

CHRISTINE MORGAN

GIFTED CHILDREN



*Every parent's worst
nightmare . . .*

Gifted

Children

by Christine Morgan

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Prologue

Saturday, April 12

The dragon rose from its cave in a coil of smoky-blue, the scales along its sinuous neck rippling like fog on the water. Its hungry golden eyes swept the deep forest before settling on the bold challenger standing before it.

Sir Lora the Fearless adjusted her silvery helm, raised her shield to protect her face from the dragon's fiery breath, and brandished her magic sword. At her side, her fierce but loyal wolf-companion bared his teeth at the monstrous wyrm.

"Knightsbane!" Sir Lora cried. "Behold your doom! I am come to slay you!"

Steam chuffed from its nostrils as the dragon chuckled. It swayed like a snake, trying to hypnotize her into immobility.

"No more shall you feed on the people of this kingdom and steal their treasures! I will chop you into dragon-burgers!"

She lunged and slashed with her sword, striking a blow against the dragon's tree-trunk of a foreleg. The impact jarred the weapon from her hand. Before she could pick it up, the wolf snatched it up in his jaws and bounded in a gleeful tail-wagging circle.

"Drop it!" Sir Lora commanded.

The wolf hunkered low to the ground, forepaws extended and haunches wagging. His ears canted forward. He grinned.

"I said drop it." She grabbed at the sword, but the wolf scampered out of her way just enough to taunt her.

"Ruff, darn it!" Lora yanked off her helmet, freeing her long dark hair.

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“How can we kill the great dragon if you won’t let me have my sword? The whole kingdom is depending on us, you know. Now, give it. Give it here.”

The dog let the stick fall from his mouth, but by then the fantasy was broken. Gone was brave Sir Lora, champion of the land, in her shining armor. Instead, she was regular old Lora Blake again. Only nine, not champion of anything except for the fourth-grade spelling bee.

“You’re six years old,” Lora said. “That’s forty-two in dog years. So why do you have to act like such a little kid?”

Ruff barked, picked up the stick again, and dropped it closer to her feet. He hopped side to side and hunkered down again, eyes never leaving her.

Lora sighed. “Okay, okay.” She hurled the stick across the clearing that used to be the barren rocky plain descending from the dragon’s cave but was now just a bare patch in the woods.

With a yip of joy, Ruff was off. Lora shook her head and unhooked her plastic armor. Underneath, she wore jeans and a bright red sweatshirt over a tee shirt, but the warmth of the day encouraged her to take the sweatshirt off and tie the sleeves around her neck so that it hung like a cape.

Ruff came back, cavorting, teasing, trying to make her chase him. With Sir Lora’s heroic quest shot, she gave in.

They played with the stick until even Ruff was exhausted and the stick itself was seriously gnawed, slobbery, and bedraggled.

“Yuck,” Lora said, scrubbing her hands on her jeans. “Dog spit, Ruff, gross.”

He lolled his tongue at her, trailing runners of saliva, apparently not sharing her opinion.

“Come on, let’s go exploring.”

She found a new branch. It was too big for Ruff to steal and get up to dickens. Using it as a walking stick, she turned away from the clearing and the big gnarled tree that a little imagination could turn into a dragon looming from a cave formed by two boulders tilted together.

In her mind, she became Frodo Baggins, except as a girl.

“You can be my faithful friend Samwise,” she said to Ruff. “And we’re going to Mordor, so look out for Ringwraiths.”

They moved into the cool green shadows, rich with the scent of redwood and sea spray. Here and there, a few trees and flowering bushes were starting to show their spring colors amid the backdrop of evergreen. The sky was puffed with white clouds like lambs roaming a sapphire meadow.

It was the sort of rare spring day, her stepdad joked, that made the county tourism board and the college rush out and shoot photos for postcards, to prove to people that it didn’t rain all the time in this part of the state.

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The rain would be back, Lora knew. It was only April. They could count on a few more weeks of wet-and-grey before Trinity Bay's short-lived summer season began in earnest.

Rain or no, Lora loved it here. The Arizona desert where she used to live had been beautiful in its own stark way, but most of the time everybody stayed out of the sun, going from one air-conditioned place to another in equally air-conditioned cars.

Whenever she thought about her old home, a knot tightened in her stomach. She was glad to be here, glad to be with her mother again . . . she loved Grandpa and her stepdad and her new baby brothers . . . but it was horrible that her real father had died that way.

Trying to put those sad, scary thoughts out of her mind, she concentrated on her progress through the forest. Frodo and Sam, setting out on the loneliest leg of their journey.

To further the illusion, she took the birthstone ring off her pinkie finger and strung it on a piece of cord. She slipped the loop over her head so that the ring dangled against her chest.

"One Ring to rule them all," she said to Ruff. "Are you still looking out for Nazgul?"

He was, but so far there were only birds and chipmunks.

"When the twins get bigger, they can play with us. They can be Merry and Pippin, maybe."

The prospect cheered her, until she realized that by the time the twins were old enough to be interesting, she would have advanced well toward being a boring grown-up. Jenny Forrester, her nearest neighbor, was only twelve and already cared more about music and clothes than about having fun.

"I wish they'd made Seacliff a place for *regular* kids," she said, looking in the direction of the mansion that had recently reopened as some sort of hospital or institution.

Lora silently repeated the words to herself – *autistic, catatonic, brain-damaged*. Her mom had explained them to her last year, when the sale had been finalized.

Autistic, catatonic, brain-damaged. They all meant pretty much the same thing, at least in her mind. If the Seacliff kids couldn't talk, go to school, or play, it didn't much matter what fancy names the doctors used.

The redwood trunks soared to towering heights around her. The ground was springy with untold ages of needles compressed into an earthen bed. The foliage overhead was so densely interlocked that it prevented any other plants from surviving at ground level and only allowed a little sunlight to

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pierce the gloom.

Kind of spooky . . .

A furtive little chill crept up and down the back of Lora's neck, the kind of chill she got when reading a ghost story. Like Mom's new book. While Lora hadn't read it – Mom said she was too young – Lora knew it was about a girl who'd been killed and then come back as a ghost.

It was nothing like Mom's other books, which were kind of embarrassing, really. When Lora had been a little kid, she'd thought that it was neat to have a series of storybooks named after herself and her dog. Mom sometimes got shocked letters now from people – ladies, mostly – who had read the *Lora and Ruff* books to their kids and then thought that *Mourning Glory* would be okay for them, too.

Lora wished that she was old enough to read the new one. She didn't see why she shouldn't be allowed to. Didn't she read all of *The Lord of the Rings*? All of the Harry Potter books?

She could take it. She wasn't a baby.

And she liked being scared. Sort of.

She turned in a slow circle to look around. She wouldn't have been surprised to see a pallid form float out from between the trees, arms outstretched, fingers curled and beckoning . . .

Ruff barked.

Lora, carried away by her fantasy, uttered a surprised little squeal and whirled, sure that she *was* going to see a ghost. Goosebumps ran up her arms all the way to the sleeves of her white *Pokémon* tee shirt.

But there was nothing but Ruff, standing with his ears perked forward.

“What's the matter, Ruff?”

He barked again, then began prancing and bobbing his head like he was begging for playful attention.

“Go away, dog!” a boy's voice shouted. It came from within a deep split in the base of a dead tree.

Ruff, not normally cowed by yelling, turned tail and bolted to Lora's side. There, he crouched, trembling and whining, all of his playfulness gone.

“Hey!” Lora said, stalking forward. “You didn't have to be mean to him, whoever you are!”

“Leave me alone!”

A strong and sudden wave of resentment went through her. She almost told the kid fine, if he wanted to be like that, she'd go. The urge was overpowering. She turned to leave.

But, as she looked back, her gaze found that opening in the redwood again. The lumpy sides of it widened in an inverted V, and she thought again

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of the whimsy that had been leading her through the forest in the first place.

Instead of stomping away, she giggled. The urge to leave dissipated with the sound of her merriment.

“Oops, Ruff . . . this isn’t Mordor, this is near Tom Bombadil’s house. And that’s Old Man Willow! So one of our hobbit friends must be trapped inside.”

A head poked out of the tree. It belonged to a boy with tangled light brown hair, suspicious hazel eyes, and a scratched, smudged, dirty face.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“*The Lord of the Rings.*”

“What’s that?”

“What’s that? Only the best books and movies *ever!* I’ve seen the movies ten times each, and read the books three times. What are you doing in there?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re hiding.”

“Well, duh.”

“You don’t need to be so mean,” she said. “We didn’t do anything to you.”

“You sicced your dog on me.”

“I did not. He just wanted to play. His name’s Ruff.”

“So?”

“So . . . mine’s Lora. What’s yours?”

He studied her for almost a whole minute, his face a sullen scowl. “Chris,” he finally said.

“Why don’t you come out of there?” Lora asked.

Chris emerged from the tree. He was twig-thin and bony, a little taller than Lora. His tee shirt had a fierce dinosaur on the front. His jeans and shoes were scuffed and muddy. She saw a white plastic band on his wrist that looked like a cheap watch.

“Do you go to my school? I haven’t ever seen you before. Are you new?”

“Quit staring at me,” Chris snapped.

Lora turned away so fast her head felt dizzy. “*Sor-ry!*”

“Are you gonna tattle on me? If you tell anyone I was out here, I’ll get in trouble.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Swear?”

“Sure.”

“Then do it. Say it.”

“I swear I won’t tell!” She risked an impatient glance at him even though she didn’t really want to. “Okay?”

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“Okay,” he said.

Lora smiled. “Wanna play?”

“Play what?” Chris regarded her with one raised, skeptical eyebrow.

Before she could choose one of her many, many suggestions, Ruff uttered a low warning growl. His fur bristling, he took a few stalking, stiff-legged steps away from them.

“Ruff?”

“Shh!” Chris warned, a strange, desperate look in his eyes.

Critch-crump – heavy footsteps on pine needles.

Crack! – a breaking branch.

Low voices, muttering . . . drawing closer.

“I got to get out of here!” With a horrible hunted expression, Chris started running.

Lora gaped after him.

“Over there!” a woman called. “I see him through the trees. There he goes!”

The *critch-crumping* sped up, veered in the direction that Chris was fleeing. Lora sensed that Ruff was about to bark again an instant before he did it, and jerked on his collar. All that came out was a muffled ‘wrf.’ He gave her a stinging look of reproach.

“Hush!” she hissed.

The pursuers flashed past a gap between tree trunks. Lora caught a glimpse of a tall man in brown pants and a plaid hunters’ shirt, and a blonde woman in dark grey pants and a black jacket. They were so intent on Chris that they never glanced her way, though she stood right in the open with her sweatshirt hanging down her back red as a bullfighter’s cape.

As soon as they were out of sight, Lora succumbed to the fear she’d caught from Chris. Ruff, too, seemed to understand that this was no time for games, and fell in beside her as she hurried away from the spot.

She went as fast as she could while trying not to make much noise, somehow sure that if those grown-ups found out she’d seen them, she’d be in big trouble.

“Leave me alone!” Chris’ voice floated through the woods. He sounded like he’d gotten pretty far, but not far enough.

Lora shivered at his anguished tone. She berated herself for cowardice – bold Sir Lora would have dashed to the rescue! – but only quickened her pace.

Ruff whimpered and surged ahead. She stumbled at the sudden tug, fell to her knees, and skinned them both on an exposed root. She lost her grip on Ruff’s collar.

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“Ruff, stay!” she whispered urgently.

But with her grasp on his collar gone, Ruff didn’t even pretend to obey. He streaked ahead into the shadows.

She could hear the grown-ups again, doubling back, getting closer.

They’d heard her, she just knew it. They’d heard her and they’d find her and who knew what would happen to her?

Lora scrambled back to her feet. Her jeans were torn, both knees skinned and sizzling with pain. She hobbled after Ruff and came to a place where one of the old redwood giants had fallen.

The massive trunk was almost as high as she was tall, its spongy surface riddled with insect-tunnels and sprouting with a layer of new growth. Lora ran to the larger end and found that the tree hadn’t broken off but uprooted. The exposed roots, clotted with earth and stringy weeds, looked like clutching fingers at the end of a skeletal arm.

The space they enclosed made a shallow cave. She crouched there despite the fact that she shared the space with beetles, spiders, and other crawly things that would normally have sent her scurrying.

As the grown-ups came even closer, Lora’s heart sank in dismay. They were bound to find her, and then what? Then what?

“– sloppy,” the woman said.

“But we have him now. No harm done.”

“*This* time.”

She could see them now, quite clearly through the screen of roots. The woman, tall and strong-looking, had blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a headband of dull metal that gleamed in a semicircle across her forehead from temple to temple. The man was old, not Grampa-Travis old but with more grey than brown in his hair. His face was tanned, weathered, and lined. He had a big pale scar, and his eyes were like chips of stone poking out of the earth, jagged and sharp. Like the woman, he wore a metal headband.

He was carrying Chris . . . and Chris was either sleeping, knocked out, or . . .

Lora’s mind quailed away from that last *or*.

They passed by only a few feet from her hiding place and kept going.

When she could neither see nor hear them anymore, Lora slowly blew out the breath she’d been holding.

She slid down until she was sitting on the soft soil with her back against one of the larger roots, and only then noticed that her face was wet from tears.

* * *

Monday,

May 9

1

Roger Brockman glanced out of the raindrop-pearled oval window into a grey dimness that deepened as the plane sank through layers of clouds.

He was aware of the woman across the aisle eyeing him sidelong. He could feel her keen curiosity and interest, and hoped she wouldn't act on them.

The flight attendant came by on a final toss of the cabin, collecting cups and wrappers. "We've begun our descent, sir," he said to Roger. "Please put up your tray table."

"Of course." Roger latched it into place. He looked out again, but there was still little to see, and resumed reading.

The woman cleared her throat in a timid yet expectant manner.

Roger turned a page.

"Pardon me . . ." she said. "I'm sorry, I've been trying not to bother you, but here we are about to land and if I didn't say something I'd never forgive myself. You're an actor, aren't you?"

He sighed, thinking, *here we go again!* "Um, no, I'm not."

"Aren't you Jeff Goldblum?" she pressed.

"I'm a doctor. A scientist," he said.

She nodded. "Sure, in the movies. Except for *Silverado*, when you were a gambler."

"I'm a real scientist. Not an actor. Never have been."

"You look exactly like Jeff Goldblum," the woman said, frowning in a way that turned her plain face into something that belonged on a cathedral

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gargoyle. "Are you sure you're not him?"

"Pretty sure."

"After all, it would be a surprise, Jeff Goldblum, here of all places. Unless you were making a movie. They filmed *The Lost World* in this area, but you'd know that, wouldn't you?"

As it happened, Roger did know that, but he just smiled. The smile felt false and strained.

Tall and lanky, with a head of unruly black hair, he supposed he must bear a faint resemblance to the actor, because it was a rare month that he wasn't asked that very question.

On the one hand, when he got up at a podium to lecture, the unconscious association with all those movies lent him an additional air of credibility.

On the other hand, people sometimes believed he'd actually encountered dinosaurs or aliens . . . or worse, wanted to talk about *Earth Girls Are Easy*.

"I don't suppose I could have your autograph anyway?" the woman asked.

"I only sign copies of my book," Roger said. "*Unlocking the Brain's Creative Potential*."

That frown was back, and uglier than ever. "I've never heard of it."

"I'm not surprised," he muttered.

The publisher had insisted on something catchy-sounding to appeal to the common reader, but the common reader was usually lost after the introduction. Those who would grasp the concepts and technical jargon – his fellow scientists – were too put off by the smarmy self-help title to pick it up in the first place. The worst of both worlds.

The woman glowered at him for several more seconds, then huffed. "You shouldn't go around claiming to be someone you're not." Then, pointedly, she immersed herself once more in the summer blockbuster issue of some celebrity gossip rag.

Roger sank his forehead into his hand and clawed at his temples.

Someday, just once in his life, he'd like to actually meet his Hollywood look-alike, stand them side by side, and show the world that the resemblance truly was not that strong.

At least in a town the size of Trinity Bay, he shouldn't have to deal with these situations very often.

The plane emerged from the low-lying cloud cover into an afternoon of grey light that paradoxically made everything seem gloomy while at the same time bringing vivid rainwashed color to the surroundings.

And this is summer, Roger thought. *Could have fooled me.*

To the west, he had a brief view of the slate-colored sea blending into

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the misty horizon. To the east were the foothills of the mountains. Below and straight ahead was the tiny Arcata-Eureka airport.

The plane touched down and rolled to a stop. Roger unhooked his seatbelt to retrieve his briefcase and laptop computer from the overhead compartment. Through the window, he could see airline personnel trundling a wheeled staircase out to meet the plane.

There weren't many passengers, and he was fifth to emerge into the damp, chilly air. He zipped up his quilted nylon jacket and descended the steps, searching the meager crowd that waited inside the glass doors of the terminal.

None of them looked familiar, which was only reasonable since he'd never met Dr. McGuire in person. He knew her only through months of correspondence, e-mails, computer chats, and conference calls.

All of which had led him to formulate a mental image promptly proved wrong.

"Dr. Brockman? I'm Gwynne McGuire."

He had been about to pass the woman, certain that she could not be the one he was supposed to be meeting. But her low, cool voice stopped him in his tracks.

Roger had been expecting, though shame on him and he should have known better, the typical bookish female scientist: drab of dress, bunned of hair, eyeglassed, plain. His astonishment and appreciation must have been blatant as he sized her up. Any less self control, and his tongue might have unrolled like that of a cartoon character.

I'd like to see Jeff Goldblum do that, he thought.

Gwynne McGuire did not seem to notice his drooling. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you face to face, and a privilege to be working with you."

Roger set down his briefcase and clasped her proffered hand. Everything about her seemed remote, cool, and controlled . . . but he thought he detected an undercurrent of intensity. "May I say the same?"

Her grip was light but strong, businesslike. She was a petite, willowy woman from whom the force of her intellect seemed to glow as if she were made from clear crystal filled with radiant liquid.

Out of deference to the weather, she wore indigo knit slacks and a striped sweater in several shades of blue. The outfit brought out her blue-grey eyes and set off a loose fall of pale apricot hair. She had a white coat draped over one arm.

A fine gold chain around her graceful neck supported a pendant, a gold disk half-edged in a crescent of platinum, suggesting the moon.

Underneath it all, Roger was sure, lurked a hot-tempered and passionate

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woman. The trouble would be chipping through all the ice.

“The items you shipped ahead arrived yesterday,” Gwynne said. “Do you have checked bags?”

“Two,” he replied. “Clothing, personal effects.” Scanning the sparsely-populated terminal, he added, “I doubt there’ll be much of a crowd at the baggage carousel.”

She indicated a conveyer belt along one wall. “That is the baggage carousel.”

As if on cue, a light began flashing in warning and then the belt started moving. Moments later, suitcases and duffel bags pushed their way through a doorway blocked by overlapping strips of black rubber.

Laden with his belongings, Roger followed Gwynne to a maroon Saturn sedan. The dreary rain pattered coldly down his collar while he stowed his suitcases in the trunk.

He settled into the passenger seat and closed the door. “It was ninety degrees and eighty-five percent humidity when I left Atlanta,” he observed.

“The fickle climate does take some getting used to.” She started the car. “Last week could have passed for a proper springtime, and now it’s as if the calendar was turned ahead to November.”

“I’m eager to see the institute.”

“No, no,” she corrected. “The *school*. Or the *house*. Never an institute, facility, center, or hospital. Dr. Lundquist is very clear on that point.”

Roger raised his eyebrows. “I see.”

“He is dedicated to making the environment as comfortable as possible for our —”

“Students?” he guessed. “Not patients, clients, or inmates?”

“Exactly. Most of these children have spent their entire lives in an institutional setting, some of them under abominable conditions. His wish is that they feel at home during their stay with us. Even if our work proves unsuccessful, we will at least have given them that.”

“Of course. What is it like working with Dr. Lundquist in person? I’ve only met him at a few seminars, though my work has been inspired by and based on his for almost twenty years.”

“His standards are exceptionally high,” she said, with the air of someone who probably drove herself harder than any external authority could ever do. “As you know, the implications of his theories, the *applications* of his theories, are tremendously innovative and exciting. But unlike many in this field, his decades of experience haven’t worn away his compassion. He thinks of the children as his own family, caring more about their welfare than his own.”

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“With his history, that’s understandable,” Roger said, keeping his tone professional and neutral.

Gwynne took a right turn, merging onto Highway 101 northbound. “In terms of his interactions with the staff, he is at once reserved and charming, and while there is a touch of condescension in him, it’s all but impossible to take offense. He is, for example, the only one who can call me ‘my lamb’ and get away with it.”

Roger studied her as she piloted the car through the increasing down-pour, trying to imagine anyone calling her ‘my lamb.’ He knew he’d never have the guts.

As she drove, she filled him in on the progress at Seacliff. A few of the specially-chosen children had already arrived, and in a matter of weeks there would be eighteen ‘students’ living in the house. Several of the staff would also be live-ins, the two of them and Dr. Lundquist included.

“The site is perfect,” she went on. “I still have trouble believing it came together so effortlessly. It is exactly what we need. We lucked into a wonderful opportunity.”

There was no emotion other than pride and exultation in her statement. It struck him a little odd, given the circumstances. Luck? It had been the suicide of Gwynne’s own sister three years before that had led to her discovery of Seacliff.

The house, built by a lumber baron in the late 1800’s and left empty in the wake of the death of the man who had been planning to turn it into a resort, was situated on a bluff overlooking Trinity Bay. After a complicated series of legal back-and-forthing involving various peoples’ wills and competency hearings, it had eventually been put on the market.

Seacliff was, according to Gwynne McGuire, just the sort of thing that she and Dr. Lundquist had been looking for. It was the perfect setting to start a ‘school’ where chronic, severely impaired children could enjoy a quality of life free of dismal hospitals and institutions.

And where, just possibly, some progress could be made in treating or even curing their disabilities.

The negotiations, funding, remodeling, and other details had taken over two years to complete, but now their shared dream was about to become a reality. Roger regretted having missed out on the initial hands-on stages. His other work had by necessity kept him on the other side of the country. Now, he was finally here, and the plans of a lifetime were about to see fruit.

“I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to pursuing such valid, meaningful, important work,” he said. “Let alone in the company of such highly esteemed colleagues.”

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He and Gwynne shared a smile, a smile of accomplishment and anticipation. They'd been through so much together already, just in organizing this. It was a relief to Roger to find that, her demeanor notwithstanding, they did not look to be starting off on a sour note.

The Trinity Bay exit appeared out of the rain. Gwynne took it, turning onto an underpass that carried them beneath the freeway. Trees closed thickly around the road, seeming to loom and overhang all the more ominously with their boughs weighed down by rain.

"Trinity Bay is very small and fairly isolated, but not so insular as many other small towns," Gwynne said. "There are a few college students that commute to HSU. The sawmill is still in operation, owned jointly by the employees. Summer brings a fair amount of tourism to the region. Motor homes as far as the eye can see."

They crested a mild rise and descended into the town proper. Trinity Bay was nestled between two rising points of land. A protuberance to the north looked like a single massive boulder half-buried in the earth – Agate Head, if Roger remembered the map correctly. A number of smaller rocky islands clustered around the Head's base, and the sea churned in whitecaps among them. To the south, the land rose in a dramatic sweep to a wooded bluff, where Seacliff perched.

Roger didn't look at the big house except for that brief glimpse, wanting to take in the rest of the town first. "So this is it?"

"This is the Square, or the Plaza," Gwynne said, following a series of one-way streets around a grassy park. "Bookshop, deli, pharmacy, bar, salon, arcade, boutique, preschool, post office, the municipal building, produce shop, bath shop, the Leland building, eatery, bank, and movie theater . . . and that's essentially it for downtown."

"They shouldn't be allowed to name bath shops 'Scents and Sensibility.'"

"If that bothers you, then you'd better hope you never need to take a car in for repairs."

He didn't ask. "And the movie theater's boarded up?"

"Yes."

"So, what do people do for fun?"

"Drive somewhere else. There's talk of a multiplex and bowling alley going in at North Valley, but the tone of the *Trinity Bay Gazette* seems to be that they'll believe it when they see it. All of the more commercial businesses are out there – grocery store, fast food, motels, et cetera." She pointed to the north side of town. "Over that way is the medical center and Silver Grove, a nursing home and eldercare facility. One of my brother's projects."

"Is he going to be working with us in any capacity?"

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“Kel?” Her laugh, though pretty, was derisive. “Kel represents the entirety of Trinity Bay’s social services. He spends his time running back and forth as a geriatric case manager, a school counselor, a hypnotherapist, and all-purpose wailing wall for this little corner of what he calls paradise. He lacks the focus and self-discipline to be a part of our team.”

Roger elected not to pursue the topic further. He knew a little something about family troubles and rivalries.

They left the business district – such as it was – behind and cruised residential streets. Most of the houses were in good repair with neatly-kept yards. The few people braving the rainy outdoors tended to be pale as a result of not seeing the sun for much of the year.

The road curved toward the shore, where an upscale-looking restaurant named Jordano’s offered views of the bay, and boats bobbed at a small marina. From there, the road began a gentle climb up the sloped side of the bluff.

“Just like in the pictures you sent me,” Roger said as he finally took his first up-close look at Seacliff.

It deserved the title of ‘mansion,’ sitting on the top of the cliff like a lord surveying his realm. The central section soared to three stories high and was topped with a dome of blue and green stained glass. Angling back from the center were two long wings.

A wrought-iron fence stretched from the ends of the wings to enclose a garden. Beyond the fence, a mowed meadow of a lawn sprawled toward the woods. Roger knew that the perimeter security fence had only been added within the last year, but a very successful effort had been made to match it to the house’s style, so it seemed as if it had been there for the past century.

Gwynne parked in front of a stable that had been converted to a garage. “Welcome to Seacliff, Dr. Brockman.”

“It’s magnificent.”

“Wait until you see the inside.”

“I’m ready for a tour whenever you are.”

“Don’t you want to rest from your flight?”

“Later. Seeing the place in the flesh . . . it’s a surefire cure for jet lag.”

She smiled. “Then let’s go look around.”

He left his bags in the car and followed her across the wide crushed-gravel driveway to the covered entryway. Window-flanked double doors, beneath an arched half-circle of stained glass, led into a foyer done in mahogany, crisp black and white tile, and creamy gold drapes.

Twin staircases, sweeping curves of polished wood with carpet runners down their middles, rose to the second floor mezzanine. Between them was

Christine Morgan

an ornate brass-cage elevator.

Straight ahead, a wood-paneled hallway with two doors on either side ended in another set of double doors. These ones were of clear but thick glass, too thick to be easily broken. Beyond them, the light shifted and shimmered turquoise.

"It's called the atrium," Gwynne said.

Roger walked down the hall to look in. The octagonal room was floored in pale green and white marble tiles, soaring to the stained-glass dome he'd seen from outside. Railed hallways ringed the room at the second and third floor levels.

In the center was a sunken pool roughly half Olympic size, surrounded by deck furniture. A row of curtained changing booths lined one wall, and French doors led out into the terraced gardens.

"All the comforts of home," he said.

"Not quite. We removed the wet bar."

"Now there's a shame. I could use a drink."

"We can take care of that in the library."

She led him to one of the doors on the east side of the hallway. The windowless two-story room was floor to ceiling with bookshelves. A walkway, accessible by a spiral staircase, ran around the room at the halfway point. The carpet was a rich dark brown, the chairs upholstered in fine leather. A small but serviceable bar took up one corner.

"Very nice!" Roger said, gazing at the books.

"Dr. Lundquist's personal collection. The conference room is across the hall, and above that is his private study." She smiled as she mixed them each a drink. "Complete with secret passage over here to the library. The door is up there behind one of the bookshelves."

"Well, it wouldn't be right, a place like this, without at least one secret passage."

Gwynne sat down, crossing her slim legs in an elegant motion. She seemed amused, but secretively so. "But of course!"

"And the east and west wings?"

"The east wing, which was once primarily the servants' quarters, is devoted to the students. On the first floor are the kitchen, dining room, laundry, janitorial closets, and so on. The second and third floors have been broken up into classrooms, observed play areas, and bedrooms."

"Leaving the west wing for staff?"

"Yes. Offices, labs, a smaller kitchen and dining area, private apartments for those of us who'll be living in, break rooms for the others. We have a fully-equipped operating room that would be the envy of hospitals ten times

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the size of the Trinity Bay Medical Center.”

“And our . . . off-site personnel?” he asked.

She inclined her head. “In place, established in the community. With a few likely prospects already located and identified.”

“Incredible. What you’ve done here . . . I can’t help but feel ashamed for not arriving sooner to help out.”

“Not at all. I enjoyed the challenge. How are things at CFHM, by the way?” She pronounced the initials C-F-H-M as everyone in the field did – *cuffem*, what a gruff cop might command his partner. They stood for Center For the Human Mind.

He sipped his drink. “Interesting . . . in general, they’re still decades behind us in terms of accomplishments, but they did have a few novel approaches.”

“That you didn’t hesitate to incorporate into your own theories, of course.”

“Oh, naturally. And if they work, I’ll take full credit.”

“No mercy in this field.”

“None.”

“I’m looking forward to this, Dr. Brockman. I anticipate a highly successful project.”

“As do I. But please, call me Roger. We got well enough acquainted to use first names in cyberspace, so we needn’t backslide to formality now that we’ll be working together more closely than ever.”

“True. Roger.”

“Gwynne.”

They clinked glasses.

“To Seacliff,” he said.

“To Seacliff.”

* * *

2

Brooding in the dark was a sign of an unhealthy mind.

Benjamin Lundquist knew that, but it didn't stop him from doing it anyway.

In the dark, he couldn't see the faces on the framed photograph he held. Not that he needed to see them. They were engraved on the walls of his heart like epitaphs.

The tattered, faded, sepia-toned photograph didn't do them justice. A stranger would have been hard-pressed to say whether the figures shown were male or female, or of what age.

It had been seventy years since that moment in time was captured on film, and while the decades had withered his body, they had not dimmed his memory or blunted the keenness of his mind.

Anton had been seven, Gerda only four, on the day their mother coaxed them to sit together on the sofa for that one last picture. She'd been sobbing as she took it, but her hands had held the camera straight.

Somehow, by some trick of the light, they looked alert and sweet and dear and *normal*. They looked like bright, happy children. Gerda's face was angelic rather than slack and dull; the fierce grimace that presaged another of Anton's sudden violent outbursts looked more like an impish grin.

The picture was a lie, but it was all he had to remember them by and he clung to it. He had been a boy then, his life as respected doctor Benjamin Lundquist a far-future fiction as yet undreamed, his purpose unknown, unsuspected.

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All he had known on that long-ago day was how bitterly his mother had wept when she surrendered her two youngest chicks to people who claimed they'd be better off in some other place. Who had promised to take care of Anton and little Gerda. When all they were really doing was putting them out of the way.

Someplace where their mother didn't need to work herself to the bone trying to care for them, someplace where their father wouldn't have to see the defective children his drunken loins had produced. Someplace where they wouldn't be the shame, and the talk, of the neighbors.

Benjamin ran his thumb over the smooth glass that protected the photograph. He had failed Anton and Gerda, believed in the lies even after he'd seen the wretched place for himself, seen the care and treatment his brother and sister were receiving.

No more. He would do better. It was too late for Anton and Gerda, but he could still atone for his failure to help them. And for his subsequent failures with his wife and son.

It had taken him a lifetime of preparations, but he was finally ready.

The children here would be cared for, yes, cared for lovingly and with compassion . . . but he would do more. They would be uplifted, made well, made *better*. No more cruelty, no more neglect. Instead, a chance to reach for the potential that circumstance had denied them.

It was his vow, which he renewed every day.

He reached for the lamp on the table beside his chair, finding it by memory in the darkness and switching it on. Its mild yellow light spread like melting butter.

Now he could see the photograph in its heavy, tarnished silver frame. He set it on the table beside the one of Elizabeth and William that had been taken only a week before the accident, and picked up his watch.

One minute until the hour . . .

Someone rapped softly on the door. "Dr. Lundquist? It's seven o'clock."

"Come in, Aiden. You're forty-five seconds early."

The door to his study opened to admit an elfin girl, with hair of utterly neutral beige-blond and a face of forgettable, nondescript prettiness. She was eighteen, but could have easily passed for three or four years younger.

Her timid grey eyes could never meet anyone's for long, flitting like moths for a quick brushing glance and then away again.

But, he thought, considering where she was when I met her, she's made remarkable progress. The poor, dear thing.

Her lips moved soundlessly. Benjamin was perplexed until she smiled – fast, flickering, gone – and said, "*Now* it's seven o'clock."

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He checked his watch; she'd been counting off the seconds. "So it is."

"You asked me to let you know."

"Yes, thank you. Has Dr. Brockman arrived?"

"An hour ago. Dr. McGuire gave him the tour, and now I think he's getting ready for dinner." Again with the flickering smile, like lightning viewed from many miles distant. "He looks just like Jeff Goldblum."

Benjamin recalled his previous meetings with Roger Brockman, at various conferences over the years. "Now that you mention it, he does. Well. The core of our staff finally assembled under one roof. I've been looking forward to this. Will you be joining us for dinner?"

She shrugged and twisted the toe of her shoe into the carpet.

"Please, my pet. And extend the invitation to Mr. Sorenson as well."

Aiden quailed visibly at the prospect and Benjamin sighed.

"I'm sure he doesn't bite, Aiden."

"No, sir, of course not," she whispered, staring down at her folded hands.

Benjamin rose carefully from his chair. No particular aches or sufferings plagued him, but he was always well-aware of the general decrease in function of his aging body. His cane, a length of stout black wood topped with a silver knob, was within easy arm's reach.

"I do want you to join us, Aiden."

"But . . . it's just for the staff, isn't it?"

"Why, I consider you a valued part of the staff. My Girl Friday, as it were. Every good leader knows that the strength of any organization lies not with the laborers but with the administration. You and Mrs. Willis keep Seacliff running smoothly."

Distant-lightning smile. "Thank you, Dr. Lundquist, but really, I'd rather not." She slipped wraithlike out and away before he could pursue the issue.

He sighed again. Tremendous progress in the past five years, but still . . .

Not for the first time, he wondered if he was doing the right thing by continuing to allow her to remain so isolated from the world. The accident that had taken her mother's life had left Aiden deeply traumatized, and losing her father not so many years later had struck her a serious setback just as she'd been beginning to show some signs of improvement.

He wanted no harm to come to her, but sooner or later he would have to examine his decision, and see where the line was between not rushing her, and hampering her recovery.

In the meanwhile, he had a staff dinner to attend.

* * *

3

Roger followed Gwynne McGuire into what had once been the Cliffwood family's breakfast room, designed for informal meals away from the cavernous opulence of the main dining room.

Not that the main dining room was all that opulent anymore, following the remodeling to make it more suitable for Seacliff's new status as a school.

He was pleased to see that they hadn't done the same to the breakfast room. At the far end of the west wing, it boasted a bay window that truly deserved the name, showing as it did the bay and the ocean beyond in panoramic beauty.

Light golden wood paneling rose halfway before yielding the walls to wallpaper in a muted green pattern. The ceiling was inset with plaster reliefs of arboreal scenes. The effect of the room was one of light and airiness, though the sky outside was drab and leaden.

Several people were already seated at the long table. Gwynne introduced them, allowing him to put faces to names that he'd already known from the detailed profiles he'd read.

Laverne Willis was Seacliff's chief administrator, a handsome mocha-skinned woman about Roger's age, stylishly dressed. She handled herself with a calculated reserve, as if emotion, like money, was something to be parceled out in measured amounts.

Counseling supervisor Adam Raleigh had the thinning brown hair and myopic inquisitive expression of the classic academic, but Roger knew he was a talented artist and musician, a computer programmer of some skill,

Christine Morgan

and a first-rate auto mechanic as well. A modern-day Renaissance-man range of interests.

Michael Lee, R.N., was their nursing supervisor. A well-built man of Chinese descent, he was highly animated, energetic, and outgoing. He was also a Southern California health nut, and before dinner was even on the table, he was regaling them with the reasons why they should all go vegan.

Brian Sorenson, the computer expert, fit every preconceived image of his type. Thin, mumbling of speech, and indifferent to fashion, he could probably expound at length on the relative merits of every *Star Trek* captain and name the best websites to find nude images of Lucy Lawless and Gillian Anderson.

As Gwynne was also introducing the nursing assistants and counselors not currently on duty attending the students, the clack of a cane on the hallway's parquet floor brought a sudden respectful hush to the room.

Roger hadn't seen Dr. Benjamin Lundquist in person for a few years, but the man remained as impressive a figure as ever.

His piercingly direct green eyes commanded the attention of everyone present. The stiffness of his gait and posture gave him an almost military bearing, making it seem like the cane was more a prop in the dramatic than physical sense. The steel-grey suit was unusually but strikingly combined with a black silk shirt, the only touch of color being a burgundy handkerchief in his breast pocket.

He paused in the doorway, resting his cane between his feet and folding both hands over the silver knob. There was something eerily falcon-like in the pose, or perhaps it was in the intensity of his gaze.

Despite the close-cropped hair of blindingly pure white and the deep lines that marked his skin, he appeared far younger than his eighty-plus years. The vitality of his genius seemed to shine from him like a beacon.

Lundquist smiled, and in that instant his entire demeanor changed from that of a stern admiral to that of a doting grandfather. It was a convincing illusion, one that even Roger almost believed.

"At last, we are all together," he said, looking from one of them to the next. "Thank you for bringing your skills to work on behalf of making this dream into reality."

"Thank you for inspiring us, Dr. Lundquist," Roger said. "I'm sure I don't just speak for myself when I say what a privilege it is to be here."

That sentiment was echoed by the others, and brought a wider, more genuine smile to Lundquist's face. He made his way to the head of the table and took his seat.

Three members of the household staff appeared as if they had been

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waiting in the wings for their cue. They began serving the meal with the prompt unobtrusive speed associated with manor servants, calling up images of European lords and ladies, country estates, English squires.

And come to think of it, Roger felt that there was a good deal of the European lord or English squire about Lundquist. It didn't come across in his lectures, it certainly didn't come across in his articles, but it was unmistakably there.

Roger even thought he heard a trace of an accent, though that might have been his own mind putting a filtering veneer over Lundquist's words.

"We are embarked on a splendid journey, my friends," Lundquist said, raising a glass of wine. "Welcome aboard."

* * *

Wednesday,

August 6

1

Elliot Shaw shuffled papers and folders on the surface of his desk, pretending to read but not seeing any of the words.

He was supposed to be reviewing the files for a Friday morning staff meeting at the hospital, but he could not concentrate.

Hope, dread, and shame churned inside of him, making a sickening mix of emotion. Today was the day that his life would change forever. His life, and more importantly, David's.

He had taken over as the Trinity Bay Medical Center's chief of staff a year and a half ago, replacing Arthur Kensington, and was still referred to as 'the new doctor.' It wasn't so bad now, but he had the sneaking feeling that he would be 'the new doctor' in five years, even ten.

Doc Kensington was still something of a legend at the TBMC. Elliot had never met the man personally, but had heard so many stories about him that it was impossible not to feel as if he knew him. The nurses had lived in fear of him, and he had been notorious for bullying administrators.

Some said that the only reason Kensington's patients recovered so swiftly and suffered illnesses so infrequently was because they were frantic to escape or avoid him. The local farmer's market had always done a booming business in apple sales, in hopes of keeping that doctor away.

Even the tyrant's death had been noteworthy. A practitioner of every vice he'd advised his patients to forsake – smoking, drinking, meat three meals a day, an abhorrence and avoidance of exercise – Kensington had dropped dead in his office one day, victim of a massive heart attack.

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Elliot had personally witnessed the aftermath, which hadn't been without some beneficial repercussions. The patient Kensington had been with at the time, Tom Harmon, subsequently went off cigarettes cold-turkey, took up jogging, lost forty pounds, and sold his bar in favor of buying a fishing boat.

Nothing like a good scare to encourage a change of habits, and there weren't many scares more effective than having one's own doctor go down like a felled tree, mid-lecture.

Elliot snapped himself out of his half-daydreaming state and looked at the clock. Quarter to ten in the morning.

Almost ten. Almost time.

The television's drone couldn't drown out the sounds from the den. Nor could the wind-stirred rustle of the leaves of the tree outside his window. Not to Elliot's ears. If he turned on the stereo and thundered his favorite classical pieces until the house rattled, he'd still be able to hear David.

The low, cycling moans made it seem like the boy's every movement was agony. His glottal animalistic grunts were interspersed with the loud sucking-rattling gasp of air harshly drawn in through clenched teeth. Every now and then there would be a gabble of senseless, wordless syllables.

A new noise joined in, a blunted heavy banging. Elliot got up and went down the short hall, stepping over the gate, into the den.

The only pieces of furniture were a low couch and a scattering of pillows. The television and VCR were bolted to high shelves. The carpeting was indoor-outdoor, thick and durable. Toys suitable for an infant or toddler were strewn around a Playskool plastic toybox with rounded edges and a wide base to prevent it from tipping over.

The walls were coated with a sprayed-on foam-based paint, not padding but making them at least a little softer than bare plasterboard or paneling might have been. Posters of animals, landscapes, and cartoon characters brought color to the room.

David was on his back in the corner, drumming his heels against the wall. His arms flapped as if he were trying to swim or fly.

"Hi there, big guy," Elliot said. "Video's over, huh?"

He moved to correct the source of David's displeasure, pressing the rewind button.

The seven-year-old did not react to his father's presence or his words. He just kept slamming his feet into the wall, so hard that the jolts shook his entire body.

While the cassette was rewinding, Elliot sat on the floor beside his son and talked to him in a calm and soothing tone.

It hurt his heart to see so much of Sharon in David's features. He had her

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curly caramel-colored hair and deep brown eyes. If his face hadn't been at once slack and contorted, he might have been an adorable child. He was clad only in diapers, rubber pants, and an oversized soft cotton tee shirt.

David's eyes swept the room in great looping circles, never focusing on anything for more than a few seconds, passing over his father as though Elliot were just another one of the room's furnishings. He subsided to muttering, growling vocalizations separated by more of his convulsive slurpings-in of breath.

The doorbell rang.

Time.

"It's going to be all right," he promised. "It's going to be better. You'll see. Oh, David . . . Davey . . . Daddy loves you."

He got up and pushed 'play.' While the animated films couldn't capture David's attention, he seemed more *here*, less likely to lash out physically, when in the company of Disney's characters and songs.

Elliot stepped over the gate again and headed for the front of the spacious brick house that had been part of the package deal he got for taking over for Arthur Kensington. At one point, years ago before the TBMC was built, the house had doubled as Kensington's office as well. There was still a vaguely 'waiting room' aura to the living room.

The silhouette of a man was visible through the sheer curtains on the tall narrow window. Elliot opened the door.

"Hello, Adam."

"Good morning, Elliot. Ready for the big day?"

Behind Adam Raleigh, parked at the curb at the base of the sloping lawn and partly hidden by a hydrangea bush, waited a green van. The sight of it renewed Elliot's inner mix of hope-dread-shame. He could see another man in the driver's seat.

"Who's that?"

"Stan, one of the attendants. Ready?" he repeated.

Elliot ran a hand fitfully through his hair. "I . . . how could I be ready for this? I feel like I'm failing him. Failing him for the second time. I don't know if I can go through with it."

Adam nodded in understanding. "I know. But this is what's best for David, Elliot. And for you." He waved to the driver and came in, closing the door behind him.

"David is the one we should be thinking about," Elliot insisted. "Not me."

"What's best for him is what's best for you."

"Taking him away from home . . ."

Christine Morgan

“Giving him a chance at the help he needs.”

“Yes . . . I know. You don’t have to convince me. It’s just . . . it’s so hard. I don’t know what I’ll do without him.”

Adam laughed. “You make it sound like we’re carting him off to Siberia! Seacliff is just up the hill. You can see it from your own front porch. You’re welcome to visit whenever you want. Not only that, you’re part of the staff. When you come up on-call, for whatever reason, you’ll be able to spend time with David.”

“Turning him over to strangers . . . it’s like I’m abandoning him.”

“You’re giving him what he needs. You’ve done so much for him . . . don’t think I don’t appreciate what you’ve sacrificed! I do. I know what it’s like.”

“It’s not a sacrifice –”

“It’s repayment.”

Elliot froze, and looked at Adam. “Why do you say that?”

“I’ve been through the same thing. When my wife died, I blamed myself for things that were beyond my control. I felt like I’d failed in my duties as a husband. I quit my job, I gave up my friends, I did nothing but take care of Joey – our son. He was born with Down’s Syndrome. I thought that if I sent him away, it would be for my own selfish reasons. But keeping him at home was just as selfish. I did it for me, to try and relieve my own guilt, to try and make it up to him, but not for him. For me.”

“It’s not the same –”

“Isn’t it?”

“What happened to Sharon was my fault. I knew it was dangerous for her and for the baby. I let my promise to her get in the way of my professional knowledge.”

“You can’t change what happened, Elliot. It’s done. That’s the hardest part to accept, believe me. But you can’t go on punishing yourself and David.”

“I’m not punishing him. I’d never punish him.”

“Which is why it’s best for him to come to Seacliff.”

Elliot exhaled in a sigh. “I know it’s best. I know I can’t deny him what he needs, deny him a chance of improvement.”

“And it’s not a betrayal, a failure, an abandonment. You’re not putting him out of the way so you don’t have to think about him or be bothered. You’re helping him.”

He bowed his head and stood in silence, listening to David moan and babble in the other room.

Would he still hear that when David was at Seacliff? When he had started going back to work, he’d paused sometimes in the middle of an examination

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or procedure, certain that he was hearing David. Mistaking the groans of patients or the distant chatter of a radio for the voice of his son.

Seacliff . . . or home? Which was the more selfish course? Which was more of a giving in to guilt? Which was more of a punishment, and a punishment for whom?

What choice did he have? He couldn't afford to retire and stay home full time, and every caregiver he'd hired hadn't been able to last more than a few months before quitting, too unnerved to stay on no matter how professional their credentials.

Elliot made himself take a deep breath. If Lundquist could help David, he could not let his own feelings of guilt and shame stand in the way. Adam was right. David was the important one here. David's welfare had to come before anything else.

"I'm sorry," he finally said. "You're right. This is best for David and I've known it all along. I just have trouble admitting it to myself."

Adam nodded. "I understand. I really do."

"And Lundquist can help him. There will be improvement." He heard the pleading in his own voice and knew he was trying to convince himself as well as seek reassurance from Adam Raleigh.

"That's the plan." Evidently sensing that the matter was settled, Adam smiled. "Let's take him to see the place, what do you say?"

"I packed some of his things. Clothes, toys, his favorite videos. He'll be able to watch them, won't he?"

"Absolutely."

"All right. It's time. Let's do it before I lose my nerve."

* * *

2

“Here are the records on the Shaw boy,” Gwynne McGuire said.

Benjamin Lundquist took the sheaf of papers and skimmed over them.

“The poor child. The poor family! We live in an age of such tragedies.”

“Yes.” She sat down opposite him. “I propose beginning with a —”

“The mother was so determined to undergo natural childbirth,” Benjamin mused, reading the history. “So much so that she was willing to put her own life and that of the child at risk rather than submit to medications.”

“If the scan shows —”

“And the father, who handled the delivery, did not overrule her when complications arose. He chose to abide by his wife’s convictions against his better judgment.” He blew a slow whistle through pursed lips. “And then to have her die in the throes of labor, undertake emergency surgery to save the baby, and find that it had been half-strangled by the umbilicus so that severe brain damage resulted . . . my God, his guilt must be tremendous.”

“The MRI in his records seems to indicate —”

“That poor, poor man! He has gone above and beyond. The boy is seven, barely able to feed himself, incontinent, with motor control equivalent to that of a child less than one year of age, compounded by the involuntary muscular spasms . . . he’s been keeping this child at home for seven years rather than submit him to be institutionalized.”

“Admirable,” Gwynne said. “If I may —”

“There comes a point at which the admirable becomes the absurd. The life they must have led! Look at this! He has tried his very best to expose the

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child to a variety of stimuli, taking him out to the park, to the beach, to movies . . . can you imagine what that must have been like for him? The cruelty to which they must have been exposed . . . ranging from innocent and well-meaning advice to deliberate scorn and taunting . . .”

“I believe we can make progress with this case, Doctor Lundquist.” Amazing! She’d gotten an entire sentence out that time.

“Yes, yes . . .” Benjamin held up a photograph of David Shaw. “He has such potential, my dear Doctor McGuire. They all have such potential.”

She settled back in her chair, knowing what was coming. She had heard it all before, but there was no stopping Lundquist once he got to sermonizing on his favorite topic.

Benjamin rose from his seat and walked stiffly to the wall, which was made of two-way glass. From the other side, it was a mirror, preventing anyone from seeing into the conference room. From in here, it was a tinted window looking out into the atrium, where the pool rippled silvery-turquoise.

“It is never too early, or too late, to start living up to one’s potential,” he said. “That is the one thing that saddens me most about this world. How few people reach the heights they could attain. We feel so limited, so restricted, by what others see as success. A high-paying job, a good education, wealth and all of its trappings, social standing . . . these are the measures of success, and they are meaningless.”

Gwynne quirked her lips, unable to keep from thinking what a fine attitude that was for someone who had attained each of those measures. *Would he be so quick to dismiss them as meaningless, she wondered, if he lacked them himself?*

“When all that really matters,” he went on, “is to be happy. To be content. On whatever level that might mean to the individual. Not bound by what someone else tells us we must have to make us happy, but by what balm eases our own souls.”

She nodded, knowing that while he wouldn’t see the movement, he’d sense her silent agreement.

He planted both hands on the head of his cane and sighed heavily. “I’ve spent many years railing against God, society, government, whatever force you please, for the miseries of my life. And then came a day when I realized that everything I so hated was not caused by fate and circumstance, but by me. How I responded to what the world offered was all in my own control.”

“We have all benefited from your teachings,” she said. “Your work has paved the way for revolutionary new theories and developments. And this . . . Seacliff . . . is the most noble project of them all.”

“I only hope that we are able to help those most in need. The children,

Christine Morgan

Gwynne, these poor children whose lives stretch out before them as bleak and empty places of torment . . . when they could be so much more!”

“I know. We will succeed, Dr. Lundquist. The children will live up to their full potential, I am sure of it.”

He smiled faintly. “You have such surety of will, my lamb. Do you never doubt yourself?”

“Very rarely.”

“How proud your parents must be, to have a daughter that burns with such brilliant fire.”

She breathed a soft laugh. “I like to think of myself as proof, Doctor . . . proof of your theory that with effort and determination, we can all reach great heights. I had the same benefits of genetics and upbringing as my brother and sister, but made myself something more.”

“Which is why it seemed odd to me that you, with such a promising career and countless and lucrative offers from hospitals and research facilities the world over, chose to come to work with me. Not that I am trying to get rid of you. Far from it! I’m merely surprised.”

“Are you?” Gwynne shook her head in amazement. “A chance to work with Benjamin Lundquist, one of the greatest minds, the greatest geniuses, of our time? I’d have to be a lunatic or an idiot to turn down that opportunity. Your theories challenge me to think along paths I’d never considered. As for the money, it’s never been a concern to me. Which isn’t to say that you’re not paying me enough, of course, only that yes, some of the other offers named higher figures. But it didn’t matter. I love my work, Dr. Lundquist. The accomplishment, not the paycheck.”

“Well,” he said, nodding. “I am quite pleased to hear it.”

“And now, if we could continue reviewing the Shaw case? They’ll be arriving any moment and I’d like to discuss my ideas with you before we see the boy.”

“Carry on, my lamb. Carry on.”

* * *

3

Elliot Shaw had seen the interior of Seacliff before, when he'd been interviewed for the job of on-call physician. It seemed different now that he was seeing it as his son's new home.

Different, but not bad.

"East wing," Dr. Roger Brockman announced. "It's been entirely remodeled to accommodate the needs of the students while still maintaining much of the feel of the original construction."

Adam Raleigh had accompanied the attendant, Stan Montgomery, to get David settled in his room. Elliot had wanted to go, but they felt that it would be better for David to get used to the idea of other people helping care for him.

"How many other children are here so far?" he asked as they moved from the dining room into the enormous kitchen.

He noted that the door was sealed with an electronic lock, opening by key card . . . and that the key card had a whorled, oval depression in it that fitted the pad of Roger's thumb exactly.

"David's the tenth. Once he's settled, we'll be ready to start going over the files with you, so you'll be familiar with their case and medical histories."

"Strict security," he said, indicating the card.

"I know it seems extreme for only a kitchen," Roger chuckled, "but we certainly don't want to take any chances. Which reminds me, I need to get you a key of your own." He pulled a small black device that looked like a miniature cross between a cellular phone and a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

Christine Morgan

“Brian? We need to issue a key card. I’ll transmit you the print now.”

Elliot raised his eyebrows as Roger flipped the device over, slid open a panel on the back, and revealed a glass screen.

“Okay, stick your thumb there . . .”

“You’re kidding.”

“High-tech toys, got to love them.”

He pressed his thumb to the screen and watched as a luminescent green line ran from top to bottom, then right to left. “Cute.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Roger closed the screen, pushed some buttons, and spoke into the phone again. “Here you go, Brian. We’ll be down to pick it up in about half an hour.”

“So no one can use the key but me?” Elliot asked.

“That’s right.” He winked. “The card even picks up the temperature and electrical activity in your skin, so it won’t work if someone were to, say, steal it and chop off your thumb.”

“Good God! Why do you even need all of this?”

“Oh, we don’t, really. It just gets to be a habit for those of us who’ve done some work for top-secret research companies or government agencies. And there are a few things here we need to keep protected. The labs have some pretty delicate and valuable equipment. Dr. Lundquist’s not worried about anyone stealing our secrets, though. His work is meant to benefit everyone, not to be stingily guarded for profit.”

“Then where is the funding coming from?”

“Mainly Dr. Lundquist himself. He’s built up a considerable personal fortune during his lifetime, partly from inheritance, partly from his work, and then of course there was the settlement.”

“Settlement?” Elliot frowned.

Roger’s voice dropped to just above a whisper, not in the manner of one imparting a juicy secret, but in the manner of one maintaining a level of discretion. “He had a younger brother and sister who were committed to an institution. This was back when ‘therapy’ consisted of icewater baths, lobotomies, and so on. Terrible conditions. Patients left in restraints and strait-jackets for weeks at a time. Shock treatments in their most primitive state of development. A lot of the patients died. The institution was shut down in the fifties and the families launched a massive lawsuit.”

“It certainly explains his dedication,” Elliot said. “He’s made it his life’s work, helping children, so that no other families have to go through what his did.”

“I might even go so far as to say it’s an obsession, especially after his fanatic devotion to his work cost him his wife and son. I think that plays a

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part in how intent he's become on Seacliff. If what we're doing here is successful, the Seacliff model could become an industry standard of care." He clapped a friendly hand on Elliot's shoulder. "Now, shall we go see how David's liking his new room?"

They went up to the second floor. The hallway was long but not oppressively so, with high vaulted ceilings and a floor covered in textured linoleum nearly indistinguishable from hardwood. The doors were not the originals, each having a wire-reinforced window in the middle.

David's room was the first one down from an open space that served as a combination staff area and lounge. It was on the north side of the east wing, with a view of Trinity Bay.

"If you look carefully," Adam said as Eliot and Roger came in, "you can see your house from here."

Adam sat on a cushiony block of a sofa that looked like a four-foot-long Three Musketeers bar. David was hitching himself around in the bed mumbling to himself in what sounded like a low and thoughtful tone, interrupted now and then with short sharp barking cries.

"There's my guy," Elliot said, going in with a sense of relief and approval.

The walls were a warm lemony yellow with white wainscoting and trim. A four-foot-high runner of quilted chocolate-brown cloth circumnavigated the room and managed not to look like padding. The floor was carpeted in attractive golden-brown with an abstract woven pattern of deep brown, yellow, and white.

The bed was built to rest flat on the ground, and its sides rose in foam-wrapped rails. It had yellow sheets and a white bedspread, and David's favorite stuffed animal was already perched on the pillow. The television was, like the one at home, bolted high and out of reach . . . and beside the glassy eye of a surveillance camera.

"We have cameras covering each room," Roger explained when Elliot pointed it out. "The bedroom doors operate by conventional locks and the stairway doors are, as you saw, secured by the electronic version. That's to make sure none of the kids go wandering. There are two bathrooms, one for the boys and one for the girls, with shower stalls and tubs —"

"David doesn't wander, and he can't go to the bathroom on his own."

"Yet," Adam said with such surety that the nape of Elliot's neck prickled with hope.

"Yet," Roger seconded. "I can't promise you anything, Dr. Shaw, but I share Adam's confidence that we'll be able to, in time, bring David to that level of functioning at least."

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“How?” he begged, finally asking the question he hadn’t dared ask before, not in all the months he’d been preparing himself for this day. “I’ve read some of Dr. Lundquist’s articles, and none of them are clear on the exact process. I have to know what you’ll be doing here. Not just as a concerned father, but if I’m going to be working with you to take care of the medical needs of these children, I will have to know everything.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Roger said. “And I will make sure you’re fully up to speed on our entire program. Legal mumbo-jumbo and all.”

“Legal . . . so the treatments *are* experimental?”

“It’s not nearly as extreme as it sounds,” Adam said reassuringly. “We’re mainly working with alternate forms of therapy, focusing on creativity as a way to stimulate unused areas of the brain.”

Roger nodded. “With those areas then taking over some of the functions of the damaged areas. It’s all a matter of forging new neural pathways, encouraging other sections to pick up the slack, as it were.”

“And that’s what you have in mind for David?” More than the nape of his neck was prickling now; goosebumps of excitement were breaking out all over him. “To . . . to have other sections of his brain compensate for the damage?”

“That’s the plan,” Adam said.

“But he’s too old, isn’t he? I’ve read studies, children denied stimulation as babies –”

“The box orphans?” Roger cut in, shaking his head with a sighing scowl. “This isn’t the same thing. We’ve all heard how the younger a child is, the more versatile the brain. A baby suffering an injury to the speech center, for instance, can still learn to talk by re-routing the pathways. Or how it’s easier to learn a foreign language the younger you are. The older the child, the less flexible the brain . . . but David’s only seven.”

Elliot looked down at David, who had fallen into his usual fitful, restless sleep. Every few seconds, he twitched, or grimaced, or grunted.

“If you can do this . . .” he whispered. “I . . . I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

“That’s not what we’re here for, Dr. Shaw,” Roger said. “We just want the same thing you want. To see David, and others like him, have the opportunity to live up to their potential. That’s Dr. Lundquist’s philosophy . . . no, it’s more than a philosophy. It’s . . .”

“Practically a sacred vow,” Adam finished. “His *raison d’etre*. I’ve known him for over fifteen years, and the only thing that makes him truly happy is being able to give a child a second chance at happiness. You should see how happy he is with Aiden’s improvement . . .”

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“Did he use these treatments on her, on his daughter?”

“She’s not his daughter. More like a . . . ward, I suppose you could say. And it wasn’t quite the same, since her condition was the result of a psychological trauma, but he did use a variation of his theories in developing her treatment regimen.”

“And it helped her,” Elliot probed, searching for hope, searching for encouragement.

“She’s not the outgoing girl she was before her parents died,” Adam admitted, “but she’s come a long way back. I know that she’ll continue to improve, and I think most of her lingering difficulties are as much a matter of habit as anything else.”

Elliot thought it over, rubbing his hand along the padded rail of David’s bed. “I want him to be happy. To lead a fulfilling and meaningful life. Do you really think it’s possible?”

Roger squeezed his shoulder. “We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t.”

“That’s right,” Adam said.

“I’ll do anything to help him,” Elliot said. “Anything at all.”

“Of course . . . you’re a father.” Roger glanced down at his pager. “Your key card is ready. Come on down to Brian’s office with me, and then I’ll show you around the labs.”

* * *

Friday,

September 12

1

Jenny Forrester studied herself in the mirror and decided that the lipstick was too much. Even her dad would notice that vivid a shade of pink.

She wiped it off on a tissue and went with gloss instead, slicking it on until her full lips were nice and shiny.

Satisfied, she opened the drawer in her dressing table and swept the cosmetics inside in an untidy jumble. She shoved the latest copy of *Stunner* in too, and covered it all up with a stack of old comic books on the extreme off-chance that Dad went snooping.

He wouldn't, of course, but it never hurt to be prepared. Which was why, as Jenny readied herself for her big Friday night on the town, the first weekend of the new school year, she checked to be sure that the stuff hidden in her purse was still there.

Yep. Couple of condoms in foil wrappers. Along with a half a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. And tampons.

Not that she had any use for any of it. She was twelve. Hadn't gotten her period yet – any day now, she was sure of it, any day now! She had never let a boy get his hands on her boobies, let alone do more. And anyway, smoking was for losers.

But the looks on her friends' faces when they saw the stuff she carried in her purse proclaimed that she, Jenny Forrester, was the coolest of the cool.

“Daaa-aad!” she bugled. “Going out!”

“No, Peanut, I'm home.”

“I'm going out,” she clarified, putting on an artfully tattered denim jacket

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to help hide her too-tight, too-low-cut blouse. Since she'd been the first girl in her grade to get them, she figured it was her job . . . her duty! . . . to show them off.

She sashayed down the hall, practicing swinging her hips, but quit it as she reached the living room where her dad was stretched out on the couch with their dog Bingo.

Charlie Forrester was a lanky scarecrow of a man, swimming in his clothes and looking like a strong wind would blow him away like a raggedy kite. He had always been gangly, but in the past three years, he had passed the boundary between thin and scrawny.

He left off watching Daffy Duck cartoons to glance at Jenny. No change came over his gaunt Ichabod Crane face, so she figured she had succeeded in making herself look surface-innocent. Though sometimes she wondered if Dad would even notice if she paraded through the house as tatted-up as one of the hookers they said hung out in Oldtown Eureka.

"Where'll you be?" he asked.

"The arcade, where else?"

"Back when?"

"Midnight."

Was that a flicker of disapproval? No . . . he just nodded and reached out one bony, callused hand to scratch Bingo's head. "Have fun, Peanut."

"Can I have ten dollars?"

"My wallet's by the phone."

"Thanks, Dad!"

She could hardly wait to be sixteen so he'd let her have the car. Disdaining her bike, she went down the woods path shortcut that led to town all the way from the Zane place – or was it the Blake place now? Theresa Zane had kept her maiden name, but given Chief Blake's name to the twins and to Lora . . . but it was still Travis Zane's house . . .

At any rate, the path started up there and led to town, past the Forrester abode with its Victorian garden and examples of Dad's woodcarving.

Jenny knew the route well enough to follow it in a pitch black rainstorm, which this wasn't. The evening was pearly with low-hanging mist wreathing a crescent moon.

She sang all her favorite Flirty Boys songs to keep herself company, and paused a few times to try out some of the hottest new dance moves she'd seen on MTV. She flung her hair around in wild abandon, imagining herself on a concert stage dancing with Joey Mack, the dreamiest of the Flirty Boys.

The Square tonight was as close as Trinity Bay ever got to hopping. Most of the shops were closed for the night, but the door to Nate's was propped

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open and rock music rolled out. It had to compete with the folksy stuff being performed live by a street band at the center of the Square. Periodically, both types were swallowed up by a rousing cheer from the ball field behind the Municipal Building, where the flag football teams from Tom's Market and The Sports Den were indulging their customary rivalry.

And last but not least, Galaxy West. The sign was bright pulsing neon, the G made to look like a stylized version of Saturn. The outside walls were a mural of stars, planets, and comets on a field of dark blue. The windows jittered and flashed with light.

Jenny passed Red's Salon, wondering if it was time to take another stab at getting Dad's permission to have her ears double-pierced. Her attempt last fall had been met with a "gee, Peanut, let me think about that," and then he'd never mentioned it again.

"Jenny!" Kaylee Neeman hailed, waving from the patch of sidewalk out front of Galaxy West. The neon turned her glittering braces into an incandescent mouthful of red fire.

Kaylee, short, blond, chubby-cheeked, bouncy, and dressed almost as saucily as Jenny herself, was standing with Eva Mittleschut. Eva wore plain black pants and a black long-sleeved blouse buttoned all the way up. Her hair, likewise black, hung straight to her shoulders from a ruler-perfect central part.

"Donny Peterson is here," Kaylee reported as Jenny joined them. "And Brett James!"

"And Rocky," Eva added, crinkling her eyes in the way she showed displeasure. "He asked about you."

"Oh, ick . . ." Jenny threw a pleading look at Kaylee. "Can't you call off your brother?"

"He thinks you're cute."

"He's a total jerkoid."

"*Tell* me about it!" Kaylee groaned. "It's 'cause he's the only boy in the family. Our dad acts like he's all special and everything."

"Your dad is weird," Jenny said.

"So's yours," Eva pointed out.

"In a different way!"

"He and Mom were fighting about it again," Kaylee said. "He wants her to have another baby, can you imagine?"

Eva tilted her head. "Isn't she too old?"

"Yeah," Jenny said. "Your sister Traci's the same age as my brother Jerry, so that makes her twenty. How old is your mom?"

Kaylee did some math on her fingers. "Thirty-seven."

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“Only thirty-seven?” Jenny gasped. “She looks . . . wow, lots older than that!”

“After eight babies, you’d look old too,” Eva said. “Not to mention irresponsible. Overpopulation is destroying our Earth. MY parents limited their family to one child.”

“Your father isn’t convinced his DNA’s so magnificent that everyone should want a Neeman baby,” Jenny snorted.

“Jenny!” Kaylee tried to look indignant and ruined it by laughing.

“Lisa Garrick told me that your jerkoid brother told her that she should go all the way with him because your father told him that Neeman sperm is better than anyone else’s!”

“I am not going to stand out here all night talking about *sperm!*” Kaylee announced. “That’s just sick, sick, sick, Jennifer Forrester.”

“Okay, okay, sorry!” Snickering, she followed Kaylee into the light-wild, noisy chaos of Galaxy West.

The space theme was continued within, the walls like alien moonscapes and the roof a solid black dome pocked with tiny twinkling light bulbs. Neon tubes encircled the base of the dome, glowing eerily steady in the flashing screens of video games.

The electronic din was one step short of horrific – lasers, gunfire, screeching tires, grunts, screams, explosions, roaring monsters, and recorded voices exhorting the players to try again. Tokens jangled out of the change machines. Kids called to each other, exclaimed in excitement, cursed in frustration, shouted their conversations in an effort to be heard. Weaving through like a single thread in a tapestry, top-forty music issued from speakers embedded in the ceiling.

Jenny spotted Rocky Neeman right away, hunched over a game of Death Mutant while a couple of his co-jerkoids cheered him on.

The worst thing about Rocky was that he *was* actually kind of cute. Rocky was fourteen, with thick wavy hair as blond as Kaylee’s – as blond as all the Neemans’ – and a tall, broad-shouldered build.

Cute, he may have been, but that didn’t change the fact that he was an insufferable snot.

Galaxy West was crammed with kids every Friday and Saturday night, but tonight was special. Tonight was the first weekend of the new school year, a time to see and be seen.

Every table was full. The air was thick with the scents of pizza-by-the-slice, popcorn, and hot dogs. The floor was sticky with spilled soda and melted ice cream.

Jenny and her friends were the youngest ones present, but they did their

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best to pass for full-fledged teenagers. It didn't work very well in Kaylee's case, as she still had no notable progress in the boob department despite her plumpness. Eva was also flat as a board, but she was the tallest of their trio and her broody-Goth-artsy image made her seem older than her years.

They bought sodas and cruised through the crowd, chattering brightly – Jen and Kaylee did, anyway; Eva was lost in thought, probably musing about overpopulation. Jenny let her jacket hang open, and basked in the appraising looks she got from the boys.

Seeing and being seen, that was what it was all about. Proving that, while maybe they still went to the baby-grades, they were high-schoolers at heart.

That was the worst thing about Trinity Bay. The elementary building housed grades K through 8, while the high-school was the same plot of land. They shared a gymnasium, athletic field, and even cafeteria. But junior-high-age people like Jenny and her friends still had to go to the baby school.

Trés uncool.

"Hi, Jenny. Guess who just set the new high score on Death Mutant?" Rocky Neeman swaggered up to her, his entourage in tow.

Jenny beamed a saccharine-false smile at Neil Scribner, a hopeless dork caught in Rocky's orbit like a pasty-faced asteroid. "Congratulations, Neil!"

Eva, Kaylee, and Kirby Underwood started laughing. A tentative smile tugged at the corner of Neil's mouth, but it faded almost at once when he realized they were teasing him.

"Ha-ha, very funny," Rocky said. "I did. Broke eighty thousand points. Want a soda?"

She held up her cup and shook it so the ice sloshed. "Got one."

"Ooh, shot *down!*" Kirby crowed.

Rocky's face darkened. "Shut up, Kirby! Who cares, who wants to hang out with little girls anyway? They have to be home by nine for bedtime."

"I don't have to be home until midnight," Jenny said archly.

"And we're not little girls!" Kaylee glared at her brother. "We're more mature than you'll ever be. You don't see us wasting our time on stupid games."

"Only because you're no good at them," Rocky fired back.

"We could be if we wanted to."

"Go ahead, then!" He thrust a fistful of tokens at her. "Let's see you try."

"We're busy," Kaylee said as if he was the dumbest thing that ever lived.

"Yeah, Barbie's Dream House won't play with itself," Kirby chuckled.

"That's one thing it doesn't have in common with you, then," Eva said. Before any of the boys could respond, before it had even sunk in, she nudged Jenny. "I see a table."

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Neil got it then, and yodeled freaky laughter that always made him sound like the village idiot instead of one of the school brains.

“Fine, go on!” Rocky yelled after them. “Bunch of babies!”

“If we’re such babies, why are you always staring at me?” Jenny shot back over her shoulder as she followed Eva.

Whatever he replied was lost as they moved too far away, leaving Rocky in the noisy depths of the arcade. A group of bigger kids was leaving a table, not bothering to pick up after themselves.

Eva slid in like a lean black snake and claimed the spot before someone else could beat her to it. “Slobs,” she announced, flicking at a pizza-smear paper plate.

“Not going to start in on how bad those are for the environment?” Jenny said, half-teasing, as she and Kaylee stuffed trash into the can – in keeping with the Galaxy West theme, it was made to resemble a vaguely R2D2-esque robot.

Eva gave her a world-weary look. “At least they’re not polystyrene.”

“Look, there’s Donny Peterson,” Kaylee squealed in Jenny’s ear.

“Look, there’s Rachel Carter with him though,” Jenny said.

“Rachel Carter!” Kaylee sniffed, fluffing her bouncy curls. “My sister Diane says Rachel’s the biggest tramp in the eleventh grade.”

Jenny glanced at Donny, who was dark and sultry, then past him to Brett James, a senior and total hunk.

“Why are boys our age so feeble?” she said. “It’s so not fair!”

Kaylee sighed as Donny put an arm around Rachel’s waist, low so he could tuck his fingers into the back pocket of her tight pants. “What are we doing? These guys are four, five years older than us . . . they’re never going to give us a second look. Or even a first look! Not when they have Rachel look-at-my-big-ones Carter to drool over.”

“Don’t be lame,” Jenny said. “We may be young, but we’ve got what it takes.”

“We . . .” Eva trailed off, looking toward the door. “Isn’t that Eric Raney?”

“Eric Raney?!” Kaylee and Jenny chorused, whirling in their chairs.

“Subtle,” Eva muttered.

“It *is* him.” Jenny pressed a hand to her chest as if to calm the pounding therein. “Eric Raney, *here!*”

He had paused just inside the door as if evaluating whether to come all the way in or not, poised like a panther full of hidden lazy strength. Like Eva, he was dressed primarily in black. Black jeans, black athletic shoes, black shirt unbuttoned and with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, plain white tee shirt beneath.

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His hair was ink-black and short, with a tuft of it that fell down over his left eye . . . the exact style, if not color, of Flirty Boy Joey Mack's hair. He had sharply defined features and hooded eyes that implied they had seen the darker underside of the universe.

Jenny's heart did a giddy little flip-flop.

"He should have a motorcycle," Kaylee said.

"Why, is it in the 'bad boy' handbook?" Eva said.

"Shh," Jenny hissed. "He's coming in!"

Eric started through the crowd, greeting no one and being greeted by no one, but Jenny saw several people observing him out of the corners of their eyes. The guys with a sort of speculative challenge, wondering if they could take him. The girls with the same sort of drawn-to-danger compulsion that filled Jenny herself.

He'd only moved to Trinity Bay a few months ago, last May, shortly before the end of the school year. Not long enough to give anyone a chance to get to know him, but plenty long enough to get them all speculating.

The arrival of a new kid was always an event. Especially when the new kid was someone like Eric. Hardly anybody ever talked to him but everyone talked *about* him.

For starters, he lived with his mom in a shabby house on the beach south of Seacliff – probably the only ugly stretch of coast on the Pacific. When the tide was in, it was a swampy salty morass. When the tide was out, it was a stagnant mud flat.

Mrs. Raney, who hardly any of them had ever seen, worked a couple of late-night and weekend jobs. Opinions were equally divided as to whether she was a stripper or a cocktail waitress, and most kids thought she was probably also an alcoholic. There was no Mr. Raney in the picture.

Eric himself was sixteen and, depending on who you listened to, a junkie, a biker, a drug dealer, gay, on parole, or any combination thereof. But people also said he was smart, that he'd come in as the new kid in school and promptly aced all his tests.

Either way, Eric didn't seem to care what people said about him. That was part of what made him so cool. In the cafeteria, which was where Jenny had first seen him last spring, he always ate in solitude and studied his schoolmates with an intensity that bordered on bizarre.

Tuesday, Jenny and her friends had been having lunch when Eric sat down by himself at the next table over. They'd been able to feel his gaze upon them like a tangible sensation. Kaylee had fluffed and fluttered and pretended she wasn't aware of him.

But Jenny had turned and met his stare boldly. She'd never been close

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enough to him before to notice the color of his eyes, and saw they were the unusual copper-brown of brand-new pennies.

She'd been able to sustain the eye contact for two seconds before totally losing her nerve. It felt like he could look straight into her brain and learn things about her that she didn't know about herself.

Now here he was again, headed for the snack bar. Plenty of girls were carrying on in what to Jenny was the most blatantly transparent fashion, giggling overloud, and so on.

Eric ordered a Dr. Pepper. Jenny and her friends continued watching in silent fascination, until he turned from the counter with his soda and saw them. They quickly started talking about nothing, as if they had been all along.

Under Kaylee's babbling about some new Orlando Bloom movie at the Bayshore Mall, Eva spoke without moving her lips, as skillfully as a ventriloquist. "He's coming over here!"

Jenny risked a glance and he was, Eric Raney, coming toward their table! And he was looking right at her!

An effervescent little squeal rose up inside her like a bubble in a bottle of pop and she locked her jaw against it.

He stopped right at the end of their table, sipped more Dr. Pepper, let the straw slide from between his lips. "Hey," he said to Jenny, with an upward nod of his head.

"Hey," she said, just as casual.

And he left. Walked away, back into the crowded arcade and out the door. Gone into the night.

"Jenny!" Kaylee shrieked breathlessly. "Omigod, Jenny, he *talked* to you!"

Eva was gaping at her. So were many other girls, older girls, bona-fide babes like Rachel Carter, all gaping at her, Jenny Forrester, with surprise and envy.

The urge to squeal was nearly overpowering but she fought it down again. "Yeah."

"He *talked* to you! Eric Raney!" In her ebullience, Kaylee knocked over her cup.

The resultant river of Coke drenched Eva's leg, necessitating a sudden flight for the bathroom by all three of them. The moment the door wheezed shut behind them and Jenny ascertained there were no feet in the stalls, she finally loosed the squeal.

"He talked to me, did you hear him, he said 'hey,' he was looking right at me!" She couldn't keep her cool, hopping and clapping her hands like a hyper four-year-old, but Eric Raney! Talking to *her!*

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Eva sopped the worst of the spill up with paper towels and satisfied herself that the rest wouldn't show up on black anyway. "So what's the deal?"

"I don't know!" Jenny caught sight of her reflection, all shiny-starry eyes in the mirror. "I mean, he was looking at us the other day and I didn't look away, maybe he liked that. Maybe he likes . . . *me*."

"Do you think he's going to ask you out?" Kaylee seemed about to faint at the very thought.

Jenny felt a little like fainting herself. "I don't know."

"I hope Rocky saw. That'll teach him, calling us babies. Eric Raney wouldn't be interested in babies. Jenny, this is so great!"

"He could be trouble," Eva said.

"Don't be jealous," Kaylee ordered. Her eyes widened. "Jen! Maybe he wanted you to follow him."

"Shit!" Jenny yelped, grabbing her purse off the counter. "Maybe he did!"

She bolted out of the restroom with Eva and Kaylee close on her heels. All at once the interior of Galaxy West seemed five times as big and more crowded than a super-sale. She struggled to get through, more sure with every step that Eric was out there waiting for her, getting impatient, deciding she wasn't worth it, leaving . . .

"No!" She exploded out the front door and into the street before she could stop herself.

The football game had just ended and the Square was filling with people, streaming every which way, over to the Trinity Bar and Grill for a milkshake, up the street to the all-night donut shop, across to Nate's for a beer.

Jenny turned frantically left and right and all around, and saw no sign of Eric Raney. A crushing wave of dejection pressed down on her, so hard she was sure she must be leaving deep footprints in the sidewalk.

"Where's the fire?" someone asked.

She spun with hope blazing all through her veins, but it was only Toby Edwards.

"Toby!"

"What?"

"It's you."

"Last I checked."

"Where is he?" Kaylee demanded.

"I don't see him," Jenny said, anguished.

"Wasn't he waiting for you?" Eva asked.

"Who?" Toby said.

Kaylee grabbed Toby by the shoulders. He was a year younger than them but a grade ahead, and as short as she was. "Did you see Eric Raney come

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out of the arcade?”

“Sure, he said hi to me.”

“What?” Jenny grabbed Toby away from Kaylee. “He said hi to you?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t he?” Toby plucked her wrists off of his shoulders. “Ease off, huh?”

“*You* know Eric Raney?” Eva said.

Toby rolled his eyes at her dubious tone. “Of course I do. Nice guy. Pretty smart. I saw him in the library just the other day. He was reading about – “

“Who cares what he was reading about?” Kaylee cut in. “Did he ask you about Jenny?”

“No, why?”

“Well, was he waiting for me out here?”

“No.”

“Tell us what happened,” Eva said.

“I was at the ball game, told my folks I was going to get either an ice cream cone or go up to the donut shop and then meet them at Dad’s store. I was trying to decide when Eric came out. We said hi, how’s it, fine. He kept going toward the bus stop. I’d just made up my mind for a buttermilk bar when Jenny came busting out the door and almost ran me over.”

Jenny slumped onto the bench in front of Red’s Salon. “He left?”

“What’s the big deal about Eric Raney?” Toby asked.

“You’re Mister Smarty, skipped two grades, you figure it out,” Eva said.

“Ohhh!” Toby bobbed his head in comprehension. He broke into a chant. “Jenny likes Eric! Jenny likes Eric!”

“For your information, *Eric* likes *Jenny*,” Kaylee said loftily.

“Really?” His face creased in puzzlement. “Even though she’s Rocky’s girlfriend?”

Jenny shot off the bench as if propelled by a spring. “Rocky’s what? Are you crazy?”

“That’s what I heard!” Toby said, backing off. “Though maybe Eric just didn’t know.”

“What gave you the idea I’m Rocky’s . . . Rocky’s . . .” she gagged on the word and finally hocked it out. “Girlfriend?”

“Rocky did. He told everyone.”

Kaylee’s mouth dropped open. “No way!”

Toby’s nod was emphatic bordering on licentious. “Yes, he did. It was in P.E. last year. We were playing basketball and you girls were doing laps and Jeff Garrick said something about . . . well . . .” He faltered and blinked at their chests, particularly Jenny’s.

Gifted Children

She snatched her jacket closed. “And what did Rocky say? Tell me exactly.”

And Toby, being Toby, could do just that thanks to the flawless memory that made him the envy of every kid in school.

“He said, *Yeab, Jenny Forrester may only be a kid but she doesn't stuff her bra*, and Jeff asks, *Yeab, so how do you know?* and Rocky says, *Because these hands don't lie*—” here Toby paused to waggle his fingers lewdly and Jenny almost smacked him. “And Cody Devons tells him he's full of it, and Rocky says that he is not, that you've let him go almost all the way—”

Jenny screeched in outrage. “That lying scumbucket! I have not! I wouldn't let him touch me if he was the last boy on earth!”

“I'm just telling you what he said,” Toby cried, backing off still further.

“What else?” Eva prompted.

“A bunch of stuff . . . like about how ever since her mom went to the hospital her dad can't control her and she runs wild and *she* was chasing after *him*,” Toby said in a rush.

He was speaking to Eva instead of Jenny, maybe because Eva looked a tad less likely to kill the messenger. Jenny certainly felt like killing someone, but if she was making a list the first person on there would definitely be one Reginald “Rocky” Neeman. With maybe Jeff Garrick as a runner-up.

“That is all *so* not true!” she spat, tears of fury and shame burning her eyes. “What a . . . what a . . .” Words failed her.

“Asshole,” Eva supplied.

“Yes!” Jenny spun toward the front door of the arcade and raised her voice to its most hectoring shout. “You're an asshole, Rocky Neeman!”

Several kids were standing on the sidewalk, and most of them laughed. But it was a mean-spirited laugh directed more at her than at Rocky, and she just knew that he'd spread his dumb lie to everyone in school and now they all thought she was mad because he was dumping her or something.

“I'll show him,” she grumbled. “He'll be sorry.”

“What are you going to do?” Kaylee leaned forward, avid at the prospect of some sort of revenge being dished out on her brother.

“I don't know yet.”

“Jenny . . .” Toby began. “Look, hey, I'm . . . I didn't mean . . .”

“That's okay, Toby, it's not your fault.”

“You . . . uh . . . want to come up the street with me and get a donut? My treat.”

“No.” She looked at Eva and Kaylee, and sighed. “I'm going home.”

“Don't go!” Kaylee protested. “Maybe all the stupid boys believe Rocky's crap, but we know better!”

Christine Morgan

"I'm going home," Jenny repeated. She zipped up her jacket, burrowed her chin down into the collar, and crossed the street into the grassy Square.

So that's what people thought about her. Wild girl, out of control. Desperate enough to go after Rocky, for pete's sake. And that stuff about her mother . . . that was a low blow.

Her breath hitched once as she passed Agate River Books and Coffee, Mr. Edwards' shop. Inside, a single light was on over the coffee bar, and she could see Toby's parents sitting side by side on the stools.

They looked nothing like her own parents, being black and old and everything, but she could still remember how it used to be at her house when both Mom and Dad were there. Never mushy, but there had always been an absent-minded comfortable warm affection between them.

Thinking about Mom only made Jenny nudge even closer to crying. She tried to put it out of her mind as she hurried onto the woods path leading home. It wasn't easy, because now that she'd started she couldn't help wondering what her mother was doing right this minute.

Did they still strap her down?

Dad said no, he said they were even considering moving her to something called a 'less-restrictive environment.' They didn't have to keep her in the rubber room anymore, if they even still used rubber rooms.

A single tear trickled down her face, startling her. She stopped inside the shelter of the woods and scrubbed angrily at her eyes with her sleeves.

"Hey."

Jenny drew in a whistling breath and almost jumped clear out of her skin.

Eric Raney was leaning against a tree, one foot propped up behind him, his dark hair a tumble over his pale forehead. He was cleaning his fingernails with a small pocketknife. "S'up?"

"Uh . . . eh . . . Eric?" she stammered.

"Yeah."

"Um . . . hi."

"Hi. S'matter?"

"Nothing!"

"You got eyeliner and stuff . . ." he flapped a hand in the general direction of her eyes.

Jenny clapped her hands over her face and felt the smeary residue of eyeshadow, mascara, and eyeliner. Mortified, she pawed at it but realized she was only making it worse.

"Here." He fished in his back pocket and came up with a tissue.

She was so astounded that she couldn't even move when he came right up to her – Eric Raney only a foot from her! – and started wiping away the

Gifted Children

makeup.

Eric Raney touching her! Eva and Kaylee would never believe it!

And then without warning, she burst into tears all over again.

“Hey,” he said, an expression of concern rather than a greeting this time.

“Jenny . . .”

Eric Raney knew her name!

She sobbed all the harder.

He handed her the tissue and she cried into it, more humiliated than ever. Crying, and she was probably leaking snot, too! Of all the times for the dam to break!

“I miss my mom,” she hiccupped through her weeping. “I want her to come home!”

“Yeah?”

“It’s just not the same anymore, with her in the hospital and Jerry at college. I love Dad, but even when he’s there he’s not all there.”

“That’s rough.”

“And half the time he doesn’t even notice I’m around. No matter what I do, he never pays attention. Mom would never let me go out dressed like this.”

“S’okay, Jenny. You don’t have to worry about it any more.”

She looked up at him, into copper-colored eyes that were dark as blood in the forest night. “Really?”

“Really. Promise.”

Something happened then, something that Jenny couldn’t understand. It was as if a towering wave rushed against the shore of her mind, and carried her away into a cold black sea.

* * *



Spring 2007 Catalog

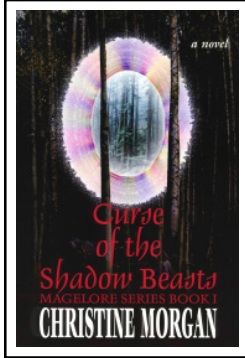
Books & Games



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Always the home for online orders, free pdf demos and exclusive stories, as well as appearances, reviews and more.

*The MageLore & ElfLore Trilogy
by Christine Morgan*



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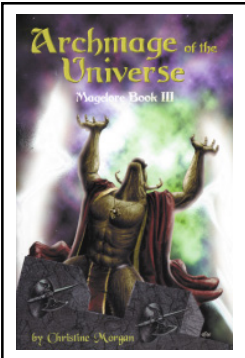
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The only ones who will stand a chance against him fled on a foolish quest – to bring his predecessor back from the dead.

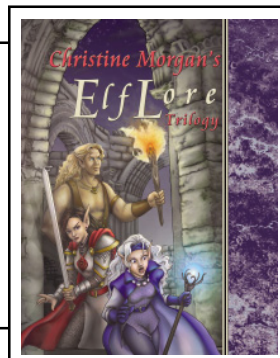
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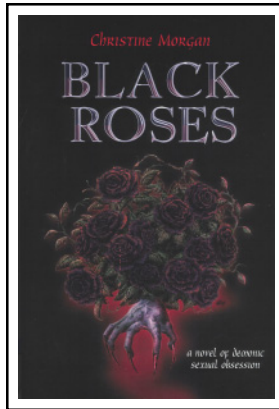
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by Christine Morgan*



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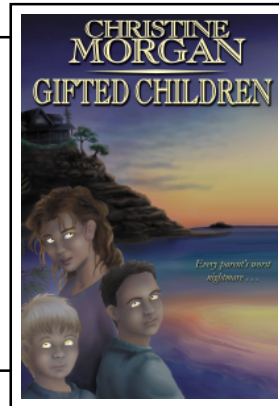
He is the man of their dreams – literally. He feeds on the sleeping minds of the women of Trinity Bay, making them believe their most forbidden fantasies are coming true. Now he has chosen the one woman he intends to be his, no matter how many people must die. Theresa Zane, newly returned to her childhood home, is drawn into a century-old mystery of sex, death, and the ominous haunting of the power behind the black roses.

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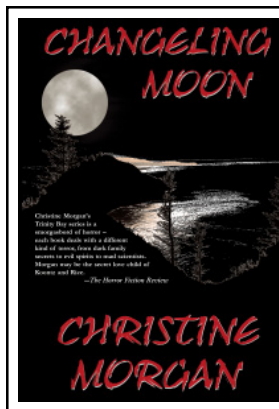
For thousands of years, they have lived among us. Their abilities have given rise to our oldest legends and our deepest fears.

They are changelings. Shape-shifters. Hunters. Creatures of the night. Ruled by the moon, and by their own savage hungers.

To them, we are prey.

Now they have come to Trinity Bay, where one troubled young woman will be caught in the midst of their deadly conflict.

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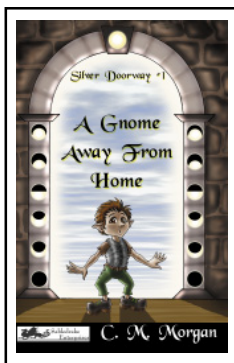
*The Silver Doorway series
by C. M. Morgan*

Life is complicated for the Broderick kids. They've just moved to a new neighborhood. Their parents are having problems. Mom is always busy with work, Dad is always busy on his computer. Half the time, it seems like they forget they even have children.

The kids are having problems too. Twelve-year-old Katie doesn't like having to take care of little brother Sam. Katie's twin Kevin is only interested in sports, and is mad at Mom and Dad. Eight-year-old Sam can't stand being bossed around by Katie.

The rest of the family thinks Dad's sister, Aunt Ellie, is weird. But when the kids discover a secret room in Aunt Ellie's basement, and a glowing silver doorway that leads to another world, they realize how weird their aunt really is.

Other kids sometimes come through that door. Kids from a world where magic is real, and so are gnomes, elves, goblins, and dragons. They come through the door looking for help from a good sorceress. Instead, they get Katie, Kevin and Sam.



A Gnome Away From Home – Silver Doorway #1

Marky of Gnome Keep is lost and alone. He can't find Pip, his puppy. He can't find his way out of the woods. To make matters worse, some giant owls have decided to have him for dinner.

When Dad doesn't show up to get them after Kevin's game, the Broderick kids decide to walk to Aunt Ellie's house. She isn't at home, so they use the spare key.

A sneeze leads them down to the basement, where they follow a little gnome back through the door . . .

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-2-3 • 104 pages

Dwarves in the Dark – Silver Doorway #2

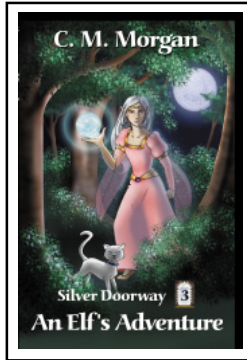
Stone Hammerfine and Sam Broderick might be from different worlds, one of them a dwarven boy and one of them a human boy, but they have something in common. Mean, bossy sisters!

Sam decides to prove he's not a baby by going off to find Stone all by himself. But when giant spiders want to tie them up in webs, and robbers with axes chase them through the dark tunnels, Sam and Stone wonder if maybe this time, just once, they should have listened to their sisters after all.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-3-1 • 104 pages



Silver Doorway books are written for younger readers, ages 7-12.



An Elf's Adventure – Silver Doorway #3

The world on the other side of the Doorway is a dangerous place, full of giant owls, spiders, goblins, and robbers. So, just in case, Kevin gets a lesson in how to use a sword from Aunt Ellie's boyfriend, Cal.

The kids are spending the whole week with Aunt Ellie, when someone comes through the Doorway. She is the most beautiful girl Kevin has ever seen. She's an elf, able to cast magic spells, and she is on a quest for an enchanted cup that will make her divorcing parents fall in love again. She needs help. She needs someone to protect her.

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Dragon on the Loose – Silver Doorway #4

Katie thinks that she is going to have a peaceful day. Her brothers are playing video games. She is spending a pleasant afternoon reading . . . until she gets a phone call from Aunt Ellie's cat.

With Ellie gone, Chester knows that there are only three people he can turn to for help. There is no time to waste! A baby dragon is on the loose in Luna Park!

And catching the baby turns out to be just the start of their problems. They have to take the baby home to its mother, but where is its mother?

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-7-4 • 104 pages



Orcs Ahoy! – Silver Doorway #5

Sam Broderick thinks he's got it bad.

That is, he does until he meets Druush. Druush has it a lot worse.

Chagro, the fiercest warrior in the Empire of Gerosh, wants to marry Druush's mother. But before he can, he has to get rid of one thing – her son.

The people of Gerosh are seagoing orcs – strong, tough and blood-thirsty. On his own, there is no way Druush would survive. He needs help. He needs a way to convince the emperor to spare his life.

\$6.99 • 0-9702189-8-2 • 104 pages

The Alchemist's Girl – Silver Doorway #6

After all of their adventures, keeping the secret of the Silver Doorway has been difficult. But it becomes impossible when hostile wizards from the other side send their magic against Aunt Ellie and Chester.

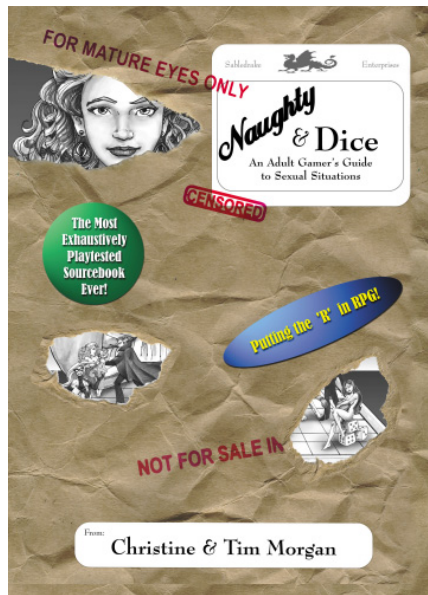
Katie, Kevin and Sam must find help on both sides of the Doorway in order to rescue their Aunt, but can they do it in time?

Coming in May, 2007

\$6.99 • 0-9771005-2-9 • 104 pages



Roleplaying Games



Naughty & Dice: An Adult Gamer's Guide to Sexual Situations

Written by Origins Award nominated author Christine Morgan and 20+ year gaming veteran and game store manager Tim Morgan, *Naughty & Dice* takes a light-hearted yet serious look at the topic of sex in RPGs. The tone of the book is centered around themes of tolerance and respect. It is recommended for mature readers, and is easily adaptable to any roleplaying game system.

Naughty & Dice includes chapters on:

- instructions for factoring a character's "Sexuality" statistic.
- rules for sexual gifts, drawbacks and abilities.
- character types and adventure ideas.
- pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases.
- enchanted items, spells, potions, and types of sex-related magic.
- an overview of sex in history, mythology and folklore.
- genre-specific looks at horror, aliens and fantasy races.
- OGL conversions, feats and classes.
- and much more!

\$19.95 • 0-9702189-6-6 • 108 pages

Available in March 2007
through Key20 Games!

Simulacrum RPG

And look for *Ellis: Kingdom in Turmoil* featuring the **Simulacrum Roleplaying System**, by Tim Morgan, coming in 2007 or 2008 from Sabledrake Enterprises. We're still working on the final size and price, but check out <http://sabledrake.com> or <http://SimulacrumRPG.com> for updates, demos and up-to-date information.

Tell No Tales

The latest hot reality television program is in the works, blending historical re-creation with physical challenges, mental strategy, and emotional manipulation. On the Caribbean island of Veradoga, a dozen contestants and the show's production team get more than they bargain for when world events and the island's haunted history combine to make it anything but a game.

\$TBA • 0-9771005-3-7 • ??? pages

Coming
in
July,
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Christine Morgan



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In addition to the works presented here, Christine Morgan's writing has appeared in many magazines and story anthologies.

"Coppers, the Alchemist" in *Pyramid Magazine* #17.

"The Reaching Wall" in *Cthulhu Sex Magazine* #14, Vol 2.

Several entries in *GURPS Villians*.

"The Dawn of the Living Impaired" in *The Book of All Flesh*.

"Seven Brains, Ten Minutes" in *The Book of Final Flesh*.

"I Am . . ." in *Leather, Lace & Lust*.

"Safe Sucks" in *Closet Desires IV*.

"Monsters" in *Path of the Bold*.

"Don't Look Back" in *Fear of the Unknown*.

"Death and the Scream Queen" in *Hell Hath No Fury*.

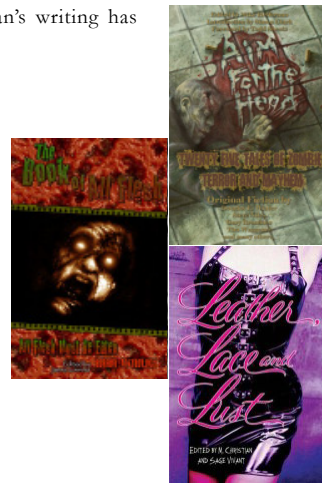
"Easting for Two" in *Dreaded Pall*

and coming soon . . .

"Family Life" in *Aim for the Head*.

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