

A portrait of a woman with long, dark hair, looking directly at the camera. The image is framed by a large, stylized yellow star shape against a dark, textured background.

BIRGIT FIGHTS BACK

J BENNINGTON

Justice WILL prevail

Birgit Fights Back

By - J Bennington

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Chapter One

Calvin Westwood had no inkling of the pending devastation when he arrogantly strolled into S-Rand Publishing in Manhattan. He entered the office directly from the elevator on the 20th floor as his usual happy self and feeling like a king on top of the world. He paused at the receptionist's desk and greeted her. "Hey, Mel. What's up today? What's hot, besides me?"

Her cheeks flushed as usual, and she stared at him. "After six years, you can train an idiot to pronounce your name. After six years, you still don't understand that my name is Melissa. Not Mel. Not Missy. Melissa. That's who I am. So, I guess you've proven that you're beyond an idiot. Sit down, and I'll let Barnaby know you're here."

"Touchy, aren't we?" Calvin said and headed for a chair.

"No. I'm not Touchy. I'm Melissa. And you won't acknowledge that I'm worthwhile. You like to degrade people by slicing up their names, by making them feel insignificant, like you're so much more important in the world! You've got a lot to learn, arrogant prick. Someday you'll have a lot of time on your hands and maybe that will bring some humility to your life, Mr. Calvin Westwood. Hotshot psychotic gore writer!"

"Slim chance of that. When you're on the roll I am, I'll be beyond retirement before I ever lose the inspiration or the readership, Melissa Snyder."

"Could be a surprise lurking around the corner. The next skirt you drop to the floor could be the one to end your inspiration, sexual conquests, and writing career together."

She pressed her intercom. "Mr. Barnaby, Calvin Westwood is here to see you. Shall I send him in or call security and have him removed from the premises?"

"Send him in."

Calvin neared her desk and whispered, "You can be too much of a smart ass sometimes."

“Right on, but I got you to say my name today, and that’s a victory. Also, I can guarantee it’ll never be my skirt that drops to the floor at your touch, and I’ll still be employed tomorrow. Can you say the same?”

“As I said, when you’re on the roll I am, employment’s a given. See you later.”

With that, he dismissed her and opened Mr. Barnaby’s office door.

Nathan Barnaby sat in his high-back leather chair behind his substantial polished walnut desk. Five other men were seated there in front of the desk.

Calvin paused to view each man’s face. James Millington, Senior Vice President. Dennis Riley, Executive Officer of Distribution. John Wilcox, Executive Officer of Sales and Promotions. Randal Cobbs, Senior Editor, and Jeremy Kalb, Contract Attorney from the legal department.

“Greetings Calvin,” said Barnaby. “You know everyone else here?”

“Yes, I do.” Calvin nodded at each man. He moved forward and sat in the one empty chair in front of the desk that seemed placed for him. “What gives with all this? This is a very unusual array of guests for finalizing a book proposal.”

Barnaby cleared his throat and sighed. “True. However, we have a small problem that we need to discuss and since it could potentially involve all these men in the future, that’s why I invited them.”

“What small problem?” asked Calvin, experiencing a sudden uneasy feeling.

“The small problem is declining sales and distribution of your last three books.”

“What? You can’t be serious!”

“We can,” said Wilcox. “And we’re talking a few million less on each book.”

Calvin felt shocked. “Is that my fault? Maybe you dropped the ball on doing your job, but I didn’t.”

Barnaby retook control. “Calvin, the first four books were brilliant, and I’ll have to say that the one you have on the floor right now is the best of all you’ve ever written.

However, the decline in sales and diminished acceptance in foreign markets doesn't leave us many viable options. The first four will probably be your most remembered works and that will be all. Once the avid reading market stops buying you, you're finished. Do you recall the times I've told you that?"

Calvin recalled the times, and he knew the problem. The first four were inspired, coached, and edited by Birgit, his wife and after that, the three declining novels were from other women. He gulped and thought swiftly, "Damn the luck! I can't believe this is happening to me!"

"Yes, sir, still, I can't believe this. I've struggled so hard and if this is the best one so far, why can't the promotion department make it happen anyway? It makes sense to me."

"Because the Board of Directors don't have that faith in you any longer. I'm sorry, but it's out of my hands. Therefore, we must reject this proposal and bid you farewell."

"What about changing genre?" Calvin asked, desperate to at least have a chance.

"If you did that, it would have to be before you published the second one," Wilcox said. "You can't do that now. People will remember you as Calvin Westwood and even a pen name won't hide the fact that it's you and it won't work for sales. As it stands now, we're having difficulty getting chain stores to accept even free donation books. They reject book signings. They consider you an albatross. It's sad, I know, and it hurts, but it happens."

"That sucks greatly!" said Calvin. He closed his eyes and recalled the short banter conversation with Melissa. His desperation grew in realizing his plight.

"Well, since you reject it, am I free to offer it to other publishers who might be willing to promote me? I can do that, can't I?"

Kalb nixed it immediately. "No way, Calvin. You can't do that for four years. That's when your current contract with S-Rand Publishing expires. Until then, we would have to hold you liable for contract violations."

“So, you propose to simply kill my future because you can’t turn a large sum of money? And like a dog in the manger, you won’t let me go elsewhere to start a new life?”

“You’re the one who agreed to the contract,” Kalb reminded him.

“You say I agreed to the contract. I agreed to a contract for you to promote me and my novels and you have four years left and you wish to stop? What the hell is that? Sounds like a contract violation to me!”

“If you read the contract, that’s one of our options. We’re not obliged to destroy our profit margin to print, produce, distribute, and promote books that won’t keep us in the black,” said Kalb.

“But it’s also your option to let me go elsewhere,” Calvin said. “Am I correct?”

“It is,” said Barnaby.

“Then why don’t you let me do that? Why destroy me?”

“Because even though the competition is fourth and fifth or sixth place, we don’t wish to help them,” Kalb said. “Also, there’s the fact that movie rights and international distribution are pending on the first four novels, and letting you go to the competition, regardless of the small profits you and they might make, could bind us in litigation that is detrimental to our existence.”

“In other words, I’m screwed?” Calvin said.

“You don’t have to look at it that way,” said Barnaby. “Look at it as a needed vacation, a sabbatical away from the limelight, or a period to renew yourself. Then after the contract expires, go, and write and sell to the competition.”

“Whatever, ass wipes! No matter how you look at it or whitewash it, my life as a writer is destroyed because of sales figures. It doesn’t matter what brilliant works I do later, I’m killed by sales figures, greed, and desired profit margins today with S-Brand. Because, after four years, who’ll remember me or have faith in me? If I don’t keep producing novels to the public now, I’m screwed, like I said before.”

“I’m afraid that’s all we can offer,” said Riley. “It wasn’t in our annual plan to destroy you. Something happened to the readership and to you, which brought this about. We’ve spent more money on you than any other writer in this organization, but the readers won’t buy what you write now. How much would you risk helping one writer and ignoring two hundred others?”

Calvin felt deflated and defeated. “Probably not much. Thanks for turning ostrich. Wish you’d made a big deal about this earlier. So, I can’t thank you for what you’re doing to me. I just hope that before the year’s over, all of you suffer some personal tragedy that will cause you to retire early. It will give you time to reflect until your contracts expire and then go to the competition and beg for scraps. Bastages!”

He looked at Millington’s reserved face. “Et tu, Brute?”

“Not a chance, Calvin. I voted to go with it. I was the only one who did. These people don’t know what they’re doing half the time and screw up the other half. They’d be better off to go for it, but they’re afraid, and fear often overrules logic until a cattle prod touches their ass. Don’t give up hope until it’s useless. Don’t do an eleventh-hour suicide because the midnight hour might bring a miracle that will make you much in demand again.”

“Thanks for your confidence,” Calvin said.

He stood and walked from the room without looking back. He closed the door behind him and paused at the receptionist’s desk. “Melissa, did you know that was going to happen?”

“I could see it coming. After the fourth novel, you started screwing around. Too much money, too much fame, too much drink, too many sexy groupies wanting to make a name for themselves at your expense. I’m sorry to say this, but you screwed yourself in this case. It’s a real shame you did. Your astute brilliance destroyed by having to get inside as many panties as possible. And even if you don’t believe it, I feel sorry for you. This is only the beginning of your problems in life.”

“You’re probably right.” He held out his hand and it pleased him that she shook it. “Thanks, Melissa Snyder. You have a great day and life. Sorry for all the agony I’ve

caused you. I was only being witty and jovial. I just didn't realize it wounded you so much."

"I'll accept your apology and I'll pray for you. That's about all I can do."

Chapter Two

In O'Reilly's Pub in lower Manhattan, Birgit Westwood sat with Connie Stump, sharing conversation over lunch.

"So, how's your interior decorating business going?" asked Connie.

"Business is great! It's so great, I can see soon that I'll have to hire someone to help me and possibly open a shop. I'm limiting my horizons by operating on one-to-one marketing right now. I guess that's a plus, but I'm worried about losing control over quality when I start expanding. You know?"

"I understand. What about what's his face?"

Birgit giggled. "He's doing well. His first four novels are still selling, and he's got novel eight on the table right now. He's still bringing in the bucks."

"He still plays the field with women?"

The question irritated Birgit, and she turned icy. "Unfortunately, yes."

"Then why are you still with him? You can't tell me that it's all because of the money he's making. You're doing well on your own. Why not dump the cheating low-life sucker and find someone who'll love you like you should be loved?"

Birgit's response was adamant. "Look, let's drop this line of conversation and move on to other topics. I'm different than many other women in the world. I see what you and other women can't. There's more to Calvin Westwood than his success."

"Sorry. However, I couldn't hold onto someone like that."

"No one's asking you to hold onto him! Are you finished with that discussion?"

Connie collected her purse and keys and stood from the table. "I'm finished. Sorry about the outburst. I'll call you later when I can control my mouth."

"You do that."

While alone, she scanned the other diners and noticed a young American Indian woman sitting two tables away, watching her intently.

“Did you get your eyes full?”

“Yes, I have, but there’s room for more. Do you have your heart full?”

Birgit bristled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can see much pain in you, and if pain is sufficient, then my eyes are full. If you ask about your heart, I see the same, much pain. Does the pain in your heart equal the determination of your unrequited love?”

“What’s it to you? Mind your own business and leave me alone!”

“I was. You’re the one who chose to confess your problems and ask my opinion. Am I wrong?”

“Birgit sighed at getting nowhere. “No. Just hate eavesdropping.”

“Then, choose a private place to talk about such matters. That’s what I do.”

“Do you have a name?”

“I’m BlackBerry. And you are?”

“Birgit Westwood. Would you join me for a moment?”

“My pleasure. I feel much distress in your life. Am I correct in that?”

“Yes, nosey critter.”

“Nosey critter? I’ve never been called that before.”

“There’s a first time for all things in life.”

“Your husband’s cheating on you?”

“Yes, he is. Yes, he has for the last maybe five years. Do you want him? You have the correct facilities that interest him, and you can add your ethnic group also.”

“No. I want what I have now. When was the last time you slept with him?”

“Five years ago, as if it’s any of your business.”

“You’re the one with an over-abused heart. I’ll ask embarrassing or nosey questions, but if you don’t want to answer, don’t.”

Birgit studied her and asked, “What are you? You have such an unruffled voice. You’re so calm and poised externally and probably internally as well.”

“I’m an Apache Medicine Woman. I’m trained in many different methods of healing and spirituality. And you design interiors for people’s homes.”

“Yes.”

“But you cannot design and apply the basics of a marriage in your life?”

Birgit moved her gaze to her glass of iced tea. “That seems right so far.”

“Who is he?”

“Calvin Westwood. You know him?”

“I’ve heard the name, but I’ve not read him. I’m very attuned to the spiritual world and by choice I don’t read such books as he writes. I experience far more terrible demons in my everyday life. Heaven forbids that I read about them from writers like Calvin.”

“But they sell, and they make us a lot of money.”

“Agreed. But for me, when it comes to demonic beings, there is only black and white. There are no shades of gray, twisting of facts or truths. Only a demon or not a demon. Did you inspire his first four novels?”

“Yes. Calvin was young. He was full of fire. He had outlines and notes, and ideas galore. I read them. I suggested changes, modifications, and redirection of plots. He listened. Under my love and suggestions, he focused on the genre he wanted and excelled in it. He responded, and he was great.

He could still be, but I see him slipping. He slips into bed with women who don’t care for or love him. He seeks a new jolt of inspiration from a new woman, but all he

gets is laid. I look at the market, and I see him failing. And it breaks my heart, but he doesn't turn to me, only those who don't care or love him."

"That's sad. I see and feel a deep and sincere love, which impresses me greatly. What do you wish for in life? What would you like to see for you and for Calvin?"

"I'd like to see him turn to me, to cling to me like he did after we were married. I'd like him to achieve his wildest dream of being better than Stephen King. He has the potential. He just needs to realize what he has in me and stop everything with other women."

"Noble gesture. You impress me more with each word. Would you like some help? Like you did for Calvin, I can help you focus on what you want in life and help you make it a reality. Are you interested?"

Birgit nodded and signaled the waitress. "Bring us a fresh glass of iced tea and the checks. Give the checks to me."

"I love him enough to listen to the ranting of an Apache Medicine Woman. Give me something to hope for. Give me something solid. Please? Please don't leave me dangling like my friends and life. They all suck and disappoint me."

BlackBerry handed her a business card with her phone number and address.

"When are you free to visit me in private?"

"About an hour's drive from where I live. When do you want me?"

"Tonight at 8:00 PM is good for me. Is that too late for you?"

Birgit offered a faint smile. "I'll be there. What do I need to bring?"

"Yourself, your wounded heart, and your love. That will be enough.

Thanks for lunch. Have a good Apache day."

Chapter Three

Birgit felt relaxed for the rest of the afternoon. She kept three appointments and closed on two decorating assignments before she headed home at 5:00 PM. It surprised her to find Calvin sitting morosely on the sofa.

Though any conversation was rare, the afternoon's uplifting events suddenly moved her to greet him.

"Hey, Calvin," she called as she stepped from her shoes and laid her keys and purse on the hall table. "You're home early. Figured you'd be out late celebrating after the proposal meeting."

He drained his drink glass and threw it at the living room wall. "Not this time. Death to the bastages. Assholes to the last man! May they suffocate in their shit and drown in their piss."

She winced from the breaking glass and detoured to the living room. On the floor beside their gas-log fireplace was a pile of broken glass. She counted six bottoms and watched him fill a seventh with gin and tonic. "Is something wrong, dear?"

"Yes, something's wrong!" He staggered back to the sofa. "There's no accepted book proposal this time. S-Brand Publishers effectively and efficiently killed me today. My last three novels didn't sell like the first four. So, they rejected me. And my current contract runs for another four years, so I'm dead. Simply dead." He mimed a fly swatter. "Swat the fly. Calvin's the fly. Don't let him get up. Piss on him, break his bones, slash his muscles, or whatever you wish to do to him. He's dead anyway, so it doesn't matter."

He fell silent and took a gulp of his drink.

"Oh, brother. Haven't seen you this low for many years. Could be the wakeup call you need," she thought.

"It can't be that bad. You can go to other publishers, can't you?"

“Not until the present contract expires! And after four years without my name on the market, and knowing I was rejected by one of the best now, I might as well apply for a dishwashing job. Or a trash collector. I’m dead! Killed by bastages who have far too little faith and shallow dreams.”

“That sucks. What are you going to do?”

“Get drunk and sit around and feel sorry for myself. I’ll worry about the rest of my life tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a good plan. Clean up the mess when you’re done or in the morning if you can’t tonight. I’m going out this evening. I have a late appointment with a client. Should be back around or before midnight.”

“Good for you, Birgit. Have fun.” He tossed the empty glass to shatter, lay with the others, and headed for the bar again.

She shook her head and went to her bedroom to shower and relax before meeting BlackBerry.

*

Birgit drove through the bogged traffic and exited the freeway to less traveled country roads. “This is so cool. This is like a mini vacation away from Manhattan. A place to clear the cobwebs from your mind.”

She followed directions until she located the house. It was a one-story ranch house on a block with one similar house and three two-story houses.

She exited her car and paused momentarily to enjoy the stillness and breathe the fresh air.

“Amazing. Love it.” She walked up the stepping stone path.

BlackBerry opened the door and invited her inside. She wore a rawhide halter and skirt that stopped well above her knees. Her hair was braided and hung down her back. “Two minutes to spare. Punctuality is a good quality. Welcome to my home.”

Birgit beheld the woman in the doorway. “She’s certainly gorgeous and friendly. Wonder if there’s a man in her life. Note to Self, keep her away from Calvin,” she thought.

She drank in the western motif of the living room and relaxed more.

“This is like stepping into another universe. And one-hour south, there is this teeming mass of people with dead-end lives. Amazing.”

One unique thing that instantly held her attention was a green parrot in a cage. It eyed her as she approached.

“Pretty woman,” it spoke in a shrill voice and then whistled.

“Good taste for a bird,” laughed Birgit.

“Basheer is not a bird,” it said. “Basheer is a parrot of renown.”

She was close enough to inspect him. “Sorry. I’ll remember that. Basheer is a beautiful parrot. Striking colors and good taste. How old are you, or do you know?”

“Twelve.”

“Did you teach him to talk?” Birgit asked.

“Not everything,” she replied.

“Wow.”

“And this is my other companion,” said BlackBerry. She moved across the living room to another cage on a stand. “This is Brave One. Come on. Say hello to Birgit.” She nudged the animal inside, and it uncurled and stood, chattering as she stroked its head with a finger.

Birgit joined her. “Hi, Brave One. You look almost like a mongoose.”

“He’s in the same family, but he’s a linsang.”

Brave One eyed Birgit chattered, clicked his teeth, and stuck one paw through the bars.

She stroked the soft fur on top of the paw. “You’re a cutie. Does he bite?”

“Only me. Only once.”

Birgit stuck a finger through the bars and stroked his head like BlackBerry did. Brave One caught her finger between its fore paws and bit her.

“Ouch. That hurt!” She snapped her finger back to stick it in her mouth.

Brave One ran in circles, stopped abruptly to lie on his back, and stared at Birgit.

BlackBerry frowned at the action. “Why did you do that? You know it’s wrong.”

Brave One pulled back his lips to expose his teeth and hissed.

“Well, he’s only done that once when I first played with him. Linsangs do that when they trust and love someone and want to bond with them. You’re the first outside of me. You must be exceptional.” She handed her a tissue for her finger and made sure she touched her arm and held the wounded hand.

“Grand. I don’t often feel that way.”

She considered BlackBerry’s action briefly. “Careful, self. You’re going to get hit on before you leave.”

“Come. Let’s go to the kitchen and talk there,” BlackBerry said.

“You guys behave while I’m gone. Hear?”

Brave One curled up in a ball, and Basheer cocked his head. “Birgit kiss Basheer?”

“He’s a little ham. Blow him a kiss.”

She complied, and Basheer sighed luxuriously and twisted his head like the kiss hit him. “Wonderful. Basheer is in love!”

BlackBerry guided her to the dining room, where four chairs and a settee were in front of the window large enough for two people.

“Do you like teas?”

“Yes, plain to enjoy the flavor. Your choice. Surprise me.”

“Sit where you like,” offered BlackBerry.

Birgit sat on the settee before the open window and felt a breeze blowing across her back. “Marvelous,” she sighed. “I could overload on emotions here.”

BlackBerry prepared the tea and moved a TV stand in front of the settee. She placed the tea on it and then lit a stalk of sweet grass. She moved around the dining room to fill it with aromatic smoke.

“This clears away all demons,” she explained and sat beside Birgit.

“Good.”

“Brutal honesty is required for me to help you.”

“I won’t be bitchy like at the pub today. Ask, and you shall receive abundantly.”

“How many affairs has Calvin had?”

“Five that I know for sure.”

“Is it the sex that attracts him?”

“Not at first. He’s a writer and a very different man. He fantasizes a lot. He dreams a lot. He talks to his book characters and gives them life and feelings. He’ll talk to an empty chair as if they were sitting there having breakfast with him. At the beginning of our relationship, I often roleplayed for him. But he could do it without me as well.

“Each new woman inspires him. His fantasies and attraction might not be about sex and probably isn’t. It might be about their unique personal tragedy or life situation. The sex happens to help him stay with them for a while, so he can infuse their problems and lives into his novels. That’s why his novels are so great. They’re bizarre

and twisted, but they touch people with similar situations. If sex doesn't happen, they fly so fast it makes your head spin. Does that make sense?"

"It does. And you know that sex happened at least five times?"

"Yes. It might have been more. I don't know."

"And you would take him back, accept him in your bed and your body after knowing about these other women?"

"Yes. After I ran him through the wringer and knew he was disease and entrapment free, I would. Nothing would make me happier now or later."

"You have an extremely pure and loving heart. Now I know why Brave One bit you to bond with you. You're both pure spirits. You're totally amazing and unique today."

"And you want to bite and bond with me, too," she thought.

"I tend to go against the norm. I know I'd be justified in divorcing him. That's what society says I should do. But I'll wait for him to come to his senses and come back to me. And if he doesn't, then I guess I'll have a lonely life until one of us dies."

"How do you handle being close to him and not touching him? Does he ever touch you or make advances?"

Birgit sighed and considered the question. "That's a loaded question that has no point, nosey critter. Then again, it does for you. Are you sure you want to be here, Self? You're staying, so you most likely want to be here, regardless of what happens. And you like the ranting of a lesbian, an Apache medicine woman who wants to get into your pants. Shut up and stop thinking."

"No. After I found out about the first one, we had a huge fight, and I moved out of the bedroom. I made the guest room my bedroom, and he never goes there. It's my domain, male-free."

"That solves that."

"So, how can you help me?"

“By letting you be his next conquest, his next mistress of ill repute. Do you want to finish your tea here or bring it with you?”

Birgit felt wonderfully warm and lightheaded when she stood and picked up her cup. She could taste no alcohol, but it had the same effect on her. “This is awesome tea. Where can I buy some? Let’s go. You’ve got me interested.”

BlackBerry led her down a short hallway off the kitchen. “My bedroom is down there. This is my den and sitting room. And this is where my special helper lives.”

Birgit looked down the hallway toward her bedroom and imagined BlackBerry sleeping without her rawhide halter and skirt. She heard nothing that was said after ‘bedroom.’ Her fantasies kicked in, and she remained staring at the bedroom door, frozen by what she could not stop until BlackBerry tapped her arm.

“What’s happening?”

“Huh? What? Uh, nothing.”

“I said brutal honesty, and that’s what I meant. What happened to you? You were lost to the world. What were you thinking just now?”

“Uh, I fantasized about you and me in your bedroom. I don’t know where that came from.”

“Really? Would that help or hinder what you want to do?”

“Right now, neither. It would bring some wonderful relief from stress that seems to be building to critical mass. To be brutally honest, I’ve never considered that as an option until right now. Don’t know why I did, really. Sorry. This is an awesome tea. Let’s continue where we were going.”

“You shouldn’t be sorry about your feelings, my friend. This way, please.” She gently tugged on Birgit to move her from the bedroom to the special room.

“This is Kanji,” she said proudly and patted a massive box with lights, dials, and gages occupying about a six-square-foot area of the room.

“This is your secret weapon?”

“It is. It’s based on the Kanji, the Japanese phonetic alphabet.”

“What can it do for me?”

“It will make you Calvin’s next mistress. You said that he’s interested in their tragedy, their unique lives. Well, you can be his next mistress and give him an inspiration which will be so well accepted that it will boggle both of your minds. You’ll have what you want, Calvin’s full attention. He’ll have what he wants, the inspiration for a fantastic novel. Imagine his surprise when he finds the inspiration he needs is you.”

“I like the theory, but how will this box help me? Wouldn’t we have to meet and become lovers?”

BlackBerry grinned and turned it on. “Not necessarily. When you contact him, you can reject all dates he requests. You can give him the guidance and plots and even open the door for him at S-Brand Publishing with your charm and personality via the phone, but he’ll never know unless you tell him.”

“Marvelous. How does it work?”

“We’ll program it tonight if you wish. You dial the number I give you. Kanji will scramble and translate your voice to be that of some other woman. Voice analysis will not pick up your voice, only your chosen one. They will be totally different entities. The number you dial can’t be traced without extreme difficulty. You can call him from your cell phone in your bedroom and talk to him in your living room; he’ll never know it’s you. It’s a 99 percent perfect machine. What name would you like?”

“I don’t know. Let me think. His women were Ingrid, Shallson, Elise, Minerva, and Giavanna. How about a sexy French name? How about Cassatt Lyon? One hundred percent French blood woman, what wants to turn him on?”

“I like that. Shall we give it a test?” She handed Birgit a microphone.

“This will match your voice to the voice you choose. It will automatically work after we have it set. Say anything you like, and tell me when you hear what you like her to be.”

“Hello, this is Birgit Westwood. I don’t know what I’m doing here. However, I have the courage and love to achieve my goals. Love is a lifetime thing for me. One man. One woman. One flesh. Joined forever in the sight of men on earth and in the sight of God in Heaven.”

BlackBerry typed “French Women Speaking English” on the keyboard and hit enter. A speaker on top of the machine turned on and began to copy Birgit’s voice with a heavy French accent, and she adjusted the tone and quality.

Her voice was sultry and thickly French-accented but understandable English. “But of course, my friend, BlackBerry, I’d love to do business with you. I love that voice. Intriguing. Sensual. Sultry. Everything he’ll love to hear. I love you, Cassatt.”

It pleased BlackBerry, and she locked in the voice codes. She gave Birgit a card. “The top number is the one you call most, and Kanji will automatically call your home number and match Cassatt’s voice with yours. Give him the middle number if he insists on a return number, and he’ll get a message machine inside Kanji with Cassatt’s voice. The bottom number will let you check for messages. If you want to call elsewhere, call the middle number, and after the machine beeps, press # twice. Then dial the number directly. The same thing will happen. Cassatt will do the talking.”

“Marvelous! Wonderful! The potential delights me, but it makes me curious also. Why are you doing this?”

“Because I can’t always say no to people who are in distress. And because, quite frankly, I like you a lot. And I want to get to know you better. You have a pure spirit, and I want to help you have what you want in life if I can. One word of caution, though, use Kanji judiciously. If you don’t, you can create a scene that destroys what you want and need. You must be careful and focused on your goal.”

“Okay. Is that all?” She drank nearly all the tea, saving one good swallow.

BlackBerry closed the door to the Kanji room and nudged Birgit down the hall toward her bedroom. “Now we’ll take care of everything else there.”

“You don’t have to do that. It was only a fantasy.”

“Will it help you to calm down?”

“Don’t know. I think it would. Did you do this before? I’m scared of trying it.” She stood very close to BlackBerry then and could smell the rawhide and a faint trace of sandalwood perfume. “This is going haywire, Self. This is too exotic.”

“It’s okay to be scared. I’ve never done this at all. Never considered it until you appeared before me this afternoon. But I want to get to know you and help you regain focus. So, I want to try. I’m also nervous, but I want to fulfill your fantasy if I can.”

“What do you do otherwise?”

“Nothing, like you.”

There was a whistle from the living room. “Birgit’s getting laid.” Whistle.

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t think it’ll be as bad as you might presume. Go to the bedroom or go home to your bed. Your choice. But, if you’re going home, do it now.”

Birgit drained the tea cup and handed it to her. She pulled her face close enough to kiss her and floated in a warm cloud to the bedroom. She sat on the bed and waited for BlackBerry to join her, then relaxed as she looked around the room and began to smell and feel it rush, ebb, and invigorate her.

“Your curiosity will land you in deep dooky someday,” she thought.

“Really got to find some of that tea,” she sighed and flopped backward on the bed. She pulled the messed-up pillow across her face and inhaled.

“Oh, wonderful, BlackBerry! You smell great. This is going to be wild.”

Chapter Four

Calvin woke with a slight hangover, lounged, and nursed it with tomato juice until it disappeared. He cleaned up the pile of broken glass and knocked on Birgit's door a few times until he figured she was not home.

"Wonder who she spent the night with? Why do you care? You've screwed up so much that it's pathetic. Don't begrudge her getting what you're not man enough to give her." He mumbled, grumbled, and returned to his bedroom to prepare for a bland day.

*

Birgit woke to hands massaging her from shoulders to chest to feet and back. She felt sensational, kept her eyes closed, and moaned as the hands turned her over and did the same to her backside. "You're too good to me," she mumbled into the pillow.

"When I feel the need to be, I am. You relaxed and focused now?"

"Definitely."

"Then get dressed and meet me in the living room."

Birgit yawned and swung her legs to the floor. "Not bad at all." She collected her clothes. "Skin, sweaty from rawhide, sure smells and tastes great when you're high on lust. Now we go back to loneliness in my room."

She joined BlackBerry, where Brave One and Basheer were eating merrily.

"Kanji will stay turned on until you've met your objective, my friend."

She gave her another copy of the phone card and a key to her house. "You're welcome anytime. You don't have to phone ahead or ring the bell. Walk in like you're family. I want to keep you focused, and I like you a lot. Do you have any problem with that?"

Birgit lit up and gave her an excited hug and kiss. “No problem, sweetheart. Thanks a million for what you’re doing.”

*

Returning to the teeming masses of upper Manhattan, Birgit entered her apartment to find Calvin home again. Newspapers were scattered around the sofa, chairs, coffee table, and the floor. She noted the pile of broken glass was cleaned up.

“What’s going on?”

“Checking for what I might do until S-Brand wakes up, if ever. Since I’m screwed, I figured I might as well do something. I can’t sit here every day and do nothing. I’ll go so crazy; I’ll be worthless to everyone who’s a part of my life, including me. What’s up with you? Didn’t make it home last night?” He sipped coffee and sat the cup back on the coaster without looking.

“No, I had too many drinks, and my client took my keys. Wouldn’t trust me to drive home.”

“Wise decision. He nice?”

“She, and yes, she’s nice. Men aren’t into interior decorating. Not unless they talk with a lisp and want to impress their boyfriend. She liked my proposal and I’ll probably land the contract with her.”

“Good. It’s better than what I’m doing.”

The comment truly saddened her. She was not conversing with Calvin, who had the fire and drive when they met. He sounded defeated. “Hey, don’t you think you might be jumping the gun a little? Is there no chance for S-Brand to back off its position? What happens if the first four turn movies like they lust for, and that sparks a rush on your novels again? Is that a possibility?”

“That could be, but it’s a remote possibility not signed in stone. In the meantime, I’ll do what I can to provide income for us. Don’t want you to do all the work.”

“Thanks.” She went to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee for herself. She stirred the liquid slowly and considered him. “He’s in a strange mood today. Did losing the book proposal put that huge a crimp in his life? Interesting. Wonder what he’ll do when Cassatt latches onto him?”

She wandered back to the living room, intent on going to her bedroom, but he spoke as she passed.

“Do you ever get lonely?”

She stopped abruptly beside the dining room door and momentarily leaned against the wall. The question stunned her. “Yes, I do sometimes. Why do you ask? Are you lonely?”

“Sometimes. Why are you still here? Why haven’t you divorced me? I’ve been a pigdog and then some, and you’re still here? You’re still living down the hall. I’ve ruined your dreams of having a good husband and solid marriage, and you still hang on. Why? Why put up with me? Why not roast me and toss me to the dogs, like S-Brand? You both might be better off. You might find someone who’d love me out of your life and mind.”

The questions stunned her.

“I don’t know, Calvin. I’m not playing the field. I’m not looking for another man. The decorating work keeps me busy and occupied, and I’ve never considered leaving. Maybe I’m idling until you find something you like more than me and move on. Each new twist-of-tail brings that possibility to mind. Never really gave it much thought.

“As for divorcing you, I’m an errant Catholic girl. You know that, but that’s one thing I don’t believe in. It might come from you, but not from me. I can stay this way forever. I don’t mind. Even if it sucks. Which it does.”

“Well, part of me is glad you’re still here.”

She released a sigh. “Whatever. So, what are you really going to do?”

“I have an appointment with my psychiatrist at one, and then I’m going to talk to Vernon Dasher over at Meridian Publishing. He keeps offering me a job as a senior editor. Think I’ll see if he’s serious. It sucks to take a salaried job, but it’ll keep me occupied and close to what I love. I’ll truly go totally insane otherwise.”

“Okay. Sounds better than your plan last night. Did this denial of your book hurt this much?”

When he raised his face, she realized it was a fact. He looked as if he would cry.

“Yes. It felt like someone crushed my rib cage like one of my demons. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t argue or fight, couldn’t do anything that I needed to do. But I guess I’ll live. I’m not the only writer to get rejected and make a recovery. The problem is, I don’t know if I can do it. Just don’t know if I have the strength to weather the storm. I feel so lost now. Before this event, stepping down or giving up would never have entered my mind. You can screw yourself in many ways by making a mistake.”

“Well, keep your spirits up. Maybe something good will come your way.” She continued to her bedroom.

*

Birgit had luncheon meats, cheeses, and bread on the table when Calvin came home that evening. He entered the kitchen and saw what she was doing.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Does that include me making you a sandwich?”

“If you don’t mind. If it bothers you, I’ll fix my own. Just don’t rush off to your private retreat so soon. Let’s eat together, okay? I won’t molest you.”

“Okay.” She prepared two more slices of bread as he got another plate.

“How’d your afternoon go? Feeling better?”

“Yes. Dasher was serious about me being his editor. He was pleased and thrilled about me being a writer for him after the contract with S-Brand expired. He has faith in me. Can you believe that? The salary is \$60 thousand a year to start, and insurance and retirement are included. Not bad. The rent is prepaid for another seven months. The salary will take care of that and utilities. It’ll suffice for the basics.”

“And what I make will take care of the rest. Neat.”

He took a bite and groaned. “This is delicious, honey.” He held up his hand. “Sorry. Forgot I can’t use pet names with you. It’s delicious, Birgit.”

She smiled and studied him. “What’s wrong with you? This isn’t Calvin Westwood sitting with me.”

“I feel crushed. I told you that. I can’t focus. I can’t think. I can’t write. I feel lifeless and empty. I thought I was on a roll forever until I got too old and frail to even think or talk. Now I feel like a dog turd, rejected and avoided by everyone.”

“And your girlfriends?”

“There are none. Haven’t had one for a long time. I was too busy writing *The Seventh Sail* to do anything. Anyway, I can’t keep them forever. They’re nothing compared to you.”

She choked on her drink of tea. “What did you say?”

“I said they’re nothing compared to you.”

He had finished nearly all his sandwich and stood from the table.

“And you can laugh at me, call me stupid, or whatever you wish, but I mean that. I’m not a stupid man. I know when I’ve screwed up, and I have. And you don’t know how sorry I am about that.”

He took his tea and retreated to the balcony, his sanctuary from the world outside and inside his home.

When he left her, she dropped the remnants of his and her sandwich into the trash can and cleared the table. “Well, it looks like the leopard is trying to rid himself of his spots. Don’t worry, dear. I’ll help you; after you suffer a little bit.”

She prepared the orders for her two contracts, faxed them to the suppliers, and spent the rest of her evening in her room. She heard Calvin roaming around the apartment, and he finally settled down at around 7:00 p.m. and turned on the television. At 8:30, she made herself comfortable and made a call on her cell phone.

The apartment phone rang four times before Calvin answered in a rough and peeved voice.

“Hello. Who is this? Do you know what time it is?”

The sultry accented voice spoke with no regret at possibly bothering him. “Is this the Westwood residence in Manhattan? I’m looking for Calvin Westwood.”

“That’s me. Who are you? If you’re a salesman, you’re about to receive the reaming of your life!”

“I am Cassatt Lyon. Are you always this abrupt, monsieur?”

“No, I’m just having a bad spell now. And taking it out on strangers is better than busting on the ones you love. What can I do for you? What do you want? Speak up or hang up!”

“I don’t want to bother you. I own a quantity of stock in S-Brand Publishing. Mind you, it’s not a controlling share, but enough for me to watch what they do and have people watching what they do, monsieur. I know they, how you say, canned you, no? Is that the correct term? And that isn’t reassuring. It makes me want to sell my shares of stock.”

Calvin took the phone to the balcony and sat on the chaise. “Why on earth would you do that?”

“Because I have faith in you, monsieur. I have an autographed copy of every novel you’ve written. I also have beaucoup stock in Les Apperalis, based in Paris, who desire desperately to make your novels into French movies. You’re a brilliant writer and a

source of income for moi in my portfolio. So, what happened to you is very distressing, no?”

“Yes, it’s very distressing, uh, Cassatt, did you say?”

“Oui, I said that. That’s my name.”

“Do you know what happened and why?”

“Most of it. My sources are unreliable, but the publisher and the board of directors did not accept *The Seventh Sail*. They thought it the best and most brilliant of your novels, but past sales troubled them, non?”

“That’s it exactly! Who are your sources?”

“Ah, monsieur, I cannot reveal that. That would be what you call treason, no? And it’s unethical. Let it suffice to say that I’m on your side in this delicate matter. Okay?”

“Okay. So, what do you want of me?”

“Tomorrow, I will call you again and give you an address to send me a copy of your proposed novel. I will read it and pass my astute unbiased judgment, and then I will see what this uneventful French woman, who owns lots of stock in many companies, can do to help you. Maybe foreign publishers would not be concerned with contracts and other minute matters. That is fair, no?”

“That is fair, yes. How did you get my phone number?”

She laughed gaily. “I must admit I had to pay 50 American dollars and expose much of my breasts to distract, bother and arouse the man I talked with at the phone company to get it. However, it worked. When Cassatt sets her mind on a goal, she maintains a steady course until it happens. That is good, no?”

He laughed. “That is good, yes. I’ll wait for your call and print a copy of the manuscript. Good night, Cassatt. That’s a lovely French name.”

“It’s been in the family for generations and only given to full-blooded French women, monsieur. Have a pleasant evening.”

She disconnected the phone and lay back on the bed, chuckling. “I love it. You’ve not let me read the last three novels inspired by your affairs of the heart. That’s why you screwed up and are now wallowing in misery. I want to see what you’re doing and what S-Brand is missing out on. Good night, horndog.”

Chapter Five

Birgit woke to the printer passing through sheet after sheet of paper. She dressed and entered his den, his writing palace where she had not been in years.

She casually laid a hand on his shoulder. “Good morning. What you up to so early?”

“I received a call from a strange woman last night. She discussed my novels being produced in foreign film markets if S-Brand still balks at accepting me. And she mentioned foreign publishers not being concerned with contracts with S Brand. It’s a long shot, but it’s worth it to keep my name in the market.”

“Would you like my input?”

“Why would you do that now? You helped me when we first met, but not after the fourth book was printed. Why now?”

“Because I’m still your wife. Because after the fourth novel, you stopped turning to me and started having difficulties. You’re not in this life venture alone. You never have been. It was always us, you and me until you gambled outside of my love and killed us. I gave you directions. I gave you a serious critique. I gave you all the love I had for you. You gave it up for shit women who let you down.”

“Can you offer me foreign markets?”

“No, all I can offer is love and the suggestions and guidance you needed when I met you. I can still offer that because that’s all you need now.”

“Bullshit! Good day!” He stormed from his den as the printer continued its task.

She pouted when he left. “You’re doing excellent at this. You’re truly a winner at Marriage Saving 101. BlackBerry’s right. Can’t apply the basics to save your marriage.”

She wandered into the kitchen and found him breaking eggs into a bowl.

“Sorry, Birgit. It’s been so long since we’ve had a decent time together that I can’t even hold a conversation with you. That’s stupid! Really pathetic, you know?”

“I know. This slap from S-Brand really slammed you, didn’t it?”

“Yes. Want an omelet?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind. You do them very well. Ham, cheese, and onion if we have any. If not, your choice.”

“We do.”

“So, what about the mysterious woman? Want to talk about her?”

“She said she’s from France and has connections with a French movie producer to maybe get my books translated into movies and into theaters there. She wants to see the manuscript of *The Seventh Sail* that was rejected. So, that’s what I’m doing. She said she’d call today and give me the address, so I could mail it.”

“Really? A woman contacts you and wants it mailed. Why not request it delivered in person? If I were her and had the chance to meet a famous writer like you, I’d not pass it up. I’d demand a face-to-face meeting. Something’s fishy about that.”

“Now that you mention it, that is strange. I was so excited about the possibilities she presented last night that it never occurred to me. Maybe I’ll ask her when she calls.”

“And it really is a long shot, but you’re good at taking them and winning. Do you still think you’ll take the senior editor position at Meridian?”

“I think I will, just in case nothing happens elsewhere. I can always quit if I need to write full-time again. And it’ll occupy my mind to keep me from thinking of foolproof ways to kill the board members at S-Brand or invoke one of my demons to rip the whole office to shreds.”

She laughed. “Well, that’s a good thing. Just wanted you to know that you didn’t have to do that. With my business growing, I could have more than covered our bills.”

He sat the omelet before her. “Thanks, but I realize I must grow up and be responsible for once, whether I like it or not. I can’t muddle by on this incident. If I do, then I’m truly dead.”

“Mmm, how do you do that so well? Such perfection. Mine always turns out broken, burnt, and yucky looking.”

“I consider I’m writing a book on making them, and I want the pictures to be as perfect as possible. You don’t have to wait for me. Dig in. Enjoy it while it’s still hot.”

She ate in silence and was halfway finished before he sat down.

“Do you think there’s any possibility for us to be like we were before I screwed up?”

She did not choke on her food, but the question stunned her again. She took a drink of juice before she answered. “Could be possible. You know, the number one thing that must cease before I’d even consider it. For the rest, I have a list of ‘must show me’ before it could happen. If you’re interested in that list, let me know. I’ll lay it on you.”

“Okay. What are your plans for today? Do you have clients to care for?”

“I just have to check for delivery times from the suppliers and meet them at the warehouse. Then I must run back up Yonkers way later this evening. Why?”

“Just trying to make conversation. The manuscript will take a good three hours to print. Then I’ll package it up and see if Cassatt calls back with the address. Then I think I’ll take a walk through Central Park. Haven’t done that for a while.”

“Well, thanks for the omelet, and I’ll stay out of your hair about the manuscript. I’ll let you handle it your way.”

*

The solid ice cloud that carried Cassatt, the female side of twin demons, drifted in the space vacuum near Saturn's orbit. She had been banished from the earth and the netherworld and sealed inside the ice cloud for over 20,000 years. She existed in an inactive state which prevented her from doing anything at all except think. Her present thoughts made her curious and delighted her. Someone called and chanted her name, and she wanted to know why. The voices came intermittently from telephone signals bouncing off clouds and leaving the stratosphere for deep space, and each one intrigued her.

*

Birgit finished her day by walking into BlackBerry's house. Basheer greeted her, and Brave One ran around his cage excitedly.

"BlackBerry, it's me, Birgit! Are you home! Hello!"

She received no answer, so she wandered through the house and did not find her. She opened the back door of the sitting room and stepped onto the wooden deck. She sat on a chaise and watched the flowers, lightning bugs, and birds in the dimming light.

"Might as well use my time," she said, fishing her cell phone from her purse. She dialed the programmed number, heard Kanji ring, and transferred the call to her apartment in Manhattan.

"Hello, monsieur Calvin," Cassat's voice greeted him. "How are you today? Better, I hope."

"Yes. I've spent some time today printing out the manuscript, and it's boxed, waiting for the address."

"Tres Magnifique! I get to read the world's greatest novel before it's printed. I'm so lucky, no? Post it to Cassatt Lyon, post office box 10233, New York, New York, 10001."

“In Manhattan? If you’re that close, why not let me deliver it in person?” His mind replayed that question from Birgit earlier.

“Because I’m not in Manhattan now, monsieur Calvin. If I were, I might consider that, but I’m in Seattle now and love to get packages in the mail. It’s so exciting, no?”

“I guess so. It just seemed strange for you to know about me, have seven autographed novels, and not want to meet me. By the way, did you get them at book signings? If you did, why didn’t you introduce yourself to me? I’m sure I’d remember the name Cassatt. It’s unique and uncommon to writers.”

“Ah, monsieur, is thinking. I like men who think. The first one I did, but the others I purchased for a fee or had my friends acquire them.”

“Why that way? You’re an intriguing lady, Cassatt.”

She laughed gaily. “Yes, I am. Well, I don’t go out in public very much. I’m not too fond of crowds. I do like fine writers like you, but I don’t care to meet them and get to know them personally. I like to keep my picture of them in my mind and from the media. That way, if there is something that you do that I don’t like, then it will not; what you say, soil, no, tarnish my perception of you. Do you understand, no?”

“Wow, that was deep and very understandable. You’re very wise. But meeting me on a social level would not reveal those things. Like at book signings. You know what I mean?”

“I do, monsieur Calvin. But that is me.”

“Well, when will you be back in Manhattan? I’d still like to meet you someday. I’ll be well-behaved, and we’ll keep the meeting short and very public to spare you tarnishing your image of me.”

“Ah, monsieur Calvin, you are not listening, but then, men are sometimes, what you say, not observant of significant things?” she cooed.

“My first husband was unaware that the casual and sophisticated way he talked to women made them wish to pursue him for more than a social encounter. His innocent social activities led several women to flirt with him, and finally, he betrayed me. It was

not his intent, monsieur Calvin, but the damage was done to me anyway. Trust is paramount in a relationship, no?”

“Yes, trust is a primary factor. The second is fidelity. But maybe they’re equal.”

“Well, I don’t wish that to happen to me again. I might be strong on my own, and you might be strong on your own, but even if we met at a social level, we might break down and not observe that we’re letting ourselves be distracted by mutual temptation and how many people would suffer from the results of that? Your wife, my new husband, my four children, and I would all feel anguished. Our friends and other family members. And the suffering would go on for a long time after the pleasure is felt.

“Monsieur Calvin, in my mind, you are a great gentleman and brilliant as that Einstein fellow. I prefer keeping you that way, in my mind, where I can love you and not damage anything that is precious to Vous or moi. I am right, no?”

“You’re right, yes. You’re too wise. You should’ve told me that about six years ago. Okay. I’ll mail the package on Monday. It’ll be there Monday. I’ll wait for your call.”

Behind her, she heard the door open and turned to see BlackBerry waving at her. She held up the cell phone and then replaced it to her ear.

“I will be sure to call you when I’ve read it and decide if I can help you, monsieur Calvin. Good night. Sleep well.”

She shut off the phone and turned to BlackBerry, who sat in a chair beside her then.

“Good to see you in my space, girlfriend. How’s it going?”

“Very well. This is the second call, and he’s responding. We’ve shared two meals and talked over the last two or three days. He got rejected on his eighth book, and he finally realized that he screwed up when he stopped turning to me and turned to other women. The inspirations he gained were not worth it. Amazing.”

“Grand,” BlackBerry said. “You’re still focused, and that’s good. So why are you here now?”

“I’m focused, and I’ve enjoyed the quiet time here alone. And you told me to come as a family member, and I did. Was I wrong to do so?”

“My dear Birgit, I heard much of your conversation through Kanji. You’re dead on with what you’re doing. You’re focused. You’re close to reaching your goal. Why are you here?”

“Because I’m curious and took you at your word that I could come anytime and be welcomed as family. But I guess you might not have meant it completely. Sorry. I believed you when you gave me the key.”

“What are you curious about?” BlackBerry held out her hand.

Birgit caught it and sighed. “I see what you’re doing is expensive, and you won’t take one penny from me. And you’re probably lonely. So, if I can do something to make you feel good, then I want to do that. Am I making myself clear?”

BlackBerry grinned. “You don’t lie very well, dear. That was a good speech, but not all the truth. You’re on good grounds here in my domain. It’s okay, so speak the truth in the sunlight of noon or in the darkness of midnight. Here everything is clear, and there will be no reproach for any reason.”

Birgit shivered. “I truly never considered doing what I did with you. It surprised me that I consented, and it surprised me that I enjoyed it so much. So, I’d like to experience it again if you don’t mind. Anyway, one of your body massages is enough reason to visit you. Okay?”

“That’s sufficient and highly true. I love you, Birgit. Most of my clients are men. You’re the first woman who chose to see what I could do for them. This is really a first-ever. This lifestyle needs to be lived chastely. Not shared intimately with men or women. You’re the first I’ve dared to touch and experience. Sexual affairs can make you let your guard down, and that’s dangerous for a spiritual warrior. But I couldn’t resist trying it with you to see what it was like. And like you, I enjoyed it.

“You got into my pets’ lives like only I’ve been able to do, and you did it in less than three minutes inside my home. Therefore, I’m going to say this sincerely. Keep the key I gave you for life. Whenever you need a private retreat, come. But don’t feel obligated

to share yourself with me after tonight. That's totally your call. I enjoyed it, but I don't care about that. I care only about your happiness in life. That's what friends are for. Understand?"

"Completely. Did the little snitch, Basheer, tell you I'm getting laid?"

"He did. That's how I knew you were here, other than your perfume that lingered in the air. You're wearing Torrid, aren't you?"

"Yes, and you're wearing rawhide. That's great. Thanks a million for letting me into your life at this level."

Chapter Six

Birgit entered her apartment to find it empty. “Guess he’s mailing the manuscript to Cassatt. Wonder if he’ll be surprised to learn she is me? He hasn’t let me read anything after the fourth novel. Screw buying them. I’m dying to see his tone and style. Why did he ever shut me off?”

She changed and called both customers to arrange a time for their unique makeover, one for each of the next two days. She called her delivery people to ensure they were free to meet her needs and set firm times. She then prepared cash in envelopes to pay them.

“Guess he could also be at Meridian checking out his new office. That sucks, but I hope it will give me the time I need.”

She went to his den, opened his filing cabinet, and searched the file folders until she found his copy of the contract he had signed with S-Brand Publishers long ago.

“Well, it seems like a long time ago,” she whispered, taking the contract to her bedroom to review it in case he came home early.

She laid it on her desk and opened the curtains to see a thick film of dust on the outside. “We’ve really got to move away from Manhattan. We need to be somewhere in the country where fresh air is pollution-free. We’ll work on that soon.”

She cracked the window slightly, returned to her desk, and reviewed the contract one paragraph at a time. Two hours later, she sat back and rubbed her eyes.

“Well, S-Brand, you did an excellent job tying his hands, but you didn’t restrict him from dealing with foreign publishers. Only American publishers. And you didn’t specifically prevent him from copyrighting his own works if you violated the contract which you have. You also agreed to publish him regardless of sales figures. That is not very wise. Really rather stupid. But I love it. I think I’m going to love this fight.

“Overall, you got him by the balls with most of this contract, but this French bitch, Cassatt, has you by the balls. Let’s try on some negotiating skills and see what fits. I’ve got more to lose than you do, so that makes me wilier and wickeder, I hope.”

She turned on her computer and had S-Brand’s board of directors on-screen with phone numbers and e-mail addresses. She retrieved her cell phone and dialed the number. She pressed ## and dialed the number for S-Brand.

“Thank you for calling S-Brand Publishing; this is Melissa Snyder speaking. How may I direct your call?”

“Ah, what a lovely name and voice. I hope they pay you well for your services. I am Cassatt Lyon, and I wish to talk with Mr. Nathan Baynard. He is available, non?”

“You must mean Nathan Barnaby, and yes, he’s available. You sound very French. May I inquire what the subject is before I transfer you?”

“I’m French. Good that you know that. Sorry for the pronouncing difficulty. The subject is unfortunate maladies in a contract with one of your expired writers, Calvin Westwood. You know him?”

“Yes, I do. Hold, please.”

Melissa paged Barnaby. “Sir, I think you might want to take this call. It’s some French woman who wants to discuss Calvin Westwood’s contract. She says it’s got some illness. I think that’s the correct translation for malady.”

“Okay, put her through.”

“Hello, Mr. Barnaby,” Cassatt’s voice said. “How are you today?”

“Busy. What can I do for you?”

“Sorry, you are so abrupt. This is a preliminary call about one of your ex-writers, Calvin Westwood. Do you recall him?”

“I do, what’s the problem?”

“It is no problem for me, monsieur. The problem is for you, non? I’ve reviewed his current contract with you in detail, and nowhere do you prohibit him from offering his works to foreign publishers. And since I have a lot of stock in your company, I would like to know why you did that? I have full faith in his writing ability and his sales potential. What made you stop?”

“Who the hell is this? What kind of crazy questions are you asking me?”

“Monsieur, that conduct and language are not called for. This is a preliminary call to discuss his contract and its maladies. I have approached him, and he’s agreeable to offering his works to the world from his present proposal forward. I ask you to please check for yourself what I say to you.”

“I will. Anything else?”

“Oui, monsieur, I do have something else. Your contract also stated that all novels become your property and copyright under S-Brand Publishers unless you violate the contract as you have. Therefore, I’ve advised my potential client to copyright the last one under his name. Since you choose not to publish him, he is legally permitted to do that, non?”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing? You can’t do that shit to us!”

“Monsieur, please! I am conducting myself in a very professional manner. If you wish to conduct business with such profanity, I will record all future calls and have witnesses present to verify it. Your language is, what you say, reprehensible, non? Please control yourself like the gentleman you like to portray to the public.”

“What do you know about that?”

“I’ve seen you before, monsieur. You never use such language in public in front of your family. Refrain from that now. It only aggravates the situation, non? You are the one who initiated the contract. Personally, I would have eliminated those loopholes. So, monsieur, you must either publish his current proposal, or you can be held liable for contract violation, and he will be released to deal with me and my other companies. Voila. A happy conclusion for all, non?”

Barnaby swiped a hand through his hair. “Whatever. Can I have your number to call you back?”

“Non, monsieur. I’m leaving shortly and still don’t know where I’ll be, Atlanta or Dallas, tomorrow. I’ll give you today to talk with and maybe fire your contract negotiator, Mr. Kalb. I’ll call you at about the same time tomorrow or the next day. Until then, au revoir.” She disconnected.

“Boil in your own oil, baby,” Birgit said and laughed.

She dialed the programmed number and waited patiently for the answering machine to pick up. “Comment ca va, Calvin? This is Cassatt. Do me a tiny favor, darling; please send a copy of your current manuscript to the Library of Congress to be copyrighted in your name. I know that most contracts have clauses, too; what do you say binds you against that, non? However, for the sake of argument, please do that for you and moi. I’ll be leaving Seattle, this dreary city, the day after tomorrow. I’ll call you again when I finish reading your manuscript. Au revoir.”

She disconnected and stretched. “You’re getting into this, aren’t you? Yes, I am, and I’m starting to love it. It’s time for a change.”

She returned the contract to its folder, went to the wet bar, and prepared herself a drink to return to her bedroom.

*

Cassatt reveled in the bantering of her name. During the last unknown period, the radio waves had increased her body temperature from minus 2000° Celsius to minus 1700°. Overall, it was insignificant in her punishment. Still, she knew that when her internal temperature reached -1000 degrees, she could “accelerate” freedom from her indefinite prison sentence and return to her usual self.

“Most adequate. Don’t know who you are, but you’re doing quite well. Keep using my name until I can thank you personally, and trust me, I will.”

*

Calvin knocked on her door at five to wake her. She stumbled to the door and pulled it open.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “This is unusual for you.”

She yawned and left the door open as she flopped back on the bed to stretch. “I know. Haven’t done that for months. Must have needed it.”

“What’s on for tonight?” he asked, standing in the doorway, holding onto the frame, and admiring the view of her body.

“No plans. I’ve met all my obligations for the pending makeovers tomorrow and the next day. Maybe watching television later. Why?”

“Would you go to dinner with me?”

She sat up on the bed to watch him. “What the hell? Are you serious?”

“I’m serious. A steak from O’Reilly’s Pub sounds fine about now. Haven’t had one in ages, and they serve the best as far as I’m concerned. Will you go with me?”

Only then did she realize she was in her underwear. “Yes, I will. Let me shower, and I’ll be glad to join you.”

*

They ordered and sipped wine as she watched him and the folks around them.

“That strange Cassatt woman left me a message today.”

“What did she have to say this time?”

“She wants me to copyright The Seventh Sail on my own. S-Brand has a clause that it’s theirs unless they terminate or violate the contract. Cassatt said what they’ve done is a contract violation since they refuse to publish the work. Makes sense to me.”

“Interesting. Do you think she’ll help you? She might be your next inspiration.” Instantly she mentally abused herself for mouthing it.

“I think not!”

“This is where we met. Do you remember that?” he asked a moment later in a much softer tone.

She laughed and nodded, relieved by the change of conversation without reprisals. “Yes, I was at the bar with two friends, and I was way too loud and mouthy, if I remember right, at least for you. It bothered you to the point of wanting to pay me to leave or smack me off the bar stool.”

“Glad it didn’t work. Otherwise, I’d never have known how wonderful and loving you are.” He turned his head to the bar stool where she sat that night. “You wore black slacks and a red sweater. Your hair was longer then.”

When he turned back to her, concern slipped into her voice. “Are you okay?”

He made a strange face and looked like he was struggling with some grave matter. When he did speak, his voice was solid and loud.

“No! I’m not okay! I’ve not been okay for a long time. And like a supreme doting idiot, or mindless, stupid fucking fly, I keep hitting the same brick wall or window again and again! Hurting myself again and again, and I can’t seem to stop! And I’m paying an idiot psychiatrist who can’t help me but takes my money anyway. I shouldn’t begrudge him making a living, but what the hell? That’s what the hell I want from him. I want him to help me stop!”

She heard the noise level in the dining room drop slightly, but she did not turn away from him to scold them.

He stared at the tabletop a moment. "I went to church last Sunday. I went to the St. Francis Cathedral, right down the street from us. That's where we were married. Remember? That was a beautiful moment for me, for us."

"I remember. You really went to mass?"

"I did. I sat there and listened to the priest give a sermon on how you should be a good steward in life with the things the Lord gives you. It made a lot of sense to me. And I cried because I've screwed up so much of my life over arrogance, pride, and things that didn't leave me with what I wanted or needed. I've destroyed what I loved, wanted, and needed. I've hurt what I loved so much, and I'm not a good steward! I'm a lousy, horrible steward! I truly suck! I screwed up as a husband but want to change and be worthy."

She could see tears on his cheeks when he raised his face to look at her, and the agony tore at her heart.

He slammed the table with a fist. "There's been no other woman in my life for quite a long time! You don't know that because we don't communicate enough. We live in the same apartment, sleep in separate bedrooms, and don't communicate! So, I'll tell you truthfully. I don't want Cassatt for a girlfriend. She can go to hell and deal with my demons!

"I want you for my girlfriend, my mistress, my wife, my confidant, my editor, my guide, my psychiatrist, my everything. The way we live now sucks so much; I can't take it any longer. I hate every damned minute of every day living in that room in hell, even if I look happy or not. It sucks to death! I can't stand the pain, Birgit! I can't help it! I'd rather be dead than live like that one more day. If I can't be your husband, I'd rather be in a cemetery plot, dead like the people I write about! I can't deal with it!"

The dining room became silent as people focused on their table, the jukebox was silenced, and the wait staff poked around walls to see what occurred.

Calvin wiped his face with his napkin. "Please, give me your list, Birgit. I truly can't handle this much more. I'm sorry. I can't stand the pain of this separation and living like we do. I'd rather be dead!" When he finished, the tears flowed freely.

She moved to the chair beside him and turned him around to hug him as she blinked back tears of her own. "It's okay, dear," she whispered. "Welcome home. I've been dying for you to wake up." She moved back, wiped his tears away, and kissed him.

It started with one person, but soon, all over the dining room, forks and spoons tapped glasses, and cheers and applause sounded from a few tables.

She kissed him again to appease them like it was a wedding reception.

The room returned to normal other than quite a few women touching them, offering congratulations as they passed the table.

"Question. If you've had no girlfriends, who inspired the last novel?"

"Me! It's all mine. And Barnaby and Millington say it's the greatest manuscript they've ever read. They said it would put me up there with Stephen King and Daniel Koontz. It would drive Calvin Westwood over the edge and into the light. However, they're worried about past sales and won't even give it a shot. They're worried it will break even or less and not turn a profit. And they won't budge. At least Barnaby won't. Rumor has it that Millington was the only one to vote for the novel going to press."

"Maybe Cassatt can budge them or get you into foreign publishers."

"She might, but I'm not counting on her. If you were on my side, I'd wait. But since it's her, I start to work editing for Meridian tomorrow. I'll help other writers make their start and idle while I wait for something to happen to wake them up. I know it will."

"Sounds like a good plan." She smiled silently, "Glad I made those phone calls this afternoon, she thought. You'd best get busy, Cassatt."

Chapter Seven

Birgit picked up the manuscript and put it in the trunk of her car. She drove to Brooklyn, met her delivery men on time, and made a woman very happy with her new dining room and bedroom results. She collected a healthy check for her work, a promise for another contract for the living room, and deposited it before she considered herself done for the day. It took five hours, and at four, she left a message for Calvin that she was going to Yonkers and might not make it back before midnight.

*

She sat on BlackBerry's deck, and for five hours, she did not rise from the chaise until nature forced her to move. She was halfway through, and *The Seventh Sail* was excellent, gripping, and powerfully written.

It boggled her mind why Barnaby would not pounce on it and let it be the smashing success it would be. If she were him, she would force the issue and let the board whine until their pockets were lined with gold and shut them up.

"Something's not right here." She flushed, fastened her shorts, and paused to wash her face and hands. She opened the door to find BlackBerry about to enter.

"What's up?"

"Just needed to get away and read Calvin's book. I made it halfway today. I'll come back tomorrow to finish it. Meet me in the living room when you're done? I want to yak a bit before I split for home."

"Be there in a second," BlackBerry said, closing the door.

Birgit was on the phone as Cassatt when she entered the living room.

“Truly, it is brilliant. It boggles my mind why Barnaby won’t assist you, monsieur. Something stinks, like a baby’s diaper, when he makes a mess. And it keeps stinking until you change it.”

“Yes, I know it’s a good analogy, monsieur. This is difficult to ask, but have you had any affairs? Have you dallied with other women’s bodies besides your wife? Why do, I ask? Well, I’d like to accept you as a client. You will owe me nothing unless I get *The Seventh Sail* published. That is good, non? Okay. Please post me a copy of your contract and this delicate matter. I want a list of your girlfriends. Names, phone numbers, last known address, and age. No, I don’t hold that against you. I just assumed you are like any man. You can set limits, but eventually, temptation will wear you down, and the deed is done. I don’t want to meet you unless you’re about to sign a contract with me and have your wife with you to keep you straight. Like a messed diaper, something stinks about this deal, and I want to change it if I can, monsieur. And if I can’t, then we’ll go to foreign publishers, and hell with S-Brand, non? Okay. Thank you, monsieur Calvin. When I get it, I’ll have my investigator proceed with it. Au revoir.”

She disconnected.

“Excellent,” BlackBerry said. “You’ve made about six calls and a lot of progress. Usually, the men are about fifteen calls by now and banging their heads against the wall. What’s going on? Fill me in?”

“He took me to dinner last night. He broke down and cried over events that happened over the last few weeks. He wants to get back to me as girlfriend, mistress, and wife. The manuscript I’m reading is the one he mailed to Cassatt. I’m halfway through, and it’s truly brilliant. I’ve only found two things that need more concentration to improve it. I see it’s like a Stephen King blockbuster, and Barnaby won’t risk it. Something’s wrong, and I need help changing it or blowing it out of the way for him. So, pretty woman, do you know any reliable private investigators?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. My brother, Big Elk. I’ll give you his number before you leave. Tell him I sent you; you’re part of my family now. He will charge you, though. He’s a capitalist.”

“No problem.”

“Lay down on your stomach.”

“Why?”

“So, I can give you the massage you want before you leave.”

“Thanks a million.”

“You have the house to yourself the next few days, girlfriend.” I’m going north to Albany to visit my sister.”

Basheer chirped. “Sister? Sun Flower? Big tits. Big tits. Love Sun Flower.” Whistle. “Little Woman, Big Tits. Love it!” Whistle.

“Yes, you horny varmint.”

Birgit giggled. “Is she that attractive?”

“She is to Basheer. And sweet incorrigible sister that she is, she encourages him. After fifteen minutes in the same room with them, it’s enough to gag you.”

Whistle. “Heaven is just a sin away. Expose your tits, Sun Flower, and Basheer will take you to paradise.” Whistle.

“Strong-willed parrot,” Birgit said.

BlackBerry’s hands worked up and down Birgit’s back. “What you got planned? Would you like to share with me?”

“I want to learn who his girlfriends were and if any are related to the Board of Directors of S-Brand Publishing. I also want to see the dollar figure of budgeting for promoting the last three books compared to the first four books. I see something wrong here. If I were Barnaby and knew the quality of this book, I’d have to say, ‘Damn the board. I’m the president and CEO and must do what’s right here.’

“The inaction is inconsistent with the potential of this novel to have so many people praise Calvin Westwood as they do other famous writers. It would push S-Brand so far over the edge financially and literature-wise that it’s pitiful. It would give

the third-rate publisher a goldmine that they need to move them up a notch. Movie directors would demand rights to make movies of his books, not dragging their feet like now. It's idiotic to me. I don't understand, but I want to dig into their logic until I find the grub, sprinkle some salt on him, and watch him die in misery. Can you dig it?"

"I can dig it. Is this sufficient?"

"It is. Thanks a million."

BlackBerry delivered the card with Big Elk's number and address. "Good luck, honey. Drive carefully."

*

Birgit entered her apartment and found the living room, dining room, and kitchen empty. "Rats," she muttered, mixing a drink to take to her bedroom. She knew he was home in his bedroom but resisted joining him.

A knock on her door awakened her, and she opened the door in her underwear again.

"I waited for you until I crashed last night. Are you okay?"

She returned to her bed. "I'm fine. Come on in. It's okay now."

She pulled the sheets to her waist, and he sat on the side of her bed.

"This Cassatt woman's starting to bother me."

"How? She wants to sleep with you?"

"No. But she wants to accept me as a client, without pay, unless she can move S-Brand to publish number eight or have a foreign publisher do it. She wants to know who my girlfriends were and a lot of other information."

"Isn't that the point? Isn't publishing the goal?"

“Normally, but under the circumstances, I’m beginning to see what Cassatt’s getting at. She’s so remarkably like you, kissy face. Something’s wrong with S-Brand, and she wants to tear into them. Fix what’s wrong with them to help me or force them to set me free so I can go elsewhere. You know?”

She smiled. “Kissy face? Haven’t heard that pet name in years. You’re free to do that now. Touches, hugs, kisses, pinches, teasing, everything except foreplay and sex.”

He kissed each cheek, her forehead, her nose, her chin, and both sides of her neck. And he pinched her left nipple through her bra.

She was delighted he did that and never let his hands stray to her exposed skin.

She sighed luxuriously and kissed him. “Let her do it if she wants to, so long as you don’t get into her pants. More power to her. I’ll help her all I can to help you.”

“Okay. I’ll do what she wants. I just want you to know what she wants. I don’t want to screw up now that I’m close to having you in my life again, as you should be. You know?”

“I know. What time is it?”

“Ten in the morning. I have to be at work in an hour.”

“And I have an appointment in an hour and a half. Thanks for waking me. Missed appointments really piss people off, you know? Please go now so I can shower and dress.”

“Okay. I’ll leave a carry-out breakfast on the table for you, kissy face,” he said, sticking his hand between her legs and pressing her hard. “Will you please give me your list tonight? I want to get back into your life something fierce.”

She gently shoved him away. “Okay. I’ll do that for you. Go now so I won’t tempt you.”

*

Birgit met her appointment, completed the job, and deposited the money. She made five preliminary appointments for the next three days and headed for Yonkers. She sat on BlackBerry's deck and finished the manuscript.

"Damn, you're good, Calvin, and I'm motivated to help you. Now it's time for action."

She got the card and her cell phone and wandered barefoot around the damp grass in the backyard while she called Big Elk.

"Hey, Big Elk, this is Birgit Westwood calling. Your sister, BlackBerry, says you're the best investigator around, and it happens that I need one right now. When and where can we meet?"

"Where are you now?"

"In your sister's backyard, where I just finished reading a rejected manuscript, which is part of the reason for hiring you."

"I thought she was visiting Sun Flower?"

"She is, and she took Basheer and Brave One with her. She said to tell you I'm part of her family here right now. She gave me a key and told me to come anytime as family instructions."

"In that case, I'll stop by her house in about an hour to discuss what services you want. Her backyard is a wonderful place to relax your soul and talk about anything."

Big Elk was handsome, but at first sight, he could appear rough and intimidating. He sat beside her on the deck and listened to her requests.

"Most of that will be simple. Checking the women could be difficult since people are so mobile these days. That could take some time. And connecting them to board members will also be a challenge. However, since you're family, I'll do it for you. Just

exercise patience and let me know if anything unusual happens once I start, which will be tomorrow. Private Investigators often make people very nervous.”

“Thanks a million. I have not asked yet, but what do you charge for something like this? Do you want a retainer?”

He grinned at the question. “Did she tell you I’m a capitalist?”

“Yes, and that’s fine with me.”

“Five hundred would be a good start. I keep meticulous records of my time spent on your case, and I’ll give you a bill with a family discount, which will probably require a home-cooked meal. Is that reasonable?”

“Very reasonable, so I’ll make it six to start.” She got her checkbook from her purse.

“Are you using Kanji?”

“Yes.” She handed him the check. “I haven’t used it much because my husband got slapped down and hurt, and he started coming back to me on his own. Why do you ask?”

“Did she tell you it could be dangerous?”

His question made her wary. “She did. Is there something I should know that she didn’t tell me?”

“Probably not. I don’t trust things I don’t fully understand. I prefer the ancient American Indian ways, not electronic and made in Japan or China. I worry about her sometimes. She’s still my sister and full-blood Apache, but she meddles too far in the white way of life, which bothers me sometimes.”

“Well, if things go well, as they seem to be, I won’t be using Kanji much more. I don’t see how it could be dangerous, but I’ll take her and your word for it.”

“You won’t pass this on to her? She doesn’t like her family worrying or nosing around about her behind her back.”

“No problem. Has Kanji backfired before?”

“Once. A husband was trying to reconcile with his wife. She made an appointment to meet him, and when she did, she killed him before she realized it was her husband. It’s been idle for about six years. That’s why I had to ask and ask you to be careful. It’s tough to collect money from dead clients, you know.”

She laughed at his humor. “That sounds like Basheer logic. Thanks a million, Big Elk. I’ll call when I get his contract and list of girlfriends.”

*

Cassatt was nearly hysterical at the time. Her internal demonic temperature was 1000, and she took control of her return to normal inside the frozen ice cloud. “Thank you so much, Birgit Westwood. You have made my life wonderful again. You’ve given me a future. For that, you will be richly rewarded. I guarantee that.”

Chapter Eight

Birgit made it home before Calvin. She turned on her computer, called up her ‘Must Show Me’ list, and erased the last eight items, leaving only two. She printed it, folded it in quarters, and tucked it in her shirt pocket. She checked her e-mails and noticed one she did not understand.

She opened it to read, “Thanks so much for your help. I truly appreciate it. Be seeing you soon. It’s been too long. Cassatt Lyon.”

She opened the message further to check the headers and delivery path. They were all blank. “What the hell?” She closed it and deleted it, but she felt an ominous sense of dread. “Haven’t used her name in any e-mails to anyone. How did that happen?”

She finally dismissed it and shut her computer off. She left the door open and took a nap until Calvin woke her.

“What do you feel like tonight? Want me to make some sandwiches and we’ll share a bag of chips?”

“Sounds great to me,” he said, following her to the kitchen.

“How did your first day go?”

“It went rather well. I enjoyed it, but I had to watch myself and keep from editing with my own ideas. It’s different editing somebody’s work instead of writing it yourself. However, I’ve learned from you, and I’ll use your past training wisely and do a great job for Dasher.”

“Great.” She set the sandwiches on the table as he got the chips. “And here is what you want.” She handed him her list.

He opened it and read it. “One. Must show that I’m free and clear of any sexually transmitted diseases. No problem. That’s wise and good. Two. Must show if I have children that would entangle us in child support payments or that I’m clear in that area also. That’s it?”

“That’s sufficient. I eliminated the other eight because of what happened over the last few days. No need to drag it out or cause you more humiliation. That crying scene at O’Reilly’s Pub was enough to express that you still deeply love me and want to be a part of my life again. I’m not wicked enough to hurt you further. Know what I mean?”

“I do. So, who’s your friend in Yonkers?”

“She’s BlackBerry. An Apache Medicine woman. She gives great back massages. We hit it off as fantastic friends on the day you got canned. I considered having her brew up some formula to get you back into my life but never got that far. You came on your own. So, what’s up with Cassatt?”

“I sent the contract and the girlfriend’s names and when I had them, etcetera. I’ll have to be patient until she gets back to me. Hope it’s soon, but I doubt that it will be. Now, I’ll work on your list to get that cleared. Thanks, love.”

She cleared the table. “You’re welcome, honey.” The name Cassatt had reminded her of the strange message. “Let’s go to the balcony and relax for a moment. Do you mind?”

“Wonderful idea. It’s great to have you here. Really here instead of in your room and untouchable.”

She sat in a chair. “Well, I think I need to confess something here. Had a weird e-mail message from Cassatt, thanking me for helping her. I’ve never used her name in any e-mail message and the headers were all blank. That bothers me.”

“It should. I’ll ask her about that when she calls again.”

She sighed heavily and shook her head. “I hope this doesn’t piss you off too much, sweetheart, but there’s no need for her to call you again. I’m Cassatt Lyon, monsieur. BlackBerry has an electronic marvel that will change your voice. I wanted to talk to you, but I couldn’t. I wanted to read your novel, but you wouldn’t let me. Like you, I felt left out, and I used Cassatt’s voice to try and touch you. That’s why she sounds so much like me because it is me. You’ve been shafted and I’m damned sure going to find out why and correct it. Is that okay with you, monsieur lover?”

“You’re amazing. Yes, it’s okay with me. Again, I’m sorry about all this. Tell me, what did you think about the novel? Now that I know you’re Cassatt, I’m dying to have your critique.”

“It’s superbly written, darling. I only see two areas that could be strengthened. One is Captain Quillen’s ho-hum attitude about each sail. The first one alone would get on anyone’s nerves, and they’d hire a voodoo witch doctor to prevent the rest, even if they didn’t believe in them. He says he wants to avoid them, but he makes no effort to do anything until the last one. He needs to fight the second through the sixth vigorously, or simply give up after the second and let it be a short story.

“The second area is the seventh sail itself, where he smiles as he finally understands the way to stop the eighth one from happening. He’d be better off laughing insanely and gloating that he’s achieved a major victory and freed himself, as he watches the demon die from a demon chainsaw enema. Know what I mean? Why not let him jerk off watching what would happen?”

“You’re good and you’re right. Fleshing out his character would add a level of intrigue and make him more bona fide. How about sales? What’s your inkling there?”

“It would explode S-Brand Publishing into the number two spot in the marketplace instead of three and make Guild Press LTD very nervous. It would pull in so much money it would gag them all. You’d take your rightful place along with Stephen King and Daniel Koontz where you should be. It’s mind boggling to see them go ho-hum like Captain Quillen. Let’s just mosey on home for dinner. He’s a loser anyway. Unbelievable.”

“You’re really fired up about this, aren’t you?”

“Yes! Slapping you down is one thing. I could understand that and agree with it. Outright killing your career is another and it’s got me boiling now that I’ve read it. I’ve also got a private investigator working now. I’ll find the problem even if I must keelhaul each board member until I get a confession. Then I’ll have him apologize to the board and correct his error in judgment while I’m giving him a sea salt enema!”

“Wow! I’ll make the doctor’s appointment tomorrow. I can’t wait to be back between your legs, love. The other, well, you can go through my checking account. I don’t have anything there to hide. I’ve made no babies along the way. But I seriously doubt any of them would sign a statement about that. I don’t even know where they are now.”

“Big Elk will find them if they’re to be found. And, well, if condoms aren’t too humiliating for you, please get some until we see the results.”

“How about tonight?”

“You aren’t back yet, lame boy scout? I’ll be in my bed waiting for you.”

Cassatt dropped through the ceiling of BlackBerry’s home and studied the machine with blinking lights and dials. “So, you’re Kanji. They chose a nice voice for me. I’m sure my twin brother will like it when it starts working for him. Can’t keep him frozen forever, you know, Kanji.”

She passed her hands through the machine and studied its layout and circuits. “Simple.”

She adjusted two dials and flipped a switch. She turned the electronic speaker toward the night sky and flipped the final switch.

“Wake up, Pollock. Wake up, Pollock. Wake up, Pollock,” French Cassatt’s voice radioed into the sky.

“Most adequate,” Cassatt said, leaving the room as she came.

*

BlackBerry returned home near noon and opened her front door, carrying Brave One in one hand. Basheer was still in the back seat chattering about Sun Flower. Brave

One jumped around his carrier and braced himself against the cage bars and snarled ferociously.

“What’s this?” BlackBerry felt Skin Walker dance across her arms. “Something’s not right here.”

She sat Brave One’s cage on the porch step and returned to her car to open the trunk where she kept a .38 Special. She took two feathers from a now silent Basheer’s cage, tucked them behind her left ear, and returned to the step to open Brave One’s cage.

“Okay, Brave One. Seek and I’ll be right behind you.”

Brave One snarled and charged from the cage. He zipped through the living room, dining room and down the hallway. BlackBerry cocked the hammer and followed him slowly, checking each corner and everything she could see. Brave One stood with fore paws resting on Kanji’s room, growling.

She turned the knob and pushed the door open. Brave One snapped into the room and ran around the floor and leapt on top of Kanji, sniffing, and hissing. He finally stopped and turned to face her.

“It was here. Thanks Brave One. I can feel it too.” She eased the hammer down and clicked on the safety catch.

She listened to the message. “Wake up, Pollock.”

“I thought I explained the danger of messing with things you don’t understand.” She flipped down all the switches and shut Kanji off. “Let’s get Basheer and then give her a call. Thanks again, angel.”

*

The phone warbled and Birgit reached across Calvin to grab it. Her nipples dragged across his hairy chest, and it tickled her. She could not focus on the number, so she answered it with a yawn.

“It’s BlackBerry. What do you think you’re doing? I told you not to mess with things like Kanji and to use it judiciously. Why didn’t you listen?”

“I did. I have been to your house twice. I went through the living room, the sitting room to the deck. Other than the bathroom, I never went inside any other room, even when Big Elk came to visit me. There was no need to go anywhere else. And I’m no longer using Cassatt’s voice to talk to Calvin. We went through that last night.”

“Well, maybe I’ve been a little hasty. Someone did and used your chosen voice to send a wakeup call.”

“What was the message?” Birgit asked.

“Wake up, Pollock. Three repetitions a pause and then it repeated. I don’t know how many times it did before I stopped it.”

“Pollock? I’ve heard that name before. Think, brain. Where did it come from?”

Calvin stirred and checked the time. “We have to stop this heavy napping and waking late.”

“You’re right, honey, we do.”

“You’re sleeping with him? Man, you’re fast,” said BlackBerry.

“I know. Honey, who’s Pollock? I chose the name Cassatt from thin air, or I thought I did, but maybe I didn’t. Who’s Pollock? Does that sound familiar?”

Calvin closed his eyes. “You forgot my first book? The one no one would touch. The Gemini Demons. Cassatt and Pollock? No publisher had faith that it would sell. Why?”

“Oh, shit, now I remember! BlackBerry, we might have accidentally done a bad thing, even if was meant to be good. We could be in for a spot of trouble. No time to tell you the whole story now, but I’ll visit you after my last appointment today. Is that okay?”

“Fine with me, sister. See you when you get here.”

Birgit disconnected and kissed Calvin. “Thanks so much for last night. It’s so good to have you back with me. Do me a favor please, before or after you go to work?”

“What flavor? Strawberry, peach, or banana?”

“Mmm, peaches with cream. See if you can find that old manuscript and see what you wrote. See if anything parallels with what’s happening to us now and where the story will lead. Can you do that? And call me on my cell phone if I’m in Yonkers. Okay?”

“Of course. I’d be happy to assist my advocate.”

“Thanks a million. You’re the bestest,”

Chapter Nine

Big Elk had studied the Board of Directors of S-Brand Publishing. On the surface they appeared to be clean and honest people. No criminal background, or such. He had requests for information on the board and the women involved with Calvin on his web investigations site and waited for the results to trickle in. He reviewed the personnel list for S-Brand and concentrated on Melissa Snyder. There was little information on her. She had worked for the company as a receptionist/administrative assistant for several years, long before Calvin Westwood had joined them as a writer. He chose her for first contact and waited outside the office building for her to appear.

When she did, she looked much different than the photo he could find from her driver's license. The picture was drab, barren, but the woman herself was attractive.

When she passed him, he asked, "Excuse me, are you Melissa Snyder?"

She eyed him strangely. "I am. Who are you? Why do you ask? You're very large."

"I'm Big Elk. I'm an Apache Indian, but I'm also a private investigator."

"Really? Are you investigating me? Have I been naughty without realizing it? You want to handcuff me in a sensual situation?"

"I don't think so, but every company has eyes. Every company has ears. Every company has a brain. Every company has one person who is reliable, who is considered mundane compared to the board. It's someone who shows up for work every day, even if they're sick and pours their life into the company while acquiring poop for attendance."

"Mercy me!"

"I'm taking the chance that you are the eyes, ears, brain, and slave for S-Brand Publishing. If you are, it would make my job simpler. I could and will use the Freedom of Information Act to get what I want, but you could make it simpler."

She stopped and studied him then. “And why, if I am that person, would I want to make your job simpler? If you’re investigating someone or something that could destroy the company, I could make myself unemployed tomorrow. Rather foolish of me to do so, knowing the downsizing slashes of jobs and destruction of companies these days.”

“I seriously doubt that what I’m doing will damage S-Brand Publishing. It might even help them. I’m representing Cassatt Lyon, who is interested in Calvin Westwood’s contract. Do you know him?”

“I do. He’s very proud, arrogant and a womanizer. He thought he was on a roll, just didn’t know it was out the door. You’re representing Cassatt? She his recent bitch, or partner?”

“No clue. Why aren’t you married? You’re a beautiful woman. Marriage is still normal for billions of people in the world. Why not you?”

“Are we going to talk standing on the street all night? I’m hungry and I really don’t feel like cooking for myself this evening. Feed me. If I think I can help you without jeopardizing my job, then I might consider it. I’m bored, but I insist we talk about that over food. Is that okay with you?”

“Certainly. Where do you want to go? It’s your choice tonight.”

“Well, I’m in the mood for a Korean feast. They really know how to lay the food on you. Haven’t experienced that for a while. It might dent your wallet though. You up to it? Wan Jo’s is closest and the best in my book.”

“My client won’t mind if it helps her reach her goal. Do we walk or hail a taxi?”

“It’s around twenty blocks. Let’s use a cab.”

They were seated in the restaurant and Big Elk was astonished at the small food plates and bowls of rice that appeared at increasing rates until there was little room except for the charcoal grill in the middle of the table.

“So why aren’t you married?” he asked again.

“I’ve had several boyfriends, and the last two, well, they were serious enough to want to spend the rest of their life with me. They both bought me rings, proposed, and set a wedding date. I was thrilled to death.” She grew silent and then said nothing for a time.

“I know that men and women are different, and I’m thankful they are. It would be a boring world if all men acted like women and ditto if all women acted like men. We’re biologically and physically and mentally different for a reason. But it seems that men cannot fathom the pain women feel when they find the man who wants to spend his life with you, screwing another woman. I guess they think that their passionate pleas and explanations about why it happened will stop the breaking heart, stop the violation of trust, stop the shattering of the very foundation that is necessary for a marriage to exist. All it did was make me want to puke.”

“Okay. We won’t go further on that route. Sorry. Not all men are like that. I’ve been married twenty-two years and I never dallied with any young maiden, nor will I.”

The grill specialist arrived at the table and lit the grill in the center of the table and turned on the exhaust fan. He snipped bits of marinated beef with scissors and dropped them back into the bowl.

“I’m Sam Chun. Good to see you again, Melissa. It’s been quite a few weeks since you visited us.”

She cast a wary glance at him. “Do you know me?”

“Your female friends call you Melissa. I remember you. I like your smile, your laughter, your beauty.” He paused and blushed. “Sorry.”

He laid quite a few pieces of meat on the grill as Big Elk and Melissa watched him work.

“I don’t remember you,” Melissa said.

“Not unusual. However, I remember what brings joy to this place. Many people don’t appreciate our work, but you do. You’re always so happy here.” His hands used

long wooden chopsticks to turn the beef. He picked up one piece and held it before her lips.

“I remember, Melissa. She makes the place beautiful.”

She leaned forward with wrinkled brow and took the offered morsel.

She read his name tag. “Sam Chun? Is that right?”

“Yes.” He blushed, looked at Big Elk and straightened. “Sorry. Shouldn’t have said that or done that. Sorry. Maybe I’d better go.” He nervously filled the rest of the grill and handed them chop sticks to care for themselves.

“You don’t know him?” Big Elk asked.

“No, that was a total surprise.”

“So, what about Calvin Westwood? Is he a good writer? I’ve not read his novels. I usually avoid those kinds myself. However, I did read the last one that was rejected. I don’t understand why it was.”

“I’ve read them all. I even bought them, even the last three, and he signed them all. However, I don’t know why they slowed down in sales. He’s a brilliant writer. You start reading his novels and suddenly you look over your shoulder to see what’s lurking there. You must go pee, but you don’t want to because you might miss something or feel you might be slaughtered by something lurking in the commode. You sleep with the lights on for a week and dread placing your feet on the floor, fearing something will drag you under the bed to rape and massacre you. It’s awesome!”

“But you don’t like him?”

“I dislike him for the times he’s cheated on his wife. I don’t dislike his novels. I said he’s brilliant and I meant that. He’s also arrogant. He likes to belittle people if they aren’t writers or someone who can help him advance in life. He’s like the two men who had to stick their dick in some other woman and explain it away like it was insignificant. If it was insignificant, why even think about doing it in the first place?”

“So, all that aside, who in the company would want to totally crush his career?”

“What do you mean?”

“Forget his arrogance. That can change. Who would be jealous? Who would be angry with him for some other reason? Who would benefit at his career being destroyed?”

“Do you think that’s happening to him?”

“I do. So, does my client. What about you, miss innocent employee?”

She ate merrily in silence a few moments and then sat back to rub her stomach. “What do you want of me and what’s it worth?”

“I like you, Melissa. Do you have access to accounting data that won’t be flagged as unusual for you to review?”

“There’s little that I don’t have access to, and no one would question it unless it was a huge quantity or restricted data.”

“I’ve requested a lot of public data on the board members and Calvin’s girlfriends. What I’d like from you is the sales and promotion figures for all his novels. Something tells me that after the fourth, he started stepping out and stepped on someone’s toes and someone in S-Brand wants to see him dead where no publishing company will ever deal with him again.”

“Damn! That’s rather harsh! He’s a smart ass, but I don’t hate him that much.”

“Do you do, or type all the contracts?”

“I do. There’s only one other woman at S-Brand so far. She’s in sales and promotions. I do a lot of everything else. Is there a problem with that?”

“I think there is. I’ve delivered a copy of Calvin’s contract to my lawyers and I’m waiting for their finite reply. However, it seems that S-Brand agreed to publish every novel that Calvin offered, no matter what. And now they won’t. To me, that’s a violation of contract. They also assume copyright of the novels, in exchange for a large sum of money based on projected sales. They won’t in this case and that’s the second

violation of contract. We could act on this alone in court and we would probably win, but we, my client and I, want to ferret out the weasel from the hen house.”

“You’re kidding.” She closed her eyes and her hands typed in the air. After a flurry she stopped and looked at him. “That publishing clause is on page five, around the third to last paragraph on the page?”

“Precisely.”

“And on his, they agreed to publish every novel he presented?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not right. Not from what I’ve seen. I’ve done a few thousand of them and S-Brand has them by the balls before day one. They buy the poor writers, and they never agree to publish even one novel. Are you sure?”

“I’ve reviewed the contract line by line and it’s there.”

“Well, right off hand, Big Elk, I’d say whoever put that clause in the contract thoroughly screwed up. So, given the information I’ve learned, let me do some digging and I’ll get back to you the day after tomorrow. I might meet you here for a replay. Hope your client doesn’t mind.”

“She won’t. Also, if it helps you, his wife is getting back together with him. I did learn that. They’re learning forgiveness for past sins. He approached her and begged for reconciliation.”

“Wow! Will miracles never cease? Thanks for this evening. Please give me a card so I can call you. What’s next after that?”

“After that, I’ll compare all the data against the women he dated at the time. I doubt that it’s beyond the fifth novel or the third girlfriend, that something significant happened. Whatever that was, real or imagined, it caused a plot to destroy him at all costs to the company. I’m sure I’ll be able to tie in one of the women to someone on the board of directors. If I can’t, then I need to retire.”

“Interesting. I’ll do what I can for you. Thanks so much for enlightening my boring life.”

Sam Chun returned to the table to inquire if the meal was satisfactory.

“Of course,” Melissa grinned and glanced at his left hand. There was no trace of a wedding ring. “You have a girlfriend or wife?”

He blushed. “No. Sam Chun is single.”

“Why?”

“Never find truth in women. Only lies and seeking pleasure with other men.”

She patted his hand. “I can understand that. Keep up the faith in women. Somewhere there’s a true woman waiting for you.”

*

“I’m sorry,” Birgit said again. “I never thought of this happening.”

“You’re forgiven, girlfriend. It was just a surprise to find my home violated. I know now that it wasn’t your fault. It was mine for loving you and wanting to help you. I let myself go unguarded, but now I can’t.”

“You want the key back?” Birgit offered.

BlackBerry hugged and kissed her. “That stays with you as does the open invitation as a family member. I’ll deal with this intrusion and never worry about you, honey. I’m truly sorry that I blasted away at you. I knew there was a risk in what I did, but this is something that’s out of our control, for the moment anyway.”

“Let me return some kindness,” Birgit said and led her toward her bedroom. “Let me give you a massage.”

“Okay,” BlackBerry said and lay face down on the bed.

Birgit removed her shoes and socks and kissed her feet. “You have beautiful feet,” she said and began her massage from there. She ended by stretching out on top of her. “I never paid attention to myself or to other women before you happened to me. Did you know that?”

“I had no clue. Mmm.”

“Well, I didn’t. There’s so much perfection in you that you’re nearly like one of Calvin’s novels. It scares you, it quickens your pulse, but you keep turning the pages anyway. You must!”

She pulled her feet up along BlackBerry’s legs as far as she could and slipped her hands under her breasts. “Thanks for caring about a life that was ready to self-destruct. Turn over. I want to feel your muscles working while I’m lying on you.”

“I’ll eventually get to the end of this novel, but I’m a slow reader. I want to love you and wake up in the morning in your arms. Shut up, Basheer.”

Chapter Ten

BlackBerry bid her companions good night and dressed in her favorite pajamas. Near two in the morning, she woke with a migraine and heard Kanji talking.

“Wake up, Pollock,” it repeated.

She started to sit up when she noticed that her bedroom door was open. “What’s up with that?”

The sheets were jerked down, and huge hands grasped her and threw her across the room. Her closet doors caved in from the force of the collision with her back.

“What the hell?” She shouted and flung clothes helter-skelter in her struggle to get out.

“Hell? Yes! Cassatt is your hell! I’ll personally fling you there tonight, evil bitch! Detestable, vile warrior!”

Hands grabbed her again and jerked her from the closet. She hit her dressing table face first and the mirror shattered as her body knocked everything to the floor. She rose to her knees and locked on the open door.

“Get out!” she screamed internally. She bolted for the hallway and through the dining room, intent on opening Brave One’s cage. She could hear him howling with rage and ready for action.

Cassatt caught up with her by the sofa and kicked her in the back.

She stumbled and slammed into the wall. She saw stars and her ears rang like crazy. She turned and got to her knees to see the shimmering form prepared to kick her again.

“Whoa! Please whoa!” She threw up her hands in desperate surrender.

“Stop! I’m overwhelmed, and I can’t fight you. No need for either of us to die here tonight. Please, let me go! I surrender! I’ll take Basheer and leave the linsang.”

“You will?” Cassatt hissed.

“I will.” BlackBerry wiped her mouth and tasted blood. She glanced at Brave One who whimpered and stared forlornly at her. “I know. It’s okay. You’ll hibernate when you’re not fed and sleep a long sleep. You’ll not suffer as Basheer would.”

She turned to the demon. “Let me use the bathroom and change clothes. I’ll take Basheer and leave. Wake Pollock for whatever reason. I’m going back to the reservation. I’ll stay there until I die. You have my word on that.”

“I’ll accept that condition.”

“You’ll be sorry come judgment day,” BlackBerry said and stood.

“You have no clue!” Cassatt screamed.

“Oh, but I do. You and your kind will be sorely disappointed, but for now, press on with pride. I’m out of here.”

She used the bathroom without turning on the lights because she did not want to see her face. She went to her bedroom and turned on the lights there to find her choice of clothing. She pulled on her socks and shoes and returned to the living room, where Cassatt waited to watch her leave.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“You’re a woman of your word, and Cassatt is a demon of her word. However, spiritual warrior, I know you and your record. It pleased me to hear you grovel for your life, and willfully agree to extinguish the evil linsang. I know you bonded with him, and it must hurt his spirit to know you’re going to let him die so you can live. Nonetheless, I guarantee I will not be inclined to do this again. Stay out of my business. The next time there will be no reprieve. You’re dead when we meet.”

“Agreed, Cassatt.” She got a box of feed for Basheer, clipped her cell phone to her belt and gathered Basheer’s cage. She paused at Brave One’s cage where he still stood and whimpered. “It’s okay, sweetie. You’ll do just fine. You won’t suffer long. In fact, you won’t suffer at all. Realize I still love you. Good bye my friend.”

She drove to the interstate and headed south and then west. She felt Cassatt follow her for a few hundred miles before she went away. She pulled off at the next rest area and parked as far as she could from the other cars. Her hands trembled as she dialed a number on her cell phone.

Falling Snow picked up the receiver as she looked at the clock. “Why would anyone call us at five in the morning? I have a bad feeling about this. Hello? Who is this?”

All she heard was sobbing and wailing. She switched on the light and focused on the Caller I D. “BlackBerry? What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“I need my brother! Please?”

She woke Big Elk and handed him the phone. “BlackBerry’s crying something fierce. Something dreadful has happened. Talk to her.”

He could get no conversation for her tears and whimpering so he finally sang her a lullaby in the Apache language. That served to calm her down.

“Thanks, brother. I needed that.”

“Good, now, what’s wrong?”

“Don’t go to the house again. It’s not safe now. I got evicted tonight. Got my ass kicked by some powerful demon named Cassatt.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m alive. That’s about all I can say for the moment. I know Sun Flower won’t visit me any time soon, but I have to warn you. You can tell her.”

“What about your extended family, Birgit?”

“Leave her alone. She’ll be alright for the moment. They won’t bother with her. She’s not a threat.”

“Where are you headed?”

“To the reservation. I need to get hooked up with the Women’s Medicine Circle. Cassatt scared the shit out of me, brother. Far too powerful for me. I couldn’t cope with

her. If I hadn't surrendered and begged for my life, I'd be dead right now, kicked through the living room wall with a two-by-four stuck through my dead body."

"And you think Birgit can hold her own against that? You sound delirious, sister!"

"I'm certain she will. She's a good scrapper and tenacious as a bulldog, as if you haven't learned that by now. With the Women's Medicine Circle behind her, she'll do very well. Cassatt will amuse herself and underestimate her true nature until it's too late."

"Do you know her that intimately?"

There was a pause before the answer. "Don't go there, brother! Don't make me bust on you! It won't do either of us any good."

"Sorry. A big brother must worry about his siblings. Promise me you'll call when you reach the reservation."

"You can bank on that promise, Big Elk. Thanks so much for putting up with me."

*

She dried her eyes and opened her glove compartment to get her old leather pouch. She shuffled through a small stack of business cards and removed one with a faded number on the back. She was much calmer when she dialed the number for a hotel near Fredericksburg, Maryland.

"Hello, Rachel? This is BlackBerry. I promised myself I'd never use this private number, but circumstances make it provident to do so. Sorry to bother you at this hour, but I need a room. I probably won't be there until around eight or so and I'll be exhausted. Can you give me the room number and leave the door unlocked for me? That would help me greatly. Again, sorry for bothering you so early."

“Sure, my darling friend. We have one room empty. Room 11. I’ll make sure it’s unlocked for you and leave the key inside. Don’t worry about waking me up early, sister. We’re all a part of one body anyway. Look forward to seeing you again.”

BlackBerry disconnected and started her car. She checked the fuel gage and sighed at it being nearly empty. “Glad that someone’s watching out for you,” she whispered and drove to the gas lanes.

An attendant approached her door. “How may I help you?” Then he noticed her face. “Damn! What happened to you? Do you need medical help?”

“A request for a divorce turned nasty. Do you have an employee only restroom? I’d really prefer not going over there in public. Can you dig it?”

“We do.”

She took out a \$50-dollar bill from her purse and handed it to him.

“Fill the tank, keep the change, keep your mouth shut about me, and give me the key to the restroom and directions. Fair enough?”

“You got it, Miss.” He unhooked his key ring and handed it to her with the key already sorted. “It’s in the office, behind the counter. Help yourself, and good luck.”

She returned and got into her car after she returned the ring. “You’re so kind.”

He winked. “You’ve got a 5 gallon can of gas in your trunk, my company’s bonus for being our millionth customer. Hope you don’t need it, but it’s there if you do. Have a better life without the scum.”

She drove on until she reached the hotel and collapsed onto her bed at eight thirty.

*

Melissa went to work the following day, and at her first opportunity, she called up Calvin's contract that she had stored on her computer. She scrolled down to page five and read the standard "No Guarantee" of publishing clause.

"Hmm," she sighed. "Why would Big Elk lie about that? Something stinks here. Where would his signed contract be held? It could have been modified afterward, after I printed it out, but why and by whom?"

She called Josette in Sales and Promotions. "Hey, Doll Face. Would you know where signed contracts are kept? I have an electronic version, but there seems to be a quandary about Calvin Westwood's contract. I've had two different people question it. I see what I have on my word processor, but what I have doesn't match what they're reading. I'd like to see the original signed contract if I might. Can you help me there?"

"Help you? Of course, I can help you. I know where they are. I'll locate it and get with you after lunch. Is that fine?"

"Thanks."

Next, she pulled up accounting records for Sales and Promotions. She reviewed the first four novels from Calvin and the dollar figure staggered her.

"Four hundred thousand? For sales and promotions? That took a lot of balls or a lot of faith," she whispered. Then she called up the last three. Again, the figure was four hundred thousand dollars.

"This is the same allotment. And they flopped. What am I missing here?"

She went back to the first four and tasked the computer for allotted figure versus actual figure spent. The first four were budgeted at close to \$400 thousand dollars each and went ten percent over. The last three would not return a percentage. They returned a figure of \$40,000 spent on novel five and six, and "\$20,000 on novel seven."

"Oh, shit! Three-sixty, three-sixty, three-eighty with no obvious promotions like the first four. They could go over budget and for good reason. Huge profit margin. But the last three? Why the decrease in the promotion budget? On the surface that's what?

One million, one hundred thousand unaccounted for? Damn! That could get me killed. Does Barnaby know this? This is dangerous stuff. Maybe Big Elk will have to do this some other way.”

Her phone rang, and she jumped. She picked up the receiver warily. “S-Brand Publishing, Melissa Snyder speaking. How may I direct your call?”

“Josette here. You free for a moment?”

She breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “Yes. You’re not here yet?”

“I’ll be right up.”

Josette stepped from the elevator and laid a folder on Melissa’s desk. “I took the liberty of reading it. Someone in S-Brand took an enormous risk to get him published. Considering recent events, someone else took a whopping risk to kill him professionally. This is some dangerous crap. Are you sure you want to be involved?”

“Would you side with who’s trying to kill him or promote him?”

“With who’s trying to promote him. That only makes common sense for the company.”

“Would you say that in court?”

“I would. Like I said, though, this is dangerous. It also smacks you alongside of the head as being so wrong that it’s reprehensible. Is that the correct word?”

“It is.”

“Well, I replaced the original with a copy I made, and I don’t know what happened. Get this original to a safe place and let me know if there’s anything else you need. I’ll pull the stops on this one. It’s so stupid that it’s unbelievable. I mean, duh! Here I am. Come and shackle me. Duh! Pretty please?”

*

“Wonder if BlackBerry made it in yet?” Rachel asked Carl, her husband. “I unlocked the door when I first got out of bed.”

“Don’t know, dear. Go check.”

She opened the door and checked the parking spaces to her left. “She’s here. At least her car’s here. Should I risk checking on her? Her phone call really worried me.”

“Please do, sweetie. It’ll stop you worrying anyway.”

Rachel knocked on the door without a response, tried the knob and found it still unlocked. She pushed the door open and saw BlackBerry sleeping. She closed the door, pulled the curtains open slightly and approached the bed.

“Oh my gosh!” she gasped and gently shook her. “BlackBerry. I’m sorry to disturb you. Are you okay? What happened? I think you need to see a doctor.”

BlackBerry woke in a daze and finally focused on Rachel. “I’m okay. I just need to rest a few days, and this is such a spiritual place to do that. Don’t worry about me.”

“Are you sure? You truly don’t look okay. What happened?”

BlackBerry moved the bloody sheets aside and sat up on the edge of the bed. “Some irritated demon happened and kicked my butt bad. I’ll be alright.” She stood and took two steps toward the bathroom before she collapsed face down on the floor.

Rachel grabbed the phone and pressed 9 until Carl answered. “Call 911 for an ambulance and get over here right away. We’ve got a serious problem with our friend.”

*

It was near six o’clock when BlackBerry woke. The first thing she saw was Rachel sitting beside her hospital bed, holding her hand.

“Most excellent,” Rachel said and reached across the bed to press the nurse call button. “I’m so happy to see you open your eyes. You’ve nearly checked out of the world twice today. I’ve been praying you though, dear.”

“Thanks, friend. I feel like a truck hit me.”

Two nurses entered the room.

“She’s awake and alert. Get Dr. Greene here stat.”

One nurse left and one checked BlackBerry’s vital signs. “Much improved over what you had when you came here. You’re one mighty lucky woman.”

“Wonderful.”

The door opened, and Dr. Greene came in. He checked the current vital signs and was pleased. “Where did this happen?”

“In Yonkers, New York.”

“And you drove all the way to Frederick, Maryland alone?”

“I did. I had no choice. Why?”

“Well, you have three serious concussions. Any one of them should have killed you instantly. That you lived and drove here without dying is nothing less than a miracle. The two minor heart attacks you’ve had only added to your problems. And you took two pints of blood. You’re either richly blessed or truly damned lucky. Who did this to you? I’d like to see criminal charges filed.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“I’ve witnessed some bizarre events in this hospital, Miss. Try me.”

“A demon who was upset that I wanted to stop her from waking her twin brother. I didn’t know how much I was hurt. I just knew in my heart that if she kicked me again, I would have been dead on the scene. That’s why I begged, and groveled for my life, and it worked, this time.”

He gripped the hand that Rachel did not hold. “Then you’re blessed. I’ll keep you here for the night to assure myself that you’re okay and then I’ll let you go. Take care and avoid that demon in the future if you can. It isn’t good for you.”

“Thanks Rachel. I guess I’ve drifted too far from my Catholic upbringing.”

“It happens to the best of us. Would you like me to hook you up with a local priest to give you confession and absolution? I can do that for you tonight and I guarantee he’ll be here tomorrow morning if you make it through the night.”

“Please do that. It’s nice to have Christian friends lurking around every corner. Thank you so much.”

Chapter Eleven

Birgit kept all her appointments and closed on all five. She faxed in her orders and prepared a schedule as she made several phone calls to BlackBerry and only received the answering machine. It bothered her after three days, but she had little time to worry about it with her business and Calvin.

His doctor had returned a clean bill of health for sexual diseases. She had gone through his check registers for the last five years and there were no payments at all to any of the women he was involved with. Based on that, she let go her requirements for condoms and truly enjoyed her renewed relationship. She refused to go to Yonkers and get involved with BlackBerry, her one weakness. She practiced patience and enjoyed Calvin's passion as he worked to help other writers and began to rewrite *The Seventh Sail* with her recommendations.

Her present dilemma was Big Elk's Answering Service. She compared it to a steel corset and hung up the phone again.

Melissa met Big Elk and Falling Snow at Won Jo's and she even convinced Josette to join them.

The table was filled to overflowing and Melissa surrendered her package and information.

Sam Chun was at the table again to get the grill going. "Good to see you again, Melissa. Twice in a week is a nice treat."

"Yes, I like it when someone else foots the bill."

Again, he watched her face more than the others and when the first piece of beef was ready, he held it before her lips.

“Do you do this for anyone else?” she asked and caught the morsel with her teeth.

“No, only for the people I like. Only you. Sorry.”

He worked to fill the grill and turned to leave the table.

“Sam Chun, thank you. I’m glad you pay attention.”

“You’ve got a good thing here, Melissa,” said Josette.

“I don’t think so.”

“He only had eyes for you, drinking in your beauty,” Falling Snow added. “He’s bashful, but that’s not a problem.”

“Still, I don’t think so. Tell them what you’ve got, Josette.”

The conversation shifted to the figures Josette gathered.

Big Elk smiled and rubbed his hands. “This is great! Is this normal, Josette? The first four novels were a year apart, then two years before number five.”

“Some of it’s normal. If the company sees that it has a winner, they’ll encourage him or her to get three or four in the distribution chain. Then they’ll take a break. If the writer is good, that will only whet the readership’s appetite, so when the next one is finally announced, you’ll have diehard fans camping out in parking lots to get the first book. There will be publicized fights, shootings, etcetera to get the first book from store x. It’s a good ploy, gets tons of free publicity, and it works well.”

“And the over \$400,000 budget?”

Josette waved a hand to dismiss the worry. “Not a problem, sir. Consider that Calvin’s first novel peaked at an \$11 million return and then trickled after that. It’s still selling today and picking up new fans. Would you begrudge an over-budget advertising plan?”

She paused a moment to let it register. “Then add another \$5 million, \$9 million, and \$6 million in the next three books. You spend \$1 million and some change to get \$31 million in your pot that’s still filling? That’s the brilliance at work, not waste. Why

on earth would you want to stop him? Except for pushing your envelope of returns to \$10 or even \$15 million when the next one is released. It might sound crazy, but it's a solid and credible sales tool. It works flawlessly if the writer is good. It can't fail, and Stephen King has proved it repeatedly. Even when he was injured and couldn't write, readers still demanded and begged for him."

"Is that all? This sheds a whole new light about publishing."

"There's more," Josette said. "I know that there are movie negotiations going on for the first two novels. S-Brand is pushing and bickering for 25 percent of ticket sales. Consider that over the primary push of big screen releases for one novel turned movie, you can conceivably pull in 20 percent of \$90 to \$120 million dollars. Would you turn around and shoot the writer? Might sound small, but it's around \$18 million and nothing to ignore. Plus, it's free advertising for the next novel or movie."

"Wow," said Falling Snow. "Never considered writing as big business before."

"Ditto," said Big Elk.

"So, can you see what a precarious position you're placing us in?" Josette asked. "People will fire you for stealing \$10 or a pack of cigarettes. What will they do for a million or more?"

He understood and empathized with their worries. "I appreciate your concern here, but I approach my tasks with a lot of spirituality, and I can't see anyone killing you or destroying you or S-Brand in this matter. I consider that whoever did this, concocted this plot, will have his or her ass in a bind so quickly when it's brought into the light of day that they'll be overwhelmed and simply surrender to authorities."

Josette nodded to Melissa. "What he says makes sense. For me, that's good enough. How about you? I say we go for it. I don't think the board has a clue of what's going on behind the scenes. There's a huge communication breakdown and if either of us or both together expose it, it would be their salvation and might even net us a huge promotion if Big Elk adds his unwanted opinion."

"Okay. Count me still in. What else do you have going on, Big Elk?"

“Well, one sore spot is Shallson. I can’t find any trace of her. His first fling was Ingrid and it lasted around six months. His second was Shallson Petri and I can’t find anything on her. She’s not licensed in any state’s Motor Vehicle system. Preliminary requests show nothing in the way of a Social Security Number or green card number. She’s a mystery woman who was then but isn’t now. Amazing, isn’t it?”

Melissa said, “I recall that name, but I can’t attach a face to it or remember where I know her.”

“The same goes for me. Shallson is an unusual name and that’s why I remember it,” said Josette. “Do you have a picture of her?”

Big Elk shrugged and looked blank. “Never thought to ask. Never found this problem before. Let me ask. Never overlook a long shot.”

He dialed Birgit on his cell phone.

Josette excused herself to visit the restroom and noticed that Sam Chun stood with several other waiters and waitresses, but he ignored them and watched Melissa all he could. She smiled to herself and walked past them to the restroom. On her way back, she paused and laid a hand on his shoulder.

He jerked and gasped.

“Sam Chun, do you like her that much?”

He blushed. “I think I could. Trust is hard. The last two girls brought me much pain. Don’t like butterflies. I want solid, only me in my woman’s life. Can’t find it. So, I’m afraid to try.”

“Well, I don’t think you’d have that problem with my friend. She’s been hurt the same way in the past. I’ll try to see if I can be your courage tonight.”

*

“Big Elk!” Birgit said. “It’s finally good to hear from you. What’s up with you and BlackBerry? Neither one of you wants to return calls. Is that a family tradition?”

“No, we’re just busy.”

“So, what are you up to?”

“A small mystery woman. Could you inquire if Calvin has any pictures of Shallson Petri? I’m having a most difficult time in finding anything on her. I was thinking that a picture might help.”

“I doubt it but hang on. Hey, sweetheart. Hate to ask you this delicate question, but did you ever take any pictures of your girlfriends?”

“No. Well, only one, Shallson Petri. I think I might have one picture strip of her and me in one of those instant photo booths like they have in malls. It was a spontaneous thing that she wanted to do.”

“Grand. Would you check for me now?”

“Might be able to help you with that, Big Elk. Calvin’s checking on it. Now, where’s BlackBerry? Out of town?”

“She is. She’s headed toward the Jicarilla Apache Reservation in New Mexico.”

“Wow! Long or short term? I’ll miss her and Basheer and Brave One. She told me I was special with those two guys.”

Big Elk closed his eyes and shivered when he heard that statement. “I don’t want to ask this, but I must. Did the linsang perchance bond with you?”

“He sure did. In less than three minutes on my first visit he bit me. Also, Basheer was in love with me. He flirted with me while I was in the living room.”

As nonplussed as he could, he said, “Please don’t ever advertise that or mention that fact after tonight. Keep silent about it. Okay? Please promise me that you will?”

“Okay. I promise that. Is something wrong with BlackBerry? I feel you’re acting strange, even though you’re trying to hide it.”

“I really don’t want to discuss that on the phone. Some things should never be discussed on the phone. Drop that whole subject for now.”

Calvin returned to the balcony with the strip of four pictures. They were slightly faded, but still revealing.

“Wow! I know this woman. Before she slept with Calvin, we were close friends, but her name’s not Shallson. It’s Sharon or Shannon. The argument was vicious, and I sort of blocked her out of my mind. She was number two. Is she still around? Has she ever called you, Calvin?”

“No. I don’t know where she is. She was secretive about her past and family. Haven’t heard from her since she called from San Francisco to tell me she wasn’t coming back to the east coast. Long distance breakup and I gave her clothes and all she left to the homeless.”

“Big Elk, I have her picture. She’s exotic. She’s erotic. She’s damned beautiful. I’ve met her, talked with her, loved every moment I spent with her, but I have no clue where she is. Where can I meet you to give them to you?”

“Where do you live?” he asked and opened his day planner. He jotted down the address and made an appointment at 5:30 P.M. the next day.

Big Elk disconnected and sat back to rub his stomach. “We have a photo of the mystery woman. Where can I meet with you, other than here to show you the pictures the day after tomorrow? This place is too rich.”

“O’Reilly’s Pub?” Melissa asked. “You know where that is?”

“I do. Excellent choice. This is great, but too much for every other night. I’d soon weigh so much I’d have to custom build a bed for me.”

Josette laid her arm around Melissa’s shoulder. “Look, friend, would you do me a favor? Before you leave the restaurant, give your name and phone number to Sam Chun. He’s idolized you all evening, but he’s shy. If you ever get past his shyness, you’ll have one wonderful friend.”

Melissa gaped at her. “I can’t believe you! Why don’t you leave well enough alone? I enjoy being single.”

“And so, does he. So, why not be single together?”

“You’re incredible.”

“I agree with her,” said Falling Snow. “He’s stood where he could watch you since he left the table. There’s a lot of feelings for you, but he is shy. I think it’s adorable. He struggles to get the words past his nervousness but can’t.”

“He’s just worried you’ll butterfly like his last one or two women,” Josette said.

“You asked him that?”

“Sure did. And he answered honestly. I love it. Give him your name and number. If he calls, fine. If he doesn’t, fine. At least for tonight, you’ll make him feel wonderful.”

Melissa closed her eyes and sighed. “Okay, I do think he’s nice, but I’m fine the way I am. However, to make him feel good, I’ll do that. You’re incredible, but thanks for being my friend.”

She moved with the group to the cashier’s counter where she picked up a business card and wrote her name and number on the back. She walked through the restaurant where he had turned with his back to her and tapped him on the shoulder.

He whirled, paled slightly, then smiled at her. “Did you enjoy the meal? You didn’t laugh too much tonight.”

“I’m glad you noticed. Tonight, was business.” She tucked the card in his uniform pocket. “You’ve got my name and number here. Call me and we’ll talk. Okay?”

“Possibly.”

“Good night. Thanks for liking things about me that I never notice about myself.” She winked and enjoyed his smile again.

*

Big Elk entered Birgit's door and turned down every drink offer except tea.

She handed him the four-picture strip and watched him closely.

He studied the photos silently. "I've seen her before. I know I have. Three women have talked to her, I've seen her, why can't any of us remember her?"

"I don't know. You asked. I delivered."

"Well, thanks. Maybe the other two will have a memory jog when they see this." He put it in his day planner.

"What about BlackBerry?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Do you have any chips? They help me focus and talk."

"Chips? Yes, come along to the kitchen."

He opened the bag and sighed again as he began munching.

"So, BlackBerry's going to a reservation. Why? What couldn't you discuss on the phone?"

"The linsang bit you?"

"It did."

"Then you bonded with BlackBerry?"

She stood swiftly and stared at him crossly before she turned her back to him. "Don't go there, Big Elk. You won't like what happens!"

He sighed again and asked her to sit down. "As much as I dislike it, it's probably the one good thing that you did for yourself and for her."

"Will you just tell me what's wrong? Cut the mystery and get to the point."

“If you see her again, it will probably be in the next world. I talked to her a few days ago. She never cries. On that day she was hysterical. She wailed like a mourning woman who’s lost an only child. I sang her an Apache Lullaby.” He paused a moment and cleared his mouth of chips with tea. “It also serves as a burial lullaby to help someone who’s mortally wounded to pass over.”

He lay the bag down. “Don’t know the details of what happened. She was so physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually distraught that she cried for thirty minutes before she could even speak.”

He seemed lifeless himself then. “I asked for a phone call when she reaches her destination, but I’m not expecting one. I said goodbye to her for probably the last time in this world.”

Birgit screamed, grabbed the bag of chips, and hit him. “No! No! You’re wrong! She can’t be dead. Why are you doing this?” She jumped up and rounded the table and started slapping him. “Stop it! You can’t do this to people!”

He grasped her flailing hands and held them as he put his other arm around her and hugged her. “I’m sorry. I truly am. I hope she calls you. However, this is a way of life for us. I can’t look forward to being with her again. The odds are too great. I’m sorry.”

“You can’t be right!” She moaned and sobbed and clung to him like she was dying herself.

He said nothing else but simply held her until she calmed down on her own.

“Was it Cassatt?”

“She said that! I realized when the conversation started that I had the duty as big brother to her and to you to determine what to tell you and what not to tell you. I must do that while I accomplish the other task to correct an injustice and save your husband. Neither one is proving easy now.”

“Okay, big brother.” Talk to me. Sorry for smacking you around.”

“That’s the least of it. I know you loved her, and she loved you. I knew it when you called from her house. There’s no escaping her pristine love. If it’s there for you, you revel in it and can’t wait for another helping. I just didn’t know what lay so soon for her or me or you.”

“There’s so much love in her spirit. Do you truly believe she’s dead?”

“If she’s not, then it will be a miracle, granted by the Great Spirit. Otherwise, I’d never have told you. That’s why I wanted to tell you in person.” He sat her on a chair beside him and sang her the same lullaby.

“Beautiful.” She wiped her eyes. “Didn’t understand a single word, but the soulful expression is clear enough.”

“Did she tell you about the linsang?”

She gripped one of his hands. “No, not really, other than it only bonded with special people.”

“Well, I guess I should tell you that. There are only four of them alive in the world today. One was with BlackBerry. One is with Swaying Lily, a Comanche medicine woman somewhere out west. One is held by Moshiri Narasaki in Japan. The fourth is held by Su Ling Yoon somewhere in Tibet, China.”

“Only four?” She took a napkin from the holder to blow her nose.

“Yes. The last four were matched with special people when they were born. Brave One lived, suckled from the same breast, slept with, shared his breath with, shared every moment of his life with BlackBerry.”

“She told me that when she dies, it will die.” She succumbed to another crying spell.

“True.”

“What was she?”

“A spiritual warrior.”

“What about the linsang?”

He stood without a response and thought, “Time to see her reaction.”

“I need to go. See you later,” he said.

“What about the linsang? Tell me!”

“Drop it. You’re not sufficient!” He turned to the door.

She jumped onto his back and locked her fingers into his hair. “Tell me! Tell me, dammit!”

He shrugged her off his back and shoved her across the kitchen.

“Forget about it. It’s too late now anyway.”

“What do they do that makes them so special?”

“You can’t handle it! They must be with you from birth!”

“Brother Big Elk!” She scrambled from the floor with a scream.

“I demand to know!” She ended with another charge at him. She hit his back and grabbed his hair again. “What do they do?”

He dislodged her again and grabbed her blouse. “You crazy woman! You can’t act responsibly and keep your marriage intact and you want to consort with linsangs? You’re a pathetic piece of shit! Damn it all!”

He shoved her again and she hit the refrigerator. He thought the rapid slide to the floor and the jar would be enough and turned his back on her.

“No one takes away what I love and keeps it! I got my husband back and I’ll get BlackBerry back if I have to charge into hell and rip the devil a new ass!”

She jumped on the table, grabbed her drink glass, smashed the top and kept hold of the bottom edges. She hit him hard, and he fell under the weight and viciousness of her attack and the glass cut his shoulder.

They both struggled to control the deadly glass until he had her pinned firmly underneath him and immobile.

“Drop the glass, woman!”

“Fine. What do linsangs do? What is their function in life?”

“When they’re trained like Brave One, they can take the most powerful demon ever created and turn them into a dead puddle of gelatin in a matter of minutes. And there isn’t a damned thing the demon can do to stop it once it starts! Because my sister got into your pants, she let her guard down! And when she did, the demon Cassatt, killed her! You aren’t even a close match. Let it go! Let go of the glass, you crazy-ass bitch! Damn, I hate using that word!”

She relaxed and dropped the glass to the floor. “So, you blame me for BlackBerry’s death?”

“I do, but my word is my bond, and I can’t back down. If I’d known what would happen, I’d not have taken on your other task.”

He grabbed her by the blouse again and dragged her back to prop her up against the kitchen sink. He wet a dish rag with hot water, knelt and wiped her face tenderly. “Better?”

“Sufficient. Thanks. Is getting you to answer a question always this difficult?”

He laughed, soaked the rag with soap and water, and slapped her with it. “No. I’m usually as likable as a stuffed animal.”

“Do you really think that’s what happened?” she asked and laughed herself. She handed him the rag and he rinsed it and washed her face again.

“I do, but now that I’ve got it out of my system, I can get over it. I’ll be over it before the scars you gave me heal.”

He put an arm around her neck, kissed her passionately, and let her go.

“I can see what she saw in you. You’re so much alike you could pass as her twin. She chose love well, though she shouldn’t have.”

“And she loves intensely. Like I fight. You’d better be glad I chose to stop.” She ended the outburst with another crying spell.

Calvin entered the apartment and then went straight to the kitchen. He saw Big Elk standing over Birgit who blubbered on the floor.

“What’s going on here?”

“I’m a private investigator she hired, but she doesn’t like what my investigation is revealing,” said Big Elk.

“Hold me,” Birgit pleaded.

Calvin sat beside her, and she clung to him and kissed him.

“You’re gross,” said Big Elk and took a napkin from the holder. He kicked her leg and gave her the napkin. “If you’re going to kiss him, have the decency to get rid of your snot first. That’s downright disgusting.”

She blew her nose, wiped her mouth, and threw it defiantly at him. “Satisfied?”

“Yes, thank you.” He turned to leave again.

“Hey, hotshot big brother,” she said and kicked him in the thigh.

“You want smacked around again? Isn’t one welcome to the family butt-kick enough?”

“One’s enough.” She grabbed the bag of chips and threw it at him. “Take your frigging chips with you. Don’t want cooties or crumbs.”

He grinned and tucked the bag into his pants pocket. “Thanks for today, Butter Cup. I’ll call you when I have anything concrete on Shallson.”

Calvin said, “She’s not Butter Cup! She’s Birgit.”

“Chill, husband. When someone joins an Apache family, they’re given Indian names. Butter Cup is a flower name. A very beautiful and delicate but rugged flower. It is charming to the eye, can be crushed with insensitive fingers, but can survive

hurricane strength winds. That describes her spirit very adequately. She's Butter Cup to this family, sir. I'd suggest you get used to it. Good day."

Chapter Twelve

Birgit spent the next few days finishing her contracts and she ignored four initial appointments with prospective new customers. She worked, hung out with Calvin, and waited for a phone call. She came home from shopping one day to find Calvin there.

“There’s a message for you that you might be interested in, sweetie. I’ll wait for you on the balcony.”

She hurried to the kitchen and pressed the play button. “One old message,” the machine said. “Hey, Birgit, BlackBerry here. I wanted to let you know that I made it to the reservation. Sorry I left without talking with you, but things happen fast when you least expect them. Don’t know exactly how to say this because we haven’t discussed spiritual matters and our Apache heritage, so, guess I’ll just say it and let you feel what you feel.

“I’m seriously hurt. I’m back in the Medicine Women’s Circle, but I don’t think I’m going to make it. Across this beautiful country, I’ve had two heart attacks and collapsed three times. Doctors look at me and say it’s a miracle I’ve made it from Yonkers to wherever I was.

“Sorry I can’t be more upbeat about this. I’ve angered many people over what I’ve done, but I don’t regret it. All that aside, I’ve made Crescent Moon promise to call you when I do pass through. I have Basheer with me. Brave One is in the house, waiting for me to die. Take care of him when you get the call. When that happens, don’t let your guard down in my house. Bury him and leave quickly. Don’t think about me or reminisce about events there. Accomplish your task and leave swiftly.

“You have a beautiful spirit, Birgit. One that I love sincerely. Promise to keep yourself alive, and my memory alive in your wonderful heart.

“Basheer is yours. I’ll make sure he gets to you when I’m gone. We’ll meet again someday, but not in this life.”

She started coughing and gasping for breath. “Sorry. Talked too much. I must go and rest now. I love you, Birgit. That’s forever. See ya.”

“End of messages,” declared the machine.

Birgit opened the refrigerator, filled a glass with cold iced tea without ice cubes, and went straight to the balcony. She sat numbly on the chaise and remained silent for a few moments as she felt Calvin feeling sorry for her.

“I know you’re hurting, and I’m sorry. What can I do to help you?”

He placed his glass on the table, moved behind her, and raised the back of the chaise to upright. When he rubbed her shoulders, she started crying.

“You’re too good to me, honey.”

“Is that why you were crying in the kitchen when Big Elk was here? You never explained or shared that thoroughly.”

“Yes. Big Elk blamed me for what happened. He said I was responsible for BlackBerry dying. She wasn’t dead, but he was certain she wouldn’t make it. That’s Apache Indian logic talking. Who am I to argue with what I don’t understand?”

“Still, that wasn’t your fault. What happens, happens, like my writing did with me. Anyway, that’s why I didn’t make any dinner for you. I figured you might be too upset. Is that okay? If not, I can make something for you.”

She laughed through her tears. “I’m so glad that I reconciled with you before this happened, lover. I’m not in the mood for food or sex, but your conversation, touch, and love are so wonderful to have at this moment.” She sat her glass on the floor and reached up to touch his massaging hands.

“What do I do now? Do I give her up like Big Elk or press on like Butter Cup? I’m no longer sure. Give me some husbandly guidance.”

“What to do? I recommend that you hold onto hope until hope is totally shattered by reality. No one, except for God, truly knows what will be. She can recover. She could die. She can spend the rest of her life in a coma. No one knows except for God, and

He's usually not inclined to tell you what's in store. If He did, you might do your best to change things and thoroughly screw up the most provident plan in the universe."

She sighed and laughed and stopped crying. "My darling husband, have you been going to church regularly?"

"Yes. How did you feel when you visited BlackBerry in Yonkers?"

"When I walked into her house, sat on her deck, and read your novel, it was like I was in paradise. All the burdens, worries, care, woes, anger, frustration, and every negative thing in my life stopped when I entered her front door. Paradise. That's what I felt when I visited her or her house, with or without her presence. Total acceptance. Total love. Purity so intense that it takes your breath away."

"Then you were in a place of immaculate love?"

"That's the best way to describe it."

"Then, my darling Birgit, let me forgive you for what you did with her."

"You think I slept with her?"

"I do. Otherwise, this immense distress is for nothing unless you're practicing being a professional mourner for some South American countries. It's okay."

"You're right. Did you ever consider I might start running with men?"

"I did. Your cleanness wounded my straying spirit, but at the same time, it brought comfort to my soul."

"Did that help you to change?"

"Yes. During my guilty periods, I considered myself fortunate to have a Christian wife who refused to shatter the marriage bond in kind like I did. And it finally stopped me. It grew to a constant ball-and-chain that finally dragged my cheating heart to a full stop. I didn't have the heart to keep hurting you. But shame over my sin kept me from asking for forgiveness. The loneliness and being dumped finally drove me to start talking to you."

She stood and hugged him. “Fetch me a napkin. You don’t need to kiss a snot-nosed punk like I am now.”

He pulled a napkin from his shirt pocket. “If you insist. Personally, I love you in whatever condition you are. Snotty, sweaty, bad BO, stinky feet, whatever. You’re my wife, and I love everything about you, good or bad. Will you start going to church with me starting Sunday?”

“Okay. Thank you so much. Didn’t the snot bother you even a little?”

“A little, but your comfort and security were paramount. Things like that can be overlooked. However, if it’s important to you and Big Elk, then I can make a change to love you differently, maybe even better, Butter Cup.”

“Again, your love is sufficient.”

“Since you’re not in the mood for food or sex, let me continue massaging you in bed, and I’ll hold you while you cry, talk about your fling with her, or whatever until you sleep. Is that a good deal or what?”

“The bestest deal. Thanks a million. Is it okay for me to take a break now? I’ve finished all the agreed contracts and ignored taking in four more. I need some time to slow down and heal. Are we okay for that?”

“We are. I told you that before. Rent’s paid for six months, we still have a tidy sum in the bank, as you should realize, and I’ll be getting paid soon. Relax. Unstress. We’re not close to welfare yet.”

*

Josette stopped by the bookstore to find another novel. She browsed the fiction aisle, where the books were arranged alphabetically by the author, and stopped to gawk at the name “Shallson Petri.”

“Unbelievable,” she whispered and checked the back cover. “Same as the pictures Big Elk showed us.” She opened the front cover to check the publisher. “S-Brand Publishing?” She felt her skin crawling. “This is too damned eerie.”

She checked the books under her name, collected all three titles, and went to the cashier.

“Are there any more books by this writer?”

The clerk turned to her computer and keyed in the name. “No. Only these three. They’re coded not to reorder. I liked The Golden Quill, but I don’t think she was all that popular. She was good but not good enough to make it in the publishing world. If you can’t make the publisher a buck, goodbye.”

Josette purchased them and hurried outside. She bought a coffee and a soft pretzel from a street vendor and leaned against a light pole as she called her friend. “Melissa, I found Shallson Petri. Three books, anyway. She was or is right under our noses. She’s a writer for S-Brand. Something solid to start with, anyway. I’ll have to check her contract in the morning.”

“Did you buy them?”

“Of course. I finished my latest book last night and was shopping for a new one. That’s how I found her. But it looks like she’s done with us. The store won’t re-order after the last one’s sold.”

“Bring me one tomorrow.”

“Right on, cheapskate. Did your man call you yet?”

“Not yet. I’m still in a holding pattern over the Lost Love Airport.”

*

Sun Flower answered the phone. “Hello, sister. How are you? Is there good news?”

“No. I’m not going to make it.”

“Big Elk took the train north to visit me and told me what happened. He also told me about you and Birgit. Why did you do that, sister?”

“Simply because we were there alone, and I have no clue why I was driven to do so unless it was a very crafty and sly demon.”

“Do you have no shame or compassion?”

“Please stop and get away from Birgit!” BlackBerry started coughing.

“When you tell me, I’ll stop. Do you know what’s going to happen to her?”

“I know!”

“And you didn’t have the human decency to tell her about the waiting hell in her life? You’re unbelievable, sister.”

“I had no time before I was attacked.”

Sun Flower remained firm and nurturing. “I was there the day you were born. Basheer was there. Brave One was there also. You shared the first few breaths of your life with them and me. There were millions more shared after that. Why didn’t you tell her? You had time.”

BlackBerry cried. “Because I lusted so much for her, okay? I was frightened and didn’t want her to go crazy or become too headstrong. I messed up, sister. I wanted to but couldn’t undo what I’d done with her.

“Then nothing happened, and I enjoyed her immensely. It was so marvelous and pleasurable. And then it was too late, truly. However, this way will give her a fighting chance to survive and have the babies she wants. She’s a good scrapper. Her body’s nice, tight, compact, and muscular. She’ll have a fighting chance where otherwise she might not. Okay?”

“So far, so good. Keep going. How long did it take for Brave One to draw blood from her?”

“Less than three minutes in the house. Shocked me, and he went crazy. Then I took her to the kitchen to talk. She accepted hot tea and wanted me to surprise her.”

“Oh, come on, BlackBerry. You didn’t do that?”

“Yes, I did. When I sat close enough to smell and touch her the first time, I thought I’d faint from sensory overload. I set up Kanji, and then it was time for us. Surprised myself and her too sister. And like I said, I messed up, and it was too late to stop.”

“Good to hear you say it. Now I’ll lighten up. What’s the situation, really, and what are your requests?”

“I’m dying. There are too many internal injuries. I have lost too much blood, and my internal organs are torn beyond repair. Before sundown tomorrow, I’ll meet the one who created me. I need to know how she reacted?”

“Ha. Man, what a tale from that encounter. When our brother visited her, she cried, wailed, blubbered like a baby, slapped him, and accused him of lying. Pure wounded spirit’s grief over a loss that hadn’t happened yet. To test her, he withheld what the linsang could do and what they were. She nearly whipped his ass before he controlled her, and he has another wound for his collection. Cut him with a broken drinking glass.”

“Good, but not good. I guess the spiritual bonding and sharing kisses is responsible for that.”

“I know that. So, what do we do? Out with it, darling sister.”

“I’ve arranged for Crescent Moon to call her after I’m gone. I’ve left her a message telling her to bury Brave One. I know she’ll come to my house, and I told her not to reminisce about me. Just accomplish her task and leave quickly. She won’t. She’s brilliant and good at deciphering problems. She’ll figure out what happened, and somewhere in her heart, she’ll vow to hurt Cassatt like she did me. She’ll also learn swiftly that Brave One is still alive. I know that, and she’ll call you.”

“Did you give her my phone number?”

“No. You need to call the house and leave a message for me. She’ll use the Caller ID method to locate you. When she does, tell her about the medicine pouch in my desk and how to use the recovery food for Brave One. You might as well because she won’t bury him when she learns he’s alive.

“Then do whatever it takes to get her here for the funeral. The Gemini Demons are very old and slow, but they’re not stupid, and it won’t take too long to figure out what’s happening. They’ll go on the attack, and she desperately needs to be here before that happens. So, either you or Big Elk must tell her what she can do to help herself at the minimum. Brave One will take care of everything else. Thanks, sister.” She coughed too much to talk any longer.

Chapter Thirteen

Josette visited Melissa and laid the book on her desk, facing her. “Here’s one novel. It’s good.”

“The Golden Quill. It looks interesting.” Melissa turned it over to look at her picture on the back. “That’s her. I’ve talked with her in this office before. So, who is she really?”

Josette shrugged. “No clue there. No contract. No personal information. Nothing at all on file about her. Not a piece of evidence anywhere about S-Brand publishing her novels.”

Melissa checked her computer files for a contract. “You’re right. Did someone remove it?”

“No, there’s not even a file folder with her name on it.”

“How do you manage to publish three novels and not have a contract? How would you get paid? Something’s creepy here. It’s beginning to smell like roadkill.” Melissa watched the tiny hairs on her arms stand straight.

“I felt that way last night. I stayed up until two reading this one. She’s good, but not keeping quality. The story ebbs and flows and takes you on a charted course with mystery and intrigue at every turn. The plot is excellent. The characters are well-developed. She’s good but not good enough.”

She placed her right hand on Melissa’s desk. “Say this is Shallson Petri.” She raised her hand as far as she could over her head. “This is Calvin Westwood. Take this novel, keep the plot and characters, add his diamond touch of storytelling ability, and it would be like his first four, maybe greater.”

“Intriguing, but scary. What’s next? Are you sure about this?” Melissa dropped the book in her purse.

Josette nodded. "I'm sure. I will download the writer's and personnel databases to a personal disk tonight before I leave and give them to Big Elk. I will do some cross-referencing on the women writers in the time frame of this book. Maybe somewhere in the mess, there will be a clue that Big Elk can build on."

"You know what? This is almost like we're characters in a novel," Melissa said. "I sort of like it, but get me out before any of Calvin's demons show up."

"Right on. Got to run. Are you coming by for dinner tonight?"

"Never turn down your cooking skills. See ya."

*

Birgit moped around the apartment, watched TV without listening, ate little, and kept looking at the phone, wanting it to ring, but dreading it if it did. At six, it rang. Calvin asked if she wanted to do Chinese.

"Yes. Sesame chicken. Perfect, honey."

"I'll pick it up on the way and see you in about an hour," he promised.

She laid the receiver down. "An hour? You've moped long enough, self. You've not showered in three days, and you stink about now. Calvin might not mind, but I do. Clean up your act, like now."

She showered and stood at her vanity a moment, checking her perfumes. "You don't need them. Calvin likes you as you are. You're not going to be in public for a long time. Forget you."

She dressed in clean clothes, changed the bed sheets, and filled the hamper with clothes to wash before he came home.

They ate, chatted, and watched the news before one disturbing scene came on the screen.

“The normally quiet Jicarilla Apache Indian Reservation was the scene of death and chaos when the first major earthquake to hit New Mexico in well over two hundred years shattered the tribes. It occurred near three o’clock this morning and registered 5.6 on the Richter scale. The lack of tall buildings and structures probably spared the Apache Reservation a greater deal of destruction; however, rock slides down hills and mountains did massive damage. The death toll stands at 189 and 135 unaccounted for.”

The camera panned through several devastated areas and weeping families.

Birgit strained to see the faces, hoping to see BlackBerry among the living, but she did not see her.

“That sucks. Why there? Makes no sense to me.”

“Remember last night?”

“I know, but okay. I’ll leave it in His hands.”

He cleared the coffee table of their meal and dropped the bag in the kitchen trash.

“How was your day?” she asked when he returned.

“The same as most. I’ve resisted adding me to the author’s stories and calling them to offer suggestions unless they were horrible from the ground up.”

“Are you getting used to it?”

“Yes. Your investigation progressing well?”

“No. Can you change from what you’re doing now to return to what you were before? You might be okay, but I want you to make your dreams a reality, you know? Don’t want to see you trapped forever. Wanting to and having to is very different.”

“Sweetheart, trust me. I can change in a heartbeat. I’ve made the changes you suggested to The Seventh Sail. I’ve sent it in for copyrighting in my name, and I’m hoping for a change in the next deal of the cards. Still, I might continue working where I am to help others while I continue to help myself. I don’t think I’m wrong in doing that, am I?”

“No. I’m learning so much new about you that it makes my head spin. Maybe you and I both needed you to mess up so we could become greater for each other.”

He could not reply before the phone rang.

“Oh, no! Don’t answer it, honey. It might be bad news.”

He picked up the receiver and saw the Caller ID on the handset. “It’s Crescent Moon. Get composed and do it, sweetie. You’re going to be okay. I promise you.” He pressed the talk button, and she took it from him.

“This is Crescent Moon, and I must tell you that BlackBerry passed over this afternoon.”

“Was it from the quake?”

“No, it was the massive internal wounds that ended her life. Do you know what she wants you to do now?”

“Yes. Bury Brave One who died with her.”

“Then do so. Will you join us here to start her journey into the afterlife? Under the present circumstances, you need to be here if possible.”

“I’m not sure of that. I’ve got your number on Caller ID now. I’ll save it, and I’ll let you know. She suffered greatly, didn’t she?”

“She did. It’s good that she’s sleeping the long sleep now. She’ll hurt no more in this life form.”

“I understand. Can I ask you to do something for me now?”

“If I can, I will.”

“Big Elk sang her a lullaby to let her go, and he sang it to calm me down before. Will you do that for both of us now? I don’t know how, or I would do it for us.”

“Wow! Never thought you’d ask that. Why do you want that?”

“So, we can both cry for her. So, we can share the pain of losing a loved one on the phone and then move on with our lives like she would want us to do.”

“You’re as wise as your heart is full of love. I know the one you speak of. I sang it for her many times when she was a tiny baby in my arms. Thanks, Butter Cup. I wish you well and will invoke the Great Spirit to bless your life.”

*

Jason Williams sat in the basement Computer Maintenance and IT Department of S-Brand Publishing. He watched employees and board members log off individually until only one employee remained on the network, Josette Robinson.

“Of all the nights for you to work overtime. You do this occasionally, but why tonight? I want to get this network upgrade done and get home to Sarah. She wants to get pregnant again, and I want to be there when it happens. You know?”

“What work are you doing today?” He logged onto her account. “If it’s unimportant, I’ll call you and have you log off and go home.” He picked up the receiver and ran through the list of employees to find her number.

He saw she had the Writer Database open and watched her run several queries before she closed it. “Hope you’re finished now. Don’t like talking with you much anyway.” He watched her open a personal program on her computer. The Writer and Personnel databases were selected, and he watched them copied to a removable disk.

“What the hell are you doing?” He dropped the receiver. “I hope what you’re doing is legit, honey. Otherwise, you’re about to be busted for theft. You picked the wrong night to turn traitor or thief.”

He saw her log off and shut down her computer. He considered what she would do with the databases as the upgrades ran through their lengthy process. With his task complete, he locked her account from network access and sent a secure email to Nathan Barnaby about what she did.

Chapter Fourteen

“You did very well. I’m proud of you, kissy face,” Calvin told Birgit when she finally woke and joined him on the balcony in her robe.

“I guess so. I was pretty much cried out anyway.” She yawned and hugged her knees on the chaise. “Sure, you don’t want to join me when I go to Yonkers? I’d love to have you with me. I’m not going to wait until the evening. About an hour from now will be fine. Nothing’s alive in her house, so it doesn’t matter if I shower.”

“I considered it, and I feel you’re better off alone. It can’t take that much to bury a small linsang. I really want to chill here and relax.”

“Crescent Moon wants us to go to the funeral. Will you consider that? I want to go, so I’d love to have you there. We’ve been apart too long.”

“I know where you’re coming from. I’ll think about that this afternoon. If you don’t get a move on, you’ll not keep your deadlines.”

“Thanks, honey. Breakfast would be nice. Could I con you into that while I dress?”

“You already did. You talk in your sleep. A healthy brunch sandwich you can eat while driving, including a bottle of peach tea to tickle the palate and a pickle on the side, madam. It’s in a brown bag on the dining room table. Have a good day, but don’t hesitate to call me if you need me desperately.”

*

Melissa woke to the sound of her phone ringing. It never did that on Saturday morning.

She pulled the receiver under the covers. “Hello. You must have the wrong number. Goodbye.”

“Whoa, it’s Sam Chun. Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“Yes. How are you this morning? Didn’t think you’d call, but I’m glad you did.”

“I’ve had an exciting morning. I fed my fish and watched them eat and swim in circles. That’s a typical Saturday morning.”

“You’re lucky. All I can do is open the curtains and watch the wind blow. That’s boring.”

“You’re funny. It’s almost eleven o’clock, and I haven’t been for a walk in Central Park in a long time. I know today, there’s a puppet show for the children, a mime, a clown show, and even a Shakespeare-in-the-Park production, which I know nothing about. Would you join me for a lark in the park? I want to learn some things about you and spend time with you until you decide you’ve had enough for one day. Is that agreeable?”

“Yes. I’ll eat lunch and join you.”

“How about I buy you lunch right outside the park? There’s an awesome corner stand that makes the best gourmet corn dogs in the world.”

“That sounds very fattening and unhealthy.”

“Won Jo’s is unhealthy. I see people come there two or three times a week. Stupid and unhealthy. That’s bonchon. It’s a normal traditional meal, but Americans don’t understand and always overeat. I’m talking about one corn dog, one small bag of chips, and one soda, water, tea, or juice. Your choice. That’s the limit.”

“Wow. I didn’t know that. And it’s been a long time since I greased down on a corn dog. Okay. Then I’ll shower and dress in clean clothes, or is that not an acceptable tradition?”

He laughed. “That’s very acceptable and desirable. Can we meet at noon at the south entrance? That’s close to where the gourmet vendor is located.”

Melissa met him at the entrance, and he purchased a gourmet meal for them and some bread for the pigeons and peanuts for them and the squirrels.

They ate while they walked and talked and finally sat on a park bench to share their wealth with the animals.

“This is so nice, Sam Chun. Thanks for the call, really.”

“It took some courage to overcome the hurt of the past, but your friend seems to think we’re very compatible.”

“I know. She’s a good friend. You think she’s beautiful?”

“She is, but beauty is not what attracts me. She’s beautiful. You’re beautiful. You have a wounded spirit that Sam Chun did not create. I like your laugh. I like your smile. It makes me feel good to see your smile, hear your laugh, hear your voice, and enjoy your beauty. I don’t care if your friend is the most sought-after woman in America or the world. I don’t care if she’s the most looked at and drooled-over pinup girl ever. She’s nothing compared to your laugh, your smile, your face. To me, she’s nothing. To me, you’re everything that’s good.”

“Oh wow!”

“You asked. I don’t like lying and cheating. You ask me; you’ll get the truth.”

“That’s so cool.” She held a hand. “It’s just that my whole life, I’ve sought someone or something I could never find. I’ve been engaged twice, and twice I’ve never made the altar because of infidelity. So, I’m willing to take another chance because of my friend and your beautiful spirit. It scares me, but what you’ve said has touched my heart.”

“I don’t mean to scare you. I just don’t want to love again and get hurt for loving. That’s not a way to live.”

“Agreed.”

“Let’s move away from that. We’ve lots of time for those discussions. What do you do for a living?”

“I work for S-Brand Publishers. I’m a receptionist and admin secretary to the President and his staff.”

“Wow! Calvin Westwood writes for them, doesn’t he?”

“He did, until now. You like him?”

“He’s the best. His novels scare me sometimes, but I like them and his style with demons. Not sure I’d like to personally meet any of the ones he writes about, though.”

“I feel the same way. What would you do if you met one of them?”

“I wouldn’t want to, but if I did, I couldn’t react like his characters. I wouldn’t have the courage to stand up and fight. I’d run for my life. Knowing me, I’d probably poop like crazy while I ran away. The poor demon would probably die from the stink or be smothered by the output, and I’d be three states away before I knew it.”

She started giggling and stood from the bench. She walked to the grass, flung herself on the ground, and rolled and laughed like crazy.

He finally joined her and sat beside her. “You, okay?”

“Oh, what a marvelous visual picture you painted. You’re so good. I can see it. The smell overcomes the demon, and would rather return to hell than pursue you. Great! I love it!”

“Yes. At least I made you laugh.”

“I laugh, I cry, I love, I feel sad, I get sick. That’s life for everyone.”

“And laughter is good for the body, mind, and spirit. So, today I was good medicine for you.”

She grabbed his arms and pulled him down to kiss him. She released him, and he sat up.

“Sorry, but I had to do that. You’re such an amazing man. You’re nothing like all the men I’ve had before. I just never knew. Never had a clue. You were there to serve, and that’s all.”

“It’s alright. The last time you were at Won Jo’s, you didn’t laugh. You said it was business. I felt your tension then. I feel it now, even though it’s lowered by your laughing spell. Is something troubling you?”

“Yes. Do you know anything about publishing?”

“No, I only read the books which are the result. Is there more than that?”

“Yes, and since you don’t know about it or me, maybe you can give me a non-subjective answer. Do you have the time to listen to me?”

“Until tomorrow morning when my fish will be gnawing at the glass and attacking each other due to hunger,” he grinned and gave a thumbs up as she giggled again.

*

An hour after Birgit left home, she pulled into BlackBerry’s driveway and stared at the house. “Be strong, self, as Calvin told you. Do this and go back to him quickly.”

She unlocked the front door and paused to inhale deeply. “Feels like I’ve been away from home for five years, and this is my first visit. It smells great and comforting, even though there’s no life here now.”

She left the door open and opened the curtains to let in the sun.

Basheer’s cage was gone, and Brave One was curled into a ball, not moving. She noticed an indentation on the wall beside where Basheer’s cage should be. She inspected it closely and saw a small amount of blood. She turned and looked at the carpet and saw several drops of blood there.

“Don’t reminisce. Don’t think. She told you. Bury Brave One and go.”

She looked at Brave One and then back to the wall.

“One small smear and all this? That didn’t cause all this blood on the floor. What’s wrong here?”

She inspected Brave One, and she saw no movement. “At least you don’t smell bad yet. That’s good, I think. I’ll be right back.”

She went to the dining room and saw one chair lying on its side. She turned down the hallway and stopped beside Kanji’s room. “Wake up, Pollock,” it repeated in Cassatt’s voice.

She pushed open the bedroom door and inhaled again. “Wow,” she sighed. “It’s almost like you’re still here. She hurried to the bed, grabbed her pillow, and inhaled again. “Beautiful. Oh, BlackBerry. I loved you. Did you know?”

“Don’t reminisce. Bury Brave One and go,” she thought again and lay the pillow down.

She opened her eyes, switched on the table light, and saw the closet doors caved in and clothes in disarray. She imagined the pain she felt.

“Ouch! That was one.” She took in the rest of the room and saw the shattered mirror, and everything knocked to the floor. She went to the mirror, saw a lot of blood on many of the jagged pieces, and looked at her own jagged face. She found more blood, a lot, on the vanity and on the floor again.

She winced and blinked back a tear. “That was two. Oh, man, what that must have done to your beautiful face. Damn!” She kicked the vanity, noticed several more drops of blood in the hallway, and returned to the living room.

“Indentation here is three and the last. Then what? Maybe you saw her ready for the fourth hit and knew you couldn’t survive it. You groveled and for some reason, she gave in and let you go. Why would a demon do that? Doesn’t make sense to me. If they’re as evil as Calvin’s, she should do you in while you’re groveling. Break your neck, rip your head off, and laugh until she peed herself, you know?”

She closed her eyes, considered what she had found, and added up the accumulated pain, loss of blood, and bitterness of defeat. “She let you go so you could suffer painfully and long before you finally died.”

Her anger surfaced swiftly. “Bitch! Cassatt, demon bitch! We’ll meet someday, and that will be the last day of your life. I’ll slam-dunk you back into hell! I promise that!” She clenched her fists, grunted from frustration, and slapped her legs.

“Okay, now we’re through that and we’ve done what we were told not to do, by three people, let’s do this.”

She opened Brave One’s cage.

He was very light when she held him in her hands. “Hope you didn’t suffer,” she whispered and kissed him. She planned to bury him in the garden off the back deck, but she stopped in the dining room. “You’re mighty warm for something that died yesterday afternoon.”

She paused again and laid him on one of the place mats on the table.

She sat on a chair and rested her chin beside him, staring at his chest, willing it to move to show life. It did not.

“Do linsangs hibernate? Some animals do. Maybe no feeding caused him to hibernate. Will that mean he’ll die if I wake him? That’s wrong. Wake up and then die. Should I bury him like this anyway and go? Why do you make things so complicated? Or was dying at the same time just an old wife’s tale?”

“Who would know? Crescent Moon would. So, would Sun Flower. How about Big Elk? He might, but I’ll go with Sun Flower this time.”

She hurried to the sitting room and sat at the desk. She picked up the phone as she switched on the desk lamp. She found Sun Flower’s ID and pressed the talk key.

“Took you long enough,” Sun Flower said. “What part of burying Brave One and leaving quickly, don’t you understand? Evil doesn’t wait for your convenience! Dammit! What’s up?”

“I believe Brave One is alive, just hibernating. Do they do that? Is that possible? Does that mean BlackBerry’s still alive, and I’m just a pawn in the Apache Version of Chess 101?”

“He’s alive. She’s dead. Bury him, and please leave the house!”

“Not without him! You know. You must know. What do I do to get him out of this state? Do I have to come to Albany and whip you too?”

“Damn, you’re stubborn! You’re just like BlackBerry. Never give up. Big Elk and I both hoped you’d bury him, go home, and live the rest of your life like you want. She told me you would figure it out. We hoped she was wrong. We hoped you’d be mourning and overlook it. Dammit, all! Stubborn bulldog bitch! FUCK! Where are you in the house?”

“At the desk in her sitting room.”

“Open the top right-hand drawer. Inside you’ll find an old leather pouch with rawhide string. Inside is a quantity of kea feathers donated by Basheer. There’s also a small plastic bag with some black powder. Don’t know what that’s for, but I’ll do my best to find out. Take it and the phone and go back to the kitchen. Where is Brave One?”

“On the dining room table.”

“In or out of his cage?”

“Out.”

“Dammit! Fuck! Bring his cage to the table, and please, Butter Cup, follow this to the letter, and get out of there! If Cassatt returns and you have no protection, which you don’t, you’re both dead. You won’t be able to sustain even a fraction of what BlackBerry did. You’ll be dead meat in an instant, and Calvin, a widower! Will you please listen to me?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“I know, and it’s not your fault for loving. But it doesn’t stop me from being pissed off about now! I don’t like this stupid incident happening!”

“I’m in the kitchen and have his cage here.”

“In the fridge, there’s a clear plastic jar with a yellow lid with b o written on the top. It won’t smell great, hope you don’t gag, but Brave One will love it. Take a knife or toothpick and press a tiny amount of the food into his mouth. It might take two to four applications to dissolve enough, but he’ll respond. When he starts uncurling, and you can see him breathing, put him and two spoons full of it in his cage, close the door, and leave the house.

“Leaving is vitally important! I’ll visit you tomorrow and have a long chat about this. Okay?”

“Do you know where I live?”

“I know, dumb ass!” Sun Flower shouted. “Be curious later! Do what I told you precisely and get out of her house! See you after church in the morning.”

Birgit followed the instructions and had Brave One in his cage. She returned to the desk and pulled out the .38 Special that was with the pouch. She checked to see that it was fully loaded and went to the Kanji room. She opened the door and looked at the machine.

“You aren’t worth it,” she said. “Go to sleep, Pollock.” She emptied the gun as sparks flew and smoke curled from the machine. She grabbed the wires leading to it from the wall and ripped both ends out.

She ran to the dining room, grabbed Brave One’s cage, and left the house. She was happy to have listened to Sun Flower on that one. Brave One went ballistic while he ate and recovered for over thirty minutes on the way back to Manhattan. She knew she would never have been able to catch him outside the cage.

She took him to her apartment, where Calvin greeted her at the door.

“What did you do to piss off Sun Flower so much?” He took the cage from her. “Think she cursed us out in English, Apache, and maybe Swahili and Chinese. Glad she wasn’t here in person for that rant, or she might have wounded me.”

“Seems like if you ask anyone in that family certain questions, they don’t like to answer. They messed up inviting me to join them. I’ll change their communication process if it takes the rest of my life.”

“Isn’t he supposed to be buried? Isn’t that what BlackBerry wanted to happen?”

“Yes, but he’s alive, and I’m curious. I want answers.”

“Some questions have no answers.” He placed the cage on the dining room table. “And some questions were never meant to be asked. This is an American Indian thing, not White American Transplant thing. Curiosity could get you killed, and I don’t prefer losing you again, sweetheart. Maybe burying him, dead, hibernated, or alive, is what was meant to happen, even if you don’t understand or agree with it. Remember what I said about provident plans?”

“I remember! It’s just that I saw what happened to BlackBerry. All the blood she lost, and pain she felt.”

She threw up her hands in defeat. “I know, I know! Maybe I’ll stop after Sun Flower will visit us tomorrow.”

“You say that with little conviction, but something in my mind says that you’ve opened a box of evil that was meant to be sealed until judgment day. And I don’t think you’ll be able to walk away or quit.

“It’s like one of my novels. Pandora’s box is open and will follow you until you destroy it or it destroys you. However, I promise I’ll not leave you and do everything I can to help, support, and keep you alive. You can count on that.” He stopped talking and kissed her.

She rubbed her forehead on his chest and looked at Brave One. He stood on his hind legs and hugged the cage while eying them intensely.

“You look so lonely there. Is a cage necessary for you? If I let you out, will you promise not to disappear, run away, or hide from me?”

He dropped to the cage floor and rested his head on his forepaws. He rolled his eyes to look at her and pulled back his lips to expose his teeth.

“That looks like a yes to me, Calvin.” She opened the cage door.

Brave One stepped outside, jumped on her arm, and raced to her shoulders, where he wrapped around her neck. He sniffed her nose, her breath, her eyebrows, behind her ears, inside her ears before he stopped and crawled slowly down to cover the rest of her body. He dropped to the floor, and for over an hour, he inspected every corner, nook, and cranny of the apartment. Satisfied, he came to the sofa and curled up on her lap.

“Why do demons exist?” she asked.

“To bother and seduce as many people as possible to do evil. Anything they can do to turn people away from God is permissible. That’s their mission. Destroy the beauty of Truth with lies until they gain souls for their own malicious intent.”

“Are any of them nice?”

“Haven’t you read my books? I don’t have them stop a fight and take afternoon tea and scones before returning to their mission. I write them as I see them. You should know that.”

“I’m still strung out over BlackBerry. I don’t want to believe a demon killed her.”

“As much as I believe in demons, I also believe in angels. And you might think I’m silly and laugh at me, but I truly believe I’m married to one. You have too much purity for an American woman in Manhattan.”

She blushed and felt tingly. “I don’t feel that way about me. Still got the knack for touching me. You know me too well.”

“That’s what happens when I can’t even pay you to shut up. You keep the information coming non-stop.”

“Enough. Want to make some sandwiches for us? What do linsangs eat for food?”

“No clue. Either call Sun Flower or look it up on the internet.”

“Internet it is,” she said and took him to the bedroom and turned on her computer. When she logged on, there was an urgent e-mail message waiting from Cassatt. “The whore is dead! Good! Challenge accepted! We’ll see who slam dunks who into hell.”

“Oh, that’s not good. Should have taken Calvin to control you.” She groaned and looked up linsangs.

“Snakes and small rodents? Not appetizing, but then I’m not a linsang, and I’m fresh out of those anyway until I go shopping next.” She shut off her computer and phoned Sun Flower.

“What now?”

“Look, I’m sorry about this, and I’m hurting like you are. Brave One is my concern right now. What do I feed him normally? That recovery food over-activates him.”

“Pretty much anything you would eat. He loves meat and cheese. Make a sandwich on a half slice of bread the way you like, cut it in half, and fold it over. He’ll finish it. He knows his limits, and he controls himself. He’ll leave what he doesn’t need; slightly less than he needs is no bother to him.”

“Does he have to stay in the cage? That looks too cruel.”

“No. Just close the doors and windows, and he’ll watch over you. BlackBerry kept him caged frequently; I don’t know why. If he’d had freedom on that night, she might have lived. He checked you out yet?”

“Sniffed me from head to toe and every millimeter in between. Felt weird.”

“That’s a good thing, trust me. Look, I’m in the middle of cooking here. I’ve given you enough to care for him tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She wanted to tell her about Cassatt’s message but kept silent for once. “Okay, thanks a million.” She found Brave One watching her from the bed.

“What have I gotten myself into?” she asked and held out her hands.

“Come on, sweetie. Let’s go.”

Brave One leaped into her arms and raced up to curl around her neck.

She went to the kitchen. “Snakes and small rodents are out for the moment. Make him a quarter sandwich like mine and double the meats. That will work tonight.”

“One linsang special coming up.”

Calvin placed the plates on the table, and they sat down. Brave One walked to the small one as if he knew it was his and sniffed it. He hissed and began devouring it.

Calvin was in a silly mood and insisted on feeding Birgit. He would hold the sandwich while she bit it and hold the drinking glass.

“What are you up to?”

“For you, anything. Haven’t done this for years. Does it bug you?”

“Makes me feel awkward.”

“Anything else?”

“Special and loved.”

“Good. That’s what I wanted you to feel. You can eat on your own now.”

Halfway through their sandwiches, they both stopped and kissed. They had not done so for years, but the renewed relationship affected them more than they realized. Brave One momentarily stared at them while their lips were locked and listened to them sharing breaths. He pulled his lips back, hissed quietly, and returned to his sandwich.

Birgit cleared the table and watched the news while they talked with Brave One curled in her lap.

“Brave One, Calvin shut off the television and locked the doors and windows. We’re going to bed now. I feel lost and awkward because I don’t know how to communicate. It’s difficult to grow up with someone and then be left with a stranger. I’m sure

BlackBerry would know what to do or say to make you understand. Anyway. No cage. I'll leave it open if you want to sleep there, but you don't have to. Okay?"

Calvin chuckled from across the room and gave her two thumbs up. "You'll make a great mother someday."

Brave One hissed at Calvin's laughter and ran excitedly in circles on the sofa. He stopped abruptly, stood on Birgit's stomach, and raised his head until his nose touched hers. He felt her nervousness, concern, and desire to care for him. He stood rigidly, loved her, and waited for her to look down at him.

It did not take too long before she stared down her nose at the two beady eyes that were solid and unblinking.

His forepaws fidgeted with her lips until she closed her mouth and breathed through her nose.

Soon she felt dizzy as if her body temperature warmed several degrees. She suddenly sensed movement and was captured by a gold ball holding her inside as it zipped through a fiery sea. The outside temperature would vaporize her instantly, but inside the ball, she was secure.

The ball grew, and she beheld a massive gate, the top of which she could not fathom. A smaller door opened in the gate, and Basheer sat on his perch in his cage.

"BlackBerry evil!" Basheer squawked. "Birgit, good."

"Maybe she had reasons," Birgit thought.

"She evil. You, good. Calvin good. Sex with him?"

"Yes."

"Good," Basheer squawked. "Birgit's getting laid by good. Who could ask for anything more?"

On the sofa, Birgit's arms shot straight from her shoulders, and she felt her body jerk as her skin crawled and tingled.

She squealed as Brave One's hind paws sunk into her abdomen. They penetrated, curved inward, and moved while her stomach felt like the fiery lake she passed through.

"Oh, gosh!"

"Honey, are you okay? What's going on?" Calvin asked, moving toward the sofa.

"Hold it," she requested, and Brave One pulled his claws from her.

He shivered as she did, and he licked her nose. He jumped from the sofa back to the dining room table, ran around his cage chattering, jumped back to the sofa, and curled up on a cushion beside Birgit.

"That was wild," she said as Calvin checked her.

"He drew blood. Why did he do that?"

"Don't know. Let's go to the bedroom, and I'll tell you about the vision I just had." She blew a kiss to Brave One and left with Calvin.

Chapter Fifteen

Birgit attended mass with Calvin, and before he could suggest it, she moved to the side and got in line for the confessional. As she moved along, she focused on the crucifix behind the altar and prayed.

Once inside the confessional, she sat before the Priest and confessed her sin of loving BlackBerry and her sexual fling. She also confessed several other things that Calvin did not know about, and she felt a burden lifted from her when he gave her penance and absolution. She stood to leave, but his hand touched her and returned her to the chair.

“Something’s not right here. All you’ve openly confessed that hurt your heart, I understand. Something else has you locked in a difficulty that will not let go so easily. Talk to me, Daughter in Christ. I can feel your gentle and pure spirit. Besides all that preceded this moment, what else have you touched that is unclean?”

She sighed forlornly, lowered her face to her knees, and stared at her shoes. “Demons. Not intentionally, but through association with BlackBerry, who was a spiritual warrior.”

“Do you feel that it was a real experience?”

“I don’t want to, but I know it is. She, the demon Cassatt, killed BlackBerry. She’s sent me two e-mails with no header information or server info. I was angry over BlackBerry’s death and told her I would slam dunk her back into hell.

“I believe in peace and love for everyone. I don’t want to believe that God created these evil creatures or beings and can tolerate them to this very day. But, when I think that, He sends my husband or someone else to tell me the opposite.

“He also tells me I’m going to be okay, but He won’t tell me how I can be okay when this demon and her twin brother, Pollock, want me dead and buried.”

She sat upright in the chair and viewed the Priest as tears trickled down her cheeks.

“I’m scared, Father. I have a big, boisterous mouth, and I sound ferocious. I’m not. I’m scared I won’t survive this ordeal I cannot avoid. I can’t turn aside because He won’t take the cup from me.

“And my husband tells me I’m an angel. He tells me that my spirit’s so clean that it astonishes him. But I don’t feel good, clean, righteous, or heavenly. I feel lost. I feel confused, defiled, raped, and jaded. I feel so separated from Christ that I don’t know what I’m doing here in this confessional, let alone this church. Still, I’m here because I can’t resist the pulling on my heart. I hurt, and I see no end to the pain. Help me, Father.”

She wailed and slipped from her chair to rest her face and hands on his knees.

“I provide a service to many clients. I see many families so full of love and blessed with abundance. I want children, and I can’t have them. I’ve hidden that fact from my husband. I’ll never have what they have for myself. I’m not envious. I don’t want their husbands, families, or children. I want my own, and I can’t have them. I cry, mourn, die in silent remorse while serving families, and I know it’ll never be me enjoying that love and fellowship. And the pain won’t stop.

“My husband cheated on me due to my distraction and stupidity. How many years must I suffer and grieve before I get relief? I don’t want to die. I don’t believe in suicide. Yet living one more day only compounds the pain in my heart and soul that others can’t see. Make it stop, Father. Please! Make it stop!”

He rested his hands on her head, closed his eyes, and prayed as she cried out and returned to her chair.

“Sorry.”

“You needn’t apologize. That’s the most heartfelt confession that I’ve witnessed in twenty-seven years. So, I need to tell you this. Listen to your husband. Read the Bible. The word of God is as reliable today as when it was written so many thousand years ago. If God sends you these people to assure you, trust Him and in them.

“As for the rest, Elizabeth spent many years in the desert, in sackcloth, wailing, fasting, begging, and pleading with God to give her a child. Only when she was well

beyond childbearing years did He grant her to bear a daughter, Mary, who would one day give the world the beautiful present of Jesus Christ. Do not give up hope until God's reality reveals the opposite as truth, gives you something better, or says forget it. It doesn't matter."

"Thanks, Father. What do I do about that?"

"Have you ever prayed a rosary before?"

"I have, long ago and far away in another galaxy."

"Then find it, buy a new one, and pray it. Only once. That's all I'll commit you to since Elizabeth's faith never yielded until she was pregnant with Mary. Just one for me and for God. However, if you want to do more, you should commit to one a week. Is that fair?"

"You're the Priest, Father. Why are you asking me?"

"Because of this special situation. God's promises and word don't change. You can rely on that. If you want someone in the world to hold you responsible for this confession and absolution, then you can tell them that Father Mallory did this for you and promised you absolution. I will honor my word to God and my promise to you. You will be okay. You will not fail in God's sight even if you fail and die in the world's sight. Do you understand?"

She wiped her eyes and sighed. "I understand. Thanks a million. You're such a beautiful person."

"No, child. You outshine me with your candidness and pure spirit, even when it's tarnished and burdened with all the sins you've confessed. Your husband's right. You're an angel, and I feel exceptionally blessed to clear your soul of its muck today. Go and serve the Lord as He wishes. And, young lady, sin no more. Try your utmost not to sin. That is one thing that still hurts the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

"You got it," she smiled and left the confessional.

She knelt beside Calvin as the mass began. “Not a word or question,” she said, pressing a finger to his lips. “I’m going to be silent. Thank you for having faith in me when I was at my weakest. No more until Sun Flower leaves.”

*

Sun Flower joined them on the balcony. Brave One gave up Birgit for a while as he wallowed around her lap.

“Should I leave?” Calvin asked.

“No, you need to hear some of this, so you might as well hear all.

“First of all, Birgit, I need to clear the air of tension between us. At first, Big Elk and I both blamed you for what BlackBerry was doing. I knew we were wrong after she was hurt and finally talked with me. It was all her. She lusted for you. She did everything in her power to get you to her house and guarantee a score on her bed. And it worked wonderfully.”

“How’s that?” Birgit asked.

“She cleared the evil spirits away with sweet grass, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“You asked for any tea, unsweetened?”

“Yes. Were you there?”

“No, but what she gave you is a wedding night custom. The teas she used are consumed by the bride and groom. Some say it’s an aphrodisiac, but what it does is relax you, increase blood flow to the skin, increases nerve sensitivity, lowers your inhibitions, and makes you unafraid to do what you might otherwise avoid with passion. And once you share the orgasm, it keeps the timidest coming back for more. It

works well. Did you go back for more sex with her even after your reunion with Calvin?”

“Yes, it does. I was apprehensive when I walked inside the house. I got the feeling she’d hit on me. Then after a while, it didn’t matter. I wanted it.”

“Did Basheer announce that you were getting laid?”

“He did.”

“If he and Brave One were her pets, her long-term, lifelong companions, why didn’t he use her name?”

“I don’t know. At that time, I thought it was cute.”

“He did because she had already broken the bond between them with her lust for you. She planned what would happen down to her dress, her mannerisms, the tea. Linsang owners, these owners do not marry. They remain single, celibate, and chaste their entire life. No sex, not even with the same sex. She was already over the line when Brave One bit you and Basheer denounced her by using your name. And she should have, she could have stopped her folly, but she did not. You’re clear in this matter, Birgit. You were there by her design. She was in charge and put you exactly where she wanted you to reach her goal.”

“That’s good because I like Big Elk and I like you now that we’re talking. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Now, on to important matters. When you were in BlackBerry’s house yesterday, did you threaten or challenge Cassatt in any way?”

Birgit looked at Calvin before she answered. “Yes, I did. After I walked through all the bloody path and pieced it together, I was angry, and I told her I’d slam dunk her back into hell.”

Sun Flower sighed and shook her head. “That was not a good thing to do. Look, Birgit, you’re not the same person you were a month ago. The linsang DNA in you won’t allow that. You must work on controlling two things, starting right now. One is your emotions, and two is your mouth. You can cause a huge disruption and many problems for you and other people you love with either one.”

“I’m still me. I’m the same.”

Sun Flower shook her head and sought Calvin’s gaze before she spoke.

“Sorry about this, Calvin, but it must be said. Birgit, you’ve done something that no one else on earth has done. You’ve bonded totally with a Spiritual Warrior. You shared her breath, saliva when you kissed her, dead skin cells with caresses of your tongue, and other body fluids when sex progressed. You’ve infused BlackBerry’s life into your body and spirit, and you cannot go back and undo it. Like it or not, nothing short of death will free you from her intrinsic being that you accepted into your body and spirit, unwillingly or not.

“To add to that situation, you’ve also bonded with a linsang. Only spiritual warriors are permitted that bonding because it creates a powerful weapon and target. If Brave One hadn’t bit you, he’d be dead now like he should be, and you’d be happy in Manhattan for the rest of your life.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Birgit said, and Brave One jumped into her lap again.

Sun Flower looked at Calvin. “When you forgave Calvin, my brother and I were amazed and shocked. I could forgive that transgression with my husband, but I’m not sure I could allow him to bring all the other women and their lovers and mistresses into my bed. I might have to draw the line there. That’s why a husband and wife should cling to each other for a lifetime. You’re one body, one flesh, and one spirit in marriage. Calvin had tainted his blood, body, and spirit with five or six other women. You have done so with BlackBerry.”

Birgit considered the information. “I understand that. Still, it can’t be that bad.”

Sun Flower groaned in frustration. “When the Apache Women’s Medicine Circle began to train BlackBerry, they were amazed. She excelled in all thirty-five plus skills taught by thirty-five different people. At fourteen, while the Comanche warrior was far from ready, BlackBerry and Brave One killed their first demon. Since then, she’s scored 157 kills, a record for any spiritual warrior.

“You say it can’t be that bad? You have enough of her in you, and spiritual warriors don’t seek! They stay in one place and arrogant demons seek them out like mindless

mosquitos hitting a bug light! Zap! Zap! Zap! And when one dies, a thousand will follow to avenge or seek the thrill of victory in killing the warrior! It's that bad!"

She jumped up and slapped her. "Get it through your resistant, thick skull, woman! This is not a game that you can stop, start at will, or walk away from or even wish away. It will go on and on and on until one of you is dead! And it's you against millions of demons!"

Brave One jumped to his feet and hissed at Sun Flower.

"Sorry, Birgit," Sun Flower said. "Can't you understand that I don't like leaving you ill-prepared? Can't you understand that I'm worried about your life and Calvin's existence? Because of BlackBerry, we've accepted you into our family. We're waiting for you to make the first visit. We want to share our lives with you. Big Elk and I hoped you'd bury him and go home. The demons wouldn't have bothered you then. We had a huge commotion and bitter fight when I wanted to go there and do it myself and ignore her dying request. I'd have buried him alive in his hibernated state to spare you the hell that's hovering over you."

She sighed forlornly, leaned against the railing, and slid down to sit on the floor. The emotional torment she experienced caused her some tears.

"I talked with BlackBerry right before she died. I don't want to go through that pain and agony again with you or listen to Calvin tell me how you were killed. And I'll agonize every moment until you're safely inside the Apache Women's Medicine Circle, because that's a good possibility now. There's no time to train you, prepare you, or do much of anything to help you. And that hurts. And that sucks. Your pure spirit makes people look at you as an angel. You don't need that spirit crushed and destroyed by something so damned unfeeling and ruthless that you can't fight fairly, like a true spiritual warrior could."

Birgit handed Brave One to Calvin and moved to Sun Flower. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be pigheaded on purpose. I can see things that are right and wrong. And I can see things that look wrong but can be made right. And in any case, I must react, because that's me. That's Birgit Westwood. That's who I am.

“However, I’ve listened to you today and I feel that every word you spoke was truth. Show me what you can and trust me when I say, I’ll do my best to survive and join you in New Mexico. I may lose, but I won’t lose without a hell of a fight. And I’ll never lose in the Great Spirit’s sight anyway. Can you dig that?”

Sun Flower relaxed in the tender arms surrounding her. “Yes, sister.”

She whistled. “Brave One. Medicine pouch. Fetch it, pronto.”

Brave One struggled and Calvin let him go. Soon he was back, carrying the leather pouch. He laid it on Birgit’s lap and sat on his haunches between her legs.

“Have you opened it yet?” asked Sun Flower.

“Yes. Fifteen green feathers and a small bag of powder.”

“They are kea feathers, provided by Basheer. They’ll be your primary, first defense against demons. If they’re in human form, as many are to start, and you stick them with a feather, it will force them to revert to demonic form. It will slow them down to a crawl and if you perchance stick a second one into them, they’re paralyzed and Brave One will not slow down after he starts. If they’re already in demonic form, it will work even faster.

“I’ve asked Crescent Moon about the powder. She said it was for Brave One to use and when he needed it to give it to him. Don’t know where it comes from or what it’s for.

“Keep a feather handy when you start the journey. Keep one tucked behind your ear, in your hair, under your watch band, shirt pocket, purse, buttonhole, anywhere you can get to them easily. Promise me and don’t ignore me like you did everyone about burying Brave One?”

“I promise you. Is Big Elk going to the funeral?”

“I don’t know.”

“How’s the investigation going?”

“He’s stumped. He hasn’t been stymied so hard in many years. It’s driving him crazy, but it’s good for him to be challenged occasionally. That’s about all I know. You need to talk to him about that. Call him this afternoon, like right now. Ask him if you can visit tonight. Take Calvin and Brave One with you. Get your update in person. I promise you’ll both love it. So, will his wife and kids.”

“Is he over me hurting him?”

Sun Flower chuckled. “Yes. You’re the only one who’s wounded him in a fight in over twenty years. Falling Snow yelled at him something fierce. He let it scar to piss her off and told her he’d tattoo your name on it, but they’re both over it now. You’ll be welcome as you will be at my home. Just do it. Pick up the phone and announce your visit. It’s truly longed for, sister, but you must make the first request. We’ve already told you that.”

Calvin noticed his cue and brought Birgit the phone.

“Hey, brother, how’s it going? We haven’t connected recently. Are you padding the books? Am I paying you for something or for nothing?”

“Well, smart ass sister, it’s good that you called me. I’m making progress, but I’m having a lot of difficulty opening many closed doors. If I don’t break any of them down soon, we might have to file a lawsuit against S-Brand for contract violation so I can subpoena their records and get what I need. Are you willing to do that? Will you go the extra hassle and expense?”

“Sounds good to me, brother. Some injustices need to be corrected even if the harvest doesn’t yield good fruits for a few years. Know what I mean?”

“I do. Are you going to the funeral?”

“I am. And you?”

“I don’t think so. Something has me worried about this investigation.”

“Can we discuss this in private?”

“Where?”

“At your house. Can Calvin, Brave One, and I visit you this evening? I want to make the first move in getting to know and appreciate this new family situation. I’ve got the courage to do that now.”

“Hey, sister! I love it! That would be great. Excellent idea. Hey, Falling Snow, can you handle Butter Cup, her husband and Brave One for dinner tonight? Great. “Hey, Butter Cup, she said yes. Look forward to seeing you. Six-thirty sound fine?”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Sun Flower still there?”

“She is.” Birgit handed her the phone. “He wants to yak at you for a minute.”

“Hey brother. What’s up with super sleuth?”

“Worried. I haven’t had a case to blow up on me in a long time, but I feel strongly this one is going to do so very soon. If it does, I don’t need to be in New Mexico, even though I want to be there. If I were the only one involved, it would be okay, but I’m not and I care about the pawns that I rely on sometimes. You know?”

“I know. You’re a good and loving brother.”

“I’ve already said goodbye. I sang her the lullaby when she first contacted me on the night from hell. Just put in my grief with yours when the mourning begins for real. I’ll owe you one, sister. I can’t walk away from disasters here. I’m really stressing out over this case.”

“Got you covered, big brother. I have supreme faith in you. You’ll be fine. See you when I get back.” She disconnected and handed the phone to Calvin.

“You finished here?” asked Birgit.

“I am. I’ve got a hotel close to the airport. I’ve got an early morning flight from JFK tonight at 2 AM. I’ll be in Jicarilla Reservation around nine in the morning. You have my cell phone number. You have Crescent Moon’s number. Don’t let pride or prejudice stop your call for help. You’re not in this alone. You have a few hundred people totally stunned but rooting for your success. We all want you to live.”

“Promise.” Birgit pulled her to her feet, kissed her on the lips and bid her farewell.

Chapter Sixteen

Josette did not feel well when Monday morning arrived. She had a headache and considered taking a sick day. Still, she talked herself into going to work. She turned on her computer and could not log onto the network. She looked around the office and the noise level irritated her to a greater degree.

“That’s all I need,” she mumbled and picked up the phone. “Jason, this is Josette in Sales. I can’t log onto the network. Can you fix that for me? I really don’t need this hassle today.”

“I will as soon as I take care of two other priority projects. Be patient.”

Barnaby sat beside Jason in the computer room. “What else did she take?”

“Just that as far as I can tell,” Jason replied. “I can do some backtracking, but it won’t be quick. Given a few days, I can tell you every query she’s run and even her e-mails.”

“Do that for me, please. “Forget the e-mails. Just what she’s copied and queried and where else she’s been on the network that she doesn’t need to be.”

He picked up Jason’s phone. “Security, this is Nathan Barnaby. I’m about to leave the computer room. Give me ten minutes, go to Sales and Promotions, and escort Josette Robinson to my office.”

“See you later, Jason. Contact me when you have anything.”

*

Barnaby stepped from the elevator, and it immediately went back down.

Melissa greeted him as usual.

“Good morning, Melissa. How’s your day?”

“Not so hot. Think that time of the month is coming on, but I’m alive and here anyway.”

“Sorry to hear that you’re not well, but I appreciate your service. Wish more people were like you. Anyway, do me a favor. Contact Personnel and have them bring Josette Robinson’s file to you. I’m going to be busy for a few moments. Send all my calls to voice mail, no matter what. I’ll deal with them later.”

She felt her heart sink past her stomach. “Yes, Sir.”

She complied with his request and just lay the phone down when the elevator opened, and two security guards led a white and shaking Josette to Barnaby’s office. They took her inside and closed the door.

Josette sat shaking in the chair where Calvin sat before, waiting for Barnaby to speak.

“You look nervous.”

“Yes. It’s most unusual to be treated this way.”

“I agree.” He motioned to one of the men. “Get her a glass of water.”

“You were monitored copying the Writer’s Database to a removable disk on Friday evening. Why did you do that?”

She did not answer.

“That database is company property, and it contains privileged information that is NOT to be shared with anyone outside the company.”

“I didn’t know that” she whispered.

“I want it back and I want to know everyone who you shared it with outside the company!”

“I don’t have it.”

Barnaby slapped the desk with his fist. “Look, Josette, you can make this difficult, or you can make this easy. It’s truly your choice. Who did you sell it to? Who asked you to copy it?”

She jerked from the sudden loud sound and spilled some water on her dress. “If that’s the case, I guess I need a lawyer.”

“If you’ll work with me, it might go easier for you.”

“I think I need a lawyer.”

“Then have it your way,” he said with a wave. “Take her to her desk and let her clear her personal items. If something’s questionable, it stays. No disks or CDs leave the building, personal or not. Then take her entry ID cards and any identification from S-Brand and put her on the street. Block out anywhere she might gain access.”

She gulped, and one of the men touched her arm.

They led her outside and waited for the elevator. Barnaby followed them and stopped by Melissa’s desk. He watched Josette cast a baleful glance toward her and then stare at the floor.

“Our lawyers will contact you swiftly, and so will the police. There will be criminal charges brought against you. I hope what you got was worth it.”

He picked up her file from Melissa’s box and retreated to his office.

Before he sat, his private line rang.

“What’s up, Jason? This is quick.”

“It was easier than I imagined, sir. She also took the personnel database. However, she’s been running queries all over the network, her office, accounting, contracts, personnel, writer’s data, distribution, promotions, and so has Melissa Snyder.”

“What? Any clue as to why?” He frowned and stared at his closed door.

“Most of it concerns Calvin Westwood, but there have been many over the last week for Shallson Petri. Don’t know why. There’s no one on the system with that name,

but they've nearly exhausted the system trying to find her with nearly every concoction you could imagine."

"The name does ring a bell, but I don't know from where."

"Do you want me to print out this information for you?"

"Not yet, so long as you can do it quickly later. You do archive old databases, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. Want me to check them?"

"Not now. Just sit tight on this and fine-tune the upgrades you applied on Friday. I'll get back to you soon. I want to run a little query myself."

He called security and had them send one man to his office and walked outside when he heard the elevator door open.

"Yes, Sir. What can I do for you?" the man asked.

"Right now, nothing. Just remain in the area," Barnaby said, pulling up a chair beside Melissa, who started trembling like Josette.

"This morning, you said you didn't feel well. I told you I appreciated your service. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you like to continue your service here, or would you prefer to join Josette in the lawsuit?"

"Stay here if I can," she finally whispered.

"What is it with women and water? Get her a glass of water so she can talk.

"What are you two doing? What are you looking for?"

She took a drink and closed her eyes. "Irregularities."

"Are you working part-time for the IRS or the FBI? What are you getting paid for this? I don't believe this is happening."

“Nothing, sir. Not one penny.”

“Then why and what? Will you give me something to work with? If you don’t, you’re moments away from being put on the street with her. If you don’t talk now, I’ll let you both talk under oath in court.”

She sighed, placed the glass down, and ran quivering hands through her hair. “I’m terribly frightened, sir. Can we do this in private, please? I’m no danger to you, and I promise I’ll be truthful.”

Barnaby glanced at the security man, standing on the other side of her with hands clasped behind his back. “You can go but stand by for a call. Lock the elevator from this floor. I have a key if the need arises.”

With that, the man disappeared.

“Well, Melissa. What are you doing?”

“Trying to find out who in this company is killing Calvin Westwood’s career and making money disappear. I’ve been so stressed out since this began that I’ve made myself sick. If you’re the man doing it, I’m dead and I’ll be floating in the Hudson River in the morning, but I can’t handle the stress any longer. Death would be preferable to this.”

Barnaby studied her and waited for her to regain some control. “First, the money. What money? Where?”

“Each of Calvin’s first four had \$400 thousand allotted for promotions. They used more. The last four had \$100 thousand allotted, but only \$40 thousand or less was used. With that in mind, they go together. Someone killed his career deliberately.”

“Can you show me what you mean?”

She opened the familiar screen and turned her monitor for him to see.

She scrolled through the data on all seven books.

“Unbelievable.”

“I know. One million one hundred thousand is a lot of money.”

He had her log off and logged on under his own name. He accessed the Accounting records and opened the files for Calvin Westwood.

“We keep close track of these matters so we don’t get slaughtered by the IRS. What you say and what you’ve shown me is bullshit. Check for yourself. These are the figures for the first four books.”

She scrolled through the four screens. “Four hundred, four hundred, four hundred, four hundred fifty thousand? We discovered that, but not the last three.”

“Yes, that much, and on books five through seven, we budgeted \$600 thousand with an open end. We have a thief, or possibly worse, between what you see here and what you’ve just shown me.”

“What could be worse than theft?”

“A mole planted by a competitor destroys us when the time is right. These four screens, if compared to the three you showed me, would be enough to destroy us and put us out of business for good. Dammit, all!”

“Sorry, sir.”

“It’s not your fault. What about this Shallson Petri? Why are you trying to find her? She’s not an employee. She’s not a writer. What’s up with her?”

Melissa pulled The Golden Quill from her purse and handed it to him.

He sighed and frowned. “Unbelievable! How many novels did we publish?”

“Only three, but there’s no contract available either electronically or on paper. We have no clue who she really is or how that happened.”

He closed his eyes and remained silent for several minutes, contemplating what to do. He opened his eyes and absently touched Melissa’s back. She yelped, jerked, and knocked over her glass of water.

His voice was naturally tender. “Hey, relax. This is not a sexual advance. I want to help you relax. Nothing more. Over the years, I’ve learned how important touch is to humans. It just never occurred to me to touch you. It seemed you never needed that. Until now.”

“Sorry. I’m just way too tense now. I know it’s not sexual. It just surprised me, you know?”

“I know. Want me to stop?”

“No. What do we do now?”

He set her phone to the intercom and dialed a number. “Jason. Nathan here. Are you there?”

“Right on, Sir. Need something?”

“Yes. I will notify security that you’ll be stopping by their desk soon. They’ll put you on the elevator, and I’ll wait for you at Melissa’s desk. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You used his first name with him. He somebody special to you?”

“He’s my son-in-law. He became that three years ago. He married Sarah, and they’re about to give me my first granddaughter. I can’t wait for her to be born.”

“Babies change your life.”

“Fine with me. I’m old, but I’m looking forward to her birth. Bring her on! She isn’t here yet. What’s the holdup? That’s what I keep telling Sarah, and she laughs at me.”

“What are you going to do about Josette?” she asked as she enjoyed his finger nails moving in haphazard patterns.

“This might sound cruel, but I can do nothing for the moment. I must proceed and hope for the best. After the pain, suffering, and trial, I’ll do what I can to compensate her, but I can’t back off now. It sucks, but I must do this or risk destruction if the thief or mole is watching and knows he’s suddenly under investigation instead of her.”

“I understand, and as her best friend, I guess I shouldn’t tell her that, right? I’ll have to suck like you.”

“That’s about right. While waiting, will you make an after-hour appointment with Mason Thurstan?”

“Sure.” She dialed the law firm. “Hello, this is Melissa Snyder from S-Brand Publishing. Is Mr. Thurstan available?”

“He’s with a client and has three more appointments,” said Sylvia.

“Well, would you be inclined to make an afterhours appointment with him for Mr. Barnaby?”

“I’ll do that for you, Melissa. I’m sure I could convince him to meet Nathan at O’Reilly’s Pub at 6:30. He’ll be free then. Is that fine?”

“Six thirty is fine. O’Reilly’s Pub. Barnaby’s favorite table.”

“Done deal.”

Melissa disconnected and called O’Reilly’s Pub to make the reservation, which they disliked, but always arranged when she did. She finished her task and then stopped to stare at him.

“This sometimes makes me feel like your wife.”

“Sometimes you are, but you get paid a salary. She gets paid in a much different way.”

Jason entered the office and joined them.

“Are the archives stored separately or on the network?” Barnaby asked.

“On the network, but we also have CD and Internet storage off-site.”

“Would you be able to tell me if anyone accessed an archive file, like who and when?”

“That’s an easy task. What are we getting at or looking for?”

Barnaby handed him the book.

“Shallson Petri. Published by us,” he mumbled and turned the book over. “No way! She’s not Shallson. She’s Shannon. I’m sure of it.” He stood and closed his eyes. “Where? When? Yes. The door opened behind me. ‘Good morning, Jason. Ready or not, your girlfriend’s here.’ Every Tuesday morning, 8:30 on the dot, she was there with my favorite bagel, cream cheese, and a cup of coffee exactly like I like it. She had one for her, and we nibbled, sipped, and chatted for an hour. For some reason, she disliked her middle name. Wouldn’t share that until one day, I kissed her. It surprised her, and she winked and said, Patrice. Shannon Patrice. What’s the last name? Don’t lose her in the hunt. That’s it! Shannon Patrice Huntington.”

He opened his eyes and sat down. “Easy.”

Barnaby looked sourly at him. “You kissed her? Why did you kiss her?”

“Relax, Dad. Once. I seriously wanted to do everything with her like I did with Sarah. She refused. She said my future wife was somewhere else waiting for me. She was before Sarah, and she was right. Anything else?”

“A huge disparity in accounting budgets allotted and actual use on Calvin’s last three books. This Shallson is also a money problem. They’re growing like flies.”

“You want to tie her into the company?” Jason asked and stood again.

“It was little when she talked about her family, but she would open up occasionally. Mother divorced her father when she found him cheating on her. Father left town. Later, Shannon wanted to find him and have a relationship with him. He changed his name after he left town. Who was it? She told me fleetingly one day when she had a fever, apologized, and left breakfast early. Will the mystery father please sign in?”

He sat down and shook his head. “Wow! He’s your man, Dad. Your second in command at S-Brand. James Millington is Shannon’s estranged father.”

“Unbelievable. Okay, check the archives during the time of this book. See when she was put in, when she was taken out, and by whom in each case.”

“Not a good idea,” said Jason. “That would corrupt the access dates. I’ll first copy them to a secure directory to maintain their integrity and work on them there. Keep them intact if it boils down to a court battle later.”

He turned to Melissa. “Did you and Josette dream this up on your own?”

“No. Birgit and Calvin have reconciled their marriage, and she hired a private investigator to check out why we’re violating the contract he has with us, and we’re guilty of that.”

“How so?” asked Barnaby.

“Between the time I printed it out and the time it was signed, it was changed. One clause was inserted where we would publish him without fail until the contract expired. Two, you’re holding the eighth book and won’t let him go anywhere else with it until the contract expires, and maybe not even then. That is the second clause added. Last I heard, he sent it to be copyrighted under his name, and it’s legal, and a breach of contract claim would likely hold up in court.”

Chapter Seventeen

Birgit and Calvin were seated on the direct flight from JFK to Albuquerque. They worried and wondered how they would get Brave One through the security checks. Brave One solved that for them. He wrapped himself around her neck, stretched out, and hid his face and feet from prying eyes. To the casual observer, Birgit was a wealthy woman with a unique fur necklace. Two of the stewardesses commented on it and she told them it cost \$40000 and that pretty much ended the interest.

“Amazing,” she whispered, “but you’re getting hot. Can you handle being in my purse until we deplane?”

He unwrapped himself and licked her nose. He nodded and dove headfirst into her purse between her and Calvin.

“This is an interesting flight, Shannon,” said Marcia, one of the steward staff. “I don’t remember this model aircraft flying direct before. Usually there’s a connection point and a plane change.”

“I know. It’s the first one ever. I heard that many pilots turned down this flight. They think the runway at Albuquerque is too short. Captain Starkey thinks otherwise. He’s good and jumped at the chance to prove them wrong and open a new service frontier.”

“Good for him. He’s a handsome one. Anyway, non-stop is better than all the hassle of transferring planes.”

“Do me a favor?” asked Shannon.

“You, the boss. Lay it out.”

“Do the final headcount and compare it to the passenger manifest. Since this is a first for us, we don’t need to make any mistakes.”

“Wow! You really trust me with that?” The task both pleased and shocked her.

“I do. You need some responsibility other than looking beautiful and charming for the passengers. Get it done, and let me know the results. The exercise will do you good and help you in the future.”

She went to the main stewardess compartment and pulled out a copy of the manifest for verification later. The intercom buzzed, and she picked up the handset. “Yes, Captain?”

“Hey, Shannon. How did you know it was you I wanted to talk to?”

“You just got lucky that I was here. Please be professional when schedules happen to put us together, Sir?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Being the Captain, my professional opinion is that you are the most marvelous woman that I’ve ever encountered in my life, before or after this flight. It’s also my professional opinion that I love you and can’t wait to begin the rest of my life with you.”

“Well, I think you need to take a cold shower since you’re piloting this plane, Sir. Two-hundred-twenty-seven people count on your professional FLYING skills, not your romantic prowess. Shannon out.” She grinned and waited for the return.

“You crush me without recourse.”

“Shall I bring a bucket of CRUSHED ice water to help you regain your focus, Sir?”

“No, just a manifest and headcount verification would work nicely now.”

Marcia appeared beside Shannon to report. “Two-twenty-seven passengers. All accounted for according to the seating manifest.”

“Great. The official head count is 227. See you in Albuquerque, Sir. Shannon out.”

Captain Starkey pulled onto the runway and rolled to take off. He extinguished the Fasten Seat Belt lights at cruising altitude. He settled in for a five-hour flight to where he started his flying career with the Air Force, flying F-16 Eagles from Kirtland Air Force Base, which cohabited with Albuquerque Airport.

“Going home,” he reflected. “Damn, I’ve really missed you. Never thought I would.”

Around two hours into the flight, Birgit unfastened her seat belt.

“Got to visit the little girl’s room. Save my seat?”

“Not a problem,” Calvin said and kissed her.

Marcia called Shannon on the intercom when Birgit stood. “This is a miserable flight. No one wants to be served. Everyone is grumpy and mean-spirited. Please remind me to never take this flight again. Miserable, grumpy people. I want to knock a few heads off.”

“I know what you mean. Maybe this plane is undergoing PMS,” Shannon joked.

“Could be,” Marcia laughed and hung up.

Birgit made it to row 13 when she saw another woman stand as she passed.

“Excuse me, Birgit Westwood,” the woman said in a heavy French accent.

Birgit paused and looked at the woman over her shoulder. “Do I know you? I don’t recall seeing you before. Don’t bother me unless I know you.”

She returned to her course.

“When you want to slam dunk someone back into hell, you should at least know what they look like, bitch!”

Cassatt screamed and jumped on her. She locked her arms around Birgit and dragged her to the aisle floor. She grabbed the sides of her head and smashed her face into the floor three times.

Birgit’s ears rang, and her only sight was shooting stars. She had difficulty thinking and focusing on anything other than her next breath. She gulped in some air and briefly envisioned BlackBerry and her tempting mouth waiting for a kiss. Her arms were pinned underneath her at the moment. She moved her right hand and found the kea feather under her watch band. She removed it, braced her right hand with her left, and sucked in another breath.

“Die, bitch, die!” screamed Cassatt. She released her grip on Birgit’s head and heard Pollock shouting.

“You got the whore! Do it! Kill her! Kill her!” he chanted. “Rip her limb from limb!”

“Right on!” shouted Cassatt.

Birgit jerked her upper body upward, and her clenched fists shot outward and up. The kea feather jammed into Cassatt’s forehead.

A blood-curdling screech filled the passenger area, and Cassatt jerked to the left. The plane followed suit from the force of the move. She also turned into demonic form, ripping her dress and undergarments to shreds, and her icy, shimmering form covered Birgit in the aisle.

Birgit could barely move from Cassatt’s full weight on her, but she struggled to get the kea feather from her left ear. Finally, she connected with it, and Cassatt made her last move.

“Damn!” shouted Calvin, who finally moved to see what the commotion was about. Birgit’s purse was in a frenzy, and he pulled it to his lap and unzipped it.

Brave One jumped swiftly across the seat backs until he was beside Birgit and Cassatt. He growled, hissed, and leaped into the struggle.

Cassatt had her claws extended and ready to do mortal damage.

Birgit jerked twice and stuck the second feather into Cassatt’s rib cage.

Cassatt screamed and jammed her hands downward. Her claws penetrated Birgit’s jaw muscles and jerked them upward, ripping furrows in the flesh in her progress.

Brave One was on her then, and he went into a frenzy. She could not move, only lay paralyzed as the linsang demolished her demonic vital organs, and she continually screamed in agonizing pain. Then her body began to twitch and jerk as the linsang cut through the muscles and nerves, and it caused the plane to bank to the left and right and drop in altitude frequently.

Pollack witnessed the affair and knew that his sister was dead. It saddened him, but it also filled him with rage. He was fed up with the paltry spiritual warriors and their pathetic fighters. He had slammed the Jicarilla Apache Reservation with a significant earthquake where the smart-ass warrior BlackBerry lay dying because of Cassatt. He had more in store for the region, but, for the moment, he needed to depart the plane. He realized that even in her crippled, childish state, Birgit could still understand the process enough to invoke the linsang.

“It’s better to live and fight another day than to charge prematurely into hell. That displays intelligence and not cowardice.”

He disappeared, only to materialize on the top of the plane in demonic form.

He studied the structure of the aircraft and its integral composition.

“Well, Captain Starkey, let’s liven things up somewhat before I leave you. I think you need to earn your pay for once in your life. Paper Captain an extraordinary dipstick. Ta-ta.”

He rocked the plane right and left and repeated it again. He lurched downward and laughed as he felt the vessel bottom out on an air pocket a thousand feet below where they started.

Inside the passenger compartment, chaos ruled for the moment. It seemed like a lifetime before the conversation with Marcia and the last left bank ripped Shannon from the stewardess compartment. Her head slammed into the wall, and when she woke seconds later, she stared into the face of a strange man.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“So, so,” she said as she realized where she was. “I don’t normally drop in unannounced like this. Could you possibly help me up?”

He and his wife worked to help her stand.

She covered the area instantly from years of training and did not like all she saw. She saw the woman with the \$40000 fur necklace lying in the aisle bleeding profusely and Marcia crawling toward her. Beyond Marcia, she saw a man lying in the aisle with

one leg twisted at an impossible angle. She winced and moved her scan backward. One woman lay in the aisle screaming with a plastic drink stirrer jammed into an eye socket. Everywhere else, people were screaming, wailing, and jumping up and down in their seats. The debris was atrocious, and she realized she could do nothing about it at that instant.

“Not good,” she whispered, struggling to return to the compartment while the plane dipped oppositely. She finally made her objective, fastened herself into the jump seat, and gripped the safety rails.

On top of the aircraft, Pollock laughed at the damage and leaped into the air with a victorious shout.

“Welcome to hell, flight 1203!”

He hit the airplane again and passed through it to pursue other events.

Shannon’s head shot up when he left the plane, and the whole plane lifted into the air. Her head slammed into her knees when he passed through, and the plane dropped another thousand only to bottom out again.

She regained consciousness to John’s voice calling her. She took a moment to breathe deeply and rub her tender face.

“You’re going to have a rough face for a few days, Self,” she thought. She strained from the jump seat and grabbed the handset.

“What the hell do you want?” she screamed.

“What happened back there?” John demanded.

“I don’t know! Haven’t had a moment to stand upright as homo sapiens should! We’re in chaos and working with what we have. Give me five minutes of stable flight, and we’ll have emergency operatives implemented and can more reliably communicate with you! Right now, get off my ass, John Starkey!”

“Sorry, honey. It started there.”

“I know! Give me a chance to do my job before you demand answers. Okay? What the hell, over?”

“Again, sorry. Do your thing. I’ll assess the damage on my end.”

“Love that man,” she thought and unfastened her seat belt.

She stepped back into the aisle and looked in both directions. Both were clear, and flight attendants worked the aisle to comfort passengers. The exception was Marcia, who looked like a broken rag doll on the floor near where Birgit lay before. She signaled the rest of them to get to a compartment so she could talk to them.

“Look, team! We need damage and injury assessment, and we need to stow anything that can fly around and do more damage. Glenna, please do me the favor of a head count against the manifest. I want to know who’s missing.”

“Can’t be anyone missing,” Glenna replied.

“Don’t argue with me! Do it, and do it now! One more negative, and I’ll slap the piss out of you! This is not time to play games!”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said, moving to the front of the passenger compartment to start counting.

Shannon moved swiftly to Marcia and knew she was dead before she checked.

“Broke her neck on the ceiling during that last drop,” a passenger said.

“We need to get her out of the aisle, sir. Would you mind for a moment? We have some empty seats, and we’ll relocate you as soon as we get under control.”

“No problem. Please do what you must do and get us on the ground safely. I understand. Need help?”

They moved her body under the seats to her left and covered her with a blanket. The man twisted his feet to the empty seat next to him.

Shannon returned to her compartment and paused at row 27D, where Birgit sat. Calvin had torn his shirt and held Birgit’s face with both hands. Both pieces of cloth

were bloody. Birgit sat with open eyes, staring straight ahead, hands gripping the seat rests so tightly they were white. She could not open her mouth to scream from all the damage to her jaw muscles. She wheezed shallow breaths through her bleeding nose.

Beyond that, Shannon could not believe her eyes. She became focused on Birgit's body and Calvin's hands.

"Need help?"

Calvin snapped at her. "That's damned obvious! Got any doctors on board?"

"Don't know. That's my next step in this situation. I'll check that and get you an emergency kit."

She tapped the seats before her and signaled the ones behind her. "This woman was attacked, and she's seriously wounded. Will you offer anything her husband can use to help stop the bleeding? Like now? And if you can help otherwise, do so. He can't keep the pressure on her face forever."

Clothing and pillow covers flew back in her direction.

"Hang in there." She paused again and stared at Birgit's purse. It was vibrating, growling, and dancing around. "What's up with that? Is that a cell phone or pager?"

"No. That's her necklace."

Shannon's mind flashed to what had happened and the woman before her. "Did it do that to my passenger? Did it kill her?"

"It's trained to kill demons. It won't hurt people, like normal humans."

Shannon gripped the backs of both aisle seats and shivered. "Please, out!" she heard sharply in her mind. "Please, out!"

"Let it out. Like now!"

Calvin lowered his hands long enough to unzip the purse.

The linsang shot from it and wrapped around Birgit's neck. It wailed and crawled up the back of her head and rested its face on her forehead. It moaned and cried, and

its tears dripped from Birgit's nose. It leaped head first into her purse, emerged with the medicine pouch, and lay it in Calvin's lap.

Calvin opened it and took out two kea feathers and the plastic bag of black powder.

Brave One nudged the plastic bag, and Calvin opened it. Brave One shoved his nose into it and moved back to Birgit. He started on the left side and began licking her with the black powder.

"Be back as quick as I can," Shannon promised and hurried to her compartment.

Reports came in from the other flight attendants, and she composed herself and contacted the cockpit.

"Good to hear from you. What we got back there?" John asked.

"One fatality. Marcia is dead from a broken neck. We have four broken arms, which are being set one at a time. Five broken legs, which we're working on. Two of them are going to be difficult. One hopelessly gouged eye socket. Numerous cuts and bruises, sprained muscles, and bruised rib cages. And the woman attacked in the aisle when the chaos started is in serious trouble and losing too much blood. Her jaw muscles are ripped so badly I don't see how she'll ever talk again. It's all she can do to breathe and stay alive. Other than that, we're peachy keen."

"Splendid. For this side, we've lost three of four hydraulic power units, we've got cable severed warnings on 70% of our flight controls, and with all that damage, we've crossed the threshold of returning to JFK."

"Any emergency alternatives to help the passengers?"

"We've passed the opportunity to use them. We're so crippled now that we couldn't divert and land safely anyway."

"Can we land safely in Albuquerque?"

"Under normal circumstances, we'd only use 75% of the runway. Under our present condition, we don't stand a snowball's chance of escaping a furnace. The only remote chance is to use runway twenty, but at the end, there's a housing area, a huge one. We

might squeak by wiping out houses on the first four blocks. Other than that, the only option is to crash anyway and let what happens happen.”

“Then we go for the best option. Evacuations might work. Do we have time?”

“Little, unless they cooperate fully. Besides, only a miracle will get us on the ground alive.”

“We might have one. Remember when I bought that plain statue of Mary, the solid white one with the fake gold halo?”

“I do.”

“You raised a huge fuss about how tacky it was, but when a light shines on it for a while, it glows white in the darkness?”

“Sure does. What’s that got to do with us now?”

“The woman who was attacked is in seat 27D, and she’s glowing white, exactly like the Mary you fussed about.”

Glenna swung into the compartment to interrupt her. “You’re right, Shannon. I’m sorry. Thought you were crazy. We have two people missing. Seats 13A and 13B. Everyone is accounted for, and the lavatories are empty. Where’d they go?”

“Don’t know. Thanks, Glenna.”

“You hear that?”

“I heard. Give me a few moments and I’ll be back with you.”

“Glenna, get with the rest of the staff individually and have them go on mobile intercom so we can implement crash procedures swifter, if necessary, which is highly likely. Tell them, in private, that if they panics in front of the passengers, I’ll track them down and kick their ass, dead or alive. Got that?”

“Not a problem,” she grinned. “Are we going to be okay?”

“If you pray, then do so. Now go and get it done.”

Chapter Eighteen

Melissa was still nervous when she opened the door for Sam Chun. She hugged him before she closed the door. “Thanks for calling me and coming over. Your timing was perfect. This has been a horrible day.”

“I’m glad I did then,” he said, following her to the living room.

“This is nice. I like it. What’s got you stressed out?”

“This morning, Josette got fired. One minute she was there, and the next, she was gone.”

“Why did she get fired?”

“She copied some databases to a disk to give to Big Elk, the Indian who was with me at Won Jo’s. He’s investigating S-Brand to find who’s trying to destroy Calvin Westwood’s career.”

“That scared you. Are you doing something to help also?” He turned toward her on the loveseat, and the move cramped her legs.

“Yes.” She stretched out one leg across his. “And I got caught also. I was nervous and confessed, and they didn’t fire me. However, they told me not to talk to Josette about it. They’re not going to take her back, and they’re still going to press charges against her. Arrested. Courts. Fines and/or prison. The works.”

“And since you’re good friends, you’re stressing out. Now I understand the situation better. It’s not pleasant, I know, but since you asked me to help you, here’s my advice.”

He rested both hands on her leg and smiled. “Listen to your employer. If you two are close friends, then what’s going to happen won’t break the bond between you. You might get fired yourself or even caught up in the tragedy, and you don’t need that. And your misfortune won’t help Josette either way. She’ll forgive you when she learns what happened. I’m sure you’ll be okay.”

“That’s good advice. I was going to fix linguini with chicken meatballs and my own marinara sauce. Would you like to stay and join me?”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll eat almost anything, but I don’t care for pork products. A nice leg with some salt and pepper is fine also.”

She giggled and swung her other leg across his lap. “Glad you didn’t have to work tonight. Have any other plans?”

He rubbed her legs from feet to knees, held them, and tickled her feet.

“I’m yours until the fish dial 911 and report me for abandonment. Hate it when they do that. Makes me break out my canned air and threaten them.”

She laughed, freed her feet, and stood with his help. “You’re great news. You plan on being a chef or waiter all your life?”

“No. I’m taking classes with the intent of becoming a pharmacist eventually. It’s difficult to work my way through college and take classes piecemeal, but that’s the best I can do for now. Do you plan on being a receptionist and secretary all your life?”

“No. I’m working on a Registered Nurse program. I love people, and I want to help them when they’re sick and down. It’s not a career for everyone. I’m told it’s demanding, and you’re never paid what it’s worth, but I’ve at least got to try it. Helping people has its own payment system. Financially, it pays more than what I’m earning now, and there’s also the opportunity to branch out and work with hospices if I don’t like the tension of a hospital setting.”

“Sounds like we both have good plans.” He sat at her small kitchen table. “How old are you?”

“Thirty,” she said and paused to stare at the ceiling.

He laughed at her. “Don’t worry. I like older women. Do you like younger men? I’m all of twenty-six.”

“Matter of fact, I do. Do you make a lot of money at Won Jo’s?”

“Enough.”

“Well, S-Brand is set to make a hiring blitz soon. It’s well above minimum wage. If you’re interested, I’ll snag an application for you and get it into personnel before they advertise.”

“I might be interested in that. A schedule with nights free for classes might prove worthwhile. Thanks.”

“What do you plan for me?”

“For you? Well, I was thinking that when tomorrow morning gets here, I plan to watch you go from fully naked to fully dressed. That is, if you’re not self-conscious about being naked in the light for a few moments. Some women are.”

“What?” She stopped her task and stared at him. “Josette and Falling Snow said you were bashful. I’ll have to correct that feeling when I see them.”

“I was afraid and shy to ask you for your phone number until you gave it to me. Now I’m testing the waters to see if they’re calm, stormy, frigid or sensual, inviting or rejecting.”

“Well, if I’m naked in the morning, wouldn’t I have to undress sometime in the night?” She returned to cooking while she blushed.

“That would be the best way, and I can help if you wish.”

“Well, youngster, if I cooperate, that sounds like a good plan. But I have a counteroffer of what to do with me. Since we’ve both loved and lost four times together and for sexual/sensual reasons, I propose we do it His way. We refrain from sexual relations, however much it bothers us, until we’re married. What do you think of that proposal?”

He stood and asked if she needed help.

“Yes, you can open the cupboard door beside the left of the stove and get the spaghetti pan.”

He bent down, opened the door, and brushed his arm against her leg.

“Sounds like a fairly good plan,” he said, retrieving the pan and lid. “And I’m fully aware that if all parts of a relationship work perfectly together, there will be no problem with sex. It will be like a home run over the left-field wall. Marvelous! I’m glad you chose that input.”

“And, I will not be self-conscious to be naked before you, so long as you don’t watch other women do it, then I’ll love it. It will have to wait until we’re married and have our lives on track with His guidance, not our genitals in the present mood. Okay, dude?”

“Okay, dudette.” He kissed her as he sat the pan on the burner she pointed to.

*

Big Elk stepped inside the dump that was labeled a restaurant and bar and scanned the tables swiftly. He located Josette and took in the scene.

Two men held her arms, and a third held her hair and kissed her as his right hand moved under her skirt. First, he grabbed that man and threw him backward, where he hit the noisy jukebox. He smacked the other two in the head, causing their heads to collide. One collapsed to the floor unconscious, and the other backed away and collapsed, holding his head with both hands.

The first man was on his feet, yelling a stream of Spanish curses. A switchblade appeared in his hand with a clink.

Big Elk faced him calmly. “That’s a bad move, buddy. Put it away, and I promise not to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me anyway, gringo.” the man snarled and lunged at Big Elk. He tried to stop when his target disappeared but could not until his arm stopped solid in the air and his bones snapped. He dropped to the floor and screamed before sailing toward his original position.

Josette saw it and moved before he hit her chair face-first. She dropped to the floor and huddled against the wooden barrier between her and the door.

The next instant Big Elk had the man on a tabletop with the tip of his switchblade resting on his forehead. “Want to bet I can’t drive this through to the tabletop?”

“No.”

“Are you married?” Big Elk asked.

He answered in what sounded like Spanish curses.

“Are you married?” Big Elk repeated.

“Yes, you pig!”

“Then why are you here, wanting to rape someone else’s wife to prove yourself a man? If you were home with your wife and children, that would show every man in this building that you’re a REAL man. Go home to her! Teach your children to live in this world, speak English, and not cheat on their future wives and husbands. Teach them respect for their marriage partners. This bar is not a living and no place for a family man to be. This is little above a dog brothel.”

He closed the man’s switchblade and put it in his shirt pocket. “I’ll take this. It’s illegal, and I don’t want you to get arrested where you can’t care for your children. They’re important to you and the world. This knife will get you killed someday. That’s not good for you, your wife, or your children.”

“Josette!”

She scrambled to her feet, frightened and awed by what she witnessed.

He tossed her the keys. “Green van, two spots to the right of the door. Parked in front of the fire hydrant. Go!”

He turned to the men, hooked the jukebox cord with his foot, and yanked the plug from the wall. “This is America,” he said and pointed toward the floor. “If you want to live, speak, read, write, communicate, and live a Spanish life, go back to Spain or wherever you came from. American Indians learned that necessity and adapted.

Suggest you learn it too. If anyone walks out the door before I leave, I'll stop and bury him. Prove yourself to be real men and stay alive to care for your families."

He joined Josette in the van and drove away hastily. She sat in the passenger seat and trembled violently for a while. He glanced at her occasionally and could smell the tension building further until he thought she would puke. When she reached that point, he smiled and pushed in the CD that stuck out of the player. Soft Indian melodies drifted around the van.

"Why did you do that?" she sighed and got a tissue from her purse. "I only asked for a ride."

"I know. What he did changed things. You must make a lightning judgment when you fight something, especially something like him, and I did. Maybe this is the first time that someone told him what I did. Maybe he'll start to think about it and change himself. I hope so. Indian philosophy."

"Anyway, thanks, dude."

"Can I be a PI tonight and ask some questions?"

"Go ahead. I can't go anywhere until you let me out."

"Why were you there to start with?"

"I've wandered the streets of New York since about nine this morning." She moaned bitterly and blew her nose again. "I got fired, locked out of the network, locked out of security access, had my whole time of service with S-Brand shoved into a little plastic bag while the whole office stared in icy silence and booted out the door. The speed of it and being promised I'd be arrested and have criminal charges filed against me froze my mind. Truly. Didn't wake up until a few minutes before I called you. I panicked then when I realized where I was."

"That's because of the databases you brought me?"

"Yes. What's in them that's so all-fired important anyway?"

“Personnel and personal information on company people. It’s company property. Could be used by the competition to woo writers away from S-Brand, set strategy, pricing, find loopholes to slice away at the company through IRS, FBI, or SEC informants.”

“Damn! Well, did you come up with anything solid? I hope. Hope I didn’t get fired for nothing.”

“I got a strong lead, which will open the other doors I need. I found Miranda Joyce Millington. At least she’s a genuine person. I’m patiently waiting for investigations to send me the information. She does have a bank account. Waiting for that also.

“Now, why did you call me? Why didn’t you call your husband?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged and looked out her window for a moment.

“When I found the phone off, I turned it on, and he’s the first one I thought of. He’s probably worried sick by now.”

“Is he abusive? Does he hit you?”

“No. We argue a lot, mostly because of money problems and a lack of enough to live on. I know this will upset him. We really can’t afford for me to be fired. Not when you have three children and possibly one on the way. It’s damned sure not going to help us.”

“You think he’ll slap you tonight?”

“Yes, I do.” With that, the tears started. “He’s come close a few times, and this might be the night. This sucks. Why are you doing this? You can’t get involved with people’s lives like this, Big Elk. What do you expect of me?”

“The truth that you just spoke and your tears. That’s good enough for now. That’s an excellent start.”

He let her cry until he parked the van in an empty lot a block from her apartment building.

“Thanks, Big Elk. I feel better now.”

“Good.” He shut off the engine and got out before her.

She shook her head and met him at the front of his van. “You can’t do this. Go home to your wife and kids, and I’ll see you later. I’ll be fine.”

When his arms rested on her shoulders, she could not move.

“Josette, my wife, and children are in New Mexico, along with most of my family and friends. They’re there to bury my sister, who died a few days ago. I stayed because my spirit told me that someone I cared about would be harmed and cause a lot of agony. I didn’t know who, just that it would happen. If you were Melissa, I’d be with her now.”

“You’re not going to the funeral because of me?”

“Yes, but when they light the bonfire to burn her earthly body, I’ll do as you did in the van tonight. I’ll cry, grieve, and be worse than you.”

She stared at the sidewalk. “You’ll cry?”

“I will. I’ll invite you to join me if you wish. I have no shame in using what God gave you to help yourself. Why are you hedging? Speak your fear.”

“I never knew that any man could move so fast as you. Kevin’s okay. He loves me, and he loves the children. I’m afraid you’ll hurt him. I don’t want him to hurt. Please go away. It’s alright.”

He placed an arm around her and nudged her toward the building again.

“Lightning judgment. Lightning response. I won’t have to hurt him like the other horny dog who longed to rape you. There’s more than one way to touch a man’s heart and change the direction of his life. And if I can do anything on the face of this earth to lessen or stop the impact of what’s going on in your life, I will. That’s the way I love, and I don’t want to change me. Do you?”

“No. I surrender to your will.” They entered the lobby and the elevator under the scrutiny of the night watchman, who said nothing.

Outside her door, she hesitated again with her face pressed against it.

The agony on her face nearly broke his heart. “Come on, woman. I’m not going to hurt him. I promise. Please open the door.”

She sighed, nodded, and unlocked the deadbolt first and then the door knob. She pushed it open and stepped inside.

Kevin was coming from the kitchen when it opened. He had Jacob on his left hip and Stephanie wrapped around his right leg.

“Josette!” He exclaimed and moved toward her. “Where the hell have you been? Why haven’t you called? I’ve been worried sick. Called everyone I could think of. What’s up with that?”

Josette never saw Big Elk enter the apartment, only Kevin and two of her children. However, he did, and the blow that Kevin wanted to deliver, and she cringed away from, was stopped in midair by his massive hand.

“What you show your children is what they learn to do,” Big Elk said.

“Do you wish to teach them that frustration and worry are reason enough to slap someone silly, even if you love them? You don’t have sufficient information to make a sound judgment before you deliver that form of punishment.”

“Who the hell are you?”

Big Elk pulled a business card from his pocket and held it up for him to see. “I’m working for someone else who has a legitimate complaint against S-Brand Publishing. Josette’s been helping me. That’s my association with her, that’s all.” Then he dismissed him.

“Josette, kiss your children and take a hot shower while Kevin and I have a powwow. You’ve been through a lot of hell today, and tomorrow will be worse. Prepare your body for battle instead of helping the opposition destroy you.”

“You can go! We don’t need you here.”

The hand left his arm and pressed over Kevin’s mouth. “She invited me here, and you’re one flesh, dude. So, you’ll have to deal with me and put up with me until she’s

ready for me to leave. Josette, do as I tell you. Prepare yourself for battle. Don't cave into the enemy."

Josette finally found her voice. "He's right, honey." She kissed Jacob, Stephanie, and Danielle, who suddenly appeared with a 'mommy' shout.

"Listen to him, please? I'm sorry I didn't call. It's been a horrible day, more like hell as Big Elk said. And I truly need a shower to wash off some of the filth. We'll talk later. Promise."

Big Elk closed the door and twisted both locks. He turned as Josette disappeared, and Kevin eyed him harshly.

"Let's go to the living room," Big Elk said and studied the environment as they walked.

"Okay, so what terrible things happened to my wife?"

Kevin sat on the sofa with Jacob on his lap, Stephanie sat beside him and Danielle beside her. They all watched the huge Indian in the easy chair.

"First, she got fired. She was caught copying some databases from S Brand Publishing and fired. She was blocked from all access to the building and put on the street after being told they would have her arrested and have criminal charges filed against her."

"Just great! That's all we need."

"Because she's going to suffer from the prosecution, or because of the income loss?"

"Both. Why did you ask that?"

"How much, how deeply, do you love Josette, without money being a factor?"

"A lot. She was the first woman I loved, dated, slept with, and married. She's the best thing that happened in my life. I'd choose her over money if that's what you're getting at."

“Fair enough. Do you have any sisters or brothers?”

“One sister, two brothers.”

“Do they live in New York?”

“No, they live in Chicago and on the west coast. Yes. They’re wealthy. That was your next question, right?”

“Yes. Do they have wonderful families like you do? If your brother’s wives didn’t come home or call, would they want to slap them around? Do they sit on a sofa with their children beside them?”

“One brother has been through two wives. The other has had three wives, and both treat their women like dogs. Neither have any children. My sister has one daughter, but she has a nanny. Okay, I get the point, but you still need money to live, and it’s getting harder each year.”

“And in the flash of an eye, Josette could die or be gone from your life for quite a time, and you’d have to live without her. Can you?”

“You’re worrying me.”

“Not as much as I worried Josette when I got her here. She was scared that I’d hurt you. She loves you enough to let you slap her so I wouldn’t hurt you. How much do you love her? Think about it. Put your children to bed and let me tell you about the rest of her day and her coming days.”

Chapter Nineteen

Shannon and her crew continued to help anyone that they could, and she dropped a first aid kit at Calvin's seat. Birgit's face was covered with black bubbles and a slimy black liquid. She remained the same, except she was glowing whiter than before, and the linsang worked tirelessly.

She made one final pass and sat in the jump seat to wait for John.

John Starkey finished a bleak profile of his plane and contacted Shannon.

"Shannon, is there any update before I contact Albuquerque?"

"Yes. Ask them to make us a reservation at the Hilton, the honeymoon suite."

"Funny girl."

"Wait, Glenna just showed up. What's up? We're about to contact Albuquerque."

"This is unreal, Shannon. Before this chaos happened, they were silent, morose, mean, nasty, and grumpy enough to bitch slap them unconscious. Now, they want service. They're jovial, happy, chatting amongst themselves, laughing, helping each other where and how they can, whispering words of encouragement, touching, hugging, and kissing each other. We told them we can't do meals now, so they want snacks, sodas, and drinks. Unbelievable. It's like a frigging' family reunion out there."

"Captain Starkey," Shannon asked. "Is it safe to say we're fairly stable now?"

"We are. Besides increasing or decreasing engine speed, we're flying stable, and that's all we can do. Why?"

"The passengers want service. Do I have permission to bargain with them under the circumstances?"

"Okay. Do that, and then give me your final damage assessment."

Shannon stepped into the aisle and hit the PUBLIC INTERCOM button.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Shannon, your senior stewardess today. I’ve been told that you want service. Under the circumstances, this is the deal. We’ll serve you free snacks, drinks, and mixed drinks. However, only one mixed drink or beer per passenger. If circumstances require it, and it may, I want you fully alert to help yourself and your fellow passengers. And when you’re finished, stow the waste in the seat back pockets or drop it in the containers by the restrooms on your own. We’ll have no trash run. Do you agree? Let’s see some hands.”

Nearly every hand went into the air and a resounding applause followed.

“Okay, Glenna, you and Andrew make one pass, meet in the middle and then stow the carts and return to your preparing the passengers for an emergency landing.”

In the cockpit, John idly watched the clouds they passed through and glanced at his course mapping screen. “What’s this?” he thought and concentrated on it. Instead of where he should be, his monitor displayed a map of the Jicarilla Indian Reservation with a white light blinking around 30 miles north of the southern border.

He leaned back in his chair and looked at Clark Rogers, his copilot’s screen. It was normal. He twisted to check Jeffrey Stiles, the navigator’s panel. It was normal.

“Must go. Must go,” sounded in his headset. His hand automatically went to the intercom, but he saw that Shannon was still talking.

“Must go,” the voice whispered again.

“Okay. I hear you.”

Shannon was still in override, and he felt frustrated. “Look, sweetheart, I need to talk to Albuquerque, like now. Come on. Please?”

“Practice your patience,” he heard her voice tell him when he grew anxious or frustrated and closed his eyes. “Take a deep breath and consider what you’d miss if you lost me in a frustration attack.”

He smiled as he opened his eyes and saw the long-range color radar switch flipped on and dials he had never touched rotated.

“What the hell is going on here?” he mumbled as he watched the screen refresh several times and then presented colored patterns of what they detected in the distance.

“Fuck me to tears!” he whispered.

Clark looked at him cautiously. “Hey, John, are you okay? Are you hiding something from us? You’ve been acting weird on this flight. What’s up? You need to level with us if you have a problem.”

His eyes darted back to the course mapping screen and the white dot.

“Must go,” whispered in his headset.

“Okay. I understand. I will. Give me a chance to figure this out. I think I might need some help, though.”

“No problem,” answered the voice that no one else heard. “Must go.”

“John?” Clark asked again.

“Hold it a moment,” he said, holding up a hand as he turned to his navigator. “Jeffrey, you’re a storm buff. You like to track killer hurricanes, tornadoes, and cyclones. Turn on your long-distance color radar and lock onto my coordinates. Give me some input on it, please.”

Moments later, Jeffery commented. “John, let me off the plane before we hit it. I’ll take my chance with a parachute! Where the hell did it come from? How do you get a Category 6 hurricane in the frigging desert where there’s no water to start it or support it? Totally unreal!”

“What’s your estimate of its speed?”

“As best as I can do with this poop equipment, I’d say 30 knots. I could be more accurate if I could read the core wind speed. And I’d say it could reach 40 to 50 knots easily. And you can expect winds around 90 to 190 miles per hour in the outer regions, and that’s a long way from the center. Total frigging killer storm! And that’s not BS.”

“Enough to kill us if we can work through our current difficulties,” said John.

“Again, I ask you, where do you get a Category 6 hurricane in the desert?” asked Jeffery.

“Start with a Category 10 demon who has no respect for human life,” said John.

“What do we have on this plane that’s so important that we all die instead of walking away?” asked Clark.

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“You got it.”

“I think we’ve got an angel on board or maybe a spiritual warrior. We must get her to the Jicarilla Reservation, regardless of our situation or the hurricane that will try to blow us out of the sky while it rips Albuquerque a new ass. She’s in 27D and must get there regardless of the loss of life. No other option exists.”

He glanced at the intercom light and saw Shannon’s override blink out.

He called her immediately.

“Shannon, what’s the status of the woman in 27D? Who is she? Do you know?”

“I’ve been so busy I haven’t checked. She’s a mess right now. Her face is black, oily, bubbly, and looks rather gross, but she’s remained the same except for the light inside her glowing stronger now. Really unbelievable.”

“Well, could you check for me, please? I need to know.”

“I’m in my station; hold on.” She flipped open the seating manifest and flipped pages until her fingers rested on 27D and E. She read the names and froze.

“Of all the planes in the sky, why do they have to be on my flight? I don’t need this right now. My life is great and on track. My wedding is set. Why now?”

“Shannon?” John asked.

The emergency steward bell chimed, and she instinctively moved to the aisle to see where it was.

“Seat 27D,” she murmured. “Isn’t that damn convenient?”

“Shannon, what’s wrong?” John asked.

“Take a deep calming breath and relax,” she thought. She stepped back into her station and answered. “Sorry, it took longer than I thought. The passengers are Birgit and Calvin Westwood.”

“Do you know them? Or know of them?”

“Yes. He’s the demon-psychotic suspense writer from New York. Birgit’s his wife. I was invited to a party she threw for writers one evening, and we were best friends until I moved back to the west coast.”

“Convenient,” he said.

“I have to go and check on them, honey. Go ahead and call Albuquerque and get us on the ground safely.”

He released his button and shook his head. “You’re not telling the whole truth,” he said to himself and made the call.

Shannon arrived at the seats. “Clean face. Feed me,” she heard.

“Okay. Sir, what does he eat? Anything to avoid?”

“No.” Calvin looked at Brave One. “Is he communicating with you?”

“In a way,” she said and left them. She wet a towel in her sink and arranged for Glenna to bring the linsang a microwaved meal. She returned to Birgit and slowly cleared her face of all the black slime. She was amazed to find many deep cuts gone and estimated her to be 90% healed.

Birgit released her grip on the seat arms and gagged. She bent forward, and Shannon grabbed a bag for her. Birgit sat up, and Shannon returned with another towel.

“Amazing,” she said as she rewashed her face.

Birgit groaned and slowly opened her mouth and closed it. “Oh, wonderful,” she sighed and turned to face Calvin. “Kiss me. I thought I’d never be able to do that or talk again.”

Shannon sighed, stretched, and knelt beside Birgit’s seat. “What was that thing that attacked you?”

“A demon. One that didn’t like me at all.”

“You killed it?”

“Yes, between Brave One and I, we did. We make a good team, I think.”

“The other one left the plane?” Shannon asked.

“Yes.”

“Do they work together?” asked Shannon.

“If they want to do so, they can, but they can also operate independently. The one who died was Cassatt. The one who left was Pollock.”

“The Gemini Demons? Of course, it’s them. I thought they were only Calvin’s fiction,” she said absently.

“How would you know that?” asked Calvin quickly.

“You let me read all the notes and the complete manuscript.”

He studied her blankly.

“You don’t recognize her, honey? She was your second woman and the one who really pissed me off. She was my best friend until you slept with her, and I blasted you both off together.”

He moved closer. “Shallson. Yes, but you look so different. You look so vibrant and alive. What did you do?”

“I stopped bleaching and dying my hair when I left New York. I decided to be completely me. And I love me like I am now.” She looked sadly at Birgit. “I’ve agonized over that so much. I’m sorry. Never should have done that.”

Sabob “I recognized you rather early on. Other things got in my way, so I couldn’t chat with you. I’ve forgiven and gotten over it all and reconciled with Calvin. I’ve missed you terribly. I’d like to stay in touch and spend more time with you.” She slid a hand through her hair. “I think we both need that.”

Brave One licked the last drop of sauce from the tray and licked his lips. He moved to Birgit’s lap and rested the tip of his nose against Shannon’s.

Shannon entered a gold ball, raced through a fiery sea, and stood before Basheer’s cage. “BlackBerry bad,” he squawked. “Shannon, good. Birgit excellent. Fear not. No harm to you.”

Birgit watched them and Shannon jerked and nearly fell in the aisle.

“What are you?” she asked Birgit.

“A spiritual warrior, I believe. I’m going to New Mexico to bury my sister, BlackBerry, and then get some training. Why?”

“He’s been talking to me, I think. Freaks me out sometimes. I think it’s working on John also, even though he won’t tell me what’s happening.”

“Have you been touching her?” Birgit asked.

Brave One hissed and shook his head.

“Comanche warrior and Sun Flower,” she suddenly thought.

“Easy,” came the answer. “You were wonderful. We love you. Don’t overdo it.”

“I assume we’re in a lot of trouble on this plane,” Birgit told Shannon.

“We are.”

“I’ve not been trained from birth. I wasn’t meant to be like this, but I’m stuck with it. Let me contemplate and pray; if I can help you, I will,” Birgit said.

Chapter Twenty

Kevin got his children in bed and listened to the running water in his bedroom shower. He returned to the living room, where Big Elk looked at family pictures on the wall.

“Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Water? Tea?”

“Cold tea and some chips if you have any, kind sir.”

“Well, what happened after that?” he asked as Big Elk munched.

“Between being fired and the time she called me, I don’t know. Neither does she. She snapped out of her trance in the middle of Spanish Harlem. Not a good place for a white woman to be this time of night, not someone as attractive as Josette anyway. I hauled ass there and located her by cell phone. Two men were holding her, and one was kissing her and feeling her up. I stopped him. He pulled a knife, and I broke his arm. He’ll have to learn to be a badass with his left hand.

“Five minutes later, you’d be in an emergency room with a Rape Crisis Team, and your life would be hell for a long time. Trust me. I had that happen to a client when I was too late. Four years to hold his hand. Six years to sleep in the same bed with him. Eight years before she would ever kiss him again.

“So, give her a lotion massage when she finishes her shower. Rub her back, her legs, her arms. Nothing else unless she asks you to. Touch her everywhere that he didn’t. Hold her. Listen to her. Let her cry. It’s okay. Comfort her as much as possible. Can you do that?”

“Yes. What are you, really?”

Big Elk smiled and drank some tea. “Good tea. Love it. I’m Big Elk, a private investigator. I’m also someone who despises injustice. Josette does too. She sees a big problem in the company, which is probably larger than she imagines. I see injustice in her being fired and the rest. I can’t save the whole world, but when I can save one person or family, then I do.

“I’m a free spirit, born of the will of the same God who gave you life. The difference between us, brother, is that I’ve been taught respect for the spirit, mine, and others. I hold my wife on a pedestal. I comfort her, I tickle and tease her, I taunt her, I make her cry, I make her laugh, I massage her, and I refuse sex sometimes just to drive her crazy until she nearly rapes me. I love her deeply, sincerely, because, brother, she is me. We are one flesh. I do all that and honor her and the Great Spirit, and I’m very blessed.”

He paused and ate some chips. “I feel so much love here in this home that it pleases me. So, in this case, I will do what’s right in the sight of the Great Spirit. When you do what I’ve just told you, your life will be so enriched that it’ll amaze you. I’ll set you on your journey, and when the wind catches your sails, you’ll have your brothers and sister begging you for your formula. Don’t give it to them unless you truly love them and want them to join you. Doubt they’d follow your advice anyway.”

“You’re confusing me,” Kevin said, straining to hear the water still running.

“Work with me, brother. Have patience.” He took the switchblade from his pocket and laid it on the coffee table. “Sometime tomorrow morning, the police will be here to arrest her. S-Brand won’t delay on that. No doubt they’ll drag her out in handcuffs while the neighbors watch. They’ll put on a grand show. That’s going to be traumatic for her.

“Do you have birth certificates for you, for Josette, for your children, marriage license for you and her? Do you have it where you can produce it right now, tonight before I leave?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do. Go and get them and bring them to me. Don’t worry, trust me.”

Kevin delivered the documents. “This is unusual for her. She’s been in there for a long time. Should I check on her?”

“No. She’s trying to wash off the touch of his fingers on her genitals. Might take thirty times to satisfy her wounded spirit. Let that go. She’ll be out soon enough. Let her heal and satisfy herself before you take over.

“Pick up the knife. Press the white button.”

It swished and locked into position.

“Instant open, more than razor sharp. That’s what makes them illegal. See the tip? That’s my blood. Josette thought I was blinding fast. I wasn’t fast enough to escape another scar. Cut your right hand. Nothing major. Just enough to draw blood.”

Kevin did that and Big Elk did the same.

Big Elk reached his hand across the coffee table to grip Kevin’s. He laid his card on the coffee table, along with another. “Keep these handy for tomorrow. If you need help, please don’t hesitate to call me.

When the police show up and leave, call him, Red Wolf. He’s one of the best Apache Lawyers this side of the Mississippi. Then relax as much as you can.”

“Is he that good?”

“He’s tried 110 cases in Manhattan alone. He’s lost only one.”

*

Josette stopped the water and stepped from the shower. She dried swiftly and put on her favorite purple robe. She went straight to the hallway and listened. She could hear them talking, but not what they said. She padded down the hallway and leaned against the corner where she could see them.

She saw Kevin gripping Big Elk’s right hand across the coffee table.

Kevin turned and saw her there. “Come on over here a moment,” he invited and patted the sofa beside him.

Josette sat beside him. “Are you okay, honey?”

He kissed her.” I am honey. I’ll do what I can to help you and we’ll take this one step and day at a time. We’ve been through some tough times and lived against the odds and shaking heads of friends and family. We’ll do it again.”

“This is different.”

“Different situation for sure, but not in how we react to a problem or threat against us. I’ve got my focus back tonight, darling wife. We’ll make it. The only thing in the world that can break us apart is ourselves. If we cling to each other, then we have more than enough to love us through. Go to bed and lie face down. I want to give you a lotion massage.”

“What? Kevin? You’ve not done that since we were newlyweds.”

“And now I’m focused. Don’t let me get away with what you feel is important for you. Remind me and remind me until I help you. Okay?”

She stared at him blankly and started to laugh. Then she stopped and stared at him again. “You’re serious, aren’t you? Did he tell you what all happened?”

“Yeah. And I promise I’ll never raise my hand to you again. I got my focus back and you’re in my focus, honey bunch. If we lose each other then we both lose what we love the most beside ourselves. Do you really want to give them up?”

“Never.” She sighed. She giggled nervously and then started crying, then grabbed him tightly. “Big Elk, I’m done with you now. Thank you so much. See you soon, probably tomorrow.”

*

“Albuquerque Control, this is Flight 1203 inbound from JFK, over.”

Captain Starkey received no answer. He repeated his greeting and again got no response.

“Hey, Clark. We are transmitting, aren’t we?”

“We are. Maybe they’re busy kissing their butt’s goodbye. Try multiple channels next time around.”

“Grand idea.”

“Flight 1203, this is Albuquerque Control, we copy your transmission, what can we do for you?”

“What can you do for us? Have you been monitoring our course?”

“No, sir. You’re not on our flight list.”

“Unbelievable! Well, we were FAA approved and we’re slightly over two hours out and we have some serious problems.”

“What are your present coordinates?”

“Clark, do you believe this? Not monitoring us. Let us fly into anything that gets in the way.”

“Flight 1203, this is Albuquerque. We have you on radar now. Don’t know how this happened, but you can’t land here. Our runway isn’t long enough to accommodate your aircraft. My suggestion is to continue to Denver, and we’ll let the company straighten this out from there.”

“Albuquerque, this is Captain John Starkey, and I don’t know what’s going on here either, but we’ve sustained a great deal of damage and we need to be on the ground in around two hours. The storm front between you and Denver is too large and dangerous for us even to consider going through.”

“Flight 1203, this is confusing. The weather here is 70 miles visibility and there is no storm front east or west of us. You’ll have to go to Denver, sir.”

“Albuquerque, did you sustain any damage from the earthquake?”

“No earthquakes in Arizona in over 200 years. Go to Denver. Maybe the altitude and air will help you. You can’t land here.”

Clark reached across the console and tapped his arm. "Category 10 demon humor is wasting your time. Something's horribly wrong there. Circumvent the situation."

"You're right," said John and changed the frequency in the radio panel.

"JFK, this is Captain Starkey on Flight 1203, is Allison Winters still on duty?"

"Ten-four, Captain Starkey. How's your flight going?"

"Not the greatest right now. Get her on the radio ASAP for me please?"

"Hey, Captain Starkey, Allison here. What's going on? Miss me already?"

"Sure, do about now. Look, we've had an emergency happen and we've tried to contact Albuquerque, but something's wrong. They haven't picked us up on radar until now. And the controller is acting weird. Could you see what you can do for me on land line? We're getting into a critical situation, and we don't have a lot of time to play with it. Two hours can go to hell in a heartbeat and kill us all."

"Ten-four. Give me three minutes, and I'll be back with you."

She opened her notebook and located the number. She hit the speed dial and snapped a finger to get attention. "Chester pick them up any way you can. I want to see where they are."

"Albuquerque Control Room, how may we help you tonight?"

"This is Master Controller Allison Winters from JFK, New York. We have an in-flight emergency approaching you and they're having some difficulty communicating with you. Is something wrong with your center?"

"Nothing wrong here, baby sweet lips. They won't wait until Simon Says land. And Simon won't say land. He needs to go to Denver. Den Ver. What's so difficult about that? He deaf or something? Remove the cotton balls. Den Ver. Understand? Simon Says, go there."

He hung up the phone.

"Okay," she said, checked for another number, and pressed the speed dial.

“Allison from JFK. Is Randy Smith still in the airport. No? Drat. Look, could you send someone from security to check on the Traffic Control Staff? We have an in-flight emergency headed your way and we need to get them in touch with the tower, like soon, and we’re having extreme problems with them. Great. Thanks.” She gave her number and hung up.

She waited and watched the clock and the news flow across a television screen of the sudden and impossible Category 6 hurricane that nearly leveled Denver, the flooding, the mudslides, the 2099 deaths, thousands more missing and homeless, overflowing shelters, the brutal destruction, houses, and cars floating away in the overflowing rivers. She looked at the tiny blip halfway across the continent on their tracking screen that read 1203 headed smack-dab into the center of that hurricane.

“You’re going to need more than luck on this one, Captain Starkey,” she whispered.

It took five minutes for Randy Smith to call her, and the news was not good.

“Captain Starkey take a deep breath and relax as much as you can. Albuquerque can’t help you. All the controllers are dead as far as can be determined right now, and the bozo who’s inside has jammed the doors. They have S.W.A.T. Teams on the way to deal with him and they’re shutting down its equipment. Meantime, Dallas, Butte, and St. Louis have teamed up to handle diverting all traffic from Albuquerque for you. Randy Smith’s arranged for Kirtland Air Force Base Traffic Control to serve you and coordinate your needs. Transmit your coordinates to them and you’ll be okay.”

“Okay? What’s okay? Nothing’s been okay in the last two hours into this flight to hell! What the hell’s going on in this crazy world?”

Allison stared at the hurricane and pondered his voice. “Something’s not right here. Doesn’t sound like the normal John Starkey. Don’t want to stress you, but since we set this flight up, I must ask.”

“Captain Starkey, will you switch to private channel 27 and contact me please?”

“What’s wrong John?”

“This flight is wrong! Wrong! Never should have taken it. Damn it all!”

“What? You’re the best pilot in our service and you know it. What’s wrong, John?”

“This flight is wrong! Besides all the mechanical problems, we also had two passengers disappear from us. They’re not on the plane, Allison. They’re gone! We have many injuries, a dead stewardess, a frigging impossible hurricane that’s going to crash land at the same time as we do, and I’m supposed to be calm? I don’t think so!”

“Yes, you are to be calm! We choose the best to carry our passengers and cargo. That’s why we pay you so richly. And right now, you don’t sound like John Starkey. What’s wrong, dammit? Get it out of your craw, please!”

“Shannon’s on this flight as head stewardess.”

“Your fiancée? Is that unusual?”

“No, but we’ve got one casualty so far. Are you listening? Shannon’s been hurt. One of the other stewardesses let it slip when she served us. And she’s four months pregnant! It’s not only 225 passengers. And it’s not only me. It’s also her and our son, that’s growing inside her. This is her last flight before she leaves the service, and we get married, and she delivers. I don’t want it to be her last flight. And I don’t want it to be my son’s last flight and I’m afraid. I’m afraid that I won’t be able to pull this one off. Okay? One or two simple problems? Fine. Hung landing gear? Fine. Not so many hundred that we’ll need a miracle to overcome them all.”

“Excellent, my darling friend. Now I can help you,” she thought.

“John, I was with you on the one real crash landing. We had one gear that would not extend. I was afraid also. But you got us on the ground safely and we only had one broken arm. I’ve dated and talked with you for over two years before Shannon came on the scene. I know you inside-out and upside-down. Switch your focus, my beautiful friend. Instead of focusing on your agonizing loss of them if you fail, make those two people’s lives the primary focus NOT to fail. How bad is this situation really compared to the one we shared and survived?”

“Around 300% worse and we’ve not even gotten to the point of trying to lower the gear yet.”

“Well, I still have faith that you’ll find a way to see your son born. And if you don’t stop your pansy-ass whining, I’ll pull you over and give you a reason to whine, Captain Starkey. Don’t give a damn if it’s in the air or not! You’ve got it coming!”

“What?” His mouth hung open and then he laughed. The scene flashed before his eyes, and he remembered they laughed so hard they had to pull over to keep from causing an accident on the interstate.

“Thanks, Allison. I needed that reminder. I’ll fight this Category 10 demon that’s trying to kill us with my Category 20 love and brilliance, and I’ll call you when we’re on the ground.”

“You’d damned sure better, Captain Starkey. If you don’t, you’re fired, and I’ll put burrs in your casket liner.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“Go and see her,” Clark told him after the preliminary contact with Kirtland AFB.

“I need to be here.”

“Go, John. See her and ease your mind. You need to see her more than sitting here now. I know it’s getting critical but do us all a favor and give yourselves five minutes.” Clark pointed firmly toward the door. “I’d expect no less orders from you.”

“You’re right. Might give me a shot of insight to help me.” He removed his headset and unfastened his restraint harness.

He made his way through the passenger compartment and sidestepped stewardesses along the way. He could see Birgit glowing, but not as intensely as he expected before he reached her seat. When he was at her side, her hand went up to touch him.

“Captain Starkey, when you’re finished, please talk with me briefly. Promise?”

“Yes, ma’am. Are you my angel that I must deliver to Jicarilla Indian Reservation?”

“Yes, but I’m not an angel.” She winked. “Go. Ease your spirit and hers.”

He frowned, but he walked on back to Shannon’s station. She was about to exit when he opened the curtains and bumped into her.

“John! What are you doing here? Oh, my gosh, you scared me!”

“I’m visiting you. Is that wrong?”

She gripped him tightly a moment before she kissed him. “It’s a pleasant surprise. You shouldn’t have, but I’m so happy you did. I’ve so many questions that I’ve been dying to ask. So many things I’ve wanted to say. But I didn’t want to bother you.” She kissed him again and clung to him with her arms wrapped around his neck. “My sweet darling man. Are we going to make it?”

“We are. Don’t know how, yet, but we will. I’m going to see my son born, no matter what. I promise you that. You’re hurt.” He lifted her chin and inspected her bruised eyes.

“Sure am. I also got a pulled muscle in my back that makes me grit my teeth sometimes, and probably a bruised rib or two when I sailed across the aisle for a serendipity bonding with that couple. And John Boy is just fine. It’ll take much worse than that to damage him. You appear calm now. Are you truly, okay?”

“Yes. Massive problems all over and around us, and it’s bound to get worse. I had to contact JFK to solve some of them.”

She grinned impishly. “And Allison slapped you alongside of your head? Good for her. Love that woman.”

“She’s good at that. She knows me too well. Think I’ll have to change airlines in the future.”

“Wrong. I’m glad you called her. If anyone knows how to change your focus and motivate you in the right direction, other than me, it’s her. I’ve just had my hands and mind so full here, I couldn’t reach you. You did good, future husband. Fresh out of gold stars, but you have one on credit. Give it to ya later.”

“Our spiritual warrior’s still glowing. She wants to talk with me. Is that okay with you?”

“John, honey, you can talk with any woman you want. Just know and keep the boundaries that would shatter our bond. Allison was an excellent choice. So is Birgit. Talk to her. She might prove to be the miracle you’re grasping for.” She kissed him and squeezed him again.

“Thanks for the visit. That’s dropped a ton of stress off me and energized me. Now I need to get back to doing my job and so do you. I think it’s wonderful that we’re together now, facing this crisis together. If one of us was on the ground watching this on the news, can you imagine the pain? See ya later.”

He stopped beside Birgit’s seat. “What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“The name is Birgit. Ma’am sounds too old and prissy. I’ve looked at this aircraft chart in my seat back and it’s very inadequate. In my mind, I can see many cables, snapped, or hopelessly wedged. Is that a part of our problem?”

“Yes, a huge part of it. You can see that?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what they do. What’s the one item that’s causing you the most dread? Can you show me? Do any of the crew have a laptop with remote internet access? Can they show me the functions of this plane? Can you give me a specific function that I can work on to possibly help you, Captain Starkey?”

He stood silent and stared at her blankly. He jumped when she touched him.

“Sir, will you answer? It’s okay.”

“I guess we can do that, but we have little time. And we can’t let you inside the cockpit. Then again, this is my plane and my landing. Come on.”

“Brave One, bandish,” she said and frowned on using an unfamiliar word.

Brave one jumped to his haunches and stared into her eyes.

“Can you see pictures and understand concepts, mechanics, and necessary motions?”

He pulled back his lips and nodded.

“Well then, boyfriend, let’s go and get educated, very quickly.”

She picked him up. “Captain, are there crawling spaces in the wings?”

“There are.”

The intercom chimed. “Captain Starkey, you have an encrypted, priority one message from JFK. Please return to the cockpit.”

He pressed his intercom. “We’re on the way. Birgit, who is passenger 27D, her furry companion, and me. Jeffrey, get your laptop on and pull up the mechanical functions and flight controls of this model aircraft please.”

“Are they accessible from inside the aircraft?” she asked.

“They are.”

A different woman passenger grabbed his arm.

“Captain just wanted you to know we’re not frightened. Something so wonderful is on this aircraft, we all feel blessed. We love you whether we make it or not. Thank you for taking this flight. You’re a miracle for us.”

He felt numb and all he could say was thanks. Five other passengers told him nearly the same thing before he reached the cockpit door. He turned to look back at the rows of passengers. They gave him a standing ovation and then returned to their seats.

“Unbelievable.”

“Let’s go,” Birgit suggested.

In the cockpit John strapped himself in and pressed the retrieve button on his communication panel to read the message.

“Unique Landing Posture. Sequence: The Eagle and the Mouse. Break a leg. For extra luck, break both. Screw the plane. Love, Allison,” scrolled across his screen.

He closed his eyes and envisioned the meaning of the message. Eagle and mouse. The eagle drops to the field. He turns his talons inward, toward each other to grasp the mouse. Otherwise, he’d lose it. If it’s takeout, he continues to his nest to feed his young. If it’s dining in, then he bounces once, maybe twice with the prey in his talons, lands, sits on his butt, and merrily eats his meal.

Brave One had antagonized the Navigator by crawling all over him and sniffing him before he had the chance to say hello to Birgit. He respected her like she was a queen of some powerful nation.

“Which button do you press to flip through the screens?” she asked him.

“This one.”

Brave One clicked the button repeatedly as fast as the computer could respond.

Birgit closed her eyes after around 100 screens flashed by her. She squealed and held her lower abdomen. “Oh, no!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Jeffrey.

“Pain,” she groaned.

Brave One ignored her and continued his new mission, even if he did not fully understand.

A sudden vision of Josette being slaughtered flowed across Birgit’s agonized mind. “Wrong! Can’t let that happen.”

“Are you okay?” Jeffrey asked again.

“Do you have landline communication capability?”

“Of course.” He picked up his set. “What’s the number?”

She opened her eyes to witness the flow of screens and what Brave One was drinking in. She spoke the number to him and groaned as she dropped to her knees again.

Jeffrey handed her the phone and grimaced at the look of agony on her face.

“Big Elk! What are you doing?”

“Sleeping about now. What’s up, Birgit?”

“What’s up! Did you leave Josette?”

“Of course, she was finished with me. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Was Pollock finished with her? How dare you leave her to her own recourse? What are you thinking, brother? Do you know she’s pregnant?”

“She mentioned something about that, but too soon to tell. So, what? Many women get pregnant every day. It’s a way of life for women, married or not in this great white society.”

“Every day? Brother, how deeply are you involved with them?”

He yawned and pulled the sheets up to his chin. “Deep enough. I’m going to invite them into our circle, our tribe. I’m doing it out of compassion and love, and I truly like the man, Kevin. Both he and Josette have clean hearts. They’re just bogged down with White American muck now. I’m going to set them free, Butter Cup. Is this really a life-or-death emergency tonight? This human body can only handle so much. I’ve not entered the super-hero level of existence yet.”

“Maybe not, just haven’t mastered determining immediate threat from future promise. However, at your swiftest possibility, create the time to set them up with a stealth spiritual circle. Will you do that for me? Pretty please?”

“How did you know that I can do that?”

“Brother, I’m only now realizing why you and Sun Flower were so angry with her for loving me and the level of intimacy she pushed on me. I realize now that it was wrong, and though I don’t like most of it, I can’t walk away. I’m needed here, now. Don’t want to see that tremendous burden forced on Josette and Kevin unless they embrace it with open arms. Can you dig it?”

“I can. One stealth spiritual circle coming up for them. Now, before I go back to sleep, why?”

She giggled and clicked her tongue. “Thought you liked challenges? Come on, Big Elk; suave, charming, articulate, the kind, loving, thorough investigator whom you are. Don’t tell me you can’t solve this little quandary on your own? If you can read their pure hearts and want to do so much for them, it should be super easy for you. This is way too cool. Will you accept the challenge?”

“Accepted. Buffalo steak dinner at the expense of the loser?”

“Yummy. Love free food. I’ll be ready, but please humor me, brother. Do it swiftly. Evil doesn’t wait.”

“Promise, Butter Cup. You still in danger?”

“Big time danger of death. Love ya. I have to go now.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brave One finished the indoctrination display of the flight controls. He turned his back on the computer and rested his nose on Jeffrey's nose.

Soon Jeffrey jerked and scrambled from his seat. "What the hell was that? Where's that freaky parrot? Kick his green feathery ass into next week! Bastard!"

Birgit regarded his response curiously. "You saw a green parrot?"

"Sure did. Totally weirded me out. I'll kill it if I get the chance."

"What did he say?"

"BlackBerry evil. Birgit excellent. Jeffrey dies tonight."

"Something's wrong here. A weasel in the hen house?"

"What's that?"

"I grew up on a quasi-farm. We had a lot of chickens. Chickens are synchronized fowl. When the sun comes up, they wake. During the day they eat and poop. When the sun goes down, they roost and sleep all night long. "If they wake in the middle of the night, something's wrong. One, weasel. Two, fox. Three, stray dog. Only that will stir them into a frenzy, once asleep.

"Brave One, has Basheer contacted people through you?"

Brave One grinned and nodded.

"Why?"

He lay on his back.

She picked him up and held him, until he faced her. "He uses you for communication?"

He nodded.

“Even those on the outside of the circle?”

He looked up, down, right, and left, never at her.

“You know that’s not right, don’t you?”

He shivered in her hand and nodded.

“Can you refuse him?”

He shook his head and cast her a gloomy look.

“Now I understand. You’re okay in this matter. Relax a moment.”

She laid a hand on Jeffrey’s shoulder. “Next landline number.”

“Hey, Sun Flower. Got a small problem. Something’s wrong here, I think. Basheer is using Brave One to contact people who are not inside the circle. Every time he tells them how evil BlackBerry was. Is this his way of grieving? Why continue bashing her to people who don’t know her or know him for that matter? He just told the navigator he would die tonight. That just doesn’t ring true to me. Ideas?”

“You’re growing in leaps and bounds, sister. Wonderful! And you’re right and I didn’t know he was doing that. We’ll have to stop that. Remove the weasel or remove Basheer. You’re much closer now.”

“Yes, I’m closer, but more confused, more emotional, more stressed, and more in danger. Nonetheless, I’ll join you soon.”

“Good. Be careful and thanks for the call,” Sun Flower said.

*

Sun Flower laid the phone down and stared at Basheer’s cage, covered with a black cloth for the night. She nudged Crescent Moon and snapped her fingers to get the

attention of two other women. She silently motioned for them to surround Basheer's cage. When they were in position, she removed the black cloth.

Basheer squawked and turned his head in every direction possible. "Gang bang or ganging up on Basheer?"

"Neither one," said Sun Flower. "This is called problem solving. Remember your training here in this very tent?"

"Remember. What's wrong?"

"You're wrong. You're touching people who don't need to be touched. You're using your bond with Brave One to instill fear in those who are untrained. Some of it might have been used for good purposes, but that isn't a permissible activity. And don't try to tell me that you didn't know it."

"I'm sorry."

"BlackBerry was not evil. She was excellent and you know that. The only mistake she made was to give into the sin of lust. That doesn't make her evil, only human. And she suffered greatly and long and paid for that sin with her life. And still, you bash her in front of strangers."

"This isn't right. She violated the bonding with us."

"And she paid the price with her life. And still she removed you from the pain and left Brave One to die if it happened. She spared you so that you can live, and you bash her. Basheer, you were mine before I gave you to her. I raised you until I had the difficult task of giving you up."

Basheer twisted his head around, but he could do nothing to avoid eye contact with one or more women who knew him too well.

He shifted nervously from foot-to-foot. "Her sin hurt me. It shouldn't have happened."

"I agree, and I'm sorry, but you must hibernate."

"No! Please? Not that," he said mournfully.

“BlackBerry wanted me to give you to Birgit. Right now, you’ve given the enemy a foothold in your mind, and we can’t have that in this battle. Pollack will use any tactic he can to ensure a victory. We must see that he doesn’t. Hibernate, Basheer. You know the alternative. BlackBerry wished to spare you. Will you let her down and let me down with the sin of pride and arrogance?”

“I’m afraid.”

“You should be. Consorting with cruel demons is not a rewarding task.”

“I’m afraid that you won’t waken me and give me to Birgit until I die.”

She opened the cage door, put her right hand inside, held it where he could see it, and extended her index finger. “I promise you I will. Since I had you with me from birth, have I lied to you?”

He nervously extended his right foot until he could guide it to wrap around her finger. “No. I’m still afraid. She died from her first mistake. I don’t want to die from mine.”

Sun Flower blew him a kiss. “I promise you’ll be okay. You won’t be needed in the next chain of warriors, only your feathers. You’ll join us again. Stop worrying and get on with it.”

“I’m already getting cold. Your love and wisdom can’t be resisted. I was wrong to give him a foothold, but there was no way to stop him when I did. Birgit found a way. I’ll wait for your wakening.”

He slowly moved his head underneath his right wing and stopped communicating.

*

“Can you hook me up with a headset?” Birgit asked.

Jeffrey rummaged in his flight bag and produced a headset. “You’ll have to press this button to talk, but you’ll be privileged to all that’s said between us and the steward staff.” He connected it to his spare jack.

“Captain Starkey?” she asked to get his attention. “Will you tell me what I can do to help you?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry, I was figuring in my mind what to do to get us on the ground safely. What can you do to truly help us? The flaps are not responding. We need them to drop our airspeed and altitude. We have fair to middling control over basic flight controls, but without flaps, there’s little chance of slowing the plane down enough to prevent a worst-case death toll. I need to see what’s wrong with them and if they can be fixed.”

“Can Jeffrey take Brave One and let him inspect them?”

“He can. Does he truly understand what to look for?”

Jeffrey tapped the counter beside him. “Brave One, can you show me where the flap drive motors are located?” He honestly did not know why Captain Starkey had such faith in a movie star and a weasel.

Brave One hit the scroll button and stopped the screens on the rear wings where the access panels were located. His right forepaw rested on the screen where the flap drive motors were located.

The first response frightened him and made him suspicious. “How do they work?”

Brave One touched a drive shaft and extended both forearms to the right and left. He moved both paws in a coordinated effort and let Jeffrey know that the shafts were used to raise and lower the flaps, along with whining sound effects.

“Never mind. Let’s go to the cargo compartment, and I’ll trust your judgment.” To himself, he said, “A weasel in the chicken house and a linsang on Flight 1203 into hell. Which will fare better? Probably us.”

Birgit sat in the empty seat and listened to Starkey and Rogers talking as she studied the vast array of panels, dials, lights, and gages. “Seems like an intense waste to move people through the air. Probably 200 % redundant, but I guess it works well.”

“What’s the next order of business?” Clark asked.

“Want to funnel all the output of our one hydraulic power unit to the flight controls and see what autopilot can do with them,” John said. “If it only works 40% and we can assist manually through the sticks, then that’s better than what we have now.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Birgit studied the panels before her and located what she thought were the hydraulic power units.

Seconds later, John reached across her shoulders and flipped switches on the panel. She watched what he did and followed tiny white lines across the panels.

“Are there four units, one on each engine?” she asked.

“Yes, and right now, we have only one.”

“Do we have less fluid?” She studied that panel intently.

“No, we just have three less hearts to pump the fluid and keep the blood pressure up. I’m hoping the autopilot system can use what little controls we have and give us one more plus to help us.”

She closed her eyes and concentrated. “An arm, whose artery is 90% clogged, can keep itself alive by finding a new way to re-route the blood flow and use any vein available as an alternative method to stop unnecessary death to the member. The brain doesn’t know the arm is near death. The quantity of hydraulic blood on this plane is the same. It’s not bleeding; it just needs to find a different route to use the blood necessary to keep the heart beating and the body alive. Damn! That’s awesome, self.”

She viewed the panel again and thought about what she did when sitting in the chair. “Redundancy. If system a fails, then system b kicks in. If b fails, c kicks in. If c fails and d can’t handle the load, you have a choice. Kiss your ass goodbye, or teach it

to keep the arm alive until you can get an operation. Why isn't there a backup for this? Maybe it's because the plane's brain doesn't know it has a problem.

She opened her eyes and smiled to herself. "Will this upset him or enlighten and impress him? Only one way to find out."

"Captain Starkey, shouldn't a failure of three hydraulic units allow the same fluid to be used by the remaining one?"

John keyed a course correction into the autopilot and engaged it. "Yes, and it does, but you need pressure. When we move the sticks, flight controls need a lot of fluid and pressure."

The plane jerked and shuddered several times but did not move from the charted course.

"Not enough," he said.

"Wrong," Birgit said. "You have enough blood. You have to relearn how to use it. Which unit is functional?"

"The one on number four. You have a plan?"

"I do. The plane's system is doing its best to function with a wounded heart. Maybe it doesn't know that death is imminent. Maybe the one left operating doesn't know it's the only one operating. If the plane's mind knew, it might just draw on an available failsafe system or access an emergency plan. Where are the manual shutdown switches for the power units?"

"Hot damn, Birgit! That's marvelous. Look to your right, table level, about three inches from the edge. Turn the wing nuts a half turn to the left, and the panel will open."

"Any ones in particular that I shouldn't shut down besides number four?"

"Number one. I'm going to kill 2 and 3 anyway."

“Then we’ll show the system that 2 and 3 have had a heart attack and see what happens.” She opened the panel as instructed and looked at the red switch guards. She flipped the numbers 2 and 3 cover down.

“Bing! Bing! Bing! Hydraulic power failure!” sounded in the headsets.

She looked at the gages on the panel that John had touched. Suddenly a yellow light blinked over the gage marked 1, and the needle jerked to the right side a few times and stabilized.

The aircraft shuddered again as the autopilot inched toward the course that John had entered.

“Flight 1203, Kirtland Control. Sir, you’re moving off course. Is that intentional?”

“Kirtland, it’s intentional. Just testing a new transplanted hydraulic heart.”

“What are your plans, Sir? We need some time to prepare for you.”

“We need to burn off some fuel before we hit the ground. So, I’ve set a course to take us across Jicarilla and bring us in over the northwest approach to runway 20.”

“Are you sure about that, Sir? The hurricane will be here before you can accomplish that.”

“I realize that, but with our crippled controls, I’d rather have the winds at my back instead of being totally at their mercy by hitting them head-on. It will also bring us over the housing area, which has caused me great grief. This will spare them and limit risking an additional loss of life.”

“Okay, Sir. Are you ready to give us the rest of the plans?”

“Roger that. Chart an angled course of around 25 degrees starting at the runway's center at the TACAN vector and take it from there. If there’s anything you don’t want hit, move it.”

“Twenty-five degrees? What’s that for?”

“When I get the vector lights, I’m going to jettison 2 and 3 engines. That pattern should cover where they might roll. Also, I want you to foam a thousand feet of runway starting about five hundred feet from the same point you use for clearance.”

“I don’t think the foam will be necessary, Captain. There’s a lot of rain here already.”

“Kirtland, just do what I ask. When 2 and 3 are gone, we will drop hard, and with our gear locked at 90 degrees, it will be a humdinger of a hit. I’m not worried about fires. I want a cushion.”

“Your gear won’t work?”

“They might work absolutely great, but I’ll lock them manually,” John said. “I want them to break for extra luck. Because, in theory, that will snap the wings, and they won’t fly far. And we’ll roll to a stop where you’ll have all the rescue personnel waiting. That is, providing the nose gear survives, and I think it will.”

“Sorry, Sir. This is a most unusual night, and I’ve never had these requests before.”

“No problem. If you think that’s unusual, try this one. When I was stationed there, you had search and rescue helicopters. Do you still have them? I need one after I get these passengers on the ground.”

“We have them, but I don’t think you’ll find anyone crazy enough to imagine flying in this weather.”

“Kirtland, now that I know you have them, get me permission to fly one of them and fuel it to the max,” he said, turning to see Birgit’s hands waving through the air, nearly like flight control surfaces. “I have an angel on this plane, and she needs to be on Jicarilla tonight. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Tonight. I’ll get her there or die trying. Just cooperate and let us get on the ground.”

“Yes, Sir. Let us know if you need anything else, and we won’t question anything else. Kirtland out.”

“Clark, start routing fuel from the fuselage to any nook and cranny you can find at the end of the wings. We’ll feed 2 and 3 from that point back until we don’t need them.”

“Yes, sir. I’m glad it’s you here in the Captain’s Seat tonight. I might be in serious trouble with someone else. I think it will go down the way you believe. Are you really going to fly into the hurricane?”

“I am. It’ll cause Shannon some grief, but I must do it. I’ve been told too often to get her there, and I’ll obey.”

“Well, if you need or want a copilot for that mission, let me know. I’m with you.”

Jeffrey and Brave One returned to the cockpit.

Brave One leaped to Birgit’s shoulder, ran around her, and crawled through her hair to hang his head over her forehead.

“Then, what do you call them, jack screws that operate the flaps are clear. The problem is the frozen motors that operate them.”

“Then maybe we can use the extra pressure to free them.”

“Not that way. Think cold. Think ice at minus 200 degrees Celsius.”

“What could do that?”

“The demon who left the plane and did all the other damage that has you crippled in the air. All we can do is overcome what he did, and it’ll piss him off, and he’ll come back and try something else.” She stiffened, sighed, and leaned back in the seat. “I don’t like that part, but I’ll have to get used to it. Can’t undo what’s been done. You need the flaps to slow down, correct?”

“That’s a fact. It’s like our major brake and landing control; if we can’t use them, everything else will count for little.”

She rolled a pencil back and forth on the console top with a finger.

“Well, then, I guess he’ll be upset with me. I’ll overcome what he’s done with willpower. When you want them down, I’ll get them down, but I won’t be able to get them up.”

“Angel, you get them down, and I don’t care what happens to them after that.”

She smiled and stood to let Jeffrey reclaim his seat. She moved to the Captain’s chair and rested her hands on his shoulders. “John, you don’t have to call me an angel. I’m not. But thanks for being my hero. It’s great that you understand and are willing to brave the danger. I hope you’ll be richly rewarded for what you’re doing now and will do.” She kissed his cheek. “I want to go back to Calvin for a few minutes. Is that okay?”

“Sure thing. The show time for the final act is twenty minutes. Mosey on back and join the rest of your crew here.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Josette lay sighing on her bed in New York as Kevin massaged her tense body.

“I’m truly sorry, sweetheart.” He kissed the back of her neck. “Turn over so I can deal with the rest of you.”

She hesitated, and he thought of what Big Elk had said earlier.

He groaned to himself and went to her dresser. He chose one of her favorite panties and short-legged pajamas. He returned to the bed, laid them on one arm, and switched off the light.

“Get dressed in the dark. I’ll settle for massaging your legs from the knees and not worrying about the rest of you. I don’t want to stress you out. I’ll practice my patience and wait for you to heal.”

She cried as she dressed. “I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t put myself in that situation intentionally. I’d never go to that part of the city if I could avoid it, and not without you.”

“I know that. What are you thinking right now? What’s troubling you the worst?”

“Wow! Is this side of you going to stay for a while? Look, can we stop now? My worst fear is that I’ll have a flashback and puke if you touch me more than now. I’ll get over it. Just give me time.”

“You have all the time you need, and, yes, I want to stay this way. I don’t like to think of reaching the point of frustration and slapping you like the idiots next door do. Losing you and the children would destroy me.” He lay beside her, and she snuggled against him.

“Do you ever wish we were somewhere else? Maybe somewhere outside this dense city.”

“Sometimes. Maybe this is a good time to give it some serious thought and discussion. Let’s get through the rest of the week I don’t want to face and get back together on this subject.”

Danielle lay in her bed across the hall and slightly toward the living room and listened to Mom and Dad talking. She was troubled by the night’s events and Big Elk’s candid manner. The things he said would happen greatly distressed her. She heard the couple in the next apartment fighting. They did that often, and it usually ended in slapping and crying. Sometimes the police came to end it. Then they did it again.

Farther down the hall, she could faintly hear the Chinese women smoking, cackling in their language, and playing with tiny plastic cards. She had seen them one day when they left the door open, probably to clear the smoke. Three families in one tiny room. Cramped inside like her toys in the box at the foot of her bed. Bunk beds stacked to the ceiling. No room, and still, there was hope, love, and happiness. That day they were all smiling, and they waved at her. One spoke her language and rushed into the hall to kiss her. Mommy was pleased with that.

Above her was someone who paced the floor frequently. His footsteps creaked the boards when he did. If he did not pace, he peed and flushed the commode. It gurgled, and the pipes in the corner of her room shivered and rattled when he did.

“This is my world. I’m only four, but I’d leave and take us all away if I could. I don’t like it here.”

She felt a draft of cool air and opened her eyes to see a ghost beside her bed. She saw them sometimes, but they usually just looked at her and disappeared. The present ghost filled her with dread. She gasped and scooted away from it until her back touched the wall. It stared at her wickedly, and she wanted to scream for help, to bring Daddy running, but her throat was frozen by fear.

“You’re evil,” it hissed and pointed a finger at her. “I don’t like evil things. They serve no purpose in this world. I’ll bury you soon.”

It disappeared, and she trembled until the room warmed again and the familiar sounds returned. She looked at the small bed across the room where Stephanie slept as if nothing happened. From there, she glanced at the crib where Jacob slept, curled up on his left side and sucking his thumb.

“Three families in one tiny room. Three children in one tiny room. Barely room to walk, move, or play,” she whispered. “Hope the love lasts.”

Finally, she calmed enough to drift off to sleep, wondering what it would be like to be buried. It did not make her feel good.

*

The plane was on the ground, and Captain Starkey was annoyed that the nose gear was 2 feet over the pavement edge.

The emergency crews were all over the place like flies as they loaded the injured into ambulances. The mob passengers ignored the rescue workers and formed two lines beside the slide where Marcia’s body was removed. They saluted or held hats over their hearts until she was in the ambulance and out of sight. Then they ignored them again, walked by Captain Starkey, and shook his hand in the pounding rain. They smiled, laughed, hugged, and praised him as the best pilot on earth. They stuffed his pockets with damp business cards and promises of invitations to meals, weddings, and parties galore. The passengers were all gone, and the flight attendants were on the last bus when Starkey and Rogers were picked up.

Lieutenant Colonel Mansion greeted them in the Kirtland Control Tower. “Good evening, Captain Starkey. That was a brilliant landing. Very impressive. Cleanup will be a breeze.”

“Thanks, Sir. It was a lot of luck.”

“I’m told you want to fly a helicopter from here to Jicarilla. Is that true?”

“It is. I’ve still got to get my angel there. And it has to be tonight.”

“Who’s your angel?”

“Her name is Birgit Westwood. I also need her husband, Calvin, and our furry stowaway, Brave One.”

“I think you got big balls, Captain. Who’s your co-pilot? You’ll need one.”

Clark raised his hand. “I am, Sir. I rode that plane to the ground with him and I’ll ride the chopper into the hurricane with him.”

Mansion called an aide. “Where did they take the passengers?”

“Any hotel or motel in the area that had rooms, and the rest to guard armory shelters.”

“Contact them and locate Calvin and Birgit Westwood and their pet. Send a military transport to bring them here for the last leg of their flight for tonight.”

Starkey and Rogers reviewed obstacles, fuel consumption, and worst-case weather scenarios in the planning room. The phone began to ring nearly constantly. Soon an airman approached them.

“Colonel Mansion, Sir, we’ve got main gate security on the phone. We’ve got the people you requested, but a woman forced her way into the van, and they can’t get her off. She’s handcuffed herself to the steering column.”

John glanced at Clark and saw a playful smile. “Don’t tell me that,” he whispered.

“Well, who is she? We need to get this chopper in the air, and it needs to be soon.”

“Name is Shannon Huntington, Sir.”

John raised his hand. “She is my fiancée. Let her come on, please. During the landing and the chaos, I forgot to tell her what I was going to do. I’m in for a spot of hell here.”

“You could just leave her handcuffed to the wheel?” suggested Clark.

John paused a moment to consider that. “Nah, I want to live with her the rest of my life without waiting for a payback.”

Soon the door opened, and Shannon grabbed him and spun him around.

“What are you doing, John? You can’t be serious! Tell me you’re not serious. Please don’t do this to me.”

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry that I neglected to tell you about this. This is something I MUST do. Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.”

“Please, John, reconsider this,” she begged, sliding from his arms to wrap herself around his legs like a frightened child. “I can’t deal with this, honey. I don’t want to sit in ashes, tearing my clothes and mourning your death. Please?” She started sobbing.

John looked helplessly at Birgit.

She smiled and nodded. “Deal with her,” she mouthed and heard Brave One whimper. “No. Stay here and let him work on his own. He’ll do it quick enough.”

The room was silent except for Shannon. John reached down, hooked his hands under her arms, and pulled her upward until she acted to stand alone. He moved her to arm’s length and kept moving her up until she stood on the tips of her toes.

“Miss Huntington, future Mrs. Starkey, stop this right now,” he said firmly with no harshness. “Might I remind you that you are the key factor in straightening out my life? You got me back into the church. If neither of us were there, the coming union would not occur. You told me I could fail in the sight of the world, but as long as I followed God’s will, I would never fail in His. This spiritual warrior must get to Jicarilla tonight. Clark is going with me, and we need to go. Do you want to stop or change His will for your own selfish and scared reasons?”

Inwardly she felt herself calm, and she shook her head. “Okay, you’re right. Sorry for acting childish like that. Just felt like my heart was being torn out for no reason.”

“And you don’t want to be on the ground while I’m flying into the hurricane because it’s hazardous. I know, sweetheart, but suffer it this time because it must happen for the angel here. Anything else?”

“Please let me down. My toes are killing me, honey. I’m focused. I’ll be okay now.”

He let her down and released her. “When we get there, I’ll call you. We’ll be staying there until the trouble passes. We won’t try to return tonight. Okay?”

“Yes, dear. Go. I’ll be in my hotel room waiting for your return. Go now. Colonel Mansion, I apologize for my behavior and the interruption of this mission and the stress on your base security. Sorry.”

“That’s quite okay, Miss. Occasionally we all need some excitement in our lives. Like a wild-ass crash landing where everyone walked away alive except for the one who died in the air. Like a sincere and beautiful lover’s reunion. Don’t worry about it.”

*

The flight was not the best adventure, but they finally landed at Jicarilla, where Birgit guided them.

“I’m so happy to see you, Butter Cup. Now our circle is complete, and we can get to work,” Sun Flower said. “Look, men, go with the braves to their tents or homes. It doesn’t matter if you can understand what’s going on or not, just do what they tell you.” She hugged and kissed them all. “Welcome to my home. I hope to kiss you again in the morning. That will be a good thing.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Josette woke to Jacob's crying and rose from the bed. "My turn," she yawned and shoved Kevin down to the pillows. "Haven't seen the little guy yet today. Thanks for last night. You were great."

She changed Jacob's diaper and noticed that Danielle and Stephanie were sleepyheads like Kevin. "It looks like it's you and me today, buddy."

She took him to the kitchen and put him in the high chair and fixed a bottle of formula. She helped him when his hands strayed and drank some tea.

The couple next door soon started a shouting match. She looked at the clock in the microwave. "Nine-thirty. Starting early today."

She hit the kitchen wall with her fist. "Knock it off, will you! Why don't you give it a break? Spend one day in love and silence!"

"Shut up, bitch!" the man yelled, not at Josette but at his wife.

Josette jumped when she heard a body hit the wall beside the table. At the same time, the doorbell rang, and there was a pounding knock on the door.

"Oh, gosh," she agonized. "Yes. Today is a long one." She stood to open the door but never reached the kitchen door before she heard a loud popping noise; her microwave jerked, and the door shattered.

"What the hell?" she screamed as another followed, and her flour canister burst. "Jacob! No!"

She raced across the floor while she heard two more pops and kicked Jacob's chair over to get him out of the line of fire. She stood and staggered back against the refrigerator and sagged to the floor on her left side.

Kevin heard the fighting, the gunshots, and Josette's screaming. He jumped from the bed and pulled on his pants and ran down the hall to open the door to the irritating bell and knocking.

Corporal Owens forced his way into the apartment with badge and credentials in hand. “Where is Josette Robinson?”

“In the kitchen,” he said and cursed as the officer ran past him. He followed to see him kneeling beside Josette on the floor and Jacob was red and wailing. “Dammit all. This is stupid.” Kevin started to go to his son.

“Crazy bitch,” Owens said and slapped her. He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her up a few inches. “What drug did you take? Answer me.”

Kevin paused and his stomach sank as he noted the holes in the wall and the damaged kitchen items. Then he saw the blood on Josette’s pajama top. “She’s hurt. She’s been shot, you idiot!” he shouted and moved closer.

Owens pulled his weapon. “Back off!”

“Let me get my son.”

“I said back off! I’m in charge here!”

Kevin grew frustrated swiftly, but then Big Elk’s words about being useless if he could not control his emotions surfaced in his mind. “Sorry, Jacob, Josette.” He stepped back and watched Owens shake her and expect a response. Jacob’s wailing tore at his heart.

“Okay. You’re in charge now. I feel sorry for you when that gets reversed. If my wife dies because of your foolishness, there will be nowhere that you can hide from me. I’ll find you and you’ll suffer greatly.” He grabbed the portable handset from the wall and went to the living room. He sat on the sofa and steeled his heart against the crying and dialed 911.

“Yes, ma’am, I have a problem. I’m Kevin Robinson and my wife has been shot, and she needs medical attention. I also have a supposed police officer in the kitchen with her and he won’t call for help. He doesn’t act like a police officer. He’s not even acting human. Will you send some real police to check him out also?”

The emergency agent verified the address and promised to send the requested help.

He groaned again and hit the end button. He ran to the bedroom and got his wallet and sat on his bed and dialed Big Elk. “Where are you, brother?”

“On the way to meet some of the tribal leaders. You sound stressed. What’s wrong?”

“Yes, I’m stressed but I’m doing my best not to kill.” He gave Big Elk a rundown of the situation.

“I’ll be there in less than ten minutes, brother.”

Kevin disconnected and walked purposefully back toward the kitchen.

Sergeant Downing, the senior man of the team left Owens and broke through the door of apartment 407. He worked his way through the apartment and viewed the carnage in every room. The man with the gun was on the floor in the living room, dead from suicide. His four children were dead in their bedrooms. His wife was dead in the kitchen with lots of blood on the walls and bullet holes all over.

“Not a good way to start the day.” He radioed for backups, ambulances, and crime scene investigation support. “Simple task. Arrest Josette Robinson, who has no prior criminal records. Take her in. Book her. Let her post bail and be done with it. Not a good start here.” He pulled the door closed to 407 and returned to 405. He found the kitchen destroyed and Josette on the floor bleeding.

Jacob was still wailing, and Owens was shaking Josette with his weapon still in his hand. “What the hell are you doing, Owens!”

“Trying to make the bitch talk.”

“Did you shoot her?”

“No. She was like this when I came in. Must be some good drugs.”

“Drop your weapon!”

“What?”

“Drop it now! Did you call an ambulance for her?”

“Why the hell should I do that?” demanded Owens and started to stand. Downing tripped him and kicked his right hand, causing him to drop the gun and fall. “Until I get this situation straight, you don’t move!”

He knelt beside Josette and checked her. “Not good. Looks like a clean shot through the right lung, but too close to the spine. Not good.”

Owens glared at him. “Why did you do that? This is screwed up.”

“I agree and until I sort this out, shut up,” Downing said.

Kevin reached the kitchen then and saw Downing between Owens and Josette. “Since you’ve failed your job, I’ve called for an ambulance for her and the police to check you out. You’re not police officers. You’d better hope she doesn’t die.”

“That’s good, sir. You did the right thing,” Downing said. “Are you Mr. Robinson?”

“Yes, I am, but this asshole isn’t an officer.”

“I agree that something’s wrong here. This kitchen is too cold for a normal kitchen. And there are no windows here. Most unusual.”

“Can I get Jacob?” asked Kevin, taking a step toward him.

“Hold on a minute,” Downing said. “Just a minute, please.”

At that moment Danielle appeared in the kitchen door. “Daddy, what’s wrong here? Why’s Jacob crying and no one helping him?”

Owens glanced at her and lurched forward to grab his weapon. “You evil bitch!” He fired twice at the doorway before Danielle squealed and disappeared. He continued firing rounds through the wall toward the apartment door until Downing’s black jack broke his grip on the gun.

Downing handcuffed Owens after he was unconscious. He rose to his knees only to see Kevin going for the gun.

“Hold it! Don’t do that! Don’t make your life worse. Please. Don’t make me react and stop you.”

Kevin stood shaking with his hand inches from the gun. He screamed and backed off. “I can’t take much more of this! This shouldn’t be happening!”

“I saw the girl there. Go and check on her. See if she’s hurt or needs help. Please,” Downing urged him.

Kevin was afraid of what he would find and gingerly stepped through the kitchen door. Danielle was nowhere in sight. He ran down to her bedroom, and she was not there. He returned to the kitchen and heard her crying. He stepped outside the entry door to find one of the Chinese women cradling her on the floor in the hallway.

“Is she hurt?”

“Only her mind.”

Danielle heard his voice and struggled up. The woman helped her, and she scrambled to his arms.

“Daddy! I’m scared! He killed Pansy. My bear didn’t hurt him! Why?”

“Danielle, I don’t know what’s going on here, I’m just glad that you’re not hurt.” He reached down to the Chinese woman. “Thank you for helping. I appreciate that very much.”

She smiled and stood. “Beautiful, gifted child, this one.” She patted Danielle and went back to her apartment.

Kevin returned Danielle to the bedroom and told her to stay there until things were calm.

Once more in the kitchen, Kevin found Downing was more relaxed.

“Benson? Downing here. Where are you?”

“Entering the building now.”

“Before you come up, bring a set of leg shackles with you.”

“Roger that.”

Before Kevin could speak, Downing had Jacob in his arms, hugging him and rubbing his back. “You’re okay, dude. You’re scared for sure, but you’re okay, and you’re going to live. When you’re fifty, you’ll never remember this day.” He stood and crossed the floor to hand Jacob to Kevin.

“Take care of him, arrange for babysitting, and come back, please. If she gets worse before help arrives, I want you here with me.”

Kevin took Jacob to the bedroom, calmed him, and asked Stephanie to talk to him and play with him until Big Elk showed up.

On his arrival in the kitchen again, Owens had leg shackles on, and they were fastened to handcuffs.

“Get him out of the building and don’t release him until you have him in a cell under guard and a police psychiatrist present. Something’s wrong and I don’t like partners tripping out like that. Then get busy in apartment 407. It’s going to be a long day.”

Owens was gone and Downing turned his full attention to Josette.

Kevin sat by her head. “Isn’t that a lot of blood to lose?”

“Yes and no. That’s not my concern now. If we’re lucky, she’ll remain this way until the EMT team arrives. If she starts coming to, that’s where you come in. She knows you, your voice, your touch. You can help keep her calm where I couldn’t.”

“What the hell happened?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. The kitchen was too cold. When he took the shots at the girl and I had him unconscious and handcuffed, the temperature returned to normal. I’ve noticed it before from time to time in cases we investigate. Just don’t have an explanation for it. I know things are chaotic when it’s cold, and there’s a swift return to normal when it’s normal temperature again.”

“Well, you sound more like a real police officer.”

“Thanks. I am. Sorry about the trauma to your family. It wasn’t my intent. And I’m happy you didn’t kill him. That would have ruined my day. Don’t enjoy scenes like the one next door. Kill the whole family and commit suicide. Stupid. Killing Owens might have made you feel good now, but your children would be scattered in an imperfect system with little true love. You’re a good man, Mr. Robinson. Stay that way.”

Big Elk stepped into the kitchen then. He did a quick evaluation and moved straight to Josette. “Hello, Charlie. Nasty circumstance?”

“Yes. David lost control, and I had to arrest him. It sucks. After so many years on the force, how can you go so crazy like that? Tried to kill this man’s daughter. Stupid!”

Big Elk knelt beside Josette and lay a hand on her head. He moved the hand down her body to her feet, back to her head. He rubbed her face and passed the hand across her chest to her feet again.

“Not good. Shot through the lung and has lost too much blood. Internal organs are out of balance and in total chaos. Has she moved?”

“No, but David shook her a lot. Slapped her. Tried to drag her up.”

“Asshole!” Big Elk pulled a leather pouch from his pocket. He opened a small plastic bag and took a small spoon from his bag. He carefully put a small amount of the powder on the spoon and placed it gently before Josette’s nose. He flipped the spoon with his finger to force the contents into each nostril.

Next, he took a tiny green feather from the pouch, closed it, and put it back in his pocket. “Charlie, hold her ankles. Kevin, one hand on her hips and right under her arm.”

He lay on the floor beside her face and held the tip of the feather at the top of her nose. “Great Spirit, we commend the body and the spirit of Josette Robinson to Your infinite grace and mercy. Return her to us if it is Your will. If You have a different mission for her, add her to Your roster of angels in Heaven and let her shine for You. Amen.”

He pressed the tip of the feather into her flesh, and her body jerked.

She took a ragged breath and groaned. “Kevin? Are you here?”

“I’m here, honey.”

“I’m terrified. I hurt so much. The children? Are they safe?”

“They’re safe. Big Elk’s here to care for them. Relax, dear. Help is on the way.”

“Good. You smell like burlap. That’s why I love you so much. I’ve got to sleep now. Sorry.”

Kevin watched her body relax. “Burlap? I didn’t know that.”

The EMT team arrived and had her stable and ready for transport. They promised not to touch the green feather until she woke and rolled her out of the apartment.

The Chinese woman appeared and offered to babysit for him. Kevin thanked her but left them in Big Elk’s care and followed the ambulance to the hospital.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Shannon's agony ended when she got a call from John to let her know he was on the ground and safe. Still, she had trouble sleeping. The lightning was horrendous, and the thunder sounded like a hungry growling beast. There was a hungry beast inside her also. It was called past sins, which had been forgiven, but she felt they would raise their evil heads and cause her problems in the present.

She had talked with Calvin during Birgit's absence, and she could not understand his fall from popularity. Somewhere in her mind, she questioned whether her father could have had something to do with that affair. It saddened her to think that, but she admitted that the past did not always stay buried. She promised to visit her father in New York and ask the painful question.

"I hope you give the right answer. I'd love for you to see my son. I'd love for him to have a grandfather to enjoy. That is if you want to share your time with him. This sucks royally."

The storm raged on until she made a visit to the bathroom. When she returned to the room, in the space of two minutes, the storm had stopped.

The wind died. The rain ceased to fall. The lightning and thunder stopped shattering the stillness. The clouds began disappearing, letting the moon and stars return to the sky.

"Amazing!" She stepped to the balcony and its cool, wet surface and looked north. In the direction of Jicarilla, the sky shone brightly with white light. "You were right. I was wrong," she whispered.

Finally, the calmness and accumulation of stress put her to sleep.

*

The apartment was clear and calm, and Big Elk went to the children's bedroom. He opened the door to find Danielle sitting beside Stephanie with Jacob curled up before them.

"Hello, Danielle. You, okay?"

She stared at him blankly and shook her head with no vocal reply.

He knelt on the floor to be at her level. "What are you afraid of?" he asked softly.

She shrugged and turned her attention to Jacob.

"Fear is okay. You might not understand that being so young, but it helps to talk about what makes you afraid. Things that make you afraid can stop you from having a good life."

She looked into his eyes a moment, then back to Jacob, again without a reply.

"Well, we'll work on that later." He tickled Jacob. "Dude, one of us stinks and I don't think it's me. Let's get you changed."

Stephanie gave out a long yawn. "I'm hungry."

"Well, we'll correct that." He stood to look around the room.

Danielle pointed out the directions. "I can do it if you want! Diapers are there. Wipes are there. Lotion and powder are there. I don't like this."

"You've changed him before?"

"Yes."

"When you were left alone?"

"No! When they were here. Are you going to do it?"

"Yes." He gathered the items and changed them while Stephanie held her nose. He kept silent because he could feel tension building to the breaking point in Danielle and he did not want to push her.

He picked Jacob up. “Okay, stud. Let’s go to the kitchen and get some breakfast for Stephanie, Danielle, and you,” he said.

Jacob giggled, and Big Elk carried him out. He righted the high chair and put him inside. Stephanie scrambled onto a chair and waited.

Danielle watched them from the door as she leaned against the frame.

“I’m sort of lost here,” Big Elk said.

Danielle slapped her legs from frustration. “Just great! You can leave if you want. We don’t need you. I can take care of them. I haven’t before, but I know I can do it better than you!”

“Danielle, I know you’ve experienced many traumas this morning.”

She screamed her answer. “What do you know about the trauma in this house? You know nothing! You don’t live here! Be quiet!”

She walked to a cabinet door and jerked it open. “Cereal is here.” She opened a drawer. “Spoons are here.” She pointed to another door. “Bowls are there.” Her finger moved. “His bottles, nipples, and liners are there with his formula in a yellow container. Four scoops to 8 ounces of water. Heat the water first and he’ll be your friend for life. I won’t! I don’t like you! I hate you!”

She looked at the blood on the floor and the refrigerator and slammed the door with her fist. “Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! I can’t take much more of this. I was foolish to think I could.” She kicked the cabinet beside the refrigerator and dropped crying on the floor.

Big Elk was stunned at the outburst and went to her.

Before he reached her, she scrambled to her feet. “Don’t touch me! I said I don’t like you!”

“Relax, Danielle,” he said soothingly.

She covered her ears with her hands. “Don’t speak my name! Take care of them and leave me alone. My life is ruined! Feed them and let yourself out. I don’t like you! You bring the pain! You’ve already destroyed me. Are you happy?”

She dodged his hands and disappeared.

He shivered from the raw anger and fixed a bowl of cereal for Stephanie and a bottle for Jacob. Stephanie requested seconds and he obliged her. He took Jacob to the living room to find Danielle in the recliner with tears painting her cheeks and wetting her pajamas. He put Jacob on the floor and asked Stephanie to entertain him for a moment.

“How are you?” he asked and knelt beside Danielle.

“Numb. I hoped there would be a change for the better, not worse.”

“I don’t hate you and I don’t want to destroy your life.”

“I’ll forgive you, but you’re too late. I know big people. They destroy what they don’t understand. They fear what they don’t understand and doesn’t matter if it’s people or things, they destroy what they fear. It’s a given in life. It’s an absolute that can’t be changed unless it’s by God.”

“I don’t want to destroy you. Neither does your mother or father.”

She sighed, grabbed a tissue, and blew her nose.

“On the floor below us, there was a boy named Gary Spinoza. He was four when I met him. He was brilliant. He knew so many things. When his parents learned that he had this extreme intelligence, they had him tested and he disappeared. I’ve heard mom and dad talk about him. He was in a hospital for a while. Drugged and supposedly happy. How do they know? Now he’s dead and people say he’s better off. His parents were afraid. The doctors were afraid. So, Gary suffered for their fear. The One Who Sounds Like Rain gave him to the world and people who feared him destroyed him.”

“So, you fear not being able to explain things to your parents or having them take you for tests and ending up like Gary?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “That’s one of them. The other is the evil that simply must walk through this home and pester me to no end. I’d love to be like Stephanie and Jacob. They’re never bothered by any of it. The ghosts and other evil things pass right through them, and they play, sleep, eat, poop, and never have a clue to what’s going on. For me, it bothers me until I wake in the night, two, three, four times, then disappear. The one last night, though, scared me a lot. He said he would bury me. Maybe it’s best. I can’t take much more of this pain. Just hope it doesn’t hurt too much or for too long.”

“Was he very evil?” Big Elk asked.

“Yes. He was in the kitchen this morning. He stood on the policeman who tried to shoot me. He bothered the family next door until they all died. I heard each scream when they died and his laughter. I don’t like ghosts, but, maybe when I’m in a hospital, drugged like Gary or dead and buried, maybe there will be peace for me. Maybe I’ll be better off.”

“How long have they visited you?”

“Maybe about two years.” She blew her nose again. “It’s gotten worse since New Life came to us.”

“New Life? Who’s that?”

“Why do you ask so many questions?”

“That’s what I do in life. That’s my job. I get paid to find out information for people.”

“You’re a Private investigator. That explains it. Sorry to bother you, but I’m stressed and need to eat. Might as well talk. It’s too late for me anyway. Can we talk in the kitchen?”

“Sure. This is your home, not mine.”

She let her eyes tour the living room. “My home,” she said wistfully. “For how much longer?” She held up a hand, and he pulled her from the chair.

She chose a different cereal in the kitchen and got a spoon for herself while he got the bowl and milk. He sat opposite her and sat Jacob on the tabletop.

“New Life is just that. New Life is my name for her because she has no name.” She crunched some cereal and sighed. “She won’t get a name until she’s delivered about nine months from now.”

“Josette’s pregnant?”

“You sound surprised.”

“She mentioned she might be, but how do you know so certainly?”

“I was there when it happened.” She held up a hand. “I’ll answer it for you. Hold that thought.” She took a mouthful of cereal and retrieved the calendar from the refrigerator door. She laid it beside her bowl and ate some more.

“Today is Tuesday,” she said and counted back. “She was created on Saturday afternoon, around 5:30 p.m.” She wiped her mouth and looked at him. “No questions?”

“You got the floor. Go ahead. You know what I’ll ask anyway.”

“How do I know? Stephanie and Jacob were tired and fell asleep around 4:30; Mom and Dad were touching and kissing a lot already. They kept telling me I looked tired. So finally, I obliged them and went to my room. I lay on my bed with my eyes closed and listened to them loving each other. I hear them often. It brings me great comfort when they do. The ghosts don’t seem to bother them or me, then. When they finished, they were quiet. Must have slept for a spell. Then I heard One Who Sounds Like Rain whispering words of love and announcing a creation. Then she was there.

“It was like a tiny shockwave of energy. I felt it there on my bed. It was like a rush of euphoria snapped through me, and I opened my eyes and knew. She was quiet for a while. Then I heard her soft, creamy voice.

‘Danielle. Where are you? I feel you here. Speak to me. Let me hear and love your voice.’ I didn’t answer. Later she said it many times. I finally answered. Big mistake. She chattered for four hours straight.

“Later, mommy came to the room to check on us and change Jacob and feed him one more time. It was dark outside then. She sat on Stephanie’s bed to hold him and sing to him. And New Life sang to me. She said, ‘Danielle, I can’t wait to be born. I long to share my first breath with you. We will have so much fun when we can touch each other. I love you.’ Mommy put Jacob in bed and kissed Stephanie. She turned off the lights before she kissed me.”

She sighed. “When she stood, I could see New Life. She’s a tiny white spot in mom’s tummy. For Stephanie and Jacob, I knew they were there from what went on around us. They were silent; New Life announced herself to me.”

“That’s my life as it is now.” She poured a half glass of milk and returned the bottle to the refrigerator.

She returned to the table and her hand shot out to grab the hot sauce from Jacob’s hands. “No, Jacob. You’re too young for hot sauce. Don’t want to hear you wailing again. You had enough trauma for today.

“So, Big Elk, can you understand my fear? I’m a twenty or thirty-year-old woman trapped inside this frail body that won’t mature along with my growing intelligence.”

“I understand. Have you read any books? Can you read?”

“I love to read. Gary taught me before they destroyed him. I’ve read every book in the house. The whole encyclopedia, all the novels, the Bible, every magazine, and newspaper they buy and leave lying around.”

“Amazing!” Big Elk’s cell phone rang.

“Hello, Red Wolf. What’s up?”

“What’s up? What’s wrong with you? Are you crazy? Got a call from Kevin Robinson a short time ago. Said you told him to call me. You know I only represent members of the tribe.”

“Call him back and apologize. Then tell him you’ll take the case and represent his wife. If you don’t, you’re making a huge mistake.”

“You want me to break my oath not to represent whites? Are you crazy?”

“They’ll be tribal members shortly.”

“Now I know you’re crazy. The Tribal Council is not accepting people or families from the general population. They haven’t for a couple of years now. You should be aware of that also.”

“I think they’ll make an exception for this family. If not, I’ll forsake my birthright and go to the Comanche, the Sioux, the Cherokee, or anyone who will appreciate what they can offer.”

“Which is? This had better be good or all you’ll hear is a click! I’m that upset and angry about now.”

“Their four-year-old daughter, Danielle, is a Precursor. The Spiritual Warrior is present, growing inside Josette, and the two have already communicated. Is that a good start? Now tell me I’m crazy. Crescent Moon will certainly verify what I’ve said when she can get here, or we can get her there.”

Red Wolf was silent a moment.

Danielle tugged on his pant leg. “Crescent Moon? I know her.”

“How do you know her?”

“I saw her in a dream, and she talked to me. Told me not to worry when bad things happened, because I’d be okay. Told me, I’d have a very wonderful and enriched life. Told me not to sin as I grow up. Told me to remember the Crescent Moon and someone would guide me to her. It was a few days before New Life came to us. Are you, my guide?”

“I think so. Did you hear that, Red Wolf?”

“I heard. Let me call Kevin back and apologize and take her case. If the council says no to them, then we’ll go together. Regardless of that, I’ll represent her this time, if nothing more than to worry the smart-ass DA’s office.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The celebration was long. The tribe and its guests dined on antelope, elk, buffalo, potatoes, corn, eggs, and corn bread. John Starkey gave some of the children a ride in the helicopter and they headed home. Birgit went with them. She wanted to discuss some things with Shannon and did not think she would honor a request to stay a few extra days to visit. She promised to be back on the reservation on Wednesday to set BlackBerry free.

*

Shannon jerked the door open, still in her underwear. “Oh, John!” She froze.

“Hi,” Birgit said. “I’m not John. He’ll be along shortly. He’s got some debriefing to do first.”

“Oh.”

“May I come in?”

“Uh, I guess so. If you must.”

Birgit closed the door behind her and watched Shannon pace the floor uncomfortably until she stopped and picked up her skirt. “May I ask you something?”

“Yes, if you must.”

“What do you think of Calvin?”

Shannon paused and then adjusted the waist of her skirt and donned her blouse. “That’s an open-ended question. Can you be more specific?”

“I know you must have talked with him on the plane. Do you believe his drop in popularity and sales?”

“I don’t, but it happens.” She tucked in her blouse tails and adjusted her skirt again.

“The fifth book, *The Knight’s Deadly Dub* was inspired by you, or that’s what he told me. I thought it was good. *The Seventh Sail*, which was rejected, I’ve read it. It’s totally Calvin. Technically, it should have blown the other seven out of the water and quadrupled sales at a minimum. Do you believe he’s suddenly that lousy a writer?”

“No, I don’t. What are you searching for?” Shannon asked and sat in a chair.

Birgit felt odd and wondered why the woman was so snippy and unfriendly.

“Is this happening because we’ve been estranged for so many years? Yet I can walk onto the reservation, where I know no one except Sun Flower and feel loved? Something’s not right here,” she thought.

“Well, this might sound silly, but I know that I’m going to win this fight with S-Brand. I’m going to get his career back on track. However, I also know that there are times in writer’s lives where they hit a deadlock on ideas and such. The book you inspired, and I feel the other two were also, did well.

“So, I had this idea for us to buy your ideas for novels to help him in the future. We’ll draw up a contract based on percentages of advances and royalties. Will you consider that?”

Shannon closed her eyes and drummed the arms of the chair with her fingernails. She stood and opened the curtains to let in some light. “Sure, I’ll consider it. He already paid for three. Why not?”

Birgit rose from the bed swiftly as if shocked by electricity. “What? He paid you for the plots for the three novels. How much?”

Shannon faced her slowly. “You didn’t know? He never told you. Why would he keep that a secret?”

“How much?”

“You’d better go. I’ve said too much already.”

“How much?” Birgit repeated.

“Four hundred thousand each. Please go! Walk away and leave me alone!”

“Plus, a royalty share?”

“Yes, yes, yes! Look, Birgit, it’s been nice to see you again. Never thought I would. Never had the courage to try it on purpose. Please go.”

Birgit stepped closer to her, running the figures through her head, and dismissing any further questions for Shannon. She let her mind give that up and focus on the secondary mission. Reconciliation.

“I’m done with that.”

Shannon backed away from her, but she was in the corner of the room and had nowhere to go.

“It’s okay. I’ve genuinely missed you so much. I was a loner in this world. So was Calvin. Together we’re great. But you? Only you made me feel so good that I could open myself to you. Then I lost you. Now circumstances beyond your wildest imagination have suddenly opened me to many strangers who call me sister, welcome me to their home, and risk their lives to help me. It’s excellent, and I love it.

“But the wound of losing you is still there, and I want to heal that. I desperately want to heal that. Strangers open their hearts, arms, and minds, and my one true friend wants to dynamite the bridge. I’ve sincerely forgiven you, and him. Calvin and I are totally reunited. Please, can we try?”

Shannon closed her eyes as Birgit raised her hands.

Birgit adjusted the blouse collar and straightened her necklace.

“I’m afraid to try. I’ve done some things that aren’t so very nice over the years. I’m back into the church, and into Christ. I’ve been forgiven, I know that, but I feel cross hairs on my back from one or two that might want revenge or at least wreck my serenity. I’m afraid that if I open the door to you, those sins might blow up and I can’t stand that happening to us again. It was too bitter between us.”

“Well, all that aside, I’d truly like to try.”

“That flight was my last one. I was going straight on to San Francisco, but, after talking with Calvin, I realize that I must go to New York before I go home, get married, deliver John Jr., and get on with my next career move, mother. I want it all. Breast feeding, changing diapers, the works. I won’t be working but I won’t be traveling much either.”

“Doesn’t matter. I can still pour my heart into a letter, email, or a phone call. I think you’re worth it. If that’s not enough, I’ll come to you. Let’s try it but agree not to dredge up too much of the past, and let it go if it causes too much pain. Come on, gum drops. Let’s give it a teensy try. I’ll put lots of sugar on it for you to make it easier.”

Shannon relented and hugged her tightly. “It’s been so long since I’ve held you, bubbles.” She sighed with relief. “I dread this trip to New York. I spent a great deal of my lifetime without my father. It took another chunk of time to find him when I could. Another chunk to get any kind of relationship going. Now I must ask some questions that might make me lose him again. I don’t want to, but this need to be totally free of guilt isn’t going to give me rest, like I hoped forgiveness would bring.”

“Who’s your father? You never talked much about him?”

“James Millington, Senior Vice President of S-Brand Publishing. He was irate, to say the least, when he learned that I was Calvin’s mistress. That’s the first time in my life I ever saw him angry and the first time he yelled at me and lectured me on immorality. We had a huge fight and called each other names and it took six or seven months before we would answer the phone when the other had the courage or pain to call.

“So, bubbles, I dread this trip. If he had something to do with Calvin’s professional assassination, then I’m going to be torn apart again. If he did, do I turn him in or for the sake of having a relationship with him, walk away from yours again. I’m afraid, but I know I’ll make the right choice if it comes to that.”

“Well, you could eliminate walking away from me as an option if the truth brings light and it hurts us. We have the strength to get us through it and remain friends.”

Birgit kissed her cheek. “Let’s exchange contact information now and let me get back to the reservation. We have to set my sister’s spirit free and then back to New York and work and reality.”

“Okay, you win. Thanks so much for a second chance. Call me when you’re back.”

*

The week passed slowly, and things were finally calming down for Josette and Kevin. Red Wolf pushed for her to be arrested at the hospital and after a heated debate with the prosecutor, he paid for her bail with a personal check to ensure she could leave the hospital and go straight home. He told Kevin some important instructions before they appeared at the bail hearing.

“Don’t grovel. Whatever happens from me or the defense team, simply say thank you and offer your hand without offering to repay or make restitution.”

Kevin did so, and he even approached the prosecutor’s table and offered his hand in thanks. The prosecutor never moved, but Red Wolf laughed ever so hard at the impact Kevin’s humility put on his face.

Kevin got a few phone calls for work and kept appointments and worked when he could as he supported Josette in recovering from her wound.

The wound was not even as severe as the surgeons thought. And it was discovered that she had an incredible healing factor. Some called it a miracle.

*

Big Elk visited every night while he grew frustrated at closed doors on Miranda Joyce Millington. Every request was denied, or standard information returned. The

bank where she had an account established refused any information with shrugs and accompanied by the irritating word, 'privacy.'

He waited patiently for Birgit and Sun Flower to return and finally made a call to Jason, only to find the internal investigation at an impasse also.

*

Josette enjoyed the massage Kevin gave her and giggled when he tickled her. "You're so good at loving me."

"Do I really smell like burlap? I've smelled myself often and I don't think so."

"What? When did I say that?"

"When you were in the kitchen and Big Elk stuck the green feather in your forehead. You said I smelled like burlap."

"Oh, wow!" She rolled onto her back. "I remember. I grew up on a farm in Idaho, you know that. Well, one day dad took an old burlap feed sack and stuffed it with dry hay. He put it in the hayloft by the loading doors. When I got tired of playing and pestering the animals, I'd climb up to the loft, open the doors to let in the sun and flop down on that burlap pillow. I'd let the sun toast me while I inhaled deeply the rich odors of sack and hay. And I'd sleep up a storm. So comfortable. Sometimes I'd remember dad kissing my cheek and that only made the matter better. I told you that?"

"You did. And if I do, then I do. I want you to be comfortable. I'm so thankful that you're alive and well, I'll buy a feed sack and stuff it for you."

"You don't have to, but, if you do, I won't object. Wonder if it will give me the same feelings now as it did then?" she said when Jacob started crying and the phone rang.

Josette answered the phone and Kevin went to check on Jacob.

"Are you guys sleeping or ready for bed?" Big Elk asked.

“Not yet. Why?”

“Well, I’m at a dead end on this case until Birgit comes home. We’ll probably have to file a lawsuit to get momentum going. So, I’d like to visit you and pursue a different case for a different client. If you don’t mind? I don’t want to interrupt you or disturb your serenity.”

“Come on over, Big Elk. You’ve brought some good things to this family and you’re welcome. I’ll let Kevin know and we’ll help you all we can.”

Twenty minutes later they sat in the living room.

“This is most unusual. I’m representing a client who wants to know what happened to Gary Spinoza, like why he disappeared. I’ve tracked him to an apartment on the floor below you, but his parents are still distraught and don’t want to talk about him. Do you perchance know him or anything about him?”

“Gary? Of course, we know about him. He and Danielle were very fond of each other.”

Big Elk listened and he faintly heard the clink of the doorknob turning down the hall. “Very good, my friend. Hope this works well,” he thought.

“I understand that he was very gifted. He was too intelligent for his age.”

“He was,” Kevin said. “And when he started in kindergarten, the teachers saw it, and insisted that he be tested. They thought his IQ to be near that of genius. It was greater, but not for the good.”

“What happened?”

“Well, he also had some other problems. He was too aggressive. He had seizures at school and at home. Not good or natural for a boy his age. The IQ tests and seizures led to physical tests. He was brilliant but it was due to a brain tumor which caused the rest of the problems also. The doctors tried everything they could to kill the tumor but couldn’t. It was in a critical area of the brain and so entangled that if they operated,

he'd be in a coma for however long he lived. His parents allowed the doctors to test experimental drugs to fight this kind of cancer, but to no avail. They did find one or two treatments that worked for a while, and they're pursuing them with other children. But, in the end, Gary died."

"That's sad," said Big Elk.

"Sad? It was a shock to us all," Josette said. "We, many parents who knew the family were shattered by the sudden and fatal diagnosis. Kevin and I, many parents, watched the cancer advance swiftly and agonized and worried about what we would do if it happened to one of our children. It scared us. Would we have the courage and faith that Manuela had? Or would we just go crazy and give up? That sent a serious shockwave through many parents in this building. Even people who didn't know them so personally agonized over the incident."

"I understand that there are children who are born with brilliance, and I could handle that," Kevin said. "But to go through what Manuela and Garcia went through, I'm not so sure. I want my children to live, not meet an unfortunate but unstoppable end of life at the age of seven. I want to protect my children from that. I might not be able to help them if they're a hundred times more brilliant than I, but from cancer. Any way I can, I'll fight for them."

"If it would help you, we know his parents and I'm sure we can get them to talk with your client," Josette said. "Maybe we can move them where you can't. And I'm certain that we can convince them to at least have the child tested. If there are no other physical problems or cancerous manifestations, there's no need to fear brilliance. It might cause some parenting and relationship problems, but it's not insurmountable."

"Wow!" said Big Elk. "This is most amazing. Should have asked you a few days ago instead of Manuela and Garcia. I might have spared them some grief also. I think this is enough to go on to help my client. Thanks very much."

"Good. We're so happy to help you with that. Are you really stumped on S-Brand's case?" asked Josette.

“Yes. Hate to admit it, but it’s the truth. Whoever is doing this is protecting himself or herself very well. They must have a sagacious mind like mine.”

“Maybe you did it to yourself,” laughed Josette.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was near midnight when Danielle woke and heard a different sound upstairs. It was a series of muffled voices. The pacing man stopped and then she heard him fall. Several feet stomped hurriedly around in different directions and then there was silence. She wondered if she would ever hear him pacing, peeing, and flushing the commode again. Across the hall, mom and dad had loved each other for the first time since the night of trouble and were sleeping peacefully. She considered Big Elk getting her parents to really discuss Gary and his unfortunate end. What they said made more sense to her than what she had pieced together from earlier conversations. It also removed a lot of fear in discussing her condition with them soon.

Kevin woke with a yawn and stumbled to the bathroom. He was barely finished when Josette shouted. "Stop! Don't touch me! Get out of my home!"

He jerked the door open in time to see her sail and land on the floor before their dresser. He watched her body rise swiftly into the air and could faintly make out a shimmering figure holding her with giant hands.

He glanced around the room for anything and chose an eagle statue that a friend had bought him for Christmas. It was rather large but could be easily gripped. He figured that whatever held Josette had to be solid and hopefully vulnerable to pain. He grabbed it from the night stand and charged around the bed as Josette sailed across the room, bounced off the bed and hit the wall beneath the window. He heard her grunt once and she did not move or even try to stand after she hit the floor. He chose his mark at the being's midsection and swung hard. It connected and he heard a howl and a hiss.

"Who do you think you are?" it hissed.

"I live here! Get out now while you still can!" said Kevin.

"Stupid!" it hissed, right before Kevin struck it again.

One hand gripped him and threw him through the bedroom door.

“No one tells Pollock what to do. I tell them what to do!”

Kevin tried to stop his backward momentum but failed until he hit the children’s bedroom wall.

Stephanie scrambled onto Danielle’s bed in a flash and Jacob whimpered but still slept.

“Evil is here,” Stephanie shivered. She grabbed Danielle tightly.

“So is Big Elk’s gift for us. Let me go. I must see what’s happening. You’ll be okay. If Jacob cries too much, get in the crib with him. Promise?”

“Yes. Don’t go out there. It’s too evil.”

Danielle unlatched the door and saw Kevin run past toward the living room. The evil shimmering ghost moved slowly but steadily behind him.

She twisted her head sideways and watched him. She heard him shriek when Kevin hit him with a folding metal chair. She watched him stagger to the right and fall.

The blast of hatred made her gasp and lurch backward from the door as Pollock stood.

New Life’s voice reached her. “Sweetie pie, are you awake?”

‘Don’t bother me now,’ Danielle said. She ran to her bed and pulled two feathers from under her mattress and tucked them behind her ears. She took four from under Stephanie’s mattress and fastened them to her left wrist with a rubber band. She took two from under Jacob’s mattress and opened her dresser drawer to retrieve a glass tube filled with clear liquid with a cork in it and dropped it into her nightgown pocket.

“Sweetie pie, mommy’s in trouble,” New Life said.

‘Hush, child. We’re all in trouble, but not for long. I’ll get to her soon.’

She hurried to the door and slowly stepped into the hallway. She saw Kevin pick up a baseball bat and charge Pollock again. Pollock tried to dodge it, but he failed, and he

fell again with a shriek. She shivered from anger again, but she moved softly toward him when he stood and faced Kevin.

She held two green feathers, one in each hand and cringed as she watched Pollock kick Kevin backward into the curio cabinet. She wanted to cry, but she dared not do that. Big Elk told her what to do and how to control her emotions.

Steady. Calm. Everything will be okay. Don't cry, moan, or speak until you know you're safe and out of harm's way, my darling friend, for life.

She could tell Kevin had difficulty in standing when he tried, and he also had difficulty breathing. He was holding his chest with one hand and could not focus on Pollock.

The demon prepared to kick him again when she reached him and stuck one feather into each leg.

He stopped immediately. "Damn you! Damn you, you evil child!"

She said nothing, but she let go of the two feathers and took the two from behind her ears. She stood on her toes and stuck them higher up on his legs. She smiled at the roar of pain and saw him totter and sway. Soon he dropped to his knees, still groaning.

"Should have buried you like I promised and let them grieve over you. Damn you're such an evil child! How can you stand yourself?"

She said nothing but took two more feathers from her wrist and stuck them into his back.

Again, he roared, and Kevin dropped to his knees.

"Yes, die before her eyes, fool! Die! Serves both of you right."

Kevin looked through him to Danielle's solemn face and watched in dim amazement.

"You laughed when the man next door shot his children! I heard you. You thought it was funny when they screamed and died. Why aren't you laughing now, demon? Laugh!"

“Die, you evil bitch! I can’t wait to get you into hell with me!” His mouth hung open and he slobbered white fluids on the carpet.

“I want to hear you laugh, demon,” she said and stuck one feather in the center of his back. She fished the vial out with one hand and pulled the cork out with her teeth. “Maybe this will help you laugh.” She jiggled the feather with her left hand and splashed the liquid over his backside.

He shrieked and it increased in decibels until she held her ears and fell to the floor from the pain. The glass began to shatter around the apartment, and she heard Stephanie screaming down the hallway. She heard glass breaking throughout the building and people were shouting in many different languages, but “What the hell?” was the most popular.

She opened her eyes to see Pollock’s back blistering and white repulsive smoke rising from burst holes. She stood and shook her head.

“If you’re not going to laugh at your own pain, then be quiet, self-inflated demon.” She stuck the last feather in the back of his neck.

He fell silent and collapsed into a puddle as he dissolved.

She scrambled across the floor to Kevin and rolled him from his side to his back. She shifted his head back and listened to see if he was breathing. She felt a faint breath and worried that it was not enough. She stood and looked at the ceiling. “Look, I could use a little help. I know the concept of CPR, but my lungs are too tiny to work here.”

“Open the door, sweetie pie. Rescue is waiting.”

Danielle grabbed the phone, dialed 911 and dragged a kitchen chair to quiet the furious knocking on the door. She talked to the dispatcher as several Chinese rushed into the apartment. The old woman who held her in the hallway scooped her up and held her again as she finished with the dispatcher. Two women came back to the living room with Stephanie and Jacob.

“We take them to our home,” one woman said.

“No problem. I know they’ll be safe there.”

Three raced down the hallway to Josette's bedroom and three to Kevin while the old woman hugged Danielle and barked orders and questions.

One man ripped open Kevin's pajama top, and Danielle could see a huge red and black bruise down the middle of his chest.

"Possibly broken sternum," said one man. "JoJo get the small pillow from the sofa. Fold it and put it under his neck and hold his arms. Wenjun, hold his legs."

He took a small green bottle from his pocket and shook it several times. He pulled the cork out and dragged the plastic tip across Kevin's nose.

Kevin drew a ragged breath. "Pain! Damn that hurts!"

"Easy," said the man. "Easy. Had to help you breathe more. Help is on the way. Relax and breathe."

Kevin drew another breath and sighed. He opened his eyes to find Danielle. He called her and she struggled until the woman released her.

"Yes, daddy? Rest easy, please. Stephanie and Jacob are safe down the hall with the Chinese folks. I called 911 for you and mommy."

"How did you know to do what you did tonight?"

"I've always known a lot," she said and stroked his forehead. "I just didn't have the tools to stop them before Big Elk became my friend and guide."

He closed his eyes. "Are you Big Elk's client?"

"Yes. I was scared to talk with you after Gary disappeared. He taught me how to read. I've read every book in the house, the Bible twice. I was afraid. Big people destroy what they fear. I didn't want you to be afraid of me and make me disappear like him."

"Honey, never would I want to destroy you. The love is too deep."

"I know that now. Please rest. We'll talk later. Heal now."

"What's going on with mommy?" she asked, and the old woman yelled toward the bedroom.

One woman hurried to her. “She’s in trouble, but she’ll be okay. Concussion when head hit the floor. Possibly fractured left arm. Sun Li is a nurse. She’s well cared for.”

“Sweetie pie, wow! You are so great! Wow! I love you so much! Can’t wait for me to be born!”

“Me too,” Danielle sighed and crawled across the floor to let the fussing old woman who smelled like tobacco hold and comfort her again.

*

James Millington was set to take a week’s vacation and go to San Francisco to visit with Shannon. Her phone call that she would be in New York the next day delayed his plans and inwardly it pleased him. His life was not harmony as usual. It was Friday and he went to the office instead of packing for the trip. When he stepped from the elevator, an Indian woman sat at Melissa’s computer, Melissa to her right, and Jason to her left. Nathan stood behind her and another large Indian male stood to the left of the desk.

They all stared at him blankly.

After a few seconds of silence and immobility, he asked. “What? Is there a Martian with a ray gun sitting on my shoulder? Is it about to disintegrate my head?”

Nathan answered. “Thought you’d be packing for your trip.”

“My trip got delayed. Nathan, you’re acting totally weird lately. If you have a problem, maybe you’d better start talking about it.”

“I’ll do that.”

James shook his head. “Melissa, I’ve arranged for my daughter, Shannon Huntington to get a pass from Building Security. When she gets here, send her on to my office. I’ll be there doing my job and not acting weird like you all. And if you have

the chance, send a memo to the people around your desk and to yourself. Three words. ‘Get a life.’”

With that, he strode down the hall and closed his office door.

Nathan flipped an obscene gesture after him. “Get a life? Will do. What do you think, Sun Flower?”

“I think he’s far craftier than I. This could take some time. Are you sure you want to spend the time and money?”

“To save the heartache later, yes. You’ve seen nothing?”

“Not a thing. Even the slickest thief will leave a tiny trail of bread crumbs. Here, not even one. Everything balances perfectly. So, I don’t know how he’s funneling the money from the budget or where it’s going. Very crafty.”

“Well, keep at it while we all get a life.”

The elevator door opened, and Shannon stepped off. Like her father, she froze at the stares of the crowd and then shook it off.

She winked at Jason. “Hey, Jason. How’s it going, boyfriend? You’re looking good. You married yet? Babies on the way?”

“Yes, and yes. Nice to see you again.”

“Told you so. Is she a better woman than me? Be truthful.”

“She is.”

“Told you so, I know me, and I knew I wasn’t for you.”

She glanced at Melissa and Nathan and greeted them. “Is my father here?”

“In his office,” Melissa said. “You know where that is?”

“Of course, Melissa Snyder. I know it as well as I know the importance of your name to you. See ya later.”

She dismissed the rude greeting and walked down the hall to her father's office. She stepped inside and leaned against the door when it closed.

"Hi, dad. What's up with the Iceberg Committee down the hall?"

"I've got a good idea, and it's starting to piss me off a little."

He moved around the desk to hug her. "Good to see you, daughter. I saw the news and I called the airline and learned you were on the flight. I was anxious until I learned of only one fatality, and it wasn't you. It's truly good to see you." He kissed her cheek.

"Good. You don't mind me coming here to see you?"

"Shannon, you can visit me anytime, anywhere. I truly love seeing you. You should know that by now. I know we don't see each other enough and after you're married, it will probably be less, which sucks, but that's the way of life. Unless I grow into a meddlesome busybody who invades your privacy till you kick my ass back to the east coast."

She rested her hands on his shoulders. "Wow, dad. Well, I'm getting married in two months, and I've still not received the RSVP from you. What's up with that?"

"I've been busy with Miranda and Donna, but I mailed it yesterday. It should be waiting for you when you get home. Are you still prepared to let me walk you down the aisle and give you away? I'm looking forward to that."

"Yes." She said it but failed to keep it positive.

"What's up, daughter? You're as cold, frigid, and nervous as the Iceberg Committee down the hall. You can deny it, but I still feel it. And it bugs me. Talk to me. Ask questions. Unburden yourself."

"I'm that obvious? Can we sit down?"

"Of course. Want a drink? All we have available is water, soda, and juice. Name your poison."

"Water will work fine. Calvin and Birgit Westwood were on the flight with me. Calvin told me of his woes here in S-Brand and his political assassination. And that

dredged up the only argument we ever had, which was over him. And somewhere in the depths of my heart, I could see you protecting me by destroying him since his decline started at about the same time. There. It's the burning coal in my heart and I dread the answer but give it to me. Give me some rest, dad. Either way."

He sat beside her on the love seat and rested a hand on her knee and enjoyed her hand on top of his. "Can you think of any reason for me to want to destroy Calvin Westwood? I'm the Senior Vice President of S-Brand. I'm paid to recognize good and excellent authors. Calvin is excellent, but he can be super-excellent. I want him to be that daughter. I want him to be the most popular, most bought, most talked about, most adored and idolized writer that ever existed. I want him to be number one in America, the North American Continent, the South American Continent, the world! And if we ever open trade relations with Martians, Venusians, etcetera, I want him number one there. Every success for him only pleases me to the max, daughter. Why would I damage myself to destroy him? I truly love the man and all that he can do for himself, and for S-Brand Publishing."

"I don't understand. This is confusing me. If not you, then who? It smacks of treasonous revenge. I'm sorry for thinking it was you, but that's the first time you yelled at me and lectured me on morality."

"And you figured it out for yourself and got away from him very swiftly compared to his other groupies." He paused to laugh at her.

"Shannon, daughter, we need to spend more time together and share more of each other than we do now. Do you agree?"

"I do. And I know what you said is true about me spending less time with you after John and I are married. And that also weighs heavy on my mind."

"Because you're pregnant?"

She rolled her eyes and groaned. "Yes. I'll deliver about three months after I'm married. I'll be slightly plump during the wedding. Everyone tells me how adorable and lovable pregnant brides are. Gag me with pregnant bridesmaids already. How did you know?"

He laughed and hugged her. “It’s a father’s prerogative to know. Will you do me a favor, please?”

“Name it.”

“Before you leave for San Francisco, I’ll give you a blank check. Find me an apartment, close but not too meddlesome close to you and hook me up. I can work out of the San Francisco and Los Angeles offices as well as here. And what is it, boy or girl or do you know?”

“Boy,” she grinned. “John Junior.”

“And I want to spend time with him. Look, Shannon, I know there’s a load of things that I’ve not shared with you. You don’t know about the divorce, the bitter, totally insane custody battle that I finally dropped to give you stability and all of us some peace. You don’t know the pain I’ve suffered and what Susan’s ferocious hatred has cost us. We need the time to get through it. I’ll give you the check. I’ll trust your judgment, and we’ll enjoy the rest of our life. I’ll spend more time on the west coast with you and my grandson. Is that agreeable?”

“Most agreeable. Are you clear here?”

“Not 100%. What I did was unethical but warranted at the same time. Nothing was illegal. I just never told anyone what I did or why. And after the initial establishment, everything migrated outside of S-Brand to become an entity of its own. I might get slapped on the wrist for unscrupulously publishing Shallson Petri, and I’ll take that rebuke. No problem, but I’ve done nothing inherently wrong. Nothing that will warrant prosecution. And I’m certain if that rumor started around, it would cause an uprising they couldn’t deal with.”

“Great. So, how’s Donna?”

“She’s gone and though I miss her, it’s really a blessing to be without her now.”

“She left? No way! Why?”

“She couldn’t tolerate my devotion to Miranda. Don’t know what took her so long to leave.”

“Explain that later. How about Miranda? I want to stop by the house and see her before I leave.”

He looked old and tired during the long wistful stare across his office.

“She’s back in the hospital again, but this time she’s in the terminal ward.”

“Then let’s go and see her there. I truly love my sister. You know that,” she said and rubbed his back as he cried.

“I know. She talks about you frequently. Good idea, daughter. Let me wash my face and blowtorch, some of the iceberg down the hall before we do. They need it, and so do I. They’ve got on my last nerve today.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

James and Shannon walked down the hallway arm-in-arm and stopped at the suddenly hushed desk, which now had Birgit as an added member.

James spoke first. "Oh, yes. It's me and my killer Martian. We stop conversations everywhere we go."

He looked sourly at Nathan. "You're really starting to piss me off and that's not good. After so many years together, you'd think you could trust the people you work with. Sad. Very sad."

He dismissed him and turned to the Indian male. "Who are you? I take it you're the Private Investigator who's conducting this major, hush-hush, triple-top-secret investigation into S-Brand and Calvin Westwood. Do you have a name or are you anonymous?"

"My name is Big Elk, sir."

"James Millington," he said and shook his hand.

Shannon gasped and clutched her father's arm. "Oh, father, that's way too cool! I don't believe it. Is this for real? Did you hear that?"

"I do believe. I know that many dreams come true in this world. So, Big Elk, what information have you gathered about Miranda Joyce Millington?"

"Very little, sir. In fact, nothing that anyone else could gather. When the case goes to court, that will change."

"Do you consider that people have the right to privacy and protection against prying eyes that don't need to know? If Miranda Millington has done nothing wrong, why do you need to know all about her? Do you know Nahami and Shanta? They're from the Comanche tribe."

"I've heard of them."

“Well, I employed them to protect Miranda because she truly needs protection, and so far, I’d say I’ve got my money’s worth from them. You’ve made 23 requests and have nothing from any of them. The banks give you the cold shoulder and icy word, ‘privacy.’ Maybe that’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

He turned to the Indian woman. “And you’re who? You’re Big Elk’s genetic sister. There’s too much facial similarity to deny it. Your name, please?”

“Sun Flower, sir.”

“Are you, his assistant?”

“I’m helping him this time. I’m a CPA.”

“Oh, yes,” James grinned and wiggled two fingers on each hand. “Got to find out my secret of embezzling hundreds of thousands from the company to destroy Calvin Westwood.” He turned to Nathan who stood stoically. “You’re a pathetic piece of poop, Nathan. This is a very sad day. I never thought I’d say that about you.”

He picked up a paper clip box and dumped the clips on the desk. He showed the box to Sun Flower.

“See, this box is empty. I’m going to close it and hand it to you. I want you to open it and find the dead cricket inside.”

He handed it to her. “Open it.”

She blinked and opened it.

“Where’s the dead cricket?”

“It’s not there. It never was there.”

“And maybe you can’t find a trail of embezzlement linked to me because it doesn’t exist. It never was like the dead cricket. If I’m not doing it, shock, and horror, then you’ll find nothing to connect it to me. Totally in the wrong department, all because I couldn’t delete one record of Miranda Joyce Millington to establish payments for Shallson Petri’s first novel.”

He turned to Birgit. “What about courts? Do you think this case will go to court?”

“I don’t care either way. All I want to see is justice to be done here. I’m waiting for Big Elk to find this money disparity. I’m doing that for Josette’s sake, but soon I’ll decide.”

“Well, I don’t think it will go there. I do believe that very soon, Nathan Barnaby will grow a huge set of balls between his legs and his erection will drive him to do what’s right or I’ll have to do it for him.”

He cleared his throat. “Sun Flower switch your accounting investigation to the Distribution Department. If you’re as intelligent and crafty as you are beautiful and pregnant, it should take you about fifteen minutes or less to find the disparity.”

Nathan shouted, “They have nothing to do with the Sales and Promotions or Accounting, asshole!”

“You forgot one word in that sentence. I’m an editor at heart, remember? They SHOULDN’T have anything to do with it. However, if you have a man determined to do so, he’ll try and he’ll find it. Sun Flower don’t listen to him. Do what I told you and I’m certain you’ll find your man. I don’t want pregnant women to work too hard.”

She typed on the keyboard to list that department. “How did you know that?”

“It’s written all over your face, like a great pregnancy should be. So is my daughter. I’d say you’re both around 4 months.”

“Correct.”

James turned to Big Elk. “I’d like you to accompany me and my daughter, Sir. I’d like to introduce you to Miranda. She’s been waiting to see you and she’s waited long enough. Then, if that’s not enough to satisfy you, I’ll call Shanta and have her open all the doors for you, even the ones you’d never find on your own. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough.”

“Before we leave, Nathan, I have this last thing for you to do. Call the board and tell them that you’re going to honor the contract with Calvin and publish his eighth novel, whether they like it or not. Then get the proposal group together and do it.”

“We can’t do that! It’s not in the contract! Are you seeking to get fired?”

“It is,” Birgit said.

“She’s right, Sir,” added Melissa. “Someone added that clause after I prepared it and before it was signed. S-Brand agreed to publish every novel he presented, even if it broke even or lost. I told you that before. Guess you didn’t pay attention.”

“Who in his right mind would do some crazy shit like that?” Nathan shouted.

James and held up his hand. “Me. I did it to force this company to do something right for a change. Get the publication in progress, Nathan. If you don’t want to, then I’ll do it when I get back. With you or without you liking the action, or agreeing with it, it’s going to happen.”

“I don’t believe this!” Nathan shouted.

“I do,” said James. “I still believe in God and Santa Claus too. Come along, Big Elk, Shannon. Let’s visit Miranda.”

*

Josette and Kevin were back from the hospital again. Josette had a short arm cast on her left arm and sat on the floor in front of the sofa. Danielle sat on Kevin’s lap.

“Relax, honey,” she told Danielle. “Gary had many different problems than you. The Chinese women think you’re very gifted. You must be.”

“Do you think I’ll have problems in school?”

“Don’t know. We’ll face that when it happens, but you won’t leave us like Gary.”

“Who is New Life?” asked Kevin.

“She’s growing inside mommy. The One Who Sounds Like Rain brought her to us, just like me and Stephanie, and Jacob. He’s God, the one who creates life. I heard him here that night and then I felt her being created. It was way so beautiful.”

“You felt her being created?” asked Josette.

“Yes. It was like a huge emotional wave of energy. And when you came to change Jacob and feed him, you sang a song to him on Stephanie’s bed. She sang a song to me. It was a beautiful song, a beautiful night, and you finished it by kissing me and I knew you hadn’t washed yet. I remember I was created the same way every time you do that.”

Josette’s mouth dropped open and she blushed.

“Don’t worry, mommy. I enjoy it. I live in a world of heightened hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. It’s okay. There’s no need to fear it or be ashamed. Be yourself, please. Don’t be self-conscious because I know something about you. Don’t shut me out. It’s fine. It makes me feel like you when you lay on the burlap pillow and slept in the sunshine. And the more I know, the better I can serve you.”

“Serve us?” asked Josette.

“Yes. When was the last time anyone in this family has been seriously sick, other than Stephanie with her ear infections?”

Josette thought about the matter. “Not for a very long time.”

“That’s right because I can smell it when the food in the refrigerator is going to spoil. I can smell the yeast, the fungus, and bad bacteria growing. So, when I can’t sleep at night, I dispose of the foods that would degenerate the immune system and we stay healthy. It works. And I can help you keep us healthy in many other ways. What’s going to work for New Life will work very well for all of us now. I love you. I love dad. I want to help us all. Just don’t change what you’re doing, except for including me more in family matters.”

“Sweetheart, I won’t be ashamed or afraid, I promise. Come here,” she said and opened her arms. “I just didn’t know you were so aware of things. I’ll be me; I won’t change what I do. You be yourself and talk to me now about what you want to do to help us. I’m just amazed that I only thought of you as a bubbly daughter. Now I can see that you can also be a good friend and spiritual warrior. It’s just taking some getting used to the idea. I won’t change what I do if it makes you feel good and brings you love and comfort. No problem. Okay?”

“Sounds like a good plan, mommy, but I’m not the spiritual warrior, New Life is. I’m here waiting for her to be born so I can teach her what I know and bring other people to her to teach her what they know.”

She hugged Josette and turned to sit between her legs. “There’s going to be a lot of changes for us, dad, mom. We can’t stay like this forever. The One Who Sounds Like Rain and Big Elk both said that. Crescent Moon is coming, and help will come for you too, daddy. Don’t worry and stress out over the present situation, money, jobs, anything. It’s temporary and it’s going to get better from this moment on. I promise. You’ll be thoroughly amazed soon.”

“I’ll try. It’s just that I don’t like charity.”

“Daddy, charity is love. Let the people love you however they can. The day will come when you can love other people to help them. This is God’s plan, and it will work marvelously. Just trust it, trust me. and let it work like He planned it.”

The doorbell rang and Josette went to answer it. Melissa and Sam Chun stood in the hallway.

“Hey, Melissa. Good to see you. I’ve sort of overlooked you in the mess that happened to me. Come in.”

“Sorry about all the terrible things that went down for helping me and Big Elk,” Melissa said. “I think things are going to be different very soon.”

“You know something I don’t? I received a court date in the mail this morning. Are you clear in this or did they catch you?”

“I got caught, but I confessed, and they’ve launched their own investigation. That’s why I say, things will change soon. Trust me.”

Josette hugged her and Sam Chun. “I’ll trust you. Come on in and join us. Good to see you guys. Really.”

*

James parked the car in front of a hospital on the north side of the Bronx. Big Elk got out and read the name, “Miranda Millington Memorial Children’s Hospital.” He followed James and Shannon inside. He remained silent and stared at the hundreds of children’s pictures on the wall. Each one had a name and date underneath it on a brass plate. One was a smiling boy named Gary Spinoza.

“Good morning, Mr. Millington,” said the guard and the receptionist who stood and shook his hand. “Good to see you, Sir. Thanks so much for stopping by.”

James greeted them warmly. “How’s Miranda today?”

“Still with us. She had a bad night and we thought she’d leave us a few times. She’s much weaker than I’ve seen her before, but she’s awake and watching television now. So happy you came today, Shannon. She’s been wanting to see you. I worried you’d not make it before she left us. Go on up.”

They exited the elevator on the fifth floor and nurses moved to greet James as he walked down the hallway. One took the other arm opposite Shannon. He stopped once to talk to a boy in a wheelchair, rub his head, kiss his forehead, and then moved on.

Miranda sat up when they walked in the door. “Daddy! Shannon! It’s so great to see you. Come in. I was just thinking about you both. Today must be my lucky day!”

Shannon kissed her and rubbed her face. “How are you doing, sister?”

“Last night I hurt a lot. It was terrible, but I’m okay now. I’m getting weaker. I feel it. I don’t think I’ll see you again. I’m truly happy you came to say goodbye. You’re a

wonderful sister and I'm glad I had the time to get to know you. Sorry it wasn't longer. Sorry I won't see my nephews and nieces. Hey now, don't cry. Please? It's okay. Save the tears for later."

"Okay." Shannon kissed her again before she stood and turned away to take a deep breath and curtail the tears.

Big Elk stood in the doorway and watched the scene. There was a stuffed moose on the bed with her and several stuffed animals around the room, sitting or lying amongst flower bouquets galore.

Miranda suddenly looked up at Big Elk. "You're bigger than most people I know."

"Yes, but I'm gentle. That's a nice moose you have."

She frowned. "It's not a moose. "It's an elk. I don't like moose. I'd like to meet an elk someday though. What's your name?"

"I'm Big Elk," he said and approached the bed. "I'm a full-blood Apache and, yes, that's my real name."

"Wonderful. I've been waiting for you." She yawned. "You know the One Who Sounds Like Rain?"

"I know who you're talking about. Haven't met him personally, but I know him."

"Well, he talked to me last night. Said to tell you to stop this time, and you'll find what you want without anyone else getting hurt."

"Thanks, Miranda. I'll do that." He laid a hand on her head.

"You have soft, high-energy hands. Feels almost like angels when they touch you. I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm just too tired right now. I have to sleep."

"That's okay, sweetie. I'll be back to see you soon. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow."

She smiled and went to sleep.

At the car, James handed Shannon the keys. “You drive. I can’t right now. Big Elk, can you understand the need to protect her?”

“I understand. I never would have hurt her. She was only one more piece of the puzzle of my investigation. How old is she?”

“Nine. When she first got sick, she was three and the insurance companies wouldn’t pay for squat. Better off just to die so they can save money. This hospital had lost its state and city funding and had exhausted all its charitable funding and was ready to close its doors. Miranda had nowhere to go. That’s when Shannon found me. She was a freelance journalist and I came up with the idea of her writing novels and contributing the proceeds to the hospital. Several doctors and nurses worked without pay until the proceeds were in the bank. It was enough to keep the place open and charities returned to donating and kept donating for people who had nothing at all.

“Then I asked one writer if he would donate a percentage of his novels. He met Miranda and some of the other children in the hospital and it touched his heart. He agreed. Through him, other writers got involved and I covered myself by deleting Shallson Petri from the books and Miranda Joyce Millington’s bank account became a trust fund through Shanta that has helped a few hundred children have a chance at life. Some walk away, most, like Miranda, are doomed, but they have the best treatment, care and love available until they can no longer hold onto life. And it doesn’t bankrupt and devastate the family.

“I never dreamed that it would turn into this giant that won’t stop growing. I started it to help my daughter, but it evolved into the entity that it is now. And it has nothing to do with S-Brand Publishing at all. Only one record that was necessary to establish a deposit account for Shallson’s novels and royalties.”

“You’ve got a good heart,” Big Elk said. “I felt that when I saw you the first time. Sorry if I’ve caused you pain.”

“It’s not you who caused me pain! It’s the rest of the jerks around me.”

“Calvin was the writer who helped you by donating?”

“Yes. Shannon’s first three books went to Miranda, the money from the three he purchased from her went to Miranda, and the promise is there for ten percent of everything he earns from this point on. He’s amazing. So, it’s stupid for me to want to destroy him. I could never do that to him. Understand?”

“I do,” said Big Elk.

They returned to Melissa’s desk and a much happier greeting.

“Did you find your weasel?” James asked.

Sun Flower beamed. “Sure did! Daniel Webster in Distribution. He was slick, but I nailed him. And between Jason and I, we’ve found how he circumvented the system’s security to gain access and where he deposited the funds he diverted. Everything.”

“Sorry, James,” said Nathan. “Shouldn’t be so hasty to reach conclusions.”

“Harrumph! You’re correct for a change. When is the meeting to get Calvin’s novel published?”

“I haven’t arranged it yet, but I will. I’m looking at next Tuesday. Can you delay your trip to San Francisco until then? I’d like you to be here. The board isn’t going to be happy with this, and I’m sure they’ll have questions for you.”

James turned to Shannon. “What do you say, daughter?”

“Under the circumstances, he can do that. Looks like I’ll be making a hasty trip back within the week. It sucks, but I’m glad I was here to say goodbye and touch her one more time.”

“Excellent.”

“Why would Daniel Webster do that?” asked Nathan.

“Sorry, Birgit, but this is what happened,” James said. “Giavanna was engaged to Daniel when she got caught up with Calvin. She dropped her skirt for him, and Daniel found her out. He put her in the hospital, canceled the wedding, and promised to crush

Calvin to stop him from hurting more women. When you're driven by insane hatred, like my ex-wife, you're blind to anything you do. You pull no punches, stop at nothing to accomplish your goal.

"Now that you know what happened, what about Josette Robinson? Are you going to keep on screwing up her life for no reason? She took a risk to do something good for this company. If she hadn't, it could have killed us."

"I guess we should drop the charges against her," Nathan said.

"Then we can do that now and go to her apartment and correct the damage you've done? No need to drag the agony out over the weekend."

Nathan sighed. "Yes. We'll correct the mistake if she'll let us."

James smiled and clapped his shoulder. "Good man. Let's get on with it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Crescent Moon, Spotted Lily, Shooting Star, and Dandelion stood outside the Robinson apartment. Crescent Moon scanned the floor they were on and focused down the hallway to her right. Soon a door opened, and the elderly Chinese woman entered the hallway. Crescent Moon beckoned her with a smile, and the woman approached her.

She placed an arm around her shoulder. “Hello, sister. Thank you for what you’ve done. Please join us.”

She rang the doorbell.

Kevin escorted them to the living room, where Danielle stood beside Josette.

Crescent Moon knelt before her and placed her forehead on her feet.

“You are truly a gifted child. Thank you for what you’ve done so far. I appreciate it more than I can express.”

“It’s nothing. I only did it to help my family.”

“Do you know who he was?”

“No. I didn’t care who he was. I had to think about my family. He wouldn’t have stopped with Dad. He’d have killed us all.”

“So, you reacted out of love. Absolutely great. You understand hierarchies, child?”

“Yes, like from the lowest servant to the president or ruler of a country.”

“Well, consider the demon you killed to be the vice president. That’s how powerful he was. He’s wreaked enormous carnage on the world in the past and the present. And one nine-year-old girl stopped him and said it’s nothing? Child, you are great! And you did it without a linsang and without fear. That’s unheard of in the past! You’re awesome, child!”

She laid a hand on Josette’s stomach. “New Life, did you aid her in the battle?”

“No. I was worried about mom. She told me to be quiet and did it on her own. She’s wonderful to love,” she answered.

“That she is,” said Crescent Moon, turning her attention to Josette.

“I don’t think you’ll have many more problems from now on. This is very distressing to the bad side of the spiritual world. When she’s born, name her and call me. I’ll arrange training for her and Danielle. If not me, then through someone else.”

Josette snapped up defensively. “Call you? Train my children? Shouldn’t someone ask us instead of telling us? This is our family, you know. Do we count for nothing?”

The Chinese woman chuckled. “You say same as I say,” she said. “Things change. You soon want to help. I do for my granddaughter. Mama die, but she lives a wonderful life. Help many peoples.”

“Yes, it’s a wonderful growing family. I can feel the powerful love here. And your children will ask you when they know the time is right. They will drive you crazy until you get them to us. Don’t worry, Josette. Relax and enjoy your life and children. The days fly swiftly, and you should savor every moment with them,” Crescent Moon said.

“Still, I might not want to be a part of it,” Josette said.

“I think you will,” said Danielle. “The three of us will not be a political force, but we will have a significant impact on society, and society will move the political forces to bring great changes to America.”

“Well spoken,” said Crescent Moon.

The doorbell rang, and Kevin opened the door. Three more people joined them in the small living room. Barnaby, Millington, and Birgit all sat on the floor.

“You have a lot of nerve showing up here,” Josette said bitterly. “Come with more bad news to devastate my family? Going to slap some more criminal charges on me?”

“No.” He took in the cramped quarters. “I came to tell you that due to the circumstances of our investigation and Big Elk’s investigation for Birgit, S-Brand has dropped the charges against you, and if you let me, I’d personally like to make amends

for the pain and suffering I've caused you. I'd like you to return with a 50% salary increase and a cash bonus of \$2 thousand for a start. Plus, we'll cover any medical expenses you've incurred since you've been out of work if the insurance company doesn't. If you're willing to accept that."

James tapped his arm. "Three thousand cash bonus."

"Okay," Nathan said. "Three thousand cash bonus."

She looked from him to Kevin and nodded. "That's acceptable, but I must tell you, it might not be permanent. A lot of things are happening in our lives right now. I don't know how much longer we'll be here."

"That's understandable, but the offer stands as is. I'm not going to bind you to any term of service, and I'd like you to return, sincerely. We have several offices across the country; if you go somewhere close to one of them, you can transfer and not lose wages or benefits. I'll guarantee that also. I've recently discovered that I'm sometimes too hasty in making wrong decisions."

"Then is next Monday acceptable for me to return to work? I want another week to enjoy my children and relax."

"That's great. Make it two since you're not losing money. Enjoy your time with them. I don't mind. Just wanted to make amends to you after I learned why you did it."

Birgit listened and looked at the interior environment. She liked the relaxed and warm feeling it presented to her. "This is a nice atmosphere, Josette," she commented casually. "Did you do this, or have it done by someone?"

"I hired my husband to do it. I have no taste in decorating. That's his department." She blew him a kiss.

"You're kidding," Birgit said and turned to Kevin. "Is this what you do for a living? Do you work for someone?"

"So far, I work for me, but contracts have been so scarce lately that I've started looking for a job. It sucks, but I have mouths to feed and children to keep alive."

“Positively marvelous! Do you have a portfolio available?”

“Sure, I’ll get it and be right back. Why do you ask?”

“I also do this, and I’ve been so swamped with clients, it’s ridiculous. Now I’m taking a break to reconcile with Calvin and motivate S-Brand to do what’s right. Soon I’ll be back in business, and I was thinking of hiring people and maybe opening a store.”

He returned with the book, and she leafed through it. “I like this. And this. And this. Wow! Marvelous blend of color and expression. This is great. I love the way it opens the room!”

She closed the book. “Look, Kevin, can we make a deal? I’ll press on with what I’m doing and move two or three, maybe four, contracts for you to handle from start to finish as a potential partner. If the customers are satisfied and you’re willing, maybe we can operate as a limited partnership. I’d prefer that to the expense of opening a store and hiring employees. Will you consider that? From the looks of this portfolio, you are a quality that I can trust. I mean, you’re the answer to my prayers and worries.”

“Yes, I’d love that. I don’t know what happened, but the market died for me.”

“It was the ghosts,” Danielle said. “They don’t like people to have good things. The worse the living conditions, the better they like it. They didn’t want me and New Life to grow. They wanted us to be miserable to the point of not caring about life. Even dead if possible.”

“Truth,” said Crescent Moon.

The phone rang, and Kevin answered. “Yes. Yes. I don’t know anymore,” he said. He laid the receiver down and cleared his throat. Big Elk and Sun Flower want us in our living room to join them at Big Elk’s home for a cookout. This sudden loving family is good but very unexpected. Show of hands.”

“Fifteen, Sun Flower. Can you give us directions? Birgit knows the directions. How did you know she was here? Never mind. I don’t want to know. We’ll see you shortly.”

The Westwood Robinson LLC was established, and life for both families improved rapidly and significantly. Calvin decided to retain his position with Meridian Publishing, which distressed the board of S Brand. Still, he gave them a written guarantee that he would quit if there was a conflict of interest and if they would let him do the same thing for them for the same salary. He let Birgit and Big Elk draft it for him. And The Seventh Sail, the return of Calvin Westwood, was next in line for printing, with \$800 thousand budgeted for initial advertising.

Birgit bargained with Big Elk and Sun Flower to buy BlackBerry's home, and a week later, they arranged for Josette and Kevin to buy a house a few blocks from them. One of the Chinese daughters moved with them and became a live-in babysitter, while the other three families moved into Josette's old but larger apartment.

They returned from a cookout with Josette and Kevin and vegetated in their clear back yard. Birgit sat on the deck on the chaise with Brave One in her lap and Calvin holding a hand.

"Honey, why didn't you tell me about buying Shannon's three books? That was a hefty price to pay."

"You never asked. She needed the money and I figured I'd more than get my money's worth from the books being published. I did, but not close to what I should have."

"What did she need the money for?"

"For her sister. Really her stepsister. When James Millington asked me for a donation, I went with him to the children's hospital. I was ill-prepared. I looked at her, and the other children, the parents, all loving, hoping, and holding onto life to the very last second. It broke my heart.

“I made the donation and then I promised him that 10% of every novel, initial payment, and royalties, would go to her trust fund which helps hundreds more besides her. I didn’t have the heart to say no. We’ve been so richly blessed in our lives, I just had to give to the children. I’ve often wondered why we never had any for ourselves. I know you got tested, but you never discussed the results. Probably too depressing. But sometimes I visit the hospital, when I have the strength, and I pretend they’re my children, and I add what love I can to help them. I take them stuffed animals, balloons, books, toys, flowers, whatever they want that will help them have a moment of peace or joy.”

“Oh wow! That’s so wonderful of you. I’m learning so much about you that I didn’t know. And you’re right about me not being able to have children. However, we have one on the way, and I hope it’s not the last. I feel so much different since I met BlackBerry and all the wild things that have happened to us. Returning to the church, Brave One came to us, confessions, the Apache Women’s Medicine Circle, where we stopped the hurricane within a few hours, and all their healing ceremonies. I missed my period, and I’m too consistent to think nothing of it. The positive results came back this morning.”

“My turn to say, oh wow! That’s wonderful news to hear at the end of a long day.”

“Thanks a million, sweetheart.”

Squawk! “Birgit’s a preggie,” shouted Basheer.

“Right on, loudmouth,” Birgit laughed.

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