

The Jade Bear

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Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About J. Bennington](#)

[Other Books by J. Bennington](#)

[Sneak Preview](#)

[Connect with J. Bennington](#)

Prologue : The Beginning of the End

Damash of Three was on his knees, his forehead rested on his arm, pressed against the green crystal prison where he resided for the last fourteen years. His arm stopped some of the sweat dripping down his face. He was exhausted and recovering from anxiety of the events beyond his prison, dying to interfere, but happy with the present results.

Fifteen years earlier, Damash was on a hunting and rescue party when for some odd reason they were discovered. The protection they normally enjoyed, failed. Of the fifteen hunters, he was shot by the locals who did not take the time to understand what they saw. As with most encounters with human hunters, it was shoot first and worry about the wrong later.

He remembered bitterly the others departing, hastening to summon the portal, the only entrance and exit to Jade, his country. They must have considered him dead, and he groaned as he watched the portal blink out of sight in the sky. Around him the humans who had discovered them were hastily searching for Damash of Three, following the trail of blood. The beams of their flashlights passed through him and he groaned again as he realized that the pain had snapped him into the zone of nothingness, between the Earth and Jade. They walked through him and they could find nothing except the blood spots in the soil. He moved aside and watched them for a while as he also looked to the west, hoping to find the portal reappear in the sky. In a way he considered himself lucky. He would not die from the wounds he sustained, but the bad part was, he could not enter the Earth's atmosphere, and he could not return to Jade.

Jade began on the Planet Jade in the Andromeda Constellation. It was a dimensional glitch, a world that had popped into existence from an experiment in science and remained for nearly 4000 years. It rested in the Swiss Alps, totally unknown or detected by the Earth's residents. Jade, however, was very knowledgeable of Earth, its climate, and its species. Jade residents were very human in appearance, but their mental capabilities far surpassed that of humans. They had mastered dimensional travel and in one final experiment, a huge section of their world disappeared and became attached to Earth in the Swiss Alps.

The situation resolved to be beneficial for Jade. The absence of female births in Jade was nearing them to extinction. But with the advent of the portal and their secluded spot on the globe, they soon found that mating with earth's females was possible and very sustaining for their species.

Damash stood and stretched. He wiped the sweat from his face and pressed his forehead against the crystal wall to view Amanda again.

Yes, it's still there. This is good, Damash. We might just make it this time, he said to himself. He was not a full Jade Bear, the final phase of Jade male development, but since his confinement to the netherworld, he had made some progress in that direction, without the use of the Paraclipse. He was able to touch the Jade Lines that were in abundance in the world, unseen by humans. He knew that much of it was driven by the love for the woman lying on the bed before him. The other factor was his determination NOT to remain a prisoner forever.

After he recovered from the shock of being left for dead, Damash of Three wandered around the earth for a long time. He constantly looked for the portal signal threads in the barrier around him, but they remained elusive. He finally arrived at the conclusion that the Council must have decided to close the portal. He could understand that, for the mishaps and accidents were becoming more frequent. That was the price of an increasing human population and decreasing wildlife territories.

His wanderings took him to South Africa where in one of the tent bazaars in Johannesburg, he found a replica of a Jade Bear. The likeness was so astonishing that he realized the sculptor must have had the opportunity to observe one at length.

It was exquisitely beautiful. Jade colored crystal, with the hair in fine detail. Silver fangs jutted downward from the opened mouth. Even in the dimness of the tent it stood out, begging for attention.

Damash stayed in the area for a long while and one day a trader named Randolph Watson came to the bazaar and the owner of the Jade Bear launched into a long and pleading diatribe about the magical quality of the Jade Bear. Damash chuckled at the lies but they had a good effect on Randolph. He purchased the bear, and Damash made his decision. He sought and found the transferring threads and he launched himself into the Jade Bear before Randolph dropped it into a velvet sack provided by the seller.

So, Damash of Three eventually made his way to America and was given to Amanda Blake. Amanda kept him on her dresser and wished on him many times, until nothing happened and she stopped. However, she would not hear of his departure, destruction, sale, or anything else that would separate them. Uncle Randolph said he was magical, and she promised that she would always believe, and she did. She kept belief in the back of her mind and the bear on her dresser.

Amanda was married five years later, and what a delirious marriage it was. It even made Damash delirious and wonderful inside the Jade Bear. He was torn between fits of jealousy and happiness as the groom, Joseph Matkins, began to love his bride. Life was a garden of roses and happiness until the accident.

The light turned green and the pedestrian light switched to walk. Amanda stepped into the street, well inside the cross walk lines and ahead of the other people. She heard the squeal of tires before she had a chance to stop or even think. She never had the chance to turn her head before the car hit her at 65 mph. She bounced off the windshield and flew through the air like a rag doll, to land on the ground 75 feet behind the car.

She was lucky, for what it was worth. Her life hung on by a thread for several minutes. She was declared dead on the scene and then she reacted. In the hospital she was declared dead six times more. She remembered each one and the growing frustration of the doctor. The seventh time, he begged her to die and stop the torture. That's when Amanda's spirit rallied and she returned to the living, if it could be called such. Her injuries were many. She was brain damaged. She could not remember her name, her friends, where she worked, nothing. Both broken legs and crushed right hip had to heal. Her broken back and collar bones were longer in healing. Joseph accepted his responsibility and he tried to care for her at home, but her invalid status lingered and soon grew into a burden that he could not handle. That is when the real problems and the beatings started.

The last one was the worst. But with the last blow, came a very odd but welcome change. Capillaries in a section of her brain broke and blood started trickling to the parts that were not normally stimulated in humans. And her mind responded dramatically to the life-giving fluids.

Damash could scarcely believe what happened as her brain developed a new pattern, one that he could feel and touch himself. He realized the woman was Jade, but not how it could be possible.

But for the other parts of her, Damash worried. Three times her heart had stopped and Damash clung to the Jade Lines and willed her to live, pouring as much compassion and love into each one as he could. With each re-start of her heart, and recovery of life, her vital signs became stronger until at last she slept peacefully.

And Damash of Three watched, wept, and continued his loving vigil, interwoven with a silent rage against Joseph.

On the last strike from Joseph, Amanda's brain shifted from the blow, gathered into a puddle against one side of her skull and then shuddered back to near normal, knowing it would never live through one more pummel that strong.

However, veins that were clogged became unclogged and a gland that remained dormant since her conception no longer remained that way.

The gland delighted in the flow of the blood life force and all of its 2000 cells rejoiced with excitement.

"Who are you? What are you?" asked the brain. "You are an intruder and cannot remain."

"I am not intruder. I must have been present at the moment of conception or else I would never be. I cannot have been inserted after the fact and after the birth. That will never work. I am necessary for life."

"Who are you? Where are you from?"

"I am from Jade. I am Jade City. I am Jade trees, soil, air, water, blood flowing through Jade residents, Jade memory, history, and future.

"Where am I? In whom do I live? Please tell me versus returning me to a dormant state."

"How can I do that? I am damaged."

"Do you still have access to the memories? They are genetic. Take me there and I will communicate further."

"I can, but they are damaged. They are scrambled."

"Who is the person?"

"Amanda Amy Matkins. That is the extent of my knowledge."

"Open her memories. Let me ride on the blood stream and inside her endocrine system. My instructions are imprinted on my and her DNA. It has to be, from conception."

"Hold on, please. Let me arrange it since we are at rest now."

The Jade Gland waited and then suddenly seeped through every cell in Amanda's body. She gathered all the information, felt overwhelmed at the extent of damage, but set about her task. She called for assistance from the Jade City and the Jade Portal and both were empty responses, as if they were deceased.

She then analyzed all the damage to Amanda's body and mind and set into motion war plans to salvage her at all cost.

“The Life Principle must exist, and it will, so long as I live inside her. I will work with you to heal her, brain. Together we will work to heal her and to do that we must heal you. Do you disagree?”

“No. I have waited long for something to happen. I am nervous about your sudden appearance, but I agree. Proceed.”

“Okay, Amanda. Let us see how you respond to a release of this little-used hormone.”

Amanda stretched, took a deep breath, sighed luxuriously and fell into a relaxed REM sleep pattern.

CHAPTER ONE

Amanda opened her eyes and the first thing she saw was the jade bear, sitting solidly on her night stand. Silver teeth in the bear's open ferocious looking mouth glinted from a stray sunbeam. The bear remained stationary, while the rest of the room spun and danced.

She groaned and closed her eyes. "Why are you still here?" she asked. "Why don't you help, like Uncle Randolph said you would."

She reached and attempted to grasp the bear, but missed and moved too close to the edge of the bed. The fall brought another groan and another respite of unconsciousness.

The next thing Amanda heard was the distant wail of a siren and the responding howl of a dog nearby. She opened her eyes again and stared at the carpet and a cardboard box under her bed.

"Why are you on the floor?" she asked, and comprehension returned with a rude jolt.

"Joseph!" She forced herself to her knees and winced from the pain in her arms and legs when she moved. Once more saw the jade bear which glowed softly. She looked at the empty bed and for a brief moment enjoyed the darkness.

"Why are you still here?" she asked the jade bear. She sighed heavily. "Once Uncle Randolph told me you were magic, but all the fortune you've brought me has been bad. Maybe you're bad magic."

For a moment, she contemplated what to do. "We've got to get away while we can." She shivered, ran a hand under her mattress and pulled out a gun. She stood, picked up the jade bear and dropped both into her purse. At the door, she paused and listened to the sounds of her house.

Nothing stirred and for that she was grateful.

"We must do this, but it has to be done smartly," she chided herself. She opened a dresser drawer, tossed some clothes onto the bed, a box of shells and a ragged envelope stuffed with money. She packed them into a small suitcase, checked her credit cards and left the bedroom quickly. Between the bedroom and the car, she paused only once for the bathroom.

The four diesel engines of a train rolled over Chicken House Crossing, rumbled past the switch point and stopped to let the conductor turn the rail switch. He waited until the train load of coal backed into the Indian River electric plant. The roar of the engines disrupted the tranquility of the nighttime atmosphere and shook the ground as it moved.

"There's a woman in that car," the engineer announced on the intercom. "She must be lonely. Check her out when you pass, Brownie."

"What's a woman doing here in this desolate place?" Brownie asked from the caboose, 110 cars away.

"Waiting for you. I can't see much but I'm sure you'll like her."

"Brownie likes anything female," chirped in the brakeman.

Amanda lay sleeping in her car beside the tracks and her body vibrated with the throbbing of the engines as they passed. She barely opened her eyes, woozy from drinking and nearing the

point of not caring. The coal cars clicked as they crossed the switching rails and some of the steel wheels squealed as they grated against the steel rails. An indeterminate time later the engines throbbed by her and quiet returned. She heard the conductor pass her car, and caught the swift flash of his lantern as he inspected her.

A few minutes later, Amanda left her car and relieved herself behind the sage brush around the area. She leaned against the front fender for a few minutes, enjoying the quiet and the fresh night air.

“This is graduation night, and this is one hell of a party. At least I got a diploma, and the principal signed it, with his fists and feet, all over my body.” She sighed and looked at the stars as she struggled against the tears. “Well, I’ve graduated and I’ll not subject myself to any more of those lessons. My name’s not Bitch, Whore, or Slut. My name’s Amanda and I’ll find someone who loves me, even if it kills me.”

A noise alerted her and she moved to the tracks and looked north.

She saw a bobbing set of headlights headed south and she returned to her car. She got inside and locked the door again. She gazed at the jade bear on the dashboard.

“How I wish you were real. If you were, those sharp teeth and claws could tear me up. I’d be a good meal for you. I’d suffer the pain for you, darling Jade. I truly would. It would be a good experience for both of us. Afterwards, there’d be no more pain.”

She lay back in her seat, closed her eyes, and ignored the green van as it drove passed her to gather the crew. She drifted to sleep and the bear on the dashboard blinked and twisted its head to gaze at her.

“What’s the deal, honey?” Joyce asked, opening her eyes to watch him dress.

The bed sheets were tangled and disheveled and her left leg and much of her upper body lay on top and exposed to the air.

“The deal is, I’ve got to work. I’m still at the age where that’s necessary, and the probation office is waiting for me.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. I want to know what’s going to happen between us. The events are leading to truth or dare time, and I won’t let it be avoided forever. Can I make that any clearer?”

Joseph gently grasped one breast as he kissed her. “I don’t plan avoiding it forever. The difference between you and Amanda is like night and day.”

“So, divorce is eminent?” she pleaded, hoping against hope for a pleasing answer.

“Yes. We discussed that yesterday. She’s upset, but it’s only a matter of time for the lawyers to handle it. Now, don’t worry your pretty little head about it, lover. I’ve made my choice and it’s you.”

Joyce smiled and stretched. “That’s a good wake-up message. I love you, Joseph. And life is good, but it’ll be better when you’re free.”

“Rock on! I’ll call you tomorrow.” He kissed her again before he left, declaring his inability to live without kissing her beautiful scrumptious lips daily.

Joseph did not go home but went to the probation office early and entered through the back doors. He greeted Howard Nelson, his supervisor, and went to his office. Habit took over as he closed the door, unlocked his file cabinet, and took a swift drink from a bottle of gin he kept hidden there. Sitting at his desk, he popped a breath freshener in his mouth and picked up the phone to call Amanda. He frowned at no answer and hung up.

“What are you up to, Amanda? Do your drugs have you spaced out again?”

He removed his calculator from his center drawer. For the next twenty minutes he studied his finances, calculated how much a divorce would cost him several ways and found the results not reassuring.

“That sucks.” He threw his pencil down on the desk. “I guess this is one of those cases where you're stuck between a rock and a hard place.” He sat back in his chair and let his mind replay the escapade with Joyce the night before. “That’s all right. I’ll take Joyce’s love over the rock.”

A knock on the door interrupted him.

“What’s up, Joseph?” Howard asked. “You’ve been coming in early lately.”

“Oh, just a few problems here and there. Nothing major.” He hurriedly tidied up the papers on his desk.

“Money problems?” Howard asked regarding the papers and calculator.

“Not yet. However, things might change when the divorce gets underway.”

“You’re divorcing Amanda? For real? I didn’t know there was a problem with you two.”

“It’s nothing I announce to everyone. However, life with her is becoming unbearable. It’d be cheaper to stay, but I’d rather be poor and happy.”

“Is she still an invalid?”

“Yes. I’m putting her in the care of a nursing home. I can’t take it anymore.”

Howard observed him thoughtfully. Joseph was one of the top probation officers in his department. He was tough with his clients but very thorough. He did not yield to the pressure that the clients could and often did apply. He was stable and had none of the problems that besieged the newer officers.

Joseph continued his prattle. “Besides that, I don’t want it to interfere with the job here. That wouldn’t be good for me.”

“Or me for that matter. At least you appear to be handling it well. Anyway, if you need to talk about it, I’m always available. Do you think Amanda will be vicious about it?”

“I doubt it. She’s lost in her world of drugs anyway. She took the news rather well yesterday. Like I said, I just can’t deal with it. So, am I on your schedule for today?”

The news still shocked Howard and had his brain working wildly, trying to make sense of it and failing.

Joseph took no response as a sign to continue. “This morning I have four clients coming for visits. This afternoon, I need to visit a lawyer and handle some personal matters. Tomorrow it’s court time for the naughty ones who violated their probation.”

He picked up two folders from a basket on his desk and handed them to Howard. “These need to go to the clerks for having Violation of Probation Reports typed. Carper hasn’t shown for three appointments and Johnson for four. They’re not at home when I visit. It’s time to hammer them a little. Get their attention.”

Howard shook off the disparity and spoke. “Very well, Joe. I’ll deliver them for you. Take the time off and we’ll work around the rest that’s sure to follow. Keep your chin up. I’m sorry about Amanda.”

“You’re a prick,” Brian said dejectedly.

“I beg your pardon? What did you say?”

“Nothing. Nothing makes no sense to you. It would if you were here and I was behind your desk. So, I didn't say nothing!”

“Smart choice, punk dude. If you learn to keep your mouth shut sometimes, maybe you could stay out of trouble. However, you must pay the fines, and if you miss any more this month, I'll let the judge remind you of your responsibilities.”

“I'm sure you will.” He stood and moved to the door. “You're still a prick,” he muttered under his breath.

Joseph escorted him down the hall and unlocked the security door to let him into the lobby. “See you in two weeks.” He clapped his back lightly like a long term friend. “Have a nice day.”

Joseph returned to his office and called Amanda again. Once more he disliked the ringing and hung up. He took a quick drink and locked the cabinet. He popped a breath freshener into his mouth and hummed a song as he exited through the back door. Outside he watched Brian get into a car with another man behind the wheel and the car sped away with a shower of rocks.

“Just a matter of time, Brian, and you'll be back in jail. You're just too mouthy and dense to stay out of trouble. You and Amanda should get together; you both deserve each other.”

He went to the bank and waited in line for a teller to make a withdrawal. Soon he cursed and slapped the counter. “How the hell did that happen?”

“The account is joint, sir, and she has access. If you wish to discuss it, see one of the customer service representatives. I can't help you.”

Joseph walked across the lobby to sit bitterly in a chair outside the low wall. He soon moved inside and talked with a clerk.

The woman left him and returned with a folder shortly. “The account was joint Mister Matkins. Amanda withdrew the nine thousand this morning, shortly after we opened. I remember it now. She was sent to me, and it took an hour to do. We had to get approval from the regional office to open the vault and use reserve funds. She wanted the sum in cash versus a check.” She lay the folder on the desk for him to see.

Joseph looked at the left-handed signature on the card and scowled. “Did she get the bonds and CDs from the safe-deposit box also?”

The representative nodded her head.

“Shit!” He shouted and slammed her desk with a fist. Immediately he apologized and sighed as he leaned back in the chair. “Never mind. It's not your fault. I should've thought of that sooner. Sorry. I'll leave now.”

He grew more irritated as he drove home. “No use talking to a lawyer for the moment. I guess I'll have to wait until payday. Damn you, Amanda. How'd you manage that anyway? You can't even piss without being helped. You have to crawl to get anywhere.”

Inside the house he went straight to the bedroom, intent on venting his rising anger. The empty bed and several open drawers told him she was gone. He checked the bottom drawer for the emergency cash and slammed the drawer closed. “Well, I guess I underestimated you, but what the fuck happened? Last time I saw you, you couldn't even speak your name. You just slobbered.”

He went immediately to the closet and opened his side. He felt on the top shelf and located his private stash of money. He smiled and put it back. “Guess this'll do for a retainer and we'll work out the rest. I'm glad you don't know about this one.”

After he checked for her handgun and shells, he noticed the jade bear was gone also and sat on the bed. "This isn't going well. It never crossed my mind that she would, or could do this. Maybe I was a little harsh in requesting a divorce. However, who helped you? You've got no friends. Where are you?"

He thought of Joyce and winced. "How're you going to take this? This could be a large setback. I guess we'll see how strong and true your love is, soon."

Then he considered Amanda. "This is a fine mess, and before the accident, I trained you how to use handguns, for your defense. You'd be a bear to cross, if you're cognizant. I guess I lied to Howard." He gazed at the black circle on the night stand where the bear formerly sat.

"Why'd you take the worthless bear, Amanda? Do you use it for sex when I'm not around? What're you thinking? You're probably thinking of how to screw me without kissing me. I still don't know how you did it. Damn it all. This isn't going well."

Amanda gleefully left the bank and stopped at a pharmacy to purchase a box of envelopes. She drove to a remote railroad crossing north of Blackbird, Delaware and parked her car in the forest, out of sight of the tracks. She counted the money and divided one thousand of it into ten envelopes. She spent some time stashing them around the car, under the mats, the seats and the trunk. The rest she counted and replaced it in her backpack, along with the stocks, bonds and CDs to deposit in another bank, under her own name.

She estimated Joseph's reaction and smiled. "Thanks. You're such a dear to let me have the money as part of the divorce settlement. I wonder when this is finished, what you'll think of this brain-damaged southpaw with a learning disability, who slobbers and drools. I'm going to break it off in you. Jade and I will deal you one little death blow at a time, and we'll see who squeals like a pig. I'm done squealing. It's your turn."

She watched a freight train pass and tried to count the cars. She gave up the futile attempt and when the last car disappeared, she left the forest and drove to New Castle and found a bank to hold her money. With that accomplished, she gassed her car and made a phone call.

"Hello, Jan. This is Amanda. How are you these days? I haven't seen you in far too long. Could I stop by for a visit?"

"Of course you can, Amanda. That's a rather silly question to ask. It's absolutely great to hear your voice. Are you okay? You sound so different. Who's bringing you? The dirt bag?"

"That's debatable at the moment. I've been judged sexually incompetent and a worthless piece of white trash. I don't feel that way. I hurt a lot, physically and mentally, and I need someone to dump on. May I? I'm bringing myself."

"Bringing yourself? Seriously? Well, come on. Please come on. I'm here and you're in need. Come quickly, girlfriend."

Jan opened the door and stood agape mouthed at the bruises and cuts on Amanda's face.

"Damn, Amanda. Did Joseph do that to you?"

She grasped an arm and led her inside.

"Yes, along with a lot of verbal abuse and a request for a divorce so he could marry a real woman."

"This is a shock." Jan sat close to her on the sofa. "Open your heart, and unload all you got." She hugged Amanda and listened to the tearful account.

CHAPTER TWO

Joyce opened her front door and smiled. "Welcome, sweetheart. I didn't expect you tonight."
"Neither did I."

"You don't sound too excited. What happened to bring you down, darling?"

"Amanda screwed me. That's what happened. She emptied the bank account and took it in cash. She also left the house, along with her handgun and the emergency money, we have on hand."

"I thought you told me she handled the request well?"

"She did, but I guess she changed her mind. So I'm pissed right now."

Joyce laughed in spite of his mood. "Come on in, honey. Your mood's understandable. It happens to the best of us."

"But it was going so smooth. All that does is set me back."

"Don't worry. We'll live. I have the money and you're worth it. I don't mind investing in us."

"No. That's not the right way to start a relationship."

"In this day and time, is there a correct set of rules for us to start? After all, I've gone through this divorce scenario once. That's why I got to know you first. Your problems are few compared to other men, so we'll do it together. Like I said, you're worth it."

Joseph shook his head but he stopped arguing with her. He held her on the sofa while he thought about Amanda. "I wonder where she is and what she got in mind?"

"I'm sure we'll find out. Is she a descent shot with the gun, or will her disabilities interfere?"

"She is a good shot; I trained her. As for her disabilities, I have no idea. For her to have done this much is a real miracle. It's only been about nine months that she could talk occasionally without babbling."

"Does she know about me? Will she be able to control herself?"

"She doesn't know about you. I'm the one who has to worry."

Joyce lay across his lap and gazed at his worried face. "Don't stress out, dear. Things will get better. Remember what you're getting here in me and keep things in focus."

He kissed her and relaxed.

"She took the jade bear." He spoke it offhandedly and nearly in a whisper, but it was heard.

"What's that?"

"It's a six-inch tall bear, made of jade crystal with silver teeth. It's an ugly thing, but she likes it. One of her uncles, a hunter, gave it to her a year before he died. He told her he got it in Africa and it has some magical powers. All it does is collect dust."

Joyce blinked. "Why did you tell me that? Do you believe it?"

"No. That's just one of her idiosyncrasies. She talks to it sometimes as if it were real and could answer. Like I said, she's handicapped."

"She's pretty skilled at looking out for herself, regardless of her handicap. Either that, or someone's coaching her. Does she have any friends she hangs out with frequently?"

"If she does, I don't know them. I never saw another woman around the house or heard her talking to anyone on the phone. After the accident, she withdrew into herself for nearly two

years. All her feisty nature disappeared and she grew lethargic and antisocial. I'm the only one she talked to because no one could stand the babbling and jumbled sentences.”

Joyce closed her eyes and thought. “If you ask me, hon, either you're wrong about her, or something drastic has happened to change her, or you're totally blind. We've been dating for nearly two years. Have I blinded you to what's happening in her life?”

“I don't know, love. I love you intensely, and her sexual drive dropped to zero long ago. That's made it easy for us to know each other. For that I'm grateful. It was never the same after the accident. It was cold and lifeless affair on the rare occasions when she did want it.”

Conversation dwindled after that and Joseph caressed her face. Her soft skin, kisses and body heat began to work on both.

“Well, you might as well plan to move in with me. I'd say you're pretty much free right now, and I'd love to have you here always.”

She went to her small bar, mixed a drink for each of them, picked up a small bag from one drawer and returned to the sofa. “I do this occasionally.” She lay the bag between them and watched his response. “Will you put me on probation for it?”

“Roll one for me. We'll answer to each other for it. I wondered when you would confess.”

“How long have you known that?”

“About three months. You hid it very well.”

Amanda stepped from Jan's shower and felt better. The release of tears and the pent up pain, left her calm and clear headed. She dried herself and even the bruises did nothing to depress her. In fact, since the beating, severe as it was, her thoughts crystallized quicker than before. It was not the first beating, but she promised herself it would be the last.

“Here's your letter. Do you think your plan will work?” Jan asked.

“Definitely. I'll get a beeper and give you the number. In the mean time, I'm going to stay mobile. I feel safer that way.”

Jan regarded her before she spoke. “You appear to be different, like you're changing, but not in the normal way for a divorce-in-progress change. What's up, or do you know? I've really missed you a lot since the accident.”

Amanda shrugged. “I just thought about that. That part of my life's in limbo, and out of reach. He's hit me before, usually over my lack of interest in sex. However, this time, I felt I wouldn't live through it. I remember the last blow to my head and it felt like my skull collapsed.

As far as I can remember, that's similar to the last thing I felt when the Corvette slammed into me. They said I hit the windshield and flew some seventy feet before I hit the ground. I remember they declared me dead seven times before I came back and stayed.

“My legs and body healed but my mind was out there, lost in space much of the time. Now, I don't know. I do know I feel great and my mind is working fast and clear, and my thoughts hold well enough to plan and follow through. I also know that I'm going to hurt him. He thinks he's tough on his clients, wait until he's dealt with this probation officer. He doesn't know the meaning of tough, yet.”

Jan walked her to the door. “Keep in touch, please. If you need any more assistance, let me know. You can come here and rest, use my shower, sleep in the sofa, anything. You know that.”

“I will. I'll call you soon.”

Joseph stopped by his house before he went to work the next morning. He went to the bedroom closet to get his private stash of money and retain a lawyer. When he opened the envelope, he found a note. "Thanks, darling. You are so generous with your money. I'll set you free, but on my terms. Love, Amanda & Jade."

"Bitch!" He crumpled the empty envelope and note and flung them across the room. "You have no right to . . ."

"This isn't going well," he declared as he took a tour of the house. The television, VCR, stereo, tape and cd collection were missing also.

He sighed and sat in his recliner in the living room, feeling exasperated and angry. "This is crazy! Okay, if you want to fight dirty, then so be it. I'll find you, wherever you are."

He went to work, gathered his files for the court appearances and spent the rest of the morning in court.

"She's crazy." He told Joyce that several times over lunch.

"Will you listen to me now? Please, Joseph, before she hits you again."

"Fine! After this morning, I'm ready for just about anything. What do I do?"

"I'll give you the money for a retainer and get that part done, as soon as possible. When you finish with court today, report your credit cards stolen or lost. That'll put a freeze on your account immediately and she'll lose them when she tries to use them next. If you don't, she'll probably max them out and leave you high and dry to pay them off."

"I'm not going to take this lying down."

"You don't have to, but keep it legal. Listen to me and we'll stay one step ahead of her. The third thing to do is change the locks. That'll keep her out and if she does come in, after you file for separation, you can nail her for that. Hang tough, Joseph. We'll make it."

The Indian River coal train rolled past Amanda at two o'clock and she woke to watch it. She drained the last of the bourbon and rolled her window down. She watched the brakeman swing from the caboose and reposition the switch back to the main line.

When he passed her car, she spoke and he stopped.

"What are you doing here? This isn't a good place for a woman to be."

"Hiding, and very effectively. What are you doing here?"

"Working a coal train, but that's my job. I'm not hiding."

"Good for you. My name's Amanda. Do you have a name?"

"Brownie is the name I use."

"Then Brownie it is."

"Have you been drinking?"

"A little. Was that you who shined the light in my car two nights ago?"

He nodded. "I'm curious by nature, and finding a woman parked by the tracks in a desolate region, is curious indeed. Who are you hiding from?"

"My husband. Shine your light on my face again."

His light beam showed him the bruises. "Wow. I'm sorry that happened. Your husband did that?"

"He did. That's why I'm drinking and hiding here. Have you ever hit a woman?"

Brownie shook his head.

“Good. That's one thing in your favor. Do you easily mislead yourself into believing that every woman in the world wants to have sex with you?”

“No. Is there a reason for these questions?”

“Yes. I might need a male friend I can rely on and I want things clear, up front. I'm armed and I know how to use it very well. I've also been beaten half to death, sexually abused and I'm not inclined to advances. Can you live with that?”

“Yes I can, but I have to go and work now. That's not a put off. The engineer can't finish this without me. Will you be here frequently?”

“For a time. We'll talk later, Brownie. Be good and take care of yourself.”

Brownie gave her a mock salute, left her and radioed the engine.

“That took long enough. Are you alone?” the engineer asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. Let's get this done and go home.”

Joyce snuggled next to Joseph and slept soundly. She woke alone and anxiously searched the room for any sign of Joseph. She walked slowly to her bedroom door, because she heard voices in the hallway. She opened the door and a seven- foot tall jade green bear with silver teeth confronted her. She shivered and backed away from the door as one huge paw swiped at her. She fell across the bed, unable to scream and with two waddling steps, the bear was on her.

It gripped her left shoulder in its teeth and tossed her across the room with a snap of its head. Still she could not scream.

She woke with a shrill scream and slapped Joseph when he touched her.

“What's wrong? What is it?”

“Joseph? Oh, that was horrible. I dreamed of the jade bear with silver teeth attacking me. Why did you tell me about that? Don't tell me anything else like that. I don't care for nightmares.”

“Nor do I. I'm sorry, Joyce.”

She sighed and moved into his arms. “That's quite okay now, darling. Just hold me and I'll get over it.” She lay down and snuggled against him once more.

Joseph received his credit card bill and a letter confirming the cards stolen. The bill reflected a purchase of \$400 in clothing and food between New Castle and Salisbury, Maryland, and a \$500 purchase of gift certificates from malls.

“This is getting ridiculous,” he complained and sorted through the remainder of the mail. He lay the electric bill aside and dropped three sweepstakes on the floor. The final piece of mail simply had his name typed neatly on the front with no return address, and the postmark was from Philadelphia. He opened it and removed the one sheet of paper.

Mr. Joseph Matkins,

The Court of the Jade Bear has found you guilty of treating your wife in a cruel and inhuman manner. You will be set free when you have completed the period of probation and paid your fines. You will be contacted again when you have been assigned to a probation officer. You are required to confine your movements to the boundaries of Delaware until your sentence is completed.

Amanda and Jade.

Joseph gently lay the letter down, sighed and did not respond with the cursing of the previous day. "Self, I think we'd better watch our back. This is serious. She'll mess us up if we give her half a chance."

He disposed of the sweepstake documents, changed the locks and went to visit Joyce, choosing not to take the letter. He found Joyce very sober. To answer his question, she handed him a paper.

Hickory dickory dock
The jade bear smashed the clock
One two three
Hee hee hee,
You forgot to change your lock.

"Did it come in the mail?"

"No. It was on the kitchen counter when I came home. I think Amanda's more aware of life than you know. It's obvious she knows about me, when you thought she didn't."

"How do you know it's Amanda?" No sooner did the word leave his mouth before he felt guilty to defend her.

"Come off it! Level with me. I'm not handicapped and after the experience with Ralph, I prefer sobering truth to deception and no problems. Did you abuse her?"

He sat and stared at the floor. "At times, I guess you could say I did. I never really meant to do it. I was patient for years and then, well, she aggravated me and I slapped her once. Her and that damned jade bear."

"How can you be so tender and loving with me and abuse her? That doesn't make sense."

"You weren't there, you haven't seen her or dealt with her. Carry her to the bathroom, wipe her ass. Listen to babbling. I've tried not to, but I did."

"What about me? Will you be patient with me for years, then crack my skull some night?"

"No." The insinuation hurt him and his face reflected the pain he felt. "It was her, her and the damned jade bear."

"Why do you come back to that? Is there something you're hiding about the bear also? You're not helping matters."

"I'm not trying to be difficult or evasive."

"So, she resisted the divorce and you beat her?"

"Yes, but I never mentioned you."

"I don't believe this! This is totally screwed up and so are you!"

She walked through her sliding doors and stood on her patio, her back to the house.

He watched her for a time, went to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I know this isn't easy anymore, although easy is how I wanted it. I love you. It might not sound that way and I might not sound so good right now, but I'm not evil. Most of the time it started over sex and she always, always, turned to the bear. That's something you have to witness to understand, but imagine you talking to me and me ignoring you to talk to a stuffed rabbit. It's crazy, but it worked on me long enough to make me snap after a while. I truly never meant to do it."

"I know you love me. That isn't a question here. Amanda's response is a direct result of what you did, and I feel she'll not stop, and that poses a big problem."

"I agree there."

“We must be careful. She's dangerous, especially if she can have access like this and get away with it. If my feeling were only lust, I'd tell you to hit the road right now. However, I do demand honesty and I want communication also. I want to know what you think about her, about life, about anything. If you can't do that, then let yourself out. And don't come back.”

Chapter Three

Joseph went by himself to do an unannounced home visit. He looked through the kitchen door before he knocked and saw Brian at his table. Brian saw Joseph, grabbed a bag from the table and ran. Joseph caught him in the bathroom before he had time to dispose of the cocaine.

After the brief struggle, Joseph held Brian's arm behind his back and pressed his face against the wall.

“You dick! You got no right!”

“I got every right,” Joseph said without a noticeable ruffle.

“You're in a world of shit, Brian. I can stick it to you good for this, and the results of a drug test.”

“You're a demon! I look forward to the day you die.”

Joseph ignored the remark calmly. “You can change for the better, Brian. I want you to find me a woman. If you do, I'll forget what you have in your hands.”

“The only woman I'd find for you would be armed, with a weapon and AIDS.”

“Think about it a moment. I don't want any woman. I only want to find one specific woman. If you help me, I'll help you.” He released his hold but stayed alert.

Brian straightened and stared at the wall over his tub. “What'll you do for me?”

“End your probation early and I'll get your files off the DELJIS system. Plus, if you're good and fast, your file in my drawer might just disappear. Think hard. I'll give you a few minutes to let it sink in.”

Brian looked from the bag in his hand to Joseph's face. “Who do you want me to find?”

“Amanda Matkins, my wife.” He handed Brian a photo.

“She can't stand you either? Smart woman if you ask me.”

Joseph ignored the insult again.

“How do I know you won't cross me?” The proposal was so far out of character that it caught him off guard and made him nervous.

“Wait at the table,” Joseph said and left the house. He returned and lay a stack of arrest, trial transcripts, information sheets, sentencing, and probation reports on the table. “Will this suffice for a start?”

“How do I know you didn't make copies?”

“You'll have to trust me on that. Consider if I've ever lied to you before. Finding Amanda is very important to me.”

Brian thought and he knew Joseph's reputation for honesty. When Joseph said he would do something, screw you or help you, he would. However, the present proposal was far out of line for the man and therefore unnerving. “You got a deal. Tell me what I need to know and I'll work on it.”

Joyce prepared to leave for work when the phone rang.

“Hello, Joyce. How are you this morning?”

“Who is this?”

“This is Amanda. Does that name mean anything to you?”

Joyce checked her first response and sat on the arm of her love seat. “I know who you are, but I don't know what you expect from this conversation.”

“Of course you don't. For the moment, I want you to stay out of the way. I have no quarrel with you, but I do with Joseph. I really don't want to see you involved until after the divorce and he's free. Then he's all yours. Is that plain enough?”

“Very. What are your plans, or is that a secret, like the riddles?”

Amanda chuckled. “No secrets are necessary. I plan to hurt him and I will. I won't mess him up or kill him, unless it's in self-defense, but I'm going to get his attention. I just don't want to involve you. You're more than welcome to him, afterward.”

She remembered her dream and had to ask. “What's the deal with the jade bear?”

Amanda's tone softened. “I don't really understand my attraction. When I got home after the accident, it was one thing that didn't reject, hate or ridicule me. My attention span was short and my thought patterns were scattered. It listened, soaked up my lonely tears and love, and brought a wonderful sense of reality to the scrambled remains of what I was before. Why do you ask?”

Joyce blinked and felt the goose flesh crawling over her arms.

“Joseph mentioned it and I dreamed about it attacking me last night. Just curious.”

“Are you also curious about his drinking? He only hit me when he was intoxicated, or did he share that with you?”

“No. I didn't know that. He told me only last night that he abused you, and I'm sorry. He's not that way around me.”

“Well, I wish you luck when you do get him. Maybe you're what he needs, but you'll have to wait a spell. Ta-ta.”

Joyce listened to the dial tone until the recording started, lay the receiver down, and checked the time. “Might as well make a bathroom stop before I go.”

She dropped her purse and jacket on the love seat and walked upstairs, humming tunelessly until she opened the bathroom door and jumped back swiftly and hit the wall with a frightened squeal.

The bathroom was bathed in a jade green light and on the edge of the bathtub, stood a two-foot tall jade bear, with silver teeth. Its black nose twitched, and its head twisted to look menacingly at her. It spoke in a guttural but distinct voice. “Joyce, listen to Amanda. Remain on the outside and do not interfere.”

Chills raced up and down her spine and her hands twitched nervously but she nodded her head to show she understood. The bear nodded its head, as if in agreement, and disappeared as she fainted and slid to the floor.

The doorbell aroused Joyce and she scrambled down the stairs, unaware of the time. She jerked the door open, and Joseph stood there.

“What's wrong with you? I've called your office and here so many times it's ridiculous. Are you feeling okay?”

Instinctively her hands went up in a defensive posture. “No! I'm not feeling okay. I don't know what the hell you're doing or what Amanda's doing, but I don't want any part of it. Do you understand that?”

“What happened? Why didn't you go to work? You don't look well.”

She sighed and walked to the love seat. “Come in, love. This is as far as I made it to work. I was right here when your Amanda called to tell me to stay out of the way, because she doesn't want to hurt me, only you, and then I can have you. After that, I decided to use the bathroom and it was filled with jade green light. A jade bear with silver teeth stood on the edge of my tub and told me to listen to Amanda and stay on the outside.”

When he did not answer, she tapped his shoulder. “Well?”

“What can I say? This is totally insane, she's insane.”

“She is not, love! She knows EXACTLY what she's doing, but don't worry. She said she won't mess you up or kill you unless it's in self-defense.”

“This is not going well.”

She laughed at his nervous display. “You should have thought of that when you abused her.” She regarded his face and noticed the telltale signs of stress beginning to show.

“I can't believe you're laughing.” He stood and paced the floor. “I fail to see the humor in it.”

“Maybe it's because you have to live under someone's thumb before you can see the rich humor in Amanda. You've held her in complete control for how many years while she was defenseless and now you can't find her and stop her? Don't worry. I'll wait for you. Who knows, maybe this will help to strengthen your character.”

“Thanks. I thought at least you'd feel sorry for me.”

She responded with more laughter. “I do feel sorry for you, but I still think it's funny.” She unbuttoned her blouse and stretched out on the sofa. “It's too late to go to work, so we might as well enjoy the afternoon. Take away some of your stress.”

“What about the jade bear?”

“Perhaps I was hallucinating, maybe I wasn't. Anyway, I don't want to sound harsh, but I'm going to stay on the outside. For some reason, I think Amanda told me the truth. When she proves to herself that she can make a good statement on her own, she'll leave you alone. I mean, seriously, I love you, and I'll wait for you, but I'm not going to jump into the middle of this.”

“I can't blame you for that. Will you still help me stay ahead of her?”

“If I can. Right now, let's both relax.”

Amanda napped in her car when a jeep pulled along beside her and blew the horn. She sat up to see Brownie waving and rolled down her window. “Come on, Brownie. I was beginning to think you forgot me.”

She reached across and unlocked the passenger door for him.

“I don't forget damsels in distress, whether they're over or under sexed, married or single, raving beauties or two-baggers.”

“I guess I fit in there somewhere. Thanks.”

“So what's on your mind? Revenge? Murder? You look very docile, and by the way, your face is much improved. It looks like you'll make it and your beauty will shine through once more.”

“Thanks,” she said and her cheeks blushed. She reached behind his seat, retrieved a bag from the floor, pulled out a stack of magazines and handed him a pen. “When you pile all the weight on a camel's back that it can carry, is it possible for it to carry an extra feather?”

He considered it and scrunched his face in several ways. “No.”

“Correct. This is an additional weight, a small one, but an irritant nonetheless. Fill out the subscriptions with Joseph Matkins, 127 Medford Drive, Smyrna, Delaware, 19977. Lay them on the dash and we'll trash the magazines. We'll mail the subscriptions later. If you run out, I have three more bags.”

He laughed and clicked the pen. “You're good, friend, however, I take it you want something else from me.”

She patted his shoulder. “Yes. I need to know something about street fighting, tactics and such things. I have the balls, but I need some coaching to gain all the advantage I can, preferably up front and overwhelmingly. We'll talk about that later.” She gathered a bag of magazines for herself.

“No sweat. When I've finished coaching you, you'll be an invincible junkyard bitch.”

She frowned, closed her eyes and then smiled. “I like that.”

Jalan and Ningla walked through a forest, eating an occasional berry from bushes beside the trail. They stopped and turned north when they heard three gong sounds from the mountain.

“Isn't that the signal request for opening the portal?” Jalan asked.

“Is there a Recruiter outside? I thought they were disbanded about fifteen years ago.”

“There hasn't been one for years,” Ningla replied. “It's been so long, I confess that I have forgotten them.” His face wrinkled as he stroked his white beard. “It's been thirty years since we rescued an orphan. This is interesting.”

Jalan snorted and adjusted his tunic. “Well, let's assemble the council and call the Interpreter. We'll find out who is there and what this is about. We will not open the portal so readily as before, if at all. Not after the last incident.”

The council assembled in the Majestic Hall and the nine men waited until Slidon, the Interpreter entered the room.

“Did you hear the request to open the portal?” Jalan commenced.

“I did. Nearly everyone in Jade City is talking about it.”

“Who is it? Is this another deception, like the last?”

“Not this time. I researched the code, and it registers for Damash of Three. He is on the outside, still, although I don't know how or why. He was reported killed on the last hunt before the portal was sealed and disassembled. However, the Jade Bear Code could not be compromised by anyone on the outside, only a Jade resident would know it. It is Damash of Three who sent the request.”

Ningla shifted his position in his chair dramatically and cast a worried glance to Jalan. “The Jade Bear Code was enclosed?”

“If it is legitimate, and he has been on the outside all this time; he would not know. I understand your worry, my friend. We all do.”

“This does create a problem of ethics, doesn't it?” Righli tossed out the barb as a question with a casual air, but sinister smile. It delighted him to remind the men of the former debate on recruiting, the one which ended with a decision to close the Portal and accept extinction through attrition.

Jalan snorted and frowned. “Yes, it does, sir. I'm glad you enjoy the danger of the situation.”

“Should we send an Inquiry, or a Rescue Team?” asked Slidon.

“No. We will use the Jadesaw Imagery and summon Damash of Three to appear before the council in spirit form and let him voice his proposal. Then we will decide on a course of action,” Jalan declared. “Is there an objection to that?”

“If we must, but I'm all for ignoring the request,” Ningla stated.

Righli merrily rubbed his hands and studied the other grave council members. “Re-born heartaches are a wonderful learning tool sometimes. Smile, gentlemen, it could be worse.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Joseph stopped his car in a driveway, checked the surroundings carefully, then casually walked to the front door and rang the bell.

Susan Vayo opened the door with a wounded countenance.

“Hello, Joseph. What brings you by, as if I don't know already?”

“Morning, sunshine. You look superb as always. How's business? Are you going to invite me inside?”

She stepped away from the door and turned her back to him. “Please enter. You can't imagine how much I enjoy these visits.”

He walked past her and sat on a sofa in her small living room.

She lit a cigarette and crossed the room to a tiny end table with doors, opened one and took out an envelope. She dropped it on his lap and sat beside him. “There you go, sir. Things are slow, and that's not my fault. Economics is tough all over and when it is, men even cut back on sexual activity.”

He opened the envelope and counted the money. “Not bad, sunshine. It's only twenty-five less than two weeks ago.”

She sighed, lay back on the sofa, and puffed a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. “Is there anything that bothers you? I mean, why do you still come around and expect a cut? How many years do you plan on doing this?”

“Hey, I stuck my neck out for you. Remember?”

“Yes, you did. And no, I can't forget. You never give me a chance. Why didn't you just marry me if you want so much from me? I'm working to support your habit and I'm available. . . .”

He grasped her tee shirt and pulled her up a few inches. “Would you rather be in prison? I could arrange that, You know. You're the one who screwed up, not me.”

“Maybe a life sentence there might not be bad. At least I wouldn't see you there.”

“That's a stupid assumption.”

“Really? The way I figure it, I'd be out by now and free of the system controls. And again, I wouldn't see you again.”

“I can't be that bad.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” She finished her cigarette and sat to crush it in a half full tray. “You were nicer when you first started this crazy game. You played with me then and it was good. I loved those times and you. Then you got me started turning tricks and You disappeared, except for when you need money.”

He stuck the envelope in his inner coat pocket and rubbed her stomach. “I have to be careful. I never know from one day to the next when the wife will snap around and want sex. It wouldn't be good to be unable to perform.”

“That's a unique and lame excuse. You got me started and now you don't want me.” She sighed forlornly. “Never mind. You're not mean, so I'll keep the money coming until you get tired or fired. Please let yourself out.”

She curled up on the sofa for a nap and twenty minutes later, she stood at her door again gazing at a strange woman.

“Yes? What can I do for you?”

“I've been having erotic sexual fantasies and someone told me that you're a prostitute. So I'm here to find out and get some relief.”

Susan did a double take. “Excuse me? Are you a cop or something? Hit the road and don't bother people when they're napping.”

The woman pulled out a hundred dollar bill from her shirt pocket.

“You're a prostitute, I'm a customer, everyone has a price. What's yours?”

Susan stood open-mouthed and watched another hundred appear.

“I'm sorry. I can do that for men, but not women. You look good, Miss. You shouldn't have a problem like that.”

Another hundred appeared.

“I really don't think I can do that. I'd probably throw up.”

“I don't think you will. My name isn't Miss, it's Amanda and when we're finished, I think you'll like me so much you'll invite me back.”

Another hundred appeared in her hand.

Susan stepped back from the door with downcast eyes. “I think I've gone too far off the deep end.”

Amanda closed and locked the door behind her and tucked the \$400 into Susan's blouse.

“No you haven't gone off the deep end. Let's start our exotic adventure on the sofa.”

Amanda stepped from Susan's shower and dried. She inspected her face, gratified with the progress of disappearing bruises. She dressed and went to the kitchen.

Susan greeted her and signed the six page letter. “Here you go, my beautiful friend. Fresh off the printer and super damning.” To that she added two notebooks and two photographs. “I'd like the notebooks and photographs back. Are you sure this'll work?”

“It will work. Trust me.” Amanda gathered the pile of papers together and lightly rubbed Susan's back. “Just follow the map, meet me at nine and you'll disappear for a spell to safety. You need a break anyway.”

“Thanks, Amanda. You're really very kind, even though you shook me up for a moment. I really thought you wanted to have sex.”

Amanda smiled and shook her head. “Nah, I'd probably throw up.”

Brownie arrived at Indian River to find another woman with Amanda. “Another one? She isn't bruised.”

Amanda corrected him. “She is wounded where it doesn't ever show, in the mind and heart. Sexual abuse hits you there out of sight and does the damage, far more than the physical act.”

She lay a friendly hand on Brownie's shoulder. “While I was out of commission, I remember being used sexually by some of Joseph's friends. That was during a time when I had speech difficulties and I couldn't protest, stop them or defend myself, however, one part of my mind buried every gross experience, and replayed them later. Joseph used me as a diversion and a

favor for some of his friends. Susan isn't that far gone yet and I want to give her the opportunity to get out now, while she's still young enough to recover."

His face flushed with anger. "I'd like to eliminate him for you, my friend. I think that would end a lot of pain for you."

"I appreciate that, but I need to do it for myself. Thanks for the offer, though." She kissed his cheek.

"So what's on for tonight?"

"Did you bring the helmet?"

"Got it."

"We go for a bike ride first, then I want you to take Susan to your house for the night. I'll give you directions and you can deliver her to my friend, Jan, tomorrow night before you go to Harrisburg. The day after tomorrow, she'll be lost in Pennsylvania and Joseph will be mad enough to eat nails and sting from hornets in his underwear."

He put an arm around her and walked back to the car. "Where's the bike?"

"Under an awning, right inside my back yard."

"It's his?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

He chuckled and hugged her. "No. I've done crazier things, trust me. Let's get it on."

Brownie talked with Susan while Amanda drove to Smyrna and parked two blocks away.

She shut off the engine and turned to Susan. "Slip behind the wheel, and if trouble arises, come quickly. I know he still has a few guns around the house. I don't think he'd use them, but I'd prefer to be safe."

"Do you have a dog?" he asked when they neared the driveway.

"No."

"Do you have the spare keys?"

"He keeps them on a nail, right above the bike. He reasons he's so mean that no one will bother it. Wrong."

"I love you, Amanda."

"Good to hear that." She kissed him quickly and disappeared into her back yard. She walked near the fence to where she could see the bedroom window on the second floor.

"He's there," she whispered and handed Brownie the key. "Can you move it away from the house first?"

"Good plan. Where do you want it?"

"The first house on the right after you pass the Dairy Queen in Camden headed southbound. Jimmy will be expecting you and I'll pick you up there."

He saluted and moved the motorcycle through the gate and down the driveway. He pushed it half a block, started it and drove away.

Amanda waved and ran back to where Susan waited. She scrambled into the passenger's seat and laughed. "Follow that biker, but don't keep the meter running."

"You're a total imp," Susan said and followed the motorcycle.

"Not yet, but I'm working on it." Amanda snuggled into the seat, satisfied with what she had accomplished.

The mailman delivered a 5" stack of mail to Judy, the receptionist, in the Dover Probation Office. She began to sort through it, open the envelopes, and date-stamp the contents. She found

merely one marked "CONFIDENTIAL - FOR YOUR EYES ONLY." It was addressed to Howard Nelson. During a slow period, she distributed the mail and lay the letter on Howard's desk as he talked on the phone.

Howard opened the envelope and unfolded a letter with three photo copies of 5" x 7" photographs. The woman's face was so bruised that he did not recognize her, but he felt he knew her.

Dear Howard,

This may be difficult for you to understand, but this is the method Joseph Matkins used to request a divorce. To many people, he is wonderful, and it's my misfortune to be the only person he wishes to abuse. He's not hurting anyone else, or is he? Did you know that the only time he abuses me is when he's drunk? Did you know he had a drinking problem? Or is that something a man can shut off at the front door of the office?

Amanda Matkins

Howard looked at the photos again, folded the letter and placed it with the envelope in his briefcase. He tried to ignore the letter and review the prior week's client records, but the pictures of her face kept flicking across his mind. He sighed and lay the stack of records aside.

"Spouse abuse? Drinking problem? I think Amanda has passed the point of vicious. If what she says is true, what else are you doing? This makes no sense. The main question is, what do I do with this? This puts me in a hard position. Damn, man, what're you thinking?"

The phone beeped twice and Judy spoke. "Mister Nelson? Joseph is on line three."

Howard picked up the receiver and pressed the button on line three. "What's up, Joseph? Really? Damn the luck. I understand. No, take care of that first, then come in."

Joseph strode vehemently between kitchen and the backyard and stared at the place where his motorcycle used to sit. He had heard the motorcycle starting in the distance, but he attached no importance until he went to move the garbage can to the curb for pickup.

Eventually the police finished with their investigation and Joseph met the mailman at the edge of the drive and complained about losing his bike. He took the one manila envelope and noted the address and postmark of Perryville, Maryland. "You again!" he swore and opened the flap. He removed a thick package, containing Susan's information, copies of the payments and photographs of Joseph and Susan together.

He gritted his teeth and read Amanda's left handed writing:

Joseph,

Don't you agree that this is rather shocking behavior for a married man? These days I guess you have to tie a husband up to keep him faithful. Whatever happened to morals?

Anyway, there are ten copies of this around, along with the originals in a safe place. Five of my friends have them, (yes, I do have some friends) and will mail the pre-addressed envelopes with the attached exposition, if anything nasty happens to me. Can you guess where they will go? Can you guess where my friends are? My, this is a problem.

I hope I don't have to repeat myself. That really irritates me. Your ass is mine and the revolution has started. The quicker you learn, the sooner you can enjoy all the delights Joyce's body can offer.

Amanda and Jade

"Damn you, Amanda!" He shouted and threw the package on the ground. "I should have refused to take you out of the hospital after the accident. I should have left your ass there with

the freaking jade bear. Shoved it in you and sewed it shut!" He grabbed up the package and stomped into the house where he tossed the envelope on the table and called Brian.

"What's the word, Brian?"

"Nothing yet, man. Be real for a change. It's only been two days or so. The word's out and my people are watching'. We'll find her, so relax, man. What did she do to piss you off so bad?"

Joseph opened his mouth and stopped himself. Do you have this line tapped, Amanda? How did you know about Susan? "Never mind that. Just work faster, okay?"

He immediately drove to Susan's house and her car in the driveway pleased him. He let himself inside and she was nowhere to be found, but she did leave a note on her pillow.

Little boy Joe,
Lost his dough.
He lost his wife
he thought for life.
He lost his hooker
and couldn't book her.
And when he falls,
will have his balls?
Little boy Joe,
No screw, no mo'.
Amanda

"When I find you, I'm going to take that bear and shove it!" He swore and pounded the wall with a fist. "I swear, I'll kill you afterward and damn your exposition!"

He hurried down the hallway, turned the corner to the kitchen and stopped short. The kitchen was filled with jade green light and in the middle of the floor stood a two foot tall jade with black nose twitching.

"You should learn, Joseph Matkins. You can spare yourself, but I feel you won't. Cooperate, with Amanda."

CHAPTER FIVE

The council sat in session and the Protractor summoned Damash of Three. Into the middle of the Majestic Hall, the hazy form of a Jade Bear became noticeable but quickly faded to the normal human shape of a Jade resident.

“I am Damash of Three. Thank you for hearing me.”

“We know that,” Jalan said. “What we don't know is how you remained outside, and why we should honor your request? Would you tell us, please?”

“The first question is difficult. I was wounded and could not catch up with the hunting party, and the wounds would not allow me to send a message. I was trapped, had nowhere to go, and could do nothing to help myself. I remained that way until a few years ago when a Jade Bear statue appeared in South Africa. When I discovered it, I attached myself to it and eventually stopped in America, where I have been for the remainder of the time.

“The second question is easy. I want you to open the Portal to allow me to bring Amanda Matkins back here to live as my wife.”

Righli snickered as he watched the sour expression on Jalan's and Ningla's faces.

“That might not be possible,” Jalan commented.

Damash of Three's face grew concerned. “Why not? Are you going to violate the Jade Code and leave me outside? What is wrong here? Is this the Council of Jade, or is it something else? Where is Nansu, the Arbitrator?”

“Dead,” Ningla said. “This is the council and there has been some changes since you left us. Sixteen years ago, we chose to seal the portal and stop recruiting and stop rescuing orphans. I vaguely remember the last hunt through the Portal. They were all renegades and if you were one of them, oh well.”

Damash felt his body relax and waver slightly from the astonishing statement so casually delivered. “That is insane! It would lead to extinction through attrition. Do you speak for the entire Jade population?”

Ningla did not answer but Righli gladly spoke up.

“They spoke for some of the population. There was much debate over the last orphan brought in and six of the council members voted for sealing. I did not. Neither did Nansu or Volla. We were against it, but they voted us down. Now you have sent a request and have opened old wounds.”

Damash studied the men's faces. “What happened that you fought for extinction? This is very difficult to believe.”

Jalan cast a peeved glance to Righli and answered. “The last one we rescued was defective, but skilled at hiding it. She killed seven of our residents before . . . before we killed her. That was a painful time and although some disagree, we chose to close it and keep all the people and problems on the outside.”

Righli waved a hand. “I voted for tighter screening, but the rest would not hear of it.”

Damash grew firmer in his questioning. "For that you chose extermination? You prefer genocide and suicide to supporting the Life Principles? This is wrong! I was not included in the vote. I wish to run the Paraclypse and achieve full Jade Bear status. That is my right as a Jade resident! I demand it!"

"Bravo!" shouted Righli.

Ningla stood swiftly in a fighting posture. "You fool! That would require opening the Portal, after we have chosen not to!"

"Sit down!" Jalan tugged on his tunic until he complied.

"And you think that leaving me on the outside, trapped and useless is justified?"

"That's your own fault! Hie thee hence and stop bothering us!" Ningla said.

"It happened against my will and I was left! The hunt leaders did not return to check on me; they simply left!"

"Silence!" roared Jalan with a slam of both fists on the table and the place fell quiet. He sighed and sat. "Is there no other request, Damash of Three?"

"If you don't grant that request, then I will explain of the Jade Community. I've touched the Jade Request Lines, and I've touched the Jade Bear Transposition Lines three times and I know that if I have the correct motivation, I can penetrate it fully, regardless of not running the Paraclypse. I dislike being left, being trapped and being denied an orphan of the caliber of Amanda Matkins. If you violate my rights now, I will make you suffer for it. I'll expose you to the world outside. And you know what their scientists will do. Need I say more?"

Ningli's eyes narrowed in a heinous gaze. "You would not dare."

Righli snickered and covered his mouth at a malevolent glance from Jalan.

"He just might," said Jalan. "What is Amanda Matkins? Why is she so important to you and to us?"

Damash offered a shrug of shoulders. "Ask the Inquirers. I prefer you finding out on your own, instead of hearing it from me. That way I know you'll agree with my request versus perpetuating stupidity."

Jalan nodded in agreement and promised. "We will hold some special meetings and consider your request."

"I will accept that answer. It's better than a direct and final no." He bowed slightly and his image disappeared from the hall.

Amanda met Brownie at the former Kent County Drive-in and took him to pick up the motorcycle. "Do you know where the pull off is, north of Blackbird? It's right alongside the tracks, maybe half a mile north of the switch point on the west side of the tracks?"

"Oh, yes. I know it well."

"I'll meet you there." She blew him a kiss and drove away.

Brownie scratched his head and looked at Jimmy, who simply smiled. "It won't blow up, will it?"

Jimmy chuckled. "No. She's only going to hurt him, not kill him. Trust her, Brownie. She's all right. It's a true pleasure to see her back from the living death. I love it."

Amanda had him move the bike to the backside of the clearing and she placed a plastic cover over it. She chained it to a tree and placed some brush in front to hide it.

"Now what?" he asked.

“You curious? If you're around when he gets the keys, I'll take you along to watch. I think you'll get a kick out of it.”

He considered her reaction before he spoke. “Amanda, if we're friends, can I ask something of you? Just a little favor?”

The seriousness in his voice stopped the smile on her face and she nodded. “Lay it on me, friend.”

“Be careful of your drinking. You don't look like the drinking type and I don't want to see you unable to quit. You know what I mean? I don't want to see you messed up and hooked on a deadly habit. You're a nice person and someday, a good man will come along and what a treasure you are. You also need to be clear-headed if Joseph gets vengeful and the same holds true if you meet a good man later. You don't need the complications that can grab you and ruin what you have or want.”

“Wow!” She sighed and leaned against him. “I never thought of hearing that. Are you serious? Never mind that question. You wouldn't have said it if you weren't. I'm using it as an escape, but I guess I'd better watch it. Thanks, friend.” She kissed his cheek and moved toward the car. “I'll do that, I promise. However, for right now, have you ever been to a petting zoo?”

“Not for a long time.”

“It's time to correct that. Come along and let's give the animals a thrill.” She beckoned with her hand and a sunny smile.

Joyce laughed when Joseph told her about his bike and the letters. She stopped when he glared at her and shook her head. “This is rich. Tell me, Joseph, should I place a chair in the corner and keep a dunce hat nearby?”

“You're the one who wanted honesty! You're not helping matters.”

“Nor are you. How can you do those things to and with other women and treat me like a queen? You do that. You make me feel so excellent and loved that my head spins sometimes. That's why I overlook some things, but everyone has a limit. You don't have to reveal all you dirty laundry during the divorce.”

He put his hands over his face and sighed. “I don't know what to do or say, love. I can't find her, I don't know where she is, so I can't talk to her. I'm not sure she'd talk right now anyway. However, the waiting really sucks, because I don't know what she has in mind.”

“I know what you mean. I also know that's exactly what she wants you to feel. Torment is hell in itself. She'll let you know when she's ready. In the meantime, have you made the visit to the lawyer?”

“I did. He said it might take a little longer since we don't know where she is, but it's done.”

She rubbed her hand in circles up and down his back. “Wonderful. We'll handle it one step at a time and then we'll be together. And in the meantime, let me take you upstairs and work some of my magic on you, to drain some of the tension away. Would you like that?”

“I think so. No, I know so.”

Joseph left Joyce and went to work the next morning. Howard followed him into the office with many question about past cases and after an hour he was uneasy, although he had no specific cause.

“What's the meaning of these questions?” he asked during a break.

“Didn't you read the memo from the director about case reviews? It was through the office about a week ago. Maybe you missed it because of your problems with Amanda.”

“Possibly. It just caught me off guard.”

“That happens sometimes. Speaking of Amanda, how's the divorce going?”

He grew sullen instantly. “It's going, and that's about all I know. She moved out and I don't know where she is. She just disappeared. That'll slow things down, but what can I say?”

“Sorry to hear that. You'll be okay, so long as you're clean in the affair. You are, aren't you?”

Joseph picked up on the remark and felt his heart skip a beat.

“Yes, I am.” Inside he realized he spoke with more conviction than he felt.

“Good to hear that.” Howard stood in way of ending the meeting.

“We'll call it quits for the day. You're due in court tomorrow morning, aren't you?”

“Yes. I'll be there.”

“Take Linda Lutz with you. She's new to the office but not the system. She came from Georgetown and she wants to get into the Level Three cases, so I want to give her some courtroom experience, and I may as well use the best.”

“Okay. I'll talk to her before the end of the day,” Joseph promised. When Howard left, Joseph locked the door and took a drink of whiskey. He popped a breath freshener and the receptionist beeped his phone.

“Yes, Judy?”

“While you were in conference, a woman dropped off an envelope for you. It feels like a set of keys.”

Joseph hurried to the reception area and tore open the envelope.

He jingled the keys and thought. “What did she look like?”

“She was small, quiet, had short red hair and was really pretty. She said her name was Amanda and she'd call you later. She your new girlfriend?”

“Not hardly.”

He returned to his office, raised the blinds and sat down at his desk. “This is unusual. What are you up to, Amanda? Why steal the damned thing and give it back?”

Soon Judy beeped him again. “Mister Matkins, you have a call from Amanda on line five.”

Joseph grabbed the phone and pressed the button. “What do you want?”

“To talk, dear. How's your life going right now?”

“Just shut up about my life and tell me what you want? Do you want the house? Alimony? What, damn it?”

“Oh, my, dear husband. Do calm down. Stress isn't good for your heart. When I'm finished, I want nothing that I haven't already taken. I want nothing of yours.”

“Then why are you doing this? I could kill you, you know?”

“You have, more than once! Every harsh word, every slap, every one of your blood sucking friends who used me against my will. You've already killed me, hon, but you won't again! Your bike's in a pull off along the railroad tracks, north of Blackbird. It's covered and chained to the tree. You have the keys for the bike and the lock in your hand. Just go north on the west side of the tracks about a half mile from Road 213 and you'll find it.”

“You didn't answer me. Why are you doing this?”

“So I can divorce you without putting you in jail for sodomy, for one reason. This way I can take the stand if necessary, with a clear conscious, knowing that you've suffered enough at my

hands and I'll let it pass. If you try to worm out of it, I'll tear you apart and you'll have so little self-esteem left that no one will want or care for you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Do you have any nude pictures of Joyce?"

"No. I don't."

"I'll send you some. She's a nice woman. You'll be nicer for her when you're finished your probation. Ta-ta, darling."

"Wait!" he shouted and heard a dial tone.

Across the highway, Amanda watched him through binoculars from the showroom of an automobile dealer and laughed as he slammed the phone down. "Let's see, from his limited vocabulary, he probably used the words, bitch and whore."

Amanda phoned Brownie and he had time to spend with her. She drove to an empty field where they could watch Joseph without being seen. They sat on her hood with binoculars and talked for nearly an hour before he arrived in his car, bouncing along the tracks. Amanda removed a small black box from her blouse pocket and lay it on the hood beside her. "Very good, trusting husband."

Joseph parked the car and locked the doors. He walked to the back of the pull off and moved the brush aside, uncovered the bike and tossed the cover aside. He unlocked the chain and moved the bike close to the tracks and put the kick stand down.

Amanda laughed and coaxed him. "Now inspect it, husband. I may have left a bomb on it."

He spent several minutes inspecting the bike and eventually satisfied himself that it was safe to ride. He put the keys in the ignition and started the engine.

"Excellent." Amanda held the tiny black box in her hand.

Joseph mounted the bike and moved it forward along the side of the tracks, going south. Amanda flipped a red switch and the bike moved faster as a servo poured more gas into the carburetor. Joseph turned the gas to compensate for it but it only increased in speed.

"What the hell?" he asked. The ride quickly got rough and he applied the brakes. Amanda flipped a blue switch and the brake cables were locked in place.

"What the hell?" he repeated and suddenly the bike became airborne.

"That farmer's crossing will get you every time if you aren't careful, Joseph," Amanda warned him as bike and rider separated.

Joseph hit the ground and rolled a few feet. The bike hit the ground a few feet farther away from him, and spun in a circle. Amanda flipped both switches up and the bike stopped.

Joseph lay still for a few minutes, until he regained his senses and slowly sat up. He felt several cuts along his legs and arms and probably his back also. He removed his helmet and checked his head for cuts or bumps and found none. "What the hell happened?" he asked the bike, and slowly pushed himself up. He walked to the bike and inspected it again, but he still could find nothing out of place.

Amanda laughed richly. "Short but sweet. What do you think, friend?"

"I think I'm very glad to be your friend and on your good side. That dude's going to be sore and then some."

"He'll also be bent out of shape when his mechanic finds out how it was done."

They watched him start the bike again, but he tested the throttle and brakes many times before riding away.

“You going to do it again?” Brownie asked.

“Nah, once is enough. He liked to do the same thing to me, again and again. I’ll go for a variety. I’ll let him go and then we’ll go around the field and put the second part of this into action.”

CHAPTER SIX

Amanda knew the trains would be silent, since Brownie informed her of the schedule. She slept soundly at her favorite spot by the tracks in Indian River. On the dashboard, the Jade Bear increased in brilliance and gradually filled the car with a rich jade green light while she dreamed peacefully.

Amanda walked through a garden, lush with flowers and green vegetation. Fear and pain were so remote that she did not consider them. She discovered a wooden chair, sat on it and removed her sneakers and socks to let her feet play in the grass. The sun beaming down on her blue jeans warmed her legs and she relaxed. The chair lifted into the air and moved gently toward the west. For several minutes, Amanda sat without realizing she was airborne.

When she became aware, she did not panic, rather experienced awe at the adventure. She watched the terrain pass beneath her and then the ocean and then the ground again. "This is the Swiss Alps," she whispered and the chair descended.

Between two mountains, above the cloud level, a jade green disk appeared in the sky. The chair carried Amanda through the disk and through a short tunnel of green light beyond the entrance. The difference in terrain was astounding and she was held captivated by the brightly colored birds and other winged creatures that moved around the sky. The nearly uniform forest below told her that she was not in the Swiss Alps, even though she was a moment before. The chair descended lower and came to rest beside a gently rising hillside and she drank in the peaceful environment.

Before her, and twenty feet distant, a life-size Jade Bear stepped from a grove of trees and approached her.

She panicked. "I was just joking about being eaten! Really, Jade."

The bear stood on its hind legs and roared once. A cloud of light green mist surrounded it and when it disappeared, in its place stood a man with a loose white tunic, faded jeans, and barefooted. A silvery sword hanging from his left hip was the only item to mar his casual appearance. Brown curly locks of hair surrounded his rugged face. His blue eyes were topped with bushy brows.

"I know you were joking, Amanda. Arise, woman, and come with me." He held out a hand. She stood, still spellbound and gazed at him.

He grasped her hand and moved her toward the hill and stopped before a cliff which had a smooth and shiny silver surface.

Her mouth went slack as she gazed at her reflection in the mirrored wall. Gone were her jeans and tee shirt. She wore a green silk blouse with ruffled lace sleeves and waist and gold buttons. Below that was an orchid color silk skirt that stopped above her ankles. Her headband was gone and in its place a gold tiara with heart-shaped opals visible in eight points. A white rose was tucked into her hair over her left ear.

"What is this?" she asked softly.

“This is a small pittance of what you're worth,” the man said and moved behind her. “Your beauty is breathtaking. This is the real you, waiting to be loved and growing when you are.”

“Who are you?” she asked, seeing his face above hers in the silver wall.

“I am Damash of Three. Will you join me in this place?”

“Yes,” she said with no hesitation.

He unbuttoned her blouse and dropped it to the ground. “No bruises, ever, and your skin will remain unmarked, except for blushes,” he promised.

“There will be no pain here.” He unfastened her skirt and it slipped to the ground around her ankles. He picked her up with strong arms and gently lay her on the ground.

“Wow! You're doing wonderful things to me,” she said shortly. “It's been so long I've forgotten how exciting this can be.”

He smiled and separated her knees.

Amanda's left knee smacked the door and her right the gearshift.

“What?” she gasped and jerked upright in the seat. The Jade Bear glowed brightly but swiftly returned to normal. She stared at it while she raised her hands to her breasts. “Wow. That dream was vivid! I could feel the hands there. What are you, Jade? My uncle said you were magic, but what kind? I hope you aren't the evil voodoo kind of magic. But if you can make that dream happen, go for it. Do it now.”

She shivered and checked the time. “Two o'clock? It's going to be difficult sleeping now. I'm too excited and turned on. Wow.”

It was nearly three o'clock when Amanda knocked on Brownie's door. It opened and he stood blinking at her in his tee shirt and pajama bottoms. “Can I come in?” she finally asked.

“Sure,” he replied and moved away from the door. “Sorry. I'm still half asleep.”

She followed him to the living room where he flopped down on the sofa.

“What brings you here at this hour of the morning?” He looked at his watch for the first time.

“You work today?”

He shook his head. “This is an off day, as well as tomorrow. We dead-head to Enola tomorrow night.”

“Good. Excellent timing.” She removed her jacket and draped it over an arm. “I need someone to talk to right now.”

“At three in the morning?”

“You're the one who told me the door was open. Anytime. You're the one concerned about me drinking.”

He yawned and shook his head. “Right on. What's on your mind?”

She sighed and kicked off her shoes as she tossed the jacket on a chair. “A lot and a little. This is difficult, but I don't want to end it in a bar, or in Indian River, so drunk that I don't know who I am.” By the time she finished, her socks lay on the shoes. “I want to be loved, my friend. I want you to make love with me.”

The simple request had him fully awake and alert. “Hey, I can't do that, not with you.”

“If not you, then who?” She sighed deeply, leaned back into the sofa beside him and stretched out her legs and arms. “There's no one else on the face of the earth I'd trust to do that. Except you.”

“Look, I like you as a friend, but I don’t want to complicate our lives with a romantic relationship.”

“I don’t want a romantic relationship. I want to be loved, tonight. It won’t ruin the friendship we have.”

“I fear it will.”

“Do you have any wine?”

“I don’t want to do this.”

“Do you have any wine?”

“Look, I like you too much already. If I enjoy your body, just once, I might not want to stop. I need to keep you as a friend, unless you plan on moving in and letting me share your life, like forever.”

“Do you have any wine?”

“Are you listening to me?”

She slapped her legs and stood from the sofa. “I hear you, and I feel very strange. I’m listening, but you’re not. Do you, have you, ever had a girlfriend? Never mind.”

He waited for her to continue while studying her figure from behind.

She hooked her thumbs in her jean pockets and faced the wall, where there were pictures of Brownie and his parents and relatives.

“After the accident, I still loved Joseph. I just couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t show him. He was my husband and I knew he was getting frustrated with me. Who wouldn’t get frustrated with a blob that lay on the bed and demanded so much attention? He wanted to have sex, but he wanted a participating partner. He wanted my touches, my kisses, my nibbling his neck. I couldn’t do that. I really didn’t mind if he had sex with me. But I couldn’t tell him.

“He finally broke down and did that. He apologized and he did it. It was okay with me. I was his wife and there to take care of his need. No problem. I couldn’t feel anything anyway. And I couldn’t tell him it was okay.

“It’s frustrating, knowing things and not being able to communicate them. I might want to say, ‘The barking dogs kept me up all night.’ What would come out is, ‘The parking cars rolled in the green grass.’ That was wrong and I knew it but I couldn’t help it. “So, the sex satisfied him for a while, until he worried that I might get pregnant. He asked the visiting nurse if I could and she said yes. He started using condoms, but then he arranged for the nurse to inject me with a long lasting birth control drug. Trouble is, that caused me a lot of pain, and there was no way to communicate it. There was only one or two tests to make sure I was ‘safe’ and that’s all. They had no concern about the rest of my body, just the vaginal part.

“Then non-participating sex started to bore him, but he let some of his friend have at me. I was still beautiful and sexually attractive to them, so why not? I wouldn’t, couldn’t complain about it. But I knew. I knew.”

She hung her head and wiped the tears from her face. “When he started the injections, that’s when I started hating him. I felt nothing would ever bring that emotion to light in our marriage, but that did it. But what could I do? I just lay there, this little flesh and blood, inflatable doll, being the sexual whim of Joseph and his friends. Why he did it, I’ll never know. I’m not going to ask. “I haven’t felt horny, excited, entertained sexual fantasies, or anything since the accident. I couldn’t play with myself, even if I wanted to. But I feel that way tonight. I had a dream of the Jade Bear and he was a man and he was making love to me. Not screwing me. Making the most delicious love to me, talking about my babies and kissing me until I was delirious.”

She wiped the tears away again and turned to face him. "So, do you have any wine? I don't want to drink this feeling away. I want to share it with the best friend I've got in the world. Please? It won't ruin the feelings we have for each other."

He stood and opened his arms and she filled them swiftly. "Say no more, love. No more arguments."

Joyce nursed Joseph as he told her what happened. "You think she rigged the bike?"

"Yes. She knew what I'd do and she had it planned. She probably watched from somewhere and peed herself laughing when I hit the ground. In the note at Susan's house, she wondered if I would have my balls after I fell. I wondered when I hit the ground. That hurt a lot."

She agreed and kissed the back of his neck. "Well, I've got all of them, sweetheart. What are you going to do now?"

"Stay here for the night. Tomorrow, I'll take the bike to my mechanic and let him start fixing it. Then, if you have no objections, drive me to get the car." He finished and fell silent.

"What?"

"I think I should never have abused her. I think I'm nervous also. I think I'd apologize if she would let me, but I'm not certain it would do any good."

"Have you thought of going to the police?" she asked and massaged his shoulders.

"No. If I do that, I'll probably lose. She told me as much this morning. She said I have to accept her punishment or theirs." He thought of what Susan told him. "This is screwed up."

"It's screwed up, but not insurmountable. Where did she come from, anyway?"

"Topeka, Kansas is where she was born. She said her red hair comes from the brilliant Kansas sunsets."

She considered that a moment. "That's wrong. She wasn't born in Kansas. I remember when you showed me the bank statements that her social security number begins with a two. That puts her birthplace on the east coast. If she was a three or a four, maybe, but not two."

"You're kidding?"

"No. We deal with socials a lot in the insurance office and that's how it works."

"Can you check it out? Now you have me curious also?"

"Certainly. Bring it to me and I'll check it and narrow it down to a state for you."

"Maybe she wasn't born. Maybe she was hatched for the solitary purpose of torturing me." She laughed again. "That's entirely possible."

The next morning Joseph awoke stiff and sore. He moved slowly and gingerly until he was situated in Joyce's car and he gave her directions for Blackbird and then his car.

Joyce sat in her car and watched him kick rocks and curse as he inspected his car. On both sides, the hood and the trunk the words, "WIFE BEATER" were painted in bright silver.

"And you're only nervous? It's only a matter of time before that changes to fear, I think. You're tough, but she's got you beat by a long shot, honey. I feel sorry for you, but I'm not going to get in the middle."

She smiled weakly and shrugged as he walked back to the car and got inside.

"Let's go to the hardware store in Smyrna and get a can, no, a case of black spray paint. This is ridiculous."

She turned her car around and headed back along the tracks.

“This is where I went airborne,” he commented and sighed. “I’m a little scared and sober now. What am I going to do? She’s too devious for me.”

“Cooperate with her. She said she won’t kill you and I believe her. Just hold yourself together until it’s over. Then we’ll heal together. This is starting to hurt me also.”

At the probation office, Howard was in conference with two men in suits all morning. Joseph wanted to talk to him but situations and work prevented it. He took several drinks, to calm himself, but stopped before he went too far. Right before lunch, he received a call from a neighbor.

“What did you say, Missus Johnson? I don’t have animals. I don’t even have a frigging dog. Have you been drinking?”

“The hell you don’t. You’ve got a damned zoo in your backyard and I work shifts, as if you don’t know that. If you don’t keep them quiet, we’ll go to court, before or after I shoot their noisy asses and yours.” She slammed the phone down.

“Crazy bitch. Must be on drugs. Too bad I can’t do a urinalysis on her.”

He saw two clients and Judy called him. “Mister Matkins, there are two police officers in the lobby to see you. Shall I send them back?”

Joseph sighed and rubbed his eyes. He told her to send them back and popped another breath freshener.

The officers entered the room and Joseph stood to greet them.

“You’re Joseph Matkins?” one asked.

“That’s right. What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is the zoo in your back yard,” said the same officer.

“It’s against city codes to have cows, horses, goats, sheep and chickens inside city limits. We’ve had ten complaints from that area this morning. Personally, I don’t know how you’ve kept them quiet so long, but they have to go now.” He lay five tickets on the desk. “Sign these please and get the animals off your property before sundown. If we get complaints tomorrow, we’ll be back to arrest you.”

Howard stuck his head into the office. “Problems, Joseph?”

“Amanda.” He signed the last ticket. “I’ll have the animals removed before sundown. You can count on that. I’m sorry for the problems.”

They bid him good day and left.

Howard remained and chose to add a dig. “You look haggard, Joseph. Are you sleeping well?”

“As well as I can.” He stretched and rubbed the back of his neck. “However, Amanda’s getting on my nerves.”

“Well, you could maybe talk to her and cancel the divorce.”

“No! It’s over and that’s it! She couldn’t pay me to go back with her.”

Howard smiled on the comment and turned to the door. “Well, at least you don’t have the problems of some employees here. You should be very glad of that. Hang tough. You’ll survive.”

Joseph turned in his chair and watched the two suited men get into a car in the parking lot. He jotted down the license number on a pad and went to the DELJIS room. He ran a license check and found the registration to James Dalton, with a Seaford address. He called his friend, Donald in the Wilmington Probation Office.

“Do you know a man named James Dalton? Does he work in the system?”

“James Dalton? From Seaford?”

“The same. Do you know him?”

“Yes. He's an FBI agent. Why?”

“Oh, shit!”

Joseph disconnected, locked his file cabinet, went to the parking lot and got into his car. He looked around and took a flask from under his seat. He checked again, took a quick drink and replaced it.

“If you don't be careful, your days are numbered,” he said and drove away.

From Joseph's office, Howard watched him until he was out of sight. “At times like this, I'm sorry to be your friend, Joseph. I truly am.” He lowered the blinds and called for a locksmith to open the file cabinet.

Joseph stood by the gate and stared at the animals in his back yard. “How did you manage that? You're good, Amanda, and I'm sorry that I crossed you. I should have divorced you long ago, like after the accident. Just left you to a nursing home for care.”

He went inside and listened to the messages on his answering machine.

“Hey, man, this is Brian. We got something. Your woman hangs out along the train tracks north of Blackbird. She also has a man with her at times. She loses us easily. She's good at that, but we found her there twice.”

“No shit, Sherlock. What a moron.”

Two hang ups.

“Hello, Joseph. This is Amanda. That's a quaint petting zoo, but I think it's illegal. Move them out before you get arrested. This call is to update you. You've been assigned to a probation officer and it's, Amanda Matkins. You'll receive a letter soon telling you where to report for your intake interview. Make sure you wear a jock strap that day. You could do some heavy lifting, like your ass from the ground. Ta-ta, darling.”

Two more hangs ups.

He sighed but did not curse her as before. He mixed a drink and sat in his recliner for a moment of relaxation, and let his mind go back to a time before Amanda was knocked into another dimension by the Corvette.

He reviewed their marriage and their honeymoon. “Man, how screwed up can you be?”

The phone interrupted him.

“Hello, Joseph. I was right. Her social security number is from the Appalachian region of West Virginia, or at least that vicinity. She wasn't born in Kansas,” Joyce reported.

“Great. Now what do we do with that information? Will a tabloid pay for it?”

“Funny. Why did she lie to you? Think, man.”

“Maybe she had something to hide?”

“Very good. One in a row, sweetheart. If she lied about that, what else did she lie about? You have some more weight for the divorce lawyer. I said I wasn't going to get involved, but I can do this and stay on the outside. I'm going to check her out tomorrow and see who she really is.”

“Good, lover. I'd like to help you, but I have to go milk the cows.”

“Cows? Where the hell do you find cows in a city?”

“It's a long story. I'll tell you about it on our next field trip. Go ahead and check her out. I'll be busy here for a while. Love you, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Amanda drove through west Dover, near the area where Joyce lived and watched her rearview mirror. “You people are beginning to get on my nerves. This is number six now. You should be glad I’m not a James Bond fanatic, otherwise, I’d do an oil slick right now, or tacks, or better yet, rockets.” In the distance she saw two semi trucks headed toward her and she scouted the surrounding area quickly. She accelerated as fast as she dared and gripped the wheel.

“Hold on tight, body. Stay in the car.”

She cut the wheel sharply to the left after the second truck passed. She kept the wheel turned, drove over the sidewalk and across one driveway and lawn before she got the car back onto the road, in the right lane, with the trucks beside her. She squeezed between them and cut across the highway through a shopping center parking lot and laughed.

With the trail lost, she drove north on the back roads and across to the coast line. She smiled as she remembered the dream from earlier in the morning, and Brownie when she woke him. That she had to plead for what she wanted, surprised her. But perseverance paid off. She gave a thumbs up and turned south on Route 9.

His cool hands on her hot skin worked well for both of them. She remembered a poem she read once: Country lines / clinging vines / red roses / evocative poses / red wine kisses / from lustful misses / passion feats / damp tangled sheets.

“That and then some,” she sighed.

Afterward, Brownie started with her shoulders and massaged and kissed her down to her ankles while she told him the dream she had and what she wanted to do in the future.

“Thank you. I really enjoyed this.”

His hands caught her hips and he jostled them playfully. “So have I. Now, will you please dress so as not to tempt me again?” He watched her dress. “How long are you going to be around?”

She paused and contemplated his question. The idea that someone could be truly concerned with her welfare tugged at an emotion that she felt gone from her life. She zipped her jeans, sat on the bed beside him and lay a hand on his shoulder. “Slipping back into life so suddenly is most difficult. I’m glad that you are the first friend I found. That’s why I chose to come here tonight, rather than do another bottle of whiskey. I like you, Brownie, and I’ll not split without telling you goodbye. We’ll go to dinner or do something before I leave Dover. And I’ll let you know where I am when I get there.” With her other hand she wiped a tear that trickled down her cheek.

She pulled onto Route 113 and headed south to Indian River.

“Erotic, lustful, and delicious were the adjectives Brownie used to describe me.”

Her mind flashed through scenes when Joseph dated her, a year before they married.

“Joseph used the same words frequently. What happened, Amanda? What derailed the Passion Express into oblivion?”

She stopped for a traffic signal at Bower's Beach and a Corvette stopped beside her. The driver raced his engine and honked the horn to get her attention. He smiled and waved. She stuck out her tongue and gave him an obscene gesture. "The Corvette is what happened," she said bitterly. "I hate Corvettes."

"She's dead," the doctor announced, for the seventh time with a finality that caused her to shiver. He sounded frustrated enough to kill her if she did not die. "And if she isn't, she will be. Please die, bitch."

Those words buried themselves in the resolve part of her mind and Amanda returned, for life.

"Stop it, Amanda!" she shouted and hit the steering wheel. "The Corvette wasn't the problem. The frustrated doctor wasn't the problem. Joseph's inability to cope was the problem. He didn't honor the till death do us part portion of the wedding. His weakness led to the abuse. Don't let yourself slip back into that hell. Get over it!"

She waved to the departing Corvette. "Sorry, dude. I'm not ready for anyone like you, for I'm having difficulty in holding onto myself right now. Maybe later. However, if I run across that Damash of Three, the whole world will have to kiss my ass and adjust to life without Amanda. I'll be gone so fast, you'll get dizzy and faint."

Joseph arrived at the office as the FBI agents apprehend Denise Hendrickson. They put handcuffs on her and led her through the back door. "What's up with that, Howard?"

"She was making illegal transactions on the DELJIS system. We don't know if she was doing it for favors or money, but either way, she's out of here and in lots of trouble. How did you make out with your zoo?"

"I got rid of it. I can't wait for the end."

"I know what you mean. Don't forget to take Linda to court with you. You were tied up yesterday afternoon so I told her what to expect. While you have the time, go see her."

Joseph finished the morning in court and found Linda to be intelligent and tougher than she looked. He figured quickly that she could hold her own against the Level 3 probationers. He spent the rest of the day dealing with unruly clients. He was frustrated when quitting time arrived for he had not had a drink all day. He considered locking the door for a quick one when the phone beeped.

"Call from Amanda on line three."

He picked up the receiver. "Yes, Amanda?"

"Hi, Joseph. How are you today?"

"Fine. What do you want?"

"I want to give you the time, date and location of your intake interview. Didn't you get my letter?"

"Yes. Right in the middle of the zoo."

"Excellent. The time is eight-thirty, the date is Friday, and the place is Brandywine Park, across from the real zoo. Park in the first lot and walk along the river, away from the bridge and you'll find me."

"Amanda, I'm sorry."

"Not good enough now. You did too much for too long, and pushed me past the point of tolerance. Be there, or I'll mail the envelopes with Susan's letter."

“How did you know about her?”

“Elementary, my dear Joseph. I have an eye for detective work. See you on Friday, darling. Ta-ta.”

Joseph cursed under his breath and stood, intent on taking a drink.

The door opened and Howard greeted him. “Are you busy on Friday morning?”

“Not to my knowledge.” He checked his calendar. “Nothing on my schedule. Why?”

“I want to discuss some changes in the level three branch, bringing Linda in to work under you for training, and some memos from the director. Put me down for nine o'clock. Keep cool until then. Have a good evening.”

“Good evening my ass,” Joseph spoke to the closed door. “I see only one way out of this and that's to kill her on sight or before Friday if I find her first. If she can do this now, she can do it in the future, and I won't live with this hanging over me.”

“Cooperate with her, Joseph,” he heard Joyce say.

“I'll cooperate, but on my terms this time.” He locked the filing cabinet and picked up his coat and briefcase when the phone beeped.

“Last call before I leave. A Joyce on line four, Mister Matkins.”

Joyce said, “I think I'm enjoying this, love. Are you coming by tonight?”

“Yes. I guess I will. I feel safer there than anywhere else. What do you have?”

“Wonderful news, I think. Come on over now. I'll fix dinner and we'll enjoy the night. Sound good?”

He considered her cooking and the desert later. “I'll be there.”

Joseph enjoyed dinner and the conversation with Joyce.

“Amanda isn't Amanda. The social security number is assigned to Jessica B. Holton, born in November 1943 in Ryderville, West Virginia, and deceased in June 1965.”

“Jessica Holton? She said her name was Amanda Amy Blake? This is strange, but does it have anything to do with what's happening now?”

“It might.”

“How did the Internal Revenue Service manage to let this slip by them? And why would she use a false number to start with? And if she's not Amanda, who the hell is she?”

“Amanda Amy Blake was the maiden name she used, correct?”

He nodded, still deep in thought.

“I'll work on her birth next. We'll see who she really is.”

Joyce went to sleep while Joseph tossed about, haunted by Amanda, the arrest in the office, the FBI and several other irritants. She woke at three o'clock to an empty bed, and she found him in the living room, intoxicated, with a bottle of her whiskey beside the sofa.

“This isn't the correct way. You must get serious if you expect to stay around me.” She left him sleeping on the sofa, locked her door and went back to bed.

Jalan, Ningla and Righli sat in the Research Lodge and watched Amanda Matkins from the time before her accident through the present.

“Incredible,” Ningla said reverently, and realized how the comment would be interpreted. “She's doing this on her own, with no prompting from a Jade Bear. Quite remarkable.”

Righli beamed and spoke. “It's a shame that she can't join us, don't you agree, Ningla? Damash of Three knows quality.”

Ningla cast a disdainful glance at the man. "The council has voted to . . ."

"And the council is sometimes wrong. It is more wrong not to admit mistakes and correct them," Righli finished for him. "If you wish extinction, then do away with yourself, but let others have the choice. That is the Life Principle."

Ningla started to rebut the comment when Jalan's voice stopped him. "Righli is right, Ningla. Do not make matters worse than they are." He stood and paced behind his chair and watched Amanda lay back in her seat at Indian River and go to sleep.

"Council," he said. "I move that we allow Damash of Three to run the Paraclipse and go to the full Jade Bear status. Also to that, I move we allow him to bring Amanda Matkins to us, regardless of our previous decisions."

"You can't be serious!" Ningla protested immediately.

"He will need to become a full Jade Bear soon or he'll remain trapped in the intermediary realms, Ningla. Would you like to take his place?"

"No. I would not."

Righli held up his right hand. "You have my yes vote. You might also consider another vote on the attrition. You might find that the majority of Jade City citizens wishes are contrary to yours."

The remaining members voted in favor of Jalan's motion, including a weak hand raise from Ningla.

Jalan stood and adjusted his tunic. "Protractor, reinstate the Portal and summon Damash of Three. Make the Paraclipse available for him at his will."

Amanda slept and dreamed once more.

She sat before a huge tunnel in the side of a mountain. The entrance looked like a thirty-foot-tall pair of parentheses. The outer surface of the left side was studded with millions of emeralds, and the right with rubies. The area between the two sides was violet light and hazy.

From her left, a group of people came and stopped before the tunnel. A smile crept onto her face and her pulse quickened when she recognized Damash of Three. The group of people went through a ritual in a language that was alien to her and then Damash of Three approached and knelt before her.

"Lady Amanda, I must ask you again, will you join me here in this place?"

She gazed at the rugged and handsome face. "I think so. This is strange."

"Will you watch me run the Paraclipse?"

"Yes, I will. What will it do for you?"

"Make me a full Jade Bear, and make it possible for me to bring you back here, through the Portal."

The conversation with the handsome man on his knees as if she were queen intrigued her. "Where's here?"

"The country of Jade, a country between two mountains that has remained hidden for four thousand years."

"Why do you want me here?"

"I want you to be my mate, to live with me and bear children. Much like the life outside but here there is a serenity and security that is not available beyond the shields."

She gazed at him and the area surrounding her. "Do men beat their wives here?"

He smiled and shook his head. "If they do, it is only once and they are sent to the outside, with no protection and left to die. That has happened once in four thousand years. You will be treated with dignity and respect here. You will not suffer the injustice you have outside."

"I accept. You are truly beautiful, Damash."

He stood. "Then cheer me through the Paraclypse and do not be alarmed by anything you see."

She nodded and he left her. "What are you doing, Self?" she asked. "Giving up nothing for something good," she answered. "Just stay out of the way and let it happen."

Amanda woke to the throbbing engines and waited for Brownie's words of encouragement as he passed. She stroked the Jade Bear and asked, "What are you doing for me? What's with all this lucid dreaming?"

The Jade Bear twitched its nose and turned its head. "Offering a way out," it spoke and returned to a stationary pose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brian entered his house, dropped a package on the counter and turned around the refrigerator. Suddenly, a handcuff closed around his right wrist and he was flipped around and face down on the floor. The other end of cuff fastened around the table leg.

“What the hell?” Brian shouted. His assailant sat on his left shoulder, pinning his left arm between legs.

“What's your name?” Amanda asked.

“Fuck you! I'll kick your ass when I get free.”

“Who said you're going to go free? Once more, what's your name?”

“None of your business.”

Amanda twisted his left arm behind him and gripped his little finger. “These little suckers are very fragile, you know? They hurt a lot when they break. Would you like to experience that?”

“Brian Drexler. What are you doing?”

“Why are you following me?”

“Are you Amanda?”

“Yes. Is Joseph behind this?”

“He hired me to find you.”

“What's he giving you?”

“Early release from probation and removing my history from the DELJIS system.”

She stared at the wall. “He's risking his career and possible legal action, just to find me? Wow. I must have scared him more than I thought. Do you know he wants to kill me?”

“I didn't care what he wanted you for. I liked what he offered and I put out the word.”

“I want you to stop following me. I'm going to meet him in three days, so you can stop. If you don't, I'll be back and get rough.”

“Why does he want to kill you?” He wanted to buy time to think of an escape plan.

“To keep my mouth shut, possibly. Have you ever been abused or beaten in your lifetime?”

“My father did that, when he was drunk or on cocaine. Joseph did that to you?”

“You got it. I got it once a week and maybe more and I could not defend myself, until now. I've been mentally and physically handicapped for about eight years.” She paused. “So, while you're thinking of a way to escape, consider this, if you didn't like it, why should I? I really don't want to hurt you or kill you. So my options are to call the police and let them bust you again with the cocaine you dropped on the counter, or you agree to leave me alone.”

“Are you serious?”

“When you've died seven times, it makes life very precious. I feel like a cat who has lost eight of his and I want to enjoy the time I have left. If Joseph finds me while I'm sleeping, I'm dead. So, yes, I'm very serious.”

She moved from his shoulder and placed the key in his left hand. She moved quickly from his reach and waited for him to stand. She was uncertain of his promise and flipped the lights on to watch him better.

“You're good, girl.” He tossed her the handcuffs and then the key. “How did you recover so fast?”

She shrugged. “I really don't know. It started with the last blow to the head. During the week or so since, the clarity is phenomenal. I still have some problems, but I'll work on them after I'm finished with Joseph. Now that I think of it, I should thank him for that. Otherwise, I'd still be a vegetable.”

“You're a pretty woman. Sorry you've had bad luck. I'll get off your back. You can count on that.”

The water was shut off Wednesday when Joseph arrived home. He soon found the electric, gas, and telephone disconnected. He closed and locked the door and went to Joyce's.

“I really feel like killing her. This is getting carried away.”

“Don't say that. That would be the end of us. It'll be over soon. You got a court date?”

“Not soon enough. It's sixteen days from today, with or without her.”

“Great. Hang tough. Any word about her attorney?”

“She's not mentioned it. She's only mentioned my intake interview on Friday.”

“She's a determined soul. I'll give her credit for that.”

“I'll give her a forty-five slug in the brain. She's driving me mad.”

“You'd better get that out of your mind,” she warned again. “I don't like that talk. I'm serious, and I'm thinking of our future. Wake up, Joseph. Are you listening? I'm thinking of OUR future.”

He sighed and sank back into the sofa and snuggled against her shoulder. “I'm with you, sweetheart. I won't do anything irrational to ruin us.”

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his neck. “If I didn't love you, I wouldn't be here and neither would you. I'm waiting for the end of this, so we can both get on with our life together.”

He agreed and relaxed. “You're a good woman. I don't think I deserve you sometimes. I do appreciate your love and patience. Really.”

Amanda watched as Damash of Three entered the Paraclypse and for a time, she felt that the whole affair was going to be long and grueling. He fought a variety of men in different sections and picked up one item in each section.

“This is like a video game,” she thought. She let her attention wander, and an armor-clad man stabbed Damash in his shoulder.

“Damash!” she cried and as if hearing her, he turned and took the long knife from the man and killed him.

After the next room, she determined that she was not simply an observer, she was a necessary partner for Damash. It took him being hurt again, but she concentrated on what he did and what happened in his environment from that time. She knew that one of the council members watched her more closely than necessary, but she dared not turn her attention from Damash.

“Let it pass, Self,” she whispered. “This will in some way benefit you. Pay attention to him and forget the old men on the council.”

She became his eyes and ears, she told him which way to go, and what to watch for and any dangers that he might encounter. Together they moved their way through the sections and levels into a long and torturous maze. At the center, he stood on the edge of a cliff and looked down on a giant statue of a Jade Bear. He looked up and she could clearly see his face, sweaty, cut, dirty, but smiling.

“We did it, my love. You learn exceptionally well and very quickly. I'm very proud of you.”

He held up a leather pouch in which he had placed everything he gathered inside the Paraclipse. “This is ours, Amanda. Without you, I would not be here. Thank you, my love. Until we meet again.”

He turned, crouched, leaped into the air and dropped into the giant Jade Bear.

The sides of the Paraclipse turned into a yellow haze and the center to brilliant orange. Red flames burst from the center and in a flash of green, the entire entrance disappeared, leaving nothing but jagged rock formations.

“Damash! No!” She screamed and was on her feet in an instant. “DAMASH!”

“Calm yourself,” Jalan said and held up a hand. “It will be fine. This is supposed to happen. You did extremely well, Amanda Matkins. You will be a very welcome addition to our community, if you choose to accept us.”

She seated herself again and felt confused. “If I accept them? They're so far above me that I feel inferior, like belly button lint,” she muttered.

She noticed that one of the council had left, but she did not know which one it was. She did know that the scrutiny had stopped with his departure.

Amanda woke with a start to a loud slap on the roof of her car.

She screamed and grabbed the gun from the door pocket and opened the door quickly.

“Hold it, Amanda.”

“Brownie? You scared the shit out of me! Why are you sneaking up on me like that? That's a good way to get killed!”

“You slept through the train? I didn't think you did that?”

She sighed, tossed the gun back inside the car, grabbed him and held him tightly. “I'm used to the train. I trust it, and I trust you. It's just a part of my environment. There's nothing to fear from you or the crew, so, I don't always wake, no matter how noisy it is.”

“Sorry, dear. I just wanted to say hello and see how things are going.”

“Can I ride along? I'll tell you my latest dream, the one that I just had before I was rudely interrupted.”

He caught her hand. “Welcome aboard the Indian River Choo-Choo. Just don't let the boss know.”

Thursday was a grueling day for Joseph and the probation office. Three of his clients had a fist fight in the lobby and the State Police had to break it up. Two probation officers in Joseph's section had a shouting match that led to blows and both were sent home. Howard divided their clients up between the remaining officers, and Joseph did not like the arrangement. At the end of the day, he opened his filing cabinet for the third time and took a drink. The door opened, and Howard stared at him while he still had the bottle in his hand. He groaned to himself and screwed the lid back on, dropped the bottle inside and closed the drawer.

Way to go, Joseph, he thought. How many times have I told you, lock the damned door first.

"I just wanted to remind you of our meeting in the morning."

"I remember. I'll be there. Wouldn't miss it for anything."

"What the hell are you doing? Have you forgotten the rules around here? Do you need a refresher? Maybe I'd better do that in the morning also."

"It's not that, Howard."

"Just shut up and give me the damned bottle! I don't care what the reason is, Amanda, your clients, your weakness, your parents, your long-dead ancestors! I don't care. I won't put up with this on the job. Give me the bottle and don't replace it."

Joseph roughly jerked the drawer open and tossed the bottle to Howard. "I'm sorry. The pressures getting too rough for me to deal with. However, I'm still a good probation officer. I'll get over this when I'm finished with Amanda."

Howard frowned and stuck the bottle in his coat pocket. "Go home. I'll see you in the morning." He closed the door behind him.

"Shit!" Joseph and hit the filing cabinet with his fist. "Damn you, Amanda." He glared at the closed door for a moment and sighed. "Are you too far gone to save yourself? If you're not careful, you'll lose Joyce also. Still, you've been in the game for more than a few years, and you know you're smarter than any of your clients."

He nodded in agreement. "With Susan gone, who is there to refute any accusations that might surface? Your reputation can survive one attack. No traces, no proof, no problem." He hit the filing cabinet again.

He sat down at the desk and called Brian. He listened impatiently for the answering machine to beep and left a fifth message. "Where the hell are you, Brian? Don't tell me that Amanda's got to you also? If I killed her eight years ago, I'd be out of jail and free now. Damn the luck."

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“Shit!” Joseph and hit the filing cabinet with his fist. “Damn you, Amanda.” He glared at the closed door for a moment and sighed. “Are you too far gone to save yourself? If you're not careful, you'll lose Joyce also. Still, you've been in the game for more than a few years and you know the ropes, and you know you're smarter than any of your clients.”

He nodded in agreement. “With Susan gone, who is there to refute any accusations that might surface? Your reputation can survive one attack. No traces, no proof, no problem.” He hit the filing cabinet again.

He sat down at the desk and called Brian. He listened impatiently for the answering machine to beep and left a fifth message. “Where the hell are you, Brian? Don't tell me that Amanda's got to you also? If I killed her eight years ago, I'd be out of jail and free now. Damn the luck.”

CHAPTER NINE

Jalan left the Paraclipse and followed Ningla to the man's favorite retreat, a log beside a small waterfall. For several moments he sat beside him, waiting for him to speak.

“What is wrong with you, Ningla? You have not been yourself lately.”

“Then who have I been?” Ningla asked curtly. “I am the one who led the movement for closing the Portal and stopping the hunts, and doing away with Jade Bears. And now what? Now what, I ask you?”

“Is what you've accomplished more important than what is correct according to the Life Principle? Would you leave Damash of Three in the area of no return?”

“This is not about Damash of Three!” Ningla knew he was loud, but the frustration made him too edgy. He slapped his legs and stood to kick at rocks. “And it is not about being stranded in the Intermediate area! I would not wish that on anyone!”

“Then what is it? Your strange behavior makes it difficult to understand you, my friend. I grow more concerned about you every day. Are you ill?”

Ningla snorted and then sighed. “I imagine you do.” He stood stationery a moment then chuckled softly. “Consider Amanda Matkins carefully. Consider her and tell me that Jade genetics are not a factor in her. How many outsiders have picked up the action and reason of the Paraclipse so quickly? She figured it out, unaided. One hundred percent of the others, including the best ones, even your mother had to be told.”

Jalan thought through the events of Amanda and the previous outsiders. “Maybe Damash.”

“Maybe Damash coached her in a dream sequence?” Ningla interrupted and stomped the ground. “No. No. No! He touched Jade Lines and displayed scenes of Jade City and Jade life, but he said nothing to her in them that has not been recorded. Review them for yourself if you do not believe me. Are you awake yet, Jalan? My gosh, I can't believe this!”

Jalan blinked and his mind ran through the events again, and he discerned the implication. “That would mean that there has been a violation of the Jade Bear Code.”

“Damash of Three's presence in the Intermediate Area is a result of a Jade Bear Code violation. Yet no one on the council has said a word about it or condemned anyone for it. It has been a long time ago, well over thirty years since the last orphan rescue, so I guess that investigations are no longer required. Would we punish someone for leaving him there? Would we punish someone for any violation of the Jade Bear Code now?”

Jalan rubbed his chin and flipped the white beard. “Wait a minute. Wait a jade moment! That genetics in Amanda would be impossible. The genes and chromosomes do not permit female births here. That is the reason for the hunt and then the rescue.”

“Really? I didn't know that,” Ningla said.

“You can be an irritating as well as a comforting friend. Did you know that? I'd like to smack you about now!” Jalan shook himself and stared at Ningla. “This is confusing. I cannot be certain but I feel that what you are telling me is not as important as what you are NOT telling me.”

Ningla smiled and sat again. "You could be right, but I know that we will get to the truth of the matter. We have been a good team at solving problems and dilemmas over the years, have we not?"

Joseph woke to a swish of Joyce's hair across his face.

"Are you set for your big day?"

To that he sighed and sat up on the edge of the bed. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be. We're down to fifteen days now. What a relief that will be."

"That's the spirit. How are the utilities coming?"

He dressed and followed her to the kitchen for coffee.

"I'll call you before I leave the office. All the utilities are back on except the phone and it won't be turned on until Monday. I'm going home from there and wait until time to go to Brandywine Park. I'll see you after that."

He arrived at work and had two clients phone in to report encounters with the Dover Police Department. That did little to improve his mood. At nine o'clock, he went to Howard's office.

"How's it going?"

"As usual." He grunted and sat stiffly in a chair. "Amanda wants to see me tonight, before we see the lawyers in court. I'm not looking forward to that."

"I can understand that. And I hate to add to your problems, but it's necessary." He opened a drawer and placed Joseph's bottle on the desk.

"In a way, this saved you. Denise took most of the heat in the DELJIS tampering, but I know you've been doing the same."

"Howard, that's a crock and you know it!"

"Save it! If you want to get testy about this, I can call the FBI back and let them find it. Would you prefer that?"

Joseph shook his head and sank back in the chair. "No. I can't believe any of the shit that's happened this month."

"Neither can I." He opened the drawer again and handed Joseph the envelope that Amanda sent him. "Take this and think about it. I don't want to be responsible for using this against you. Finding you drinking makes it easier on both of us, however, this is the last time, Joseph Matkins. I'm suspending you for three months, and during that time, I suggest you enroll yourself in a detox center, to help yourself."

"Howard, please don't do that."

Howard hit the desk. "Either accept the suspension or it's the FBI for the DELJIS tampering, altering client's records and removing court records from files! I also got a call from Susan Nester about a pimping operation. I'm trying to be easy on you because we're friends, but you're pushing it. I've covered for you as much as I can and I have limited choices left without screwing myself also. What would you do?"

Joseph sighed heavily, pressed hands against his queasy stomach and nodded. "Okay. I understand. Will I be back in three months, or is this simply a soft way of firing me?"

"You'll be back, but on probation. I promise that. If I wanted it otherwise, you'd have hit the road with Denise. Like I said, I'm doing you a favor. Don't blow it."

Howard handed him a letter. "I'm giving Linda Lutz your case load, so clear your desk of personal items, read and sign this and mail it back. Use the time wisely, and don't screw yourself in the process. Do you understand?"

“Thanks, Howard. I'll see you later.”

Inside his office, he opened the envelope and looked at Amanda's bruised face. He put his head in his hands and sat still for fifteen minutes.

“Okay. I guess this makes things easier.”

Joseph parked his car in the parking lot and looked around him, but he did not see Amanda's car anywhere. He walked along the river, going north, just like she told him. It was near dusk, but he could still see clearly and he looked everywhere he could think she would be. The river turned away from the paved pathway and the environment grew quieter and his pace slowed accordingly.

Amanda watched him and smiled. She prepared herself and when he neared her, she dropped from the tree and swung the piece of rail car air hose that Brownie had given her. She shouted gleefully when it hit its intended mark, across his shoulder blades.

Joseph grunted loudly and fell face down on the ground. His right hand went for the handgun in the waist of his pants, but before he could get it clear, a handcuff snapped around the wrist and she pulled the arm around behind his back. She put most of her weight on the arm and wrist.

“Naughty, naughty,” she scolded him. She pried the gun from his hand and tossed it aside before he regained his senses. She leaned farther across him, grabbed his left sleeve and wrestled the arm around him also. She chuckled and moved away when she closed the left side of the handcuff.

“Stop this, Amanda! Stop it now. Let me go!”

“Whoa, darling. I don't think that someone who's handcuffed, face down on the ground and disarmed should make demands.”

“What do you want?”

“Nothing!” she shouted back. “When I'm finished, I want nothing from you. Not the house, not alimony, not one thing that I don't already have.”

He made no response and waited for her.

“Someone told me once that the muscles in the calves of the legs are peculiar.” She picked up the hose and hit him across the legs. “They say that when someone is hit like this that walking and standing is difficult and most painful the next few days. Be sure to let me know if it is.”

He screamed and cursed her. “Who are you? Why didn't you tell me that Amanda wasn't your real name? Why are you covering your real name, Jessica Holton?”

Amanda stepped back, startled at the outburst. She experienced chills along with gooseflesh.

“Whoa. Where did that come from? Who the hell's Jessica Holton?”

“You tell me. That's what your Social Security Number tells us. You're not Amanda Amy Blake, so who are you? Have you committed a crime and use Amanda as a cover?”

“Have you run a DELJIS check? What did it tell you?”

“Nothing.”

Amanda sighed as she felt her control slip back into place. “Then Amanda I am and I'll not worry about this Jessica woman. She's probably someone from your past, like Susan Nester. Did you or Joyce come up with that?”

“Joyce did some investigating and found it.”

“Have you set a court date yet?”

“Yes. It's fifteen days from today in Family Court.”

She stuck her hand in his left hip pocket. "This envelope has the card for my lawyer and five hundred dollars for you to give to Joyce for the retainer fee she provided. When we meet the first time in court, I'll sign the papers. I won't contest it, for I want nothing but freedom."

"Then why are you doing this? You've already caused me to be suspended. Why?"

She considered his statement. "You caused your suspension. I didn't cause you to drink, and I damned sure didn't cause you to hit me the first time, or the last. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise. Maybe you'll do something about your problems before you ruin the relationship you have with Joyce."

She paused a moment. "Do you know what celibacy is?"

"Yes."

"Good. That is what you practice, starting tonight and for the next fifteen days. Spend that time away from Joyce and the pleasures of her body. Think about every time your fists or feet hit me. Think about every harsh word you spoke about me to your friends when you thought I couldn't hear straight. You can survive without her sex and touch for that long. Avoid it and consider the pain I suffered, because you had no tolerance."

She sat on his legs and removed his shoes and socks. "That's the end of your intake interview and that's your probation. I'm done and you're free in fifteen days. Just do the right thing for once. Go to her house, tell her, and go home to serve your sentence. Okay?"

For a moment he said nothing and considered his options. "Okay."

She gathered his shoes, the gun and the hose and moved them a few yards away. She returned to him and knelt beside him. "I must thank you for the last time you hit me. It pulled all the scrambled parts of me back together. I thank you for that, but nothing else during the last eight years."

She unlocked the left side of the handcuffs, and held his hand a moment. "I'll leave your shoes at the car. You're enterprising enough to free yourself now." She lay the key in front of him. "Ta-ta, darling. See you in court."

CHAPTER TEN

Amanda smiled when Joyce opened the door.

“Hello. I hear you're investigating me. Want to talk about it?”

Joyce tried to close the door, but Amanda's hands got in the way. “I won't bother you or hurt you. I promise. I'd really like to know more about this Jessica Holton. I'm not her, or at least I don't think I am.”

Joyce frowned but she relented and let Amanda inside. “From what I can find out, you are. You also were not born in Topeka, Kansas.”

“So what's it all about?”

“Your Social Security Number is assigned to Jessica Holton, who was born in Ryderville, West Virginia. At least that's what the computers and records report. The problem is that Jessica Holton died in an auto accident in nineteen-sixty-three. That's the year you were born, correct?”

“Yes.” She felt the chills and curiosity again while Joyce spoke. “Do you think it's only a computer error?”

Joyce shook her head. “Under normal circumstances, I might, but with the jade bear appearing in my bathroom, I don't think so. You're either hiding something or else you truly don't know. At this moment in time, I'm not sure which one I'd prefer.”

Amanda's eyes widened. “The jade bear appeared here?”

“Right after you called me the first time. It told me to cooperate with you and stay on the outside. I did, but this thing with the social security number and your birth won't let me rest.”

“That's strange, for I've had the bear since a few years before the accident and only recently have I ever dreamed of it. The dreams are strange but very beautiful, the kind that leave you feeling warm and cozy. Do you know what I mean?”

Joyce nodded.

“Anyway, how did you get all that information about me? Are you a private investigator?”

Joyce shrugged. “No. That's bizarre also, for under normal circumstances I'd be told that the information is classified, restricted, or not available. However, no one asks why I want it, or ever asks if I'm Amanda or Jessica. They simply give me what I ask for. For example, do you have a sister?”

“I do, but I haven't heard from her in over ten years. Her name's Janet Blake.”

“Her name is now Janet Blackstone, she's married, has two children and lives in Springfield, Illinois. When I talked to her, she first denied that she was your sister, but later admitted that you were a part of the family. After that, she gave me the number and address of an aunt in Ryderville. Her name is Helen Blake Waltman. She has a Bible and a diary that she's sending, although she told me that if I ever try to get her in court, she'll not acknowledge talking to me and forbid me to give you her number. What did you do, Amanda?”

Amanda looked dumbfounded. “I have no idea.” She shrugged. “Truly I don't. So far as I remember, most of my childhood was happy. It wasn't until, maybe junior high school, that the verbal abuse, mistrust and isolation started. It began with my mother, then Janet and then dad.

“The day after graduation, my clothes were on the front porch and I was told to leave and not return. Then I hurt so much that I left without an argument. The biggest hurt came from not knowing why they turned on me.”

“You can't remember any major event that led up to the beginning?”

“No.” Amanda's forehead wrinkled and her eyes scrunched closed. “Wait a minute. Maybe two months before that, my dad talked about a woman dying in Kansas and leaving an inheritance for her niece.” She jumped from the chair and paced the floor. “Yes, her death and then the abuse. What was her name? They were looking for Jessica Holton, but I don't know her and I'm not her. What is the meaning of this?” She felt nervous and her heart beat too fast.

Joyce caught her and sat her on the sofa. “Are you okay?”

“Beatrice Minnick! The aunt's name was Beatrice. They were in their bedroom and I remember hearing dad read the newspaper to mom and then their voices got too low for me to hear clearly.” She took a deep breath and willed herself to relax. “Why didn't I remember that before?”

Joyce rubbed her shoulders. “I don't know. Maybe the Bible and diary will give some good revelations. Can we talk about Joseph for a moment?”

Amanda shrugged. “Sure. You really love him, don't you?”

“Yes. I don't care for his abusing alcohol, or his abusing you, but like I said, he's not that way with me.”

“I'm glad. I think that before the court date, he'll become a much better man for you. I really wish you luck.”

“Thanks. What else have you done, that I don't know?”

“Well, I sent his boss a few photos of me, along with a letter about his drinking. He told me that he was suspended on Friday morning. I'd recommend you persuade him to go through a detox center, like Brawnmyr, in Malvern, Pennsylvania. If he gets that under control, he'll be much better.”

“Well, we'll work through it. He didn't tell me anything else, except the celibacy part. That was unique. I liked that.”

“I want nothing except what I have right now. When I go before the judge, I won't contest it. I don't want the house, the other car, alimony, nothing. I'll also return most of the money I took. It's strange, like this tiny voice is guiding me, and advising me to not hurt him like he hurt me. I wanted to kill him, but I can't. The term, Life Principle, keeps coming to mind, and it tells me to let him live, so I will. I'm done with him when we go to court.”

Four days later, Amanda sat in a coffee shop with Brownie in Wilmington. She told him of all that had transpired since their last meeting.

“So, what do you think? Just talking about this Jessica makes me shiver. Could I be living a dual life, like some of the people profess in the tabloids? What should I do?”

Brownie grinned and shook his head. “I don't think you have a dual life. It might make for a good novel or television show, but I don't put much credit on the tabloid stories. However, I do believe in family secrets, the skeletons in the closet archetypes that surface years later and wreck havoc with the descendants. For something like that to happen to you is a safer bet. If you were this Beatrice's niece, what happened to the inheritance?”

She frowned. “I never thought about that. At the time, I was young and naive. After that I was abused and isolated and I never considered it again. Is there some way to check into that after thirty years?”

“There is, but it sounds like Joyce is doing that already. Maybe she'll turn up something.” Her beeper sounded and she took it from her purse. “Well, Joyce is paging. Maybe you're right.” She stood and kissed him goodbye. “Thanks, love. I'll see you later.”

“I wanted to have you here when I opened the package,” Joyce told her. “You can do the honors, since it's really yours anyway.”

Amanda tore the brown paper cover and inspected the Bible and a very small diary. She lay the Bible aside, opened the diary and started reading.

I feel the strong need to write this, but I don't know who will read it. My name is Jessica Belinda Holton and I was born in Topeka, Kansas. My family moved to the foot hills of Wyoming when I was five, so my recollection of Topeka is too dim and remote to mention. I enjoyed the hills of Wyoming, though. As I grew older, I fell in love with animals and had the goal of becoming a veterinarian. It seemed that I had a natural charm for animals. I could tame the wildest of horses and feed wild birds, squirrels, and raccoons from my hands. We, the animals and I, had a special, natural bond that satisfied both our needs. I didn't like hunting, not even for the meats. I know that my family and neighbors did it for a food source but I still disagreed with them. I spent a great deal of time out in the hills and forests and less time with the family, but I didn't mind. I was where I loved to be. The family, however, did not share my love and enthusiasm. They resented me and by the time I was twenty-three, the term 'Old Maid' was used with more frequency. It wasn't fashionable for a woman to be twenty-three and not married. Still, I didn't mind. When I was thirty, I was in the hills, about five miles from my home and I came across a hunting party. Three of the group were relatives, my father Ned, my brother Jack, and my uncle Walter. The other five I didn't recognize. They were hunting grizzly bear, for food and sport.

They enjoyed roasting the meat over hickory logs, but I never cared for it. I followed them from a distance for two hours as they supposedly had a track to follow. Suddenly I heard shouting and heard several shots. I moved to the top of a hill and saw the men surrounding a green-colored bear. They were astonished, dismayed as they discussed what to do. I remember looking at the green bear with sunlight glinting on his silvery teeth and I felt a great sorrow. The uniqueness of a green bear didn't affect me as much as the fact he was shot and killed. At the end of the discussions, they dug a shallow grave, buried him, and covered it with loose rocks.

I sat on the hillside and cried while they buried him and for a while after they left. Then I figured it was safe and I went down to the grave site to get a better look at such a magnificent creature. I worked for a few minutes to uncover his head and when it was clear, I nearly fainted. The one eye that was exposed, blinked. I hastily cleared the area of his muzzle and felt his hot, shallow breath on my hands. His teeth appeared to be razor sharp, but I felt no fear of him, I was too excited, and amazed to find him still alive.

It took an hour to uncover him completely and during that time, he breathed labouredly, blinked and when he could find strength, his eyes followed my movements. By the time I finished, I counted ten bullet wounds and three of them should have been fatal, still he lived. Only then did my curiosity really turn on and I considered what a green bear would be doing in the hills of Wyoming.

Then I thought of water. I ran to the river at the base of the hill, removed my blouse and soaked it in the cold water. I returned to the bear and squeezed the water out so it fell on his mouth. Four times I did that and then he began to struggle to rise.

I watched his undaunted effort for about a half-hour before he finally gained his feet. He inspected me, sniffed me and my blouse on the ground at my feet. I asked if he wanted to go to the river and he groaned as he moved his head. I gathered up my blouse and we slowly made our way down to the river bank. He drank for a time and then turned to look at me again. He lay down on his side and closed his eyes.

I made a comment about bringing a veterinarian to tend his wounds and he growled and shook his head, as if he understood and did not want it.

I gathered some wood and made a campfire for the night. I had decided I would stay with him until he could manage on his own or died. It seemed the least I could do. I put on my damp blouse and curled up beside him, resting my head on one of his massive shoulders.

Near morning, I was awakened by his wet muzzle against my cheek and a lick from his rough tongue. I sat up and stirred the campfire and added a few logs. The bear seemed in much better condition and drank some more water. Then he stood on his hind legs and roared loudly. A green haze surrounded him and I scrambled a few feet back from him. The growling sounded rather like a chant and then there was a brilliant flash of jade green light and a very handsome man stood in the bear's place.

I backed farther away from him then.

He spoke gently but with commanding tones. "If you did not fear me as a bear, you need never fear me as a man."

I stopped and waited for him to speak more or move. "My name is Ningla, and I do not belong here. I was hunting with a party of twelve, and suddenly, I was the hunted. Thank you for saving my life. You are most kind."

"If you don't belong here, where do you belong?" I asked him.

He smiled wistfully. "In the country of Jade, located in the mountains of Switzerland and hidden from the rest of the world."

"Are the Jade people magicians?" I asked, considering the impossible change from bear to man.

He laughed at the question. "What is your name?"

"Jessica Holton," I answered. "Why are you laughing at me?"

"Because you're so innocent and pure. So innocent, carefree, loving and tender. You are a marvelous work of art. A treasure beyond measured worth."

The words of kindness and the touch of his hand on my face were delightful after so much harshness and ridicule from my family.

"The Jade residents are not magicians. We are people living out of place and time and we have for nearly four thousand years. The men of Jade, when it is their time, run an obstacle course called the Paraclipse. In the end, if we survive, we achieve a level of mental ability that is phenomenal, and the strength, agility and endurance of a bear. We are still human, but we exercise parts of the mind others cannot touch."

I asked what he was hunting, but he did not answer.

He kissed me and slowly removed all my clothing and he seduced me there in the mountains. I was a virgin until that moment, naive and totally lost, except for the feelings he opened for me. I confess, I did not resist, for I loved every second and I still remember my shivers, my wild heartbeat, his touch, his kiss, the red fiery sun peeping over the mountain peak,

the birds chirping and flying around us, everything. I went to sleep, more peaceful than I ever remembered, lying naked on the ground. When I woke, he was gone and lying on my blouse was a huge green emerald.

“Wow,” breathed Joyce. “Talk about unusual events.”

“Ningla sounds familiar from my dreams,” Amanda pondered. “If I’m not mistaken, he’s on the Council of Jade. Maybe that explains the scrutiny I received during the last lucid dream.”

“Please go on. I want to hear more.”

Amanda handed her the diary. “Your turn.”

Problems seem to arise when you don't need them. During the last few months, I have received three beatings from my father, because I can't produce a man for the father of my child. What can I tell them that would suffice? If I told them of the green bear they thought was killed, I would be beaten and locked away in an asylum. I can't attach the child to anyone else in the community because I don't date. I'm lonely, scared half silly and I've nowhere to turn. Aunt Beatrice, Walter's wife, took the emerald that Ningla left me and scornfully said that tramps and whores were not deserving of good things. What am I to do? I'm seven months pregnant; I don't know how to have a baby or be a mother; I can't tolerate the beatings or the cruel abuse. I fear they will damage the baby inside me. I've been to the mountain where my child was created so many times it's pathetic, hoping I will find Ningla and he will make things better for me. But now I have quit going there and must face this alone.

I hope that I will be forgiven. I am denied the right to go to church, because of my embarrassing condition. I have no options it seems and there is talk of stopping the pregnancy. I can't let that happen. I don't know what has happened to me, but the changes with the pregnancy alarm me sometimes. But this I firmly resolve, if it kills me, the child within will be born. That is mostly because of the voices I hear at night telling me about the Life Principle. I've stolen \$30 from the cigar box in mother's sewing closet, and I'm leaving town. I'm going east, for that's where the sun rose on the morning my child was created.

“That was all in Wyoming,” Joyce said. “The next entry is for near the delivery time.”

Things look better now. I've found a home in Ryderville, West Virginia. A wonderful couple, John and Alice Blake, who want a child but can't have one, have taken me in. I've been too long without food, or so the doctors say. The month it took to get here was grueling and there was little food available. The doctor says I should not deliver. The midwife, Ruth Morgan, says to trust in God, but both tell me that I'm far too emaciated to deliver and that I'll die in childbirth. If I die, I die, but the child will live. I've decided to go with Ruth and hang the doctor.

We've decided on a name for the child already. Amanda Amy Blake if a girl, and Aaron Arnold Blake if a boy. It saddens me to know that I have nothing to give the child but life, but that is all I can do. I would like to watch it grow and love it, but all I can hope for is to live long enough to see it once before I die. My life is too full of pain and tears to write more. If you ever read this, Amanda or Aaron, know that I loved you while I carried you and gave you all that I had, which was my life.

“That's sad.” Joyce wiped at the tears on her cheeks.

“Awesome!” Amanda sniffled. “I don't know what to say.”

“No need to say anything. This pretty much says it all. You're unique and special in some way. What do you think will happen next?”

“I think I'll soon be the wife of a Jade Bear named Damash of Three. And to be truthful, I can hardly wait. From what I've seen, it's fantastic and so peaceful there.”

“That doesn't explain the Social Security Number, but that's okay now. Maybe it was done intentionally for this moment in time, like fate or destiny put the diary in the right hands at the right time for discovery. Does that make sense?”

Amanda nodded and stood. “Thank you.” She picked up the diary and Bible and left the wrappings. “I want to go, if you don't mind.”

She lay the books on the passenger seat and drove away from Joyce's house, dazed and so lost in thought, that she did not notice Joseph following her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“So, you are Amanda's father,” Jalan said, sitting beside Ningla on a log at the waterfall.

“Yes. I was on my last hunt and I was abandoned, much as Damash of Three was. I had the misfortune of being seen while in the Jade Bear and you know the rest. Amanda is an exact copy of Jessica. If you could place Jessica and her beside each other, you could not tell the difference.”

Jalan chuckled in spite of himself. “Maybe that explains the reluctance to open the Portal. For someone who opposed the hunts, and opposed mating with outside women, it is quite ironic to find that you dabbled once and left a progeny behind.”

“You find that amusing?” Ningla snorted, and then grinned. “I can imagine what Righli will say when he learns. I wish I were young enough to contest him, simply to defeat him in a fight. Yes, I did that with Jessica. It was a one-time thing and I really do not know why I did. However, after careful scrutiny, I find that her genetics are different, quite possibly because she was created and delivered outside the Jade community, where there is no infusion of atmosphere and mineral intake. I would be willing to bet that when she bears children that we will have the first Jade woman born in our history. Maybe this is fate working its hand for our meddling with life.”

“Did you ever consider going back for Jessica?” Jalan clapped his friend's shoulder. “I find it inconceivable that you would leave her there.”

“A few times I did, but after the bad one we let inside, I forgot about it until Damash of Three's message and request. It has haunted me ever since. I think it is time to pay for those sins and correct some injustices, not only to Amanda, but to the Jade Colony as well. What do you think?”

“I agree. You have my support and we know what that is worth. I think we also will have Righli's, after a good round of shocking reports about your dabbling, and your progeny. The rest will follow us.” He chuckled again.

“I am grateful that you are on my side in this matter,” Ningla said and joined the laughter. “That was a wild morning, Jalan. I remember it vividly after all those years.”

Joseph followed Amanda until she turned south from Chicken House crossing and drove along the tracks. He watched the headlights bobbing and then turn back toward the highway and stop. He smiled in the darkness, satisfied with himself and his discovery. “I have you now, sweetheart. I'll divorce you soon, before we go to court.” He turned around beside the tracks and drove home.

Near two in the morning, he returned to Chicken House and parked his car beside one of the huge coops that gave the crossing its name. He took a rifle from his trunk, rested it across his shoulder and walked south along the tracks.

Indian River train UIR-28 rolled over Chicken House crossing shortly after that. The head lamp illuminated Joseph a few seconds before he dodged into the brush.

“Did you see that?” Conrad, the engineer asked. “What’s he hunting here at night?”

“Deer?” offered the brakeman.

“No. I don’t think so,” said Conrad and rolled past the switch point. He looked and saw the now familiar car, with Amanda sleeping. “I don’t like this. He’s up to no good, and I’m not going to take chances.”

He keyed the radio mike. “Harrington Yard, this is UIR 28. Would you call Millsboro Police and report a man carrying a rifle along the tracks, south of Chicken House and north of the switch point? Our friend is sleeping here tonight and I think the prowler’s up to no good. Over.”

Brownie heard the transmission and Harrington’s response that they would notify the police.

“You copy that, Brownie? You two should come together about the switch point. Be careful. I don’t like this at all.”

“Tell him that,” Brownie replied and picked up a piece of air hose from the one he cut for Amanda. He moved to the back railing of the caboose and stood where he could see the east side of the tracks. He was grateful for a full moon that provided enough light for him to see fairly well.

Joseph stopped when he could see the windshield and he grinned. Amanda sat up to watch the train go by and to take another sip from her water bottle on the dashboard. She glanced north and caught a brief glimpse of a man with a rifle and she opened the door. As she started to move, the windshield and the jade bear shattered and pieces of both lodged in her right shoulder as the bullet grazed her bone. She fell to the ground face down and heard herself screaming.

She tried in vain to move her right arm and willed herself to stop the screaming and move away from the car. She wiggled, squirmed and crawled around the car and into the relative safety of the brush away from the tracks. Once inside the relative safety of the brush, she paused for a moment. Her right arm came around slowly but the burning pain in her shoulder did not diminish. She twisted around and raised her head until she could barely discern the car.

Brownie swung down and hit Joseph with the hose, hard enough to knock the rifle from his hands and him to the ground. He recovered himself quickly and kicked Joseph in the stomach before he could move. The tussle was brief. He grabbed the rifle up and chambered a round.

“You move and it will be your last, dirt bag! Get your hands where I can see them! Now!”

Joseph moved his hands slowly around and over his head as he lay on the ground.

“Make yourself comfortable. You’re not going anywhere until the police get here,” Brownie said firmly.

He turned and glanced ruefully at the car. “Amanda!” He shouted loudly and listened to his voice echo off the trees and stalled coal cars.

Amanda heard him shout but she could not answer for crying from the pain that ripped through her body. She tried to stand but her muscles refused to respond.

Oh, no! I’m going to return to this mental hell. Please don’t let this happen, she begged silently.

“Amanda!” Brownie shouted again and received no response.

Amanda’s car filled with a flash of jade green light that illuminated a large area of the tracks. The sides strained and the top creaked as all three separated. The tires exploded from the excessive strain and from a large green cloud emerged a Jade Bear, standing nearly twenty feet tall.

Joseph stared agape mouthed at the bear.

“Oh, wow!” sighed Brownie.

“Damash of Three? Beautiful,” breathed Amanda.

The bear rose on his hind legs and took three waddling steps north. He reached down and scooped Joseph up in one hand and held him above his head. He growled and Joseph shook with fright.

“Put me down!”

The jade bear tightened his grip and moved Joseph closer to his wide open mouth.

Amanda concentrated and forced herself to her feet. She moved slowly at first and then faster, around the car to stand before the jade bear. She saw the fear on Joseph's face and the determination on the bear's.

“Please don't kill him, Damash! Let him go!”

The bear stopped, tightened his grip, and growled again.

“Damash of Three, please put him down. I'm okay. I'm alive and waiting for you. Don't start us off with his death. He won't hurt me again.”

She begged him for Joseph's life, dropped to her knees and clasped her hands in as pitiful a method as she could. “I helped you through the Paraclipse. Remember? This is not too much to ask. Put him down and let's do the Confusion Rite, like you did on Level 2 in chamber 17 of the Paraclipse. Let's not turn away from the Life Principle.”

The jade bear extended his arm and dropped Joseph to the ground.

With another flash of green light, Damash stood in his place in human form. “We would not violate the life principle by killing him, since he is broken, but you are wise, my love. Because of your heartfelt pleas, we will do it your way.”

In the distance, police sirens wailed.

“Hurry, Damash. Let's do it before they get here. We don't need that complication.”

Damash turned and smiled at Brownie. “Thank you for your kindness, sir. Please go now.”

Brownie nodded, winked at Amanda and ran to the caboose.

“Conrad, let's get this load to the river and go home. Everything's under control here.

Amanda's safe.”

Damash held Amanda's hands. “This will be easier than inside the Paraclipse.”

“Good. I like easy.”

“What are you going to do?” Joseph asked warily.

“Help you. Be grateful for her intercession, because I would do it another way. I have no sympathy for men who abuse women.”

Damash started a chant in a strange language and Amanda joined him until their voices blended into one voice.

Joseph shook his head and felt dizzy. He looked back along the tracks and saw the rifle laying where Brownie dropped it. Immediately a sharp pain stabbed into his right shoulder. He swore and felt his arm go numb as he groped to touch it with his left hand. His head jerked back and felt as if someone had kicked him in the face. The same invisible foot kicked him in the chest and sent him flying backward. He lay gasping on his back and staring at the stars. Visions of Amanda played through his mind and all were painful. His heart beat wildly and he felt he could not breathe enough to keep himself alive. Amanda screamed. Amanda cried. Amanda hurt. Amanda begged. Joseph raised his hands to cover his ears.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I'll stop!” His screams ended in tears.

Pieces of the jade bear from Amanda's car flew through the air and lodged in Joseph's forehead and chest. His body jerked as if shocked with electricity, his muscles contorting into

seemingly impossible positions. The jade pieces glowed brilliantly for a few seconds and disappeared. Joseph lay on the ground on his back, trembling and moaning.

The two police cars turned along the tracks and after a few feet, they both stopped. One rolled down his window. "What are we doing here?"

"Beats the hell out of me. Car three to dispatch. Do we have a trouble call in for Chicken House?"

"Negative. Not unless you wish to pick up a chicken for lunch."

They turned and left the area.

Joseph woke in a sweat and although he could not move, he could hear Damash and Amanda talking. He felt a sensation, like he traveled, but being trapped inside the constant jade green light, he could discern nothing for a reference.

"What do you feel about Amanda?" Damash asked.

"Amanda? Amanda is okay."

"Do you want to hit her?"

"No," Joseph replied immediately.

"What do you feel about Amanda?"

"Amanda? Who's Amanda?" Joseph asked, confused by the question.

Amanda squeezed his hand. "Do you love Joyce?"

"I do, very much."

"I'm Amanda. Do you want to hurt me?"

"No. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Amanda kissed him. "Goodbye, Joseph."

"Who are you?"

"It's not important. Go to Joyce. Listen to her. Her love for you is great. Will you do that for her?"

"I will. Thank you. Who are you? Do I know you?"

"That's far enough," said Damash.

Joseph's body jerked violently again and he blacked out.

Several moments later, he sat up then stood, cast a glance to Amanda and Damash, waved and walked north along the tracks. He sidestepped the rifle and left it laying on the ground.

Damash placed an arm around Amanda's waist. "You're a good woman. He owes you a great debt."

She nodded in agreement. "Joyce will be good for him and he'll be much nicer now. Life is a very precious commodity, given by God. Death should be left to God also. Isn't that the first major part of the Life Principle?"

"Yes. Are you ready to go?"

"I've been waiting for the invitation, Damash of Three. Let's go and pay my father a visit. Will he deny you the right to marry me?"

"I doubt it. He'll probably be very humble and happy."

He turned to the north and held up both hands. "Council of Jade, open the Portal and grant passage for Damash of Three and the orphan, Amanda Amy Blake."

From the north, a huge jade green disc appeared in the sky and from the outer rim, several lights shone and came together and traveled to a few feet away from Amanda and Damash. They joined hands and stepped into it. The beam withdrew and the disc disappeared from the sky.

Epilogue

The train rumbled across the switch point and headed toward Indian River. Amanda sat on a wooden bench beside the track. She waved and held a finger across her lips when she stood in the beam of the headlight. The engineer saw her there, waved merrily and nodded.

Brownie swung down and turned the switch to the correct position and locked it into place. he headed toward the caboose and stopped short.

“Amanda!” He ran to her, grabbed her and swung her around.

“You look great, sweetheart! How are you?”

“I’m fine, silly. Did you miss me?”

“Silly thing to ask.” He gave her a quick kiss. “Of course I missed you. We never got the chance to go to dinner, you know.”

She shrugged. “Well, I’m here for three days, so you can correct that.” From her dress pocket, she retrieved a small velvet bag, handed it to him, and watched gleefully as he opened it.

“Wow!” He held up one of the sparkling diamonds. “This is great.”

“Is it worth a hotel room and a few dinners? I have no money or credit cards.”

“That will work well. Come on. Let’s get this done and go home.”

She joined him on the caboose.

“You’re pregnant, aren’t you?” he asked, inspecting her in the interior lights.

“Slightly.” She giggled and blushed. “It feels good, Brownie. I feel good. Life feels good.”

“It’s not mine?”

“No. We created nothing that night except a deeper friendship.”

“Are you on, Brownie?” Conrad asked.

Amanda grabbed the mike. “We’re on and I’m riding shotgun. Let’s put this train to bed and go home.”

Amanda handed Brownie a small Jade Bear. “You’re good, my friend. Keep your eyes and mind open. There’s room for good people in Jade, all the time. When you meet her, come on. You’ll always be welcome.”

Brownie stuck the Jade Bear in his shirt pocket and kissed her again as the train jerked forward. “You got a deal, love.”

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About the Author

J Bennington: Fresh out of High School, I spent 21 years in the Air Force, serving in Viet Nam, Thailand, United States, and Germany. After retiring from the Air Force, I drove a limousine under contract for Conrail, moving train crews from stations to trains, and anywhere needed. I wrote 5 books, longhand, while waiting in rail stations, State Prison fields at 2 A M, and forlorn rail crossings right out of Stephen King novels with all the demons and terror. Following that interesting but tiring job, I tackled a few independent businesses that failed. Worked two years in a restaurant as the salad bar manager. Worked 1 year as Electric Meter Reader for the City of Dover, DE. Then a friend arranged a part-time clerical position in the State Probation Office. From there I applied for full-time positions and worked 20 years for the Department of Transportation, selling Hauling Permits to truckers or trucking companies, billing companies for Outdoor Advertising, and later I paid the bills to State Contractors. I retired for good in February 2014 and now I'm doing what I love, writing and working to publish the books collecting electronic dust over the years.

Other Books By This Author

Please visit your favorite eBook retailer to discover other books by [J Bennington]:

Other books pending publication:

Evil Love (Published May 2015)

Virginia Rose (Coming June 2015)

Idoya Valdez (Coming June 2015)

Silent Train of Dreams (Coming June 2015)

The Gemini Demons (Coming late in 2015)

Sneak Preview:

Virginia Rose excerpt:

A merciless sun beat down through a cloudless sky, scorching the earth and threatening to turn it into powder. The same threat was applied to the man whom lay face down beside the road. The shade of the trees above were of little help against the rays that burned through the parched leaves and attacked him in many spots. He had lain there in the dust for hours, hoping the lack of movement would spare him a heat stroke. Although he dozed occasionally, simply from boredom, he thought more frequently than he dozed.

Of one thing he was certain, the one fact in his life was the secret that the whole world realized and shared, Bower's Point, in the Province of Delaware was the last stop on earth. The dying seaport was bereft of life; it was the catch-all for the hopeless, the used-up, the low life people. Bower's Point was the hand basket filled with rejects resigned to descend into hell. Those who came there, stayed there, suffered there, and died there. There was no way out and no hope for the ones trapped in Bower's Point.

He felt a nudge and lazily opened one eye. He saw a set of toes, covered with dust and dried mud. He opened the eye wider and saw a small ankle that disappeared into the folds of a brown skirt. It intrigued him enough to move his head and open both eyes. The skirt, faded from age and wear, but clean, ended at the woman's waist, and was topped by a yellowed white blouse, partially covered with a light brown cloak.

The woman's tanned face had a weathered look, as if she was the spouse of a farmer. Her cheeks were dimpled and soft. Her nose was small and slightly tucked under at the tip. Her hazel brown eyes looked at him with concern. Her jet-black hair which surrounded her face fell straight and tangled at the moment, but he could see the past effects of curling above the ears and at the nape of her neck. A faded yellow scarf was tied loosely around her head.

"Are you dead?" she asked when he had looked at her for a moment.

"No, I'm not dead yet." He moved a little, shifted his body, yawned and stretched his muscles. "I may look dead, but I was just trying to stay calm and hoping the sun wouldn't bake me before it sets."

"Pity," she said. "I was rather hoping to claim your coat to keep me warm this coming winter."

"That wasn't very nice, Miss," he frowned.

A tiny smile fluttered across her face. "Since you've known me, have I ever claimed to be nice?"

"Who are you?" he asked, still frowning. "Where did you come from? I haven't seen you here before."

"I'm Virginia Rose," she said, bowing her head slightly. "I came here from Philadelphia. It's taken me a while to get here. In fact, I just arrived. That's why you haven't seen me. Were you looking for me?"

He shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck with a parched, wrinkled hand. “Why the bloody hell would I be looking for you?” he growled and stretched again.

“Pity,” she sighed. “It’s been like that my whole life. No one ever looks for me, but they ask about me. Who’s that? Virginia Rose who? Never heard of her.”

“Well, I wasn’t looking for Virginia Rose, I’m sorry to say. You do look like you were a fine young woman, once.”

She raised her brows. “I beg your pardon?” she spoke curtly. “You told me I wasn’t very nice, wishing to keep warm this winter. Now look at you. You’ve become intimate with me and you insult my looks. You have a lot of nerve, sir!”

His frown deepened. “I’ve not become intimate with you,” he informed her. “I haven’t touched you at all!”

“Pity. “That’s in line with no one looking for me. It’s depressing you know. I mean you know my name, and where I’m from. Then you tell me I’m old and not pretty anymore. You should look at yourself. I think you are older than dirt and I’ll bet you your coat that I’m younger than you.”

She sat beside him. “Well?”

He suddenly laughed at her expression. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean it as an insult. I meant I should have been looking for you many years ago when you were . . . Maybe I’d better think of something else to say.”

She laughed and threw her head back. “Well, since you know me, would it be possible for me to know you?”

“That’s fair enough. I’m Captain Merriweather, ex-captain of *The Willow*. I’m originally from London, England. Now I sit here in this last stop before hell and wait for the end of my life. If you wish to live and be a part of the world, Virginia, my advice is to move on. Move anywhere except to Bower’s Point.”

She smiled. “Thanks Captain. Do people call you that?”

He nodded. “My first name is Nathan.”

“I’ll call you that then. She crossed her legs and spread out her skirt.

“I’m hungry. Can you feed me?”

“Are you crazy? I have a bloody hard enough time just keeping myself alive.”

“No, I’m not crazy. I simply asked if you could feed me. I take your answer to mean no. You’re a hard man. You should be glad I’m not your mother. I’d take a switch to you if you were my son. I’d not be sparing the rod on such an unruly person.”

“I’m bloody happy I’m not your son! What is the point of this? Why didn’t you keep going? Why did you stop to bother my sleep?”

“Why were you sleeping anyway?” she asked. Inwardly she enjoyed the distress her presence created. She admired his self-control.

“Because there’s no work today. The nets have all gone out on the boats and I went for a walk. If I bloody want to sleep, then I will, whether you like it or not!”

She reached into her skirt pocket, took out two apples and handed one to him. “It never hurts to ask,” she said. “If I hadn’t asked you, I wouldn’t have known your name. You learn by asking and listening to what’s said. I do hope you won’t be this way forever. You will only make life more difficult for yourself.”

He looked at the apple and then her. He thought to himself, *This is strange. What’s she looking for? She can’t be interested in me. She looks like she comes from a rich family. Watch*

yourself and your pockets, Nathan. She'll knock you in the head when you're not looking. When you wake, your coat, pants and money will be gone.

"I know I could have walked on," she said. "I also could have taken a rock and done you in. Then I would have your coat, shirt, pants and shoes. However that isn't me."

She took a bite from her apple and chewed slowly. "I married when I was 13 and my mama said it was high time for me. I've lived alone for many years since my husband decided he had to go west and seek his fortune. He found his death and a grave somewhere there. True, as you said, I'm not the young woman I was when I was seventeen. Right now I'm twenty and I'm worried about the future and what is going to happen to me. I'm lonely, but I'm not the kind of woman who can hang out in the bars and earn my money that way. That isn't a life; that's a living death.

"Five years I've been alone. I've wandered from Philadelphia to here. Why did I stop to talk to you? I don't know. You didn't seem to be an unkind person, lying there sleeping. I still think you're a nice person even though you try to be as mean as a baited bear now that I woke you up. So don't pretend to be bitter with me or with life."

"Agreed," he said. "You still haven't answered my question. Why did you choose me?"

"I don't really know. I just decided to stop. I have no particular reason. I'm a hard woman. You have to be to live in this world. If I were simply a little fluff, like some women are, I'd probably be dead by now, trying to live on my own. It's not easy. However, now that you're awake and alive, I find that I like you. I hope you like me a little. Do you?"

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