

*Arc of the Shah*  
*The Bright and Boundless Path*  
*Book 2: Constant Star*  
*By Cindy Rae*



*Chapter One*  
*Adam*

*Red hair. Long, red hair. Hair like Corinne's but not. Silkier. Lighter. Whore's hair. Not that I give a damn about that, Adam Blackmane thought.*

The slender, unknown woman had gotten out of a blue Chevy sedan ten minutes earlier, the rental sticker prominent, the trailer hitch on the back the newest looking thing about it.

She'd emerged incautiously, like someone used to being where she didn't belong. Like she was accustomed to stepping onto property she didn't own and had never been to before. For a long minute, she simply stood, arms folded, just looking at his house.

*Looks like I'm sleeping here in the mine, tonight,* Adam thought. He knew he wouldn't show his face; not with a strange woman around.

The thought rankled. For the last few weeks he'd been sleeping outdoors. Next to Celeste's grave, mostly.

*Celeste.* Her beautiful name was like a dagger, in his Shah heart. He was fading. Failing. Losing a battle he wasn't even fighting, and he knew it. He reasoned that if he hadn't been so strong to begin with, he would have been dead by now. He regularly wished he was. Each day was just a thing to live through, since his wife's passing. A thing he wished would take him, and make the empty pain of living just... stop.

Adam's unknown visitor cocked her head to one side, looking for all the world as if staring at his empty home could tell her something interesting. *If she's selling something, why isn't she just knocking on the door?* he wondered. He peered at her from a well-hidden, side entrance to the working mine that dominated his homestead. *She had to pass a helluva lot of 'no tresspassing' signs to get here,* he realized.

Anger simmered. *Bitch has some nerve.* He spit on the ground. If she kept him from his wife's side, tonight, he thought he just might scar that pretty face of hers.



No. Disgust with himself filled him. Whatever had happened to Celeste, it was not this woman's fault. She did not deserve either denigration or reprisals. Whatever brought her here, car trouble, a sales pitch, trying to find out if Jesus was his personal savior, whatever... she would just have to deal with being disappointed. And alone. His home was obviously unoccupied, at the moment.

She would leave soon, car willing. He hadn't heard any signs of trouble on that front, when she'd pulled up.

She stared at the open garage for a long moment, then walked around the house, then circled it a second time.

*Nobody's home, woman. Get back in your damn car and....*

She walked up the front steps. *Good. Now she could ring the bell, or knock, and realize there was no...*

But she didn't knock, and she didn't ring the bell. She studied his plants, for a few moments, all of them dead in their pots. Tending

them had been Celeste's job. If he hadn't cared if he lived or died, he damn sure didn't give a crap about the rhododendron. Or whatever the hell Celeste had called it.

Leonine eyes narrowed, as he watched her handle a dead leaf that belonged to a variegated ivy plant. Except for the wildflower seeds Corinne had scattered across the back yard, and those pretty much took care of themselves, there was no ... life, about the place, at all. The front area was a hard pack of clay and sand, the path to the mine little more than a well-worn footpath, strewn with rocks, some of which had come from the dig itself. The entrance was a hole in the side of a hill which sloped gradually upward.

The surrounding area had trees, eventually. The homestead she was standing near had been carved from the timber.

But the home itself had an “abandoned” feel. There was nothing lifelike about either the peeling paint or the naked clothesline, or the plastic pot the redhead was now picking up and looking under.

*What are you hunting for, woman? A key?* He waited and watched, as she set the barren pot back down. *If she was key hunting, she was doing a piss poor job of it.* She left the other pots right where they were.

She looked back toward his front door, which was covered by a screened one. She stared hard at both, for a moment. *You won't find me in there. You won't find anyone in there,* he thought, wondering if she was about to press her pretty face to a window. She didn't. Brushing off her hands, she looked up at the front of the house a moment longer, arms folded casually across the front of a button down cotton shirt that had come partially untucked from her jeans on the drive over. She was the picture of feminine patience.

*Go away, he thought loudly. Even if I barely live there, you're standing in front of my home.*

He'd stayed away from the house as much as he could, preferring to work inside the deep caves that were a mine, but which also served as a refuge of sorts, for him. Montana was dotted with such stony enterprises, and few people, especially this close to the Canadian border. Neighbors were far apart out here, sometimes miles distant. A mine claim came with a considerable deed for the surrounding property. Adam knew that made it a great home, for a man like him.

A man with a face like a Barbary lion, and a mane of nearly black hair. A beard that looked like a pattern of stubble, but wasn't, because it never grew longer. Grey eyes studied her, as she knocked on the door, once.

*Finally. Get it over with.* She stepped back and just waited. After no one answered, she didn't knock again.

*Why in God's name was she here?* He could go a month, a season, or more, and not be interrupted by anybody, and when he was, it was expected, and they were people he knew. That was the point of living this far away from civilization. Several of those, considering.

She folded her arms protectively across her chest, again, and turned to scan the yard once more. She was willowy. The red silk of her hair hung loose, and she pulled it back into a quick pony tail, while she stood there. The shirt was rust-colored, and her jeans that had seen many trips through a washer. Worn boots covered her feet, but they were good quality ones. The car was a rental, so there was no clue about her there, other than she'd picked it up in town. No rings on her fingers, but small gold hoops hugged her ears. She wore a

wristwatch that looked too big for her slender wrist. Blue eyes, probably, but they could be brown. He was too far away to tell.



Then she surprised him. Which was to say that she did a thing that had not happened in a long, long time.

"Adam?" Her voice called out his name; and she'd called it out clearly, not timidly. There was strength, in her tone. "Adam, my name is Diana Bennet."

The name told him nothing. But whoever she was, Adam now knew now that she was not here by accident. He dismissed completely the notion of car trouble or even of a lost traveler.

She continued in the same, steady, self-assured tone. "We both know I can't see you, but I assume you can hear me. I know about you. I promise I mean you no harm." She scanned the yard, realizing he could be one of a dozen places, and could move away from wherever he was hiding, if she got too close. She had seen Vincent move with lighting speed. She didn't want him to feel as if she were hunting him, though in a way, of course, she was.

Blue eyes moved from one structure to the next. There was the house, a detached garage, two work sheds, the mine, a scrub yard with a few wildflowers in it out back, and that led to a tree line, and farther out, a small lake made from runoff and rain. From there, the land sloped upward to craggy pine forest, capped by a small plateau. There was a large pond ringed by more trees, and the road she'd come in on.

All of it meant that he could be watching her or hearing her from any one of a dozen vantage points. The tree line all but ringed his property, though it was broken in spots. The door to the detached garage was up, and the cluttered space housed a pickup truck with Montana plates, and a huge collection of tools.

A mine car sat at the track entrance to what she knew was a working silver mine, which was to say that Adam Blackmane made his living pulling, silver, nickel, coal, and some gold out of the earth. Whatever he mined he sold. She had no idea how deep its tunnels went, though the word "tunnels" reminded her of Vincent, and New York. If the mine was even fractionally like the maze of tunnels beneath Manhattan, she knew she'd never find Adam there, if he didn't want to be found.

The two storage sheds stood out back. All served as places he could be hiding. And of course, if he tired of hiding, he could always just kill her.

Diana did not discount that possibility, even as she thought it unlikely. Calculated risks. Diana earned her living making them.

She kept her tone firm. "Listen, not to be indelicate, but it was a long trip, and it's hot, and I need to pee. So if you don't mind....." She

turned back to his front door, lifted the screen, turned the knob and walked straight in.

*Damn the woman! Of all the gall!*

Adam waited, staring at the house from the mine entrance, chafing at her rudeness. She had just walked into the lair of a Shah. Did she not understand what kinds of territorial lines that crossed? He reconsidered scarring her face, liking the vindictive spike of adrenaline, even as he shoved aside the urge, once again. *She'd get herself killed before this day was out, if she wasn't careful*, he thought, anger simmering.



From inside his mine, he stood impotently, fuming, staring bullets into his house. He heard her flush. *There. Damn rude woman.* She needed to get out of his house. Right now.

Except she didn't. Fifteen minutes went by. Twenty. Whoever Diana Bennet was, she was now in full possession of his property. If he hadn't sent his children, Julia and Alex and Chloe away, they could handle her; ask her what the hell she was doing on his porch, and now in his house, to begin with.

But he *had* sent his children away. Sent them away after the strain of the year had got to be too much for him. Sent them away after their mother had died; after the grief over their lost life together simply refused to leave him, or even abate.

Adam continued to stare, knowing his newfound anger was barely disguising the pain that had constantly seemed to twist, inside his gut. Time wasn't helping that. If anything, it was getting worse. He knew it. He was no good to his children. And he wouldn't let them watch him die of grief.

*Some things*, he'd thought, *they should be spared*. So he'd sent them away to live with his sister, in town.

Which left him with his current predicament. The redhead was still in there, doing God-knew-what.

*What was her name? Diana. Diana... Bennet. Well, this was a fine mess. Was she here to rip the place off, or something?* Rather odd that she would introduce herself, if that was her intention.

He crouched down inside the protective shade of the mine, watching the house. The homestead had entrances front and back, and one beneath the floorboards of his bedroom closet that only his family knew about. It led to a tunnel system that honeycombed the property; made it possible to escape, from any building or angle, as long as he could find a way below.

Well, he didn't feel like "escaping" now. He felt like fighting. He glared the house, willing her to leave.

Minutes turned into an hour. She didn't emerge.

Nearly two hours passed. Adam maintained his position. Maybe she was going through his things, for some reason. He truly didn't care.

*Or maybe she was going through Celeste's.*

Oh. Now that. That he was going to have to stop. Her jewelry, her clothes, the music she listened to... no one got to touch those things. Not even him. Not anymore.

He strode across the yard as though his appearance was common. Whatever this was about, he was going to settle it.

He opened the door loudly, letting the screen drop hard, and slamming the main door. He hoped she would run, but didn't really care if she did, one way or the other. He was angry. It felt good to feel something besides grief.

"So, Diana Bennet." He gave her the full frontal view of his face, his clawed hands, and his fangs. She sat on one of his kitchen stools, drinking his iced tea from one of his glasses. "What in the *hell* are you doing in my house?"

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## *Chapter Two*

### *Diana*

He was well over six feet, of course. Diana was starting to think that all of Vincent's people (that's what she called them, because to her,

that's what they were), were well over six feet. She'd met Vincent, of course, and then heard Peter Alcott's breathless news: another being like Vincent, a man named Seth, had come into the tunnels after a serious injury suffered in a motorcycle wreck.

She could hardly believe Peter's tale. Could believe it less that Seth had a wife and five children, one of whom was the spitting image of Seth. She got the whole story from Peter, Father, Vincent, and Catherine. Catherine was planning her wedding. Come Autumn, she would be a bride. Diana wished the starry eyed couple every happiness.

*Speaking of 'starry eyed...'* Diana's mind snapped back to present concerns. Adam's wife's name had been Celeste, as in 'celestial.' And she had died. And now her angry mate stood with his hands on his hips, challenging Diana. Diana considered that progress. If he was planning on killing her, she'd probably have been dead in the first five minutes after she opened the front door - assuming he knew she was there, which Diana did.

He knew her name. So he'd heard her call out. That had been two long hours ago. *He has patience, then, even when he's angry.* She catalogued what she knew of him already, added that tidbit to many others, and filed it away.

So, while he stood looking threatening, Diana realized she was in no real danger. Or at least she didn't think she was. That was good enough, for Diana, for the moment.

"What am I doing? At the moment, just having a glass of iced tea," she answered. "And you're Adam Blackmane. Is that a family name, or just a description, and it stuck?" She sipped from her glass. His glass.

"None of your damn business." He took the glass out of her hands, indicating she was not welcome. He was thirsty. He drank it down. And then set the empty glass on the table, a bit hard, a note of finality in the gesture.

She rose, understanding she had been dismissed.

He glanced around his mess of a house. Nothing looked disturbed, that he could tell. Or if she'd gone through things, she'd been careful about it. Or the mess was so bad he just couldn't tell, one way or another. *Whatever.*

"I have your Harley," she said, out of the blue. "It's in a trailer. It's a little worse for wear, I'm afraid. Seth Hunter damn near died on it, riding it back through New York."

She registered his shocked expression, as his anger was replaced by something else.

"Seth was hurt?" he asked.

Diana fished her card out of her pocket. She noted the concern in his voice. *Concern for someone else. Good. That was good.* Of course, a lot of suicidal people still did that; they showed concern for others. It was themselves they were not too keen on. Diana knew as much. And that his situation was very unique, thanks to the exceptional being that he was.

"Yes. Badly, I'm afraid," she answered. "But he's okay, now." She produced a pen and wrote an address on the card. "This is the fleabag where I'm spending the night, in town." She set the card on the cluttered kitchen table. "The trailer the rental place gave me to haul the bike in is a busted piece of crap, so that's getting fixed."

He picked up the card, and she watched him tuck it into his back pocket. *You didn't throw it away, or rip it up in front of me. Good.*

Again, it was a favorable sign, albeit a small one. He also hadn't simply let it sit on the table. All were options, and each of them meant something different, from indifference, to a show of force. Diana knew it. She's been trained to know it. He might not like her, but he was responding to her presence, if only to show her how annoyed he was. She stepped around him, and made for the door.

"Just ride it over," he ordered. She turned and rolled her eyes at him. *Blue, not brown, he realized. An odd shade of blue. Dark, and storm tossed.* They looked startling, in her beyond-fair face, and she had some freckles, here and there, proving that she was indeed a true redhead.

One that wasn't going to do as he asked, apparently. "Sure. Ahhh. No. Sorry. I don't ride bikes." She headed for the door, again, and stepped out onto his porch. He followed, keeping a few feet between them.

"And this one barely starts. Did I mention it hit a tree?" she tacked on.

He did not respond to the damage to his property in any way she could see. And she had spent her life training to pick up on involuntary cues. *Nothing. Almost too flat,* she realized.

"If the trailer's fixed, I'll see you tomorrow," she told him. "If it isn't, I might just stop by anyway." She walked to her car.

"No," he told her.

"Goodbye, Adam. If you water that philodendron on the porch railing, it just might come back. The ivy is a loss, I'm afraid."

He let the screen door close with a soft bang as she marched to the her car with a long-legged, booted stride. The Chevy door creaked, as she opened it.

She got in the car and drove away, kicking up dust from the dry ground, as she went.

*What in holy hell?*

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### *Chapter Three*

#### *The Mourning Soul*

Adam laid by Celeste that night, missing his wife, just as he'd done for months on end. Apologizing to her for ... oh, so many things. Trying to explain that he would have saved her if he could have. Other things. Private things. Things he had said to her many times by now, both when she had been living, and now that she was dead. He told her again that he was sorry that their lives had turned out the way they had. Sorry he'd married her when they had both been much too young for it, in a way. Sorry for a lot of things.

She was buried a long way from the house, a place deep in the forest he had to hike to. He hadn't wanted her in the barren sand patch near the house, or the dying soil of what he jokingly referred to as his "back yard." There was no "yard" to it. It was hard pack and sand. Rocky, like the mountain it stood next to. The wildflowers had been her idea back when she thought she might enjoy a "spot of color."

Some of the tougher kinds had made it. That had been fine, with both of them.

His homestead was the remote place he'd intended it to be, the area no one else wanted to settle because the ground was too rocky for farming, and the mound that was the mine entrance sloped up out of the ground like an interruption of the otherwise gradual rise of the scenery. Many such caves dotted the countryside. His was fairly rich in ore. There was water from both the small pond and a larger lake dominating the landscape, both of which were good signs, for mineral mining.

The mine was remote, and could be run by any number of strong men, depending on what kind of seam was being worked, and how long it took to play out. While the simple homestead might not seem like a perfect spot for everyone, it was very close to that, for a Shah.

Adam's father had cleared the land for the house with him, and they both had loved the nearby forest. They fished, hunted, camped, and ran naked through the brush under the moon, when the mood struck them. Big Sky Country. It had been that, for him, both boy and man. Now, he wasn't sure what it was. It was still "home." It always would be. But it was a sorrowful one.

Clouds wisped across a barely there moon. There were at least a few stars out, tonight. There usually were. He forgot the pain of losing his wife, for a moment, as he tried to remember happier times. Times when he and his father had been wildly free, together. *The nights were so dark... yet... there was light in them.* Father and son had run as companions, always.

They were Blackmanes. Blackmane meant "strength," to his people. The broad shoulders the father had passed on to his son meant

something. Blackmanes were known for their power. *We are the mighty ones*, his father would say, flexing a bicep, as he did so. Now and then, Adam remembered that he had tested that strength, as they'd raced through the open land, together.

His mother had understood. Well, mostly. When his sister Cheryl had been born, his mother had expected the Blackmane males to civilize, some. They had tried. Not that hard, but they had tried.

*Not so mighty now*, Adam mourned, knowing he was but a shadow of his former self. Emptiness gnawed at him, as he laid alone, in the night.

Montana was a place that was still mostly unsettled, and the further a man (or a Shah) got off the main roads, the more solitary it became. As in most states, the Northern edges were less populated than the southern ones. Adam lived so far north he could see Canada on a clear day. And the days were mostly clear.



To many, he knew his homestead would look lonely, like the last place anyone with sense would want to inhabit. But he knew he wasn't

missing “people.” His life had always had only so many of those. But he was missing one of them. One, in particular.

He rested a clawed hand on night covered stones. *You were my world. My whole world, once. I miss you, Celeste.*

Pain, his constant companion, reasserted itself. His stomach and chest felt tight. The ground felt hard, but he knew he didn’t want to trade it for a mattress.

He turned on his side, wondering what tomorrow would bring. If the redheaded woman would return, and what would happen, if she did.

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## *Chapter Four*

### *Deep Places*

Diana Bennet didn’t come back the next day. But she did drive up the day after, same blue car, no trailer attached. Again, he watched her from the entrance to the mine. *Damn.* He’d half convinced himself she’d left, thanks to his inhospitable attitude. It was fine with him if she had.

As he stood inside the mine, she walked right into his home again, this time, not bothering to knock. *Damn her.* This was a habit he was going to have to break.

He came in the doorway, five minutes behind her. It had taken that long to stow his tools where he could find them, again. She noted the time on her watch, absently.

"Anybody ever tell you you have some personal space problems, lady?" he demanded.

"All the time," she replied, pouring tea into two glasses, this time. They were both dirty. One was the one she had used the other day, and it had germs from both their mouths on it.

*Oh well.* If she didn't give a crap, he damn sure didn't.

"It's part of my job." She sat on that same stool, again. He didn't like her.

The vellum card that still sat in his back pocket gave no indication of what she did. It just had her name in plain brown ink, and a phone number with a New York prefix. And the scribbled name of the hotel she was staying at, which was a run-down flea bag off the interstate. *Good. She'll be gone that much sooner, if she's uncomfortable,* he thought, a little vengefully.

"You have a job? And all this time I thought you were just a nosy bitch with boundary issues." He took a cookie from the open package on the counter. He was hungry. He didn't offer her one.

She laughed at that, and he became aware that it had been forever since he'd heard the sound of a woman's laughter. That it was a sound he hadn't heard since way before Celeste had died. Before they found out how sick she was, probably. Maybe before that. Long before, he realized.

Diana's mirth died down to a chuckle, and she took a drink from the dirty glass. They both knew that the kitchen could use a good cleaning. Or a bad one. Much of the house was a pig sty.

"Being a nosy... well, person with boundary issues *is* kind of my job, Adam. I'm a special investigator."

"You're a cop?" His wariness immediately increased.

"No. But I work for them. When they call me. Sometimes."

He shrugged, giving her the indication that he didn't care what she did.

"And you're a miner with three kids who now live with their Aunt, since you were widowed, over a year ago." He'd been about to grab another cookie. He spun his head around to her, as if she had slapped him.

"Who the hell *are* you?" His grey eyes tried to pierce through her. Today she wore a simple yellow blouse buttoned over a white top, and another pair of comfortable jeans. He'd give her this much, she didn't fuss over her appearance. Brown sandals adorned her feet. Her toenails were brushed with red polish. Bright red. He shrugged at the color.

"I already told you. I'm a special investigator," she answered. "I freelance, and I'm self-employed, though different police agencies pay me to work with them. Sometimes I have to tell them things they really don't want to hear. But I tell them, anyway. I want it understood, that whatever else I may be, I'm not a liar, Adam. I'll never tell you something that isn't true."

It seemed like an odd pronouncement to make, considering. "I thought you were here to bring back my bike. That Seth paid you."

She shook her head, and her silky pony tail moved, with the motion. Wispy tendrils of hair framed her face with soft, airy curls. "No one is paying me. You should know that, too. Also that I was sent here by a man named Vincent, at Seth's request. He's a... a person like you. But you've never met. He never knew about all of you, until a few weeks ago."

Adam's mind spun. *An unknown Shah?* That was news. But... why should someone who didn't even know him send her? "So... why are you here?"

She seemed to consider the question, as she considered the smudges on the glass. "I'm not sure, yet. That is, I have to make up my mind about that one. Some of what's happening here adds up. Some of it doesn't."

"Lady. I am really not into games." He wasn't. There was no mistaking his tone.

Her blue eyes moved from the glass to him. "Of course you're not. You're grieving. You hate the world, right now, for taking away your wife. It's not fair that you're still here and she's in a grave. And you're right. It isn't fair. Sometimes, life just hands you a really shitty deal." She set down the glass.

Adam admitted to being a bit stunned. One, that she'd pegged him so correctly, and two, that she'd used the word "shitty" in a sentence. Five minutes ago, she'd refused to say "bitch." He figured her for a stuck up type, when it came to swearing.

"And you're an expert on shitty deals?" He glared at her.

"Adam," her voice was low, but not sultry. "I am its commander-in-chief, its unquestioned ruler." The reply was sarcasm at its finest. She slid off the stool.

"I'm starving and your kitchen is probably breeding E. coli. Let's go see where you work."

She walked out the door, opened the trunk of the rented Chevy, and fished a sandwich out of a cooler. She ate it while she walked forward, into his mine.

*Well, at least she could multi-task.* He trailed after her. He really had no other choice, short of picking her up and dropping her tight little backside into the driver's seat of her rental. The thought was a tempting one.

She asked him no questions. He realized how unusual that was, for a woman. *As a matter of fact...* he searched his memory across their two strange encounters. He realized she had not asked him *any* questions. Not one, really, since she'd stepped up on his porch. And now, she was walking into his mine.

She strolled down his entrance tunnel, nodding appreciatively at the high walls, and heavily beamed passages. The wood also helped keep the wiring in place for power, when he used the big drill, or wanted more light. Naked bulbs hung from strings, overhead.

A huge bin, half full of dark ore, sat on the tracks, just inside the entrance. A black, stylized lion was stenciled on one side of the car, and the word "Blackmane" had been stenciled on the bottom.



"That your logo?" she asked.

He nodded. "I'm incorporated. Which is to say my daughter drew the design several years ago, and my sister legally owns the property, until we transfer it to my son, someday."

"Sounds complicated," she observed.

"If you don't pay taxes, the Feds come snooping around. There are ways for people like me to keep that from happening."

*Yes. Yes, there were.* It was a thing she was coming to appreciate, the more she knew about these unique people.

"By 'people like you,' I assume you mean more than small, private business owners," she jibed.

It was the first time he'd ever heard her try to make a joke. She didn't seem bothered that he didn't laugh.

"Yeah. That's just what I meant," he replied.

*Was he aware that he'd replied to her bad jest with one of his own?* she wondered, not sure if he did. *Good, Adam. Good.*

She looked up, to where the stone ceiling vaulted away.

"Vincent would love this place. You two would get along." She had grabbed a flashlight out of her trunk and shone it on the walls.

A mine was an ugly thing, almost by definition. It was a scar in the earth men used to hack out a living. It took dynamite, muscle, and swinging a pickaxe to work it. It took a willingness to stay inside, for hours, and never feel claustrophobic. A willingness to break every knuckle of your hands sorting through the ore, and a willingness to get filthy, with dust, dirt and sweat. It was not for the timid, or the weak, and it wasn't for weak women to marry into.

*And it was not for weak women to go traipsing through, as if they were shopping in a department store,* Adam thought uncharitably. Diana scanned the walls with her flashlight, letting the white beam play over them.

"Precious metal prices as they are, you must be doing pretty well." She eyed the size of the seam he'd been working for the last three years. It was a good vein, and unless he missed his guess, and he seldom did that, it was a long way from being played out.

This was a one-man operation, for the most part, though Diana didn't doubt he'd had help, from time to time.

"You here for my fortune?" he asked.

Again, she chuckled. "You pull out a lot of coal. Those prices have cratered, thanks to mine openings in Kentucky. You're not doing *that* well," she scoffed.

Adam stared, not needing the light to see by, as she continued to track the seam with her flashlight. Her profile looked like it belonged on a cameo brooch. *What the hell kind of woman was a special investigator from New York and knew the price of blue coal? Or that it had dropped, the last few years, thanks to openings in Kentucky and West Virginia?*

She saw a table with a lantern on it he had set up at the first widened out area. It was like a small room, in the side of the mountain. He used the table as a dining table, for his lunch. His thermos sat on it, along with a beat up lunch pail. There was a map held open by rocks, sitting at its corners.

She unscrewed the cap of his thermos. *Boundary issues, again.* "You going to eat my lunch, too?" he asked.

"No, just looking."

She inspected the cap on the thermos, opened his lunch pail, closed it, and tucked the paper wrapping from her own sandwich into her

pocket. Calmly, she sat on the stool, letting her blue eyes trail along the walls, as if she thought they too, might tell her something.

"Lady. You *really* do have boundary issues."

She kept her blue eyes following a seam of coal on the ceiling. Adam knew that particular seam would be a bitch to get to, without dynamite. And he wasn't sure if he wanted to take that risk. He was about to say something to that effect when her answer surprised him. "I'm sorry, Adam. It's just that mostly, when I'm working, the person is already dead."

*What?* "Already dead?" he asked.

"Yes. Like you want to be." She said it calmly, without the slightest hint of accusation, or emotion.

The urge to keep his private life just that, flared. "Who told you that? Seth? He's right, you know. Part of me really, *really* does want to die. You might not want to stick around, if I get any sudden urges." He knew that wouldn't move her. But it felt good to try.

"I know," she said, with utter calm. "Some days are tougher than others." She really didn't even bat an eyelash.

*Good god, who was this creature?*

"Is that why you're here? You a shrink? You here to talk me out of it?"

She barely shrugged. "I'm here to meet you." Her blue eyes didn't move off the walls and ceiling of the room. "I told you I'd be honest. And no, I'm not a shrink. Like I said, I'm a special investigator. Vincent and Seth asked me to come up and take a look, and bring the bike along, as a favor. The part for the axle on the trailer should be in by the weekend, by the way."

He digested her information, though it was close to what he already knew or could figure out, as far as who had sent her in his direction. Several people had come up/down/whatever to discuss his deteriorating state. All were friends, or had been, in what he now considered another life.

It wasn't like he wanted to be this way. Except for the part of him that did.

"And no. I'm not here to talk you out of it," she concluded.

Adam could only stare. *Well. She wasn't boring, that was for sure.*

She rose from the stool, walked a ways further out of the chamber and into an adjacent tunnel.

*I'll need to bring a piece of chalk with me, next time I come,* she thought. The mine was starting to branch out, some. She got the feeling it would be easy to become lost. This was not like the New York tunnels, which had a certain sense of direction and reason, at least close to the entrance. These passages were carved the way water flowed, the way mineral deposits went. Every branch was a seam of something, or an indication that more could be found in "this" or "that" direction. It was very maze-like.

Her next non-sequitur was as unexpected as her other pronouncements and been so far. "Meeting you in here would be like finding a Minotaur, in the labyrinth," she mused.

*She said what she was thinking, at least sometimes.* He'd give her that. It was a romantic image. Fanciful. He didn't think she had it in her.

"Careful. The minotaur ate little girls," he replied.

The eyes that looked right at him did not flinch.

"I catch creatures that eat little girls. Literally, sometimes."

*Literally she caught them, or literally they...?*

She paused. Then: "I haven't been a little girl since I was seven years old, and I figured out my best girlfriend was being molested by her neighbor." Diana knew she hadn't meant to say that, that it was a professional slip. But couldn't he see what a waste destroying himself was? She sighed, regretting the comment. She'd been rankled by him. Or her version of rankled, anyway.

He stood completely still. "Did you tell anyone?" he whispered. It was a mine. It seemed like the sort of place you whispered, no matter what. Even then, the sound carried. It almost echoed.

"Yes," she answered. "No one believed me. My friend even denied it, because she was protecting him. He told her she had to, of course."

She turned back to the walls. They all seemed like such a strange mixture of rough and smooth. She tried to imagine working with stone, all day. The axe would be heavy. Not at first, perhaps, but as the day wore on. She knew that secrets were like that. That childhood was like that, as well, sometimes. It was often a far more complicated thing than adults recalled.

"Molesters are like that," she continued. "They're very good at manipulating children." *Almost as good as you are at manipulating stone.* She paused, gathering her memories. She didn't even turn back to him as she continued, she just ran her hands up the stone wall in front of her.

*She's feeling a seam of copper. Does she know?*

She reached as high as her extended fingertips would go. "She killed herself when she was thirteen. They got to read about it in her diary."

Her voice was even. Too even. She hated this memory, still. She did not like what she was feeling, right now. He knew that much.

"Did he ever come after you?" Adam watched for her reply, carefully. She turned, surprised.

No one had thought to ask that. No one. Not even her mother had realized the danger her peculiarly insightful seven-year-old had placed herself in.

"No," she said, very evenly.

"Now, Diana." He took a few paces forward, then stepped into her personal bubble. His eyes pinned hers. "Here we were doing so well, when you said you wouldn't lie to me." His voice was deceptively soft. And somewhere in the world, there was a man he wanted to kill, right now.

Her eyes flew up, and he saw one flicker of an unguarded stare, in the half-lit dark. Then it was gone, and her control was back.

"He backed me into a corner one time, in a garage. Told me what he'd do to me if I didn't shut my mouth. He was very graphic. But he didn't touch me." So, technically, she hadn't lied.

*Killed. Killed dead. Brutally.* The father in Adam Blackmane rose up, along with the urge to protect innocence. Even though they were talking about something that had happened long ago, he felt the whip of anger, inside him.

She pretended to linger a moment longer, but they both knew she wasn't really looking at the walls, any more. Pulling her impressive self-control back around herself, she walked back out of the mine at the same sauntering pace she'd walked in.

"I'm going to get something to drink," she announced, indicating they were done with each other, for the moment.

He let her go.

----

When he finished up in the mine a few hours later, he was surprised to see she hadn't left his property. That she was sitting on the rear of her car, feet planted on the bumper, drinking a can of soda from her cooler. She climbed down, opened the trunk, reached in, and tossed him a Pepsi. She then shut the trunk and climbed up on the back of it again, just sitting, like some kind of red-haired sphinx. He joined her. His weight made the car creak.

"Needs new shocks," he said.

She eyed him. "They didn't have much at the rental place, in town."

He almost smiled. "Darlin' that's not a rental place. It's a chop shop with a nice sign."

"Yeah. I know. The serial number on the dash has been screwed with. But the rates were cheap."

He laughed at that. The sound was unfamiliar to his ears and it hurt his chest, a little. But it was a laugh. *God. Whatever this woman was, she was a marvel.*

He took a long swallow, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "So. You any good at your job?" he asked.

"I'm very good at it. Too good. Not to make another mythology reference, but it's like being Cassandra, and living with a curse." She liked the view from his front yard. Unlike the city, there was lots of open sky. *Big Sky Country.* She played with the words, in her head.

"So. You never tell a lie."

She looked down at the top of her soda can, and picked at the ring, with her fingers. "I've told some. When you find a dead little girl whose face has been covered with plastic, and the mother asks you whether or not she's been raped... I've lied. I said I didn't know. Even though I could see the bruises on her thighs." She took a sip of the soda. Again, her voice was almost dispassionate. Even. Too even.

*And this is what you do for a living?* He couldn't imagine that kind of horror. Adam shook his head. Whoever this woman was, she was knee deep in ugly.

She ran a long, lovely finger around the lip of the can, drawing a circle, over and over. "They'll find out later, of course. It will all come out in the police report. But sometimes, I'm the first one on the scene, so... it just seems kinder when a parent has just discovered their baby is dead to lie, some." She stopped drawing the ring and just held the can. "Even if it only buys them another hour of not knowing."

He shook his head. "How in God's name do you do *that*, for a living?"

She wondered if he was aware he'd just expressed interest in something outside himself. Not only that, but he'd done it again, today. The first time had been when he'd asked her about whether or not Brenda's molester had come after her. *Twice in one day. Good. And before that, he asked about Seth.*

She answered his question as best she could.

She shrugged. "It's not always bad. Oh, it mostly is," she assured him. "But sometimes you get there before it's too late. Or you find out who the bad guy is, so he doesn't hurt anyone else. Those are good days. They hold you together."

"It's a wonder you're not in a nut ward, someplace."

*Keep going Adam. You're doing it. That's three.*

"Oh, I don't know." She finished the soda and jumped off the trunk.

"Sometimes you do have to do something totally crazy to get away from it. Like go to Montana, for instance." Her humor was wry. He had a feeling it usually was.

Silence spun out, between them.

"So. Do you think I'm going to kill myself?" he asked.

She eyed him. Whatever it was he thought she might be about to say, it wasn't what she said.

"I think you already tried." Again, those blue eyes did not flinch one iota.

*Say what?* "I haven't." He shook his head in denial. "That is, I wanted to. Especially right after. But I didn't have the courage to stick a gun in my mouth or cut my wrists or swallow a bottle of pills. I may not love my kids enough to want them near me, right now. But I didn't want them to find me, like that."

He looked out at the horizon.

"I hate waking up in the morning. Hate the feeling of being without her, for another day. My people even have a name for this. They call it "The Wasting." I want it to end."

"I know you do." There was no condemnation in her voice. Just acceptance.

He looked out over his property, and his hauntingly grey eyes stared on some fixed, distant point. "I don't know how much you know about us. The bond between a mated pair is so strong, Diana. It grows

as we age, it... deepens, as we have children together. It's a living thing all its own." He closed his eyes over the pain he was experiencing, right now. "It's dead. Ripped away. Severed. Even if you've ever been married, you don't know what this is like. I keep thinking... that this hurts so much, that one day, surely my heart will just... stop... beating."

He crushed the empty soda can in his hands, then handed it to her.

"It hasn't yet," he finished.

She took him in, realizing how deep-seated was the thing that was beating him. Then, she made a decision.

"I'm bringing the bike back, tomorrow. Before I leave, I'll ask you a question. How you answer will depend on what I do next, whether I stay or go."

He admitted being curious. "What question is that?"

She didn't give him a direct answer. At least not to that question. She answered a different one.

"You did try to kill yourself, Adam. Or at least, you set it up so you could. The throttle on the bike was set to stick and fail after the rider took it over eighty-five miles an hour. I don't think you remember doing it. I don't think you would have let Seth Hunter take that bike, if you had remembered doing it. But it was definitely tampered with, and it was done by somebody who knew their way around machinery, and had access to the bike." She nodded to the well-stocked garage.

He was stunned. *I didn't. Did I...?* He looked toward the garage, then back at Diana, helplessly.

"I don't remember doing that." It was the only denial he gave. Not that he hadn't done it. Just that he didn't remember.

"I can help you, Adam. But it will be very painful. The question is..."

He waited. It would be the first one she had ever asked him.

"Do you *want me* to try to help?"

He had no idea how to answer her. Or even if she was expecting him to answer, at all. She produced her keys, and he got off her trunk.

"I'll give you the night to consider an answer, a night to talk it over with her, while you sleep by her grave. I promise to respect your decision."

She tossed the garbage into the back seat and got in. Then she drove away, kicking up dust, again, as she left.

\*\*

## *Chapter Five*

### *Confessions and Revelations*

He slept near Celeste, as they both knew he would. The peace of being near where she lay eased the bleeding in his soul, just a little. He had no bond with another living soul, now, for good or ill. For the first time in his truly adult life, he knew what it was to be truly alone, on every level. The sensation was an almost indescribably lonely one.

"I nearly killed Seth, Celeste," he told the mossy, rock-strewn mound with no headstone. He had laid her deep, the stones serving as a cairn to mark the place. He knew in a year or two he would no longer need the rocks to keep the animals from disturbing her. Her scent would be utterly gone, even to the keenest of noses. But he liked sleeping next

to her, like he did when they were in bed together, when things were good between them. And even when they were bad. And very bad, when she got sick. Back in his house, there was a bed that he knew he'd never lay in, again.

"I didn't mean to." He caressed the moss-softened rocks. "I didn't even remember, until Diana told me. You'd hate her. Pushy broad. But smart as hell, and I didn't remember setting the throttle to blow, until she told me. I'm not sure I remember it now. But I do. A little. Maybe." he shook his head, plumbing it, for the memory. Parts of the last year felt trance-like. Other parts felt like being burned alive.

"I damn near killed Seth. What kind of monster would that have made me?" Adam shook his head, fearful of what he was becoming, for the first time. He sat up, and simply faced his wife's grave.

Celeste, wherever she was, had no answers for him.

He found he couldn't sleep, so he wrapped his arms around the knees of his jeans, jeans that fit far too loose, now, and wallowed in his misery.

*It had started so differently. So very, very differently.*

His memories took him backward.

*He'd always liked working with machines; liked that he could fix them. It was good to take something that was broken, and restore it to working order. The right tool for the right job. With Celeste in his life and his tools all in the right place, his universe was a perfectly balanced, well-ordered thing. He liked that sense of order. Celeste had known that about him, when she'd married him.*

*They'd married young, and had kids right away. She'd loved being a mother more than anything, even more than being a wife. Though she*

*had been upset that in their first three tries, no Shah, no child like him, had been born to them.*

*Then, after Chloe, Celeste simply hadn't gotten pregnant, again. Of course, they hadn't really tried, the first couple of years, while the baby had been in diapers, but after that... nothing. Once Chloe had started second grade, Celeste had become truly worried about her inability to conceive, again. A few years after that she had a missed period and Hallelujah. Another bun in the oven. Only it hadn't been a bundle of joy, or a bouncing baby Shah, or even another beautiful daughter to give Chloe someone to chase after. It had been cancer. Of the ovarian variety. And it was far too late to save her.*

*Seth sat hugging his knees, remembering the blackest days of his existence. Oh, they had tried to save her, of course. You always have to try. She had wept harder at the hysterectomy than she had when her hair had fallen out from the chemotherapy.*

*"A Shah never dies at the feet of his Shahnna." It was a thing his people always said. The link between them kept Adam on his feet, raising their children, weeping that he couldn't be with her in the hospital, when she went for the radiation treatments. Alexander had taken her the last time. Seventeen, and driving his mother back and forth for more bad news. God. It had been a nightmare. For a long time.*

*Hope dwindled as Celeste Blackmane did. She wanted to last long enough to see their eldest, Julia, get married, maybe hold a grandchild in her arms. It didn't happen.*

*Adam remembered that he'd howled his rage at the universe into the dawn, the morning he woke up beside her to find her cold. Howled until his voice was raw and hoarse with it. Screamed and cried until*

*he'd scared his children, especially Chloe, into tears. He'd felt the dark side of his nature trying to overwhelm him.*

*For several long months, he'd tried to pretend as if he weren't dead inside. Tried to keep the dark thing in his soul at bay.*

He thought it might have been that part of him that rigged the bike. He knew that wasn't some chicken-shit excuse. It was the truth. *He began to lose pieces of time, and knew something else was in control of him, when he did that. He knew he had to get his kids to safety, at least. Alex was almost eighteen, now. Julia was twenty. Both legal adults. It was only little Chloe, fourteen, now, who needed parenting. And she was far, far better off with his sister, Cheryl, than she was with him.*

A tear rolled down his cheek as he remembered the sight of his youngest daughter, her face pressed to the window of Cheryl's van, as she'd pulled away. "Chloe. I'm so sorry. I swear it was for your own good. I swear it was," he whispered.

Adam hated reliving all his failures. Hated that this Bennet woman was here, and on his land, and in his life, and having an excuse to come, by way of having his bike. He had no idea what he was going to tell her when she returned, tomorrow. Mostly because his mind could not stay fixed, on one subject. The past felt too close. And things he didn't even remember doing felt even closer.

The deep night wore on. Between the hours of two a.m. and three a.m., Seth felt he was determined to send Diana packing. Between three and four, he thought he owed it to his children to at least try. Between four and five, he thought she had no idea what "The Wasting" truly was, for a creature like him, so he was back to the idea

of sending her on her merry little interfering way. Between five and six...

He might have dozed for a few minutes, in a sitting position. He wasn't sure. When dawn came, he still was unsure about what he was going to give Diana, for an answer.

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By late afternoon, Diana pulled up with the trailer in tow. The Shively brothers had put the trailer together with bailing wire and non-standard parts. It was a wonder it made the distance, given the ruts in the road between here and the main highway.

Diana didn't make eye contact as she dropped the gate on the back, and she let him wheel what used to be a very decent Hog out of the trailer.

Adam grimaced in disgust at what he saw. The frame was bent. The gas tank had been hammered back into some kind of shape. The right tail pipe was still dented, the left one was totally sheared off. Nothing glass was still in one piece, though the broken parts of the lenses had been knocked out clean, by somebody with a small hammer, so you wouldn't accidentally cut yourself, working.

Adam knew he had nearly killed a man, a friend, a Shah, on it.

"And this is the cleaned up version," Diana told him, as he wheeled it shakily across the yard. It wobbled like a drunk on a bender. "From what I understand, you might still be able to find pieces of it in Central Park. Oh. And you owe the City of New York a pine tree, by the way. Not to mention some lawn."

"The City of New York will have to send me a bill." Adam pushed the wrecked hunk into his garage, and let it lean against the wall. He didn't trust the kickstand, assuming it still had one.

"But the engine does actually start. I have a friend named Mouse who insisted on that."

Adam shook his head, looking at all the damage before him. "You say Seth walked away from this?"

"No, I said he survived it. He was carried down Below by a ... Shah named Vincent, who happened to be there when the bike hit. Lucky."

"And you... know this Shah?" Adam asked.

"Yes." Pleasure at a memory lit her blue eyes. Whoever this "Vincent" was, she liked him. "We helped find his girlfriend together, after she was abducted. His fiancée now."

*That must be a story.*

"How badly was Seth..."

"Broken ribs, one nearly shattered. Fractures at the collar bone, knee, and several other places. Saved by the helmet, your unique physiology, and the intervention of two very good doctors who think of Vincent as a son."

"Not to mention Corinne." Adam said, knowing how a Shahnna could help to heal a Shah. He still couldn't believe the extent of the damage to the bike. "She must be ready to kill me."

Diana kept her arms folded across her body. "I never told her or anyone else you set the bike to fail. I don't think anyone knows that."

He spun to face her, and stared. Okay. That was it. He could only stare openly at her, grey eyes full of his own amazement. *Are you always this... unpredictable?*

"But you... figured it out." He said it slowly, for emphasis. "Right after you got out of the car, the other day?" He remembered how she'd looked in at his open garage, assessing its contents.

"No. I figured it out before I left New York. I just confirmed it, when I got out of the car."

He shook his maned head at her. *Such a stickler for details.*

"How? How did you know?"

She inhaled deeply, then began her description of how she knew about the bike: "You're suicidal. You have a dark side, and so does Vincent. He's not always aware of what his dark side does, or in control of it, so I figured you wouldn't be, either. You're good with machines, yet your bike failed. This model isn't known for having that kind of trouble. I looked it up."

"You looked it up."

"It just took a phone call to a mechanic. It didn't take a rocket scientist," was all she replied to his long look.

"Just a... special investigator... apparently."

She glanced toward the damaged machine. "Honestly. I'm surprised nobody else has figured it out, yet. Though somebody might have," she shrugged slightly, as if it were just that obvious.

She brushed some dust off her pants, clearly ready to get back in the car and drive away, unless he said something to indicate otherwise. They both knew the real question that was hanging in the air, between them.

"You said you were good at your job. But I'm not a missing person, Diana. What makes you think you're good enough at what you do so you can help me? Or for that matter, help anybody?" he asked.

*Okay, not the question I asked for, but it might get me there, she thought.*

She crooked her finger at him, indicating he was to follow her into the house. He did so, no longer annoyed that she entered his space uninvited. He let the screen door drop as she turned around. She stood in the space between the living room and the kitchen, which was at the front of the house. Her expression frightened him a little, because she looked very, very... apologetic, for lack of any other word. He didn't remember ever seeing that look on her face, before.

"For whatever part of this is going to hurt you, I'm truly sorry. Truly. Do you understand me, Adam?" Her voice was a little soft, and her blue eyes were sincere.

He nodded, watching her face. Watching her push the sympathy away, and gather herself up, inside, mentally. *She does that a lot*, he realized. *It must be exhausting.*

When her voice began, it was like a blur of information spewed forth out of her; like her description of the sabotage to the bike, but moreso.

"Your jeans don't fit you anymore, and you wore the belt on the last notch until you finally had to start poking holes in the leather with a knife point, so it fit around your waist. You won't buy new ones because there's no point in that, if you're going to die. Judging by where the most worn hole on your belt *used* to be, I'd say you've lost about forty, fifty pounds, in the last year. Even at six three, that's some weight. Your arms are huge, thanks to your work, though they

probably used to be bigger. Your shirts still fit, though they're looser. It's a general weight loss, not one particular place. The kind you get when someone simply isn't taking enough in to maintain their body weight. Like you said, you're wasting. It's the only way you can die without actively putting your hand to it. So you are."

She barely seemed to take a breath, as she swept her hand around, to indicate their environment. In the brief pause, he was trying to take in all she'd just told him. Then, she told him some more.

"The house is a pig sty, because you can't bear to clean it, but your Thermos gets washed, and that's the only thing you really drink out of anymore, so what the hell. The house has been reduced to less than its most basic functions. You don't even use it for shelter. You use the bathroom, grab food from the kitchen, and rarely sit in the living room."

"How in hell do you--"

"It's messy, but it's dusty, too. The dust means it doesn't get used. And you never, ever go into your bedroom. It's neat as a pin, except for the dust, and the sheets are all that's obviously missing. The sheets are missing because she's wrapped in them. Otherwise, there would be something on the bed."

Pain crossed his features. *What in the hell kind of a woman—*

"You can't sleep in that bed. It's where she died. You might as well get rid of it, once you have the strength, Adam. You'll never sleep there, again. Never."

His body rocked with the blow. It was like being punched. Punched, with the facts of his life.

This time, she didn't pause. She just kept going.

"She liked to cook, judging by the quality of the pots and pans you're no longer using. It's part of why you can't stand to be in the kitchen. People on chemo lose their appetite. When she got sick, you used to cook to try and tempt her, but it didn't work, so she'd sit and watch you eat whatever you made. You probably gained weight the last year she was alive, while she lost it. The pattern of wear on the holes in your belt tells me that, too. You got heavier, while she got thinner. It happens, with cancer patients."

*Stop.* A knife. She was taking a knife to his insides.

"You're thirty six years old with a daughter who's twenty. That's easy math. You were married young. Too young, most would say, but you know the Shah. They mate for life. That would have made her a Shahnna, at a very young age. Fifteen, maybe, for both of you. She was pregnant, but just barely, before you got married. Your daughter Julia was born just about five months after the wedding."

"That would make it possible she was conceived on our wedding night." Adam was still gasping from her earlier assessments.

"But she wasn't, and you knew it. Even when the baby is born human, Shah babies tend to gestate for about six months, plus a couple of weeks. Possibly owing to the healing powers inherent in the mothers, once they're bonded to their mates. The babies are in a very ... beneficial environment. This is just my theory, but that's probably what helps the brain development of the area that augments their empathic abilities, which occurs whether the child is male or female. Shah children have roughly seventy days fewer gestation, yet still come out "normal," according to my friend, Jacob Wells, if what he learned from Corinne Hunter is correct. Give or take, of course."

She just kept talking. Telling him his life without missing a beat.

"The bond between you and Celeste stopped the night Julia was conceived. That's how you knew you had to get married," she tacked on.

Damn. Even Adam's own mother had taken a few weeks to figure that one out.

"Don't say her name. I'll take the rest of this bloodletting, but don't put her name in your mouth. I don't let anyone do that. Not even my sister, or my children."

Diana nodded.

"If you married at fifteen, you were either very impulsive, trying to avoid the madness, or both. I understand why you did that. Vincent's father, Jacob Wells, told me stories about those times. They would have been very frightening, for you."

She inhaled as if she were turning a page in a book. From his past, to his present. She looked around the room.

"You starve yourself because you forget to eat, or because you punish yourself for still being here, while she's gone. I have not seen you enjoy one thing you put in your mouth, since I've been here. Your lunch the other day was a bag of chips. You're down to the pre-packaged foods, in the kitchen. There's soup in the cupboard, but you won't cook it. No clean place to even do that, now."

She eyed the cluttered stove.

"You work until you drop. You sleep near her grave. There's moss on your jeans, and it didn't come from the area near the house, so she's buried in the forest. You grab some food and throw it into the lunch pail, and work until you drop, some more. It's a rhythm you don't bother to break. It also burns up what's left of your body, so you keep

that routine. But the work is physical, too. You're still strong, in your way. You don't like that. But you can't help it. I think you're probably still working so the kids will have something when you're gone." She gave a small shrug at that guess.

It was like she'd been standing in his living room for a year. She was telling him his day, having never actually seen him live through one.

She paced a little, indicating family photos on the shelves in the living room. There were none of him, but there were of the rest of his family.

"Your kids live with your sister, but the two eldest are adults. Cheryl is a good woman, and you trust her to guide them through this. You might see them, from time to time. But you don't think you'll ever be reunited with them, again, not really."

He closed his eyes against that hard bit of truth.

"The adult children, Julia and Alexander, will begin carving out their own lives, no matter what. That just leaves you with Chloe, who looks so much like... her..." Diana did not use the name 'Celeste,' since he'd asked her not to, "... it hurts that much more." The pictures told Diana of the resemblance his youngest daughter bore to his wife.

Adam nodded, almost imperceptibly. Diana wasn't a hundred percent in her assessments, maybe, but she was amazing in her insights, none the less. Adam realized how good she was, at this. And she wasn't done, yet.

"You work, much the same as you always did. You just care for yourself less. Something to fill the day. The electric bill and water are still in her name."

He knew where she'd gotten that bit of information from. The mail sat on the table amid piles of other random clutter.

"Of course, they would have to be. But you're not really worried about that. You figure you'll be gone, somehow, before getting it changed over becomes an issue. Or you just haven't really thought it through, that much, at all."

Grey eyes watched her blue ones scan back toward the kitchen.

"You don't own a phone. But you used to. The lines still run to the house. You had it removed, after she died. It used to be on the wall, in the kitchen. You can still see the phone jack, and the paint is lighter, there. You've been cutting yourself off, since she died. Before, maybe. Money's not the issue."

Diana was watching him for signs of reaction. He was a closed book, with his pain.

"The plants on the porch are all dead, except for those that maybe caught the rain, off the edge of the rail. But some of them are from the funeral. They still have those little sticks in them, from where you set the cards. You let those die. Hell. You wanted them to."

*Wow. Just, wow. Bullseyes. On so many things. It was like she had a bow. Diana the Huntress, putting arrows into his life.*

"You sleep by her grave. But your clothes are fairly clean, compared to your job, so you've got enough together to run a load of laundry, now and then. That bespeaks wanting to live, but you can't figure out why you should. Oh, and you're out of clean undershirts. You've been wearing that one for two days. There aren't any hanging on the line, right now. Better hop to it, after I leave."

*Boundary issues? Did I say she had boundary issues? She's discussing my underwear? Really?*

"Hold on." Her eyes absolutely pinned him, as her hands gripped his biceps a moment, then released. "I need you to hold on to something, right now." Her voice was stern. "Whatever it is in you that keeps you on your feet. You need to find it. That's a warning. It's the only one I can give you, before this next part."

He stared at her beautiful face, wanting her to shut her mouth. Stop her, before she said any more.

"She liked jazz and power ballads. All the music CD's are dusty, but hers are in the front, on the shelf. Those would have been the last ones played. You like classical, and hard rock, and Billie Holliday. Your stuff is in the back. You haven't listened to music in ages, even though the stereo is a good one."

Diana's blue eyes darted toward the bedroom.

"The bedroom closet door is ajar. Her clothes are still hanging in it. She liked light colors, especially near the end. They weren't as depressing, and they made her look bigger, even though she was losing weight."

She was describing a dead woman she had never met. And doing it exactly.

"How... can you know that?" he asked hoarsely.

"When you open a closet, the things the person wears the most are in the center, where it's easiest to grab. Things she never wore get shoved to the sides. If I open it up all the way, I'll see the larger sizes, shoved to the back, since those didn't fit, any more. Especially the pants. Shirts, you can get away with, a while longer. The larger sizes

are also darker colored. She wore a lot of black and dark blue before she got sick. She wore a lot of white and yellow, afterward."

He bent his head. *God. It was bad.* It hurt so bad. Even he hadn't been aware of why Celeste had suddenly preferred lighter colors.

"And she loved you, at least for part of your years together, but she didn't always understand certain things about you. And she blamed ... something." Diana shook her head. This part she had not been able to crack, by looking around, or speaking to him. "Something you understand, but I don't. Not yet. Something to do with you for making her sick, maybe. Or not making her well. Something."

"S-stop." His voice shook. "You have t-to stop."

She closed her mouth, her hands folded in front of her. She stopped. He had asked her to, and she'd complied. Her eyes watched him, then looked away, giving him a moment.

*Dear god. Was she good at her job? Was there anything, she didn't know, after spending time in a room?*

He breathed in deeply, as if he'd just been sucker punched, repeatedly; eyed the woman who had invaded his house and his life.

He added up the brief times she'd been by, getting no more than a few hours total, and that was if you added the two hours she'd spent sitting in his kitchen, time he would have sworn she did no more than use the bathroom, and take a cursory glance around the rooms, from her spot on the stool. If this was what life was like with her, he wanted none of it.

*She did stop, though.* One thing Adam was discovering. She did as she said she would and she did as he asked her to.

"Do you remember tampering with the clutch on the Harley?" Her voice drew him back through the pain.

"No. I really don't."

"But you did it?"

"Yes, I'm sure I did. I'd know how to do it. What's left of it looks like the way I would do it, if I were going to try."

She nodded at that.

Suddenly, he was simply exhausted. More than exhausted. He wanted to go lie down near the grave, and sleep. Perhaps eternally. He had no idea.

"Thank you, Diana, for bringing the bike around. You can go."

She nodded again, understanding.

"Good luck, Adam. It really would be a loss, if you can't rejoin the living. Reunite your family. But you gotta do what you gotta do."

She went out the door without a backward glance, and took the four porch steps two at a time. Adam watched her cross to where she had left her ride, what now seemed like nine hours ago.

She closed up the trailer, making sure the hitch was still solid. The repair job had not been the greatest. *Oh, well.* Not her problem. Once she turned in her hotel key, she would drop off the trailer, and head back to New York.

He'd had a moment to breathe, a moment to let the pain wash through him. *She was brutal, this one.* He stood at the entrance to the house, just out on the porch.

"Diana?" he called.

"Yes, Adam?" She was double-checking the trailer hitch. It should hold. Especially now that there was no motorcycle inside it.

"Are you doing this because of what I am?" he asked.

"I have no idea what you mean," she said, tugging on the hitch. It barely moved.

"Because I'm ...exceptional?"

She shrugged, and glanced up his way.

"I'd do this if you were a six-year-old boy being held by a vengeful father. I'd do it no matter who you were. I think everybody is exceptional, some way or another. So, no. Your ...unique physiology doesn't have a whole lot to do with it, when you get right down to it."

She took a deep breath before she explained: "A lot of my work is... dark. People go missing and you really do never find them, sometimes, or at least you don't find them alive. Such a waste. All that specialness. All they ever were or ever could be. Gone." Her shoulders lifted, then dropped again. "Sometimes it's nice to be able to help somebody who's still here find their way back, again. That's all."

"I thought you said you weren't a shrink."

"I'm not." She crossed back over to the porch, and planted her booted foot on the bottom step. "I help find missing people, when it's possible. You're missing, Adam." She said it gently.

He came a little farther forward, meeting her half way. "What makes you think I can be found?" he asked.

"Because you clean your thermos. And you put water in the philodendron, after the other day."

"That's it? I watered a plant and washed a cup?"

"Pretty much. Some other stuff. But you get the jist. I think I can help you put your family back together, Adam. If you want to."

He held her eyes, not answering, one way or the other.

"Oh. And something else. If I stay, I need to check out of that motel. The manager gives me the creeps, has a coke habit, never washes his hands and is screwing one of the maids."

At least he wasn't the only one she did surgery on, Adam realized.

"And forty-eight dollars a night is starting to add up on me. I'll have to stay here, at least a little while. It shouldn't intrude on your space, too much. You barely use the house, as it is."

He considered, then nodded. "How long?" he asked, aware he'd just agreed to let her stay.

"Long as it takes, as long as it doesn't take longer than a month. I need to be back in New York, by then, one way or another. Bills to pay."

He nodded again. A month to give him back the rest of his life. He could spare that. For Chloe's sake, if not for his own.

"Diana. If you fail. If this doesn't work out, and I decide to just... stay like I am. I don't want you blaming yourself for that. Okay?"

"Deal," she said, leaning forward to shake his huge hand with hers. It might have been the first time he really saw her smile.

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She did not come in and start marking territory, a fact for which he was truly grateful. He'd offered her Julia and Chloe's old room, indicating that Julia had moved out when she started college a while

back, so her drawers were empty. He saw Diana idly fingering his younger daughter's belongings, some things she'd left behind, on a shelf. In another woman, it would have been a fairly empty gesture. In her... well. He bet she somehow could now tell him nearly everything about at least one of his two daughters, down to the color of the socks she was currently wearing, somehow.

She left the kitchen and living room as it was, making the sole allowance of washing one glass, so that she could get herself a drink from the tap. If he wanted the pigsty cleaned he was going to have to clean it, himself. Her message was clear.

*Fair enough*, he thought.

Diana explored his property intermittently, while he worked. She found Celeste's grave, and traced the area with her hands that marked where he slept. Fresh pine needles served to make a comparatively comfortable bed, for Adam. It also explained why his clothes smelled as they did, some of the time.

He came in from her grave near sunrise almost daily, using the sun as an alarm clock. He usually showered, then went to work inside the mine. He filled eight of the heavy cars a week with the ore that he managed to hammer out of the rock. A huge truck came by to load it up, and take it away for processing and refining. Eight was all the truck would carry in one load, he explained, so eight it was. If the day went well, he would stop work sometime after two, tinker in the garage, or just disappear into the forest.

He barely spoke to her at first, clearly afraid of her, after all she'd said the other day. By Wednesday, she noted that he'd cleaned off part of the dining room table, having thrown out several pizza boxes and

some junk mail. She considered it a promising start. Probably as good a one as she was going to get.

She was also surprised when a charity van pulled up, saying they were here to pick up a bed. *So he had been listening.*

Diana pointed them to the bedroom. She had no idea how they had been summoned there. Adam didn't even own a phone.

The movers took the bed away, she tipped them five bucks, and she nodded toward the dark opening of the mine, where she could swear he was watching her, where he always watched her. She felt him nod back. *Good, Adam. It's good. You'll see.*

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By that evening, he was ready to establish some parity, between them. She'd told him big chunks of his life story, he wanted to know some more of hers. It wasn't "interest," exactly. More like a balancing of power.

Diana knew she'd put up with it, if it helped. It wasn't normally something she would have allowed. But Adam needed to reconnect with the living, before he could disconnect with the dead. Since he'd shuttered himself into almost total isolation, she was "the living."

"So. No boyfriend back in the Big Apple?" he asked, as they sat near the small pond. The path to it ran straight from his house, then swerved, once you hit the tree line. It was a pretty place, with huge rocks that overhung the water, ideal for sitting.

"I don't always stay there. I stay where the case is. I just work there when I have to," she replied.

"No boyfriend anywhere?" He rephrased the question.

It wasn't a pickup line. He was getting down her basics. Height, weight and age he could pretty much figure out just by looking at her. She wore no rings, but then, not all women did.

Diana tossed a rock into his pond as they sat on a stone ledge near it, considering his question. Her last "serious relationship" had lasted an even shorter time than the others, she mused. Either that meant she was getting better at figuring out it wasn't going to work, or becoming even more difficult to live with, faster.

The rock made a satisfying plop, as it hit the water.

"For some *strange* reason, most people find it very uncomfortable to be around me for extended periods." She said it with utter guile.

He tossed his head back, laughing. *Good. He could still laugh.* Even if it was at her expense.

"Do tell," he replied, when the laughter settled.

She smiled back at him. "Oh. By the way." She flipped in another stone. "Thank you."

"What for?" he asked.

"You haven't called me 'Red' yet."

A late afternoon sun was burnishing her beautiful hair, making it look like it held fire, inside the strands. "Ah. That nickname is already taken, by our kind. It's what Seth Night Hunter calls Corinne, when he's trying to piss her off."

"Why would he do that?" Diana asked, more interested in how he viewed their relationship, rather than the actual reason the nickname was given.

"Because sometimes it's better to have her angry than scared. Or worried. Or something like that." He threw a rock. His went farther than hers. Much.

*Ah. Dealing with a frightened woman. Something Adam Blackmane would know about, intimately.* She made no reply because none was needed, and let him chew on his own answer, a while.

A pleasant sun had warmed the air, and insects buzzed across the pond, leaving small ripples where they touched. She tossed another rock in, making a larger ripple than they did. He lobbed one overtop of hers.

"So. If you're not a shrink, how come you know so much about how people think?" he asked. She was a curiosity, to him. Beautiful but... strange. Not like most women he knew. Not like most people he knew.

"I didn't say I never studied psychology. Just that I'm not a therapist. I don't do group therapy. I'm not here to shrink you. I'm here to free you. If I can."

He let that information settle. *I'm here to free you. Well, she was consistent, then, considering.* He knew that was a big part of her job.

She threw in a small pebble, and he tossed a similarly sized stone companionably near hers. She wondered if he knew how telling a gesture that was. *You started out throwing farther from me. Now, you're waiting until I throw, then tossing yours in close to mine. Good, Adam. Very good. We're connecting.*

"So? How do you do it? Find people when they've been taken by psychotic maniacs?" he asked.

She looked sideways at him, and kicked her legs, and the beautifully expressive eyes veiled, for a moment. The question had made her a little uncomfortable. *Good.* He'd been damn uncomfortable in her presence, enough times. A fraction of a get-back was long overdue.

"I don't... just..." Her voice trailed away, and she frowned. Diana was struggling to find the right words.

*Well my, my. Mark your calendars, ladies and gentlemen. Diana Bennet is uncomfortable. Distinctly.* The woman who could rattle off sentences like they were gunfire when she talked about other people was trying to choose her words, about herself, now.

She struggled to find the explanation without making herself sound utterly creepy. She inhaled deeply, and started again. "I don't just.... observe how someone thinks, when I'm trying to solve a case," she started carefully. "I... become the victim. Or I become... their abductor." There was just no other way to say that. She'd had years of trying to make what she did sound less off-putting. There simply was no way to do it.

She waited for his reaction, waited from some form of mild censure, from him. Most people correctly thought that it was incredibly bizarre to "become" a twisted person, even in the effort to save an innocent one. Diana waited for the sensation that he was drawing away from her. She'd just told him she became a murderer, a molester, or a sociopath, on a regular basis. That meant it was "distance" time. While people were often fascinated by outliers, very few actually wanted to sit next to one. She expected him to get up, and to move away. Even just a few feet. Even just as a reaction.

He didn't.

"How do you do that?" he asked, digging another rock out of the ground with a heavy, pointed nail.

She shrugged, liking that question even less. By now, the answer was rote. "Go where they go. Do what they do. Sit where they sit. Right where they sit. In the same chair at the same angle, at the same table, if you can get to it. See the room from that angle. At the right time of day. See what's closest to your hand, from there."

Adam listened, fascinated.

"Go to the refrigerator. See what's in front, or what's been pushed to the back. Get the plate from the top shelf, that's the one that gets used. And the glass from the front of the cabinet. Check to see where the condensation rings are, on the furniture, to figure out where they sit, most often. Sit there, too. Lay where they sleep..." Her voice drifted, and she tossed in another rock, purposely moderating her throw. "Trying to... recreate them so you can get..."

*She was about to say "Inside their skin."* He would have sworn it.

"Close enough to solve the case." She amended it. Her jaw took on a stubborn set, and she pursed her lips together, for just a second. They were telltale signs, but they were there, nonetheless.

He watched her choose another rock, and though she tossed it no farther than the others, she gripped it harder. She was closing up; becoming just a touch self-protective. More so than she'd been when she talked about the child molester from her youth.

*This had... distanced her from people. Men. Women. Lovers. Friends. Everyone. Unavoidably.*

"That must be exhausting. Utterly." He could not imagine it.

No one had ever used that word, that completely accurate word, to describe just what Diana did, almost every working day. She nodded. "It is. There's just not much left of me, for anything else." *So, no boyfriend.* The message was clear.

"But you have saved people?" he asked

"Oh, yes." Her voice brightened, a little. "On a missing person's case attached to a criminal investigation, sometimes you get there in time. Less than half. Way less. By the time they call me it's usually already too late. But sometimes."

"That must be an amazing sensation, too," he prodded.

She actually smiled. "Oh it is!" Now her eyes did light up. "That's the best! It's just the very best! They get a chance to have another day, a whole host of days, and they're messed up, maybe, by what's happened to them, but they're here, and they're so glad to be back home."

"Why didn't your mother believe you, when you told her about that man? The one who molested your friend?"

Her head snapped to his.

"No fair."

"You've been asking me questions, making comments. They've been painful. Do you know the answer?"

She shook her head. "No... Maybe." Honesty forced her to admit as much. "It was a... damning thing to say. And I didn't know it for a reason you could prove. I just... knew."

The answer made him even more curious. "How? How did you know?" He was intrigued. *She'd done this at what age? Seven?*

Her shoulders lifted in a soft shrug. "Kids are very intuitive. I guess you could say my intuition was off the charts, as a kid." She paused, remembering the painful time; then sighed, realizing he wasn't going to just let it go.

"Every time he looked at her and he thought no one was watching, he licked his lips," she began. "Like he was tasting something. And he'd do this..." she rubbed her thumb across her fingers, like a money counter handling coins, "with his fingers. My eyes were at that level, since I was so young. It was a subtle gesture. But it was there. His pupils would dilate. Things a detective would pick up on. His respiration would change. He was clearly... on the brink of getting excited, watching her. I could just see it, so clearly. That's all. He... hid it, when other adults were watching. He didn't realize I was... picking up on him. At first."

"That is not a burden you should have had to bear, so young. And so alone," he stated.

Diana took him in. he had done that in the cave, too. He'd shown concern for her, however off-handedly. It was part of why she had told him the story. To see if how strongly he might react.

"Children need to be protected by their adults." He tossed a rock in after hers, clearly aware of his own shortcomings in that area, recently.

She shrugged. "My mom was a good woman. We're close to this day, and we already worked this out. I was just... a tough kid to raise. It's not easy knowing way more than everyone thinks you do. And when you're little, you can't even articulate 'why.'"

She rubbed a smooth stone in her hands. "I was always saying things. Wild things. "The cashier at the grocery store has a crush on her

boss.' or 'My second grade teacher is anorexic.' 'This one has a drug problem.' 'That one is having an affair.' I made people uncomfortable. Go figure."

Adam nodded. Now this area of her mental forest, he understood, at least a little. "You should try doing childhood with heightened senses, and an empathic bond with everybody in the house. My mom had her hands full."

Now it was her turn to chuckle.

"Ah, yes. The famous empathic bond. The one you're born with, but which heightens, when you fall in love. The one that fails during pregnancy, and reasserts itself, after."

"Yeah. Famous." He tossed the next stone pretty far.

"You say you saved Vincent's Shahnna? That must be a great story," he said. It was also an utter deflection. He didn't know Vincent or Catherine. She filed the information regarding what they'd been talking about before he changed the subject. *The bond*. Like all the other information she filed, it could be useful, later.

"Oh, it's epic," she replied. "A photographer had pictures of Vincent. A madman found them, and grabbed Cathy, hoping she was pregnant. She wasn't, but it was... quite the brawl," she elaborated.

"I can probably swing you an invitation to the wedding, by the way. Seth's whole family is going to show up," she said.

He looked out across the dark blue water. "I would like to be able to attend the wedding of another Shah, help them begin their life, and bless their union. But..." Adam's voice trailed off.

"Too close to home, huh? Watching a marriage ceremony?"

He shrugged, slightly. "No. Not really. Celeste simply... took my last name. We were never actually 'married.' She was a free spirit. We decided the bond made us married enough."

"If that didn't do it, the three kids would have." Diana agreed.

*Yeah. It would have.* "I loved her, Diana. I loved her so much." His eyes were looking at a distant past.

Diana's voice was quiet. "I know. I know you did, Adam."

She squeezed his hand, unexpectedly, a gesture of sympathy or a "thank you" for the companionship, or.... *Something else? Or maybe the afternoon has all been some kind of test?* He wasn't sure. With Diana, it was just too difficult to tell.

She rose without a backward glance, and headed back toward the house before the sun set any further, and the mosquitoes carried her off. They never seemed to bother him.

He waited a while, and let the sun go down. He wasn't hungry, so he simply went back to Celeste's grave.

The pine needle bed did not feel as comforting as it once had.

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## *Chapter Six*

### *Predator and Prey*

*Running. She was running. Through his forest, and then down near the path. Not the path that wound up to the pond. The one that wound down to the lake.*

Adam had had at least one dream where she had whispered across his sleeping consciousness, as their first week together slid into the second one. And now she was running. Actually running, and not in a dream.

Adam's eyes were wide open. Deep sleep had eluded him, so he'd risen early, and gone for a walk in his woods. The path wound near the big pond.

He could hear her. The sun was just barely coming up, and the deep black of the sky was lightening to every shade of blue, imaginable. Her breath was getting closer, then farther away. Panting. She was panting. Running. Running hard. Her footfalls were rapid.

*Some kind of trouble?* he thought.

Her breathing was fast, and somewhat labored. Her footfalls stopped, then made an uneven landing sound. She had just jumped to clear a log. He knew it was her. The early morning breeze carried her scent. It held no other. She was down near the big lake, not the small pond they'd been sitting near, yesterday, and the day before, talking, or for that matter, just sitting in silence, while the dragonflies buzzed. Unlike most women, she seemed in no rush to fill a silence. He liked her for that.

Keen eyes scanned the area and caught her scent, again, on the early morning breeze. Then, without thinking, he ran after her, in the general direction he thought she was heading. She was sticking to the path around the lake, mostly, though she would go elsewhere, judging by the sound of branches she was breaking. Her breath was coming faster. *Was she frightened...? Or....*

He was getting closer. As he came through the trees, her pony tail flashed red, ahead of him, in the dawning light.

"Diana?" he called to her.

She didn't turn. She just continued to run away from him. And she increased her speed.

"Diana!" he called, louder.

*Prey. She was behaving like prey.* It made his pupils dilate, and his nostrils flare. She cleared another log, then took off like a sprinter, down the path. Her breathing was strained. *Something was chasing her.*

Or something was about to, he realized, scenting her again, on the wind. She smelled of soap and shampoo, and sweat. Pheromones and laundry soap and whatever deodorant she used. Something clean, and vaguely floral. Very female. His legs began responding to the stimulation, before his mind could tell him to ignore it.

*Now, Chase!* It was an inner command he could not disobey.

His strength was greater than hers, and his legs were longer. She broke into the grassy clearing she was heading for just as his weight launched out from behind her, as he grabbed her around the waist and bore her to the ground. He turned his body so that he took the impact, as they fell.

"Adam!" She was astonished. "What the hell!?"

He was panting, heavily, checking her with his hands to see if she was all right. Little white ear buds fell out of her ears as she lay sprawled, mostly on top of him. Music played in them, from the Walkman, tucked into her pocket. Stravinsky. *The Firebird.*

*Well. That certainly suits her.* No wonder she hadn't heard him call her name.

"Are you all right?" he asked. They had rolled so his body was pinned mostly under hers, her arms planted on either side of him.

"Am I all right? Are you out of your mind?!" She pushed at the wall of his chest, disentangling their legs.

"I thought you were running from someone. Something. I called you, but you didn't answer."

"Turns out I *was* running from someone. I just didn't know it. Or I'd have run a whole lot faster." She sat up as he rolled out from under her.

"I'd still have caught you, you know," he assured, as if that was somehow a salient point. His pulse was racing, and his pupils were still dilated. "What are you doing, running along the lake at this time of morning?"

"It's called 'jogging,'" she informed him drily, her breathing starting to even. "People from New York do it. Especially in a place like this." She indicated the lake. She wrapped her earbuds around her Walkman, and put it away. He stood.

"Well." He offered her his hand. "Out here, we run down prey. Especially in a place like this. You might want to bear that in mind, before you start acting like a startled doe."

She took his hand, and rose, brushing the trail off her shorts. "I *will* bear that in mind." She walked back, considerably slower. *Damn*. She'd wanted to take a swim in the lake, before he realized she was up and about. *Oh well. Some other time*.

She wondered if he realized he'd had a partial erection, when he'd fallen on her.

He was scrubbing the sink, when she came back in from taking her clothes off the line, later that afternoon. The kitchen was looking better. Not perfect, yet, but nigh on usable. They'd said nothing to each other, about the incident by the pond. Diana had no real idea what to say, or even if talking about it was warranted.

"Julia is coming by, today." Adam looked down into the sink. It was gleaming. He still scrubbed it, some more. The incredibly broad shoulders moved, with the task.

"Alexander and Chloe, too?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. Just Julia." He offered no explanation other than that.

"I'll be sure to make myself scarce."

"She knows you're here. Cheryl told her."

Diana had discovered that the closest pay phone was at a convenience store on the state road a few miles away. Cheryl's best friend since high school owned it. And he knew about her brother.

Diana watched him work. The stainless steel sink probably hadn't looked this good since the day it was installed. "Mmmmm. Knowing about me and seeing it may be two different things," Diana replied. "It would be natural for her to be upset. I'm sleeping in her territory, and staying in her mother's house, after all."

Adam shrugged his wide shoulders.

"I don't think it's a problem, but you do what pleases you." He went back to his chore.

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Julia was beautiful. Tall and svelte, she had her Father's deep black hair and a deeper shade of his grey eyes. His were almost ghostly. Hers were that color that was often mistaken for an odd shade of blue. She would have been stunning, no matter what.

Diana stayed in the garage, watching the interchange between father and daughter from a distance. She embraced him, warmly. Clung. He wrapped his arms around her in a powerful hug. Clearly, he missed his child. Diana couldn't help but overhear their conversation.

"Baby. You doing okay?" Adam asked.

"Sure," she replied, giving him a smile. She infused it with her strength. "Classes start soon. Freshman year!" Julia was clearly trying to stick to "safe" subjects, with her troubled father.

Diana knew a little about Julia, largely thanks to what Adam had told her. She was serious about her studies, and wanted to do something related to art. She worked three part time jobs and lived with Cheryl to avoid dorm fees. The college wasn't very far from Cheryl's home, and it allowed her to keep an eye on her younger brother and sister.

She'd signed up for a full load of classes and was dreading College Algebra, a required course. That, Diana heard between Julia's car and the front door.

"You'll manage it. Car running okay?" he asked, as he held the door open for her. It seemed that he, too, was content to stick to "safe" subjects.

"Fine. Back window's sticking again, though." She went in, and Adam closed the door behind her, so that Diana could hear no more.

Diana stayed standing near the washing machine, and checked out Julia's ride. The car she drove was probably something Adam had

arranged for her, Diana guessed, as she decided to draw closer to have a look. It was silver, older, and the rear window on the passenger side was indeed stuck permanently in the “up” position, while the other three were down. But it had sounded like it ran perfectly, when she’d pulled up in it, and looked like a restored classic. Gleaming, metallic paint covered a low-slung metal body. Chrome letters assured her it was a Dodge, but Diana knew nothing else about the model. “Montana College of the Arts” was stenciled along the top of the rear windshield. It was a pretty car, and had a “sleek” feel to it. Diana decided it suited its owner, well.

At one point, Adam came back out and tinkered under its hood, while Julia stayed in the house and Diana hung her clothes on a line. Diana retreated back to the garage, put another load of wash in, and spun the knob.

A few minutes later, Julia emerged from the house with some boxes that Adam helped her load in the trunk of her car. They went back into the house together. More boxes. A third trip, and one more of the same. Done.

Diana felt silly, hiding in the garage watching her clothes agitate. She decided when they next went into the house, she would make a run for the woods and the lake. So she did.

She was sitting on the outcropping of rock over the lake, kicking her legs, when Julia Blackmane came up behind her.

"I've been looking for you," Julia's deep voice said.

*How like her father she sounds*, Diana thought. Her voice was a feminine version of his low, masculine tones.

“All over the place, actually,” Julia added. Diana stood.

*Here it comes*, she thought.

Julia bear-hugged Diana so hard they both nearly fell into the pond.

*Okay. Not what I was expecting.*

"He's better! Not all the way back, yet, by a long shot, but better!"

Julia's voice was sheer happiness.

Diana was cautionary. "We're not out of the woods yet, with him, Julia. *Don't read too much into it. I'm a distraction for him, right now. We'll see.* "But yes. He is better. I don't think he really wanted--"

"He says it's thanks to you. That Seth sent you, to help?" Julia interrupted.

Diana decided not to explain all about Vincent, and the tunnels. Julia had probably already gotten at least some of that story from her father.

"Yes," she answered simply. "Seth sent me." She omitted bringing back the damaged motorcycle.

"Well. Whatever it is you're doing, don't stop. Even Zachariah, tried. And he couldn't get anywhere. And when it's so bad Zachariah can't budge you... well. He's kind of famous or being an irresistible force." Her smile was a brilliant one.

Diana smiled back, liking the younger woman, instantly.

"I'm just glad you're not annoyed that I'm here."

"Annoyed? I'd build you your own wing, if I could." The smile faded.

"The last couple of years... they were very hard on him."

Diana gave the young woman another hug, this one a bit more gentle.

"They were hard on you, too. You lost your mother."

Tears pricked the young woman's grey eyes. "I know. But whatever else the rest of us were going through... It was so much worse on him."

"Because of their bond, you mean?" Diana asked.

Diana was surprised to see Julia's expression immediately darken.

"That damn thing." Julia nearly spat the words. Disdain made her lithe body go rigid.

*Interesting.* Diana thought, knowing that "now" was not the time to speak, but to listen.

"They say when I get a little older, I might become an empath. I swear to God I hope I don't." There was no equivocation in the pronouncement. "Knowing what the other person is feeling, every minute of the day, really isn't necessarily the greatest thing in the world."

*Considering the pain Celeste must have been in, not to mention the despair, it's not odd Julia would feel that way, considering she saw how that affected Adam.*

"Relationships are... difficult at the best of times," Diana said neutrally. *Just ask me.*

"No kidding. That's one of the many reasons I'm not really looking to fall in love, yet." Julia looked to one side, toward the direction of Celeste's resting place. "I feel... guilty, about that, though. Sometimes," she confided. "I know my Mom wanted... different, for me." The grey eyes darted, with memory. From happy, to sad, to guilty, Diana knew that Julia's emotions were all over the map.

*And you feel sorry that you couldn't fulfill her wish. Ah, Julia. Falling in love and having kids doesn't work that way. And it should never be about that.*

"Your mother wanted to hold her grandchild in her arms, before she died. There's no sin in that. But you weren't ready to become pregnant at the same age she was, or anywhere near it. There's no reason to carry guilt for that decision, Julia. You did what you needed to do." Diana hit the problem with amazing accuracy. As usual.

The young woman's gaze swung back to Diana. "How did you know that?" Julia's eyes grew wide

Diana glanced out toward the placid lake, wishing she and Julia could toss a few stones in, just as she and Adam had. Then she looked back at Julia. "Most mothers hope their daughters make at least some of their same choices. It validates that they were right. Also, any woman's biggest point of reference is her own experience." Diana shrugged her lovely shoulders. "It's tough to have a daughter and hope she turns out exactly like somebody else," she said wryly, as she sent Julia a small smile. Julia tentatively smiled back. "Mine never had a job in her life," Diana added. Julia smiled at that, as well.

"While you barely stop working," Julia inferred. Now it was Diana's turn to nod.

"Plus, what went on between you and your mom, well, some of it was just usual Mother-Daughter stuff. You didn't want what she wanted. There's no sin in that. But it's not hard to see how that would have caused you some pain, considering. It doesn't take a rocket scientist." Diana discovered she was using that expression a lot, this last week or so.

They both heard Adam hiking up the trail. Dry branches cracked under his booted feet. He was clearly not trying to come up silently.

"Ah. I see you two have found each other," Adam noted with approval. Thanks to his keen hearing, he'd caught at least some of their conversation.

"So, now that she's met you for five minutes, has she told you your life, yet, Jules?" he asked.

Deep grey eyes met blue ones. "As a matter of fact, she has."

--

Diana thought the boxes loaded into the silver car might be items from Julia's room, and some of them were, but it turned out they were from the room Celeste had once shared with Adam, as well. Diana realized they had removed Celeste's clothes from the closet and drawers, and Julia had taken the jewelry box that had sat on top of the dresser.

Adam looked in the room sadly a few times, then closed the door. It hadn't been as hard to say good-bye to her things as it had been to say good-bye to her. But this one was going to take time.

He went to the kitchen. Diana sat at a kitchen table that could almost be recognized as such, as she seemed to be wrestling with the vagaries of her checkbook.

Adam was very glad of the distraction she provided, now that Julia was gone. He knew the house would feel frighteningly lonely, if she weren't here. *You're beautiful. Not for me, but... beautiful, still. Intriguingly so. You look fragile, but you're anything but,* he thought, allowing himself to think it, for the first time.

Her scowl deepened, as she flipped the little rectangular page of her checkbook register front to back. He wondered if she was running low on cash.

"You know. It occurs to me that Seth didn't pay you, and I haven't offered." He brought it up as he snagged a soda out of the fridge. Its interior was gleaming. He'd spent yesterday seeing to it.

He popped the top on the can of soda and fished the last cookie out of the package. Diana noticed he had a bit of a sweet tooth, probably thanks to how hard he usually worked. It reminded her, some, of Vincent.

She went back to the source of her consternation, as she politely declined his offer to pay her. "I'm not on the clock, here. I'm just trying to figure out why I spent almost two hundred dollars on shoes, last month." She stared at the receipts. "Ah! Shoes for the wedding! Now I remember. Plus some sneakers I needed, and a pair of boots I couldn't resist. And a pair of bedroom slippers for my Mom." She closed up the checkbook and stretched out the kinks in her neck.

"I mean it, Diana. I'm not a pauper. I can afford to pay." He stood near, not letting her simply dismiss his statement.

Diana considered his offer, then rejected it, again. "If I take your money, it means I can't leave when I want to. Or if I need to." She tossed the checkbook back into her plain leather purse. It looked like it had seen some years, but somehow, he knew she wouldn't change it until either the strap broke or the zipper stuck. There was a practicality to her he just couldn't deny.

He shrugged at her refusal. Let her have it her way. He'd find some way to even things, between them; donate to her favorite charity, or something.

*Would that be 'Save the Children?'* He shook his head as he crossed to the stove. He still couldn't believe that such a beautiful woman was so often surrounded by the kinds of horrible things she dealt with.

"So. Do you know how to cook anything?" He changed the subject, pulling out a pan. The stove was clear, the shiny sink ready to do something besides catch tap water in a glass.

"Of course. I'm Irish, Adam. We have one directive, when it comes to cooking."

"And that would be?" He set the pan on the stove.

"Catch it, or bring it home from the store. Throw it in a pot. Boil the crap out of it until it stops kicking, then eat it."

His laughter filled the almost-clean room.

*Lord, you have a marvelous laugh,* she thought.

"Oh. And then serve it with potatoes. Also boiled," she added.

He grinned at her. She liked that that was getting so much easier for him, these days.

"Well, Irish, I can at least do grilled cheese sandwiches," he told her.

She rose from the table. "You are so in charge. I promise to clean up any mess, to help you keep the kitchen looking nice." She made the deal.

"Sounds fair."

She watched him work, as he made them something to eat. His movements were fluid and economical, and after a few minutes, the kitchen began to smell good.

Diana pulled a fresh pitcher of iced tea out of the refrigerator, and poured them each a glass. She stood behind him, and tilted her head

to one side, regarding the amazing breadth of his shoulders, as he flipped toasted bread onto plates. Julia was right. He did look healthier. The belt had even gone back up, a notch. *Hang in there, Adam. You'll make it. You have to.*

She knew he was a good man, and he was finally seeing his way clear, after a monstrously tough time. The last week had been good to him. His jeans fit a little better. His complexion looked healthier. He'd had conversations with her, when the spirit moved him to. He still slept near Celeste, but Diana had a feeling that would end, soon. The few pounds he'd gained back looked good on him.

He started flipping sandwiches onto plates. Diana realized she needed to clear the table. The battered Coach relic she'd carried since college was still sitting in the middle of it.

She settled the purse back in her borrowed bedroom, noting that the space felt extra spacious, thanks to the things Julia Blackmane had removed. The room felt just a bit emptier, since it was.

She heard Adam drawing water from the tap. She wondered if he was often lonely, out here. It was incredibly isolated, and it would certainly be an easy trap to fall into. This place was not like Vincent's tunnels, teeming with humanity of all ages. Aside from the friend at the convenience store who sent staples over, and the guy who drove the truck that picked up the ore, she realized how little company he had.

She scanned the room, realizing that Julia had taken more clothes with her, ones suitable for the coming fall. That his eldest daughter was "leaving home" in more ways than one, not the least being that at twenty years old, it was simply time, for that.

Julia realized that if Adam wanted more companionship, especially adult companionship, he'd have ways to get it. Seth Night Hunter had told her that North Edge Logging Camp was several hundred souls large, and that Adam had regularly visited there, with his wife and children, in the past.

*Perhaps he'll plan to go there, after I leave. Maybe he might even meet someone.* After all, he was handsome, in his way. Handsome in a broad shouldered, dark-haired, grey-eyed kind of way.

She heard him setting the plates on the table, as she re-entered the room.

"Get it while it's hot," he invited.

He'd made them a small meal, and they made some small talk. She was feeling down right productive, considering the gains he'd made.

Diana watched him eat, through lowered lashes. He was getting his appetite back. Three sandwiches sat on his plate.

*I might even be able to leave before the month is out. All things considered, I probably should.*

*"All things considered?"* Now, where did that thought come from?

But of course, she knew. The woman who could read other people the way most other people read a book knew what she was thinking, and why. She was starting to feel attracted. And she knew there was no way she was going to act on that, that it wouldn't be fair, to anyone.

A week or two more, then gone, she decided, keeping that information to herself. She watched him eat, noting he finally looked like he was actually enjoying his food. *I wonder what else you enjoy? And how much?* The thought raced across her mind before she could bid it back.

*Down, girl. Two weeks. No more.*

Given how she was starting to feel about him, she knew that might not be a bad idea.

--

He decided not to sleep outside, that night. It was going to rain. He used that as an excuse. But truth to tell, he'd decided to stay indoors hours before he scented the weather on the wind. He decided that it was time to sleep like a person again, even if he was a fairly ... unique one of those.

He stood in the doorway of his home, looking at the late afternoon thunderclouds. *Time to stay in*, he thought, knowing the decision had very little to do with the weather. He'd slept in the mine, on other rainy nights.

But not in his old room. He couldn't face that, yet, bed or no bed. Bunking down in Alexander's twin bed wasn't exactly comfortable, considering his size, but it was better than the hard ground. He didn't announce his decision. He simply bid Diana good night, as she cleaned up the dinner dishes, deciding that way they could avoid any awkwardness over sleeping in the same house, together. She'd been there a little over a week. Two, counting the first few days, when she'd stayed at the motel. But they'd never slept under the same roof, together.

As it turned out, they weren't about to do that tonight, either.

Sleep came, easily enough. But Adam's dreams were filled with images of Celeste. Celeste healthy. Celeste sick. Celeste thinking she was pregnant, then finding out it wasn't to be. Celeste dying. Angry with him. Blaming him. And in his dream, one he was having from their son's bed, Celeste knew how he was beginning to feel about

Diana. *You're starting to want her. You're starting to realize you can want her.* It was a whispered charge, but the accusation might as well have been a shouted one.

For Adam, the guilt over that was legendary.

He slammed out of the house just after two a.m, as the predicted rain began to fall in earnest. Diana rose when she heard the slam of the door, and watched him walk across the wet hard pack toward the mine, a pillow in his hand.

*It's okay, Adam. At least you tried,* she thought.

\*\*

## *Chapter Seven*

### *Two Steps Up...*

--

Morning dawned, sweet and refreshed. The rain had washed everything clean the night before, and Diana didn't even mind if it meant she had to re-wash the jeans she had left on his clothes line. She headed out to the lake, this time careful not to run until she reached the trail on the other side.

She stood and addressed a deep, green line of spruce and pines. "Adam? if you can hear me, I'm just going for a run, okay?"



Morning insects buzzed. She looked around, feeling no particular sensation of being watched. Diana realized that Adam was probably still asleep in the mine. She winced at that, realizing he couldn't have been very comfortable, there. She would have to talk to him, once he appeared.

*If he appears.* Diana knew that he might choose to behave defensively, today; that he might just choose to spend the day in the mine, isolating himself. *Two steps up, one back. It's okay.*

A bad dream must have awoken him, and she didn't have to concentrate too hard to figure out what it was about, since there was no need to. Julia had been by, so it could easily have to do with his children. Celeste's things had been moved out, so it could easily have to do with her. No matter what it had been, the results had been the same. Adam had slammed out of the house in the middle of the night, his face a study in thunderclouds.

Diana knew he would come to her when he was ready to talk about it. Or he wouldn't. It would do her no good to push. Good gains were often punctuated by some losses, with this sort of thing. She turned on Stravinsky and put her ear buds in.

The morning breeze felt cool and damp, and after making it three quarters the way around the big lake, Diana was good and sweaty. She kept forcing herself to run. Diana didn't consider herself a "jogger" so much as she considered herself a "runner." She pushed her body hard, then pushed harder. She liked clearing the occasional log or standing mud puddle. The variety in the landscape kept things interesting, far moreso than the staid, paved paths that wound through Central Park.

She upped her speed, and pushed herself, harder, knowing that her job could often be as physical a thing as it was a mental one. Finding out about Vincent and his world had necessitated her climbing down into the tunnels, discovering more about those, and tracking Vincent like the quarry he'd been. That had taken stamina. Everything Diana did required that. She took a hurdler's leap over a low boulder that was covered with lichen, and liked the sensation of feeling her body soar, then land nimbly down. Making her body work was the best way she knew to clear out the mental cobwebs, and she knew that living for the past ten days in Adam's house was giving her plenty of those. *Celeste's house. It had been Celeste's house, too.*

The clearing came into view. She half-expected to be tackled, again, but she wasn't.

Certain she was alone, Diana turned toward the gently sloping lakeshore. She had earned this.

Tossing her shirt off of her sweaty body, kicking out of her shoes and socks, she dropped her Walkman on the pile as she gave a rebel yell and half-ran/half-dove into the crystal water, wearing only her running shorts and a sports bra.

Adam heard her holler just as he was about to turn up the path toward the grave site. *What in hell, now?* he wondered.

Splashing. The sound of splashing greeted his sensitive ears. It was a beautiful summer morning, and from the sound of things, a lively one. He made for the lake. *Oh no. She wasn't. She couldn't be.*

She was.

She was swimming with the long, sure strokes of the well-tutored, making for the middle of the lake. Water lillies floated near her.

Though he didn't stop to examine his feelings, he knew he was both relieved and disappointed to see she wasn't naked.

Not that what she was wearing was going to tax his imagination, any.

A beige bathing suit top - *no it was more like a bra, well, it was something or other*, held her breasts still as she stroked through the water. It was wet, and he could clearly see where the nubbins of her nipples protested against the cold water. Her bottom was clad in a blue pair of nylon running shorts, now soaking wet, like the rest of her. Her hair was liquid fire, slicing through the clear water. Her torso was long and untanned. *City girl*. Her arms reached powerfully, as she swam, her body twisting sinuously, in the water.

*Mermaid. Irish mermaid*. He wondered if the Irish had stories about mermaids, and decided that if they didn't they'd better start.

She played in the water some, diving, swimming over to this water lily or that one. Ducked under, and came up, slicking her hair back from her face, with her hands.

Tearing his eyes away from her long enough to register that most of her clothing sat in a pile, he exhaled slowly, fighting down morning arousal. Her shoes sat near the clearing. He had half a mind to take them, but couldn't say "why." A morning breeze caressed his cheek. The air was cooler than it had been, thanks to the rain last night.

Adam realized that she would feel cold, when she got out. He realized that she hadn't thought to bring a towel. And that if the gentle protrusions on her bra were any indication, she was already feeling at least some of the chill.

*Her problem*. It was nothing to him. He was aggravated for a reason he wasn't sure he was supposed to name.

He ripped his eyes away from her lovely form, and stalked back toward the house, his mood black. *No. Just... No.* It was mornings like this he wished he drank.

Several long minutes later, she came back to the house shivering, with goose pimples down her Irish fair arms and legs. He watched her run in, from where he stood in the kitchen.

"Brrrr!" She chafed her arms as she ran into Julia's old bedroom, then through to the house's only bathroom.

*Oh, great.* Adam thought, knowing she was about to strip. There went the sound of the hamper. *That means she's naked. This morning just could not get better,* Adam thought sarcastically, as he waited for a kettle to boil. An empty cup sat on the counter, a tea bag at the ready.

There was rattling in the pipes as the hot water came on. *And now, she's taking a shower.* Adam rolled his eyes heavenward, and put a steadying hand on a nearly clean counter. *No. Just no. Why not just shoot me now, and get it over with?*

--

Fifteen minutes later she emerged, her hair wrapped in a towel, her body clad modestly in jeans, a white undershirt, and one of those button down blouses she favored. Red blouse. He thought redheads weren't supposed to wear that color. Her feet were bare. Her red toenail polish needed a touch up.

"You should have taken a towel," he told her. His voice came out a bit more brusque-sounding than he'd intended.

"I've got one." she replied, indicating her head. If she registered his tone, she didn't let on.

"I mean down by the lake," he clarified.

"Oh." She let the towel fall, burnishing her impossibly bright hair as she stood in his kitchen. When it was wet, it was like the red was trapped inside some brunette shade. Distant but still there. *A warm fire. Irish. Burning peat moss, the smell of the smoke trapped in good whiskey. Why do I feel like I could warm my hands on your hair, even when it's wet?* he wondered. His fingers itched to touch it. And that unsettled him a little more.

"Two steps up and one step back," Diana told him, noting his dour expression, as she continued to towel dry her hair.

"What the hell does that have to do with you freezing your ass off because you were too stupid to remember to take a towel?" he demanded.

They both froze, her in mid-dry. *Oh, hell,* he thought, expecting either her silence or her censure.

"Nothing," she replied, resuming her chore.

*She was actually going to answer him? Well. This might be interesting.* He braced for the reaming he deserved. It had been a while, since one of those.

"It has to do with your nightmare, last night. I'm sorry, Adam." She finished rubbing her hair. It was a mass of red curls, though it hung longer than it did when it was dry. He tore his eyes from it to try and focus on what she'd just said. *Sorry?*

"Sorry for...."

"Sorry you had a nightmare. Sorry for whatever has made you feel bad, this morning. I hope you feel better, later."

She slung the towel over her shoulder, picked up a ceramic cup she'd bought at the convenience store, filled it from the tap, and headed out to his porch.

He stayed where he was, but he had to ask: "You're not going to give me hell?"

"I figure you're going to do that, enough." She let the screen door drop, behind her.

She didn't turn when she heard the sound of crockery smashing against the wall. And she was not going to offer to clean that up.

--

Alexander Blackmane drove up from his Aunt Cheryl's house, bringing a blueberry cobbler she'd baked, a small bag of groceries, and doubtless a pile of curiosity, thanks to his older sister.

Diana realized that had Adam been human, his son would have been his younger twin. Thick, dark hair curled over a broad forehead and riveting grey eyes shone with intelligence. Thick lashes, and eyebrows with a built in arch of curiosity marked his face as a handsome one. He was rangy, and on the tall side. Taller than his sister. Not broad, especially, the way Adam was, but bright. Quiet. Fair skinned, like both Adam and Julia were. And he had a smile that would break every heart in a sorority, next year, if he went to college. Diana was positive of it. And she tried to stay out of the way, once more.

The two men worked companionably on the Harley, most of the day. Alexander came in for a quick bite of lunch, clearly taking her in, but not offering an opinion. His smile was shy. Diana could tell that he was very likeable. She hoped they would have a chance to talk, some time. As it was, he simply offered her his hand in a handshake, and thanked her for helping his father. Then he went back out in the

garage to join Adam. His body language said much. He was glad she was here. But he didn't really know her, and there was work to be done.

*So. Julia's the extroverted artist with strong opinions, and you're the quiet type.* Diana wondered if he'd been like this prior to his mother's illness, and decided he probably had been. Diana went back to her borrowed room and read a book, for most of the rest of the day.

She opened a can of soup for dinner, and was stirring it on the stove, when Adam came in, wiping his hands on a rag. He crossed to the kitchen sink, and began scrubbing his hands.

"I'm sorry about this morning," he told her.

She nodded. "Want to talk about it?"

"I really, really don't."

"Okay. Soup's on. Or, you can make something else, if you want."

"Soup would be wonderful. Thank you." He dried his hands on a dishtowel.

"You have handsome children, Adam."

"Think so?" He smiled at the compliment.

"Please. Julia could be a fashion model. And Alexander is the word 'handsome.' And so polite."

He set down the towel and reached across to squeeze her hand.

"Thank you. That means a lot to an old man."

"On the contrary. You're too young to have children that age."

"I know. Still. The years went by on me, anyway. Just like they do on everyone else. I can't believe two of them are already grown. Alex wants to join the military. I keep talking him out of it. In another

month, it won't matter. He'll be eighteen. He can sign his life away all he wants."

"It's tough to let them go, isn't it?" Diana asked.

"Considering I pushed them out the door a few months ago, you mean?" There was self-deprecation in the words. He took down a pair of bowls, waiting for her reply.

"No, considering that it's difficult for any parent to watch their nest empty. And you just lost your wife, recently, on top of that. You must feel like the whole world is abandoning you, Adam."

"Mm." He made the noise briefly. "Let's just say I've discovered the virtues of being alone, more and more."

They ate the soup in companionable silence, the equilibrium between them, restored. When they were done, she carried their bowls to the sink.

"No, you cooked. I clean. That's the deal," he told her.

"I opened a can. It was hardly cooking."

"Yeah. I know. That famous Irish culinary talent. Boiled... um... stuff."

She smiled. He must be feeling better, if he felt good enough to rib her.

--

Diana was at the convenience store, picking up soda and toiletries, when the clerk behind the counter surprised her.

"Got a phone message for you," he said. She already knew his name was Ricky. He tore the message off a yellow pad, handing her a piece of paper. She recognized the number. It had a New York prefix.

“Did he say it was important?” Diana asked, glancing up at the sandy haired clerk who sometimes handed her Adam’s mail, as well.

“Said there was no rush in calling him back, actually,” Ricky replied, bagging up her purchase.

“Hm. Okay if I use your phone? It’s long distance, but I’ll leave you cash for it.” She knew that the caller’s remark meant one of two things, and only one of them was good.

“Sure,” Ricky replied, moving away to stock a kiosk of chips, so she could have some privacy.

She dialed the number and waited for the connection to be made.

“Detective Hughes,” came Greg’s voice, on the line.

“Hi, Greg, it’s Diana Bennet. What have you got?”

In New York City, and a world away, Greg’s voice took on a tone Diana didn’t like. “Hi. Yeah... uh, about that... How’s Montana?”

Diana knew he was stalling, preparing himself mentally to give her bad news. She let him have the moment he needed to compose himself.

“Pretty good,” she answered. “It rained the last night or so. Big sky, like they say.” She shifted the receiver from one ear to the other, as Ricky went to the other side of the store.

“Yeah. Well, Steve Freedman called. From St. Louis.”

Diana well knew where the detective Greg named was from. And she had a feeling she knew what was next.

“They closed the Hartman case?” Diana asked, knowing that “closed” was a polite euphemism for what actually must have happened. Ian Hartman, of St. Louis, Missouri, had walked off his job, as a customs

inspector, there. And had never been heard from, again. Diana and Detective Steve Freedman had struggled to find him, but the trail had been completely cold. That had been over a year ago, and well before she'd come to work on the Chandler case.

"Yeah. Sorry, Diana," Greg sympathized. "They ID'd the car, in a ravine outside Sioux Falls. He was at the wheel."

*Damn it.* "That still leaves me with some loose ends. Like what the hell he was doing in Iowa."

"Passing through, apparently. Steve says there was a mistress. Evidence in the trunk, and a packed bag."

*Okay. That didn't show up anywhere I looked. And I was looking.* "He's sure this has nothing to do with the fact that Ian Hartman was in customs, when the mob was moving product through the airport?"

"You can call Steve if you want, but he said to tell you 'no.' This was just one of those things. He checked it out. The mistress was pregnant, and it looks like he was going to leave his wife for her. Or something."

Diana did some mental math. "The baby would be over a year old, by now."

"Nah. She had an abortion, after he didn't show."

*Great. "Steve told the wife?" The one who showed me their wedding pictures? The one who didn't know her husband was cheating on her?* There was nothing to indicate that Ian Hartman wasn't the good family man everyone thought him to be. That was part of why she'd been called in on the case. Foul play was the only reasonable conclusion... until it wasn't.

"Yeah. She says in a way, she was relieved to know. All of it. Get some closure, you know?"

Diana heard the bustling office, behind him. Another line on his desk was ringing.

"Sure. Closure." *Closure. What a nice word for 'Everything I thought I knew was a lie.' People can be such assholes, sometimes.* Diana rubbed her forehead with her fingers.

"Hey, Diana? Nothing you could have done. Accidents happen."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know. Thanks Greg. Accidents happen. *But sometimes, if I'm fast, really fast, I can save people from those, too.*" "When I get back, I'll dig out the files I have on it and mark it 'closed.'"

"Sounds fine. Take care."

"I will. If Steve calls back again, tell him I said 'Thanks for letting me know.'"

A sudden, unexpected thought crossed her mind.

*Adam would never do that. He would love only one woman. Always.* The thought made her both admire him and be sad for him, since Celeste was gone.

Greg's voice came back on the line, as Diana realized she'd been romanticizing the man she'd come here to help. "Will do. Gotta run. Stay sharp, Diana."

"You too, Greg."

*Adam wouldn't ever leave one woman for another. He'd stay. Stay, and protect them, protect their children. No matter what.*

*What must it feel like, to be loved like that?*

Adam noticed she was quiet when she came back to the house, but also knew enough not to question her other than to ask if she needed anything. She was distracted, and stayed in “her” room, reading, rather than poking around inside the mine with him, or wandering around the property. He checked on her for dinner, but she declined any offer of food. He realized she’d been in almost the same position on the bed that he’d left her in. It felt “odd” to see her so still.

“Diana? Did something happen at the store?” Adam asked, trying not to intrude, but curious, just the same.

*You’re a good man, Adam. You’re kind, and you care about people. I’m sorry for what you lost. And I’m starting to realize how much I... envy it.* “Nope. It’s okay, Adam. I’m just... taking some down time, right now. Do you want to talk about anything?” She laid the book on her chest. He had no idea what it was about, thanks to a plain book cover.

“No. No, I’m fine. I’ll leave you a plate of leftovers in the fridge. I’m going to go back into the mine and get some extra work done. I... fell behind a little, this week.”

*The day Julia came, then Alexander. Yes.* “Okay. Adam? Are you ever... afraid to be in there, all by yourself?” she asked.

Adam shrugged his broad shoulders. “No. Why would I be?”

“Vincent and the other sometimes talk of cave ins, and things like that. Things you’d need... help to get out of.”

He shrugged again. “The mine has several exits, and I know what I’m doing. If there’s a slide, that’s what the strength of my arms are for,” he said, as if it was a given fact that if he was ever in a cave in, he’d simply have to dig himself out. His shirt was fitting a bit more snugly,

around his biceps. *He's getting stronger*, she realized. The extreme breadth of his shoulders meant he was a man built for hard labor.

She set the book down and sat up. "Your family... were they always miners? Always... underground?"

He shook his head. "We always did jobs that required strength. My father said one of his forebears might have been more of a logger, but I think that's the side of the family you're not supposed to talk about. Why?"

"Just curious. I... sometimes people... leave their jobs. Change their lives. *Have affairs, get killed on the road on the way to their mistresses, do things that are unexpected...*

"Yeah. That really wouldn't be me," he replied.

*No, of course it wouldn't be. You're... a family man. Completely. You adored your wife, and you love your children. You never wanted to be away from them.* "Did you ever want to? Change... anything about who you are?" Ian Hartmann's story was weighing, on her mind.

"Did I ever want to be able to go to a movie, or watch my daughter graduate from high school? Sure. Fine. Did I ever want to do anything else for a living?" He shook his head. "I like this land. It's raised my kids. And this is what I know. Now there's traces of copper in one wall I want to investigate. So ..."

"Go on. Sorry. I didn't mean to keep you." *And what I'm really trying to ask is... do you think you could ever fall in love, again?*

"You didn't. And... if you want to talk about whatever is bothering you... you know I'm here, right?"

"Who said I was bothered?" She was aware that her voice sounded a touch querulous. She knew she had no right to think the things she'd been thinking.

"Nobody. Nobody at all, Irish." She'd have sworn he smiled, as he turned his back on her and headed out the door.

*Two steps up...* she thought, realizing he'd just teased her.

\*\*

## *Chapter Eight*

### *Night Storms*

--

That night, another storm came through, so he tried sleeping indoors, again. And this time, it wasn't Adam, but Diana who sat awake, in the middle of the night.

For Diana's part, any time she had to close a case, she knew she'd have trouble sleeping. Often, the results were far gruesome than this one had been. But in the end, the result had been the same. Missing person, found dead. She rarely slept well, the night she knew that.

She padded out into the living room, as the rain began to fall. As it picked up tempo, she settled herself in an easy chair by the window. Adam had been straightening up in here, too, she realized. The furniture had been dusted, and the couch throw laundered.

She made herself comfortable by the window, and looked out at the storm. *I thought I could help you. I thought I could find you in time. Maybe everything is a matter of timing. Maybe nothing is. Who am I to know?* Her thoughts were circular, and she let them go, knowing

somewhere, two women were likely up as well, tonight, and unable to sleep, thanks to Ian Hartmann's duplicitousness.

Adam's eyes opened. Something had awoken him from a deep and all but dreamless sleep, though he wasn't sure what. *Screen door slamming in the wind, maybe.* He thought he'd latched that, before he come to bed.

When he walked out into the living room, he saw Diana sitting in the easy chair, silently, and in the dark. She was wearing sweat pants and a grey throw. He realized he could not picture her owning a pair of pajamas, and so far, he'd never seen her in a dress.

"Diana?" His voice reached her across the darkness. "Are you afraid of the storm?" It had kicked up, some, but it was dying down, now. Rain pelted the roof. He knew he'd sit with her, if she liked.



"No. Storms don't bother me, Adam."

*Of course storms didn't bother her. A giant heaving a cup hard enough to knock off the plaster off the wall didn't bother her. Monsters didn't bother her. A hurricane wouldn't bother her. A bout of plague, and she'd just pooh-pooh it and tell everyone to get their shots. The unshakable Diana Bennet. What is it, Irish?*

"Bad dream?"

"No."

"Are you sick?"

"I'm fine."

"Is this about... something that happened earlier today?"

She decided not to bore him with the story of Ian Hartmann, and his affair. "I'm just restless." She had no desire to explain to him that she was always like this, after a case got closed, no matter how things turned out. "It's all right, Adam. Just go back to bed."

"Are you... working... right now?" His brow furrowed. She was stuck still in the chair, as though she were concentrating on something.

She barely turned her head. "Working? What do you mean by... oh. Oh, no. No. I'm not working, not on you. Not now."

*Not solving the world's problems, huh? Or at least, not solving mine.* He came to sit across from her, and pulled up the rocking chair to do so.

"Something you'd like to share with the class?" His voice was husky from sleep.

He wore blue pajama bottoms, length extra-long. They were loose at his hips, thanks to his weight loss, and they rode low. His chest was bare. Hairy, but not so much as she might have expected. He had

interesting swirling pattern around his chest muscles and at his abdomen.

*Nice.* It was an idle, barely-there thought.

He had huge shoulders and arm muscles from the work he did. *Also nice.* She ignored her own impression.

She sighed. "I didn't have a bad dream. But I will have, if I go to sleep." *I'll see a man dead, in a car. Then I'll see the infant his mistress aborted, and the wife he left behind. Then I'll see other people I was too late to help.* "Just one of those nights when being too late to save... all of them catches up with me." She sat forward in the chair, her hands folded between her knees.

She decided to let him know at least some of it. "Greg Hughes is a cop from New York. He had a message for me, up at the store. A case I looked into a while back is now closed. Car accident. They found the body. No foul play suspected or anything, it's just..."

She looked back out toward the rain, and watched lightning trace the shape of the trees. Thunder rumbled, softly. "Some nights, you just... see every time you ever failed, every time you figured it out, but not fast enough." She sighed, again. *If I missed this, what else did I miss?*

"I can't say that I see a man getting into a car wreck is your fault, Diana."

She let her head roll to the other side, as she contemplated his landscape. "I investigated it. Interviewed his wife. She was wrong that they were happily married, as it turns out. But I didn't see it, because... because in a way, back then, I don't doubt she was. Or thought she was." She shrugged, hating the sensation that she'd been wrong, even as she also knew there was no way she could have discerned otherwise. Ian Hartmann had fooled far more people than

his wife and her. Near as she could tell, he'd fooled everyone.

"People. It's all so... tricky, sometimes. We're complicated."

*Some of us more than others*, Adam thought, keeping his own counsel.

"I don't like to work on a wrong assumption," she clarified. "It's a waste of time. People can get hurt." She closed her eyes a moment and just breathed in. The good smell of rain was in the room.

"Sometimes I just... I know it's going to be one of those nights. A night when sleep isn't going to come. This is nothing new, with me. It happens."

*Does it? Small wonder, considering what you do for a living.*

"Usually, I just get up and work, but I'm not in my apartment, right now. Every time I've tried to close my eyes, tonight..." she let her voice trail off. "It wasn't just this case. It's... all of them, in a way." She pushed her hair back from her forehead, and let it fall where it would. "It's hard to be the first one there. Be the one that finds them. And then it's hard, when you don't." She let the words just tumble out.

He studied her face in the dark, and then when the flicker of lightning traced it; he then watched it fall into shadow, again. He knew he was looking at a profile that belonged on a cameo brooch, but on a woman who was anything but "Victorian."

*Who do you lean on, Diana?* he thought. *Who do you lean on, when it gets like this?*

Her face was relaxed, as she looked out, probably because she thought he couldn't see her very clearly, in the intermittently lit room. She looked frail, without the light from the sun to catch in her hair, or illuminate that usually curious gaze she had. Her mind was nearly

always churning, he realized. She was already almost an empath, even without the actual gift of it. That realization hit him, as well.

He knew better than anyone else how much such things could take their toll. "You work too hard," he told her, leaning close. She didn't look like "The Unshakable Diana Bennet" right now. She looked frail, and small.

"So I hear." She sounded almost wistful.

*So this is part of why you run herself to death, at least once a day. It helps you sleep. Especially when you think you might have missed something... failed someone.*

Without asking for permission, he scooped her up out of the chair, and set her across his lap, in the rocker. She was too tired to protest. Then the warmth of his sleep tousled body enveloped her, and she just didn't want to.

"You haven't taken a day off since you've been here," he said.

"Neither have you," she replied.

He set the chair to rocking. It was a large one. He'd made it to rock his children in, a long time ago. It more than held his large frame.

He rocked her in silence, a while, while they both just listened to the storm, as it moved on through.

"I know I said it before. But I really am sorry about today. I was in a bad mood and I took it out on you," he apologized.

"It's okay." The rocking motion was strangely comforting. It felt like someone was taking care of her, for once. *God, this is so nice.*

He kept his voice low. "I want to kill that man. The one who hurt your friend. Who scared you."

His heart was beating, under her ear. *Was he aware he had just told her that he loved her, in a way?* She wasn't sure if he was.

"I know. I want to do that, too, sometimes," she confessed.

"No chance that he's already dead, is there?"

"Not much. He didn't even go to jail."

The rocker stopped. "You serious?"

Diana kept herself against his chest, fully, willing herself to simply sink into his long frame, so she wouldn't have to deal with any of this. *Five minutes. For just five minutes.*

"Brenda was always 'troubled.' She was considered unstable when she died. There was no physical evidence at all, and a diary can't be used as evidence in a trial of that sort without something else to back it up, so...."

He tightened his arms around her protectively, knowing that sometimes, the world could be an ugly, unfair place. *Don't you know you're too fragile to take all this on, all by yourself?* he thought.

He stroked her hair, comfortingly. "I'm sorry, Diana. So sorry. For all of you. All of them." It was a whispered consolation.

She sighed in his embrace. He was so huge, even in what everyone considered his "diminished state." His bicep ran a diagonal across her back, and she could feel the power in it. *God, the arms on him. So strong.* She would soak it up for just a minute more. Take something from him, rather than give. She gave and gave all day long. Surely she could just "have" something, here, for just a moment.

*This feels so good. The days are so full of work...* She was constantly taking in information. Processing it. Going with what her instincts told her. Sorting it all and matching it up with whatever else she knew,

and spitting it back out so the huge jumble of dissimilar bits of information made coherent sense. It was what she loved to do, what she was good at. But that didn't mean it wasn't exhausting.

He could sense her fatigue, and the pain that lay under it, and just for a moment, he wished he were bonded to her. He would send her waves of comfort along their link. But he wasn't that person, not for her. So he had to offer the alternative.

"What about if I just sit here, and hold you while you rest? Sleep if you want, Diana." His voice was a lure of comfort. "I'll just hold you."

*Yes. Rest. Just lay your head against his chest and ... Wait a minute.*

*No!* Diana remembered his reaction to her by the pond, and knew that right now, he smelled entirely too good, too close, and too male. She had no idea that he'd just wished them joined empathically, but she knew she couldn't do this, couldn't accept this kind of comfort from him, not in the middle of the night, sprawled in his lap, with him half-dressed and her half-willing to just stay this way.

She was trying to help him heal, not seduce him... *Aren't I?*

The question was like a call to action. Diana raised her head, immediately, facing him. He felt her body startle. She was about to get up. He felt her weight shift, to do it.

"Adam. Thank you, but I have to--"

But he never learned what it was she had to do. Because at that moment he only knew he'd been wanting to kiss her since before he'd tackled her to the ground, since before he'd seen her dripping wet, swimming in his pond, since before... everything. He had to kiss her mouth. So he did.

It had been teasing him for days on end, the thought of that mouth; her soft, full lower lip. *Pink. Absolutely perfect for kissing.* Sometimes she bit on it, when she was concentrating. She had no idea how unselfconsciously sexy she was, when she did that.

He wanted to do that, now, nip her lower lip, gently. She had a full upper lip, too, for that matter. Her mouth was meant for kissing, meant to be teased, be coaxed. He gathered her mouth against his, not holding her head, not forcing her. She tasted like something impossibly sweet. It was the only way he could think to describe it. *Apricot jam. And sunlight. Fire. Oh, Irish. You taste like a sweet morning sun.*

He felt her startle, felt her mouth open wide, for him. Felt a lick of desire curl in her center.

*That's right. Come to me, Irish. Come to me,* his mind coaxed her.

Her mouth answered his, beguiling him. His instincts veered immediately to the sexual. *Oh, lord, yes. That's right. That's right, angel. Tempt me.* The rain fell against the panes of glass, outside; the wind shook the branches. But they each would have sworn the bigger storm was raging here, inside the room.

By the time they broke the kiss to breathe, each one was panting, and Adam's right hand was laying firmly on Diana's left breast. He didn't actually remember putting it there. She didn't, either. She just knew it felt very warm, and very good, and her small breast was swelling to fill his palm.

She drew in a deep breath and all but shot off the chair.

"I'm sorry, Adam. I need to go back to my room."

"Good idea." He rose to join her.

"Alone." She dashed across the room, shut the door and flipped the inside lock.

Adam stood in the room, knowing he'd just committed the worst kind of transgression. He'd kissed a woman. And more, he knew he'd wished himself, if not bonded to her, at least closer to her than he was right now. He didn't think about his wife. He thought about the woman who'd just got up and bolted from his arms.

*Great. Now I scared her by manhandling her.*

*She would probably leave in the morning.* Adam threaded his hands through his hair. *Son of a bitch.*

--

She found him by the grave, as a swift-rising sun claimed the sky. Found him there, as she knew she would. The ground was too wet to sleep on. He'd used the mine for that. And then he'd come here, at first light. He was sitting on an outcropping of stone. His face was a mask.

"I'm sorry I kissed you back," she began.

*Well at least she wasn't going to pretend it was all him. Oh yeah. Dead honest. I almost forgot.* He was getting so used to it, he was taking it for granted, from her. "Are you." He didn't phrase it like much of a question.

"Yes. That was very unprofessional, of me."

"I think we established that I'm already not paying you anything," he responded, still sitting right where he was, as she stepped closer.

"Begging forgiveness?" she asked point blank, directing her eyes to the grave.

"From you, maybe. From her, nope. Not for kissing you, anyway."

Adam replied. *There. Figure that one out.* If they were going to fight, he would give as good as he got, here, for honesty.

She sat down on a stone across from him. "I keep thinking about you. And her. And I keep knowing I'm missing something. What did you do that was so bad, Adam?" She asked it gently. "To her, I mean." Diana clarified. "We'll circle around back to us, later."

Adam heaved a sigh, looking at the moss covered cairn. "Sometimes I think it's 'what didn't I do?'" He shook his head.

"Was it really so terrible?" she prompted. Some piece of his puzzle was missing. Something he hadn't told her, yet.

His sigh was deep. "I was fifteen years old when she conceived Julia. She barely was. You already did that math." Diana nodded.

"*Everybody* told us 'no.' My sister, my father, Jarrett. That's Seth's father. Jarrett doesn't say much, so when he does, you listen. Everybody said it was an absolute disaster of an idea. But did we listen? Oh, no. I'd seen Jarrett and Ramona Hunter's eldest son, Zachariah, go through the madness, when he turned sixteen. It took *three* of them to hold Zach down, while he raged. I didn't want that, for myself. I wasn't... afraid of it. Just... disgusted."

Diana could well imagine such a sight, and the effect it might have had on a young boy.

"You smell... strange, when the madness is on you. And you have... literally no control."

Diana took his word for it.

"So, I'd had one or two.. encounters... sex, earlier. Nothing bond-making, just... learning the ropes."

"Sounds... normal, for an adolescent." *Of any kind*, she amended mentally.

"Probably. And then... there was Celeste. And she was beautiful, and wild, and free spirited, and we were so... hot for each other." He gave his head a rueful shake. "Two teenagers with a bad case of hormones. Talk about a recipe for disaster. Marriage to me... it wrecked her life."

"Teen marriages almost always... falter. And with children? And of course, your circumstances were special, you being... well, who and what you are," Diana prompted.

He scrubbed his hands on a pair of jeans, as the rising sun continued to lighten the sky. "I don't know how much you know about us, but between you and me, our puberty lasts forever. Starts around ten. Never seems to end." He shook his head.

"Unless you... find a mate? Someone to bond with?"

Seth nodded. "Unless that."

He glanced away from the sad grave, and then back to it. "I swear we had several good years in there, Diana. I swear we did. She loved Julia and Alexander. And I do mean she loved them. Part of why they're not screwed up is that. She wanted a big family. Big, like the Hunter clan, and they have five. I was okay with that. And I would have stolen the world for all of them, if I could have."

Diana simply nodded. *Don't talk. Let him do that.*

"The entry shaft and the big main antechamber of the mine? I pretty much pulled it out of that mountain with nothing more than a pickaxe and my bare hands. I never stopped, in those years. I mapped out and dug tunnels for me to use, if I needed them. Started them, anyway, finished them later. Followed a seam of ore. Followed another one...

Read books on geology, at night, after the babies were in bed. It's like I never got tired. Never got tired of working for my family, providing for them. Keeping them safe."

In spite of his limitations, Diana realized he'd been an excellent husband and father.

Again, Diana simply watched him, listening.

"My dad was older, and he died, but we got through it. Then my mom, and it was just us. Celeste, me, Julia and Alex. Cheryl had already moved into town, going to school. Which was fine."

*So at first, being married young hadn't been a problem. Okay.* Diana was keeping up with him.

"And then... things started to change. Things... happened. Or didn't happen. It took a long time for Celeste to conceive Chloe." Something painful crossed his face at that. Diana watched it hold his features, then flit away.

He inhaled, and let the breath go, slowly. "And after she was born, we waited, and I thought... I don't know what I thought. Julia and Alex came one after the other. Then, it was years, before Chloe. And then..." His voice trailed off.

"Then what happened?" Diana asked. She could tell he was reaching the most difficult part of his story.

"At first... nothing." His voice held a chasm-like sorrow. "She couldn't conceive, again. Then *it* happened."

"Celeste became ill?"

"Yes. Yes. But first, she thought she was pregnant. With a baby, you see?"

"Yes, I know what 'pregnant' means, Adam." *Like Ian Hartmann's mistress was. Like people get, when they're intimate with each other. Especially often.*

He swallowed, hard, and his Adam's apple worked up and down.

"Her period stopped. Her belly got tender. She couldn't zip up her jeans, for the swelling. She *looked* pregnant. Tired. Pale. But she had to wait to see a doctor, because our pregnancies are so..."

"Peculiar?"

He nodded. "Not at first, mind you, but yes, they're shorter, and the women get these strange cravings, sometimes, but no morning sickness, and ... well. She waited until she was nearly two months along to see a doctor, one of our Helpers, who knows us." He swallowed, again.

*Go on. Get it out, Adam.*

Adam closed his eyes.

"She just knew she was pregnant, Diana. 'Maybe twins,' she said, she was so sore, so swollen. Her breasts ached. Kind of like they did with Julia."

Realization crossed Diana's face just as hopelessness crossed his. *But you knew she wasn't pregnant, then. You knew the whole time.* Diana realized why that would be the case.

"She had no appetite. Her face started getting thin. She started losing weight. But her belly kept swelling. 'Maybe twins,'" he repeated.

"But you knew she wasn't pregnant."

He dropped his head. "I knew. Or at least, I suspected." He shook his head, the picture of sorrow. "I... I think I knew it the whole time. I

thought maybe it *was* twins, and the bond was behaving strangely. Because you see, that was it. That's what was wrong. I still had the bond with her."

Yes. "And you never have a bond with a pregnant woman."

"No," he shook his head. "Never."

He inhaled deeply and rose, suddenly not liking the constraint of sitting, as he struggled with his memories, and with his story.

"I didn't know how sick she was, Diana. I swear. I didn't... feel that, from her." He threaded his fingers through his hair, again, and gripped the back of his head. "She just kept sending waves and waves of 'pregnant' across the bond. *She* thought she was pregnant, so I thought she was. She had all the signs. I had no idea. We would have got her help weeks before, if I'd have known."

"Oh, Adam. No one blames you. No one could think you would have wished this on your wife."

The silence was long. Too long.

"She did." Adam's words came like stones, from his heart.

"No!" The word was out before Diana could call it back. *That's not what I'm supposed to say. I'm supposed to say 'Tell me more,' or 'Why is that?'* She knew she'd erred, even as she stood with him.

Adam didn't seem to realize that Diana had made a mistake, or if he did, he was too caught up in his own guilt, in his own memories, to mind it.

"Old saying. 'A Shah never dies in the presence of his Shahnna,' in case you never heard it. It has to do with how they heal us, if we're injured, how much better we feel, when they're near."

"Tell me more about that," Diana said, recovering herself.

"The bond... protects us, somehow, Diana. It keeps us from getting sick, sometimes. Calms us. It heals us if we're injured. Just having them close by, is enough."

"Yes. I've heard of this from Vincent's family, recently. They saw it first hand when they met Seth and Corinne. That his condition began to improve, markedly, right after she arrived to care for him. Catherine told me there were times like that between her and Vincent."

Adam nodded. "It's a gift of the bond. Even when... even when things weren't good, between us, I still received that benefit, from our connection. I damn near took my hand off at work, one day." He held up his left palm. She couldn't even see a scar on it. "I was back to work in a week."

*It's not hard to figure how an advantage like that would be an obvious benefit, to a species,* Diana thought, processing it.

"But I swear. I swear to you Diana, we do not take the life force of our mates. We do not... weaken them. It's not a parasitic effect."

Diana understood that much to be true, just from watching Catherine and Vincent, together.

"It's benevolent, for the males. It helps us protect our families. Keeps us strong. 'The Shahnna is the strength of the Shah.' No one has ever indicated otherwise. The bond may piss a wife off from time to time, but it will never hurt her."

That made sense, as far as it went. It would hardly do to have all the mothers of the children be weakened, by the fathers.

"Celeste didn't believe that, I take it? That you weren't... hurting her?"

"No. Not once she knew she was ill, and we all knew how bad it was. She said it was my fault that she'd gotten sick. Openly asked me if I'd sent the illness to her, one time. We both knew she should have been seeing a doctor, sooner."

"Adam... you can't blame yourself for that. And for Celeste to--"

He raised a taloned hand, and kept looking at the mound of stones that contained his dead wife. "She said that our bad years had poisoned something good between us, and, well, that this was my revenge." He closed grey eyes full of painful memories.

"I was a fool of a kid when I was fifteen, but I swear I didn't want her to die suffering, no matter what we put each other through. She hated me, by the end, Diana. Hell. She hated me before that."

*Hated you? But I thought... How could anyone...*

He hung his head. "By the end, I couldn't even use the bond to send her comfort, any more. I just didn't have anything left."

He looked back in the direction of the house, and away from his wife's grave. He knew that he was done with this place, and that he would not be coming back here, for a long while.

"They all thought I came here because... because it was grief. Or survivor's guilt. Or whatever." He looked at the ground, and not at her. "It wasn't. Just... bone-breaking sorrow. Just... loss. Just wasted life. Bond gone. Life gone. Chance to fix any of it, gone. Just... gone. Just that. That's all."

Adam walked back down to his home. He was done here. Of that, Diana was certain.

One day bled into another. Back at the house, Diana made breakfast, which was to say she poured milk and cereal into a bowl.

She and Adam hadn't spoken about the kiss, or anything else from that day. That was fine. He worked, and they made small talk, when they happened to be in the same room. She knew it meant he was processing everything, slowly.

She finished her breakfast and carried the bowl to the sink. She would have to wash it up. Then, it was time to consider packing. In spite of everything that had happened the other day, and perhaps because of it, Adam was well on his way to fixing his life. The house was livable, again. While he sometimes slept not in his bed, he had not slept by her grave for two nights, now. His children seemed well settled, except for the youngest. Julia had even dropped by again, just a brief visit to deliver a cake from Cheryl, and the mail.

So far, Chloe was the only Blackmane child Diana hadn't met, hadn't helped, in some way. Maybe she should just leave that work to him, by himself. After the revelations of the other day, and the kiss she couldn't forget...

*Soon, you're going to stop working through what happened with you and Celeste. And then you're going to start thinking about me...*

She'd have to leave before that happened. An affair with Adam Blackmane wasn't what she'd come here for. It was out of the question.

She was still rinsing the bowl when a van pulled up and the horn beeped. Adam was just emerging from the bathroom when he heard it, too. Tensing, his eyes darted toward his old bedroom.

*His bedroom? Why?* Diana wondered.

The center door of the van slid back and out swept a positively regal looking Shah. Diana realized she was finally growing accustomed to using that word. His hair was as red colored as hers was, with soft touches of brown in the mix. Knee high chestnut-colored boots hit the dust as he jumped down. He wore brown cords and a tight fitting, long sleeved tan shirt, under a brown leather vest. A silver hoop winked at one ear, He was slender, for a Shah, and perhaps a little shorter, though still over six feet tall. He had a deep green cloak similar to the one Vincent wore, in shape and style. Deep hood, now pushed back and down, around his neck. A twining silver leaf pin kept it closed, at his throat. Catherine had told her that Seth and Corinne wore a similar design, on their bracelets. *'Give him a sword belt, and he would be a pirate,'* she thought. A half full army duffel bag hit the ground behind him.

"Elijah!" Adam bolted out the front door. The two embraced on the hard pack, before Elijah's booted foot could even make the first step of the porch.

Diana recognized the name, and put it together with the rest of him. *So, this was Elijah, then; Seth and Zachariah's youngest brother. The twined silver leaves must be some sort of family symbol, like a crest, or a form of identification.*

Seeing the two unique men embracing muscularly in broad daylight, Diana thought she would never get over such a sight. *Vincent, you don't know what you're missing, staying in those tunnels.* She would have to speak to him about it.

"God. I don't see any of you for two years, then all of a sudden it's a family reunion." Adam clapped Elijah on the back.

"Yes. Well. You know my mother." Elijah looked around the place as he went in. *Not great, okay.* But not what Seth and Zachariah had led him to believe. A beautiful redheaded woman stood on Adam's porch, holding a mug of coffee, watching the two men walk up. *Maybe she was the reason things were improving?* Elijah hoped so.

Something about Elijah looked younger than either Vincent or Adam, but if you asked Diana "what," she'd be hard pressed to say it. He was powerfully built, certainly, but a little shorter, and there was a way about him that bespoke a young prince in his early to mid-twenties, rather than one a decade or two older. He simply carried himself like a younger man. And he had a huge smile, for Diana.

"And this must be Diana. Seth said you brought back the bike, for him."

She held out her hand for a handshake and he swept her into a huge, fast hug. *Yep. Younger. More ebullient.* Diana found she instantly liked him.

"Well, yes, what there was of it I threw in the back of a trailer. I think there were parts still falling off of it, by the time I caught the state road."

Elijah threw his head back with laughter. "You going to tell Seth he owes you a new bike?" The young Shah asked his elder. "Because I so want to be there for that conversation."

"As a matter of fact, he doesn't. It's probably me who owes him." Adam shot a look at Diana.

Elijah shrugged. "Whatever. I'll leave you two to work it out. Am I too late for coffee?"

"Never. Diana drinks it by the pot full." The odd trio went inside.

Elijah mentally noted that the kitchen was clean, except for the breakfast things, the living room not so much, perhaps, but habitable. This was indeed much better than Seth's description. And unless Elijah's nose was deceiving him, Adam had just showered, though the woman had not. Also, they had not slept together, at least not yet. Elijah would have smelled him on her, if they had. So, they were not lovers.

Elijah shrugged, mentally. If she had helped Adam out of his funk, and not had to resort to sex to do it, more power to her. She looked intelligent. Determined. She would make an exceptional Shahnna, he realized, though he did not know if Adam's thoughts trended in that direction. *Too soon*, Elijah thought. *Too soon after his widowhood*. It had barely been a year. It was enough that Adam finally looked like he was getting back on his feet.

After they chatted for a few minutes, Adam rose from the table.

"Well, I'm burning daylight. You still know how to swing a pickaxe, young'un?"

Elijah rose, also. "I'm better at swinging the kind you use on trees, but I'll join you. Wouldn't want you to hurt yourself all alone in there, old man," Elijah teased him. Adam merely snorted. The two friends were heading out the door, when Adam turned back to where Diana sat. Elijah waited by the door.

"We still have a conversation or two to have. So you don't go taking off on me, hear?" He said it in a whisper, though Diana did not doubt that Elijah could hear every word.

"I might do some packing, today, but I won't leave," Diana answered. That was as good as he was going to get.

"Fair enough," he replied. Snagging his thermos off the counter, he rejoined Elijah, as the two men crossed the broad yard and went into the mine.

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Diana found herself feeling strangely alone, most of the rest of the day. She thought about going into the mine just for company, but decided against it. Whatever this was, it would be good for Adam to begin having good days, without her in them.

The only part left of his recovery that she could see was reuniting him with his youngest child, Chloe. That might be tricky. Young children could be very unpredictable, and at age fourteen, Chloe was not so young she could be bought off with a pretty toy and a simple apology.

She had been nine or ten years old when her mother was taken ill, thirteen when she died. Hard years to live through, with a dying parent on the one hand, and a grieving one, on the other.

*Maybe I should stay.* She was still eleven or twelve days shy of the month she had given to this task. She mulled it over.

Curious, she went into the bedroom that Adam had shared with Celeste. It was nearly devoid of furniture, now, save for an empty pair of dressers and a night stand. She wasn't sure what she was looking for. But she'd know it when she found it.

Empty clothes hangers swung in the closet, spare linens for a bed no longer there, on the top shelf. She looked around the space. Something was off.

She's seen enough false bottoms in floors to know one, when she saw it. You could never completely hide the seam. Usually, in her work,

such places contained a dead body. Rarely, a living one. She pried up the floorboards of the closet.

This one contained a hole in the ground. The ladder bolted to it reminded her of Catherine's basement. "An escape tunnel," she realized. They were not far from the mine, though it would have taken a lot of work to carve out the solid rock.

She had wanted to know why Adam's eyes had darted toward the empty bedroom when the van containing Elijah had pulled up. *Well, well.* She wondered how many more such places there were, on the property.

Still curious, she decided to explore, seeing if she could answer her own question. She replaced the floorboards and began to look around, outside. She found another "escape hatch" in the garage, though you had to move the washer, to find it. *Surely some of those branches in his mine led elsewhere.* And the mine itself would have more than one way in and out, apart from the obvious ones. There was no way he would let himself become trapped, in there. He'd told her as much.

*Clever, Adam,* her mind shrugged. No wonder he walked around in broad daylight without much fear. He would see or sense an approaching vehicle for many yards. Easily time enough to make an escape, from any of the buildings, if it were called for.

*You made yourself a safe place. Huge, and secure. Like the tunnels, but not.* She marveled at the amount of work that must have taken.

She went back inside the house. Time to get to work on her packing. She had the feeling that her time here was drawing to a close, after all. *You're going to be alright, Adam. You don't need me. You really don't. Even if I think I'm starting to need you.* She remembered the

feeling of being in his arms, in the rocking chair. Had she ever felt so... safe?

Diana shook her head. She couldn't... use him, for that. She couldn't use him for anything. It wasn't fair.

Pacing back into her room, she opened up the nearest drawer, and began pulling her shorts out. She wasn't set to leave, just yet. But she wanted to be ready to be. She put most of her clothes in her suitcase. If she decided to stay a day or two longer, she could dress out of it as easily as she had the dresser, she reasoned.

She had no idea how long Elijah planned to stay. His lack of significant luggage indicated he travelled light. But she did, too, and look at her. She had stayed nearly three weeks, already.

The two men emerged, hours later, filthy from the mine, sweaty and sticky. They'd had a race of sorts, to see which one could fill his respective bin faster. Adam, more muscular and more experienced, had won by a good margin. But Elijah had done more than his fair share for the day, and both of them raced for a dip in the lake.

"Last one in has to eat Diana's cooking!" Adam yelled, and the race was on. Diana did not find that particular jibe humorous, in the least.

The sight of the two of them swimming was one she could not pass up. Diana walked down the hardpack to the forest trail, feeling the sun pass its zenith.

Elijah was first to the big lake. What he lacked in upper arm strength, compared to Adam, he'd more than made up for with the power in his legs. He was lean, for a Shah, lithe, and fast, and he swam like it was a thing he'd been born to. As Diana watched him stroke through the water, his red body hair compacted wetly against his torso, Diana

realized he had more of a swimmer's build than Adam, who was more of a bodybuilder in frame, thanks to the breadth of his shoulders.

She looked to the ground to her left, and saw a collection of boots, jeans, and shirts. It was then that she realized both men were naked, in the water. Unless they wore some kind of underwear, that is.

Diana blushed. Vincent had often told her that the tunnel community swam as it bathed, mostly nude. Elijah floated on his back, while Adam stroked his way across to the middle of the pool. *So much for underwear.* It was quite the view, from both sources.

"Come on in, Diana!" Elijah called, motioning with his bracelet clad arm. Diana realized that was the sum total of what he was wearing, at the moment. "It's hot, and the water is gorgeous." Diana shook her head, smiling. *Wouldn't that be a page for a diary?*

*"Dear Diary,"* she wrote mentally. *Today I swam naked in a Montana lake, with two men from an ancient race who look absolutely gorgeous soaking wet.*" She paused, then finished the entry. *"And I might be falling for the darker one. Love, Diana."*

"No thanks. My diary can't take that kind of entry," she called back to Elijah. He laughed at her ability to make fun of herself. "Suit yourself," he told her, swimming out for the deep section.

He liked her. He had a feeling Adam did, too.

Adam. Diana watched him as long as she dared. He plowed through the water, the hair on his head glinting, from sunlight on black. He was a power swimmer, and his strokes seemed to punish the water. He swam fast, and Diana realized he was the stronger swimmer, of the two of them, more than likely, that Elijah's more slender shape couldn't compensate for Adam's sheer strength.

Diana went back to the house and tossed together a huge pasta salad for dinner. *At least Adam can't tease her about boiling his meal to death*, she figured. She checked the crisper. He was running low on vegetables, and anything that looked like fresh fruit was long gone. It was canned peaches or nothing, for dessert.

She wondered how he procured such things, now that his wife had died, and he lived essentially alone. The convenience store had some things, but it was, after all, mostly just a place to get gas, chips and soda. Julia had brought up a few things, but she could see they were steadily depleting his groceries.

*Probably his sister Cheryl*, she thought. She would have to ask about that. She realized that most Shah were part of a community. But there was scant evidence to indicate that a lot of people around here knew what Adam Blackmane was. There simply weren't many residents, nearby. The convenience store was a place to stop on the state road for gas, before you hit the county line. The closest town was some thirty miles distant, but its sprawl was in the other direction, not this one.

Yet, Adam seemed to like it that way. After the clamor of New York, Diana did, too, but their reasons for liking solitude probably differed. Vincent had told her such Shah, ones who lived without the support of other Shah, were called a 'Solo.' As he had been, when he was found. It was not considered good to be a Solo. Much was made of the support a Shah gained from his immediate family, or, from a tight knit community. In return, he offered them his protection, and his strength.

*To Adam, that wasn't a community. It was his family*, Diana realized.

The two men came in the door, chatting, buck naked, and carrying their clothes. Neither had wanted to put on the dirty things, again. Elijah changed in Adam and Celeste's old bedroom, while Adam used Michael's old room, the one he had slept in last night, on the floor. Diana kept her face firmly turned toward the sink, cutting a can of black olives up into pieces, as the two cleanly dressed men entered the kitchen, pulling back the chairs. She kept her eyes on her task. There was no way she was filing an image of two powerfully built, wet, naked Shah males into her consciousness. There was only so much her brain could hold.

The three unique people sat at Adam's big kitchen table, chewing down salad and dinner rolls. Diana lifted an eyebrow at Adam, daring him to make another jibe about her cooking, which he wisely chose not to do. When it was over, Adam offered to take care of the few dishes the meal had caused.

Diana and Elijah went for a walk, while Adam squirted dish soap into the sink. The kitchen did not have a dishwasher. Diana realized she'd just made a note of that. With three kids, one would have been handy. She also realized she had not noted that, about the house, before.

*Odd.* Usually, it was a tidbit she filed, almost immediately. *I must be slipping,* she thought, as she and Elijah headed out for an evening stroll.

"Seth tells me you're an amazing detective, of sorts." Elijah began companionably. She did not feel like a trip back to the lake, again. She passed into the tree line with him, and sought the comfort of a fallen tree as a bench. He joined her.

"Yes, that's what I do. Vincent, whom you'll have heard about by now, and Seth, asked if I would come up here to try and help Adam."

"Judging from the looks of the place, I'd say you did well, Diana," Elijah complimented. "Seth and Zachariah both said it was a pigsty, and that Adam was all but unreachable."

"It could just as easily fall back apart, but yes. Overall, I'd say he's pretty much out of the woods," she replied.

"So. Adam says you can tell somebody their life, after knowing them for five minutes. Like a carny fortune teller, only better. Care to try it with me?"

Diana stared at him, without trying to look like she was staring. He really was a charmer. He didn't realize he was asking her to work, that hers was not some carnival trick or a cheap cheat. She gathered and sorted what she knew about him, based on all she'd seen and heard.

"You're the youngest of three Shah brothers, and the smallest."

His eyebrow rose. "How do you know I'm the smallest? You've never seen my other two brothers."

Diana shrugged. "Everyone says Zachariah is a force to be reckoned with, and that usually means tall. Seth pulled up a Harley doing around ninety miles an hour, and I saw his ruined clothes, in the tunnels," she explained. "So, among at least two other powerful males, you'd be the smallest, which you're used to, since you're the youngest. They've always been bigger than you. No big deal."

Elijah folded his arms across his chest and listened.

"But that also makes you the most outgoing, and everybody's favorite one. You like to make them smile, but it keeps some of them from understanding that you have a very serious, very caring side. If you

didn't, you wouldn't have come all the way out here. Wouldn't have helped him out, today." She took a deep breath in, and Elijah stayed quiet, listening to her talk.

"You weren't the first one they sent. That was Seth. He's the family man, the married one with kids, the one with the most in common with Adam. The one who would understand. So they sent him. But that didn't help. So then, they sent Zachariah." she continued. He watched her blue eyes as they flitted from fact to fact, like a butterfly visiting flowers in a garden.

"Zachariah is the eldest, and from what I understand, the biggest and maybe considered the wisest of you?" That sentence ended on a question, and he nodded. "But he can be intimidating, and Adam didn't need that, so his visit was a failure. They probably should have sent you in first, to begin with. You thought as much, but kept your opinion to yourself, out of respect."

Elijah's eyes widened. It's like she had been standing in the kitchen with them, back at the logging camp.

"You wore a distinctive pin, on your cloak, today. A leaf design, in silver. It's also on your bracelet. Seth has something similar, and so does Corinne. But they're not identical. A leaf design, appropriate to loggers, to foresters. The jewelry didn't come from a store. Made by hand. Family crest, of sorts?" Elijah nodded, again.

"You came with one duffel bag, half packed. You either like to travel light, don't plan on staying long, or both. You're not afraid of hard work. You're the only one of your people I've ever seen or heard tell they wear an earring, so you like to be a bit of a rebel, from time to time, just to make sure they know you're here." She touched the hoop at his ear.

"My Dad gave me hell for that. And keeping it pierced was a nightmare. Take it out to clean it and the hole tries to close back up. You know how quickly we heal."

She nodded, chuckling.

"But it was worth the effort to you, to make your point that you were not like your brothers. I haven't heard you mention a mate, so I take it you are not... joined, or married yet. You're young. It's a step you know you'll have to take, eventually. But you're in no rush. The family thinks you're sowing some wild oats, but you're not. You like to play, but you don't trifle. The easy charm is there in part to disarm, and a way to hide the fact that you're afraid you can't fall in love."

If his jaw could have dropped off and shattered on the ground, it would have.

"You're a good guy, Elijah. You'll find her. Somebody who will love you for you and not compare you to the other two. Four, counting the human brothers, but you don't consider them, when people start making comparisons."

"Wow. Just...wow. Did you do this to Adam, too?" he asked.

"It was much worse for him, considering the circumstances. And, I'm sorry. I should have stopped doing it to you, before I did. But I'd like to help you, too, if I can, Elijah. And I never helped anybody by knowing less than the truth about them."

He raised a curious eyebrow. "You think you can help me? How?"

"I think you'll help yourself, when the time comes. I think there's a woman out there for you, yes. You're too special not to find her."

He stared off in the direction of the house.

"I need to find her before the next time of madness hits. I know it's a long ways, off, or it should be. But it feels like there's a time bomb ticking inside me, sometimes," he admitted. He had never uttered that sentence to another living soul. Something about her inspired confidences.

"That must be... an incredible thing to know about yourself."

"Zachariah says we can't live, shadowed by it. But he also says he'll kill himself before he goes through it, again. Hell of a mixed message."

"You'd have been young, the last time Zachariah went through the madness."

"Too young. A teenager. And I remember every second of it," he said, Diana could tell by the look on his face that the memory was a dark one, indeed.

She shrugged. She could not help him find his soul mate. It was something each of the Shah needed to do, for himself. She could only assure him that odds were good he would find her. His people seemed to do that, more often than not.

"I think you'll find her. I can see no reason why you would be the exception, to that rule."

"Thanks for the encouragement." He shot her his most winning smile. He was the word "charismatic."

"Can I ask you something?" she asked. Oddly, she'd never posed that question to Adam.

"Sure," he replied.

"The bond between mates. It's... for life?"

Elijah nodded. "Pretty much, yes. And past it, for some of us. Widowhood is a dangerous thing, for our kind. 'A Shahnna is the strength of the Shah,'" he quoted.

"That's one of your sayings."

"Yes. There are others, but that's a big one. My Father's people are from Alaska. That saying is used up there, though I don't know if it originated from there."

Diana nodded. "When Adam went into mourning like he did, I take it everybody was saddened, but not necessarily surprised?"

"No. Not surprised. The bond is tight, between mates. Stronger as time and childbearing go on. Wasting is a hard, hard thing, Diana. My father says the pain of it is physical, as well as emotional or mental." Elijah kept his eyes in the direction of the house.

"But it isn't always fatal? Widowhood?"

He shook his head. "It can be. Suicide as an open act is almost unheard of, but... to weaken, and sicken and die... that has been known to happen. Without Celeste to heal him, injuries and illnesses can be much riskier. Often, when they become widowed, my people simply... fade. It's what was happening to Adam. My mother calls it 'The Wasting,' so we all do. I don't know if it has another name."

Diana nodded. If there was one thing she was familiar with, in her work, it was grief, and the toll that often took. "A lot of regular people do pretty much the same thing," she offered. She started walking back toward the house, slowly. Elijah nodded at that.

"I mean, married couples who have been together for years... that kind of thing," she added, hoping she didn't sound insensitive.

"Yes. I don't mean to imply my kind has cornered the market on grief, it's just... they seem to experience it very, very deeply, with their bondmate. It's part of what keeps our other saying in play. When picking out a mate, we must 'choose wisely.'"

"That sounds like terrific advice. And I'm not sure if Adam thinks he heeded your father's advice, when it came to that."

"Jarret, my father, is a plain spoken man, but a wise one. But Adam wouldn't be the first person to ever chart his own course, against better advice. And as for what happened to Celeste... well, it's not like anyone would have predicted that. We were just afraid that Adam wasn't going to recover from it. For a long while, well... things didn't exactly look hopeful, Diana."

"It isn't a foregone conclusion, then, that Shah widowers just... die?" she asked. "In some animals, it is. In some it isn't."

"No! Oh, no," Elijah fell in step beside her. "It's what you would call a huge possibility, depending on the strength and length of the mating bond. Adam and Celeste were married, or at least joined by the bond, for nearly two decades. Literally all their adult lives. They had three children together. So it was harder for him, when she passed." He kicked over a mushroom, with his foot as they wound back toward the house. The rain was having a predictable effect on the landscape.

"Children help a widower survive, but his link to them needs to be ... viable. He has to be necessary, to them." Elijah explained. "Shah with adult children do badly here. Again, that kind of hit Adam, hard. Two of his three children are adults already, and the other is far from an infant."

Ah. Diana's wheels were turning. "So you thought you all could help, but you weren't sure."

They were getting close to the house, and Elijah paced her, feeling her steps slow. The lights from the house were visible. She stood still a moment, looking toward the little dwelling that had been her home for the last three weeks, and would not be, for much longer. She had to ask it, even though she knew she shouldn't.

"Do widowed Shah ever fall in love, again, Elijah? Do you know?" she whispered it.

Elijah took her in. *Ah. Now there was the question you really wanted answered. With that brain, you could have figured most of the rest out, on your own. I'll keep my fingers crossed for you, Red Lady.*

"Yes. They do. Or they can. But as with all things Shah, it is rare. But yes. Our hearts are built for it."

"Will he get the madness, again, if he doesn't chose a mate?" She realized how much she didn't know, about this. She didn't want to make wrong assumptions, where Adam was concerned.

*Was she looking for a reason to be near him, or avoid him?* Elijah wondered. Miraculously, both adults thought something similar at the same time, but said nothing of it.

"Not as far as I know. Not once children are born. It would endanger their upbringing. If I sound like I am not quite sure about some things, it's the nature of our kind. To a certain extent, we are very solitary, and there's no such thing as a 'library of information' on a Shah. Though my mother, to her credit, seems to be trying to make one."

"She must be quite an exceptional woman," Diana complimented.

"Oh, she is. Ramona Star Hunter. First Shahnna. If our kind has a matriarch, it's her, now."

Diana strolled in a companionable silence feeling the night deepen, around them.

"You know, this... madness everyone talks about, the thing that spurred Adam to marry too young... It almost seems... out of place, for your kind. Like you wouldn't try to find mates, without that push."

Diana no longer led, but followed him. Rather than go back into the house, he was veering toward the lake.

"Perhaps it exists because we are so different. Even with the madness, our race struggles to maintain its population. My mother is considered exceptional, having bore three Shah."

Diana did some quick mental math. "You would need at least two, to ensure population growth. There's always the chance that one would not achieve adulthood, for whatever reason," Diana stated.

"Math is your long suit? Or sociology?"

"Both, in a way. Just running the numbers, in my head."

Elijah nodded. They walked in silence a while. Diana stayed near, remembering when Adam had tackled her, in the clearing, remembering the feeling of his long, powerful body under hers.

"You know about the madness, then?" Elijah's voice ventured. She snapped her attention back to him.

"Yes. A friend of mine named Vincent told me. Or his Father did."

"Adam and Celeste were okay, for a while. But it was fear of the madness that drove him to choose... less than wisely." Elijah spoke the words sincerely. He slowed his feet. Stopped them.

"You think she... she wasn't a good match for him?"

Elijah didn't answer her directly, at first. "My father says our youth have to endure the first time, which is bad, but necessary. It gives them the impetus not just to wed, but to "choose wisely." There is no *wisdom* in a fifteen-year-old. They choose with their genitals. Then are trapped with the choice, once the bond is made. It's a shame that his marriage failed." Elijah concluded.

"By 'failed' you mean that he didn't have a Shah... a son, like himself? Or that she became ill?" Diana asked, a bit confused.

Elijah shook his head, and like Diana, he glanced back at the house. One where he suspected Adam was now drying the dinner dishes, and putting them away. "No. By 'failed' I mean they were way too young when they got married, and two or three kids later, the bloom was off the rose for her. It's tough being married to an empath, Diana."

*Tell me about it. She'd all but written that miserable song. But... they'd had children together. Calling their marriage a failure didn't make sense. The hard parts at the end weren't a reason to call the whole thing a failure...*

"You want to know why?" he asked. "Really why?"

Diana looked at the big auburn man beside her. So like Vincent, and yet not.

"Sure," she answered, curious about his take on Adam's marriage.

"Because... you know the very minute she falls out of love with you," he paused. "And it totally breaks your heart."

*You know the minute she...* Diana squeezed her eyes shut. *They'd had problems. Adam had said things had been rough, that he'd wrecked Celeste's life. Of course.*

She'd been six kinds of idiot. And here she was, known for her insight.

Adam Blackmane hadn't had a beautiful, yet tragically doomed marriage. He'd just had a tragic one. Adam and Celeste's marriage hadn't just been rocky just at the onset of her illness. It had been bad for years, before.

*How long?* Diana wondered. *Is that why there's a larger age gap between Alexander and Chloe?*

"And you can't really *do* anything about it. Because you're bound, irrevocably, together. *Bonded*, Diana. Do you have any idea just what that means? To know the thoughts of someone who can no longer stand to be in the same room with you? To still feel that, to hear it, no matter how far away you are from each other? To hear it, to know it, whether she says it out loud or not?"

*Oh. Oh, Lord.* A lot of things were starting to crash in on Diana, right now.

"But... he loved her."

"He did. That doesn't mean she still felt that way." The pronouncement was terrible.

"Elijah, when I got here... he slept by her grave!"

Elijah knew that was true. "Don't mistake love for apology, or just plain grief. He had to love her. He's bound to her. But she didn't have to love him. 'Choose wisely' isn't just nice advice, here, Diana. Celeste was sick for years. *Years*. Four of them. Four years of blaming him. Loathing him. Hating him. Sending it through their bond to him. It's a wonder he didn't go completely insane."

Diana shook her head, confused. "But he loved her. He says it. It's true. You can see it in his eyes."

"All Shah love their mates." Elijah shrugged. "It's part of what creates the bond. If things change between them, it's him who will suffer the most. Endlessly. Mercilessly, if she's that kind. Now that can kill love, yes, but..." Elijah shrugged.

"He didn't tell me. He confessed his soul, but... he didn't tell me she didn't love him, anymore. I thought the strain between them was because of her cancer," Diana said. "You're telling me it was before that?"

"It was way before that," Elijah replied. "And I'm sure he did love her, once, Diana. Back when Julia and Alexander and maybe even Chloe were young. Depends on when she'd had enough of him. After Chloe ... or before."

Diana's eyes opened wide, with realization.

"Is Chloe... Is Chloe even Adam's?"

Elijah folded his arms across his chest, again, not liking the water they were wading into. "Ah. Now she gets it. Maybe," he allowed. "Maybe not."

"But he would have been aware when she, when Celeste..."

"Cheated on him? Oh yes. By that many years of marriage, very aware."

Diana felt her stomach churn.

Elijah's voice was firm. "Chloe is Adam's because he says she is, and he will brook no argument on that score. He's all she knows, and he won't hurt a child to avenge himself on the mother. But Shah genes are strong, and she looks nothing like him. And then there's the age gap, between Alex and Chloe. Julia and Alex were back to back. But then... it was years. Four years is a long time for a Shah and Shahnna

to go without producing a child, especially when there is no Shah heir, between them."

Diana broke a confidence of Adam's, for the first time.

"He says she blamed him for her illness."

"That would probably be easier than blaming herself for it. Or just accepting it." He shook his head. "What a waste."

They stood still, and she digested. So much she had not put together, before. *And all this time, Adam's been congratulating me on how smart I was.*

They both looked back toward the house, now obscured by the trees.

"Thank you for all you've told me, Elijah. I wish you good luck in your search."

"And you, Diana Bennet. As to what your next course of action must be, I do not know. I can only advise you as my people advise each other: 'Choose wisely.'"

The young prince walked back toward the house, leaving her there. She doubted she would see him, after tomorrow. As far as he was concerned, there was no work here he needed to attend to.

—

Chloe Blackmane was a bundle of laughter on the one hand, and solemn brown eyes on the other. Adam's sister, Cheryl, had come by, bringing a van load of groceries and supplies with her, for which Adam paid her in cash.

*So that was how he got re-supplied,* Diana thought. After Celeste's passing and the departure of his older children, Diana realized that Adam's supply line was growing a bit tenuous.

The little girl clearly adored her father. And the feeling was mutual. "Aunt Cheryl tells me you are doing very well in summer school." Adam sat his daughter up on the kitchen table as her coltish legs dangled. The room gleamed, compared to what it had been. Cheryl was clearly impressed, as she put away fresh lunch meat.

"I like reading. I hate math." Chloe replied, twirling a light brown lock of straight hair into a curl, around her finger. She was nervous. "Can I home school, again, next year?"

*Well that was right to the point.* Diana thought. She was asking if she could come home, before September, and stay there.

"Of course. I just need to get the phone and internet back up. Maybe get you one of those desktop computers." Adam looked at Cheryl, who had tears in her eyes. She would take care of that, for him.

"You finish this term with Aunt Cheryl. That's just a few weeks away. Then you come back home and we can convert one of the bedrooms into a proper school room, for you. Okay, Pumpkin?"

Chloe launched herself off the table, at her father, her joy so apparent she shone with it. Diana's heart twinged. Knowing, as they both did, that there was a chance the little girl might not even belong to him, biologically.

*But he loved her. And she was a child.* And she needed him. That was that.

"I love you Daddy." Chloe sniffed a little. "I'll be good. You'll see."

"Baby." Adam's grey eyes drew level with her brown ones. "You have always been a good girl. Nothing that happened in this last year, or before that was anything you did wrong. Daddy was just...."

"Sad. You were just sad, Daddy. I know." Chloe hugged him with all of her ninety pound frame.

*A child's capacity for love and forgiveness.* Would Diana ever not be impressed by it?

They chatted and ate an early supper together, and before they left, Adam brought his sister to his body for a fierce hug. "I love you, Cherie," he told her, tears in his eyes.

Hers were equally wet. "I know, honey. I do." The look she gave Diana told her that Cheryl thought Diana to be some kind of miracle worker.

Chloe tugged Adam into her bedroom, checking to see if there were any books or belongings in there she wanted to take back with her. Elijah tossed his duffel bag into the back of Cheryl's mini van. She was going to give him a ride to the rail yard, where he would spend the evening in a boxcar, making his way toward home. Cheryl had a moment alone with Diana, in the back yard.

"I don't know what you did, but my family can never thank you enough," Cheryl told her. She was lovely, a bit past forty, and clearly protective of her younger brother. That made sense, given their family dynamic.

"You all are most welcome." Diana told her. "It must have been... interesting, having a Shah for a father, and a little brother."

Cheryl laughed. "There were times when my mother and I felt outnumbered, growing up, even though it was technically two against two." Her smile grew wistful. "Our parents' passing was hard on both

of us. It wasn't long after that things started going so wrong for Adam and Celeste." Cheryl shrugged.

"I'm sorry about that. Death is hard on everyone, especially something like that."

"He was in a very dark place, Diana. I dreaded these visits and kept them spaced far apart. It broke my heart to see him dying, and not being able to reach out for Chloe." A shadow passed across her face. *She knows. Or at least, she suspects,* Diana thought.

Cheryl was clearly here to focus on only the good things. "But that's better now. And we have you to thank."

"The pleasure was mine. Cheryl, there's something I've been meaning to ask about." Again, it was a question she had never asked Adam.

"The other Shah. They seem like a part of a community. That community protects them, and gives them strength. Were Adam and you always raised so... isolated?"

Cheryl shrugged. "I guess so, though it never felt that way. Outside a family, they tend to stay separated. Almost like a kind of territoriality. We have some cousins, scattered around. One owns the Quick-Mart up the road, so Adam *can* get to a phone if he needs to." She shrugged. Diana knew as much and realized that explained the sudden appearance of the charity van, among other things.

"We used to spend summers up in Canada with the Hunter clan, though we're not loggers. Adam and my Father always mined, though the original dig is a good ways from here."

"It still sounds... rather solitary."

Cheryl shrugged. "We never went to school, formally, though my mother was a teacher when my Father bonded with her. We were

always raised with a lot of books, and exposure to as much as we could find, considering Adam's... well, his limitations. But you're right. We've never been a part of a community, as such. That's more of a Hunter trait. Or the Longspears, in the Dakotas."

"My friend Vincent is also the center of a very large community. It seems like that might be more of a help to ... well, to someone like Adam. Lessen his burdens."

"Having more people around isn't something we ever took to," Cheryl replied. And again, Diana knew that feeling. There were times when even one other person in her life was too much to bear, considering her work.

"My parents always liked their privacy, and so did Adam. Not that he got much, raising three kids. Life out here was a way Adam and I could play outdoors, and be free. Adam used to run through wherever we were all day, and not come home until after dark. Drove my mother crazy. She was always afraid he'd get caught. He never did."

"How did he meet Celeste?"

"She was a summer fling, up at the Hunter logging camp. Their union was not favored, by the way. But she... well, she got pregnant. With Julia. And that was that."

This much of the story Diana knew.

"Well. If you know a nice girl, there's Elijah to yet consider," Diana replied. They rounded the corner of the house, just in time to bump into the topic of their conversation.

"Ah. Two beautiful women talking about me. My day can just not get better." He flashed them that easy grin Diana liked, but knew masked a more serious nature.

"We'd best hit the road. Don't want to miss my train." He jumped into the mini van, pulling Chloe in beside him. She showed him a small pile of books she wanted to have read, by the time she returned, in August.

"Alice in Wonderland! No kidding? Say, have you seen the movie?" he asked her, as the door slammed shut.

Adam watched his friend and part of his family as they kicked up dust, winding back to the path that would eventually take them to the side road then back to the main, and toward town.

Which was right about the moment Diana realized she was alone with him, again. She should have had her stuff in the car. This should have been the part where she said goodbye, too. But she hadn't expected Cheryl, or all that had happened in the last few days. Hadn't known that Elijah would leave so soon.

Hadn't known the man she feared she was falling in love with was huge, and powerfully close.

*This is ridiculous.* They had been alone together, before. For a couple weeks, even. And apart from an earth shaking kiss, not so much as a longing look had passed between them. He walked back up the steps to the house. *Come into my parlor...*

She stayed where she was.

He crossed back over to her. "You said we were going to get around to this conversation. Fine. This is me, getting around to it."

He looked at her. Hard. Stars were starting to come out. He looked up at them, and then spoke. "I don't like the looks of the suitcase on your bed. But I like the looks of you. I'm willing to accept that you're going to leave."

He exhaled softly, into the Montana night. He closed his eyes, letting the feel of it brush across his skin. To feel it. To *really* feel it. *It had been such a long time.*

"It's going to be a beautiful night, Diana. Share it with me."

*Well. There it was. The offer.* Diana knew that she would be a fool to say no. And she couldn't possibly say yes.

"So. No strings, and a little slap and tickle?" she asked.

He blinked away at something.

"No strings. Strings. Many as you want, or none. You call it, Irish."

Oh, she really did not want to have this conversation. Not like this. It gave her no way to refuse him, simply.

His hands remained on his hips. Not pulling her toward him. Not pushing her away, either.

"It's been a long road. And I'm alive." *Really alive.* "So are you. Enjoy it with me, Diana."

"Adam. I know you think you're offering me something wonderful, but... it's not for me."

"Is there someone else?"

"Not a soul."

"You find me unattractive?"

"I think we both know the answer to that one, after the other night."

"Explain, then." His command was succinct.

"It's just... I'm just.. " She was stammering, hunting for words. Like she'd done before, when she described what she had to do for a living, sometimes.

He realized now that she only became uncomfortable when she had to talk about herself. And about something intimate, along those lines. About other people, she could talk a blue streak.

"I'm just... not that good at it, Adam. Really." She was not looking for sympathy, and not issuing a challenge to his manhood. She was just trying to explain things as honestly as she knew how. "Everybody's got their talents. That's just not one of mine."

He didn't say a word. He just listened. She found that attitude unhelpful.

"I just can't... relax enough to make it any good, or much more than passable. Usually, at best, it's pleasant. At worst, it's a chore. It's nobody's fault. It's just how my brain is wired." She was blushing, and trying not to be embarrassed.

*I have to give you credit. You always said you'd be honest.*

He didn't need a neon sign to understand that this was part of why her relationships had failed, at least as far as she was concerned. She was too... difficult to love, in her own eyes.

"There are things I'm good at. There are things I'm not. Like we both know, I can't cook, either." She was trying to end this conversation on a light note. Quickly.

He tried to hide his reaction to her words, but found he couldn't, quite. This amazing woman had not ever had a wild satisfying night of passion with... anyone?

Then all he knew about her added up and slammed home. *Of course. Of course she hadn't. Hadn't she said as much, in so many ways? "Not much left, after the job." A disaster at relationships.* No husband, no boyfriend at home, despite her amazing looks and keen mind.

"I'm not issuing an invitation, or a challenge. It just doesn't happen, and I really don't feel like faking it so you can finish."

*Okay, that was blunt. Spoken like she'd done that, a time or two.*

"That just feels... dishonest, between us, and we've been very honest with each other, so far. I'm not frigid. I just don't get all that much out of it. And you should have better than that, Adam."

Okay. There were now a lot more people somewhere he needed to kill. Or at least a couple. And once again, he was utterly stunned by how she never cut anybody any slack. Even herself. Maybe especially herself, considering the outcome.

Her hands were out, her fingers flexing. "I just don't... let go enough for it to happen. It's kind of ... well, bland for me, if you want to know the truth. I'm not afraid of it, and I don't hate it. I'm just not terribly... well-suited to it."

"If... if you're going to have this, Adam, and I think you will," she put in hastily, "with somebody... you deserve something really wonderful to happen. With someone who is going to share this with you the way you want to share it with them. I would wish nothing less, for you."

"Diana, you are seriously forming my opinion of all the men in New York, right now." It was the first time he'd spoken since she began her explanation.

"And what opinion is that?"

He picked her up off her feet before she could say a word, and began heading with her toward the thicket.

"That they're all idiots."

She put her hands around his neck just to steady herself. "You're trying to sweep me off my feet?" she asked.

"Check where your feet are, right now. It's been done."

"I thought I just made myself clear on this subject, Adam. It's not like I think you're going to force me."

"I'm not going to need to. Relax, Diana. I swear to you nothing is about to happen that you don't want to."

He stalked on with her, hugging the edge of the lake for a while. She thought he would stop at several places she knew there, but he kept going.

"Where are you're taking me?" Diana asked, almost conversationally.

"Did you ever make love to her there?"

*Okay. Low blow and good shooting. Wrong, but nice try. Fair enough of her to ask.*

"Celeste and I did not make love much after Alex was born. We had sex sometimes, though, and yes, there is a huge difference, to someone like me." He let that bit of information settle. "And to answer your question, no. I neither made love nor had sex with my wife where we are going."

*Well, I guess you told me.* Diana accepted his words.

"I'm sorry. That was a horrible question. I'm sorry, Adam. Even if nothing is about to happen but a long walk back to the house for me, I apologize for saying that."

He slowed his pace, turned his head to impale her with his ghost grey eyes. His voice was so gentle she nearly had to hold back a tear. "It's all right, Diana. It's just because you're scared, baby. That's all."

She normally didn't like to be called "baby." But she found she liked it very much, when he said it. Of course, compared to his big body, everybody was a "baby." She shrugged.

The ground began to change, and rise. She lost sight of the house, the trees, and the distant pond. She realized they were clear on the other side, of all that. Of course the lake would be at the bottom, the low ground, between higher elevations. He was taking her to that high ground, now.

"I can walk. I'm not going to run away, Adam."

"The ground is uneven. And you can't see it as well as I can. And I like holding you." He didn't even sound winded.

*The power of his arms. The thing his family is known for. Would she ever stop marveling at it?*

Steeper, now, and he continued to climb. After a few minutes more, he set her down. "There are trees in front of you. Past that... the area before you is broad and flat. There's an edge about a hundred yards straight out in front. Step through the tree line before you, Diana."

It was dark out, but not so dark yet that she couldn't see. The sky was deep twilight, with purple undertones. The sun was utterly gone. A thick stand of pine stood before her. *More forest?*

He was a little in front of her, holding out his hand. The stand of pine was in front of him, thick, and sheltering. He held back a patch of branches for her, so she could step through.

She did. It was like stepping through a curtain of black and deep green, then...

A wide, flat space in front of her, and...

*My God. The sky!*

As Diana stepped out of the pine trees. It seemed the whole world opened up in front of her. Opened up, and then fell away. There were no more trees. *Plateau. We're on a plateau. Now I see it.* The land before her spread outward, a high bluff, overlooking a desert-like landscape. There was scrub and brush for miles, and nothing to block the view. The sky was starshot, and it went on, forever and ever.

The pine trees sheltered her back. The ground was rocky, and a little uneven. She was standing on a small, white, sand-and-rock plateau perhaps only thirty to forty feet higher than the rest of the land around it. But it was the high ground, here. Adam's home, his mine, and all the rest of it was to her back, and to her left. No city lights, nor road spread out before them. Nothing to compete with more stars than Diana had ever seen in her entire life, twinkling in the sky.

Some were blue some red or pink, some few even seemed green. Most shone white, in clusters and whirls. It was like looking at a Van Gogh, a little. She suddenly realized what the artist had seen, one night, in Flanders.

It was like looking at another country.

She was silent, pulling the scene into her memory, and into her soul. Something to hold against the dark times. Something to... nourish her... she realized. She almost couldn't take it all in, at once. She took a step forward, then stopped.

Visually, it was just too big. *Big sky country*, her mind whispered. But she kept trying. Trying to photograph it, mentally; trying to store it into memory. She stood for long moments, wordless. The purple of the sky was darkening to deep indigo, and it made the stars over her head seem brighter.



"I can't... Am I still in the United States?" she asked, awestruck.  
*Stupid. Stupid question.*

"Yes." She could hear the smile in his voice. "But you're looking into Canada, if you look far enough. So I guess it's their sky, too."

Diana could only stare. "The sky... shouldn't belong to anyone." She whispered it. The moon was just rising, low in the newly evening sky. She got the impression she was actually standing higher than the gentle gibbous, right now.

She smiled, in wonderment. "How can I be standing higher than the moon?" her voice was like a little girl's. Her hands were open, palm up. She took a few more steps forward, then stopped, mindful of the edge she knew was there, even though it was distant.

He kept his eyes on her. It was like she was a different human being than the one she had been a minute ago.

*Good. There. She did feel it, did see the magic in this place.* He knew she would be able to. Or prayed she would.

She glanced down, taking in the ground around her for the first time. "There are white stones, set in a half circle," she realized, when the moon shone its scant light toward her. "Who set them here?"

They were deep set in the ground. Big. Boulder sized. Gleaming white, except for some moss. They had clearly been there a while, and made the bluff seem more like an altar, of sorts.

"I did."

"Why?" Her eyes were still taking in everything above and below her, trying not to give up one view for the other one.

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

"A... A long time ago. You did it... a long time ago." She could tell it was true by the moss, but she turned off her brain before she could over-analyze it.

"Yes," he answered. "When I was young."

"But you don't know why?"

"I don't know why. I had an instinct to do it, so I did."

She nodded, accepting.

His voice came, still from behind her. "Do you know why you felt so good the other night, after just a kiss? Why you got wet?"

She shook her head, still staring. After a moment, she answered. "I had an instinct to do it. So I did." She shook her head again. She hadn't meant to mock him. This time it was his turn to accept the words.

She looked back up, fascinated, then looked around her now, some. She was taking in all the surroundings. Trying so hard to store every bit of it in her amazing memory, so she could pull it back out, later. He could see her trying to memorize it.

*I don't think I can hold it all, she thought, knowing she could never memorize all the stars. But I have to try. He... he carried every boulder up the hill, on his back. A long time ago. When he was stronger. Who carried the stars? For surely they'd been transported here, as well.* There were simply too many for any other explanation to make sense, to her wondering mind.

Adam was more engrossed in watching her than the scene before him. She stepped forward, more into the center of the white stone half-ring. Her palms were still out, and up. The moonlight touched her face. He wasn't sure whether or not he was surprised to see that there were tears on it. Silent ones. She didn't bother to wipe them away. She clearly didn't want to. It was her gift to this place.

She let the tears fall, unchecked. *You're consecrating the ground, do you know that?* he thought.

She tilted her head back as far as it would go, so that she looked straight up. *Polaris. The North Star.* It seemed very close, and though that was an illusion, it seemed like it was precisely over her head.

"I'm being marked by a constant," she said, and even though the words sounded like nonsense, he understood them. She was standing beneath the constant North Star, Polaris. The Pole Star. The one sailors and travelers used to find direction, for all the millennia there were travelers and sailors. It was right above her head. *Marked by a constant.*

"They help you find your way home," he told her. Wasn't that something she was always trying to help other people do?

She squeezed her eyes shut tight, and fresh tears fell, nodding.

"It hurts to stare at it too long. It's like the sun."

*God. She did see it.* He had felt the exact same way the first time he'd come here. He was so in love with her, right now.

He pulled a dark, quilted blanket from a cache chest, hidden in the trees. One of his tunnels was nearby. He spread the quilt on the ground, behind her. He'd never brought anyone here for sex. But he'd run here, occasionally, years ago. Drank from a bottle. Sat on the ground. Said his prayers. Took it in. Cursed his fate, sometimes, even as he'd drawn strength from this place.

"It's like a church," she whispered, not looking at him. "No. Not a church. An altar."

*There. That was the word.* It was why he had brought the stones. He'd never called this place "The Altar" before. Now he would never call it anything else.

That's what the flat rise of ground felt like. An altar. His altar. Theirs, right now. She looked back up. "Altar means high, in Latin." Her mind slid from one piece of beauty to the other.

*Good. Very, very good.* He wanted her like this.

"That would make you its High Priestess, tonight," he said.

"It would make you a God." The words were gone before she could call them back.

*Never mind. Let the words go,* she thought. It's all right if he knew how she felt. She would be gone, tomorrow. Unless she died, tonight. Which she suddenly felt would be not be so terrible a thing.

*There's so much peace, here. So... much... beauty.* The constant star above her felt like it was placing a gentle kiss on her crown.

*Starlight... is kissing me. Kissing my hair. Please don't let it stop.*

She took another step forward, wanting to be well clear of the trees. *There. There. Every step feels right.*

There was even more happening, inside her. She felt the failures she carried with her were now cast above her like a wide net thrown at the ocean, but they were thrown at the sky, instead. The people she'd not been able to save... The children she'd not been able to reach in time... They were not in a dark place. They were here. *Home.*

Her constant star shone overhead. *Oh lord.* She knew she might need to drop to her knees, in a moment. She saw there was a blanket for that, just in case. She didn't wonder where it had come from, or who had put it there.

"You're going to make love to me under a constant star, aren't you?" she asked, awestruck.

"I don't know, yet. Maybe." His voice was soft. He watched her face. She was taking more in than the starlight. *It's all right, Diana. Let it out. I understand. Believe me, I do.*

She nodded, accepting his words.

"It's all right if it's just... It's all right if it's just... good for you." She glanced over to where he stood, then back up. The moon was intoxicating, to her, as it rose higher. She swayed a little, on her feet. "It's all right," she repeated.

Her words broke his heart. Then, she said something else, to break it further. "I thought I lost all those people I couldn't save. But I think they're someplace like this." She took another step forward. Stopped. It was like being paralyzed, by wonder.

"I think I've been carrying some of them a long time. But I think it's okay to let them go, now." She closed her eyes as the feeling of complete peace washed through her. A feeling of letting go of things she'd not realized she'd been carrying.

"It's too beautiful here, Adam" she whispered. In church, you kept your voice low. "Thank you. Thank you more than I can say, for showing it to me."

She stood quietly, testing the strength of her stance. Once she was still sure her legs would hold her, she turned to this exquisite creature who had brought her here.

Her fingers went to the top button of her blouse, and then just stayed there. She waited for him to say.

"I need you to see something, before we decide," he said.

*There was more?* "What?" she asked.

"Me."

He stepped right in front of her, this time filling her view. The grey of his eyes seemed silvery, up here, and she didn't mind losing the view of the sky so much. "Adam?" It was a question, but she wasn't sure which one.

He picked her straight up, making her closer to her constant star. *Her star.* He'd just given her Polaris. She steadied herself, hands on his wide shoulders; then she held her arms out, as if she were flying. He hefted her up as high as she could go, without tumbling over backwards.

*Yes, I can hold you. I can hold you up all night, if you want me to. This is who I am, Diana. This is what it means to be known for strength. This is why I didn't die, months ago. Go ahead. Touch a star. I'll help you reach it.*

"I'm higher than the moon, again." She smiled it, feeling a hundred feet up. *He was so strong, so tall.* The ground seemed so far away, right now.

He gradually eased her down him, feeling her slide against his hard body. He was going to use his strength to slide the length of her down his huge frame.

"Look at me, Irish. Just me."

She came down slowly, feeling the virility of his solid, compact frame. *You are strong. Why had they said you were wasting?*

"Why did they say you were wasting, when you're so strong?" she asked, realizing how firmly she was being held.

"I don't think I've been wasting since the day after you got here," was all he gave, for explanation.

"Oh."

He stopped, and held her eyes level with his.

*Grey pools.* She could get lost in them. The stars, the amazing sky, the stones... They all suddenly seemed very far away, very distant. They were all beautiful, but cold, perhaps. He was not cold.

"See me. Just me. Just for a moment." Her feet dangled above the ground. He didn't let her drop an inch further.

He held her gaze captive, held it until she could no longer blink, normally. Her eyes always moved, with her mind. They always shifted, taking so much in. He wanted her to see just him, right now. Just him, for what was about to happen. For what he wanted to happen, more than anything else.

"That's it. That's good, Diana. Beautiful Diana," he praised. He didn't move his head so much as a fraction. "Let it fill you. All of it. Me. This place." His voice was a seductive whisper. She carried so much, in her mind. He wanted it all but empty, for this. *You're so good at taking everything in. Take all this in, Diana. Take this place. Take me.*

Diana obeyed him. He had brought her here, to his special gift. Of course she obeyed him. His eyes were definitely silvery, and full of moonlight. Framed by dark lashes, they looked as if they were almost shimmering.

How could something look both reflective and fathomless? She wasn't sure. But she knew it was true. His pupils were deep wells, obscuring some of the grey. The iris was a darker shade, around the outer rim, and he was focused, on her. Her feet still dangled off the ground. He was holding her above the press of his erection, if he even had one.

"What color?" he asked her.

"Grey." she answered immediately.

*Good.*

"Even in the dark, grey." she continued. "Grey like clouds before a storm. Or the sea, after." her voice whispered.

"And yours?"

She blinked for a moment, confused.

"Your eyes, Diana. What color are they?"

"Blue. Just ... blue."

"Nooooooo," he drew the vowel out, crooning to her. He was studying her eyes. She held them open for him.

"Blue toward the deepest shade of evening. Blue toward the color of secrets, and whispers. Only true redheads have that color. You have eyes the color of the night sky, where it's closest to the moon, Diana."

She would never look in the mirror and see the same thing again. She knew it. She would hear his description of her, every time she so much as brushed her hair, while looking at her reflection.

"Look. See me. Just me," he repeated. *Because I damn sure plan on seeing just you.*

She looked. *Grey. His eyes were so grey.* Rimmed with a thin line of impossible black. Riveting. Uncompromising. She knew Vincent's eyes could shine an almost sapphire blue, in the darkness. Adam's were more like antique silver. He stayed steady, holding her. His pupil gave some of the iris back. His eyes were silvery, again. "They're silver," she whispered.

"Are they?"

"Yes."

*And you don't have any idea what that means, do you? Try running, now. I'll chase you and bring you to the ground before you take half a dozen steps, Irish.*

"Are you afraid?"

"No."

"Good. It's not going to be just for me, Diana."

Adam held her as her scent changed. The beginning of her awareness; She was becoming wet. She might not be aware of it, yet, but she was.

His pupils didn't seem to need to widen, in the dark. Not yet. He could still see her very clearly, she realized

"Let me drop. Along you," she requested.

"You know what you'll feel." he told her, warning her of the steel at his groin.

She smiled a woman's smile. "I know. I want to," she replied.

Slowly. So slowly there was no mistaking either it or him, he lowered her feet the rest of the way to the ground. He held her eyes with his until her sex caught on his hardness, then brushed against his entire length.

He closed his eyes, then, feeling the pleasure of it. So did she. Her breath caught. Then she moaned low, in her throat. So did he. She buried her mouth at his neck, in blissful reaction. He had to hold her a moment, when her feet touched the ground. She was unsteady.

She stepped back, once she regained her balance, and trembling fingers began unbuttoning her blouse, again.

"Let me," he pleaded.

She dropped her hands as he brushed the backs of his furred fingers up the front of her blouse. *Ah*. There were her nipples. *Button down blouses*. He had dreamed about removing hers since... well, probably since well before last night, if he was honest.

There were six of them. Buttons. All unfastened in an instant. She was undressing him, too. Her fingers were less steady. He filed that little tidbit away in his heart, for later.

A light beige bra. Almost the same shade as her skin, and smooth, devoid of lace or decoration. A sports bra. Like the kind she'd gone swimming in, the other morning. He brushed the tan blouse down her arms and let it drop, bending to plant a kiss on her impossibly fair shoulder.

She opened his plaid work shirt at almost that same time. She felt her palms run flat across the widest part his chest, then let her fingertips draw back toward center, tangling in his chest hair. She did it again.

She liked that, and so did he. He suddenly realized how tactile a creature, she was. Always picking things up, setting them down, placing them just so. She drew in a wealth of information with her eyes. Did she realize that she got at least that much, from her fingertips?

He was in no hurry, and knew it would be suicide to rush her. She had to gather information, had to learn him. And she had to learn what it was about him that pleased her, too. She didn't know it would be so pleasant to touch his body hair. Now, she did. That kind of learning took time.

*That's it. Learn me. You learn everything else. Now me.*

He softly settled his hands just beneath her still-covered breasts. He gently brushed his thumbs across her Lycra-covered nipples, while she explored the textures of his chest. Her eyes were fascinated. She was only vaguely aware he was touching her, yet. This was like the night of the storm, when she hadn't realized his hand was on her breast, until she did.

She was more aware of him than she was of herself, at the moment. Again, he smiled. *This was going to be magnificent.*

Eyes drifting shut, she leaned toward the soft dark paps that marked his chest. He hadn't nudged her in that direction. She had an instinct to do it. So she did.

He drew in his breath at the feeling of her warm mouth on his skin. *Ooooh. Yes. That's it, Irish. Make me feel good. Make me feel the way you want me to feel. The way you want to feel. Do it. It's been so long and you are so goddamned beautiful.*

Mmmmm." He said it deliberately, so she would know how much he approved. She smiled against his skin, then moved to the other side. *Yes. Like that. Yes. Thank you, Diana.*

He had not moved his hands from where they were, other than to test the weight of her breasts from the bottom, his thumb still caressing her nipples, which were large, and very erect. Something penetrated her brain. *Discomfort.*

He felt it through the tension in her skin the moment she realized it. A vague sense of discomfort, though he was barely touching her, and only through her clothes.

"I'll stop." He said it before she had to ask. *How many times had she simply endured it?*

Her breasts were hypersensitive, he realized. Probably one of the reasons she wore plain bras, though she might not realize it. He took his hand away from her nipples, gently tracing the outside curve of her breasts with only the back of his fingertips. He felt her muscles relax, heard her sigh, as she licked his breast with approval.

"If it hurts. If it doesn't feel good, or makes you wince, stop me. I will try to be so careful, Diana." She lifted her red head. Her huge eyes looked at him, trustingly.

He slid his fingertips gently beneath the bottom band of her bra, then lifted, removing the stretchy cloth from her body. His twin prizes were gently freed from their constraints. *Dear god, you are so lovely.* Not big. Wide nipples the color of warm honey. He leaned over one, and rather than take it into his mouth, as she expected, (he felt her bracing for it, like it was a slap of some kind,) he simply exhaled over it, not even touching, letting the warmth of his breath caress her skin.

Shock. It slammed into her unexpectedly, racing up her backbone and throwing her body forward, her head back. For a moment, she thought she would fall. She felt his hand behind her back. He bore her gently, to the quilt.

"That didn't hurt," she assured him unnecessarily. "I don't know what that did."

*Felt so good it took you to your knees, maybe? Oh, you magnificent, magnificent woman.*

He tugged off his boots, then knelt to where she sat, gesturing for her foot. She was wearing sandals. He removed them, brushing the sand from the bottom of her feet as he did so. Then he made what she thought was the strangest gesture. He kissed her on the ankle. She didn't think anybody had ever done that, before. She once knew a guy who liked to suck her toes, but her ankle? It just seemed like such a sweet gesture. He repeated the entire process with her other foot. When he was done, she realized she could still feel where his mouth had touched her skin.

He undid his belt buckle and unzipped his jeans. She did the same. He stayed near her feet, and when she was ready, he tugged at the legs of her jeans to help her lower them. His hands went to her waistband, taking down the denim, leaving her panties intact. They were as smooth as her bra, and exactly the same color. Low cut. The hair peeking out of the top of them was nearly the same color as the hair on her head.

*Oh lord.* He might not survive this.

"If you lay on your stomach, I can kiss your back." he told her, not moving her to force it, just seeing if she liked the idea. She must have. A moment later, she rolled over, the beauty of her bare back shining in the night air; her buttocks and sex were protected by her panties. Unthreatened. Safe. With him.

"You have to take off your jeans." she told him. Did she realize how much she was trusting him, in that moment?

"As my lady commands," he answered, letting the denim slide off. He wore no underwear. Did she realize that, when she had slid down him?

He brushed aside her gorgeous red hair, for the pleasure of seeing her shoulderblades. The pink line where her bra had once been was already fading away.

Bracing his hands on either side of her back, he gently kissed the skin at her shoulders and just below her neck. Her backbone was a delicious ridge in his mouth, and he brushed it with his fangs, gently. She shivered. He made a sound in his throat that was between a soft growl and a purr.

He sat back, loving the expanse of skin exposed to his view. He did not want to massage her, here. He wanted simply to touch her, to

electrify her skin. He set his palms, fingers wide, at the tops of her shoulders, and drew down. He let his nails have her a little, at the small of her back and across her buttocks. Lightly. Just so she knew they were there, and that he could keep them from hurting her. But mostly, so she could know they were a part of him, and always would be. She had to know what he was. She had to. She could not pretend he was just a normal man. He wasn't. He never had been.

He reversed the caress, this time starting with the backs of her knees, going upward. The peril here was that the caress ended at the juncture of her thighs. She jumped. He repeated the caress. This time, she thrust, slightly, against him. *Yes. Yes. Perfect.*

He leaned over her back again, this time tasting more skin: shoulder blades. Both of those, and the area between. His sex hung down, brushing the round curves of her buttocks. *Good.*

He lay his body low between her spread legs, kissing down her back bone. She was trembling. He reached the elastic waist band of her panties, and stopped. Going back up, he repeated the kiss, this time nudging her with his hands, so she would lift enough to allow him to cup her breasts. *There.* Down her back again. This time brushing his mouth across the cleft of her covered backside. She moved her hips, when he exhaled, near her sex.

Gently disengaging his hands, he began kissing the back of her right knee. Then he crept upward. It was a caress like the one his fingers had given her, earlier, but with his warm mouth. She could anticipate what was coming. His tongue worried the fabric at her crotch, and he blew his warm breath through the cloth. She squealed, and hit her fists to the side of her head, on the ground. He nudged her hips

forward in a bare rhythm, urging her to rub her clitoris against the ground while he aroused her. She was panting. And frustrated.

"No fair." Her gasping voice reached him.

*As in 'All's fair in love and?'* he wanted to ask but was too busy, taking her amazing scent into his nose.

"I'm not getting to touch you." She tried to turn her now very aroused body over. She couldn't. He was sitting on his knees between her spread legs.

"Is that what you want? To touch me?" He was on his knees behind her, now. Aroused. Lean. Hard in every sense of that word. He needed her to be sure.

"Yes. Yes, that is what I want."

"As you command." It was the second time he'd said something like that.

Turning, then sitting up, she immediately seized the front of his torso again, her mouth more demanding on his nipples, this time. She was aroused. She wanted him aroused, too. Her hands ran down his back, over his buttocks. Her short, white nails softly raked the backs of his thighs, feeling the fine texture of the hair, there. Her nimble hands moved to the front of those thighs. Her mouth left an open-mouthed trail down his torso to drink from his navel. Her questing hands completed their journey up his thighs, and ... then... he waited for it, hoping, not sure if she would... she cupped his testicles with one hand while she ran the other up the length of his shaft.

His reaction was immediate, and intense.

Head thrown back, he pressed one hand to her head at his navel, holding it there. The other came across her shoulders, holding her

where she was. He was on his knees while she was still sitting. Her hand kneaded and stroked his most sensitive flesh. *Diana*. It had been forever since a woman's hand had been there. Years.

"God. Please don't let this be a dream," he prayed, not aware he had said it aloud. Her hand gently squeezed the turgid crown of him, her thumb spreading his first expectant drop along the skin there. *Please. Please. Just for this night then okay. But please. At least this*. His hips wanted to change their angle, already. No. He would not have this end this way. Not by a long shot.

"Irish, no. You can't. I can't. Not yet." He had to move away from her hands. "Let me go, Diana. Please, baby. Please."

He forced her passion-glazed eyes up to his face, and took her mouth in a devastating kiss that communicated all he was feeling. Heat. Urgency. Desire. He cupped her sex with his hand and rubbed her in slow circles while they kissed until she had to break away, panting. She held his head to her breast, and he finally, finally got to taste the sweetness of her nipple. *Apricot jam*. She tasted like it, here, a little.

Now it didn't hurt her, or annoy. Now it felt wonderful. She pushed her belly against his, seeking.

Knees to knees he embraced her, setting his hands inside the silk at her buttocks and drawing her full onto him. She turned her head to the side in the center of his chest, hearing and feeling his heart pound beneath her cheek, as he lifted her body against his, so their sexes rubbed together. She wanted to shatter. Had she ever felt anything this erotic?

Her breathing began to change. She prayed he wouldn't stop what he was doing. They always stopped, just when it started getting good for her. Changed on her. Made her start all over. *Not enough time...*

The ridge of his shaft had a vein running along its underside and it was hitting her right on the bundle of nerves at the top of her cleft. Over and over. "Adam." she gasped. "Please don't change." He closed his eyes. He knew. Controlling her movements with his hands at her backside, he kept the rhythm steady.

"It... takes me ... a long time." Her nails dug in at his back. Did she seriously just apologize to him for needing him?

"Good. More for me. I'm not going to change." He didn't alter his tempo one iota. She suddenly realized if he had to do this all night, with her, he would.

"Adam." All she could say was his name.

Her panties were damp. The silk felt good, against his erection. She was forcing herself to breathe in a shallow pant. It was helping. Her hands were wrapped around the small of his back. Holding on. Holding tight. "Close your eyes, Diana." he whispered to her, not changing his movements. "The stars are still above you. See your constant star. See it?"

"Ye-es." she stammered, still needing to pant.

"Good. Now feel it." He kept the same rhythm, the same tempo. Her hands tightened. Half moons from her nails marked his skin.

"Scream if you need to, Irish. There's no one here to hear it but me. And I want it, so much."

She pulled herself against his rigid sex while he pulled her more tightly to him. Her head snapped back and she did scream her orgasm into the night. He held her against him while she jerked, spasmodically, two, three, four times. Liquid drenched the silk and he felt it wet his sex, through its layers. With his hands still cupped inside

her underwear at her buttocks, he slid the now soaking garment down her legs, letting it fall to her knees, then controlling her fall, to the quilt. He cupped her sex with his hand, feeling her aftershocks. She held his arm shamelessly, so he wouldn't take his hand away. *tay... stay...So good. That was... so good.*

"You are the word 'gorgeous,'" he told her, kissing her forehead. She opened her eyes, trying to find focus. The spangled sky glistened over his head, above her. The look on his face was incredibly tender.

"That can't have been much for you," she stated.

"You are... so wrong." He simply disagreed.

"I mean it, Adam." She was blushing.

"Then you're still wrong. It does happen." He kissed her forehead again.

"Does anybody here think I'm not going to get my turn, before this night is out? You wouldn't be that selfish, Diana. You don't have that in you."

"There's something else I haven't had in me, yet." She teased him ribaldly, settling her legs open on either side of his.

"I do believe that's true." Adam began to settle his weight down, when he realized something.

"Oh hell. I realize I should have asked you this before, but..."

She shook her head, laughing at him. "It's okay. Adam. It's taken care of. I get the shots for it." But she was touched that he'd thought to ask her, even if it was late in the dance. *Not too late, at least.*

"Whew." He dropped his head.

"Now," purred Diana, feeling like a seductress for the first time in her life, "Where were we?"

She reached between his legs, stroking an erection that had begun to falter when he feared they would have to stop.

"Shhhh," she soothed him. "There, there." Her hands were magic. Her fingers were so long. Like a concert pianist's. She kept her nails short, and white. So pretty, against his turgid flesh. In a moment she had him writhing in her hands.

"Feel how wet you made me, Adam." Her half closed eyes were lambent pools of desire as she rubbed his now hard maleness against her juices. Red curls, wet and dripping, held her offering to him. She was wet from there to half way down her thighs. He wanted to feel those thighs, holding him.

"This may not last very long," he warned her. It had been such a long time, and she was so very, very sweet.

"It won't need to," she told him, guiding the head to her opening. She lifted her chin at his slightest penetration, allowing her head to fall to one side. *She was so lovely.* It was his last coherent thought before he eased forward, into her.

*Wet. Wet from his care with her. Warm. so warm. No, not warm. Hot. Drenched.* She drew her knees up and wrapped her long legs around his back, crossing at the ankles. They helped pull him forward, into her dark center.

*Mmmmn. There.* He was sliding into her as though he had been there all his life. She stopped him a moment, forcing herself to relax, as she adjusted to his size. He realized that whatever else she was, she had not had a larger man than him. Nor had she had one, recently. The

thought gave him pleasure, though it meant he had to be that much more careful.

But it was so hard to be cautious, when her legs were pulling him forward, again, when her channel was so wet, when her smell was so very ...intoxicating.

Now it was his turn to pant, his turn to twist, against her. He tried to make it last. But she didn't want him in control. She wanted him without it. When he refused to set a rhythm, she planted her feet and began thrusting against him, squeezing. He shook his head, and growled, (growled!) his pleasure at her, and in a warning.

"I know," she whispered. "Close your eyes, Adam. Follow your constant star." She didn't stop lifting her hips to meet his. His shoulders were hard steel, his thrusts short and sharp. She rested her hands at his ribs, coaxing him forward.

"See it?" she asked. "Now feel it. Like you made me feel mine."

His testicles tightened along with the grip of her fingers on his ribs. The image of starlight exploded behind his eyes and a full throated howl rang in to the night. She siezed his spasming back and she came into his second burst, eyes shut against the splendor of the view above her. *"You can't have two heavens at the same time,"* she thought.

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They made love thrice more, once with her sitting astride him, once simply laying spooned on their sides, the position they woke up in after sleeping. He'd covered her sex with his hand and as he stroked and brought her a quivering orgasm. He always embraced her when she came, using his hard body to absorb her impacts.

She was learning to adore the muscles at his shoulders. He was so much stronger than other men. Even stronger than other Shahs, by the look of things. She complimented him prettily about it, and he blushed.

Then he set her on her knees and surrounded her as he made love to her from behind, letting her hold his bicep in her mouth as he braced himself over her. He felt like an animal, then, but a free animal. Not a base one. Powerful. Raw. New, and untamed. He didn't need to come, again. He was already sated. He just wanted the feel of his woman's skin, against him while he tested the silk of her, again. Wanted to feel her set her teeth against his arm, in acknowledgment of his strength. She'd bit down, when she came. Not too hard, but definitely there. Then again, when he did.

He'd knew he'd cherish the bruise she gave him, in the morning.

*In the morning.* The sun was lightening the sky. They'd spent the night on the high ground. Time to come down, now. They had some decisions to make.

He led her by the hand, back from the bluff. Both half dressed, wet and exhausted, picking their way home in the grey dark.

The beds in the rooms were all twin size. He curled next to her on the floor in the living room, and slept for a few hours, while the sun rose some more.

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Good. His body felt impossibly good. Every cell exploded and reset, every muscle tensed and strained and relieved. Even on the hard floor, he felt good.

His senses told him she was no longer next to him, but he smelled coffee, and heard her in the kitchen. She was beyond glorious.

And today was the day she was supposed to leave. He knew enough to know last night hadn't changed that. He wasn't that naïve.

He pulled himself up out of semi-consciousness. He knew she wouldn't leave without saying good-bye. But this was all too new, too new for her, and for him, and somehow, they were running out of time.

Adam looked toward the kitchen. *Well. The direct approach was usually the best one. Especially with her.*

He got up and zipped his jeans, re buttoning the shirt he'd worn since yesterday. He wasn't sure if he had time to change. *Time to do battle with her.*

She was already dressed, in fresh jeans and a light blue shirt. The cooler was in the trunk. She had a mug of coffee sitting on the porch railing. It was now mercifully free of the dead plants, and the philodendron was showing odd signs of life, here and there.

She prized honesty. Well, here it came.

"I'm in love with you, Diana. I think you know that."

She shook her head at him. He knew she would.

"Oh, Adam. You think you are. I appreciate that, I really do. It's just that I'm the one that happened to be here when you...'

"Don't. Don't psychoanalyze me. Irish. Or I may actually have to beat you. And this may be one of the few days left where I can still do that, so don't push it." His voice was firm.

"Adam. Don't confuse gratitude for love."

"Don't confuse fear for the lack of it," he countered. She stared at him, wide eyed.

"That is not fair."

"Oh, I so don't plan to get you by playing fair, lady."

He advanced on her.

"I am not some lovestruck teenager, any more Diana. And do you think ... for one second... that my race, of all people can't tell the difference between love and lust? Or love and gratitude?"

She shook her head at him, the red silk of her hair a halo in the dawn.

"Adam. If you think you want to be bound to me... of *all* people..." Her head snapped toward his, her expression startled. "We aren't... are we?"

*Oh, that was tempting. That was just so tempting a lie. He could tell it, and she would stay, and...*

He sighed. "No. It's not that easy, Diana. If it happened every time any of us had a one night stand, Elijah would have a harem."

Sparks of fury shot from her eyes. She shot off the railing she'd been half-sitting on. "Okay, in the first place, Elijah's a lot deeper than you all give him credit for, and second..." her rage came off her like the sunlight in her hair, "how *dare* you call it that!"

She was righteously angry, at that description. He'd never seen her righteously angry, before. *Good. Let her be.* Because he was bleeding inside, at the thought of her leaving. She marched across the yard and snatched a pair of jeans off his clothesline.

He folded his arms, leaning against her car as she tossed them through the open window and into the back seat.

"You're leaving aren't you? One night stand. Not because / want it that way. *I'm* not the one leaving. And I'm not going to change the definition of an ugly phrase so it sounds all pretty, for you."

"That is not fair." She folded her arms across a chest he'd been kissing his way across, a few hours ago.

"Told you I wasn't going to be."

The rage of their impossible situation shot from her eyes.

"Look. If you want an affair, now and then, when I can get away, maybe. But that's it."

His grey gaze didn't give an inch. "For somebody who's fighting for how meaningful last night was, you're sure running it into the ground, fast. Pass."

"God damn you."

He rolled his expressive grey eyes at her. "That the best you got?"

Her hands went to her hips, and she steadied her breathing. *Temper*. She had not lost her temper in a good while. Had her heart shredded by her job, yes. Become so furious she swore at a man, no.

He levered himself away from the car, turning to go back inside the house. "Whatever it is you want, Diana, I do sincerely hope you find it."

*Don't. Don't you dare walk away from me thinking you can have the last word!* Diana knew that the impulse was completely irrational.

He heard her footstep and turned a second before her swinging hand caught his neck. She didn't slap him. She held him. Her other hand came up to hold the other side of his face. Six kinds of pain filled her eyes, and the rage was all that was keeping her on her feet.

"What I want?! *What I want?! How dare you or anyone else even presume to know what that is. What I want. What I want....*

She took in a deep breath. *Here it comes*, he thought.

I want ... to lay on that ground again, tonight. And make love there when it rains." She was seeing a picture her mind's eye had drawn for her. "I want my children conceived there, and born there, even." Her eyes were huge. Impassioned. "I want them christened there, because it's holy. And but for the fact that it would ruin it, I want to be buried there, when I die." Her breath caught. "Please Adam. No matter what does or does not happen between us. Please let them bury me there when I die. If you can."

*At what point during last night had she thought that? All of it?*

"That's what I want. And that's after only being there, one night," she told him.

She released his face as though his head burned her open hands, her fingers splayed wide apart. *'There.'* The gesture told him. *'Now do you get it?'*

Now it was she who stalked off into the house.

"So don't presume to know what I want." She swiped at the angry tears on her cheeks. He let her get a good head start, before he followed behind. Now was not the moment to cage her.

He walked into the house, letting the screen door drop, the rattle of the sound so familiar she could have tapped it out, on her borrowed dresser.

She was checking the bedroom drawers for anything left behind. He knew if she left, she might not return, or it would be a very long time before she did.

She yanked the nightstand drawer, open, then closed it, hard, still furious. Forward momentum. It always carried her from one thing to the next. Always some bit of ugly, needing her attention. Like he had been.

She opened the closet door, pulling down a leather jacket. She shouldered into it, feeling like she needed the armor of it.

"Want to know what I want?" he asked. Fair was fair.

She turned to face him.

"No. Because I can't give it to you, Adam." She walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. She rinsed out the ceramic mug she had bought at the Quick Mart to drink out of, back when the kitchen wasn't fit to serve dog food to a dog in.

He stood well behind her as she dried the cup.

"I want to make love to you on the altar, tonight. And pray that it rains. Pray that one day there's a merciful God who lets me put a child inside you. I would hold you while you brought it forth, and hold it to the sun, the day it was born, showing him or her the world. I decided a long time ago that when I died, I want to be buried in that place, Diana. If you go about fifty yards forward of where we were last night, you can see the spot. It faces west. Where the sun sets."

He let all his words sink in.

"You didn't bury Celeste there." She didn't turn. She also forgot she wasn't supposed to say her name.

"No," he paused. "I didn't."

She dropped her head over the sink. The cup clattered into it.

"And no matter what you do in the next hour," his voice was steady. "I swear to you I will never, *ever* bring another woman there who is not my daughter. I want them to be married, there, if they will it."

She turned to face him, nodding. A wedding there would be beautiful.

"Why?" he asked. It was a simple question, but one she didn't understand. "Why 'you of all people?'" he clarified.

*You listen too well. You ask the right questions. You'd make a hell of a special investigator, Adam.*

She looked to one side. "I've thought about it. I've done nothing but think about it, since last night. Longer, maybe." She turned her head back so she was facing him. "Because of what I am, and what I do. I can't unmake myself, for you, Adam."

*Okay. Say what?* "Amazingly, I thought that would be my line, Irish, not yours. I can't change what this looks like..." he indicated his leonine features, "so that it's easy for you."

She grabbed a dish towel, wet it, and pressed it to her tear reddened face. *Cool. It was so cool. Good.* She needed that, now.

"You don't really understand... understand what it is I do. Everything you've seen me do here...his is a day at the beach compared to how it usually is."

*It'd been a vacation? Really? It had felt like a bloodletting.* But of course he realized what she usually did. Yes, he understood her.

"You save people. Good people. Lost people. You fight through, and you save them."

Diana shook her head. "It's not *that* I fight. It's... *how* I fight." Her blue eyes looked hopeless. He realized that was the first time he'd ever seen that expression on her face.

"You would feel... my thoughts. *Feel* me when I... drop who I am, and start to live, eat and breath like a butcher. A serial killer, a torturer, a child molester." She let the words sink in. "Or a victim of one."

*Ahhhh. So that was it. That was why she was leaving.* Her job was vicious, and he would be able to feel everything she felt.

"Who's raising our kids while I'm off in Detroit, or New York, or Boston or LA, chasing Jack the Ripper, or the Marquis de Sade? You? Is that fair?" she asked.

"You don't stay away that long. When you need to go, you go. When you're done, you come back. I can deal with raising kids, Diana. I've been doing it all my adult life."

Diana stuck to her guns. "There is no way you could handle the kind of ugly I would bring to this relationship, Adam. I wouldn't ask you to. I can barely handle it myself, sometimes."

"Diana," it was his turn to draw in a deep breath. "Ugly is when you can feel your wife being nailed by some guy she picked up. And you can't do anything because she's in a hotel off the interstate and it's two in the afternoon. Not that it would matter if it was any other time, or any other place. You can't *change* it." He said it as if he needed her to understand how trapped the bond had made him. "But you can *feel* it. Every...hrust." his eyes were steel and nothing. Hard, with memory.

"Ugly is when she comes in at three in the morning, and you can still smell him on her. The first time or two, she actually tried to lie. Can you imagine?" He shook his head. "Then... she didn't." He shrugged.

"And she stops trying to lie, because she knows it isn't going to do any good, and you can't beat her to death, the bond won't let you. She wanted something different, for her life. And she couldn't have it."

It was all coming out of him. Things he had never wanted to tell her, never wanted to tell a living soul. He never would have. But if they were going to have an "ugly" contest, he was going to show his honest entry.

"And this is the mother of your children, so there's that. And she *does* still love *them*. So you patch things up because she's a good mother, just a terrible wife, and a divorce won't make any difference, you'll still feel it, when she offers the next guy her ass. Hell, you'll feel it more often."

Diana's gorge rose. He recognized the look.

"And I sat in the tunnels vomiting over that one, more than once, Diana. Not wanting my kids to see me. Not sure what my life was going to become, how far bad it could go. Then she got sick. And I learned never to ask the question, 'How much worse could it get?'"

He walked over to the refrigerator as if he was about to open it, but he kept his long fingered hand on the white door, and just leaned.

*That's why... that's why Julia is terrified of becoming an empath,* Diana realized, far too late with that conclusion to do any of them any good.

Adam stayed where he was. "Most people would say she got something she deserved, or I was well rid of her. But most people don't understand that she was a good person, once, and they damn sure don't understand what a bond is. Good or bad, you are stuck with each other. '*Choose wisely.*' We couldn't. We were just a couple of kids. Then she was trapped here, and miserable, and couldn't escape it. And then she was sick, and then... she was dead. All before thirty five. What a waste."

He opened the door, took out a bottle of water, and twisted off the cap.

"So I think if you have to be John Wayne Gacy while you're trying to save somebody else's baby, I can suck it up and hope to God you make it in time. I don't see it as that much of a sacrifice. Hell. I'd help you, if I could. I know it's why you're so good at your job."

"It puts me in a lot of pain, Adam."

He set the bottle down on the counter and held his arms open, bidding her to come to them. His voice was uncompromising. "When that happens, when you couldn't save her, or couldn't stop it...then it's all way too much, that's when you come here." She stepped forward, and he pulled her into his embrace, letting her feel the strength of his arms.

"Here. You hold on to that." He squeezed her between his shoulders, flexing the muscles of his back, letting her feel the power of him. Willing her to feel not just the strength of his body but the strength of his heart, as well.

"Because it is not going to leave you," he swore to her. That much she knew was true. He had not ever left Celeste, and he had more than enough reason to. "And if you need to go out to the bluff and scream with the pain of what you've seen, I'll hold you while you do it."

"Oh, Adam..."

"As long as you swear never to sleep with anybody else, we'll be all right," he finished.

"I would never do that to you." She was vehement.

"I know that. Of all the things I know right now, I know that."

She rubbed her nose against his chest. He smelled so good.

"You have to not be afraid to lean on me, Diana. I'm stronger than I look. And yes, that is saying something."

"This shouldn't be a burden you have to bear."

"Every couple bears the burdens of the other. That's part of being a couple."

"Mine are huge."

"Mine are no picnic. Chloe might not be mine."

"I know."

*And she'd never mentioned it. My God, the woman was a marvel.*

"I'm never going to tell her. Never ask for a test. It doesn't matter to me," he said.

"I know. You're an amazing man, Adam."

"You're an amazing woman, Diana."

She lifted her head. "I... I need to think. I'm not sure if I can do my job if I'm afraid you'll *feel* me, doing it." She looked up at him.

He bent his head over hers. "Okay. That's one you have to figure out, for yourself." He wouldn't beg. She knew what he was offering, and what its limitations were.

"How... how deep does the bond go?" A question. For him. Well, she'd given him that, at least.

He shrugged. "River deep, mountain wide. I can't completely turn off, once it starts, if that's what you're asking, but I can control it, some. I would always be able to feel if you were hurt, or in danger. For day to day stuff, well, if I'm not concentrating on you, or if you're not calling out to me, it's just kind of a... place in my head where you are. No Shah would be able to function if he were constantly overwhelmed by

the thoughts and actions of his Shahnna. I guess you'd say I can turn it down, when I need to. But I couldn't turn it off."

She nodded her understanding. *Would that be enough?*

"You'd be able to feel me, too some. Once we start to share a bond. More, as time goes on. Not like I feel you, not near so much. But it would be there." He wanted her to know what she was getting in to, as well. "Corinne knew when Seth got hurt. They've been married a long time, and they have five kids together. She felt him hit the tree in the park."

"Vincent told me," she said.

"And... you'd feel me come. Here." He kissed her forehead.

"Sometimes. If you wanted to."

Her eyes were huge. *What an incredible sensation that would be. Incredible, and... so intimate...*

"I'm so afraid that this might be a mistake for you, Adam. And for me. And I don't want fear to rule my decisions. If there's one thing I've learned from you, it's that I let that happen way more often than I think I do."

He sighed, deeply.

"I can't watch you load up. I can't. I'll stay here. When you're ready to go, come get me. I at least want to say good-bye."

She nodded, and he sat at the table, while she went to put her things into the back of the car.

--

Suitcase. Check. The cooler. Her beat up purse. Check. She needed to get on the road. She could put a huge chunk of Montana behind her if

she gassed up in town and just drove until the needle went to an eighth of a tank. She'd had little sleep. It didn't matter. She could sleep tonight, in some hotel off the interstate.

Makeup kit, without a bit of makeup in it. Check. She used it for her toiletries. Deoderant, shampoo, tooth brush... it was already packed. But she opened it to check it, just the same, not wanting to leave too quickly. She checked her purse, and counted the cash in her wallet. Aside from the rental car fees, she hadn't actually spent very much, this last month, once she'd started to stay here.

There was nothing more to verify. It was time to go.

She found him sitting in the kitchen, hands spread flat on the table top, looking like a man either in prayer, or awaiting an execution.

When she stood in the doorway, indicating it was time, he rose.

"You saved my life, Diana Bennet. I will never forget that."

"You were going to do that by yourself. I just gave you a kick."

"You gave me a lot more than that." He shut his eyes a moment, feeling the bittersweetness of it.

"No. You gave me more." Her voice was so sincere he didn't doubt she believed it.

"But not enough to stay."

"Enough to make me want to. You have no idea how much that is saying."

He nodded, pulling her into his embrace for a fierce bear hug. "I will be here if you decide different. Hell. It's not like I'm going anywhere."

"When you get your phone hooked up. Will you call me?"

"Do you think I should?" the sorrow in his voice was tangible.

She squeezed tears behind her eyes. *A quick break would be better, be more fair, for him. This was for the best.* She had to know that. Otherwise, she was killing herself for nothing.

"I guess not." That would only draw things out. She couldn't picture talking to him on the phone, anyway.

She reached up to kiss his cheek.

"Say it," he commanded. "Don't you dare leave here without saying it. Give me that much, at least, Diana."

"I love you," she whispered.

He shut his eyes, tight. Nodded. Let her go. Stepped back from the doorway, releasing her. There was no reason for her to stay, any longer.

He watched the blue Chevy kick up the dust, as she left. He felt the sorrow of her going settle into his chest. He needed to sleep. Doubted he could. Needed to pull the furniture out of his old bedroom, and put Chloe's things in there. Needed to set up Michael's old room, as her classroom. She'd need a set of book shelves. And a bigger desk than the one that was in there, now.

After that, there were some things in the living room that needed going through. It was time.

He looked back at his house. In a way, it felt like he hadn't really seen it, for a year.

--

Diana drove through his winding entry road, past his "No Trespassing" signs, to the side road that took her to the main. She filled up her gas tank at the Quick Mart, checked the air pressure in her tires, and said 'good-bye' to Ricky.

She wanted it known for the record books that those things took about twenty five minutes. She paid for the gas. Got back in the car. Put the keys in the ignition.

She knew once she cranked the engine she would have to drive the car. Right turn, New York. Left turn, back to Adam's place.

Her hands set on the steering wheel, and gripped it. Everything from last night came flooding back to her. Then everything from the last month. And some things from much further back. Things she hated.

She played the view of the altar over again, in her mind. Pulled back the image of all those stars, in her head; of Adam, laboring over her body so sweetly, treating it like a priceless treasure. She'd told him she wasn't able to enjoy sex, very much. And that had been true. Until last night.

He'd called her 'insatiable' sometime around three in the morning, when she'd pushed him on his back, gently, and sat astride him.

He'd been smiling as he said it, and aroused. And she was morally certain no one else had ever called her that, or thought of her in that way, ever.

It was the second time she'd had to close her eyes when she came, even though the starshot sky above and before her was magnificent. *You can't have two heavens at the same time.*

She tapped her hands on the steering wheel. If she turned right, she knew she would have none.

She put her head on the wheel and sobbed. Not little tears. Great, heaving sobs that wracked her body, especially inside the small space of the car. Had she told him everything? Had she told him that before last night, she could have counted her orgasms on one hand with

room left over? That her breasts had to be treated very gently, or it was uncomfortable for her? That he'd known that after ten minutes with her, but others who had spent far more time with her never figured it out?

Had she told him he was sexy? That his patience with her stunned her? That he was a good father, and had been an astonishing husband, through the most difficult circumstances? Had she actually said any of it? Or had she just thought it, really loudly?

She couldn't go back to his place if she didn't intend to stay. In the end, that would make her just another woman jerking him around.

She wished there was a chance she was pregnant, so that the decision would be out of her hands.

The thought bought her head up. Fast.

*What was that, again?* She wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm. She tried to look at it dispassionately. She was good at that. *Did I just wish there was no way I could leave him?*

She had.

Gritting her teeth, she reached down for the keys and cranked the engine, pulled back out of the parking lot, and headed to the main road. She turned left.

--

The rock tumbler didn't need to be completely taken apart. The machine helped process the few precious gemstones he sometimes pulled out of the mine, along with the minerals. Tiny diamonds, mostly, but sometimes there were emeralds. The tumbler pulled the rock from the gem, so it could be cut and polished, if it was high enough grade. It was a machine he seldom used, but liked having.

Tearing it into a hundred pieces gave him something to do with his hands besides tear his house apart. He knew he needed to draw up some plans for Chloe's new computer desk. He also knew he needed to stop thinking about Diana, about holding the silk of her hair in his hands. He needed to make sure Chloe's bedroom was ready to receive her, in a few weeks. She liked wildflowers. He would make sure she had some, in a vase, the day she returned.

*Did Diana like wildflowers?* He had no idea, he'd never asked her. But he had asked her if she liked being made love to with excruciating slowness, when he had straddled her. It had been a whispered sentence, in her shell of an ear. "*Like this? Slow?*" She had bitten his arm in response. He'd taken that as a yes.

He worked in a tank top. He liked looking at the mark, her mark, on his arm. Maybe he'd get a tattoo. *Diana Bennet slept here.*

He wrestled with a tight bolt, until it gave way. Then, he heard something. A car. Hers. There was no mistaking that sound.

She pulled up and got out. He was not visible, from the area that passed for his driveway. "Adam?" She called his name. It reminded him of the first time she'd driven up to that exact spot, almost a month and a lifetime ago.

"I'm here, Diana." He came around the side of the shed. "Took you long enough."

She checked her watch. She'd been gone just under an hour. "I had to stop for gas," she told him, standing there.

"Did you come back for your mug? You left it in the sink."

"Did I? Freud would love that."

She reached into the window and pulled out a spiral notebook. She flipped it open and tossed it onto the hood of the car.

"I have six days before I should be back in New York. We have to make some plans, before then."

"Diana. The way I feel about you right now, I'd be bonded to you in six days. Hell, by tomorrow, if I'm not careful. We can't have an affair. My kind doesn't do those. Not when we're in love."

"We're not having an affair. We're making plans. You need to listen, Adam." Her pencil was already starting to fly across the paper.

"I have a two bedroom apartment, wherever I go. I always used one room in my apartment to work in. Usually. the extra bedroom. There is cork board on the walls, so I can pin up pictures, or maps, or the victim's mementos, or whatever. Sometimes, the FBI or somebody ships me a box of stuff, and I go through it. Cold case files. I start work, that way, often. I guess you'd say I take my work home with me, that way."

She stood back, looking at her plans on paper. "I can't work inside your house, not with Chloe there, and not with what I'd be bringing inside."

Adam had very little idea where she was going with this. As he looked over her shoulder, he saw she had drawn a box shaped room. Written "cork board/one wall" on it, and "computer."

"The door has to lock. It should be private, and quiet. The door has to lock because there is no way Chloe, or anybody else should see what is in some of those pictures on the wall. So, no windows, either, ideally. Or at least cover the windows with heavy curtains."

She was bargaining with him? Really? For a windowless room?

He nodded. "I built the garage, the outbuildings... I can make you a separate building, if you like, just for your work."

She nodded. "It doesn't have to be anything fancy. A desk with a computer and a phone. Good overhead lighting. There will be bad things in there, Adam. Things I don't want coming into the house, where the children are."

*Children.* He caught the plurality of the word. He nodded. Was she seriously trying to tell him it was going to cost him some cork board and lumber to keep her? He had to tell her she needed to brush up on her negotiating skills. Later.

"Sometimes... I will get up in the middle of the night to go work. Because I've had an idea. Something maybe doesn't add up. I'm not trying to ignore you. But it will *feel* like that, when you wake up alone." She had to make him understand how it was. Why all her other relationships had failed.

He nodded his understanding. Then, he spoke.

"Now that I'm healing... Sometimes I go out for a run in the middle of the night," he told her. "I'll be gone for hours. I run as hard and as fast as I can, to see what my limits are. It's something my Father and I used to do, when I was growing up. It doesn't mean I'm cheating on you, or unhappy with you, or with my life. It just means the mines are a close space, and I get the urge to run through the open air. I haven't done it in a long time. But I used to, when I was healthier. You okay with that?"

They were both revealing things that had caused them problems, with others.

She nodded. "I'm still not going to be a cook. I just use food to keep going. It doesn't matter to me what it is."

"I mean it, about Chloe. I'm not ever telling her, Diana. It's the only thing I'll ever forbid you to do, is say anything about that."

"I will never cheat on you. But you're not going to like the things that are in my head, from time to time. Maybe a lot more than 'from time to time.'"

"I have tuned out a woman sending me absolute hatred, for years, at least enough where I can live through the day, work, and raise our kids. Maybe there's some good to come out of that misery, after all."

*God, the toughness of the man.*

"I want to stay. Not just for six days."

"Are you sure, Diana? It's awfully ... isolated, up here."

"You have no idea what 'isolated' is until you do what I do. And that was in New York. City of millions."

She wrote something else on the paper. *September 25<sup>th</sup>*. She underlined it.

"We have to go to a wedding, this fall. Vincent and Catherine. He lives in the tunnels under Central Park. I promised I'd be there. And he did send me to you, so...."

"It would be an honor to meet this Vincent and his Catherine. That it?"

Diana blinked. "Well... I don't know. I guess so."

He leaned closer, stepping well into her personal bubble. "Some time after I rip off your clothes and make love to you, I'm going to discuss with you why you should never become a hostage negotiator. You could have got a lot more than a cork board wall and a promise to attend a wedding, out of me, Irish."

In spite of his words, he did not haul her off. He simply pulled her close to him, settling their foreheads together.

"Are you *sure*?" he asked, again. "You have to be sure. The bond either happens or it won't, but once it starts... It can't be undone, Diana."

She planted her hands on each side of his face. It was the second time she had made that gesture with him, today, in just about this spot.

"Are *you* sure? I hate the thought that I am bringing so much... ugliness, into your life, Adam. In a very real way, I'm the last person you should even consider wanting to be bonded t--"

"You bring you. There is nothing ugly about that. The rest we will face, together."

A tear slid down her cheek. *This place would now be home.*

"Can we get married? Do you want to?" she asked. He hadn't, the first time.

"Yes. God, yes. Zachariah. We need Zachariah. And I want my sister to be there. And the kids."

"Can Zachariah come here? Can we get married at the altar, after sunset? In a few days? Is that too fast?"

"Diana, we can get married any time you want."

---

Four days later, the tallest one of Vincent's people Diana had ever seen stood before her. He was blonde. Utterly. And that was his dark color. Much of his mane and fur were actually white. Forest green eyes took her measure, and smiled; Zachariah Shadow Hunter was pleased with Adam's choice, this time. Elijah was there, and Seth and

Corinne and all five of their children. And Corinne was pregnant. Barely. Then Julia, Alexander, Cheryl ...hloe was the flower girl.

Catherine Chandler had flown up specifically to be Diana's maid of honor. Vincent had been too far away, in the deepest part of the tunnels, something to do with a gift for Catherine. Diana had no idea how they were going to fit all these people into the house. Adam would have to meet Vincent when they attended Vincent and Catherine's wedding, a few months from now.

Cheryl took on hostess duties, as it turned out, so Diana wouldn't have to.

Adam's wedding gift to her was a diamond pendant in the shape of a star. The stones had come from his mine. It was not huge. But it was perfect. Hers to him was a braided lock of her hair. He tucked it into a pocket watch that had belonged to his father. He found he could not stop checking the time, the day he married her.

She had placed a small note under the shimmer of copper silk. *"I may not always have time for you. But after today, I will be with you all of the time."* He understood the worlds she was trying to convey, and kept the watch on a steel chain, clipped to a belt loop on his jeans.

She wore nothing more than what she had brought, which was to say the white blouse he'd already seen her in, and a white pair of jeans. It was the best she could do. Corinne let her borrow a white cape for the ceremony, having a feeling she would need it. It was edged in blue embroidery. Adam wore its twin. He looked solemn, excited, and so in love that even Elijah couldn't tease him.

Zachariah spoke holy words as the sun set, and Diana felt a tingling along her spine. And inside her brain. *Bond*. The word whispered through her. Adam had been struggling to keep it contained, until

now. The grey eyes that held hers were fathomless. She barely heard what was being said, for the depth of feeling that was going on, between them. Her heart was about to burst.

Zachariah joined their hands together, gently laying a beautiful ivory ribbon across their wrists. Diana had asked they not be tied, having had far too many negative connotations with bound hands. So she turned her palm up and grasped one end of the ribbon, while Adam grasped the other. It seemed there was no wrong way to do this, nor any particular thing that needed done. Catherine held her wildflower bouquet, as Adam was told he could kiss Diana.

By the time the stars began coming out, Diana Bennet was a bride. Refreshments were served at the house. Punch, cookies, and a very impatient groom waiting to throw all the well-wishers out of his home.

Seth laughed, remembering how very much he had wanted to be alone with his own red-headed temptress, on their wedding night. He hadn't been sure they should all come. He didn't like to travel when she was pregnant, since he no longer had the bond with her. But he found he wouldn't have missed this for the world. Corinne looked happy. Their monsters were fairly well-behaved.

Adam had taken him aside and explained about the throttle on the bike. Other than a sore left side that improved by the day, there were no lasting ill effects, so all was forgiven.

An hour later, the guests were leaving. *Finally*. Adam thought he had never been more happy to see two sets of tail lights leave, one his truck, driven by Julia and loaded with his kids and Seth's, and Cheryl, bearing most of the adults in her van.

He turned to his beautiful bride. "Wife. I am starving for you. *Starving.*" He pulled her to the bluffs, to their destiny.

"I felt you... in the ceremony," she answered, stepping long, to keep up with him.

"That was just a taste," he replied.

*It was? That... feeling of excitement that ran up and down my spine was... a taste?*

He hadn't left her side all evening. A growing sense of awareness was simmering between them, and Diana knew it was the bond, reaching from him to her. Adam had kept yanking it back, wanting to wait for the right moment.

They were approaching the plateau. She had no doubt of his words. She could feel his side of the bond, almost a tickle inside her brain, just behind her left ear. He had sent her its beginning. He promised her there was more.

When she stepped through the pines she was stunned. Wildflowers lay in huge bunches, all around the stone semi-circle. Flowers in vases, tied with ribbons, arranged around candle globes, or laying on the stones. Candles glittered in huge pillars, covered with glass, to protect the flames from the breeze. Her own constant star twinkled overhead. A wedding pallet dominated the space where his simple quilt had been, last night.

"I want to keep my necklace on. Please," she asked.

Adam placed his watch in the center of a pallet Corinne had prepared for them in their special spot. White sheets, blankets, and an ivory quilt owned the ground, and feather down pillows ringed the quilt. Diana could not believe her eyes. When had he done this?

"Your friend Catherine did the candles, Corinne arranged the pallet. I think my sister brought some of the flowers, and the kids picked the rest. It's their wedding gift to us," he explained

"We know some amazing people," Diana said.

He toed out of his shoes, closed his eyes, and stood in the center of the circle. "Please, Diana. Please, now. I can hold this back, no longer."

With a loving smile, she unbuttoned her blouse. He was really going to have to speak to her about the virtues of t shirts.

He shook his way clear of black slacks and a long sleeved black shirt. The cool air should have been a balm to his skin, but for the loveliness of the titian haired angel before him.

*Fair. Her skin was so fair.* Fairer by candle light than even by starlight.

The phrase '*Who's the fairest of them all.*' danced through his head. *She was. Always.* He had no doubts, this time, about his choice. He pulled her to him by the waistband of her jeans, impatient with her progress with her clothes

"I wanted to wait until after we were married, to bond with you. Save the feeling of it, for the first time you were my Shahnna." He nuzzled her neck.

"I think I've been feeling you near me all day, inside," she whispered. "It's like being next to a door when you know someone else has their palm on the other side of it." She raised her hand as she said it, and matched it to his much larger one.

*What an amazingly accurate description of the sensation,* he thought.

For many Shah, the bond was not synonymous with a wedding night. Vincent had been bonded to Catherine, for instance, having never so

much as kissed her, before experiencing it. They had not become intimate until years after their initial meeting. So her awareness of their bond had not truly been felt until then.

But Diana was an almost natural empath, having developed that portion of her brain so fully in childhood, and by extension, during her work. He didn't know what being linked to him would do to her, entirely, or how much she'd be able to feel of him, while they were new. But he knew she was all but dancing across his sensitive mind, right now.

"Adam." Her voice was a siren's whisper across his consciousness. "Now that we're married, there's something I've always wanted to do."

*Swim naked. Do it standing up. Tie me to a tree. Anything. Anything you want. I'm so in love with you. Anything. Ask me anything.*

"Anything." It was the only part of what he was thinking that he could actually say.

Still clad in unzipped jeans, she pulled him down onto their marriage bed beneath the stars, spreading and his length on the shimmering quilt. His dark hair was a perfect foil for the shades of snow and ivory he was lying on. His eyes never left hers.

She planted her arms on either side of him, lowering her body so her bare breasts rubbed against his chest.

"You have the most magnificent chest," she complimented. She'd originally thought he would be hairier, thanks to his dark coloring. But truth to tell, only the magnificently sexy mane that ran down his back indicated he was more hirsute than other men. That, she loved. It looked like a natural extension of his hair, and the thin line that ran along his spine spread out softly just above his buttocks. Likewise, the

hair on his chest arched downward, barely curling around his waiting sex. His abdomen was tense, as her hair fell over her shoulder, and brushed him, there.

He purred as she petted his chest. She'd discovered that she loved touching him, placing her palms flat against his torso, and just letting her hands wander.

*Tactile. She was so tactile.* He realized he could love her a hundred years and never get tired of the feeling of her dancing her fingers along the hair of his chest and torso; of feeling her palm as it slid along his solar plexus. There was just something about her hands. Long-fingered. Strong. Ringless, even as a wife. Beautiful. Her nails were always kept to a minimum, with a French manicure that left her fingers looking even more tapered, even more lovely.

"I adore your hands on me, Diana."

Diana knew nothing about what kind of lover Celeste Blackmane had been, and knew far better than to ask. But their first night together had taught her that he did indeed love to be touched, and that sometimes, he seemed almost surprised at her desire to explore him, before they came together.

She stroked downward on the muscles of his torso. His eyes drifted closed. She was caressing him. Everywhere. The peace it brought him was indescribable.

She licked the tips of those gorgeous fingers and stroked the head of his penis, spreading the first expectant drop of his semen along the skin. His back arched. *Thank you. You're glorious.*

He wanted to finish undressing her, so he could touch what he was scenting from her. She was aroused simply because she was touching him. Very. Her mouth pressed a kiss to the center of his chest. He held

her head with his hand, but she removed it and folded his father's watch into his palm. Closing his fingers around the steel case she placed a kiss on his fingertips and then resumed kissing his chest, softly. Her necklace dangled as she drew her fingertips over his nipples and trailed down, once more. She moved evenly and symmetrically, as the left hand imitated the right. The brushing sensation moved over his abdomen, to the tops of his thighs. She kissed the center line of his torso, let her sweet pink tongue dip into his navel. He moaned.

He'd never known such... thorough patience.

When her mouth touched his sex for the very first time, the shock of it was so great he nearly threw her off him, on instinct. She had taken him from a deep, peaceful arousal to a volcanic one, in an instant.

It was a sensation utterly unknown to him. Celeste hadn't, so he hadn't known it. His other brief encounters prior to her had been more... straightforward. It wasn't even something he had hoped for. It's not that it had been removed from his life. It was that it was never there to begin with.

"Diana!" he sat bolt upright, dropping the watch, taking her head in both his hands.

She smiled at him, prowess and love and generosity in her eyes.

"You keep interrupting, and I'll have to keep starting over." She gave him a tongue laden kiss that stopped just long enough to nibble at the very sensitive cleft of his upper lip. It was another thing Celeste hadn't much cared for, either.

"You... you don't.... I mean... I never..." He would bite off his tongue before he would bring up the name of his dead wife.

He took a deep breath. "I... have never been touched that way by a woman, before."

Her eyes deepened, as her look became almost predatory. His Irish rebel was stalking him. He would take that look to his grave.

"I know, Adam." He didn't dare ask how.

"I want to be your first."

"You don't... mean that. You can't mean that."

*For shame. Somebody somewhere had told him this was unpleasant. Or something. Oh well.* Not her problem.

"I want you to think very carefully," she whispered to him, her necklace swinging gently, as she kissed him from her kneeling position.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

He shook his head, his eyes silver fire as she pushed him back to the pallet. He watched her, almost warily, as his hands bunched into the fabric at his sides. She settled the watch into his hand, again. "Hold it. When you look at it, later, remember how you feel, right now."

*Humbled. Besotted. Overwhelmed.*

The next time her mouth touched his sex, his back bowed from the blankets, as his chin pointed toward the heavens. *Too much.* It was so much it was almost too much.

Her tongue was a wet serpent, teasing him. Her mouth was a warm cavern of comfort. Her lips brushed the tenderest skin he owned and traced the vein on the underside of his shaft. The one she liked to feel when he rubbed against her through her clothes. The one that was screaming at him, now.

"Diana." His voice was ragged. She knew what he was about to say.

"I know you are." She forbid him to interrupt her again.

It was like being ridden. *More than when she was actually in that position?* his confused mind wondered. She rhythmically stroked his testicles. Blew her soft breath there. His legs thrashed, then tightened.

*Never. Never.* He was squeezing both hands into fists, the one that held the watch feeling the steel case, as it impressed itself upon his palm. *I love you.*

He opened his eyes as she loved him with her mouth and hands. He was going to come, this way. A way he had never come in his life. The starshot sky spun over his head. His hands tightened in the blankets. He wanted to touch her head, just to feel her hair. Didn't want her to think he was forcing her head down. He was large. She held his shaft as she loved him, taking him as far into her mouth as she could. He flipped open the watch with his finger, placing his thumb on the lock of her hair, inside. *There. Soft. So soft.* Her mouth, her lips, her tongue, the hair beneath his thumb. All of it. *Everything.* His scrotum tightened, perceptibly. *Now.*

Her hand covered his as he started to spasm.

His hips bucked and her hand held him, her mouth taking him in. He was no fool. He knew that even among women for whom taking a man in your mouth was acceptable that this was special. A kind of offering of love, from a woman. *Acceptance. Desire.* He screamed into the night, wishing he could both die right then, and live forever. The spasms simply would not stop coming. She simply held him, while they continued. His abdomen was rock hard. His hips lifted again, and again, with each tremor.

He finally did thread his other hand through her hair. He simply wanted to touch her too badly, that way. When he quieted, he nudged her upward, still holding her hair. She came up beside him, laying on her side, watching him process what had just happened. She had been the first to give him that. She knew he would give her something, soon. Something more than sex. Much more.

She kicked off her jeans, and lay beside him in the moonlight. It was full. So was she, in almost every way.

He opened his eyes, and the most beautiful creature in the universe was laying on her side, next to him. For a moment, he felt as if his imagination must have conjured her. He said nothing, for a very long time. Then he simply leaned over her, kissing her with the soft brushing of his tongue in her mouth.

*Again. Again.* There was no mistaking him. He wanted to know their taste, now. He cleaned her mouth with his tongue until he was satisfied, and she was throbbing. He felt her sex. She was soaking wet.

"Will you let me do the same for you?" he asked almost shyly. *Oh, this was going to be so much fun.* In their night together prior to this, that had not been explored territory.

"Yes, but later," she answered him, trailing her hands down his body.

"Right now, you have something that belongs to me. I want it. You have to give it to me, Adam." She was very sincere. She touched a place behind her left ear, the place she had been feeling him all day. Not everyone felt the bond, there. It was as individual as a hand print. But she felt him there, and he lifted his head to kiss that spot.

"You want it? Come and get it, Irish," he whispered into her left ear.

"You're not afraid to join us?" she asked.

"I have never, ever been afraid of joining with you." He turned her onto her back, knowing these would be his last moments as an unjoined male. His erection was as hard as if he had never come.

"Love me, Diana. Love me. Only me. Love me and I swear on the lives of my children that I will always love you."

"Oh Adam, I do. You know I do. I wish it could be perfect, for us, and I know it won't. But I swear, the one thing I will always do for you is love you."

He nuzzled her neck, more a lion's gesture than a man's. Diana looked up at her constant star. It's twin twinkled at her throat. There was a ring around the full moon. These were her last moments as an unjoined female.

She didn't want him to toy with her, or tease her, or make her wait. Guiding him into her, she demanded all that he was going to give her, knowing all that he was going to take, in return.

In spite of her impatience, he entered her slowly. The tingling in his brain told him to, so he obeyed. She had said she felt the image of a hand on a closed door. He pictured that. Then slid inside her and pushed the door open, a crack.

"Mmmm." Her sound. Her body quivered, hard, and her fingers tightened into claws, at his back. It was not simply from his entry into her sex, but his entry into her spirit. She was going to mark him, with her hands, the same way he was marking her, another way.

*Let her*, he thought. He was already hers, in more ways than one. He began to stroke her, giving her the length of his sex each time. *This was no time to tease*. The instinct to love her thoroughly came to him. So he obeyed it.

He pushed her chin up with his thumbs, trailing his mouth along the most vulnerable area of her neck. He caressed the cord of her jugular vein on one side, her carotid artery on the other, with his lips and tongue, not letting her feel his fangs. *She knew they were there. She knew.* He had set them to her shoulder the other night, when he'd taken her gently, from behind. She had reached back to grab his neck, holding him there, forbidding him to lift his head until he'd finished.

*I love you, wife.* He wasn't sure if he said it, or if he'd simply just thought it.

*Opening the door. More now.* A feeling that had been brewing inside him for days, now spooling out, between them. A silken line, being cast. Tensile. Tenuous. The anchor line, between them, ribbon-like, and smooth. Gleaming white, like their marriage ribbon. *Last chance before there was no choice at all. Last chance.* He paused, kissing her cheek, having no words for what was about to happen.

She pulled his head to her neck again, offering him her throat, offering him her life. "Take me..." she whispered, "...into you." The broken sentence finished.

*The door pushed much further open.* But Adam knew he hadn't done that.

*What was this?* She was pulling from her side.

"Diana!" It was the last word he knew, before his world exploded.

*White light. Brilliant and starborn. Gleaming pure, and flooding through. From him, to her. Now, no sense of a doorway at all.* Adam felt the flash of it, as much as he saw it: a sun. A star. *A Constant star.* A hot stream of pure white light, shimmering, and incandescent, burning every sorrow away.

Brilliance and sensation flooded through his brain as it flooded through the rest of him. *Love you.*

Diana screamed from the impact, as she orgasmed with it, spasming beneath his pumping sex. He groaned into her shoulder, the same one that bore his mark from the night before. Heaving forward, he felt her nails rake his back, as they both shuddered their pleasure. The world tilted. The world righted. He wasn't sure which sensation felt more like falling. Neither was she.

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He kept his weight off her, arms on his elbows. She kept her eyes closed, a long time, feeling the light dim, the bond settle, between them. The line between them was felt, as much as seen, this first time. It was still white. It had no other color. Most of it was from him, she realized, but a part of it was from her. The tickling sensation that had kept her on pins and needles all day was gone, now, replaced by a soft humming so low she couldn't hear it unless she concentrated. It was a beautiful almost-sound. It soothed her. She felt his love inside it.

In languor, she opened her blue eyes. He was poised above her, grey eyes still closed, head turned slightly to the left, as if he was listening to something. Some beautiful piece of music perhaps. His brow furrowed, slightly, then relaxed. She was settling, inside him. Settling along their bond. He was spent, inside her, and in no mood to move.

"Touch right above my eyes, in the center, wife."

She did so. Roughly the place a Hindu painted a red dot, as a prayer place. The Eastern seat of the soul. He all but purred, with contentment.

"That's where you are. Where I feel you most," he whispered.

"You're still right here," she whispered back, touching that same place behind her left ear. "I mean, you're everywhere. But mostly there."

Diana knew she'd never get tired of being called that.

"You can feel me, now, my Shahnna." The grey eyes opened, and they were smiling.

It wasn't a question, though she answered it like one. "Oh yes. Very much. It's...indescribable."

A secret smile played around her lips. He saw it. *She had a secret?*

"What?" he asked.

"I was just thinking... If we're across a crowded room, or something, and you see me go like this," she brushed her hair back behind her left ear, and left her finger to linger, "it means I love you and I'm thinking of you."

*Lord. Secret love signs. Could they get any more sophomoric?* He adored her, completely.

He grinned, delighted with her. "And if I do this," he brushed the center of his forehead, lightly, "It means you are the love of my life and I will always adore you."

She smiled with delight. "No one will know."

"Or they'll think you play with your hair a lot, and I have a headache."

Laughter. She shook with it, which was hard, considering he was still half sprawled on her.

"Thank you, my love. Thank you for being brave enough to let this happen," he said. He could already feel her coursing through him. Making him better. Happy. Whole. A thousand hurts seemed

inconsequential, were inconsequential, now that she was here. He could all but feel his strength, returning. More even than her healing had helped him, this was empowering him; making him feel whole.

"I love you so much, Adam."

"I love you, Diana. Wife. Shahnna." He stroked her hair.

The ring around the moon suddenly had meaning. Thunder rolled in the distance. He took in a deep breath, scenting the wind.

"It's going to rain."

She smiled with happiness. "Are you sure?"

"We have about ten or fifteen minutes to get back to the house, if you want to."

"And miss this chance? You mean I get yet *another* wish fulfilled, tonight?"

He gathered her close to his warm body, holding her with all the love in his heart.

"I am going to make it my life's purpose to make sure you get every one of those fulfilled, Diana. And more you don't know you made, yet." He kissed the spot behind her ear.

"Then stay here with me, Adam. Husband. My Shah." She twined her legs with his, kept her lithe body aligned with his larger one.

"Stay with me... and wait for the rain."



*No matter where you are under a Constant Star, I wish you love. ~*  
*Cindy*