microwave? "You, I'm going to need more bullets," she said to the man in front. She patted Oliver's back. She turned back to her soft voice toward her son. "It's okay, Sweetie, momma is right here. Nothing's going to hurt you." She looked back to the other man and her rough voice came back out. "More bullets if you have them, now!"

The man tossed her more bullets.

"Momma?" Oliver finally spoke. "This is a lot of stimulation. I don't feel so good."

"Oh, your world is just getting started." She refilled her gun. "Why don't you hum a song you like, huh? You'll be okay, Honey. I have to go kill some people now, be right back." She hung back out the window, aiming with all her might. "Wasting only three cars on little lesser Mary, huh?! Well, your mistake." She wasn't aiming for tires this time. She sniped the side driver that was trying to get a good shot. It surprised the first enough, he tried to shoot at her too. "Driver, turn to your right now!"

As he turned out of the danger path, she shot and got him. No one messed with Mary. The other Centre car cut his losses. *Good choice.* She ducked her head back in. "Keep driving, whoever you are."

“Miss Parker,” he said hesitantly. “Don’t you remember me?”

“Don’t. Even.” She glared at him. “Mary.”

“Wow. Okay. Okay. Can I call Sydney? You know Sydney?” He picked up the phone.

“Sydney.” Sydney. “Barely know him,” Mary said. “Doctor of The Centre. Don’t call him or I’ll kill you.” She pointed her gun at him. “I’ve still got more left but I don’t want to make it tough on Oliver unless I have to. He already has a tummy ache from all this exposure.”

“Okay. Okay, we’ll call later,” Broots said. “Where do we go?” His phone started to ring. “That’s Sydney’s number. Um? Maybe you could answer instead?”

“Sydney.” Tip of her tongue, like she said it more than once. “Jarod.” Right, Jarod was with Sydney. “Jarod just saw us.” Okay. “Answer.”

The man answered his ringing phone. “Hello?”

“Broots, did you do something?!” Sydney accused him. “What is going on?”

“Well, I, uh? I sort of freed Miss Parker, but sort of didn’t,” the man said. “I think I sort of mixed up the, uh, emotional sides? Mary feels a lot like Miss Parker. Sorry. She broke out of The Centre with her son.”

“So you did know about Oliver?!” Jarod’s voice, about as mad as she felt. “I knew it!”

Ooh. Jarod’s voice. It agitated her for some reason, though she didn’t know why. He was just yelling at a man she didn’t know. She looked back at Oliver. He made her feel better. She held his hand and smiled at him. “Always remember. Sometimes it’s better to kick ass and live. Okay?”

Oliver nodded and tightened his grip. “Um? Are we okay out here?”

“Yes. Simulation rooms are just complete malarkey for people to take advantage of others.” She knew that now. How, she . . . couldn’t put her finger on it, but she knew. At this point, she was running on instinct, and even though Oliver looked like he was feeling sick? It was probably from his mom gunning people down and the fast car speed than the lack of white and calm in a room.

“Jarod really wants to talk to you, Mary.” The man moved the phone away from his ear. “Plus, they are both starting to hurt my ears.”

*Jarod.* She took the phone. “What.” Hm? “Sorry, I don’t mean to be irritated at you.” She still felt herself almost seething. “What is it, Jarod?”

“Are you Mary or are you Miss Parker?”

“I’m both, Jarod,” she said. “You always told me to never separate myself like that.” Her mouth twitched. “Although I have a large amount of anger in my heart right now, and I apparently remember combat skills. I used them to rescue our son. I also killed some people.

I don't think Gil would approve of any of my actions. I also punched him. I felt like he deserved it."

"Okay." Jarod sounded off. He was probably getting used to the idea of fatherhood still. "We need to meet."

"Jarod, I'm sorry, you're in The Centre. I don't even know where in The Centre you are," she apologized. "I just had to focus on rescuing Oliver."

"No, I've been out. Sydney helped me trick Gil to go up and see you."

"Oh. You came all the way back to The Centre for me? That was nice of you."

"Y . . . yeah." He still sounded strained. "What's the last thing you remember, Mary?"

"An hour, once a month on the fifteenth, over and over again," she said. "Plus? New things have hit me. It's like, being in a story and having different parts in different places, Jarod. Like? I don't know who's driving but he was there with a getaway car and he knew my name."

"Broots. His name is Mister Broots," Jarod told her. "Oliver's there? How is he?"

"Absorbing everything around him, Jarod," she said. "Every single thing. He's overwhelmed and has a slight tummy ache. Nothing severe, just . . . I trained in the darkness."

"Trained in the darkness?" Jarod asked. "What do you mean?"

"I trained in the darkness. I was surrounded by objects I talked to like people, but I trained in darkness. I trained in red lighting. There was an instructor, that's it. They talked to me and all the objects." She swallowed. "Why was I talking to objects? My mind feels fried, Jarod."

"Okay, give the phone back to Mister Broots. Sydney and I are meeting you very soon, I promise."

She gave the phone back to the strange man. "Here. Um. Broots." She tossed it in the front seat. He took the phone and said 'uh huh' and 'uh huh' and 'thanks' and 'sorry' and 'okay' before hanging up. *How do I know him? Who are you? Why are me and Oliver with you in this car right now?*

They traveled awhile in dead silence. She went ahead and scooted closer to Oliver, calming him down. He was getting better now. He'd be alright. When they reached a small diner, the man Broots stopped and got out. He opened the back door.

"It's alright, they'll meet us here." Broots held out his hand, but she didn't trust it. She unbuckled herself and Oliver but went out Oliver's side with him. She held him tight in her arms as they went into the diner. She kept her gun handy.

She sat down at the table, but didn't let go of Oliver. She just stared at the man in front of her. "How do I know you?"

“Well, I’m Broots,” he said. “Do you want something to drink while we wait?” She didn’t answer. “Okay.”

“How do I know you?” She questioned him again.

“We work together,” Broots said. “Does any of it ring a bell? You’re fighting like you remember being Miss Parker. You sounded like that on the phone too with Jarod. Is that what college was?” He asked. “Were you just trained in The Centre, in a sim?”

He was asking her questions? *I don’t even know him. He isn’t telling me anything.* “What do we do at The Centre together?” He didn’t look like the type she simmed with. Was he new?

“I’m the computer guy for it,” he said. “I work with you. Your father put me, you and Sydney together.”

Her father? “Raines worked me at The Centre?”

“Your original dad. The one who raised you,” Broots said.

“No one raised me except Gil. Since 1970.” Ooh. Her emotions. It wasn’t just rage anymore. She was feeling herself start to tear up. She held Oliver tighter now. “No one raised me, I’ve always been at The Centre as a lesser. They didn’t care. They. They threw me away.” She felt Oliver’s grip around her increase in understanding.

“I’m sorry. I think your college was a hoax,” Broots said to her. He tried to reach out for her but she backed off with Oliver, scooting her chair out. “Don’t be scared. I know the real you. You were released as Miss Parker permanently in September 1996.”

Like she didn’t know the month she was dropped from most of her life? Oliver was only born in July. August. “September.” Tears were starting to fall. “What do I do? Harder Sims?”

“Well. You.” He was stalling again. “You’re not owned by The Centre. It was a paid job.”

Her throat felt like it had gone dry. “I worked for The Centre? I? Worked worked?” They did it, they turned her into a soulless soldier after all! She stared at this man. He was not her friend. He was the Miss Parker of The Centre soulless soldier’s friend! *He’s not taking Oliver and he’s not taking me!* She stood up with Oliver, reached for the keys he left on the table, took the back of his head and knocked it out on the wall next to him. He yelled in anguish about it, so she flung him out of the seat hard, hoping that did something else as his head smacked against the back of the bar. She dashed out. She ran back to the car, put Oliver on the other side, buckled him up and got in the driver’s seat. *I know how to drive.*

A simulation of a car that didn’t work with a screen ahead of her popped into her mind. *First driving lesson was a sim.* No time. She put the keys in the ignition and got out. As she road away, she looked for the phone. She must have left it with the man. She looked at Oliver. He was upset again. “Are you okay? We had to get away. I didn’t trust him.”

“I? I know,” he said. “So much, there’s just so much.” He shook his head.



Yes. Calm. He needed calm. She needed calm. *Darkness, we need darkness.* They lived their life in lights of white and the darkness of night. *Darkness, safe darkness.*

“We can’t murder Broots, Jarod,” Sydney reminded him as they stopped at their location. “Without him, we never would have gotten one DSA. I was too upset, I’d never ask.”

“I know.” Jarod kept it together. “He just shouldn’t have set a rescue mission *all by himself*.”

“He was scared of what Gil said,” Sydney reminded him once more. “We were working without him as well.”

“It was too personal. It was my unknown three weeks, Sydney, and then her involved? I just needed you and that’s it.” Jarod got out of the car with Sydney and went in. He looked around and saw Broots nursing his nose. No sign of Parker or Oliver. He went straight over to him. “Where are they, and the answer better be ‘Oliver wasn’t feeling well and they are in the bathroom’.”

Broots looked scared. Maybe too strong? “Oliver wasn’t feeling well, but they aren’t in the bathroom. Once she found out she worked for The Centre, she fled.”

“Fled? Oh, Broots, where to?” Sydney demanded. “How long ago?”

“Not long. My nose stopped bleeding,” Broots said. “Ten minutes?”

“Any ideas, Jarod?”

*Betrayed. Finding out she worked for The Centre. She’d run but where to? She doesn’t know this place. She feels lost. She feels alone. She’s going to be worried about Oliver too, she’s a good mom. She’d want to make Oliver feel better too. Calmness. No white rooms easily accessible so the opposite. Lights out. Darkness.* “We need to find this town’s movie theatre.”

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## Local Movie Theatre

Darkness. Complete darkness. Empty seats and no one around. Nothing was playing in that room. She mugged someone outside for a few dollars and went inside. She got a ticket for him and her, but didn’t go to the room for the movie.

She knew movies. They were like huge sims playing overhead. She heard giggles in her head, like she used to enjoy them with someone. A part of her other self leaking through. She must

have liked movies. Anyhow, there wasn't a movie playing nor was it what she wanted. The darkness and the overhead projection screen. Just like sleeping for Oliver. She kept him in her arms wrapped tight, sitting in a corner, not a chair. She could watch the door to make sure no one came in after them.

Oliver felt better. She hummed a little for him as she gently rubbed his back. The whole time, she still had her pistol ready. She sat on the floor so she couldn't get trapped in a chair. Oliver's heart didn't beat as fast and he felt more at peace. After she finished her humming, they both sat in silence. Tranquil silence and darkness.

She heard a knock at the door. No one would knock at an empty movie door. As it opened up, she called out, "Back off! Get out now!" She would have shot her gun if she had any bullets left. It was the Broots man of before, he probably didn't need a bullet. "Get out!"

"It's okay, Miss Parker?" He held his hands up.

"I will kill you with any accessory currently on you if you don't get out now!"

"Move. Stay back. *Now*." Jarod pulled Broots back. Sydney and he helped him look at the rooms. He knew the theatre would be the perfect place to go. He looked back at Broots and Sydney. "Stay out here. Guard the door. Don't say anything. Don't come in."

"She doesn't remember us at all, but she remembers a movie theatre?" Broots asked. "Her actions, and knowing how to drive? There has to be some of Miss Parker in there too."

"Look." Jarod held his hand toward both of them. "The only person in the world right now that can go into that room is me. I'm the only one who knows what it's like being used by The Centre. Trapped. Alone. Frightened. So you two stay out here and guard this door." They seemed to get it.

Jarod opened the door slowly. He didn't hear a weapon. Probably out of bullets. "Mary?" He gently looked inside, letting his eyes adjust. She didn't make a sound. Neither did Oliver. He stepped in, opening the door more to let some light come in.

There she was. In the corner, Oliver in her grasp. He closed the door behind him. "I know you're scared," he said softly. "It's okay. I'm not here to hurt you, you know that." She still wasn't moving. "You trusted me enough to put Oliver's arms around me. At one point, we must have been close enough to have Oliver. That should say something." He noticed Oliver opening his eyes to look at him.

Jarod looked back toward her, another step closer. "I know it doesn't make any sense but Broots wasn't there to harm you."

"I worked for The Centre!" She finally cried out. "They turned me into what they wanted."

"No, they didn't. You did, you worked for The Centre, but you weren't . . ." Words. He had to be careful. "You were full of more than rage. You felt sorrow too, about your mom. You felt

love, with a man named Thomas. You almost left The Centre for good to move away with him but he was killed. You discovered secrets. You had openings, leeway's that helped me get away a couple of times," he said. "If you were what they wanted, they never would have brought the more obedient side of you back. Right?"

" . . . right." Her voice was soft, so soft. "I'm not obedient anymore."

He could see that. He walked up to her slower. "Can I come to you?" He moved more casual when he got the nod. He came right to them and bent down. He looked back at Oliver. He had the roundness of his nose, but the shape of his mother Margaret's eyes he saw time and again in the picture. He even had his chin. He had her ears though, and her eyebrows that crinkled just right when they were worried. *Little genetic miracle. A sum of different pieces of DNA of me and Parker.*

He looked back at her. She wasn't even holding the gun at him. Yeah, he got it right. For once, he was on her top list of people to trust. "Broots and Sydney worked with you. Whether you liked what they did, they appreciated you. Without Broots, we never would have been there tonight."

"Oh." She looked so confused. "I. Was I good or bad then?"

"Complicated," he settled on. "You were okay. You'll see. I'm sure you'll remember more."

"It was a con," she said. "Everything. He just. He." She was searching. "I saw him. After I did well with the instructor, he tried to show up."

"Mister Parker." Jarod understood, and it didn't make him any happier. *Hang on.* She had college buddies. So if no one else was at her college sims except an instructor and her father every once in awhile? "Did you see someone else? Tommy Tanaka?"

"I knew him from there. I saw him," her throat sounded sore. "He was there in the red room tonight. I. They said I was going to my future. And I didn't want to listen. I didn't want to be obedient anymore. I didn't want to let them have Oliver. I didn't want to become a wife or a mistress for the yakuza. I. Want."

"Freedom." Jarod touched her hand. It wasn't the Miss Parker asking for freedom of The Centre, but it was still the words he'd dreamed of hearing her say. And he wasn't letting it go. "You have it. You and Oliver, I promise. The Centre will never get a hold of you two again. Sydney and Broots are just outside--"

"No!" She curled up tighter with Oliver.

She didn't trust them. Not a shred of her. How the tables turned. "Okay. I'll make them leave and then we'll get out. I have a car."

"I drove with a video game wheel," she said in disbelief. "I couldn't see but now I see."

"That's the sims. The Centre must have used your . . ." No, he shouldn't get into red files with her. None of that right now. "I'll go get them out, I'll get my car and we'll all be out of

here in five minutes. Okay?" He looked back at Oliver. "Are you doing better now? I heard you weren't feeling good." He nodded, but he still wasn't recovered from the night yet. A lot of freedom very fast and unexpected. "I'll be back."

"Okay, Jarod," he finally responded.

Jarod headed back out. Broots and Sydney were right there. "You have to leave," Jarod said. "I'm getting them out now. They are coming with me, but not with you here."

"But? We aren't here to hurt them," Broots said. "I'd never hurt her. I was here to help her."

"We're just worried," Sydney said. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine, but until she remembers anything else, she isn't going to want to see you." Jarod gestured out the door. "Go." Neither of them moved very fast. "Yeah. It sucks. Someone you love and trusted no longer wants anything to do with you. They don't trust you. They hate you. Everything you say makes them angry. Welcome to the other side of what I went through with her. Go!"

Broots headed out. He didn't say a word, just went out.

"I hope that she remembers everything soon," Sydney said. "She deserves to be whole. Not just a mess of emotions and only the memories of Mary." He nodded and headed out.

With them gone, he went back into the movie room and into the darkness. He went to the corner. "Okay. Come on." She stood up and held Oliver's hand in hers and then outstretched hers to Jarod's.

It felt like such a rush. She hadn't trusted *him* in so long. He took her hand and led them out of the darkness. The light pierced their eyes slightly after lingering in the absolute darkness, but it didn't last long. Jarod opened the front door of his car. He looked toward Oliver. His chance to finally pick him up. "Come here. Middle with you." He wasn't going in the back seat, he was going right in the middle. Right between him and Mary.

He tried to pick him up, but watched Mary pull him away and pick him up into the middle instead. Well? She still didn't know him well. He was going to have to ask if he could pick up Oliver if he wanted her to feel better about it. He did help him fix his seat belt though.

Mary was already getting in on the other side and closed the door. She fixed her seatbelt.

Jarod looked at the both of them as he climbed into his car. He wanted to memorize everything about it.

It was wrong, a part of him knew that as he started the car and headed away. Broots and Sydney were Miss Parker's partners. They'd been through many things, trusted each other completely. Meanwhile, he'd been shunned. Pushed into an area to be distrusted, lied to, hated and chased by her. And now?

Karma bit them all back.



## What Alex Did

Jarod had rented a double bed and a single bed in one room for the night, but Oliver wasn't leaving his mother's grasp. Or she wasn't letting go of him. Either way, they weren't leaving each other.

Oliver watched Jarod move toward the bed with them. "You look wide awake," he said to his mom. "Oliver looks like he's ready to plunge into bed."

"Sleeping habits, Jarod," Oliver said to him, leaning back on his mom and looking straight at him. Wow. *His* dad. From earning his pictures and working diligently for simulations, he had actually somehow ended up with the real him. In real life. "I mostly worked on simulations during the day because momma didn't visit until night on the fifteenth, and that was always 9:00 PM. Then I go to bed at 10:00. Then it changed and mom was awake. She could see me more. I changed a little so I could see her more."

Talking. He was really talking now to Jarod. Amazing. "That makes sense," Jarod said. "You're tired. She's not."

"The running and shooting and killing of people woke me up for awhile," Oliver insisted. "This world is big and it feels dangerous."

"It is, but it's free," Jarod said quickly. Very quickly, like he said something wrong. "You don't need to worry about the dangers, just the freedom. I'm here to handle the dangers. So is your mom. Okay?" He nodded. "That's what parents are for. We are here to protect you from anything that wants to hurt you out here."

"And to teach," his mother added. "To teach you how to avoid some danger as time goes by." She patted his hair. She always loved doing that when he was upset. It made him feel better too. Jarod looked hesitant about something though.

"Mary?" he asked lightly. "Can I please try holding him?"

"Oh." Nervous of course. "Gentle."

Whoah. Jarod wanted to hold him? His dad wanted to hold him. "He does like me." He looked up at his mom. "The man with the oxygen tank was wrong. Right? Or is it because he doesn't know my scores yet?"

"Scores?" Jarod leaned in closer to him. A little unsettling. "What do you mean? The man with the oxygen tank?"

He could tell Jarod knew. *He wants something else.* Oh. "Raines, he's my grandpa, but I can't call him that. I'm a disappointment."

Jarod glanced up to Mary. "What?"

Oliver felt his mom stroke his cheek lightly.

"I countered as I could," she told Jarod. "I tried to counter the hate. He was no more with him than I was, so he's more confused than converted," she said. "Raines used to tell him a lot of negative things, Jarod."

"I'm not a very good pretender," Oliver confessed. "I can only run 6 minor sims a day." Hesitant. Real hesitant. "At my age, you were running 20. And, he said." Jarod's eyes were glued to him. Should he keep going? He looked back up at his mom and saw her give a solid nod to him. "He said until I meet at least 20 a day, you wouldn't want to leave your sim room to see me."

"No. No!" Jarod's eyes were wide, like they were terrified. "Never."

Oliver felt himself getting shifted over to Jarod. He was holding him now. Which was different. His mom's body was nice and light. His dad was strong and muscular. More than he thought.

"Oliver. I don't care about that, I had left The Centre. I didn't know about you." It sounded like he was pleading. "It wouldn't matter whether you did 6 or 20 or none. I don't even like The Centre or it's sims, that's why I left. Understand?" He nodded. "Never let Raines make you feel or think different. He might be your biological grandfather but he isn't there to love you. He was only there to control you. Okay?"

So, his mom was right. "Okay, Jarod."

"Any father that would ever put that as some milestone to see his son, is no father worth having," Jarod added. He touched the top of his head. "Don't call me Jarod. Call me Dad. I'm your dad."

He felt Jarod wrap his arms around him tighter, but saw his mother getting nervous. "Oh, not too tight, Jarod. I mean, Dad," Oliver said. "That'll unsettle Mom. That's how Faith was lost."

"Faith?" His dad looked toward his mom. "What does he mean? You remember Faith?"

His mom looked confused. "You said you didn't remember the three weeks. So, how would you know about her?" She raised her eyebrow at him.

"You knew a Faith. Oh he is talking about a different Faith," Jarod said. "Of course."

Oh, Oliver shouldn't have done that. He was trying to save his mom her nerves. Now he had better explain. "Faith was my sister," he said to Jarod. "My older sister. She died at birth."

"Oh." Jarod sighed. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Oliver said. "Her dad Alex snapped her neck."

Jarod absorbed that for a second. He looked back toward Mary.

“I don’t remember,” Mary said in her defense. “Gil remembers. I was taken away for another mindwipe. I only know because Gil told me.” She looked at her hands, making them into fists. “He said after that, that’s when the real difference started to come in. Between me and the rage of the Miss.”

“I?”

“You don’t need to say anything, Jarod, it’s involuntary, the slight.” She scratched her head. “I know you won’t hurt him. I’ve seen you enough with him.”

He wanted to know more. Why was Alex there? Why couldn’t he have been with Oliver?

“Contract,” she said, like she could see what he was thinking. “Gil thought Alex was fine. He never hurt me in that three weeks. At first, he was grabby when we first met. He’d never seen a girl before. Then, he eased up more. We met more.” She shrugged. “I blank out after that, but Gil said he was nice enough that he let him be at the birth.”

“I didn’t get to know about Oliver, because of Alex.” Oh. He rocked the boy gently. “Sorry.”

“I don’t remember, but it might be like you said on the DSA,” she said. “It was enough that Miss Parker couldn’t contain it alone.”

Now, his last words made sense in the DSA. His pleading to keep her away from *all* of the pretenders. “I told Lyle never to let you near another pretender.”

“Yeah,” she said. “When she was born, Gil said he started to cry. He said he thought that it was normal and healthy. To cry. Gil said he even cried after he did it.” She wiped her eyes. “I don’t remember, yet it’s still not easy to accept.”

“I know that,” Jarod said.

“He said ‘Death was better than The Centre’. After that, Gil never trusted anyone with me ever again. They had to yank me away to do their testing when Gil wasn’t around. But. He should have done more. He could have done more, somehow. He shouldn’t have just signed a contract for Oliver never to see you, and I shouldn’t have-!” She stopped.

“The Centre controls, and takes away control.” Jarod touched her hand. “I will never harm Oliver. Ever. I will never harm you either. We are all going to be okay.” He looked down at his son.

“I know. Like I said.” She shrugged. “I really shouldn’t have punched Gil. Twice. Not his fault he was a moron.”

Jarod smirked. *There’s a little of my Miss Parker. Just on the underbelly of the surface.* He looked back down at Oliver, now content in his arms. Actually, he was feeling his arms.



“You’re really strong.”

“I have to be,” Jarod said. “I outrun The Centre.” Heh. He remembered how much he always wondered how strong his dad would be. A part of him used to think Major Charles could take down the whole Centre. That thought always kept him going. “Your grandpa is very strong too.” He felt a fidgeting in Oliver. “Not Raines. My dad.” His dad. He would want to meet Oliver. Everyone would want to, once he got all their numbers. A new member of the family.

He looked back at Mary who was starting to fade. Even though she wasn’t close to her bed time, outrunning the Centre with the adrenaline of her mind and abilities kicking in along with all the stressful thoughts had worn her out. He wasn’t too far behind either. “Maybe we should get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.” Definitely. He had to show Oliver the good parts of the world.

And Mary. *If only I could remember those weeks.* More pieces fell into place at least. As much as he hated that Gil kept him away, now he understood why. He was lucky he even got into that room with Oliver.

His phone started going off across the room. Probably Sydney. Jarod moved across the room to answer it. That wasn’t Sydney’s number? “Hello?”

“Jarod?”

“Dad.” Oh! “You? How’d you get the newest number?”

“The Centre had my newest in the file ‘til a man named Broots scraped it. Sydney just called me on it to give me yours. A last minute kind of thing considering we always run across each other again sooner or later. So what is it, Jarod? Why did Sydney say I’d want to call?”

Jarod looked back at Mary, now sleeping side by side to Oliver. Curled up. “Because. You’re a grandpa.”

“You’re kidding?” He sounded shocked. “Are you kidding?”

“No. His name’s Oliver. He’s five,” Jarod said.

“Oh no.” His dad’s voice deadpanned. “Centre involvement.”

“He was at The Centre,” Jarod admitted. “He wasn’t, uh, made by The Centre. He was an accident between me and someone.”

“Someone? Who?”

“Miss Parker,” he admitted. “I had my mind wiped though. Basically, the day they stopped my heart.” He had told that to his dad before.

“Miss Parker is the mother of your son?”

“Sort of. It’s complicated,” Jarod said. “From what I’ve pieced together, in 1970, her dad was dealing with her mom’s death. Only a month later, he loses his adopted daughter Faith too.

Not wanting to deal with anymore, Miss Parker was taken away. I'm guessing Mister Parker wanted more control of her, so she'd never run or he'd feel like nothing could ever happen to her. Seal her away from the world He put his own daughter into a pretender program. Called her a lesser, a pretender that couldn't have much stimulation to the outside world. Only, weren't as gifted as pretenders. They didn't run sims. Sims ran them, made their fake worlds seem real."

"You're kidding? That's a load of bull, Jarod!"

"I know. She was there as Mary, and they were experimenting on her. Trying to create two people. One that was obedient and sweet and calm no matter what. She was called Mary. The other was supposed to be nothing but rage and anger as a kind of soldier for The Centre. She was Miss Parker. After 1970, that was the only side I was allowed to see until 1995."

"Oh. My. The Centre never stops surprising me. You'd think I'd learn after the Gemini project."

"It's not like Project Gemini." Jarod watched Oliver nestle closer to Mary. "He's not a clone of me at all. He has mom's eyes. He has . . . Miss Parker's floppy hair that she curled below so no one knows it's not perfect." He smiled again at them. "He has my chin too. He's just a combination of us. He's not me, he's us. He's . . . beautiful, Dad." He didn't hear his dad answer back. "Dad?"

"Gaw, Jarod, you are really a father. He's there with you, isn't he?"

"Yeah. He's free with me," Jarod said. He leaned back against the wall. "The Centre will never get a hold of him again. They won't try so hard anyhow."

"What do you mean, son?"

"He's a pretender, but he's lower in ability than they want," Jarod explained. "The Parkers only kept him because he was Parker but Raines was trying to put him someplace else. He was trying to sell Miss Parker too. To either Africa or apparently the yakuza."

"Ugh. I'm sorry, Jarod."

"They are safe now. I have them both. No matter what, I'll take care of them," Jarod said.

"So, which is in control? Mary or Miss Parker?"

"The Centre didn't make it," Jarod explained. "She seemed like two different people, but she's not. Tonight, the obedient Mary just busted out of The Centre with our boy. Miss Mary Parker broke through to abilities she never had. Her mind is frazzled, like a story board with missing pieces. But she is a great mom, I have no doubt about that."

"That's good, Jarod, that's good. Does she remember that time with you?"

"No." Jarod paced the room looking out the window. A little more paranoid than usual now. "She watched the DSA's. Her instructor, her Sydney? His name was Gil. He's the one that knows what she doesn't get to."

“Sorry, Jarod. I’m trying to understand. You are the smartest of boys, how did this happen?”

“The Centre saw to my education. Since they weren’t going to use me in things that would require much female participation,” he said bitterly, “it was more limited. I didn’t even see a girl until I was a teen. What they did give me was more like . . . how invitro worked. And. I don’t know. After I left The Centre. Oh, I could have messed up,” he admitted, “but I learned very quick. Each of them were okay.” He sighed. “I guess during that three weeks, we crossed a threshold. I know that I loved her. Or I thought I loved her. It was three weeks, alone, no outside influences into behavioral guidance. I mean?”

“No other women, I get it, Jarod. Not your fault.”

“His name’s Oliver. I don’t know when they wiped her mind, but he said I named him,” Jarod admitted. “Because Oliver sounds like ‘I love her’. I was never supposed to forget that. Or she wasn’t.”

“Yikes. How are you with it?”

“I’m. I’m getting used to it actually,” he said. “When I looked inside that little locked white apartment. I *knew* it. I could see it written in his face, he’s mine.” Jarod beamed. “Tomorrow, I’m taking him for his first real world breakfast. We’ll go for a ride to somewhere special. Maybe a park. He can play, he’ll be able to play.” Jarod chuckled. “Yeah, he’s a kid. He should play. Kids should play. Can we meet up?” It just fell out. “I just, I want you to meet him.”

“You bet, Jarod. First flight out, me and Gemini will be wherever you want to meet. Where do you want to meet?”

“Well.” Shoot. “Mary’s skittish. I mean real skittish, dad. Bad things happened, real bad.”

“Mister Parker put her in there so she wouldn’t run away like her mother,” his dad said. “Then he pulled her out as Miss Parker, commanding and manipulating her. Yeah, I can guess bad things happened, Jarod.”

“That’s not everything. The Sims. Just. I’ll tell you more later.”

“That’s fine. You can talk to her then. Oliver. A grandson named Oliver. How about that?”

“Yeah. Oliver.”

“Well, then tomorrow, we’ll see? I’ll come with Gemini, and you can talk it over with her. If she’s comfortable, we’ll come up. If she’s not, we’ll back off, unless you say otherwise, Jarod.” His dad chuckled. “My first grandson. Five, right?”

“Five,” Jarod confirmed. “Five.”

“Then I hope I see you tomorrow. Get some rest, son.”

“I will. Thanks, dad.” He hung up and moved toward them, staring down at them. Mother and child. So content. He went over to the other bed to lie down, not wanting to disturb them.

“Jarod.”

Jarod looked from the bed. “Still awake?”

“Your father can see him. Just don’t hold him. I just have a problem with holding.”

“Yeah. I know,” Jarod said. “Thank you, Mary.”

“But not with you. I’ll get used to it.” She moved her position and looked at him. “I don’t know you any better than Alex. I hate to say that, but it’s true. Everything that happened with you was the same with Alex. Gil knows it too.” She swallowed. “Another reason I slugged him. After that he just locked me away tighter, but he still didn’t *teach* me. He wants me to stay this innocent naive little girl.” She looked like she was getting mad again but he gave her a second. “There’s something. I have to trust my gut. I think it’s . . . the part that chased you. I don’t know for sure, but I have nothing but instinct anymore. So? He’s your son. You’re not Alex.” She gestured for him to come over.

Jarod left the spare bed and went over toward the other side of Oliver. He lied down at the edge, turning on his side. It was a little trickier but worth it. He touched his mopsy styled hair.

“I trust you,” she said to him. “I don’t know you. Did she trust you?”

Ooh. Everything was a complicated answer. “Not always,” he settled with. “Eventually, she started to believe me. Eventually, she was . . .” Starting to like him back. “In the end, I think she trusted me.” She just still couldn’t break free.

And now he knew why.

She wasn’t the part that could.

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Jarod woke up with a stir when he felt something small beside him move away. He reached involuntarily. It was hard for him to sleep hard. He turned and watched Oliver heading toward the window. He was climbing up the couch. And? And he missed many firsts. First words, first steps but he realized he was going to see one of the most important firsts of them all.

Jarod watched his son open the curtains and see the sun for the first time. Oliver’s eyes blinked unused to the same kind of light that the sun gave off. He reached his hand towards the glass, feeling for the warmth. *It gives off heat, he can feel it.* When he got off and headed for the door though, he had to stop him. Not alone. “Oliver.”

Oliver jumped like he did something wrong. Usual Centre response.

Jarod got off the bed and went to the front door. “You need to ask to leave. A little bit of limit on your freedom. We need to stay near you to protect you. Okay?” He nodded as Jarod

opened the door. "The sun."

"The sun," he heard behind him. Not surprisingly, Mary didn't sleep heavy either.

"The sun." Oliver stuck his hand out again as he went out. "It's hotter than the lights of home."

"The Centre, not home," Jarod corrected him. "Yeah, it is."

He watched Oliver walk closer to the railing. *Easy*. His boy didn't go too far over though. He just reached out, probably to see if he could feel it warmer above. Jarod went outside beside him and bent down to his level. "We are going to be leaving soon to get some breakfast. If you like the sun? You are going to love breakfast."

Oliver just looked at him, his eyes still winking and adjusting to the sun. "What's different about breakfast?"

"Everything." Jarod had been concentrating so hard on Oliver, that he almost missed Mary. She came out, staring at the sun, almost like in a dream. Her brow was furrowing, trying to make sense of it, but not staring directly at it. She put her hand up too, but not to feel the heat. To block most of it so she could concentrate on it.

"Sun exposes all. Gil always said that." She put her hands down on the railing. "Dangerous exposure. SPF. If you ever go. Liar. Nothing at all."

"Depends on the heat level and time of day," Jarod said holding some defense for Gil. "Not remarkable?"

"No. I guess I've seen it before." She looked toward Oliver. "It's nice though, isn't it? Against the skin?"

*Sun exposes all. Hang on.* They were in low lighting last night, even the movie theater lighting on the outside was florescent. The sun was always so bright, even the smallest details came out. Jarod reached out for Mary's hand. She took it and he dragged her over to Oliver. "I'll be a second."

He kept himself in check as he went to his only bag of clothes. He had to sacrifice his clean shirt of the day for Mary. She wasn't kidding when she said the yakuza was a choice. Underneath her white dress, he could see the outlines of something red and not a common slip. *Tanaka gets in, takes off her simple Centre dress and off they go, making the decision so much easier.* Unsettling to say the least. He went back out. "Here, Mary, put this on."

"Over my dress?" she asked. She started to look at her own dress more carefully in the bright sun and quickly grabbed it. It was a simple button down shirt but it would work. She didn't look happy at all as she buttoned it. "Thanks, Jarod." She still said her thanks and reached out for Oliver's hand. "Exciting day today I hear?"

Yeah, after shopping. Nothing major, but each of them would need clean clothes. And in that thin white dress, even his shirt looked better on her than it should. *If she had nothing on. No,*

*she must usually wear a slip. Right?* Yeah, he would have said something about it on the DSA if she didn't wear a slip. She had to wear a slip, The Centre just replaced it for something that day. "You usually have on a slip, don't you?"

She looked back at Jarod. "If I leave the room. Otherwise, no."

Jarod started to scratch the rail slightly. Low level lighting, nothing could really be seen. Surely Gil was like a father to her. A father figure. Like Sydney had ended up being to him. "You have more solid white dresses that don't need slips?"

Yes, that annoyance was trying to shine through, but she was still nice. "They're all the same. Thanks for lending me the shirt."

Move on. It was time to get some clothes. "We are going clothes shopping, first," Jarod said. "and then we'll pick up some breakfast. Sound good?"

"Oh no." Mary seemed to just have a notion strike her. "I'm going to have to accumulate money, I can't just mug people for theirs. That wasn't very nice in the first place. Oliver didn't like the bloody noses either."

A healthy cross between Mary and Miss Parker. At least the anger didn't fall against him. "No problem, I have more than enough."

"Eventually." She looked toward Oliver. "You can't take us on pretends, Jarod." She looked back toward him. "You can't slow down. The Centre won't be after us nearly as bad. I will have to find a place for Oliver and I. Don't I?"

Oh. "I." No. *She's right, I can't slow down. The Centre is only mildly after them, they don't care enough. But?* Oliver was his. It wasn't like leaving behind a nice dog or good friends or an environment he grew to like. It wasn't even like leaving the women he always had to leave. Just the thought, hitting him like that, it didn't even occur to him last night. "No." No. "No. You have to come."

Never. No. Oliver was abandoned, left in a white room all that time by The Centre! Visited briefly by his mom once a month, no! He went over to the other side of Oliver and looked at him again. "Sun is nice, huh? Let's go get you some clothes. Something nicer than The Centre, okay?" He grabbed his hand, not even wanting to visit the thought again. He latched onto Mary's hand too. "Let's all go, okay?"

"I'm sorry," she said. No matter how many times she said it, Jarod wouldn't get used to those words coming from her. Especially to him. "I was thinking out loud. My mind, I don't trust thoughts within. I didn't mean to make you anxious, Jarod. I'm not taking him away- I wasn't at college."

Jarod glanced over at Oliver. He didn't understand what was happening with her. "You're having different firsts, learning about the world," Jarod said. "Your mom is having other firsts from you. She'll be okay." Oliver nodded.

Yeah. Even if he had to lose Oliver, it couldn't be to Mary right now. She was scatterbrained, still learning. He didn't need to worry about that yet. Her eyes seemed glossy. Shiny. She wiped a tear from her eye.

"We should go, I have to get out of this." She hung onto the railing like it was her only support in life. "We have to go Jarod."

"Right, okay."

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### Small Shopping Department

"First thing, I'll just get the first thing that fits," Mary insisted as she went into the small department store. She tried to work quickly to find her size, but she could already feel eyes on her. Luring eyes. On her. She quickly went through the hangers, trembling slightly as she went. Jarod said not to worry about the price tag so good. Whatever fit, just something that fit. Make, model, color, she didn't care about any of that.

"Mary, are you okay?" Jarod asked her. He placed his hands over hers, probably trying to calm them. "Hey?"

*Ask. No, don't ask. Just ask. No, I can't ask.* "Fine." There, that dress seemed about her size. Maybe? She looked at the rack behind her. Perfect, those were correct. She picked up the first dress she saw. "This one."

"Okay." Jarod grabbed it. "Come on. Let's get this one first."

Yeah, of course, so that she wasn't sticking out like a sore thumb in nothing but his top and an almost see through white dress with a red teddy underneath it.

The attendant at the register smiled at Jarod and Oliver, but gave her an odd look. "Checking out?"

She placed it on the counter. While Jarod paid for it, she glanced around. At least three eyes were on her. An old woman that looked absolutely appaled. A younger woman that seemed to have negative thoughts of her. *Why does the counter have to be in the sunlight?* Did it matter though? Hiding it with Jarod's shirt just made it more obvious she was hiding something. The last person was a young man, twentyish, tapping his friends shoulder, like he found something for his friend to see. *It's all in your head, Mary. How many times did Gil say that? Everything is in your head.* They only had one outfit, shouldn't they have been paid up yet?

Oh. Maybe it wasn't in her head.

“For the last time,” Jarod said to the lady at the counter. “If she was going to steal something, it wouldn’t be that obvious. Secondly, she came in wearing that because of an awkward situation. Stop, just let me buy the dress, she can change and you can see for yourself whether she has any unpaid for items from your store besides the dress we are buying. If she does? I’ll pay for them.”

The woman at the counter sighed and stared at Mary, like she just knew she stole something. “Let’s go to the changing room.”

In the changing room, Mary took off Jarod’s shirt, her old dress and the . . . lacey red outfit she shouldn’t have been wearing under that white for any circumstances. She put the new one on. Solid, one color. Simple. She came back out and handed the items over to the attendant, who now also had someone else with her. They checked the room she just got dressed in.

They kept looking over the red outfit to match it to something at the store but couldn’t find it. Finally, they gave up.

“Happy?” Jarod didn’t sound happy at all. “Scan the price so we can pay and go.”

Oliver was right next to Jarod. He looked at her oddly then up to Jarod. He wiggled his hand, which Jarod was holding. It caught his attention. “This still feels like The Centre.”

“That’s because this isn’t a good place.” Jarod said.

Mary watched the attendant scan the tag on the new dress. Jarod came over, paid the bill, and ripped the sale tag off. *Geez, he is mad.* It was a good thing she didn’t ask what she wanted to.

Jarod flung the tag to the ground. “There, paid for. Let’s go.”

“Less violent, Sir,” The attendant said to him.

Jarod ignored it. Each of them walked out. Jarod helped Oliver back in the car. “We’re going to shop at a nicer place. Don’t worry.”

Mary got in but didn’t say anything. At least that was over. She looked decent now, they shouldn’t get hassled about anything.

“My fault,” Jarod said. “I should have gone in and got something. I just don’t want to leave Oliver’s side.”

“Don’t worry about it.” It wasn’t the first time she felt out of sorts. “Thank you for the dress.” She looked at Oliver. “Let’s see what we can find for you that The Centre never had in stock.”

“One new rule,” Jarod said to them. “We need to ban the word ‘The Centre’ in public. Find a different way to say it. It’s best not to leave even the slightest hint of involvement. Okay?”

Mary and Oliver nodded. It was a good rule.





# Definitely Not A Clone

## Chapter Notes

The clone from project Gemini I've always just called Gemini.

Having to deal with the situation at the department store had set them behind schedule, but they could eat afterwards. Jarod was not missing the opportunity for Oliver to meet his grandpa. Whenever they were together, it never seemed to take long before they had to be separated again. It just seemed to make it that much easier for The Centre to find them when they coincided together. They still met. Still kept in touch how they could, but meetings were more reserved except for risks that were worth it.

Major Charles was meeting his grandson. Even he felt like it was worth it.

Jarod tried to show Oliver how to swing, and then watched Mary to see if it was familiar to her. Certain things hit. Other things didn't.

Oliver tried to swing, but his feet didn't touch the ground easily. They were placed a little higher, so Jarod pulled him back slightly. It didn't take very high to get a reaction out of him. He was playing, like a real kid. Jarod as a child, even as an adult, usually placated his whole new experiences in huge amounts of large, complicated words most people couldn't follow.

Oliver didn't do that. It was always just written on his face or the most simplistic of words found their way out of him. "It's like riding a pendulum!"

Absolutely ridiculous. Jarod was falling for his son every minute more they were together. *I'll find a way. They have to stay. I can do my pretends with them, why not? They don't need to pretend, they can just be my family. Why can't a doctor or a lawyer or a bouncer or anyone have a woman and a kid? They do. Everyone does. It's more authentic. It's family.*

Speaking of family? His dad. "Dad!" Jarod waved excitedly at him, his heart racing as he slowed Oliver down on the swing.

He watched his dad's eyes as he came over with Jarod's clone, Gemini. He looked at Oliver and realized he was watching his clone instead.

"Hi there," Major Charles greeted Jarod. "So? This him, huh?"

"Yeah. This is Oliver." Jarod looked toward Mary. She was quiet in the corner, but very observant. Giving his family some time, but still watching out for him.

Major Charles bent down in front of the swings, but Oliver bent more back. “Hey there. My names Major Charles. Do you know who I am?”

Oliver glanced up at Jarod like he was scared.

“It’s okay,” Major Charles said to him. “I’m your grandpa. Grandpa Charles.”

*Grandpa Charles.* Jarod gestured for Oliver to look at him. “Say hi to your grandpa.”

Oliver looked in front of him at him. Still, uncertain.

*Damn it, Raines.* Oliver must still be thinking about Raines judging his smarts. “Dad. Tell him you don’t care how smart he is.”

“Oh yeah.” Major Charles smiled at Oliver. “Hey there? Kindness goes a lot further in my book than smarts. Don’t you worry about me being like your other grandpa. I’m happy to see you. I’m happy to meet you.”

Oliver put up his hand and waved once. It was a start. He looked toward Gemini. “I earned DSA’s when I did good on so many sims. Your dimensions all seem to fit Jarod.”

“Yeah, family is complicated,” Jarod said to Oliver. “He is family though.”

“He’s not a clone at all,” Gemini said. “He has different structural aspects composed of both you and Miss Parker. He’s neat.”

Oliver leaned away from him too. He looked back at Major Charles again. Then to Gemini.

“Don’t surround him on three sides,” Mary spoke up firmly. “He’s got problems with it.”

“Oh. Right, The Centre. I’m sorry.” Gemini went over behind Major Charles. “You worked with Raines, right Oliver? It’s okay. I worked with him too.”

Oliver got off the swing and stared at Gemini. “Man with the oxygen tank? You worked with him too?”

“Yeah, but it’s okay now,” Gemini smiled. “Freedom makes it all easier to accept.”

“He *never* laid a finger on him, he was right beside my room,” Mary interrupted again. “Only thing Gil did right. He could never visit without me finding out. No one could.”

“Hey, that is really good to hear!” Gemini looked at Jarod. “That is really good!”

*Never again.* Jarod had Sydney, but Oliver had Raines. Sometimes he forgot the difference, especially since he had no bruises on him. It wasn’t so easy for his clone.

“Thank you very much,” Gemini smiled at Mary. “For watching over him so closely. I always knew you’d make a good mother.” He tried to move back more, so that Major Charles could talk to Oliver. Still, Oliver was hesitant.

“Jarod said you were born in The Centre. First taste of freedom today,” Major Charles said. He brought out a small gift from his pocket. “I got you this.”

Oliver took the little gift.

“It’s a present,” Jarod explained. “Take off the paper and it’s got something for you inside.”  
*Dad got him a present.*

Oliver fumbled with the paper. When it was off, it was a box.

Major Charles opened it and smiled at Oliver. Inside was a heart segmented into three chains. It said Family. He picked the small chain on the bottom. “That’s yours. You always wear it, okay?”

Oliver nodded and put it around his neck.

Jarod watched as his dad stood up and looked at him.

“You always wear yours too. Don’t *ever* forget, no matter what happens.” He took the chain and looped it around Jarod’s neck. “One for his dad.”

Jarod looked down and touched it. He held it together so far, but he was losing it. He wiped his nose and his tears away. Connecting heart.

Major Charles was as strong as iron though. “One for his mom.” He went over toward Mary and looped it around her neck. “No matter what the future holds, *you* are the mother to my grandchild. You take care of him. Okay?”

Mary looked at the little charm around her neck too. He whispered something in her ear Jarod couldn’t make out. He was still rubbing tears out of his eyes. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good,” his dad said to her, apparently finishing their little conversation.

“Eat with us,” Jarod said. “Just, a quick bite? Oliver hasn’t eaten a real breakfast. We were going to do that before but, life happened.”

“Life always happens when you aren’t looking,” Major Charles said. “Sure, let’s go eat.”

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## **Small Diner**

“That’s. Jarod’s clone?” Mary checked back with Major Charles again. “The Centre made clones. I can’t believe it.”

“Yeah,” he whispered back to her. “It’s strange. They are each still a little different. They weren’t raised exactly the same.” He looked back at her a little longer while Jarod and his clone were at the counter, working something out with Oliver in the middle between the two. Mary was trying to give Jarod some room with Oliver. It still wasn’t easy.

“Mary. Miss Mary Parker. I guess I’m more used to cloning, because it’s hard to believe what The Centre did to you.”

Oh. He really was a nice man. “It.” She swallowed.

“It’s alright.” He patted her hand. “Just take care of Oliver and Jarod. Don’t run off as Miss Parker.” He gestured toward the chain. “I hope that is a decent reminder for you if something happens.”

“I won’t run off.” She already knew that. “I’m twisted and confused, but I’m *learning*. It’s just different,” she admitted. “I know things that I shouldn’t know, and I don’t know where I learned it from.”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” Charles said. “Don’t leave Jarod. I think with him, you’ll find yourself. He’s a good judge of what’s going on inside. If he thought you were trouble, he wouldn’t be with you right now. Oliver or not.” He looked to the front. “Wonder if we are going to eat any time soon?”

“There it is again,” she said. “Just a thought that I don’t know why I would ever say it.”

“What?” He asked.

“Only Jarod would turn breakfast into rocket science.”

The Major chuckled. “Your instincts right on the ball.”

Oliver just looked between his dad, and the guy who looked like his dad when he was younger. Each of them were playing with weird looking food like it was something scientific.

“That might be pushing it, Jarod.”

“Well, everything’s pushing it.”

“He’s five.”

“He needs to try it.”

“It does strengthen the more he tries.”

“But I don’t want him to get sick.”

“He’s going to. We did, didn’t we?”

“Changing The Centre diet isn’t easy.”

Oliver just looked back at his mom. She was still talking to his new grandpa. Weird. To actually use the word grandpa. He waved back at her.

She looked at him with delight and waved back. Oh, his mom was always so beautiful. Especially in her new dress. He moved away from the two genius minds and went over to her. He started to climb up into her lap.

“Still working on breakfast?” she asked.

“Guess so.” He took his chain and squished it against hers. “Jarod’s is the missing piece.”

“Dad, sweetie. Jarod wants you to call him dad,” she reminded him. “Why are you over here?”

Oliver shrugged. He chuckled. “Dad enjoys talking to himself.”

“Can’t hide nothing from you,” Major Charles smiled at him. “The Centre did a lot of things.”

Oliver just hugged his mom. “You’ve been sad today.”

“Hm.” She rubbed his back. “Nerves. I’ll be okay. Don’t you worry about mom. Go back over to your dad.”

“You’re using him as an excuse, momma,” Oliver confronted her. “Something happened this morning by the rails. Jarod missed it. What was it?”

“Ooh.” Major Charles rubbed his lips a moment. “He’s a little like Catherine.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Mary said. “Catherine Parker?”

“Does he hear any voices like Ethan?” Major Charles asked.

“I don’t know who that is,” she answered honestly. “I. I don’t know?” She just kept her gaze on Oliver.

“Sorry. You are missing a lot,” Major Charles noticed.

“Yes,” she seethed, but held herself back. “I. Know.” Anger was rising again.

“It’s okay, mom. I love you.” Oliver tightened his grasp on her. She still wouldn’t tell him what was wrong and his new grandpa didn’t help by talking to her like she knew information that she didn’t. That never helped with her. He seemed to help her calm down again. “We can walk in the sun?”

“Done, I promise.” Jarod came over with a strange array of things. “Little bit of everything, Oliver. Hopefully not enough to irritate your stomach much.” He put it out in the middle.

Oliver looked at it. That wasn't his food. It was shaped different. There were different smells. Textures all over the place. Including colors.

"Just pick one thing out," Jarod said. "Pick anything you want."

Jarod really wanted him to eat some food. *Okay. Let's not go for yellow brains. White mush.* Oliver smelled different things. It was all different.

"His olfactory looks like it's overwhelmed," Jarod's clone said. "Maybe simple is better."

Jarod went to the front and brought back a flat round piece.

"Pancake," Jarod said. "Try that."

Oliver picked up his fork. It smelled good. *Hmm.* He looked toward Jarod. *Jarod missed it. He's concentrating on me, he isn't seeing it.* Oliver pierced the funny oval thing and cut it. Not rubbery, but strange. When he had a decent sized piece? He looked at Jarod. Straight on. He was watching.

He glanced up at his mom who was also watching, and shoved it in her mouth.

Major Charles started to laugh as he watched Mary's reaction to being fed by him unexpectedly. "I guess you get first dibs?"

"I didn't see that coming." Gemini looked at Jarod. "He didn't eat. He gave it to her." His eyes shifted.

Jarod's was doing the same.

Oliver took his fork and cut another piece. This time. He popped it into his mouth. *Oooooooo.* He dropped the fork and started to devour it.

"Uh, no, no?" Gemini said lightly.

"No, that'll definitely give you a tummy ache." Jarod tried to pull the pancake from him, but no way! Oliver ducked against him taking it under the table and cramming it all into his mouth. Now he just had to chew.

"He has got fire!" The Major just laughed again. "Yeah. He's definitely got some of his mom in him."

Jarod looked under the table as Oliver chewed the whole thing in victory. "You're not going to be happy about that later."

"You should have waited," his mom said to him too. "You never even got to experience syrup."

Syrup? Was it as good as the pancake? Oliver got up from under the table and looked at the middle of it. He saw the word Syrup. He made to reach for it, but Jarod swiped it.

“No,” Jarod warned him. “You’ll have bad enough repercussions from eating that pancake that fast. You don’t need syrup too.”

“You’re going to need some water,” his mom gave over her glass of ice water to him.

Oliver took it and sipped, only to pucker. “Cold! Cold, cold, cold.”

“Well, he’s still getting experiences,” Jarod said. “Your mom’s right. You’re going to want some liquid for when it all-“

Jarod waited outside the bathroom. He knew it would end that way, The Centre’s diet getting dropped for real food wasn’t easy on the gut. However? It definitely didn’t help that he pounded that pancake away like that.

“He’s got a lot of his mom in him,” Jarod’s dad said to him. “He’s got some Catherine too.”

“Catherine?” Jarod asked.

“He asked his mom about this morning. Something about the rails. He said you missed it,” his dad said. “He’s good at reading people.”

“Yeah. He’s good at following his appetite too,” Jarod joked.

“Do you know what it was about this morning?” His dad asked. “You could tell me. We’ve got time. That’s some mess you left her to clean up.”

“It was her or me, I let her take charge of Oliver so far, and I can’t go into the woman’s room.” Jarod knew that wasn’t what his dad was concerned about. “She just repeated something we figured out last night. She didn’t go to college. She said ‘I wasn’t in college’ specifically,” Jarod said. “They ran sims on many parts of her life. I thought it was a repeating thought.”

“Well? Just ask and make sure,” he said. “Why did you miss breakfast though? You never miscalculate your scheduling.”

“When we woke up and she was out in the sun, I realized something besides a slip was under her dress,” Jarod said honestly. “I placed my clean shirt on her. I was going to get her a dress real quick and then finish shopping, but? Even with my shirt on her. Maybe because of my shirt on her, they pegged her as a shoplifter, seeing what was beneath. Kept wanting to call the cops.” Unbelievable still. “Got that straightened out and found another place to get another pair of clothes.”

“Hm.” The Major touched his head. “That. Doesn’t sound good. I’m not talking about the shoplifting part.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jarod said. “They were . . . wrapping her up for the yakuza like a . . .” He tightened his lips. “One day at a time.”



“One day at a time is how we do everything,” his dad agreed. “Hey, at least you were smart enough to buy more than one thing for Oliver.”

“I’ve had occupations where I had to handle kids of all ages. Preferably planning three sets of clothes is best per day.” Jarod watched them both come out. “Just, forgot to plan on extra for us as well. Better go shopping again.”

“I can feel anger inside of Mary. Feels like Catherine’s daughter,” his dad said. “Hope things turn out okay.”

“She’s going through a phasing between anger and calm. She’s trying for calm.” Jarod heard his phone and looked at it. *Really?* “I am trying for calm too.” He put it back away.

“Sydney?” Major Charles asked. “They worked with her for years. Just worried I’m sure.”

“I have nothing new for them,” Jarod insisted. “I’ll call when I have something.” Otherwise? He just wanted left alone. He wanted The Centre to leave him alone. To leave his son alone. To leave Mary alone. Why was it so much to ask?

The door opened with Oliver bounding out like retching was nothing. “Can I have more pancake?”

“Fast recoverer, aren’t you?” His grandpa noted.

“No more pancake,” Jarod said bending down to him. “Take this world a little at a time. That’s why I gave you a sampling to start with.” He watched as Mary came out and stood up. He looked at her straight on. He knew she was fidgety in the store, but that made sense. On the rails though. “Dad? Can you hang out with Oliver for two seconds? I’d like to talk to Mary a second.”

Jarod didn’t go far, he could even see Oliver still in the restaurant. He looked back toward Mary. “This morning, on the rails, you said something. I thought it was a repeating thought from yesterday.”

“Oh. I did?” She looked in at Oliver too.

“Yeah, you said, I wasn’t in college. You already knew that.” Jarod moved closer. “Why did you say that?”

“Oh. Memory.” She looked off in the distance.

“Memory of what?” Jarod pushed a little. “A memory you didn’t have access to before?”

“Sydney. Your doctor,” she said. “I was eating with him.”

“Eating’s good.” Jarod moved right beside her, trying to hold her focus. She was really dealing with something, Oliver had hit it on the nail. His dad was right, he might have had some Catherine in him. Like Ethan.

"I don't want to, Jarod. I don't want to remember right now," she protested lightly. "I don't, I just don't."

"A memory including Sydney. You were employed as Miss Parker at that time, you had to be," Jarod said. "What is it?" He shouldered her playfully. "Not leaving you alone 'til I know." He shouldered her again lightly. "Come on."

"An old friend. He was an old friend," she said. "He wasn't an old friend, he was in my college that was not a-a college." Mary crossed her arms, actions of Miss Parker again slightly surfacing. "He. *Dared* to do that to me."

"Someone visited you as Miss Parker who manipulated you in college?" Jarod asked. "Who?"

"I wanted to kill him. She wanted to kill him. She backed off though, like an uncharacteristic good girl when she found out he worked for Raines." She bit her lip. "This is not good feelings, Jarod."

"You can't stay just even and calm anymore. You have to involve that anger and emotion in you too." Jarod moved to her other side. "Come on, out with it. Who was he?"

"Michael Patrick. As soon as she saw him. As I saw him. The usual personality just bled straight out and I just went straight for him. Not even a Sim. In town for a couple of days." She was chewing on her bottom lip. "I can even be manipulated without a sim, just because I remembered him from there."

Ooh. "I can't imagine how that feels. Not knowing what's real and what's not. Even when you are in the real world, you can get dragged back in." He watched her eyes. So hurt.

"Liked him. Liked him in the sims, and liked him out. He lied in the sims, and he lied outside. Man even had a wife and kids." She looked disgusted. "Said he was traveling salesman or some crap like that. I." She groaned. "I think I shot him. Good for me. Yeah, it was . . . he got tricked by a dog. You were there?" She looked at Jarod. "Why were you there?"

Hm. "Dog." Let's see. "Someone new was after me one time, not my usual hunters. Easily manipulated with a dog." Ooh. "That was probably him."

"Well. Good. Hope he got bit and shot and hope he got a divorce and lost all his kids." She sighed. "No repercussions, still works for The Centre, lovely wife and kids. Doesn't really matter." She started to walk away slowly. "Just, a Lesser, even outside as her."

Ouch. Jarod followed her. "No, it wasn't right. It doesn't matter who you are, treating you like that wasn't right." Damn. *Michael Patrick*. He'd remember that name. He already had his face in his memory, just in case he was a new hunter he made sure to keep it there. "Is there a way to counter the sims against you?"

She shook her head. "My last sim, I was riding in a video game wheel area. Up on the screen was just a simple game. When I slid into it? I saw all of the details and colors of the night

sky, right before hitting Tokyo. The car, the night. Everything fit except it was a still night. Unless something pulls me out. I stay in.” She looked back at Jarod. “Telling you to stop becoming someone will give you the same results as asking me to stop my lesser self. It’s just part of who I am. Easily manipulated thing.” She started to walk back the other way again.

“I do have power over that.” Jarod didn’t give up yet. He went toward her. “The guy in there serving sandwiches? I don’t want to become him so I won’t become him. It’s my choice. I bet there’s a way to get it turned off for you, so that you choose when and where it happens.”

She just gave an unconvincing laugh. “Suure. Do you want know something?” She said. “I wasn’t going to be Mary at first. They thought it was better to have a name that could flip on itself. The less Parker was addressed to me, the better off I’d be. Only things is? They couldn’t stop laughing long enough to put it in. S-sim.”

Hm. “You can’t think that way. You can’t live that way,” Jarod said. “You need to stay stable, to take care of Oliver. If you don’t-“

“-you wouldn’t take him away from me, would you?” Oh, those eyes. “It’d be foolish. Our boy is more than just a pretender, Jarod. He’s a lesser pretender. You need to watch him, more than you need to watch me.”

“Are you saying when he uses his pretender abilities, he can’t see the difference between reality and what he’s pretending?” Oh. Whoah. No.

“He’s more pretender than lesser, I was just trying to get a rise out of you saying that.” Then her eyes went wide. “Whoah, that was cruel. I’m sorry, Jarod. I-“

“It’s okay.” He needed her to do that. Keep pushing. “I accept the apology but can you explain better?”

“He can be a pretender, just like you,” she said. “However, if he’s left working on a sim for more than two days it could take him a week for him to pull out of it. Just a few months ago I visited him and he hugged me so tightly, believing himself to be an innocent convict from the 1930’s that was two days away from his own death date. That wasn’t a fun visit.”

“Very deep pretending.” That’s where the lesser came in. “He’s the perfect pretender they always wanted, but because his IQ isn’t top notch, they hadn’t even realized it.” Good. Now they never would.

“Well, perfect pretender, lesser pretender he’s a five year old so you better watch his stomach. That was a terrible mess and I’m still soaked trying to get it out of my clothes.” She looked less than enthused and went back in.

Feeling a little more anger and emotion. A few more memories ‘Mary’ wasn’t supposed to have. Sharing more details. It was the road to recovery, of pulling herself back together.

“Your turn, Jarod, I am soaked still!”

Jarod just smiled as he went in too. His son? Definitely not his clone.



## Gil's Role

“Are you kidding? No way.” Jarod led Oliver back out of the stall to finish washing his hands. “You ate that whole pancake and you grabbed that syrup like it was going out of style.” He placed his hands beneath a heat vent and dried them off. Then he watched Oliver’s reaction, moving his hand and shoving his face in front of it.

“Brisk.” He started to feel the object. “Mom had paper towels in her bathroom. I have paper towels in my bathroom. This is neater.”

Jarod let him explore a bit before he brought Oliver’s hands back down to it. “Explore the world a little more later, let’s clean hands for now. Let’s stop trying to eat more stuff that will make you sick? Okay?”

“Still worth it!” Oliver held his hands steady. Well, as he could. “Always enjoy everything while you can because you never know what happens when ‘That Place’ gets you again.”

“It won’t get you again.” Jarod bent down beside him. “I promise, it’s not going to get you again. You won’t be bouncing off the walls of white anymore with no one to talk to and nothing to do but sims.” From the way the boy acted, he imagined that’s what it was like. “You’re free now.”

Oliver pursed his lips, like he only half believed him. “Unless you see the future, you can’t promise that. I’m here with my mom now, and I get to hang out with you too, Jarod. That’s what is important.” Then he wrinkled his nose up. “If I stay out of That Place forever, it’s a bonus!” Then he went over to the door to try to open it. Too heavy.

“Okay, you got me. I will do my best to keep you out,” Jarod bended for him on that. But? “It’s Dad though,” Jarod tried again with him. Jarod never had any problem calling his dad, Dad. It was the first thing he shouted out when he saw Major Charles. Oliver even knew it, had goals to get *his* things. Always wanted to see *him*. “I really want you to call me Dad, okay?”

Then something broke. Something Jarod never even thought of, and something that made Jarod want to just run to the phone to call Sydney. To thank him. For remembering his real spot.

“Trying, Dad,” Oliver said, “but it’s weird to call you dad though. Gil was Dad.”

Okay. Deep breath. Major Charles had to go through this too. “No. Gil was your teacher,” Jarod said. “I had a teacher too. His name was Sydney. They are there to teach and offer what comfort they can for you that The Centre will allow. Gil wasn’t your dad though. I’m your dad. Does that make sense?”

Oliver shook his head. “Dad Jarod and Dad Gil?”

“No. Not Dad Jarod, just Dad. Gil is Gil and Jarod is Dad.”

“Not to Gil,” Oliver said. “He barely considered you a dad. He never even knew if you’d be crazy enough to snap my neck. To him? He was Dad, and you were the BP. Biological Parent. I figured Jarod Dad sounded nicer.”

Ouch. The phrase ‘from the mouths of babes’ made a lot of sense just then.

“But I never called him Dad in front of mom. Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. He didn’t like it.” He patted the door again. “Can we go now Jarod? I ate enough, I won’t do anything wrong. I just wanted to try the syrup.”

Mary watched Oliver come out and about to bounce up to her lap again. He gave her a big hug again. He was going to suck up every minute with her, a part of him probably still believing The Centre would find them again. Then she watched Jarod come out. He didn’t look happy. He was soaked to be sure, but it wasn’t that.

“Jarod, you okay?” His dad asked. “You need to sit down, Son?”

“No, *Dad*.” He put extra emphasis on the word. “I hate to ask you again, but can you watch Oliver one more second? I need to talk to Mary.”

Okay? Mary put Oliver down on the chair. She made sure she could see him from outside, but found her hand in Jarod’s grasp. She was going outside whether she wanted to or not.

When they were outside, she waited to see what he was fussing about.

“Who was Gil to him, and who was Gil to you?” Jarod commanded. “His job description was to teach Gil and take care of you, right? Did he overstep that boundary?”

Ah. “The Dad thing with Oliver? He’s confused, Jarod. You just came into his life last night. Gil’s been there for him even more than I was allowed to. He never overstepped with Oliver. He’s just very young and all he’s ever known is him.” He still didn’t look convinced. “You escaped late in The Centre. 1996. Imagine how confused you would be if you were born there, all you knew was Sydney, and you were five?”

“He calls him Dad when you aren’t around.” Jarod moved closer. “He overstepped. *I’m Dad*.”

*Yikes. Okay. I know that like everyone else trapped in The Centre, Jarod wanted his family. He didn’t know about him, but he wants to know him. Now. Lost time. Names make all the difference. He feels threatened. Afraid someone took his place.* “I didn’t know that, but family is more than just a name. I’ll talk to him about it. He’ll get that. Keep at it. This is a five year old,” she reminded him. “Give him room to breathe about this. He switches on and off with you because he’s not sure. He’ll stop switching eventually when he learns what a real dad does for his child.” Well that look? Good, he understood now.

“That makes me feel half better,” Jarod said. “He was an instructor. He was paid to be there.”

Hm. "He adopted him too. Officially, he had to, to make sure The Centre didn't go overboard and take him away."

"I don't care about papers, I make up papers all the time." Oof, that didn't help him. "Papers doesn't make him his, he is mine!"

Okay. Jarod got angry for a second, but she watched him visibly turn himself calm after a minute. He had a very good teacher to do that.

"Okay. I know what Gil was to him. Now what was Gil to you?"

*Oh, here we go.* "I know everything is new to Oliver and you, Jarod. Gil is the only person he ever interacted with. I was the only person he ever interacted with. We were the only people he ever interacted with that was good. Gil is my instructor too. Although?" Hm. Rankled. Angry again? Why? *Why am I so angry again at him? He was a lousy protector who could have done more but-* She took a step back from Jarod. "I knew I just didn't know." *Crap! I can't blame that on her, that was me. That was all me.*

"What do you mean you knew but you didn't know?" Jarod asked. "Mary."

"Nothing, what's it matter? Oliver's been alive five years, if there was anything it was when I was just really young. Not like young, young. Like twenties." Damn. "Nothing happens. Everything's fine." *I want to shoot something now. That tree over there on the side of the road would be nice. I don't have a gun. I need a gun.*

"You look like you want to shoot that tree over there." Oh of course he noticed it. "Mary?" Great, now he was creeping up on her.

"What?!" What was he doing? She felt really confused as he hugged her. "Not the time for hugs, Jarod. You know, your dad is only going to be here for so long. Do we really have to do this?" He still embraced her, but he looked at her from the side. "Quit that."

"When?" Simply put.

"I hate pretenders, you can't get away with anything around them." Ouch. "Oh. Oh, I'm sorry, Jarod I didn't mean to." *Be so mean.* He just held her a little longer.

"Don't worry about it." He still hung on for a little longer before letting go. "You're right. My dad is only here for so long. Let's go. We can talk about it later."

"I don't want to talk about it later." Seething again. "Drop it."

"Can't," Jarod said. "Have to work it all out."

"It wasn't Miss Parker, okay?" Geez.

"It doesn't matter. It still needs worked out," he insisted.

"Oh damn it, Jarod, if it hadn't been him it would have been Alex, so thank his fucking ass!" Ouch. She covered her mouth. She cursed, and not just a little word. The F word. "Gil would

be so disappointed in me.”

“He shouldn’t be. He did *that* act with you.” Jarod’s voice was deep and nasty.

Jarod. Damn, Jarod. Damn him. Just, damn him. “I lured him to me,” she confessed. “Nineteen. He didn’t lure me to him.”

“It doesn’t make it anymore right. He was your instructor.”

“Stop judging me!” Jeez, like she didn’t feel bad enough?

“I’m not judging you. I have nothing against you. I’m judging *him*.”

“Nothing else has happened since . . .” Okay, that didn’t sound so good. “A couple. A few times. Twenty three, maybe, just drop it.” He still looked mad. “Your spot is secure, I never let him call himself dad. If he was doing it, it was behind my back. Which means Oliver should know. Okay? It’s a word to him right now. He’s just associating words. He knows words, give him time.”

“My son is never seeing him again.” Flat out cold.

Oh just great. “I told you, I was the one doing the-“

“Doesn’t matter, he was the instructor and he crossed a line on both of you! Never should have stepped over that line with *my* son! And he never, ever, should have stepped over that line for you. Especially for?” He lifted up each finger on his hand. “Five years. No cameras. No one looking over his shoulder.”

“It wasn’t like that.” Damn it. “Who cares?!”

“You do. You are the one who started to get angry before I did.” Jarod grabbed her hand gently. “If you had said it like it was nothing. Like you loved him. If you were bashful and said ‘please don’t hurt him it was all my fault’. If you didn’t have this look in your eye like you were ready to rage down this road and kill everything in sight. I wouldn’t care. You said before that you hit him twice with no remorse when you left The Centre.”

“So?”

“There is always a reason for everything.” He kept his eyes trained on her hand as he rubbed the top of it. Touching and feeling. She didn’t think much of it, she knew it was how pretenders thought. He was deep in thought. Then, he stopped. Whatever he was thinking about, it was done. “We’ll go back inside. You’re right. I only have so long with my dad.”

Yeah, but she could already tell this conversation wasn’t over.

“So? His mom clearly needs some work,” his dad told him as he parted from the restaurant with Gemini. “I’m guessing that’s going to take time. Can you handle them until then?”



“Handle them?” Oh. “Yeah. I can handle them until then.”

“Does she need to work with you or is this something she works out on her own over time?” His dad asked more clearly. “If I need to take them now or later, let me know.”

“K.” A single consonant fell out of his mouth. *I don't want to lose Oliver. I can do everything and hold them. Right?*

“We'll make plenty of room,” Gemini assured him. “No matter how underground we go, the Major always makes room enough for everyone. Like, we never know when everyone will finally be together.”

Gemini was a pretender himself and Jarod never watched him. He needed a father. He gave him his. That didn't mean. “They're mine.” It wasn't the same situation. Emily. He was supposed to get her to his father that one time. She didn't stay with him, but she was old enough. Had her own life she could live. Yeah. His dad didn't like that harshness though. “I mean-“

“Yes, I know what you mean,” his dad blocked him. “He's your boy. That's his mother. You don't want to separate yet. That's fine. When you pretend though, things get dangerous. When The Centre is on you, things get dangerous. Make sure if you are going to keep them near during your pretends? That she is fully recovered, because you are not going to be happy if either The Centre gets them, or she steals Oliver away not knowing which way is up. Remember? The Centre wasn't even bothering with your girl Zoe until-“

“Yeah, I know!” Just remind him. “Sorry. Just. I will be the most careful. The lightest. The farthest. No clues, nothing. Minimal.” Jarod picked up the part of the heart on his necklace.

“Okay.” His dad hit him playfully on his shoulder. “Okay, Son. As long as you understand the risks, it's fine by me. It's your family.”

“I know the risks. Once Miss Parker is back to normal, there's no way anyone could even survive and touch Oliver without her permission.” He could do what he had to, and she could watch him. Miss Parker could hold her own, he had no doubt about that.

When she got better though. Not as Mary. Not yet.

“Alright then. You take care. Have fun with your son. We'll meet again, okay?”

“Okay.” Jarod let go of the heart piece and gave his dad a hug. “Oh. We should get him for a hug.” Oh, wait. Mary. “Maybe not.” He watched as Mary moved Oliver outside of the restaurant doors with her. Oh good.

“Bye, Oliver.” Gemini patted his head. “Good to meet you. See you again soon.”

Oliver looked confused by the action. He patted Gemini's cheek instead. He went over by his Grandpa and hugged his legs. “Goodbye, Major Grandpa Charles Person Sir.”

“Saying goodbye is the same greeting. Grandpa Charles,” The Major said to him. “You have a good rest of the day. I'll see you again soon, okay?”

“Okay, Grandpa Charles.” He let go of his legs and went back toward his mom.

Jarod watched them leave. Away. Again.

“Off of that sign!”

Jarod looked back and saw Oliver almost to the top of a stop sign. He went after him like Mary did.

“You are not an Olympic athlete, you haven’t been one for six months so no excuses, get down!” She commanded.

Jarod helped grab one but couldn’t help but crack on that one. “Stop signs are for stopping, not for climbing.” He put him back down. “No climbing signs.”

“My weight can clearly be held,” Oliver said in his defense.

“No climbing signs,” Jarod said again.

“They aren’t dangerous, I can balance myself just fine,” Oliver said. He looked over in the street. “That one I wouldn’t do. Not because I can’t, but because mom won’t let me.” He looked back to his mom. “Right?”

“A light post? Oh don’t even ask.” She rolled her eyes.

Freedom from the perspective of a young child who lived in a white room with nothing to climb on or do. From that height and that angle? *If I was lighter, I would have done it myself when I first left.* He smiled. In fact? He probably would have gone for the light post.

## The Twain Will Meet

Arcadia rhythm, being out in the sunlight during the day was already working. Mary fell asleep on the bed with Oliver hanging over her. Long day. Exciting day.

Time to make that phone call. Jarod watched as Oliver shifted his hand, slightly bumping Mary's necklace too. He made sure the boy stayed asleep a little while longer, and then moved outside to the rails to make that phone call.

"This is Sydney."

"Sydney," Jarod said. "Exciting day over here."

"I imagine so from what you sent in your email. Is everything okay so far?"

"Yeah." Jarod looked back in through the window. "Both of them are a lot of work. My dad wondered if he needed to take them yet. I wouldn't let him," he said. "I don't want to ever let him."

"It's reasonable, Jarod. Oliver is your son and Miss Parker is his mother. These emotions are perfectly normal to want to keep both of them close, especially considering they were both raised in a Centre setting."

Helpful? Yes. Sydney answer? Yes. Fatherlike? No. "Thank you," Jarod said. "Really. I? I never said it. I didn't think I would ever say it."

"Thank you for what, Jarod?"

"You were my teacher. I always wanted more. I always wanted. A father. And." Hard. "I know we were *very* close, but you never crossed a line. Seeing Oliver, and hearing how he described himself with Gil. Just? Thank you." Now? "What I said in the email. Did you get a hold of him?"

"As soon as I heard, I had Broots locate his home address. We both went to go see him," Sydney told Jarod.

"And?" Jarod "Well?"

"He admitted as she was growing up she used to be very forthcoming. She wanted a relationship, but he said no. He said that someone was even delivering something to their room that was sexual attire at first. He kept trying to send it back. Hearing that, Broots checked it out. It was true. They were out in a couple of days of being fetched. A Centre signature coming in, his signatures returning them back out."

"Just tell me what you think of him. Did you think he really crossed that line?"

“He confessed to thinking of her as his daughter, and . . . Oliver as his son. He never pressed the line because he thought of her as a daughter. And honestly? He wasn't there, from the ages of what you told us? He had to complete a Centre Re-education Program. They claimed he was unfit for her.”

Jarod propped himself up higher. He didn't like the son part, but he already knew he'd discover that from his talk with Oliver. “Are you sure you believe him?”

“Well, not only did Broots find all of the proper evidence to support it. I didn't see a single sign of . . . he was nervous, very nervous, but I . . . I'm sorry, Jarod. I just don't see it.”

“Yeah. I was angry at first. Enraged actually, I mean that was just absolute betrayal. Then I thought about it,” Jarod said. “The ages. On the recording, she said he wasn't there at the college times. And? You'd want to have a college dorm in a separate place from college activities.”

“I? Then you don't believe it's him? You believe?”

“Michael Patrick, do you remember an old friend of hers called Michael Patrick?” Jarod asked. He was just about to call it. “Be in 1996 or 1997. Early days of catching me. You were eating at a restaurant and she saw him.”

“Ah? Yes, yes I know who you are talking about. An old friend.”

“How did she react when she saw him? Did he make a move on her, or did she just fly to him?”

Yep. Flew. Cut dinner short with Sydney. Didn't even want to come to The Centre, more interested in the sheets.

Jarod gave himself a minute. “I know how it works Sydney. How she became a ‘Lesser’.” It was going to break her heart when she found out.

“Can it be reversed?” Sydney asked Jarod.

“Yeah. It can. Broots made the crack that can't stop, but I have to break it open, and it's going to hurt.” He hung up the phone.

Mary felt herself getting jostled awake. She saw Jarod in front of her. Oh great, did they have to finish that conversation now?

“I have something to tell you. I know how you and the other side of you works,” Jarod said.

“Of course,” She chuckled. “You're a pretender. Any problem solved within 24 hour guarantee.” She smiled wide. “They could have used that as advertising.”

Yeah, he wasn't going for her happy mood. “It's not going to be easy to hear. I am going to let you know a couple of things before I tell you. One, this can be a hundred percent reversed.

I believe that. It might even happen tonight. Two, if you start to slip, I will make sure that you are safe. Nothing will happen to you, I promise that.”

Oh no. “I am going to really hate this, aren’t I?” She stared at Jarod. “What?”

“Do you remember anything about being Miss Parker at all in your head between 1996 and now?” Jarod asked her seriously. “Besides Michael Patrick.”

Hm. “No.” This Miss Parker side of her, it was like she wasn’t really there. Just her anger flared up sometimes, but Mary could subside it.

“Okay.” Jarod nodded. He looked down at Oliver and then back toward her. “You’re two sides of the same coin.”

“Split personality.” Did Jarod admit to it now?

“No, because you are there against each other. It works both ways.” He sighed. “College. You remember training in the dark, and your father coming to see you sometimes. Miss Parker remembers the actual college. Driving lessons, you learned at a video game wheel. Miss Parker saw the bright lights of Japan.”

“No, I remember seeing the bright lights of Japan, but it started as a wheel.” What was Jarod getting at?

“Miss Parker knew people at college that were ‘old friends’ like Michael Patrick.” He visibly changed from okay to not looking so sure of himself now. His eye even winced, like he didn’t want to say it. “She wouldn’t just be with them in training rooms. She’d have a dorm room.”

“Okay?” She still didn’t understand.

“From 19 to about 23, you had a relationship with Gil.” He shook his head. “You had no relationship with Gil.”

Denial. “I agreed to drop it,” she said to Jarod. “We haven’t talk about it in a long time.”

“Those were college times. See? Your even counteracting yourself. On the recordings you said he wasn’t there at the college times. He never said you did anything, did he?”

“No, but I *know* that I did.” What was Jarod driving at?

“He never agreed to it once because he never did anything.” Jarod was quiet for a second. “A college needs a dorm room. Miss Parker knew who she met. In your life, you only knew Gil and no one else. What else would . . . fill in the gaps.”

Her breath grew steady. Her eyes opened wider as she realized what Jarod was signifying.

"Your not split. The part that isn't active, fills in memories and stimulus as best it can."

"I? I?" She got up from the bed and headed to the bathroom. She needed to be alone.

She looked in the mirror. *Miss Parker. Mary. Miss Parker. Mary. I am no different. I am not good or bad, I am neither one. I am both!* She started to breakdown and cry over the sink. *Miss Parker saw college. I saw training darkness talking to objects. She saw the lights of Japan, I saw a wheel. She had old friends in a dorm room. I had Gil in my Centre room. I didn't remember the wheel at first. She looked in the mirror. I didn't remember training in darkness, I didn't remember it at all. I wasn't supposed to. One side on, one side off. But. But.* "That Broots man cracked me!" She yelled as she hit the floor.

Whatever he did to those lights, whatever he triggered. Her breasts rose and fell so fast as her breathing paced up. Never the twain should meet.

The twain were meeting. The twain were meeting.

*///"Well, another day, huh?" Mary said to a stuffed dummy beside her as she started to do exercises.///*

*///"Well, another day, huh?" Miss Parker said to Britney as they both started to exercise together for their warm ups of the day.///*

*///Mary stared ahead. Dazed and confused. She kept driving behind the video game wheel, saying nonsensical gibberish she didn't understand. What was this simulation? What was she doing there?///*

*///Miss Parker opened her eyes. How far had she gone away from The Centre now? Thousands of miles at least. She was in a different country. Yet, it still felt so close. Maybe it would always feel like that. Maybe until she had someone to run away with?///*

*///"Mary. I don't think I can take much more of this," Gil said from beside her on the couch. "Seeing you each day. Seeing how much you've matured over time. I wonder, if you aren't ready, to finally take that step with me?"///*

*///"Miss Parker. I don't think I can take much more of this," Michael said beside her from the couch. "Seeing you each time in that room? And wow, seeing how much you've matured. Your father said I'd be a decent first practical choice. Do you think you're ready to take that step with me?"///*

Jarod heard that ear piercing scream that he knew he would. He'd been right there at the bathroom door, timing for it. He opened the door and saw her, crouched down and miserable on the ground. Sorting it out. He went near her, carefully.

When her eyes shot up to meet his, he definitely saw Miss Parker with hints of the tame Mary behind it all. She didn't say anything as she just stared at him. Not knowing what really to say. Until? "I am going to be pissed for awhile. You may want to leave me alone." Her words dripped thick.

"You are going to be mad for the rest of your entire life about this," Jarod said to her. "Miss Mary Parker."

“Just give me a gun so I can find that Broots man and drive him out to the middle of nowhere, shoot him in the head, set the car on fire and throw it off a cliff afterward!” She pushed him away. “You don’t touch me right now, give me a minute!”

Theeeeeere was Miss Parker. That’s where all the anger was really coming from. All those years. All that pain, unable to break or be taken away. Unable to control what was happening, just running the role. “Hello, Miss Parker.” He watched her reach up for a bottle of toothpaste on the sink and aim it at him like a weapon. Then realizing how senseless that was she just dropped it to the ground along with her head. “Do you prefer Mary now or Miss Parker?”

“Miss Parker!” She yelled. “Miss Parker.” Her teeth grinded against each other. “I’m not a single name, I *am* Miss Parker!”

*Girl has teeth again.* That was the end of her apologies and hugs. Well, he enjoyed it while it lasted. “Do you know what happened at The Centre? Do you know why you can’t go back to it?” She didn’t answer, but she didn’t need to. It was written in her eyes. The easiness of the Mary phase was now over. There was no separation anymore. He gave her room to move as she scrambled against the wall and went out into the room.

She stared at Oliver on the bed. Regarding him. She looked outside the window. Confused. Maybe frightened, but ready to kill anything that went after her.

“Easy,” Jarod said as he came out of the bathroom. “You don’t want to wake Oliver up.”

“He snapped her neck like it was a piñata.” She glared at the window. “He’s lucky he’s already dead that son of a bitch.”

Even Mary couldn’t remember her daughter Faith’s death. “Are you better now?”

She just glanced back at him. She looked toward Oliver. She looked back at him. “Oh! Jarod? You’re the boy I used to visit in Sydney’s lab, aren’t you?”

Okay, not fully there. Maybe she would say something else.

She moved closer to Oliver, watching Jarod like he was an unwary predator. “I.” She didn’t answer at first as she kept near to Oliver. “Okay, yeah. Ooh, I don’t know. You were good. You were a friend, the dearest. But, Alexxxx was good to me too. Until he took my Faith,” she muttered. “In more ways than one.”

Jarod held his hands out. Steady. He had no idea where she was at in her mind, just that she was close. She recognized portions of Mary and Miss Parker now. She recognized their son, but recognized Alex’s time with her and Faith’s death too. She didn’t remember chasing him yet though. “Where are you right now? What do you remember?”

“That crack. So soft yet so sure.” Her eyes were circling the room again, falling on Oliver. *Do I trust him? What am I doing here exactly? How did we get out of The Centre?* Jarod seemed okay. Oliver was right there and he wasn’t making to hurt him. Jarod would never hurt him,

she'd known him since they were kids. *Yeah, but I knew Alex too. Gil knew Alex. We all knew Alex, it didn't stop him from doing it!*

Jarod was just waiting. He wasn't making a move. Good, or bad? Alex didn't do anything fast at first. He just went into the room so casual. Picked her up so casual in her little blanket. That soft bone snap hit her head again. That sound, she couldn't run away from it. It would haunt her forever. It would be taken to her grave. Her daughter was dead before the pain of the birth was even over.

Okay, she had to think logically. Number one, they were clearly not in The Centre. Number two, Jarod was strong enough if he wanted to hurt Oliver, he could have. Number three. *I'm nuts, I trust Jarod with my life! He'd never, no matter what. How dare my scatterbrain even stop and think that.* Even now, while she wandered around clueless, he was just waiting. Still. "Six years is a long time, I'm sorry," she finally addressed him. "I don't want to be against you, Jarod."

"You don't need to be," he encouraged her. "Do you remember the hour on the fifteenth you spent with Oliver?"

"You already knew that." She softened her stance. Her body started to relax. "We are in a hotel. Away from The Centre?"

"Yes. You and Oliver are safe," he said.

Yes. Of course. *He'd never hurt him. I know him differently. I know those eyes.* She relaxed down on the bed. "Sorry, Jarod. I don't know where my mind goes to somehow. Well. Actually, now I do."

"It's okay. I don't imagine you'd want to be real friendly after having all this coming back to you," Jarod said.

"Hm." True. His understanding never ceased. She stayed next to Oliver, hoping that something would come to her. She remembered talking to people in college and talking to inanimate objects. She remembered her old college buddies, while remembering her time with Gil. "Ah, and there it is. I escaped with a man called Broots. We met your dad today. Yep. We just went full circle again. That must bore you, huh?" She smiled.

"Full circle? So we've discussed this before?" He edged closer.

Discussed it before? *Oh no.* "You don't remember the three weeks, do you?" Her body slumped. "Oh."

Yeah, now he was moving to her a little faster. "But you do? That's. Interesting. What do you--"

"No." No.

"I know a little." Jarod gestured toward Oliver. "What else?"



“What?” she asked. “Like some secret you don’t know about happened?” Oh was there ever, but if he didn’t remember? “I’m missing at least a night in my head. I don’t remember escaping. Where’s Gil?” Oh, he didn’t like Gil now. “You don’t like Gil? I thought you used to say Gil was the best thing for me.”

“Opinions change.” Jarod looked away slightly. “He was calling my son his son, behind your back.”

Oh. She reached out her hand to touch his. *Poor man*. “I know how much that must have hurt. Gil adopted Oliver, and he did everything he could for him. In fact, he tried several times to fully convince The Centre he wasn’t a pretender so he could take him home. It never worked, he was always slightly above the curve. I know you don’t want to hear that, Jarod, but if Gil didn’t take initiative? Oliver would have been given to Raines. We both know that never would have turned out well. He’s not a good grandpa and I know he has no problem putting his own kids through misery.” He still looked hurt, but a little more confused too. After all, Gil wasn’t there to pretend to become. He had no idea what Gil felt, just like the rest of the world.

Their relationship was built entirely on honesty, so it was best to be completely honest. “I tried, Jarod. At the time, when I was pregnant, I really wanted him to let you and your instructor know instead of making that terrible contract with The Centre. I couldn’t overcome experience and he treated Oliver like Faith and you like Alex. I had no proof otherwise you’d be okay and you know our instructors.”

“Undeniable proof or the solution isn’t a solution. Just a belief in what you want.” Well, he was participating in the conversation again. “I know, we have no control over them. They have control over us.”

*Oh, Jarod*. She’d kiss him right now if he did remember. “The Centre giveth and The Centre taketh.” Still? Knowing him? She went over and gave him the biggest hug she could. He loved hugs more than anyone else.

He seemed a little surprised she hugged him. Barely hugged her back. “Since when did you become like cement you ass, you love hugs.” There, now he seemed to respond. “Do I always have to get tough with you to make you open up and share?”

“I shared?”

“Oh my Clueless Moron,” she groaned. “Of course you shared.” Now his hug was getting tighter. “We both shared so much. We talked about the rabbits we met over casually, not in a sim for the first time. I shared how I really remembered the first time my father took me from our house and up to my new apartment and explained to me my future so young. After so much freedom. I shared how I felt when Raines started to take over the lead on me. You shared how you wished Sydney had actually been your dad. How much you wanted to taste real food and walk on real beaches. How much it hurt wondering if your parents were actually dead or if it was another Centre trick.” She tightened the hug and rocked herself against him. “I even took you into my lesser world, letting you see everything you couldn’t as much as possible. You wanted to risk it all, to get as lost as me. We guided each other as I took you to that other side.”

Yeah. She should let go. He didn't actually remember her. She needed to stay within the first two weeks of their time together.

"I went to another side? I was able to do that, with you?" He questioned. "That was dangerous."

"Hey, Genius Boy, you're the one who wanted to take the plunge," she said. "Do you remember it?"

He shook his head. "Describe it to me."

"Uh? Okay." She bit her lip. "What you knew was more limited so we kept it very small. A gas station and a car."

Oh. He looked shaken. "I didn't. That. More details."

Wow, practically demanded. "There aren't many more details, Jarod. It was the simplest of settings. We just, wanted to be somewhere else. Where we could feel--"

"Love." He answered her back. Yet, he didn't look good about it. At all.

"Like we belonged out in the real world again." He let go of her. "Jarod?"

What about that had scared him so bad? "Jarod?" He grabbed her for a hug again.

"Don't tell me I did that, don't tell me I put you into a simulation too," he begged her.

Put her into a simulation? "I don't understand, Jarod."

"Thomas Gates!" He yelled at her. Then his voice softened as Oliver started to stir. "I didn't drive feelings into that. I didn't drive those feelings into that. I didn't. I didn't make Gil into Michael Patrick except with him."

What was he talking about? "You didn't drop me into a simulation." She patted Oliver's head, making it easier as he was waking up from Jarod's accidental yell. "Jarod, calm down." He was losing it, starting to pace in the room. Ugh. She went toward him again, standing in front of him. "Hey! Shutup and listen! You can't set off a simulation by just dropping me off in something. There's a process with a lesser. Unless the outside world has sequential lights, it won't happen. That's why everything takes place on the inside of The Centre. The only one who controls it on the outside is me."

He wrapped her arms around her this time. He was on the verge of a breakdown. "Lovable Moron, you need to quit. It's okay. My mind isn't *that* gentle. They know what they are doing when they mess with it."

"Michael Patrick," he managed to say. "Feelings from simming, it encouraged you on the outside of The Centre."

"You mean people used in sims? That might retrigger feelings that were felt in a sim, but it won't be the sim itself. Nor if I go out to a gas station am I going to get lost in a sim. Okay?"

Yes, there we go. He was getting noticeably better. She felt him stroking her back.

“I’m sorry. I was scared I did that. I don’t ever want to set you off. I want to protect you from that happening to you, not make it happen.” He took several deep breaths.

“Jarod.” She leaned against him. “I need to be prepped like a cake to make me do what they want. The only time I broke without it. Against my will and against theirs. Was. Faith. I didn’t even remember her name when I named her with Alex, I just remembered I liked the name Faith. You were the one that helped me work it all out.” She held his hands after the hug. “You helped me work a lot of it out. Just like now.” There. Aw, look at that face. She placed her hand on his cheek. “Better?” He grabbed her hand and rubbed it against his cheek. She wasn’t surprised at all.

“You are almost whole and you’ve touched me more than anything in the last fifteen minutes.” He still held her hand.

“Of course,” she said. “You not only have to stay in The Centre, you are a pretender. So many times you have to become someone and you can’t reach out and touch them to get the most understanding. You get pictures and data and diagrams but you can’t get what you want most. Touch. Touch keeps you happy, feeling alive. You wished everyone touched you more.”

“How do you know that?”

How would she know that? “Because you told me, Jarod.” She smiled. “That is why you are the Boy Genius, or the Lovable Moron. You can *only* get skin deep into people because you can’t do the simple act of feeling them and it drives you crazy.” She pulled her hand away. He looked better. “We should get to bed.”

“How long were we friends? How much was I doing simulations compared to talking with you? Sharing with you? Did I share with you more, or did you share with me more?”

Oh goodness. “Oliver’s practically awake, Jarod. We need to get some rest. We can talk more tomorrow, okay? I promise, I will cover the entire three weeks if you want over time.” Silly Goon. “I’ll be fine. Mary. Miss Parker. Call me whichever again, doesn’t matter, but I need rest. Okay?”

“No. But. Us.” He gestured to Oliver as she took the initiative to go to the bed. “Him.” He followed beside her. “How much did we talk verses other activities?”

“Activities?” She laughed softly, trying not to stir Oliver awake anymore. “What, do you think we just went at it for three weeks because of a boy girl situation? Hm, Pretender?”

Jarod had thought so. By that look, they didn’t. They talked. A lot. He looked at Oliver again.

“Oh yeah, he’s ours,” she said. “It doesn’t mean we were conceiving him for three weeks.” She leaned against the bed. “*That* was Faith and Alex. Learning. All the bads and all the goods. I didn’t want to learn again with you,” she revealed. “I didn’t want *anything*. You

accepted that. You even wanted to show me that trust by sleeping next to me. You got to hold someone all night long. I felt protected in an apartment that wasn't mine and without Gil. It was a win/win."

"We never tried anything?" Jarod asked.

"Not for a long time, no. We were just friends." She tried to close her eyes. "I really can't go deeper than this, Jarod. It's not fair if you don't remember."

"I want to remember. Just. I'm--"

"If you say, I'm a Pretender, and expect me to let you do your little thing on me? You're going to be upset. I'm warning you, Jarod," she said. "Let it come naturally."

"It doesn't come naturally." Didn't she get that? "You forgot for the longest time and I still don't remember." He tried to keep his voice low, but it was hard. "Three weeks, and the last day, I went in for a sim to stop my heart."

Her head popped right up on the pillow. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me? Are you serious? Was he really sooo upset he put your life on the line?" Her eyes darted out. "You know, he was the one who put me in the program, he's the one who risked me! He should never have blamed you." She grabbed his hand. "I'm so sorry." She squeezed his hand. "If he did that. I dread what he planned afterward." She looked straight at him. "What happened afterward, Jarod?"

*Years of chasing me.* "Guess I wasn't on par with his favorite chosen bedmates."

"No. Jarod. No." She just shook her head, like he was still clueless. "It's my fault, the way I acted with Oliver just now. Everything was just flooding back to me too quick." She groaned. "Fine. Lyle knocked it away when I was leaving. It should be under the white seat in your apartment. Tell Sydney and he'll decide. Instructors know best."

"Instructors don't know best all the time." What was it?

"Well, okay, you go over to The Centre and find it. Otherwise, let me rest, and just wait." She rubbed his hand okay. "It's okay, Jarod. Let's just get some rest?"

Nope. Jarod pulled out his phone and got off the bed. She dropped something. The Centre must have scanned his apartment a hundred times. It would be something small, meaningless. Under the white seat. Jarod managed to get a hold of Sydney, but Broots was the one working late at The Centre. So? Whatever, as long as he could find out what it had been.

# Why His Heart Was Stopped

The Centre: Jarod's Apartment

"Oh man, I was just ready to go home too." Broots went in with the extra security key clearance Sydney gave him. You know, so Sydney could rest and he could drag himself into the lower levels at almost midnight. He turned on the lights and looked around. White seat. Yeah, there was a white armchair. He scooted it back but saw nothing. "Maybe it's caught underneath." He flipped the chair over and saw something. It was caught a little on its side. He pulled it away, put the chair back down and looked at it.

What was he looking at? "It's pretty." Almost like fused metals. Oh yeah, it was fused metals. Broots grabbed his phone and called Sydney. At least he stayed by his phone. "Yeah, I found something. I could see how The Centre missed it. Nothing really significant."

"What is it, Broots?"

"It's weird. Different metals look like they've been fused together," Broots said, moving it around in his hand. "It's like? Not a washer. Pretty smooth. He held it in his palm. "Pretty metals actually, some of these look downright." Ornamental? Broots looked at it in a different way now. He placed it on his smallest finger and turned it around. "Sydney. Um? Why did I need to find something under the white chair?" Oh. Okay. "Sydney? I, uh? I really think you should come down and see this. I-I know it's late but you should come see this."

Broots waited for twenty minutes for Sydney to open the door. He held it out to him, in the way it should have been presented. "I think? He did the best with what he had." Sydney rushed to take it. He examined it just like Broots did.

"My God, this would have taken time Jarod wouldn't have wanted to waste away. He had no reason to make such a ridiculous thing unless?" Sydney looked at Broots. "Unless."

Hotel

Jarod hung out at the edge of the hotel room, not wanting to miss the call. He couldn't go to sleep. She had lost something and it was in his apartment. Something that could explain the missing three weeks. Then he heard his phone. He answered in on the first ring. "What was it?"

“Jarod.” Sydney sounded strange. “Broots found something you made. I fear this is not going to have good repercussions on you.”

“I don’t care,” Jarod said. “They stopped my heart and I have to deal with that. What could be worse? What is it? Tell me.”

Sydney took a deep breath. “It is a ring forged of metals that were in your room or from your sims in October. They tend to be very delicate. Polished. Ornamental, Jarod.”

“Ornamental?” Jarod asked. “What was it?”

“Marriage ring or engagement ring perhaps?”

Uh? “Engagement ring? You sure, Sydney?”

“Is that the first thing that gets shouted? Ugh. Can you just not be surprised?” She answered from the bed. “Okay, alright, Jarod. You win. As usual. If I don’t, you’re going to go down the wrong way of thinking.” She groaned. “We were friends. Very close friends. But, each of us felt more. I was scared to pursue anything after Alex, or what he did to Faith. I didn’t want that again. You didn’t want to be seen as anything even close to him. So, we went right on being friends. Until you made the first move. You gave me a ring you had been working on.” She held her finger up quickly before he could say anything. “Not a wedding ring or an engagement ring.” She lowered her finger. “You made it for me so I would never forget you. I promised I wouldn’t. You put it on my finger, and took the moment to steal a small kiss.”

“Oh?” Jarod smirked with a small ‘ha’. “Boyfriend gift.”

“Yeah, a boyfriend gift,” she said. “Day nineteen. Two days left.” She shrugged. “We made the best of every minute afterwards.” She looked at Oliver. “I knew about protection. I told you about it. You did your genius scheduling magic, figured out it was a terrible time to be risky. We worked around it, but . . . we couldn’t do it. Never knowing if we’d even see each other ever again. Knowing there’s no guarantee of what tomorrow brings at The Centre. Nature took over. After that though, doubt settled in.” She took a deep breath. “And you warned me, if anything happened. If it was a boy it needed to be named Oliver. If it was a girl, it needed to be named Marina.”

“Oliver sounds like I love her.” Jarod barely hung up the phone before he went to the bed. Oliver wasn’t an accident due to them being put together or him not knowing anything. It really was in his name.

“Yes, and Marina sounds like ‘my ring’. Could you get more literal?” she teased him. “But no, Jarod, couldn’t just wait ‘til morning even, could you?”

His face lit up as he bit his lip slightly. “I be-caaaame your boooy-friennnd.”

“Why are you saaa-ying that with such enthuuu-siasm? You don’t even remember.”

“Don’t need to.” No more diving into her psyche, wondering about the three weeks or anything. He got it. “Mister Parker wasn’t happy about the new bedmate, but he was waaaay

more aggravated by your Pretender boyfriend giving you a pretty ring.” He grabbed her hand and interweaved hers with his. He looked down at Oliver between them. “He knew we made a connection, a deep one he didn’t allow, and if I ever found a way to run away?”

“You’d find a way to take me with you, of course. You said that when you gave me the ring.”

“Yep, and whenever someone tries to take away *his* precious daughter.” Now excitement was turning into anger. *She was mine. Not just by an accidental pregnancy. By a ring. By love. So what does he do?* Blame his own brother Raines? Oh no, no. Put him in more dangerous circumstances. A death simulation. Damen. He probably delighted in it! And, as soon as Jarod broke free? *He took her so I couldn’t!*

“Jarod? Are you okay?” She asked. “You don’t look happy anymore. What’s wrong?”

“He’s lucky he’s dead.” His heart ached. Six years. Mister Parker tore his own daughter apart to go after him, just to twist that knife. He held her hand so tight, and looked between her and Oliver.

“Nuh uh.” She sat up. “Don’t. You don’t know how long the good will last, don’t waste it on the bad feelings. They don’t deserve to tear you up, Boy Genius.”

Sitting up was it. He couldn’t take it anymore. He reached over and drug the top half of her to him, kissing her for all he was worth. The good feelings were never a waste and he was in short supply.

Her touch. Her taste. It was easy and right. A short time on Carthis was all he needed to invigorate that feeling. It was why she kept saying ‘just wait’. Their connection was so in tune to each other that-

“Are you ever going to go to sleep?”

Jarod stopped kissing her and realized he dragged her down right beneath him. Or she dragged herself beneath them. Either way, they were both getting eyed by one grumpy five year old. “Eventually.”

Oliver sat up in the bed and massaged his ear. “Why are you on top of my Mom, kissing her Dad?”

Oh. Now he was using the word Dad. “Checking for . . . bad breath?” He felt himself playfully getting hit and started to laugh himself. He pulled her up, and gave her one last kiss before letting her go on the other side of Oliver. “I got one more phone call to make. I’ll be back. I won’t wake you up any more.”

“Good ‘cause I need rest,” Oliver said. “Who knows what’s going to happen out there tomorrow! Got to enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Yeah.” He stroked his hair like he saw Miss Parker do earlier that day. “Get some rest.” He looked back at her. “The guy you want to drive out to the middle of nowhere, shoot in the

head, set the car on fire of and finish off with a cliff? Found your ring.” He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. “I’m going to call to arrange to get it back. Tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to get it tomorrow,” she said. “I know you want to have fun tomorrow with Oliver.”

“Nah. I’m not going another day without getting that ring back first. Besides, I can do both.”

He left back to outside so he wouldn’t bother Oliver. He dialed Sydney. “Sydney? I need that ring back.”

“What is it, Jarod?” Sydney asked. “I’m sorry if my lack of preparing you for real women resulted in you misunderstand marriage or commitment or-“

“Nope, not that,” Jarod said with a pinch of excitement. “I made it for my girlfriend. Miss Parker was my girlfriend.” No. “Miss Parker *is* my girlfriend.” That’s better. “I need her ring back.”

“Are you sure, Jarod?” Sydney didn’t sound as convinced. “What about Oliver?”

“We were friends for nineteen days, Sydney. We shared *everything* as friends. I shared things with her I never shared with anyone before. I tried to *not* become romantically involved because of what happened with Alex. It didn’t matter.” He leaned against the hotel wall. “We never could stop those feelings.”

“I. Jarod? Those feelings might not be quite the same still. She did chase you in The Centre.”

“Yeah, I know it’s strange, but they are. I almost kissed her on the isle off Scotland. That little bit of time, just us?” He smiled. “Almost. Just a small bit.” He shrugged. “Just made out with her in the bed a few minutes ago. Way better there. Good thing Oliver’s here!” He laughed. “Probably be making a Marina.”

“What, Jarod?”

“Nothing, Sydney.” Ah, he couldn’t darken his mood for anything. “Anyhow, it wasn’t any ‘boy girl trapped with knowing nothing’ situation. I knew the risks. So did she. Oliver’s here.” Yeah. “I’ll call you tomorrow to meet somewhere to get that ring. It belongs on her finger.”

“Well?” Sydney sounded happy too. Jarod’s voice and feelings must have been coming through the call. “I’m glad your happy, Jarod. Is she better now?”

“Almost. She’s got everything. She’s got more than me,” he said a little jealously. “The chasing years as my Hunter. Those are on the horizon. I need to make sure that I . . . I show her as much as possible how much she belongs here with me. I want her with me, Sydney. Her and Oliver. If anyone tries anything, she can and will get out, and she’d take anyone down in the process.” He chuckled. “My girlfriend doesn’t pull punches. I really like that word for her.”



“I can tell. Well? I can honestly say I did not see this coming. Not from the one that pursued you the most.”

“Yeah. Oooh, her Daddy wasn’t happy with me. He sent her in just because of what happened. It doesn’t matter though, I’ll make her see that. I have to. I will. When it all hits?” He looked up at the sky. “I want her to feel like nothing’s changed. I don’t want her to want to leave with my dad with Oliver because of the past or the hurt. We hurt each other when I was running. I *know* we did, but we reached a turn. I just need a little more on the turn. To change that ending, I need a bigger turn. I want them both here with me.”

“Jarod. I wish you luck with all my heart that you find your happiness then.”

“I already found it,” Jarod said. “I just need it to stay with me.” He hung up and went back inside. Yeah. Past bedtime. He crawled in on the other side of the bed. She was resting now along with Oliver. He stroked her hair the same way he did for Oliver. He was rewarded with a groan but she held his hand. He closed his eyes, but kept wanting to keep them open.

Three weeks of just sharing. Hearing her side of it all. Finding out how much she knew about him. Oh, he wanted that so bad. He could start though. Tomorrow.

“We’ll be here tomorrow when you wake up,” she muttered half asleep. “Get some rest, Jarod.”

Right. They would be.

For now. But how would she feel when she remembered the true days of Miss Parker?

## Revenge is Jarod's Thing

Jarod woke up early in the night as he saw Mary get up. He stayed quiet as he read her face. Confused. Frightened. Embarrassed. *Miss Parker*. He couldn't risk calling to her yet. Her mind looked like it remembered everything. Her eyes were darting everywhere, her breathing intensive. Her mind would be flooded. Mary had no recollection of her mother and father, while Miss Parker had genuine fond memories of her mother. Her father, she had believed she had spent all that time with, that he had taken care of her, and now she realized he had her in The Centre as Mary. All of her days, were a lie. Not to mention, their son. Him. Their time.

It would be boiling in her, confused and enraged. She almost looked like she was ready to cry or throw a screaming fit. She did neither one though. She stayed silent. Her eyes casted over Oliver and then away toward the door. *I am giving you time, Parker, don't run*. He was hoping he would have more time. There was so much on her mind. All of the memories, living as two beings, now one again. All the treachery that was disguised as love and protection.

She had covered her mouth with her hand, rubbing it and he heard her sigh with a slight stutter. Trying to keep it together. *When*. He knew her so well, but he'd messed up on Carthis. He moved too fast. She'd gone through too much, he had to be gentle. Slow as a snail if that's what it took. As soon as he touched her, she'd know that he knew. He couldn't let her leave in confusion. He stayed quiet, remained that way a good ten minutes as she continued to stay in the bed. She seemed to be thinking the same thing. Moving would trigger something, and she couldn't just run.

Quiet. Steady rhythm. Don't move unless she did.

Miss Parker stared ahead of her at the door. *My mind is melted fudge in a microwave. Someone's messing with my clocks*. Those lines were so vivid in her head. *Lyle. Then*. Fuzzy, so fuzzy. What she did remember though? *Escape, I escaped, I shot at Lyle and Raines. Projector. Movie*. Darkness, why was she in darkness? Not alone, the boy next to her. He was there. *If I knew what was going on, I would bag Jarod right now, but-!* But she didn't feel like she should. She didn't know why she'd been there. She was sleeping, in a bed, with Jarod. Not just with Jarod like some whiskey insane night, there was a boy between them. A boy she had been curled right up next to. A boy that . . . she couldn't . . . she felt like . . .

"Don't run and we can talk."

Miss Parker turned fast to Jarod. He was up? She dug around herself for a gun, but she couldn't find one. She didn't have one. She also didn't want to use it. *What is wrong with me?!*

"What is the last thing you remember?" Jarod said gently to her.

Gently. He was being gentle. She was in a bed, in some hotel, with a young boy, and Jarod. Being gentle. Now wasn't the time to yell hands up. She didn't speak at first, trying to judge for herself what happened. "Were you playing with my clocks?"

"No. I need to know what the last thing is that you remember," he said again.

Remember. "Broots and Sydney, in the office. Someone was messing with my perception of time by an hour." She had no choice but to share. "Lyle came by. I went to go . . . something. Then a? I shot at someone, in a movie theatre." She looked at the young boy. "With him."

"It's going to come together," Jarod answered her. "Don't run. Please. I won't run either."

"Who is this boy?" She looked straight at him.

"Who do you feel he is?" Jarod asked her back.

Miss Parker looked back toward the boy again. The name Oliver ran over in her head. "Oliver?"

"That's his name," Jarod confirmed.

"Why are you not running away, and why am I not holding a gun on you?" Obvious question that she would love to know the answer to. "What is going on?"

"You already know," he said. "A part of you knows who the boy is."

*Impossible.* Her instinct. She knew this boy, but . . . "He can't be."

"He's your son." Jarod said it out loud.

"I don't . . ." She didn't have a son. She wouldn't have a son. Why would she ever do that? Right now. Here. Yet. "How?"

"I would answer, but I don't want you to run," Jarod said, once again very gently. "He's your son, DNA confirmed. He knows that. Don't run."

Miss Parker felt her whole chest tighten. "I." What could she say? "Jarod."

"Give it a bit. I want to see if you remember more," Jarod said. "Relax. Breathe deeply. Just remember, don't run. Don't leave your child behind."

She felt a shudder move through her, and not from the temperature. Now it made sense why Jarod was there. *He must have discovered Oliver's existence and brought him to me.* Jarod cared about family, if he found Oliver, he would take him to his mother, no matter what. That explained why he was there in the hotel. Watching out for The Centre. Was she on her way to a new life with her new son? *If I had a son. If they did something because I was a red file, it would have to be The Centre.* She couldn't stay there. "The Centre isn't safe."

"You couldn't say it any truer," Jarod said to her. "I am taking you and Oliver from The Centre."

"What's this have to do with the clocks? The time, the missing time?" It had to be connected.

"Oliver was from inside The Centre," Jarod answered. Vaguely. She waited for more. "The time you lost, you became someone named Mary. Mary remembers Oliver, and he gets to visit with Mary. Once a month."

Mary? "What? Are you telling me I have a split personality?"

"No. Miss Mary Parker, you don't," Jarod corrected her. "You have split emotional sides, thanks to The Centre. They've been pulling together though. Mary and Miss Parker, are about to be whole again."

That didn't feel her with lots of joy as she watched his expression. "This isn't going to be a fun thing, is it?"

"No," Jarod admitted. "It's not, but you will get to remember Oliver. You'll remember more things."

"Wait." Huh. "That day that I lost time. Sydney was breathing down my neck about you and your near death," she said, her memory coming back to her even more. "You said I was there." Was she?

"You weren't there, when I was . . . put under," Jarod settled on. "You were there, when I was pulled away, to be put under."

"You aren't kidding?" His look said no. "Do you have any video?"

"Yes," Jarod admitted, "but I'm not showing you yet. I don't want to risk . . ."

"What, risk what?" She asked.

"I don't want to risk you running away from me. Promise you won't run," Jarod said. "I won't run. You won't run."

Running away from him? Taking the boy and escaping would be a bad idea, Jarod must have been the one knowing where they had to go. *This isn't just about The Centre. I have a son and little memories of what happened.* "I won't run," she agreed.

"Promise me," Jarod said harder. "Swear it, Miss Parker."

Swear it. "I swear I won't run away."

"Okay." He looked over at Oliver and touched his hair gently. "He's got your moppy hair you always tuck under."

Hey. That was hard hair to control, he better not be judging her based on that. She looked at the boy's hair. He did have that same kind of hair. The bangs even grew in his face, about needing to be cut. The original moppy look she had if she didn't keep it under control with hairspray galore. On him, it seemed to fit. He seemed to have familiar features too. From somewhere.

"When he wakes up, you will see beautiful eyes." He kept his attention on her. Fully. "My mother's eyes."

Okay. Jarod liked playing games sometimes. When he first found her in the red files he addressed her as 'sis'. This could be the same thing. Don't jump to conclusions. He'd stop playing and say something. What he really meant.

But he wasn't. He didn't say anything. There was no kidding. No playful look in his eye for his little offset humor.

*Oh gaw!* She glanced back at him, back to Oliver, back to him, back to Oliver.

"Don't run, you promised," Jarod said.

Well she couldn't, her child was right there! But? Shared with Jarod. " . . . how?"

He wasn't rushing to answer. "The Centre."

Lousy answer, he was hiding things! She wanted to yell to get the answers, when she felt Oliver nestle into her deeper. He was attached to her. He knew her.

And somehow. "I know him."

"Yes, you do."

"As Mary."

"Yes, as Mary," Jarod confirmed to her.

Okay. Strange. *If I couldn't leave out of frustration I should be tackling him for answers. Why am I not yelling at him?* Her heart wasn't beating half as fast. She felt a sense of calm, something she hardly felt.

Jarod seemed to notice it too. "I know it doesn't seem like it? Things are going to get better for you. I will promise you that."

"I don't feel right, I feel . . ." Strange. "I should want to run out right now and go gun down someone at The Centre. Who's responsible for this?" Which one of those ridiculous assholes had decided her and Jarod would make a good child for The Centre?! Someone took her child, in The Centre. Raised it for The Centre.

"There are those in The Centre who play a part in all of this," Jarod said strangely, "but it's not worth gunning down for you. You feel more relaxed. Calmer, even though you feel everything falling around you."

Yes. Why?

"Emotional separation, is what made you different from Mary," Jarod reminded her. "You feel like her, but you don't remember her. The Centre is losing it's grip upon that separation. You'll be whole again soon. You'll remember everything."

"When and how?" Miss Parker still didn't see it. "I haven't lost any time, I never had any concussions that lasted long enough for some other part of me to take over." *How am I speaking to him so calmly while my world is falling apart?* Almost like Carthis.

"Miss Parker. I have the answer to about everything you want," Jarod revealed. "I'm not being mean, but . . . it won't be easy to hear it all at once."

"I'm the kind who rips the band-aid off and deals with the consequences," she told him. "Don't pitter patter around me, tell me." He sighed, a slight annoyance, meaning she knew he would tell her something.

"Mary didn't know either," Jarod revealed to her. "You both had different lives and she didn't know how." He was quiet. "College."

"What about it?"

"You never went."

What? "Last time I checked, I did."

"You didn't," Jarod said again, "and your sarcastic remark? You should have actually tried it out. Your college doesn't exist. Neither did your position in corporate."

What?

"You were Mary, flipped. The Centre controlled what you said and you did. When she remembers, she remembers it differently. She remembers the truth."

What?! "I don't understand. I? What are you saying, that I never?" Never left The Centre? "I was, why, hypnotized? You can't believe that."

Jarod glanced at the boy, then back at her. "You're something of a pretender. A Lesser Pretender is the phrase you used for you and Oliver."

"Lesser Pretender?" What the heck? "The hell is that?"

"The power that I have to become anyone I want to be," Jarod answered. "You . . . don't get that. You are whatever they choose you to be. Calm. Docile. Easy to manipulate for The Centre's deeds, but that isn't you."

"You got that damn right."

"And that other side of you, it rebelled. They named it 'Miss Parker'," Jarod confirmed. "The more they separated you from what they were turning you into, the more you became distant from the truth. You and Mary were hypnotized to do whatever they wanted."

Miss Parker took a few minutes. Strange visions of . . . wheatgrass. Tomato juice was in front of her, with Jarod sitting in front of her. Eating with her. In his Centre clothes.

"Miss Parker?" He asked lightly, but she wasn't answering back yet. "Are you okay?"

"I've been hypnotized to believe . . ." She didn't want to believe it. She shouldn't. "I want to talk to Sydney." He would have a phone that could call.

He didn't look like he was going to fork it over. "There is a lot involved into this, Miss Parker. Information is not what you need. Relax and let the memories flow. It's the easiest way. Don't involve The Centre."

"I want to hear, from Sydney or Broots, from their own voices," she declared.

Jarod seemed disappointed. "I would never lie to you. But. I get it." He brought out the phone and gave it to her. "Don't stay on long."

She dialed Sydney's number. "Syd?" She asked. "I'm in a hotel room with Jarod and a kid I have been told is mine. Is all of it true?" Yes. "Did I ever leave The Centre?" Jarod was right. She hung up.

Somehow, she had never left The Centre. Not until later, when she was chasing Jarod. She rubbed her temple as Jarod took the phone back. "Now what?"

"Now, you stay away from The Centre." Jarod answered her obvious rhetorical question. "With me and Oliver. There's no choice this time. The Centre can't have Oliver, and you can't take him from me. He's mine too."

Weird. Jarod would never let his boy go, and she couldn't just leave her son.

"Get some rest," Jarod insisted. "The running is over."

She couldn't do anything. She couldn't say anything to that. She laid back down as the boy nestled closer to her again. She took a deep breath. Strangely, it wasn't hard to actually fall asleep.

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### **Meeting Place with Sydney.**

Sydney handed the ring to Jarod. "Miss Parker is back in control," he warned Jarod. "Are you sure you still want that? What did you say about this meeting"

Jarod looked at the ring. It looked like his craftsmanship made with what material he would have at the time. He pocketed it. "Just a rendezvous meeting to see what's going on at The Centre." One day, that ring would be on her finger again. "She isn't the same, Sydney. Like Mary had Parker's fury, Miss Parker didn't run or threaten to kill me. She relaxed and even slept last night." He felt the ring in his pocket. "Part of Mary is there."

"Mary with Parker. Parker with Mary. It won't be long before she remembers," Sydney warned him. "I hope Parker can stay calm enough as she pulls it all together."

"Well, she can't return to The Centre. She knows that now, completely," Jarod said to him. "She won't run away with Oliver, she knows she can't outrun The Centre." She'd stay. She'd stay and they could have their chance finally. "Thanks for the ring."

"When she comes back together, Jarod?" Sydney asked. "Will she be more Mary or Parker?"

"She'll be both." Just like she always should have been.

"Perhaps I should put it a different way," Sydney said. "Mary is obedient. Parker isn't. When she discovers the truth of what happened to her in College?"

Ohhh. "She won't run away for good."

"Why would she run away, Dad?"

Jarod looked down at Oliver. "You're supposed to stay in the car with your mom."

"Mom told me to come to you," Oliver answered. "She said she had a message."

Parker! "What message?"

"You'll eventually find her, whatever, she's got bullies to deal with in the meantime."

Ah! "No, no." Her memories. "Bullies." Raines? Lyle? No, she'd want to stay away from The Centre. Who was near there? Jarod looked back at Sydney. "College?"

"I believe that would be a good start," Sydney said. "Remember Jarod. She won't run away to The Centre, but she does take care of grudges. She'll come back."

Oh no. Jarod wasn't waiting on that.

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### **Michael Patrick's Home**

"Get to the car, Son," Michael said to his boy. His wife and daughter were out shopping and his son and him were getting groceries. They would meet up for lunch afterwards.

"Can I get an extra bag of chips?" His son asked. "They disappeared in like a day."

"Fine," his father said as his son ran to the car. He locked the door of the house, but when he turned back around.

Impossible. The Pretender was standing right next to his son as he went past him to the car. The Pretender glanced back to the boy, then at him. Michael found himself taking a step back. What was he doing at his personal home? He hadn't even been on the pretender thing in years! It was a short stunt, what was he doing there?

"Michael Patrick." He was right there in front of him, on his front porch. He gestured to the back. "Going somewhere with your son?" Michael nodded. "Groceries?" He nodded again. "That's good. It's important for family to get time together." He leaned in closer. "Not that I *should* know that, right?"

"What do you want?" What was he doing there? He looked back toward his son again. The Pretender on his private property, right next to his personal home, this wasn't right.



"I've come to ask some general questions," he answered. "Do you remember me?"

Should he say yes.

"I remember you. I never forget a face." The Pretender smiled at him. "My names Jarod. Do you remember me now?"

Michael nodded, it wouldn't be good to lie. If he just had a gun or a phone. His cell, it was too far away to reach at that distance. Not to mention, Jarod picked it right out of his coat pocket.

"Let's make sure this is just a casual meeting," Jarod said to him. "Now, a couple of questions, and then you and your boy can do that all important grocery shopping. Have you seen Miss Parker?"

"Parker?" Oh, *her*. "Not since we last seen each other." Parker, the best thing about that whole time. Well, until afterwards. Ouch.

"Great answer. Glad to hear it." Jarod smiled at him. "Second? When did you first meet Parker?"

Parker. "Back in college."

"Really?" Jarod didn't smile anymore. "Funny." He pulled some things out of his own coat. College memorabilia. "I got this, and this, and this. All of this is a different alma matter. Different colors. Different everything." Jarod dropped it all to the ground. "Give me proof you went to college with her."

Oh, Jarod had his college things that were from his own house. Jarod had been in his house?! Worry was getting deeper now.

"Dad!" His son called out. "Are we getting closer?"

"Are we getting closer, Dad?" Jarod said, stealing his son's words. "To the truth?"

Okay. Jarod knew, it was obvious. "I didn't hurt her, it was up to Mister Parker that we meet." Jarod wasn't backing down, The Pretender wanted more. "I never did anything against her will. Even when I went back a few years ago, I never forced her to be with me. She came to me."

"She came to you like a moth to a flame, are you saying that?" Jarod asked. "There's a reason why, though. She was psychologically drawn to you, because you were there, at The Centre, when you pretended she was at College!"

"Yes, fine!" He admitted to Jarod. "She believed she was in College. I was up and coming, we were the same age, it seemed like I would be a good match. I haven't seen her in years though, I haven't made any mistakes, and I haven't come after you at all." So why was he there? Why did he just want to know about his past with Parker?

Jarod adjusted his coat, pulling it closer around himself. "Thanks for answering the couple of questions. Go on, you go enjoy your time with your son. With family." He leaned forward again. "It's important." Jarod turned away.

Michael heard his phone ring from Jarod.

"By the way, you know what else is important?" Jarod asked as he turned around to look at Michael Patrick. "Wedding vows, which you broke, and I think your wife's calling to say a little something to you about that second escapade with Parker." Jarod tossed him his phone back and turned away.

Michael continued to stare at his phone. He glanced toward his son. He watched Jarod start to walk off, flipping a pair of keys in the air.

# Rings and Things

## Chapter Notes

I hope you enjoyed this Pretender. It didn't take long to put out, but a lot of time was spent in making it just right. Trust me. I'm really happy with and I hope you are too. Happy Thanksgiving.:)

Jarod walked several blocks away, and waited in his car. He watched as a car sped away. He watched as that same car sped home. Michael had lived in a cul-de-sac, Parker had to come that way. He was the closest one she would want to have a word with. He waited. He left his son with Sydney for now at a safe hotel so he could handle this. Waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . "Gotcha."

He spotted her in the car and took off behind her, honking his horn annoyingly. She had no choice but to stop. She pulled over and he did the same, getting out about the same time.

"Like I can run from you anyhow, I have business to take care of," she insisted to Jarod. "Fifteen minutes."

"No need. Taken care of," Jarod said. "Please get in the car."

"Taken care of?" She asked. "Nothing was taken care of. You don't get it."

"Yes, I do. You were never in college, you knew Michael Patrick in college. Two and two together, I already dealt with him." The look on her face. "Revenge is sort of my thing, Miss Parker."

She looked confused. "What do you mean? What did you do?"

"Michael wasn't a good guy with his wedding vows," Jarod answered. "I made sure the married couple have no more secrets."

Miss Parker stood a little straighter. "That was *my* personal business, Jarod."

She still didn't yell. "Your personal business, is giving you a reason to run away. Run away from Oliver and run away from me. That's not going to work."

"Not everything is about you," she answered to that.

"I know that," Jarod said. He should be careful. He had already warned Oliver not to tell her about their 'wrestling' or their past. As far as she knew, Oliver was made by The Centre. Not by them willingly. She already had a lot on her mind, he wasn't going to give that up yet. Even when he did, it wasn't going to make her run to him. She'd just want to run away more.

So, how should he express this? "I help people who were wronged, Parker. You were wronged. Why wouldn't I want to help?"

"I am not a charity case, I can handle things myself." Still, she wasn't yelling. "Is he getting a divorce?"

"Most likely," Jarod admitted.

"Yeah, well, a bruised bone is better." She snorted softly, trying to hide it behind a yawn. "Fine, whatever." She looked toward his car. "Where's the boy?"

"Oliver I had to leave with Sydney. That's another reason you shouldn't just off and go, he's too young to leave alone."

She didn't answer right away. "If it didn't end his marriage, I'm coming back to take care of him."

Good. "If he doesn't we'll find a better tactic. This is my area of specialty, Parker. Let me handle it or help."

She clearly didn't want to, but she wasn't getting a choice. "One man show can't do it while watching a kid."

"Nope, I can't," Jarod agreed.

She was still bitter. "I can't even believe I'm doing this. Fine, I'll let this go for now."

"Good. When you have all your memories back, that'll be the time to get this done," Jarod agreed. "Until then, let's stay safely away from The Centre with Oliver. He already spent his life in there."

"He can't get caught," she said. "I didn't want him involved, it's too close."

"You're his mother. You can't get too close either or he'll lose you." *I'd lose you.* "I won't bother you about your mother, your father, or bring up your past working with The Centre to catch me. Not unless it's vitally important."

That reasoning seemed to agree with her. "I smashed his head."

What? "Smashed who's head?"

"Broots. I remember, I *know* I smashed his head into the side of something."

Ah. "Broots gave you a ride out of The Centre with you and Oliver. When he revealed you worked for it, you got a little testy," Jarod said. "Afterwards, you ran."

"To a theater. A movie theater. Dark, no movie running," She looked at Jarod. "I had the boy with me and a gun."

"Yes." Her memory was getting tighter. "Darkness felt safe for you and Oliver. It's how you lived. It's how *we* lived," Jarod added. "In complete darkness or complete florescent lighting in an all white room."

Her face. She was struggling with that, realizing that it was the truth. Even if she didn't recall it. "I'll never attend a magic show. They'll make mincemeat of me."

"You can watch." He smiled at her. "Can we get in the car and go get Oliver now? I don't want to leave him there long with Sydney."

"Fine." She moved toward his car. "I don't get it though. Why would I name a boy, Oliver? I've never thought about that name."

Jarod hid his smile as he took off. "You'll find out one day, Miss Parker."

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"Where's my ring?"

Jarod turned from the stove and looked at Miss Parker. For two months, she had switched on and off like a light. Oliver understood it, and seemed to know what he should talk about around her. Jarod's clear indication is when she asked his favorite question.

"Where's my ring, Jarod?" Mary asked. "It's missing again."

"It's never missing." Jarod reached in his pocket and gave it to her. "I always have it."

"Right." She smiled and put it on. "My mind doesn't always remember that." She scrunched her nose. "Oliver?" She went toward their son who was coloring on the ground. "How are you doing, Honey?"

Jarod went back to stirring dinner. Mary was back. When Miss Parker's memories only came back, she'd ask what the ring was on her finger, he'd say he didn't know, and he'd take it and keep it safe again.

Then when Mary's memories kicked in, he would always here 'Where's my ring?'. They never seemed to remember that he had it or he took it. He was getting used to it.

At first, he tried not to act any differently either between the two of them, but it wasn't easy to treat the side of her that remembered Miss Parker the same as Mary. As Miss Parker, she was still a great mother. She was becoming greater, and it was almost impossible to tell the difference when she was with Oliver. Both sides were wonderful and patient with him.

But with Jarod, there was always a difference. Like?

He hugged her and stole a kiss on her cheek. "Suppertime."

That would always lead to a real kiss between them afterward. He always stopped it before it could go further. Stealing a kiss was one thing, anything else when she was still working her memories out was a no. One day though.

"Come on Oliver," Mary said as she held Oliver's hand. "Let's eat."

"What are we having?" Oliver asked.

"Anything but wheatgrass and tomato juice and that's all that matters," Mary said as she helped him sit down.

As Jarod served them food, he sat between Oliver and Mary. It was nice to have dinner with them. It was nice with the Miss Parker side too, although she was still awkward around him, she wasn't as bad. "Butter?"

"You want butter, Oliver?" Mary asked their son.

Usually Oliver answered right away. "Oliver?" Jarod asked. "Son, are you okay?"

Oliver stared at Jarod, then whispered to him. "Mom changed again."

Again? She was just the memories of Mary. Jarod didn't catch it yet, but Oliver had his grandma Catherine Parker's gift. "Miss Parker, do you want any salt?"

"No." Oliver was right. She noticed the ring on her hand. "Where'd this come from?"

Jarod reached for it again. Two minutes. These memories were getting closer together. "Here, let me see."

"Wait, no." She held her hand away. "No. I know it's mine. And?" She looked at Jarod in a funny way. "I've said that before and you've taken it before. It's back on my hand."

Oh, that was a great sign. She remembered at the edge of coming back.

"This looks different," Oliver said.

Jarod left his attention on Parker for Oliver. "Yep, we are near the ocean. I thought we should try seafood." He grabbed a crab leg and cracked it.

As soon as he cracked it, he heard a shatter. He looked back toward Miss Parker. "Parker?" He put down the crab.

Her fork and her plate had fallen to the ground along with her. Jarod got down to attend to her but she just screamed. "Parker? Mary? Miss Parker?" Which one now? "I'm here. It's Jarod, I'm here." He watched Oliver come from the other side.

Oliver was crying now. "She's hurt." He pounded his little chest. "She's hurting here. It hurts bad." He wiped his eyes. "Momma."

Jarod pulled her closer, trying to settle her down. He pulled Oliver closer too. "It's okay." Oliver's gift allowed him to feel his mother's pain. Just like he felt her presence. "We are safe and sound and secure. We aren't in The Centre. We are okay." He risked it and kissed the top of her forehead, not knowing which one it had been. He just wanted to make her better. "It's okay."

"It cracked!" She yelled in Jarod's arms. "It cracked and so did I." The fighting energy seemed to die away as she melted into Jarod's embrace. "Faith."

Jarod waited. She had rested against him so easy like Mary, but Mary went through this. Could it be? "Miss Parker?"

She looked toward him. "I couldn't," she said to him. She shook her head. "Not after that, not after that." She looked toward Oliver. "I thought I couldn't. Damn you, Jarod."

Jarod smiled, a thin smile. He knew she was emotional and her memories hit hard but that? That 'Damn you, Jarod'. "I love you too."

"You know you should have said something," she started to criticize him.

"I told you he was mine," Jarod said in defense.

"Nah, Mister, don't even." She didn't back away though. "I guess I wouldn't have known what to do if I knew Oliver wasn't some Centre experiment." She looked back at him and shook her head. She looked back toward her ring. "It's not the latest thing from Europe but I can't complain. It's all you had at the time."

He smiled, and watched her finally smile back.

"I've been jumping back and forth in my emotions. It rolled my memories into two different forms." She touched Oliver. "Sorry if momma drove you crazy."

Jarod couldn't help it as he stole a hug. She was there. Able to roll through both sets of emotions, letting her experience all of her memories. The Centre could never control her again. Knowing he had to try, he gave her a kiss.

He felt Mary's gentle lips on his. As he pulled back away, he felt a playful rub against his nose. That was new. "Your free, Mary Parker."

"Mary. Miss Parker," she groaned. "At this rate, maybe I should just go by LM again." She pulled Oliver closer to her. "It's nice though. I'm not missing anything of you anymore."

Oliver smiled at her. "Are you glad I'm here after all?"

"Never regret a day," she said confidently. "Never will. Don't say it." She looked back at Jarod. Then, she smiled. "Nevermind, Jarod. Say it."

"We're a whole family now!" He could barely contain himself. He wanted to hug his son, and kiss Miss Mary Parker. LM. "I love both of you so much."

"I know touchy feely genius," She said, but let him cuddle her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Jarod," she admitted. "Honest to goodness, I've never had anything on your family."

"I know." He knew that. "I'll find all of them one day, but now, I have both of you." He hugged them again. "And I'm sorry too," he said to her. "I promised if I ever escaped I would take you with me."

"We'll call it even then." She smiled at him as he stole another kiss.

"She's feeling better," Oliver said to his dad. "Can we go back to the food now?"

"In a second." Jarod moved back to Oliver and lifted him up to go back to the table. Then, as LM was getting up, he grabbed her too. Bridal style in his arms by surprise.

"Jarod!" she complained to him.

He ignored it as he set her down into her chair. A hot fire and a gentle passion. "Enjoy the food, Little Miss."

"I said LM," she corrected him. "I don't want anymore dissonance between my emotions, not even with names."

"It won't happen again. The Centre we'll never get you back," he said with confidence. "Little Miss."

She stopped to look back toward him, debating. "In private, not public."

Of course. Jarod looked at his watch. "Two more hours until you have to get to bed. Should probably get to eating this food."

"I used to stay up much later," Oliver said. "No worries."

Oh no. He was going to bed at a decent time. Tonight.

LM casted a glance his way too as she popped a bit of shrimp in her mouth.

Nope, nine. Oliver was going down at nine.

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## **Morning**

Oliver got up and crawled out of his bed. He looked in the little mirror the rental had. He waved in it. It was a nice home for a little while. He got dressed and went outside his bedroom. Usually his dad was up fixing breakfast but he wasn't there. His mom was usually somewhere near too, she didn't sleep real late. Seeing neither one, he went to his parents room and knocked on the door. He could tell she was in there. When he knocked he waited a few minutes before his dad opened the door. "Good morning, Dad."

"Good morning." Jarod had the brightest grin on his face he'd ever seen. He looked at his watch. "It's late." He chuckled. "Sorry. Busy. Cereal fine?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay. Give me a little bit," Jarod insisted. "Give your mom a little bit too."

Yep. "Were you wrestling again, like in the hotel when you first got us?" Oliver asked. "I heard all kinds of noises."



"Don't answer that, Jarod!" Oliver heard his mother's voice through the other side of the door.

"I can't apparently answer that." Still, Jarod didn't seem anymore down. "Don't worry about the noise. They were . . . happy noises." He smirked. "Five minutes and I will get you some cereal. Then we are going to be heading out soon."

"To where?" Oliver asked.

"Big City. We are going to play a little pretend. Just, a little pretending," Jarod said to him. "I don't need you getting stuck in one."

He grinned. "I'll be okay. I'm a Lesser Pretender, I know what I'm doing." He headed away toward the kitchen, waiting for his dad now.

When his dad came out, so did his mom. She was dressed more in a casual form, but she also wore the fancy high heels. A combination he hadn't seen, but he understood. She was learning to balance herself. It's what his dad was probably helping her with last night. As Jarod got him cereal, he watched between the two of them. His dad was pouring her cereal and he was kissing her. A lot. Geez.

Parents were nice but they were also kind of gross. Still, they loved each other. It was what lovey people did, he knew that. He went ahead and concentrated on his cereal. "Dad says we are leaving today on a little pretend."

"Yep," his mom answered him. "I know you'll be fine. Jarod's occupation and last names will change, but that's about it."

"But it's time," Jarod confirmed as he looked at Oliver but held his mother's hand. "It's time to move on again and bring you each with me."

"Hm. No more Centre," his mother said to Oliver. "Ever again."

Ever? His mom had never said that before. "Really?"

"I've been on the other side of this." She scooped more cereal on her spoon. "No one can catch your Dad. No one ever could."

"Only when your mother was in trouble," his dad corrected her. "I never could leave you in trouble." He smiled at her. "Even for my freedom."

She just smiled back at him. "Easy there, not here at the table."

Not what at the table? *Eh*. Oliver just ate his cereal. No more Centre. From his own mom's mouth.

He really liked the sound of that. He also just noticed something else.

His dad was holding onto his mom's hand again while he was eating cereal. The ring she always asked about was on that hand, instead of the other hand she used to keep it on.

Oliver wasn't nearly as smart as his dad, but he knew what that ring meant because of where it had moved now. "So what is going to be my new last name?"

His dad didn't answer, but just smiled back.

**THE END**

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