

Double Trouble

by Tanaqui

The now familiar scents of old paper and floor polish, mixed with a faint underlying hint of mold, greeted Paul as he entered the Sodalitas Quaerito offices, only half masked by the aroma of coffee drifting up from the styrofoam cup he carried.

"Morning." Evie was at her desk, sorting mail.

"Hi." Paul put his coffee cup down on the table in the centre of the main office and began to shuck his coat. He'd felt a little guilty at first that Evie always seemed to beat him into the office, until she'd explained with a laugh that it was only so she could leave early. That way, she could spend time with her son after she picked him up from whichever of her sisters was minding him after daycare. Paul hadn't thought her old enough to be a mother, certainly not old enough to be the mother of a four year old, especially as he knew she'd spent time in as uniform with the Boston PD. There didn't seem to be any sign of a husband or father, though, which was another mystery. He guessed he'd find out the rest of her story one day.

"Ah, Paul. You're here. Good."

Paul turned at the sound of Keel's voice. His new employer was making his way down the stairs that led up to the mezzanine floor. Paul had figured out after a week or so that the reason Keel was always in the office before and left after him was because he *lived* there. When he'd half-questioningly confirmed it with Evie, she'd pulled a face that suggested he really didn't want to venture up into Keel's private space.

Keel had reached the bottom of the stairs. "We're going on a trip."

"We are?" Paul paused in shrugging out of his coat.

"Yes. Very interesting case in Pennsylvania. Friend of mine down there called me about it last night. Identical twins born to different mothers." Keel waggled the file he held in his hand. "I'll tell you about it in the car on the way." Setting off for his office, he paused after a few steps and turned back toward Paul. "We'll probably be at least two days, maybe three, so you'll need to pack a bag."

"When are we leaving?" Paul finished taking off his coat.

"Oh, in about an hour. Shouldn't take you more than that to get home and pack and get back here, right?" With another wave of the file, but not waiting for an answer, Keel sauntered on into his office, closing the door behind him.

Paul stared after him and then back down at his coat, still in his hands. "You think he could have phoned me before I left home...," he muttered.

Looking up, he met Evie's amused grin. She chuckled. "That's Alva for you. You'll get used to it."

oOo

An hour and a half later they were in the car on I-90. Paul was working his way through the slim case file, wishing it was thicker. That way, he could've kept himself distracted from Keel's driving for longer. Not that it was so bad that Paul was in fear for his life. It was just that Keel seemed determined to hog the middle lane while sticking—Paul couldn't help sneaking another look at the dash—five miles under the speed limit, all the time oblivious to the honking of the drivers barreling past them on either side.

Evie hadn't joined them, claiming she couldn't rearrange childcare and, anyway, she and Matty had plans. Paul was beginning to think it was because she didn't want to spend eight hours or more in a car with Keel.

Reaching the end of the file, Paul turned back to the front and found again the page from a local newspaper, tucked in between Keel's notes, that included a photograph of the two girls. He'd been a little surprised to discover they weren't babies, as he'd assumed when Keel first announced the trip. The article accompanying the paper told him they were both thirteen—that they did in fact share a birthday—but lived three counties apart. They'd met for the first time just a few days before, when their respective schools had made it through into the finals of a regional basketball tournament.

Apart from the colors of their basketball uniforms, Paul couldn't have told the two girls in the photograph apart: the same height, the same build, the same blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, and the same look of uncertainty in their blue eyes.

"So why are we investigating this? SQ, I mean?" Paul flicked a glance in his new boss's direction.

Keel shrugged. "Sign of the impending apocalypse? You know, two-headed calves, that kind of thing?"

"They don't exactly look two-headed to me," Paul pointed out dryly.

Keel gave a half-laugh. "Very well, then. How about: twins are often considered a sign of divinity or divine intervention?"

"You mean, like in Greek myths?" Paul remembered borrowing a retelling for kids from the library once, when he was ten or eleven, that had left him with a strong impression that everyone involved was the illegitimate child of a god. He hoped Keel wasn't suggesting the Second Coming had already happened.

"Greek, Native American, Mayan." Keel shrugged. "In Africa, the Yoruba have a legend about what they call ibeji that says the first twins were spirits sent by monkeys. In several cultures, one twin is the evil counterpart of the other."

Paul looked back down at the girls half-frowning out at him from the picture. If one of them was the other's evil doppelgänger, she was hiding well. In fact, both of them looked like they were perfectly ordinary people caught up in something they didn't quite understand.

Closing the file, Paul turned his head and gazed out of the car window, watching but not really seeing the scenery as it rolled by and only half-listening to Keel offering up Sumerian and Melanesian legends.

Paul thought he knew how the girls felt.

oOo

An hour or so later, just past Waterbury, CT, they stopped to buy lunch and change drivers. Keel was keen to get back on the road, so Paul munched one-handedly on his sandwich while he drove, distinctly unimpressed by the feel of Keel's car as he steered with the other. At his side, Keel tucked into the vile-smelling burger he'd bought. When he was done, he tossed the empty box into the back seat. Then, settling himself more comfortably, he pulled his cap down over his eyes and went to sleep.

Paul took a sideways look and grimaced. On reflection, he decided, the lack of conversation was preferable to having to listen to more of Keel's crackpot theories. He could have done without the lingering smell of the burger, though. Finishing his sandwich, he cautiously cranked down the driver's side window a fraction and breathed in the slightly fresher air from outside.

He drove on for another four hours. They were well into Pennsylvania before he stopped to wake Alva and consult the map for the final part of the journey. The occasional rain showers he'd driven through had cleared up, although gray clouds still darkened the sky, making dusk approach swiftly.

"You should have woken me," Alva grumbled, when Paul told him where they were.

Paul shrugged. He didn't mind driving, and he'd decided letting Alva sleep was better than suffering him taking the wheel again. But he let Alva drive the final few miles, cutting through the edge of Williamsport after they left the interstate to reach the neat residential suburb where Melissa Farmer and her parents lived.

The house seemed as unremarkable from the outside as Melissa had in the photograph: two floors, with a porch stretching across the full front of the house and shutters at the windows picked out in a different color to the recently painted clapboard. Paul noticed a basketball hoop above the roll-up garage door as he and Keel walked up the empty drive toward the house.

They could hear the tinkle of the doorchime when Keel pressed it sounding from somewhere deep in the house. A moment later, a rattle indicated the door was being opened. It swung back to reveal a dark-haired woman in her late forties or early fifties. There were smudges under her eyes, as if she hadn't been sleeping well,

though she was smartly dressed in a brightly patterned blouse and navy skirt. Paul remembered from the file that she worked part-time in a bank.

"Mrs Farmer?" Keel asked, before she had a chance to speak.

"Yes." She gave them a puzzled look.

"My name is Alva Keel. This is Paul Callan." Keel gestured in Paul's direction. "We belong to an organization which investigates unusual events—such as the kind you're experiencing with your daughter."

Mrs Farmer visibly bristled. "My daughter is fine," she said coldly.

She began to close the door, but Keel spoke quickly. "But you do agree it is somewhat unusual that what appears to be her identical twin should appear three counties away, living with another family?"

Mrs Farmer hesitated.

"Please." Alva put his hand on door. "We can help."

Mrs Farmer sighed and then opened the door wider. "You'd better come in."

She led them into a living room at the front of the house and gestured for them to sit. Glancing around as he took a place next to Keel, Paul noticed there were photographs everywhere of Melissa. Sometimes she was with her parents: the two of them beaming proudly as they held her as a baby; a more informal snap of them at what looked like a family picnic, with an older lady who was probably her grandmother; a photo from when she was maybe eight taken at Disney World, Mickey Mouse waving alongside her. More often, though, the photograph was of Melissa alone. Hands supporting her as she took her first uncertain steps as a toddler; serious-faced as a first grader in a ballet tutu at a performance; looking up from a book with a distracted expression on her face; surrounded by her teammates from the basketball team, clutching a trophy.

This was the home of a family who loved their daughter very much, Paul decided, as he turned back to Mrs Farmer. She'd settled herself on a chair opposite, her hands twisting together.

At his side, Keel leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees and the tips of his fingers steepled together. "Is Melissa at home? Or your husband? Can we talk to them as well?"

Mrs Farmer shook her head. "They're not here. Melissa goes to a friend's to study until I finish work, and my husband isn't back from the plant yet." Mrs Farmer glanced at the clock on the wall. "They should both be back soon, though."

Paul automatically reached into his jacket pocket for his notebook. "Do you mind if we ask you some questions while we wait?"

Mrs Farmer hesitated and then shrugged. "Sure."

Paul groped for his pen as well as he flipped the notebook open. "Is there any possibility that you and the Powells—" That was the name of the other family. "—are distantly related? That this is just genes skipping a couple of generations from a common ancestor?"

Mrs Farmer shook her head again. "No. We wondered about that, but—no. The Powells told us their family has lived in this area for, oh, two hundred years, ever since they arrived here from Wales. My husband and I moved here from Milwaukee just after we got married, when he got a job with Avco. Lycoming, I mean; that's what they're called now. But both my husband's grandparents and mine came from Milwaukee. Our families have lived there for years."

"And you never met before?" Keel's tone was sharp.

"No." Mrs Farmer shrugged. "At least I don't think so. The Powells said they used to live in Williamsport, too, but we didn't know them back then."

Paul thought back to the case file they'd left in the car. "But you both gave birth at the same hospital? At—?"

His words were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. A male voice called out. "Barbara? I'm home."

"I'm in here." Mrs Farmer got to her feet. Paul stood as well, followed a moment later by Keel.

The man who appeared in the doorway had graying hair, close-cropped to hide his receding hairline, and looked a few years older than his wife. He stopped dead when he saw the visitors, glancing at her and raising an inquiring eyebrow.

"These men are... investigators," Mrs Farmer offered up. "They say they can help...."

Keel, who was nearest, held out a hand while scrabbling in his jacket pocket with the other for a business card. "Alva Keel."

Mr Farmer shook his hand and took the card, frowning down at it as he read it. Paul stepped forward and also offered his hand. "Paul Callan." He dipped his head. "I'm sure this is all very distressing for you. We just want to help you understand what's happening here."

"And why would you want to do that?" Mr Farmer looked from Paul to Keel, his expression wary, as Paul took a pace back.

"It's what we do," Keel explained.

"This Soda—?" Mr Farmer gestured dismissively with the card.

"Sodalitas Quaerito." When Mr Farmer's frown deepened, Keel added quickly. "It

means *brotherhood in search of truth.*"

"You're private investigators?" Mr Farmer still sounded uncertain.

Keel gave him a brief smile. "If you like. Not the usual kind. My colleagues and I," he indicated Paul with a wave, "investigate unusual occurrences. The paranormal, or the supernatural or psychic. Or, as in the case of your daughter, events that cannot quickly and easily be explained in normal ways."

"You make a living at that?" Mr Farmer raised an eyebrow.

Keel laughed. "Not a very good one, I can assure you. But we're not looking to be paid, if that's what you're worried about. We're supported by grants and donations, and cases like this are part of our wider work." When Mr Farmer still looked unconvinced, Keel added, "I myself am a former professor of comparative religion at Harvard, and my colleague here was previously an investigator for the Catholic Church. We both have a great deal of experience of these kinds of events."

Mr Farmer's gaze switched back to Paul. "So you think you're going to find some kind of... miracle? Is that it?" His tone was skeptical.

Paul tried to give him a reassuring smile. "We just want to help you find the truth. Whether that's something miraculous or... something mundane."

Mr Farmer made an unconvinced noise in the back of his throat, but his expression relaxed a little. He looked across at his wife. "Did you show them yet?"

She shook her head. "I was waiting for you."

"Show us what?" Keel had an eager look on his face.

Mr Farmer shrugged. "We had a DNA test done. We got the results this morning." He hesitated, before adding, "Seems, as far as the DNA says, Melissa and Kimberly *are* identical twins. We were hoping..."

"That it was just a coincidence?" Paul offered sympathetically.

Mr Farmer nodded.

"There's no such thing as coincidence." Keel's tone was casual, almost distracted, but quite definitive. Glancing across at him, Paul saw he seemed to be inspecting the room, only half paying attention to the conversation. Paul clamped his lips together, biting back his irritation. Whatever Keel did or didn't believe, now wasn't the time to be voicing it so bluntly.

Paul turned back to the Farmers, not liking to have to ask his next question, but knowing it was the logical next step once he'd heard they'd had DNA tests done. "Were you tested as well?"

Mrs Farmer nodded, her face tightening. "They say we're not related to Melissa," she

whispered. "Neither of us."

Paul thought it sounded like it cost her a lot to say it out loud, as if not saying it would mean it wasn't really true.

"She's our daughter." Mr Farmer's tone was slightly belligerent as he took a step closer to his wife and put his arm around her.

Paul couldn't fault Mr Farmer. Even if Melissa wasn't theirs biologically, they'd raised her. Just like Poppi wasn't connected to Paul by blood, but he was more of a father to him than whoever his real father was. But Paul had always known Poppi wasn't really his father, whereas the DNA results contradicted everything the Farmers had ever believed. He was still trying to frame a reply that would reassure the Farmers, without sounding as if he was denying the evidence of the test results, when Keel spoke.

"That's perfectly possible." Keel gave a slight shrug as the other three turned to stare at him. "There's a case about to be published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* of a woman in Boston whose sons appear to be genetically unrelated to her. Turns out she's a chimera."

"A *what?*" Mr Farmer stared at Keel in horror, his hand tightening on his wife's arm, pulling her closer to him. Paul couldn't blame him. Not only had they just had to admit their daughter wasn't theirs but Keel had, as far as Paul could tell, just called Mrs Farmer a monster.

Keel had the good grace to look slightly embarrassed; apparently even he'd realized that wasn't the best way to break that kind of news. He cleared his throat. "It means she has cells that carry two sets of DNA. Only one set was inherited by her sons, but the other set was what showed up in *her* DNA test. It happens when two embryos fuse back together in the womb."

"Oh." Mrs Farmer put her hand to her throat, almost like she was checking she was still herself.

There was a moment of silence while everyone tried to digest that. Then Keel shook himself. "Anyway. Did the Powells also get tested?"

Mr Farmer nodded. "They should have gotten the results today as well. The lab couriered them to us."

"Well," Keel stretched his mouth in what was clearly meant to be a reassuring smile, "why don't we find out what their results say? If we all get together, perhaps we can sort this out."

Paul caught a look between the Farmers that suggested they didn't want this sorted out at all, that they just wanted to forget any of it had ever happened, before Mr Farmer shrugged. "I'll call them. See if they can come over tomorrow. I guess we do need to figure this out."

oOo

Another car was already parked in front of the Farmers' house when Keel and Paul drew up outside the following afternoon. Mr Farmer had called Keel on his cellphone after they'd checked into a motel and told them the Powells would make the trip over the next day and would be at the house after three.

With a morning to kill, Keel had dragged Paul off to a supposedly haunted mansion a few miles away. They'd joined one of the regular tours, which might have been interesting enough if Paul hadn't found himself wanting to sink through the floor about five minutes in, when Keel started giving the docent a hard time. That she didn't entirely buy into the notion of the hauntings herself became obvious from her growing discomfort as Keel insistently probed about the "scientific" studies mentioned in passing in the guidebook, while proffering a number of increasingly bizarre-sounding explanations of his own for the "sightings".

The other people on the tour, who also didn't seem to be taking the stories particularly seriously either, started fidgeting as the docent tried to hurry Keel along and stick to her script. As they were leaving, Paul heard one small girl ask her parents, "Mommy, was that man who talked funny crazy?" Paul reckoned she had a point: he couldn't quite figure out how Keel could manage to be well-versed enough in scientific theory—and well-connected enough in serious academic circles—to be able to casually talk about articles on chimerism that were about to be published in respectable medical journals, and yet still believe the things he apparently believed with a straight face.

As they walked up the path to the Farmers' front door, Paul wondered if he was crazy too, getting mixed up with someone like that. It was certainly a change from the cynicism of his former employer.

Inside the house, the Farmers' living room was crowded. The Powells occupied the couch, Kimberly between her parents. Mr Farmer sat in an armchair, with Melissa perched on the arm. Mrs Farmer flitted around offering people drinks, before taking up station next to her daughter. Keel took the other armchair, while Paul made do with a dining chair that Mr Farmer fetched from another room.

Seeing the two girls in the flesh, Paul found the resemblance between them no more startling than between any other twins. It was their history that was remarkable. He could also see, now that he'd met them all, the likeness between the girls and Mr and Mrs Powell. Mrs Powell—like her husband, she seemed to be about ten years or so younger than the Farmers—had the same fair coloring as the girls. Mr Powell had gifted them his chin and nose, softened in feminine form.

Discreetly scrutinizing each of them in turn while the preliminary introductions were taking place, Paul accidentally caught Kimberly's eye. She blushed and he gave her an embarrassed smile in return.

Turning his attention back to the rest of the room, Paul realized Keel had already started in on the questioning and established that the Powells' DNA tests had shown Kimberly was very much their daughter.

"So that means Melissa is, too." Keel's words, half spoken to himself, as if he were merely working his way out loud through a logic problem, had an air of finality.

"Daddy—?" Melissa's softly voiced exclamation was full of distress.

Mr Farmer squeezed her hand. "You're ours, sweetheart," he reassured her. "I don't care what the tests say."

Keel opened his mouth, but Paul leaped in faster. The point had been made; no need to labor it and get everyone more upset than they were. "But you were both born on the same day? In the same hospital?"

Mr Farmer nodded and Mrs Powell added her own confirmation. "Yes. Divine Providence. It's on the north side of town."

Paul had his notebook open at the page where he'd jotted down some reminders last night after he and Keel had discussed theories. He made a neat tick next to one of them. "And you were living in Williamsport at the time?"

"Yes." Mrs Powell glanced at her husband. "We moved to Du Bois when Kevin got a job with the water department there. Kim was three."

"But you didn't know each other when you all lived here?"

There were shakes of the head all round from the adults.

"Are you absolutely sure?" Keel was leaning forward and looking pointedly between Mr Powell and Mrs Farmer. "Is there no possibility that two of you were having an affair?"

Paul gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to reach out and slap Keel. The two of them had discussed that possibility, of course they had, but Paul had hoped to bring it up a little more tactfully—and not in front of the girls.

He couldn't help looking at them while Mrs Farmer gave a shocked "No!" in answer, echoed by Mr Powell's quieter but equally horrified, "Absolutely not." Melissa had her head bent and her cheeks were pink, while Kimberly was glaring at Keel with such intensity that Paul wouldn't have been surprised if she had gotten up and hit him.

Paul cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention back to him and away from Keel and his question. "Is it possible there was some kind of mix up at the hospital? That your daughters were accidentally switched?" Before they'd left Boston, Keel had asked Evie to dig up their birth records, and she'd emailed the results to his laptop. Apparently Mrs Powell *had* given birth to twin girls, but one of them had died shortly after she'd been born. Evie had sent the death certificate along with the birth certificates. If Paul had been a betting man, his money would have been on the hospital messing up.

Mr Powell shook his head. "I saw them write the identity bracelets for both Kimberly

and Lauren and put them on." His lips tightened for a moment. "Lauren was Kimberly's twin, but she only lived a few hours."

Paul acknowledged his words with a nod. He looked over at the Farmers. Mr Farmer dipped his head. "I saw them put Melissa's ID bracelet on too. There's no way they got the babies mixed up."

"So." Keel coughed, again making himself the focus of the conversation. He spread his hands to indicate Melissa and Kimberly. "We seem to have ruled out mundane reasons for the current situation... assuming everyone is telling the truth. So perhaps we should explore some other possibilities."

"What sort of possibilities?" Mr Powell sounded nervous and Paul couldn't blame him after what he'd heard so far.

"Well, for instance, there's a long history among Native American tribes of spirit twins." Keel lifted a hand and scratched the back of his neck, a frown settling over his features. "Though I've never heard of any manifesting themselves corporeally for such an extended period of time. It would require a tremendous amount of energy."

He peered at Melissa for a moment, long enough that she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, before he shook himself and continued, "However, I think we can definitely rule out changelings. You young ladies appear to be in quite impressive health, and not at all green. Although," Keel turned back to the Farmers, "if you have any eggs, there's a quite simple test we can do."

Mr Farmer blinked at him. "Eggs?"

"Yes. It's quite straightforward." Keel rested his elbows on his knees and steepled his hands, tapping his fingertips together lightly. "You boil up some water in the shells and the changelings are so confused they can't help exclaiming, 'I'm hundreds of years old and I've never seen the likes of that!'" The last part came out in the worst fake Irish accent Paul had ever heard.

Mr Farmer blinked again. Before he could speak, Paul cleared his throat. "I really don't think that's necessary," he offered.

Keel gave him a surprised look and then shrugged his shoulders. "No, I suppose you're right. Now," he turned eagerly back to the parents. "We could be dealing with a case of a doppelgänger perhaps, although I would definitely rule out a Norwegian vardøgr or a Sami Etiäinen—."

Paul took in the pinched looks on the faces of both sets of parents as Keel rambled on, and the way the two girls sat hunched over, hands pressed together between their knees, discomfort written in every line. With a loud snap, he flipped his notebook closed, drawing everyone's attention. Smiling at Kimberly, he said lightly, "You know, I used to play ball myself. Still coach a little sometimes. How 'bout you and Melissa and I go outside and shoot some hoops?"

Paul and Kimberly waited in silence in the hall while Melissa fetched a ball from somewhere deeper in the house. Paul had made sure he'd shut the door behind them after they left the living room, so that Keel's voice could only be heard as a low rumble. Though he hadn't missed Keel's glare at being interrupted, he didn't care. He'd simply had to get the girls out—and if Keel complained about it later, he'd point out that it was the perfect opportunity to ask them a few questions without all those adults hanging on their every word.

Melissa returned and they headed outside. Following the two girls, Paul shivered. Even though the March day was sunny, a cold wind was blowing. Playing a little ball should soon warm them all up, though.

Melissa led them to the hoop. Reaching it, she turned and faced Paul, bouncing the ball in front of her, a guarded look on her face. Kimberly joined her. They exchanged another glance that suggested the chill breeze wasn't going to be the only problem Paul faced.

He rolled his shoulders a little, loosening them. "So what position do you girls play?"

"Center." Melissa passed the ball sideways to Kimberly.

"Both of us," Kimberly added. It was her turn to bounce the ball, showing her agitation was the equal of Melissa's.

Paul wasn't surprised by that: they were tall for their age and it was where he would likely have played them if he'd been coaching them.

"But you're right handed and Melissa's left handed?" He'd guessed that from watching them handle the ball, assuming nerves would make them use their dominant hand, but he wanted to be sure. If nothing else, it would help confirm they were identical twins and not just fraternal or—not that he believed it was possible with medical science at the stage it had been thirteen or fourteen years ago—clones of each other.

Kimberly nodded.

"Well, I used to be a point guard." Paul tried a smile, but just got a wary look back. He cleared his throat. "So maybe we should take turns playing a little one on one?"

The girls exchanged another glance. Melissa shrugged. "Okay." She stepped back, leaving the space under the hoop to Kimberly and Paul. They switched places and Paul readied himself for her move. She eyed him for a few seconds, apparently weighing her options, before she performed a nice foot fake. She drove past him and went for the shot, but the ball skittered off the edge of the hoop and rattled the backboard.

Paul caught the rebound. "Nice jab step," he complimented her. Kimberly gave him an embarrassed grin in reply as he passed the ball to Melissa and took up position

again in front of the hoop.

Melissa also hesitated a moment, clearly unsure how to attack. While Paul was wondering whether now was a good time to ask her another question—although it seemed a little unfair not to let her get one play in first—she made her move. He was slow to react: though he guessed right what she was planning, she still managed to get a jump shot in over his head, the ball just brushing his fingertips as he went up for it. Turning, he watched helplessly as it dropped through the hoop.

He huffed a wry laugh as he retrieved the ball. "Nice! You beat me good there." Turning back, he caught a faintly triumphant expression on Melissa's face as she pushed her bangs back off her forehead. Holding off on the questions for the moment was definitely the smart move.

He passed the ball back to Kimberly. This time, she pulled off a very neat crossover step and again passed him, but once more the ball clipped the hoop and bounced away. Paul noticed her biting her lip as he captured the ball. "Do you always have trouble with the shot?"

She blushed and nodded. "I practice. Lots. But..."

"Uh-huh." Paul threw the ball back to her. "Show me." He looked across at Melissa. "If that's OK?"

"Sure." Melissa gave a little shrug that said she didn't much care either way, but her expression suggested she was interested in what they were doing.

Paul stepped to one side and a little behind Kimberly, so he could watch her as she made the shot. Again, she was close, but didn't quite make it. Now that he could watch her, he could see why.

Retrieving the ball, he kept hold of it as he handed it back to her, stepping behind her and encouraging her to lift her arm into a shooting position. "See your thumb, here?" He nudged it with his own thumb. "You need to keep it pointed up a little more. Not so sideways. That'll keep your elbow in, give you a better shooting platform."

Kimberly gave him a doubtful look over her shoulder as he stepped back, before turning back to the basket. This time, though the ball still clattered the hoop, it went through.

"Huh." The line of Kimberly's back suggested she was a bit bemused as she watched the ball bounced to a stop and then begin to roll back down the slight slope toward her. She picked it up and turned back to Paul. "Thanks." She smiled at him.

Paul accepted the ball from her with a slight grin. "You're welcome. Melissa?" He turned and tossed the ball to the other girl and the two of them took up position under the post again.

Melissa's expression was still slightly wary. Paul suspected he might have won

Kimberly over enough to get her talking, but Melissa was even more suspicious of him now. She was passing the ball from hand to hand, not quite taking up position yet as she looked him over. As she stepped forward and readied herself, she asked, "So is that other guy your boss?"

"Uh-huh." Paul's guess that her question was designed to distract him was confirmed when she made her feint as he answered. She still telegraphed it a bit too clearly, not shifting her weight hard enough onto her right foot before she made the switch to pass him the other way. He managed to knock the ball from her hand. It bounced away in Kimberly's direction.

Straightening, Paul saw Melissa was biting her lip in annoyance. He wiped a hand across his forehead, realizing he was getting warm, and added, "Kind of jerk, isn't he?" Melissa giggled uncertainly and Paul winked at her, before he turned and gave Kimberly, who'd collected the ball, a conspiratorial grin. "Better not tell him I said so, though, huh? Might lose my job otherwise."

Kimberly grinned back as she replaced Melissa in front of him. "We've got a counselor's kinda like that," she confided.

"Guess you've both had to have a few chats with the counselor since all this happened?" Paul flicked his gaze in Melissa's direction.

"Uh-huh. Not that they're really interested in what you say." Kimberly shrugged, and then turned the movement into another attempt at a fake and drive. This time Paul managed to knock the ball away from her hand as she drove past him. He was relieved: for a moment there, he'd thought he was losing it or getting too old. Or maybe he was just figuring out Kimberly's preferred moves.

Tossing the ball to Melissa, Paul tried to reassure Kimberly, "Well, for all he can be a jerk sometimes, Keel cares about finding out the truth. So do I."

"So what do *you* think's happening?" Melissa asked as she stationed herself in front of him. This time, she seemed genuinely interested in the answer, not just like she was trying to get him off guard.

Paul shook his head. "Honestly? I don't know. I thought there'd mostly likely been a mix up at the hospital when you were born, but your mom and dad say that's not possible."

Melissa went on bouncing the ball, a small frown creasing her forehead. "If... if Kim's mom and dad," she shot a quick look at the other girl, "turn out to be my mom and dad.... Will I have to go live with them?"

Paul sighed. He'd wondered about that himself during the drive down and then wondered about it some more the previous night, when he'd been kept awake by Keel's snoring from the other bed in the cheap motel room they'd booked into. "I don't know. I guess it depends what we find out and then what your parents decide."

Seeing Melissa's face tighten, he wished he had a better answer to offer. "It's not always so terrible to have to go live with someone else, you know?" he tried to

reassure her. "Or at least, it wasn't for me."

"You were adopted?" Kimberly sounded surprised.

Paul shook his head. "I grew up in an orphanage. My mother died when I was five, and my father—." He stopped. He actually had no clue why his father hadn't been around to claim him, or at least park him on distant relatives somewhere. Or where he might be now, if he was still alive. All he'd had from him was some DNA and a name. Melissa had gotten a great deal more from the Farmers, even if they weren't her parents, just like he'd gotten so much from Poppi.

"So you don't have any brothers or sisters?" Melissa seemed to have forgotten about trying to score a basket, gathering the ball into her arms and hugging it to her.

"Well, no. No *actual* brothers and sisters." Paul grinned. "But I feel like I do. All the kids I was with at St Jerome's. Especially Georgia. She arrived a couple of years after me and I still think of her like she's my kid sister, even though we're all grown up now."

Kimberly stepped up closer. "I always used to wish Lauren had.... That she'd...." She lowered her voice and admitted quietly, "Sometimes, I used to make up stories that she was still alive and that we were playing together."

There was something about the way she said it that made Paul think she'd been maybe talked out of it, or learned to hide it from her parents. Not that he could blame them for reacting badly when they'd overheard her playing with "Lauren": their daughter's death must have been difficult for the Powells, and he remembered the sisters at St Jerome's always rather briskly squashing any talk about parents maybe still being around.

He turned to Melissa. "But I guess this must all feel pretty weird for you? Finding out maybe you've got a sister?"

"I guess." Melissa was tapping her fingertips against the basketball. Paul recognized the signs and let the silence stretch out until, eventually, Melissa whispered, "Sometimes I used to think there was... someone. Another little girl. And sometimes she'd watch over me, and sometimes she'd get mad at me. Birthdays specially. She really hated birthdays...." Melissa's voice trailed off, her gaze turned inward.

The bang of the front door screen being flung back made all three of them jump. Turning, Paul saw Keel had appeared on the porch. He raised a hand to indicate Paul should join him.

"Uh-oh. I'm wanted." Silently cursing Keel for interrupting, Paul mustered a grin for the girls, though Melissa was still too lost in thought to return it.

Leaving them, he headed for the porch. Keel came down the steps to meet him, a frustrated expression on his face.

"Well, I'm not sure that was a lot of use." Keel jerked his head back toward the

house and scrubbed a hand across the back of his head. Paul wondered what he'd expected after the way he'd questioned them. "But I did find out one thing that might be relevant. Not only did they both give birth in the same hospital, but apparently they shared the same obstetrician."

Paul ran through the possible implications in his mind. "You think there was some unofficial sperm donation going on?"

Keel looked across at where the girls were still shooting baskets. Paul noted absently that Kimberly was now scoring as many as she missed.

"More like *in vitro* fertilization." Keel's weary-sounding words drew Paul's attention back. "Given the DNA results. Except that seems even more unlikely than some of the other theories we've come up with. I think Mrs Powell would have probably noticed if her eggs were being harvested, and the success rate is low even at the best clinics."

"We can't rule it out, though?" Paul realized he would be far more comfortable with a mundane scientific explanation, however statistically unlikely or medically unethical, than the notion that the girls—one or both of them—were some kind of supernatural projection.

"Not until we've done a little more digging, no." Keel pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket. "Fortunately, they've agreed I can talk to the doctor and the hospital. I'm going to try and set up a couple of meetings for tomorrow. See if they'll let us look at the records."

"OK." Paul jerked his head in the direction of the house. "I want to go and have a talk to the parents again. Melissa just told me something I want to follow up."

Keel waved a hand distractedly as he began to dial, giving his blessing, and Paul headed back into the house.

oOo

Inside, Paul found both sets of parents talking quietly, although they stopped as soon as he appeared in the doorway. He couldn't blame them for the slightly suspicious looks they gave him.

He opened his hands, trying to show them he meant no harm and put them at their ease. "I'm sorry to bother you again.... Melissa told me something and I wanted to check...."

After a moment, Mr Farmer nodded for him to join them. Mrs Farmer was now perched where Melissa had been, on the arm of the chair next to her husband. Paul took the chair that had been vacated by Keel. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees, his hands clasped together loosely, and looked from Mr Farmer to Mrs Farmer and back again. "Melissa told me that she sometimes thought she sensed a presence. Another little girl. Especially around birthdays...."

Mrs Farmer let out the smallest of gasps. Paul saw Mr Farmer's arm tighten around her waist. Both of them refused to meet Paul's gaze. Without realizing it, he leaned a little further forward, urging them silently to tell him what had gotten them so upset about his question. At last, Mrs Farmer put a hand to her mouth, stifling a sob. "I didn't think she remembered," she whispered. "Not the worst of it, anyway."

"What happened?" Paul's notebook was in his hands again, though he didn't remember taking it out.

It was Mr Farmer who answered. "Her first birthday. We had a party. Just the three of us. We had a cake. Something... pushed it off the table."

"Pushed?" Paul raised his eyebrows.

"Uh-huh." Mr Farmer looked embarrassed but he plowed on, "I thought I'd just caught the tablecloth and it was an accident, but when I bent down to pick the cake off the floor, whatever it was... threw a plate at me as well." He cleared his throat and shrugged. "You think you're going crazy, right? Except next birthday, we couldn't get the candles to stay lit. After that, we started taking Melissa out to a restaurant on her birthday, but when we got home, we'd find the house in a mess. Never very much, but things would be thrown on the floor, especially in Melissa's room. Got so's one of us would head home first and tidy up before the other one came back with Melissa."

"Just birthdays?" Paul looked up from his notebook.

Mr Farmer looked at his wife, as if not sure what the answer was. She turned to Paul and shrugged. "Things being moved around, yes. But other times it felt like there was someone there."

"But just in the house? Not anywhere else? It never followed you to the restaurant, for instance?" Paul knew Keel would want to know the answer to that; it would help narrow down the possibilities.

Mrs Farmer shook her head. Mr Farmer pulled her closer and turned his head to press his face into her arm. "God, if that—thing was around when Melissa was on her own...," he muttered.

"I don't think it wants to hurt her," Paul offered. He reckoned if that was the case, it would have thrown the plate at Melissa, not her father. "Not from the way she described it." He couldn't be sure, of course; Keel had gotten in the way before he had a chance to find out more. But Melissa hadn't seemed particularly frightened telling him about it.

He turned to the Powells. "Did anything like that happen with you and Kimberly?"

Mrs Powell shook her head. "No. No, I don't remember anything like that happening. Do you, Kevin?" Mr Powell shook his head as well.

Paul nodded in acknowledgment: looked like whatever was going on was centered here at the Farmers' house. Not that he was sure how that would help with figuring things out. Up until a few minutes ago, it had seemed likely there was some perfectly natural explanation here, even if he couldn't yet see what it was. Suddenly, it had turned from simply being some form of mistaken identity into maybe being an SQ kind of case after all....

Mr Powell shifted in his chair, the movement pulling Paul from his thoughts. "Your colleague. These theories he has. Do you believe in those too?"

Paul cleared his throat, wondering what outlandish ideas Keel had proposed to the Farmers and the Powells while he'd been outside talking to Melissa and Kimberly. "I try to keep an open mind," he offered. "I've... seen things, had things happen to me, that the science we have today can't explain. And some of the legends about supernatural creatures do turn out to have a basis in fact. It's just people didn't know what those facts were a few hundred years ago. Maybe in another five hundred years we'll be able to explain things that seem just as bizarre to us now. But I'm not —."

The sound of the front door opening alerted Paul to Keel's return and he cut short what he was about to say: that he wasn't as likely from the get go to assume events didn't have a perfectly rational explanation. He would have definitely kept to himself that he didn't subscribe at all to Keel's belief that everything was part of some vast, global, supernatural conspiracy that heralded the end of the world.

Keel appeared in the doorway and surveyed the five faces turned to him. "I've arranged appointments with your doctor and the hospital for tomorrow." He wagged his cellphone. "But they want signed permissions from all of you before they'll allow us to access the records."

"Sure." Mr Farmer got to his feet. "What do you need."

oOo

With the necessary authorizations from both families drawn up, signed and tucked into Keel's jacket pocket, Paul followed him outside. Melissa and Kimberly were still messing about under the basketball hoop, but they stopped what they were doing as Paul and Keel emerged from the house and watched them as they made their way back to the car. Melissa raised her hand and said something behind it that made Kimberly giggle.

"Did you talk to them at all?" Paul inclined his head in the girls' direction as Keel unlocked the car.

Keel gave a grunt that Paul took for a yes. He suspected Keel's diffidence was because the conversation hadn't gone very well and Keel was either annoyed or embarrassed about it. Although he didn't have much hope the answer was going to prove useful, Paul forced himself to ask, "Did they tell you anything interesting?"

"Not really." Keel paused, the car door half open. Resting his arm on the top of the car, he said, with a trace of smugness in his voice, "They did ask me if I knew

whether or not you had a girlfriend."

"What?" Paul, reaching to open his own door, stopped and stared at him in horror.

"Oh, yes." Keel smirked at him. "You seem to have created quite an impression."

"They're *thirteen*," Paul protested. He snuck another glance at the girls, careful to make sure they didn't catch him looking. Because he really didn't want to give them any ideas. Any *more* ideas.

"An eminently marriageable age in many cultures," Keel offered with an overly innocent air. Paul's annoyed glare made him raise his hands defensively. "Fine, fine. Not this one. You have a point."

Still smirking, he climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine.

oOo

"One of my nurses showed me the newspaper report." Dr Winton, the ob/gyn, had turned out to be a severe-looking woman in her late fifties with close cropped gray hair. She was resting her hands on a stack of files on the desk in front of her. Trying to squint discreetly, Paul thought he could make out the name *Lisa Pow*— and he guessed the files belonged to Mrs Powell and Mrs Farmer. Lifting his gaze, he realized Dr Winton was scrutinizing him over the top of her spectacles and had caught him looking. He blushed. She gave him a smile that softened her stern expression, before she turned back to Keel. "I saw the girls after they were born, of course, but only briefly and not together." She chuckled wryly, "I find small babies look much alike anyway, you know. And they would have been under the care of their respective pediatricians, I imagine."

"Yes, we understand." Keel glanced across at Paul and gave him an approving nod when he saw Paul had opened his notebook. "Do you remember anything unusual about the pregnancies?"

Dr Winton spread her hand flat on the files. "Well, the Powells had twins, of course, but they didn't exhibit any of the typical complications one might expect to see in a multiple birth. Mrs Powell's labor was quite extended but not beyond that typical for a first pregnancy. My notes indicate I didn't feel a C-section would have been necessary for some hours. Such a pity, naturally, that they lost one of the babies so quickly."

"Do you know why?" Keel crossed his ankle over his knee, settling back into his chair.

"The cause of death?" Dr Winton shrugged. "I understand the post-mortem didn't reveal anything specific. It's possible there was some underdevelopment that went undetected; that's not uncommon with twins. But sometimes there is no explanation for these things." She shook her head, her expression turning grim. "Crib deaths happen. More than people care to consider. But the hospital should hold the full post-mortem report if you require it."

"And were the babies monozygotic?" Keel flicked at a bit of lint on his pants as he flung out the question in a casual tone.

Dr Winton nodded. "Almost certainly, yes. They were di-amniotic but mono-chorionic." Though he wasn't aware doing so, Paul must have made some gesture or sound that betrayed his confusion at the medical terms, because Dr Winton turned and smiled at him kindly. "Two amniotic sacs but one placenta," she elaborated. "While it's possible for two separate embryos to fuse and share a placenta once they have developed beyond a certain stage, it's extremely rare. So, yes, they were almost certainly identical twins."

While Paul scribbled down the terms that confirmed what the DNA tests had already told them, Keel turned the conversation to the other family. "And the Farmers?"

Dr Winton slid the bottom file out from underneath the top one. Looking up from his notes, Paul saw it was considerably thicker than the Powells' file. "Ah, yes, the Farmers. They were under my care for quite a number of years. Mrs Farmer had a great deal of trouble conceiving, although none of the tests we ran on her or her husband showed anything medically wrong that would account for it."

"But testing twenty years ago was much less sophisticated," Keel pointed out.

"That's true," Dr Winton conceded. "It's possible that with today's diagnostics we might have better luck pinpointing the root cause. Be that as it may, after more than five years of attempting to identify the cause, we regretfully concluded a pregnancy was unlikely. Six months after that, Mrs Farmer turned up in my office and told me she thought she was pregnant. And, lo and behold, she was."

"Did she say if she'd done anything different?" Paul asked. "Did she have any theories about what she thought had changed? About why she'd gotten pregnant now when she couldn't before?"

Dr Winton shrugged. "No theories. No reason. Babies come when their time is right, you know? Although it's not that unusual for women to conceive once they stop trying." She leaned forward and added with a confidential chuckle, "Babies don't much like stress, you know? We just took it as God's blessing and were thankful."

Paul caught the amused look Keel sent in his direction at Dr Winton's last words. Ignoring it, he turned his attention back to her. "And were there any issues with Mrs Farmer's pregnancy?"

Dr Winton shook her head. "Nothing beyond the usual concerns with a first baby for an older mother. In fact, once Mrs Farmer finally became pregnant, everything went very smoothly."

oOo

"God's blessing, huh?"

It was two hours later and they were on their way to the hospital, having found nothing in Dr Winton's records to explain Melissa and Kimberly.

"What?" Paul snatched a glance in Keel's direction as he guided the car crosstown to the hospital, following the directions given by Dr Winton's receptionist.

"Mrs Farmer's pregnancy. Dr Winton said it was God's blessing." Keel sounded a little scornful, like he was surprised a doctor would believe in such mumbo-jumbo.

Paul thought that was a bit rich, given it didn't seem any more out there than some of the theories Keel had come up with, but he kept his tone mild. "Maybe it was."

"You really believe that? That Mrs Farmer prayed to God or the Virgin Mary or Saint, Saint—." Keel flapped his hands, apparently having exhausted his knowledge of who might intercede on behalf of infertile women.

"St Anne?" Paul offered. He had a feeling there was someone more specific, but he'd never had reason to find out who.

"Whoever," Keel waved his hand dismissively. "You really think Mrs Farmer said a prayer and got herself pregnant as a result?"

Paul thought Keel was probably trying to get a rise out of him. He didn't answer, concentrating his attention instead on peering at the street signs, looking for the turn he needed to make.

His suspicions about Keel's motives were confirmed when the other man prodded again. "You think this is that miracle you've been looking for?"

Paul suppressed a small smile as he made the turn. "You were the one who said twins were often considered a sign of divine intervention."

Keel made an unimpressed noise. As Paul drove into the hospital parking lot, he wondered what Keel *did* believe in.

oOo

The appointment at the hospital proved to be with a representative of the public affairs department. She was a sharply dressed woman around Paul's age who was distinctly less welcoming than Dr Winton. The three of them had barely sat down when she said briskly and coldly, "You do realize that the statute of limitations for medical malpractice and personal injury claims in this state is two years. The hospital cannot be held liable for any claims relating to the births of these girls."

"I'm sure you also realize, Miss Morris—" Keel's tone was offhand but he sounded undaunted, "—that the girls are both unemancipated minors and the statute of limitations doesn't start running until they're eighteen."

Paul wasn't much surprised to discover Keel was something of an amateur lawyer. It fitted with the way he dabbled in a dozen different fields in his work for SQ. Probably

been in more than a few legal scrapes of his own, as well.

"The hospital can accept no liability," Miss Morris repeated firmly.

"Look," Paul leaned forward and smiled at her. "We're not here looking for evidence for a lawsuit. We just want to look at the records to see if we can find out what might have happened."

"Hmm." She didn't smile back at him. "Well, the records aren't here. They're in our storage facility in Boyers. We can arrange for the relevant documents to be retrieved if you're willing to sign the appropriate undertakings." She slid a document lying in front of her on the table—several closely typed pages stapled together—in Keel's direction.

"Of course." Keel picked up the document, skimming his eyes over the pages so quickly Paul couldn't believe he was actually taking in more than one word in ten. He held out his hand to Paul as he turned over the last page. "Paul?"

A little reluctantly, Paul handed over his pen. While he didn't think that the Farmers and Powells were very interested in suing, he didn't much like the cavalier way Keel was prepared to sign away their rights.

Keel paused, the pen hovering over the dotted line. He peered up at Miss Morris. "When will the documents be available?"

Paul caught a flicker of discomfort in her eyes before she answered reluctantly, "Tomorrow morning." When Keel raised his eyebrows, she added defensively, "Boyers is three hours drive from here. Even if I call them now, by the time they've gotten them out of storage and onto a truck...."

"Uh-huh." Keel bent back to the release form and signed his name with an ostentatious flourish, before carefully printing the date underneath. "Tomorrow will have to do, then."

oOo

The files were waiting for them when they were shown into a chilly conference room the next day: six folders lined up in a neat row in the middle of the table. Keel marched up to the table, scanned the titles, grabbed a file and flung himself into a chair. Flipping open the folder, he began to read the contents without saying a word to Paul.

Paul, following behind, realized Keel must have taken the post-mortem report, since he was left with a choice of the records for the two mothers and the three babies. Picking up the nearest folder, which belonged to Mrs Farmer, he sat down in a chair on the opposite side of the table and began to read as well. As he turned the first pages, he tried to decide if he preferred it when Keel talked to him or when he didn't.

The file proved itself to be just as uncommunicative as his boss. Paul scanned blood test results, ultrasound photos, records of drugs administered and a half dozen

different kinds of charts that recorded everything from temperature to the intervals between contractions. Halfway through, he realized he wasn't sure what he should be looking for, or if he'd recognize it when he saw it: he had no idea what most of these figures meant or whether they were normal. Still, he kept going to the end, hoping something would leap out at him.

Keel was still reading the report from the ME when Paul reached the end of the first file. With a shrug, he set the file he'd just looked through to one side of the rest and took up one of the others, this time choosing Melissa's records. The file was a lot slimmer: it looked like Melissa and her mother had only spent a little over a day in hospital before they went home, and there wasn't much in the file beyond measurements of Melissa's weight and length at birth, some blood pressure and heart rate readings, and some other observations made during the short time she'd been in the nursery.

Kimberly's file was equally unenlightening, despite being thicker. She'd spent several days in hospital after she was born. Paul guessed they'd been keeping her under observation after Lauren had died, in case she exhibited any of the same symptoms. There didn't seem to be any reason for concern though: the charts showed lines that either marched across the pages steadily or climbed satisfactorily according to what they measured.

A snort from Keel made Paul look up in time to see him slap the file closed and shove it frustratedly away from him. "An absolutely normal, perfectly healthy baby—except for the fact she's dead!" he muttered. He looked up at Paul. "Did you find anything?"

Paul shook his head. "Not yet. But I'm not sure what I should be looking for." Closing Kimberly's file, he put it with the two others he'd already read. "May I?" He leaned forward to pick up the file with the post-mortem, his hand hovering above it while he waited for Keel's permission.

"Of course." Keel waved one hand casually in Paul's direction while with the other he reached for one of the files Paul hadn't yet read.

Taking the post-mortem file, Paul settled back in his chair. The file consisted mostly of the ME's report, with some witness statements attached to it. It seemed the birth had proceeded normally and Lauren had been placed in the nursery with her sister while their mother got some sleep. A few hours later, a nursing assistant working in the nursery had discovered Lauren wasn't breathing. Attempts were made to revive her, but were unsuccessful. The ME had examined the body and—

Something made Paul stop and turn back to the previous page, to the description of the nursing assistant finding the body. He read it again and then shuffled through the pages in the file until he found the statement she'd made. She'd signed her signature at the bottom—Margaret Anne Clarke—and printed the date under that. The shape of the black-inked marks nagged at Paul. Blindly reaching out with one hand, he grabbed the nearest file and opened it. Glancing at it, he saw it was Melissa's file. There, on the sheet recording Melissa's vital statistics when she was born, was the same distinctive squiggle for the number eight as in the date that Margaret Anne Clarke had printed on her statement.

Putting both files down, Paul scabbled through the files Keel had thrown together in a heap in the middle of the table once he'd finished with them, until he found Kimberly's file. The same handwriting looked back at him from her records. In Mrs Powell's file, he found that tell-tale eight in her temperature and blood pressure readings.

"Paul?"

Keel's soft question made Paul look up. He discovered that, without realizing it, he'd gotten to his feet and was standing with his fists resting on the table, the files spread before him.

Keel, peering up at him, raised an eyebrow. "You've found something?"

"Maybe." Paul squinted at the folder Keel was holding. "Is that Lauren's?"

"Uh-huh." Keel passed it across.

Paul spread it open and again found the betraying digit. Looking up for Mrs Farmer's file, he discovered Keel already had it open at the same chart as Mrs Powell's. It confirmed what he'd already deduced. "The nursing assistant. She was present at both births and she was the one who found Lauren in the nursery."

"It's a small hospital, Paul. We—."

Paul shook his head. "The midwives. The physician assistants. Even the phlebotomists. They're all different. The only person who was present at both births and at Lauren's death is the nursing assistant." He looked up at Keel. "I think we need to talk to her."

oOo

An elderly woman was out front as Keel and Paul approached the small brick house. She was busy weeding the borders that lined each side of the path leading to the front stoop and didn't look up until Paul's shadow fell across her. He guessed she might be slightly deaf.

"Mrs Margaret Clark?"

"Peggy," she corrected with a smile. She sat back on her heels and pulled off her gardening gloves. "And who might you young men be? I'm not buying anything and I'm quite happy with my church. St Mary's, just back up the road there." She gestured with one hand.

Paul found himself grinning back at her directness. "I'm Paul Callan and this is Alva Keel." He gestured in Keel's direction. "We'd like to talk to you about something that happened while you were working at Divine Providence hospital."

"Hmm." Paul thought he caught a flicker of unease in her eyes. "Well, then, I guess

you'd better come in and have something to drink. Here." She held out her hand to Paul. "Twenty years lifting patients didn't do my back and knees any good at all."

Paul helped her to her feet, finding her grip unexpectedly strong, and followed her inside the house. Keel brought up the rear. Somewhat to Paul's surprise, he was carrying the small basket of gardening tools Peggy had left on the path. She smiled at him as she took it from him and put it on the hall table. "Thank you, dear."

Peggy Clark seemed to have a lot of grandchildren and a fondness for china rabbits, judging by the decor of the living room she showed them into. She waved away Paul's offer to help with the coffee and disappeared to the kitchen, bustling back a few minutes later with a tray neatly laid out with china cups and saucers, a sugar bowl and cream in a jug.

"Now, then," she said, when they'd all been served and she'd settled herself into an armchair. "What do you want to know?"

Keel gestured to Paul that he should be the one to speak. Paul turned back to Peggy. "You worked in the labor ward at Divine Providence as a nursing assistant, didn't you?"

"Yes." Peggy nodded. "I started off in a surgical ward, but then they transferred me to the labor ward and I spent nearly twenty years there. Such a happy place, you know? So much joy."

Paul leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him. "But not always?" he suggested gently. "Sometimes some of those babies are stillborn? And sometimes they don't live for very long?"

"Sometimes." Peggy had been restlessly playing with the bottom edge of her sweater, but now her hands stilled in her lap. Her gaze slid away from Paul's. He dipped his head to try and catch her eye again.

"Do you remember a baby called Lauren Powell?"

Peggy didn't answer, but Paul, watching closely, saw her lips tighten a little, as if keeping her response in check. When it was clear she wasn't going to say anything more he prompted, "She died a few hours after birth. The ME's report says you were the one who found her."

"Then I guess I must have." Peggy's gaze flicked up to his face for a moment and then away again. Her tone was flat, yet with a little something at the edge that told Paul she wasn't nearly as indifferent as she was pretending to be.

"Are you saying you don't remember?" Keel, now also perched on the edge of his seat, peered at her with a frown.

Peggy turned her head away from both of them. "There were a lot of babies." Her tone had taken a peevish, almost childish turn.

"I don't suppose you remember a baby called Melissa Farmer, either?"

Keel's voice was soft in the quiet room and Paul wondered for a moment whether Peggy could hear him. The way she'd spoken herself when offering them coffee, a shade too loud, suggested his initial guess that she was a little hard of hearing had been right. But the slight twitch of her cheek when Keel spoke Melissa's name told Paul that she could hear well enough. He thought now he knew what had happened, though he still had no idea *why*.

"Melissa was born around the same time as Lauren," Keel reminded her. "They were in the nursery together. So was Lauren's twin sister, Kimberly."

Peggy turned her head further away and closed her eyes. Paul suspected she was wishing she was a lot deafer than she was.

"Peggy?" Leaning forward and touching her arm, Paul discovered she was trembling slightly. "We're not here to get you into trouble. We just want to know what happened."

Peggy drew in a deep, shuddering breath, before she turned her head and, opening her eyes, looked back at Paul.

"The baby the Farmers took home: that was Lauren, wasn't it?" Paul raised his eyebrows a little, seeking confirmation. "The real Melissa was the baby who died?"

Peggy nodded, letting out a small gasp that she quickly smothered with a hand to her mouth.

"Why?" Keel was shaking his head. "Why did you switch them? What possible—?"

A tear trickled down Peggy's wrinkled cheek. Paul dug in his pocket and passed her a handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes with it.

"They wanted a baby so much." Her voice was hoarse. "She talked about it, Mrs Farmer, when I went in to there take her vitals. She told me they'd waited ten years and they'd tried everything and they'd given up. And then God had given them this... miracle." She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes again.

So much joy, she'd said. Paul found his own throat growing tight, making it hard to ask the next question. "And then you were in the nursery later that night and you found Melissa and she wasn't breathing?"

Peggy nodded. "I was doing a regular check." She swallowed. "I was a bit late doing it. We were really short-staffed that night. There'd been a storm and a lot of trees had come down and the roads were blocked, so people couldn't get in. But she'd been fine—they'd all been fine the last time I'd checked. But this time.... Her lips were blue. Really blue. And I knew that even if the doctors came, even if they tried...." She looked down at her hands twisting together in her lap.

"It would have been too late?"

Peggy nodded wordlessly.

"So you swapped the bracelets and put Lauren in the bassinet that Melissa had been in? And then you called the doctors?"

Peggy nodded again.

"And you didn't think about how the Powells would feel finding out their baby had died? How much hurt that would cause *them*?" Keel sounded faintly disgusted.

"They had two babies!" Peggy's head came up and her eyes were blazing. "They'd still have one even if they lost one. And they were young. They'd be able to have more children. The Farmers.... They'd had a miracle and then something went wrong, but God put those two baby girls there and He put me there so I could make it *right*."

oOo

Driving away from Peggy's house, listening to Keel calling the Farmers and the Powells, Paul was still mentally shaking his head. He could understand why she'd felt the urge to swap the babies and to spare the Farmers the devastation of their loss. He could even understand that she'd genuinely thought God had placed her there to do it; he'd spent most of his life around people who believed they were doing God's work. He couldn't quite believe she'd gone against all the hospital's rules and procedures, not to mention medical ethics and sheer common sense, and actually done it, though.

Keel had seemed equally unable to wrap his head around the idea. At one point, he'd asked incredulously, "Didn't you think anyone would notice? Especially once the girls started growing up."

Peggy had collected herself by that point, having sniffed back her tears and accepted the fresh cup of coffee Paul had poured for her. "I didn't think. Not at first." She'd given a small shrug. "Afterwards, yes. When... when I saw how upset the other family were. And then when I had to give my statement. But I was too scared to tell anyone what I'd done. And I hoped.... After all, God had given me this chance to make things right, so surely he'd take care of the little details."

Maybe God had taken care of things, Paul reflected, as he steered the car back toward the chain motel on the edge of town where he and Keel were staying. The Powells had moved away, and the Farmers had been given thirteen happy years with the daughter they'd wanted so badly. It was possible Melissa and Kimberly might never have met at all, never known of the other's existence: one jump shot missed—or made—and their teams might never have reached the regional finals together.

oOo

"So what do we do now?" Mrs Powell's question broke the silence that had settled on the room after Keel had finished explaining what he and Paul had discovered.

Keel shrugged. "I don't know. Technically speaking, Melissa *is* Lauren Powell. Practically speaking,...."

"She's our daughter." Mr Farmer repeated what he'd said two days earlier. "I don't care what anyone says. We raised her. She belongs with us."

Mr Powell cleared his throat. "I'm not sure legally that's—."

"Kevin." His wife put her hand on his arm, her tone soothing. "We talked about this...."

"No, dammit!" He sat forward, throwing off her hand. "The DNA shows it and now the story from that damn fool nurse confirms it. Melissa's *our* daughter. She's Lauren. She doesn't belong here at all."

"Now, let's just hold on a goddamned minute—." Mr Farmer was on the edge of his seat too, his fingers digging hard into the upholstery.

Paul saw the two women exchange a look, before Mrs Powell again reached out to her husband. "Kevin, please. Melissa grew up here. I know—" Her voice caught in her throat. "I know she's our baby girl that we thought we'd lost, but just think how we'd feel if it was the other way around and they wanted Kim back."

"But it's not the other way around, is it?" Mr Powell snarled. "Melissa—*Lauren* is ours just as much as Kim is. And these people stole her from us."

"Hey!" Mr Farmer was on his feet. "We didn't *steal* anybody. Whatever happened at the hospital, we took home *our* girl with *our* name right there on her bracelet. If anyone's trying to steal her, it's you people."

"Mr Powell. Mr Farmer." Paul had gotten to his feet too and stretched out a calming hand between them. "Please, let's—."

Keel was standing too, and suddenly the room seemed very full, the four men occupying the space between the chairs while the two women and the two girls pressed themselves back. Paul heard a plaintive "Dad" from Kimberly's direction and a horrified "Daddy" from Melissa.

"She's our daughter, dammit!" Mr Farmer took a step forward. "We raised her and we made her what she is and she's our baby, no-one else is—."

A crash from over by the fireplace made everyone turn. One of the photographs on the mantelpiece had fallen to the floor; a long crack ran diagonally across the glass, bisecting Melissa's smile.

Mr Farmer turned back to Mr Powell. "Now look what—." He'd barely got three words out before another of the photos lifted from the mantelpiece and flew toward Mr Farmer. He ducked and it caught him a glancing blow on the temple, before spinning away to land by Mr Powell's feet.

"What the—?" Mr Powell backed up against the couch he'd been sitting on, throwing out his arms to protect his wife and daughter on either side of him.

Another photograph launched itself from the mantelpiece. Mr Farmer put his hands up to fend it off. Even as he batted it away, one of the pictures from the bookshelves aimed itself at his head.

"Get down." Paul flung himself at Mr Farmer, wrestling him to the floor and trying to shield the other man's head as well as his own as more pictures hurled themselves at the two of them. Against the clatter of glass and wood and metal, he heard Keel say, "It's Melissa. The real Melissa."

A sharp metal frame caught Paul's cheek and he felt the sting of blood, while hard corners rained down blows on his back and shoulders. He tried to remember how many pictures there were in the room—a lot—and to comfort himself with the thought that whoever or whatever it was would run out of ammunition eventually.

"Melissa?" Keel spoke loudly, making himself heard over the din. "Can you hear me?"

There was a sudden silence. Paul, tensed for the next missile, lifted his head cautiously and peered up. Another photograph hung in the air by the bookshelves. Even as Paul watched, it suddenly fell straight down to the ground, as if whatever entity was holding it up had exhausted itself.

"Good." Keel sounded pleased. Peering back over his shoulder, Paul saw he'd taken a step forward and had his hands open in appeal as he spoke to whatever was manifesting itself. "Listen, Melissa, you shouldn't be angry with your parents...."

Paul jumped at the loud bang that came from the direction of the bookshelves. Turning, he saw a picture had been slammed over. But not thrown. That was an improvement, at least.

Cautiously, he lifted himself away from Mr Farmer a little. Not wanting to disturb Keel's conversation with the spirit—he was speaking with it again—Paul merely raised his eyebrows questioningly as the other man began to roll over. Meeting Paul's gaze, Mr Farmer gave him the slightest of nods. Paul backed off a little more, letting the other man sit up, while he kept a wary eye on the row of photographs still standing on the shelves.

"I can understand you're angry." Keel had lowered his voice a little now he didn't have to compete with the sound of destruction. "Maybe you feel neglected. Like your parents are ignoring you. But this isn't your parents' fault. They didn't know—."

"Look out!" Out of the corner of his eye, Paul had seen a picture rise from the group that stood on top of the TV cabinet on the far side of the room from the bookshelves. Apparently the real Melissa had more of a talent for deception than her namesake; while Keel had been talking to her, thinking she was still by the bookshelves, she'd moved.

Keel turned and raised his hands, managing to get them up in time to stop the picture smashing into his face. A second followed, and he caught it.

"Melissa!"

Paul turned, startled at the voice that had spoken. Melissa had stepped away from her mother, who was cowering against the wall. No, Paul silently amended to himself: Lauren had stepped away from Mrs Farmer.

"Melissa. Sweetheart...." Mr Farmer held out a hand to hold her back.

She looked down at him and Paul saw there were tears in her eyes. "I'm not Melissa," she reminded him, her voice a whisper. "I'm Lauren. Lauren Powell."

She looked back up, toward where the last photograph had been thrown from. "Look, I'm sorry." Her voice cracked a little. "I'm sorry I took your place. I'm sorry I... took what was yours. Your mom and dad—" She shot a quick glance over her shoulder at Mrs Farmer, before giving Mr Farmer a smile as she turned back towards the television. "—they're really great. They're really—."

She stopped, her lips trembling. Mr Farmer reached up and took her hand and gave it a squeeze. Swallowing hard, she went on, "I know we ignored you, but we didn't mean to. We didn't know. Please, don't be angry with them."

"We didn't ignore you." Kimberly stepped around her father's outspread arm and joined her sister in the middle of the room. Paul saw her grope for her sister's free hand as she turned to face the television. "We'd go visit your grave every year, and mom and dad would talk about you sometimes."

Another picture on the TV cabinet rocked a little. Paul tensed, wondering who Melissa was mad at now and which way he would need to fling himself. But after a moment the picture simply fell forward, face down, with a quiet clatter.

"It's my fault." Mrs Farmer's voice cracked a little as she took a pace away from the wall. "I should have known. I should have known this Melissa wasn't you." She reached out and lightly touched the shoulder of the girl she'd thought was her daughter. "I held you and I fed you. Before—. Before you died. I held you and I fed you and I should have known. I'm sorry I didn't."

"You couldn't have...," Keel started to object, but Mrs Farmer shook her head at him, silencing him. She turned back toward where her daughter's spirit had last shown itself.

"I'm sorry we hurt you. We gave the love we should have given to you to someone else, and that isn't how things should have been." Mrs Farmer hesitated and then slipped her arm around the girl who had been raised as Melissa and smiled down at her. "But I can't regret loving her, loving this Melissa. She may not be our blood, but she is our daughter. I just hope you know we would have loved you just as much."

The picture frame quivered.

"And we *did* love you, even though you weren't ours." It was Mrs Powell's turn to speak up. She put her hand on her husband's arm and he turned to look down at her and meet her gaze. "You were loved and missed, Melissa. You were. I don't think there's been a day that's gone past that we haven't thought of you. Please don't be angry with your parents."

The picture frame rocked again and then slowly lifted itself upright. It teetered for a moment, before settling back in place, once more displaying the photograph to the room: the Farmers holding Melissa—Lauren—as a baby, proud smiles on their faces.

"Thank you." Mrs Farmer tightened her arm around Lauren's shoulders as she whispered the words. She looked across at the Powells. "Lisa, Kevin, may we visit Melissa's grave?"

"Of course." Mrs Powell nodded at her. "Any time."

Paul couldn't have told how he knew—except maybe, just at the edge of hearing, he caught a baby's chuckle—but he suddenly sensed that Melissa was gone. Her spirit had perhaps found its release and had finally moved on to wherever it was supposed to be. Getting back to his feet and helping Mr Farmer up, Paul found himself murmuring, "Anima eius et animae omnium fidelium defunctorum per Dei misericordiam requiescant in pace."

He hoped she could find peace at last. He hoped all of them could.

oOo

While Keel had a few last words with the Farmers and the Powells, Paul stepped outside. The girls were where he'd expected to find them, standing under the basketball hoop. Kimberly held the ball in front of her, but they didn't look like they'd been playing. Seeing him, they exchanged a glance and then crossed to meet him as he came down the steps.

Melissa's gaze went to the cut on his head, which Keel had cleaned and closed with a couple of butterfly bandages. "Does it hurt?"

Paul gave a wry laugh. "I've had worse." Catching her anxious look, he added quickly. "I'll be fine."

She nodded, her expression serious. "Do you think we'll see her again? The... real Melissa, I mean."

Paul shook his head. "I don't think so. It felt like she's at peace now."

Melissa looked up at him coyly from under her lashes. "And will we see *you* again?"

Paul scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Uh. Probably not." He dropped his hand. "But your parents have promised to let us know how things go."

Both girls looked a little disappointed and there was a moment of awkward silence while he cast around for something else to say. What the heck was taking Keel so long inside? He cleared his throat. "What you did back there, that was very brave. Both of you."

Melissa simply shrugged, a blush coloring her cheeks, but Kimberly giggled and offered up an embarrassed-sounding, "Thanks." Spinning the basketball in her hands, she added, "And thanks for, you know, the thing with the shooting...."

"It helped?" Paul allowed himself a rueful chuckle inside at how absurdly pleased he felt to hear he'd made a difference about *that*, given all they'd been through and all they'd achieved in the past few days.

Kimberly nodded. "Yeah. I still forget sometimes, you know? When I don't have time to think about it. But when I remember? Yeah, it really helps."

"Well, lots of practice and you won't have to remember," he reminded her. "It'll come naturally. That's the secret to being good at anything."

Melissa looked up coyly from under her lashes at him. "I guess you must have had a lot of practice at... this." She flapped her hand in the direction of the house. "Dealing with ghosts and stuff."

He laughed and shook his head. "This? I'm just a beginner."

"Beginner's luck, huh?" Paul jumped as Keel slapped him on the shoulder. He hadn't heard him come out of the house. "Come on, time to drag you away from these two delightful young women and get you home. Ladies." He dipped his head in salute to them and headed down the path.

Paul turned back to the girls. "Gotta go. The Boss has spoken. Take care, okay?" Giving them a parting smile, he headed after Keel.

oOo

Settling into the car, Paul closed his eyes against the early evening sun and leaned his head back, letting Keel steer the car back to the Interstate.

"So, how was it?" Keel asked after a few minutes, when they'd reached a steady cruising speed.

"How was what?" Paul opened one eye and squinted in his direction.

"Meeting your first ghost."

Paul's lips twitched. "Who says it's my first?"

"Is there something you haven't been telling me?" Keel's startled question was accompanied by the car taking a lurch sideways on to the shoulder. Keel swore under

his breath as he wrenched them back onto the road. From somewhere behind them, a horn blared. Paul grabbed on to door handle and made a mental note not to tease Keel when he was driving.

"No." Paul cautiously let go of the door handle. "I've seen a few weird things, but no ghosts before." When he'd seen Tommy in the church, he'd been imagining it, hadn't he? It had just been his mind playing tricks. He huffed a laugh. "And it was painful." He lifted his hand to touch the band-aid on his cheek.

"Our line of work often can be." Keel sounded fatalistic.

Paul thought for a moment about asking Keel why he did it, if it was so dangerous. Why not stay at Harvard, where the worst he'd face was some metaphorical backstabbing from his peers. He wasn't sure he wanted to get into that discussion—or his own part in Keel's choices—right now. Settling himself more comfortably in the car seat, he turned the topic back to the case. "So. Ghosts. I thought they usually haunted the place where they died."

Keel nodded. "That's quite common, yes. But perhaps in Melissa's case, she was more attached to the mother who'd just given birth to her than the hospital, and she hitched a ride."

"Uh-huh." Paul lifted his hand and then lowered it again, resisting the urge to scratch his cheek. "Do you think they'll be okay?"

"Oh, I should think so." Keel took one hand off the wheel and waved it breezily. "Now that Melissa seems to have forgiven her parents, I doubt they'll have any more trouble."

Paul shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I mean, with Melissa turning out to be the Powells' daughter after all. That's got to be pretty... confusing and upsetting for her."

Keel shrugged. "They seem to be handling it okay."

That was true enough. Mr Powell had come into the kitchen while Keel was patching up the gash on Paul's cheek and told them Melissa would be staying with the Farmers. He'd given a slight shrug. "She might have our genes, but she's their daughter, and it's best for her."

Paul thought he was right—about Melissa being the Farmers' daughter, even if they weren't genetically related. Poppi had always been more of a father to him than the man who'd given him his name and disappeared out of his life before Paul was old enough to remember him. And he could barely remember his mother, either: just a few brief impressions of being held and wanted, of her quietly murmuring a lullaby, of his hand reaching out futilely for hers before a nun had bundled him out of her hospital room.

The Farmers had given Melissa thirteen years of love and care, the way Poppi had cared for Paul for thirteen years in the orphanage. The way he still cared for him. Paul knew that was really mattered.

Flinching as Keel had applied a band-aid over the cut, Paul had tried to reassure Mr Powell. "I'm sure you're doing the right thing."

"How will you handle things legally?" Keel had been gathering together the used cotton buds and the wrapping from the band-aid and was dropping them in the trash.

Mr Powell had run a hand through his hair. "I guess we'll have to consult a lawyer about that. See about getting a statement from that nurse you spoke to. And the Farmers will maybe have to adopt Melissa, or we'll have to have some kind of fostering agreement." He'd smiled. "We can sort it out. After everything we've been through, that's the easy part."

"I think you've both gained a daughter," Paul had offered.

Mr Powell had nodded. "Yes, I think you're right. Whatever happens, we're going to make sure Kimberly and Melissa get to spend some time together. Get to know each other." He'd hesitated and then jerked his head toward the living room, where they'd left the two families clearing up the mess the real Melissa had made. "We're going to visit the grave. We didn't know if you'd like to come...."

Keel had rubbed his hands together as if dusting off some dirt. "No, no. We'll leave that to you. The two of us should be getting back to Boston."

"Okay, then." Mr Powell had held out his hand to Keel. "In that case, we just wanted to thank you for your help. I don't know why you guys do this, but we appreciate it."

Keel had shaken his hand. "We're just in search of the truth."

"And sometimes we get to help people along the way," Paul had added when it was his turn to shake Mr Powell's hand. Keel's quiet snort hadn't been lost on him, but Paul hadn't cared.

Closing his eyes and settling back into the car seat as they headed back to Boston, Paul remembered what he'd thought back at the house and nodded to himself. Whatever reasons Keel had for running SQ—and no matter how much his blinders might make him behave in ways that made Paul cringe—Paul knew he could do good work here.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the David Greenwalt Productions/ Spyglass Entertainment/ Touchstone Television series *Miracles*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it.