



## CHAPTER 1

*WITH a stygian flash, a dark hole opened in the hillside. It wasn't a cave, but a patch of nothingness—the absence of everything normal and expected. Like a monstrous yawn, the opening widened until I could no longer see its edges, just a growing blackness with lumps of greater black moving inside it.*

*The little band of hikers continued up the trail, oblivious. As I watched, my vision telescope-clear, they rounded the last bend before the meadow... and were gone.*

I STRUGGLED up from the darkness, blankets twisted, strangling tight around me. With rising panic, my heart thumped as though it would beat its way out. Then I opened my eyes and saw only my familiar bedroom, clothes still where I had tossed them the night before. The morning sun shone cheerfully through the curtains. A glance at the clock made it nine a.m. Shaky but grateful, I rolled out and did my usual push-ups and sit-ups, adding an extra ten each to burn up the last dregs of adrenaline.

God, I hated waking like that—no memory of what the dream had been about, only a nasty mental aftertaste. Not that it happened all that often, but even once a year would

be too much. A shave and a hot shower washed away more of the night's residue. I dressed in khaki Dockers, a blue silk shirt from Armani, and my favorite Kenneth Cole loafers, and drove into town as usual. I managed to enjoy the board luncheon at the museum, and put on a pleasant face for a fellow member who was also a client when he asked if I'd located that first edition of Dickens' *Christmas Carol* he wanted... I hadn't. But although my routine was comforting, an uneasy feeling of foreboding lingered well into the day. In fact, I didn't forget the dream completely until I took an afternoon break at Starbucks. That's when I saw her.

From where I was sitting, I couldn't see all of her, but my inner vision filled in every detail. Her figure was slender, with just enough curves, her dark hair twisted into some sort of knot on the back of her head. The clingy lavender dress she wore looked to be designer made—DVF, perhaps. The classic pearl jewelry looked expensive, although at that distance, I couldn't really be certain. There was a faint hint of perfume in the air—Evyen's White Shoulders—but that *had* to be my imagination. She was beautiful, that's the one thing I was sure of. Even from twenty feet away, through a crowd of people, and with only a single glance at her profile, I knew. I was looking at the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. At the corner, the light changed from red to green, and she and the rest of the pedestrians walked on.

I blinked a little, wondering if I had imagined the sudden vision. No, whatever else she was, the lady wasn't imaginary. My mind, odd though it might be, wasn't in the habit of making things up, even using the goddess Aphrodite as a template.

It surprised me a bit to find myself thinking that way about a woman. Not that I didn't look at the opposite sex with pleasure. I looked at almost *everyone* that way; I always had. But mostly it was just looking, admiring from afar. I rarely thought about getting involved with a woman, and that was just what I found myself thinking about. I had seen her once, and I wanted to see her again.

What was going on in the deep, dark recesses of my mind would have been difficult for anyone else to imagine. I hadn't jumped up or called out to her, hadn't tried to catch her or even craned my neck to see where she had gone. In fact, I hadn't moved at all, except to take another sip from my double shot mocha latte. Starbucks was busy and I wasn't about to give up my choice sidewalk table for anything less than a hurricane, as unlikely as one of those might be in downtown Denver, Colorado. Disturbing dreams were not my only quirk. I got feelings about things, and this particular feeling was telling me that I *would* see the lady again. All I had to do was what I always did and I'd see her again... soon.

I didn't know whether to smile or frown. My life was perfect just as it was. I didn't need complications. Who did? Not all those button-down business types who were starting dutifully back to the office after their executive coffee breaks. Not the secretaries, both male and female, who had already scurried off to be sure to beat the bosses back to their desks. Not even the cute little server who looked at me questioningly from the doorway, wondering if I was about to rush away like everyone else. I decided on a smile, just for him, and he brought me another double mocha without my even having to ask. Perfect.

Fifteen minutes later, I regarded the tables around me, empty now except for the grandmotherly pair surrounded by shopping bags and the older gentleman with the fluffy white Bichon Frise on a rhinestoned lavender leash. It was a beautiful day, and I was one of the few still here to enjoy it.

Complications? I shook my head thoughtfully. No, I'd sit this one out, thank you. When, and if, the beautiful stranger made her next appearance, I'd just turn and walk away... and that would be that. Feeling better for having made the logical, safe, and sane decision, I was ready to enjoy the rest of my day. George at Blue Moon Books had promised me the first look at a shipment of rare editions coming in this afternoon. I had a feeling that one of them was meant for me.

Sensing another familiar something, I glanced up. Half a block away, a harried-looking mom with not one, but two whining toddlers in tow was headed in my direction. I had no desire to be there when she sat the kiddies down next to me to order chocolate chip cookies and milk.

I stood up, leisurely stretching in the direction of the cloudless sky. A gentle breeze ruffled my hair; the sun warmed my face. I'd already tipped the cute server generously and he waved at me discreetly from the doorway. I gave him half a smile, this time, feeling not the slightest inclination to respond to the invitation plain in his eyes. Nope, no more complications.

I was halfway to the corner across from the Tattered Cover bookstore when I heard the little kids' voices raised in petulant howls. Without looking back, I knew just where they were sitting. Starbucks was *out* of chocolate chip cookies.

THE sun was going down at last. I loved these long summer days. I could spend all the time I wanted in town and still drive home before dark. Not that the headlights on my yellow and black Miata didn't work, but I enjoyed the majestic, ever-changing vistas of mountains, trees, and sky as the road curved its way out of the city.

Not so long ago, I would have walked home, my path well lit by streetlights, to one of those nice new penthouses found down around Larimer Square. But fight it though I might, my life has a tendency toward complication. The latest place I hung my nonexistent hat was somewhat larger than my lofty downtown aerie. All but a few of the twenty or so rooms in the eclectically styled stone structure were still closed off, awaiting their promised, eventual renovation, but the house wasn't the important thing. What mattered was the land: thirty acres of fenced meadow and forest, hidden in the rolling hills off Highway 285. Its gated and almost inaccessible entrance was at the end of a barely paved single lane path not much wider than a driveway.

The sun had dipped behind the mountains, and night arrived as quickly and completely as it does when one is far from city lights. I smiled as the little car easily negotiated the tree-lined hairpin turns. The road could be a tight squeeze for anything larger than my little beauty. In fact, when the water heater expired last month, we had to airlift the plumbing crew in by helicopter.

When I pulled up in front of the garage door, the house was dark; the only lights on anywhere were the motion sensor floods activated by my arrival. But I knew that didn't mean anything. I got out of the car, rummaging in the

Miata's minute trunk for my purchases: two silk dress shirts, a couple of nice bottles of champagne, a fresh baguette wrapped in brown paper, some assorted cheeses and fruit, a leather-bound copy of Shakespeare's sonnets, and the latest edition of the *American Journal of Psychology*. In spite of how well I had adjusted to my oddities, I still thought it sensible to consider the possibility that they were all in my head. Perhaps one day I might find my particular aberration described in detail inside the journal's worthy pages. And sometimes I thought I'd be better off buying an issue of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. At least then I'd be entertained while I read.

I had my arms loaded and was fumbling for my keys when I heard it—a rustling behind me in the undergrowth, just beyond the reach of the floodlights. Something big was out there. Shit.

I briefly considered a run for the door, or trying to slip back into the car I'd already locked, but I didn't think I'd make it. Instead, I put my packages down and turned bravely to face the dark. My eyes adjusted quickly, but not quickly enough to catch more than a shadow before the thing began to move. With a ghostly lack of sound, it came toward me at the speed of a freight train. In only seconds, a ball of absolute blackness was flying through the air.

When it hit, I fell flat on my back and rapped my head smartly against the hard-packed ground. I didn't lose consciousness, but some little lights, completely unrelated to the stars appearing overhead, danced around behind my eyes.

The weight now resting heavily on my chest had taken my breath away, and between that and a sharp pain in my



head, I was not quite with it for a bit. The first thing I saw, when I *could* see again, were two large green eyes, spaced wide apart and set like emeralds in a glossy, coal-black face. Small round ears topped the flattened skull, and as I watched, transfixed, the large mouth, like the entrance to a forbidden cave, opened, jaws revealing rows of needle-sharp stalactites.

I braced myself as I felt a tongue the size of a washcloth and the texture of coarse sandpaper lap its way up my neck and over one ear until it had thoroughly dampened the hair on the side of my head. Paws as big as dinner plates kneaded my chest contentedly, their sharp claws not altogether sheathed. The hot breath on my face smelled, not of raw meat as you might suppose, but of mint.

I couldn't get up, but I could speak. "Dammit, Glen! How many times do I have to tell you? This is not funny!"

The slow, determined licking continued.

I pushed ineffectively at the almost two hundred solid pounds of muscle and fur crouched comfortably on my body, weighing me down from chest to groin.

"C'mon!" I yelled, now a bit more than irritated. "Keep that up and you're going to take my face off!"

The deep-throated purr that had started almost at once in the cat's barrel-sized chest turned slowly into masculine laughter, and I found myself staring into blue-green eyes framed by golden lashes, and holding a double handful of muscular, naked man. If I hadn't been absolutely sure about the naked part, the feel of his erection thrusting its way between my legs would have brought it home to me. All of a sudden, I was glad to exchange the rough tongue for a gentler sort of kiss.



Things might have progressed from there, but I was still fully clothed and the small, but sharp, rock I had fallen on did nothing to add to the charm of the moment. When I squirmed uncomfortably and continued to push him away, Glen relented and rose, even offering a hand to help me up.

Feeling the back of my head gingerly—no blood—I bent to retrieve the packages. "You're just lucky you didn't break the wine bottles, you dumbass," I chided.

He laughed again, closing the trunk of the car with a bang. "Think I'm stupid? I waited until you put them down."

I shook my head, wincing slightly. Great. Well, I was a big enough person to take a joke at my expense—even if it *was* the third time this month.

Glen draped one arm across my shoulders and relieved me of a couple of bags as we walked toward the house.

"Ethan, my love, you take life much too seriously."

I wanted to hit him, but I had to laugh instead. I had enough bumps and scrapes without bruising my hand on Glen's iron jaw—or any other part of his solid anatomy. Shapeshifters, if Glen was any example, seemed to be pretty tough. Nothing bothered Glen much; he never even caught a cold. And since I'd been hanging out with him, I'd had reason to be grateful, on more than one occasion, that I healed fast too.

I thought about what Glen said as I watched him stretch up for the wineglasses hanging over the counter. The muscles moving under that golden skin were pretty distracting. But maybe he was right. I did take life too seriously... sometimes.

Sure, Glen and his “condition” made my life different—more difficult in some ways. When we found each other and made a commitment, I’d felt it wise to sell the penthouse and move to this place in the middle of nowhere. But I also had Glen, in my life and in my bed, and that was worth a *lot* of extra trouble.

Of course, there were things that Glen took seriously, too, though he might try to deny it—his job, for one. I could never talk him into taking more than two vacations a year, or working less than four days a week. He liked being a financial advisor, and he was damned good at it. In fact, that was how I met him, though most of his clients weren’t trust fund babies like me—just everyday people who needed his sound advice.

I sat on a stool at the breakfast bar and watched Glen set out our dinner. He was perfectly comfortable in his nakedness, as well he might be. Even without the fur and tail, there was plenty of the beast still showing in the liquid way he moved, almost gliding across the tiled floor.

In a suit and tie, he was still an imposing sight, but seemed somewhat tamer. Until, that is, you got a good look at his eyes. One close-up glance had been enough to melt me into a puddle at his feet. And he’d known it too, damn it. I prided myself on being a bit aloof from it all, but with his insight as well as those extra animal senses, I could rarely hide anything from Glen. We’d gone from business to pleasure in one afternoon. That had been over a year ago now, but just looking at him still gave me the shivers.

He turned abruptly to glance at me, as though he could feel my eyes on him. He lowered his head, the pupils of his eyes going to cat slits for a moment as his nostrils flared. A

slow, deceptively lazy smile spread over his fine features, and he moved in on me like I was his chosen prey. I didn't even have time to scream. Well, not right then, anyway.

WE LAY on the bed, parts of us draped over each other like kittens in a basket. Glen's fingers idly twisted my damp pubic hair into little curlicues as I stroked his smooth back. Funny, he wasn't very furry at all when not in cat form... except for his face. I rubbed a finger against the grain of his bearded cheek. He grimaced and stopped to scratch the spot while I smiled.

"I saw a woman today." I was too content to wonder at myself for mentioning it. After all, I'd already decided to ignore the potential situation.

Glen's ears pricked—figuratively speaking in human form, of course. "A woman? Anyone special?"

Shit, he knew me too well. I wished I'd been thinking before I spoke. But what harm could it do just to talk about it? "Well, I don't know. I only saw her for a moment. She just seemed...." I couldn't think of the right words.

Glen lifted his head, leaning on one elbow to look down at me. Somewhere in the past hour, I'd loosened the thong that held my long hair back, and, catlike, he was careful not to lean on any of the dark strands spread out on the pillow.

"Special?" he finished for me.

I caught the question. There hadn't been anyone else in my life since I'd fallen for Glen. Would he be jealous—even of my mentioning someone I found attractive? He'd told me that he thought of women sexually too... as I did. I hadn't

considered what this might mean for our relationship. But... no, I wasn't going to get involved with her in any way.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Her face floated up before me as though imprinted on the backs of my retinas. Even though I'd just had very satisfying sex, I felt things stir in my lower regions. Glen took quiet note of that.

His voice was soft. "Maybe you'd better tell me about her."

There wasn't much to tell, not many facts, anyway. First, I tried to make light of it, but ended up describing in detail the way I'd *felt* when I saw her—the sense of destiny, of wheels turning out of my control. Both the anticipation and the frustration I felt at knowing I had no choice, that she would be a part of my life whether I wanted her to be or not.

When I ran down at last, Glen was cradling me on his shoulder, one strong hand stroking my hair. He didn't say anything for a while, then... "Is that the way you felt when *we* met?"

He was looking somewhere far away, over my head, beyond the stone walls and into the lonely dark. I grasped a handful of his golden hair, turned his eyes to mine, and waited until he truly saw me. I knew I had to be completely honest. "Maybe, at first, a little... but not now, never now. You're a part of me, my love—you have to know that."

His eyes went kitty-cat green for just a split second, and I thought his beard began to darken... then he smiled and was his everyday self again. Glen's changing was more controlled by his mood than anything else, and the phase of the moon seemed to have little to do with it.

“I do know that, my friend.” His voice held a gentle, purring note. “And I love you, too.” He kissed me and I marveled that I felt so strongly about anyone. After spending most of my life without a companion, I now had someone to share things with. That he was amazing, and wonderful, and unique were undeserved extras.

He pulled back, now looking deeply into my eyes. “What will be, will be, Ethan. Maybe we shouldn’t try to fight this; just wait and let it play itself out.”

Good advice, I supposed bitterly. Always best to go along with the inevitable. Then I caught the part about “we.” Yes. What happened to me now happened to him too. Knowing he accepted that gave me a surprisingly warm feeling.

Sitting up, I rolled him over, stretching myself on top of him, full length. We were nearly the same height, and I could comfortably kiss him while grinding my pelvis into his. I kissed him quite thoroughly, and nipped the side of his neck because I knew he liked it. After a while, I moved lower to bite and suckle his tender nipples. When he spread his legs wide and pressed his hardness against my belly, I knew he wanted what I did.

He yowled when I entered him, his head thrown back as though in pain. But I didn’t stop. I’d asked him about this behavior the first time it happened because I didn’t want to hurt him, whatever his powers of recovery. He’d told me not to worry, that it was a cat thing... I wouldn’t understand.

So I didn’t worry at all.

## CHAPTER 2

WHEN I woke next morning, Glen was already gone. He'd taken the time to wrap and refrigerate last night's forgotten food, so I had nothing to do but scratch up something for breakfast and contemplate the necessity of some serious housecleaning in the near future. Whatever needed doing had to be done by one of us. The nearest maid service was rather far away, by design. It wouldn't do to have a cleaning lady surprised by Glen as I had been the night before. As usual, I decided that loading the dishwasher was quite enough.

The shirt I'd been wearing last night was wadded up under the kitchen table, though I couldn't really remember how it got there. I fished it out, unwittingly capturing a few dust bunnies in the process. The shirt was made of a washable silk but when I shook it out, it was as I had feared. Ten neat slashes, matching the already healing marks on my chest, rendered washing it unnecessary.

I smiled as I tossed that shirt into the overfilled trash bin and hung up the new ones I'd bought the day before. Buying clothes more often was one of the consequences of life with a big, playful cat. It didn't bother me; Glen was worth a lot more than a new shirt.

I glanced out the kitchen window. Mostly, all you could see was row upon row of trees, with only a glimpse of the

Rockies and the little lake in the meadow. Our secluded thirty-acre parcel, and the public land beyond it, gave Glen the perfect playground for his alter ego's necessary exercise. He'd lived in town before we met, though I found that difficult to imagine. I knew he'd worked out every day, almost religiously, while in human form, to keep peace with his inner cat.

Glen had been able to change safely only in his apartment, or on weekend outings in wilderness areas, so he had to have plenty of control. Though I never let on or tried too hard to spoil his fun, I had no choice but to believe that most of the mischief Glen made was deliberate. Smiling, I shook my head.

Sometimes I tried to imagine what his early life must have been like. Glen said he had been as ordinary as any other boy until his body began the first changes of puberty, somewhere around ten years old. Then, one night, he was camping with the local scout troop and heard coyotes howl on the nearby plains.

He claimed he didn't remember anything after that until the next morning when he was found naked just outside the camp by a very distraught scoutmaster. His pajamas lay near the tent he'd shared with three other boys. Finding them had given everyone quite a turn, even though there was no blood on the shredded cloth.

Unlike some movie monsters, Glen's clothes did not magically accompany him when he changed. As long as I had known him, he'd remembered to take them off first. If he didn't, he'd have to buy clothes more often than I did.

My own differences had manifested far earlier. Even as a five-year-old, I had known unexplainable things. I had



begged Miss Marsters, my favorite nanny, not to go to the movies on her day off that Thursday afternoon. And when she never returned home, I had cried and cried. I knew the car accident could have been prevented if she hadn't left the house, if she had only listened to me.

If.... Why was it that no one ever listened?

I came back to myself with the neck of the loaded trash bag twisted almost into a figure eight. I sighed. A little more stress on the thin plastic and I would have had a larger mess to clean up. Oh, well. This wasn't the first time I'd wondered why they called such psychic peeks at the future "gifts."

I shook my head, took the bag outside, and stuffed it into the Miata's trunk with the usual difficulty. I'd have to remember to drop it off at the dump on my way into town.

The phone was ringing when I got back inside. Few people had our home number. Only a friend or two ever called here, once in a while one of Glen's business associates, and... "Claire! It's great to hear your voice, where are you?"

"Hey, lucky me, I caught you at home! We're still in St. Louis, honey. I just thought I'd call and remind you that Roger and I will be in Denver next week... for the convention, you know... the one that happens every year?"

I smiled. She was right, I had forgotten.

Claire was my aunt, my mother's youngest sister. At only six years my senior, she had always felt more like a big sister to me than an aunt. She and her handsome husband Roger made their yearly pilgrimage to Denver for the Central Realtor's Convention. Both of them were top property jockeys

back home in Missouri. Claire was my only living family, and I always enjoyed her brief visits.

“Marvelous, Claire, darling. I’ll pick you up at the airport. Do you have your flight information?”

“You’ll pick us up? In that little puddle-jumper car of yours?” Claire preferred larger vehicles. Her current ride was a Hummer. “Where will we put Roger... on the roof?”

I laughed. “I’ll borrow Glen’s SUV, silly. I know how many bags you always drag along.”

Last year had been the first time Claire and Roger had met Glen, and they’d all gotten along famously. Claire had seen me with many a short-term partner over the years, male and female, but she had pulled me aside to remark that Glen seemed like something special. Good taste undoubtedly runs in our family.

“Glen? Mmm....” Claire purred. “Maybe I’ll leave Roger in Denver and take Glen back home with me.”

I laughed. “No trades, Aunty, dear—even if Roger is a hunk.”

Claire’s laugh tinkled back over the phone line. “Okay for you. I’ll e-mail you the flight info. We’ll be in late Monday afternoon. It would be nice to have dinner together, if you and Glen are free.”

“We’ll be free,” I assured her. “See you then.”

I hung up, feeling happy, until I looked around at the cluttered kitchen. Then my shoulders slumped. Before Glen and I moved, Claire and Roger had always stayed in the guest room of my penthouse. There, they were downtown, close to the convention center, close to everything. If they stayed out here with us, it would mean at least a forty-five

minute drive each way. Certainly there were plenty of rooms, but.... I shuddered, imagining what everything would look like through Claire's eyes. The place was a mess.

I carefully shelved my latest purchase in the library, went back to the kitchen, and picked up a broom with the righteous intention of evicting some of those dust bunnies, then thought better of it. Instead, I showered and dressed, got in the Miata and headed for town. After missing dinner last night, I needed a bigger breakfast than I was willing to cook.

I felt slightly better with eggs Benedict inside me. Claire would understand about the new house. Even when we were children, she always understood. It would be great to see her again, and Roger was good company. Denver had some excellent hotels, and staying in one of them would be no hardship for Claire and Roger. Come to think of it, why didn't I book a room for Glen and myself as well? Then the four of us could get together for dinners and a good visit... perhaps see a play or the opera. Glen could forego his romps in the woods for one week.

I took out my cell phone and dialed the Brown Palace Hotel—only six blocks from the convention center. They had two suites available and the concierge promised to look into theater tickets for me. I sighed, relieved. Yes, it would be fun to stay in town, back in the thick of things again. Sure, I drove in most days, but there was always that long trip home. Glen didn't mind the commute, but I missed the late night parties and walks on the streets of downtown after dark. There were so many beautiful places to visit and always something happening.

The server gave me a questioning look, and I realized I was grinning. I took a second to school my face before she got the wrong idea and came over to sit on my lap. Then I motioned for a coffee refill. It was only ordinary coffee, but in my upbeat mood, it tasted great. While I was thinking of it, I phoned a couple of acquaintances to let them know I'd be in town. I say acquaintances because there weren't many people I'd call friends. I'd grown up with money, and many resented or envied that. Maybe they didn't know that money was a poor substitute for a parent's love.

My folks had been distant, at best, leaving their only son with a series of nannies and governesses. I was lucky to see them on holidays. I was a junior at Princeton when their private jet fell into the Atlantic. Claire had been born to Grandfather's second wife... the one Great Grandfather did *not* approve of. The withdrawal of his financial support left them to live a more "normal" life. I treasured the memories of summers spent at Claire's home, briefly enfolded by a real family.

I finished my coffee and then wandered around on the Hill for a while, rummaging in dusty cartons in the back rooms of my favorite bookstores. After, I walked uptown to enjoy the Cezanne exhibit at the art museum, generally feeling as though I had returned home after a long absence. I was surprised when my stomach demanded to be fed again.

In spite of the wonderful time I'd been having, I felt slightly guilty for not consulting, or at least informing, Glen about our new plans for next week. The logical thing would have been to phone him immediately, but it was nearing his lunch hour, and I thought maybe I could tempt his nose

from the grindstone with the promise of a steak at Gallagher's.

By the time I arrived at Glen's building, I was even more concerned about his opinion of my hasty decision. Would he think I regretted moving, that I didn't enjoy living with him? Of course I did miss the city, but a home in the wild places suited him better, and I could no longer imagine a life that didn't include Glen.

I nodded to myself. Some people took their vacations in the country; he and I would stay in the city. I would make sure he knew that was all it meant to me, a vacation... a brief hiatus in our everyday lives. Perhaps, when Claire and Roger had returned home, we'd begin remodeling the new house. It would be nice to have a place of which we could be proud.

"HE'S WITH a client." Glen's secretary Esther was fortyish but still attractive, and I gave her my usual admiring appraisal. She shook her head and smiled.

I smiled back. "I'll wait. He doesn't know I'm here, and I want to surprise him. You can go on to lunch if you'd like." She fussed a bit, like a good secretary, but she knew me. I assured her I wouldn't touch anything.

She rolled her eyes. "Just tell Mr. Chase I'll be back in an hour."

I spent the next few minutes looking through the magazines in Glen's waiting room. There were some good decorating ideas in *House Beautiful*. Terrazzo tile in the foyer? Why not?

It was well past one when the door to Glen's office finally opened. "Thank you so much, Mr. Chase," a lovely contralto voice was saying.

I looked up and my eyes went wide. The clothes were different, but there was no mistaking that face and body. It was the woman from my vision... my Aphrodite.

Her eyes... yes. I looked again. Her eyes really were violet—though by nature or contact lenses I couldn't tell. Her hair, still done up in a complicated knot, was brown, but such a deep, dark, chestnut shade that it missed being black only when compared with mine. Her lips were full, touched with a faint glaze of color. Her skin was pale as porcelain and the haunting scent of White Shoulders perfume hung around her like an aura. Close up, her beauty was almost startling. I could think of only one comparison: the classic actress Elizabeth Taylor, in her prime... and yet... not.

Beautiful isn't like pretty. It's not about the pleasant arrangement of soft features. This woman's cheekbones were high and sharp, her eyes set deep in dark-painted hollows. The cords in her neck stood out sharply, and her forearms, below the elbow-length sleeves of her tailored jacket, revealed defined muscles, only lightly padded. When she turned her head, those Liz Taylor eyes cut into me with Bette Davis precision.

Then she smiled, and all bets were off. I might dissect her features one by one, but they still added up to beauty. With an effort, I dragged my eyes away to glance at Glen, who was looking back and forth between us, brows raised. She followed my look, and I was overcome by a sudden fury.

"You just had to do it, didn't you? It wasn't enough to ensnare me in your little web; you had to go after him too!"

Glen's expression went from inquiring to puzzled, while the look she turned on me was pure amusement.

"I don't believe we've met, Mr....?" Her voice was honey in my ears, but it did little to ease my anger. With a challenge in her eyes, she held out a white hand, the nails painted bright crimson. I hesitated, wanting nothing more than for her to leave us alone. Then my innate good manners took over. I let her grip my hand for a few seconds, while I fought not to pull away. She was still beautiful, but that beauty had become the deadly attraction of a black widow spider.

Glen cleared his throat. "Ms. Delilah Thornton, meet my partner, Ethan Yeager."

Her amethyst eyes widened a bit. "Your *partner*? Oh," she said. "So, you're the ones." Her glance flicked from me to Glen and back, and then she began to laugh.

Startled, I backed away and hurried across the room to Glen, still standing beside his desk. I felt as though I had swallowed an icicle, and he was my one and only source of warmth. Glen put out an arm and drew me to him.

Ms. Thornton dropped gracefully into the upholstered chair at her side, rummaged in her large bag, came up with a handkerchief, and wiped her streaming eyes. I noted that the darkness around them didn't come off, as makeup would have. At last, she drew in a long breath.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Suddenly it all just struck me as funny."

I looked at Glen and he shrugged. She finished wiping her face and sat up straight, again looking as though she had just left a day spa.



"I'm sorry if I was rude. It's just... well, I knew I was going to need help, I just didn't know who would be chosen. I've spent so much time searching for the right people and then suddenly... here you both are." She spread both hands in a "ta-dah!" gesture.

"What the devil are you talking about?" I said.

She shook her head. "I'll need time to explain, and unfortunately, I have another important appointment."

"Good," I said with calculated rudeness. "Mr. Chase and I were just going out...."

"...to Gallagher's for lunch, I know."

My eyes widened. How...?

"Mr. Chase has my contact information; just call me when you're ready to talk." She stood and moved gracefully toward the door on stiletto heels.

"Talk about what?" I challenged.

"About our problem, of course," she said, turning to fix me with those remarkable eyes. "You know."

I felt a cold hand stir my guts.

"Just don't wait too long," she said, and the door closed behind her.

I stood for a moment, staring at the space she had occupied. Glen went over to a leafy plant flourishing by the window, broke off a stem, and chewed it thoughtfully. I was glad he didn't offer me any—I've never cared for fresh catnip.

"What was that all about, Ethan? Why were you so angry?"

I shivered, not wanting to let my unease spill over onto Glen. "Why was she here?"

“Why? For the same reason anyone comes here, for financial advice. Why else?”

“Just a client?”

“Of course. Do you know her?”

I shivered again. “She’s the woman I told you about.”

Glen nodded slowly. “I thought that must be it. Do you know what she meant, why she would need our help?”

“I don’t know anything more than you do!” I snapped. But it wasn’t true. I didn’t *know*, exactly, but I *felt* something... a feeling I desperately wanted to deny. I couldn’t see it clearly, but something was out there, ready to pounce, ready to destroy the lives of people I loved....

I started when Glen’s arm went around me. “Ethan, what is it?”

“I don’t know.” I said, laying my head on his solid shoulder. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

He tilted my face up. His smile washed away most of the darkness, and I was able to breathe again. “It will be all right, love,” he said.

I almost believed him.

“I was planning to work on my client files this afternoon, but I don’t have any more appointments... and I’m hungry.” Glen smiled again. “*Starving*, in fact. If you really did come here to take me to lunch, I think we both deserve a good one. Gallagher’s?”

I tried to push my fears away and nodded at the man I love.

## CHAPTER 3

I IMAGINE Gallagher's steaks were up to their usual standard; Glen certainly attacked his bloody porterhouse with enthusiasm. I didn't eat much; my filet tasted like Styrofoam. Glen didn't mention Ms. Thornton and neither did I, though I couldn't get our meeting out of my mind. We chatted about trivialities until I calmed down a little and remembered to tell him about Claire's upcoming visit. He didn't balk at spending the week in town, just remarked that he hoped we could get tickets to *The Lion King*. I wasn't sure if he was serious, but I made a note to ask at the hotel.

With our late start, and lingering over dessert and coffee, we almost stretched lunch into dinner. As the waiter departed with my debit card, Glen reached for my hand.

"It's Friday, love. Why don't we stay in town for a while, take a walk like we used to? I'll drive us home tonight and we can pick up your car later."

I shook my head and grinned. I couldn't help it. Glen knew what I needed better than I did.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you, sweetheart?"

The waiter, returning with our check, cleared his throat discreetly. We tried not to laugh.

IT WAS a balmy night, the perfect time to be out on the downtown streets. Skyscrapers sparkled with light, large flower boxes and tiny pocket parks mellowed the hard shapes of concrete and steel. Happy people were everywhere. We strolled down Larimer, and I looked up at the lights in windows that used to mean home, remembering my aerial view and rooftop garden. Well, I had a much larger garden now, and someone to share it.

“Ethan?” Glen broke into my thoughts. “I got the impression that you were... somewhat attracted to the lady you told me about. That certainly didn’t seem to be the case with Ms. Thornton.”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t feel the slightest attraction.” I stopped and looked into his eyes. “Seeing her close up like that, and knowing she had been alone with you... it scared me... really scared me.”

“But... why?”

“I wish I knew.” I’d been trying to make sense of my reaction since we left the restaurant. “Maybe something about her reminds me of all the things I dislike about myself, all the forebodings and dreams and visions.... I don’t know. There’s something of power about her. It was all I could do to stay in the room with her, and if you hadn’t been there....” I had a sudden thought. “Were *you* attracted to her?”

Glen’s lips pursed behind his mustache. “No, sweetheart. I noticed she was a lovely woman, of course, but I didn’t feel anything for her in particular. Why would I?” He smiled. “I have you.”

I took his hand and squeezed it gently. “I have no idea what any of it means—my feelings, all the things she said—I want to ignore it all, but... she sounds as though she *knows* something. I suppose I’ll have to contact her if I want to find out what it is.” A chill walked up my spine. “I didn’t care much for her last remark.”

“About not waiting too long? How long is *too* long, do you suppose?”

I shrugged. “Will you come with me to talk to her?”

He smiled. “You know I will.”

It felt so good, so natural, for the two of us to be walking down the familiar streets, holding hands. As far as I was concerned, there was no one else in the world at that moment. I was almost surprised to see a man directly in our path, but his scowl made him difficult to ignore.

“Fucking queers.” The man went out of his way to bump my shoulder as he passed, hard enough that I might have stumbled into the gutter if Glen hadn’t steadied me. Then it was my turn to grab Glen’s arm. He was glaring at the man’s retreating back, eyes burning with a yellow light, mouth suddenly revealing sharp teeth.

“Glen, don’t,” I said urgently.

He shook his golden head and was all human again. He smiled. “I wouldn’t have, love. But that idiot... are you okay?”

I nodded as I watched the man walk away. Having stated his opinion, he didn’t look back.

“You scared me for a minute there.” I smiled as we continued walking.

Glen deliberately took my hand again. “If you hadn’t been along, I might at least have let him see my face.”

I suppose I looked shocked because Glen laughed and hugged me to his side. “I wouldn’t have hurt him. Besides, would he have believed his eyes?”

I smiled, thinking... a cat-man in downtown Denver? Probably not. I shook my head and we walked in silence for a few blocks.

I found myself remembering when I’d learned about Glen’s... abilities. The first time we made love was the day I met him, right there on the leather sofa in his office. The moment I saw him I felt something indefinable, perhaps the touch of destiny. When I shook his hand, I knew... this man was special, and I had to have him. From the intense way Glen looked at me, I was sure he felt the same.

Thankfully, I was the last client of the day, and when his secretary peeked in to say she was leaving, he’d locked the door behind her. And the rest, as they say, is history.

We saw each other every day after that, spending our nights together, sometimes at his apartment and sometimes at mine. It was maybe a week of great sex later that it happened. We’d had dinner and gone back to his place, a nice little duplex on stylish Capitol Hill. I didn’t know then that the improvements he’d made in the house included soundproofing, but I was glad of it before the night was over.

We started kissing the moment the door shut, stripped to bare skin in the living room, chased each other down the hall, and fell into Glen’s king-size bed. Many men, me included, consider anal sex too intimate for casual encounters. It shows how serious I was feeling about Glen that I had let—read, encouraged—him to fuck me a couple of times. Glen was a wonderful lover, gentle and caring and always concerned for my pleasure. I was thinking of

suggesting we try it again when he rolled us over with me on top.

“Ethan, I want you inside me,” he said, in that sultry voice I’d grown to love.

“You sure?” Glen was always so sexually aggressive I had figured him for strictly a top. To find out he was versatile, like me, was a nice surprise. When he nodded, his eyes dilating with excitement, I reached for the lube and a condom. Everything we’d done together so far had been wonderful, and I wanted this to be good for him; I had the feeling he didn’t submit all that often. I tried to take my time making him ready, but he squirmed with impatience.

“No, Ethan, I want you now... right now!”

There was no way I was going to argue. I kissed him one more time and then started to ease into him, as slowly as he would allow. As I felt myself penetrate that first tight ring of muscle, Glen threw his head back and screamed—there is no other word for it. I was horrified and tried to pull back, thinking I had hurt him beyond bearing, but he wrapped his strong legs around my waist.

“Don’t stop,” he commanded, voice raw. His eyes found mine and there was something different about them, about the shape of his face, too, but I couldn’t think well enough to understand it.

“Close your eyes,” he said, pleading now, and I did as he asked, feeling him pull me in deeper, legs tightening, his hands moving over my back. I knew something strange was happening, but I didn’t want to care, I only wanted to feel. Putting my mind on hold, I let my body have its way, thrusting hard and deep, glorying in the wild sensations,



spurred on by the guttural growls rolling out of Glen's throat.

I don't know how long I fucked him; I only know his heat brought me off much sooner than I would have liked. As I came, I heard a gasping cry that mixed with my own, felt his body spasm, and knew that Glen was right there with me. Drained and sweating, I opened my eyes and froze in shock. I'd encountered some strange things in my life, but nothing to prepare me for this.

The body beneath me flowed with shining dark fur, thick patches on the shoulders and arms shrinking a little as I watched. The black velvet face was relaxed, eyes closed, moist pink tongue lying over a row of sharp teeth that became more human by the second. The sigh that issued from the wide mouth was almost a purr. His legs and claw-tipped fingers released me and there was nothing left to connect us but my still-erect phallus. I didn't move, but held breathlessly still and watched with fascination as the cat-man resumed Glen's familiar features.

"Glen?" I said at last. His eyes opened to find me staring. I can't imagine what my expression must have been.

"Ethan, I...." Glen turned his face away from me. "God, I'm so sorry." He tried to pull away, but I rolled us to our sides and he buried his face in my neck. "It shouldn't have happened," he whispered. "I tried so hard not to let it happen. But I feel so comfortable with you, I got so excited, I lost control... and now I've ruined everything." His chest surged with a single sob. "I never wanted you to know what I am."

"Glen, look at me." His eyes, soft and blue and human, met mine. I hated the uncertainty and fear I saw there. Some

tight emptiness inside me loosened and bloomed and suddenly everything seemed very clear. I knew I'd been waiting a very long time for this man and this moment, and I wasn't going to let him get away.

"It doesn't matter, Glen. I don't care that you're different. I've never said this to anyone before, but... I love you." And that was the beginning.

That was the only time Glen accidentally changed during sex. But once he found that his wild side didn't frighten me, I had to watch out for his playful moods—those times I might find a panther under the covers. Glen hadn't had all that many lovers and no long-term relationships. He'd always kept himself under tight control during sex, lest he reveal his secret. For some reason, conscious or not, he'd trusted me, and now there was no stopping him. Glen was enjoying sex as he never had before. It was wonderful.

And things weren't as different for people like us as you might imagine. Like any couple who has just realized they are in love, we had a lot of adjusting to do, important decisions to make. While we were doing all that, Glen's "alter ego" appeared from time to time and soon became just another fact of our lives.

I was curious about his difference, of course, but I didn't want to push, and it was a month or so before he told me about his first change, and what happened after. Then one day we walked past a school just as the children came pouring out onto the playground. Glen watched them, his expression so odd I asked what he was thinking.

He sighed. "When I was a kid, a couple of months after the incident at scout camp, a bunch of older boys met me after school. I suppose they had heard rumors about me

being found naked and all, and decided I was different enough to be fair game. Maybe they had sensed my differences before I did, as children will. They gathered around me, pushing and shoving, until we were in the trees behind the football field. Then they started in—‘Hey, pervert, show us what you were doing without your clothes on.’

“I was so scared. I knew I couldn’t run—it would only make things worse. I tried to fight them, but there were too many. Some of the braver ones pulled off my jacket and shirt and were working on my belt. I don’t know how far it might have gone if the principal hadn’t heard the yelling and come out to investigate.”

“God, Glen. What happened?”

“The boys ran off. The principal helped me inside, called my parents. They took me to the doctor, but I only had a few bruises.”

I slipped an arm around him. “Glen, did your parents know, I mean about...?”

“The day I was sent home from scout camp, they both treated me strangely. Mom kept looking at Dad, as though he was somehow to blame. Dad just turned away. After a couple of days, everything seemed to be back to normal. I almost decided I’d imagined the whole incident. Then it happened again a few weeks later.

“I was dreaming something frightening, a typical child’s nightmare, I suppose, and I remember wanting to run. I woke up in the back yard, naked like before, but this time my hands and feet were covered in black fur, and when I tried to call for help, it came out as a growl. I’ve never been so terrified in my life.

“Dad ran outside in his pajamas and carried me back into the house. I held on to him so tightly I left claw marks in his shoulder. He didn’t seem very surprised at how I looked.”

I’d met Glen’s parents only once. They lived on the other side of the Rockies, in a small town near Grand Junction. They were polite to me, but only just, and not much warmer to Glen. I got the feeling that having a son who was not only a shapeshifter, but a *gay* shapeshifter, was a little too much for them.

“Was your father...?”

“No. I guess it sometimes skips a generation. The day after the incident at school, they drove me up to Grandpa’s. Grandma had been gone for years and the old man lived all alone on a few acres in the mountains, sold vegetables in the summer and raised sheep for meat and wool. Grandpa was the one to tell me about what I was becoming, and how it had begun for him when he was about my age. I asked him ‘why’, but he said it was just something the men in our family had to put up with.

“I stayed with Grandpa for almost a year, working with him on his farm and hunting with him in the woods on all fours until I learned to control the change.”

Glen later told me that he didn’t especially enjoy hunting as a man, but that it seemed perfectly natural when he was in cat form.

“Of course, I always wondered why our family was so different. Grandpa had photo albums and records that went back a hundred years, but there was never a mention of the change. I tried to research it, first in libraries and later online, but could never find any real information. I suppose

that people like me, if there are others, wouldn't exactly form clubs or anything... not even on the internet."

I'd tried to help Glen with his search, but the people who claimed belief were often obviously unbalanced, without Glen's practical acceptance and relative normality. No one I contacted had any real information to offer, and even books spoke mostly of legend, myth, and fairy-tale monsters.

A surprisingly chilly breeze blew in our faces. I spotted a wrought-iron bench in front of a closed shop and pulled Glen down beside me.

"Glen, what happened to your grandfather?"

If my question surprised him, he didn't show it. "He died last year, just before I met you." Glen leaned back on the bench, stretching his arms over his head. "I still miss him, Ethan. He was the only person in the world around whom I could really be myself." He sat up and turned to smile at me. "Until I met you." I smiled back.

"You know," he went on, "I suppose it would have been easier in some ways, just to stay with Grandpa, become like him... a hermit, always alone." Glen's smile grew warm. "But there were so many things I wanted to do."

He cupped my cheek in one strong palm and kissed me. I was dimly aware that a female/male couple walked by, but their pace never slowed. Perhaps they didn't see us, or perhaps they were happy enough in their own relationship to allow us joy in ours.

## CHAPTER 4

CLAIRE'S plane was right on time, and I was waiting outside the security gate when she and Roger came through. It had been months since I'd last seen her, but she hadn't changed at all, except that her reddish-blond hair was short now, in curlicues that framed her snub-nosed face. Hugs and kisses were exchanged—not with Roger, of course, though I wouldn't have minded. I had always found his thickset, dark bearishness attractive. For his part, it seemed that a smile and our usual handshake were quite enough. It took a while to load all their suitcases into the Explorer. Claire glared at me as I counted aloud: two for Roger, and six, a personal record, for her. I just grinned and complimented her on keeping her cute figure for another year, and she smiled and forgave me. Glen and I had already made our move to the Brown Palace, so I drove us there directly.

The hotel's Palace Arms Restaurant is one of the best in the city, and we had dinner reservations for seven p.m. I puttered about on the computer in our suite while Claire and Roger unpacked, then we went down to the bar to wait for Glen. Claire brought out a small photo album and I dutifully admired pictures of my nine- and twelve-year-old cousins.

"Adele and Jacob have grown so much I hardly recognize them!" I exclaimed. It was true. It had been over a year since I'd seen them, and kids change so fast at that

stage. Adele was dark like Roger, and Jacob had his mother's strawberry-blond sunniness.

"You should come out and visit us this fall, Ethan; the trees will be beautiful then, and the children would love to see you."

I smiled. I'd been to St. Louis a time or two, and I much preferred Denver's high, dry climate, any season of the year. "Why don't you bring the kids with you next time you come to Denver?" I suggested.

"They're at camp in the summer," Claire said, and changed the subject, realizing that the topic had reached its customary impasse.

Glen soon arrived and more greetings were exchanged. At the restaurant, all four of us ordered bison steak, one of the Palace Arms' Western specialties. It was delicious, richer than beef and somehow more satisfying. Between bites, we talked about anything and everything, and Glen and Roger discovered a mutual interest in the hotel's fitness center. When we'd finished our coffee and a polite few minutes of after-dinner chat, both of them donned shorts and T-shirts and went down to work off their meal. I might have been tempted to join them if the center had included a pool.

Instead, Claire and I settled back in the comfortable sitting room of our suite with a nice bottle of wine.

"This is a wonderful old hotel, Ethan. I'm glad you decided to stay in town while we're here. Do you like living in the country? I was so surprised when you said you'd moved."

I smiled. I wasn't about to tell Claire *why* we'd moved.



“It’s beautiful... you know, fresh air and all? We’re in the foothills, right up against the mountains. I wish you could see the house—after we’ve done some work on it, of course.”

“Maybe next year. That’s quite a lot of property, Ethan. Do you plan to keep any animals?”

I knew Claire meant chickens or horses or something, but.... “No, no farm animals. Right now, we’re just enjoying the wild life.” That was certainly true.

Claire looked wistful. “The city is all right, I guess. I enjoy St. Louis, but I think I’d like to move to the country too. I just love the out-of-doors. In fact, this year Roger and I decided to extend our business trip into a real vacation. We’re staying on an extra week—at a nature retreat in the mountains.”

“Oh really?” I laughed. “I *thought* you packed more suitcases than usual.”

Claire smiled, mellow enough now to ignore my teasing. “Yes, we’re taking a tour bus up to Estes Park on Friday, as soon as the convention is over. The ranch driver will pick us up there.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You know I’d be glad to drive you to Estes.”

“That won’t be necessary, dear. We’re going with another couple from the convention. It’s all planned.” Claire leaned back, a dreamy expression on her face. “I’ve always wanted to spend time on a real ranch... riding horseback, swimming in the creek... you know, roughing it.”

A strobe light went off inside my head. I had a sudden chaotic vision of utter, empty blackness splashed with brief, bright points and a crushing sense of danger. It almost

seemed familiar, like a puzzle piece falling into place. My throat tightened, and that wonderful bison steak threatened to make a sudden reappearance. Then the room was back and Claire was going on about the joys of an overnight hike. Before I could blink, the door opened and Glen and Roger were there, sweaty and laughing.

Claire kissed my cheek and got up quickly, pleading an early morning. When she and Roger had left, Glen headed for the shower.

And I sipped my wine, wondering what the latest vision might mean, or if it meant anything at all.

OUR hotel bed was fine, a pillow top with real Egyptian cotton sheets, but I couldn't get comfortable. The dark behind my eyes filled up with disturbing images that refused to stay in focus and be recognized. I dozed, then half-woke again and again, only to be dragged back into the uneasy depths. When I finally roused myself, the morning was well advanced. Tuesday was my "aerobic yoga" class, and I was glad when Ms. Singh put us through a routine that was more strenuous than usual. I had hopes that the exercise would help me sleep that night.

Glen left work early and we met Claire and Roger on their walk back from the convention center. Claire looked lovely in a white shorts outfit, her red-blond curls shining in the Colorado sun.

In spite of a lack of sleep, I was in a good mood, having spent the remainder of my day book hunting, actually finding a rare edition that a client of mine had had on order

for some time. I'd enjoy delivering it to her tomorrow—with a suitable markup, of course.

"God, I love it here, Ethan," Claire exclaimed, and turned to Roger. "Maybe we should move, darling." Roger was sweating in his proper gray business suit and blue-striped tie; his only reply was a noncommittal grunt. Glen wore a short-sleeved dress shirt and had shed his tie the moment he left the air-conditioned office. Claire turned away from her sulky husband and grabbed Glen's arm. I smiled over at Roger, and the big man looked even more sour than before, if possible. Maybe he was afraid I'd try to take *his* arm. I made a mental note to have Glen give Roger a few summer wardrobe suggestions. Roger never listened to me or to Claire; surely he would take advice from another alpha male after their bonding experience at the gym.

For tonight's dinner, Glen and I had decided we'd take them to one of our favorite places: the Mongolian Grill. There, you could choose from an impressive selection of meats, veggies, and sauces, create your own unique combination, and watch while it was cooked together on a sizzling metal surface by one of six attractive male chefs. Good food, and entertainment, too.

All day I'd done my best to forget last night's unease, but instead of fading, the feeling intensified when we sat down with our meals. I was quiet for a few minutes, lost in my own world, picking at my lamb and rice and trying to slay my dreamtime dragons with the sword of logic. It wasn't working.

"Claire?" I broke into the middle of a story Glen was telling without realizing it. They all turned to look at me, eyebrows raised. "Uh, I didn't mean to interrupt," I

apologized. "I just have to tell you, Claire... I don't think you should go to this ranch.... I have a bad feeling about it." I hadn't known what I was going to say until I opened my mouth.

"A 'bad feeling', Ethan?" Claire said slowly. She shook her head. "I know you have these ideas from time to time, honey. I even remember how upset you were all those years ago when your nanny was killed in that car accident you warned her about."

I felt like I'd been gut-punched. She remembered too? That made the old incident and these new and similar feelings seem all the more real and immediate. I must have looked stricken because Glen put an arm around me, and Claire smiled and reached over to pat my hand.

"You've always taken things too seriously, Ethan, ever since you were a little boy. I know you have feelings from time to time, but they don't mean anything, not really. Everyone has them. It was just a coincidence that something bad happened when you thought it might."

She was smiling steadily at me, so sincere. Roger looked away, uncomfortable with the emotions, and I silently drew strength from Glen's warm accepting presence.

"It's wonderful being here with you, Buddy." Claire had always called me that when we were children, back when I called her Sis. "Let's just have a nice meal and not worry about anything, okay?"

A message from big sister to little brother. Claire always treated me with love, but she made it clear that she knew best about most everything, certainly about her own life. I forced a smile. "Of course, I'm sure you're right." What else

could I say? No one ever listened—they all knew better than I did.

Glen gave me a questioning look, but I asked him to go on with his story, and soon all three of them were laughing about something, although I couldn't tell you what it was.

I MANAGED not to say anything more to Claire as the week passed. We did go to see *The Lion King*, and it was as entertaining as might be expected, an excellent production of the Broadway musical. Glen was mesmerized, and it was all I heard about for a day or two. As always, I was glad to see him happy.

I stayed busy as I usually did, visiting bookshops and making phone calls, attending a meeting of the library board on Wednesday. Occasionally, Ms. Thornton's face would flash before my inner vision, but I also kept that worry to myself.

Early Thursday morning, I was studying my bleary, sleep-deprived eyes in the bathroom mirror when Glen put his arms around me. "Sweetheart, you've been tossing and turning every night since we've been here. Is something wrong?"

I leaned back against his broad chest. "I don't know, Glen. I keep dreaming things—dark, confused, awful stuff." He held me closer. "I don't know what any of it means. I guess, maybe...."

I have no idea what I was going to say because that was when I heard the words in my head, so clearly Ms. Thornton

could have been standing next to me.... “Don’t wait too long....”

I shivered in Glen’s embrace. Could there possibly be a connection between that cryptic statement and my sleeplessness and general feelings of anxiety? Something inside me screamed, “Yes!”

I turned and held onto Glen as tightly as I could while some watchful inner part of me let go with a dizzying sense of “at last!” “Glen, I think we need to call Ms. Thornton.”

## CHAPTER 5

HER voice was deep and warm, and didn't seem at all threatening, as I had secretly feared. She didn't seem surprised that I had called, nor did she express resentment at my behavior at our last meeting. In fact, she acted as though we were old friends who talked every day. With no mention of why, we arranged to meet at her hotel right after tonight's farewell dinner with Claire and Roger. Farewell dinner? Just thinking of it that way gave me a chill.

The meal was pleasant enough, though my appetite seemed to have disappeared. I considered making one last plea to Claire to cancel her trip to the dude ranch, but knew it would do no good. In her own way, Claire is as stubborn as I am.

I wouldn't be driving them to the airport after their week at the ranch—that was all part of the vacation package—so this was to be our goodbye. We parted with the usual promises to stay in touch, maybe visit at Christmas, and for sure at next year's convention. The ache in the pit of my stomach made me wonder if there would *be* a next year. It wasn't easy to smile and let Claire go with only a hug.

MS. THORNTON welcomed us into her room at the Holiday Inn. This time she was barefoot, hair back in a ponytail, her face completely innocent of makeup. She was dressed sub-casual in jean shorts and a pink T-shirt with a faded picture of Tinkerbell on the front. None of it detracted from her beauty. Glen and I took the two chairs by the window while Ms. Thornton sat on the bed.

“Well?” she asked, fixing me with those beautiful, all-seeing eyes. “I’ve already told you I need your help. Have you come here to offer it? We’re running out of time.”

“You were right, Ms. Thornton,” I conceded, “when you said I have a problem. What I’d like to know is if my concern is the same as yours, and how helping you will help me.”

She shook her head impatiently. “You wouldn’t have been called to me if we didn’t share a similar motivation. Why don’t you tell me about your problem?”

I was still reluctant to tell her anything, but my worries for Claire’s safety nagged at me. “It concerns... the mountains,” I said, finally.

She was instantly alert. “Where in the mountains?”

“Does the subject of mountains mean something to *you*, Ms. Thornton?”

“Of course it does, you know that... and for all the gods’ sakes, call me Lila!”

I exchanged glances with Glen... *all* the gods? “All right.” Why did the woman always have to act as though I could read her mind?

“Look,” she said, leaning forward. “I’m not your enemy. I’m not trying to invade your privacy. I don’t need to know anything more about you than what’s absolutely necessary.



All I want is your help with this one project and I'll be gone—out of your lives. We'll act during the crisis period, which should be next Tuesday, and by Wednesday, it will all be over."

Crisis? Claire would still be on vacation then... somewhere in the mountains. I tried to forget that and focus on the situation at hand. "Why do you need us?"

She frowned. "That should be obvious. You're psychic, aren't you... clairvoyant? You see things before they happen."

How did she know that? "You could call it that," I said slowly. I'd tried never to put a definite name to my so-called "gifts." "I've always thought of it as only an oddity."

She shook her head. "Not in my world it's not—to me, your 'oddity' is an important tool. I need someone like you, someone who can see things."

"See things?" I was tired of the things I'd been seeing for the past few days.

"Yes, and believe his own eyes."

I felt like I'd fallen down the rabbit hole and Lila was the Mad Hatter. How could she possibly know so much about me when I perceived so little about her? The only good thing was she sounded crazier than I did. "Your world? What sort of world are we talking about?"

"The real world, though I suppose you'd call my take on it supernatural..." She held my gaze. "I have some unusual gifts too. One of my titles is psycho-interpatial mathematician." I must have looked utterly blank. "*You* can think of me as a magician... or perhaps a witch."

I felt Glen tense beside me. Certainly, he and I had some abilities that were out of the ordinary, but neither of us believed in *all* the things you might read about the paranormal. I didn't care what weird title she claimed for herself but... witch? Maybe I wasn't the only one who should be looking for a psychiatric diagnosis.

"So—what's *your* problem?" I hoped I sounded as skeptical as I felt.

She sighed, tilted her head to one side, and stared over my shoulder. Nothing was behind me but the darkened window, and nothing was beyond that but night. I wondered what else she saw out there.

"I suppose I'd better explain a little. You see, once in a while...." Lila shifted position uneasily, her eyes coming back to my face. "More often than you would think, actually... something goes wrong with what we call reality. Oh, maybe it's not 'wrong' exactly, maybe the change is perfectly natural, depending on your point of view, but my point of view isn't any more godlike than the average mortal's."

I made an impatient gesture.

"Right," she said. "You don't care about my viewpoint. Okay, what happens, as far as I know, is that whatever sort of barrier separates us from other worlds—other dimensions, or times, or what have you—weakens somehow and a hole opens... a gateway. You've heard of people going missing, never to be found?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Well, most often there are perfectly ordinary explanations, of course... but sometimes it's because they stumbled through an opening they didn't see, a door that wasn't there the instant before." She stopped, as though that were explanation enough.

Glen shook his head. "What's so awful about that?"

"Well, unless you're the missing person or their loved ones, not much, I suppose. But the flipside is that the hole goes both ways. That means other 'things' can come through to our side."

I felt Glen shiver. "What kind of things?"

She shrugged. "How would I know? Whatever's on the other side."

I opened my mouth, but she held up a hand.

"Hold on. You don't have the whole picture yet. Not all of these loci, other places, are exactly like ours. I don't just mean they have different kinds of animals or something. Natural laws are not the same on all planes. The gravity itself may be different, or the air. What if a hole opens on a place where the atmosphere is a poison gas... methane, maybe?"

Methane and our oxygen-rich atmosphere? I had a sudden vision of a huge, fiery explosion.

"Exactly," she said, without looking at me.

Jesus, I wished she wouldn't do that.

Glen, who still seemed to be capable of rational thought, said, "So... what kind of world is due to connect with ours on Tuesday?"

Lila sighed again, deflating slowly, like a balloon with a slow leak. "I wish I knew. I just keep getting this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach." Her eyes found mine. "You know."

Not waiting for a response from me, she turned back to Glen. "But I think it's going to be something bad... very bad."

He pursed his lips. "What can we do about it?"

That's all it took for Glen. Someone said there was a problem, and immediately he wanted to help. No thought of risks or consequences, just this unselfish willingness to jump in with both feet. That wasn't my way. I had to have time... time to think and weigh the possibilities. *Was* there really something we could do? What was it? What's the worst that could happen? The best? I wanted information. I wanted to pick Lila's brain for provable facts until I could reason it through on my own. Even then, I might decide it was too dangerous. We weren't discussing another annoying complication in my life, here. Somehow I knew this could be deadly—both to Glen and to me. Damn it, the bitch could risk her own life if she wanted to, but Glen was precious. I wouldn't risk him for anything—not for Claire, not even for the world.

"So, how often does something like that happen?" I asked, interrupting before she could respond to Glen.

"Too often," she said, staring out at the dark again.

"Let me see if I've got this right. Holes open up? Like on the full moon, or something?" I was racking my brain for the little I thought I knew about witchcraft.

Lila rolled her eyes. "Doesn't have a thing to do with the moon. How could it? Maybe there isn't any moon on the other side. Maybe there are even two or three of them."

I grimaced. "Okay, where do you come in?"

She straightened a little. "I'm part of an ancient association; a fraternity, you might say. A select group of guardians, made up of people with the necessary sorts of talent and the right temperament. We travel all over, wherever and whenever we're needed. We're trained and committed to protecting our world from... intrusions."

My mind was reeling; first interdimensional holes and now secret societies. “Then this sort of thing really happens on a regular basis?”

“Sure, little anomalies, ‘holes’, open up all the time... every day. They’re hardly noticeable; most of them last less than a second. We don’t worry much about those, even though it is still possible for something unwelcome to come through in that short a period. We can’t be everywhere—there just aren’t enough guardians to go around. But the larger anomalies are different. They won’t close on their own.”

“So, what can you do about the big ones... this one in particular?” I felt that I’d gotten the emphasis back on Lila risking her life, not Glen and me.

“Well, with enough of the right kind of power, I can close it before it does too much damage. That is, if I can come up with the applicable directives.”

I frowned.

“The right spell,” she explained.

Magic again. I could think of nothing to say to that.

Glen took advantage of the lull in conversation. “Okay, Ethan is psychic. What do you want with me?”

Lila smiled at Glen in an altogether too familiar way. “It’s part of my talent that I can see talent in others. There aren’t many like you, Glen. Your ability to change the very structure of your body gives you excellent health and a tremendous store of natural energy. A witch with you at their side can do almost anything. When the rest of my group hears about you, you’ll be in demand.” Her smile widened. “We always need more like you. The shapeshifting gene

mutation is worth conserving. Have you thought about reproducing?”

I couldn't remember ever seeing Glen blush before.

“So, this... intrusion is going to take place in the mountains?” I asked, not wanting to hear Glen's answer, if he was going to make one.

“Yes, and I know generally where. I can use *your* help in defining it.”

So we were back to the beginning. “I still need to think about this.”

Lila looked away. “Fine. You can reach me here through tomorrow. Think it over all you want. But if you decide not to help me, I'll have a go at it on my own, and I'll need to find a larger, more secure and private place than a hotel room to get ready.” She stood up. “I'd beg you if I thought it would help, but....” She turned her back on us, and Glen followed me out the door.

Glen drove us back downtown in silence. I was barely conscious of the elevator ride or the walk through the hotel corridor, and I dropped into a chair in our suite, exhausted.

Glen paced back and forth in front of me. “What do you think, Ethan? Do you believe her?”

My head was pounding. Why me? Did I trust the woman? More important, did I trust myself? Did I, as she suggested, believe my own eyes? I had no problems with my little gifts, the things I saw and felt every day... knowing who was calling before I answered the phone, picking the right shelf to find the book I wanted.... Those minor things were part of my day-to-day life and I took them for granted. What bothered me were the larger visions, the ones that involved

more than just me. If I made the wrong decision, to trust my perceptions or not, it might mean the difference between life and death for someone I cared about. Could a hole, an anomaly such as Lila described, be the menace I felt hanging over Claire and Roger?

"I don't know what to think, Glen. It all sounds crazy... but I suppose it's no more unlikely than clairvoyance." I hesitated. "Or werecats."

Glen looked at me, a hint of hurt in his eyes. "I know I'm a beast, Ethan, a freak. But I love you, and I'd go anywhere, do anything that was necessary, to protect the people I love. Wouldn't you?"

"Glen, I didn't mean...!"

He cut me off. "Ethan, I believe her. If she isn't who and what she says she is, how could she know so much about us? I know you're trying to understand everything, trying to figure it out logically, but you should just trust your gut. You were the one who first saw her, and you knew even then that we would meet. There must be a reason she came into our lives."

Yes, I had to admit there was a kind of weird logic in everything that had happened in the last few days. I sighed, rose, and wrapped Glen in a crushing hug. "You're right, Glen... but you're *not* a freak... and you're *my* beast." Catlike, Glen rubbed his forehead against the side of my face, sharing his scent, marking me as his own.

IT WAS after midnight, but she answered her phone on the first ring. I had one last question for her. "Lila, can you tell

me what will happen to any people who might fall into this... anomaly?"

She was quiet for a moment. I wondered if she was reading Claire's face from the surface of my mind.

"I'm sorry, Ethan, I can't say for sure. I know I'd like very much to prevent it, or to get them back."

"What do we have to do?" I asked. I could almost see Lila rubbing her hands together.



## CHAPTER 6

GLEN and I picked Lila up early the next morning. She had asked us for ideas on a suitable place for her preparations. Large, private, and secure, she said. Following my gut instead of my better judgment, as Glen had suggested, we offered her space in our home. Why not? There was plenty of room, and we were already officially committed to working with her. Now, there's logic for you.

Glen dropped Lila and me at the house and drove back to his office in town. He was hoping to rearrange his schedule and perhaps see some of next week's clients today, freeing him to help in whatever ways might become necessary.

On the drive out, Lila had immediately laid down one cardinal rule: Glen and I were not to have sex of any sort, not even masturbation, between now and the ritual. If we did, she said, it would drain away some sort of essential psychic energies... or something.

We agreed, of course. I was ready to agree to almost anything by then. But I was doubly sorry I had let my stress and uneasiness deprive us of our usual bedtime pleasures for the last few days.

When we arrived, I suppose I expected an immediate flurry of activity on her part, perhaps the consultation of a crystal ball or the shuffling of tarot cards. Wasn't that what

witches did? But once Lila had unpacked her things in the only other downstairs bedroom, she requested a tour of the house.

There wasn't much to show. Many of the upstairs rooms were merely catchalls for unwanted items left behind by former residents, while others were but havens for spiders. Glen and I did our day-to-day living in the stone-flagged ground floor kitchen; connected to the study by the breakfast bar, the two became a sort of great room. The master bedroom was downstairs also, and a few hardy plants survived my unreliable care in the south-facing solarium. Thankfully, the guest bath was in an acceptable state of repair. I couldn't see sharing something so intimate with a woman. The only other presentable space was the library. Situated on the north, opposite the solarium, it was always dim—so much the better for my book collection. I often spent time there and had been known to dust now and then. Books, especially old books, had always been my passion, and I made a tidy income from locating rare volumes for my clients.

Lila seemed to regard the dark-paneled walls and antique oak shelving with approval. Then, as though she had read my mind, she headed directly to the cabinets that held my favorites.

"May I?"

"Go ahead," I said, feeling an odd pride in sharing my treasures with another... even if it was Lila.

"You have some fascinating works here," she said. I suddenly remembered that a few of the books I'd kept for my own dealt with witchcraft and the occult, though I had bought them more for their antiquity than their content. Her

fingers touched several spines, finally removing a thin volume I knew well. A twelfth-century monk, Brother Andreas, had written, or perhaps copied, a treatise on madness. What interested me most about it was his description of the sufferers' symptoms, so similar to the manifestations of my own visions and illogical "feelings." Were these ancient unfortunates my brothers and sisters, and were they, as the Brother suggested, not truly mad but touched by the divine in some indefinable way? I had turned those pages so often, I almost had them memorized. Now, watching Lila, intent on the handwritten letters, I felt a growing discomfort. Did she know the uncertainty that ran through my mind when I read those words? Did she understand, or was she judging me?

"Look as long as you want," I said. "I'll be back later."

I went for a walk down by the stream, as I often did when I needed to think... or not to think. There was a flat rock there, warmed now by the summer sun, that was just right for sitting. What I call meditation may not be exactly what Ms. Singh tried to teach, but it works for me. After a time, when I felt less scattered, I made my way back.

The kitchen door was open when I returned, letting in the afternoon breeze. The house was pleasantly cool and filled with a delicious aroma.

"Hi," Lila said. Wearing one of my aprons over her T-shirt and shorts, she smiled at me, then bent over the open oven door and turned to place something on a rack. "I got hungry. I hope you don't mind."

As I stared, she cut a large square of what had to be chocolate cake and set it on a plate next to a wedge of cheese. From where I stood it looked like Havarti.

“Cake and cheese?”

“Sure. Chocolate goes with everything. You want some?”

Empty after a breakfast of black coffee and a forgotten lunch, my stomach rumbled.

“Sounds like you do,” she said smugly, and filled another plate.

I heard the slam of a familiar car door.

“Better make it three,” I suggested, as Glen’s nose led him into the kitchen.

Lila was right; chocolate cake *is* good with cheese. Glen opened a bottle of white merlot, and after second helpings of the unconventional appetizer, we moved on to a salad of fresh vegetables and finally a steaming bowl of Glen’s home-canned onion soup with garlic bread. While we ate, Lila proved herself capable of making entertaining small talk, relating anecdotes of her travels to many countries and even sounding interested in the details of our everyday lives.

Glen said he had been unable to complete all his business obligations, and would have to return to town on Monday. I didn’t look forward to spending so much time alone with Lila, but as she said, perhaps there was something I could do to help.

When all of us had eaten our fill, seated around the large kitchen table, Glen replenished our wine glasses. I was now ready for a more serious chat. Yes, we were committed to whatever course of action Lila thought best, but I was determined to have some details.

“Lila,” I began, “Glen and I have agreed to help you with your ritual....”

She nodded.

“But what, exactly, will we be doing? I mean, do you burn candles, or chant, or dance around in circles... what?”

Lila looked at me and then at Glen. “Well, there will be some chanting, but I’ll take care of that. Mostly, you two will join in when it comes time to raise power.”

I opened my mouth, but she held up a palm.

“Look, it goes like this. First, I have to figure out which spell will work best on this particular occasion. That’s mainly guesswork... aided by intuition, I hope. I already have the herbs and things I’ll need... that recipe doesn’t change much from time to time, unless... do you have any sage around here?”

“I bought a Lakota smudge stick of sage and sweet grass, if that would help,” Glen offered. I had to give him a look. Obviously there were still things I didn’t know about him.

“Perfect! It always helps to include something specific to the area. So, after we compound the spell, we locate the projected spot on a topographic map. As I said, I know generally where, and you,” she said, aiming a fingernail at me, “will help me pinpoint it.”

“Then what?” asked Glen.

“Then we go there, set things up, burn some herbs and incense, lay down a protective circle, and wait until the time is right.”

I nodded. I wasn’t completely sure of what all that meant, but she made it sound simple... if you accepted the premise at all.

“And that’s it?”

“No, to close a really large anomaly, once it has opened, takes considerable power. I’ll need all three of us to raise enough. That’s where the real ritual begins. Everything else is only preliminary.”

“Okay,” I said. “How is the power raised, exactly?”

“Didn’t I say? It’s why I want you two to abstain until the ritual. We attract energy through sex... fucking, to be exact.”

I was speechless.

“All three of us?” Glen wasn’t speechless.

“Yes, certainly. Two might be enough, but three is better, and a woman and two men is optimum.”

“It is?” I squeaked.

Glen said, “At the same time?”

Lila snorted. “If you think about it a while, I’m sure you’ll figure out the mechanics... oh, and no condoms.”

“Bareback?” I asked, incredulous.

“Has to be, in a case like this. Anything but skin-to-skin contact retards the energy flow. I don’t know why, I just know... no condoms.”

“But what about...”

“Ah, yes.” Lila nodded. “Dating in the twenty-first century. I’m clean, just tested a month ago, and I’ve been celibate since then. It’s part of the ritual cleansing, but I don’t suppose you care about that. Since we’re on the subject, what about you two?”

I hated having this type of clinical conversation with anyone, especially her, but I supposed it was more like talking to a doctor... a witch doctor, in her case.

“Glen and I were tested fourteen months ago, right after we met, and we haven’t been with anyone else since. We’re both clean.”

“Good. Your auras look healthy, so... no problem going *au naturel*.”

Our auras? I could think of one potential problem of unprotected sex with a woman. I cleared my throat.

“Are you on the pill, or... I mean... what if you get....”

She laughed. “I’ll be sure and send you a christening card. Don’t worry; conception can’t happen during this kind of ritual. At least it never has before.”

I nodded and looked away. Sex... outdoors, probably on top of a mountain... naked... the three of us. It sounded unbelievable.

With whom had she done this before... and why did I care? What other kinds of rituals were there where she might get pregnant? And was the faint thrill I felt due only to a few days’ abstinence? I had no more questions for anyone but myself that night, and we finished our wine in silence.

Watching Glen prepare for bed was almost torture. By the time he had brushed his teeth, I was painfully hard. I know he knew I was aroused, his sense of smell alone would tell him, but he gave me only a sympathetic look and a chaste kiss before turning out the light. I desperately wanted to ask him if denying himself was as difficult for him as it was for me, but decided such a discussion wouldn’t help. In the interests of keeping our bargain, we left T-shirts and undershorts on, something we rarely did except in the chill of winter. I wanted to cuddle—for reassurance, if nothing else—but decided that would make things even more

difficult. I was glad when Glen's hand reached out to clasp mine, and I fell asleep, comforted by that small bit of the warmth I craved.

UNLIKE my usual morning laziness, I woke when Glen did, at an ungodly seven a.m. The bad dreams seemed to be giving me a break, so perhaps I'd just had enough rest. At any rate, I felt the need to be up and doing. We were both in the kitchen by seven-thirty, where Lila was already busy. The large wooden table was now almost buried beneath maps, drawings, scraps of paper, and old books.

"Morning," she said cheerfully.

Today her outfit was a tank top and cargo shorts, showing off the lithe muscles in her shoulders, back, and calves. Her chestnut hair was held back with what looked a lot like one of my leather hair ties. Oh, well, what's mine was hers, I supposed. Drawing the hair away from her face emphasized those high cheekbones, the wide brow and firm chin, making her beauty seem almost masculine... except when you got below the neck. I tried not to look too closely there, but in spite of my restraint, I was almost certain she wasn't wearing a bra.

"I hope you don't mind." She pointed to a thick volume. "I borrowed this one from your library."

While Glen made coffee, I walked over to see what book she found so interesting. It was a really old one, the spine cracked and the binding mouse-chewed until the only thing holding it together was several strips of duct tape. In spite of the eighteenth-century date inscribed inside the front cover,



the seller had let it go cheap... partly because of its condition, but also because he thought it contained nothing but gibberish. I couldn't read it, either, but it still interested me. No one else I'd consulted, not even the pros on the museum staff, had been able to decipher the odd words or even to tell me in what language they were written. I hadn't shelved it, and it had lain forgotten in a box in the corner of the library. I wondered how Lila had found it.

"You can read that?" I asked.

"Sure." She nodded. "No big mystery. It's English, only written in code. I've seen others like it."

"You have?"

"Yes, it's a grimoire... one witch's personal spell book." She turned to Glen, who was at the counter pouring coffee. "There are muffins, if you're interested."

Glen and I ate bran muffins, along with coffee and orange juice, at the breakfast bar. I had better luck digesting the food than Lila's explanation. I owned a spell book? What on Earth had made me buy such a thing?

Glen only glanced at the pile of books and papers on his way out to the garage. He planned to spend his Sunday in preparations for our mountain expedition, which included changing the oil in the Explorer, checking its brakes, and other such practical stuff I knew little about. Glen also had quite a collection of outdoor items: backpacks and canteens and the like. I was never much for hiking, so I'd leave it to him to choose what we might need.

I started the dishwasher, then looked at the loaded table in the center of the kitchen.

“Um... Lila, you can use any place you want to spread out your stuff. There are lots of rooms upstairs, maybe some bigger tables or a desk. I can clear out a whole room for you if you like. I know the house isn’t as clean as it could be, but I do know how to use a broom.” I hadn’t thought about our state of housekeeping when we invited Lila. Damn, how embarrassing. “Oh, and thanks for making breakfast, but it really isn’t necessary for you to cook. I can always defrost something.”

She smiled. “I’m not much for cleaning, myself. You should see my place. I like to cook, though. There are lots of similarities between cooking and witchcraft.”

I nodded, though I didn’t know if she was teasing me or not. The mind-reading thing seemed to go only one way.

“I think your kitchen will do quite nicely; there’s plenty of room here and lots of good light. Is that okay with you? We can eat at the breakfast bar.”

I shrugged. Why not?

“So, that’s a spell book?” I asked, taking another look at the old, dusty volume.

“Uh-huh.” Lila dug under the layers of paper. “Like this one.” She brought out an even larger book, maybe twelve by eighteen, obviously not new, but in much better shape than the one from my library. It was beautifully bound in deep red leather and embossed here and there with suns, moons, and other esoteric-looking symbols.

“This one’s mine.”

I was intrigued in spite of myself.

“Does every witch have her own spell book?”

Lila nodded. “If he or she is serious about their craft, they do.” She gave me her teasing smile. “And, in case you wondered, witches come in the male variety, too. Outsiders sometimes say ‘warlock’ for the guys, but to us we’re all witches.”

“Oh,” I said. Lila always seemed capable of making me feel more than a little bit stupid. I tried again.

“Why would every witch need a personal spell book? Wouldn’t copies of one book, with all the spells written in it, be enough?”

Lila poured herself some coffee and then perched on a stool at the counter, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee. Her shorts were baggy, and keeping my eyes on her face suddenly became difficult.

“Every spell we use is slightly different. There may be a general formula written down somewhere, but each practitioner works in whatever way feels right to him or her. You start by copying down your basic plan, and then after the spell is finished, you go back and evaluate how well it worked, and maybe change it a little for next time. That’s how a book becomes unique... your own. But even the most time-tested basic spells are still experimental. All spells were made up on the spot by someone once, out of necessity, dozens—maybe hundreds—of years ago. If they worked, they were recorded; if not....” She shrugged. “Does that make any sense?”

I nodded. I hated to admit it, but I was beginning to have more respect for Lila and her “craft.” In an odd way, it all sounded reasonable. Maybe this mumbo-jumbo was real and could do what she promised. For Claire’s sake, I certainly hoped so.

“What was it you called yourself before?”

“You mean the psycho-mathematical thing?”

I nodded.

“In some circles, it’s a more acceptable name than ‘witch’.” She grinned.

“Lila,” I had to ask, “does what you do ever strike you as... odd?”

“You mean, spending my life sealing up holes in the space-time continuum?” Her eyes twinkled. “I assure you, I have to shop for toilet paper just like everybody else.”

“But do you think of this as a calling... or just a job?”

She put down her cup and leaned forward. “Ethan, once upon a time I was just an ordinary person with a little ‘gift’. Then I met some people who convinced me that by using that uncommon extra I could help others... make a real difference in the world. That sounded good to me. Now, years later, here I am.”

I pulled out a chair and sat, the table with the stacked papers between us. “I don’t want any of this psychic stuff to be real, Lila. I think I’d rather be certifiable than have knowledge of things before they happen... especially something bad, like this.” Right then, it was true.

She regarded me intently. “What have you seen?”

I shook my head. “Nothing specific, nothing I remember clearly, just darkness and formless, ugly things... but they scare me. I haven’t been this frightened in years.”

I looked up, and Lila was standing next to me. She reached out to put a hand on my forearm.

"I get scared, too, Ethan, sometimes, especially right before a big one. What if I don't remember something important? What if the spell doesn't work? What if, in spite of my best efforts, it all goes to hell?"

"How do you live with that?"

She lifted her hand to smooth my hair lightly, then stepped back. The touch tingled. "I keep moving," she said.

Suddenly I felt even worse... I suppose grim is a good word for it. Lila studied me. I tried to look away, but she pulled out another chair and sat down close.

"Ethan, will you tell me something?" Her voice was soft.

"What?"

"Why do you fight so hard against what you are?"

"What am I?" I asked, feeling lost and terribly inadequate.

She pushed closer to me, until I felt her thigh, then her shoulder and arm against mine. It didn't feel sexual, just human and comforting.

"You're a powerful untrained psychic... like I was, once."

I stared at her.

"No, I didn't mean I was *exactly* like you." She bumped my shoulder with hers. "We're not twins, you know."

I felt, rather than saw, her smile.

"I meant that I didn't understand the power I had, that I spent a lot of time pushing it away, trying to pretend it didn't exist."

That sounded all too familiar.

"Ethan, when you fight your gift, the messages can't come through clearly. The more you relax and let it in, the

more you will understand, and the easier it will be for your mind to interpret.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I muttered.

“Would you rather know, or just go on feeling something is wrong without knowing what or why?”

Either seemed a bad choice. “Are you sure we’re not both crazy?” I asked.

She smiled again. “My therapist says I’m not.”

I grimaced.

“Ethan, when I was a kid I accepted myself, just as I was, quirks and all. Then I grew a little and learned that other people didn’t believe in psychic powers or, if they did, they thought they were wrong and that anyone who had them was evil. For a while, I took on that view myself and spent a lot of years asking ‘why me?’. Then I found a place I fit, where I could be exactly who I am and help others too. So now, I’m just me again. It feels pretty good, and I like myself, most days.” She hugged me, one arm around my shoulders. “You’ll get there.”

I sighed. “This isn’t getting us any closer to fixing that hole in the mountains, is it.”

Lila shook her head. “We can talk more, after,” she said.

I nodded. It was good that she thought there would be an “after.”

## CHAPTER 7

I WAS in the bedroom trying to decide if my leather jacket was appropriate hiking gear when the phone rang.

“Ethan?” It was Claire’s voice. I sat down on the bed.

“Yes, Claire, it’s me.”

“Well, I know you were worried and I just wanted to tell you that everything is fine. It’s just beautiful here, and we’ve been having so much fun! I rode a horse yesterday, a pretty gray one, to a camp in the valley, and then we had a chuck wagon supper, just like they used to do on real ranches in the Old West. Can you believe it?”

I said something noncommittal, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“The time here is passing so quickly, Ethan. I’m glad we still have a few days left. Tomorrow we go on that overnight hike I told you about.”

My heart sank. I had a feeling I knew exactly where they would be hiking.

“It’s a long way from the ranch, so we’ll be getting up and leaving super early. Oh, I bought new hiking boots in Estes!” She sounded like a little girl.

“That’s wonderful, Claire.”

“I’m so excited. I’ve never camped in a tent before, let alone carried everything I need in a pack on my back.” Her

cheerful voice softened. "Ethan, you know I love you, don't you?"

"Of course, Claire." I had to clear my throat. "And I love you too... big sister."

I could almost hear her smile.

"I'll call you after we return home, Ethan."

I just sat for a moment after we said goodbye. Whatever we did with Lila, it had to work... it just had to.

It wasn't more than five minutes before the phone rang again. This time I felt it was Glen. I was right.

"Hi, love, how's everything going?" he asked. Even after more than a year together, his voice alone could lift my spirits.

"Okay. Lila still has the kitchen in an uproar."

Glen laughed.

I sat down again and leaned back on our bed.

"You know, Glen, I guess it's the abstinence, but I have to admit Lila is starting to look good to me."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I mean, she still irritates the hell out of me, scares me, too, sometimes. But then she crosses her legs or something, and I find myself looking...." I felt rather ashamed of admitting it, but I wanted to be honest with him.

Glen chuckled, the sound warm and sensuous, raising goose bumps on my neck.

"I suppose that's a good thing, considering what we'll have to do for the ritual. And, Ethan, I wouldn't feel too bad about it. I've found myself looking down Esther's cleavage today, more than once."



I had to laugh. The thought of Glen ogling his motherly secretary was just too absurd.

“Better not let her notice, love, she’ll be shocked... thinks she’s working for a gay man.”

“I promise not to pinch her bottom, though I confess it has occurred to me. There was also this cute little waitress at lunch....”

“You’ve got it bad,” I agreed, smiling. Then a sober thought struck me.

“Glen, I’ll be very glad when this is over and we can get back to normal.”

He didn’t reply right away, though I could hear his soft breathing.

“Me, too, sweetheart... me too.”

LILA was intent on the kitchen table and its precariously balanced contents. I walked closer and looked over her shoulder at the red, leather-bound book, opened now, somewhere near its middle. The handwriting on each cream-colored page was in amazingly neat lines and seemed to be in several different styles. Some of the words were faded and, to me, undecipherable. The ink was various shades of reddish brown.

“What’s that?”

I pointed to a series of marks that looked like, from what little I remembered of college chemistry and physics, a formula. Whatever it was, even handwritten, it looked

altogether more scientific than anything I expected to find in the book of an admitted witch.

“It’s a spell,” she said, not looking up and continuing to carefully copy passages onto a pad of plain paper, occasionally adding a new symbol here and there.

Magic spells had formulas?

“What are those?” I pointed. “They look like Greek letters.”

“That’s because they are,” she said distractedly.

For a minute, I studied the string of symbols she was working on.

“So, is it a spell, or a formula?”

“Spell... formula... as long as it works, what’s the difference?”

I imagined my questions were disturbing her concentration, but I was too curious to care.

“What’s that one... the one that’s shaped like a triangle?”

“That’s Delta.”

I must have radiated puzzlement on some wavelength because she actually tore her eyes away from the book and looked at me.

“Delta is a useful symbol in magic. It can refer to the release of energy or the transformation of one thing into another. And of course its symbol, a triangle, has three sides. Three is one of the most magical of numbers.”

She gave me that dazzling smile.

“Three things working together can be far more powerful than they are apart... like the three of us.”

Yeah, in three-way sex. I took a moment to consider that while Lila took a bite of the sandwich she'd been munching. The more I studied the writing in her book, the more the ink resembled dried blood.

"What is that stuff?" I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Sardines and peanut butter." She held up the sandwich. "I eat a lot when I'm working—doing magic burns up calories. Want a bite?"

I flinched. "God, no, I mean...."

She shook her head. "No, the ink's not made of blood... not human blood, anyway."

I stared at her.

"How'd you know what I was going to say?"

She shrugged. Her eyes danced to mine, then away. One corner of her mouth turned up.

"Maybe we think alike?"

Maybe we did. But was I prepared to admit it? I didn't reply.

I continued to watch her work, and after a while, if I didn't try to *think* too hard, it almost seemed that some of the written lines made sense. Then something caught my eye.

"Shouldn't that symbol be here?" I pointed. "Instead of there?"

She started, her expression skeptical, then looked again.

"I think you're right." She fixed me with an appraising stare.

I shrugged. “Lucky guess.”

“Maybe, but that’s the kind of luck we need.” She pushed a sheaf of paper in my direction. “Here, check over what I’ve already written. When we’re finished, we’ll copy it into the book.”

GLEN came in just as the afternoon sun was hitting the kitchen windows. He looked at us, almost head to head by that time, and raised an eyebrow at me as he held up a big bag of Chinese takeout.

“Making progress?” he asked.

Lila stood up. Hands on hips, she leaned back until her spine cracked audibly.

“That’s better,” she said. “It’s done, Glen. Things went a lot faster than I had hoped, with Ethan’s help.”

Glen looked at me with pride and a little curiosity. I fought the impulse to say, “Aw, shucks,” and kissed Glen instead.

We had copied every part of the spell onto a clean page of Lila’s book. We’d be taking it with us, but she said the crucial lines would have to be memorized. I was grateful that wasn’t up to me. I might have worked along with her, but I still wasn’t certain I believed.

Tomorrow was the big day and I expected to feel nervous, but somehow I seemed to have worked through all that and found an island of calm. I had enough skepticism left to wonder if the accepting feeling was good or bad.

After we ate, Lila spread out a big topographic map of Rocky Mountain National Park. Glen leaned over the map with interest. I knew he had hiked a lot of those trails.

“Where is Claire’s camp?” he asked me.

“Somewhere around here, I think. Not too far from Estes.”

We both looked at Lila. Her finger traced a high ridge.

“Near as I can figure, the anomaly should open up about here. Ethan, can you see anything more precise?”

I studied the map, trying again not to think logically, just to let any volunteer feelings flow through me. A small dark area appeared in my sight, and I pointed to what I saw.

“There.”

Lila handed me a highlighter pen and I made a yellow circle around the phantom dark spot.

Lila sighed. “Can’t get any closer than that. We may as well get what sleep we can. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

I looked at Lila. Something about her seemed different.

“You’re worried, aren’t you?”

Perhaps opening up to whatever power I had was beginning to let me read her the way she read me.

“Ethan....”

I had another flash.

“What kind of things might come through this opening tomorrow?”

She looked away.

“There’s no way to know.”

“But they could be dangerous, couldn’t they... some kind of monsters? That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it?”

Lila gave me serious eyes, then looked over at Glen and smiled.

“With Glen on our side, it’s the monsters that should worry.”

Glen shook his head.

“Lila, you said earlier that you knew something about shapeshifters... others like me. My family thought changing was a curse, I know. They were ashamed to tell me about it and my grandfather died alone because of it. I’ve always wondered why... why this was given to my family... to me....”

Lila took her time folding up the map. All the other papers and books were safely stacked in the library, except for the ones we would take on our journey.

“Glen,” she said at last, “it’s late, and we all really need to rest. But I will say this much. Indeed, some do think it’s a curse to change and, I suppose, like anything else, it can be.”

She faced him and smiled.

“You may not believe this, but I’ve always wished I could shift. To me it’s another gift, a talent more rare than Ethan’s and my psychic abilities. Myths and legends suggest that some of the old-time gods and heroes could change into animal forms. Many Native American tribes still believe in totem spirits. Perhaps once everyone could change as you can, but the rest of us have forgotten how. If that’s true, then you are one of the few who retains that ancient ability. You are two-natured. You can blend in with the rest of our society when you want to, but if the necessity comes along,

you can fight and survive like no one else. I think that's a blessing, not a curse."

Glen's eyes had gone wide. I could almost see him considering what Lila had said, trying to rearrange the attitudes of a lifetime to include a new acceptance and appreciation of who he was. Right then, I wanted to kiss her, and she turned suddenly and smiled up into my eyes.

"I like you, too," she said, and turned back to include Glen. "Both of you."

GLEN and I were tucked in bed—wearing underwear again, hopefully for the last night. In spite of our enforced abstinence, I wasn't hard; there was too much on my mind. I turned to face Glen, and there was just enough light from the half moon outside the window to reflect from his eyes.

"Glen... are you afraid of what might happen tomorrow?"

He didn't answer at once, but reached for the thong at the nape of my neck and loosened my hair to his stroking fingers.

"Ethan," he said at last, "I've always wondered why I am what I am. But if I can protect you, and Lila, too, while you do what's necessary to save Claire and the others, then maybe there's a reason for it. Yes, I suppose I am afraid, but it won't stop me from doing what I must."

I hugged him tightly for just a moment. "I've never doubted that, my love."

## CHAPTER 8

GLEN was up at first light, and I crawled out soon after him. Both of us were dressed and ready by seven-thirty, but Lila already had coffee made and plates of steaming pancakes on the table.

“Eat up,” she said, pouring maple syrup on her own tall stack. “We’ll need plenty of carbs for the high-altitude trek.”

The pancakes were delicious, and I took time to enjoy them. Even the butterflies in my stomach calmed down and absorbed their share. Glen looked almost eager, and I confess that I felt a certain illogical optimism. Today was finally *the* day... no more waiting. Today we would face whatever was out there, and tonight we could relax... if we survived.

We packed things into Glen’s Explorer and headed for the mountains, passing through Denver in time to be slowed down by the last of morning rush hour. It wasn’t quite lunchtime when we reached Estes Park, but we stopped for a slice or two of pizza anyway. It’s quite a tourist town and, as usual, the shops lining the narrow streets were filled with colorful, happy people in search of fudge and T-shirts. Seated by the picture window of the restaurant with Glen and Lila beside me, feeling the uncertainty of the day and indeed the future, the pleasant bustle outside seemed more than a bit unreal.



Beyond the little town of Estes was where the real climb began. Denver is known as the Mile High City, and Estes is higher still, but Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park tops out at 14,000 feet. That's well over 4,000 meters for anyone on the metric system. Glen pulled into a parking lot before we reached that lofty height, but when we climbed out to don our backpacks, the air seemed palpably thinner and the sun extra bright.

Dressed in t-shirts, shorts and hiking boots, Glen and Lila looked quite used to carrying heavy things on their backs. Even though Glen had gone to extra pains to adjust his spare pack for my use, the weight seemed unwieldy and the straps, though padded, wanted to cut into my shoulders. Glen plopped a tan canvas hat on my head—to avoid sunstroke, he said—and kissed me lightly, his blue eyes now twinkling with excitement. I took a deep breath of the pine-scented air, pleasantly, although only momentarily, distracted from my thoughts by the surge of Glen's biceps when he lifted and strapped on his own pack. At the rear of the parking area was a simple wooden sign that marked the head of a well-used trail. From the map, I knew we would follow this trail for a while, but soon branch off on our own to get to the spot Lila and I had pinpointed.

She and Glen had done a good deal of conferring on what to take besides the necessities for the ritual. Lila had loaded her spell book and other occult gear into her own green nylon pack while Glen and I divided the more mundane items—water purifier, cooking kit, small stove, electric lantern, and a surprising number of freeze-dried food packets, along with some silver “space blankets” and other odds and ends, including my satellite phone. Each of us

carried our own lightweight sleeping bag. The air was warm, and I was glad Glen had vetoed my leather jacket.

At most, we'd be gone overnight, and when I grumbled, Glen informed me that we were "packing light," even as he hung a two-quart canteen around my neck. I forbore to ask what would have constituted packing "heavy."

I did my best to balance the unaccustomed weight, hoping the bulky pack wouldn't pull me over backward as we climbed some steep section of trail.

The noon sun shone overhead as we set foot on the marked path, then the trees closed in and the breeze blew cool and welcome. The trail wasn't too steep at first; it climbed gradually, twisting and turning back on itself, the natural rock and earth footholds tamed and supplemented by an occasional stairstep made from pressure-treated twelve by twelve timbers, now so overgrown with lichen and moss that they seemed a natural part of the landscape.

I have never been much of a hiker and was glad now that I took at least some sort of regular exercise. Without aerobics and swimming, I doubt I'd have made the first quarter mile. I was glad we hadn't weighed the packs. Knowing how much extra I was carrying would have been even more discouraging.

After an hour or so, we stopped at a particularly enchanting vista—forest stretching away on all sides, topped by a cloudless sky of an elegant blue, its color echoed in a small lake below.

"We turn off here," Lila said, pointing toward a thin track that led upward into the brush. From where I stood, it looked much too steep, not softened by the frequent switchbacks of the tamer trail. Lila led the way and I did my

best to follow. Glen paced behind me, never panting or even sweating, no matter how steep the climb.

In another hour, we stopped for water and a trail-mix snack. Branches moved in the gentle breeze, birds chirped and twittered, and there was the occasional rustle in the underbrush as a small animal went about its business. I had grown quite used to the background noises and was thinking about how nice it was to remove our packs, if only for a little while. It was a shock when everything fell silent.

Lila stood ready to start up the trail. I reached out, touching her shoulder.

“Wait,” I said, “something....”

“What is it?” Glen said.

Lila only asked, “Where?”

“Over there, in the trees. Like a flutter.”

I was warm from the exertion, but sudden rivulets of cold sweat ran shivers down my sides. I had just seen a circle of reality blink out to a cold gray window, and then reappear as though a drape fell back into place.

“It’s gone now.”

I continued to stare at the spot, now quite ordinary again, feeling Lila’s and Glen’s eyes on me. There seemed nothing to say, and after a minute or two, Lila turned back to the trail.

We climbed.

“How much farther?” Glen asked when another half-hour had passed.

“Not far, I think. I’ll know the place when I see it,” Lila said, and pushed on. Glen and I walked side by side now, where the trail permitted.

The path leveled out a bit ahead and I was looking forward to the change of pace when I heard an ugly sort of sucking sound behind us. We turned and then I saw the... thing.

Don't ask for a complete description, I can't give you one. I only know that it was huge and dark and had a mouth with teeth as long as my forearm. It made a noise halfway between a meat grinder and a jet airliner, and the long hair on the back of my neck tried to stand up. Glen growled and dropped his pack. The creature shambled quickly toward us on too many limbs, and Glen ran to meet it, closed with it, pushed it back, and struggled with it until both he and the thing disappeared into the bushes.

"Glen!" I cried, shaking off Lila's desperate grasp on my arm.

"Ethan, no!" she shouted, but I ran back the way Glen and the creature had gone, careless of the treacherous rock-strewn path.

"Glen!"

He was entwined in slimy blackness, his head gone cat-shaped, his arms furred, his fingers, claws. The track narrowed there, the rocky cliff reaching high on one side and angling sharply down on the other. Glen and the thing rolled near the edge, and I ran faster than I ever had in my life, grabbed a handful of Glen's shirt, and threw my other arm around a foot-thick pine. The knit fabric stretched but held; then Glen let go and the heavy, dark weight of the creature fell away, spinning end over end to smash on the boulders a hundred feet below. Lila joined us, carefully leaning out to look over the lip of the drop-off.

“What *was* that?!” I asked. I could feel my heart thudding just below my Adam’s apple.

“That,” said Lila, “was a preview.”

Glen turned back to me, his mouth still full of leopard’s teeth. Grimacing, he spat a gob of... something onto the ground. It steamed.

“Gah... what a taste!”

He spat again and rubbed his tongue with the back of his hand. He wouldn’t let me kiss him until he’d rinsed with a mouthful of water.

I wanted nothing more than to turn back then... forget I had ever known anything about magic or monsters or holes in the air. I wanted to hold tightly to Glen and run back down the mountain and return to our comfortable, peaceful, *normal* lives.

But... could I forget about Claire and Roger, and all the other people who might be at risk? Could I turn my back on lives I might help to save?

I looked at Glen and Lila. One minute we were calmly brushing dirt and leaves from our clothing, and the next we were all huddled together, arms entwined, hugging tight, like three children whose only protection from the bogeyman was each other... and this bogeyman was real.

We stood that way for another moment, then, shrugging, I helped Glen don his pack and we went on.

Gradually, the tall pines became shorter, thicker, more twisted. We were nearing the tree line, almost 10,000 feet above sea level. At last, we topped out into a little meadow, a grassy clearing surrounded by dwarfed trees, rather like the shaved tonsure on the head of a monk. I could feel the rightness of the area, as close as we could get to the spot I

had marked on the map. We had arrived. Without a word, the three of us removed our packs.

The sky was a darker blue now. Fluffy white clouds piled behind the farther, higher peaks and the sun was little more than an hour above them. I hadn't bothered to check my watch for that observation; I didn't need to. The time, the temperature, and our exact location were as clear to me as if I read them from a computer screen... clearer, because there was nothing artificial between me and my environment. I had always been a city boy, but today's trek had led me farther from my everyday reality than just the top of a mountain. Somehow, I felt I had traveled back into a time when nature was everything and human beings only a small part of it.

I took a deep breath. The air was clean and filled with the scents of pine and grass and sun-warmed rock. Mixed with those was the smell of Lila's herbal shampoo and a scent I knew very well—the sweet musk of the man I love. Calm certainty stole over me. I was precisely where I was meant to be, at the center of the universe.

Glen turned back from his own survey of our surroundings. The smile he gave me was warm.

Lila knelt, opened her pack, took out her measuring rope, and just as we had planned, Glen and I helped lay out the magic circle, marking its boundary with large rocks. When we were finished, the circle was perhaps twelve feet in diameter, placed near the center of the grassy space, leaving a large clear area around it. We gathered more rocks to form a fire ring; Glen built a cone of dry wood and grass inside it and kindled it with a match. Lila brought out a heavy metal bowl and added a small disc of charcoal. When that was lit

and burning well, she topped it with leaves from Glen's smudge stick and some sort of dull, yellowish crystals. The herbs and sap caught, and I smelled the dusty scent of frankincense and the refreshing bite of sage.

Glen moved our packs away from the circle while Lila continued her preparations. I prowled the edges of the clearing, looking down at the rocks and brush below, spying the occasional trail. I was amazed at how far my vision stretched in the clear, thin air. I saw hawks soaring above the trees, a fox drinking from a brook, a marmot sunning himself on a rock. Then something else caught my eye. On a path far below us moved a line of human figures carrying packs.

"People," I called to Lila.

"It'll take them a while to get here," she said, "if they're even headed this way. Don't worry."

She was busy arranging the remainder of the ritual supplies. I shrugged.

It wasn't long before Glen returned, his arms full of fresh-cut pine-smelling branches. He piled them within the circle, but well away from the fire.

"How long?" he asked.

Lila shook her head.

"A while yet. We should be ready, though. Why don't you two get undressed."

It wasn't cold, but at this elevation, the afternoon wasn't warm, either. Besides, I wasn't eager to remove my clothes. If I did, that meant the start of the ritual couldn't be far away.

Glen obligingly kicked out of his shoes and stripped off his T-shirt and jeans. I couldn't help but stare at the

beautiful body I loved so much. It had been almost a week since we had done anything more than kiss and cuddle. Glen must have felt my eyes on him because he turned and smiled at me. I felt a spurt of excitement... sexual, of course... but something else as well. It couldn't be long now.

I concentrated on the mundane task of folding my clothes neatly, determined not to watch as Lila removed her shorts, top, and boots. When I looked back, she was wrapped in a long gray cloak. It covered everything but her bare feet and had a hood as well, though she left that lying back on her shoulders. She had released her hair from its fastenings, and the long, dark strands moved with the light breeze.

That same breeze raised goose bumps on my exposed flesh. I eyed the pebble-strewn ground suspiciously, and then walked with care, wary of bruising my tender, indoor feet, to shelter on the lee side of a clump of scrub oak.

Glen moved gracefully, spreading a thick blanket over the mound of pine boughs, wildness evident in his every step. That ease was one of many things I loved about him, but right now, I envied it. I felt very much a naked stranger in this raw place, away from all the comforts I had always taken for granted.

I continued to check on the hikers from time to time. Their progress was slow but steady, and it seemed to me they were headed right for us. I thought about reporting their position to Lila, but I could hear the occasional word of some sort of chant, her voice rising and falling in cadence like a poem. The ritual preparations seemed well underway. It would be wrong to disturb her now.



The day's light was dimming, clouds massing in the west to cut off the last light of the sinking sun. I strained my eyes, trying to make out individuals in the narrow line of people climbing the path, now less than a quarter mile away... almost within calling distance. I'd grown used to the cool air of the hilltop, but a sudden shiver of presentiment wracked my spine. Could one of them be Claire?

I stiffened and a splash of fear surged into my bloodstream. Then... with a stygian flash, a dark hole opened in the hillside below. It wasn't a cave, just a patch of nothingness—the breathless absence of everything normal and expected. Like a monstrous yawn, the opening widened until I could no longer see its edges, a growing stain of blackness with lumps of greater black moving inside it.

The little band of hikers continued up the trail, oblivious. As I watched, my vision now telescope clear, they rounded the last bend before the meadow... and were gone.

It was happening! The memory of my dream came back whole in a flash. How could I have forgotten such a vision? If only I had remembered earlier. If I had remembered, I could have... done something. But... what?

The darkness expanded, further engulfing the mountainside as it grew, creeping upward toward our circle. The tremendous crevasse of emptiness wiped away everything in its path. Moving shadows roiled at its base. I felt a chill wind touch my feet and thought I heard strange, faint cries. I wanted to shout a warning to Glen and Lila, but I couldn't move.

"Here!" Lila ordered, demanding my attention. A thin band of brightness, no more than trapped stars in a

transparent sheath, formed between us and the dark. “Hurry, I can’t hold it for long!”

“But what about...?” I began, looking away, still hearing the screams that no longer echoed from farther down the hillside.

“Goddamn it!” she swore. “This is all we can do for them. Get over here... now!”

Lila was on her back, naked, the pine boughs further cushioned by the gray robe she’d thrown off with a single gesture. Her pale skin glowed in the firelight.

Glen knelt between her thighs, and as though in a dream, I moved to stand behind him. Thunder rumbled somewhere beyond the hills. Heat lightning played on the peaks looming above our heads.

“Do it!” she said, voice raw with urgency.

Glen looked at me over his shoulder, eyes gold and green, the pupils gone to stand-up slits. His shoulders seemed to ripple and thick black fur grew from nowhere, flowing over his skin like spring grass appears after a rain. Lila reached for him, her dagger-sharp nails marking his still pink-skinned sides.

“Fuck me!” she commanded, and I heard the words with my ears and in my head.

Before Glen’s body could complete its transformation, a half-animal scream ripped out of his throat and he leaned forward, plunging inside Lila with a single thrust. She made a cry—whether of pain or pleasure I couldn’t tell.

The storm moved toward us at an unbelievable pace, swollen thunderheads filling the sky so low it was hard to breathe. Now the only light was the fire, flames wavering in the wind until the world seemed nothing but shadows.

Ozone warned my nostrils, but all I could see was Glen's round ass, now bearing a coat of dark hairs, muscles clenching as he repeatedly drove himself into Lila's body.

Until that moment, I would have sworn I didn't want this, would have given a great deal just to go back to my familiar, routine life with Glen and forget all this frightening nonsense. Now a hammering that matched the thunder took root in my chest. I clutched Glen's rocking hips and slammed myself into him. Glen roared, throwing his head back, lips drawn away from rows of sharp fangs. Lila shrieked as my thrust pushed him deeper inside her. I closed my eyes at a blinding flash, using the thunderclap's strength to fuel my movements. Glen's insides were furnace hot, as though they tried to melt the core of me to become a part of him, even as he was a part of her. The three of us... one energy, one will.

Driven by that power, I pushed in again and again, hearing, feeling the storm's answer on my skin. The actinic purple flashes were almost constant now. My long hair broke free of its binding to writhe away from my body like the tentacles of a jellyfish, each tendril discharging tiny prickles of energy, scarcely noticeable in the storm's wrath. Any second and the nexus would be over our heads.

Exposed on the hilltop, we drew the furies like rods of iron. I felt energy build inside me, hot and glowing and raw. A path formed between the clouds and our centers until the weight of power became unbearable.

Lila's voice rang out like a thunderclap, and I screamed as passion ripped a white-hot bolt through my vitals. A moment later, a tremendous roar slammed us flat to the earth.

## CHAPTER 9

THERE was no sound now but drips and trickles. I rolled free of Glen, still prostrate on Lila's quiet body. To my relief, he groaned and raised himself on hands and knees. I saw Lila move, clutching at the ground. I wiggled fingers, then toes, finally sitting up to push hair out of my eyes and mouth. Rain continued to fall, now no more than a warm summer downpour... tame as a neutered tomcat.

Glen crawled to my side, leaving Lila to gather her own wits. We leaned into each other. His skin was smooth again, without the dark fur. That storm had also passed.

"Glen," I tried, just wanting to say his name aloud, my voice a croak until I cleared my throat. "Are you all right?"

"I think so."

He ran a hand over his face, sluicing away the water that still fell in sheets to drip off his beard and the end of his nose.

I heard a nearby cough and then a moan. We three were not alone on the hilltop; a mound of bodies was jumbled outside our circle. One of the closest figures sat up just as there was a faint far-away flash. I caught a glimpse of curly, red-gold hair.

"Claire?" I called, full of hope but unsure if I could trust my eyes.

“Ethan,” Claire sighed, and the last tense knot inside me let go.

I stood and staggered to where Claire and Roger sat clutching each other.

“It must have been an earthquake!” Claire cried to no one in particular. “One minute we were hiking and then... we fell.”

Earthquakes were not unheard of in the Rocky Mountain region. Most were minor and written off as the ground settling after the collapse of some of the old mine tunnels that honeycomb those hills. I was glad for Claire’s explanation, though in truth the effects we’d suffered were more like those of a hurricane.

Roger looked around dazedly, then gently pushed Claire away and crawled toward the other figures, several of which had not yet moved. Glen took in the scene and rose to join Roger, unaware or uncaring that he was naked. Noises of distress came from the tumbled group as Glen and Roger knelt to give them what comfort and aid they could.

Just below us, a pair of pines, burning pitch-hot enough to foil the rain, cast a hellish glow over the scene. There was little remaining of our circle, and as far as I could tell, our clothing seemed to have been swept away by the storm. I couldn’t bring myself to care.

I blinked and wondered how close we were to dawn. I thought I remembered the sun going down only minutes before, but it seemed I could feel it pushing now against the eastern horizon.

I turned back to Lila. She was sitting up, her muddy cloak draped around her shoulders.

“Quite a show, wasn’t it?” she asked, pushing a curl of hair off her face. The gesture left a smudge behind. She stretched a hand toward me, tentatively, as though she were afraid I might refuse it. I grasped her cool, damp fingers, rubbing them with my own, though mine were little warmer.

“Yes,” I said, “well worth the price of admission.”

Lila smiled.

THE sky brightened steadily, and the rain diminished. The sun’s first rays revealed a sorry band of twelve wet and somewhat shocky hikers, one bedraggled but human-looking werecat, a muddy, naked witch, and me—dazed, bleary and glad to be alive.

I tried to snug the cape around Lila’s shoulders, but she pushed it off. “I can’t wear this now. The ritual is over.” She smiled. “See if you can find our packs, okay?”

Amazingly, the packs were right where we had left them, all our belongings still tucked neat and dry inside the waterproof nylon. I stopped to pull on the spare sweatpants and shirt Lila had insisted we pack. I felt like kissing the satellite phone, but settled for using it to call the park ranger station. While we waited for the helicopters they were quick to promise, Glen set up the little propane stove, and soon everyone was wrapped in a space blanket and had a cup or bowl of something hot. Now I knew what “just in case” meant.

I’d been surprised to find a large first-aid kit in Glen’s pack. We dispensed bandages and ibuprofen as needed.

Lila put on her spare pants and shirt, but Glen continued with his tasks unclothed until I suggested he get dressed. No one but me seemed to notice or care. Most of the hikers had lost backpacks and parkas, some were missing shoes and socks and one his pants, so our clothing problems were far from remarkable.

Less than an hour later, we heard the unmistakable sound of choppers. The machines took turns landing on the flat space in the clearing. Rangers bundled us efficiently inside the compartments, and then we were airborne. I suppose they could have flown us all the way into Denver and a hospital, but no one was in any particular distress, so we headed for the ranger station's infirmary.

The rangers told us that those at lower elevations had not experienced such severe weather, but they had seen the lightning storm. Privately, Matt Connolly, the ranger in charge, expressed surprise that we had survived with so few problems.

"Looked like all hell was breaking loose up there!" he said. I didn't let him know just how right he was.

The rangers were kind, settling us in front of a roaring fire with hot cocoa while we awaited the arrival of a doctor from Estes. A lawyer representing the dude ranch was already on the scene, expressing concern but mostly wanting to make sure no one blamed the ranch for what had happened. He carried around a briefcase with a sheaf of papers and a pen—liability releases, probably. I don't know if anyone signed them.

Everyone in both parties was safe and reasonably sound, so no one would be inclined (I hoped) to do much in the way of investigation, not that it would matter if they did.

Lila assured me that, once the anomaly was closed, there would be no sign it had ever existed. I wondered if the remains of that... thing Glen fought was there at the bottom of the canyon, but I wasn't about to tell anyone where to look for it. I felt certain the incident would be in my nightmares for some time to come.

Another rep from the dude ranch came over to thank Glen, Lila, and me for our rescue efforts. They asked me how we happened to be there and why we had the first-aid kit and other items with us. I could see a couple of the rangers turning to listen for my answer to that, and I was trying to think what to say when Lila stepped in.

"I haven't known Mr. Chase for very long, but when he told me he was a hiker I just *had* to ask him to take me up here." Lila leaned into the first man.

"I hate to admit it," she confided, "but the thing is, it still makes me a bit nervous, being in the great outdoors and all. You understand?" The man nodded, eyes wide. I was feeling rather sorry for him by this time. Lila, even in a sweatshirt, was a beautiful woman.

"So, I always take *everything* I can think of—even on a short hike. Wasn't it lucky I did? Of course, it's a lot to carry. Mr. Yeager"—she pointed at me—"was kind enough to come along and help." Lila had the "helpless maiden" act down pat.

"Oh, I'm still chilly. Would one of you kind gentlemen bring me another cup of cocoa?" They practically fell over each other to fetch it. It seemed that discussion was closed.

Glen was in conversation with ranger Matt, and I was sitting alone on a sofa to one side of the large room, sipping hot tea and trying to convince myself that it was really over—



and that we had survived. Claire, wrapped in a gray wool blanket and holding her own steaming cup, sat down beside me. “Ethan, I haven’t really had a chance to thank you.” She smiled. There was a skinned spot on the end of her turned-up nose, and an Ace bandage wrapped around the wrist she’d sprained. She was wearing olive-green sweats with “Rocky Mountain National Park” stenciled on the shirtfront. She looked adorable.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’re all right,” I said.

She looked at me steadily and took a sip from her cup.

“Me too. But what I can’t figure is what you and Glen were doing up there....” She glanced over at a laughing Lila, still surrounded by admiring men. “With *her*.”

I smiled. “Why, big sister. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were jealous.”

Claire blushed. “Of her? That’s silly, I....” She shook herself. “Don’t try to distract me. Why on earth would you and Glen take that... woman hiking with you? Who is she, anyway?”

“Claire, you know Glen tries to keep his clients happy. Besides, he loves to hike. When I heard Ms. Thornton wanted to come up to the park, I thought I should go along—to protect my interests, you know.” I smiled at Claire. She looked at Lila once more, then shrugged.

“I can’t help feeling that there’s something more than just coincidence involved. I guess you were right when you told me and Roger not to go to the ranch. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you.” She seemed to be studying the liquid in her cup.

“I could have been wrong, sweetheart,” I said. “And everything turned out all right. That’s all that matters.”

She rested her head on my shoulder. “I’ve never been so afraid before, Ethan. We were walking along and then it seemed as though the world was falling apart.”

“I know,” I soothed.

“I was so glad to see you... and Glen. Ethan, was he really walking around naked?” A little smile played over the corner of her mouth.

“We were all half-naked for a while. I guess the storm took our clothes.” I didn’t add that we weren’t wearing them at the time.

“Well, the light was pretty bad, but I think I noticed one of the reasons you like Glen so much.” She giggled at the blush rising in my cheeks.

“Claire, you are incorrigible!” Roger chose that moment to join us, so thankfully that subject was dropped too.

CLAIRE and Roger invited us (including Lila) to dinner the next night at their hotel in Denver. There, I saw Lila turn on a slightly different kind of charm—this time aimed at Claire. Before the meal was over, I would have sworn that Claire had begun to like her. Well, I felt a sense of camaraderie with Lila too. Perhaps even friendship.

Lila’s flight for New York left two days later. The very ordinariness of the airport with its anonymous crowds had a balancing effect on me. Ever since the ritual, I felt that my senses were sharper, that I could see and hear and feel things I hadn’t even suspected before. The sky seemed bluer,

the sun brighter, and any other clichés you might care to add. I was pretty sure that Lila knew what I was feeling, and I was grateful she didn't say anything. Part of me was hoping the strangeness was only temporary; the rest felt as though I'd been half-asleep all my life and was finally waking up. But if my oddity—my gift, as Lila said—was becoming stronger, did that imply I should use it somehow, for something good, something larger than my own purposes? The idea scared me. I'd never had much luck sharing my “gift.”

Lila had casually mentioned that psychic training was available to members of her “fellowship.” I didn't feel pressured, exactly, but the offer was there and we both knew it.

We three shared a last drink, seated at a small round table in a little airport bar that pretended to be on the French Riviera. Lila was back to her fashion plate look in a sleeveless lavender top and slacks, her hair twisted into a French braid. I sort of missed the shorts and T-shirts.

Glen toyed with his iced tea, finally looking up. “Lila, I've been meaning to ask you... something you said earlier... that there are others like me....”

Lila covered Glen's free hand with her own. “Glen, I don't think there is anyone in the world quite like you.” She smiled until warmth colored Glen's cheeks.

“Seriously, though, you're not alone. I personally know of two others who change, though their furry sides are wolves, not panthers. I could introduce you... if you want to come out to New York.” She leaned forward earnestly, including me in her gaze as well as Glen.

Glen looked almost wistful, then glanced at me and smiled. “I like it here.”

Lila nodded. “Guys, I don’t know how to say this. I’ve always worked alone before, only accepted temporary help on site when I had to but... the three of us... we’re a good team. I think we could do great things together.” She smiled at Glen, but he shook his head. Her eyes held mine for a second and then she rose, picking up her carry-on.

“Okay. But you know how to reach me if you change your minds.” Lila reached over to smooth, then tug, my ponytail. Her touch still gave me tingles.

Lila gave us one last wave, and then she was gone, lost in the crowds headed for the security check-in gate. The sudden disappearance reminded me of the first time I saw her. Then she’d been coming into my life; now she was leaving it.

Glen took my hand, looking at me with those deep blue eyes I loved so much. It would be great to be alone again, just the two of us. But... would I miss Lila and the complications she’d brought into our lives, the ones I’d tried so hard to avoid?

Complications? I hadn’t imagined the half of it.

Deep in thought, I held Glen’s hand tightly on the long drive home.

## $\Delta$ (Delta)

$\Delta$  represents:

- a finite difference
- a difference operator
- the angle that subtends the arc of a circular curve in surveying
- the difference or change in a given variable, e.g.  $\Delta v$  means a difference or change in velocity
- distance to Earth, measured in astronomical units
- heat in a chemical formula

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek\\_letters\\_used\\_in\\_mathematics,\\_science,\\_and\\_engineering](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_letters_used_in_mathematics,_science,_and_engineering)

BRIAN HOLLIDAY once tried to live a normal life, but he was unable to figure out what it was. Now, when not writing down the stories characters insist on whispering in his ears, he photographs the beautiful Oregon coast as well as his friends and family when they will hold still for it. Brian reads almost anything, loves listening to jazz and pop, and sings along when he remembers the words. The rest of his time is spent trying to keep his multiple personalities happy—or at least not fighting one another. Brian believes that his writing would still exist only in a dusty pile of spiral-bound notebooks if it weren't for the dedication and encouragement of some great online friends and his writing group, the WordCrafters.

[http://groups.google.com/group/brian\\_holliday](http://groups.google.com/group/brian_holliday) is Brian's web site.

The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of two men's faces in profile, facing each other in a romantic pose. In the upper left corner, there is a white diamond-shaped logo containing a black spiral. The text "dreamspinner Press" is written in a white script font, with "dreamspinner" on the top line and "Press" on the bottom line, positioned to the right of the spiral logo.

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