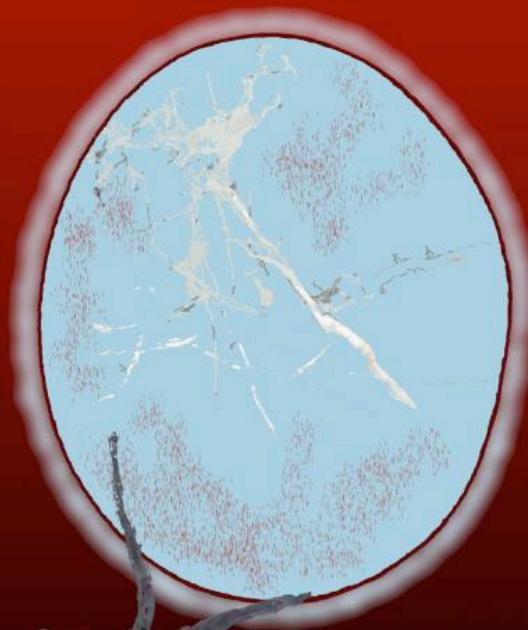


Morgan Law



Gaea's
Tears

Gaea's Tears

by

Morgan Law

(Sample chapters)

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Chapter 1

The thin, high scream floated on the sharp February wind. China Logan was mid-stride when she heard it, and she was so startled that she almost fell. The sound lanced through her ears and stabbed like a phantom icicle into the most primitive part of her brain: She recognized it immediately as the anguished cry of a terrified child. Without making a conscious decision, she left the deserted Potomac jogging trail and plunged into the woods toward its source.

She was less than twenty yards beyond the tree line when a second shriek sent arctic gooseflesh racing down her spine. It was more agonized than the first, and it was cut off abruptly. “I’m coming,” she screamed back into the wind. “I’m coming! Hold on!”

Seconds later she ducked under a low-hanging fir bough and crashed through low underbrush into a large, darkening clearing. The instant her legs stopped moving, they felt insubstantial and rubbery. She gasped but seemed unable to take up oxygen.

In the center of the clearing, a huge slab of gray rock loomed like an evil altar in the fading twilight. On top of it lay a little girl—only six or eight years old. Her long blonde hair splayed out messily beneath her naked, wounded body and soaked up spreading pools of her own spilled blood. Four slender white nylon cords snaked tightly around the child’s wrists and ankles and bit deeply into her pale, bluish flesh. The cruel restraints were pulled taut across the rock face and tied to metal tent stakes hammered into the forest floor.

The small, savagely brutalized figure was now eerily silent and motionless. Had the little girl only fainted, or had she passed beyond the reach of help in the seconds after that last, terrible scream? China could not tell; nor, at the moment, could she allow that to be her primary concern.

Three sizeable preadolescent boys stood in a tight cluster on the far side of the rock. Their hands were slimed with fresh blood, and they had ceremonially striped their cheeks and bare torsos with the hot red product of their violence. All three were armed with gore-encrusted knives that were large enough for gutting deer.

To China's dismay, they showed no more than mild surprise at her appearance, and even that wore off almost before she had stopped moving. As they grew certain that nothing more threatening than a lone female jogger had caught them at their work, their expressions relaxed visibly, and they allowed their big knives to droop casually in their grips. Within a few heartbeats, their surging confidence had mutated into prancing bravado. They leered at her boldly, with an almost palpable malice beneath their twisted grins.

Suddenly, an unsuspected reservoir of instinct stirred strongly within China. It warned her that any hint of weakness or fear would send the three dangerous near-men into a killing frenzy that she would not be likely to survive. "Get away from her, you little bastards!" she barked. "Get away from her NOW!"

The tallest of the three—a beefy, towheaded boy—bared his teeth at her and snorted disdainfully. "Stupid bitch wants to give us orders," he jeered. His voice had not yet begun to change, and it hung disconcertingly high and innocuous in the acoustically flat air of the clearing.

China felt as if her heart had lodged in her throat and would explode there at any moment. Still, she had to continue her bluff. "You're all through here, boys," she said evenly. "The cops will be here any minute, and then you're all three toast."

"Oh, I'm *so* scared," the smallest, mouse-haired boy shot back at her contemptuously. "They probably won't even get here for a fucking hour."

The third juvenile was dark-haired, lean, and well-muscled. He stared at China indifferently through flat, jet-black eyes that did not belong on a living organism. As that silent scrutiny stretched out into interminable seconds, the sidelong, deferential glances of the other two clearly marked him as their leader.

At last he spoke, in a cool, disarmingly pleasant baritone. “Next time we’re in the neighborhood, sweet meat,” he said, “we’ll be sure to look you up. Why don’t you plan to spend a whole evening with us, so we can really get to know each other?” He smiled wickedly, showing clean, professionally straightened teeth. Then, never taking his eyes off of China, he motioned lazily to his companions; a moment later they melted soundlessly into the trees.

“Oh, God!” China wheezed. “Oh, God!” She staggered numbly towards the rock slab. It seemed to be pulsing grotesquely in the half-light—as if it were radiating some of the evil it had absorbed. Trying hard not to gag on her own fear and revulsion, she reached down with shaking fingers and felt at the little girl’s throat for a pulse.

* * * * *

Were it not for Detective Eldon Whitebear, China thought she might have fallen apart completely. Almost two hours after she had dashed frantically back to the jogging trail in search of help, he had freed her from the rear seat of a squad car. She had been placed in cold storage there by a fleshy uniformed officer who smelled strongly of hamburgers and tobacco and milled about looking dyspeptic.

Whitebear, by contrast, was so focused and alert that he practically hummed. When he walked over to the black-and-white unit, which was still parked at a hasty angle across the jogging trail, a clean London Fog trench coat dangled from his large-knuckled hands. He offered it to her, and when she nodded her acceptance, he helped her slip it on over her Nike warm-up suit. Then he escorted her to his unmarked brown Ford and whisked her to the small police station that served the suburban

community of Potomac Tides, Virginia. Thankfully, he spoke very little on the short drive there.

Once they were inside the three-story, red brick colonial building that housed both police headquarters and the municipal jail, Whitebear showed China into a clean, brightly lit interrogation room. He brought her a steaming mug of thick, black coffee, which on any other occasion she probably would not have touched. Tonight, however, the warmth of the glass felt wonderful against her bloodless hands. While she sipped gingerly at the steaming liquid, the compact, middle-aged detective attempted to locate her husband by phone.

After several minutes Whitebear tugged at his single long, gray-streaked braid in frustration and shook his head. “It looks like he’s not at this work number, either. Is there anyplace else I should try for you, Ms. Logan?”

“No,” China whispered. “I don’t think so. I feel sure he’s working late in his studio again—which happens quite a lot—and he’s just stepped out for something to eat.”

“In his studio, huh? Is he an artist?”

“He’s a glassblower.”

“Is that his studio over there in the historical district?”

China nodded. “On Church Street. Yes, it is.”

Whitebear grunted appreciatively. “He does some nice stuff, then.”

China tried to smile. “Thanks. I’ll tell him you said so.”

“What about you, Ms. Logan? Would you like me to have some food brought in for you?”

“No, thanks. I think I’m still too queasy to keep anything down.”

“I understand. If you change your mind, just let me know. Okay?”

“Okay. I honestly hope I won’t be here that long, though.”

“We’ll get through this as fast as we can,” the detective said, “but I wouldn’t want you to count on that. Part of our police routine is to ask you the same questions over and over again until you start swearing and tearing out your hair.”

“Oh, swell.”

Whitebear grinned at her and shrugged. “At least I’m honest.” Then the grin faded, and his lined, leathery face aged ten years in a moment. “Let’s start,” he said in a soft, sad voice, “from when you left your house to go running.”

China dipped her head and sighed in resignation. She stared down at the scratched, gray laminate surface of the conference table for a few moments and prepared herself to speak. Then she carefully tucked her thick black mane of hair behind her ears, looked up into the detective’s waiting eyes, and began.

Under Whitebear’s skillful questioning, another half-hour flew by. Then, abruptly, it was over. He switched off his video recorder and slowly closed the cover of his tattered, red spiral notebook. “Sometime tomorrow, Ms. Logan, I’d like you to come back down here for a few hours to work with our artist and his computer. We need to get sketches of those boys on paper while their faces are still fresh in your mind.”

China shuddered. “I don’t think I’ll *ever* be able to forget their faces, Detective, but tomorrow will be all right.”

“If you need a ride, call me, and I’ll come get you.” He paused, then, and his eyes seemed to search China’s features—as if he were having an inner debate about what to say. When he finally spoke, his voice was frank but muted. “Considering what they did to her,” he said, “it’s

probably a blessing that the girl didn't live. Whether that's right or whether that's wrong, though, you need to know that you couldn't have saved her. You couldn't have saved her, and you should never torture yourself by wondering."

"But maybe if I had gotten there just a few seconds earlier...."

Whitebear shook his head. "No," he said heavily. "I'm not the coroner, of course, but I'm pretty sure the last knife wound got her right in the heart. Once those boys got started on her, Ms. Logan, I frankly don't think *anyone* could have saved her."

China blinked back sudden, grateful tears. "Thank you for that, Detective. I only wish somebody had seen or heard something much earlier."

The detective looked doleful. "Maybe somebody did," he said, "but didn't do anything about it. The awful truth is that these days, most people would have kept right on running down that path, no matter what they heard."

"I would prefer not to believe that."

"I would rather not believe it, either. Unfortunately, almost every day of the week I see the evidence that it's true."

Suddenly, China frowned. "What about these boys, Detective?"

Whitebear frowned back at her and nodded acknowledgement of her question. "Yes. We should talk about that. I don't want to frighten you unnecessarily, but I'm not going to lie to you, either. As long as they're out on the streets, they could potentially be a problem for you. I'm not saying anything will happen—please don't get me wrong—but they conceivably could decide to come after you. We'll do our best to keep your name out of the press, of course, but they still might be able track

you down. I think you and I both know these weren't any kind of stereotypical, low-IQ slum kids on a rampage outside their ghetto."

China shivered. "No, they certainly weren't that. They...do you want to know something that really bothers me?"

"What's that?"

"I'm not quite sure how to describe this. It's just that they didn't—they didn't react at all like I would have expected. Not when I first ran into the clearing, and certainly not later on."

"How so?"

"Well, they acted a little bit startled, but that was about it. It didn't even seem to phase them that I was an adult. I mean—sure, I'm only a skinny jogger-lady, but I'm also identifiably a grownup, and I don't think they even cared. It was like they simply didn't recognize adult authority, regardless of who it was."

"I understand what you're saying, Ms. Logan, and I can certainly see why it would bother you."

China wrinkled her brow thoughtfully, and she shook her head. "That's not quite all of it, though. I think it goes deeper than that. I don't mean to sound weird, but I think what scares me the most is that I never saw anything even remotely resembling guilt on their faces."

Whitebear shifted in his chair and stared down at his hands for several seconds. "I'm Indian," he announced with his eyes still down. "But you probably already figured that from the name and the hair and all."

China smiled faintly. "I had a pretty strong suspicion."

"You have Indian blood, too."

“Well, no.” China was sure her surprise registered on her face. When the detective’s dark eyes fixed on hers again, they looked different and even a little frightening. Suddenly, they seemed infinitely deep, and ageless, and wise. “Not that I know of, anyway,” she trailed off weakly.

“You have Indian blood, too,” Whitebear repeated. His voice was firm—authoritative. “Take my word for it. So I’m going to tell you an Indian prophecy that I first heard when I was a child.”

“All right.”

“My grandfather was a very powerful medicine man. He told the prophecy to my father, and my father passed it down to me. He said that in the last days, as the suffering of Mother Earth became too great to bear and she prepared to cleanse the earth of men, children would begin to be born without souls. At first, the Creator would send only a few of these soulless shells into the world, but as the time of the great upheaval came nearer, the trickle of soulless births would become a stream and then a torrent. If we ever saw these demon-children walking the earth, Grandfather said, it would be one of the final signs. It would tell us there was no longer any hope of either avoiding or delaying the cleansing of the earth. It would tell us that the destruction of life as we know it was soon to come upon us.”

China was utterly transfixed. As the detective recited the prophecy in a low, flat voice, something seemed to come alive and echo inside her. She felt somehow transported, as if she had suddenly been swept up in something huge—something huge and ancient and powerful.

A heartbeat later, Whitebear’s eyes lost their strangeness, and China felt her momentarily expanded psyche shrivel quickly back to normalcy. “If there were such demon-children in the world,” the Indian said somberly, “they would feel no guilt whatsoever for butchering a helpless little girl.”

Chapter 2

“No, Gary!” China shook her head firmly and scowled. “These children from hell will *not* chase us out of our home! We can get a German shepherd dog, or we can hire private security guards, but we will *not* put this house up for sale and run. What would be the point? If they ever find out who I am, do you really think I’d be any safer in Maryland, or Falls Church, or Georgetown, or anywhere else we moved?”

Suddenly, she felt stifled and confined in her own cheerful, bay-window breakfast nook, and that only increased her agitation. Without waiting for her husband to reply, she leapt up from the small oak table and began pacing cross-armed and unhappy on the antique brick floor of the kitchen.

Gary immediately got to his feet and padded after her. “Hey, hey, hey!” he crooned. His forehead was creased with concern under his shaggy, surfer-blond hair, and his wide-set blue eyes were troubled. As he approached, he opened his arms to China. Then he waited until she met him halfway and walked into his light embrace. “It was only a suggestion, okay? It never even occurred to me that you’d have such a bad reaction.”

She hugged him back, but without conviction, and she quickly wriggled her way out of his grasp. “I thought you understood how much this house means to me.” She had turned half away from him, and her voice quivered with hurt and reproach.

Gary huffed in apparent frustration. “Well, excuse me very damn much! Given a choice between hanging onto the house or increasing the odds of staying alive, for some stupid reason I thought you might want to let the house go and live.”

“You’re not being fair at all,” China accused him. “Those are *not* the only reasonable choices.”

“The hell they’re not!” he flared back at her. “If you weren’t still trapped in your chronic, dead-parents-who-saved-me-from-the-orphanage grief trip, you undoubtedly would be able to see that!”

China felt like she had been slapped in the face. “Oh, Gary! Tell me I didn’t hear you say that. Tell me I couldn’t possibly have heard you say anything that mean.”

His face collapsed like a house of cards in the rain, and he immediately became contrite. “Oh, Jesus, sweetheart! *I* can’t believe I said that, either. I swear to God, I don’t know what came over me to get me that worked up. It was like all of a sudden I just wanted to lash out at you with the ugliest thing I could think of. And I did. Can you forgive me, sweetie? Please? I’m so awfully, awfully sorry!”

China nodded stiffly and swiped at her brimming eyes. “Let’s just forget it, okay? I don’t think either one of us is handling this thing very well.”

“That’s not too hard to understand, is it? We’re talking about a pack of goddamn little jackals coming after you.”

“No, Gary. Not in that sense, it’s not. The part that’s hard for me to understand is why we seem to be taking it out on each other.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He walked up to her slowly, looking both rueful and sheepish. He cupped her elbows in his strong, artisan’s hands, pulled her forward, and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. Then he pushed her gently back to arm’s length and frowned uncomfortably. “Look. I know this is terrible timing, sugar, but I absolutely have to leave now. It’s already eight-fifty, and I told Bill—the guy from Seattle—that I’d meet him for breakfast at nine. So why don’t you arrange for a police dog, or hire guards, or do whatever you want to do—whatever will make you feel safer? And I promise, promise, *promise* to make it home early tonight, for a change.”

“But....” China started to object, but all at once she found herself awash in confusion and guilt over her own self-absorption. *She* might want to stay in the huge, rambling house in Potomac Tides, and *she* might want to stay in the Washington, D.C. area, but what about poor Gary? In hindsight, she realized that all he had talked about for three days—when she wasn’t verbally obsessing about the murder and he could get a word or two in edgewise—was the big glass factory in Seattle and the possibility that he might be offered a partnership. What was it he had called it last night? It was “the premier glassworks in the country,” she thought.

“If they make you an offer, you really do want to go, don’t you?” she asked quietly.

The question seemed to make him wince, and his jaw tightened with obvious longing. “Let’s don’t jinx it by talking about it before it happens. Okay?”

She nodded. “Okay, sure. I just want you to know that if it does happen, we’ll definitely talk about it.”

His eyes lit up hopefully. “Does that mean what I hope it means?”

Her lip trembled under the pressure of warring emotions. “I’m only saying that I’m willing to consider it, Gary. That moving to Seattle would not be entirely out of the question.”

* * * * *

China was uncommonly critical of what she saw as she stared into her brightly lit makeup mirror. The strain of the last few days had taken its toll, and her eyes looked tired and lifeless. She had not gone running since the murder, and that, too, was beginning to show in her face.

Her color was bad, she thought. Well—not bad, exactly, but certainly not as healthy as it usually was. She knew in her heart that she would never

have the courage to run on that particular trail ever again in her life, but she pledged to select a new place and go running the next afternoon.

In the meantime, she definitely needed makeup. Her boss and best friend Brigit Quinn had almost put her foot down and forbidden her to come back to work at the gift shop yet, but China had insisted. She needed to be busy, to keep her mind from straying back again and again to that horrible scene in the clearing. She also knew that Brigit would send her straight home if she looked too tired or too washed out, so she had allocated extra time for fixing her face.

She absorbed herself in plucking stray hairs from the arches of her bushy, heavy eyebrows—the caterpillars, as she called them. Then, with extra care, she sponged on foundation and lined her full, even lips. Abruptly, as she raised her natural bristle brush to her hair, the words of Detective Whitebear came rushing back to her. “You have Indian blood, too,” he had said. Almost as in a trance, she set the hairbrush back down on the vanity and stared at herself anew.

Could that actually be true? Was it even remotely possible? She did have thick, straight black hair, and her irises were so dark that they blended almost seamlessly with her pupils. Her cheekbones were high and fairly prominent, too, but none of that struck her as anything more than suggestive.

Conversely, she was almost six feet tall, which was probably not typical for a Native American woman. Her skin wasn't at all reddish or even particularly dark, and the shape of her eyes seemed to her more Eurasian than anything else. She examined her nose from two angles and concluded that while it might be the right shape, it was too small for an Indian nose.

An instant later she realized that she was being shamefully insensitive. She knew almost nothing about Native American Indians, so her insipid little self-analysis was necessarily based less on reality than on culturally ingrained stereotypes. She was definitely ignorant, she acknowledged to

herself regretfully, but her lack of knowledge certainly did not stem from any bias or racism. As a matter of fact, she thought it would be quite wonderful to have Indian blood.

If Whitebear was right and she could confirm it, maybe she could finally begin to feel like she belonged somewhere. Maybe the fundamental loneliness that had plagued her all of her life could at last be replaced by a sense of connection, however vague it might be. She recognized that with only a little more encouragement, she would be unable to resist pulling on the threads the detective had cast down. She also sensed that trying to trace her ancestry and identify the actual tribe she might have come from could easily turn into an obsessive personal quest.

She sighed. It was a marvelous fantasy, because it would give her both a cultural identity and a blood family. Realistically, however, it seemed most unlikely that she could ever find out one way or the other.

Almost four years ago, just before her twenty-fourth birthday, her adoptive parents died in a tragic yachting accident in the Caribbean. They left her the beautiful house in Potomac Tides, two expensive cars, a big sailboat docked at a vacation home on the Severn River near Annapolis, a time-share condo in Hawaii, \$850,000 in life insurance proceeds, and an enormous portfolio of stocks and bonds. She was extremely thankful for that, because it gave her the freedom to work purely for fun instead of having to worry about making money. To her everlasting disappointment, however, they left behind no information at all about her birth parents.

“Maybe it’s better this way,” she said to her image wistfully. What Detective Whitebear had given her was a beautiful, secret dream. If she was unable prove it or disprove it, then no one could take it away from her. That way, she could hold it safe and precious in her heart forever.

* * * * *

Thanks to a large convention in town and a one-day sale on handmade jewelry, business at The Barking Iguana was brisk. China was glad. She thought about the murder only a few times, when she was idle and happened to catch Brigit glancing protectively in her direction.

Dear, outrageous Brigit! Fluttery, flighty, artistic, borderline-anorexic Brigit, who did not have a conservative bone in her body. She wouldn't own a piece of clothing unless no one in her right mind would wear it. Then—regardless of what it was—it had to be worn with earrings the size of demitasse saucers that made a great deal of noise.

The two of them had been friends for well over three years, but China still wasn't certain what color hair Brigit had sported at birth. At the moment, it was the most aggressive shade of red that natural henna could produce, worn in a long spiral perm. She had kept it that way for almost five months now, so China did not expect it to last much longer.

The only things that were constant about Brigit, in fact, were change and absolute loyalty to her friends. She was a work that would never be completed—a chameleon that could and frequently did reinvent herself overnight. Whenever one of her transformations occurred, it generally involved not only a radical change in appearance, but also the adoption of a whole new lifestyle to go with it.

Lately, China had seen telltale signs that Brigit was growing restless with her current routine, which was going home each evening to brown-rice-and-something, breathing in heavy incense, and listening to New Age music. She suspected that another metamorphosis was imminent.

“Hey, Girlie!” Brigit called across the shop to China at a few minutes after 5:00. “How about we shut this thing down and find a good happy hour to crash?”

China laughed. “I thought you were still abstaining.”

“Today, I’ve decided to make an exception,” Brigit said, and her contact-lens green eyes twinkled devilishly. “Maybe tomorrow, too. I simply can’t live another day without a dry, dry, *desert-dry* gin martini.”

China shook her head sorrowfully. “I’m more tempted than you can ever know, dear friend, but Gary has taken a solemn oath to come home early tonight. The two of us need to talk.”

“Right,” Brigit said sarcastically. Her mouth was tight with unconcealed disapproval. “So when you get tired of waiting on The Prince, give me a call, and we’ll get a late dinner out.”

China groaned in frustration. “He has a Christian name, Brigit, and it would be terrific if you could see your way to using it. It would also be wonderful if you would explain why you’re so absolutely, positively unrelenting in your dislike for him. You never will give me a real explanation, and after all this time, it’s beginning to make me crazy!”

Brigit shrugged insouciantly. “He looks like a piano. His teeth are too big and white.”

China rolled her eyes. “Someday—preferably before I die of old age—I will worm a straight answer out of you.”

“You stay with him, Girlie,” Brigit said darkly, “and I don’t think you’ll have to worry about dying of old age. You’ll go long before then of either apoplexy or heart failure caused by chronic stress.”

“Ooh! I think you kept your tongue in the pencil sharpener a little too long today.” China fussed at her friend with practiced, feigned offense. The entire exchange was of a pattern that had evolved over time and was now a staple in their relationship.

Brigit eyed her appreciatively. “That’s a good one,” she acknowledged grudgingly. “Your training at my feet is obviously beginning to pay off.

When we first met, you couldn't have come up with a good, catty retort even if your life depended on it."

China smiled and ducked her head deferentially. "Thank you, oh Mistress of the Caustic Mouth, for your generous kudos."

"You know my penchant for balance," Brigit said in a lofty tone. "I take great delight in laying blame where blame is due, but I also give credit where credit is due."

"With the notable exception, of course, of my husband," China laughed. "I'm not sure you'd have anything nice to say about him even if he went out and saved a bunch of helpless pets or babies."

"I very much doubt that we'll ever have an occasion to test that proposition out."

China smiled good-naturedly. "Maybe you'll be surprised one day. Seriously, Brig, he does seem to be changing for the better. Believe it or not, we hardly even fight anymore."

Brigit raised a chili-pepper-red eyebrow archly. "So, what happened? Did Mr. Right have some sort of an epiphany and reform on you all of a sudden?"

"Now behave yourself! No. Things have just been better between us lately. I'm not sure why, but maybe a lot of it is because he's increasingly willing to take on responsibility. Besides which, he seems to be getting a lot more considerate of other people's feelings." When Brigit said nothing, China shrugged. "I don't know. I guess a lot of it is plain old adaptation, too."

"Adaptation?"

"Yes. I think we've worked through a long, tough period when we were having to...to adjust our expectations about each other. I honestly do believe that we're going to be okay together now."

“Oh.” Brigit’s face looked almost brittle.

China tried a smile, but it wavered on her lips, and she sighed. “You won’t cut the guy any slack at all, will you?”

“No,” Brigit said firmly, “I won’t.”

“But aren’t you at least glad for me? That everything’s finally starting to work out?”

Brigit stared hard at her for an uncomfortably long time. “A leopard like Gary,” she said at last, “never changes its spots. Not unless it’s moving into new territory and needs a different camouflage.”

Chapter 3

China sat up in bed and hugged her knees miserably under her chin. She had awakened, just as she had retired, alone. As she rocked herself and stared at the empty bed beside her, she fought back tears of anger and disappointment. “How could you do this to me?” she whispered. “Just when I was feeling so much better about us, too.” She flung back her thick flannel sheets and down comforter, jammed her arms into a luxurious fleece robe, and stormed out of the bedroom in a huff.

As she barreled into the kitchen, she almost ran into Gary, who was coming out with a fully laden breakfast tray. “Whoa!” he yelped, but he spun aside in time to avoid a collision. “This stuff’s supposed to go in you, not on you!”

“But what...?”

“It kind of spoils it, that you’re already up, but never mind. Follow the rich, full-bodied aroma of your morning coffee, and I’ll serve you in the breakfast nook.”

“Gary, I want to know—”

“Hush, woman. I’m not stupid. I know exactly why you’re upset, and I know exactly what it is that you want to know. Come sit down, and I’ll explain while you drink your coffee.”

China still felt enormously cross, but against her better judgment, she also found herself both touched and intrigued by her husband’s conciliatory gesture. She trailed silently in to the table behind him and allowed him to seat her with a flourish, as if he were the maitre d’ at a fine restaurant.

He did not speak again until he had poured coffee for both of them from a silver thermal carafe and had settled into his own usual chair. “Under

the warming cover on your plate, madam, you will find a blueberry bagel—toasted to perfection and generously slathered with fat-free strawberry cream cheese. Also, a piping hot bowl of oatmeal topped with brown sugar and fresh raspberries.”

China frowned ungraciously and shook her head. “Gary, I—”

He held up his hand for silence. “Yes, I deserve thirty lashes for being late and another thirty for failing to call you. I knew you’d be mad as hell, so I tiptoed in and slept on the couch instead of waking you. I’m really, really sorry, babe, but good things were happening, and it was flowing, and I just couldn’t break away to call you.”

“I’m glad it went well for you, Gary, but in the meantime, I wasn’t having any fun at all. I’m not sure you understand that—how it feels to be left hanging out to dry that way.”

“I do, sweetheart. I promise that I do. But I got trapped. Bill showed up right as I was locking up the studio and wanted to grab a quick drink together, and then he absolutely insisted on buying me dinner.”

China’s frown deepened into a scowl. “And including me in your dinner plans was apparently impossible. Why was that, Gary? Why couldn’t I have gone along?”

He shrugged, and his eyes would not quite meet hers. “I don’t know, honey. It didn’t seem right somehow. I mean—he sort of made it sound like he wanted to keep talking one-on-one. So I just went along with him. And then there never was a good opening when I could gracefully duck out to call you.”

“I didn’t get to sleep until almost one o’clock, Gary.” China’s voice now had an acid edge. “But of course you had no way of knowing that.”

Gary looked momentarily puzzled. “I, ah—no, I didn’t. You make it sound like it’s a really big deal, though.”

“That’s because I happen to think it is,” China said coldly. “It means that you were out wining and dining with Bill for a bare minimum of six hours. And you’re sitting there right now trying to tell me that things ‘flowed’ so well for that entire, long time that it was impossible for you to go call me.”

He lifted his hands and let them clap back loudly against his thighs in a gesture of pure exasperation. “Jesus! Sometimes I don’t know why I even bother to try. It seems like the only thing you care about anymore is punishing me. That’s what it comes down to, China: You always lock onto some little thing you think I’ve done wrong and make sure I get thoroughly punished for it.”

“That’s not true, and you know it!”

“The hell it’s not! Right now is a perfect example. You didn’t give a damn about hearing my good news, but you couldn’t wait to start cutting me up for being out late without special permission.”

China’s eyes screwed shut tight with wretchedness. Somehow, he always managed to turn things around on her. There was no question that he was totally in the wrong for last night, and she had every right to be angry and upset. For the moment, however, he had succeeded in making her feel derelict and guilty.

He had freely admitted and apologized for his misbehavior, and he had slept on the couch and made up the lovely breakfast tray for her as additional gestures of atonement and reconciliation. And what had she done in return? Instead of taking the olive branch that he was holding out to her and showing an interest in whatever good things had happened last night, she had insisted on picking at the details of his transgressions.

“I’m sorry I trampled on your news like that,” she apologized quietly. She stared down at her hands regretfully and waited for words of forgiveness that did not immediately come. Unable to bear the lingering, heavy silence, she blurted out, “It’s not that I don’t care about it, Gary.

Surely you understand that. It's just that I was so *upset* all night...." She trailed off and looked up at him beseechingly.

Now it was Gary's turn to look down. He shook his head slowly and said, "The absolute last thing I wanted to do this morning was to have a goddamn fight with you, babe, and I guess I deserve a lot more of the blame than you do. I'm sorry, too." He looked up and met her gaze then, and his blue eyes were soft and moist and remorseful.

Although a lump of emotion was trying to burn a hole in the front of her throat, China managed a faltering smile. "Let's start the morning all over again, then. Okay? Please tell me about last night."

Relief flickered swiftly over Gary's face ahead of proud excitement. "They want me out there, honey. They want *me*—out there in the best damn glassworks in the country!"

"That's wonderful!" China said. "I can't say I'm surprised, because your work is so spectacularly good, but congratulations, nevertheless. I honestly do know how much this means to you."

Gary bowed as best he could while seated at the table and adopted a formal tone. "Thank you. Thank you so very much," he said, and then he laughed aloud. "How really, really sweet it is!"

China smiled as cheerfully as she could, but both her face and her heart felt stiff. Now that the offer had actually come, the mean-spirited part of her regretted having agreed to discuss it. How could she possibly walk away from her home—from this bastion of history and culture, and from this electrifying cauldron of power—to live among strangers in some perpetually cold, soggy suburb of Seattle? "Well, then," she said woodenly, reminding herself that she had promised nothing more than a discussion. "I guess you had better fill me in on all the details."

Gary laughed again and waved her off gaily. "Don't try to rush it now, sweetie! What you have to understand is that last night was only the first

dance in this deal. They won't get down to the nitty-gritty until I'm sitting down with them on their own turf in Seattle."

"Well, they must have dangled something concrete in front of you, didn't they?"

"Concrete enough for me."

"So? What? A partnership and a benefits package, or what?"

He shook his head. "No, no, no. Look. What I'm trying to tell you is that we haven't gotten down to talking about things like official titles and benefits yet. In the real world, it simply doesn't work that way, baby, and you're going to have to be a little more patient. The next step in our little tango calls for me to go interview out there in Seattle."

"When will you do that?"

"I told them we'd both fly up there early next week to check out the area and discuss it all further."

"At their expense, I trust?"

"Well, it'll come out of our pocket up front, but I'm sure they'll reimburse us."

"So you didn't discuss that, either?"

Gary looked stung. "Oh, for God's sake, China! If I had niggled at Bill about reimbursement, I would have looked like a total cheap-ass. Believe me when I say that nobody—*nobody*—would want to take on some loser who was sweating trip costs as a partner."

"I see." China tried not to feel like an uniformed schoolgirl who had just been put roundly in her place. "I just had the idea that in a hiring situation like this, setting up explicit agreements in advance was the normal business practice."

His mouth tightened impatiently. “Maybe that’s true for big corporate America, but it sure as hell isn’t the expectation among artisans.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not like we couldn’t afford it, either, even if they didn’t pay us back.”

“Well, certainly we can afford it. But that’s not really the point, is it?”

He sighed. “Not in your mind, anyway.” His shoulders slumped just a fraction, and his mouth drooped in defeat. “If you feel that strongly about it, I guess I’d better call Bill up and ask for clarification.”

As she was prone to do whenever she seemed to have won a point, China immediately felt a wave of unjustified remorse. “No, Gary,” she backpedaled quickly. “Please don’t do that. I’m sorry; I’m out of line. You’re the one that knows what you’re talking about—not me. So if your instinct says we should leave it be, let’s just leave it be. If we end up paying for the trip, we’ll end up paying for the trip.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to go against you on this if you’re going to be uptight about it.”

“I’m sure. This is your deal, and you should call the shots.”

Gary’s shoulders went back up, and he smiled his pleasure. “You know what? When push comes to shove, I can always count on you to be reasonable. And understanding. And to change your mind if you decide you’re wrong. Thank you, babe, for being you.”

She smiled wanly. “Gee, I seem to have a fan here.”

“You sure as hell do!” Gary nodded happily, and he hoisted his coffee cup in salute.

China furrowed her heavy brows pensively. “Maybe it would be better, though,” she said slowly, “if you went out for the interview alone. I mean—until you have the details of the offer nailed down and we know that it’s right for you, it doesn’t seem like there’s any reason for me to be there.”

“As a matter of fact, there are three extremely important reasons for you to go along.”

“Which are?” She was reluctant to hear them, but she asked the expected question anyway.

“First, Bill and the other partners want to get acquainted with you, too.”

She shook her head. “I consider that a good reason *not* to go. I’d probably do something to offend them, and they’d end up revoking their whole offer.”

Gary laughed outright. “Don’t be silly and negative. You’d charm their socks off, like you do everybody.”

“Oh, right!”

He shook his finger at her. “Tut, tut! The second reason is to have you undo your bias against Seattle by seeing it for yourself.”

“You think I have a bias against it?”

He nodded. “You think it’s nothing more than an overgrown cultural backwater that’s always cold and rainy and gloomy. Is that about right?”

China looked away guiltily. “It’s probably a nice enough place to live and all. It’s just that I can’t help but compare it to Northern Virginia.”

“Honey, right now you’re comparing the Seattle of your mind to the D.C. area, which is patently unfair. But I’m not worried about it in the

least, because I'm absolutely certain that once you spend a day or two in Seattle, you'll fall in love with the place."

"I'm not sure I'd bet on that, if I were you. But what's the third reason?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, and his eyes sparkled like sun on sea. "The third reason is the clincher. The deal closer. The bulldozer of all reluctance."

"So? What is it?"

"On the way there, I want to take you on the kind of winter vacation that we've dreamed about but have never *done* anything about. This is a perfect opportunity to spend a few days snowshoeing up in the Canadian Rockies. We could stay at that wonderful, remote lodge I've told you about and do day trips into some of the most beautiful, pristine territory left on the face of the earth." He looked at her eagerly. "What do you say, my little snow bunny?"

China cocked her head. Over the years, she had spent an unconscionable amount of time poring over ads and brochures selling vacation packages in the mountain ranges of British Columbia and Alberta. Three times that she could think of, they had been on the brink of booking such a trip, but something had always come up to sink it. "Mmm," she purred. "That does sound rather attractive."

"I think it would do you good to get the hell out of town for a while, too, after the...after what happened. Mainly, though, it's more beautiful than you can imagine up there, and this is something we'll remember for the rest of our lives."

"I suppose Brigit could do without me for a few more days, since I'd be back well before the start of Cherry Blossom Festival."

"Of course she can."

"You wouldn't want to throw in a day or two at the Banff Springs Hotel just to sweeten the deal, would you?"

“Sure thing, sweetheart. Anything you want.”

“Then you’re on, Mr. Logan. You’re on.” For the first time that morning, a smile reached her eyes as well as her lips. “Go ahead and book us two tickets to Winter Paradise, will you, please?”

* * * * *

Brigit’s fiery red hair was gone—not changed, but totally gone. Her head was shaved smooth and polished almost to a mirror finish. She had also tossed out her bright green contact lenses in favor of a dark, conservative brown, and she had altogether abstained from make-up. Only her dress seemed in character: She wore black leather leggings so tight that China doubted she could sit down, a matching long-sleeved tunic, and black combat boots. The severity of the new look was relieved only by huge silver ear hoops and a silver rune that dangled from a black silk cord tied around her neck.

Although China had been anticipating a dramatic transformation, even she was taken aback. As the women sat down for their traditional coffee klatch in the tiny break room at the back of the shop, she struggled not to gape at her friend. Something she couldn’t quite put her finger on told her to proceed with more sensitivity than usual. “Well,” she said. “You suddenly look very...dark.”

Brigit nodded. “*I feel* dark,” she said. She sounded somber and—for Brigit—relatively nontheatrical. “I can’t go on any longer like I have been. I’ve been trying my dead-level best to keep looking and acting bright, when it’s not how I feel at all. I’ve been getting up and going through the motions for days now, and I’ve finally reached a point where I can’t keep the charade going anymore.”

China frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either, really. I just have this incredible feeling of doom, and it’s weighing me down like a big old rusty anchor.”

“A sense of doom. Since when?”

“Since about a week ago, I guess. I didn’t want to say anything to you because of the jogging path deal. And I’ve been trying to ignore it, but I can’t seem to shake it off. If anything, it’s getting stronger instead of going away.”

“So—whose doom are we talking about? Anybody in particular?”

The newly bald woman sighed. “I’m afraid I don’t know that, yet. I’m not sure how to explain this to you, but this is something that feels both compelling and urgent, somehow. It’s an incredibly powerful foreboding, and I have to find out what it’s about.”

China eyed her friend carefully. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Oh, perfectly,” Brigit replied. “I’m serious and scared, both.”

“What are you going to do?”

Brigit shrugged. “I’m going to start working with a group of local seers that’s been highly recommended to me. Beyond that, who knows? My gut tells me that I’m feeling the advance psychic ripples of some kind of a major cataclysm—that some serious apocalyptic stuff is on the horizon. You may think I’m certifiable, but there it is.”

“It sounds like it’s bothering you a lot.”

“That’s because it is! I’m not talking about your average little pedestrian premonition, Girlie. I think my psyche is tuning into a warning about something *big*—on the order of civilization disintegrating around us, or something wild like that.”

China shivered. “Why does this end of the world stuff keep coming up in my life all of a sudden?”

Brigit's eyes knifed into hers. "What do you mean? When else has it come up?"

"I'd rather not talk about it right now," China said shaking her head. She already regretted her muttered question. "When I walked in here this morning, I was in a nice, upbeat mood, and I would like nothing more than to slip right back into it."

"I'd rather be in an upbeat mood, too, but late last night I reached some kind of a watershed. I decided that I simply can't keep my head in the sand any longer, China. About this feeling, or about anything else either. It's smothering me."

"Oh. Well, I suppose being chronically depressed and depressing is better than being smothered."

Brigit shook her head in displeasure. "This is nothing to joke around about. For once in my life, I'm deadly serious."

"Okay. Please forgive me if I offended."

"It's all right. Don't worry about it." Brigit paused and blew on her coffee. "So explain why you're in such a good mood. Did The Prince strangle on his morning sausage and die?"

"No! Now, stop that. If I have to be nice this morning, then you do, too."

"Actually, I don't think I do," Brigit said in a much softer voice. "Not when it comes to him. Not when I damn well know how you spent the night."

China's chin came up combatively. "Oh, really?" she challenged. "And exactly how is that?"

"Alone, and feeling betrayed."

She frowned. "You're only guessing, based on past history. Aren't you?"

China felt Brigit's artificially darkened eyes bore into hers like steel drill bits. "From now on, you shouldn't ask me a question like that unless you're ready to hear the answer," Brigit said.

Time seemed to deviate from its straight-line progression. The street noises from outside stopped abruptly, and frozen as in a snapshot, China saw the fluorescent light bouncing softly back towards the ceiling from her good friend's naked scalp. Maybe Brigit was only indulging her flare for the dramatic. Maybe Brigit was indeed only guessing, and the clammy hand of suspicion tightening around China's heart was nothing more than her own paranoia at work. It was not too late to turn away, to risk nothing, to ensure that her life would go on as usual. Hearing Brigit's answer, though, could change everything for her—could leave both her emotions and her marriage in tatters.

China breathed in sharply. Then, after a final, momentary flutter of panic, she felt the calm of resolution take over. "You had better tell me whatever it is you know."

Brigit nodded with understanding. "As I hinted so broadly at closing time, I fully intended to work evil on my body last night. And that is precisely what I did. I ended up at Le Bon Temps, for the simple reason that they have the most wicked martinis and the best fried food in town. I don't think he ever saw me, but I most definitely saw Gary there. Ergo, he broke his promise to you and did not come home until *quite* late."

"I figured you must have seen him."

Brigit fixed her with another hard stare. "I saw a *them*, China, not just a him."

"Well, of course you did." China smiled. She hoped to look confident but knew she did not. "He was out with one of the partners from a huge glassworks in Seattle—somebody named Bill."

"'Bill,' huh?" Brigit mirrored. "You're quite sure about that name?"

“Yes. Why?”

“Because this particular ‘Bill’ was either a female with an incredibly tacky name, or a male who was quite an accomplished cross-dresser.”

China had thought she was prepared to hear anything, but her lips suddenly felt almost numb to form words. “What are you saying, Brigit?”

Brigit looked unhappy. “The person Gary was with was a knockout blonde who was probably using her cleavage for an ID card.”

China wilted like a scalded daffodil. “Oh, God! There has to be a mistake. He said he was out with Bill last night and the night before, while Bill was sizing him up for a partnership.”

“Well, if that was ‘Bill,’ it damn sure wasn’t a partnership she was sizing him up for.”

Suddenly, China felt old and cold and so weak that she could not have stood. “What do you mean?” she asked, dreading to hear the answer.

Brigit’s face went soft with pity. “I hate like hell to hurt you, dear friend,” she said gently. “Unfortunately, this is one of the deepest, most loathsome patches of sand I’ve been burying my head in, and I’m pulling it out right now. There is absolutely no chance that I was watching two people innocently talking business, China. They were all over each other, right there in the restaurant.”

China’s eyes slid shut, squeezing out skimpy, dispirited tears. “I guess I should have suspected something like this,” she murmured, “but I didn’t. I just didn’t.” She sat in blind silence, trying to marshal her emotional reserves. Finally, she sighed a long, shuddering sigh and made herself open her eyes to Brigit’s worried, sorrowful face. “From the way you’ve acted in the past, there must have been something else,” she said brokenly. “Before last night, I mean.”

Brigit stiffened, and her eyes shifted down and away. “I guess I tried to buy myself out of the responsibility to tell you with my little campaign of barbed hints, because I simply didn’t want to get in the middle of it. That was a total, selfish cop-out, for which I’m incredibly sorry.”

China shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. If it had been the other way around, I might have done the same thing.”

Her forgiveness seemed to loosen Brigit’s tongue. “It was less than three damn months after you married him,” she spat in a bitter tone. “That time, I happened to catch him coming out of a room at the Mayflower with some bitch. He was still adjusting his goddamn fly. But that time, he saw me, too.”

China swallowed around a dry lump in her throat. “Not the same woman as last night?”

“Oh, hell no. I think the one I saw him with at the Mayflower was the cookie-cutter from which all forty-something female CEOs have been stamped. She was brown-haired, tanned, toned, and power-dressed, and she could probably have cut through re-bar with a single laser look.”

“Oh, dear God,” China whispered in horrified realization. “I have to go home tonight and face him, and I don’t have the slightest idea what I’ll do.”

Chapter 4

Gary whirled away from the front window to face China. His face was gray and pinched with anger. “She’s flat, fucking lying to you!”

From her seat on the leather sofa, China made herself return his seething stare. “She’s *lying* to me?” she asked, with disbelief clear in her voice. “Why would Brigit lie to me? She’s my best friend! What motive could she possibly have?”

“How the hell should I know?” Gary snarled. Without waiting for a reply, he began to pace in agitation. “Maybe she’s jealous,” he fumed, flapping his arms as punctuation. “Maybe she’s some kind of a sadist. Maybe she’s an out-and-out psycho. I don’t know, and I really don’t give a rat’s ass why she’s doing it.” When he turned to face her again, his face had softened, but his blue eyes bored insistently—feverishly—into hers. “There is one and *only* one thing that matters,” he hissed. “She’s lying to you, China, and you’re about to let her ruin our whole marriage!”

“I’m about to let her ruin our whole marriage,” China repeated. She knew that her hands would shake unless she kept them clasped together in her lap, but otherwise, she felt surprisingly calm. “Meaning: it’s all my fault. My best friend says she caught you cheating on me, but you’re trying to make it *my* problem instead of yours. Not this time, Gary. No. I will not let you turn this one around on me.”

“As God is my witness,” he cried, “the woman is out to destroy us!”

China shook her head resolutely. “It’s perfectly obvious that she doesn’t like you. She never has, and I’m sure she never will. But I simply can’t believe that she would lie to me about this.”

Gary flung himself into a heavy wingback chair and flopped forward, cradling his head in his hands. “Oh, God!” he groaned. “This is like a fucking nightmare!” A moment later, he leapt back out of the chair and

resumed his restless pacing. “Why now? Why is she pulling this kind of shit right *now*?”

China’s tone matched the acid in her stomach. “Presumably,” she said, “it’s because she saw you out with another woman last night.”

He threw up his hands in exasperation. “All right, then. That tears it! If you’re going to believe her over me—which is a hell of a sorry comment on our relationship, by the way—there’s only one thing I can think of to do.” He stalked over to the telephone table, pulling a business card from his pocket as he went.

“What are you doing?”

He squinted down at the card for a moment and then lifted the receiver. “I’m calling Bill. With the time difference, he should still be in his office. I’m going to get him on the line, and I’m going to tell him exactly what has happened. Then I’m going to put you on to talk. I’m going to ask him to tell you directly and in detail how we spent the evening together, right up to 12:30 or so.”

“But what if—”

“No ‘buts,’” he ordered China. He leaned over the phone and jabbed a 1 and the 206 area code. Then he stopped and looked back at her earnestly. “If it queers the deal with the glassworks, then so be it. I don’t like that, China, but I’ll give it up in a heartbeat if it’s the only way I can convince you.”

Suddenly, she wavered. “Well, but wait a minute. There’s no need to go that far, is there? I mean—can’t you call a waiter or a bartender or somebody like that to vouch for you, instead?”

“Right,” he spat, and his lips twisted with disgust. “Out of a couple of hundred tables he served last night, do you seriously expect a kid who

never waited on me before to remember me, and who I was with, and what time we left?”

“I...okay,” she stammered. “Maybe that particular thing isn’t realistic, but there must be some other way.”

Gary sighed and rubbed at his eyes. “Wake up, will you, baby? Unfortunately, we’re still stuck right here in the real world, where children murder children, and trusted friends flip out and start lying to you all of a sudden. There is no sanitary, pain-free way out of this one.” He fixed her with an injured gaze for a moment and then bent to punch in the rest of the phone number.

China was in anguish. She frowned so hard that her bushy eyebrows almost met over the bridge of her nose, and she gnawed furiously at the inside of her cheek. As she watched him straighten to his full height to wait for the connection, her stomach was on fire with tension. What if he was telling the truth, after all? What if Brigit in fact was trying to break up their marriage? Maybe some arcane motive for it had surfaced during her ‘watershed’ experience of the night before. If so, Gary was about to pay a terrible price in humiliation to establish her deceit.

“Bill Winchell, please,” Gary said in his best formal, business voice. A moment later he said, “Thank you, but I’d prefer to hold for him.”

“No!” China finally cried. “I can’t let you do this!” She launched herself off the sofa, snatched the receiver from Gary’s hand, and replaced it quickly in its cradle, as if it were burning her fingers.

“God damn it!” he protested, high color in his cheeks. “Don’t you understand anything? I don’t want you taking my word on this! I want proof! I want this over, and I don’t ever want it to come up again!”

She read such raw pain in his eyes that she had to look away. In her own mind, she juxtaposed that picture against the memory of Brigit’s bizarre new appearance and fixation with impending cataclysm, and her conflict

immediately began to melt away like a dusting of early snow. He was, after all, her husband, and she felt certain that only love could give rise to the kind of hurt she now saw in his face. “It won’t come up again,” she mumbled to her hands.

“It will, too, China. If I don’t give you proof, it *will* come up again.”

She raised her head and stared at her husband stubbornly. “No. It’s over. I’m taking your word over Brigit’s, and that’s the end of it. I’ll tell her that tomorrow, at the same time I tell her I quit. I believe you, Gary, and that leaves me no choice but to sever all ties with her. After that, I never intend to speak of this again.”

“I—oh, Jesus!” Gary whispered, and his azure eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. He sniffed and opened his arms to her. “Come here to me, baby. Please, come here and let me hold you.”

Tears were now spilling out of her own eyes. She let them run unhindered down her cheeks, and she stepped into his reassuring embrace. “I never meant to—”

“Shhh. Hush, now. Just be quiet, and let me hold you.” He hugged her and rocked her in silence for a moment. Then he tightened his arms around her and whispered, “I love you so much, baby! I don’t know what I’d do if I ever lost you.”

“As long as you love me, you won’t,” she squeaked between her sobs. “So please, please, please keep on loving me.”

* * * * *

To her own distaste and disappointment, China could not summon enough courage to confront Brigit face to face. She was quick to tell herself that it was only because their friendship had meant so much to her for so long. An unwelcome whisper from the shadows of her mind,

however, told her that fear of hearing Brigit's rebuttal was the more truthful reason.

In the end, in spite of the enormous pain it caused her, she took Gary's advice and left a message on Brigit's home answering machine. "I'm sick and I'm sad about this whole thing," she said, "but Gary flatly denied your accusations, and I'm convinced that he's telling the truth. Under the circumstances, I think it's better if you and I have no further contact. Please don't bother trying to call me, because we're leaving for Canada and Seattle immediately, but I wouldn't call you back even if I were here. I'm sorry that our friendship had to end like this, but it came down to making a choice between you two, and I did. So, I'm calling to say good-bye. Unfortunately, this time it's forever." She hung up with a heavy heart and salty tears tracing lines down her face.

Apart from the murder of the little girl, leaving the message marked one of the low points of China's adult life, and she was pitifully eager to have both time and distance separating her from the ruptured friendship. Gary, happily, seemed to be doing everything in his power to cheer her up. He had booked first class seats for their flight, and he had hired white stretch limousines to ferry them from home to Dulles airport and, upon their arrival, from Calgary to Banff.

Her mood began to lift the moment she walked out the front door, and she soon felt as if she had stepped into a different and better world. She and Gary had explicitly agreed not to discuss anything even remotely connected with their life back home—with special emphasis on the murder and Brigit. The arrangement gave her an even greater sense of freedom than she had expected, for she was now in full control of her destiny in that regard. As long as she did not allow her mind to stray into unpleasant territory, she could pretend to herself that nothing awful had ever happened.

If it was cowardly to shut out the past in that way, so be it. She allowed herself to relax and slip effortlessly, unresistingly, into a time of carefree enchantment. Soon, her overwrought emotions felt like they had been

wrapped in pink cotton candy. She gave herself over to the healing magic of the magnificent Canadian Rockies and the experience of pampered, absolute luxury that Gary had arranged.

After a surprisingly short drive across the barren, westernmost fringe of the Great Plains, the limousine ascended the mountains. Abruptly, they passed into a cocoon of agelessness; they were surrounded by snow-covered mountain peaks that jutted up through stands of pine and spruce and towered over winter-silent lakes. Each new vista seemed more awesome than the last, until China could scarcely breathe from her delight. She would have been perfectly content, she thought, if the ride could have lasted forever.

She was still filled with wonder when their white-gloved limo driver turned them over to the liveried bellman at the Banff Springs Hotel. Although she regretted having to come out of the forest, it was impossible to be displeased, for there was a special aura, too, about the stately, chateau-like old hotel. It, like the entire town of Banff, owed its existence to the hot sulfur springs which two railroad workers had discovered there in 1885. Since 1888, the hotel had sat perched on the northeast slope of Sulphur Mountain, keeping watch over the Bow River. Somehow, even on such short notice, Gary had managed to get a nonsmoking room with a king-sized bed and one of the most spectacular views in the entire hotel.

As China explored the little town itself, it yielded up treasure after treasure and delight after delight. Twice only, Gary begged off from going along on her forays of discovery, pleading the need to finalize the arrangements for their upcoming snowshoeing adventure. The rest of the time, he lavished attention on her like a new groom and cheerfully escorted her through a seemingly endless succession of cute shops, antique stores, galleries, arcades, and quaint lunchrooms. They took the water of the springs together, and both evenings they dined at the hotel in formal, romantic elegance. They made love tenderly and leisurely, and the renewed sense of closeness that she felt had China fairly glowing with contentment.

Gary made only one selfish request of her, and she was more than happy to fulfill it. If they had any clear weather while they were in Banff, he wanted to go for a ride on the Sulphur Mountain Gondola. On their second and last morning there, he woke her a little before 9:00, announcing that she would have to make good on her promise.

“We couldn’t possibly have gotten any luckier with our weather,” he chirped. “It should be clear as a bell for us all through the morning, and there’s nothing major forecast for at least the next couple of days. If it’s okay with you, though, I’d much rather get moving and go early.”

“No problem,” China murmured. She was still fighting to come out of deep sleep. “Give me twenty minutes and a cup of your gourmet, in-room, Mr. Coffee blend, and we’re out of here.”

In reality, it took her a full thirty minutes to shower and dress, but they still arrived at the tram station in time to catch the first car of the day. China had never ridden on an aerial tramway, and she was thrilled and chilled through every second of the twenty-three hundred foot ascent to the summit.

“Oh!” and “Look!” were all China seemed able to say. Unlike Gary, she had never spent any time in the mountains, and she felt a little like she thought an astronaut must when first looking down from space. The fairyland town was cradled in the depths of the valley below, and Cascade Mountain soared majestically beyond it.

Gary smiled broadly. “I knew you’d love the Rockies. By the time we leave for Seattle, you’ll be a regular mountain woman.”

She laughed gaily. “I hope that doesn’t mean I’ll have to smear bear grease all over myself and start walking like a cocky gorilla.”

“No, but you’ll probably be so sore from snowshoeing that you’ll wish you weren’t walking at all. That’s the price of doing something new, but it will be well worth it. That, I can promise you.”

“So exactly what have you got arranged?”

“Well, I’m sorry to burst your balloon, but this afternoon we start roughing it.”

“Roughing it?” she asked in alarm. “But I thought we were staying at the Bighorn Lodge.”

“What I mean is, no limo. I’ve rented us a van, and I’ll be playing chauffeur. Without the white gloves.”

“You rented a van?”

“Uh-huh. It has your luxury interior, of course, but it also comes fully equipped for snow emergencies.”

China frowned. “What kind of snow emergencies?”

“Blizzards or avalanches, but don’t get yourself all fretted up about it, honey. It’s purely precautionary, standard gear. Up here, smart people always carry a transceiver, a probe, and a shovel in their car, just on the off chance of an avalanche. And they carry survival rations and space-age blankets in case of a breakdown on the road or a blizzard.”

“Well, I don’t want any emergencies today, thank you very much. Frankly, if it were up to me, I’d rather be beamed directly into the Lodge.”

Gary looked crestfallen. “I hope I haven’t done something that’s going to upset you. There weren’t any limos available, and I *am* an experienced winter mountain driver. You seemed to get such a kick out of the scenery on the way up to Banff that I thought you’d be okay with the van. The only other choice was to take a helicopter shuttle.”

China’s response was quick and unequivocal. “No, no!” she exclaimed, and she shuddered. “You know how I feel about helicopters! But you’re right about me loving the scenery, and I’m sure the van will work out

fine.” She blinked sheepishly. “As I think you’ve already inferred, I’m a wee tad nervous about driving around all by ourselves in all this vastness. I keep forgetting that you’re not a tenderfoot like me. But I’ll get over it.”

“Are you sure? Because it’s certainly not too late to switch to a copter.”

“I’m sure. The rational part of me knows this is all old hat to you, and I know perfectly well that you’ll take good care of us. I think I’m just a little overwhelmed—and even a little bit threatened—to see such big, huge mountains in winter.”

He chuckled good-naturedly. “Oh, you’re just a poor little flatland weenie girl! Luckily for you, I happen to be a graduate of the Bubba Beasley School of Extreme Winter Mountaineering, and I know precisely what to do in each and every conceivable situation.”

She jabbed her right elbow playfully into his rib cage. “You didn’t graduate from any such place!”

Gary feigned offense. “I might just as well have.”

“Okay, okay, okay, Mr. Know-it-all Mountaineer! You can drive us there in your van”

* * * * *

They left Banff shortly after one and went south on Highway 93. It was a wide, well-plowed road, and Gary drove confidently. They spoke little for the first hour, as China drank in vista after vista on one of the most beautiful drives in the world.

When her senses were too full to absorb more wonder, she opened the glove compartment and looked unsuccessfully for a map. After a moment she frowned. “I can’t seem to find a map in here.”

“Really!” Gary exclaimed. “Well, in our particular case it isn’t important, because I know the roads, and I know how to get where we’re going. Still, that’s poor form on the part of the rental agency. I was so sure they’d have one in there that I never even bothered to check. I’ll have to give them a real tongue lashing on that score when I go to check the van back in.”

“I guess you’ll have to be my talking map, then. What will our route be, and are there any landmarks I should help you look for?”

Gary laughed. “And the next thing I know, you’ll be asking me, ‘How much farther is it, honey?’ And, ‘Are we there yet?’”

She smiled back at him, pleased to see him so relaxed. “I’m that transparent, am I?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So, talk to me anyway, Map.”

He shrugged. “I thought we’d take the most scenic route, going south down 93, and then looping back up 95 to the north. That should get us to the Lodge by dark, even with a stop for a snowshoeing lesson.”

“A snowshoeing lesson this afternoon?” she asked. The idea had caught her completely off guard.

“Why not this afternoon?”

“Well, where? And who from? Are we going to a school or something?”

He grinned, showing his flawless white teeth for a moment. “There’s me, myself, and I, and all the gear we need is right there in the back of the van.”

“Oh,” China said. She wasn’t sure why this new turn of events should bother her, but for some reason she found it mildly upsetting. “I had

thought we'd be going straight to the Lodge, so we could get unpacked and all before dinner."

Gary mock-pouted. "I see what it is. I see your little game."

"What do you mean?"

"You just want all your lessons to come from the ruggedly handsome instructor-guide up there at the Lodge."

Her reluctance vanished in the face of Gary's good humor, and she giggled. "With my luck, they will recently have hired a new instructor of indeterminate sex."

"In that case, you should be grateful to have such a good-looking teacher this afternoon."

"And conceited," she gibed. "Don't forget that part."

They drove for another half-hour during which they saw only a handful of cars. By then, the sun had vanished into a rapidly darkening cloud cover, and China was beginning to feel concerned. "I thought you said there wasn't any snow in the forecast," she said.

"That's right."

"Well, I'm only a poor little flatland weenie girl, but those kind of look to me like snow clouds," she said. To her annoyance, she could hear the growing apprehension in her own voice in spite of her attempt at levity.

"Nah," Gary reassured her. "You don't have a thing to worry about, Weenie-Girl."

"Seriously, now."

“Aha!” he exclaimed abruptly. “Here comes the road to our snowshoe lesson.” He slowed and turned right, onto a side road. It had not been plowed recently, but it was still passable.

“This doesn’t look like a very good road to me,” China said uncertainly. The roadway was quite narrow compared to the main highway, so that the towering trees closed in around the van, and the snow was completely undisturbed by traffic. Nor could she tell precisely where the pavement ended or whether there was a true shoulder.

“Hey! Cut me a little slack here, will you, babe? The weather is fine, the road is fine, and I promise that I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

Ten minutes later, China was gripping her armrest tightly. The road had narrowed to little more than a wide track, and twice the van had swerved sickeningly on patches of ice. “Couldn’t we just turn back now, Gary,” she pleaded, “and get on into the Lodge? The sky looks perfectly dreadful to me now, and I’d really rather head for the Lodge. Just in case some storm is breaking unexpectedly.”

“But we’re almost there now, baby,” he said. “We won’t have to hang around, but now that we’re so close, at least let me show you this place. It honestly is extraordinarily beautiful.”

The excitement in Gary’s voice was palpable, but his eagerness was far from contagious. In fact, although China despised herself for it, she was becoming more nervous by the second. They had been climbing steadily ever since they left the main highway, and they were now winding their way up quite a significant incline. Some of the switchbacks were sharp, and none of them were adequately protected with guardrails or barriers. She thought Gary was driving faster than he should be, and she did not want to go even one mile further down the unused road. The huge trees that loomed on both sides of them were no longer lovely to her; they now looked dark and forbidding, and God only knew what kind of forest threats were lurking out there beyond them.

Unbidden, she pictured herself relaxing before a roaring fire in the bar at the Bighorn Lodge. It made her feel spineless and weak, but she now wanted desperately to be someplace safe and warm. She wanted to be someplace where the first sight of fat, lazily falling snowflakes would not—as now—cause fear to coil greasily in her stomach.

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