

THE JEVIN BANKS EXPERIENCE · BOOK 1

PLACEBO

A JEVIN BANKS NOVEL

STEVEN
JAMES



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*To Pam Johnson,
For all of your help, all of your smiles,
all of your insights*

Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?

—Morpheus to Neo
in *The Matrix* (1999)

Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

—Edgar Allan Poe
(1809–1849)

Who knows but that we all live out our lives in the maze of
a dream?

—Weng Wei,
eighth-century Chinese poet

Part I

ENTANGLED

The Shore

September 24

Heron Bay, New Jersey

1:12 p.m.

You are there when they recover the bodies.

The day is gray with thick, somber clouds hanging heavily in the sky. Mist lurks above the bay, circling in a breeze that comes in damp and cold off the water.

You stand onshore watching the divers position their boat at the place where the witnesses say they saw the minivan go in. As you wait for them to reappear, your heart squirms like a thick, wet animal trapped inside your chest.

It was your wife's minivan.

And she had your two sons with her.

The silence is stark and chilled, disturbed only by the wet slap of waves against the shore.

For some reason, even though the van disappeared into the bay more than two hours ago, you still hold out hope that somehow Rachel and the twins have survived, that some inscrutable miracle has drifted down from heaven and stopped the water from pouring into the van.

You try to convince yourself that the vehicle has become a safe haven filled with air, a metal bubble of life—proof that a loving God exists and cares enough to step into time and save lives; you tell yourself that someday you'll all look back at this and stand in awe of the unimaginable possibilities of divine intervention.

You tell yourself that.

But then a pair of divers surface, tugging something with them.

And you see that it is one of your sons.

The body doesn't look real, more like a mannequin or a CPR dummy—frighteningly motionless, its skin pasty gray, its eyes open and staring unblinkingly at the blank, indifferent clouds.

It's only because of his clothes that you recognize which of your two boys it is—Andrew, the oldest by three minutes. You recall seeing him in that outfit earlier in the day, before you headed to the rehearsal for the show. Yes, it's Andrew.

Five years old and now he's dead.

As they lift him into the rowboat, his head lolls your way and water dribbles from his loose, gaping mouth. His eyes still refuse to blink.

For a moment you think it's some kind of mistake, a cruel joke the universe is playing on you.

No, no, that's not really him, that thing in the boat. Andrew is alive, of course he is. Any second now he's going to come running up the shore and yell, missing his r's like always, "Daddy! I'm okay! Don't wuwy, Daddy! I'm wight hewe!"

You catch yourself gazing along the shoreline. A few emergency medical personnel and police officers stand near the pier staring quietly at the divers, but that's all. No media. The cops have kept them professionally cordoned off on the road beyond the boat landing's parking lot. Besides the paramedics and police, the shoreline is empty: just a long line of lonely sand and jagged rocks curling toward the far shore now lost in the fog that wanders restlessly across the water.

Of course Andrew doesn't appear running up the shoreline. The

body is real. Your oldest son lies dead on the rowboat, and now the divers are going back down to retrieve the rest of your family.

The pulsing beast in your chest writhes again and you find it getting harder to breathe. You want to leave, to turn away, to run and run and run forever until your heart is finally in a safe, emotionally dead and distant place and you get a phone call outside of time from the police explaining everything in objective, detached detail, but you know you have to see for yourself what happened to Anthony and Rachel.

You have to.

And so you stay.

And stare at the water rippling beside the boat, afraid to even blink. You wonder if this comes from what you do, the knowledge that so many things can be faked, that there are so many ways to make people's minds play tricks on them in that fraction of a second of misdirection, either through the gentle deception of sleight of hand or the almighty power of stage lights or camera angles. If you blink you miss everything. The old line, the clichéd standby: *Now you see it, now you don't!*

But nothing is faked here today.

It isn't long before the divers bring up Anthony. It takes longer with Rachel.

You hear some whispered words through a radio that one of the officers has and realize that it was her hair. It got tangled in some branches as they were removing her from the van. Then he turns down the volume, and the rest of the words squibble away and drop out into an uneven static.

For some reason as you watch the men bring the three corpses to shore in the boat, you don't cry. You know enough about how people react to tragedy to realize that this is shock, you're in shock. But naming the condition doesn't help; in fact, it almost seems disrespectful to label the numbness, like a subtle move toward objectivity, which is the last thing you want right now.

"Mr. Banks?" A voice, scratchy and soft beside you. You turn and see that it's one of the police officers, a sturdy woman, maybe forty,

with dark eyes and a tight bun of sandy brown hair. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No.”

“We’ll have someone drive you to—”

“No. I want to see the bodies up close.”

She takes a small breath as if she’s about to dispute that and you brace yourself for an argument, but she replies simply, “I’ll go with you.”

You realize that letting you spend time with the bodies now, rather than at the morgue, might not be protocol, and you respect that this officer seems to care more about you than about policies and procedures. You hold back from telling her that you want to be alone with your family, and silently accept her offer.

The boat arrives at the pier and the two of you walk toward it.

None of the officers are joking around or using gallows humor like cops do on TV: “Looks like today’s special is three for the price of one!” Maybe screenwriters stick those lines in the shows because treating death honestly would be too hard on viewers and ratings. Better to lighten the mood, tidy up reality, let us escape—at least for a few hours during prime time—into a more sterile kind of pain.

You arrive and look into the boat, then climb aboard and kneel beside the three corpses that used to be your family—the boys you ate breakfast with this morning, the woman you kissed goodbye just before you walked out the door.

You reach for her cheek and hesitantly touch its wet, claylike surface. You slide the snarled, wet hair from her eyes, and though you try to hold back your tears, you fail, and the rising squall of wind brushes wisps of fog across your face as if its ghostly, curling fingers are trying to wipe the tears away. Or maybe the mist is just trying to taste the pain and carry it farther ashore.

She did it on purpose. Rachel did.

Four people saw her veer off the road, drive through the parking lot beside the bay, and then accelerate as she hit the pier. Later, the

investigators found nothing wrong with the van. Neither the steering wheel nor the gas pedal had jammed; the brakes were working fine. The trip off the pier was no accident.

Rachel had survived impact. There was water in her lungs, which meant she'd been breathing when the minivan filled with water. The air bag had inflated and there were no cracks spiderwebbing across the windshield, no contusions on her head that would've indicated that she was knocked unconscious.

Still, I hope that somehow she was. I can hardly imagine her just sitting there conscious and aware, waiting for our two sons to drown, but by all indications that's exactly what she did.

The boys were strapped into their car seats and had never been good at getting them unbuckled on their own, so even if they'd known how to swim, they wouldn't have been able to get out of the van.

Though it chills me to think about it, I can't help but wonder what it was like for Drew and Tony in those final moments—feeling the minivan speed up, experiencing the momentary weightlessness as the vehicle left the pier, then the jarring impact as it hit the surface of the water.

And then.

Sinking. Slowly at first, but then more rapidly as water began to fill the van. And the questions a five-year-old might ask: *What's happening? When is Mommy gonna help me?* Or perhaps even a thrill of curiosity as the water passed the windows: *Is this what it's like for a fish?!*

But then, of course, the troubling realization that this was scary and bad. And, as the instinct for survival took over, struggling uselessly to get free, crying, then screaming as the water rose.

The boys' lungs were filled with water too.

They were breathing as the water rose to their lips, passed their mouths, swallowed their cries for help. I've done hundreds of underwater escapes over the years, and I know all too well how terrifying it can be when your breath is running out and you can't find a way to free yourself from your bonds. You try to remain calm, but there

comes a moment when sheer terror eclipses everything. Six times I've passed out and had to be revived.

At least my sons only had to drown once.

And now.

Over and over I've searched through my conversation with Rachel earlier that day for any hint of what she was planning to do, any warning, however slight, of her dark intentions.

Everything had been so suburbally normal for a Saturday morning—I was slipping off to work for a few hours, then I'd be back to mow the lawn; Rachel was heading out with the boys to grab a few things at the grocery store for our dinner that night with the Andersons. Before I'd left, she'd seemed a little tired, but that was all.

I'd offered to ask her parents if they could watch the kids next weekend so we could sneak away—just the two of us—find a bed-and-breakfast in the country, somewhere outside of Atlantic City where we lived, take a little time to reconnect. To relax. Before the new season began.

"It'd be a good break for both of us before the new show opens," I told her.

"That would be nice," she said softly.

"That would be nice," not, "Sorry, I'll be dead by then. And so will the boys. I'm going to drown them as soon as you leave the house."

My friends, my family, the media, law enforcement—everyone who was touched by the case—searched for a reason why she did what she did: *Did she show any signs of depression? Was she noticeably upset that morning when you left? Were you having marital problems? Can you think of anything at all that would have caused her to do this?*

No, no, no.

No, I could not.

It was as if all of us were desperate to compartmentalize her actions under a specific heading—anger, loneliness, depression, despair—as if naming the motive, channeling all the terrible confusion and pain into one word, would have softened the blow, brought some sort of closure.

But we found no motive, no cause, no explanation.

A mother had inexplicably murdered her sons and committed suicide for reasons only she knew. Reasons that had drowned with her in Heron Bay.

I've tried to hate her for what she did, tried my hardest to despise her, to slice all the positive feelings I ever had for her out of my heart, but I can't make the love go away. Even after she killed my sons, even after that, I haven't been able to find a way to hate her. Part of me feels wretchedly guilty for still loving her, as if it's a failure on my part, as if it cheapens my love for the boys.

No reasons.

We found no reasons.

But something motivated Rachel to accelerate off that pier, and to make any sense of it I felt compelled to find a person to blame for not stopping her.

In the end I did. I found him. A man who'd missed a warning sign, some subtle indicator, some tiny clue as to her intentions—or possibly he'd said something, did something, without even knowing it, that'd pushed her over the edge.

He needed to be punished for his failure, and so I've reminded him of it every day for the last thirteen months.

And he has suffered acutely, just as he should, for letting his wife and his two sons die.

Sleight of Hand

Thirteen months after the drownings

Monday, October 26

1:53 p.m.

The highway snakes along the Oregon coastline like a great eel, twisting around the foothills that skirt the wild sea.

Surprisingly, the sky above us shines clear and bright and starkly blue. In the Pacific Northwest, this is a rare and welcome sight, and the Monday afternoon traffic is heavier than I would've expected. By the number of backpacks inside the cars and surfboards on top of them, I can tell that many of the drivers are outdoor enthusiasts heading home after a long weekend of enjoying the clear weather here on the coast or hiking in the nearby mountains.

I'm at the wheel of the van, and my friend Xavier Wray sits beside me. At fifty-two, he's nineteen years older than I am, but he still has a closetful of tie-dyed clothes and still uses the word "groovy."

He shaved his head last year because he didn't think the ponytail went well with his receding hairline, and, as he said, he only had control over one of the two factors in the equation: "Start losing your hair and you look old; get rid of it all and you look timeless."

I can tell he's been watching me but trying not to be too obvious about it. Figuring he would say something soon enough, I wait him out, and just as I start thinking about the television exposé we're working on, he breaks the silence: "It reminds you of that day, doesn't it? The ocean? The shore over there?"

"Yes."

Silence.

"You want some advice, Jev?"

"Xavier, we've been through this before."

"Sure, but do you want some advice now?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay, here it is." He brushes some lint from his faded season-one *X-Files* T-shirt imprinted with a picture of David Duchovny (looking quintessentially cool) and Gillian Anderson (looking urgently concerned), and the words "The truth is out there."

"Stop trying to move on."

I look at him quizzically. "That's your advice?"

"Yup."

"Stop trying to move on."

"You got it."

"That's what's going to help?"

"Yup."

"Well"—I give my attention back to the road—"thanks, Xav. I'll keep that in mind."

"Thinking about what's done, man, dwelling on it, trying to deal with it, I'm just saying, that creates a lot of emotional drag. Be where you are; let where you've been alone. Do that and the universe will lean in your direction."

"That's very Zen of you."

"There're always going to be holes in your heart in the shape of your wife, in the shape of your kids."

“And you’re telling me, what? That I need to fill the holes with something else?”

“No. I’m telling you to stop staring into ’em and let ’em be there, a part of your story, a part that affects your future, sure, but not what defines it. Stop feeding your pain and it’ll dissipate. Okay, that’s it. That’s what I wanted to say. I’m done.”

“How long have you been waiting to tell me all that?”

“It just came to me. I’m in the zone.”

“Uh-huh.” I take a small breath. “Listen, I appreciate it, really, but let’s talk about something else.”

A long pause. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Nothing really comes to mind.”

“Okay.” He sounds a little defeated. “Right.”

Xavier and I have been close friends ever since we met three years ago in Las Vegas, when my new show “Escape: The Jevin Banks Experience” opened. That was before moving to Atlantic City. Before everything happened and I gave up performing.

He’d worked backstage on the strip for nearly thirty years before coming to work pyrotechnics for me. He lives in an RV, loves to blow stuff up, doesn’t believe we landed on the moon, thinks Bush was responsible for 9/11, and still insists that Obama’s birth certificate was a fake: “Why do you think it took him so long to produce it? And who surrounded him *every day*? *The Secret Service*, Jevin. And they’re in charge of investigating counterfeit money. Right? *Counterfeit documents*? See? Just google it. It’ll make you a believer.”

Now I drive in silence and he quietly fiddles with the button camera I’ll be wearing. Moving from stage pyrotechnics to cinematography has been an easier transition for him than I thought it would be. He has an eye for it. So much of it is about angles and staging and lighting, just like in a stage production. And since I’ll be working incognito, he gets to use some of his favorite gadgets, like the button camera.

A Suburban passes us. A boy who looks about ten years old peers through the window at me as they go by. Even though my sons wouldn’t

be nearly that old by now, I wonder what they would have looked like if they'd have reached that age. It seems to happen all the time these days when I see kids.

They'd be taller, stockier, possibly into football or soccer or playing piano, but that would've been Drew, I'm guessing, rather than Tony. Probably video games for both of them. I would've taught them to ride their bikes, they'd have navigated through most of their years of elementary school and—

Stop it, Jevin. This isn't helping anything.

No, no it's not.

Emotional drag.

If nothing else, Xavier was right about that much.

I try to follow his advice and leave where I've been alone in order to get the universe to lean in my direction, but it's not as simple as he makes it sound. I've never been able to just tell myself to be happy—or sad, or angry, or anything. Something significant has to happen for my emotions to pendulum that far in another direction. It would be so much easier if I could just tell myself what to feel and then feel it, but that's not how things work for me. I only seem to learn the important stuff in life the hard way; I have to suffer before I change.

Setting the camera aside, Xavier finger-scrolls across the screen of my iPad to check my messages. "Looks like Charlene's gonna be a little late, but I think you two should still make it to the center by five thirty."

"It's what, about two hours from Salem?"

"Maybe a little less, but about that, yeah."

"Fionna send the files yet?"

He checks. "Not yet. Just another shot at a simile."

Fionna McClury, who works logistics and "information gathering" for us, is a single, stay-at-home mom who homeschools her four kids and works as a cybersecurity consultant to pay the bills. Fortune 500 companies hire her to try hacking into their companies in order to test their firewalls. Nine out of ten times she's successful.

Her kids help her sometimes for homework.

And sometimes she freelances.

For me.

She's a real pro at teaching her kids everything except English. Her Achilles' heel. Lately she's been trying to teach metaphors and similes and keeps sending us some of her own to critique before using them with her kids.

A little apprehensively, I glance at Xavier. "What is it this time?"

"The plane was as fast as a metal tube flying through the air at six hundred miles an hour."

"Um . . . it's accurate."

"I'll tell her that." He types. Hunt and peck. It takes awhile. "Hey, I forgot to mention, I need this weekend off. There's a convention I'm going to."

"Bigfoot or UFOs?"

"Very funny. It's about tectonic weapons."

"Tectonic weapons."

"They're for real, I'm telling you. There's credible evidence that the Air Force has the U2, the HAARP antennae, microwave technology. Just blast another country's fault lines with electromagnetic waves, take out their infrastructure without firing a shot. No boots on the ground. It's the weapon of the future. Intense stuff."

"Let me guess—Peru a few years ago? Haiti, Japan—test runs?"

"See, even *you* made the connection. Go to YouTube, search term *tectonic weapons*. It'll blow your mind."

"I'm sure it would, but why on earth would the US attack Haiti, Japan, or Peru?"

He taps his finger against the air as if to accentuate that my question was a way of agreeing with him. "Precisely, Jev. That is *exactly* the question we need to be asking."

Aha. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"You can have the weekend off. And you should text her, tell her we need those files tonight."

“Fionna.”

“Right.”

I guide the van along the highway and think about the TV series we’re filming—another step in my transition from the stage to the screen.

For the last year, I’ve used my background as an illusionist to replicate the tricks and effects of dozens of fake psychics, televangelist con men, and fortune-telling scam artists.

I know all too well what it’s like to search desperately for answers, and I can’t imagine deceiving someone who’s in that situation just to make a buck.

My stage shows did well; money’s not the issue. I’m really not sure anymore what I want out of life, but I figure if I debunk hucksters who are taking advantage of vulnerable and hurting people, well, at least that’s something positive. Something small but worthwhile.

The exposés have become a staple for cable’s Entertainment Film Network, and while not paying nearly as much as my stage shows did, they’ve helped me keep my skills sharp.

Three episodes left under contract. Then I’m not sure what I’ll do. It feels a bit like I’m in a sea with nothing on the horizon to sail toward. And nowhere I really want to sail.

Two shows ago, Entertainment Film Network’s executive producer told me I needed to branch out in a new direction, merge my work with more of a bent toward investigative journalism—sort of an undercover illusionist. I’d studied journalism for a few years in college, so (at least to the producer) it seemed like a natural fit.

I don’t have the name or face recognition of a Copperfield, Blaine, or Angel, and in this case anonymity would be to my advantage.

So, here I am.

But this trip is nothing like debunking a roadside psychic. The Lawson Research Center, or LRC, headed by theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate Dr. William Tanbyrn, has big dollars, big names, and a lot of credibility behind it.

It’s true that since Dr. Tanbyrn started getting deeper into the study

of the roots of consciousness, he'd fallen out of favor with some of the mainstream scientific community, but most of those scientists were discounting his findings without analyzing or carefully investigating them. It seems that for a lot of people, just the fact that he's now at the Lawson Research Center—a facility known for investigating the paranormal while also serving as a New Age conference center—is enough to undermine his credibility.

Needless to say, his most recent test results on mind-to-mind, non-local communication were controversial; the findings were widely disputed or simply disregarded, as were Dr. Dean Radin's in the books *The Conscious Universe* and *Entangled Minds*. However, Dr. Tanbyrn's research had made it into three peer-reviewed journals and, supposedly, had been replicated by two researchers in Sweden, although as far as Fionna and Charlene had been able to tell, that study hadn't appeared yet in any of the literature.

In essence, Dr. Tanbyrn and his team were claiming proof of unconscious psychic activity, or psi, saying they actually had hard data to back up the existence of some forms of telepathy. They claimed to have facts—scientific evidence, not just anecdotes of folks saying they could read other people's thoughts.

I find that all pretty hard to swallow.

Whenever someone claims psychic activity—whether it's a TV psychic, the gypsy at the fair doing cold readings, or a multimillion-dollar research center, my con-man radar goes up. As Xavier likes to say, “Wherever there's someone out to make a buck, there's someone about to lose his shirt.”

I have some ideas on how Dr. Tanbyrn and his team are faking the findings, but I need to be sure. Get it all on film. That's what my three friends are going to help me do.

Charlene isn't at the rest stop when we arrive.

While Xavier heads to the vending machines for some Gatorade

and Cheetos, I look over my notes about the center where Charlene and I will covertly spend the next three days.

But after a few moments I hear a girl in the vehicle next to me crying and see the family with the ten-year-old boy that passed us earlier. The stressed-out-looking mom is urging her two kids out of the SUV.

“I don’t care if it’s a ten-hour drive.” She’s clearly exasperated. “Please, you have to get along with your sister.” Her kids look as weary as she does. The girl, who’s about seven or eight, wipes a tear from her eye.

Go on. It might help.

I slip out of the van, lean against the door, and pull out the 1895 Morgan Dollar I always carry with me. Rachel and I didn’t wear wedding rings, but since I was a numismatist, she insisted we exchange coins. This is the one she’d given me at our wedding seven years ago. It was by no means my most valuable coin, but being worth \$125,000, it wasn’t one that I was about to use to buy a lottery ticket.

I accidentally-on-purpose let it drop. It rolls toward the boy.

After a glance at his mother for permission, he picks it up and hands it to me.

“Thanks.” But as I accept it, I vanish it from my hand. “Hey, where did that go?” I act shocked that it’s gone.

Both he and the girl search my hands, then the ground. I turn my pockets inside out to show them that they’re empty, and that’s when I palm the rest of the coins I’ll need. Then I pretend to notice something beside the boy’s arm. “Hang on. There it is.”

I reach over and pull half a dozen, more commonplace silver dollars one at a time from his left armpit, letting them drop to the parking lot.

“Did you see that, Mommy!” the girl exclaims. She’s definitely not crying now. Her brother searches both of his armpits for more coins. I gather up the ones that fell.

“Yes. I did.” Their mother is eyeing me a little suspiciously, as if I’m the psychopathic magician she’s heard about who lures kids away from their parents by doing coin tricks for them in rest stop parking lots.

Xavier is returning now, snacks in hand. He sees me entertaining the family and tries to hide a half-smile.

I do a couple more tricks—I'm in my element and it feels good—then I see Charlene pull into a parking spot a few cars away, and I tell the kids, "I didn't realize it before, but I can tell you two are good at magic too."

They look confused.

"Go on, reach into your jacket pockets." With the sight angle of the mother and the attention of the kids focused on my right hand, the two left-handed drops I did a few moments ago while I was finishing the second-to-last trick hadn't been easy, but after twenty-five years of doing this, I'd managed to pull it off.

The kids reach into their pockets and are each astonished to find a silver dollar.

"I told you. It's magic."

"That was really good," the woman tells me, finally sounding a little more at ease, then nudges her kids toward me. "Go on, give the nice man back his money. And thank him for the magic show."

Though visibly disappointed that they can't keep the coins, the children obediently offer them to me.

"Oh, those were in your pockets, not mine. I couldn't take those." I wink at their mother. "I hope you have a great trip."

At last, with a word of thanks, she allows the kids to accept the silver dollars, then corrals them toward the restrooms.

Charlene is getting out of the car, and Xavier, who has a mouthful of Cheetos, waves to her but speaks to me in between crunches. "You just can't stand it, can you?"

"Stand what?"

"Seeing kids cry when you know you can make 'em laugh."

"What can I say. It's my only redeeming quality."

"You're pretty good at blackjack."

"True."

Charlene rounds the van. "Hello, gentlemen."

We greet her and she watches me pocket my remaining coins. Xavier, who's deep into his bag of Cheetos now, licks some cheese powder from his fingers.

Charlene sighs good-naturedly. "I see you're both up to your usual tricks."

"Old habits." I put the last coin away.

"How many silver dollars have you given away to kids over the years?"

"A couple, I suppose."

"Uh-huh."

She smiles and it looks nice. Brown-haired and congenial, Charlene Antioch has a girl-next-door innocence about her, but also a slyly sexy side that she keeps hidden except when onstage in my show—that is, when I still did stage work. I don't know how many times in the last six years I've made her vanish, sliced her into pieces, or let her chain me up and seal me in a water tank. But I haven't done an escape in over a year. The thought of Rachel and the boys in the van, trapped, drowning, has just been too much for me. I can't even stand being in small, cramped places anymore.

An escape artist who's claustrophobic.

So now he makes films exposing fake psychics.

Pathetic.

Today Charlene, who's thirty-two but looks twenty-five and is a chameleon when it comes to outfits, has her hair in a ruffled, earthy hairdo that might've actually looked more natural on Xavier than on her. Birkenstocks, a button-up shirt, and tan Gramicci climbing pants round out her neo-progressive nature-lover outfit. Undoubtably, she chose it because of the center we're heading to. I, on the other hand, wasn't so particular—black jeans, a faded T-shirt from one of the half-marathons I ran last year, a three-season leather jacket. Also black.

"How was your drive?" I ask her.

"Good."

Xavier crumples up the empty Cheetos bag, aims for a trash can

ten feet away. Tosses. Misses. Goes to retrieve it, but rather than drop it in, he backs up for another ten-foot shot.

I glance at my watch. “We should probably get going. They’re expecting us by five thirty and it’s still almost an hour to the Three Sisters.” The famous mountain range wasn’t far at all from the Lawson Research Center and, coincidentally, was near the town where I grew up.

On his fourth try, Xavier finally hits his shot, and the three of us remove the cameras, the heart rate monitor, and the radio frequency (RF) jammer from the van. Even though Charlene and I have used them all before, Xavier insists on re-re-re-explaining how they work, how to keep them concealed, how Charlene would use the jammer and heart rate monitor tomorrow when she was in the chamber.

“Right.” She takes the nearly invisible monitor that’ll record her heart rate and, in a gesture of modesty, turns to the side before unbuttoning her shirt to press it against her chest, just above her heart. Xavier confirms that it’s recording her heart rate, prints out the results on the small portable printer we’re going to take with us. Then, monitor removed and shirt rebuttoned, Charlene climbs into the rental car.

I turn to Xavier. “So you’re going to get B-roll of the mountains?”

He pats his video camera. “I’ll get footage of everything around here. By the time you’re done with your little study, we’ll be ready to edit this puppy. Get it to the network. Actually meet a production deadline for once.”

“Great.” I grab the gear we’ll need and join Charlene in the car while Xavier closes up the van.

He takes off, and a moment after I start the engine, Charlene turns to me. “I saw you with that family in the parking lot. You really are good with kids, Jevin.”

“Thank you.”

“With everyone.”

“Thanks.”

A pause. “It’s been a long time since you were onstage. Do you ever think you might—”

“No.”

Another slight pause. “Okay.” As I’m backing out of the parking spot, she reaches over and gently places her hand on my knee. Despite myself, I feel a tingle of intimacy at her touch.

I stop the car. Let it idle.

“We need to get used to this,” she says softly.

“Yes.”

On the video we sent to the LRC, we’d portrayed ourselves as being deeply in love, and from what I could tell, it was one of the main reasons we’d been chosen for the study. Consequently, I know that if we’re going to pull this off, I can’t let on that her touch makes me uncomfortable in any way.

But yet it does, because in the last few weeks my feelings for her have strayed beyond the kind a co-worker can comfortably have for someone if they’re going to remain simply co-workers. Part of me knows that, yes, it’s been long enough since Rachel’s death that I should be able to move on and start dating again, but another part of me isn’t so sure that I’m over the loss in the ways I should be before delving into another serious relationship.

Charlene removes her hand. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking it’s not going to be easy being a couple.”

“I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable. If you’re not up to—”

“I’ll be fine.”

A moment passes. The car is still idling. “We were good on stage together.” Her voice is gentle, like a brushstroke on canvas. It’s an enigmatic statement and I do my best not to read too much into it.

She’s just trying to tell you that you’re a good actor, that together the two of you can pull this off.

“Yes.”

“So then,” she takes a small breath, “I’m not sure how to put this, but . . . you’re going to be alright being my lover for the next three days?”

Pretending to be your lover. Pretending.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I have a sense that there’s another layer of meaning beneath my words, a layer that I may not have intended, and a wash of slightly uncomfortable silence fills the car. Rachel’s ghost seems to drift between us. Linger beside my shoulder.

Finally, I pull out of the parking lot and Charlene nods. “Good.” But by then I’ve nearly forgotten what words of mine she’s responding to.

I merge onto the highway and head toward the Lawson Research Center. Despite the meta-analysis Fionna ran on the test results, I’m still convinced that Dr. William Tanbyrn and his team are faking it somehow, because if they’re not, if their findings are true, I don’t have any idea how to wrap my mind around the implications.