



Dangerous Dreamer

By

J.G. Paine

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Dangerous Dreamer

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Dedication

For Carol and Ora, who waded patiently and interminably through various versions of this novel, and who never fail to keep me on the path of righteous writing. With love and gratitude for everything, especially friendship.

Chapter One

Nora Ryder shifted restlessly. She didn't enjoy these weekly editorial staff meetings at *West Coast Woman*, although she understood their purpose. This morning, however, she felt more on edge than usual, and it had nothing to do with the tedium of a meeting.

She'd had another bad night filled with unsettling dreams.

Ever since Doug's death six years ago, Nora had dreamed about him. She knew that what preyed on her mind was the fear she'd never meet another man as wonderful. True, he hadn't really been perfect, but he was in her memories...and in her dreams.

They'd fallen in love at a party—love at first sight, a concept that had always made her laugh, until it happened to her. Doug had been on leave from the Army, slated for a tour of duty in war-torn Afghanistan, and they'd tried to make every moment count.

Nora still remembered vividly something he'd said to her the last time they'd been together.

"I am yours and you are mine," he'd murmured. "With love never ending—"

She'd picked up the refrain as if it were a charm against evil. "—through time everlasting."

Three months later, Doug was killed when his helicopter crashed. He was buried with military honors.

Nora did all the right things—sought counseling, worked through each phase of grief and struggled to get on with her life. She had a job she

liked, a comfortable apartment, friends and family. Her life regained some normalcy, but the empty spot left by Doug's death had never been filled and, she feared, never would.

A little over a year ago she'd met Brad when she was researching a story on investments for women. They'd started to date, just coffee, just lunch, just dinner and a play. The relationship was advancing slowly.

But the dreams of Doug still haunted her.

Last night's dream had started out about Doug, but had morphed into something else, something much more uncanny. She had awakened suddenly, terrified, unable to go back to sleep. But at the same time, she couldn't recall the details or exactly what had frightened her, and that was what troubled her now.

"And remember, if there's one thing I don't want to see, it's dishes, diapers and douches." Judith Davies' voice penetrated Norah's musings. "Keep that in mind if you're tempted to bring me a piece on cooking for two, or how to make a beach cover-up out of a tablecloth."

The staff chuckled, which their editor acknowledged with a sour grin. Nora suppressed a smile, wondering if Judith knew that behind her back her staff referred to her as the Iron Maiden.

Across from Nora, staff photographer Bernie Washington stretched, shifting her bulk forward so she could rub her lower back. Poor Bernie, Nora thought. These meetings must be hell for a woman nearly nine months pregnant, who nowadays rearranged her life around the nearest bathroom and needed help getting out of a chair.

Nora glanced at Judith, hoping the three-d's speech signaled she was coming to the end of her agenda.

"And one more thing." Judith glanced from her notes to her staff, seeing how restless they were growing. "Bernie is leaving us at the end of the week. She's decided to remain a stay-at-home mom." The Iron Maiden grinned, all teeth but little sympathy. "So if any of you know a good photographer who's looking for a job, see me. Now let's get back to work."

Nora grabbed the notebook that contained more doodles than notes under today's date, stuffed it into her oversized carryall and headed for

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the door.

“Nora, wait up.” Nora turned and saw Judith bearing down on her.

“Do you have time for lunch?”

Nora laughed. “This decade or next?”

“Very funny, Ryder. If you’re trying to tell me you’re overworked, I’m not listening. Look, I need to talk to you. It’s about a murder.”

Chapter Two

The Pepper Pot, Judith's restaurant of choice for a quick lunch, catered to business people in a hurry. After they were seated, the editor handed Nora a piece of newsprint. "Take a look at this."

The clipping had been torn from the morning paper. The headline read: *Intruder death baffles police.*

"Talk about déjà vu," Judith exclaimed.

Nora glanced at her editor, slightly puzzled.

"Read it," Judith urged, but then she hurried on. "Ever hear about the Villars murder? This one's identical."

Nora frowned, confused by the deluge of information.

"Read it, read it." One of Judith's long red fingernails jabbed at the back of the clipping.

"Then shut up a minute and give me a chance."

Judith made a face, but she clamped her mouth shut.

Jenny Clarke, twenty-eight, a preschool teacher, had been attacked the previous night by a man trying to burgle her third-story apartment. The intruder, identified as Doyle Glick, seventeen, had died of injuries sustained when he was apparently thrown headfirst through the plate glass window in Jenny's bedroom. Neighbors had called the police, and an investigation was underway. Lt. Kelso, the homicide detective in charge, had admitted that the police were baffled by the way the intruder had met his death, although Clarke claimed she was responsible.

"Wait a sec," Nora exclaimed. "The girl confessed?"

She glanced at Judith, seeing a small grin cross the older woman's face. "You're catching on," Judith said softly. "Emma Villars confessed, too."

Nora studied the accompanying photo of the girl. "She can't weigh more than a hundred pounds," Nora protested. "Are the police nuts? Surely they don't believe her?"

"Interesting situation, isn't it?" Judith said. She leaned forward, speaking softly. "I called a buddy of mine in the police department. Talk is, the creep broke in when Jenny was in bed. He was about to rape her when someone threw him through the window. Good riddance, I say, but what doesn't figure is Jenny's confession."

"There must have been someone else with her," Nora said.

"Maybe. But she's saying it was self-defense. That's what Emma Villars pleaded, but she still went to prison."

"Was Emma Villars a rape victim, too?"

Judith shook her head. "No, spousal abuse, but the M.O. was the same."

"Back up," Nora said. "Tell me about the Villars case."

While they ate, Judith sketched in the details. "It was a Cinderella story. Poor little nobody Emma Carey married wealthy-man-twice-her-age Marcus Villars. The wedding was a society event with a capital E. Everything seemed to be going along okay for the first few months, but then people began noticing a change in her behavior and even a suspicious-looking bruise now and then."

She paused to take a bite of her sandwich.

"It soon became apparent that Marcus was using Emma as a punching bag every time he had too much to drink or things didn't go well at work."

Nora felt irritation beginning to prick. She hated stories like this. "So Emma offed him, right?"

Judith grinned slowly. "So she claimed. We know somebody did, but who it was we may never know." She leaned closer. "This much I can tell you. Emma was a tiny little thing about five foot nothing. She probably weighed no more than ninety-five dripping wet. Marcus, on the

other hand, weighed two forty and stood over six feet. When the cops answered her call, it looked like the room had been trashed in one helluva fight and Villars was dead, the top of his skull caved in."

Nora's mouthful of salad suddenly tasted sour, and it wasn't the vinaigrette.

"Emma claimed he was drunk and he'd started beating her up," Judith went on. "When the cops tried to find out what they'd argued about, she became vague. She said he'd lost his balance and fallen, hitting his head on the stone fireplace. Then, she said, she grabbed the poker and beat him repeatedly over the head until he was dead."

"I don't see—"

"Patience, I'm getting there. On the surface it sounded okay, and Emma stuck to her story all through the investigation and the trial. However, the medical examiner found blood and brain tissue on the stonework over the mantelpiece, *a good seven feet off the ground.*"

Judith paused, watching Nora's reaction.

"How—"

"Aha. The sixty-four thousand dollar question," Judith said, her grin widening. "According to the M.E., Villars had to've been picked up and thrown at or rammed against that stonework."

"But—"

"Now do you see what I meant by déjà vu?"

* * * * *

"The thing is," Judith said as they left the restaurant, "reading about Jenny Clarke reminded me of Emma Villars, and that gave me an idea for a new series of articles."

Nora took a deep breath. The reason for this cozy little lunch was finally surfacing.

"Millions of women are battered every year. A lot of them end up in the morgue. As for the rest... So, new project. A series on women and abuse."

Nora grinned. This was exactly the kind of story she liked to sink

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her teeth into.

Chapter Three

Detective Kelso was disgusted, as much with himself as with the thin slip of a woman in front of him, her face red and puffy from weeping.

Nearby, on the couch, his partner—Elena Morales—watched dispassionately. Kelso glanced in Elena's direction and was rewarded with a helpless shrug. He turned back to the woman, leaning over her, his hands resting on the arms of her chair.

"Come on, Miss Clarke. I'm tired; you're tired. Give me his name and we'll get out of here."

Jenny uttered a sigh that shuddered through her tiny frame. "I've told you and told you. I was alone. Why won't you believe me?"

Kelso's temper snapped. "Do I look like an idiot?"

He hunkered down in front of her chair to gain eye contact, hoping she'd answer if he forced her to look straight at him. He spoke softly, but his tone was laced with menace.

"You listen to me. I am not so stupid that I believe that lame-brained confession of yours. No way could you have thrown that guy through the window. Someone else was here last night. Probably a man, probably your boyfriend or lover or whatever. Someone you care about, someone you're protecting—"

The drapes billowed slightly, but Kelso didn't seem to notice. Morales, however, stood up, frowned and walked to the bedroom door, glancing toward the boarded-up window.

Kelso didn't miss the flash of comprehension in Jenny's eyes when

he uttered the part about protection. He was on the right track. Now if he could break her down before she started asking for a lawyer.

"I can't say I blame him," Kelso went on. "If some punk broke into my girlfriend's place and threatened to rape her, I'd probably kill him, too."

Jenny watched Kelso closely.

"On the other hand, your guy didn't stick around. Now that's not very courageous, Miss Clarke, not at all."

The living room drapes billowed harder. Jenny's head whipped sideways. She stared at the drapes as if transfixed.

Morales glanced from Jenny to the drapes and back again. She drew in a deep breath, started to speak, but Kelso kept going.

"Wait." Jenny sat forward suddenly, shaking, the color drained from her face. "I'll tell you," she stammered, "everything you want to know, but—" Her skin suddenly pearly with sweat. She clapped her hand over her mouth. "I—I think I'm going to throw up," she moaned.

Kelso pulled back abruptly.

Chapter Four

Nora ripped the top page off the yellow legal pad with a groan of disgust. She crumpled it into a ball and tossed it to the floor, where it landed in a pile of yellow paper balls.

She was tired, her mind as blank as the paper she was trying to fill, but she stubbornly refused to give up and go to bed.

You promised to have something to show Judith tomorrow, she scolded herself.

You're accomplishing nothing, she argued back, except putting more trees in danger. Give it up, Ryder, and go to bed. A good night's sleep—

Good night's sleep, hell. If tonight followed the same pattern as the previous night, she'd get nothing of the kind. That damned dream—

She slammed the pad of paper and her pencil down and headed for the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. The sharp chill was momentarily invigorating. Nora groped for the hand towel.

As she dried her face, she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. She'd never liked brown hair, had started frosting it when she was twenty. With any luck, the ash-blond would eventually hide any gray hairs that dared appear. But she couldn't disguise the tiny lines that radiated out from the corners of her eyes and mouth. She was only in her mid-thirties, but already the lines were there. Judith said they were the result of losing Doug, but Nora wasn't so sure. Face it, you're getting older, she told her reflection.

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She switched the light out and headed into the bedroom, crossing the plush white carpet to the chest of drawers. She pulled out an extra large T-shirt.

Suddenly she paused, her hand hovering over something that had been buried beneath the shirt.

It was a framed Polaroid of a young man standing in a meadow. Nora had taken it on their last day together. Doug had signed the photo: *With love never ending through time everlasting.*

Tears in Nora's eyes spilled over as she shoved the photo back in the drawer.

She undressed, then pulled on the oversized T-shirt and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth, wondering if the meadow still existed, or if it had been buried under concrete and asphalt.

Chapter Five

The meadow grass was starred with dandelions. Clouds drifted overhead, appearing to tangle in the branches of the trees.

Nora and Doug sprawled on a large blanket, the remains of their picnic lunch shoved to one side. They peered up at the clouds, trying to identify faces and animals.

Doug rolled onto his side, his eyes filled with love and desire. She smiled into his gaze, turning toward him. He lowered his mouth over hers, his hands moving gently over her breasts. She lifted her head, rising to meet his mouth, losing herself in his touch.

They kissed gently at first, as if savoring the sweet pain of their desire. As their craving grew, they could hold back no longer. One of Doug's hands moved to the buttons on her blouse. She felt the fabric part, the spring breeze cool her skin. "Oh, Doug," she whispered, reaching for his shirt.

Bared to the waist, she pressed against his naked chest, the fine hair tickling the soft skin of her breasts.

His mouth was everywhere, his hands an exploratory team. She closed her eyes, gently rubbing the back of his neck, the sun-warmed skin smelling of his aftershave, of the grass, of clean meadow air.

She felt his hands tugging at her shorts. "What if someone—"

His grin widened. He reached for the tablecloth pulling it over them. She laughed. "You're incorrigible."

"I'm in who? Oh, no, I'm not in anyone! Yet!" His grin gained in

ferocity as he pulled her shorts lower. She obliged, raising her hips, her groin meeting his still-clothed swollen crotch.

It was her turn to be impatient. She reached for his belt buckle.

His grin melted into a groan of yearning. "God, baby, I can't get enough of you!"

She pushed his pants down, grasping his thick cock. It quivered at her touch.

He sucked his breath in hard, his hands clenching in response. "Oh, Nora."

He moved down the length of her body, kissing her, licking her as he went.

She groaned in anticipation, spreading her legs, raising her hips to meet his kiss. And kiss her he did, licking, sucking at the small swollen knob, her special secret spot that was at the center of her pleasure.

She cried out as his tongue urged her higher and higher to an explosion of ecstasy. As she spiraled down from the heights of pleasure, she pulled Doug to her, opening up to him, guiding him into her warm channel.

He groaned as he thrust deep inside her. She reached around his torso, her fingers raking his back as he drove deeply, wildly into her. She felt his muscles tense as she exploded with her own pleasure.

Their cries mingled, then trailed into delicious exhaustion.

Nora felt Doug roll off her. She turned on her side, studying him lying next to her, savoring every moment, wanting to memorize every inch of his tall, well-built frame.

He opened his eyes, smiling back at her, but something was wrong. You can't be here, she thought, raising herself on one elbow, gazing at him in wonder.

He rose, too, leaning toward her, his mouth closing over hers, and yet she couldn't feel his kiss. She closed her eyes, concentrating on his nearness, trying to capture his scent, the sound of him, but there was nothing. It was as if she were kissing air.

She opened her eyes. The wind whispered over her skin, sighed through her empty arms. Doug had vanished. She sat bolt upright,

glancing around.

“Doug?”

The echo of his name was tangled in soft, flute-sweet music.

She turned and saw on the horizon behind her—where there had been nothing a moment before—brightly colored tents sporting gleaming pennants. The pennants whipped and cracked in the wind, a rhythmic counterpoint to the eerie music.

Nora managed to climb to her feet, fighting the wind that tried to anchor her to the grass. She took one step, then another, struggling against the thick air, the eerie music taunting, teasing and calling her on.

The carnival exploded in front of her in brazen color and bold design—glittering stars and moons woven with gold thread on scarlet silk. The music was louder now, snarled in the barker’s cry and the laughter of the performers—jugglers, acrobats, a sword swallower and a clown. Their smiles glittered like gold thread. They beckoned and bowed, stepping aside, urging her on.

She realized she was naked and she gasped, thrusting one arm across her breasts, the other hand over her crotch. But oddly, no one seemed to notice.

She ran on, suddenly uncaring of her nakedness, her search for Doug more important. A sudden turn in the path and she found herself facing the largest tent of all. Sunlight rippled in the black silk, and the wind carried a potpourri of exotic scents—cinnamon and smoke. The strange music was loudest here; it came from within the tent.

“Nora.”

She froze at the whispered sound, which seemed to come from everywhere, carried on the wind.

“Doug?”

The tent flaps lifted, as if parted by invisible hands. She took a slow step forward, then another, another.... At the opening she hesitated, trying to see inside. The interior was pitch black except for a pillar of rising light. It might have been a shimmer of flames or a pulsating column of sparks—Nora could not be sure.

“Doug?”

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A broad-shouldered male figure in silhouette stood on the far side of the column. Nora moved toward him joyfully, arms outstretched, trying to call his name, but the eerie music, rising to a fevered pitch of sound and rhythm, drowned out her voice.

He turned and she screamed, joy dissolving to horror.

Chapter Six

Nora came awake slowly, groggily. Something was wrong. There was too much light in the room.

From the bedroom she heard the buzz of the alarm clock. How long—?

Then she remembered. Remembered it all. Remembered what had begun as a delicious dream. The hope. The promise. The ecstasy. Doug! He was there, alive, with her...then gone...vanished. But she'd found him again...or so she thought...until in the tent...the black silk tent...he'd turned and—

The delicious dream had segued into horror, but now, with the sun shafting across the carpet and the alarm clock buzzing, she couldn't remember what had terrified her so.

She ran into the bedroom to shut off the alarm. When she saw the time, she came wide awake.

* * * * *

Glenlowe had begun life as a small, sleepy town nestled at the base of Southern California's San Gabriel Mountains. Over the years the town had been cannibalized by the greater city. Now it was a suburb, held prisoner by the encroachment of both people and industry.

Nora drove fast onto the freeway, merging like a true city driver into the waves of cars. Her destination was a high-rise in West Los

Angeles. The twelfth floor housed the offices of *West Coast Woman*.

The elevator to the sidewalk was more sluggish than cold molasses, and the sidewalk was crowded with pedestrians who conspired to block her path and slow her down. Not an auspicious way to begin Tuesday.

A longhaired, jeans-clad kid who looked like a college student stepped directly into her path and pushed a flyer under her nose. Nora grabbed it out of his hand, almost without thinking, and stuffed it into her jacket pocket. She tried to get around him, but the little asshole barred her way.

"Hey, lady, read it."

He smelled of a mixture of incense and garlic, and his teeth were in dire need of a toothbrush.

"Move," Nora snapped.

The kid refused to be put off so easily. He grabbed another flyer and held it under her nose. Through her anger her mind still registered the caption: *Balance your life through meditation*.

Nora pushed his hand away and tried again to go around him. He leaped into her path with the reflexes of a mongoose attacking a cobra.

"Didn't you hear me? I said move," she yelled.

"Yongdon can put you in touch with your inner energy," he went on cheerfully, oblivious to her bad humor. "The great lama teaches—"

That did it. Nora raised her fist and shook it in front of his face. "You want a shot of energy in the nose, pal?" she exclaimed through gritted teeth.

His eyes widened and he bit off the rest of his sentence, raising his hands to signal a truce. He backed to one side, and Nora stormed by him.

Inner energy indeed, she fumed silently as she entered the tiled foyer. What she needed was inner peace and a decent night's sleep.

She hurried to her office, praying Judith wouldn't step into the corridor and see her. She was hanging up her jacket when the phone rang. It was the Iron Maiden, summoning her to the Inner Sanctum.

* * * * *

Judith glanced up from her notepad when Nora entered.

"Good morning. You look like hell," she said conversationally.

"I had a rough night." Nora pulled a chair up to Judith's desk. As she sat down, she noticed a pile of magazines fanned out near the editor's elbow. She turned her head, trying to make out the title: *The Fireside Reader*.

"Uh oh. You and What's-His-Face have another fight?" Judith asked.

Nora had long ago given up supplying Brad's name in these conversations. Judith and Brad had developed a unique association—a hate-hate relationship. Well, Nora amended, perhaps that wasn't quite fair. Brad didn't really hate Judith; he simply despised her for what he called her radical feminist views. Judith, on the other hand, detested Brad for being alive. Nora, caught in the middle, had learned not to let either of them bait her.

"No, just bad dreams," she said. "What did you want to see me about?"

"You have that outline ready?"

Nora shook her head. "I drew a blank last night," she admitted. "When I start researching—"

"Not a bad idea," Judith agreed. "Here's a good place to start." She picked up the top magazine from the pile and handed it over. "Half the women in America subscribed to this magazine."

"What happened to it?"

"I thought you knew." Judith's eyebrows rose to lose themselves in a spill of red curls.

Nora looked at Judith with equal surprise. "Know what?"

"The Fireside Reader became West Coast Woman."

Chapter Seven

Nora's jaw dropped. "This magazine was *The Fireside Reader*? I never knew that."

"Well, it went through a few name changes along the way," Judith amended. "My dad was an editor here when I was a kid. That's one of the reasons I was so fascinated by the murder. I *knew* Marcus Villars. I *knew* Emma."

Nora frowned. "Wait a sec. You've got me totally confused. What did Marcus Villars have to do with—"

Judith rolled her eyes. "Try to keep up, Ryder. Marcus Villars owned *The Fireside Reader*."

Suddenly it was all coming together. Nora sat back and gazed at Judith in fascination. "How old were you?"

Judith pondered. "Not old enough to understand the details of Marcus' brutal death, but old enough to understand that something bad had happened. I remember Emma being such a sweetheart, someone who always smiled at me and praised my crayon art. I adored her."

Nora shook her head wonderingly. "Your dad took over after Marcus died?"

"Exactly, and he eventually bought the magazine from Emma's daughter. Then I inherited it." She pointed to the issue Nora was holding. "Look on page twenty-four."

Nora thumbed through to the right page and found a fiction piece entitled "The Visitant." There was an illustration to go with it, but

something about the picture made Nora pause. This was clearly a love story; the picture featured a beautiful young woman—undoubtedly the protagonist, Nora decided—with a male figure standing behind her. Then she realized what seemed so strange. His features were in shadow, lending a touch of eeriness to the drawing. Not all of his features, Nora amended. His eyes seemed to glow.

“Back in the day,” Judith continued, “women’s magazines published a lot of fiction. Now....” She shrugged. “Emma wrote that story. She wrote a ton of love stories for the magazine. That was how Emma and Marcus met, when she won a short story contest the magazine sponsored. And with every additional story she wrote, the magazine collected more subscriptions.”

“So why did he beat her?” Nora asked. “Wasn’t he beating the goose that laid the golden egg?”

“Because he could,” Judith said simply. “Because she was small and helpless. Because he enjoyed it.”

She pushed herself out of her chair. “Have you had breakfast?” Before Nora could say that she’d lost her appetite, Judith pulled her purse from a desk drawer. “Let’s go get some coffee and a sweet roll. I’m starved!”

* * * * *

Ten minutes later Nora was sipping coffee, listening to Judith talk between bites of Danish.

“Read some of the issues of the magazine. Get a feel for Emma’s stories. They were all the creepiest stuff anyone wrote for the magazine.”

Nora frowned. “Creepiest?”

“Eerie. Each story featured a lover, but there was something about him—” To Nora’s surprise, Judith shivered. “And then delve into the court records. I have copies of the transcripts of the trial, as well as news clippings.”

“What about Jenny Clarke?” Nora asked.

“Yeah, you need to follow up on Jenny.” Judith frowned. “Emma

went to prison for her alleged crime. I hope our wonderful justice system is a little more advanced these days when it comes to women's issues. Anyway, this could become a *cause célèbre*." She gnawed her lower lip, thinking. "Talk to Elena Morales in Homicide. She's helped me out before, and last year I gave generously to the Benevolent Fraternal Order of Police, or whatever it's called."

Nora couldn't contain her laughter. "You bribed the cops?"

Judith grinned. "I call it saving for a rainy day, and today it's coming down in sheets."

Nora's grin wavered and vanished. "I don't know, Judith. This is an ongoing investigation. The cops don't usually —"

"Trust me!" Judith was adamant. "I've already talked to Elena, and she's agreed to help us out, at least a little bit. She thinks there may be more to this case than—" Judith stopped, thought for a moment, then went on. "It'll have to be off the record, and we can't print anything till Elena gives us the green light. But it may help us figure out what Emma and Jenny have in common."

Chapter Eight

Detective Elena Morales was an attractive woman with a no-nonsense expression. Even her curves looked hard as steel. "I can give you five minutes," she snapped.

"Jenny Clarke," Nora said.

Elena's weary eyes narrowed. "What about her?"

"I heard she'd been arrested."

"For obstructing justice."

Nora shook her head in bewilderment. "You don't really believe she killed Doyle Glick."

"How stupid do I look? Of course not, but she's covering for someone."

Nora reviewed the notes she'd made after she'd read what she could about the case. It was everything the cops had given to the media, but it didn't make sense.

"The point of impact on the glass was six feet off the floor," Nora said.

Elena nodded. "Clarke says she did it; we know she couldn't have. So who did? That's the part she won't tell us."

"There was no one else present when you guys arrived on the scene?"

Elena sighed. "And the neighbors didn't see anyone. They heard the girl screaming even before Glick went through the glass. We have a lot of witnesses who should have seen someone coming out of Clarke's

apartment—either through the one and only door into the hallway, or through a window. But no one saw anyone else.”

“So how can you say she’s obstructing justice?”

Morales’ mouth drew into a tight line and she rearranged a stack of papers, her glance not meeting Nora’s. Nora wondered if Elena had heard the question. She leaned forward, raising her voice a little. “Detective, how can—”

Morales glared at Nora, her upper lip pulled back over small white teeth. “I heard you,” she hissed. She dropped her gaze, glancing from left to right, then leaned forward. “If you ever tell anyone—”

Nora shook her head. “Off the record.”

Morales drew a deep breath. “It got weird. I’m not sure what happened, what Kelso said to frighten her so, but she was one scared little girl.”

“Because you were going to arrest her?” Nora asked.

“Shut up,” Elena retorted, “and listen.” She glanced around again. When she seemed satisfied that no one was paying attention to their conversation, she went on, her voice almost a whisper. “Jenny said she was going to puke. She ran to the bathroom, slammed the door shut. Kelso motioned for me to go listen outside the door.

“I didn’t hear anything, no sounds like she was being sick, just her sobbing. And saying over and over, ‘Don’t do it. Please, please don’t do it. Please.’”

Nora gazed at Morales as the detective fell silent, frowning, as if she were weighing her next words before she spoke.

“I knocked on the door. I said, ‘Jenny, you okay?’ She never answered, so I tried to open the door, but she’d locked it. I said, ‘Jenny, who’s in there?’ That brought Kelso running. He said, ‘Jenny, you open this door now or—’” Morales took a deep breath, as if she were in pain. “I swear, you ever breathe a word of this—”

“I told you,” Nora said, “I always protect my sources. Check my record.”

“I already have. You’re lucky I know your boss so well. Okay, then. Like I said, it was weird. There was this wind—”

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Morales thought back to what she'd seen.

When the wind had risen again, she'd glanced over her shoulder. She could see a portion of the tops of the palm trees through the unbroken section of glass that led to Jenny Clarke's balcony. The fronds were dead still. But the curtains were billowing, and the pages of a magazine on the coffee table were whipping in the wind.

"Jeez, this weather," Kelso said.

Morales grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the door. "Listen," she said, "let me handle this. You're scaring her."

"Yeah, well—"

"Kelso, this isn't helping. All your threats are making it worse. If you aren't careful, she's going to clam up altogether and demand a lawyer, and then we'll never find out who the guy is." Elena raised her voice deliberately, hoping Jenny would hear and catch on.

Kelso looked sulky. "And you know how to get her to talk?"

"I'm a woman. Let me try a woman's touch."

Kelso rolled his eyes and stomped away.

And the wind died.

Elena put her ear to the door. She heard nothing, not even Jenny crying.

"It's okay, Jenny," Elena said softly. "He's gone and he isn't going to threaten you anymore. Open the door. Let me in."

"I can't," Jenny wailed. "He'll kill—" She whimpered, as if shocked that she'd said too much.

"Who will?" Elena had asked.

* * * * *

Nora leaned forward, waiting for Elena to continue. When the detective remained silent, Nora pressed her. "Who? Did she say who?"

"She said something, but I couldn't make it out. I said, 'Jenny, if

you don't give me a name, Kelso's going to break down this door. Now open it!' This time I heard her undo the lock.

"I pushed the door open and saw her, backed into a corner, shaking like a leaf. I said, 'Who killed Doyle Glick?' She whispered something, but I couldn't make it out. I said, 'Jenny, we won't let this guy hurt you. We can put you into protective custody, keep you safe till—'

"Then she said something really weird. She said, 'You don't get it. It's not me I'm scared for. It's him.'"

"*Him?*" Nora frowned, puzzled.

Elena nodded. "Yeah, that's what I said. 'Who? Who're you scared for, Jenny?' She glanced over my shoulder. 'Detective Kelso,' she said. I couldn't believe what I'd heard. I said, 'You're scared for *Kelso*?' She nodded, and I could tell she meant it."

Despite the stuffy heat in the room, Nora shivered.

"I said, 'Who is this guy you think might hurt Kelso?'" Elena dropped her voice, speaking slowly as if still unable to believe what she'd been told. "Jenny said, 'The visitant.'"

Chapter Nine

The visitant.

Nora grabbed the magazine on the top of the stack and scanned the table of contents. She remembered the title, but which issue? She tossed the one she held aside and reached for the next one. Still no luck.

The issue she was hunting for turned up in the middle of the stack. She thumbed through to the right page.

“The Visitant” by Emma Villars. The story began with a bang!

Nancy crouched by the open window, waiting breathlessly for something.

Nora’s attention was caught—as it had been before—by the illustration of the hero. It was no clear-cut figure, only an outline, a shadow form, a silhouette. There were no features, except for those glowing eyes. Nora shivered. Too weird. Or maybe it was meant to be a trick of the light.

The eyes may have been unusual, but the silhouette did make it clear that whoever he was, he was young and well built.

And then the motivation for this weird illustration hit her, and she grinned. Ah, every woman’s dream guy. Each reader would have been able to fit him out with the features of her own choice.

Nora went back to the story.

...waiting breathlessly for something. Something or someone. Outside, the garden was dimly lit with a soft lavender glow, but in the distance heat lightning lanced the twilight. The world held its breath, waiting for the next bolt to crash against the hills.

"Come to me," she whispered. "Come to me."

Nora's desk phone jangled, shattering the moment. Annoyed, she grabbed the receiver and said, "Hello."

It was Brad. "I wasn't sure if you'd be working or not," he said.

"Ah," Nora said noncommittally. "I am."

"Oh, sorry." Only for some reason, he didn't sound sorry. "I've left a few messages on your answering machine."

Nora sighed. "Yes, I know. And my voicemail. And my e-mail. I'm sorry, Brad, I'm pretty well slammed."

"So I gather." He didn't seem interested in what had slammed her.

Nora pushed the chair back and stood, glad that the phone was a cordless. She tucked the magazine under one arm and walked into the bedroom, curling up on the bed, only half-listening while Brad talked about his day, his meetings, his trip.

"...do you think?"

"Uh...." She hadn't heard the question, had been thinking about a man with golden glowing eyes, and fumbled now to cover her gaff.

"Well, think about it. We can talk about it when I get back."

"Sounds good," Nora said noncommittally. She yawned, and Brad got the message.

"It's late. I'd better let you go."

Nora clicked the receiver off and, stifling a jawbreaker yawn, picked up the magazine.

Chapter Ten

She stood on a vast plain, black as obsidian, shiny as glass. She turned slowly, gazing about her. There was nothing but black glass in every direction except where the plain ended and a mother-of-pearl sky began.

This strangely beautiful sky was pierced through and through by streaks of lightning, black lightning that exploded into shards of white light where they bit into the plain of glass.

Nora was alone, and then suddenly she was not.

Someone was behind her, someone moving toward her. She turned and he paused, close enough for her to see he was a man, far enough for him to be nothing but a shadow figure.

"Nora."

"Doug?" But she knew he was not.

He took another step toward her and held out his hand. "Don't be afraid," he whispered.

"I'm not."

He moved toward her slowly, but she found herself turning away.

Why do I turn my back on him? she thought in surprise as he came up behind her, his hands caressing her arms. His skin was warm; his hands were strong.

But she knew why. He was a stranger. The stranger she had seen in the tent in the meadow. The stranger who stood beyond the column of light. She had screamed because he was not Doug, because he had no discernable features, except for his eyes, his golden, glowing eyes. I should be terrified, she thought, but I'm

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not.

"Who are you?" she whispered now. "What are you?"

"Who do you want me to be?"

"Doug." It came on out impulse.

"Then I will be Doug."

She sucked in her breath, feeling the warmth of his mouth on her shoulder, on the bare skin at the base of her neck. She felt the heat of his breath and wanted more than anything to lean against him.

"I won't let you fall," he promised, and oddly, she believed him. She leaned back, feeling his bare chest, strong, smooth.

"You can't be Doug," she whispered, her voice thick with desire. "Doug is — Doug is —"

For the first time ever she realized that she had never really said the words out loud.

Doug is dead.

She groaned, wanting to say the words but not wanting to say them, not wanting to hear them, because they were so final. If she said them out loud, she would have to put away his picture and all the memories she treasured and go on alone. More alone than ever.

"You will never be alone again, Nora. Not now that you have me."

Around her the black lightning crackled as it touched the plain of glass. It seemed to be coming closer. And the closer it came, the stronger the sparks of desire burned within her.

"I can be anyone you want, Nora. I am yours, with love never ending through time everlasting."

He spoke the words softly, his lips moving over the rim of her ear. His breath warmed her, his tongue flicked gently over her earlobe. His fingertips moved down her arms, down over the backs of her hands, down to her fingers to caress the very tips.

Suddenly she didn't care who he was. She didn't care where they were. She only wanted to feel his warmth, his strength and his virility. She wanted to make love to him and have him make love to her.

She moved in his arms, turning to face him, but keeping her eyes closed. If I look into his eyes and they are nothing but a golden glow, what will I do? How

will I feel? Will I be so terrified my heart will stop beating?

"Don't be afraid, Nora. I will never hurt you, my darling."

She let her hands roam lightly over his upper body, mapping his structure. Broad shoulders, broad, smooth chest, nipples rigid with yearning. Her fingers traveled over his upper arms, hard with muscle. Down his chest again to his stomach, flat, tight—to a trim waist, narrow hips. She wanted to explore—

She felt his hand beneath her chin as he tipped her head back. Felt his mouth move so gently, so lightly over hers. Felt desire arc through her like an incandescent bolt of heat lightning through a night sky.

His mouth was electric, brushing hers so tenderly it only increased her desire. She moaned softly, wanting more, so much more.

As if in answer, she felt herself lowered to the black plain. She tensed momentarily, fearing a cold hardness beneath her, but amazingly the black glass was not only warm, it felt almost fluid.

His mouth moved down her throat, down through the cleft between her breasts. She moaned softly, arching toward him, and felt his warm tongue lick each nipple in turn.

Her arms went around his back; her hands caressed the firm, smooth skin. Beneath, his muscles rippled. She might not be able to see him, but she could feel every part of him. Still, she had not yet explored—

She reached for his hardness, ran her fingers over the warm shaft, wanting to bury the whole thing inside her.

She raised her knees and spread her legs. The tip of his engorged cock caressed her clitoris. She gasped. This creature—whatever he was—had superhuman control of his body. The stroking was a light-as-a-feather sensation, but it nearly drove her mad. Brad had never touched her like this. Indeed, come to think of it, neither had Doug.

"Please, don't stop," she begged.

"Your pleasure is mine," her shadow lover said softly. "I will never stop until you are sated."

She arched higher, wanting more pressure, and as if he instinctively knew what thrilled her, he moved down her body, his lips and tongue caressing her abdomen along the way. Then his mouth was over her warm cleft, his tongue ramping up the rapture. Nora was dizzy with ecstasy. Her need grew stronger

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and stronger until she was ready to burst.

Suddenly her eyes snapped open as she climaxed, her body convulsing in an electrifying spasm as black lightning crackled, the bolts splitting the white sky.

She reached for her lover, wanting to pull him deep into her.

In a moment, he had entered her and she raised her hips, feeling him push deep into her slick wet passage. She shuddered with delight, willing him to thrust deeper, causing them both to climb higher.

He began to move faster, his breath coming in sharp pants, and she pulled him tightly to her as they ascended and exploded together in a powerful paroxysm of release.

For long moments, Nora lay quietly in his arms, her breathing slowing. Then she opened her eyes and saw him gazing down at her, his eyes as golden as the eyes of a wild animal reflecting the light from a lamp. But for some reason, this oddity no longer frightened her.

Then he pulled her tightly to him, her head against his chest, and suddenly her breath caught, pleasure dissolving into terror.

He had no heartbeat.

Chapter Eleven

Nora reached the county jail at a quarter to ten. She'd been granted an interview with Jenny Clarke at ten o'clock.

Jenny's public defender was a busy man with dozens of other pending cases on his desk. When Nora told him that *West Coast Woman* would take Jenny Clarke off his hands and pay for her legal defense, he was more than happy to wash his hands of crazy Jenny and relegate her to someone else's worry list.

No one actually thought that the charge of obstructing justice would stick when she went up before the judge. But obviously the cops hoped that even a few days in jail might scare her into giving them a name.

Before Jenny was brought to the visitor's area, Nora talked to one of the guards about their new prisoner. "How's she doing?"

"She's the quietest little thing I ever met," the woman said. "Not like most of the ladies who parade through here, if you know what I mean." She punctuated the word "ladies" with her fingers, making imaginary quote marks.

"What is she like?"

"Honey, she's not like nothin' I ever came across. Sits on her bunk or lies on it, staring at nothin'." The guard frowned a little. "Sometimes she sings to herself. Hums a strange little tune. Don't ask me where that came from. It ain't no kinda tune I ever heard before. Sometimes she giggles very softly." The guard shuddered. "Weirdest sound I ever heard.

Gives me the creeps." The guard shook her head as she went on thinking. "In fact, I guess if I had to say, seems like she's not even with us most of the time."

"What do you mean, not with us?"

"I mean she seems like her body's here, but her mind—" The woman gave a rueful smile. "And if that don't sound crazy, I don't know what does. But me and the other guards, we worry about her."

"Do you think she's suicidal?" Nora asked.

The guard thought for a moment and then shrugged. "She don't seem depressed. She's actually kinda happy, in a weird way. Seems content to—" She paused, searching for the right word. "I guess content to be where she is—wherever that is."

Nora groaned. Had the incident with the would-be rapist unhinged Jenny's mind? Would a judge find her mentally incompetent and lock her away? Nora hoped not. Jenny deserved better, but she might have to fight for it. At least show some interest in the outcome of the hearing.

Then Jenny was led into the room and helped to sit down at the scarred wooden table. Her handcuffs were unlocked, but not the restraints on her legs.

It wasn't the ugly orange prison jumpsuit that caught Nora's attention. It wasn't the leg restraints locked around the fragile ankles. It wasn't even the pale complexion and wispy tangles of brown hair falling around her face. It was the bizarre expression in Jenny Clarke's eyes.

And they were electric.

Nora introduced herself. "Jenny, your story has captivated us at *West Coast Woman*. Are you familiar with the magazine?"

Jenny shook her head.

"We're a magazine that covers topics women care about. What happened to you was—well, downright scary."

Jenny stared unblinkingly at Nora.

"Having someone invade your home, some big, muscle-bound monster—" She chose the words carefully, hoping to elicit a response, but Jenny sat unmoving.

"You must have been terrified the moment you saw him. I can't

even imagine what that kind of fear would feel like."

Suddenly Jenny began to hum. Nora glanced at the guard, and their gazes locked. The guard gave an imperceptible nod.

It was indeed a strange little tune, and it made Nora shiver.

"But you were so brave to fight back," Nora continued, raising her voice a little over the humming. "To save your own life."

Jenny continued to hum the same eerie tune, her eyes gazing at Nora as if seeing through her.

Nora took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "*West Coast Woman* wants to help you. We'll hire a good criminal defense lawyer from—"

"But I did it." Hearing Jenny speak was a bit of a shock. Nora blinked, pushed her chair back an inch. "I'm guilty. I killed him."

Jenny spoke in a bright, forthright manner that was chilling. Nora leaned forward again. "Jenny, you have to stop saying that you're guilty. You need to let your lawyer—"

"I don't want a lawyer. I don't need one." Jenny pushed her chair backward, struggling to stand. The guard was at her side in an instant, steadying her.

Nora rose, too. She gazed at the younger woman in horror.

"But you couldn't have killed that monster," Nora said. "You aren't nearly strong enough—"

"It doesn't matter." Jenny nodded at the guard. "I want to go back now, back to—" And then she smiled, an eerie, half-mad smile, and put one hand coquettishly over her mouth. "Oops, I almost said—" She giggled.

"Jenny, wait," Nora said pleadingly. "Please, let me explain. The magazine will pay for everything. You'll have the best lawyers, the best—"

She spoke rapidly, desperately hoping that something would make Jenny stop, make her listen.

But Jenny kept walking. As the guard opened the door, the young woman turned and smiled at Nora. "Who loves me, no word of mine shall e'er betray. Though for faith unstained my life must forfeit pay."

"What?" Nora's question was lost in the sound of the door clanging

shut.

For a long moment, Nora stood and stared after Jenny.

She *is* crazy, Nora thought sadly. And yet.... What was that she'd said at the end? The words had sounded like lines from a poem.

Nora whispered the words over and over on her way back to her car. Before she drove out of the parking lot, she pulled a notebook and pencil from her carryall and wrote down what she could remember.

As Nora pulled onto the street, some of the words came back in a kind of mental echo. "*...my life must forfeit pay.*"

Chapter Twelve

Nora found the entire poem on the Internet, and the words sent icy waves washing down her spine.

It was entitled “The Visionary,” and English author Emily Brontë had written it in the nineteenth century.

The final stanzas of “The Visionary” caught Nora’s attention and made her shiver. As she read them, she heard Jenny’s strange little singsong voice and saw again the eyes alight with a kind of uncanny fervency or...madness.

*What I love shall come like visitant of air,
Safe in secret power from lurking human snare;
Who loves me, no word of mine shall e’er betray,
Though for faith unstained my life must forfeit pay.
Burn then, little lamp; glimmer straight and clear—
Hush! A rustling wing stirs, methinks, the air:
He for whom I wait thus ever comes to me;
Strange Power! I trust thy might; trust thou my constancy.*

Nora read the words aloud, then clicked the printer icon. As she waited for the machine to emit the paper, she leaned back in her chair, seeing again Jenny’s fevered expression.

She’d found a link between Emma Villars and Jenny Clarke. It was that word—the *visitant*.

Emma had used the word in the title of a story.

Jenny had spoken the word during her conversation with Elena, and she'd quoted the poem that included the word.

It wasn't the kind of word one ran across on a regular basis, but Nora knew all its definitions; she'd looked it up as soon as she'd returned from the county jail.

A supernatural being.... A ghost, a phantom.

A visitor, especially one from a strange place....

Nora picked up the printout and read the poem again. *He for whom I wait....*

Had both women been haunted? Were both women mentally unstable? Were they strange and unique killers of men? What exactly was the nature of the damn link?

Judith had sent her a box of papers relating to Emma Villars' murder trial—from news clippings to a trial transcript. Next to the box was stacked a new set of clippings relating to Jenny Clarke's ordeal and subsequent arrest.

The Villars pages had yellowed to dark ochre with age, and they were as brittle as dead leaves. Someone—Judith perhaps—had slipped each page into a plastic sleeve to protect it. Nora picked up the top sleeve and began to skim.

Her cell phone's merry jingle flayed her already sensitive nerves.

"Hey, babe, I'm here," Brad's voice cut into her greeting. "Just got off the plane, so I should be home in about thirty. How're you?"

"Uh, in the middle of something big," she said, her tone flat, unwelcoming.

"Ooops, sorry, hon. Listen, how 'bout I come by tonight, pick you up around six, take you to that new restaurant in Malibu?"

For a split second, she wanted to say no, don't bother, leave me alone. But she took a deep breath and said into the silent space, "Okay. That sounds great."

"I have lots to tell you."

She was sure he did. Lots and lots to tell her, all about his trip, his business conquests, his new accounts, his....

Stop it, she scolded herself.

She tossed her phone onto the desk. Her hands were trembling, and that surprised her. I'm angry, she thought. I don't want to see Brad, not tonight, not any night.

And what's the alternative? she asked herself. More of those lunatic dreams? Is that why I'm keeping Brad around? she wondered. Just to keep me sane?

She found herself weighing the pros and cons of Brad—yes, he could be good company, but no, he wasn't the love of her life. Yes, he did keep her from being lonely, but no, she didn't see a future of togetherness. And no, she didn't love him.

For a split second she thought about Jenny's crazed expression and happy little singsong voice: "Who loves me, no word of mine shall e'er betray."

How would it feel to love someone in that way, with a love so powerful that you would willingly forfeit your own life?

She thought of Doug, and tears filled her eyes.

"Oh, God, I did love like that. I know exactly how it feels, and I want that feeling back," she whimpered. But she knew that she never would, never again. Certainly not with Brad.

Unless she found a new lover! Like Jenny's lover...or Emma's. Because they must have had lovers they were willing to die for!

Nora sighed. And where am I likely to meet that kind of incredible guy?

That made her think again of Jenny and Emma and the men they chose to protect. Who was Jenny's lover? Who had been Emma's lover? Why wouldn't the women tell?

She thought of her dreams...of the shadow figure standing behind a column of light...on a plain of black glass against a pearl white sky. Of a shadow form with golden eyes...and no discernable heartbeat.

Strange Power! I trust thy might; trust thou my constancy.

Chapter Thirteen

The new eatery was a seafood restaurant on the coast. The air was redolent with the odor of a freshly netted catch cooked to perfection over a driftwood fire.

Nora picked at a seafood salad as Brad expanded on his recent business trip.

"...so I told him, 'This is a deal you can't pass up.' And believe it or not, he said—"

What 'he' had said was lost in the tune of Nora's cell phone. Brad frowned as she pulled the phone from her carryall with a guilty smile of apology. "Sorry," she said to no one in particular.

"Nora—" Brad started to say, but she waved further speech back as she glanced at the caller ID. "It's Judith," she said seriously. "I have to take it."

Brad's mouth tightened into a thin line, and he breathed a martyred sigh.

"Where are you?" Judith demanded as soon as Nora answered.

"At dinner." Nora's tone was clipped.

"Is What's-His-Face back already?"

Nora took a deep, ragged breath. "What's up?" she said icily.

"Thought you should know. Jenny Clarke just tried to kill herself."

* * * * *

It was the next morning. Nora and Judith were ensconced in Judith's office.

"The cops aren't sharing the juicy details of Jenny Clarke's attempted suicide with the media." Judith gave Nora a wry smile. "But Morales did talk to me on the q.t. Apparently when Detective Kelso heard that we were ready to hire a good lawyer for her, he got impatient and tried one last time to scare Jenny into giving him a name. She snapped. What the cops do acknowledge is that she was moved posthaste to the psych ward."

Nora sighed. "Too bad. I had hoped —"

"No regrets," Judith said briskly. "It's a dead end. At least for now. Maybe someday Jenny will be well again. Until then...."

"Back to Emma," Nora agreed. "I read through the materials you gave me, and I've decided to start with one of the detectives who arrested her. Mel Fisher."

Judith nodded. "God knows there aren't too many people left alive who even remember the case."

"I made an appointment to see him this afternoon," Nora said. She paused, frowning in thought. "I can't say I have a lot of good feelings about this interview. He sounded distinctly unhappy about me 'dredging up all that old shit,' as he put it."

Judith raised a penciled brow. "After all these years? I wonder why he even cares. In fact, I would have thought he'd be eager to talk about it. How did you get him to agree to a meeting?"

"I told him the truth, that Jenny Clarke had done the same thing. Claimed to have murdered a man who was threatening her. Apparently Mel's read very little about the Clarke case and hadn't made the connection. What I told him seemed to startle him."

"I wonder," Judith said thoughtfully, staring unseeing out the window. "Was anything left out at the trial? Something Detective Fisher might recall?"

Nora grinned. "Maybe, if we're lucky."

Chapter Fourteen

Mel Fisher lived in a pink stucco house in an aging, shabby neighborhood. Lawns were as withered as their owners. Paint peeled like decayed flesh, and cataract-white shades blinded front windows. Death made nearly as many stops on these streets as the postman.

Mel was a tall, gaunt man, slightly stooped, with a thick crop of white hair. He invited her into his house in a distinctly uninviting manner—no welcoming smile, no pleased greeting.

Once inside, he disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Nora to gaze around a threadbare living room. The only real decorations were a row of framed photos on the mantelpiece, pictures taken over the years of a younger Mel in a cop's uniform, a pretty woman that Nora guessed was his wife and several kids.

Mel emerged with two steaming mugs of coffee. "Hope you like it black," he said curtly. "Only way I drink it."

"That's fine," Nora said, taking the mug and settling into the chair he indicated.

Mel wasn't one for small talk. As Nora tried to surreptitiously pull her notebook and pen from her carryall, he got right to the point. "Like I told you on the phone, I don't care much for reporters. I've been on the wrong end of their pencils too many times."

"I'm not a reporter," Nora said. "I work for a magazine, *West Coast*—"

"Different title, same smell." He glowered at her over the rim of his

mug. "How come you want to dig it all up again? It can't help Emma."

"It can hardly hurt her," Nora said. "But it might—"

"The hell it can't!" Mel slammed his mug down so hard it sloshed coffee over his hand. But he seemed not to feel the hot liquid. "You print whatever crap you plan to print, you don't think it'll hurt her?"

Nora's breath caught. She put her own mug down carefully. "But I thought—"

"You thought she was dead? Is that it?" His tone was loud, angry. Too angry for a man who had only known Emma Villars as a murder suspect.

"I—I'm sorry," Nora said. "I honestly had no idea she was still alive." Nora put the notebook and pencil aside, all the while watching Mel intently. His breathing was rapid, but it slowed as he calmed down.

"I really mean her no harm," Nora went on softly. "I think a terrible wrong was done to her all those years ago."

Mel's head drooped, his shoulders slumped, and when he spoke he directed his comments to the floor. "I shouldn't have spoken like that. It's just—" His head came up, his glance locked with hers. His eyes were bright with emotion. "Emma was special. Still is. We've become friends, and I would do anything to protect her. She went through hell, Miss Ryder, pure hell in that prison."

Nora leaned forward. "How did she end up in prison? She couldn't have committed that murder. Could she?"

Mel shook his head, a look of bewilderment in his eyes. "No. There was no way."

"Could—could you tell me what you saw that night?"

He straightened up, leaned back in his chair, and she saw from the expression in his eyes that he was looking back through time.

"She was a one," he said softly. "Pretty, not beautiful, not like those fancy models on magazine covers. Little and thin with the biggest, brownest eyes I'd ever seen. Pale skin and dark hair that spun out around her head like a cloud."

Nora's breath caught in her throat. Oh, Detective Fisher, you're under her spell, she thought. I'm sure you loved your wife and you were

loyal to her all through the years of your marriage, but deep inside in some secret part of your heart, the night of the murder you fell in love with Emma Villars.

“What did you see?” Nora asked.

“When we arrived, she was so calm, too calm. In shock, I guess, although I would’ve thought she’d be hysterical, but you never know.”

“The news stories said the murder took place in a cottage on the estate,” Nora said. “I wasn’t quite clear about that. What was Emma doing there?”

“Old Man Villars had one helluva big place,” Mel said. “Big main house, guest house—what they called the cottage and—”

“What about the cottage?” Nora interjected.

“According to Emma, that’s where she wrote her stories. She used it as a kind of office, but between you and me, I think she was living out there, at least most of the time. At the trial she said Marcus came home drunk a lot of the time, and sometimes he brought other women with him.”

“He slept with other women in his own house, under his wife’s roof?”

Mel nodded. “He was a piece of work, as we used to say. Anyway, Emma was in the cottage, and the place was swarming with cops.”

“And Emma?” Nora asked.

“Just sitting in the living room in a green velvet chair. Pretty green, I remember, like spring grass. Sitting there as calm as you please. Smiling, smiling at everyone. And very polite.”

Nora shivered.

“She was dressed all in white,” Mel continued. “Something lacy. Lots of ribbon, too. Beautiful. Only it was splattered with blood.” He eyed Nora. “You got a strong stomach?” She nodded. “Blood and brain tissue. Bits of flesh. Caught in her hair, smeared on her hands and face. She looked like she’d been wading through a slaughterhouse.”

Chapter Fifteen

Nora took a deep breath, waited for her queasiness to subside.

Mel took a swallow of coffee as if to wash away a bile-sour taste brought to his tongue. "They'd covered up the body," he went on, "but me and my partner took a look. Villars was lying on his back, the top of his head stove in."

"The papers said she was holding a poker," Nora said.

"She had been. They took it away as evidence. And yes, before you ask, we did find blood and tissue on the poker, but it wasn't the murder weapon like she kept insisting."

"And she really admitted to killing her husband."

"Admitted it? Lord, she all but sang it. Said, 'I killed my husband,' in that matter-of-fact way you'd say, 'I did the laundry.'" He shuddered. "It still gives me the creeps."

"Did she say why she'd killed him?"

Mel shrugged. "She didn't have to. She looked like she'd been used as a punching bag on more than one occasion."

"But she couldn't have killed him," Nora exclaimed. "You said it yourself. She was very small, very fragile."

Mel nodded. "But somebody picked up the son-of-a-bitch and rammed him headfirst into the marble mantelpiece."

The descriptive statement made Nora shudder. "Did she say what happened?"

"He came to the cottage drunk. Demanded to know where her

lover—"

"Her what?"

Mel nodded. "That's right. She said he thought she was having an affair. She said he demanded to know who the guy was, where he was."

"Was Villars right?"

Marcus shrugged again. "We never found any evidence of another man. It's true, in those days we didn't have the forensic technology cops do today, but believe me, we tested everything we could. And we questioned everyone—staff, friends, her parents. No one knew of any man other than Villars in her life."

"So why did she say—"

"She was protecting someone, that's for sure. And I think that if this guy had been any kind of a man, he'd have come forward instead of letting her take the blame." Mel sounded angry.

"Why did she go to prison?" Nora asked.

"Politics," he answered. "The district attorney was running for reelection. This was a sensational story. He ran with it to show that no criminal—male or female—was safe from prosecution in his jurisdiction."

"But—"

Mel nodded. "You're right. No way she murdered Villars, but the prosecutor didn't care. Emma claimed she was guilty; that was good enough for him. The judge was in the prosecutor's corner. He gave Emma twenty to life. But in truth, she only served three years. Got out on good behavior. No publicity when she came out, no fanfare. She just went home and stayed there."

They fell silent, each busy with their own thoughts.

"Didn't Emma have a child?" Nora asked.

"A little girl, Rose. She was a toddler when her father died. Emma's parents got custody of the child when Emma went to jail. They wouldn't give her back after Emma got out either. They held onto the kid, tried to poison her mind against her mother. But I'll say this for Rose: she's a tough cookie. Soon as she turned eighteen, she went home to her mother."

"And now?"

"Villars had made a will when Rose was born in case anything ever

happened to him. As mean a bastard as he was, he really doted on that little girl. He put everything in trust for Rose, with a stipend for Emma for life. Emma's parents couldn't touch the money. Rose inherited the bulk of the money and the estate when she turned twenty-one."

Nora gnawed her lower lip, thinking. "Could the killer have been someone who wasn't connected to Emma? A business rival, maybe?"

Mel shook his head. "We checked his personal life, his business records, their neighbors, everyone and everything connected to that man even from before his marriage. Everywhere we looked, we ran into a dead end."

"But there had to have been someone," Nora said.

Mel leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "What I'm gonna tell you I never told anyone else," he said slowly. "There was one thing. It happened after Emma went to prison. See, I personally never closed the books on the Villars case. I figured that sooner or later, after a taste of prison life, she'd wake up and want out. In order to get out, she'd have to tell the truth. So I let a few months go by, and then I went to see her. I said, 'I know you didn't commit that murder. You're protecting someone, and I'm going to find out who it is if it takes the rest of my life.'"

He took another swallow of coffee, as if to wet a mouth suddenly gone dry. "I figured that might shock her a little, maybe get her to let something slip. She smiled and whispered, 'Don't waste your time, Detective Fisher. You'll never find him.'"

Chapter Sixteen

Nora gasped. "So she admitted there was someone else."

Mel nodded. "It was a slip of the tongue, because a second later she corrected herself. She said, 'I mean there's no such person for you to find.'"

"And then?"

"Then nothing. I really had nothing, and she never slipped up like that again."

"What happened to Rose?"

"Rose lives in the main house, and Emma still lives in the cottage. Rose was married and had a couple of kids, but I think she's divorced now. I will say this for Rose, she guards Emma's privacy like a watchdog."

As she stood, Nora thought of another question. "Do you think Emma's lover is still alive?"

Mel shrugged. "Don't know."

"Do you think if he is that she'd still be in touch with him?"

"Don't know that either."

Nora picked up her carryall and reached out to shake Mel's hand. "Well, thanks for the coffee and the story."

"Yeah, well, watch what you print about her."

"At the moment, there's nothing I can print. It really isn't a complete story, is it? Now if I could meet Emma, talk to her—"

Mel drew back. "Meet her? Oh, no, she wouldn't meet with you."

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Outside of Rose, she only sees a few folks like her doctor, her lawyer, sometimes me. That's about it."

"I don't suppose you have her phone number," Nora said slyly. "If I could talk to her—"

Mel shook his head. "It's an unlisted number. You'd have to go through Rose."

Nora took a deep breath. "What if I wrote to her? Would you deliver a message for me? Don't worry, you can read it."

Mel frowned. "Maybe. What would you say?"

Nora pulled out her business card and a pencil. On the back of the card she scribbled four words and handed the card to Mel.

He read what she'd written and his gaze rose to meet hers, his expression puzzled.

Nora smiled, thinking about the four words she'd written: *What is the visitant?*

Chapter Seventeen

Nora drove home to type up what she remembered of her conversation with Mel. Halfway through the evening, Judith called. "I've had an epiphany. What if we issued a special edition of *The Fireside Reader*? Maybe we can link up to a special date, like the anniversary of Emma's death."

"Emma Villars is still alive," Nora cut in.

"What?" It wasn't often Judith could be caught off guard, but this was one of those times. Nora savored the moment.

"Mel Fisher has kept in touch with her. It's a fascinating story. Look, I'm typing my notes and—"

"So did he know who might—"

"No, but—"

"Oh, God, if only you could meet her, talk to her, interview her!" Judith was practically babbling.

"I'm working on it. I'll let you know—"

"Good job!" Judith hung up abruptly. Nora grinned into the dial tone and replaced the receiver.

The next time she looked away from the screen, the clock told her it was well past her bedtime. She groaned, but it was a groan of satisfaction. She'd done a good job of organizing the material.

At the moment she was exhausted. She yawned, stood and stretched.

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* * * * *

She stood on a beach, unlike any beach she'd ever seen. She glanced down to smile at her bare toes wriggling in sand as fine as sugar, but it was the color that amazed her. She scooped up a handful and gazed at it. The sand was a pale amethyst; it sifted through her fingers, a sparkling plume caught by a mild breeze.

Pastel aqua water—its wavelets capped with silver foam—lapped the amethyst sand. The wavelets broke against her feet with a sibilant whisper. Overhead, against a sapphire sky, brightly plumaged birds soared, diving close to the water, then rising on currents of warm moist air, their brilliant colors making rainbow trails.

Nora had never seen anything so beautiful. She half-turned, glancing over one shoulder. Behind her the amethyst sand stretched to a thick growth of plants, all shades of green, from emerald to lime to jade.

A sound, a splash of water, caught her attention. She turned back and saw, rising out of the water, the stranger, a naked Adonis with glowing golden eyes. He was still in shadow form, but as he waded toward her, his hand outstretched, Nora sensed that he was smiling, that she had nothing to fear.

"Nora." He took another step forward, closed the gap between them and reached out to stroke the back of her hand.

"Why can't I see you? See your features?"

"You will see me in time." His voice was deep, gentle, soothing. "And you already know me. You know as much about me as you wish to know. I will not harm you, beloved. I am yours until the end of time."

The words were as soothing as his touch.

She raised her hand and he took it, his hand so big it swallowed hers with both strength and tenderness.

"Love me," she heard herself moan.

He moved nearer, until he was so close she could touch his sun-warmed skin. With her fingertips she could trace the features she could not see. Good features, strong features. She raised her face and looked into his glowing eyes. His mouth came down over hers as his well-muscled arms enveloped her. She felt desire rise and closed her eyes as he lowered her carefully to the soft amethyst sand. It was as if she rested on a bed of spun sugar. She sank contentedly into its

depths.

Her lover began to kiss her face—her closed eyes, her cheeks, his mouth brushing her lips. She started to open her eyes, but he closed them again with a kiss on each lid.

“Enjoy the sensation, beloved. Let your pleasure rule the ride.”

“But what of yours?” she questioned.

“Your pleasure is mine,” he whispered. His fingers stroked her nipples, gently urging them to hardness. Desire eddied through her breasts, down to the soft, sweetly aching cleft between her legs. She moaned softly, arching her back. His fingers moved from her breasts to her pussy. He dipped his fingers deep within to better lubricate her. Each time his fingers stroked the tiny hardening pearl, she gasped with the pleasure of it.

Her need for release intensified as her craving grew.

As she had before, she tensed, still fearful he would pull away too soon, leave her in an agony of frustration, her body hungry and cooling too quickly. But as if he could read her thoughts, he whispered, “Relax, beloved. I will not abandon you.”

She spread her legs and felt the softest touch of warm water tickle her legs up to her hips, drenching her lower body. The tide was coming in, she realized.

The surge of water sucked at her clitoris, soaking it in delicious wet warmth. His fingers continued their manipulation; his mouth massaged her nipples. She was bathed in pleasure such as she had never known, the ascent to sexual culmination steady and powerful.

Just as she thought she could not endure another second of this ecstasy, she exploded in an orgasm so powerful she nearly wept with joy.

It was then that she reached for him, to guide his great cock into her now wet and throbbing pussy. But he was not done with her clitoris yet. “Patience, beloved,” he admonished once again. And as if on cue, she felt the heat rise within her pussy and the sweet ache began again.

This time she climaxed more easily and more powerfully, as his knowing fingers and the silvery foamed waters played with her body. And then again and again, until she was more satisfied than she had ever been in her life.

And yet, she hungered to be filled by his warm, stiff cock, to feel him glide in and out, faster and faster until they both exploded.

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As if he knew exactly what she was thinking, he straddled her, lowering himself as she opened up to him, her legs locking around his hips. In a moment he had slipped inside her moist channel, plunging deeply, then pulling back like the powerful ebb and flow of the tide. A surge of longing rose within her, and she cried out as they rode the wave of pleasure to its crest.

Chapter Eighteen

Nora came awake with a start. At the window, pale pre-dawn light filtered through the curtains. For a moment she was disoriented. Then she realized where she was: in her bedroom, on the bed. She blinked, still trying to orient herself, and sat up.

She was completely naked, her skin warm and sweaty.

"Jeez," she muttered, rubbing her eyes with the back of one hand. These dreams were becoming so powerful that they seemed to obliterate reality until she awoke, and awakening was like being smacked with ice water.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed. In the dim light she could make out a pile of her clothes lying on the floor. The top sheet and comforter were tangled on the floor as well.

Nora blinked again, then frowned, reached over and switched on the bedside lamp. What the hell happened to me? she wondered.

That was when the scent hit her, the aroma of sun and sea and something else she couldn't immediately identify. When it finally came to her, she gasped with alarm.

The mysterious scent was the odor of bodies sated with lovemaking.

* * * * *

She stood under the shower for half an hour, letting soap and sharp

needles of water wash away the odors.

When she finally felt clean, she climbed out of the tub and wrapped herself in her terrycloth robe. As she toweled her hair, she tried to mentally retrace her steps from the night before. She remembered the dream in extraordinary detail; it was the time leading up to the dream that she could not recall.

I remember turning out the light on my desk, she thought. I must have been more tired than I realized, because I don't even remember getting ready for bed.

Nora returned to the bedroom to untangle her clothes from the linens. She tossed her clothes into the hamper and started to put the bed back together, but the pungent odor of sex and body fluids permeated the bottom sheet.

"How—" And then the answer hit her. I had a damned sex dream, she thought with disgust. I really am hornier than I realized.

She started to pull the sheet off the mattress, but recoiled in horror. She held her hands up to the light, staring at them.

Tiny grains of sparkling amethyst sand clung to her fingers.

Nora uttered a cry of disbelief and tore back to the bathroom to hold her hands under the tap. Only when she was certain her hands were clean did she shut off the faucet and drop, shaking and sobbing, to the floor. She leaned against the wall, letting the tears flow.

What is happening to me? Am I going insane? It was just a dream!

As if to tease her, the memory of Jenny Clarke's smiling face came back to haunt her.

What I love shall come like visitant of air!

The tune that Jenny had hummed came unbidden to swirl about in Nora's head, playing over and over.

Chapter Nineteen

Glenlowe was beginning to stir as Nora merged onto the freeway; traffic was light at this early hour. She accelerated to a comfortable speed and then lowered the windows to let a chilly breeze whip her hair and sting her skin.

She almost welcomed the punishment.

This is reality, she told herself. Smog and grit in the air, wind cold enough to raise goose bumps on my arms, flesh that feels pain. There is no place in this reality for amethyst sand.

She shivered, not because of the cold.

In the parking garage, Nora found she had first pick of several choice spots, something almost unheard of.

As she was climbing out of the car, she saw a figure out of the corner of her eye. Always wary about being accosted in a parking garage, she turned fast, getting ready to defend herself.

It was the annoying kid with the flyers. Nora felt her blood pressure go down a notch as she realized she was in no danger, only to rise again as he approached, still with the wide smile.

"He's coming to L.A.," the kid said cheerfully, "so here's your chance to—"

"Who?" Nora asked without thinking. By the time she bit her tongue it was too late.

The kid looked shocked. "Who? Why, Yongdon, of course. The great lama. Didn't you read the flyer I gave you?"

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This kid has a better memory than my computer, Nora thought crossly. Aloud she said, "No, I didn't, and don't bother to give me another one, because I won't read it either. I am not in the least bit interested in the great—great—"

"Lama," the boy supplied happily. "He's a Tibetan priest, you know. And he's coming to the United States on a lecture tour."

"Well, good for him," Nora muttered, trying to get around the kid. He nimbly stepped back in her path.

"Did you know that Tibetans believe the border between the natural world and the supernatural world is blurred? Did you know—"

He warmed ominously to his theme. Nora raised her laptop in front of her like a shield and stormed forward. He seemed to realize that if he didn't move, he'd be run over. He stepped to the side and Nora strode past.

"Lady," she heard him call as she headed for the elevator, "you could use an attitude adjustment."

"Yeah, whatever," Nora snarled over her shoulder.

"You'd be a happier—" The rest of his sentence was lost as the elevator swallowed her up.

Nora stepped out of the elevator and walked down the hall, reaching the break room as the receptionist, Gladys—always the first to arrive—was stowing her sack lunch in the fridge.

Gladys cast a startled glance at Nora. "Yikes! I haven't even made coffee yet. What're you doing here?"

Nora smiled a little sourly. "I work here, remember?"

Gladys made a face. "Let me put it another way. How come you're here so early?"

"Couldn't sleep," Nora lied. "Lots on my mind. Could you page me when the coffee's ready?"

"I'll do better than that," Gladys said with a grin.

Nora smiled as she retreated.

But once in her office, the smile vanished. She sank into her desk chair and put her head in her hands.

Why do I dream about a golden-eyed lover on an amethyst beach?

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She didn't want to remember, but the memories would not be denied. The sensation of her lover's mouth moving over her skin, of his skillful hands exploring each secret place of pleasure, of the heights of ardor and the explosion of—

“It was a damned sex dream,” she said. “Just a dream.”

Her cell phone erupted. She dug the phone out of her carryall.

It was Brad. At that moment, when she saw who the caller was, Nora felt her spirits soar.

Brad. Boring egotism and wishy-washy sex. But so normal. So predictable. So...so...real. Brad might be her antidote.

Chapter Twenty

Nora had barely said hello when Brad interrupted. "Nora, I am very sorry."

"Excuse me?" Soaring spirits were instantly replaced with confusion.

"I've been utterly selfish. Ever since I got back from my trip all I've talked about is what's going on with me."

"Oh, well—"

"So I decided I would spoil you rotten tonight." His voice rose confidently. "There's not a thing you need to do except show up. Tell me what you would prefer—a pasta dish or salmon? Or chicken? No, wait, never mind. I know exactly what you want. And I guarantee it will be sensational. What do you say?"

Nora smiled. A few days ago she would have been annoyed by his inability to let her get a word in edgewise while "they" planned a menu. And his assumption that tonight was fine with her. Even yesterday she would have felt irritated by his insistence that he knew what was best for her. She would have found his apology a little selfish if not utterly fatuous. Today, however, his call seemed heaven sent.

The last place I want to be tonight is in my own apartment, she thought. "I'd love it," she said.

"Great! Fantastic! Can you get to my place by six? Dinner will be ready. Come straight here from work. Oh, and don't let the Iron Maiden talk you into working overtime."

As she closed her cell phone, she heard a tap on her door and looked up as Gladys entered, carrying a steaming mug of coffee. "Judith's here. When I told her you were already at your desk, she looked as if I'd sprouted a second head." Gladys giggled. "But you may not hear from her today. She's got a ton of interviews lined up, from now till after lunch."

Nora frowned. "Interviews?"

"For Bernie's job, remember?"

"Ah, the new photographer." Nora nodded as she turned on her computer. Suddenly the world was filled with normalcy, with the sounds of a computer booting up and the smell of fresh coffee and the buzz of people in the hall arriving for work. "Well, I hope she finds someone soon."

Gladys rolled her eyes. "So do I. Judith is never happy when she's conducting interviews, and when the Iron Maiden's not happy, ain't nobody happy." She grinned over her shoulder as she turned to leave.

The office door shut, and Nora's desk phone rang. She grabbed the receiver. "Hello?"

"Is this Nora Ryder?" A woman's voice, low, trembling.

"Speaking." Nora reached for a pencil and pad of paper.

"This is Emma Villars."

Chapter Twenty-one

Nora was momentarily shocked into silence. Then she heard herself babble. "Mrs. Villars. How nice of you to call. I can't tell you how glad I am—" Nora paused, winced.

Into the space of silence, Emma said, "You asked me what the visitant is."

"I—ah, yes." Oh, please, Nora thought in panic, don't let her give me a dictionary definition and hang up.

"What a strange question coming from a writer. You are a writer, aren't you?"

"Uh, yes, a journalist."

"And I'm guessing you looked up the word."

"I did, but"—Nora raced ahead, hoping to buy time—"Jenny Clarke used the same word, so I wondered...."

"Who?" Emma sounded genuinely puzzled.

"Jenny Clarke, the young woman who was arrested for allegedly murdering an intruder. It's been all over the news the last couple of days."

"I don't watch television or read the papers, Miss Ryder. Or, sorry, is it Mrs.?"

"Nora will do. Jenny Clarke claims she killed the man who broke into her apartment. But that would have been physically impossible."

For a moment there was only silence; then Emma said, "Go on," in a cautious tone.

"Jenny is a very small woman. Whoever killed the intruder picked

him up and threw him through a plate glass window."

More silence. Then a distinctly chilly, "I see."

"I believe there is more than one similarity to your own case," Nora said, hoping she wouldn't say anything that would make Emma sever the connection.

"You said she used the word 'visitant.' And you linked that to the story I wrote? But I wrote it so long ago. How in the world—"

"My boss, Judith Davies. She owns *West Coast Woman* and—"

Nora heard Emma's chuckle. "I remember her. A little girl with the reddest hair I've ever seen."

"Yes," Nora said. "And there's another similarity. The victims. Jenny's attacker and your...husband."

She heard Emma's sharp intake of breath.

"I don't understand why you want to talk to me," Emma replied coldly. "I can't possibly help you."

"Jenny quoted lines from a poem," Nora said, "written by Emily Brontë. '*What I love shall come like visitant of air.*'"

"Yes, a beautiful poem," Emma agreed, "but I still don't see—"

"Neither do I." Nora cast about recklessly for the right words. "But she also used the word when the cops questioned her." Nora explained that Detective Kelso had come down hard on Jenny. "Jenny was afraid that someone was going to harm Kelso. When his partner pressed her for a name, all she would say was, 'The visitant.'"

Emma gasped audibly.

Chapter Twenty-two

"Stop, Nora. You are going down a dangerous path." Emma sounded badly shaken.

"Well, unless you tell me why I should stop," Nora said, "I guess I'll keep going. I wonder how many other women—"

"No, don't go there!"

"Maybe if we do publicize—"

"Stop!" The voice was low, the tone imperious. "I think we must meet after all."

Nora let her breath out slowly. "Thank you. I would like that."

"You won't be able to print anything I tell you."

"Why not?" Nora had heard this before, but it had never stopped her from doing her job.

"Trust me, you won't."

"But you'll tell me the truth?"

There was another moment of silence, and then Emma laughed. "The truth about what? About who killed my husband? That's what you're really after, isn't it?"

"I—I don't know," Nora hedged. "I guess I didn't expect you to be so forthright with me."

"Oh, my dear, what a judge, a jury of twelve and an army of lawyers and detectives couldn't learn, neither will you. If you still want to talk to me, come to my house tomorrow afternoon at two." She gave an address and brisk directions.

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There was no polite goodbye, just a click as Emma Villars hung up.

Nora dropped the receiver into its cradle and then stared at it. When her hands stopped trembling, she grabbed the receiver again and punched in Judith's extension.

Gladys answered. "We're routing her calls through me today. Is there something I can do for you?"

"No, but if Judith asks where I am tomorrow, tell her I got my interview."

Chapter Twenty-three

Nora drove straight to Brad's apartment after work. She kept a few clothes and other personal possessions at his place, just as he kept a few of his things at hers. Sometimes having two residences annoyed her. Tonight she was glad.

The evening was a success. Dinner was delicious, because Brad was an excellent cook. He had set the table in front of the glass door that led out to the balcony. As the sun disappeared below the far horizon, he lighted candles on the table. Good jazz played softly at the edge of hearing.

Finally they ran out of things to say and both fell silent, staring out at the city lights blinking on below them. This is nice, Nora thought. Very comfortable. This is what I need to wrap my mind around, to dream about.

Brad insisted she relax while he loaded the dishwasher, and Nora didn't argue. It was too pleasant to sit and sip her wine.

At last she joined him in the kitchen, holding out her glass. He glanced at it. "Ah, there it is, the last glass and no room left—"

"Who says I want it washed?" Nora teased. "Where's the bottle?"

He straightened with a grin. "Next to my empty glass that's also waiting for a refill." He closed the dishwasher door, punched the Start button and slipped his arms around her waist. "We have enough for one more glass each. And then..." He waggled his eyebrows with what Nora assumed he thought was a leer.

"Sounds good," she said with a smile, thinking, This is definitely the way it's supposed to be. Kinda ordinary, kinda dull, kinda very fine in my book. She knew that Brad's lovemaking would be uninspired, but tonight she so looked forward to being uninspired.

* * * * *

It was after they made love that Brad raised himself on one elbow and said, "I think we should make this a permanent arrangement."

"Mmm." Nora wished he'd shut out the light and go to sleep. She had a big day ahead of her.

"I'm thinking of a small wedding, a few—"

Nora's eyes widened, and she raised herself off the pillow. "Excuse me?"

"Well, honey, be reasonable. We don't need one of those extravaganzas with a hundred guests and a ten thousand dollar tab. We need—"

"Whoa, slow down," she exclaimed. "How did we get from making love to planning a wedding? What part of 'Will you marry me?' did I miss?"

"Oh, for crying out loud. I thought it was understood." Without waiting for her reply, he heaved a deliberately heavy sigh and climbed out of bed. Nora sat up, too, watching him in surprise. Coming to her side of the bed, he got down on one knee and grabbed her hand. "Nora, will you—"

She felt her blood pressure begin to rise.

"—do me the honor—"

She took a deep breath, feeling anger rise with her blood pressure. "Stop it."

"—of becoming my—"

"I said stop it." She jerked her hand away. He looked into her eyes and she saw the anger on his face, too.

"I really didn't think—"

"No, you obviously didn't," she snapped.

And then she felt a whisper of moving air against her cheek, as if from the slightest breeze. She sucked her breath in sharply, glancing at the curtains. They moved, ever so gently.

"I figured you'd be just as tired of us keeping two separate places as I am," Brad said.

"No." She verbally recoiled from what she was seeing, feeling on her skin, her tone sounding harsh, panicked.

Brad got to his feet, glaring down at her. "You aren't being reasonable, Nora."

The curtains moved a little faster. Even Brad felt the breeze. "Did you leave the window open?" He walked to the windows next to the bed, reaching out to part the curtains, frowning when he saw they were closed, locked.

"Like I said, it was weird. There was this wind—" Detective Morales' words screamed through Nora's mind.

She jumped out of bed and snatched up her clothes. Brad stared at her in shocked surprise. "What're you doing?"

"I have to go."

He crossed the space between them, grabbing her arm. "Nora, wait."

A gust of wind blew the curtains.

"Don't." She pulled back, trying to free herself, hearing the alarm in her voice.

Brad let go. "Nora, you aren't making sense. Marriage isn't—"

She ran into the living room, dressed in less than a minute and headed for the door.

Brad stood in the doorway of the bedroom. He looked shocked, hurt, puzzled.

"I'll call you tomorrow," she said. "We *will* talk, Brad, but not now."

"Why—" He followed her to the front door.

She undid the locks, opened the door and paused to glance back at him. Am I overreacting? she asked herself. No one deserved to be treated the way she was treating Brad tonight. Worse, she couldn't even explain.

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But I may be saving his life, she thought.

Chapter Twenty-four

The Villars' estate stood high in the hills where homes had been built by old money. They were stately—and in a few sad cases, decaying—mansions of an architectural design that had not been popular for decades.

The driveway widened in front of the house, and Nora parked. The moment she climbed out of her car, she had a strange, almost eerie sense of being watched. Of course! Emma's daughter Rose would be waiting.

Feeling self-conscious, wondering what Emma had said about her visitor, Nora walked up to the front door and knocked. It was opened promptly by a woman older than Nora, an unsmiling woman with a sallow complexion and plain features.

"Ms. Ryder? My mother is expecting you. This way, please."

Nora followed, glancing quickly from side to side, trying to take in the interior of the Villars' mansion. She caught quick glimpses of walls hung with fine paintings, highly carved and polished furniture, shiny wooden floors covered by thick oriental rugs and bric-a-brac everywhere.

At the back of the house, Rose pushed open a screen door and stood aside to let Nora pass. "My mother's waiting for you in the cottage," Rose said. "Stay on that path. You can't miss it."

Nora followed the path through a gate in a high hedge that clearly separated the main house from the outbuildings. On the other side of the hedge, the grounds were magnificently kept, with wide green lawns. Sprinklers sent sprays of water and rainbows across the lush expanse of

grass.

Nora could see the cottage now. It was a small quaint house with a thatched roof and shingled walls. Ivy twined up one side of a stone chimney. Tall trees and huge beds of flowers surrounded the picturesque building, and the mixed perfume of summer flowers rose into the warm air.

Emma was waiting inside the closed screen door. As Nora approached, she pushed the door open, smiling a greeting. "Nora?"

"Yes." Nora returned the smile and entered, then turned to shake hands.

Emma was tiny, a few inches over five feet. Her hair—the dark cloud Mel remembered—was snow white now, pulled into a knot at the back of her head from which tiny, unruly tendrils tumbled, and her parchment-fine skin was etched with wrinkles and lines.

"Thank you for seeing me," Nora said.

Emma's answering smile was rather dry. "I didn't have much choice, did I?"

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Nora said. "I hope that once you hear all of Jenny Clarke's story—"

"Jenny who? Oh, yes, the girl who was arrested. But I won't be able to help you there, I'm afraid. She's made her choice."

Nora blinked in surprise. "Her choice?"

"Oh, listen to me," Emma said abruptly. "What a bad hostess I am. Would you like some tea?" Without waiting for an answer, she added, "I'll only be a moment. Please, make yourself at home. That green chair is the most comfortable one."

Emma's voice trailed away as she disappeared from the room.

Nora stared at the green chair. Mel's words played back.

"Sitting in a green velvet chair. Blood and brain tissue...bits of flesh...caught in her hair, smeared on her hands and face...like she'd been wading through a slaughterhouse."

Nora gazed at the chair in horror. Surely this wasn't the same—

She stepped away from the chair quickly and walked to another one, less comfortable perhaps, but hopefully without any bad history. She

put her carryall down beside it, but before she sat, she gazed slowly around the room, wishing she had the nerve to use the camera in her cell phone.

Her glance came to rest on the infamous fireplace with the marble mantel. If she examined the marble closely, would she find rust-colored stains? She shuddered.

An antique oil lamp that stood on a side table caught her attention. Nora bent closer, examining the lamp. Beautiful and so very strange. The base was silver, molded into a design of twisted leaves and flowers. Or, no, perhaps the eddy of a foamy pool, waves curling on the sand. Or....

Nora reached for it, her fingertips brushing the polished silver. And saw a windup key in the side of the base. It must be a music box, she decided, and at that moment, as she touched the cool metal, an eerie snatch of music came unbidden to her mind. That strange little tune that Jenny Clarke had hummed. How did it go? Nora hummed it softly.

A sudden explosion of sound and a wounded cry overwhelmed the tune.

Nora nearly dropped the lamp as she looked up. Emma stood in the doorway, a tray, broken china and spilled tea spread out at her feet. But it was as if the old woman did not notice the wreckage. She gazed at Nora in utter dismay.

“How do you know that music?” Emma whispered.

Chapter Twenty-five

Nora hurried to Emma, taking the older woman's arm to steady her as she swayed in the doorway. Emma's dark eyes were wide with shock. "How do you know that music?" she said again, her voice shaking with emotion.

"Jenny Clarke hummed it," Nora said. She led Emma to the green chair. Emma sank into it, her gaze never leaving Nora's face.

"Jenny Clarke?" The name came out in a whisper. "But how did she—"

Nora turned back to the mess on the floor. As she answered Emma's question, she piled broken china on the tray.

"Jenny hummed it during the one interview I had with her in jail," Nora answered.

"But—but I thought it was impossible for anyone else...." Emma's voice trailed away. She turned to stare at the lamp.

After Nora had cleaned up the broken tea things and spilled tea, she found a small stool and placed it directly in front of Emma's chair. "Tell me about the music," she said softly.

That got Emma's attention. She gazed at Nora with fear. "You must never, never hum that piece of music again," she exclaimed. "Never. Do you hear me?"

"Why not?" Nora asked.

"Because—" Suddenly Emma groaned, dropping her head into her hands. "May I have a glass of water, please?" The request came out

muffled.

"Of course!" Nora hurried to the kitchen and filled a glass. When she returned to the living room, she found Emma fumbling with a prescription bottle.

"Are you ill?" Nora asked, as Emma swallowed a pill.

The elderly woman shook her head. "Just old, and my heart is iffy. The shock—"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know—"

Emma shook her head impatiently. "It doesn't matter. We must talk. You see, I thought I was the only one."

"The only one what?"

Emma looked at Nora with exasperation. Then she said, "Tell me again about Jenny. Where is she now? Is she still in jail? But I thought you said this only recently happened. There can't have been a trial already; there's been no time. Oh, please, tell her not to be as foolish as I...although...." For a split second, the anguish in her eyes melted into sheer joy. Then she shook herself, blinked, and the anguish returned. "But such a sacrifice."

Nora was torn between letting Emma ramble and trying to make the woman clarify what she was talking about. "Jenny's case didn't go to trial," Nora said quietly. "There wasn't even a hearing. She tried to kill herself, and they moved her into the psych ward. But perhaps in time, if she ever stabilizes and they find her competent to stand trial—"

Emma drew her breath in sharply. "Then it's already too late for her. Oh, dear, I am so sorry. And yet..."

She let the rest of her sentence die away, but Nora had the strangest feeling that Emma had come close to confessing a possible brush with suicide.

"But it's not too late for other women," Nora said. "If you tell me—"

The look on Emma's face stopped Nora's tongue. "What other women?" The words came out in a whisper.

"I—I don't know," Nora said. "But if this thing happened to you and Jenny, it's possible—"

"No!" Emma's wailing cry filled the room. Nora drew back in surprise.

Emma reached out and planted both hands on Nora's shoulders. "There can be no others. I'm the only one with—" Her glance darted to the music box lamp.

Nora followed Emma's glance. "The lamp?" She pushed Emma's hands aside, got to her feet and picked up the lamp, holding it toward Emma. "This?"

"No." The wailing cry again. Emma struggled out of the green chair, one hand holding onto the arm of the chair, the other now clutching at her chest. Nora put the lamp back down on the table and hurried to Emma.

"It's all right," Nora soothed. "I won't touch it if you don't want me to, but I don't understand what it means. Is that the music you were talking about, the tune I heard Jenny hum?"

Suddenly Emma seized Nora's arm. She was amazingly strong. "I have to know," the old woman hissed. "Does she have a lamp like mine?"

"Who, Jenny?" Nora shrugged, puzzled by the question. "I don't know, but I'm sure I could find out."

"You must." Emma sounded desperate.

"But if I do, I'm going to want some answers to my own questions."

Emma gazed at Nora for a long moment. "Who is the visitant? Is that your question?" she asked harshly.

"Only one of many."

Emma sighed. "I don't know why I should care, even about this girl Jenny. She's already lost."

"But the lamp—"

"Never mind, it doesn't matter. Just go." The abrupt about-face stunned Nora.

"May I—"

"I should never have agreed to see you. You don't know, you'll never know. You can't prove anything. None of it matters."

"Mrs. Villars, please! I promise I won't—"

"Get out!" Emma's arm shot out, her finger pointing stiffly at the front door.

For a split second, Nora felt a breeze brush her skin. She drew her breath in sharply, glancing at the trees and bushes outside the screen door. They danced playfully in a light breeze. So, most likely an errant puff of wind coming through the screen, unless....

Nora picked up her carryall and walked to the door.

"Do you want me to call you if I learn anything about Jenny's music box?"

Emma gazed thoughtfully at her own lamp and then nodded. "Yes, please. I think I must know."

"Okay," Nora said. She started to push open the screen door.

"Wait!"

Nora stopped, turned back. Emma was standing now, but the older woman looked as if she had aged ten years in the few minutes of their meeting.

"If she does have a lamp, a music box, no one must play it," Emma told her. "You must steal it. Break it into a million pieces. Throw it into the ocean."

Nora stared at Emma in disbelief. The woman was vehement. What was it about that little music box lamp...?

"I can't do anything until I know why," Nora said stubbornly. "I have to understand why you're so in love with that damned thing."

Emma gasped, the gasp turning to peals of laughter, an eerie, insane laughter. "In love with it? Oh, no, my dear. I don't love it. I love what it brings."

Chapter Twenty-six

Nora drove as quickly as traffic would safely allow, Emma's words still echoing in her head. *I love what it brings.*

What I love shall come like visitant of air,

Safe in secret power from lurking human snare;

"I feel as if I have all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but they don't fit together," Nora said with a groan. "And I'm no further ahead today than I was yesterday." She thought a moment more and then wondered aloud, "Or am I?"

The visitant was something supernatural—a ghost, a phantasm...or a visitor from a strange place, if the dictionary were to be believed. The visitant came when someone called to it through the music. It had incredible strength, the strength to kill.

The visitant had killed Marcus Villars and Doyle Glick. And how many more?

But why had the women tried to protect it?

"Because the cops would never have believed either of them," Nora said to herself. "Elena Morales half believes. At least she's figured out that something was threatening her partner. The wind rose, and she caught on. Why? Because she's a woman?"

Maybe women are more open to strange phenomena, Nora thought. But even so, if push came to shove, would Morales tell the prosecutor that a ghost committed the murder?

Of course not, because no one would believe her. She'd be locked

up in the psych ward next to Jenny.

And besides, to what corpse did this ghost belong? There had been no mention of a dead lover or a dead male relative connected to either Emma or Jenny. Even if there was a ghost, what was the link from Emma to Jenny? Emma acted as if she'd never heard of Jenny, and Nora believed her.

So, maybe not a ghost. But maybe Elena Morales had more information.

She exited the freeway and headed straight for the Glenlowe police station.

* * * * *

Detective Morales was on her way out, and she looked distinctly unhappy when Nora stopped her in the hall. "I can't talk to you right now," Morales said sharply.

"I need one question answered," Nora said. "Did you find an antique oil lamp in Jenny Clarke's apartment? One that might also have been a music box?"

Morales scrutinized Nora as if she was certain the journalist had lost her mind. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't think Jenny had an antique anything."

She started to walk around Nora, but the journalist stepped into her path. "Is there any way I could see the inside of Jenny's apartment?"

"No." The denial was flat, unequivocal.

"But it can't still be considered a crime scene," Nora protested. "After all—"

"Look," Morales said angrily. "Get this straight. You are not getting into Jenny Clarke's apartment." She frowned, studying Nora. "What's all this about a music box anyway? What does that have to do with the crime?"

Nora shook her head. "I'm not sure," she replied. "But do you remember what Jenny said about the visitant?"

Morales nodded. "So?"

"I—I think the visitant is something she called to with that music box."

Now Morales stared at Nora as if the journalist had just confessed a crime. Then she shook her head. "You know, you're friggin' nuts, lady. Now get out—"

"Remember the wind?" Nora said quickly. "The wind inside the apartment?"

Morales' eyes widened and then narrowed. "What wind? I don't remember telling you about any wind."

"But you said—"

Morales shook her head again. "I've got a job to do, lady. This little chat is over." She pushed roughly past Nora and strode toward the exit.

Nora watched her go with a sinking feeling. If she'd ever had a chance of finding out about Jenny Clarke's music box, she'd blown it. Or had she?

Nora turned abruptly and strode back to her car. She'd remembered the name of someone who might be able to help her.

* * * * *

Stanton Garey was an antiques dealer whose business establishment was on the fringe of an old district going to seed.

Nora had done an article on antiques several years before. Stanton had provided her with so much valuable information that she had profiled his shop in a sidebar. Business had surged for months afterwards, and each time she talked to Stanton, he ended the conversation with, "I still owe you."

Now she was about to collect.

A bell chimed when she entered the shop. Stanton was sitting on a tall stool behind a glass counter at the back of the store. There was no way to miss him. It wasn't that he weighed at least three hundred pounds and loomed up over the counter. It wasn't that he loved bright colors that only accentuated his girth. It was his smile and the arms flung wide.

"Nora!" he boomed.

She smiled back. "Hello, Stanton. I need your help."

"I'm yours." The wide smile vanished; he was all business.

"I'm trying to find out about an antique music box," she began, launching into a description of Emma's lamp.

Stanton listened closely, frowning in concentration.

"That's all I know," she finished. "It isn't much, but the owner won't tell me anything about it."

Stanton's intense blue eyes gazed into hers. "There is an owner?"

Nora grinned. "Well, of course. Did you think I'd made it up?"

"I thought perhaps you'd read about it somewhere. Would this owner consider letting me see—"

Nora shook her head. "The owner is a recluse and refuses to see anyone, but if you'd like I can give the owner your card."

"Do, please." Stanton handed several business cards to Nora. "She won't regret it, I promise."

"How did you know?" Nora gasped.

"That the owner is a woman?" Now it was his turn to grin. "Because that's who the music boxes were created for...or so the story goes."

Nora shook her head in bewilderment. "Boxes? More than one?"

The antiques dealer nodded. Before Nora could ask another question, Stanton heaved his great bulk off the stool. "I could use a cup of coffee," he said. "How about you?"

Nora nodded, following him through a curtained doorway into the back room. Stanton filled two mugs from a carafe.

"Now, about those magic music boxes," he said.

Chapter Twenty-seven

"The origin of the music boxes is shrouded in the distant past," Stanton said dramatically. "Most people agree that the boxes were made in Asia, possibly Tibet, millennia ago. Legend has it that the woman who made them was a magician."

"Really!" Nora pulled out her notebook and pencil and jotted notes. Then she smiled at Stanton. "A magician, eh?"

Stanton smiled back. "A very powerful woman."

"Ah, but this is all legend. Now what do you really know about them?"

Stanton pouted as if deeply wounded. "I'm telling you everything, Nora. The music boxes are very, very old and supposedly were made by a woman magician."

Nora sighed. "Stanton, if the music box I saw is one of the ones you describe, it looks like it was made by an artisan. I don't buy the magic stuff."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. All I can tell you is what's in the literature."

"And how many music boxes are there?"

Stanton shrugged. "Again, no one knows for sure. Some say three, some say two, and some say that there were three to begin with but at least one has been destroyed."

"Back to the magician," Nora said. "Why did she create the lamps?"

Stanton smiled. "Ah, this is the good part. The story goes that she had three daughters who were very plain, so plain that they couldn't find husbands and were so lonely that night after night they cried themselves to sleep. Finally, their mother could stand it no longer. She created three magic music box lamps. Each daughter was instructed to light her lamp and wind up the music box."

Stanton gazed at Nora with an expectant smile.

"And?"

"And then she was to wait for what would come." His voice lowered dramatically.

"And?"

Stanton shrugged. "And that's all I know." He struggled ponderously to his feet.

"Hey, wait!" Nora rose, too. "So what came?"

"It's said that the music box summoned a special someone for each daughter." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, and Nora could tell he was having a hard time not laughing.

"Someone?"

"Someone," he affirmed. "Or something!"

* * * * *

Burn then, little lamp; glimmer straight and clear —

He for whom I wait thus ever comes to me....

Nora could not get the lines from the poem out of her head.

Stanton had obligingly dug through his files and found an article about the legendary music boxes. Nora took it and was about to head out the door when Stanton said, "Oh, there is one other thing I forgot to mention."

Nora raised an eyebrow.

"It's not the light from the lamp that summons the, ah, visitor; it's the music."

Chapter Twenty-eight

Once inside her apartment, Nora dropped her carryall and laptop on the sofa, kicked off her shoes and went to the kitchen to find a chilled bottle of water.

On her way back from the kitchen, she stopped at her desk, noticing the light flashing on her answering machine. Her heart sank. Who—

The phone's sudden jangle startled her. She grabbed the receiver. "Hello?"

It was the last person she expected to hear from. "Do you know an Emma Villars?" Gladys asked peremptorily.

"I do," Nora said in surprise.

"Well, she's called here once every ten minutes most of the afternoon." Gladys did not sound happy. "She says it's life and death, but she won't say what the emergency is. The thing is, once I go home, the answering service takes over and they charge every time they answer a call. I can see our bill rivaling the national debt by tomorrow morning. Judith will have a shit fit."

"Did Emma leave a number?" Nora grabbed for paper and pencil.

After she hung up, she took a long drink of cold water to moisten lips that had gone dry, then picked up the receiver again and punched numbers.

Emma answered halfway through the first ring. "Oh, thank God you got my message," she said breathlessly. "I am so, so sorry, Nora. I—"

"It's all right," Nora said, cutting through the apology. "What's wrong?"

"Can you come? I should never have said those things to you, never ordered—"

"Emma, please, it's all right," Nora soothed. "I'm not upset, I'm not angry. It's all right."

She heard Emma's sigh. "It shocked me, you humming the music. But I shouldn't have—"

"Of course I can come back," Nora interrupted. "Tonight? Tomorrow?"

"Perhaps tomorrow morning," Emma said. "Would that be possible?"

"Absolutely," Nora said, happy to accommodate. "Name the time."

"Come as early as you can." The words came out in a rush. "You won't need to go through Rose. Walk around the side of the main house. Follow the path to the back, to the cottage."

"All right," Nora said. "I'll be there about eight."

As she hung up, the blinking light on her answering machine caught her attention again. She pressed the Play button, and Brad's voice filled the room. "We need to talk. I have business meetings tomorrow, but I'm free tomorrow evening. I hope you'll make yourself available. Otherwise, if we can't get things ironed out, I don't see much of a future for us. Do you?" A loud click signaled the abrupt end of the one-sided conversation, and Nora winced.

Nothing like a little pressure, she thought.

* * * * *

Nora smelled freshly brewed coffee before she reached Emma's front door. The older woman was waiting to invite her in.

Nora could see dark circles under Emma's eyes. The parchment-thin skin was more crumpled looking, paler than the day before. She sustained quite a shock yesterday, Nora thought.

Emma led the way through the small house and out onto a stone

patio. Trellises covered with blossoming honeysuckle vines created perfumed green walls on two sides and a ceiling of vines and flowers over the top. The third side of the patio looked out over a vast expanse of neat lawns and colorful flowerbeds bordered by a high wall on the far side. "This is beautiful," Nora gasped.

Emma nodded. "It's my own little oasis," she said. "When I sit here, I can forget that huge, ugly, smog-bound city outside the gates. This is my world."

She indicated a table set with a linen cloth, sparkling silver and bone china. "That's part of what's left of my wedding gifts," Emma said with a laugh. "I don't usually get to use them. Please, sit."

She had prepared breakfast—fresh raspberries, freshly baked yeast rolls hot from the oven and a pot of coffee.

"You didn't need to do this," Nora said, but her stomach rumbled, putting a lie to her words.

Emma filled their cups with coffee and handed the basket of rolls to Nora. "I felt badly asking you to come so early. I thought the least I could do would be to offer you breakfast."

Nora smiled, helping herself to raspberries. "If it's so urgent," she couldn't resist asking, "why didn't you let me drive over last night? I don't live that far away."

Color rose in the pale cheeks. "It would not have been convenient," she said softly.

"You had company?" Nora knew that the smile tugging at her lips belied her innocent tone.

Emma sighed. "Ah, so, we get right to it, don't we?"

Chapter Twenty-nine

"You'll have to forgive me," Emma said. "I've never told a single person any of what I'm about to tell you. It may be hard for me to tell it all in the right order. These secrets are old ones, and I've guarded them far too long."

Nora took a bite of raspberries, quelling an urge to burst in with questions. She needed to let Emma find her own way.

"Even now," Emma went on, "I'm not sure where to begin. With Marcus? I don't think he was quite the beginning. Or perhaps I should say, he was the beginning for me, but the lamp was the beginning for other women who—" She bit off the rest of the sentence.

Nora's breath caught in her throat. Emma saw the expression on the journalist's face and smiled. "You're thinking of Jenny Clarke. My dear, she's lost to us."

"Lost?"

Emma reached out to put a comforting hand over Nora's. "Oh, don't worry. She's very happy now. And I doubt that she will return to us. She's made her choice; most likely she will stay where she is."

"Emma, she's in a psych ward," Nora said. "It's not a pretty place to be. And if she doesn't snap out of this mental fugue she's in, she'll be transferred to a state hospital. She could be there for the rest of her life."

"Her body, maybe," Emma said, "but not her mind, not her heart. It's—she's in a happier place."

Nora shivered. "How do you know that?"

"Because once I, too, faced the same choice. It was hard to choose between this reality and that other reality, but I had a young child, Rose, and I wanted to be a part of her life, too. So I chose to remain here."

"And the reality that you're in now is not as happy?" Nora picked her words with care.

Emma studied Nora with amusement. "You really have no clue what you're talking about, do you?" she said at last.

Nora slumped. "You're right. I don't. But I can't believe that Jenny is happier in a mental hospital. If she'd tell the cops what really happened—"

"You think you know, don't you?" Emma said, leaning back in her chair, still watching Nora's expression closely.

Nora wriggled uncomfortably. "Sort of. I have bits and pieces of information. I've tried to read between the lines, although I'm not sure I'm filling in the blank spaces correctly. I have questions. And maybe the answers would fill in the blanks."

Emma nodded. "Yes, I suppose the answers would. But here's the problem: the police would never believe the truth. It's outside their field of expertise. Ditto the psychiatrists and the lawyers and the judges and all the people who have to investigate the murder of the man Jenny says she killed. No one would ever believe Jenny. Ever."

"Because there was no man in Jenny's apartment that night, was there?" Nora blurted it out without thinking.

Emma shook her head. "Not exactly."

"I suppose you're going to say it's complicated," Nora went on. "But it's not. I looked up the word 'visitant,' and I know what it means. A ghost, a phantasm. Right?"

The smile that hovered at Emma's mouth was definitely Mona Lisa. "That is correct, Nora. That is certainly one definition."

She's playing me, Nora thought angrily. She leaned forward. "So the thing that killed Jenny's attacker was a ghost. And the thing that killed your husband was a ghost. Right?"

Emma burst out laughing. "Oh, no, Nora. Not a ghost. Never a ghost. A ghost is the spirit of a dead person." Emma took a roll, broke it

open and began to butter it. "There is another definition: a visitor from a strange place. That, my dear, is the visitant. He's not dead. He is very alive. And very, very real."

"And the strange place?" Nora pressed.

Emma paused, her head cocked to one side, thinking. "I'm not sure where he comes from, Nora, but I am certain it is not from our reality."

Nora shuddered. "Is the visitant something you summon with the music box?" she asked.

Emma nodded, taking a bite from the roll.

"I tried to find out if Jenny had a music box," Nora said, "but I struck out." She described her brief meeting with Detective Morales.

Emma shrugged as if the detective's reaction didn't surprise her. "You're right, Nora. She doesn't dare say that the wind rising in the apartment had something to do with murder."

"Is the visitant supernatural?"

Emma smiled. "What if I told you that there are people who believe the boundary between the natural world and the supernatural one is blurred?"

Nora recalled the acne-faced kid in the parking garage trying to push a flyer in her face. He'd said the same thing.

Emma settled back in her chair. "It all began with the lamp," she said, "although I've since learned that it isn't really the lamp. It isn't really the music either, but I'm getting ahead of myself."

Nora carefully drew a deep breath. She didn't want Emma to think she was feeling impatient, which, of course, she was.

"You already know a great deal about me," Emma went on. "I'm sure you read all the news clippings of the time. How I was the little nobody from the typing pool who snagged a prince of publication." She smiled ruefully. "It's true. I did that. I don't think I set out to snag him. Good heavens, marrying Marcus Villars was like marrying a caged bear. You never knew when he might turn on you.

"I married Marcus, but we did not live happily ever after." Nora heard the sarcasm. "I discovered on our wedding night that I had married a sadistic, abusive brute. It was also on our honeymoon that I became

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pregnant and that I found the lamp."

Nora sat up a little straighter.

"Or perhaps," Emma said thoughtfully, "the lamp found me."

Chapter Thirty

At the end of their honeymoon in New York, Marcus had business meetings. Emma was on her own and determined to make good use of this time, to explore as much of the city as she could.

On the day before they left for California, she came across a thrift shop.

"It was nothing special," she told Nora. "But there was a vase in the front window that caught my eye, so in I went."

Emma fell silent for a moment, remembering. "I still don't know why the woman in the shop showed me the lamp. She seemed to think it was exactly what I wanted...or needed."

"What did she say?" Nora asked.

"She said, 'This will bring what you seek. Light the lamp and wind the key. And wait for what will come.'"

Nora frowned, puzzled, and echoed the words. Emma nodded. "They made no sense to me either, but she actually gave me the lamp. She kind of pushed it on me. Oh, she did charge me for the vase, but not for the lamp. I was too shy in those days to say no, so I took the lamp thinking it was the polite thing to do. I told myself I could throw it away or give it to someone else later."

"What prompted you to keep it?"

"Well, after it was polished, I found it beautiful and fascinating. There was something about it..." Emma's voice trailed away and she gazed into the distance, as if remembering.

"What did Marcus think of it?" Nora asked softly.

Emma took a deep breath and shook her head. "At first I hid it from him. Later, he thought it was another useless piece of bric-a-brac. He didn't really like it. I think there was something about it that made him uncomfortable."

"And did you light it? Wind up the music box?"

"No," Emma said. "Not at first. Something held me back. It's beautiful and yet, so strange...."

"I know," Nora said. "When I picked it up—" She shook herself.

"After we returned to California," Emma went on, "I settled into the Villars mansion and tried to understand what I had done by marrying Marcus. He was, of course, completely uncontrollable. I exerted absolutely no influence over him. When he wanted to eat, he ate. When he wanted to drink, he drank. And when he wanted sex...." Emma rolled her eyes.

She discovered soon after they reached California that she was pregnant. She was thrilled with her impending motherhood, but her greatest solace was still her writing. Every issue of the magazine in which one of her stories appeared sold out. The newsstand copies were snatched up the day they arrived. Subscription rates soared. The Fireside Reader was becoming one of the most popular magazines in the country.

"I needed a peaceful place to write," Emma said, "so I explored the cottage and decided it would be perfect for me. Bit by bit, I moved myself into the cottage, and I don't think Marcus even noticed I was gone." Emma managed a cynical smile.

"But after your daughter was born...."

"Ah, yes, Rose." Nora wondered if she only imagined the hint of bitterness that colored the older woman's tone. Emma took a deep breath. "Marcus was enchanted with her. As luck would have it, she favored her father. When the nurse put her in Marcus' arms, it was love at first sight."

"I continued to use the cottage," Emma went on. "It made my life bearable. While Rose napped or when the nannies were caring for her, my time was my own. I came here to write."

"And that was when you lit the lamp?" Nora heard the breathless note in her own voice. Emma heard it, too.

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“Not exactly. But one night I had a mysterious visitor.”

Nora sat forward. “A visitor? Someone entered the cottage?”

Emma smiled. “Entered my dreams.”

Chapter Thirty-one

Nora felt the blood drain from her face as she remembered her own dreams. Emma seemed not to notice.

"It was the most vivid and erotic dream I had ever had," Emma continued in a soft voice. "When I awoke in the morning, I was well refreshed and for the first time truly satisfied. If you know what I mean." A tint of color rose into her face.

"This visitor...." Nora had to force the words through lips gone numb.

"He was the most amazing man," Emma said in a breathless voice, as if even the memory of that first night continued to fill her with rapture. "He was strong, yet gentle. Compelling, yet kind. He put my feelings, my needs first. He held me when all I wanted was to be held. He quoted the most enthralling love poetry. It was as if I had known him forever, and yet we had just met. And when he made love to me—"

Suddenly Emma looked directly into Nora's eyes. "But of course he was only a dream."

"I assume you didn't tell anyone," Nora said.

Emma laughed. "Oh, please. Why would I? No one would have believed me. I didn't dream like that again for several nights, and I had begun to think it was an aberration. I wanted to dream of my mysterious stranger, as I came to call him, and I thought of him a great deal by day. So one night I did light the lamp and wind up the music box."

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* * * * *

It was August, and the hot air was thick with humidity.

Marcus and his cronies were partying in the main house. Barks of laughter, loud music, even spurts of shouted conversation punctuated the soft night sounds from the garden around the cottage.

Emma had not turned on the lights at sunset, hoping that the room would cool more rapidly, but it would be hours before that happened. Unable to concentrate because of the heat and the noise, Emma walked out to the patio. In the distance, she saw lightning fork across the city and heard the low growl of thunder behind the noisy party sounds.

She wiped her damp forehead with the back of her hand. She was impatient, edgy. Desperate for a way to relieve this growing fretfulness, she went back into the cottage and paced. But physical activity did nothing to curb her mounting anxiety. What was wrong with her? she wondered. She had never quite felt this way before in her life.

Her glance strayed to the lamp. For some reason—or was it only in her imagination—the lamp almost seemed to glow with an eerie internal light. And yet Emma knew that was impossible.

She picked up the lamp, discovering how warm it was to the touch. The smoothly polished surface seemed to flow like liquid beneath her fingers, but the metal was as hard and firm as steel.

For some reason—she never knew exactly why—Emma struck a match and touched it to the wick. And then she turned the key.

* * * * *

Emma glanced at Nora. “The little flame reminded me of a tiny glowworm. It hardly did a thing to light the room. But the music—ah, that music. It was the strangest music I had ever heard.”

Nora shivered.

“I was mesmerized. It was as if all the other sounds—the partygoers, their music, the city sounds, even the thunder—simply evaporated. All I heard was the music from the music box; all I saw was

the light from the lamp."

"And he came." Nora whispered the words without thinking. Emma looked sharply at Nora. "The visitant?" Nora asked.

Emma shook her head. "No, I fell asleep, and he came to me again in my dream. But this time when I awoke, I found myself lying across my bed and I was naked, my clothes in a heap on the floor."

Emma saw the look and nodded slowly. "Oh, yes, he had made love to me again, my dream lover. And what love it was!"

Chapter Thirty-two

Emma's life settled into a comfortable routine. She took her meals with Marcus, and she spent hours playing with Rose in the nursery.

But the nights belonged to her!

At first, the stranger came to her only in her dreams. The dreams were vivid. The settings exotic, vibrant with color, texture, dimension. And yet, each morning when Emma tried to recall the face of her lover, she could only remember him in silhouette. She could summon up the memory of the way his skin felt and the strength of muscle and even the heat of his body. She heard again the sound of his voice, could bring to mind every word he had murmured. She could recollect the warmth of his breath on her throat, on the back of her neck.

But she could not see his face.

One evening, while she was working on a story, she felt the lightest touch on her arm. At first she thought nothing of it. She was deeply engrossed in her work, all her attention focused on the words. Then the gentle stroke came again.

A breeze? But the windows and doors were closed, and the curtains had not moved.

And again, this time a caress across the back of her neck, and this time she distinctly felt the warmth of a man's fingertips as he drew them gently across her flesh.

Emma drew her breath in sharply, glancing quickly about the room. But she was alone, quite alone.

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

By now the story was the last thing on her mind. With shaking fingers she lit the lamp and wound up the music box. Then—carrying the lamp—she walked into the bedroom, shut and locked the door and prepared for bed.

And waited for what was to come.

This time the dream was set in a forest, the ground below the trees carpeted with scented ferns. Her lover was there, waiting for her in the shadows, and she went to him joyfully.

She awoke, as always, feeling well rested and happy, vestiges of her dream still lingering at the edge of memory...until she arose from her bed and, turning to straighten the bedding, saw on the pillow the crushed leaf of a fern.

Chapter Thirty-three

"Oh, no!" The small cry erupted from Nora. She clasped her hands to her mouth, but from the stunned expression on Emma's face, Nora knew that her own features radiated shock.

Emma's eyes widened in sudden understanding, then narrowed in anger. "You already know," she cried out.

Nora could not speak. She gazed at Emma for a long, silent moment. Emma stared back, waiting.

At last Nora let her hands fall into her lap. "I—I have dreams," she managed to gasp.

Emma recoiled as if Nora had slapped her. "That's why you came here." She spat out the words.

Nora shook her head. "No. I honestly had no idea that...your situation...and mine were at all similar. I thought I..." She shrugged, unable to finish.

Realization dawned in Emma's eyes. "You thought you were going insane."

Nora groaned. "Nothing else made sense. I thought I was having a relapse." She saw the bewilderment in Emma's eyes. "A long time ago I was engaged...he was killed...I went through therapy and thought, hoped—" She gulped and buried her face in her hands, sobbing as painful memories emerged and the tears, never far from the surface, slid through her fingers.

Emma was silent for a very long time. Then Nora heard her say, "I

am so sorry."

"You couldn't know." Nora gulped back more tears, tried to wipe her cheeks with trembling hands. "And that's honestly not why I'm here. Everything I told you about my job, the magazine—it's all true."

She spoke passionately, even as tears coursed down her cheeks.

Emma held out a handful of tissues, which Nora took gratefully. She saw that the anger had vanished from Emma's eyes, replaced with compassion and understanding. And then they were replaced with more bewilderment.

"The lamp...."

Nora shook her head. "I don't have one. I honestly knew nothing about the lamp until I visited you yesterday. As I told you, I tried to find out if Jenny had one, but the cop I talked to didn't seem to know." Nora straightened up in her chair. "However, I was able to learn the history of the lamp—at least what antique dealers believe."

She told Emma what Stanton Garey had recounted.

Emma's answering enigmatic smile got her attention.

"Tibet, eh? Well, that doesn't surprise me."

"You said earlier that you thought the lamp really had nothing to do with the visitant."

Emma nodded. "I've done a bit of research myself, Nora. I was curious to know if anyone else had ever written anything about dream lovers who come to life. What I've learned has been more through sheer luck than anything else. Here's a name for you to research. Alexandra David-Néel."

Nora reached for her notebook and pencil. Emma spelled the name as Nora wrote. "After you read about her, we will talk again," Emma said.

"Does this Alexandra David-Néel have anything to do with the visitant?" Nora asked.

"Everything, I think," Emma said. She stood and reached for a large silver tray.

Nora stood too and began to hand dishes to Emma. "I have a lot of questions, but one in particular. Was it the visitant who murdered Marcus?"

Emma seemed surprised. "But you already know that, don't you?"

Nora sighed. "I guess I was hoping I was wrong, but of course it's the only logical answer."

"Perhaps so, but murder was not the logical solution to my problem."

Nora gazed at Emma, suddenly realizing that she was about to learn what no one else ever had. "What happened that night?"

Emma stopped clearing the table and sat again. Nora followed suit, her eyes fixed on Emma's face.

"It all started with the story I wrote," Emma said softly. "'The Visitant.'"

"I read it," Nora said. "Judith gave me a lot of back issues of The Fireside Reader."

Emma's eyes widened. "What did you think when you read the story?"

"I—it was unsettling," Nora admitted. "Now I understand how damaging to you it must have been."

Emma nodded. "It was as close to a confession as I could possibly come."

"But why? Didn't you realize how dangerous that was?"

Emma smiled. "Oh, yes. But by then it was too late. I had already been pulled into his world, and I no longer cared about this one."

"Whose world?"

"My visitant's, of course."

Chapter Thirty-four

"I never knew what made Marcus think I was having an affair," Emma said. "Although, in a way it was true, if one can be accused of having an affair with a man who does not exist. The night Marcus died, he came home very drunk. It was almost midnight when he pounded on my door."

Nora drew her breath in sharply, picturing the raging man.

"He charged in, demanding to know whom I was sleeping with, behaving exactly like a jealous husband." Emma shifted her position, as if uncomfortable. "He stormed through the cottage, which isn't very big, tearing each room apart, searching. Of course there was no one to find. No one to see, but I knew that my lover was very much on hand, and as Marcus became more and more violent, I could sense the tension in the air."

"The wind," Nora whispered.

Emma nodded. "It is as if that wind is the visitant's energy force. I can tell you that it grows in no time from what seems to be a gentle breeze to a howling storm."

Marcus didn't seem to notice the wind rising. Perhaps he thought it was a change in the weather. His anger was focused strictly on Emma, who sat cowering before him.

"I didn't know what to do," Emma said, her voice trembling, even now, as she remembered her terror. "I knew I couldn't get away from Marcus. I could only hope that if I kept quiet, if I was compliant, he would

eventually calm down and go away. But he didn't."

Nora steeled herself for Emma's next words.

"And then he punched me." Emma reached up to rub her cheek, even though the abuse had been committed many years before. "That wasn't the first time. Marcus had a quick and terrible temper, and he was physically very strong. He had hit me many times, so that wasn't a surprise. What shocked me was what happened next."

* * * * *

Suddenly the wind in the room began to howl in a hurricane-force gale. Emma clung to the arms of her chair, but strangely the wind never touched her, never rocked the chair. And yet, every other part of the room was caught in the fury of the maelstrom.

Papers whirled like dead leaves in an autumn storm. Lamps toppled, rugs curled and slid across the room, framed photos crashed from the tops of tables, slamming to the floor with the sound of a gun firing as their glass shattered.

Marcus raised his arms to protect his face. The oath he shouted was lost in the scream of the angry wind.

As Emma watched in horror, Marcus was literally lifted off his feet. It was as if invisible arms held him as one would hold a battering ram. And then she saw her husband smashed headfirst against the stone mantelpiece, not once, but over and over until his face was unrecognizable and the top of his head mashed to a bloody brainless pulp.

* * * * *

Emma's eyes were wide as she looked back through time at the hideous scene. "I think I screamed, 'No,' again and again, but my words went unheeded." She was silent for a moment. "As soon as Marcus was dead, the wind expired and the room became absolutely quiet."

"Oh, my God," Nora gasped. "What did you do?"

"I don't remember exactly, except that I sat for a very long time

staring at my husband's corpse and thinking, 'None of this is real. It's all a dream.' Only of course it wasn't. It was horribly real."

Emma sighed. "At some point I called the police. When I heard the sirens in the distance, something in me came to life. I knew that no one would ever believe the truth. So I had to concoct a story. I grabbed the poker and hit Marcus several times until the end of the poker was covered with blood and—"

She stopped, putting her hand over her mouth. She stayed motionless for several moments before going on.

"I was so horrified and nauseated by what I was doing, I could barely stand up. I collapsed into a chair and waited for the police to arrive."

"The green velvet chair," Nora murmured.

Emma glanced sharply at Nora and nodded. "How did you—?"

"Mel Fisher," Nora said. "That night is indelibly imprinted in his memory."

Emma smiled. "He was a nice young man, perhaps the only policeman who really looked at me as if I were a human being, not just a murder suspect."

"Mel had quite a crush on you," Nora said. "I think he still does."

"I know. If I let him, he would move in with me in a heartbeat. But the fact is, I don't dare let anyone real into my life."

Nora drew her breath in sharply. "Because of your visitant?"

"Of course. Imagine what would happen if Mel and I had a falling out, a lovers' quarrel? I can't take that risk." Emma stood again. "Let's go inside. It's getting too hot out here."

As they walked through the front of the house, Nora found herself glancing about. "Is he here now?"

Emma regarded Nora with amusement. "My visitant? He is always here. He never leaves my side."

"He keeps you a prisoner," Nora murmured.

"There's no need to whisper," Emma said. "It doesn't matter what you say, only how we both feel. If he senses that I am being threatened, he will protect me."

"But you're still a prisoner," Nora persisted.

"A prisoner of my own making. I choose this life because it is perfect for me." She gazed long and hard into Nora's eyes. "But enough of me. We need to talk about you. You are in danger, Nora."

Nora blinked in surprise, drew back. "Me? What danger?"

"You know what these dream creatures are capable of, and it seems that you have created a visitant of your own. You need to decide what you will do with him, before it's too late."

Chapter Thirty-five

...you have created a visitant of your own—

Emma's words went round and round in Nora's head as she drove away. Had other women besides Emma and Jenny created visitants?

What I love shall come like visitant of air,

Safe in secret power from lurking human snare;

It would appear so, if the poem was any indication. But how many women? And through how many millennia? Had other women found themselves trapped by dream creatures?

She thought of something she had meant to ask Emma, but they'd gotten sidetracked. How was the visitant created; how had he come to life? Then she remembered what Emma had told her to do: Learn about Alexandra David-Néel.

* * * * *

Nora tiptoed into the main room of the Glenlowe Public Library, looking for a place to work located conveniently close to the non-fiction stacks as well as the main reference desk. She set up her laptop and went to work.

Between the library's decent collection of reference books and the information she found on her computer, Nora was soon making notes with a vengeance.

Alexandra David-Néel—born in 1868—had traveled, written and

studied in and about a country she sometimes referred to as 'home'—Tibet. Nora remembered that Emma had not been surprised about the lamp's connection to Tibet.

Alexandra had been especially interested in things spiritual. She had even been made an honorary lama, the first Westerner and the first woman to be accorded such an honor.

It wasn't long before Nora stumbled across a book by Alexandra David-Néel—*Magic and Mystery in Tibet*—that Nora felt sure might help her. It was a reference book and she wasn't able to check it out. But she leafed through it fairly rapidly, coming suddenly upon a section about thought forms.

In Tibet, Nora learned, these thought forms were known as tulpas. Alexandra had written that some were created purposefully, but others apparently could be formed unconsciously.

Alexandra warned her readers that the practice of deliberately creating a thought form was a dangerous one, especially for anyone who had not reached a high level of spiritual enlightenment and was not fully aware of the psychic forces at work. Worse, once the tulpa became strong enough, it could free itself from its creator's control.

In freeing itself, the thought form sometimes struggled with its designer, and Alexandra advised her readers that she had heard stories of people being severely injured or even killed in the clash.

Once these mind creatures were made, they lived independently. It was true that as a rule they disappeared upon the death of the maker, but some had been formed expressly to survive.

Alexandra recounted her experience of seeing a tulpa that she believed to be a real person. Curious, the woman set out to generate her own mind creature. For her experiment she chose to make a jolly little monk, short and fat. In order to create him, she had to perform a prescribed concentration of thought and other rites. It took her a number of months, but little by little the phantom monk was formed and he became a kind of guest, living with her in her quarters.

Once she had formed the tulpa, Alexandra came out of seclusion, and she and her traveling party began a tour. The monk did not remain

behind, but included himself in the party. Alexandra stated in her book that she often saw her chubby little monk. In fact, it was not necessary for her to think of him for him to appear.

He seemed to be another traveler. He walked, stopped, looked about him, everything any traveler might do. Alexandra wrote that the illusion was mostly visual, although she sometimes felt as if a monk's robe had rubbed against her. Once, she thought she felt a hand on her shoulder.

But then things began to change—and for the worse.

Chapter Thirty-six

Alexandra David-Néel's thought form was changing. Gradually his appearance shifted from a round-cheeked, happy-faced little man to someone with leaner features. He assumed a sardonic, crafty, even malevolent look. Alexandra noticed that he was becoming more bold and troublesome.

One day a herdsman brought Alexandra a gift of butter. During the man's visit, he asked who the lama in her tent was. It was the tulpa, but the herdsman had mistaken the thought form for a living, breathing person. That was when Alexandra realized that the tulpa had broken free of her control.

Now the thought form turned from an experiment into an unwanted phenomenon. Alexandra referred to her mind creature as her 'day-nightmare.' His presence became more and more difficult for her. Since she was planning a journey to the city of Lhasa and needed to be able to think calmly about this excursion, she decided the tulpa would have to be dissolved.

She retreated once again into meditation and performed rites to extinguish the mind creature, but it took hard work to achieve her ends—so firm a hold on life did her tulpa have.

* * * * *

When Nora emerged from the library, she saw it was already

mid-afternoon, and she was starving. She hadn't had a thing to eat since her breakfast with Emma.

The Pepper Pot was not far away. Nora headed straight for it.

She was devouring a hamburger and French fries with silent apologies to her hips when she heard her name. She looked up. Brad stood on the other side of the table staring at her as if she had grown a second head.

Nora tried to smile a greeting with her mouth full. As she chewed, Brad said, "What are you doing here?"

"Lunch," she said around her mouthful, feeling annoyed at Brad for asking such a silly question.

Brad frowned, glancing at his watch. "At three in the afternoon? I tried to reach you earlier, but you must have turned off your cell phone."

Nora realized she hadn't checked for phone messages. Swallowing, she apologized.

"And you haven't checked your e-mail either."

It was the look on his face, that you're-guilty-of-not-being-where-I-want-you-when-I-want-you-there expression, that made her lose her temper.

"Look, Brad, I am up to here in a big story." Her voice rose over his. People around them stopped talking and turned to stare.

Brad glanced from side to side, turning beet red. He pulled out the chair he was standing behind and sat. "Would you please lower your voice," he said between clenched teeth.

Nora took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," she said, thinking, I sure say that a lot to him these days.

"I'm not trying to crowd you, Nora, but we need to talk."

"Well, here we are, talking," she said cheerfully, cramming more French fries into her mouth.

Brad watched her with a look of disgust. "I thought we agreed you wouldn't eat so much red meat."

"That was before I got so hungry I wanted to eat a live cow," she said recklessly.

"I don't get it. What's gotten into you?" He seemed genuinely

puzzled.

Nora took a deep breath and sat back in her chair. "I'm not sure our relationship is working out for us right now."

"Well, if you spent a little more time on the relationship and a little less time letting the Iron Maiden drown you in assignments—"

Nora sat bolt upright, fury killing what remained of her appetite. "That's not fair," she said. "You're the one who goes out of town on a regular basis, but you expect me to be at your beck-and-call when you come back."

They gazed at each other for a long, silent moment, until Nora's waitress appeared at her elbow. "Will there be anything else?"

Nora paid for her lunch and left the restaurant, with Brad on her heels. In the parking lot, she explained she wouldn't be free that evening. If he was disappointed or angry, Brad didn't show it, and they agreed to get together soon for that long overdue talk.

As she pulled onto the street, Nora realized that she and Brad had had an argument in public and nothing terrible had happened. There had been no eerie wind in the restaurant. Maybe staying out in the open with other people around was the best possible thing they could do until they worked out the details of their relationship.

But Nora knew she couldn't begin to think about her relationship with Brad until she figured out how to get rid of her tulpa.

Chapter Thirty-seven

The next morning the phone rang as Nora was dressing for work.

"Is this Nora Ryder?" The voice seemed somehow familiar, but Nora couldn't put a name or face to it.

"It is."

"This is Rose Lansky. Uh, you know my mother, Emma Villars." The woman's voice shook a little when she said her mother's name, and Nora suddenly had a sense of foreboding.

"I'm calling to tell you that my mother died last night," Rose added brusquely.

"What?" Nora collapsed on the edge of her bed. "What happened?"

"She had a heart attack," Rose said. "By the time the ambulance got here, it was too late."

"Oh, my God." Nora felt as if she'd been knocked sideways. "I saw her yesterday. I can't believe she— She was such a wonderful person."

"She liked you, too," Rose said more softly. "And that's why I'm calling. She didn't have a lot of friends, just you and Mr. Fisher."

Perhaps it was Emma's sudden death that made her feel adrift, Nora thought that night as she got ready for bed. As if a life raft had been pulled away, as if an anchor had been broken. I was counting on her to help me figure out a way to destroy the visitant. Now I'm on my own. There's no one left I can talk to.

And suddenly she felt desperately afraid.

* * * * *

She crouched in a forest of giant ferns, as tall as a two-story building, rising around her like monolithic sentinels, their fronds reaching out in all directions. These sentinels were angry, their wind-whipped leaves snapping at Nora's head. She ducked and backed from them, but they surrounded her, an army of fury-driven foliage. Terrified, she tried to run, but there seemed to be no safe haven.

Well-muscled arms wrapped around her; she leaned against a strong, smooth chest. "Don't be afraid, beloved. I am here. I will protect you."

She turned in his arms, burying her face against his chest. "I'm so tired."

"You are safe with me, beloved."

She felt the wind vanish, heard nothing for a moment, and then at the edge of consciousness she heard the steady splash of water. She opened her eyes, raised her head and looked around.

She was standing in a grotto; the walls and ceiling sparkled with rainbow-hued crystals, like elegant jewels. Cold fire danced in their depths.

At the back of the cavern, streams of silver water trickled down the walls, pooling at the bottom in a rock basin. The pool was lighted from beneath; the water glowed with a silvery light. This light, it appeared, was the only source of illumination in the grotto.

Nora looked down. The rock floor was carpeted with a thick layer of moss. When she took a step forward, her feet sank into the soft, spongy mass. Through the heavy growth small fountains of warm water spurted. The water danced in the light, catching the cold fire of the crystals to make rainbows in its depths.

Nora looked up again and saw a figure standing near the silver pool, his face and body in shadow; only his eyes were alight with that eerie golden glow.

"I am here, beloved." His voice was soothing, reassuring.

Suddenly, all that mattered was that she was here and he was here

and she was safe. She raised her arms, holding out her hands to him.

Love me, she thought. Oh, please, love me.

Magically, he appeared beside her. She had not seen him move, yet here he was. His head dipped, his lips touched hers.

"Forever," he whispered.

He took her in his arms then, kissing her, fondling her, his hands cupping her breasts, caressing them. She grew more aroused as he gently massaged the nipples with feather-light strokes. She moaned, wanting more.

He knelt before her, his mouth working over her abdomen. She spread her legs to give him easy access, but instead he gently pulled her to her knees. Small fountains gushed a constant stream of warm water over her hips, her legs and between her legs onto her clitoris, bathing the tiny hardening nugget with warmth.

Meanwhile her lover's hands and lips and tongue were free to caress every other part of her body. Suddenly, she climaxed in a spasm of delight, crying out as pleasure flooded every inch of her body.

Then he pulled her down with him, until he was lying on the moss, and he lifted her until she straddled him. His erect cock tenderly probed her, entering her pussy by careful degrees.

But she was impatient, wanting to be impaled by the length and girth of it, loving the feel of it against the inside of her body, wanting to swallow him whole if she could. As she lowered herself onto his warm wet shaft, he began to thrust inside her, his strong fingers gently manipulating her clitoris. She felt herself climbing again, ascending once more to the peak.

Waves of pleasure eddied through her body, and she heard his gasps of ardor as they climaxed together.

* * * * *

Hours later, it seemed, she stirred in his arms, feeling the soft moss beneath her, seeing the rainbow light around her. And then, gradually, the dim light began to change, the rainbows melding into pure silver, then

white. Slowly she became aware that the light that filled the cavern came from one source, not the pool, but a window. And the softness beneath her was not moss but a sateen sheet covering a pillow-top mattress.

She came suddenly wide awake and completely aware of where she was. She turned her head to look next to her. And saw a figure in the diffused light, a shadow figure lying beside her with one arm protectively over her. She drew in her breath sharply, her eyes widening, her muscles bunching as she tensed.

His eyes opened, two golden glowing orbs, and then, as she watched, his shadowy form melted into the pillows and the bedding...until she felt his warmth no longer...until he disappeared completely.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Nora leaped out of bed and turned to stare at the spot where the shadowy figure had vanished. There was a slight indentation in the pillow, but was it from a ghostly head or her own head, tossing and turning in the bed?

She realized she was not wearing her comfy oversized old T-shirt, and she became uncomfortably aware of how her naked body throbbed pleasantly, so sated, so much the body of a woman who has been loved.

She stuffed a fist against her mouth to keep from crying out. I'm going crazy, she thought. I have imagined this. He cannot be coming to life, he cannot be real, he cannot be....

But she knew he was.

What have I done? She sank back on the edge of the bed, burying her face in her hands.

How long she sat there—letting memory images of Jenny and Emma roll like film across the screen of her mind—she never knew. It was the phone jangling that brought her back.

She answered on the third ring.

It was Gladys. "Oh, God, Nora, you sound awful. No wonder you didn't make it in this morning."

Nora froze in disbelief and then turned to gaze in panic at the alarm clock. It was nearly nine o'clock. She groaned. She must have forgotten to set the alarm.

"Judith just asked me to call," Gladys said, "to make sure you were

okay.”

Nora seized the lifeline. “Sorry, Glad. I was going to call you, but I can’t seem to get moving.”

Gladys clucked in sympathy. “It’s probably that viral flu thing that’s going around. Stay home, Nora. We don’t want it.”

Nora promised not to return to work until she was sure she was germ free. As she hung up, she realized that she’d inadvertently been handed the perfect excuse for taking a few days off.

Suddenly she wanted physical activity and lots of it. Despite the weatherman’s threat of record highs, Nora opened the sliding door onto her balcony and every window in her apartment.

For the better part of an hour, she exorcized her demons with cleaning supplies and rags. She was checking the pockets of a pile of clothes to take to the cleaners, when she felt a piece of stiff paper. She pulled it out and opened it. The moment she saw what it was, she gasped. It was the flyer that the obnoxious kid touting the great Tibetan lama had pressed on her.

Nora stopped what she was doing and sat down on the sofa, reading the flyer closely. Yongdon, a Tibetan monk, was touring the United States giving lectures on balancing life through spiritual harmony. He would be in Glenlowe for just a few days, appearing at the local community college.

Tibet! Perhaps Yongdon was the answer to her dilemma.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Nora had forgotten how hard it was to find parking, even during the summer, at the college. She ended up in an off-campus lot at an exorbitant rate, but knowing she had no other choice. From there she walked quickly across campus to the student affairs center.

"I'm a journalist and I need to speak to Yongdon," she blurted out to the young woman standing behind the counter.

The girl cracked her gum briefly, studying Nora. "I just sell tickets. You wanna buy a ticket to his lecture?"

"No, I—"

But the girl had already made eye contact with the next person in line and, cutting across Nora's answer, said, "Can I help you?"

Nora stepped aside. There had to be some way to contact the lama, she mused, as she returned to her car. Maybe if she phoned the college and asked to talk to someone higher up, someone in charge of public relations for Yongdon—

She was in the middle of this thought and exiting the parking lot, when she suddenly spotted in her rearview mirror the acne-faced boy who had first thrust the flyer into her hands. Nora stamped on the brake, screeching to a crawl, and executed a dangerous U-turn, barely missing a parked car and several pedestrians, one of whom yelled a four-letter word at her retreating vehicle. She pulled to the curb, parking erratically next to a fire hydrant.

Her target was trudging toward her, a fresh stack of flyers tucked

under his arm. Nora leaped out of her car. "Wait!" she yelled.

He stared at her, open mouthed, but speechless.

"I need to talk to you about the great lama," she said.

Suddenly his face lit up. "I know you," he exclaimed. "You're that crazy chick in the parking garage."

"Yeah, well, I guess I am, but—"

"You didn't believe me," he went on excitedly. "I told you, the great Yongdon could help you—"

"It's not the spiritual path I need help with. Could you talk to him, have him call me?"

"I don't know," the boy said. "He's pretty busy right now."

Nora grabbed one of the flyers and dug a pen out of her carryall. "Turn around," she commanded.

When he obliged, she slapped the flyer against his back and scribbled. "I need you to take this to Yongdon," she said. "Please."

"I don't know—" he began, but Nora thrust the folded paper and her business card at him. She followed them up with a twenty-dollar bill. The kid gazed at the money in astonishment. "What's this for?"

"Your good deed," she told him. She was gambling that he was the classic starving student, and apparently she hadn't guessed wrong. The kid flashed a wide grin, gave her a high five and hurried away.

Nora walked slowly back to her car, thinking about the message. Along with her home phone number she had written: I have accidentally created a tulpa. I'm scared to death. Can you please help me destroy him?

Chapter Forty

The light on Nora's answering machine was blinking when she entered her apartment. She pressed the Play button. It was a call from Rose Lansky telling Nora when and where the funeral service would be held.

But Rose's message continued. "Could you please hang around for a minute or two after the service? My mother left a box with your name on it. I haven't opened it, but I'm guessing it's a memento of some kind. I'll bring it to the service."

An image of the music box lamp flashed into Nora's mind, but she quickly dismissed it. Emma had warned Nora repeatedly about the dangers of possessing the lamp. Surely she wouldn't have left it to Nora? Would she?

* * * * *

After the non-denominational service, the mourners remained briefly to offer condolences to the family. Nora hung back as Rose had asked. As the last mourner left, Rose approached Nora and handed her a sealed box.

"Thank you," Nora said. "I'm glad to have something to remember your mother by."

Rose glanced at the box. "Don't you want to open it? I confess I'm dying of curiosity."

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Nora acquiesced. After she'd torn away the tape, she opened the top flaps on the box and peered inside. And smiled thinly.

Emma had, after all, bequeathed her the lamp.

* * * * *

The box rode innocently on the passenger's seat all the way back to Nora's apartment. She couldn't resist glancing at it now and then, wondering what in the world she should do with it.

She could place the lamp on a side table as Emma had done and use it as a conversation piece or curio. But what if someone else decided to wind up the music box and accidentally brought a mind creature to life?

It can't be that easy, Nora mused. There have to be other emotions in play at the same time: loneliness, a deep yearning for love and dissatisfaction with ordinary men.

Nora sighed as she exited the freeway. She could also sell the damn thing to Stanton; he'd buy it in a heartbeat!

Emma's words from their first meeting came back to her. "...steal it. Break it into a million pieces. Throw it into the ocean."

Emma had loved her visitant, but at the same time, she had feared for other women. "And well she should have," Nora muttered, pulling into her parking space. "Look what happened to Jenny Clarke."

Upstairs, she put the box on her desk, lifted out the lamp and set it to one side. Then she noticed a note at the bottom.

"At my age each day is a sacred gift," Emma had written, "but it has occurred to me that the Giver could stop giving at any time. I have long pondered what to do about the lamp. You and I both know it should be destroyed. At the same time, I could not bear to. Indeed, I'm not sure I would know how. So, in coward's fashion, I am passing on the lamp to you.

"I don't know if it is a gift or a curse. I will let you make that determination and then also decide what to do with the damned thing that has brought me such joy and such agony. Good luck to you, my dear. May your visitant bring you great ecstasy...or may you have the good

fortune to end his reign. Remember, once you are committed to his love, you will never be able to live life in the same way."

Nora read the letter through a second time.

And dropped into her desk chair, gazing at the lamp.

She pulled it to her and examined it closely, trying to ignore the strange sensation it created. Oddly, it felt fluid, as if those weird curlicues that could be flora or might be sea foam were moving beneath her skin.

She found a way to open the reservoir that held the oil and saw that it was empty.

Nora shoved the lamp back into its box and put the box on a high shelf in the hall closet. She tried to busy herself with other tasks—making phone calls to set up interviews, typing up more notes, filing them, even putting the back issues of *The Fireside Reader* in order by publication date.

Late in the afternoon she fixed a sandwich and a salad. She ate them at her desk, forcing herself to work on projects she'd put off for months.

But the lamp obsessed her; it almost seemed to call to her, like the haunting song of a siren.

I don't need it, she reminded herself.

And yet....

As the afternoon waned, her desire to look at it again, to hold it, to wind up the music box overpowered her.

Finally she couldn't resist. She pulled the box down, opened it and took out the lamp.

Her fingers seemed to gravitate to the wind-up key. Almost as if in a trance, Nora watched her fingers turn the key, deliberately slowly at first, then harder and faster until the mechanism was wound and the key would not turn another notch.

Just before she let go of the key, she remembered something else Emma had said about using the lamp. "Wait for what will come."

Was she ready? She already knew what the lamp would bring. At least in her dreams. But what about when she was awake?

Her fingers fell away, and slowly the key began to unwind. At the

same time, with crystal clarity, bell-sweet notes filled the room, music that was achingly beautiful.

Nora could barely breathe; she was utterly hypnotized by the music. It was much more rich and powerful than the pallid tune Jenny had hummed. It was as if the music seeped into her very soul.

Nora had been staring transfixed at the lamp, but now her gaze rose to the window. Outside the sun was beginning to set. Orange light lanced the purpling sky. Buildings became silhouettes against the backdrop of riotous color. High overhead, a single star winked.

Nora began to walk toward the window. She still held the lamp out before her, her hands cupped around its base. Suddenly something at the edge of her vision caught her attention, something moving in the shadows.

Nora froze, immobilized. Out of the corner of her eye she watched, as shadows coiled like pitch-black smoke. They twisted into a column, and from the column emerged a shape and features and as Nora stared in fascination, a figure began to materialize, carved from the shadows as a statue is carved from black ice.

His golden eyes glowed.

Chapter Forty-one

Nora gasped, dropping the lamp. She barely heard the soft thunk as it hit the carpet.

She suddenly found the strength to move, to back away from the figure. "G-Go away," she commanded in a tremulous voice.

"You summoned me, Nora. I am here, beloved."

She swallowed hard. "I—I—it was a mistake. I didn't mean to—to—summon you. Please, go away. Go back where you came from."

"Nora, I will never hurt you. Do not be afraid."

His voice was deep and gentle, soft and reassuring. She could hear his voice inside her head. His face did not move; she could not see a mouth, but she remembered how it had felt moving over hers.

"Please," she begged, feeling her knees weakening.

"Nora, I am yours, beloved. Let me hold you, comfort you."

"I—I don't need comforting," she gasped, wondering if he could read her thoughts.

"You are sad," he said quietly. "You are lonely. I can take away your pain and grief."

Suddenly Nora's heart began to pound. For the first time she realized that the mind creature was indeed real. He was not a figment of her imagination. He did not appear only in dreams. She could not discount him as merely a hallucination.

"You're real," she whispered.

"I am," he replied.

"B-but I don't want you. I don't need you."

"You have wanted me and needed me for a very long time," he said patiently. "You have begged for me to come to you—in your thoughts, in your dreams, through your tears and loneliness. You brought me into your world, Nora."

Oh, dear God, he's right, Nora thought. "But I've changed my mind," she said. "I don't want you now. You need to go back to wherever you came from."

He ignored her request completely, almost as if she hadn't spoken. "Nora, let me hold you, let me take away your pain. Let me love you."

He held out his arms to her in supplication.

It's as if he doesn't hear me, Nora thought. Or perhaps he does, but he thinks he knows better. Perhaps he really is trying to protect me and care for me.

So far the visitant had not moved from his shadowy corner. It was as if he knew she was frightened and he didn't want her to feel more threatened.

Nora's panic level began to subside. She was still overwhelmed by the realization that the mind creature was not only real, but was also here with her in an awakened state.

"Can other people see you?" she asked, amazed at her own audacity.

"You can see me. That is enough. There is no one else here to see me."

"But what if—"

"Nora, let me hold you and comfort you. Let me take away your pain."

Nora sighed. It would be so easy to give in, to say yes. And what then?

She hardly saw him move. It was as if the shadowy form mingled with the darkening room. She was only aware that he moved from the corner to stand behind her. She felt strong hands gently massage the back of her neck.

She groaned as he worked the muscles, easing the tension. The

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relief was incredible; she had not realized how taut her muscles were. Bit by bit she felt herself relax under his touch.

And then she felt the warmth of his mouth on her neck, and the sensation aroused such a feeling of desire she could barely breathe. His hands moved over her arms.

“Come, Nora.” His voice was gentle, yet commanding.

Despite herself, she turned and walked to the bedroom.

Chapter Forty-two

As they crossed the room to the bed, Nora kept thinking, This isn't real. It isn't happening.

The visitant had made love to her so many times in erotic dreams set in exotic locales. Even the sex had been dreamlike, unreal. Better than real, she thought. He knows exactly where to touch me, exactly how much pressure to apply to have me shuddering in delight. He always puts me first, never himself. He always satisfies every iota of my needs. It's perfect love!

But it wasn't real!

And she still could not see him, could only feel his powerful physique, the muscles rippling under the smooth skin. She had run her fingers through his thick, soft hair, had felt his breath warm on her cheek, had breathed in his scent—cinnamon and smoke.

But she did not know if his hair was brown or black or blond. Had never seen a dimple or a scar or a blemish of any kind. And under that golden light that glowed from his eyes, were the irises a different color? Hazel or brown or blue?

He's not real, she thought again. This is not possible.

In the middle of the room, he paused, turned and began to undress her.

"Where would you like to be tonight?" he asked as he undid her buttons.

She didn't answer, didn't think she could speak. By now her

traitorous body was falling right in line with his wishes. Her nipples hardened, and her pussy was growing warmer and wetter by the second. The core of her desire was beginning to ache with her need. It was all she could do to keep from panting.

Despite what her mind might tell her, her body knew what it wanted. Almost without thinking, she reached up to cup his face in her hands. She leaned toward him, standing on tiptoes, to find his mouth with her own. "Here," she whispered, after the first gentle kiss.

He responded by pulling her closer, his answering kiss deeper, more subtly demanding.

She could not withhold a moan of desire, and she pushed against him, grinding her groin against his. She felt his cock harden and grow erect.

He grasped her buttocks, pulling her even closer.

Suddenly she didn't want to fall onto the bed. Didn't want to descend to a blanket of moss or kneel in a warm pool. Suddenly she wanted it hard and fast.

The moment the thought entered her mind she felt a stab of unease. She didn't want him to hurt her, to—

Even as that amendment entered her mind, he was sweeping her up in his arms, carrying her to the nearest wall. He leaned her against it, pulling the remaining clothes from her body.

"Never fear," he murmured, his mouth roaming over her hair as he finished undressing her. "You will never feel pain in my arms."

All at once, the room began to fill with eddies of warm, moist air. Nora gasped as tendrils of air tickled her skin like seductive feathers, teasing into her most secret places. She cried out as the tingling in her core intensified. At the same time, the visitant raised her up in his incredibly strong arms, and she felt herself lowered onto his hardened cock. The head eased into her wet pussy, and she gasped as it slid deeper and deeper.

If she had worried that her orgasm would not be as intense in a wakeful state, she found she had nothing to fear. As his shaft thrust deeper, harder, faster, it was as if every nerve in her groin were being

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electrified with pleasure. She reached her pinnacle, burying her cries in his shoulder, and they shuddered together in a paroxysm of delight.

Chapter Forty-three

The next morning, when she awoke she was alone. It was as if the visitant had never been with her, but as she came slowly back to wakefulness, she remembered every delicious moment in his arms. And she had slept so soundly, more soundly than she had in ages. She felt refreshed, revitalized.

She showered and dressed, ate breakfast, watched the news on TV. She would go to work, she decided, and put the stories of Emma and Jenny behind her. She would not think about what to do with the visitant. She would—

Her desk phone's jangle shook her loose from her plans.

"Ms. Nora Ryder?" The caller—a male—spoke with a slight accent.

"Yes," Nora said cautiously, hoping it wasn't a telemarketer this early in the day.

"I am calling on behalf of the lama, Yongdon Rinpoche. He will be able to spare you a brief appointment this morning. Shall we say in an hour?"

Nora's heart began to pound. She'd almost forgotten about her plea to Yongdon. She glanced at her watch and said, "Yes, that would be—"

The caller briskly cut across her words to give her directions to a guesthouse only a few blocks from the college campus. He ended the call by simply hanging up in the middle of Nora's attempt to thank him.

She replaced the receiver and then sat motionless, considering the ramifications.

She had come very close to succumbing to the visitant's charms. She had been prepared to give up the life she wanted for one that incorporated a dream creature. But in a heartbeat of time, Yongdon had offered her a chance to reclaim her life.

I will be rid of my visitant, she thought, with a small stab of guilt. Last night was undeniably heaven, but it wasn't real. He's not real. Not in the sense that I can take him to office parties, or go to a movie with him. Jenny chose to give herself up to madness. Emma chose to go into seclusion. I don't want to spend the rest of my life alone, with only a dream creature to comfort me. I need a real man in my life.

* * * * *

The guesthouse, a single-story bungalow, stood on a shady side street just a few blocks from the campus.

Nora rang the doorbell and waited.

A young man wearing the saffron robe of a Tibetan monk opened the door almost at once. "Ms. Ryder? Rinpoche is waiting for you." He bowed slightly.

"Rinpoche?" Nora frowned, puzzled. "I thought his name—"

"Rinpoche is a title," the assistant said patiently. "It means 'precious one.' His name is Yongdon, but you may address him as Rinpoche."

He gestured for Nora to enter.

She found herself in a comfortable, albeit slightly threadbare, living room.

"This way, please," Nora's guide said, pointing the way. He led her through the living room and down a hall to an open door. He indicated that Nora should enter, bowing slightly as she stepped past him.

This room appeared to be an office of some sort, with a desk and several comfortable chairs. Seated at the desk writing was another monk, this one much older. And yet, although the short brush of hair on his head was graying, his face was remarkably unlined. He, too, was wearing a saffron robe.

He looked up as Nora entered the room. "Ms. Ryder?" He had a commanding voice and a singularly humorless expression.

"Yes," Nora said. "Thank you for—"

"Please be seated."

Nora sat and waited.

Yongdon studied her for a long moment. Then, leaning back in his chair, he said, "What do you know of the way to create a tulpa?"

Nora took a deep breath. "I know it sounds absurd that I could have done this, but I assure you—"

"Ms. Ryder, I have very little time for you." He did not raise his voice, he did not display any emotion, but it was clear he not only didn't believe her, he was annoyed with her.

Nora's temper got the better of her. "Then let me tell you how I did it," she snapped, leaning forward.

Yongdon stiffened, as if surprised by her anger, but he displayed no emotion as she spoke. She noticed, however, that once or twice his eyes widened as if in astonishment.

"I am not the only one," Nora added and proceeded to explain about Jenny and Emma. "One of them is mad and one of them is dead," she finished. "I don't want to end up like either of them. I want—need—to get my life back, and to do that I have to find a way to destroy this creature. I beg you, please help me."

She collapsed back against the cushion and prayed silently that Yongdon wouldn't toss her out the door.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk in front of him, making a tent of his hands, resting his chin on their backs.

Finally he spoke. "It appears that you yourself have not completely made up your mind about what you want."

Nora started to reply, but he waved her into silence. "You speak of this creature's potential to do great harm to other people in your life, and you claim that you are fearful of that, yet at the same time you describe in glowing terms this creature's ability to love you, to make you happy."

Nora felt the color rise into her face. What Yongdon said was true, and she had already admitted it to herself more than once.

“Until you are determined to rid yourself of this creation, there is no possible way for you to destroy him.”

“And if I can do that? If I can make up my mind to destroy him?”

“It will take time,” Yongdon said slowly. “You must meditate, Ms. Ryder, and you must focus on what it is you do want. When you feel your mind straying toward him, you must veer into the opposite direction.”

“I—I’m not sure I know—”

“What do you want, Ms. Ryder? Only you can answer that question. When you know what you want, then you will also know what you do not want. That is the key to destroying your creature.”

Chapter Forty-four

The answering machine light was blinking when Nora walked into her apartment, but she ignored it. I have to do what Yongdon suggested, she told herself. Meditate. Focus. I have to do it while my commitment is solid and while I remember what Yongdon taught me.

She changed into the loose comfortable pants and sleeveless shirt she always wore when doing her yoga and meditation exercises. She pulled the drapes closed on all the windows, made sure the door was locked and dragged a wide cushion into the center of the living room.

The last thing she did was to throw a towel over the answering machine so that the blinking light would not distract her.

She assumed a comfortable position on the cushion and began her relaxation techniques. Her breathing slowed, became steady. She focused on making her mind a blank, to remove—one by one—the sights and memories that popped in. Bit by bit she felt herself relax, felt her world shrink as exterior noises were obliterated.

It began as a slight prickle at the base of her spine. It slowly climbed to the back of her neck until the skin tingled.

She was being watched.

When you feel your mind straying toward him, you must veer into the opposite direction.

It was almost as if Yongdon were in the same room. His words echoed clearly in her mind.

She pulled her thoughts from the eerie sensation at the back of her

neck, focusing instead on her breathing. This was what she'd been taught in her meditation classes, to concentrate on breathing in through her nose, pulling in the power of energy from the atmosphere and breathing out through her mouth, expelling the negative slowly, methodically.

Her focus was distracted by the touch of a warm hand on the nape of her neck. He knows, she thought, suddenly frightened. He knows I'm trying to destroy him.

Then her innate stubbornness took over. But I will fight back.

"Go away," she said, keeping her eyes closed, trying to maintain a modicum of concentration.

"Nora, I am here to help you relax."

"You don't understand," she said through gritted teeth. "I want you to go away, to leave me alone. I want to relax by myself."

"I will be as quiet as you wish," he said, his voice lowered. His hands moved over her neck and shoulders. The result was amazing; she felt the tension drain away as he massaged the muscles in her upper back.

What do you want, Ms. Ryder?

Yongdon's voice again, reminding her of the journey ahead.

"I don't want you to stay," Nora told the visitant. "I want you to stop massaging my neck, to leave me alone. And I don't want you to come back. Not ever. I want you to go away, completely and forever away from me."

"Nora, I cannot leave you. You need me." His voice was gentle, his words so reasonable.

Nora's shoulders slumped. I can't do this, she thought dispiritedly.

She took another deep breath, let it out slowly. "I don't want you to make love to me," she said.

"Very well. I will not make love to you until you are ready."

"I don't want you to massage me, or touch me in any other way."

His hands fell away from her shoulders, but she still sensed his warmth, his nearness.

"I want—"

An explosion of sound drowned out the rest of her words.

Chapter Forty-five

Someone was knocking on her door; someone was calling her name. Brad!

Her eyes snapped open. The room was dark, but by now she was accustomed to it. She clambered to her feet and hurried to the door.

"Nora. Open up. I know you're in there."

For a split second, she was tempted not to. But Brad's knocking morphed into pounding and his voice rose in impatience. "Damn it, Nora, I know you're home. I saw your car downstairs. If you don't open up right now, I'll—"

She unlocked the door and opened it a crack. "What is it?" she asked.

Brad's worry or impatience or whatever he was feeling erupted. Nora could see it on his face, could see his confusion turn to anger. He pushed against the door from the other side.

She stumbled backward to keep from being hit. The door swung wide, and Brad stormed into the room. "What's the matter with—" He was stopped abruptly by the darkness. "What the hell?" He rounded on Nora. "What's going on here?"

"I might ask you the same question," she retorted, shutting the door. She turned away from him and strode to her desk. She switched on her desk light, narrowing her eyes against the glare. Any thought of meditating had now vanished. "What do you mean by coming here and causing such a scene? And trying to break down my door?" She turned to

face him as she spoke. Brad had never acted like this before, had never displayed such a temper. It both angered and frightened her.

He crossed to the desk and yanked the towel off the answering machine. Its little red light continued to blink patiently.

"Don't you even listen to your messages?" he snarled. "I called you several times this morning. Where were you?" He glanced around the room again. "And what the hell is all this? Drapes closed in the middle of the day? What's going on?"

"I was trying to meditate," Nora yelled.

"Meditate? You're supposed to be sick."

"I am?" Then she remembered Gladys' mistake. "I was, but I'm feeling better. And what do you know about the state of my health? It's none of your business to begin with. And how dare you storm in here as if you owned the place...and me!"

Brad took a deep breath, crossed to the window and pulled the drapes open. The bright light of midday flooded the room, and Nora winced again. Brad turned and glared at her.

"I came back into town this morning and tried a couple of times to call you. No answer. So I called your office. Gladys said you were home sick. I called here again, but still no answer. So I drove over here to find out how sick you were, see if I could do anything for you. And what do I find?"

"Oh, put a sock in it, Brad," Nora yelled. "I am sick to death of your heavy-handedness."

His eyes widened, his nostrils flared. "My what?"

"You act as if you own me. I have news for you, buster, you don't."

"Oh, so that's it, is it? Now I'm heavy-handed. You listen to me, because—" As he spoke, he strode back across the room toward Nora, shaking his finger at her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Nora saw the drapes move and felt a draft of cool air blow across her neck.

"—I've had it with your selfishness and your—"

"Brad, wait!" She put up a hand to stop him, but he misunderstood.

"No, it's my turn, so you can shut up for a change and listen. I'm

sick to death of this, too. You always seem to think—”

The drapes billowed. A stack of papers on the corner of Nora’s desk fanned as if riffled by a breeze.

“Brad, please.” Nora felt panic rise within her. “Please calm down. I—let’s get out of here.”

His eyes widened as if in shocked disbelief. “Oh, sure, let’s run away from the issue. Let’s not try to solve our differences.”

Nora had never seen him so furious.

“It’s not that,” she said, hearing a mollifying tone creep into her voice. “I do want to talk about it. Just not here.”

“Here is damned fine with me,” he retorted, dropping onto her couch and stubbornly folding his arms across his chest.

“Brad, let’s go to the park down the street. We can talk about anything you want, but—”

“There you go again, trying to avoid the subject. This is always—”

His voice raged on, but Nora didn’t hear the words. The wind was rising.

Chapter Forty-six

"And for God's sake shut the damned window," Brad shouted.
But no windows were open.

"We have to leave," Nora exclaimed. She started to walk toward the bedroom, to grab her keys. But her attention was seized by something behind Brad—shadows coiling in the corner.

From the column of shadows, a form began to emerge. Nora glimpsed broad shoulders, a strongly muscled torso and massive fists that clenched and unclenched.

And then she saw two golden eyes glowing balefully from beneath a lowered, angry brow.

Nora deliberately lowered her voice. "Brad," she said quietly, "please don't shout. I know I haven't been fair to you. I've been—"

But if she hoped that a reasonable tone and conciliatory words would calm him, she was wrong. They only served to fuel his anger.

"Damn straight," he yelled, jumping to his feet. "It's all about you, you, you. Nora, you are the most self-absorbed woman I have ever—"

The dark form broke free of the shadows. It moved toward Brad until it loomed in front of the window, and yet all that Nora could see was its shadow form. She still saw no features, except for the intense light in its glowing eyes.

"No," she gasped, almost involuntarily.

"Yes, you are," Brad exclaimed. "Selfish, thoughtless, putting your own interests—"

"Please don't," she begged, her hands waving in the air as if to stop the visitant's forward motion.

"Don't tell me to stop, Nora. This conversation is long overdue." Brad was warming to his theme, dangerously so.

The visitant moved closer to him.

"Don't hurt him, please," Nora wailed. If she couldn't reason with Brad, perhaps she could persuade the visitant to go away.

Brad was so caught up in his argument that it was a moment before her words sank in. He stopped abruptly, frowned and blinked. "What did you say?"

The visitant was now behind the couch. Nora knew how quickly he could move, knew that he was only inches from seizing Brad.

And then she had a sudden inspiration. "I'm leaving," she said to Brad. "You can argue with the furniture if you like, but I'm leaving."

"You what?"

She started for the door, but Brad crossed the space between them, grabbed her arm and roughly shook her. "You're not going anywhere, missy."

Nora pulled back, shocked by behavior she'd never seen him exhibit before. "Stop it, Brad," she cried out.

But he was completely out of control. "You're going to stay right here," he ordered, "and listen to everything I have to say."

"Let go of me," she demanded, angry that Brad would use physical strength to gain control.

Suddenly the visitant appeared behind Brad. As Nora watched in terror, the visitant yanked Brad's hand loose from her arm. Brad let out a yelp of surprise and pain.

"No," Nora screamed. "Please, don't hurt him. You must go away."

Brad glanced at her as if she were insane. Then, for a split second he froze as the meaning behind Nora's words sank in.

"So that's it, is it?" he spat out. "All this time I thought we were a couple. Now the truth comes out." He struggled fruitlessly, trying to see who was standing behind him. "You're in love with someone else."

"No," Nora wailed. "I'm not in love with anyone. I'm—"

They were the wrong words, and they only renewed Brad's fury. He continued to try to look over his shoulder, twisting this way and that, trying to get a glimpse of his adversary, but the visitant held him firmly in place. Brad struggled to shake loose his captor. "Let go of me, you son-of-a-bitch," he shouted.

"I will protect you, Nora. He will never hurt you again." The visitant spoke so clearly that Nora was sure the words had been voiced aloud. But from the expression on Brad's face, she felt sure he couldn't hear the mind creature.

Suddenly Brad's glance dropped. He gulped in air, became motionless as he stared at his arms. His brows knit in a frown of bewilderment. "What the hell?"

Nora realized that either Brad couldn't see his adversary's hands or all he saw was the dark shadow hands that bound him. At the same time, she was certain that Brad didn't understand the ramifications of his situation. It was possible that his anger would make him discount what he was seeing.

She reached around Brad to try to push the visitant away. "Let go of him," she cried. "Go away. You have to stop this and go away."

"He is trying to hurt you, Nora. He is angry and unreasonable. I cannot let him go."

Nora was certain now that Brad could not hear the visitant speak. She turned her gaze to Brad. "Please don't struggle," she begged. "Please calm down."

Brad's lip curled into a sneer. "You bitch," he snarled. "You wait." He craned his head, still trying to see over his shoulder. "And you, too, you bastard. You wait."

But he stopped struggling and stood quietly, his humiliation and anger pulsing in the clenched muscles in his jaw. Little by little, his breathing slowed, but Nora saw his hands bunch into fists, saw the knuckles whiten with tension. She prayed that Brad wouldn't do anything stupid once the visitant released him.

Her prayer went unanswered.

Chapter Forty-seven

As Brad appeared to calm down, the visitant loosened his grip. Nora watched as Brad straightened, flexing his arms.

"Brad, please leave," she said quietly. "I'm sorry that it has to end this way, but—"

His next move caught her off guard. Too late she saw the rage in his eyes as he pulled his right arm back and swung at her.

Luckily, he missed her jaw, instead barely clipping her ear. Her head swung painfully to the side and she fell backward, losing her balance and tumbling to the floor. Fortunately the carpet was thick enough to cushion her fall so that she wasn't badly hurt.

But as she fell back, she saw the visitant's eyes glow so brightly that they practically shot sparks. To her horror, he seized Brad again, this time in an iron grip, and raised him off the floor until Brad seemed to be floating in midair.

"No," Nora shouted. "Stop. Don't hurt him. Put him down."

Brad screamed in terror as he was raised higher and higher. Then suddenly the visitant tossed him, as easily as a child tosses a paper airplane, toward Nora's desk. Brad hurtled through the air. Nora heard the sharp crack of his head connecting with the wood. She cried out when she saw blood spurt from his temple. The desk rocked; the desktop contents flew in every direction.

Brad fell to the ground, knocking Nora's chair to one side. He lay facedown, unmoving, blood spreading out to stain the carpet in a bright

red pool.

Nora scrambled to her knees and crawled across the floor to Brad's prone figure. With shaking fingers, she struggled to find a pulse and did so. She gasped with relief.

Then she turned slightly, glancing over her shoulder toward the visitant, seeking the column of coiling shadows, but there was nothing to be seen.

Suddenly she became aware of someone pounding on her door. A woman's voice called out, "Hello. Hello. Is everything all right?"

Nora managed to get to her feet and stumbled to the door. She opened it, clinging to the frame for support. The woman who lived across the hall stood outside, staring worriedly at Nora.

"Are you all right?" the neighbor asked. "We heard noises. Sounded like a fight. I—I called the police."

Nora stared back at the woman in dismay. "I need an ambulance," she said in a tremulous voice.

The neighbor peered over Nora's shoulder, gasping as she caught sight of Brad's body and the blood. Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. "Oh, my God," she muttered. "Is he—"

"He's alive," Nora said, "but he's badly hurt."

"I'll call for help," the woman said, backing quickly away toward her own door.

Nora glanced from side to side and saw other tenants crowding into the hall. Everyone was staring at her. Nora felt her cheeks redden, and she looked away.

Emma's words came back as if to taunt her. I sat for a very long time, staring at my husband's corpse and thinking, *None of this is real. It's all a dream.* Only of course it wasn't. It was horribly real.

In the distance, Nora heard the faint wail of sirens.

Chapter Forty-eight

The police and ambulance arrived at about the same time, and EMTs worked on Brad to stabilize him. Then they strapped him onto a stretcher and wheeled him away.

Nora watched them go in silence, but apparently her worry showed on her face. At the door, one of the EMTs turned back and told her cheerfully, "Don't worry. He should be fine."

Nora felt her shoulders slump, felt the tension begin to drain from her upper body.

Then she saw Detectives Morales and Kelso at her front door, and she knew her ordeal was far from over.

Once inside the apartment, the detectives conferred in whispers.

Nora heard broken bits of their conversation. "...know this woman," Morales muttered. "Let me talk...wait outside for...call the hospital and see if..."

Kelso nodded and headed back to the hall while Morales walked over to the sofa where Nora was sitting.

"Ms. Ryder?" Elena Morales stared at Nora with a blank, businesslike expression, almost as if they were meeting for the first time. "Did the EMTs check you out, too?"

Nora stared back just as expressionlessly. She heard the question, but she was having a kind of déjà vu moment. This must be the way Jenny felt, Nora thought. And Emma, too. And now....

Morales frowned a little. She leaned over, gazing into Nora's eyes.

"Ms. Ryder, can you hear me?"

Nora shook herself, took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm sorry," she said. "I—I don't seem to be thinking too fast."

"Shock," Elena said, sitting down on the edge of the sofa next to Nora. "Do you need medical attention?"

Nora shook her head. "I'm not hurt," she muttered.

Elena moved on quickly. "Do you remember what happened?"

Nora nodded. "Uh, sort of. It all happened so fast—"

"Can you tell me?" A notebook and pen suddenly appeared in Morales' hands. Nora heard the click of the ballpoint as Elena readied it for writing.

"Wait a minute," Nora said. "I thought you only worked homicide."

Elena sighed. "We're so short-handed right now that everybody in the precinct is doing double duty. Kelso and I happened to pick up the call." She paused and then added, "Now, the sooner you answer my questions, the sooner you'll get rid of me. Okay?" Nora nodded, and Elena went on. "The man who was injured. Can you tell me his name?" Nora obliged, and Elena wrote. "Is he a friend of yours?"

All of a sudden Nora saw with painful clarity how her situation must look to everyone else. And how every word she uttered needed to be chosen with care, every sentence constructed with deliberation.

"He—yes, he was a friend."

"Was? Past tense?" Nothing escaped Elena.

Nora sighed. "We...had had a relationship."

"Friends? Lovers?" Her glance dropped to Nora's bare left hand, as if searching for a ring.

"Friends and lovers."

"And what happened today? Did you guys have a fight?" As Elena's gaze came to rest on Nora's left arm, Nora remembered that she was wearing a sleeveless shirt. The detective stood up and bent to take a closer look. Nora glanced down and saw the swollen purpling flesh where Brad had grabbed her.

"Did he do that?" Elena asked.

Nora nodded. It was true, but she also realized that it put Brad in a bad position. After all, it was the visitant who had driven Brad to the brink of lunacy. And yet, she thought, this could be my saving grace.

"Why don't you tell me what happened?" Elena prompted.

Nora was silent for a moment as she marshaled her thoughts. "I—I've been sick with some kind of viral thing, been home from work. This morning I was feeling better. I had to go out, run a quick errand. When I got home, I thought doing some yoga and meditation might also help."

She paused, glancing at Elena to see how the detective was responding to her story. Elena nodded. "Go on."

"I guess Brad had been trying to reach me. When I got home, I saw the answering machine light was blinking, but I didn't want to talk to anyone."

"So what did you do?" Elena said, writing.

"I tossed a towel over the answering machine and got into my yoga gear."

Elena glanced at the cushion still in the middle of the floor. "Was that pillow there?"

"Yes, I sit on it for my exercises. I was in the middle of my deep breathing phase when Brad pounded on my door and yelled at me to open up."

Elena's brows went up. "He was angry?"

"We've had some problems lately," Nora admitted. "He wanted to get married; I wasn't quite ready to make that kind of commitment."

"So you let him in?"

"Yes. He said he'd been trying to reach me."

"What was he angry about?"

Nora sighed. "May I get a drink of water?" she asked.

"Sure." In the kitchen, Elena leaned against the counter watching Nora pull a bottle of water from the fridge. "What was he angry about?" Elena repeated.

Nora took a swallow. "He thought I was putting him off. We'd been trying to coordinate our schedules for a couple of weeks, but it

wasn't working."

"That doesn't seem to be something to get violently angry about," Elena said

"I think he was frustrated," Nora said. "As I told you, he wanted to get married, but I wasn't ready to commit."

"Had he ever abused you before?"

Nora shook her head. "Brad was the last man I would have thought of as potentially abusive. Sure, he has a temper, but he's never really lost it the way he did today. Mostly he just gets irritated with me."

"And did he get abusive today? I mean, beyond the bruise on your arm?"

Nora paused, thinking quickly. "He took a swing at me, but he clipped my ear."

"Well, he must have had some reason to get so angry," Elena said. "I mean, if he had no history of violence up until now, why would a little thing like conflicting schedules set him off?"

"I—he seemed to think I was seeing someone else."

Elena's eyebrows went up. "And are you?"

Chapter Forty-nine

"Are you seeing someone else, Ms. Ryder?" Elena repeated, her gaze never leaving Nora's face.

Nora almost said, Oh, if you only knew!

Instead, she shook her head, but whatever answer she might have framed died as Detective Kelso stuck his head around the door. "Her boss is here," he told Morales. "Says you know her. She's demanding to see you."

Nora groaned. Judith! What was she doing here?

Elena nodded. "Tell her we'll be there in a minute. Tell her to wait outside."

Kelso's head disappeared. Elena turned back to Nora.

"So your boyfriend—"

"He's not my boyfriend," Nora protested, perhaps more violently than she meant to.

Elena's eyes widened in mild surprise. "Okay, whatever he is. He accused you of having a new guy in your life. Is that about right?"

Nora nodded, feeling more and more miserable. She knew where Morales was going with this.

"And the guy was here, right?"

Nora sucked in her breath. "I told you, there is no other guy. I was trying to meditate—"

"Let me ask—"

"—and Brad pushed his way in here." Nora's voice rose over

Morales’.

“Ms. Ryder—”

“He was being totally rude and abusive. He grabbed my arm, but I pulled loose. I lost my balance and fell backward—”

“Nora, please—”

“—and Brad came at me, but he tripped over the yoga cushion, staggered forward and fell against the desk.”

Nora stopped talking and tried to calm her breathing. Morales quit trying to interrupt and instead tapped a front tooth with the end of the pen as she gazed thoughtfully at Nora.

“And that’s it?” the detective asked.

Nora nodded. “Believe me, I didn’t mean for Brad to get hurt. I only wanted him to go away and leave me alone. It was an accident, Detective. I’m so sorry it happened, but it was only an accident.”

Morales opened her mouth to speak, but Detective Kelso reappeared. Elena looked at him with a small frown of irritation. “What?”

“The hospital called,” he said. “The vic regained consciousness. He’s telling quite a story.”

Chapter Fifty

Morales' eyebrow lifted. "Oh, yeah? What's he saying?"

Kelso glanced at Nora and then cocked his head, signaling the detective to come out of the kitchen. As she followed Kelso, Morales glanced at Nora. "Stay put," Elena said sharply.

Nora sagged against the counter. How much worse could this get?

While she contemplated her fate, she heard Judith's voice outside the kitchen. "I'm her friend, damn it, and I have every right—"

Judith exploded into the kitchen like a firecracker. "Oh, God, Nora, sweetie. What the hell happened?"

Nora took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's a long story. Judith, what are you doing here?"

"I got worried after What's-His-Face called to say you weren't home and where the hell were you. I was sure you were home, but I wondered if you were worse than we thought. I decided to come over here and find out if you needed to see a doctor."

"I'm so sorry," Nora said dejectedly.

"Well, don't worry. I'll take care of this." Judith yanked her cell phone from her purse, jabbed in numbers and talked. "Gladys, call my lawyer. Tell him to stay by the phone. I may need him." She closed the cell phone with a snap. "I don't know what you did to What's-His-Face, but whatever it was, he deserved it."

Nora groaned.

"No, listen, sweetie, don't admit anything. Don't say anything.

Don't sign anything. Don't do anything until—"

Morales stomped into the kitchen. "Ms. Davies, I thought we told you to wait outside."

"No, no one told me that." Judith was all injured innocence. Nora had to smile. For all of Judith's aggravating little ways, Nora was very glad that her employer was with her at this moment.

"Listen," Judith went on, "there's no way Nora is guilty of anything, other than bad taste in men."

Judith glared over Elena's shoulder at Detective Kelso. He scowled back at her. "Nora is my friend and my associate," Judith went on. "I have known her for years; she is scrupulously honest. If she tells you that nothing happened here, then nothing happened."

Elena tried to suppress a grin and almost succeeded. "So how do you explain the large pool of blood drying on the living room carpet?"

"Blood?" Judith recoiled. "Uh, no, well I can't, but if you say, as I think I overheard you say, that What's-His-Name—"

"Brad," Nora supplied in a tired voice.

"Yeah, whatever, him. If he is alive and well...or almost well...than I fail to see—"

"Ms. Davies," Morales said in a commanding voice, "please wait outside. Detective Kelso will accompany you now."

"I'm calling my lawyer," Judith said, flipping her cell phone open. "Remember, Nora, say nothing until he gets here."

Kelso herded Judith out the door. Elena and Nora exchanged glances.

"You work for her, right?" Elena said.

Nora nodded. "She's a good boss and a good friend. A little overly enthusiastic now and then, but she means well."

"What's-His-Name?"

"Yeah, well, she and Brad didn't really hit it off."

"I can tell." Morales grinned.

"Is Brad okay?" Nora asked.

Morales' smile faded. "He's got a concussion and he needed a

bunch of stitches and they're going to keep him in the hospital overnight, but he's going to be fine."

"I take it he blames me," Nora said.

"Actually, he didn't," Morales said. "He's convinced that you had a guy hiding in the apartment. He said the room was pitch black when he got here."

"I was meditating," Nora wailed. She was getting tired of no one believing the truth—at least that part of it. "I always close the drapes. It helps shut out some of the noise and it helps me focus."

Morales nodded. "He thinks he interrupted you and some guy having sex."

Nora shook her head slowly. "Elena, there is no guy. Brad and I argued. It got physical, and he tripped over my meditation cushion. He fell against the corner of the desk, and that's how he was injured." She sighed heavily. "I do not have another man in my life. If there had been some other guy in the room, where did he go? Out the window? It's a sheer drop from my balcony to the next one down. Someone from the street would have seen him. Or out the door? The neighbors would have seen him leave."

It had not escaped Nora that this was probably how Jenny Clarke must have argued.

Elena listened, nodding now and then. "Yeah, you're right. The neighbors do confirm that no one went in or out of your apartment after the victim arrived. Do you want to press charges against him? After all, if what you say is true, he did physically abuse you, and those are grounds for—"

"No!" Nora was adamant. "I want this to be over. I want Brad to stay away from me. I never want to see him again."

Elena nodded. "I suspect he feels the same way. And frankly, it would save Kelso and me a lot of time and paperwork if everybody decided to call a truce." She shot a humorless grin in Nora's direction and walked out of the kitchen. Nora trailed along behind.

Kelso was standing in the doorway that led to the outside hall. Nora could hear Judith talking on her cell phone, and she noticed that

Kelso was wincing. I need to get the Iron Maiden to call off her dogs, Nora thought.

“What’s this?”

Nora turned and looked. Morales leaned over, grasping for something that had rolled under the desk. She straightened, holding it out in front of her. Nora’s breath caught in her throat.

It was the lamp.

Chapter Fifty-one

"Well, isn't this pretty," Elena said, turning the lamp this way and that. The key caught her attention. "Is this a music box?" Without waiting for an answer, she started to turn it.

"No!" Nora grabbed the lamp, yanking it from Elena's grasp. The detective stared at Nora in astonishment.

"I—I'm sorry," Nora stammered, "but it—it's really old; it's an antique. The mechanism is brittle; it might break."

"Oh," Morales said. "Sorry." She glanced at the lamp, then back at Nora. "You asked me about a lamp recently. A lamp you said Jenny Clarke had. Is this—"

"Uh, no, not the same one," Nora said quickly. Oh, God, Elena's going to know I'm lying, that I'm covering something up, she thought.

Morales studied Nora through narrowing eyes. Nora gazed back, praying that the detective would give up and go. Luckily, her prayer was answered.

As Morales and Kelso finally headed for the elevator, Judith slipped back into the apartment. Nora sank onto the couch, resting her head in her hands.

"What really happened here?" Judith sat down beside her.

Nora sighed, recounting the same story she'd handed Morales, without adding anything about the visitant.

Judith shook her head. "Look, kiddo, why don't you go hop in the shower, take a long hot one. I'll handle everything else."

Nora was too tired and dispirited to ask what 'everything else' entailed. Instead of a shower, however, she elected to soak in a long hot bath scented with her favorite lavender oil. It seemed to do the trick. As she toweled herself dry, she could tell that her body had loosened up, that much of the tension had drained from her muscles. Even her sore arm didn't throb quite so much.

Nora shrugged on her terrycloth robe and walked into the bedroom. She could hear Judith's voice in the living room; Judith was probably still on her cell phone. "The damn thing practically grows out of her ear," Nora muttered.

Suddenly a wave of exhaustion rolled over her. The bed looked too inviting. "I'll lie down only for a moment," Nora told herself.

* * * * *

When she opened her eyes, the bright afternoon light at the window had been replaced by the warm glow of a setting sun. Nora turned over and looked at the clock. It was nearly seven.

Nora opened the bedroom door and stopped in her tracks. The scene of the crime had vanished. Gone was the puddle of blood. Gone, too, the offending cushion. All the desk accessories had been picked up and placed neatly back where they belonged.

Judith was still sitting on the couch talking on her cell phone, but the moment she saw Nora, she ended the conversation. As she said a hasty goodbye and hung up, she grinned, pointing to an open box of pizza on the coffee table.

Nora's stomach rumbled as the tantalizing odor of pepperoni, garlic and oregano hit her nostrils. She crossed the room, making a beeline for the food.

"Feeling better?" Judith asked, as Nora grabbed a napkin and a slice of pizza and dropped to the couch with a happy sigh.

"Top notch," Nora mumbled after a moment through a mouthful of cheese and crust. Tomato sauce dripped down her front before she could grab more napkins to stop the flow.

Judith smiled a very satisfied smile.

"What happened here?" Nora waved a greasy hand toward the sparkling clean room.

"Oh, that," Judith said offhandedly. "I called my cleaning lady. She's a gem, came at once and took care of it. My treat."

Nora sagged back against the couch cushion in relief. "Thank you."

Judith stood. "You've got a lot of sick leave you haven't used, so now's the time to cash in. Take a few days off to relax. Take a week. Take two. Whatever."

"But—"

"When you get back, I want you in peak working condition," Judith went on. "By the way, there's no need to worry about Brad Boy. My lawyer will be visiting him tomorrow before he leaves the hospital to warn him to leave you alone. If worst comes to worst, we'll slap him with a restraining order. But I suspect he's going to be only too happy to move on."

Nora sighed. "That's a huge relief."

"Don't use this time to clean out your kitchen cupboards, Nora. Go to the beach. Go to the mountains. Have some fun. You haven't really done a lot of that lately."

Nora smiled. "You're right there."

As soon as Judith left, Nora grabbed another slice of pizza with one hand and punched the TV remote with the other. While she ate, she surfed through the channels, looking for local news. Fortunately, it seemed, she and Brad had not made it to the TV news.

When Nora finally went to bed, sleep came quickly and soundly. But about three in the morning, she awoke. The aspirin she'd taken earlier had worn off, and her arm was aching. Nora got up to swallow more.

On her way back to bed, she spotted something in the corner, something that momentarily immobilized her.

Two golden eyes glowing in the shadows.

"You," she whispered.

"I am here, Nora. Sleep soundly and rest well. I will protect you. No one will hurt you."

"But I want you to go away." All thought of sleep now vanished.

"I must do what is best for you," he said in a reasonable tone. He was so calm, so certain, so adamant that it terrified her.

"But you don't understand," she exclaimed. "I want to have a normal life, a normal relationship with a human man. I can't have that with you around."

"I have to protect you, care for you." He didn't say it in a stubborn way, but in the patient, factual tone he used to discuss everything with her.

Nora fell silent, trying to organize a better argument. "How can I get you out of my life?" she said at last. "How can I get you to go away and leave me alone and never come back?"

There was no perceptible pause before he spoke. "You cannot."

Chapter Fifty-two

The ringing of her cell phone awakened Nora. She stumbled out of bed and retrieved it from its charger.

"Ms. Ryder?"

The voice with its familiar accent jolted her fully awake. It was Yongdon. He got right to the point.

"I read in the paper this morning about your ordeal yesterday."

Nora's heart sank. Oh, great! What the TV news had ignored, the print media had picked up.

"Something about the story made me suspect that you and the victim of the attack were not alone," Yongdon went on.

"Oh, you're right about that," Nora said, fighting to keep sarcasm out of her tone.

"I am calling because I wondered if you had attempted to rid yourself of your unwanted guest."

"I tried, Rinpoche. Believe me, I tried." She recounted the real events of the previous afternoon, relieved that for once she did not have to choose her words with care. "But there's more," she continued and repeated what the visitant had told her at three in the morning. "Needless to say, I'm not getting a lot of sleep," she finished. "I'm trapped, if he is to be believed."

Yongdon was silent for so long that Nora began to wonder if he was still on the line. She was about to ask, when he spoke. "I must confess

I did not take you as seriously as I should have. We must meet, Ms. Ryder. I will attempt this time to give you more thorough training in what you need to do. And I will try to coach you through the process."

"You'll help me?" Nora could not contain her delight.

"I believe that is what I said," Yongdon responded dryly. "I will be leaving for Phoenix, Arizona on Monday, where I have a speaking engagement scheduled at a local university. Then I plan to travel to Sedona for a couple of weeks of rest and contemplation. Perhaps we could meet in Sedona. I will have the time then to devote to your dilemma."

"Will it work so far away?" Nora asked uncertainly. "Can I destroy the tulpa from a distance?"

Yongdon answered with a dry laugh. "Never fear, he will travel with you."

Nora shuddered. Then she said, "How dangerous is this going to be? Will the tulpa try to hurt us?"

"His hold on life will undoubtedly be tenacious," Yongdon said, "but I think he will not hurt you. You are his creator. As for myself, as long as I do not threaten you, I should pose no risk to him."

After she hung up, Nora made a pot of coffee and drank a cup at her desk while she made a list of things to do to prepare for her trip to Sedona. Every now and then she caught herself glancing around the room, searching for darker masses of shadows or eyes glowing balefully in a corner, but there was nothing.

I wonder if the visitant heard my conversation with Yongdon, she thought. Shouldn't he be angry with me? I guess I'm amazed that he doesn't materialize to tell me I can't go to Arizona and destroy him.

But the room remained free of shadows.

* * * * *

On Monday, Nora boarded a plane for Arizona. As the plane took off and the city below receded to anthill proportions, she realized how symbolic this trip was. A new beginning, she decided. I'll get rid of the tulpa—

But a small inner voice whispered, What if you can't?

Nora felt her body tense up in response. I have to get rid of him, she thought. I have to!

For the first time she really understood why Emma had chosen seclusion. She loved her visitant, Nora thought. She didn't know how to get rid of him, but she wasn't afraid of him.

What about Jenny? Had she contemplated marriage? Or was meeting men and dating in the twenty-first century just too hard for her?

And what about other women? Were there others out there? Women who found the creation of a visitant a better solution? Or women who had tried to destroy their creations and failed?

Had any woman besides Alexandra David-Néel ever won the battle?

Nora leaned back in her seat and gazed out at the clouds. What if I fail? she thought. It was not a pleasant idea, not one she wanted to pursue, but for the first time, she forced herself to contemplate a future imprisoned by her visitant.

* * * * *

After her plane landed in Phoenix, Nora retrieved her bags and rented a car. Before long, she was threading her way through traffic, heading north toward Sedona.

She found the small bed-and-breakfast where she'd reserved a room on the edge of town. Yongdon would not call her until he arrived in Sedona, so Nora decided to take that much-needed vacation until she heard from him. She even sent Judith a postcard to keep her boss happy. If Judith assumed that Nora was taking her advice to rest and relax, all the better.

On Wednesday morning, her cell phone rang. She knew even before she checked the caller ID that it was Yongdon.

"It is time, Ms. Ryder. Are you ready?"

As ready as I'll ever be, she thought, and prayed fervently that she was right.

Chapter Fifty-three

Yongdon explained the arrangements he had made for their “retreat,” as he insisted on calling it. A local real estate mogul, who was also a practicing Buddhist, had loaned the lama the use of a vacation cabin.

“We will be undisturbed,” Yongdon said. “We will need to bring our own food and personal items. Once we have completed our task, we can go our separate ways. I assume you will wish to return to Los Angeles.”

“How long is this going to take?” Nora asked, by now a little alarmed. Yongdon made it sound as if they could be locked away in a battle with the tulpa until Christmas.

“As long as it takes,” Yongdon said sagely.

After she picked him up at the Buddhist center, Nora drove to the closest supermarket. She had a vague idea about what Buddhists ate, but she didn’t want to make a culinary gaffe and upset the one person who was trying to save her. From there, they drove straight to the cabin. On the way, she tried to make small talk. The silence was too unnerving.

“I am so grateful to you for—for agreeing to—to help me,” she stammered. “I think it is such an amazing coincidence that you were in the city at the same time as—”

“There is no such thing as coincidence,” Yongdon interrupted. “We have been brought together for a purpose, Ms. Ryder. Let us attempt to fulfill that undertaking.”

Nora snapped her mouth shut and didn't say another word until they reached their destination.

The so-called cabin—which lay at the end of a long dirt road—turned out to be a beautiful A-frame facing west. The front wall was made almost entirely of glass so the vacationer could watch the magnificent Arizona sunsets from either the ground floor or the second-story loft.

The interior was furnished with comfortable furniture in southwestern designs and colors. There was even a beehive fireplace, and a faint odor of mesquite smoke hung in the air.

Yongdon suggested that Nora put the food away while he carried her suitcases up the narrow staircase to the loft. "It is late," he said. "I think tonight we will begin our preparations. I need to know how disciplined you are, how much training you will require before the actual event."

After a light vegetarian dinner of rice, beans and steamed squash that Yongdon prepared, they began the ritual of meditation. Nora was glad she'd been practicing, and even the lama seemed pleased.

"Pay attention to your breathing," he advised. "Focus on it. Breathe in...."

Nora found that her mind was her own worst enemy. It wanted to contemplate that container of chocolate ice cream she'd bought and slipped into the freezer. The ice cream wasn't a meat product, she told herself, but she still felt guilty. Did Tibetan lamas approve of ice cream?

"Focus, Ms. Ryder." The sound of Yongdon's voice nearly shattered the image of the bowl, but her rebellious mind insisted on reviving it. She could almost taste the icy sweetness, almost feel it melting on her tongue.

"Focus, focus." Yongdon sounded stern.

Nora sighed. She tried to make herself concentrate on her breathing. On feeling the air seep out of her nostrils, but the bowl of ice cream....

"Be a reed in the wind," Yongdon's hypnotic voice suggested. "Bend with the flow of energy. Bend and sway."

Nora stopped fighting with the bowl of ice cream, and amazingly it began to dissipate.

“Breathe in....”

Nora felt herself relax, loosen her grip. She no longer had to be in control.

“I believe that will be enough for this evening.” Yongdon’s voice broke into her consciousness.

She blinked, opened her eyes and discovered that aside from a small lamp on the other side of the room, they were in darkness. She glanced toward the glass wall. A blanket of night pressed against it.

Yongdon rose gracefully from his position on the rug.

“You have done well tonight, Ms. Ryder,” he said, allowing himself the luxury of a small smile. “Now we must both sleep. We will begin early. Please set your alarm clock for five.”

Chapter Fifty-four

Nora was surrounded by a vast desert of pale pink sand.

She pivoted slowly, glancing in every direction at the most unusual red stones thrusting up from the desert floor. Something—perhaps wind, perhaps water—had carved them into strange and beautiful shapes—giant flowers, exotic animals, even geometric forms.

The sound of gurgling and splashing reached her ears, and she followed the sound to its source. Beyond a fantastic rock shaped like a giant scarlet dahlia, she discovered a vast pale green pool bubbling up from a spring. Puffs of golden mist—as fluffy as cotton candy—rose from the surface. She took a deep breath. The pool was perfumed; desert scents of wild sage and spring rain rose in the golden mist.

Not surprisingly, she realized she was naked. It seemed the most natural thing to step into the pool. Warm water lapped at her ankles and as she moved deeper, it rose to her knees and then her hips.

Nora submerged herself to her chin and then floated on her back. Overhead a lilac sky glittered with a profusion of stars, as if handfuls of golden sparkles had been tossed against it.

She clasped her hands under her neck to pillow her head. The water held her up.

The only sound she heard was the soft bubbling of the water. She breathed in the perfumed mist and listened to the pool's song.

Suddenly she felt a hand touch her hair. The fingers moved gently down the side of her face, down her neck and across her shoulder. Nora

felt her insides contract with desire. She opened her eyes and gazed up.

His golden eyes glowed with warmth and love. "I am here, beloved."

"Where are we? Where is this place?"

"This place is safe for you." He leaned down and kissed her shoulder, his lips moving over her warm, wet skin.

"No, I can't stay here," she groaned, struggling to stand. "You must let me go."

"If you wish to go, Nora," he said gently, "you may go. I do not keep you here. It is your own desire."

"No," she groaned as his mouth moved closer, closer....

His lips settled over hers, his tongue gently probing her mouth, sending eddies of desire from her mouth to her most secret, sensitive spot.

She sighed, reaching for his arms to steady her as she struggled to regain her footing. He held her, helped her, pulling her toward him, his tongue licking drops of water from her throat.

She leaned further toward him, wanting to feel his warm, wet body against hers. His cock was already engorged, ready to please her. As his mouth moved over hers, the fingers of one hand gently teased her labia apart. The sensation was so delicious that she automatically spread her legs.

His fingers went deeper, first caressing her clitoris, then moving toward her pussy. He gently probed with two fingers, pushing in and out and over her now hard, aching little knob.

Just once more, her traitorous mind told her. This is the most incredible sex....

She reached for his cock, feeling it tremble at her touch, hearing his deep, low voice as he moaned in response. His pleasure increased her own. She caressed the warm, wet shaft, wanting to feel him between her legs, to feel him slip into the waiting channel, to feel him push in and pull back, to thrust again and again.

He lifted her as easily as if she were a feather. She wrapped her legs around his waist, feeling the tip of his cock against her hungry pussy. Gently he lifted and lowered her, his cock penetrating by careful degrees,

until her body had swallowed every inch of him. Then he held her firmly, thrusting in and out.

Her excitement grew and she stiffened, leaning back to ride out the wave of pleasure, her cries echoing his own.

* * * * *

"Ms. Ryder, wake up. Wake up!" The lama's voice was sharp; his hand shaking her shoulder was forceful.

Nora's eyes snapped open. The bedside light was on. She gazed in distress at Yongdon's brows drawn into a frown.

"What happened?" she gasped.

In the dim light she saw color rise into the lama's cheeks. "You were dreaming," he said tersely. "I believe from what I heard that your dream creature—"

Nora pulled herself up in bed, glancing wildly around the room. In a far dark corner, she saw a darker massing of shadows, and from it two golden eyes glowed.

Chapter Fifty-five

"Oh, my God. He's there," she gasped, nodding toward the visitant.

Yongdon glanced in the direction she indicated. "I see nothing," he said. "But I believe you."

Suddenly, to her horror, Nora realized that she was naked beneath the sheet. Not only naked, but also the bottom sheet was wet under her legs, as if soaked by her own juices. She felt her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment.

"I am so sorry," she stammered, unable to meet Yongdon's gaze. "I had no idea—"

"It is all right," he said gently. "But this incident tells me that we can waste no time. The battle has already begun."

* * * * *

By five in the morning, the Arizona sky was light.

Nora showered and dressed quickly, hurrying downstairs. She could hear Yongdon in the kitchen, and she assumed he had again elected himself their master chef. She sniffed. No good-morning aroma of freshly brewed coffee and hot toast greeted her. She sighed.

After a breakfast of oatmeal, fruit and herbal tea, they resumed their meditation positions. But before they began, Yongdon said, "Today we will actually enter the mindscape where you will engage your tulpa in

combat.”

At the word ‘combat,’ Nora shivered. She did not think of herself as a violent person, not even a combative one.

Yongdon seemed to sense her dilemma. “This combat will not be the type of battle you envisage,” he explained. “Your weapons, Ms. Ryder, are not swords and guns, or even sticks and stones. Your arsenal is comprised of thoughts, of mental armor, of spiritual munitions. Remember that what you want is the complete opposite of what the tulpa wants. You want your freedom—even if that means freedom from his protection and his love.”

Nora nodded, understanding a little better. “Do you think I can do this?” she asked, suddenly doubting her own abilities.

Yongdon smiled. “You can do exactly what you set your mind to, Ms. Ryder. Are you ready?”

“Wait!” Nora had another worry. “I know you told me you would be in no danger, but...” Her voice trailed away, but her concern was etched clearly in her expression. “Rinpoche, are you sure the tulpa can’t hurt you?”

Yongdon seemed touched by her apprehension. “I assure you,” he said, “that as long as I do not pose a threat to you, I will be in no danger. Remember, I am here to guide you on your quest, Ms. Ryder. That is my only role in this adventure.”

Adventure! What a choice of words. Nora shivered a little; she did not think of herself as a particularly adventurous person. “But sooner or later he’s going to figure out—”

Yongdon brushed her fear aside. “I have had dealings with the supernatural world,” he said matter-of-factly. “Thank you for your concern, Ms. Ryder, but I assure you I can take care of myself. You, on the other hand, must concentrate on your battle.” He paused and then asked again, “Are you ready?”

Nora drew in a deep breath and straightened her posture. She knew that if ever there was a time to start believing in herself and her abilities, it was now.

However, despite Yongdon’s inspirational speech, Nora found it

hard to rein in her mind.

Instead of emptying itself of all thoughts, bit by bit her mind began to return to last night's dream. At first it was momentary glimpses into the dream realm of the pink desert. Then the memories intensified. The sight of the lilac sky glittering with golden stars. The touch of the visitant's mouth on her skin, the silky sensation of his fingertips roaming down her arm. The scent of spring rain borne on a warm desert wind. The sound of the visitant's voice—deep, gentle, caressing.

Suddenly Yongdon's voice pierced the growing web of sensations. "Focus, focus. Your visitant is here, Ms. Ryder. He is trying to control your thoughts. You must resist."

She struggled to focus on the sound of his voice, but the tulpa was a strong presence, battling equally hard to control her thoughts.

"Ms. Ryder, you must protect yourself," Yongdon told her. "Picture a barrier between yourself and the tulpa."

For a few moments, Nora strained to comply. First she mentally erected a partition, but the visitant tore it down, brick by brick. Then in her mind she built an entire room, but the visitant broke through the wall, lath and plaster shattering in a cloud of dust.

She was beginning to despair.

Then she thought of something from the previous night's meditation session—something Yongdon had said. Be a reed in the wind.

Nora remembered from the meditation classes she'd taken that this was a very Zen philosophy. To bend with adversity instead of fighting it. At the same time, she remembered something from her childhood, a kind of toy that would build the barrier she needed.

Nora began to create a bubble around herself. It started as a small bubble, with barely enough room for her, but bit by bit she enlarged it. It was made of a soft plastic material that as a child she had blown into bubbles through a small tube, but the adult Nora built a special force into this bubble. It would give, but it would not break.

The bubble swayed gently around her, as if in a soft breeze. It was clear with an iridescent sheen. Nora could see out. The visitant would be able to see in. But he could not touch her.

She heard a strange noise and almost lost her concentration until she realized what it was: a contented chuckle from Yongdon. "Excellent, Ms. Ryder. Now remain attentive to your barrier. He will surely try to destroy it. Concentrate on its strengths, not his power."

Suddenly the visitant was there, outside the bubble, still nothing but a shadow form with glowing eyes. Nora wondered if Yongdon saw him now, but if so the lama said nothing.

The visitant ran his hands lightly over the wall of the bubble as if seeking a weak spot. He moved slowly around the bubble, searching, searching.

Abruptly, he clenched his fist and, drawing his arm back, punched the bubble. Nora flinched as his fist collided with the iridescent wall. As she had hoped, his fist forced the wall inward, but it did not break. As soon as the visitant pulled his arm back, the bubble sprang back to its original shape.

Nora immediately focused on the strength and holding power of the bubble. She suspected the visitant would try again. Her suspicions proved right. He moved relentlessly around the bubble, prodding and poking it, trying to find a way in.

Nora shivered, focusing harder and harder. She felt the clash of their wills.

Unexpectedly, she felt nothing. The dream creature stepped back from the bubble. His head drooped and his shoulders slumped as if in resignation.

Nora felt a small burst of elation, but as if he were standing next to her, she heard Yongdon caution her.

"Be careful, Ms. Ryder. Do not let down your guard. Wait! Focus, focus...."

Suddenly, she heard a rushing sound that grew louder and louder. She half turned, glancing over her shoulder and saw, in horror, a wall of water racing toward her.

She drew in her breath to scream, but Yongdon reached out to throw her a verbal lifeline.

"Do not be afraid," he called, his voice rising above the roar of the

water. "Fear is your enemy. Think of the properties of your bubble. Remember, the reed in the wind."

In that moment, Nora remembered that bubbles, like beach balls, could float. She let her breath out slowly, focusing all her attention on the strength of her bubble. Lighter than water, she thought, easily carried by the current, and it will come to rest wherever the water deposits it.

The wall of water crashed like a giant wave against the bubble, which rolled over and over and then rose quickly toward the surface.

On its way up, it floated through a forest of shimmering kelp that swayed like copper-colored silk ribbons in a spring breeze. Nora saw fish swimming by, fish of the brightest metallic colors—gold, bronze, silver—and the most amazing shapes and sizes. Her awareness was almost distracted by the beauty of this underwater spectacle until Yongdon's voice again pierced her wandering attention.

"He is trying to trick you, Ms. Ryder. Trying to divert you from your task. Stay focused. Do not be lured by pretty illusions."

All at once the bubble broke free of the water and bounced toward the closest shore. As it touched the sand, Nora saw the water begin to recede until her bubble rested on a dry plain.

She glanced in every direction. There was no one and nothing but sand as far as she could see.

It's over, she thought, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. He's lost. I've won.

Then she heard Yongdon's voice. "Do not be deceived. The battle is far from over."

Chapter Fifty-six

"Can we take a break?" Nora pleaded. "I'm so tired."

"Every time we stop, we must start over again," Yongdon said. "Over and over."

Nora groaned. "I don't know how much longer I can keep focusing."

"Relax, Ms. Ryder. Continue to be the reed in the wind. Let the force of his anger and desire wash over you as cold winter winds blow over the thin reeds growing beside a pond. The reeds bend, and the winds think they have won. See, they say, the reeds bow before us. They are weak, while we are strong. But eventually the winds blow themselves out, and the air is still again. And once more the clever little reeds straighten to their full height and stand tall at the edge of the pond."

Nora was enchanted by the story, caught up in the verbal picture Yongdon painted.

"Unlike the clever reeds," Yongdon continued, "other plants are hard and unyielding. They refuse to bend before the winds' force. These stubborn sticks are determined to flaunt their inflexibility. The winds delight in blowing over them with gale force. And ultimately, the rigid plants crack and break before the supremacy of the winds."

Yongdon paused to let his words take effect. It worked. Nora took a deep breath and straightened her upper body. She reached deep inside herself for reserves of energy. I can do this, she thought. I can be the reed to the visitant's wind.

As if to acknowledge her metaphor, her bubble was suddenly caught up by a wind that lifted it off the ground. Nora found herself tossed this way and that as the bubble hurtled across the dry plain. When the bubble bounced, she was jarred but not injured. After each bounce, the bubble rose higher, only to smash down again on the parched sand. Nora was so busy steeling herself for the next impact that she could barely concentrate on the strength of the bubble.

"Relax, Ms. Ryder," Yongdon counseled, coming to her rescue one more time. "You will not be hurt. The visitant cannot allow that to happen. He may try to frighten you, but he will never hurt you. That would be a contradiction for him. Be as buoyant as the bubble. Let the journey end where it may."

Nora slowed her breathing, made herself grow calm and found that Yongdon was right. When the bubble collided with the sand, she was not hurt. Instead, she felt only the up and down motion of the bubble. It was not unlike riding a merry-go-round.

At last the bubble came to rest against a massive black mountain. The monolith loomed overhead, its face as pitted as old lava. Nora peered up, but she could not see the top of it. As she gazed at the ugly monstrosity—so unlike anything the visitant had shown her before—she saw wisps of steam emanating from the pockets and pits in the stone face. The wisps grew into clouds and then, to her dismay, Nora saw something bright orange oozing out.

It was a viscous liquid and everywhere it touched, the rock's surface fizzed and spluttered...and vanished in a puff of smoke. The molten material began to pour out of the pockets and drip down toward the bubble.

Almost instinctively, Nora threw herself toward the far side of the bubble, hoping to set it rolling away from the melting mountain. But for some reason the bubble wouldn't move. Then Nora saw why! Her visitant was holding the bubble in place.

She drew in her breath to scream, when Yongdon intervened.

"Ms. Ryder, stop believing that he will destroy the bubble and you. He can only destroy the bubble if you let him. He can never hurt you.

Believe in the power of your own mind. Put the fires out.”

Put the fires out? Nora glanced at the fiery waterfall of molten rock coming ever closer. Then what Yongdon said began to sink in. She gazed intently at the sky above the lava flow and visualized dark clouds, bloated with rain, massing.

As she gazed at them, the clouds opened and a silvery shower of cold water sprayed across the river of fire. Heat and cold met in an explosion of steam. Plumes of vapor blossomed into the air, falling back to earth as rain when the mist condensed. The bubble was soon coated with drops of water, but through it Nora could make out the flow of cooling lava crawling more slowly until finally the molten rock hardened.

She glanced over her shoulder at the visitant, but he was nowhere in sight. However, Nora would not be fooled again. Yongdon had warned her that the dream creature was a trickster. She finally understood what the lama meant; the visitant would not give up until he had exhausted every illusion from his bag of tricks.

Chapter Fifty-seven

She had very little time before she was accosted with a new sensation. Little by little the temperature inside the bubble began to drop. After the heat of the volcanic eruption, she was grateful for the cool air. But soon cool turned to cold.

All at once she realized that a thin coating of blue ice frosted the outside of the bubble. As she watched, the ice thickened, small cracks appearing like tiny stars in its glacial depths.

Nora shivered, rubbing her arms harder. She saw that her skin was turning blue with the cold. Her teeth chattered, and she began to shake uncontrollably.

Try as she might, she could not seem to focus on breaking up the ice. The harder she tried, the thicker the ice grew.

"Ms. Ryder, focus. You can and must warm yourself. Feel the heat generate from within your own body," Yongdon instructed. "It begins in your midsection and radiates out in all directions. See it as a warm glow. See the heat move upward toward your face, outward to the tips of your fingers, downward to your toes. See the bright colors of the heat dispel the dark colors of the cold."

Nora concentrated on an image of a white-hot glow pulsing within the center of her body. But the cold was making her sleepy. It was hard to stay awake, hard to think about what she needed to do.

"Fight back, Ms. Ryder. Do not give in to him. If he can make you sleep, he will win."

Nora roused herself. Damn the visitant! She was sick and tired of this creature trying to run her life. She hadn't let Brad do it; she would not let this tulpa win.

Anger fueled her, kept her focused. She began to feel the heat, and little by little she visualized the warmth spreading throughout her body—into her arms and legs, into her hands and feet and into her face.

She struggled to mentally surround herself with a warm blanket of hot light. It wrapped itself around her until she felt as snug as she did under the covers of a warm fleece blanket in the dead of winter.

And as she watched, basking in the warmth of her cocoon, the blue-star cracks widened. The ice shattered, the cracks spreading until the ice began to fall away in large wet chunks, melting as they hit the sand, vanishing into nothing.

Nora waited.

The visitant had tried to assault her position with every awful thing she could imagine. Surely he had run out of tricks. Or had he?

The next wave of terror came straight out of her worst nightmares. It began at the edge of her vision, at first nothing but a slight movement on her left.

Nora turned to look and fell back, gasping.

Crawling up the side of the bubble was a shiny black and gold spider as big as a dinner plate. Nora stared at it in horrified fascination. More movement to her right caught her attention. Her head whipped in that direction, and she screamed. A green and bronze scorpion—the size of a football—crept up that side of the bubble. Its tail arched menacingly over its back, and Nora saw a drop of blood red poison at the very tip.

The scorpion was barely halfway up when Nora spotted a viper, bright splashes of color—silver, gold and ruby red—marking its body. As she watched, it slithered toward the bubble, its mouth wide open, displaying needle-sharp fangs dripping emerald green venom.

She glanced back at the spider. Two more had joined it, along with more scorpions and snakes and beetles of every imaginable color and shape. Several yellow-striped centipedes as thick and as long as her arm wriggled with a thousand legs into the hideous mass.

She shuddered and shut her eyes, focusing on seeing the bubble cleared of these ghastly creatures. But she found she was losing her ability to focus, and when she opened her eyes, she saw that every inch of the bubble was covered with crawling things. Worse, Nora could hear them, hear their clicks and hisses and the chitinous crackling of their bodies as they crawled over each other and over her tiny fragile world.

She shivered, nauseated by the sight. How had the visitant known that she was obsessively afraid of poisonous creatures?

"He is of your own mind, Ms. Ryder. He knows your hopes, your fears, your dreams and your needs. It is that well of emotions that slakes his thirst."

Even Yongdon had read her thoughts, she realized.

All of a sudden, Nora's temper reached its breaking point. She had had it with being told by this dream creature what she could do and how she could do it. She was tired of him running her life. He had become nothing more than a chauvinist, she realized. And if he couldn't change—

Read this, Nora thought, directing all that was left of her strength and energy and anger at the visitant. Go away from me now.

The words sounded loud as they echoed and re-echoed in her mind.

Go away from me now. *Go away from me now.* GO AWAY FROM ME NOW.

Chapter Fifty-eight

Suddenly there was silence.

Suddenly Nora sensed that she was truly alone.

She huddled, unable to move, within the shelter of the bubble. She waited.

A minute went by, then two and then three.

Surely it could not be this simple.

She opened her eyes, daring to glance from side to side.

Nothing.

The creatures had vanished. The dry, sandy plain had disappeared. There was not even a horizon line. There was nothing but a white nothing as far as she could see in every direction.

Rinpoche, she thought, what's happening?

"Patience, Ms. Ryder. We must wait and see if he is truly gone."

They waited. Five minutes passed, then ten.

Nora's legs began to ache from being curled up so long. Her back itched and her mouth was dry. Other little physical discomforts wormed their way into her consciousness.

Rinpoche, I need to stretch my legs, she thought. May I take down the barrier?

"It would appear that you are safe doing so," Yongdon said in a guarded tone.

Slowly, carefully, Nora deconstructed the bubble.

Now what, Rinpoche?

"Focus on your breathing, Ms. Ryder. We will bring you back to the here and now."

As if waking from a long sleep, Nora became aware of her surroundings—of the faint odor of mesquite smoke that permeated the A-frame, the scent of her own hand lotion and the fading aroma of cooked oatmeal.

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. Across from her, Yongdon sat motionless, watching her. As she gazed at him, he afforded her a minute smile.

"Congratulations, Ms. Ryder. I believe you have succeeded."

Nora let her breath out in a rush. She had never felt quite so relieved about anything. Then doubt assailed her. "Are you certain?"

Yongdon shrugged. "One can never be certain of anything," he said. "But I do not sense the dream creature's presence now. Do you?"

Nora shook her head. "But it was—it seems like it was too easy. I don't trust him."

"Then you do not trust yourself," Yongdon told her. "You created him. You have always had the power to stand up to him, to command him to leave your life. Today you truly exercised that power."

"So what happened to him?" Nora asked, glancing as if by habit into all the shadowed corners of the room.

"You ordered him to leave, and he appears to have done so."

"I ordered him to leave many times," she said, "and he never paid any attention to me before. Why now?"

"This time you fought back. Each time he tried to wear you down, you countered with a new defense. At the end, when he played on your deepest fears, he was going against his own instincts. He was not created to frighten you, but to protect you, to love you, to care for you. Going against his instincts was, I believe, his undoing."

Nora felt the quick, hot sting of tears. "And he did love me," she said in a choked whisper. "He protected me. He cared for me." She broke off, unable to trust her voice.

Yongdon studied her impassively. "I fervently hope, Ms. Ryder, that you meet a human soul mate, someone who will be all that the tulpa

was for you and more."

She gulped and nodded, unable to speak, but deep inside she wondered if such a man existed.

"As for me, my work here is done," Yongdon said, getting gracefully to his feet. He showed no adverse signs of sitting for a long time in the same position, no groans or sighs as he stretched his legs.

Nora envied him as she struggled to stand, wincing at the pain of cramped muscles.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Yongdon glanced at the clock on the wall behind her. "It took less time than I thought it would," he said.

Nora turned to look at the clock and gasped. "It's only been a few hours," she exclaimed. "But it seemed like it took forever."

Yongdon nodded. "In that realm, time has little meaning."

Nora picked up the cushion she'd been sitting on, tossed it on the couch and headed for the kitchen, suddenly aware that they had missed lunch. "I'm starved." She dug in the freezer, pulling out the container of chocolate ice cream. "Want some?"

Yongdon shook his head, but to Nora's amazement he reached for a bag of potato chips on the counter. When he saw her staring, he shrugged. "Vegetarian," he said, opening the bag.

Chapter Fifty-nine

While they ate, Nora asked questions that Yongdon tried to answer. "What do I do now?" she asked. "How do I keep from creating another tulpa?"

"Live in the present," Yongdon told her. "Remember, you are what you think. Try not to see yourself as a woman grieving for a man long dead. See your possibilities. And continue your meditation." He was silent for a long moment, then he added, "I hope, Ms. Ryder, that you find a real man you can focus your love on." He smiled. "He will be a lucky man indeed."

After they had eaten, they packed up their belongings and headed for the car. Nora drove Yongdon back to the Buddhist center.

"I—I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done for me," she said, suddenly shy. "You saved my life."

Yongdon smiled, made a small bow and turned to walk away. At the last moment, he turned back. "Try not to light the little lamp," he said dryly. "While I do not believe that it holds magic properties, I do know that the boundary between the natural world and the supernatural world is imprecise. I would not suggest you take any chances."

As she drove away, Nora's vision blurred with tears. I'm really going to miss Yongdon, she thought, right down to his vegetarian potato chips.

* * * * *

When Nora entered her apartment, she experienced a momentary stab of fear, but the rooms felt quite empty.

She decided that she would go back to work the next day. She'd taken too much time off already, and she craved the normalcy of a work routine.

But when the alarm went off in the morning, Nora had a hard time getting out of bed. She had to push herself to shower and dress, to grab some coffee and get out the door.

"What's wrong with me?" she muttered as she drove toward the freeway. She discovered she really didn't feel so good. Her throat was a little scratchy and her muscles felt sore. I probably caught a cold from someone on the plane, she thought glumly.

Still, she was more than halfway to the office. Might as well make an effort, she decided. And after all, the weekend was coming up.

I'll take some extra vitamins and get to bed early, she thought. With Brad out of my life and the visitant gone, my evening hours are going to be all mine.

* * * * *

As Nora walked by Gladys' desk, the receptionist let out a yelp.

"You're back!" Gladys' jumped to her feet and scurried around her desk to grab Nora in a hug. "God, we missed you."

"I missed you, too," Nora said with a grin, as she disentangled herself from Gladys' grip.

"But what are you doing here?" Gladys crossed her arms across her chest and scowled. "Aren't you supposed to be on vacation?"

"I was," Nora said. "I had a great time, but I wanted to get back to work. So what's been going on? How is everyone? You've got to fill me in on all the office gossip." She beamed invitingly.

Gladys grabbed Nora's carryall, hoisted it over her shoulder and kept pace with Nora as they walked down the hall. "Office gossip" was Gladys' cue.

"Bernie had a baby boy. Born last week. Big baby. Absolutely bee-you-tee-ful."

Nora nodded, smiled encouragingly.

Gladys ticked off news items on her fingers as she continued. Someone had gotten married. Someone else had left her husband. One traitorous staff member had taken a job with a competitor.

Gladys kept talking, rolling her eyes and wagging her eyebrows to punctuate the juicy parts, until Nora interrupted. "How's Judith?"

"Judith? Oh, fine." Then Gladys' eyes widened. "I almost forgot, yesterday she hired a new photographer. Jim Molloy." She rolled her eyes expressively. "He's gorgeous. And single. We're taking bets on who he asks out first."

"Oh, yeah?"

They'd reached Nora's office. She opened the door, went inside. Gladys stood in the doorway. They both stared at Nora's overflowing "in" box.

"Want me to bring you a cup of coffee?" Gladys asked. "Or would you rather I bring the pot?"

Chapter Sixty

The morning passed quickly. Nora took a decongestant, hoping to stave off the threatening cold, and managed to get about half the overflow of papers taken care of. She worked steadily, glad the phone hadn't rung and that no one had popped in to say hello. She had a feeling that Gladys was keeping her return a secret, at least until she could get partially caught up.

About noon she realized how hungry she was. She stood, discovered that her head was aching, probably from hunger, and headed for the break room.

When she pushed the door open, she saw Judith leaning against the counter on the far side of the room, a cup of coffee in one hand and a cookie in the other. Judith was waving the cookie as if it were a baton and she were conducting a symphony orchestra.

Facing Judith, his back to Nora, stood a stranger. Nora had only a quick impression. Someone tall, broad-shouldered, dressed in a chambray blue shirt and dark blue slacks.

Judith leaned sideways to see who was standing in the doorway. Her eyes widened. "Oh, my God!" she sang out. "You're back."

The stranger turned, a smile of curiosity and interest on his face. Nora saw a pair of eyes the color of pewter, saw an unruly shock of hair that curled where he probably didn't want it to, saw a deeply tanned face etched with laugh lines that framed an incredibly warm smile.

Their glances locked, and everything seemed to go into slow

motion.

Nora was only half aware that Judith was saying something, was motioning her to come into the room.

She took a step, then another, then another. At the same time the stranger took two slow-motion steps toward her, his hand held out. Their fingers touched, and it was as if an electric current arced through her body.

Then the world spun around and everything went black.

* * * * *

Nora awoke in strange surroundings. It took her a moment before she realized she was lying in a hospital bed in a hospital room and that Judith was sitting in a chair next to the bed.

As Nora tried to orient herself, Judith jumped to her feet and approached the bed. "Oh, God, you're awake. Thank goodness!"

"What happened?" The words came out in a croak.

Instantly, Judith was at the door, yelling for a nurse.

When the nurse came in, she smiled at Nora, even though Judith was all but climbing up her back.

"She needs help," Judith demanded. "Is there a doctor around? He needs to check her out. What's wrong with her voice? Why—"

The nurse ignored Judith. "How're you feeling?" she asked, taking Nora's wrist and feeling for a pulse. "Hmmm, pretty good. Want some water?"

She didn't wait for an answer, just poured from a plastic pitcher, put a straw in the glass and handed it to Nora.

Nora drank gratefully.

Judith hovered behind the nurse as the woman checked the patient's vital signs. "How're you feeling?" the nurse asked again as she eyed Nora's chart.

"Okay, I guess," Nora said cautiously. Her head was throbbing and she put a hand to her temple, wincing at a stab of pain.

"You banged your head," the nurse explained. "You have a slight

concussion. Nothing serious. Any pain? I'll get you something for it."

She was out the door before Nora could ask any questions.

"What happened to me?" Nora asked Judith.

"You passed out, kid," Judith said. "Do you remember that?"

Nora started to shake her head, but winced as she discovered that moving her head fast was painful. "I fainted?" she said.

"Yeah. Scared Jim and me half to death."

"Jim?" But the name immediately conjured up an image of beautiful gray eyes that crinkled at the corners and a smile as warm as a crackling fire on a cold winter's day.

"Jim Molloy, our new photographer. I didn't even have time to introduce you two. You took one look at him and passed out at his feet."

"Oh, God." Nora felt color rush into her cheeks. "How embarrassing."

Judith grinned a foxy smile. "Yeah, and it's only his first day on the job."

Nora scrunched down in the bed. "Oh, no! Poor guy! What a way to start."

"He's wondering how to make it up to you." Judith was clearly enjoying Nora's discomfort.

Nora pulled herself upright again. "Make it up to me? Why? He didn't do anything."

"He doesn't know that," Judith said. "At least allow him to take you out to dinner before you let him off the hook."

"Oh, Judith." Nora turned away in exasperation. Then she turned back. "So what really happened? Why am I here?"

"You apparently had a relapse of that viral thing that's going around," Judith said.

Nora frowned. "What viral—"

Then she remembered the story she'd trumped up. Only I didn't really trump it up, Nora thought. It would have been too hard to explain I had "visitant-itis!"

Judith caught her expression. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Only—I can't believe I fainted. I've never, ever fainted in

my whole life."

"Well, don't worry about it. They told me they're going to keep you overnight, but if you feel okay, they'll let you go in the morning."

Nora groaned. She hated hospitals, especially the food. "Can't I—"

"No." Judith picked up her purse and started for the door. "I'll be back to get you in the morning, okay?"

Nora tried to nod and instead said, "Ouch."

"Don't move your head so much," Judith said. "Don't try to talk. Don't argue." She grinned. "I could get to like this."

"Get out," Nora said good-naturedly. She would have thrown a bedpan at Judith, but the nurse walked in with her aspirin.

Chapter Sixty-one

Nora was trying to find solace in a bowl of lime Jell-O and a CNN report on Paris Hilton when she heard a tap on the door. "Come in," she called, clicking the remote to kill CNN.

A moment later a head poked around the door. Nora drew her breath in sharply as she made eye contact with a pair of beautiful gray eyes under brows drawn together with worry.

"Hi," she said, thinking how inane she sounded. "Come in."

He smiled. The warm fire glow of his smile spread to his eyes, melting away the worry. "Hi."

He had a deep voice that made her insides contract sharply. Good grief, she thought, what is wrong with me? I feel like I'm sixteen again.

"Uh, Jim Molloy," he said by way of introduction, folding his tall frame into the room. He was holding something behind his back, and he brought it forth with a widening of his smile.

It was a bouquet of daisies.

"Those are my favorite flowers," Nora exclaimed, pulling herself up higher in the bed. "How did you know?"

He found another glass, poured water in it and arranged the flowers. "Don't you know I can read your mind?" His eyes and smile teased as much as his words.

Nora's eyes widened. "What?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "I'm glad you like daisies. As a matter of fact, so do I. I think daisies are much more interesting than roses.

I took a chance that you did, too."

"Yes," Nora said in breathless agreement. "They are better than roses. Even if they don't have a fancy perfume."

"A little like some people," Jim said. "You know, maybe not as exotic, but..."

He paused and Nora finished. "But solid," she said. "Dependable."

They gazed at each other in wonder. Then Jim shook himself.

"I hope you don't mind me dropping by like this," he said. "I wanted to see how you were feeling. And to tell you that I am so sorry—"

"Oh, it's not your fault," she said quickly. "It turns out I have that viral thing."

He nodded. "I heard. A relapse?"

"Uh, sort of." She smiled, wanting to change the subject as fast as she could. "So tell me—"

"It's great," he said and when she looked surprised, he explained. "The job."

"How did you know I—?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just did. Knew that you were going to ask—"

And until the nurse came in to announce that visiting hours were over, they talked in pieces of sentences because each knew what the other was going to say before it was said.

When it was time for him to leave, Nora found she couldn't bear to say goodbye.

She fervently hoped, as she looked deeply into Jim's eyes, that Yongdon was getting his wish.

Chapter Sixty-two

On Saturday afternoon there was a knock on Nora's door. She was certain it was Judith, until she looked through the security peephole and saw Jim standing in the hall. She opened the door quickly.

His arms were wrapped around a stuffed-full brown paper bag. Nora saw a loaf of French bread and the neck of a wine bottle sticking out.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "I figured you might be running low on supplies. I know I should have called first, but I wanted to surprise you. And whatever you don't want, I'll take home with me."

Nora laughed and stood aside to let him enter.

He walked straight to the kitchen, put the bag on a counter and began unloading it. Nora's eyes widened. He'd brought a lot of her favorite foods, many already prepared. "This is incredible," she exclaimed. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing." He stowed a container of cheese-broccoli soup, a crusty loaf of French bread and a box of fresh blueberries in the refrigerator. "Except an invitation to stay for dinner. And only if you let me fix it."

Nora laughed. "But everything's prepared, or at least most of it."

"Not so," Jim said, striking a pose of nobility. "Someone has to heat up the soup and slice the bread. And I am willing to sacrifice myself for the cause."

* * * * *

They ate in the living room, sitting on thick cushions in front of the coffee table. Nora had set the table while Jim prepared the dinner, and she'd set it so they could see the sky change colors as the sun dropped to the western horizon.

Their meal was punctuated with light banter. Nora could not believe how comfortable she felt with Jim, as if she had known him for a lifetime. He didn't talk as much about himself as Nora would have liked, but over time, she thought, they would both reveal more about themselves.

Nora had put on a CD of soft music and Jim, it turned out, had the same tastes. As she carried some of their dishes to the kitchen, she saw him heading for her collection of CDs.

She put the dishes in the sink and rinsed them. When she walked back to the living room, she saw Jim standing by her desk, his hand reaching for the lamp.

"No!" The word erupted before she had time to think.

Jim's head whipped about, and he gazed at her in surprise. "What?"

She crossed the distance between the kitchen door and her desk in a flash. "I—I'm sorry," she stammered, grabbing the lamp. "It—it's an antique. Very delicate, very old."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Family heirloom?"

"Uh, no." She cradled it protectively. "A gift, from a friend. She, uh, bequeathed it to me."

"I'm sorry." Jim's brows knitted in sympathy. "Was this recently?"

"Yes." Nora was surprised at the question. "How—"

He shrugged. "Just a guess. You're so upset."

"I'm sorry." The apology was becoming habitual, she thought unhappily, and if she didn't stop overreacting, Jim might begin to think she was paranoid and she could lose this promising relationship.

Jim put his hand on her shoulder. "It's okay," he said, his voice soothing.

His hand was warm; she didn't want him to let go. And how did he always know exactly the right thing to say?

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

His glance dropped to the lamp. "It's beautiful," he said. "Is that a key?"

Nora nodded. "It's a music box as well as a lamp."

"Does it work?"

"What, the lamp?" She heard the note of alarm in her voice.

He grinned. "I meant the music box."

"Uh, I—I think so, but I've never wound it up. I'm afraid the mechanism would break." Which was a lie. She had wound it up, had summoned—

She felt color rush to her cheeks. Did Jim see her redden? Did he see the lie written on her face? A relationship founded on lies would never survive.

Chapter Sixty-three

He gazed into her eyes. After a moment, he said, "Okay," in a very neutral tone.

Nora's heart sank. He knows, she thought. He knows I'm lying.

"I love tinkering with mechanical things. Maybe it would just take a little oil to loosen the gears."

Nora's heart began to pound. "No, really. I—I don't want to mess with it."

"You'll never know how the music sounds if you don't wind it up." He smiled, and Nora felt she could drown in that smile. At the same time, she had to find a way to turn down his offer without hurting his feelings.

"Uh, it's kind of you to—"

He seemed to sense her discomfort because he put out a hand to cover hers. "But some things are better left to the professionals," he said softly, "and that definitely includes antiques."

Nora felt her shoulders slump with relief.

As she set the lamp on the desk, Jim turned to glance out the window, at the sun dropping toward the horizon. "How about movies?" he asked. "What do you like best? Mysteries? Comedies? Musicals?"

Nora took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. The bad moment had passed.

"All of the above," she said, hoping she sounded lighthearted. "I can't believe we also have the same taste in movies."

"Next time I'll remember to bring a DVD with dinner," he said.

"But now—"

He headed for the door. Nora stared at him, appalled. "Are you leaving?"

He cocked his head to one side, studying her, his smile gentle. "Yes, beautiful lady, because the doctor told you to get plenty of rest and if I stay much longer, neither one of us will want to get plenty of rest."

To her horror, her eyes filled with tears. "It's about the lamp, isn't it?" she whispered. "I am so, so sorry I—"

He crossed the space between them, cupping her chin in his hand. "No, sweetheart. It has nothing to do with the lamp. You were right to stop me. As I said, I like to tinker. Wrong thing to do with antique lamps."

"It's only—"

"It's very precious to you," he said, "and if I broke it, you would be inconsolable."

"It's not that—"

He cut off the rest of her words with his mouth. The world tilted; Nora would have staggered back if he had not pulled her to him.

When they parted, she whispered, "You'll catch that viral thing."

He laughed. "I'm not worried. Are you coming to work on Monday?"

"Oh, you'd better believe it," Nora said.

"Is your calendar full next Saturday?"

"Empty as empty can be."

"Good! May I have a little bit of your Saturday?"

She blinked, wondering if she should pinch herself. "Sure. You can have the whole weekend if you want. What did you have in mind?"

"I thought maybe you'd let me take you to your favorite restaurant."

She raised one eyebrow. "And which one would that be?"

His smile spread across his features. "I'm going to let you tell me what you're in the mood for."

She gazed at him, open-mouthed. "I have no idea," she said at last.

"Then you've got all week to figure it out, don't you?" He laughed. "Ah, decisions, decisions."

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

Nora grinned back. "So many restaurants, so little plastic."

He leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. "I'll see you Monday."

After Nora closed the door behind Jim, she leaned against it and gazed blindly across the room. All she could think about was the sensation of his mouth on hers. She could still smell the faint scent of his aftershave and hear his laugh echo in her memory.

Oh, my, she thought with a deep sigh. I think I've fallen in love again.

Chapter Sixty-four

On her way back to the kitchen to load the dishwasher, Nora remembered the lamp. As soon as she'd finished in the kitchen, she hurried to the desk. For a long time she held the lamp, gazing at the design.

She remembered the first time she'd touched it. The metal had felt almost warm and had given the impression of moving beneath her fingers, but of course that was impossible.

Tonight the metal was cold, hard, unyielding; it felt dead. Maybe the magic is gone, she thought. Maybe it was all in my mind to begin with. But she certainly didn't want to experiment in order to find out.

I'll call Stanton, she decided. He can have the damned thing.

That reminded her of the visitant. Yongdon believed the mind creature was gone, but even he admitted that nothing was certain.

She couldn't imagine quarreling with Jim, but what if he had insisted on trying to fix the music box? Would they have argued? Would she have acquiesced to his wishes in order to keep things calm between them?

If she had allowed him to wind up the music box, would he have discovered her lie? Would he have been unreasonably angry, or merely distrustful of her after that? And worse, what would he have brought to them across the vast expanse of space and time?

If I lie to keep him safe, our relationship could be doomed. If I tell him the truth, I'll destroy the relationship. Either way, I lose.

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

Tears of frustration and futility spilled down her cheeks.

* * * * *

To be on the safe side, Nora decided that until she could get the lamp to Stanton, it might be better to stow the damned thing in the back of her coat closet.

As she did so, she happened to catch sight of a garment that was too painfully recognizable, and her spirits sank. It was a jacket that belonged to Brad. Seeing the jacket reminded her that he had left a toothbrush and razor in her medicine cabinet and more clean clothes in a drawer in the bedroom.

Nora heaved a sigh. As late as it was, she went through every room of the apartment to find and consolidate Brad's belongings. When she had collected everything, she set the bags near the front door.

Somehow I've got to get these to him, she thought. But the idea of phoning him, hearing his voice was too distasteful. In the end, she e-mailed Brad, letting him know she had his things.

"Perhaps we can meet some place public," she typed. She paused, her fingers hovering over the keys, and then a brainstorm hit her. "How about at The Pepper Pot some evening after work? Just e-mail me an answer."

And then we can go our separate ways, she thought, and I'll never have to deal with Brad again.

Chapter Sixty-five

The sight of Jim's cheery smile at the meeting table on Monday morning made Nora's spirits soar. In fact, the meeting was more interesting than usual, although whether that was because Judith was in a good mood or because Nora had Jim to gaze at, she never knew.

Everyone welcomed Nora, and she was so glad to be back. Back from vacation, back from the hospital, back from the edge of insanity.

Jim remained friendly but completely professional throughout the rest of the week. That was fine with Nora. It felt good to be working, to finally map out the series on women and abuse. And once she got underway, the articles almost seemed to write themselves.

Nora buried herself in her work until the weekend, although in odd moments she contemplated which restaurant she wanted to dine at on Saturday.

* * * * *

Dinner was a huge success. Jim took her to a small Mexican restaurant she'd always loved, and over chicken enchiladas drowning in a sensational molé sauce and icy margaritas with the perfect balance of salt and lime, they talked about other restaurants they'd like to visit.

"You haven't told me much about yourself," Nora said at last, thinking they had exhausted the topic of food.

Jim dipped a tortilla chip into salsa and bit into it. "What do you

want to know?"

"Well, like where you're from." She hoped she didn't sound nosy.

Jim took a deep breath. "I was born here, believe it or not."

"You're kidding." Nora stared at him in surprise. "Did you go to school here?"

"No." He smiled. "Okay, your turn. Where were you born?"

"Here," Nora said. "And I went to school here."

"Do your parents still live here?" Jim asked.

"They did. They both passed away a few years ago. But I have a married sister, although we don't see each other very often. How about you?"

He gazed into the depths of his margarita. "No parents, no brothers or sisters."

"An only child?" Nora asked.

"An orphan," he answered.

Nora didn't know what to say. That had to be hard, she thought, but Jim said he was long past the days when he hoped to be adopted.

"Tell you what," he said teasingly, "you can adopt me." He put his hand over hers, the mischief in his expression melting into a loving smile, and then he ordered another round of margaritas.

* * * * *

After dinner they went back to Nora's apartment. She made a pot of coffee and they talked some more. At nine, Jim glanced at his watch. "I'd better get going," he said.

Nora stared at him. "It's early," she blurted.

He smiled. "Yes, but I have an assignment first thing in the morning."

Nora's eyes widened. "Tomorrow is Sunday."

"Yep."

"We don't work weekends."

"Tell that to the controversial female minister who wants Judith to publish an article on women in religion and how she believes most

churches aren't responsive to the needs of women clergy."

Nora gazed at him in disbelief. "You're going to church?"

"That's where the lady minister will be," he said cheerfully. "Preaching to the congregation. And that's what I'll be shooting. With a camera, that is." He chuckled. "Want to come along?"

"Uh, no, thank you," Nora murmured. "I realize I'm probably being a Philistine, but I do treasure sleeping in on weekends."

"Right," Jim said, getting to his feet.

Nora sighed and stood. "Okay, I'm feeling incredibly selfish," she confessed, "but I guess I hoped—"

His mouth met hers in a gentle kiss. "So did I, but there will be other evenings. And I value you too much to rush anything. About next weekend—"

"It's all yours," she told him with a smile.

"And you?" he said softly, pulling her to him.

"I'm yours, too," she answered and thought, with love never ending through time everlasting.

And wished with all her heart that he could read her mind.

Chapter Sixty-six

The week seemed to crawl by. And yet, each day began with a fresh promise of happiness. Nora had never looked forward to going to work quite so much. She had never sung so badly, albeit so enthusiastically, in the shower before. She had never welcomed the morning commute with such anticipation, because now she knew that each mile brought her closer to Jim.

There were still so many things she didn't know about him. She knew he, too, had an apartment, but there had been no opportunity yet for her to see it. She knew he liked Mexican food, Thai food and Italian food...in that order, but she had no idea what his favorite color was. She wasn't even sure of his age, although she suspected he was about her own age. She'd guessed that from the few gray hairs that salted his otherwise dark thatch and the lines radiating out from the corners of his eyes. But whether he was a few years younger or a few years older she didn't know, and she decided she didn't really care.

When they were at work, they both behaved very professionally. Jim was as friendly to other employees as he was to her. Nora wondered if word of their first date had gotten out, or if the office pool was still taking bets.

She was sure that Judith suspected something from a few offhand remarks and elbow jabs that her employer dished out when they were alone. Nora smiled enigmatically and refused to take the bait. This was one secret she wanted to hug to herself...at least for a while.

* * * * *

On Thursday afternoon Jim and Nora had a few moments alone in the break room. Nora wasn't sure if she dared broach the subject of the weekend, uncertain if Jim really had plans for them. It was Jim who brought it up.

"How would you like to spend the weekend in Santa Barbara?" he asked. He leaned against the counter, sipping a cup of hot coffee.

Nora beamed with delight. "What a great idea," she said. "I haven't been there in ages."

"Neither have I," Jim said. "I thought we could drive up early on Saturday and explore some of those great little shops."

"And there's always the beach." Nora closed her eyes, remembering how good it felt to wiggle her toes in the sand and feel the waves rush in to caress her calves.

"We could take a picnic lunch." Jim picked up the theme.

When Nora opened her eyes, she saw he was watching her with some amusement. "Good idea," she said. "This may be the last warm-enough weekend of the season."

"Exactly. And if we find a very private sand dune...."

Nora laughed. "I doubt we'll find that, but—" She flashed a sexy smile in his direction.

"Say no more. It can all be arranged." He unfolded himself from the counter and turned to rinse his cup. Nora wanted to cross the distance between them, lean against his back and slip her arms around his waist, but she restrained herself with great difficulty. With her luck, someone would walk in at the wrong time.

"Do—do you want me to go online, find us a place to stay?" she asked hesitantly.

"You can if you want," he told her, "but I don't mind doing it."

She smiled. "I'll leave it all in your capable hands."

"Any preferences?" he asked. "Hotel? Bed-and-breakfast? Motel Six?"

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

“Uh, yuck to the latter,” Nora said with a laugh. “But as for the first two—surprise me.” She was delighted that he’d given her choices.

“You got it.” He made a mock salute and walked toward the door. As he passed her, he reached out to touch her fingers with his. It was the lightest caress and the most innocent, but it sent quivers of pleasure through Nora’s body.

She could hardly wait for Saturday.

Chapter Sixty-seven

When her alarm went off Saturday morning, Nora came awake with a thrill of anticipation, until she looked out the window and saw rain coming down in sheets. Then her hopes for a magical get-away weekend plummeted.

She turned on the TV for a weather report, hoping against hope that it was raining only in Glenlowe, but her wishes crashed and burned as the weatherman pointed to an ominous dark patch on the weather map, a drippy-looking storm front moving from west to east over the coastline of California and stretching from San Francisco to San Diego.

Nora punched in Jim's cell phone number, but he didn't answer. Maybe that was a good sign, she thought. Maybe he was rearranging their weekend plans.

She took a quick shower, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved tee and was buttering toast to go with her coffee when she heard the doorbell.

Jim stood outside, looking very wet. Nora opened the door quickly and pulled him inside. "You're soaked." She ran to fetch a towel and poured him a cup of coffee.

As he toweled his head dry, he gave her a rueful grin. "Looks like Santa Barbara is a wash," he punned.

Nora winced. "What a disappointment. Do you think the gods of weekend fun are punishing us?"

"They'd better not be," Jim said, "because I happen to have the makings of an alternative plan with me." He held up the sodden paper

bag he'd brought along with his suitcase.

Nora nodded at the wet bag. "This had better be worth it."

He smiled. "Ah, mademoiselle," he said in the worst parody of a French accent she had ever heard. "Observe!" He reached into the bag and pulled out a package of microwave popcorn and a handful of DVDs.

Nora's eyebrows went up. "You rented movies to take to Santa Barbara?"

He shook his head. "No, when I got up this morning and saw what a mess the weather was, I decided we had to go to Plan B. I figured we could snuggle in here and spend the weekend watching movies and talking and—" He paused, mischief in his eyes. "I guess that's about it. Unless you can think of anything else we could do to entertain ourselves."

Nora screwed her features into an expression of mock displeasure. "This is your best shot?"

"Uh, we could play Monopoly. Do you have a Monopoly board?"

"You are not scoring points here, Group Activity Leader."

"No?" He pretended to be hurt. "And I thought you'd fall right in line with all my great ideas for weekend entertainment."

She struggled to maintain a scowl, but her mouth kept trying to expand into a smile. "What else do you have in your bag of tricks?"

He looked into the sack, then looked at Nora and waggled his eyebrows suggestively. Nora leaned forward, curious now, as he dramatically pulled out a box of playing cards. "Go, fish," he intoned.

Nora laughed. "Please," she begged. "Are you ever serious?"

His grin turned gentle, and he leaned forward and kissed her. "There is one other little game we might play," he said softly.

Nora melted against him. "I'm game," she whispered. His answering chuckle was lost when their mouths met again.

And then the phone rang.

Chapter Sixty-eight

Jim broke the kiss and stepped back, releasing Nora at the same time, but she groaned and whispered, "No! Let the machine get it."

She started to snuggle back into Jim's arms, but the voice on the answering machine froze her.

"Nora, this is Brad and I know you're home, so pick up, damn it."

She pulled out of Jim's embrace, almost breathless with shock.

Jim said softly, "It's okay. Go ahead and answer it." He gently released his hold on her.

She shook her head. "No! I don't want to talk to—"

"Nora, he sounds as if he'll persist until you do. Why don't you see what he wants? We can deal with it."

"You don't understand," she exclaimed, frustration making her voice shake. "He—we— There's a bad history here and, oh, it's complicated."

"I understand," Jim said. "But that's not the point. The point is to find out what he wants and give it to him if you can, so we can move on."

"He might come over, might cause trouble," Nora said.

Jim wrapped his arms around her to reassure her. "You don't have to be afraid. I'm not going to let him cause problems for us." At the sight of her expression, he shook his head. "No, Nora, I don't plan to start a fight. If he gets out of line, we'll call the police."

"Oh, God!" Nora pulled back and buried her face in her hands, remembering the humiliation she'd felt the last time the cops had been

called to her apartment.

At that moment, Brad's message time ran out, but he was, as Jim had surmised, persistent. The phone rang again.

"He knows you're here, sweetheart," Jim said. "You can't bury your head in the sand. Might as well get it over with."

She blinked in surprise, realizing that for once she had a powerful ally on her side. Jim was so unflappable and so confident. He smiled reassuringly. It'll be fine, his expression seemed to say.

Nora picked up the receiver and in a trembling voice said, "Hello?"

"What took you so long?"

"What do you want, Brad?" Anger clipped her tone.

"My things, of course."

"I told you, we can meet at the—"

"Screw that," Brad snarled. "I'm here now. I want my things."

"You're here?" She frowned, momentarily puzzled.

"Outside your door," he said. "So let me in."

Nora cast a frantic look at Jim and mouthed, "He's already here. He's in the hall."

Jim nodded that he understood.

"All right," Nora said into the receiver. She hung up and walked to the door. Her hands were shaking so badly, she fumbled with the locks, but at last the door opened.

Brad—wearing a hooded rain jacket that dripped onto the hall carpet—stood outside her door, closing his cell phone with one hand. He held a soggy brown paper shopping bag in the other, and Nora recognized a jacket of hers poking out of the top.

He tossed the bag of her belongings into the apartment and glowered at her. "Well? Where's my stuff?" he demanded.

She reached for the bags she'd packed up and pushed them out the door toward him. "Here."

But when she glanced from the bags to Brad, she saw he was not looking at her. He was gazing beyond her, and his expression of growing rage said it all.

"You bitch," he whispered. "You lied."

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

She knew exactly what he was referring to. "No, Brad, I didn't lie. There was no one else here that day. I met Jim after—"

She glanced over her shoulder, suddenly worried at what she would see on Jim's face, but to her relief, he seemed to be handling Brad's rudeness with composure.

And then, to her horror, the thing she dreaded most happened. A sudden icy breeze blew across her face. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the drapes move.

Chapter Sixty-nine

Nora's heart sank. No! It was not possible. But she knew it was. Her visitant had returned!

"You lied!" Brad raised his voice, his fury growing. "You said there was no one else and you lied."

"I didn't," Nora said, suddenly realizing that she could never extricate herself from this misunderstanding. No matter what she said, Brad would never believe her.

Jim, who had been leaning dispassionately against the desk, his arms folded across his chest, now straightened, his hands tightening into fists. His gaze remained locked with Brad's.

The moving air in the room strengthened another notch, the papers on Nora's desk fanning.

Nora glanced into the dark corners of the room, searching frantically for a mass of coiling shadows. She saw nothing but the movement of the drapes.

Brad and Jim continued to gaze intently at each other. Then Brad glanced at the bags Nora had pushed toward him. He leaned down and tipped one over, spilling its contents on the rug inside Nora's apartment.

"What are you doing?" she cried, as he crossed the threshold and pushed her door shut behind him.

He hunkered down, moving his belongings aside, as if searching. "Where's my key?" he snapped.

"What?"

He grabbed the second bag and repeated his actions as Nora watched, perplexed. "Where's my key?" he asked again, straightening.

And then she remembered. Months ago they had exchanged front door keys on the off chance that one of them might need a key to the other's apartment in the future. She glanced quickly around the living room, trying to remember. "I—I think it's in the bedroom," she said and dashed in that direction.

At the doorway, she paused and looked back. Brad was busily stuffing his belongings into the bags, but his gaze never left Jim's face. And Jim was equally watchful; his stare was fixed intently on Brad's every movement.

Nora hurried into the bedroom, then stopped in the middle of the room, trying to remember. Where the hell did I put the damn key?

She moved from one side of the bed to the other, pawing through the contents of the nightstand drawers. Nothing.

Baffled, she turned to the dresser. Nothing!

She groaned and ran back to the living room.

Brad had repacked his belongings and put the bags next to the door. Now he stood waiting, glaring at Jim, and if looks could kill, Nora thought....

She glanced at Jim. He remained vigilant, but his expression was neutral, non-threatening. At the same time, he never looked away from Brad's face.

"It's not in the bedroom," Nora said, "but maybe in the kitchen."

Neither man responded.

Nora ran to the kitchen. She tugged open drawers, turning them upside down on the counters, the contents spilling in every direction. She searched frantically, but she still came up empty-handed.

All at once, she became aware that she was hearing no noises, not even the sounds of conversation.

She ran back to the living room.

Brad had moved a few more feet into the room. Jim had neither retreated nor advanced from his position. He and Brad continued to study each other.

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

"I—I don't know where the key is, Brad," Nora said, her voice shaking. "Please, can't I mail it to you when I find it?"

"No!" He spat the word out. "I want my key and I want it now."

And the wind rose!

Chapter Seventy

"I've looked everywhere." Tears of frustration spilled onto Nora's cheeks. The stiff breeze dried her skin as quickly as the tears fell.

Oddly, neither man seemed to notice the moving air. They were focused completely on each other.

Nora checked again for massing shadows, or worse, for a pair of glowing eyes glaring down at them, but so far the only hint that Jim and Brad were both in trouble was the breeze that whipped the edges of the drapes.

It doesn't make sense, Nora thought. Why hasn't the visitant shown himself, at least to me? He did before, when Brad was here. So why not—

And then it hit her. The dream creature didn't need to reveal his presence...at least not yet! He was waiting for Brad and Jim to resolve their angry differences. One of them would emerge the victor!

The victor would become the tulpa's victim!

"Nora," Jim said softly, without looking at her, "try to remember where else you might have put his key."

"Yeah," Brad said with a sneer, "see if you can use your pea brain for something other than a wig rack."

The insult was so palpable that Nora felt as if he'd kicked her in the stomach. She had never imagined that Brad could be so vicious.

"Maybe it's in the desk," Nora said. Jim moved sideways to allow her access. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Brad take a few steps toward them and felt the wind intensify as it whipped the drapes.

She frantically opened the first drawer, pulling it out in her haste, and tipped it upside down, dumping everything on the desk. She fumbled through the mess, looking for the elusive key, still without success.

She dropped the drawer onto the carpet and dragged the second one loose. This one was filled with papers and as she spilled them out onto the desk, she noticed that ironically they were her notes on the creation of tulpas.

As if in response to her realization, the wind picked up half a dozen of the topmost papers; they whirled about the room in a madcap dance.

Nora pushed the rest of the stack apart, searching.

And then, all at once, there it was, cold metal beneath her fingers. She looked closely at it, then thrust it toward Brad.

"Here," she exclaimed. "Take the damned thing and get out."

Brad started to sidle toward her as the wind raged more furiously. She saw a frown of bewilderment momentarily draw his brows together, as if he had finally realized that there was a storm brewing in the room. But his anger at Nora took precedence. He took two more steps forward and reached for the key.

Jim moved toward Brad, as if warning his adversary to be careful.

Brad pulled his lips back over gritted teeth. "Watch it, ace," he snarled. "I'm in no mood for any more of your shit!"

Jim's eyes narrowed, but beyond that he didn't respond. He simply stood pat and waited.

"Here," Nora said again, shaking the key to get Brad's attention.

Brad reached for the key, but at the last moment, his hand clamped down over her wrist and he squeezed hard. Pain shot up her arm, and she cried out.

"You ugly little whore," he yelled above the wind, his words spewing forth like venom. "I can't believe what a two-timing—"

Jim seized Brad's forearm in a viselike grip. "Let her go," he said quietly, evenly.

Brad's features contorted in pain. "All right," he grunted. "Let go of me, you—"

"And watch your language," Jim said, his tone still flat.

Brad groaned, but he clamped his mouth shut and let go of Nora.

Nora glanced wildly about the room. The wind howled, mimicking Brad's anger. More papers rose into the air and flew about the room. A small lamp fell off the table, crashing to the carpet, the bulb making a popping sound as it broke.

Jim took the key from her hand and slapped it onto Brad's open palm.

"You have what you came for," Jim said to Brad. "Now get out."

For another moment, the two men faced each other with menacing glares. Brad was the first to back down and walk away. He picked up his bags, opened the front door and disappeared down the hall.

And the wind died.

Chapter Seventy-one

Jim strode across the room and shut the door. As he relocked it, Nora's legs refused to hold her up. She sank to the carpet, burying her face in her hands.

A moment later, she felt Jim's arms around her. "It's all right," he said soothingly, lifting her to her feet. "It's over."

Nora burst into tears. "I am so, so sorry," she sobbed. "You should never have had to witness that."

Jim held her, let her cry.

When she was cried out, she pulled back. "I owe you an explanation," she said, sniffing.

In reply, he gave her a handful of tissues.

"You owe me nothing," he said quietly, kissing her forehead. He gently took her injured wrist in his hands. "Did he hurt you?"

Nora shook her head. "Not really. It's a little sore, but I'll live." She smiled weakly. Then she remembered the visitant. "Jim, there's something I need to tell you—"

"About Brad? I think I've already put two and two together, sweetheart."

Nora knew her embarrassment must show. "I know what you must be thinking," she said softly.

"I'm thinking that you are so much better a person than he is," Jim said. "I'm thinking he never deserved you, not for an instant."

Nora sighed with gratitude. "Jim—"

"And I'm thinking he never cared for you nearly as much as I do."
She felt tears threaten again.

"As soon as we get this place put back together—" He grinned a slow, knowing smile.

Nora was about to say, "Oh, to hell with the place," when Jim leaned down to pick up a handful of the papers that were strewn about his feet.

"This weather is getting worse," he commented. "Did you leave a window open? You might want to close it."

Nora sagged against the desk. Jim's comment made her remember that she still had the visitant to contend with. Her chin trembled as she fought back a fresh onslaught of tears.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Jim said soothingly. "We can put the room back together in no time." He picked up one drawer after another, fitting them into the desk. "Look at it this way," he said as he worked, a note of humor returning to his voice, "You'll have the best organized desk in the building when we're done."

A bubble of laughter erupted through her tears. "Are you always a glass-half-full person?" she asked in a tremulous voice.

He smiled.

Nora took a deep breath and gathered her courage. "Jim," she said, her smile disappearing, "there really is something I have to talk to you about."

He cocked his head to one side, giving her his full attention.
And the phone rang again.

Chapter Seventy-two

This time the ringing came from Nora's cell phone. She fished it out of her jeans pocket and opened it, quickly checking the caller ID. To her amazement, it was Yongdon.

As she greeted the lama, she signaled to Jim that she needed to take the call.

He nodded that he understood and pantomimed that he would put the rest of the apartment back in order.

"Rinpoche, what a surprise," she said as Jim disappeared. And what a coincidence, she added silently. Or was it? After all, Yongdon had led her to believe that there was no such thing as coincidence.

"I am calling from the airport," Yongdon told her. "My flight to India will be boarding shortly, but before I left, I wanted to see if things are going well for you."

Nora took a deep breath. "As a matter of fact, they aren't," she answered. She glanced around to make sure Jim was out of earshot and then lowered her voice. "I—I think my tulpa has returned." She quickly outlined what had happened.

She could almost visualize Yongdon shaking his head in distress. "That is not good news, Ms. Ryder."

"What do I do?" she asked.

Yongdon was silent for a moment. "Although this rarely happens, it is possible for someone to generate a tulpa without meaning to. So perhaps you have unconsciously recalled your tulpa to you."

Nora groaned. "But I've tried to be so careful, Rinpoche. I meditate each day. Besides, when I returned from Sedona, I met the greatest guy. Jim. He's wonderful. I don't need a tulpa now."

Yongdon considered this. At last he said, "You need to divest yourself of this dream creature—and quickly. Your tulpa could free himself from your control at any time."

Nora remembered that Alexandra David-Néel's tulpa had taken on a life and form of its own, one that other people had been able to see.

"If this happens, Ms. Ryder, and you try to stop him, you could be in even greater danger. If you and the tulpa continue to fight for control, you could be severely injured or even—"

He bit off the rest of the sentence, but Nora knew at once what he had been about to say.

"This new man in your life will usurp the tulpa's position. Anyone or anything that threatens the dream creature's reason for existence is in danger. In Sedona, the tulpa paid no attention to me. I was, as I told you before, only there to guide you. I posed no threat. But Jim will become the tulpa's rival, and he will compete for your attention and your love. Once the tulpa realizes that you no longer need him, he will do everything he can to destroy his rival."

"What do I tell Jim?" Nora asked, fearing that she already knew the answer. "He'll never believe—"

Suddenly, in the background, Nora heard a loudspeaker blaring.

"They are calling the passengers to board," Yongdon said hurriedly.

His last words were almost drowned out by the loudspeaker blaring again, and Nora knew they would have to say goodbye.

"Thank you," she cried out. "Have a safe flight and—"

But he had already cut the connection.

Nora shut her phone with a terrible sense of dread. It was over, really over. She could not put Jim in danger a moment longer.

Chapter Seventy-three

Nora glanced again into the corners of the room. The visitant is here, she thought with a sense of despair. He does not have to show himself; I know he's here—waiting, patiently waiting, and always with love for me.

But I don't want him. I want Jim. Although once Jim knows about the visitant and the danger he's in....

She winced. Jim had been so reasonable, so understanding. But now? He wouldn't believe her, she was sure of it. He was certain to think she was crazy. And even if she could convince him, how could he love her after he learned what she'd created, what the tulpa really was?

She heard Jim in the kitchen, putting things back in drawers, and those sounds roused her. She picked up the rest of the papers that had blown around the living room. As she sank back into the chair at her desk to put the papers in order, she tried to imagine her life to be, the years stretching out before her without Jim, without any man in her life. Any human male, that is! How lonely, how sterile her existence would be.

"Nora?"

Jim came to stand beside her chair, leaning down to raise her to her feet. His hand tipped her chin, so that she gazed into his gorgeous pewter gray eyes.

"I've put everything back together. I wondered if you'd like to give me a hand un-making the bed?"

His request caught her off guard. She gasped, laughing a little at

his absurd words. "Un-make?"

He smiled, nodded, leaned down and caught her lips between his own. Desire eddied through her. She ached with wanting him.

Just this once, she told herself. Before I have to let him go, just this once.

When Jim pulled back, she whispered, "I can't think of anything I'd rather do than un-make a bed."

He smiled, took her hand and led her to the bedroom.

She noticed that he'd put the drawers back in place and stacked the contents in neat piles. Later, she'd have to deal with—

Before she could complete her thought, Jim pulled her into his arms, his mouth coming down hard on hers, his hands massaging her back.

His kiss left her reeling with desire. Without breaking the kiss, her fingers fumbled at the buttons on his shirt.

Suddenly they were both intent on undressing each other with an almost frantic haste. As much as Nora wanted the pleasure to last, she couldn't wait.

Jim eased her shirt over her head and unbuttoned her jeans. As he shrugged out of his shirt, Nora kicked her jeans off. She reached for the fasteners on the back of her bra, but Jim's hands stopped hers. "Please," he whispered, "let me."

She lifted her arms as his hands reached around to unfasten her bra, freeing her breasts. The nipples hardened, partly because of the cooler air, partly out of desire for Jim's touch.

As he dropped the garment to the floor, he lowered his head, his mouth brushing the nipples. Like an electric shock, desire shot through Nora. She gasped, leaning toward him, wanting more.

He pulled her toward him, his groin pressing against her. She could feel the bulge in his jeans, and she thrust her fingers into the waistband. But his pants fit too tightly. She reached for his belt buckle, fingers becoming thumbs and thumbs an impediment in her impatience to reach his hard cock.

"Patience," he whispered, but she knew his own control was

strained.

He let go of her long enough to unfasten his jeans, push them down and kick them aside. He was completely naked now, and Nora reached for his engorged cock. He groaned at her touch, trembling with his own need. Then his fingers hooked into her panties to roam over her buttocks.

Nora's mouth found his, and as his hands pushed her panties down over her hips she pressed hard against him, hungry for every inch of him—his mouth, his smooth, well-muscled chest, his enlarged cock.

He pulled back momentarily, turning away to tug back the bedding, and Nora slid her panties off. She took in his entire body in a glance and thought, *My God, he's perfect!*

He turned back with a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I told you un-making the bed would be fun."

She gasped, then laughed. "Actually, I don't think you did, but I'm quite prepared to believe you."

His smile widened. "Shall we un-make it some more?"

"Oh, yes."

He sat on the edge of the bed, pulling her gently toward him, and his mouth roamed over her abdomen. Nora sucked in her breath as her muscles tightened. Her need was increasing, craving beginning to consume her.

She straddled him on her knees, there on the edge of the bed. His mouth worked over hers, sucking, gently nipping her lower lip, licking down her throat.

She heard her own sigh of lustful wanting. Her hands massaged his broad, muscular back.

Jim pushed himself backward on the bed, pulling her with him. Then, with one smooth move, he rolled her onto her back, raising himself over her.

She gazed up into his eyes, and he smiled slowly. "We'll do this alphabetically, if you don't mind."

"What?" She panted, both with desire and surprise.

"Man-on-top comes before woman-on-top," he explained.

Before she could laugh, he spread her legs apart.

She arched her back as he lifted her buttocks, her pussy open before him. She felt his mouth go down, sucking, licking, kissing, massaging with his tongue.

"Oh, my God," she cried out as the rapture increased, followed by an explosion of sensation so intense she thought she would die from the enjoyment.

As her pleasure began to fade, she reached for his engorged shaft. "Jim, please, I'm so hungry for you."

"And I you," he whispered, his voice thick with lust.

She guided his cock into her pussy, greedy to be filled by its length, its breadth, its depth. Jim began to move slowly at first, but as she swallowed him up, his thrusts came fast, harder, driving deeper into her. She grasped his back, pulling him toward her as hard as she could, pushing her body as tight against him as possible, grinding her breasts against his chest, his tongue probing her mouth, their groans of pleasure segueing into cries of rapture as they crested in a paroxysm of pleasure.

Chapter Seventy-four

Nora came awake slowly. She was curled on her side, facing the window, the weak gray light fading from the room as the day ended. Rain beat against the glass, indicating that the storm was still in full force. She snuggled deeper into her cocoon of warmth, savoring the moment.

She heard Jim breathing behind her, felt the heat of his breath on the back of her neck and realized that for once she was not waking up alone. Better yet, his was a body she wanted to spoon with. He was pressed against her, one hand resting lightly on her hip.

She smiled to herself, thinking how safe, how happy, how contented she felt.

And then she remembered the visitant, and her spirits sank. Suddenly her throat ached with unshed tears.

She heard Jim stir in his sleep. Very carefully, by degrees so she would not disturb him, she turned over and faced him.

In the half-light, he looked so vulnerable with an unruly lock of hair falling across his forehead, his face relaxed in sleep. And she wanted to cry, because with this man she had it all. Everything she had ever wanted.

But she was about to lose it. Lose it deliberately because she knew she loved Jim as she had not loved in a long, long time. He was everything she wanted, everything she needed in a mate.

I can be selfish and hold onto him, she thought. Never tell him that he's in danger.

Dangerous Dreamer by J.G. Paine

I can tell him and risk losing him—most certainly risk losing his love.

What am I going to do?

But she knew what she had to do to protect this precious man she loved. Knew that she must make the sacrifice.

Somewhere, just out of sight, lurked the tulpa—waiting, always waiting. Was he near the curtains? In the shadows of a far corner? Had he watched them make love? Did he feel jealousy? Anger?

But that didn't matter. She knew the moment she and Jim had a disagreement—over the price of coffee or a bad investment or the way one of them drove—the moment their words became heated, the tulpa would take control. His solution would not be a good one for either Jim or Nora.

Her tears threatened to overflow and she turned away, her shoulders shaking with noiseless sobs. She did not want Jim to wake up, to see her pain.

She heard him stir again. "Nora?" His voice was gentle, quiet.

I must be strong, she told herself. I need to resist.

But Jim's next words shattered her resolution.

"I love you, Nora." His fingers trailed from her hip to her arm, caressing her from shoulder to wrist. "And we can be together...."

She stiffened, her eyes widening as she remembered something he'd told her in the hospital: "Don't you know I can read your mind?"

"...through time never ending with love everlasting."

Suddenly, it all came together, and Nora gasped with the enormity of it. She turned in his arms then, with a smile of astonishment, and looked into Jim's eyes—his golden, glowing eyes.

The End

Author's Note

Poetry selections used in this novel were taken from the poem *The Visionary* written by Emily Brontë.

Information regarding Madame Alexandra David-Néel's experiment with a *tulpa* may be found in her book, *Magic & Mystery in Tibet*, published by Penguin Books, Baltimore, Md., 1971. Her information on *tulpas* was an essential part of my research, although for the sake of fiction I have taken certain liberties with the creation and destruction of these thought creatures.

Author Bio

J.G. Paine has worked as a freelance writer and taught writing classes for many years. She currently lives in the Southwest where she enjoys eating Mexican food, drinking margaritas, and reading anything paranormal. Cobblestone Press published her shape-shifter story, *Call of the Sea Gypsies*, in 2009. *Dangerous Dreamer* is her newest novel.