

SCIENCE FICTION



RETRIEVAL

I'D BEEN THINKING ABOUT BIRDY or I would have seen the heavy clouds forming in the southeast. I've lived out here for almost ten years. I know how to pay attention to the weather. The desert is a trickster, and fools most people. You think you can cross parts of it on foot, or drive a hundred miles as well as twenty, but the fact is if you don't check out the sky, that's on you. Be prepared, I like to say. But I'd driven that road a thousand times and I should have been ready for the rain. I wasn't. Thinking about a man can do that to an otherwise sensible person, especially if you want to tell a good man you can't see your way into marrying him. It isn't as if the offers are going to come my way often out here. But if you don't love someone, you don't. It's as simple as that.

Just as I had that thought, the thunder roared and the sky opened up. Rain pounded down so hard it sounded like hail and I couldn't see a foot in front of the car. I turned the wheel just a little and glided off the road, or hoped I had. Anyone behind me had better do the same but if they decided not to, I didn't want to be in their way.

In a flash flood the dry riverbeds and creeks and arroyos fill up and overflow in seconds. I was on the mesa so all the water would be going downhill away from me. Still, it's always hard, waiting it out, the rain a veil between me and anything familiar, and it's the only time out here I get uneasy. Rattlesnakes don't bother me. Sudden storms like this do. Somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered being caught in a summer rain in a New England town where I'd stopped for awhile, soft sounds on leaves, everything green, the smell of grass and flowers, sun coming out afterwards. Strange as it is, though, I wouldn't trade that for this. The land here is different. It doesn't let go of you.

When the flood passed I drove forward in bright sunlight, the road still wet but not submerged. Far below, I could see the last vestiges of the storm coursing west, away from town. It usually did, thanks to the original riverbed that had never been altered, so it always carried raging waters away from us. The ones who built the town knew that, a long time ago. Or maybe they didn't, and were just too lazy to divert the river and decided on wells instead and so we're still safe.

A truck passed by at high speed, sending huge waves of spray over the car, covering it completely, so for a moment I was blinded again. I silently called the driver an idiot, and expected I'd probably see him soon enough and I could say it in person.

By the time I got down to the desert floor the sand and mud had already begun to dry to dust. I drove to Kai's diner and saw the usual row of trucks and jeeps parked out front. It wasn't much past 7 a.m., though I'm usually there an hour earlier. I'd slept in, after hiring a new man to handle the morning crowd. As I opened the door I was met by a bundle of voices all talking at once until they saw me and stopped.

"So what's going on?" I asked.

"We want to know that, too, Gilly," said one of my regulars.

"Don't call me that, Frank. I've told you before."

I looked around and realized in that instant that no one was eating, and there weren't any sounds coming out of the kitchen.

"We've been waiting on you," Frank said. "I can't remember a time you showed up late."

"I'm not late," I snapped. "I hired someone to open up. Which he must have done if you all got in here."

Callie stood up and came over to me. We'd been friends ever since I bought the diner and she'd come in as my first customer.

"I opened up for them," she said. "I'm sorry, Gillian. When you gave me the key I never expected to use it. Then everyone showed up and we all just assumed you'd gotten caught in the rain and I let them in to wait."

"And what if I'd floated off down the river, car and all?"

Several of the men laughed and Frank spoke for them.

"We were pretty sure that wouldn't happen to you, Gilly—sorry, Gillian. And we're hungry enough to eat a bear, and there isn't another stopover for a hundred miles, now, is there?"

"I guess not. Well, let's get you all fed, then," I said as I headed into the kitchen. "By the way, one of you is an idiot. You drove by me at seventy miles an hour and splashed my car so I couldn't see to drive. Any idea who that was, Devon?"

One of the youngest men waved his hands and gave a quick bow. Everyone laughed, including me.

Firing up the burners and setting out supplies, I mentally lambasted the new hire and wondered what had happened to him. It wasn't like he had a long way to go to get to work, since I'd rented him the closet I had upstairs. There were two rooms and a bathroom and a private stairway, but it really was not much more than a closet. Still, he'd seemed happy with it. So where was he?

He'd shown up out of the blue, wanting a job and a place to stay. It was manna for me, because he was good and fast at the grill when I gave him a trial run and I needed a backup so I didn't have to keep spending every waking hour in the diner. In his late twenties, slicked-back red hair, he told me he hated the desert sun. Odd place to end up, then, I'd said to him when he mentioned that. He'd just nodded. I didn't press for details. Part of what I like about the desert is the way it lets you keep your own secrets.

I set a plate of eggs and sausage down in front of another regular customer and started to turn away.

"Gillian, you sure don't talk much for a woman," he said to me.

"Well, Harris, I see men talking each other's ears off. You can't convince me they're saying much that's important, but women have nothing on how long men can talk about sports, like a bucket they can't fill up. So maybe I just don't want to interrupt."

For a moment he looked upset and then I smiled and so did he. "Maybe you're right," he said. "It's a pretty interesting subject, sports."

"I'll take your word for it," I said.

I was carrying out two more plates and ready to shout curses out loud at my missing tenant when we heard a massive noise, a booming sound that reminded me of the time I'd seen a building implode. It rattled the walls. We could see red flares in the distance through the plate glass window I'd had installed a few months before to give a view of the mountains, though they were seventy miles away and more haze than view.

"Those military folks aren't usually testing this late in the year, are they?" Frank said, who'd long ago finished eating and was nursing his third cup of coffee. He'd retired last year and didn't know what to do with himself. I was pretty sure that mornings at the diner were his main enjoyment now.

“Who knows what they do over there. Not like they let us in for a nice little tour around,” said Joseph, who ran the local liquor store. He took one of the plates from my hand and set it down on the table and lifted his fork.

Then the noise came again, this time with a vibration so strong it moved his table an inch toward me and sent the fork flying. The stove in the kitchen was bolted to the floor but glasses and plates came smashing down off shelves. I swore under my breath.

“What the hell is that?” someone called out.

The sky had darkened. We all went close to the window, something we knew better about doing if it was an earthquake, or even if it was just some special testing the military was performing. They never sent us a schedule but I’d hear the blasts in the early dawn hours. We all did and nothing we could do about it except try to go back to sleep. This sound had been different. Now we gathered near the glass like novice travelers, staring up.

Seven horizontal streaks like thin lines of fire stretched across the sky above the horizon. As we watched, six of them disappeared and only one stayed there, an orange and yellow band that pulsed and wavered like a mirage, but it was real. We knew that much. Then that one vanished, too, and the sky cleared and the sun came out again.

I heard the chatter around me.

“So what’s that about?” “Some new weapon.” “They don’t let us see those.” “You make a suggestion, then, smart-ass.” “Maybe it’s alien invaders. They like deserts, don’t they?”

I looked out the window again. I wanted to go and get to the place where those streaks of fire had been, somewhere between us and the mountain range. But there’d be no point. The best explanation lay with the army base twenty miles away and that meant no explanation at all would come our way.

The side door to the back stairs opened right then and my tenant walked in, pushing his hands through his hair and making it stand up straight in places. His clothes looked as if he’d slept in them.

“Noise wake you?” I said, not even trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. “Your shift started two hours ago.”

He looked confused and uncertain and didn’t offer an apology. “Keeping track of time . . . it’s hard.”

“So’s keeping a job if you don’t figure out how to do that,” I said.

“Who’s this, Gillian?” Frank asked.

I looked around. Most people were getting ready to leave. They’d already lingered, some of them, past their quota for a break. Truckers never got much time as it was. We’d all been a little off schedule.

“This is Gabriel.”

When he didn’t say anything or even nod to the group, I said “Hired him to help me with breakfast for you all in the morning.”

“Well, how’s that going for you, Gabe?” Frank said, and everyone laughed, though in a friendly way. That was the point out here, not to let things get to you, and most of all, to give each other space.

“It’s Gabriel,” my tenant said.

Frank threw up his hands. “Got it. No nicknames for anyone in Kai’s diner. Who was he, anyway, this Kai?”

“Before my time, Frank, as I’ve told you often enough. And no, I don’t want to change it. Looks to me like you’re done with that coffee.”

He got up slowly, the way old men do, but with a smile that would melt a harder heart than mine. I had the sudden, strange thought, I remember it so well, that I wished Frank could live forever, that I wished we all could. I pushed it aside as sentimental nonsense, but the truth is I really did wish for that. I wanted everything to stay exactly the way it was, for nothing to change. I was in a safe place, and I loved it enough it would break my heart to leave. Since I had no intention of going anywhere, I relaxed.

“How’s that dog of yours?” I asked him.

His face lighted up and he gave a thumb at the window. “Connor’s sitting out there enjoying the heat.”

So he was. Frank had found the retriever abandoned in a rusted trailer on the other side of the pass and said later the creature’s howling carried for miles as he drove along below the cliffs and he had to find out where the sound was coming from. Since that day Connor had set himself up as a bodyguard and woe be to anyone who raised his voice to Frank. Connor never sat in the shade, but instead always lay down where the sun could reach him, even at noontime when the heat kept the rest of us indoors.

Frank had reached the door to the diner and as he opened it the dog raised himself up about as slowly as Frank had done. They were growing old together.

“See ya, Gillian,” Frank said as he opened the screen and let it fall back behind him with a sharp slap, the way it always did.

I watched him and Connor climb into their truck and a few minutes later they were out of sight, leaving a trail of dust behind.

With some reluctance I turned my attention back to Gabriel. I didn’t like confrontation, but I didn’t like indolence, either, or broken agreements.

“Why don’t we visit the kitchen, you and I?” I said to him.

“Gillian, any chance of a refill?” Harris called out.

“Gabriel here will bring you coffee. Just give us a minute,” I answered.

He leaned against the sink and ran his hands again through his hair, making it look even worse.

“So?” I asked. Only a few plates and glasses were broken on the floor after all. I picked up a broom and swept the pieces to the side.

He watched me do that and seemed to wake up to the fact I wasn’t happy with him.

“You’re mad? Because I was late? That’s a waste of energy,” he said. He looked at his hands, turned around and ran them under the faucet, and dried them on a paper towel.

It was a mystery to me why I didn’t fire him at that moment. It isn’t something I can explain. As I look back I think part of it was that I was curious about him. He was smart and capable. Yet there was this way he had of not seeming to care about things I thought he ought to care about. And that intrigued me.

“Look,” I said to him. “I got in this morning and was greeted by a room full of customers who had no food, no coffee, nothing. I slept in for the first time since I can remember because I thought you were handling things, getting the prep ready and feeding the crowd. So what am I missing here?”

“You’re right,” he said in a calm voice. “I’ll be on time tomorrow.”

That was it, no explanation and a pretty slim apology, but somehow my anger evaporated. I handed him a refill pot.

“You can start now and give the ones who are left out there some fresh coffee.”

I watched him as he went up to each table holding out the pot, saying something to each customer and to my surprise, getting a laugh. By the time he'd made the rounds the diner seemed busier than before with the ones who were still there talking more than they'd been doing.

He came back with two orders, set the lists down on the counter and started putting them together.

"What'd you say to make Jamie laugh? The one with the long hair?" I asked him casually, though I was interested to know. "He's a pretty sour kind of guy, especially in the morning."

Gabriel looked back at the man, who by this time had moved his seat so he could chat with Callie, who looked as surprised as I was.

"I told him that shirt he's wearing reminded me of a raccoon stuck in the mud."

"We don't have any raccoons out here," I said.

"That didn't seem to bother Jamie," he answered. "Anyway, you asked."

So I had, and I had to smile when I looked over at Callie. She'd be sure to tell me in detail later what Jamie had gone on about and she'd wonder as much as I did why he'd started to talk to her at all. But right now the raised eyebrow and glance she sent my way told me she was enjoying it well enough.

As he worked, Gabriel made me think of a dancer, or better, a choreographer, pouring oil on the grill, tapping a pan, pacing the bacon and sausage as they cooked, chopping onions and peppers, timing the toaster, all of it done in a sequence different from mine, better, it seemed to me, because I could tell everything was hot on the plate at the same time. I never managed to achieve that, so the toast would be cold, or the eggs, something.

The customers liked it, too. If he kept it up, I'd be out of a job and glad of it.

I closed the diner at ten a.m. to give me time to set up for lunch. No one came by in the late morning, though if there was a straggler or two I'd feed them, but most of the time it was quiet until noon when I opened the doors again.

And that was when Gabriel said "See you. I need to take a walk," and disappeared out the side door before I could tell him he had to help me get ready for the lunch crowd. When I looked out the front window he was already halfway across the highway. He walked straight into the desert and I wondered if I should warn him about rattlesnakes but it was too late, anyway, and hopefully he'd know one was waking up from its rest in the sun when he heard it. It wasn't till later that I realized he'd gone off in the direction where we'd seen the fire streaks in the sky, but

then, he'd be hard-pressed not to. It was open desert in every direction and no rules about where to go for anyone so long as we stayed away from the military base, which wasn't where he was headed.

I went back into the kitchen and put on a clean apron and checked what I'd planned out for lunch. Kai's had what I liked to call an eclectic menu, which meant that I used any leftovers first to make up casseroles and added two more dishes to give people a choice. Dessert was always pie or cake. I couldn't get or keep ice cream very well, so it wasn't an offering. I opened the fridge to pull out ingredients and found six large bowls waiting for me and no leftovers in sight. I looked into each one. I had seven casseroles, enough for the forty people who usually showed up, all of them prepared and just needing to go into the oven. When had Gabriel done that? I was pleased, but puzzled. I didn't remember telling him how I did the menus and I couldn't see how he'd gotten it all done in the short time I was rearranging the tables and closing up shop. But he had, and left the kitchen clean.

There was still a chicken salad to make up for sandwiches and a soup to throw together, but they didn't take much effort. By eleven-fifteen I was finished with everything and had time on my hands. I looked out the front window again and could see the heat rising from the paved road and no sign yet of my new hire. That he was strange I didn't debate, but he was good at what he did. I needed someone like him around. If he had to go on a few walkabouts without notice, maybe I'd just have to handle that.

The screen door banged and I turned around, expecting to see someone coming in early for lunch, despite the "Closed" sign I'd put up. I felt my heart sink as I looked up at Birdy.

He was big-shouldered and about a foot taller than me and a smile like white lightning. There was a time when just seeing him drive into the lot would make me feel dizzy and I'd stop what I was doing, sometimes holding a plate in mid air until he walked inside, as if only then I could start breathing again. But that changed, as these things do. It wasn't anyone's fault, though for a time I laid the blame on him. He had some ways about him I couldn't seem to get past. One was his quick temper. He never used it on me but I saw him use it on others. Another was his enjoyment of hunting. I didn't see any point in going after the wild creatures that roamed the desert just for the sport of it, and told him so. He looked at me as if I'd lost my mind but he knew I was serious and said he'd stop hunting altogether. He'd give up something he'd done his whole

life just to please me. I wanted to talk about it but he railroaded the idea right past me. Somehow that scared me. That's when I knew for sure I didn't love him back.

Callie said I was just getting cold feet because I didn't want my life to change. She assured me having a good man around made life a whole lot easier, and she knew this because of her Sergei, who'd left Russia at age twenty-six and somehow ended up renting a room in her house for a month and now there they were five years later. I said I didn't want things easier and she laughed. "Yes, you do, Gillian. It's me you're talking to, remember?"

"There's plenty of time," I said to her.

"I'm not talking about time," she answered. "I'm talking about you letting your heart just die out here. It isn't what you're supposed to do."

Birdy stood in front of me with that smile of his lighting up the room and I watched it fade. He was a sensitive man along with all his aggressive ways, at least when it came to me.

"You've decided," he said, his voice flat.

"Birdy," I began.

"Don't. Don't do it, Gill. I think I'd break that window there if I had to hear you give me a reason I know already wouldn't make sense to me, wouldn't matter to me. I'd do anything for you, and that isn't enough, is it." He made it a statement, not a question.

"No," I said, and realized too late that I'd spoken in a whisper. I'd wanted to sound strong and even indifferent if I could, but instead I could hear the sadness as I said that one word and knew he heard it, too. It seemed to seal something for him.

"Okay, then. I believe you."

The screen door slapped and he was gunning the motor of his truck before I caught my next breath, the tires shooting gravel as he left. I watched until I couldn't see it on the road anymore. I'd got what I wanted. So why did it feel as if I'd just done something I couldn't ever fix?

Just then Gabriel crossed back over the highway, hands in his pockets, looking for all the world as if he'd been on a stroll in a country lane. It was nearly noon, I noticed, glancing at my watch, and he wasn't sweating from the heat. That red hair and pale skin of his wouldn't survive for long if he didn't start wearing a hat and using some sunscreen, I wanted to tell him when he walked in. But then I realized I didn't want to talk much at all. I wanted to work and get Birdy out of my mind.

I spoke to him without turning around as I headed back into the kitchen.

“Enjoy your walk? When did you set up those casseroles?”

“You had a lot of things that were going to spoil if they weren’t used right away. So I just put them in and added a few jars of sauce. It didn’t take any time at all.”

“I guess not, since I never even saw you do it. They’re almost ready so you can take them out of the oven and let them set on top of the stove. I keep it at a low burn.”

“Yes, I know,” he said.

I started to tell him about the soup and half sandwich that I offered on the lunch menu when I saw that he wasn’t paying attention to me. Instead he was gazing at the photo I’d just taped on the wall above the counter. I was getting frustrated again. Didn’t the man have any sense of what was appropriate when he was talking with his boss?

“Gabriel!”

“That photo. Where is it?” he asked, ignoring my tone.

“I cut it out of a magazine. It’s a place I want to visit, which is why I decided to hire someone else to run the diner. Someone I could depend on,” I added for emphasis.

“Where is it?” he repeated. His voice held no urgency, but I could see he was fixated on the thing and in five minutes we were going to have a stream of customers coming in.

“It’s about two hundred miles from here. May as well be the moon for all the chance I get to go and see.” He looked like he was going to ask me again so I told him. “It’s a dusty old town where something happened a long time ago. Visitors from outer space, they say. Back in 1947. Before my time.”

“Why do you want to go there?”

I shrugged. Why did he care? “I just want to. I don’t know. Why not? Are we done here?” Once again my sarcasm just rolled off him.

There was the sudden sound of wheels on gravel as people drove in.

“I’ll go take orders,” he said.

“No,” I countered. “I’ll take the orders and you fill them. How’s that?”

“Fine,” he said. “Only they like to talk to me.”

“They’ll get over it,” I said as my customers came in, one of them turning the “Closed” sign over to read “Open” and smiling at me. “They aren’t all the same ones who turn up in the morning, anyway. Only the locals are regulars. The truckers only get here every two days unless they have a short run.”

He uncovered a large bowl of potatoes that I'd cut up for fries.

"So where did you go on your walk?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Nowhere. Just like the feel of the sun on my back. There are snakes out there."

"Sleeping this time of day, most of them."

"I know. I was looking for them," he said. Seeing my expression, he added, "They look like sentinels when they're all curled up on the rocks. They wake in the instant. They can sense my presence from yards away. I tried to gauge how close I could get."

"Nice pastime," I said. The clamor out front had grown. I started to leave.

"What does it mean, the name?" he asked.

I stopped and turned around. "What name?"

"This place. Kai's. You told Frank you didn't know, but you do, don't you?"

"Willow tree. Maybe after that desert willow out back."

"Is that all it means? Is it a local name?" he pressed.

"It's a word from the Navajo. I don't think it means anything else," I said.

"I'd like to find out if it does."

"Right. Well, you can do that on your own time. Go into town and you can use the Internet at the liquor store. Just ask Joseph. He'll charge you a high price, but it works."

"I can use the library."

"You could, if we had one," I answered. "Let's get to work, shall we?"

As I walked into the crowd and told everyone what the menu was for the day, it occurred to me that the name of the diner did mean something else. I'd forgotten. I'd looked the name up years before, curious. It turned out the word "kai" existed in over a dozen other languages. I decided the original owner must have seen his new diner as a port of rest for all kinds of travelers.

That's how I liked to think about it, too. The only thing that nagged at me sometimes was wondering if maybe I was one of the ones just passing through, no matter what I told myself.

The screen door slammed again and I thought for the hundredth time I should get it fixed when I looked up to see Birdy again, beckoning to me. I sighed and went over to the kitchen and laid the orders I had on the counter and went to see what he wanted.

"Come outside with me," he said.

"Birdy, we've had this conversa—"

“It’s not about that,” he interrupted. “I mean, it’s not about us. Please.”

With a quick glance back into the diner, seeing no one was paying attention and Gabriel was busy at the stove, I pushed the screen door open and we went out. I closed it as softly as I could.

“So what’s this about? It’s our busy time, you know that,” I said, hoping he wasn’t going to talk about us after all.

“You know the old trailer up on the cliffs?”

“Of course. Where Frank found Connor.”

“There’s something there I want you to see,” he said.

I stared at him. “I can’t go anywhere. I’m in the middle of the lunch hour!”

“I need you to see this,” he insisted. “You have a helper now. He can take care of things for awhile.”

“Can he now? This is his first day, and what will my customers think if I go off just like that?” I said, turning to go back inside.

Birdy grabbed my arm to stop me. At my look he let go, but persisted. “This isn’t what you think. I need you to go with me, before I start to believe I’m going crazy.”

There was one thing I knew about Birdy for sure, and it was that he didn’t have a lot of imagination. He took life in a really physical way. You were supposed to work hard, sometimes play hard, and take care of yourself and your friends, and that was the right way to be. It was another reason we hadn’t managed to get together. He thought I was a daydreamer. I was a lot more than that. Sometimes I felt as if I’d just burst with all the things crowding my mind, all the things I wanted to learn and experience, most of which I couldn’t do where I was. And there was that feeling that I didn’t know if I was going to be staying there forever, the way I wanted. The two ways of thinking never let me rest.

“Well?” he said.

His expression was so unexpected. He was pleading with me. I could see it in his eyes. He didn’t let his feelings show very often. I had the sudden awareness that he was afraid.

“Okay. Give me a minute.” I saw the relief in his face.

Back inside I told Gabriel I was heading out for an hour or two and the lunch crowd was all his.

“Fine by me,” was all he said, barely looking up from what he was doing.

I left my order book on the counter and walked out, with only a few curious glances following me that I could see. Most people knew about Birdy and me and would just assume we wanted some time together, and maybe we just couldn't wait till evening. I didn't want them thinking that way, but there was nothing I could do about it.

We were ten minutes along and halfway to the cliffs before Birdy said anything else.

"I was out hunting." He gave me a quick glance and then focused on the winding road. The sun hit us in a full glare and it was hard to see ahead. Climbing the Forge Pass in a truck is not for the weak-hearted. There was no railing between me and a five-hundred-foot drop.

"I don't come up here much," he said.

I knew what he meant. He'd been working off his upset and anger at what I'd said, or hadn't said.

"I'd forgotten the trailer was still there as I followed some tracks—they were mountain lion."

I didn't say anything. It was a well-worn subject.

"There wasn't any reason for me to go inside the trailer, but I did. Just looked around. It was hot in there, and the only thing left that wasn't shredded or junked was a blanket Connor must have used, because it had dog hair on it."

"Birdy! What are we going there for?" I said, exasperated.

"I'm getting to that. I can't tell you, I have to show you. Then I guess we can decide what to do."

He wasn't going to say any more so I gave up. We'd reached the top of the cliffs anyway and I could see the rusted trailer a quarter mile off. It's flat up there, a mile in each direction east and west, and I couldn't imagine why he'd bother with it. Any self-respecting mountain lion would keep to the rocks and canyons. When we got a few yards away he stopped the truck and got out. He didn't approach the place, just stood where he was.

"So?" I said, joining him.

Birdy shook himself and just looked at me.

"What's going on with you?"

"Look," he said, walking over to the door that was half off its hinges and pulling it open.

I came closer and put my head inside. It would have been impossible to breathe if the windows hadn't been open and the door broken. Every surface was covered with plates of dried

food and debris and it was obvious nothing had ever been cleaned. I had no desire to go in. I looked up at him.

“Is this a test? Or are you going to tell me now what we’re doing here?”

“You don’t see it?”

“See what?” I asked, beginning to think he’d had some kind of sunstroke. He was never obtuse. Birdy didn’t play games, especially not mind games.

“I don’t see anything,” I said softly, watching him.

“Here,” he said, reaching past me. “This.” Birdy picked up the item from the floor under the table and brought it out. It had seemed just one more dull object inside the trailer but out in the sunlight it was a brilliant blue, almost neon. What he was holding was a flat disk that looked to be ten inches in radius. The surface of it was as smooth as glass.

He started to touch the center of the object but drew his hand back. He handed it to me. “Put your hand on it,” he said, “and just press down. Then maybe I’ll know if I was dreaming it all.”

I didn’t want to do any such thing, but now I was really worried about him. If it would help him calm down, that was fine by me. I took hold of it, surprised by how heavy the thing was, and pressed my hand on its surface.

The next moment the trailer vibrated slightly and disappeared, along with the disk I’d been holding. A second later it stood there in front of us the same as before, with the blue disk out of my hand and lying on the floor in the same place under the table.

“So what do you think, Gill?” he asked. His voice was steady but I heard the lingering shock in it.

I felt paralyzed for a moment. I couldn’t begin to fathom what had just happened.

“Think it’s a UFO?” he asked. His question helped me focus.

“What?” I could hear the rising pitch in my voice. Rallying, certain there had to be a normal explanation, willing there to be, I said “No, I don’t,” with as much emphasis as I could. “Of course not.” At the same time an answer came to me and it made perfect sense. “It has to be some kind of illusion. Something the army base is doing.”

“So this trailer is part of their target, or something, you mean?”

“Why not? It’s the kind of isolated place they like, since no one ever comes up here, except you just happened to walk right into it. We need to get away. You shouldn’t have come back.”

“You can’t tell anyone. They’d get panicked, right?” Frightened as he was, I suspected he also didn’t want to look like a fool any more than I did.

“I won’t tell anyone, Birdy. That’s a promise I’ll have no trouble keeping.”

We drove back. I could sense he still felt intense anxiety. I wasn’t far from that state myself. But an idea occurred to me that I thought would relax him. How little I understood what I was saying.

“You know what? Don’t laugh. The military’s been working for years developing futuristic inventions for weapons—you know, the kind we see in movies. I bet they’re doing just that with that trailer. Maybe they’ve figured out how to make a cloaking device.” I hummed the theme to a science fiction show.

He laughed. “Looks like they’ve come a long way. Still, that base is about as secret as could be. Why would they leave that thing for me to find? For anyone to find?” he asked, worried again. “Do you think they were watching us?”

“I’d say no. I think we escaped that. They’d have come after us if they’d detected us, no question.”

“Like in the movies.”

“Well, the military always chases down trespassers, don’t they? So yes, they’d have stopped us by now. My guess is that trailer is being used for some experiment. Maybe not for much longer, though. They probably received some kind of signal each time that disk got activated. I’d lay bets it wouldn’t be there next time if you went looking, which I don’t recommend.”

“I won’t be out there again anytime soon,” he said.

As we pulled up to the diner he leaned over and kissed me lightly. “Thanks for not laughing at me.”

“Ditto. It wasn’t any laughing matter. You stumbled on something no one was supposed to find. We’re friends. We help each other.”

“We’re not friends, Gill. We’ll never be that. I couldn’t handle it. But yeah, we can support each other when we need to.” He drove off without shooting gravel this time and somehow that made me feel worse than before.

I stayed looking east toward the cliffs until one of my regulars came out and asked me what I was doing. I wondered that myself as I closed the screen door behind me.

THE ENTIRE WALL reflected sunlight.

“How is that going to help me, Sarec? I can’t see a thing.”

“Apologies. I was reading,” said the man who was leaning against a panel of instruments. He held up a book, the title blazoned across the cover in gold lettering, *The Stars My Destination*.

“So? Can we get proper visual?”

“Patience is a virtue,” Sarec said.

The man sitting in the chair in the center of the room sighed. His long white hair belied his young features. His uniform was immaculate, its cut perfect. He was a man who cared about appearances. He also cared about achieving his desired mission.

“You forget I’m in charge here,” he said.

“We have come as a team, Malakai. Do you not think so?”

“No. What about the visual?”

Sarec made an adjustment on the panel behind him. A moment later a different view showed on the wall. He stepped back and studied the scene before them. It showed a military base at ground level, surrounded by desert. No one was in sight.

“Good,” Malakai said. “Now we can sort this out.”

“What is your plan?” he asked.

“To destroy it, of course. But not right away. We need to know what they’ve discovered. Thanks to the fools who were here before us, who knows how many parts of the helix are lying around down there! They’ll show up and seem like anomalies at first, but since they aren’t, someone is going to figure out what they do and how to use them. That someone is going to be one of the people living at that station. We need to stop them.”

“If the helix proliferates on its own, that is not going to be easy.”

“Be grateful there’s a finite cycle. We know each segment can only reproduce itself a few times, six at the most, and not all of them do that even once. Given the time lapse, in their world, we can collect them all in less than five days and go on to the next step. If we start now. No more books.”

“You would like that. Why does my reading bother you?” Sarec said, tucking the book into his pocket.

“This isn’t about what I like.”

“Yes, it is. It always is.”

“You’re out of bounds.”

“Once again, my apologies.”

“You’d better start preparing for the search. Send Inma with them.”

“My wife is not going down there,” Sarec said, containing his surprise. “I am sending Dojik.”

“However, you won’t care so much about him, and you care a great deal about her, which means you’ll work harder to get her back here faster, do you see?”

Sarec wondered not for the first time why he had accepted the current assignment, but he knew the answer. One of them, at least. It was only on assignments with Malakai that his own abilities were ever used fully. Not every leader of a starbreaker wanted an active team member on board who could screen and project any view desired from any source, given the right coordinates. In fact, Malakai was the only one who ever asked him to use his skills outright, like now, letting him show the base on the planet in absolute detail.

“It is not just seeing something,” he’d told Inma. “I am there, in whatever place that the rest of you just see projected on the display. I can feel the ground underfoot, feel the sun’s heat and hear the voices of the people. All of them.”

“The whole thing must drive you crazy,” his wife had said in response as they walked through their home and out into the garden. She had brought in a small pond of salt water and cultivated sea thorns. The indigo blooms floated at random. It never failed to soothe him.

“I am used to it now. I have learned how to sort them out. But the only time the noise stops is when I am with you,” he had said, smiling at her.

“Now isn’t that just the best thing?” she had said as she took his arm.

Sarec left the room. Malakai leaned his hands on the chair and pushed himself up. The wall was blank, its source gone. He’d kill himself if he had all that debris floating in and out of his mind, he thought. How did Sarec stand it? But that was Sarec’s concern, not his. Five days. It was all they had. Would it be enough to do everything he wanted?

With some difficulty he walked over to the port window that showed him nothing, given the speed they were traveling. To all intents and purposes it was as if they were standing still.

He braced his hands against a nearby table. He should have had his legs taken care of before he began the journey, but there had been no time. It was a minor injury that had escalated and no one knew why. The last thing he wanted was to have his team see him so weak, but he couldn't spend the entire trip sitting in a damn chair.

A static holograph that hung above the table caught his attention. Sarec had created it on one of his projection journeys, as he liked to call them. It had been an empty planet with nothing but buildings on it, product of a war waged with old neutron bombs below kiloton range, they deduced. Radiation alone had caused most of the damage. There were even dishes of food on tables inside many of the structures, and electronic devices playing, though the source of power eluded their team. Sarec had captured one of those interiors. It looked as if the people would be returning at any moment. Whoever they were.

Malakai didn't like such images. They held and stopped time, and that made him uncomfortable. He'd have to tell someone to remove the holograph from the room and destroy it.

A soft knock at the door alerted him and he stood straighter, resting his right shoulder on the wall for leverage.

"What is it?" he said, as the door opened slightly.

"The summary meeting is going to start in twenty minutes. People will be gathering soon. Do you need help?"

"Come in, come in," he said, impatient at the hesitancy of the voice but all too aware he needed the advance warning.

A young woman entered, her dress a bright shade of blue that matched his own jacket, a polished silver belt around her waist.

"I've set up the room for you. Hannis is here." She turned and beckoned through the door.

"Your brother can keep this to himself?" Malakai asked.

"Yes, I've explained it to him," she said.

A young man who resembled her enough to be her twin came in and walked over to the chair. "If you would just lean on me, it isn't far, only the next room over," he said. His tone was nervous, his expression matching that of his sister. They both looked at Malakai with anxiety expressed in face and body.

“I know where the room is! No one is to learn of this.”

“Emoris has told me exactly what to do and I haven’t spoken to anyone else,” Hannis assured him. He circled Malakai’s shoulders with his arm and they walked with slow steps out of the room. A few yards and they were at the meeting place. It was still empty. Malakai didn’t speak until he was in the large black chair that had been positioned on one side so that the center of the room would be open for the demonstrations that would be offered over the next hour.

“Do you need anything?” asked Emoris.

Malakai surveyed the setup in the room.

“A drink. I could use one.”

“Immediately,” she said, and she and Hannis left him.

Seconds later she returned with a cup and he saw the liquor in it.

“Have Hannis come back when the meeting is over and everyone has gone.”

She left again without a word, giving only a slight bow.

Ridiculous, he thought, the two of them acting like scared rabbits. He deserved better. He took a large swallow of the drink and sighed as he felt the heat of it course through his body. At least he had that.

The door opened again and Sarec walked in, followed by the other five on the team. They all acknowledged Malakai as they sat down and began talking together in low voices.

Sarec tapped the edge of a table that had a flat display covering its surface. He rested his hand briefly on the table surface and the display came to life, rising up several feet.

The men and women before him leaned forward as one to view it more closely, but stayed where they were. The protocol at these meetings was absolute. They would learn what they had to in a proper sequence.

“Aarim, tell us what you see here,” Sarec said, addressing an older man who wore casual clothes and hiking shoes. He had very pale blue eyes and had shaved his head. In his hands he held a string of beads that he worried at.

“That’s our goal for retrieval. We’ve seen it before.”

“No!” shouted Malakai. They all turned to him, startled.

“No,” he said in a calmer voice. “Look at it again. Tell us what we need to know.”

Aarim stopped working at the beads and put them in his jacket pocket. He glanced at Sarec and at the display. He had a deep voice but this time he spoke in a softer tone, as if he was soothing a child.

“What I see is what they term a military base and it contains a finite number of men and weapons. There are a few women present. They all live for the purpose of devising or testing weapons and to conduct surveillance against possible threats to their . . . I’m not sure to what, but there are bases like this all over the planet.

“Multiple segments of a helix were discarded on the surface by the starbreaker that was accidentally destroyed and it’s possible these segments have subsequently replicated. This base we’re looking at—its personnel—have located a segment already. They’re stalled just now because they can’t figure out what it is they’ve got. Until they are re-integrated into a helix the segments have the capacity to release their power cores independently. We can’t let that happen. Our goal—excuse me, our destination is the area in and around that base, for the purposes of retrieving any and all segments.”

“An excellent summary,” Sarec said, “but there has been a change.” He glanced over at Malakai, who did not interrupt this time. “Our purpose is not only to retrieve the segments, but to collect them in one place on the planet and activate them.”

Two of the other team members in the room began to whisper to each other.

“Linat and Ferrec, you have something to say?” Sarec asked them.

The woman spoke first. She waved her hand at the display. “You said at the last meeting that we’d study the base from here, using this image replica of yours. Anyhow, what’s to say for sure any parts of the helix can be detected? It’s guesswork.”

“What you are seeing is not an image. I have told you this before.” Sarec placed his hand close to the display. “It is not giving you a projection. This is one of my—one of our innovations, a synaxon receptor. I have moved the actual base here temporarily for our study, the size adjusted accordingly, of course. Its placement here is, in their time, less than what they call an attosecond. None of their instruments will detect this transfer. However, this is only for your study and instruction. What you do will need to be done inside the actual base on the planet. I will view it remotely from here using a reference beam, and advise accordingly where you need to go once you get inside.”

“How do we manage timing when we get there?” asked Ferrec in a worried voice. He was the only one on the team who was immune to effects from electromagnetic interference, an attribute that resulted from a childhood trauma. They needed him most of all.

“That is my job. I will take care of it for you,” Sarec said. Again he glanced over at Malakai, whose body language was, if anything, more intense.

“I still don’t understand why we have to go down there at all,” Linat said, impatience in her voice. “If you know where the segments are by looking at that receptor thing, why don’t you just use the reference beam and direct it to gather the segments into one place for us. You can do a remote activation, can’t you?”

Sarec had been her mentor before she joined the team. He could remember when Linat had entered her training with such wide-open enthusiasm, with an energy that helped her surpass everyone in physical and mental agility. The only problem was she had a temper, and it was something she’d never been able to let go of, and most likely, he had surmised, she didn’t want to. She was letting some of it show through even now, with Malakai in the room. And he took notice.

“My dear Linat,” he said, and she swung her head toward him in surprise and dismay. Whatever she felt, she hadn’t consciously intended to show it to her commander.

“Whether you can see the point or not isn’t relevant here. But it’s an easy one, so I’ll elaborate for you. Our purpose is in fact to retrieve the helix, all of it. But not to bring it back right away. We want to collect and activate all the segments together in that environment, as Sarec just said, and see what happens. Our time to do this is limited, since their proliferation will be infinitely harder to contain if we leave full retrieval for more than five days, as Sarec has also already told you. He will simply direct the team to the significant locations, to save time. All but you and Ferrec, that is. You both have to enter the actual base to reclaim the segment they have already found and to destroy whatever test results they’ve stored.” Malakai leaned back in his chair and smiled. “I can see you have another question?”

Linat didn’t hesitate to ask what was on her mind but she spoke in a tone of deference this time, aware that her own role on the team was still being shaped, and the team was where she wanted to be more than anything else. She pushed her hand through her mass of short, curly hair that was as white as Malakai’s and took a breath. “Why don’t we just evaporate the whole place, the base and the landscape?”

“Sarec? Would you explain . . . again?” Malakai said, still with a smile on his face.

Sarec wondered if Linat had any perception of the fury that consumed her leader. He doubted it, or it would have shown in her face. Insight was not one of her talents.

“If we did that, we’d destroy some of the segments,” he answered, “which means we’d never be able to collect them together and thus we’d never be able to activate any of them. The activation is critical. The integration it enables has the potential to heal disruptive forces on the planet. We want to see if it works.”

“We want to heal that planet down there. That’s our purpose. Really?” Linat sat back and gave a quick look at Malakai that he missed. Sarec was surprised by the calculation that he saw in her eyes.

He looked over at the remaining two members of the team who hadn’t said anything. They were Aarim’s son and daughter. The family held a close resemblance. “Is it clear what you’ll need to do?” he asked them.

The son answered first. “Very clear. And your projection—excuse me, your transfer of their base—is wonderful. But won’t we be seen once we access their landscape for our search? Strangers are noticed.” He shifted in his seat and stretched out his long legs.

“I have the same concern as Demic,” said the young woman sitting next to him. “My brother is right. The population is suspicious of strangers.”

“It’s an isolated location, but used to travelers,” Sarec said, wondering why his team was throwing up so many objections. Malakai would ask him to explain that later, he was sure. “Besides, you will dress like your father. It is nice of you to show up in costume, Aarim,” he added.

“Always glad to please,” Aarim said. He turned to his children.

“We’ll just be a family of truckers on the road. We’ll drive wherever we want. No one is going to notice anything.”

Sarec put his hand on the walls surrounding the base.

“These have electromagnetic pulses. If shut off they will trigger alarms, not only in the base but in a distant monitoring facility, which in turn will alert their central government, though it is several thousand miles away. It is essential you get through the walls.”

“No problem,” Ferrec said.

“For you, you mean. What about me?” asked Linat.

“It is all about timing, which I manage for you, as I said before,” Sarec said. “Ferrec will disable the pulses long enough for you to get in but not long enough for detection.”

“I’m not faster than the speed of light. I’ll be killed,” Linat challenged him.

Sarec studied her and wondered. Had he made the right choice in bringing her on? It was not too late to make a change. He would have to think about it.

“Not if Ferrec does it right.”

“Which I will,” Ferrec said, looking at Linat in surprise. “You know I will.”

Linat seemed suddenly aware that her behavior was causing a problem. A look of confusion crossed her face for a moment and then it was gone.

“Of course. I just like to have all the facts at hand,” she said in a neutral voice.

“One thing,” Aarim said, pulling his beads out again and checking the thin string that held them together, “how do we know they haven’t already alerted their government about what they’ve found—or at least contacted this monitoring facility? Wouldn’t that be part of their protocol?”

“Good question. We do not know. It makes the need for discretion even greater. But it has struck us—Malakai suggested this—that if they had sent out any alarms we would have seen consequences by now. Our assumption is that they are still trying to decide how to explain it to themselves first. They have only detected the one segment and that was less than a day ago for them. They might even consider offering it to their superiors as evidence of a new technology they have managed to develop themselves, since they have sophisticated laboratories on the base. It is a race very interested in the concept of winning approval,” Sarec added.

“Aren’t we all?” asked Aarim.

Sarec didn’t answer. “So we are in agreement about the plan,” he said to his audience. “We will meet again once the starbreaker is in position. That should be soon. Go over your assignments until you have no doubt of the steps you have to follow. They are all laid out in the oscillators I gave you. Afterwards, get some rest. You will not have any time for that once we begin.”

The team members filed out in silence. Sarec held his hand over the synaxon receptor. It flattened and melded into the surface of the table.

“That went well enough,” he said to Malakai.

“You know that’s not what I think. All the questions. You don’t run a very tight ship, Sarec.”

“I believe in free thought,” Sarec answered. “Though I agree, the meeting was not what I expected. If I did not know better, I would think someone was trying to sabotage things.”

“My thought exactly,” Malakai said. “So why don’t you look into that while there’s still time?”

“I will be vigilant.”

Sarec gave a quick nod and left the room. Seconds later Hannis entered. He once again lent his support and brought Malakai out to the corridor.

“Not there,” Malakai said as Hannis began to lead him toward the room where he had been before. “To my quarters.”

Hannis looked at him and saw the tension in his face. The man was in great pain.

“It’s some distance. Let me get help,” he said.

“No!” Malakai hissed. “Just you. The back way.”

It meant ten minutes of a grueling walk down a staircase and through a seldom-used tunnel. When he reached his rooms Malakai was pale with fatigue, but he stood at the door on his own.

“That’s enough. I’ll call if I need you again.”

He watched Hannis until he was out of sight and then went into his quarters, closing the door behind him so it was once again seamless with the outside wall. Everyone knew where he was, but only he knew how to get in.

More than anything he wanted to lie down on his bed and sleep. He knew that instead he would have to take the quartz injections that would relieve the pain and let him move freely for a limited amount of time. He needed to be alert every second. Especially now.

He went over to the port window and closed it. He didn’t have to worry about being watched. The only viewing sensors had been installed in other rooms, not his. Still, the streams and waveforms outside the starbreaker were constant and he preferred the dim light that emanated from the walls.

He did, however, need to make sure no voices could be heard. He reached up above the door until his fingers touched a small metal circle embedded in the wall. Pressing it created a peculiar humming sound that filled the room. It pleased him.

“Now,” he said. “Time for some civilized conversation.”

With an effort that brought more pain he braced his legs and pulled the table a few inches out from the wall, revealing tiny, pulsing lights that seemed to be no more than reflections, like the facets of a prism. He watched the play of light a few moments and brushed his hand across the surface of the wall once. He sat down in a chair in front of the table and waited.

The man who suddenly appeared and sat down across from him smiled, though as yet his features were unclear.

“Malakai, nice of you to call.”

“So, do you find things satisfactory?” Malakai said as the man’s features became distinct.

“So far,” was the answer.

“I look forward to hearing about it.”

“At your service, as always.”

“Sometimes I wonder if perhaps it is I who is at your service, Inac.”

“I’m using the name Gabriel when I’m with them.” Inac leaned forward. “There is a potential problem we have to address.”

“Go on.”

“She likes where she is and is loyal to the ones around her.”

“That won’t hold you back, will it?”

“Don’t worry. You know me. I never give up on an assignment.”

“True enough. So what is your plan? Say it as quickly as you can. There isn’t much time. Sarec will need my help soon, though he may not agree that he does.”

“I’ve little time to spare of my own, as well. Here’s what I have in mind.”

“Wait,” Malakai said. He got up and went to the door and pressed the metal disk again. The humming became louder. He returned to the table and sat down. All his movements had been stiff and he couldn’t hide that, but Inac wouldn’t care. It wasn’t the kind of detail that mattered to him.

“None of the others can know about you when they arrive on the surface. Even Sarec is unaware of your presence there.”

“They’ll see me, but they won’t recognize me. Now, about the woman.”

Malakai listened to what else his brother had to say.

GENE POOL

“ . . . the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

—*H.P. Lovecraft*

I

NIGHT COMES AND I drive here again, as I did that first evening when it all began. Pale birches lean low over the road, silver in the moonlight. The radio plays softly. No other cars, only the steady hum of my own in motion across the hills that lie before me in puritan shapes. The dark woods crowd, shut out the sky. At last I turn off and follow the road that leads around the lake to home.

I put off this ritual as long as I can and pretend I have other things to do, but it doesn't help. The old hall clock strikes eleven and I get up and take my jacket off the hook behind the door and pull out the keys to the car.

On the back roads my headlights catch the grasses that rise in wild profusion from the fields. I hear the river at times, the whitewater coursing, and even though I am afraid, I stop and get out and stand on the bank, listening. Stars cover the blackness. Light from an eon ago. The sound of the river soothes me a little. I go back to the road and follow the winding path again. A futile, meaningless act, born out of compulsion, as if by retracing the route over and over I can erase it.

I pass the lake only once, circling slowly. The surface is placid, black water a little lighter than the land, but it is a natural light, the diffusion of the air. From the shore comes the cry of a loon, and after a pause, an answer in the hoarse voice of an owl. Nothing else. The familiar sounds seem deceivers, a mask for something that waits out there. But it is all my own imagining. I drive on, satisfied. I can sleep, now.

I'll leave this place soon. Events reached their end some time ago yet I've lingered on. Some of the residents act as if nothing ever happened, or perhaps have come to believe none of it ever did. I thought that might change, at one point, only I didn't count on how quickly routine could re-establish itself, how it can assert the values that hold people together, or keep them apart.

The thing is, though, nothing is the same, and I can't deny that, and in the end, I know that what we were shown, what happened to us, mattered. We were meant to understand that it did.

OUTSIDE THE WINDOW of my study the land slopes down and gradually meets the woods beyond. The trees are blazing with that rampant color that shows itself in New England with such clarity, as if the bone branches waiting for a November sky are letting out a secret of some sort. The red, orange, and yellow are outlined against a sharp, unyielding blue. Everything seems contained in the stillness.

It was on a day like this a year ago when Manni Price came over with her nine-year-old daughter to talk about her husband. I knew Jim, shared an office with him at the university. I'd left full-time teaching to pursue independent research, but I still liked to give a course each term on my field studies in paleontology. Such a long time in the past it seems now, those classes, the conversations and intensity of exchanges the students so willingly gave. Yet it is all just a heartbeat away, if we take time out of the equation. If we learn how to do that.

Whitton Falls is a small town, not inclined to newcomers, as I learned when I arrived three years ago, but Jim welcomed me from the start. He and Manni had been among the first to do that. Unfortunately, I'd also had plenty of time to watch him smile a little too much at the co-eds who came in to see him in the office before and after the evening classes. He was forty-five, a hard year for men, or so I'm told.

And for Manni. She looked more anxious than usual that day. Her daughter Andrea sat quietly near the fireplace in the living room while we talked, occasionally glancing at her mother.

"He's gone again," Manni began.

I was making coffee, setting out the yellow cups on the table. I love the kitchen here, with its wide boards and the old black stove. At night under the lamp the wood has an amber glow, a softness. That day the sun fell across the white linen cloth I'd put on the table, and over the yellow cyclamen in the vase.

"You know he comes back," I told her, bringing in the coffee on a tray, with a glass of juice for Andrea. "You always take him in," I couldn't help adding.

She looked very frail, sitting there with a lost expression on her face. The story was her mantra, but somehow I couldn't dismiss her. Some kinds of love are a form of illness. I'd read

that somewhere, and once, maybe, I'd discovered for myself it was true. Manni seemed to be a woman who had nothing much to go on but her need for Jim. So their unhappy dance continued.

"It's not the same reason as it usually is. I'm sure of that!" As Manni spoke, I saw Andrea stare at her mother and then pick up my stoker and push it irritably into the logs that were burning low. Sparks fell over the grate and I got up and replaced the screen I'd moved aside when I lighted the fire. Andrea put the brass stoker back in its place.

"When he . . . decides to be away . . . he leaves me a note, telling me when he'll be back, when he has those . . . conferences to go to. I mean, that's what he always does. He's really careful about it. Now he's been gone a week, and there's no note. I searched everywhere! Something's happened to him, I just know it." She couldn't hold back the tears.

"That's ridiculous. The term's already started. Jim's handling late registration for the rest of us and that's too important to miss." I put my arm around her and her crying subsided. I poured us both some coffee.

"The college called today," she offered in a steadier voice. "They wanted to know where he was." Manni stared out the window. Gray clouds scudded across the sky in the sudden way the weather has of changing here. She rubbed her hand on her forehead, pushing back her long golden hair that always made me think of Rapunzel in the fairy tale. Her face crumpled.

"Jim's hurt somewhere. He's probably run off one of the back roads, or been attacked, or—"

"Manni!" I interrupted her. "You have a husband who does what he wants to do just about all of the time. Jim's not likely to get himself in any trouble. He likes things the way they are too much." I felt guilty about my last remark, but Manni didn't seem to really hear it. "Besides," I went on, "what could attack him out here? We're in Whitton Falls, which is hardly in the wilderness, remember."

Manni gave a half smile. "I'm, what is it, overreacting? Do you think so, Cate?"

I saw the pain in her eyes. Either way, she wouldn't win.

"Caitlin, Mom, she likes to be called Caitlin, not Cate," spoke up Andrea, exasperation in her voice. Manni looked hurt.

"Of course. How stupid of me. I remember you said that," she offered plaintively.

"It's fine. Everyone calls me Cate." Andrea puzzled me. She was a child who often acted a lot older than she was, and that didn't strike me as a good thing. "You'll see," I told Manni. "In a few hours, Jim will walk in the door just the way he usually does, as if he'd just been out raking

leaves. Go home. Relax. Maybe take a walk with Andrea, take her shopping.” I heard a groan of dismay from behind me.

“All right,” she said, standing up. “I should do something, you’re right. I just wish—well, thanks, Cate, I mean, Caitlin.”

“Try not to worry,” I told her as we went out onto the porch. It looked like rain for sure by then, coming in from the west. “Listen, when Jim gets back, plan on getting him to the fall dance on Saturday. Ethan is organizing it this time, said he was tired of Liam Hobb’s same old, same old. Last thing I’d expect him to be involved with, but there you go. He’s even got a fiddler coming down from upstate New York. Anyway, it should be a lot of old-time fun.”

“How is Ethan?” Manni asked. She tried to say it casually, but at least for a moment her interest in my love life got her thinking about something else besides her wayward husband. “Doesn’t his work sort of creep you out?”

“He’s a biologist, and deals in forensics. I knew that when I met him. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it.”

I watched the two of them go down the walk to their car. Andrea gave a quick jump and swung on the gate, for once acting like a child again. Then they were gone.

It was a trite explanation I’d given her for Jim’s absence, but it was one that made sense to me. There was no way for me to know anything else, no reason to think anything might be wrong. But everything I remember now returns in a new paradigm and I can’t shake the feeling that somehow I ought to have been more alert, should have paid more attention. Hindsight. The sense of time is so different, now.

Dusk was approaching and a thin tap of rain began on the windows. I had a lecture to prepare for a seminar that would give a summary of my research and present some of my early conclusions, but after working on it a couple of hours I gave up. I couldn’t focus. I left the papers scattered over the desk. For a while I sat with a second cup of coffee in front of the fire that had almost died out, thinking about things in general, but also about Ethan, thoughts of him invading the peace my house usually gave me. On impulse I wrote a list of words down in one of the notebooks I tend to leave lying around, just random words that came to mind. I have that notebook before me now, and the first two on the list are “desolate” and “stranger.” I wondered if that was what he and I were to each other—strangers. It was an odd, unbidden thought.

Feeling restless and unsettled, I went out for a drive along the south shore of Lake Hathorn, toward the center of town. Whitton Falls is just another one of the plethora of small towns in western Massachusetts. The university helps the local economy, bringing in an assortment of newcomers from September to May, people that the town ignores except for their spending habits. I'm a latecomer, though my parents came from here, before they eloped to the big city and left this all behind. I was born somewhere else, so I don't have the same legitimacy for the town residents that they had. Everyone remembers my grandmother, though, a woman I never met, who lived alone and grieving for her absent son for thirty years up in the old Brinkley place above Edmonton Road.

The rain had stopped and the sky was clear but there was a chill in the air. An early winter predicted, the farmers said, and they were usually right. The moon came up full that night, caressing the hills. As I passed the lake I could see the island in the center where old Charlie Simms lived, and Ed Rosen's oversized rowboat rocking against the pier, where a pile of boxes filled one corner. So quiet, this country. Even after several years, I couldn't get used to the quiet, but I liked it. Still do.

I suddenly noticed a series of bright areas shining above the lake, winking on and off. The impression was more like some emanation of light from another source, the way marsh gas rises, or as if something is being reflected. Near where Simms had grounded his own rowboat I saw it again. Charlie's lantern was visible in the window of his cabin. I glanced again at the water and the boat, but the lights were gone. I set it down to my imagination and forgot about it.

When I got back home the phone was ringing. The key stuck in the lock and I nearly broke it off in my hurry to get in. But it wasn't Ethan, and why did I hope it was? The idea bothered me. Instead of his formal tone, I heard the distinctive voice of Fiona Harris on the other end.

"Caitlin? Where have you been! I've been trying for ages. Did you forget to charge your cell phone again? Did you hear about the MacKenzies?" Fiona was the watchdog in town, a very elegant one. Everything that happened filtered through her as if she was some special receiving station. She had become a good friend from the start, one of the first townspeople, along with the Prices, to accept me right away—or adopt me is more like it. Fiona had the notion I needed looking after, which I didn't, but that wasn't going to stop her. She was old family, "ancestors in the woodwork," was how she explained it. Her friendship meant a lot to me.

“Caitlin,” she continued, not waiting for my answer, “I know it’s late, but can you come over? I want you to meet someone.”

“It’s going on ten,” I told her. “I have to be up early. I’d rather not if it can wait.”

“This isn’t a social call, darling,” she interrupted, “and you won’t be wasting your time,” she added in a mysterious voice. “Please?”

“Give me a half hour.” I sighed. I hated giving in, but sometimes it was harder to say no to Fiona, and most of the time it took less energy just to get it over with. I was pretty sure she knew that.

I had to pass the lake again as I headed toward her house. Clouds obscured the moonlight this time. Involuntarily I glanced over at Charlie’s island. There was nothing to see.

A few minutes later I swung into Fiona’s driveway. She was already waiting at the door, the porch light a soft glow. It was one of those prime Yankee clapboards with rooms that didn’t quite meet at right angles and slanted ceilings. Fiona kept it spotless, or rather her staff did, and the floors were original, their dark pine wood a burnished gold.

She led me into the kitchen, where a man stood leaning against the broad oak table she insisted on keeping there, despite the fact it filled half the room. He had wavy silver-gray hair and was slightly overweight, dressed in a dark blue suit set off by a bright yellow tie.

“I hated to drag you out, but Jeremy here has something so important to say and I told him you were just the one who’d know what to do!” With that, Fiona sat down and stared up at the two of us expectantly.

“I’m afraid Fiona, in her enthusiasm, has forgotten to introduce us,” he smiled engagingly, and held out his hand. “Jeremy Hawkins. I’m visiting from Chicago.” His eyes were a striking, vivid blue.

“Well?” Fiona said impatiently, looking up at him.

He began, rather hesitantly. “Actually I’m not really sure it matters very much, but when Fiona became so upset at the police station—”

“The police station!” I turned to look at her.

“I was there this afternoon trying to get Sheriff Tyler to set up lights on the south side of town. A person could drive into a ditch trying to navigate some of those back roads at night.”

“That’s right,” Hawkins said, “and Fiona kindly offered to help me in my search.”

“What search?” I asked, a little exasperated.

“The MacKenzies!” wailed Fiona, and she jumped up then and took a bottle of cognac from a cabinet, setting out glasses for us, chattering all the while. “When Jeremy told me his story, I had to help, and I knew you’d want to, as well. It’s Rob MacKenzie and his family.”

“Fiona, I have no idea what you’re talking about, remember?”

“They’ve gone missing. The whole family. They’ve vanished. From the face of the earth. Jeremy is a witness!” I caught the appealing look she gave to him as she handed each of us a drink.

“Witness isn’t quite the right word,” he offered. “You see, I had planned a stay with Rob. We met at a conference last June. He invited me up here to go over some of my collected data on the lives of Southern writers. We were both interested in how they seemed to use—”

“Jeremy!” Fiona’s tone stopped him. With an unassuming shrug he began again.

“We were both pretty much of the same mind and had gotten on rather well. It sounded like an excellent idea. But when I arrived today, they weren’t at home.” Hawkins shifted his position, leaning back against the high bench beneath the kitchen window.

“Vanished!” Fiona exclaimed again.

“I don’t know about that,” Hawkins replied quietly. “I went to the police station to check the address he’d given me, and so met Fiona.” He smiled. “She insisted we all go back to Rob’s house, but the police—your Sheriff Tyler—declined, so I went with her.”

“I don’t see why you wanted to tell me any of this,” I said to Fiona, puzzled. “I hardly know the MacKenzies.”

“You do!” she said. “Remember last winter, when I was renovating the downstairs here and they told me I could stay with them until the work was done? It was a disaster. Rob is the original Silas Marner. He’d as soon lose an arm as pay an electric bill. I know!” So she did, and had told me about it more than once, how they ate supper in candlelight and the cold room they’d put her in. A good blanket is all a healthy person needs to keep warm, Rob had told her when she complained about the temperature. Fiona was accustomed to a very different lifestyle. I had never understood why she chose the MacKenzies to stay with, in the first place.

“They probably went on vacation,” I told her, “and Rob just forgot, which doesn’t help you, Jeremy, of course.”

“He has the right address,” Fiona stated flatly, “and the house is unlocked.”

“Not many of us bother to lock up out here, you know that.”

“Their old dog Melvin was out in the yard when we went by,” Fiona went on, “and I stopped and we went in and there were plates on the table just as if they were ready for dinner, and potatoes half peeled in the sink. I took Melvin over to the Talliser farm. One more dog there won’t make any difference. They have six as it is.”

“Well,” I sighed, “what did Tyler say—or suggest?”

“He told us thanks, but not to worry,” she answered, disappointment in her voice.

“See? Sounds good to me. Fiona, if the sheriff isn’t concerned, why should you be? And at least Jeremy has had the benefit of your company to assist him. I’m sure you’ve already arranged accommodations for him.”

Fiona gave him the same appealing look.

“She did, indeed,” Hawkins said, “at a charming place called the Astor Inn, in a room on the second story that I won’t be able to find without a map. I’ve never seen so many little halls and crannies in one place.

“It is odd, though, you know,” he went on. “That is, this is a centennial year. Rob is principal advisor for a conference in Amherst, and he also wanted me to help set up the agenda. It’s only six weeks away, and there’s a lot to do. It does seem a strange time to take a vacation.” His voice had a quiet, rolling rhythm. Fiona had a penchant for strays and soft-spoken men.

“Don’t you see?” Fiona stopped at the sound of the phone ringing. She went into the living room and we followed her. She picked up the receiver and listened a moment and let out a faint cry of surprise. “Where?” she asked the caller, looking at us intently. She put the phone down, her expression both dramatic and worried.

“Sheriff Tyler just found Rob MacKenzie’s car. On the south road, near the lake. Didn’t I tell you how bad it is over there? Charlie Simms called it in. It seems he found the car when he came across to get some supplies he’d left on the main pier. Only no one is inside. The sheriff wants us to go over there,” she said, hopefully.

“Us?” I said.

The living room was in semi-darkness, only firelight casting shadows on the curtains that were blowing in the night wind. I walked over and closed the window. The fire burned more steadily then.

“If he wants to see us, perhaps we should go,” observed Jeremy, getting up from the sofa where he had just sat down.

“I’ll leave it to the both of you,” I said quickly. I still didn’t know why Fiona had wanted me there in the first place. There was nothing I knew, or for that matter wanted to know, about what the MacKenzie family was up to.

“No!” she said loudly. “I mean,” Fiona went on, in a more pleading voice, “come with us. You’re always so calm about things, and you know me and my imagination.”

I realized with some surprise that Fiona was afraid. It was a side of her I’d never seen before. Apparently Jeremy wasn’t enough. Despite the feeling I was wasting time, I nodded.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said.

She turned her head away, but not before I could see the relief in her eyes.

During the ride, she hardly spoke. Hawkins was lost in his thoughts as well. Since we’d taken my car, I just watched the road, wondering with vague curiosity what had really happened to the MacKenzies. The weariness hit me, born out of the hour but also out of the sense I had that the whole day had been confusing, that things weren’t as clear as they should be. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was out of sync.

Even now, the shapes surround and press against memory. A history lesson, only the history is mine now as well as everyone else’s. We were all part of the same thing, and I knew during that ride that I couldn’t get off the hook. Maybe, in the end, I didn’t really want to, or else everything would have been so different. For a long time I couldn’t find the frame of it, or forget what had been, or move on.

The flashing lights of the sheriff’s car appeared ahead of us as I turned the curve of the road near the main pier. Fiona leaned forward, her hand on the door. In the glare of a spotlight I could see an old green ’99 Chevy half-buried in the ditch on the right. It looked as if it had just skated into the hole, still upright. Tyler’s deputy, Tommy Hastings, was waving a flashlight in the bushes and Tyler himself was leaning over checking the tires.

“Hey, Cate, where’d you come from?” Tyler stood up as I approached him and gave me a grin. “Shouldn’t ask that. You’re a friend of Fiona’s. Wager the whole town could be on its way out here by now.” I liked him. He was a country officer, used to broken fences and petty theft and an occasional drowning, but I was pretty sure he could handle tougher situations if he had to. Tyler had that confidence some people seem to come by naturally, so they don’t have to spend any time proving it to you.

“So what does it look like?” I asked him, moving closer to get a better look at the car. Fiona and Hawkins had gone over to talk with the deputy.

“Got me. It’s Rob’s car, all right. No sign of anyone. Tommy’s been all over the place and found not so much as a new broken branch. Only thing is this.” He gestured toward the tires but I couldn’t see anything unusual, except that the tread was worn in places, which happens fast out here. The sheriff bent down and drew his hand over the rubber. He held it up to me. It was covered with a greasy film of oil.

“There’s a ten-yard slick of oil on the road behind me.” He pointed to an area surrounded by reflective cones.

“They must have hit it and gone out of control,” Hawkins said, joining us and hearing the last comment.

The sheriff’s face was a study in tolerance. “Had the same thought myself,” he said. “Thing is, no reason for oil to be there. Nice round slick like that, in the middle of nowhere. Not a drop anywhere else, either.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Fiona walking around the car, stepping in the ditch and peering in through the windows. I was pretty sure she was out of bounds.

“We’ve been calling the farms hereabouts,” Tyler continued on, “but nobody’s been asking for help. My guess is they got mixed up in the dark when the car hit the ditch and probably walked off in the wrong direction instead of heading back into town. If anyone’s hurt, it could be slowing them down, or it could be they’re not able to leave them alone. Those kids of theirs are all under ten. It’s easy to get lost in these woods.”

“Where is Charlie?” I asked.

The sheriff took off his hat and wiped his arm across his forehead. In the dark, his face reflected the red and white glare of the signal lights on his car.

“You know Charlie. Five words a year is too many for him. He went back to the island in his rowboat as soon as I finished questioning him. Didn’t see anything but the car.”

“It’s horrible,” whispered Fiona. I nearly jumped. I hadn’t heard her approach.

“Don’t do that!” I said to her.

“I wouldn’t worry if I were you,” Tyler went on. “They’ll turn up or we’ll find them, one or the other. Wouldn’t have brought you and Mr. Hawkins here out at all, Fiona, but you were at the

station this morning. Thought you'd want to see this for yourself. I'll let you all know when they're back."

Tommy came up and nodded a greeting.

"Sheriff, I don't want what I said before put in the report. I mean, it was just my imagination, right?"

"What was?" I asked, curious.

Tyler sighed. "Tommy here thought he heard voices when he found the car."

"Crazy, huh? I thought at first that maybe the family was nearby, stuck or something, but they were laughing. I mean, that's what it sounded like. But it's like I said, I must've imagined it."

Tyler agreed. "Can't see any reason to add it in. We need facts, not speculations."

I thanked the sheriff and went back to my car, with Fiona and Hawkins close behind.

"What about their cell phone? Can't we reach them on that?" I wondered out loud. I hadn't thought of it when the sheriff was talking.

"Rob? Not on your life," Fiona said. "He refused to own anything that had electromagnetic waves. When I stayed there it was like being back in the Dark Ages. Why, they didn't even own a television set."

"Yes," Hawkins said, "we had a few discussions about that. He was very adamant that any old or new technology was going to destroy the world in our lifetime, and he insisted we communicate only by regular mail. He wouldn't even fax his outline to me. A strong-willed man."

"A stubborn miser," Fiona said. "I wouldn't want him hurt, just the same," she added, for good measure.

"We're all tired," I said to her, as I drove back along the lake road. "I'm sure Sheriff Tyler is right. It'll all get straightened out in the morning." As I spoke she glanced at me quickly from the passenger side. I thought she wanted to say something, but instead she sank back into the seat and stared into the darkness.

Hawkins said goodbye and drove off in his rental as soon as we reached Fiona's house. I felt uneasy leaving her by herself.

"It's all right. It's not me we have to worry about," she said, as she waved goodbye.

I drove home slowly. Fiona was right, the south road needed some kind of lighting—headlights weren't enough. It was pitch dark and the curves were hard to see even with the high beams. I passed the area they had roped off with yellow tape and the cones and a warning sign where the car was. It struck me that I ought to have seen the car in the ditch earlier that night when I drove past, but I'd been focused on the pier and the odd lights and missed it entirely. There'd been no oil slick, though, of that much I was sure.

It was past midnight when I reached home. Even though I had the early-morning class, I couldn't get to sleep right away. The day's events kept crowding in on my mind. Finally I threw pillows on the floor in front of the fireplace and lay down, sinking into a restless sleep just before dawn.

The next day I heard nothing more. I wanted to call Fiona and Tyler, but I had my seminar to run. It wasn't until half past four I had the chance at last. There was no answer at Fiona's. After three attempts and leaving three messages I gave up and called the sheriff instead, just to check in.

"Hey, Cate, thought I'd hear from you before this," he said. "We seem to have a problem after all."

"No sign of the MacKenzies?" I asked him.

I felt his hesitation.

"Sheriff?"

"I sent Tommy out there again early this morning to oversee the cleanup, make sure all the protocol was followed. He was going to tow the car in himself. Seems it's not there. More than that, there's no sign of any other vehicle that might have come and hitched it up. No tire marks in the oil. For that matter, no oil slick at all. And the warning sign we put up last night is gone, too."

"Maybe MacKenzie was there himself?" I suggested. "Got help from someone?"

"Might be. Strange way to do it, though, you ask me. Somehow I don't think MacKenzie came back. Well, I haven't been able to reach Mrs. Harris. Let her know if you see her before I do. Oh, and that Hawkins guy called in, too, to see if they'd returned. Had to tell him no. Yeah, it's a strange situation, no doubt of that. Could be someone's idea of a prank."

"Twisted humor if it is. I'll keep in touch," I told him.

THE VISITORS

PROLOGUE

The habitable zone for life on planets outside our solar system is determined by our scientists to require 1) an ecosphere, 2) a liquid water belt, and 3) what is termed a Goldilocks zone, which means the planet holds the possibility of life that is just right as we know it. On November 4, 2013, astronomers stated that there could be as many as 40 billion planets similar to Earth in the Milky Way and 11 billion of those could be circling stars like our sun. One of these planets is named 55 Cancri e, which orbits the star Cancri A, 41 light years away from us.

The residents of this planet are therefore able to adjust fairly rapidly to Earth's atmosphere and gravity. I know this because I encountered them on a soft summer's night in the small town where I live. Aliens visit small towns or deserts because they are not interested in witnesses. More than that, as the visitors I encountered told me, not all aliens want to come here. It is just that some have to.

And others are waiting for the chance.

Chapter 1

The Road

Fog wove through the foothills in the summer night. A flock of geese rose up in sudden dark formation, sweeping past under a three-quarter moon and disappearing. Far in the distance a coyote let out a wild cry. A car heading east was moving too fast along the wide lane that cut through an apple orchard. Then it, too, vanished out of sight. It was after midnight and I was sitting in a field watching the Perseid meteor shower, counting at least sixty meteors flashing down to earth in the space of an hour. I'd brought a blanket with me and a nice bottle of pinot noir and a crystal wine glass to mark the occasion. I never missed a show from the universe if I could help it.

I was about to pour a second glass of wine, when I felt a series of vibrations begin and escalate into a high frequency humming. Seconds later I was pushed to the ground by the pressure of a weight that had no source, for there was nothing around me but the field and the

night sky with its shooting stars. I tried to get up but I couldn't move. It was then I saw the thing on the road, so massive and radiating an intense light. I saw figures emerge from it and walk toward me, dark silhouettes, each with a glittering center. The pressure increased until I almost blacked out.

As suddenly as it had appeared, it was all gone and I was sitting alone, still holding the crystal glass, the bottle in my hand.

Had I dreamed it? No. What I saw had been at least sixty feet long, and so high and wide it blocked the orchard on the other side. I had no doubt of this. The sense I had was that for some unknown reason I had been scanned and passed over and that was why the thing had left. Questions raced through my mind but I didn't want answers. I felt a strange detachment, no emotion. I didn't scream or run. I knew, in a rational way, that I was in shock, but it didn't seem to matter. With slow and careful motions I packed away the wine and glass, taking care to ensure the crystal was safely wrapped in the blanket, and placed everything on the passenger seat of my truck.

I got in the driver's side and started the car and made a U-turn—and stopped. My mind shouted warnings and the adrenaline was so high I really could pass out, I thought. But I had the sudden, insane desire to know if there were traces of what I had seen on the road. I wanted evidence that would convince me it had been real. Or not.

Later, when I brought the sheriff out there with me, I wanted him to take samples from the road's surface, in spite of his put-downs about my crazy story. By then he'd had six other reports a lot like mine. Only he didn't believe any of them. I should have taken a sample myself. I had touched the space, felt the connection, even though standing out on the road alone I had been terrified. Until that night I had never known real fear, how paralyzing it can be, or how long it can last.

Days later I would come across reports from a town called Levelland in Texas that sounded close enough to what I had seen to get me thinking I should go down there and talk to people. But the incident had happened back in the 1950s. Here it was almost sixty years later. There was no one left who actually saw the thing show up, even though to this day it is considered one of the most authentic UFO sightings to have ever occurred. What if I had experienced such a sighting?

I stood by the truck awhile. I could see where I had been in the field, just forty feet away. Close enough to identify objects. The air was warm. The meteors continued to fall, their paths lighting up the night sky like fireflies in a darkened meadow. I caught the scent of freesia and wild lavender.

I took a step toward the center of the road and saw nothing, just the rough black surface of the two-lane highway. No cars had come by for a long time but that wasn't unusual, given how isolated the place was. I took another step and hesitated. I should go for help, I thought, get someone to see this with me. But by the time I got back all traces would be gone, if there were any. I was sure of that. Even now I don't know where the will came from to put my hand down and touch the ground, as if I was doing the most ordinary thing. It was warm, but it would be, holding heat from the day, which had been in the high nineties. It was also soft, not like melted tar, but like a piece of velvet is soft.

I sat back on my heels, wondering what that meant, frustrated by what had happened and by having no way to explain it to myself, much less to anyone else, though I knew I would have to try.

"So what now?" I asked out loud, standing up, overwhelmed by the weirdness of it, and willing to assume I had seen nothing after all, no matter how much I was sure I had.

As if in answer I heard again the high-pitched humming, this time echoed in the sound of chimes so close the vibration went right through me. There was a flash of light. Once more I had the sensation of being scanned. I heard a massive cracking sound like a rock splitting in two. Then it all ended. The night was silent, only the hoot of an owl from the woods behind me.

I backed away toward the truck. This time when I got in all I wanted to do was drive away. I saw the road behind me in the rearview mirror and the Perseid meteors flaming toward Earth.

Chapter 2

Not On My Watch

"You, too, Jen? Must be some party."

"You said you had reports from six other people, and they were nowhere near each other. Not likely there's a party covering ten square miles, is there?"

We called Sheriff Taverson the roadblock, and not behind his back, either. We could count on him to stall anything he didn't feel like pursuing, and claims of seeing unidentified objects topped his list. "They describe this part of the world as a hot spot, ever hear that?" he was fond of saying. "Lots of mysterious things happen in upstate New York, according to those journalists who come up here and wander around and anyone else who wants to interfere. I consider it my civic duty to shut down false rumors." He did that at every opportunity, and not just for strange objects in the sky. He also had a low tolerance for being called out anywhere after six in the evening, which meant people dared to ask for help only if their lives were in danger. It was a safe bet no one called him at all.

The fact he was my uncle didn't give me any leverage. Even as I explained what I had seen, I could hear the tentative way I was doing it, the tone of voice I was using. I didn't sound convincing. No wonder, since I was having a hard time convincing myself. When he agreed at last to go look at the road he said I had to go, too, and fear washed through me. He wasn't going out there without me, he said.

On the way in his police car I asked him about the other reports.

"Same as yours, more's the pain of it."

"Doesn't that suggest something to you? I mean, we can't all be making it up, Faris!"

"I like Uncle Faris better, but I know that's a lost cause. Just remember to call me sheriff if anyone else is in hearing distance. To answer your question, it did suggest something. For your information, I called over at the Stewart Air National Guard Base in Newburgh. The airport's right next door to them, so they monitor things going on in the sky, right? Last night nothing was going on except that light show from outer space, so it seems to me all of you just got excited and filled yourselves with movie scenes to spice things up."

"That's ridiculous!" I almost sputtered as I said the words. I wanted to tell him he couldn't believe what he was saying, but I knew he did. His outlook had more to do with wanting to wrap up a story that bored him. Faris Taverson had interest in only three things: my Aunt Ella's health and well-being (to his credit), golf all day on Sundays and on Thursday mornings (no crime was allowed to occur during either occasion), and his six o'clock beer with his best friend Thomas at the local tavern. Law enforcement was never really on the list, but given he was the only person who signed up to be sheriff, he got the part.

A few people were standing around when we arrived, but not on the road. They looked expectant and it was no wonder, given my uncle hadn't hesitated to turn on the lights and siren when we were just a mile away. I saw Samantha Gallagher, reporter for the regional gazette, her daughter Lily who was fourteen and almost as tall as her mother, my Aunt Winifred and her new husband Ian who she'd met in Scotland and was some kind of scientist, and three teenagers, all boys, who looked like trouble to me. I suspected they were more interested in Lily than UFOs, though maybe I was wrong, for they looked excited to see the sheriff show up.

Samantha ran up to me, Lily in tow. "Well, star of the hour, or one of seven stars, I should say. Seen any unidentified flying objects lately, Jen?" She had a nice laugh but I'd known her since high school. I wasn't fooled.

"No," I said. She had her pen to paper, or rather thumb to her iPhone, and looked up in dismay.

"But I heard—"

"I saw an unidentified object on the road right here last night. Nothing flying around about it."

"Ah, yes. Always the perfectionist. We'll call it a UO, then, how's that." She laughed at her own joke. "Now, what did this whatever you saw look like?"

"I have to talk to the sheriff." I smiled at her and walked away.

"This about the place it landed, Jen?" My uncle was standing on the road exactly in line with the boulder I'd described to him. He was trying hard not to smile.

I nodded. The sun was already high and it was clear there was nothing to see, just the black two-lane highway going off into the distance until it converged at a point near the foothills. He made a concession to me by reaching down and running his hand over the surface, and he even looked at his palm, as if some residue might be there, but there wasn't anything. He stood up and did a 360-degree survey: mountains, apple orchard, woods, field.

"Doesn't look too worrisome to me. Sorry."

I think he was, too. Not that he wanted a UFO mystery in his back yard, but he did care about me and wouldn't have minded finding some other explanation that at least proved something had gone on, even if it was totally terrestrial in nature. A party would work for him.

"Maybe it was one of those meteors crashing down," he added.

"The Perseids are small ones. They burn up long before they touch earth."

He saw Samantha and Lily and went over to them. “Now aren’t you the eager one, Sam. I hate to tell you this, but there’s nothing to report. Clean as a whistle, no sign of strange stuff hovering around—that’s what they do, hover, right? So just take yourself off and find another story.”

“People have a right to the news.” Samantha tossed her long auburn hair, of which I was dearly envious, and texted something. “We can go straight to print this way,” she told him with no little satisfaction.

“Why not? Why bother to revise, or fix your spelling, which even I know could use some help. Bye-bye, now,” he said, pointing at her car. It was familiar to everyone, a bright, almost neon blue in a town that tended toward dark colors for automobiles. Her phone case matched the car.

“Sheriff Taverson?” It was Ian calling to him, well-trained in how to address his brother-in-law in public. With a sigh my uncle went over to where he was standing on the other side of the road and so did I.

“It’s something you should see. That is, you might find it useful?” Ian was very polite, and with his accent almost unintelligible to most of us, except for my aunt. He pointed to a spot in front of an apple tree just where the wide grassy path began to cut through the orchard. Tire tracks were visible, but he was studying something else.

I wondered I hadn’t seen it myself. There was a depression in the earth, less than a foot off the shoulder, coated with a kind of phosphorescent white dust. It was really a small crater, at least two feet deep, with sides that were perfectly curved. The radius was at least six feet.

“Must be some boulder was there that got dislodged,” my uncle said, “like those,” gesturing to the field. “Or maybe it’s left over from fireworks, kids coming out on the Fourth, like those boys over there.” I heard the exasperation in his voice. From his point of view, he was wasting his time.

“I don’t think so,” Ian persisted. “I’ve seen this before over on the western shores where I come from. I’ve some knowledge of it.” What he actually said, its lilt sounding like poetry, was “Ah dinnae hink sae. Ah hae seen thes affair ower oan th’ western shair whaur ah come frae. Ah hae some knowledge ay it.”

My uncle paused a while before absorbing this and answering.

“So what do you think it is?”

“It reminds me of a potter’s kiln,” Ian said.

“Pottery? What’s that got to do with it?”

Ian held out his hand. In it was a small portion of the white substance. “This powder resembles bone ash, which has around 42% phosphorus pentoxide, 55% calcium oxide, and close to 2% water. Of course you’d have to test it, but that’s what this looks like.” Ian glanced at the sheriff and saw his expression and started to speak more rapidly, which didn’t help things as much as he might have hoped. “Technically, it has a really high tolerance for heat, so it keeps the shape of whatever is being made even in extremely high temperatures. Bone ash also sticks to metal, and gives some protection against corrosion.”

“You’re testing me, aren’t you?” My uncle was rubbing his hands together, what he did when he was beginning to feel really irritated. I doubted he’d taken it all in.

“No, no. What I should have said first is that bone ash is made of phosphate and that’s what’s used, ah, in the production of bone china, gives it its translucent quality. Where I lived there’s a well-known cottage industry that makes unique patterns for bone china plates. They sell those all over the world, in discrete quantities.”

“And why exactly would we have bone ash on the side of the road here in Northfield?”

Ian brushed the substance off his hands and shook his head. “If that’s what it is, I have no idea. The only strange thing is that this powder doesn’t burn to the touch. It ought to,” he added.

“You ask me, it could be proof of what I saw last night,” I said.

“Not asking, am I,” my uncle said to me, “but I’ll get it tested because you’ll be on my back if I don’t. And when we find out it’s guano you can let it go.”

“Actually guano has a lot of phosphate in it, too, that’s true,” Ian offered.

“There, see?”

“So we’ve suddenly have an influx of seagulls even though we’re two hundred miles from the coast of anything, all of them congregating around the side of the road here?” I was getting irritated myself. What Ian had found was important, it seemed to me, and not for the birds.

I turned my head at a clicking sound behind me and saw Samantha tapping furiously into her phone. Great, I thought, all speculation open to the town and beyond. My uncle saw her, too, and called out “Sam, if you print any of that, you’ll have me to deal with.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Nope. It’s a promise.”

He went over to his patrol car and retrieved an evidence bag and a small wooden spatula. Coming back to the apple tree, my uncle bent down and took a sample of the white powder and then took a photo of it with his cell phone, which was an old flip-top. We didn't go in for strenuous CSI in our region. Not to mention he wouldn't have done even that much if I hadn't been there, albeit at his own insistence.

It struck me that I hadn't felt any of the unsettled reaction I'd expected on the way out to the site. Instead, I felt energized, and curious.

"When will you get results?"

"It goes over to New Paltz. I don't know how long the lab takes. We haven't had much to do with each other."

I'd have to keep watch, stay close to him until something showed up, by fax or in person. What I didn't expect, what none of us expected, was that Samantha's story for the gazette would never appear, with or without my uncle's approval.

Chapter 3

Stranger in Our Midst

Self-doubt is a killer. I didn't sleep well that night, and not just because it was humid and uncomfortable. When we experience something we don't understand, it's natural to try to explain it. Those movies where the main character goes down the steps into a dark basement or approaches the abandoned shed in the woods or goes looking to see where strange sounds are coming from in the middle of the night—that's not what we do, no way. We hesitate, think about it, decide whether we feel like taking the risk. Or better, we don't ever get into those situations. Unless there's no choice. At least, not a choice we understand.

At three in the morning I was wide awake. A dream lingered in my mind. I have always lived with my paternal grandparents, my mother having abandoned me when I was born. That had never mattered, for my dad and my extended family of aunts and uncles had loved me, and my grandparents had adored me. I was a happy child. The dream seemed a symbol of that, somehow, yet so much of it was unfamiliar. In it, I was young child on a path that rolled in

unending waves across a green land. There were people nearby who loved me, yet were allowing me to explore at will. Light came from a source I couldn't identify, though the sky overhead seemed closer to me than usual, its color a pale mauve. All the colors around me were brighter than usual, too, the flowers brilliant, the trees dark and vivid. There were cottages on my left made of stone, their entrances wound with pale roses, though they were more on the periphery. I ran along the path and my feet hardly touched the ground. I felt absolute, unconditional joy.

The window rattled as a gust of high wind shook against it. I got up and watched the trees along the edge of the field out back bending and swaying.

It had been three years since I'd come back home from the city where my job in investments had been lucrative and soul-draining. When I left the money game I took my savings with me, but they didn't last very long. So the work I wanted to do I developed into a business I loved, being a virtual travel agent.

I'd rented an office on the main street in Northfield, a room on the second floor of an old building, right above a barista-style coffee shop. The walls were white, the rug a uniform dark blue, but I hung photos I'd taken in different travel spots I'd gone to that were also on my website, and a few posters. My specialty was ancient monuments, and I gave guided tours using webcams that were already set up around the world. I hadn't advertised at all. Word of mouth had made it all happen—Journeys Into The Past was a success. And my hours were my own.

But dealing with the unknown was another story altogether. As the wind outside lessened and the white light of dawn showed on the horizon, I knew I had witnessed something very real out in that field. Whether I would ever know what it was, that was a different matter.

It was obvious I wasn't going to sleep anymore. I went into the kitchen and made coffee and decided I might as well go to the office early. After a quick shower I put on a sleeveless dress Ella had made for me, a teal cotton with indigo trim that I loved, and headed out.

It was late afternoon before I managed to finish adding unique touches to a virtual tour set in the far north of Scotland, one of the most favored by travelers—the Orkneys have monoliths and markers from 6,000 years ago and even older and amazing webcams for certain times of the year. My own marker was drawing me in now, too, as if my experience in the field had a magnetic pull. I wanted to verify the truth, and I knew what I wanted the truth to be, of what I had seen, even though the fear was as strong as the desire to know.

I heard a heavy step on the stairway leading up from the street entrance. No one came up, as a rule, everything being so easy for me to do by iPhone or Skype or even a landline, which I used for emergencies. The man who arrived in my doorway was wearing a yellow windbreaker and a blue shirt. His hair was a copper color, his eyes a deep green. He was enormous, at least six feet five, with the build of a football player. Only, he wasn't. He was the town mayor.

"Jared?"

"Surprised to see me? Wouldn't have come if I could have avoided it."

We had history. Or rather, he had history with me, since he saw me as the reason his wife left him. Miranda had been a close friend since childhood and I'd listened to her tell me the problems in her marriage. Jared had violent tendencies. I told her to get out. He blamed me, not himself.

It had all been a long time ago, though as I had discovered, some people feed on things and never try to find another way to look at what's going on. It can clear your head, being out in the world, though as fate would have it, you find out nothing is as clear as you thought it ought to be. So when you go back home, sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. Still, life is a gift. My dad had always believed that, and passed on the information to his daughter. For me, returning to Northfield had been just right.

"Is there something you want? The next election is coming up soon, is that it? I'm voting for Sheriff Taverson as mayor."

"He's not on the ballot for that."

"I'm making it a write-in."

"You always were a piece of work," he said.

I wondered if he ever had a moment of introspection. "Right, that's me. I'm busy here. What is it you're after?"

"You made a report, some nutso story about aliens landing out on the highway. I represent the people and you're scaring them."

I would have stood up to say my piece, but I was five foot five and it would not have been in my favor. I let my tone of voice answer for me.

"The people you represent never got to vote for you, remember? It got decided by the judge over in Danforth when he was assigned to us on rotation. Sticky votes, I call them. Why don't you talk to Samantha, instead of me? She's the one writing it up for all and sundry to read."

“You shouldn’t have said anything. This is my town and I’m telling you to shut it.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I meant no ill will. He was oblivious to that, however.

“Wait and see,” was all he said and he went down the stairway fast, making the floor shake more than a little.

A tapping sound made me glance out the window. It had started raining. I went over and watched the street awhile, and saw the mist obscuring the mountains in the distance.

“I hope I am not interrupting. Well, I can see I am, but I believe you are the only one who can help me.”

I spun around, startled. A man too thin for his own good stood in the room. I hadn’t heard anyone come up or walk in.

“No, I am not a walk-in. Those are something your people experience, not us. It is really just a dimensional shift for you.”

“What is?”

“Walk-ins. That is what you were thinking about. I can read minds, you see.” He was working his hands in a complex way that made me think of sign language.

He was also making no sense. He looked ordinary enough, though he needed a haircut and his pale blue sweatshirt was worn. I’d never seen him in town, but I didn’t see all that many people on a daily basis.

“Who are you?” He seemed harmless, but I was ready to react if his behavior changed. “What do you want?”

“This will not do for us. Please. You have no reason to be concerned. If you will come with me.”

To my surprise he stepped toward me and pulled at my arm.

“I don’t think so!” I started to resist and opened my mouth to yell at him, but that was as far as I got.

The next thing I knew I was standing outside a house east of town with no idea how I had arrived there. It was dusk. The house was familiar. Someone was on the porch with a drink in hand.

“Where the devil’d you come from, Jen? Scared the wits out of me. Like you fell out of the sky!”

In the dim light from a lamp on the porch I could see it was Rob McCord, a former international photojournalist I'd met in town. It was Rob who had told me about all the webcams I could access around the world.

"I don't know." The fact chilled me deep inside. The last thing I remembered was a stranger grabbing at my arm. "What day is it?"

"Now, I know you haven't been drinking. That's not your style. If this is a quiz, I'll play along. Why don't you come up here and sit awhile with me? It's Thursday, by the way, August 16. That help?" I heard him chuckle.

Full dark had come but the stone path to his porch was lighted with small lanterns. I didn't know what I wanted, but it wasn't to be alone, not just then.

SELA

BOOK 1: THE ABYSS

Now

I HAVE A CANDLE IN the window, in the center of the sill, so the drafts won't blow it out. Outside, a street lamp casts amber light on the ground and the snow that is falling glitters.

I belong somewhere else now. It has been the connection to my grandmother, to her voice and to what she had to tell me, that has held me close, stopped all other ambition. Only now do I understand what I wanted—I wanted to resolve things for her, to gather all the lives she had known together into one place, to reassure her it was done, that she had finished the course that had driven her so long and brought with it such fierce loss.

“What do you think, child, that I was afraid?” she said to me once. “Maybe I was. Fear can bring with it a great uncertainty that is hard to live with, and sometimes—perhaps often—the will to destroy. I know this and I can't forget it and yet your mother wonders why I walk at night in the hallways of this house or go outside into the garden. Too many memories.”

“How can I help?” I was so anxious to make it better for her.

“There's no help you can give.” But she said it gently, and in her voice I heard the lilting rhythms come, the voice she used only when my mother was gone from the house, and I would know the stories were already a presence in the room. We had done this for a long time. If it happened that she finished the cycle that night, she would return to the beginning, or what I called the beginning. For her they were all the same, all at once. Of course, she was right.

“I will tell you about Sela,” she would say. “It was my name in the time before. That was when the stars fell, and so did I. Were it not for Randall, I'm not entirely sure what would have become of me. Perhaps I would have entered their world after all.”

“Whose world?” I asked her, but she had already gone back to her sewing and said nothing for a while. I waited, knowing more would come.

“So many worlds waited for me to find them. In the end, I knew only one was possible. We are all allotted a version of ourselves to keep, so here I am. Of course, it is a very good thing I chose so well,” she said, “for now I am able to tell you the stories, to have you here with me, dear one.”

Often I think I am not creating any new memories, that I am simply living out the old ones,

hers and mine, that they are what hold me. Yet I know more awaits, in time.

I remember how my grandmother would lay her sewing on her lap and lean forward into the cone of light cast by the lamp. She would look at me and smile, and then begin the first words of the first story again.

Sometimes it would be raining outside, the wind driving the rain against the glass. Sometimes it would be winter like now, the snow coming down in a silent dance. And in summer sometimes she would have me open the doors to the garden so we could listen to the birds at dusk singing their last songs before night, and a soft wind would bend the white narcissus and star lilies, and we would see them both later on, luminous in the moonlight.

Beginnings

THE SHIP MOVED SLOWLY PAST the orphan and she watched the dust storms roll over the barren landscape. She'd been so sure about what they would find, had persuaded the team, insisted she was right. But she had failed.

A single road snaked across the surface of a world they couldn't access. She wanted to slam her hands against the viewer in frustration, but that wouldn't do. *Containment, love, is the secret*, Randall had told her. *Let them see only what you want them to see—nothing extra.*

Such a good friend to her. Dying so quickly, ravaged in days by the contamination. He kept a smile to the end and she wondered how he could do that and asked him. *Oh, Sela, serious Sela—this is only a part of me, not all of it. I'm about to see so much more, don't you know?* It would be their last conversation. She didn't have his faith, but she welcomed the solace it gave to him, for in the end, in the last hour, even while unconscious, the disease sent his body into convulsions. The pain level was so high it kept his face contorted. She'd seen the scars formed where the skin had split.

"Can't you help him?" she asked the doctors. They felt insulted, and after that refused to tell her anything at all. She was not family, they said. But Randall had no family, all of them lost to the same disease, a genetic aberration no one could control.

"You lived your whole life expecting this," she said to him in his hospital room, his body twitching and jerking under the influence of both the disease and the drugs. "I still don't understand how you could do that," she whispered.

What had made her remember him now? Yes. It was because she was so angry. He had cautioned her. He had spent so much time explaining why she had to be careful, to reveal nothing. *Calinar is your reality. Only you and I know this.* Now she held the knowledge alone, and what was she supposed to do with it? She hadn't entirely known what he meant. What did it matter anymore?

The warning whistle cut through her thoughts, the third and last signal. She forced herself to look at the planet below, a perfect circle of a world abandoned long before her own birth. Anton was beginning his work. He was assigned as the annihilator, after all, erasing that world on his monitor, brushing it into nothing. She watched the star field emerge more and more with every

second. Remote extinction—no one better at it. A minute later the planet was gone, not even an echo shadow left. That was how good he was. So why did she want to scream?

There was nothing more to see. Like a child's toy, removed from sight. It was mine for only seven hours, Sela thought. They should have given me more time.

"Ren is asking for you." Harry, her commander's aide, stood in the open doorway to her quarters, his hands behind his back, attentive, waiting.

"Asking?"

"He's suggesting you join him and the others immediately."

"I'll bet he is. I'll be there soon."

Harry stayed where he was.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she said. "All right. Lead the way."

The amber light of the corridor soothed her somewhat, as it always did. Compliance filters, altering her emotions whether she liked it or not. Ren thought of everything. He always had.

Almost everything, Sela thought. He did not know what or how well she'd learned from Randall. He had no idea. So far. Sela had vowed to keep it that way. So she would, for Randall's sake. She had promised him.

"Ah, there you are. You've kept us waiting." Ren spoke in his slow and measured way, his chair elevated just the slightest above the others in his public chambers. Around them floor to ceiling were viewers into the universe beyond.

"I was immersed in watching Anton's work," she said.

"Yes, our manipulator is a master, isn't he? He believes in his process."

She sensed what would come next.

"I am not so sure about you, my dear."

She didn't hesitate. "Then I must convince you."

"My very thought. We have made a decision." He gestured to the Council members who sprawled in chairs scattered about the room. The illusion of spontaneity—as if they had not voted and legislated every word hours before. She knew none of them would be her advocate.

"I think we need to test your expert skills elsewhere. What do you say?" He turned away from her, focusing on the Council. His red hair curled over his shoulders. For most women, it was his best trait and he made full use of the fact. But his eyes were a cold, deep-sea blue.

You have no heart, Ren, she said silently.

His head swung around and he stared at her. Quickly she replaced the words with others in her mind, the syllables similar, but the words harmless. It was a rare carelessness on her part to forget how well he read her mind.

His expression cleared. "Let's continue, shall we? Connor, tell our little explorer here what we've discovered and why we need her gracious assistance."

One of the Council stood up reluctantly. He was the youngest. She knew why Ren had chosen him. It was a test for the boy. If he did well, he might be part of the Council for a lifetime, free of all the journeying, of all the danger, never touched by any of it. Free, also, to decide her fate and that of everyone else.

"Well, it's this way. That is—I mean—we—" Connor stopped, stressed and uncertain.

Ren's stillness was like a creature in the room. Sela almost felt sorry for the boy.

Connor tried again, looking at her and not at the others. He seemed to find himself, his own rhythm and intent. His expression changed, a faint look of impatience crossing his face for an instant, but when he spoke to her, he kept his features blank, and said the words with quiet command. It would make Ren happy.

"You made a good case for this expedition. Even though nothing resulted on this particular planet, we know the anomalies exist. We need to find them, and soon. We want you to try again. We want the anomaly that is owned by Margate."

"Margate was cleaned, shut down, erased." Sela allowed her surprise to show.

"Recent signals suggest otherwise," Connor said

Sela was stunned. "What? Are you sure?" she asked, too quickly. Check her enthusiasm, she reminded herself. Too late, she saw Ren smiling.

"You'll have to trust me. That is," Connor corrected, "it is still information only the Council is privy to knowing. So what is your decision?"

She knew the question was meaningless. No one made decisions in Ren's world but Ren, not even his protégés.

"Do I have a choice?" she asked the boy sweetly.

"The Feeder—the anomaly—is there, despite the failure of two expeditions to find it," said Ren, aggravated by her response.

"And their failure to return," added Connor, bowing slightly in Ren's direction.

"Perhaps they did find it, and decided to go wherever it took them, instead," she offered.

“Ah, Sela, I detect sarcasm. It amuses me. You amuse me.” Ren laughed. “As it happens, despite the failures, I did not let Anton complete his work. Margate exists. You will find out what is there.”

Sela thought about this information. In Ren’s world there were no prisoners, only victims and sycophants, plus a few rebels that he tolerated, like her, because of their special skills. If he wanted her to go down to Margate, it was because he believed she could succeed where the others had not. Why? Was this leverage that she could use in some way?

“What makes you think I can do anything differently, assuming your information is valid?” she said.

Ren stood up, his right hand leaning heavily on an arm of the chair. Sela watched him walk with a slow step toward the clear crystal globe that stood on the floor in the center of the room. He laid his hands on it and pressed into it with all his weight.

“What do you see, Sela?” His voice was hardly a whisper, his clipped words the first sign of the rage that often consumed him without forewarning to his listeners.

Sela knew what he wanted. This was not the first time they had met this way, in this place. Still, she hesitated. What lay within the transparent sphere had always unsettled her, harmless as it seemed to be. Even as she watched, the activity inside the globe increased, its energy magnified by the crystal but contained by it, as well.

“You doubt us? Tell me what you see!” Ren demanded, his voice filling the room, ricocheting off the walls.

Like fireflies, Sela thought, watching the lights circle and follow invisible paths, pushing and crowding against the smooth surface of the crystal and falling in again, disappearing, as if they had been touched by Anton’s skill. But she knew better. Wherever they went, they would always return. She envied them, that they could truly know other worlds effortlessly.

“I see your kingdom, Ren, what else?”

He raised his hands into the air in a mock salute to her and moved slowly back to his chair. “Yes. Of which you are a part. One command to them,” he said, gesturing to the sphere, “and you are no longer here. Remember that.”

Where does your power come from, Ren? She caught his stare as the words passed through her mind. She let him catch the thoughts, knowing he was pleased with her question, gratified. It was her opportunity. Sela raised the aspect of her consciousness, leaving Ren to hear only what

she wanted, leaving her free to think.

He will try to break you, Sela. You know this, Randall had told her near the end, before he entered the coma that was the precursor to his death.

“He won’t,” she had said to him, defiant and grieving at the same time.

Randall had smiled, even though the effort brought another spasm of pain. *But he will try. You have to be prepared for that. Never let him or what he does be what you focus on the most. As soon as you do, he will win, I promise you.*

“Tell me how,” she had said, less to know the answer than to hear Randall’s voice. It seemed unbearable to imagine living without his voice somewhere in her day, somewhere in the passing of the hours.

My concern is not that you can live without me, my dear Sela. You will. And well. It is what you choose to live by that matters. Fear is a seducer, and you must release it when it overtakes you. To feel the fear, to know it’s real, yes, this you must do. But let it go, once you know what it is. Then, whatever power Ren has will disappear from your mind and heart as easily as the mists in the hills when the sun burns hot.

“Why me?” she asked. “Why does Ren want to break me?”

Do you remember your mother, Sela?

“No. She abandoned me when I was young.”

Ren’s story begins there.

She had waited for him to say more, but he had the first of many violent seizures that filled his last hours before he was lost to her. She had long forgotten his words. They came back to her now. She stayed present with the Council with one part of her attention and remembered Randall’s admonition in another, hidden place.

Layers of consciousness—they are well known to Ren, too. But I think I’ve taught you well, Randall had said once to her as they walked together in a summer rain. *You can even hide your thoughts from me—that is no small accomplishment, don’t you know,* he had said, clapping his hands in delight.

There would never be anyone like him, Sela thought. How could there be? They had shared so much, student and teacher, and in the end, friends, who could trust each other with their lives.

“I will tell you why I chose you,” Ren was saying. He had returned to his chair.

Sela moved into the aspect of Ren, pushing memory aside. “That’s something I admit

intrigues me,” she said, and for once, her words were entirely true.

“Good. Who is your father, Sela?”

“You know the answer to that,” she said.

“Tell me!” he said. She felt her own rage open and pressed it down, away from his awareness.

“He’s gone. He’s been gone a very long time. Again, as you know.”

“Yes. Because he defied me. I’m sure you understand. I did what I had to. But he left his particular talent to you, didn’t he?”

It was the same every time. The baiting. He knew the triggers so well, didn’t he? The memory of her father rose up, bidden by Ren’s game, and by the weight of recollection itself.

“An unfinished man, wouldn’t you say?” Ren offered, his voice seeking out the soft places in her, waiting for her anger, hoping for it.

“He took care of me when my mother chose to leave. He did so out of love,” Sela said. Something you would never understand, she added silently, but allowing him to hear her thought.

Ren’s face darkened but he smiled, for he was not done with her yet. “You inherited his wildness, my dear Sela. It is what gives me power over you, haven’t you understood that yet?” He laughed, the pitch of it rising as it always did, the one sound she was unable to shut out. “I think it’s time we turned our full attention to Margate, don’t you?” said Ren, glancing at each member of the Council until he reached Connor, who took his cue, watching so closely, adapting already to the stops and starts of Ren’s behavior.

“Yes,” Connor said. “We want the location of the Feeder. I—we—want you to find it for us. How you choose to do that once you are on Margate is your choice. So long as it gets done.”

“And if I don’t find it?” said Sela.

“Obviously, I expect you will. But it is of no matter to me what happens to you if you don’t,” Ren answered. “Do you plan to fail like your father, or perhaps like Randall . . . your dear friend Randall?”

It took everything Sela had to sustain her self-control, to keep her thoughts neutral. Emotions she had set aside filled her mind, waves of them, threatening to spill over into Ren’s aspect. She would not give him the satisfaction, but he knew, anyway, the effect he had created. He had intended the violation.

“Why didn’t you have Anton erase Margate,” she asked, diverting his attention.

“As it happens, we can thank your father for that, Sela. Have you forgotten?”

She conceded, realizing what he meant. On an early expedition to a place a thousand light years away, her father had found the first Feeder created by a man who called himself Peter. He had designed many such virtual tunnels, each one leading into many unknown and unmapped worlds he designated as diaries. Feeders had since been discovered on many planets in their star system, though even now they knew nothing more of the mysterious Peter. It was her father who had found the special diaries that existed on Margate, the ones that were different from all others, not tunnels into other worlds, but simultaneous planes and dimensions on one world. Ren had insisted her father bring the Feeder on Margate back to the ship. But he had refused and gone missing, her precious father, with his beautiful soul. It was then she had been told Margate had been cleaned, erased. Now she felt a glimmer of understanding. Not everything had been destroyed as reported. A sudden feeling of hope ran through her. Perhaps her father was still alive.

She had joined Ren’s ship five years before in such confidence for being chosen. Begun her work with such enthusiasm, even joy. How absolute had been the change at Randall’s death. How little she had known about Ren.

“You begin tomorrow morning,” Connor said.

“Don’t be late, Sela,” Ren said, and he smiled again.

She gave a slight bow in Connor’s direction, turned around and left. She would not let them see entirely what this opportunity meant to her.

Long after midnight Sela walked the corridors of the ship, even though she knew she had to be alert enough in the morning to carry out the work that lay ahead. Margate. A legend of its own. Nothing except being down there mattered now. She had tried to rest, but it was futile. She could feel the blood pulsing through her, the rush of it in her head, her whole body tensed for the moment when she would be free to leave.

In her room she opened a book that had belonged to her father. The soft leather cover and gilded pages brought her the same comfort they always had. His enthusiasm for his work was a joy that her mother had disparaged for the duration of their marriage. He did not fulfill his dreams, but he gave what he knew to his daughter. He had unlocked the first of the diaries of Peter, had recorded what he had done, and in doing that, in giving that knowledge to her, had

opened a path she knew she was meant to take. Sela turned the pages, watching their gold sheen come alive with the reflection of the candles she had left burning. Ancient art, the waxen light.

The dreams came quickly when she finally slept, of a world she didn't know, couldn't know. Yet it seemed so familiar. She woke in fear, gradually adjusting to her room, to the black space beyond the port window, to the shimmering blankets that covered her.

Getting up out of bed, Sela walked barefoot across the heated floor to the mirror near the door. Even in the ambient light she could see the fatigue in her eyes. She ran her hands through her thick, black hair. It was too long, she thought. She should get it cut. She should do a lot of things.

She had only slept three hours. Yet she couldn't bring herself to take the pills the medic supplied to everyone before an expedition. She didn't want to camouflage anything.

The dreams, Sela. You have many. Don't ignore them. They are your speakers, the source of what you are meant to know, a bridge into what waits for you.

"I just want them to stop!" she had said, more loudly than she had intended. Randall had busied himself arranging the tiles he loved to work with, creating more of his extraordinary wall mosaics, always in the shape of a labyrinth. *A shape that encourages us to look for what we don't know, instead of just confirming what we do*, he had told her.

She remembered. And remembered, too, the few times, before the end, when he had let despair overtake him. She had witnessed one of those. Nothing would comfort him. He would drink until he passed out, after wandering the city streets in the hours before dawn. He had explained it to her later. *I don't defend what I'm doing. It's an ugly choice. But it's the only one I have, at certain hours, when I sense I have lost connection with everything. That's our flaw, Sela—all of us, don't you know. When we lose connection with who we really are. I don't like knowing you found me the way you did, but it could happen again. I was afraid. I can't promise it won't happen again. I am human, after all, like you. Know that.*

Sela ordered breakfast in her quarters, the better to do her prep work, but also to stay alone until she looked better. The circles under her eyes betrayed her lack of sleep, and so did her inability to do much more than sit in front of the kalis recorder and make her notes. She usually liked this part, the sorting through, the ability to test what she planned and see it in motion, better than a hologram, because it could exist outside its circle of creation. With the kalis she could make what she envisioned fill the whole room, if she wanted, even beyond the skin of the ship.

For now, she was content to keep it confined to the screen.

“Sela, I trust you are rested enough to do your work?” Ren’s voice sounded in the room, startling her.

“That is my concern, not yours,” she said, to divert his attention until she had arranged the layers of her mind.

“Tiresome. This back and forth. Don’t test me, Sela.”

“Is there a reason you need to interrupt my breakfast?” she said in a neutral voice.

“I don’t need a reason, but since you ask, tell me this. How many worlds has our Anton, clever Anton, handled, do you think?”

“I’ve lost count. I’m sure he has, as well.”

“There is that sarcasm again. I do miss it when you are away, dear Sela. I want Anton to use his special talents on another location before we reach Margate. Before he does, first I want you to survey the planet, tell me what is there.”

“Why bother? You can project to it—use the readouts from anyone’s kalis. You don’t need me.”

“If that were a possible solution, I’d use it.” Ren’s voice changed. Sela knew she had to draw back, keep his anger away from her. Its energy could penetrate the layers—it was the only way he ever could. She could not absorb his intensity and stay free, not yet, for she had not built up all her defenses. Each defense she prepared, once set up in her mind, was fixed, but she encountered the need for new ones all the time. The process of thought was so creative. Containing it, she knew, could be a futile effort, doomed because Ren would find it, would see instantly what it was, what it meant. He wouldn’t hesitate to attack.

She didn’t say anything. He waited a moment and then laughed, a short, bitter bark of a laugh this time.

“What have I done to make you so hateful toward me, dear Sela? I was under the impression I’d given you access to the very opportunities you most wanted, given you every freedom to explore them completely, without interference. Yet, here you are, so ready to show how much you despise me. Why?”

What game was he playing? she wondered.

He continued, his voice casual, dismissive. “Have it your way, but mark it, you will investigate this planet. It has the same filters as Margate, but our inversion tools have no effect.

A heat barrier is preventing us from getting too close.”

“It sounds wonderful.” Heat barriers were notoriously unstable, and he knew that as well as she did. Even suited up she’d be taking great risk attempting to go to ground level.

“You’ll be fine. Take Lev with you. The barrier is on the same frequency as our side shields, and those are his domain. Right now, we can’t determine the source of the heat.”

So you say, thought Sela, and for a moment she didn’t care that he was listening, that she was undoubtedly aggravating him more. He seemed to ignore it.

“We’re above this planet now. I’m calling it Paris 4.”

There was a knock on her door. When she opened it, Harry was standing at attention before her.

“What am I looking for?” she said out into the room.

“I just want a report of what’s there, the usual, of course,” Ren answered.

“Right. If there is a civilization there, already, what then?”

“I have Anton, my dear. I always have Anton.” As he spoke Sela felt Ren’s voice in a deeper place. In the sudden fear of it an intense wave of nausea swept over her.

“You have to go to the port bay,” Harry said.

She tried to focus on him, and with relief, succeeded.

“I’ll be there in five minutes,” she said, closing the door. She felt Ren’s absence. She had a few minutes to herself.

She stood for awhile looking out of the viewer, seeing little but the hazy circle of the planet they were orbiting and the far-flung array of stars beyond it.

Suddenly her mind was filled with the tinkling of chimes as vivid images flooded in of the island of Latvos where Randall had taken her for a holiday. She remembered how the tall grass bent to the wind that swept past them and moved on toward the sea. The sky was a brilliant, cloudless blue. She had taken to the water *like a mermaid, don’t you know*, Randall had said, smiling. It was true. She spent hours diving in the deep, clear ocean, going sometimes thirty feet down, exploring the reefs and absorbing the cascade of colors that the coral held.

The chimes. Randall had hung them on the branch of a nearby pine tree and their thin, silver bars glanced across each other in the breeze in random notes.

Nothing is random, Randall had said, when she observed this to him. What did he mean, she had asked. *Just that everything is intended, don’t you know.*

“The wind decides which bars touch each other, and in what sequence—there’s no certainty in that!” she had challenged him.

No? he had answered. *What decides what the wind will do? Follow that path back and back and you will find the place where there is nowhere else to go, because then you have reached the source that determined, for an eon later, which silver bars would indeed touch one another, and in what sequence. This is an absolute.*

And here I am, Sela thought, turning away from the viewer, in Ren’s ship where I don’t want to be. Who or what decided I should come into being, an eon later?

She gathered what she needed and walked quickly through the outer ring to the port bay. She had opted to live where she did not only to be as far away physically from Ren and his Council as she could, but also to be able to have a room with a viewer. It meant that very little could happen without her knowing about it. She had access to the environment around the ship at any given time. Only Ren had it better. But his vision had a different source. He had the sphere, after all.

The ship still fascinated her. The series of rings emanating out in a spiral from the core, the ship slicing through space with almost no distortion of dark matter, their speed defined by which ring was activated. If all of them were, then there was no difference between the thought of being somewhere and being there. The design had been Randall’s but its execution had all been Ren’s. It was what had brought him his power—before he acquired the sphere. Then he had changed. Yes, it was then he had changed, she was sure.

We are vulnerable to two things, usually, most of us, Sela. I think so, Randall had told her as they lay on the beach after an especially long dive together that long ago day. One is the feeling of being ignored, and the other is the feeling of being betrayed. Take the presence of either emotion out of the equation in a relationship—well, things would be quite different for most of us, don’t you know.

Would they? Sela wondered, as she followed the curving route to the port side. She smiled at how easily they kept to the old terms. There was no port, no starboard, in a spiral formation. They kept on with the familiar conventions for the sake of tradition. Harmless, maybe. Yet she considered not for the first time how much traditions meant stasis. They offered unfortunate memories of what used to be, and she did not see that anyone benefited from that. Most of all, they brought the illusion of a time when there had been unity, belonging. She knew that gave

many people solace, but she also knew it gave them a deep sense of loss. In the end, that seemed less a benefit than a source of desperation.

I told you. I had known Ren from our earliest days. He chose his path long before he took command of his ship.

So he must have done, she thought. He could have chosen Randall's way, but they became so different from one another.

Is that what you think? Randall had said when she repeated the thought to him. *I am the unwilling participant in my body's decay. Ren is the unwilling—yes, unwilling—participant in the destruction of everything that matters to him. We both have our reasons, for nothing is random, as I've said so often. He and I are not so different, Sela. None of us are. Remember that.*

FORCE FIELD

I

ON THE PLAINS of the Mojave, just before Palm Springs, she saw them, masses of bird-like wind collectors covering the ground, silver arms spinning in the light. Some climbed narrow slopes as the road drew near the Morongo Pass and stood in relief against the late afternoon sky.

Seeing them was the signal she'd been waiting for, anticipating as she drove along the road through hills dotted with scrub that reminded her of the skin of leopards. And then there was the sound, a low-pitched, intermittent thing more like pressure on the ears than audible, that seemed to emanate from the wind as it touched the metal wings, sliding past them. Or perhaps that was only something she imagined.

Later as dusk approached they were motionless, and it seemed to her as if time had stopped. They were beautiful, and sentinels of the land, the dry, desert land that held the spirit close to it, entering the blood and staying. She knew its power.

In the fading light, she almost missed seeing the man who stepped in front of her car.

II

THE AIR WAVERED like heat on asphalt and dimly the forms emerged. They were gone almost as soon as they appeared. Only the one stayed. But he felt the others near him still.

Everywhere he looked large boulders lay scattered across the flat landscape, outlined in the stark white light of the sun. Small rocks and sand covered the ground. A range of mountains lay to the south. Behind him the field of wind turbines hummed as the blades rotated. He understood their kinetic energy, felt their response to the sun's uneven heating of the earth, pulling the hot and cooler air into motion. He and the others had welcomed that same charged potential as a gateway.

Random thoughts that as yet held no meaning for him passed through his mind, pieces that had been given for him to learn. He studied the pattern of his shirt, the small blue and black checks, sleeves touching his wrists, the material a soft flannel. Too warm for where he was.

Beside him the road stretched east and west, dissolving into points in either direction. As far as he was able to tell, their day was halfway through its course. He needed something to drink. He felt that.

A car appeared in red, wavy lines, moving closer to him, until its outline became solid and it stirred him to step out into the road, sure the driver would stop. Instead, the car swerved and passed him, and he saw two men who laughed at him through windows closed against the heat. He stared after them until the car disappeared from sight, aware of a sudden dark vibration, uncertain of its meaning.

The pain came at him then, a fierce and unrelenting thing. He held his head and shuddered with the effort to make it stop. They had said it could happen in the early stages, in the learning, that it could not be avoided, that he needed to create an alignment. But he had not really fathomed what it would be like. The sound came without warning, a low humming rising behind him out of the desert, escalating into a high-pitched whine. Flashes of light appeared before his eyes, their colors raw and terrifying, and he felt them pour into the rock and stone around him as the landscape suddenly split into jagged fragments. Nausea swept through him and he nearly fell to the ground as vertigo took over, something deeper than the dislocation of space. He cried out from the shock and power of it all.

He forced himself to enter the pain and live inside it, letting it surround him instead of consuming him, as they had advised. The effort seemed impossible, but gradually the effects faded from his consciousness and it ended. He was once more aware of his surroundings and saw that the sun was still high in the sky. What had happened to him had taken only seconds to begin and end. If he had not followed the advice he had been given he was sure he would not have survived. He would have had to go back, return home before he was done, before what mattered had been completed. But what if the attacks continued?

It was dusk before another car showed up on the road. By then, the air had chilled. He went out into the middle of the road again, raising his arms. The vehicle slowed this time and stopped. For a moment everything stayed frozen, the car idling before him as he stood in the glare of its headlights.

The driver's door opened.

A woman stepped out. She paused and looked him over. She didn't seem afraid.

"I need a lift," he said, his voice sounding cluttered to him, unused. She didn't appear to notice.

"Of course," she said. "Come on." With that she got back into the car.

He went to the passenger door and opened it. He looked over once more at where he had been, just to be sure. Yes, they were all gone now. He was left alone. So this woman was the one.

For several miles she didn't speak. He was glad of that. Night came and all he could see was the pale gray of the road through the headlights and a few inches of sand and rock on either side. There was no moon. The stars seemed to fill every part of the sky, a sea of light. He felt dizzy looking up at them, yet for a moment, comforted. It was a feeling he understood well enough, familiar and filled with longing. He let it go and concentrated on the road ahead.

"Why don't you tell me your name?" Her voice was musical and resonant, with a slight lilt in it.

He looked over and studied her in the dim light from the dashboard. She had long, dark hair with silver streaks in it. Her features were lean, her eyes large. There were lines around her eyes and mouth. It was a textured face and he was drawn to it and for a few minutes could not take his eyes off her. He turned his attention back to the road.

"So, do I pass the test?"

"What test?" he said.

“Never mind. At least you can talk. What do I call you?” she asked again.

“Qu’ol,” he said without thinking.

“What?”

How could he be so careless? It was so hard to keep focus. But she wasn’t sure of what she had heard. He spoke again, giving her the name that had been decided ahead of time.

“Wyn Roberts.” It was the first time he had said it aloud. He saw immediately that it made her feel more at ease.

“Well, Wyn Roberts,” she said, emphasizing the words, “what were you doing seventy miles from nowhere without so much as a bicycle to get you out of there? That part of the desert is filled with rattlers at night, you know.”

That curious lilt in her voice. It soothed him. He didn’t pay close attention to her words but he knew he should, that he should at least make the effort.

“Yes, I have these shoes to wear . . . and I knew . . . was certain someone would show up.”

“Shoes. Well, they’d keep the rattlers at bay all right. How’d you get there in the first place? Someone dump you out?” She spoke rapidly, as if she might be having second thoughts. He had to allay her nervousness, if there was any. He remembered the faces of the men in the car, and what he had perceived of their nature. He didn’t want to deceive her, but there was no choice.

“Two friends. A joke. Only they never came back. I don’t know why.”

“I was kidding but you’re serious! Are they insane? Some friends you’ve got for yourself.”

“Used to have,” he said, knowing it would make sense to her.

“You got that right.”

She was silent again and for a time all he heard was the steady sound of the tires on the road. As he watched the stars covering them, he felt that he could stay there exactly the way he was forever. Then nothing would have to change. Nothing would have to be done.

“We’re coming into Danville and I need gas,” she said. “Where’re you headed?”

The feeling of unease began to rise again. What could he tell her?

“Well, it’s your business,” she said when he didn’t answer, “but I’m only going as far as Preston, just so you know.”

He turned to look at her again. “That’ll be fine. I can just find another ride.” The words came more easily. He almost smiled at the pleasure that knowledge gave him.

“The next place after Preston is fifty miles east. Where were you and your friends off to

before they decided to play their games?”

Once more there was no way to answer her. He stayed silent and hoped she would give up all the questions.

She coasted up to an island when they reached the gas station. She handed a five-dollar bill to him as she got out of the car.

“While I fill up, how about getting us some coffee?”

He studied the paper. Then he folded it in half and put it in the pocket of his shirt. Going into the small chain store, he asked for the coffee. When the girl brought it, he told her what he thought, that she looked too young to be there at night in that isolated place. He said he was sorry she had to work so hard. She told him the coffee was on the house.

When he went back to the car, the woman was already inside, and she reached out for the plastic cup. He tried to hand her the packets of cream and sugar the girl had added.

“I take it black. Thanks anyway,” she said. “Any change?”

He gave her the five-dollar bill.

“Free coffee?” She looked surprised.

“On the house,” he said.

“Great.”

The car started with a soft, purring sound. She patted the steering wheel.

“An old faithful, that’s what this car is,” she told him. “One of the best. Sweet, quiet, and reliable. Unlike a lot of people I know. Not something someone your age chooses, of course,” she added, smiling at him as she pressed the accelerator.

Once more they were in darkness, broken only by the headlights on the road. He felt the tiredness enter him and in spite of his will and need to be alert to everything, he shut his eyes.

“You haven’t asked me my name,” she said.

He opened his eyes.

“I’m Kate. Kate Morgan,” she offered.

The mountains were closer. He saw a darker series of ridges and peaks against the night sky. They drove on, until it seemed to him that he was suspended in the air, as if the stars were above and below him, the motion of the car a sidereal thing of its own, all of them circling together in some unknown design. In that suspension, a weightless calm, he let come what he had kept at bay, the familiar images flowing past him at great speed, only a few of them lingering long

enough for him to see them clearly. The longing for home overcame him, a feeling so deep he nearly cried out. For a moment he was afraid she would notice. But when he dared to look at her, her eyes were on the road, her thoughts far away from him, he was sure, for the moment. Again he listened to the soft sound of the motor, the swishing sound of the tires, and saw small creatures dart away from the glare of the lights. The alteration of moods was overwhelming him. This was how they lived, this constant experience of emotion, but he realized he could never have been prepared enough for it, no matter how many simulations. He opened the window, letting in a rush of air and a cacophony of sounds, everything magnified. He breathed deeply until he felt his body's heartbeat slow.

"Are you all right?" The alarm in her voice came to him, muffled by the sound of the wind.

"Yes. Thank you. Some disturbance. The air helps."

"Disturbance. Interesting word choice. That's a mild way to describe what you've been through. Listen. When we get to Preston it'll be nearly midnight. I'm sure the people I'm staying with can put you up. If you want," she added.

It was what he wanted. He understood that the location where she had found him had not been his destination by chance, nor hers, yet still, he could not make assumptions. He was required to know with certainty by his own assessment whether she could accept what he had to show her. It was his obligation to fulfill. She was the one they had chosen, but he had to help her define their interaction, and in the end, she would have to decide for herself what she would do.

"Yes. That seems a good choice," he told her. "If your friends don't mind."

"My friends are my brother and his wife, Allyson. She trusts my judgment. As do I," she added, and gave a smile, the green light from the dashboard reflected on her face. "I can read people pretty well. You were out in that sun a long time. It's never good for anyone to be in the desert like that. Unless they know it really well, which, excuse me for saying, you don't seem to. And without water? Those friends of yours were criminal."

Again he couldn't answer. Why did she keep coming back to that? Only, he did understand. Why should she let it go, after all? If it had been true, if he had friends who did that, it would be an act without mercy. He knew no one of his own kind who would do such a thing. But for now, it was better she think he did.

As they drove on he yielded again to the weariness. He drifted off in the mass of sound that continued outside the window, the rustling and night moves of animals and the wind across the

sage and cactus. Thin strips of gray cloud moved overhead. The mountains were higher still in front of him, and he felt the weight of them, and the car seemed once more not a separate motion but something that belonged and moved in concert with everything else. For a little while, then, so did he.

“Wyn Roberts, wake up! We’re here! Hey!” He felt as if he was rising up from some underwater canyon, the heaviness of the water surrounding him, slowing him down. With effort he reached out his arms and swept them down, accelerating his body, kicking against the deep green world. When he opened his eyes he sucked in air like a drowning man, surprised to see the woman standing outside the car and shaking his shoulder.

“We’re here,” she repeated, as she lifted a knapsack from the ground and turned up a small walk to an enclosed porch. Lights came on in the yard, showing a small, straggling garden of native plants and a child’s swing on the right. A bike lay on the ground. The steps leading up to the porch were painted a bright red, though chips of it were peeling off.

The woman standing silhouetted in the doorway was large, dressed in a floor-length robe, and her strong voice carried easily to him.

“Another stray you picked up, Kate? Or have you run off and married someone at last? Am I supposed to open another cot out here? You’re looking so tired out, ya know? Come on in, both of you. Ever heard of making a phone call if you’re going to be five hours late?”

He got out, worried, but still caught by the strong weight of the dream. Walking up the steps, he nearly tripped over a small planter. It occurred to him that he should move more carefully, that this was something to practice.

He followed the woman Kate into a large room that was a vivid contrast to the neglected front yard. White walls were softened by small pastels that showed adobe houses and rock caves, and cliffs in moonlight. One especially drew his attention, of a figure playing a flute, dreaming into being a whole sequence of shapes and forms that spilled past, joyously. Light quilts of deep rust and pale blues and orange lay over the chairs and sofa. On the wide boards of the floor the rug absorbed sound into itself, into white and rust and indigo spirals. Books filled one wall from the floor to the ceiling. In a corner there stood a tall, narrow table with a single object on it, a fist-sized piece of rutilated quartz. He knew that object, he realized. It was familiar. It was in his world, too. Music filtered in from somewhere, very faint, so that he could only catch the sound at intervals.

He was suddenly aware that the two women were observing him.

"I am Wyn Roberts," he said quickly, holding out his hand to the large woman.

"Allyson," she answered, still watching him.

"I appreciate your effort," he said awkwardly. Allyson glanced at Kate with a question in her eyes.

"No, ah, no problem," Allyson said. "No effort at all. Kate has us well-trained. Always surprising us with unexpected guests. I'll get you set up out on the sun porch. Lots of light comes in there early with the sunrise, though. Have a look."

Wyn followed her into a foyer and they entered the screened-in porch on the side of the house.

Allyson stepped back into the living room.

"Jenny asleep?" Kate asked.

"She's not here. Visiting my folks in L.A. She's coming home tomorrow. Just as well," she added, thumbing toward the porch. "I mean, even with your usual good judgment, I'd have thought twice about bringing this one home with you, with Tom away. He'll be in Santa Fe until Wednesday."

"I didn't know Tom would be away. But you've nothing to worry about from Wyn. The guy was let off in the desert by some 'friends', apparently supposed to find his own way out. It's not like I could leave him out there. He slept hard on the drive here, a lot of dreaming and thrashing around. He'll be gone in the morning. It's really all right, isn't it?"

"Of course. I trust your intuition on things like this, you know that. It's late. Grab your stuff. You can take Jenny's room, since he's got your porch bed now."

Kate dropped her bags in her niece's room and returned and settled on the sofa, feeling the ache in her body from the long drive.

"I'm getting us some tea," Allyson called out from the kitchen, "and I made a coffee cake for the morning. It's past midnight, so that's morning enough."

Wyn entered the foyer from the porch and hesitated

"Have a seat," Kate said, smiling at him.

"Yes, thank you," he said, moving into the room and toward a chair near the painting of the flute player.

"That's Kokopelli," Kate said, noticing his interest. "A legend. Do you know it?"

“Tell me,” Wyn said.

“Well, Kokopelli’s actually many things. In ancient times here he was thought of as a fertility deity. That’s been diluted by some people, but he still rules agriculture, and favors the rain. Our oldest image of him predates the Anasazi. Ever heard of them?”

Wyn shook his head.

“They were a desert culture from centuries ago. In the painting, Kokopelli’s making music, another of his skills.”

“I see joy.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Kate said.

“He’s right,” Allyson said, coming into the room with a tray of tea and cake. “I bought it because it made me feel totally happy.”

“Really,” Kate said, looking at her in surprise.

“You don’t see that in his playing?” Wyn asked her.

“I’m not the poetic type. Colors are nice, though,” Kate said, as she lifted the cup of tea to drink it. In that moment Wyn’s features seemed to change and she felt as if she were watching a river of faces cross over his own in rapid succession. At intervals the faces receded and she saw only brilliant colors, a kaleidoscope of streaming light.

“Kate, you must be dead tired. That tea is going to spill!”

Allyson’s tone brought her back. She lifted the cup to her lips.

“Now, Wyn,” she heard Allyson say, “Tell us about yourself. It’s a requirement if you get picked up by my sister-in-law and get to stay here overnight.”

“No, it isn’t,” Kate said, and she forced herself to glance at Wyn. He looked exactly as he had before. Allyson was right. She must be more tired than she knew. No wonder, since she’d driven the five hundred miles without stopping for anything to eat and only once for coffee with Wyn.

“I have very little to tell,” he said. “I have work, and usually I am alone when I do it.”

“So who were those friends of yours?” Kate asked.

“What work do you do?” Allyson interrupted.

He was prepared for this. They had given him the words.

“I create what you would call options,” Wyn said to Allyson.

“What, like a stockbroker?” Kate said, astonished.

“A venture capitalist?” suggested Allyson.

“No, no, that is not it,” Wyn said. Both women seemed to him to be very genuine. Very trusting. He would need to honor that.

“What I mean is . . . I give people alternatives in life. I help them uncover their own creative abilities. That is what I facilitate.” It occurred to him that he had given them the absolute truth, and yet told them nothing that revealed his purpose. The words worked, as he had been assured they would.

“Cool,” Allyson said. “A self-help guru right here in the desert. If you were staying longer, I might ask you to help me get my creative stuff going. I leave it in the dust with everything else I have to do.”

“You should keep on with your work,” he said, looking at the abstract paintings that filled the back wall. “Those are yours, aren’t they?”

Allyson nodded.

“They’re very good.”

“It’s kind of you to say that,” she said, pleasure and gratitude in her face.

That was part of how they lived, he knew, a sharing of kindness, one-to-one. There were many among them who ignored that, but he sensed it was the way of these women.

But what about Kate? He still didn’t know. She had barely reacted to his effort moments before to show her the vibrations she could inhabit. Or perhaps she didn’t know what it was he had offered. That must be it. He had acted too soon. It would take more time. That was why he was there, after all. To help her understand. Then he could go home.

“So where’re you from?” Allyson continued.

What could he say? He remembered the first car he had seen, a red color, and a silver stamp on it, a name.

“Barstow.”

“Well, you’re a few hundred miles off your home base, that’s for sure,” Allyson said.

“A bus passes through town around noontime that goes to Victorville,” Kate said. “You can get a connection to Barstow from there.”

He couldn’t leave yet. He would need to divert attention from that outcome.

“Well, I’ve stayed up hours past my usual bedtime, so I’ll say goodnight,” Allyson said.

“You just get comfortable out on the porch when you’re ready,” she told Wyn as she gave a brief

hug to Kate.

“Let us know if you need anything,” Kate said to him.

“I’ll be fine, but thank you,” he said, getting up and leaving them and closing the door to the sun porch behind him.

“Just as well he’s off soon,” Allyson said as she switched off the lamps in the living room.

“What do you mean?” Kate asked, getting up from the sofa and feeling the stiffness in her back.

Allyson gave her a short wave as she went down the hallway. “Nothing, really. He seems nice enough. Just that he’s not working on all thrusters. You don’t see that?”

“No, I don’t,” Kate said, unable to keep frustration and defensiveness out of her voice.

“Hey, I’m just saying.”

Allyson went into her room and shut the door. Almost immediately she opened it again.

“Tom gets here—I don’t know what he’s going to say.”

“I’ll handle him,” Kate said.

Allyson laughed. “Right. Fire meets fire—what’s easier to handle than that?” She was still chuckling as she closed the door again.

Kate woke at two in the morning sensing that she had heard something, a sound just finished, a door shutting, or footsteps nearby. Moonlight flooded the blanket she’d pulled over her, and Jenny’s dolls and stuffed bears were all filtered in silvery hues, the colors gone. Then she did hear a sound very clearly in the thin night air. Getting out of bed, she moved quietly toward the window and pushed the curtain aside a few inches.

Jenny’s room was at the back of the house. Outside, the yard ended a hundred feet from the window, and beyond that the plain stretched to the mountains, bathed in the same silver light, a vast field of short grass and wildflowers moving gently in the wind. An unexpected rainstorm had brought life to the region for just a little while. From somewhere far away came the cry of a coyote, the song fading, leaving everything more silent than it had been before.

A slight movement caught her attention and then she saw him in the shadows. Wyn stood on the edge of the field beside Allyson’s small tool shed. He was holding his arms out before him, the palms up as if in supplication. After a moment he took a step and the stones grated underfoot. She heard a low-pitched sound and realized it came from him, a strange rhythm repeated over and over. From his posture she could sense his intensity. After a few minutes he stopped and

lowered his arms and seemed to shrink in size, to hunch over himself. Abruptly he turned and headed back to the front of the house and the sun porch.

Kate instinctively ducked away but she was sure he hadn't noticed her. Maybe Allyson's right and he's a little odd after all, she thought. But the feeling stayed that he was harmless. She went back to bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

III

ON THE SUN porch Wyn sat on the single bed, for sleep wouldn't come, though he knew he must succumb to it. He noticed a notebook and pencil on the end table. Opening it he saw it was filled with small sketches, and he understood it belonged to Allyson. With care he removed a blank page near the end.

The writing did not come easily at first but to his relief the action was more natural by the time he was done. To communicate in that way interested him. There was something so immediate in it, so tangible. So much of their experience held this aspect, this grounding in the physical reality above all others. Yet he knew also their capacity for so much more, or he would never have been given this time with them, with her.

Every assignment required some measure of alignment, some compatibility between the journeyman and the individual selected. This woman Kate Morgan had lost her path into healing. He felt that. But it was part of her true skill and talent. He had to find a way to help her transcend her reliance on the physical reality alone, before the events in her life escalated into tragedy. More than most, she had the capacity to use the knowledge, once she was willing to understand.

He lay back on the bed. Again the night sky filled him with yearning. But that was part of his work, too, his job. He had to face his own destiny, knowing that it would often take him far away from what he loved most. It was the only way.

He wondered how these people could even function, given the force of such an intense state of consciousness. Their behavior was governed by subjective perception, and by the physical changes that accompanied it all the time. He was exhausted by the waves of shifting feelings, the powerful effect that they had on his mind and the way they increased his heartbeat and constricted his breathing. The men in the car, the girl at the gas station, the woman and her friend—their energy of emotion stayed with him, something he could not prevent. At intervals he could perform the ritual as he had just done and reach into his own vibration and restore what their world took from him. So long as he did not do it too often, for the energy was displaced each time. He had to conserve it.

The headache was a different problem. Its severity frightened him. In this vibration, he would experience such attacks again. The gateway would continue to resonate and there was

nothing he could do about it. There was no way to make a full adjustment. The convergence of his form with theirs was partial. It had to be, or he would never be able to go back.

He looked one more time at the brilliant, distant starlight before closing his eyes and allowing sleep to come.

IV

SHE WOKE TO the smell of coffee and the low mutter of voices. As she was pulling on her robe Kate caught sight of herself in Jenny's mirror, an oval frame surrounded by ribbons and flowers. Grabbing a brush, she pulled her tangled black hair into some semblance of order and then opened the door. Turning down the narrow hallway, she walked to the end and saw her brother Tom in full uniform sitting in a chair in the kitchen. Allyson was beside him. Seeing her, Tom wordlessly pointed to another chair.

"I was just going to come and warn you," Allyson said regretfully. "Tried my best for damage control."

"Warn me about what?" Kate asked casually as she took the cup of coffee Allyson offered.

"Nothing much, just that you've brought a total stranger into my house with my wife's apparent permission," Tom said, frowning at Allyson, "and that you picked him up on the highway. For no good reason. For no possible reason that would make sense to me!"

"Hey, Tom. I thought you weren't due back till Tuesday. How're you doing?"

"I just told you how I'm doing. I was following a false lead up there, and a good thing nothing came of it, since that meant I came back early and discovered I have someone right here I have to get checked out."

"Checked out where?" Kate said. "You can't make Wyn a problem before you know who he even is."

"And you know all about him, is that it?" Tom usually held in his temper, but he was having trouble containing it.

"Kate's always had good instincts. You've said so a thousand times," Allyson offered, smiling over at her sister-in-law. "And she knows people—all her work at the institute. Come on, Tom, lighten up."

Tom slowly stirred sugar into his coffee.

"I'm really irritated by this, Kate," he said, not looking up right away. "What if Jenny had been here?" he said suddenly, lifting his head and staring at his wife. "Did you think of that?"

"I'd never have let him in if our daughter had been here and you know that!" Allyson said, her face flushed.

“How can you think I’d be careless when it came to Jenny?” Kate said.

Tom held up his hand to stop both of them.

“Let me tell you both how it is. I come here at six in the morning after a really long night because I was called in to help track a person or persons we think could be serial offenders, really bad guys who’ve killed four people in drive-bys in the last three days, and our only lead was in Barstow, way out of my territory. Like I said, it was a wasted trip. I find a man asleep on the sun porch, someone I’ve never seen before and who stays asleep while I go into the house only to find my wife in the kitchen making breakfast and singing to herself. I ask about the guy on the porch and she tells me my sister picked up a stray on the road and delivered him here because it was late and the poor man had nowhere to go.”

Tom was silent a moment and then brought his hand down hard on the table. “Are you both really crazy?”

His fear on their behalf was all too apparent, along with the shock he had obviously felt on seeing Wyn. But it was hard for Kate to understand. This wasn’t the first time a wandering soul had been helped by the family, especially by her.

“I’ll tell you why I stopped, if you let me,” Kate said, her voice tight with her own rising anger and unease. Tom had raised her after their mother died, but it had been a long time since he had treated her like a child. She’d thought the old pattern was gone.

“First, I didn’t even see him there until the last minute. It was a heavy dusk, almost twilight, and suddenly, there he was. He looked totally forlorn. And harmless.”

Tom moved restlessly, but she went on before he could interrupt.

“I knew he was harmless.” It was true. It had been a strange moment, the air so dense, infused with the pale purple light that always lingered over the desert until full night came.

“You knew? Since when is a practicing psychiatrist like yourself dependent on intuition—inclined to use your instincts over cold, hard observation and facts? Like the knowledge that strangers on a desert highway aren’t necessarily friendly, and even less likely to be safe. What do you think I do for a living, Kate? As the sheriff I’ve plenty of experience with how warped human nature can be. Why do you think you can keep flying in the face of the obvious, that it’s dangerous out there?”

“And why do you think I would jeopardize myself *or* Allyson? And by the way, as a psychiatrist I know a great deal and one thing is certain—I would never imagine I could use only

cold, hard facts to interpret the human personality. I knew he was okay *because* I work with people all the time, just like you. We're talking about human motivation here, a messy thing at best—not one of your black and white situations. For your information, a good scientist uses intuition all the time, and anything else that works, to come up with solutions and conclusions. You simply don't trust me. That's what this is about."

"Hold it, you two," Allyson interrupted, looking as if she was going to cry. "You both do the same kind of thing. You both can read people really well. A family tradition," she added, giving a smile, but no one responded. She tried again. "Kate—Tom does trust you. He was just afraid for us. You know that. I don't care what he says, that's where he's coming from. It's natural. And Tom, you know Kate better than anyone—better sometimes than I think she knows herself. You know she wouldn't put me in danger, ever."

For a few moments the only sound in the kitchen was the ticking of Allyson's little traveling clock that she kept on the counter.

Tom sighed and leaned back in his chair. "All right. Truce," he said.

Kate nodded, but still felt a lingering resentment.

"After all, nothing has happened. Everything is fine," Allyson reminded him.

Tom got up heavily and reached for the coffee pot on the stove. He was a large man, tall and muscular, and his presence crowded the small room.

"He leaves today," Tom said as he poured out a cup.

"Of course he does," Kate answered.

"First, however," he began, and added, seeing Kate's face, "with your agreement, I check out sleeping beauty, just run his license, ID, whatever. Can't hurt. It'll just mean I'll feel a whole lot better." He let a brief grin cross his face. "It's not you that worries me. It's the instincts of strangers, you know? Meantime, while I'm doing that maybe you can get him to your Bellevue—"

"Bellingham!"

"What I said. Same thing. Bedlam either way. Seriously, just run one of your scans. Do a consult."

"Why? That's ridiculous. I can't make someone do that. We're a voluntary sanatorium, remember? Not a state hospital. And I don't have any reason. He's just someone hitching a ride and heading home."

“Kate,” Tom said carefully, the intensity back in his voice. “I won’t say it again. Not as your brother, but as an officer of the law. Either give him some kind of checkup, or I find an excuse to pull him downtown, which won’t be hard given the fact we are really short of suspects on these serial crimes. He’d make a good candidate. I’m way out of bounds not pulling him in now.”

“Stop pushing, Tom.”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. “For heaven’s sake, this is just common sense!” He stopped when Allyson shook her head vehemently at him.

Kate hesitated and then put her own over his for a moment. “I’ll go make sure he’s up. You can meet him for yourself,” she said.

“Oh, I expect he is,” Allyson said. “He’s probably heard both of you, loud and clear.”

“I’ve given you trouble. I’m sorry.” Wyn stood in the threshold to the kitchen, running his hand through his hair, his clothes wrinkled from the night’s sleep. “You’re right,” he said to Tom, “I could have been a danger to you all, but I’m not. And you were right, too,” he said, turning to Kate, “to trust what you felt.”

“How about some breakfast?” Allyson said, rising up from the table, ignoring Tom’s look.

“No, I have to be on my way. I can get the bus in town, as you told me last night. Thank you for this place to rest,” Wyn said to Allyson.

“Sure,” she answered, “any—ah, sure.”

With that he left. They heard him walk down the porch steps.

“So we forget Bellingham,” Kate said, with finality. Tom started to object and then nodded.

“Fine. But I’m still going to check him out at my end.” He turned to Allyson, “I wouldn’t mind that breakfast myself.” He smiled as his wife banged a frying pan onto the stove.

Kate jumped up and ran outside.

“Wait!” she called out to Wyn. He was already at the end of the street. She ran to catch up with him.

“Hey, it’s five miles to town. How do you know you’re even going in the right direction?”

“It isn’t hard,” he said. “We came from the west and there is only one road, so this way is going east.”

“At least let me drive you there.” Brilliant morning light reflected off the dry stone ground. Kate shaded her eyes as she looked at him.

“No, it’s fine. Thank you. Just remember what I’ve said, will you?” Wyn started to walk

away from her.

“What you’ve said? You haven’t said much. Hey, you don’t need to be so cryptic with me. Come on. Let me drive you in. We can get some breakfast there before you make your connection. If you walk you might miss it, and the buses don’t come that often out here. What’s the harm?”

“Why are you doing this?” Wyn asked her. He waited for her answer. The choice she made now would matter more than he could tell her yet.

Kate had the feeling that letting him go away meant something important would be lost. But the thought made no sense to her and she said nothing.

He listened and nodded, as if she had spoken aloud.

“I have no idea,” she said to him. “Wait here, I’ll get the car.” She ran back to the house and into the kitchen for her keys.

“Where are you going?” Allyson said in surprise. “Don’t you want breakfast?”

“I’ll eat in town. Where’s Tom?”

“On the phone. About to head back to work. He needs to rest, but who’s listening to me?” She paused a moment before going on. “He really just cares about you, you know.”

“What he said was sensible, but irritating. He always has a good reason for what he thinks. I know that. He’s just so aggravating. He never seems to doubt anything he says or does,” Kate said in annoyance. But she pushed the irritation away. She could depend on Tom for anything. Pick your fights, he’d always told her, and plan to be damn good at doing them before you start. She had to smile. She was where she wanted to be, doing what she wanted to do. It was not the time to insist on winning every scuffle.

“He’s also a cop,” she went on, “a good one, I know. You’re right, and he’s right, a little. It was a bit crazy to stop last night. I had no basis for accepting Wyn. But I have to follow through, you know? I do trust this—him.”

“Yeah. Okay. By the way, Tom got the windows in for the porch. I forgot to say last night. Make it lots warmer out there. I’ll fix it up for you now your friend’s gone,” Allyson said. “Will you be back for supper?”

“What do you think? I still seem to have no time to find a place of my own these days!”

“My gain. See you later, then.”

“By the way, I called Allen, let him know I’d be around. He didn’t expect me back till

Thursday. Neither did I.”

“Say, I meant to ask—why’d you cut short your time in San Francisco, anyhow? You’d planned on staying there all week, last I heard, and then you call and say you’re heading back just two days after you left!” Allyson said, and she saw Kate’s face shut down.

“I don’t want to dissect it. Just one more romantic idyll revealed as paper thin. A remnant of my old life. I think I’m ready just to give up, anyhow. It’s exhausting finding the wrong man all the time. Hey, you and Tom had it easy, love at first sight.” Kate laughed and gave Allyson a quick hug. “Not to worry. I’ve got a thick skin.”

“No, you don’t. I hate to see you hurt.”

“Allie!”

“Okay, okay. Subject closed. Jenny’s back later this afternoon. She’ll be thrilled to see you,” Allyson added.

Kate gave a quick smile and ran to the car. She backed it out of the driveway, gravel spinning in her wake. To her relief, Wyn still waited down the road, hands in his pockets, staring off into the distance.

“Your patients benefit a great deal from what you do.”

“My patients?”

“You’re a psychiatrist.”

“Ah, yes, Tom and I weren’t very subtle this morning. Sorry about that.”

A half mile down the road she followed its curve, leaving the small enclave of houses behind and heading across the desert toward the small town of Preston. She opened her window. The temperature was already climbing, but the heat was dry, with the wind brushing in sudden waves across her arm when she rested it on the edge of the sill.

Over in the south she caught the flash of silver from the wind farms the county had constructed several decades before, the same ones she had seen on the road coming home. They moved like an enormous flock of birds hovering in one place, rising up on the low hills like waves on the ocean. They never failed to mesmerize her. Up close, they towered above her out of sight, their wings floating in mid-air, a giant species all its own riding high in the sky, beyond her comprehension. She remembered the steady, faint humming sound they made, a vibration, the air itself breathing with them. Butterflies in the desert, someone had said to her once, upon seeing them. Her mother had said that, hadn’t she? Yes.

As she drove, she glanced now and again at Wyn. This man was a threat to no one. She was still sure of that. Yet, there was something else, something in his calm, or was it just complaisance? Not a single protest. And no effort or expressed desire to find his friends, no explanation for his own journey. Why not?

Suddenly he groaned. His face was crumpled in pain, and as suddenly cleared. Yet the pain was still there, she was certain, held in by an act of will.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

He sighed and covered his face with his hands and rocked gently back and forth. “A headache. Blinding flashes of light. Such a pounding,” he said, as if talking to himself.

“You ask me, that sounds like a migraine. How often does this happen?” Kate asked, feeling her clinical self emerge.

“It has only happened once before. I’m sorry it happened now.”

“Keep your head back,” she told him. “Take long, slow breaths. Sip on this.” She handed him her Styrofoam cup that still held some cold coffee from the night before.

“Yes, yes,” he responded after breathing in deeply and taking the drink. “It’s better now.”

Kate drove on. Maybe she should take him to Bellingham after all, at least for a checkup if it would help him, she thought.

Wyn focused on Kate briefly. His eyes were bloodshot but his expression softer with the pain diminished. He looked out the open window. Nothing moved out there. The sun blazed over the land, and boulders rested in profile against the dark blue sky. The low hills were dotted with scrub and the mountains rose behind them in the distance in a pale purple haze that reminded him of the light when Kate had stopped for him. But just like the day before, everything on the ground seemed white or black, stark outlines in the heat.

When he saw the wind farms, the humming was so faint it could have been his imagination. But no, he knew the sound was real. He felt the pain return. It took all his effort to ward it off as he began to take the slow, deep breaths she had described.

“You know, you should get that checked out. We have a lab at the institute where I work specifically designed to diagnose pain like yours. I can run a few tests, see if there’s anything we can do about it. The place is called Bellingham, not far from here. What we do is directed toward a wide variety of problems, including severe migraines.”

“No,” Wyn answered. “I don’t think so. You see, I have to be on my way. I’ll be fine. It’s

stopped.”

“Well, just remember,” Kate added, “you were out in the desert a long time yesterday before I came along. Dehydration can really mess things up, and migraines are just one possible outcome. What did you think about when you were left there, anyway?”

What did he think about? Nothing. He didn’t remember thoughts at all. It had been feelings, not thoughts. The rush of emotion flowed through him again, overwhelming him as it had the day before. He pushed it away, allowing at last the familiar images of his world at the edge of sight to enter, superimposed over the desert, the contrast so great he nearly spoke of it to her in his joy, but of course, he couldn’t do that. He felt the cold of winter, the omnipresent twilight, the snow already falling. He sank into the peace of it.

“You know, last night you fell asleep in the car. You were very restless and said some things I couldn’t really understand.”

Her voice interrupted his state. He absorbed what she was saying with some difficulty, but it was important—he knew it must be. He focused on her again.

“What did I say?” he asked.

“You shouted something about cold and light, about reaching thresholds of cold and light. I almost woke you up, you were so agitated, but then you fell into a deep sleep until we reached Allyson’s.”

The high-pitched whine of desert cicadas began suddenly, startling him. The sounds lingered, as if thousands of the insects had surrounded them.

“We don’t hear those very often out here,” Kate said.

“What are they?” he asked.

“The desert cicadas?” She looked at him in surprise.

“Cicadas. Ah, yes. The insects. Of course.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Kate said.

“Yes. I think what I said in the car, I think I must have been dreaming.”

“Well, I’d have to agree with that.”

He waited but she didn’t ask him anything else. He relaxed. The images came again then, spontaneously, so many of them, filling his mind, pressing in on him. He began to sort them out and determine the best way to proceed. There had been no time to decide all the details beforehand and there was so much he couldn’t anticipate. Anything could happen. But as long as

he could see the images, know the reality of their presence within him, he could cope, he could manage. He saw the ice cliffs, the field of silver flowers below a gray sky in the dry season, the pale purple light of the three moons at night. Above everything he could hear the single note of sound weaving among the images in darting flashes of light. The tone of his world.

“We’re here,” Kate said, breaking into his reverie.

He stepped out of the car and looked around at the substance of Preston. There wasn’t much to see. Across the street was a gas station, alongside a small grocery store, the post office, and a brick building with a sign over it indicating it was the sheriff’s office. A few old homes sat as if they had been planted where they were. Right in front of them was a place called Marta’s Café with a faded sign in the window announcing it was open.

“You look better, but you should eat something before the bus comes. Let’s get that breakfast,” Kate said, heading toward the café.

Stumps of eucalyptus dotted the land in and around the town, trees cut down before anyone realized they gave the only chance of cool shade available. A few crooked Joshua trees managed to survive in a field across the road, but resting under them would bring no relief.

When she opened the screen door the rusted hinges protested. Inside, a huge wall fan spun slowly, doing nothing to take away the oppressive heat. A counter and four tables filled the place. There was no one in sight.

“Hello?” Kate heard an answering voice in the distance and a moment later a girl emerged from the kitchen through swinging doors, dusting flour from her hands. In her blue waitress uniform she still looked as if she belonged in high school.

“Hiya!” she called to them. “Give me another minute and I’ll be right out.”

Kate beckoned Wyn to a table near the window. The girl showed up almost immediately and showed them menus. Wyn shook his head.

“A glass of water,” he said. “That’s all I need.”

Kate ordered eggs and bacon and coffee. “You need more than water,” she said to him.

“No, it’s enough,” he said.

“Bring him some toast, at least,” she said to the girl.

“Sure,” she answered.

“You’re Sally Harbor’s daughter, aren’t you?”

“What if I am?” the girl stared at Kate. “Who are you?”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that you look so much like your mother, and I suddenly remembered she talked about her daughter starting to work in Preston. I’m Kate Morgan, a psychiatrist out at Bellingham. She kept your picture in her room, too. I only met her twice. I’m so sorry.”

“I’ll get your breakfast,” she said, all the warmth gone from her voice.

“Her mother is dead,” Wyn said when the girl had left.

“I’m afraid so. Her mother, Sally, had an unexpected outcome. That’s the toughest part to admit. She actually was doing very well under the treatment. After a short time she was responding with almost normal readings. My boss, Allen, was treating her.”

Kate went silent, staring out the window. The white light beyond the glass chalked out her face, removing all her features. When she turned back and continued the story, he watched the shadows and highlights return, bringing character into her face, so she was more recognizable to him. The contrast of light in this way intrigued him.

“She died suddenly. A couple of months ago. I’d only been here a few months after moving back from San Francisco and she wasn’t my direct patient, so I never met the family, but the few times I saw her she would talk about her daughter. It was a terrible shock to everyone. It was our only failure during that time, and it took its toll.”

She fell silent again as the girl returned with their order and set down the plates without looking at them.

“What is your name?” Wyn asked softly.

She bent her head down and seemed about to cry, but instead blinked her eyes several times and looked directly at him.

“Jamie.”

“Well, Jamie, I can tell you this much. Your mother was very proud of you. You worked hard and helped her at the same time. You never missed a day seeing her. It made all the difference to her. That’s the part to remember most.”

Kate stared at him. Jamie responded, a small smile coming to her lips.

“That’s exactly what she told me the day before she died. She said I was the only person she really trusted.” Jamie fingered a small square locket on a silver strand around her throat. At its center was a single purple stone.

“She gave me this, too. Said I should always wear it and it’d mean she was near me.” She

walked away but her step was lighter, and she was singing softly as she went back into the kitchen.

“Just where did all that come from?” Kate asked.

“I could see her sadness, and you had told me the cause of it,” Wyn said.

“That’s not an answer. Come on. What was that about? Are you part minister? How could you know what her mother thought?”

He drank some water. “I just know pain in a person’s face. It matters to try and erase that if possible, to help in some way.”

The screen door opened and two men walked in. They were both wearing uniforms despite the heat. One of them loosened his tie as he sat down at a table.

“Jamie! Hey!” the older one shouted.

“Coming!” she called out as she pushed again through the swinging doors. When she saw the two men she stopped and looked as if she was about to turn back, but instead came forward slowly, pulling her order pad out of her apron pocket. She gave a quick glance at Wyn and Kate and approached the two men.

“We’ll have the usual, sweet Jamie, okay? And real fast this time. Can’t be away too long or some patients could escape, you know?” he chuckled.

“Maybe you should leave now, then,” Jamie said, but her voice was unsteady.

Kate recognized the men as security guards from Bellingham. One was overweight with a full head of gray hair. The other was much younger and still fit. She’d never had occasion to talk to either of them.

“You’re telling us to leave?” asked the older man. “Why is that, sweetheart? Too hot to cook? Maybe you need some morning loving, hey? Feeling out of sorts, are ya?” He brought his hand down with a slap on the table. “We want the usual. Got it?”

Jamie left and came back with coffee, which she began to pour, trying to hide her shaking hands, but the pot rattled against the edges of the cups.

“Cat got your tongue again?” the other man asked, laughing loudly at his own meaningless joke as Jamie walked away. They both glanced at Wyn and Kate, and began talking to each other in low tones.

“Let’s go,” Kate said, finishing her breakfast.

“Just a moment, if you don’t mind,” Wyn said.

She watched as he got up and walked over to the two men and said something she couldn't hear.

Both men looked startled and nervous. One of them threw a five-dollar bill on the table as they got up and left the café without a backward glance.

"Hey!" Jamie said as she came in again from the kitchen. "I saw that! What did you say to them? How'd you do that, make them go away?"

Wyn smiled at her. "I just reminded them of something they needed to know," he said. "I don't believe they'll be back here again."

"Double-cool by me," Jamie said. "They come in every morning and I hate them. I never know what to do. Thanks."

Kate and Wyn left the café and walked to her car.

"What was that all about? If I had to, I'd say you actually scared those men," Kate said.

"My only intention was to remind them that what they were doing was wrong."

"Come on! They'd have laughed you out of there," Kate said.

"They believed me."

"You are a preacher guy, after all!"

"I told them I knew what they had done and would let people know if they bothered that young girl again."

"Good Lord! What on earth have they done? And how the devil would you know, anyhow?" Kate asked.

"It's not important, really," Wyn said. "They won't do it anymore. Why is this place called Marta's Café? Who is Marta?"

"Well, that's a nice segue. I have no idea. I'll ask Jamie next time I'm there, which isn't very often or I'd have talked to her sooner."

"The bus will take me to San Francisco eventually. That seems a nice place."

"Seems? What is it, a random destination? I thought you were going to Victorville."

"I just have to see what works."

"But you said you came from Barstow, right?"

He didn't answer her. "There's something else I have to take care of. You've been very kind, and trusting." He smiled. "I'll remember that."

"Do you want me to wait with you?" Kate asked, curious at his words but letting it go. She

was disturbed that he was leaving, though she couldn't imagine why. It wasn't like her to get attached to people she hardly knew, and yet Wyn had pulled her into his orbit somehow. At least, that was how it felt.

“No. I'll be fine. Thank you.”

Kate couldn't think of any other reason to stay. She got into the car and made a U-turn on the road. Rolling down the window, she called out to Wyn.

“Take care of yourself.”

As she drove off, she watched him in the rearview mirror, a lone figure standing on the worn sidewalk. He looked much as she had found him, forlorn and tired. When the road curved around, he was out of sight.