

## Chapter One

“You got my money, pal?” Ian’s voice was light with only a suggested undercurrent of threat. He knew how to intimidate without breaking from his nice-guy image. “You know, if it was just me I’d cut you some slack, but it’s not up to me.” This wasn’t true, but tapping into a client’s fear of bigger sharks never hurt. He always alluded to someone higher on the food chain who might do much worse than rough a guy up for what he owed. It kept the losers in line.

“End of the week, I swear.” Ron Haskell’s face was red and sweating and Ian hadn’t even touched him yet. “I had the money ready for you, but then something came up, you know? I have to contact a few people and get it together again. I’ll pay you by Friday. Please, just give me a couple days extension!”

He sighed theatrically. “Ronnie, what am I gonna do? You’re putting me in a situation here.” Throwing an arm around Haskell’s shoulders, he squeezed tight and let his mind go, sending tendrils of thought coiling around the addict’s mind, sniffing out the truth. There was a whiff of something that smelled like money and he latched onto it, gripping the man’s shoulders even harder. “I get the feeling you’re not telling me the whole truth. Is that right, buddy?”

“No. I gave you all I got. Honest.”

Haskell’s shirt was damp beneath Ian’s arm, his body radiating heat like a furnace. Ian smelled the stink of fear, the quiver of a body in withdrawal and, inside his mind, heard the helpless squeal of a mouse in a trap. Haskell had no money at the moment, but knew where to get some.

With a last hug, he let the shaking junkie go. “All right. Friday for sure.” He pointed a finger at him and grinned. “Promise?”

“Yes. Yes, I promise.” Haskell looked like he might collapse, blubbering in gratitude.

Ian turned to walk out of the men’s room then at the last minute swung around, driving a fist into the man’s scrawny belly.

Doubling over with a gasp of expelled air, Haskell went down to his knees. He clutched his gut and choked for his next breath.

Ian casually pushed him over on his side with one foot and pulled off one of Haskell’s scuffed leather boots. Reaching inside, he extracted a wad of folded bills and counted out two hundred bucks, only a third of what the guy owed but better than nothing. He tossed the boot back at its owner, hitting him in the chest. “Don’t lie to me, man. That’s no way to do business.”

Haskell lay curled in a fetal position, coughing.

Ian stepped over the man’s prone body and went to the sink to wash his hands. Looking in the grimy, cracked mirror at his reflection, he ran a hand through his shaggy, brown hair, widened his brown eyes and lifted his eyebrows in feigned disbelief then practiced his disarming smile. Good, he didn’t look like the kind of guy who beat up other guys in men’s restrooms. He turned and walked out of the restroom, leaving Haskell sobbing for breath on the dirty floor.

In the smoke-hazed pub, he took a seat near the end of the bar and ordered whiskey, no ice,

from the bartender. Leaning his elbows on the counter, he settled his ass on the stool to watch an inning of a baseball game before his next appointment.

Ian was home. He'd spent most of his life in dark, run-down dives like Manny's. Upscale sports bars with a bank of big screen TVs and flavored martinis made him itchy. As he grabbed a handful of peanuts and tossed them in his mouth, he glimpsed Ron Haskell stumbling past on his way to the front door.

The game was on commercial break. Ian frowned in annoyance when Raymond Brody's face, radiating paternal concern and caring, filled the screen.

"Are you tired of feeling alone?" the pseudo-spiritual leader intoned. There was an insert shot of an old woman gazing sadly out a window. "Are you drained by the speed and pressure of today's world?" Another view of a city sidewalk, crowded with people. "Are you haunted by a pervading sense of worthlessness or self-doubt?" A series of shots flashed on the screen: a well-dressed businessman at his desk, head buried in his hands; a crying young mother holding a baby; an emaciated man hooked up to an IV in a hospital bed; a homeless woman walking down the street away from the camera.

Ian sipped his drink and stared at the TV, attention caught in spite of himself.

"Do you long for peace, simplicity, tranquility and a renewed sense of purpose in your life?"

"What a load of shit," he muttered.

Manny came over, poured him another shot, and looked up at the TV, too.

The camera drifted over pastoral countryside, past a sign welcoming visitors and through wide-open gates. It angled over a green lawn with flowers and pathways to a white building nestled among the trees. Brody's rich, warm voice continued, "The Center for Human Wellbeing located in the heartland of America is a retreat from the world where you can relax and renew your spirit."

"Bullshit," Ian repeated. "Retreats, DVDs, lessons, speaking engagements, this guy's making money faster than the Treasury can crank it out. What a scam!"

Manny rapped his hand on the bar. "Shh, I wanna hear."

There was a barrage of quick camera shots of forest fires, monsoons, mudslides, floods and tornadoes. Brody's spoke soothingly over the montage. "Isn't it time you discovered the true meaning of your time spent in this world?" Once more the smiling face of the motivational speaker/guru/whatever the hell he was supposed to be filled the screen. "It's not too late. Call the toll free number now for an informational brochure about the Center for Human Wellbeing. It could change your life."

The phone number shone stark and black against a setting sun then the picture dissolved. The next advertisement, a promo for the latest horror movie, flashed on the screen.

"Bullshit!" Ian said one last time, tossing his second drink back.

"I don't know." Manny wiped the bar with a stained towel. "My wife got that DVD, *Finding Faith in Yourself* and she hasn't been so happy in a long time. Maybe this guy's onto something."

"Whatever." Ian waved away the bottle when Manny moved to pour him another. He needed to keep sharp for his meeting with Quinlan.

The movie promo ended and the Giants game resumed. Ian silenced his growling stomach

with another handful of peanuts. Gazing at green grass and white uniformed players, he zoned out, reaching a Zen-like level of peace. He liked baseball. It was a pure world where the goal was simple and the rules clear.

The batter hit a triple and everyone in the bar yelled. For a moment they were united in the simple bond of shared excitement as their team scored. It was as close as Ian came to having friends. He half rose off his seat, shouting along with the others.

When he sat back down, a pair of arms slid around his waist and the smell of a woman's too-strong perfume enveloped him. "Hey, babe," a sultry voice purred.

Ian tried to place it. *Sherry, Shanise, Cheryl, Shirley?*

"Sharysse!" He erased his annoyed frown and replaced it with a smile before turning to face her. "Long time. How've you been?"

"Missing you," she answered, sidling in close to Ian and gazing into his eyes. Hers were light blue, ringed with smudged, iridescent blue mascara. Her lush body was poured into a matching peacock blue dress. "I thought you'd call."

He cocked his head to the side and lied with a smile. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I lost your number, but I've been thinking about you ever since. That night was really special." He struggled to remember Sharysse in the sack.

"Really?" She leaned into his side, her warm body pressing against his, and he began to believe his own lie.

"Of course! It was amazing. I've never felt like that before."

"Me too." Her hand rested on his thigh, rubbing up and down its length, stiffening his cock. "But when you didn't call, I thought ... I mean, if you'd only given me your number, I could've called you."

Ian never gave his number out to women. "I'm sorry, babe." He leaned in close and pressed a kiss to Sharysse's warm cheek. Her arms tightened their embrace around his waist. Her soft hair brushed his jaw as he briefly held her. It actually felt kind of nice and he considered taking it further, but he was out of time.

He gently extricated himself from her clinging arms. "Sherry, I'm sorry. I've got a meeting I need to get to. I'm already late." Leaning down, he covered her soft, peach mouth with his, kissing her deeply enough to, hopefully, leave her speechless. When he pulled back, Sharysse blinked and gasped like a landed fish.

He traced a hand along her cheek. "Bye. Call you soon." He walked quickly from the bar before the woman could remember he still hadn't taken down her phone number.

Stepping out of the smoky bar into a dark night illuminated by neon and streetlights, he walked down the sidewalk.

*Peace. Tranquility. A sense of purpose.* Brody's seductive voice echoed in Ian's mind on a repeating loop. He looked around at the hookers, hustlers and homeless he passed on the street in this seedy Reno neighborhood. "Bullshit," he muttered, hunching his shoulders against the chill air and striding purposefully toward his meeting in the park.

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Ian arrived far too early but that was okay. It was always smarter to get there in advance, check out the place for an easy out if things went sour. He appreciated that Quinlan had chosen an open area by the dry, leaf-choked fountain, where he could see what was coming in all directions. Ian hated meeting people in alleys or abandoned buildings where anything might be hiding in the shadows.

The night was colder than he'd expected and he bounced on his heels a little, wishing he'd worn a jacket instead of just a T-shirt. His bare arms prickled with gooseflesh. Digging in his back pocket, he pulled out the last little square from a pack of Nicorette and popped it in his mouth. As his jaws worked the precious drops of nicotine out of the gum, he cursed his attempt to give up smoking. For a guy who operated primarily on impulse, it was amazing he'd been able to kick the habit. So far.

A dark figure approached from the east side of the park. Ian bounced a little harder in anticipation and his pulse sped up. Nothing was ever routine in his line of work. Things might take a nasty turn in the blink of an eye.

"Hey. What have you got for me?" Quinlan was a tall man with thick glasses and a crew cut. He looked and sounded too bookish and educated to be a bottom feeding, petty criminal, which explained why he was so good at his job.

Usually Ian had more to show, but tonight it was a handful of credit cards taken from wallets he'd lifted earlier that day. He drew them from his jeans pocket and fanned them out for Quinlan.

The man took the cards and studied them. "How old?"

"Few hours."

"That's old." Quinlan looked up, pale blue eyes magnified by the glasses. "Not worth much."

"Not my fault. You wouldn't meet me any sooner."

Quinlan shrugged. "Two hundred."

Ian hesitated. He knew better than to complain since it wouldn't do any good, and he didn't want the danger of hanging onto the cards and using them. Besides, Ian had gotten several hundred in cash from the wallets, a pretty good haul. "All right."

Quinlan pocketed the credit cards and pulled out a money clip from an inside pocket of his brown, corduroy jacket.

"Would you be interested in X-boxes? I might be coming into a small shipment if things work out right."

Quinlan shrugged and handed Ian a stack of twenties. "Maybe. Call me after you get them."

Ian nodded and pocketed the money.

On the left periphery of his vision, something moved through the park. He lifted his head and his senses opened. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the figure racing through the trees, coming in his direction. When he turned back toward Quinlan, the fence was already moving quickly away in the direction from which he'd come like a giraffe loping away from an incoming cheetah.

Ian's gaze swung back toward the runner, drawing closer, dodging around trees and bushes, zigzagging through the park rather than following one of the paved paths. The small figure was a

woman. Chasing fast on her heels was the shadowy silhouette of a man. The pursuer appeared to be holding a gun, but wasn't shooting ... yet.

Following Quinlan's example, Ian turned to fade away.

"Help me!" *Help me!* The feminine voice came simultaneously from behind him and from inside his head. The word-thought was accompanied by a rush of fear-fueled adrenaline, which also originated from outside of himself.

Despite every instinct of self-preservation screaming at him to disappear, he looked back.

The woman was only a few yards away, barreling toward him. She had something clutched to her chest so only one arm pumped along with her running legs. She hurtled straight at him, so close now he could hear her breath gasp raggedly in and out of her chest. Then she was upon him.

Without thought, he grabbed her arm and ran alongside her. His long legs and firm grip on her wrist propelled them both along. He practically dragged the woman with him. Her breath was failing and her energy flagging.

Ian glanced over his shoulder long enough to see the pursuer drawing steadily closer, and as he faced forward again he heard the sharp report of a gun. The bullet didn't bite into his body, but the shot encouraged a burst of speed. He jerked the woman along, his fingers digging into her flesh and his mind encouraging her. *Come on! Run!*

He knew the layout of the park like it was his own home. He'd slept there for a while when he first came to the city before he got his various businesses up and running and could afford to rent a place. Darting right, he pulled the woman down a steep incline into a wilder part of the park, where undergrowth had not been cleared and no paths were laid out. The park became woods. Low growing brambles snagged their legs and branches whipped their faces as they dodged small saplings.

Behind them, their pursuer crashed through the underbrush like a rampaging bear, which, Ian supposed, made them the frightened rabbits.

The slope was uneven. They stumbled and slid down the hill, impeded by rocks and fallen branches hidden in the dark. Then the woman lost her balance and went down hard on her knees, almost jerking Ian off his feet. He pulled her back up, continuing to tug her behind him with all his strength.

At the bottom of the incline, the land leveled out. Ian cut a hard left, racing for the sanctuary he had in mind. The place would either be their salvation or a trap, depending on whether their pursuer found them. The fact the man wasn't shooting at them indicated they were no longer in his sight. Although he might shoot to maim, it seemed the hunter wanted the woman alive so he wouldn't fire blindly into the woods.

Up ahead, loomed a ghostly white shape, the birch tree marking the entrance to Ian's secret den. He hadn't been here in a few years, but the area wasn't so overgrown he didn't recognize it. "Down. Crawl," he commanded.

The woman obeyed him before the words even left his lips.

Both of them dropped to their hands and knees and crawled through the dense vegetation. The ferns and brambles shielded the opening of a natural cave in the side of the hill. It was a

mere pit in the wall, only a yard or two deep, but big enough to fit a bedroll when the need arose.

Ian scrambled into the nest of dried leaves and dirt, beneath the sheltering roots of the tree above and pulled the woman in close to him. His arms wrapped around her, his chest pressed to her back. Feeling the rise and fall of her chest, he wanted to silence her loud, gasping breaths to keep her from betraying their location. No sooner had the thought entered his mind than the woman followed the mental suggestion. With a last shuddering inhale, she calmed her breath, letting it whisper silently out her nose.

They lay listening for sounds of pursuit, but the world outside the little cave was quiet. Ian realized the man was listening for them, holding still until he could locate them scrambling through the woods. For a moment, he flashed back to Jack, one of his mother's many "dates." He remembered hiding in the space under his bed, pressed against the wall, holding his breath, waiting to be dragged out and whaled on, but praying tonight he'd be overlooked as the drunk man roared around the apartment. He shuddered at the memory.

A stroke of the woman's fingers on his arm calmed him. It was as if she knew and understood his fears.

He squeezed her a little tighter and waited.

Beyond the drooping branches and weeds that screened the den, footsteps scuffled through the underbrush. The pursuing man stopped right outside the hiding place. There was a muffled curse then the man's voice cut through the quiet night, obviously speaking into a cell phone. "I lost her... She couldn't have gone far. She's with some guy now. I don't know... Yeah. Tell the boss I'm working on it. Cover for me... All right. Meet you there." After a moment's silence, the man whispered, "Shit," then his footsteps crunched away through fallen leaves.

*Jesus, lady, what'd you do?* Ian wondered.

A minute slipped by--maybe a dozen. He had no idea how much time passed as they stayed frozen in place. Despite the warm body pressed against him, his bare arms were cold and the cool earth around them gave the sensation of being buried alive.

The woman shifted and her scent rose to his nostrils. She smelled of some kind of exotic flower scent mixed with sweat and fear.

Ian had a sudden urge to kiss to her silky hair, fluffed up against his mouth. His arm was wrapped completely around her and his hand cupped her solid, warm shoulder. Despite the fear coursing through him, or maybe because of the surge of adrenaline in his veins, he wanted to move his hand down and cup her breast instead.

She shifted and her rear rubbed against his stiffening cock.

Ian fought to keep his libido under control, using the thought of the man with the gun as a suppressant. He shivered with cold, anxiety and desire.

"I think it's safe," he whispered after another long moment dragged by. Relaxing his hold on her body, he lifted his arm so she could crawl out of the hiding place.

The woman crept to the perimeter of the cave and paused, listening. Satisfied, she squirmed out of the den through the tall weeds and hanging branches to the outside world.

Ian followed.

Both of them crouched low, listening once more, but it appeared their pursuer had left the

area.

Ian straightened, brushing dirt and leaves off his clothes, then turned to look at the woman. It was hard to see her in the dark, but he could tell several things just from having held her. She was short and petite, with little sparrow bones. Long, dark hair streamed down her back. And she smelled really good. She still clutched something to her chest with one arm and now he could see it was some kind of jewelry box.

His curiosity was piqued, but this wasn't the time or place for questions. "I think he's headed east. We should go north. It's the quickest way out of the park, and you can disappear on the streets."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"No problem. My evening was boring up 'til now."

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Ian stopped on the sidewalk outside the park. "This is as far as I go. Police station's that way if you need it."

"No. I can't go to the police."

"Why am I not surprised?" He rubbed a long bramble scratch on his arm.

"I need to make a call. Do you have a phone?" Beneath the streetlight the whites of her eyes and her teeth flashed in her dusky face.

"Not on me," Ian lied, ready to get away from this chick as soon as possible. His instinct for self-protection told him to get the hell out of there before something else happened. His gut told him she was nothing but trouble. And he easily ignored the soft-bellied little voice deep inside that prodded him to help her.

"Could you lend me change then?" she pleaded, taking a step closer to him as though he might dart away any moment. "I lost my purse and have nothing on me."

Ian pictured her body with literally nothing on for a split second before he responded, "Sure." He fished the bills Quinlan had given him out of his pocket and peeled off one. "Here's a twenty. Good luck."

"Thank you." She accepted the money, but caught Ian's hand and wouldn't let go for a moment. Her grip was strong, her hand soft and small. A sensation like a low magnetic pulse shot through him, and even after she let go, he could feel a tingling in his hand. "You did more than save my life. You may have helped save the world," she said softly.

"Uh... Okay. Sure." He wrenched his hand away from the crazy woman's grasp and turned to go.

At that moment, a pair of oncoming headlights veered off the street and a black Mercedes drove up over the curb, coming to a stop half on the sidewalk. Doors flew open and two men in suits leaped out of the car and raced toward them.

"Fuck!" Ian grabbed her hand and ran again.

Racing down the sidewalk away from their pursuers, he kept his eye open for a break in traffic. When there was one, he darted across the street, pulling the woman after him. Brakes

screached and horns honked as they wove around cars to the opposite side of the road. He glanced back to see the pair of suits also navigating the street.

Ian ran down an alley. Dumpsters and trash littered the narrow passage and the smell of urine and garbage was choking. On the opposite end of the alley was another street, but instead of heading toward it, Ian pushed through a side door into the building, hoping to fool their followers into thinking they'd taken a shortcut. He slammed the door closed, but couldn't lock it as the latch was broken. For a moment he leaned against the door, panting and sweating and shot a sideways glance at the woman.

Her back was pressed against the wall, eyes closed and mouth open as she gasped for breath. It would be easy to run, to leave her behind, get his ass out of here and let her face whatever trouble she'd made for herself alone. But damned if just then she didn't open her eyes and look at him with wide brown eyes that asked, *What next?*

"Jesus," he muttered. "What the hell did you take?" Without waiting for an answer, he made a decision. "All right. Fuck it. Come on." He grabbed her hand once more and led her down the hallway.

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After exiting from the opposite side of the building and taking a winding path over several city blocks, always on the lookout for the black Mercedes or the men in suits, Ian finally dragged the exhausted woman up the narrow staircase to his apartment, certain they hadn't been followed.

He checked his security system--a sliver of paper on the top right corner of the door--to make sure no one had entered his apartment, then unlocked the door and let her inside. It felt weird. He never brought women home. Any business he had with them took place in their space, their beds. His home was private. It was also his workplace. There were piles of stolen merchandise stacked against one wall: DVD players, gaming systems, iPods and Palm Pilots. The living room also contained a couch and an HDTV with surround sound. That was all. A tiny kitchenette opened off the main room, two doors on the opposite wall led to the bath and bedroom.

Ian locked the door and turned to face the woman.

She immediately began to talk. "My name is Mirabai Kashi. I belong to an organization called KOTE. It's imperative I get this box to headquarters in..."

Ian held up his hand. "I don't wanna know. The less I know, the safer I am."

"It's too late now." She fingered the smooth wooden box in her hands. "As long as they think you're part of this, you're in as much danger as if you'd taken the box yourself."

Ian knew she was right. Besides, he was burning with curiosity. "Fine. Whatever." He walked past her and dropped down on the couch. "Fill me in. Then call your people and get out of here."

She followed him to the couch and perched on the edge. "What's your name?"

"You don't need to know." He leaned against the back of the couch with his legs sprawled out, feigning nonchalance. He didn't want her to know how uncomfortable it made him having

her there.

A smile curved her lips. "Fair enough." She paused. "Could I have a drink of water?"

He frowned. "You almost get me killed and now I have to play host?" He went to the kitchen and came back with a glass of tap water. It looked a little murky and he was kind of embarrassed he didn't have bottled water to offer, but she took it and drained the glass.

Ian was transfixed for a moment, watching her throat work as she swallowed and her hand wipe her lips when she was finished. He took the empty glass then sat on the couch beside her again.

"All right." Her voice had a trace of the lilting accent of India underlying the flat American drawl. "What I'm going to tell you will be difficult to believe, but trust me. It's all true."

"Uh-huh."

"There is much more to this world than most humans know, things beyond their understanding because they've forgotten all they once knew." She scooted back on the couch, turning to face him and gazing earnestly into his eyes.

*Great. A zealot.* Ian was paralyzed with the excruciating numbness only a door-to-door religion peddler could bring.

"There is a balance that must be maintained in order for the world to function smoothly. The elements of earth, air, water, fire and spirit are safe-guarded by Keepers, each with a special power over a particular element."

Ian's eyes glazed. It was worse than he'd thought. Not only a zealot, but a nut. He smiled and nodded to keep her happy.

"There are races other than human who occupy the planet. Protectors aid the Keepers in their work of balancing the elements, while Destroyers undermine the balance. Their acquisitive nature drives the world toward chaos. These three types are of a species called Terrans. We live alongside humans--always have. We are what many legends are based on. You've probably met Terrans in your life, but wouldn't know it."

"Interesting." Ian glanced at the door, his legs itching to run again.

"In addition to Terrans there are many other inhabitants of the world; shapeshifters and elemental beings you might refer to as fairies, for example. But that's..." She trailed off, looking deep into Ian's eyes. "I'm losing you, aren't I?"

"Not at all." His fake smile stretched wider.

Mirabai paused and looked at the polished wood box on the coffee table then up at him again. "Is the box real?"

"Um. Yeah."

"Were the men chasing us real?"

He nodded.

"Then listen to what I'm telling you and try to keep an open mind." She reached out and rested a hand on his arm.

He stilled beneath her touch, feeling suddenly unaccountably calm, and waited for her to go on.

"When I ran to you, you heard me call for help inside your head as well as out loud," she

said. “You often receive flashes of what people are thinking, isn’t that true?”

Ian remained silent, alarmed that this woman was voicing a secret he’d hidden even from himself. He’d always had intuitive flashes but never wanted to think about them. It was simply a quirky gift he possessed, which helped when playing poker or deciding if someone was lying to him or not.

“I sensed that about you. My particular gift as a Keeper is bound to the metaphysical. I work to keep the spiritual world in balance, healing peoples’ psyches, opening their minds, raising consciousness of the ‘bigger picture’ so-to-speak. Understand?”

He blinked acknowledgement, although his mind still denied her words.

“Sometimes my work requires me to infiltrate the negative--what I’ll call the dark side for lack of a better term. Someone has to keep tabs on what they’re up to.” Mirabai smiled, accepting Ian’s incredulity. “I know how it sounds. I don’t blame you for doubting.”

“So, what’s in the box?” he asked, skirting the issue.

“I don’t know yet, but it’s important. I’ve been investigating Raymond Brody’s organization...”

“The TV guy! I just saw him tonight. He’s so full of shit.” *Almost as much as you are.*

“He’s not what he appears to be,” she agreed. “The man is trouble, but he’s only a small cog in a much bigger and more dangerous machine. I went to work for the Reno branch of the Center for Human Wellbeing and stumbled across more than a charlatan fleecing people for money.”

Her eyes were shadowed and she looked suddenly deeply exhausted. “Whatever is contained in this box is essential to the Destroyers. I overheard a conversation, seized an opportunity to take the box and ran. Now I need to call KOTE and deliver the box safely to headquarters.”

Whether Mirabai was crazy or not, the box was a fact--a mysterious fact with a locked golden clasp. Ian leaned over and picked it up. It was much heavier than he’d expected. He shook it.

“Don’t!”

He ignored her, getting up to go to the kitchen for a knife to pry the box open.

She followed him. “Don’t! This is *not* something to mess with.”

But Ian was already inserting a blade into the thin line where the lid closed and digging viciously at it. “Maybe I can pick the lock,” he muttered, tossing the useless knife down and digging through a drawer in search of something to use as a pick. “You have any hairpins?”

She grabbed the box from his hands. “Stop trying to open it. Haven’t you ever heard the story of Pandora’s box?”

“No.”

“A girl was told not to open a chest and when she disobeyed she unleashed all the evils of the world.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Ian snatched the box back and started cracking the seam against the edge of the counter.

“Would you ... stop it?” She struggled for possession of the box.

For a moment they both had hold of it, then neither did and the box crashed to the kitchen floor. They stared down at it, but it hadn’t shattered. It sat on the floor, squat and unbreakable.

“Damn!” Ian said.

Mirabai leaned down and swept it up, glaring at him and cradling the box protectively. “Do you have a phone I can use or do I need to find a pay phone?”

He glared at the mysterious box. “Yeah.” Digging in his front jeans pocket for his cell phone, he handed it to her. “Needs recharging, but it should work for a few more calls.”

Mirabai gave him a hard look. “You said you didn’t have a phone on you.”

“I lied. I tend to do that.”

He left her in the kitchen to make her call, walked over to the closed blinds of the window overlooking the street and peered through the slats. He didn’t believe most of what she’d told him, but knew the men chasing her desperately wanted whatever was in that box. Although he was almost certain he’d lost them, he’d learned the “better safe than sorry” lesson long ago in hard ways.

The street was clear, but it didn’t mean much if these guys were already in the building. Ian wondered what had possessed him to bring Mirabai home with him. It was impulsive, stupid and soft--three qualities he never connected with himself. He wanted her out as soon as possible--her and her crazy stories and mysterious box.

She returned from the kitchen. “Someone is on his way to meet me. Justin Foster. He’s a Protector KOTE is sending to escort me to San Francisco.”

“Good.”

Now what was he supposed to do with her while she was waiting? Ian pictured how a normal evening would’ve passed for him. After meeting Quinlan in the park, he might have gone back to the bar for another couple of drinks and to watch the rest of the game, maybe hooked up with Sharysse or some other chick and had sex. Ian looked at Mirabai and wondered if the evening had to be a total loss.

“Do you mind if I use your bathroom to wash up?” She held up her dirty hands.

Ian considered saying, *Only if I can scrub your back*, but held his tongue and nodded. “I’ll find you a clean shirt to wear,” he said with a glance at her grimy, white blouse.

She smiled and her face was gloriously altered from average prettiness to exotic beauty. White teeth flashed against brown skin. Her dark eyes shone and crinkled at the corners. Ian forgot to breathe for a moment as she bestowed her smile on him like an amazing gift. When she turned away it was as if someone had doused the sun. A jolt of actual pain pierced his chest. He frowned at his over-the-top reaction to a simple smile. *What the hell was that?*

After directing her toward the bathroom, he went to his bedroom and rummaged through his dresser until he found a too-tight T-shirt. He knocked on the bathroom door.

Mirabai opened it and took the shirt he offered. Her face and hands were scrubbed clean, her hairline damp from the quick washing up. “Thanks.” Once more she smiled and he felt something like electric voltage surge through him. She closed the door and he stared at it. Christ, he needed a drink.

In the kitchen he took a bottle of whiskey and a glass from the cupboard, poured a couple of fingers and tossed it back. The liquid burned down his throat like molten gold and settled in his stomach, calming his frayed nerves. All he needed now was a cigarette and he’d be perfectly

happy. He pulled the crumpled pack of Nicorette from his pocket and found only empty foil. Crap!

A moment later Mirabai came out of the bathroom wearing his Giants T-shirt. It hung on her small frame, the scoop of the neckline revealing most of her shoulders and her delicate collarbones. He had an urge to run his finger along the sharp ridge of bone. The thin fabric of the shirt molded against her chest for a moment, revealing two little points. He swallowed hard and his cock leaped to attention. Then she turned and the material became loose and sexless once more.

Ian poured another shot of whiskey for himself, then, remembering his host duties, held up the bottle. "Want one?"

"No thanks, but I'm quite hungry if you have anything on hand."

He set down his glass and opened the fridge. There was most of a carton of fried rice that wasn't more than a few days old. He handed it to her.

"Thank you."

"Microwave's there." He pointed then retrieved a fork from a drawer for her.

Her back was to him as she set the food in the microwave. The T-shirt had slipped all the way off one shoulder. The sight of the smooth, brown curve was riveting. An intricate braided metal ring of what looked like brass, copper and gold clasped her upper arm.

"You can call me Mira, by the way. Mirabai is a little difficult for most Westerners." She closed the microwave door and set the timer before turning around. "And do you think you could tell me your name now? It seems a little silly for me not to know it."

He hesitated then shrugged. "Ian Black."

She repeated his name. "Ian." He liked the foreign lilt her slight accent gave it. "I suppose you have a lot of questions about all of this."

"No questions. Not really. I'd rather not know what you've already told me. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

She cocked her head to one side. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"No. But I know you've managed to piss somebody off big time. The sooner you're out of here, the better."

"Thank you for helping me," Mira said. "I don't know how long I could have kept running. And thank you for letting me use your phone to call KOTE."

Despite his protestation of lack of curiosity, Ian actually had a lot of questions. He chose an easy one. "What's the acronym stand for?"

"Keepers of the Environment. It's sort of a governing board for all Keepers. Like the U.N."

The woman really had her little imaginary world well thought out. Mira picked up his sketchbook, lying on the kitchen counter and flipped idly through it.

He stepped forward and snatched it from her hands. No one had ever looked at his sketches and as far as he was concerned no one ever would. His drawing habit was embarrassing and something he kept totally to himself. He opened a drawer and tossed the book into it. "So, you work for KOTE. You're a ... Keeper."

"That's right." She half-smiled as she looked at him, as if she knew perfectly well he was

humoring her.

The timer rang and she took the rice from the microwave.

“You control the elements like Storm in the X-Men?” *No harm in playing into her fantasy.*

“Well, my gifts as a Spirit Keeper aren’t quite that dramatic.” Her smile widened.

“What can you do?” Ian flashed on the park and Mira’s voice echoing inside his head, *Help me!*

“As I said, I’m a healer.” She forked up some rice and ate it.

Obviously she wasn’t going to brag on her imaginary magical powers so Ian changed tack.

“This Brody guy. What’s he really up to? I knew all this peace and happiness bullshit was a scam.”

She shrugged. “Often there’s truth to be found even in the midst of lies. Not everything Brody says is wrong. But he’s manipulating people for purposes that have nothing to do with the ‘wellbeing’ he claims to offer.”

“He’s after their money.”

“That too, but I believe he has even deeper motives to control them. Brody is siphoning off some of the divine spark that accompanies will power. In essence, he’s putting the spiritual world off kilter while preparing his followers’ minds to obey him without question.”

“Brainwashing at that fancy retreat center?”

“Pretty much.” She wolfed down more rice. Ian enjoyed the gusto with which she ate. Mira might be a tiny thing, but she could pack it away. “My assignment was to find out everything I could about Raymond Brody’s operation by working on staff, find the weaknesses and figure out a way to reveal his true motivations to his followers. Then I learned about the box and things got ... complicated.”

Ian leaned against the counter, sipping his whiskey. He glanced at the box sitting on the counter and wondered what it could possibly contain. Mira sounded so sane. Her words were sci-fi fantasy nonsense, but the gravity of her tone had him half-believing them. “Why are you telling me all of this? I’d think you’d want to keep it as secret as possible. How do you know I won’t go to Raymond Brody and sell you out?” Ian mentally kicked himself for saying it. He was going to get himself killed by this cult of KOTE if he didn’t watch out.

She set the takeout carton and fork down on the counter and looked into his eyes. “Because I *know* you. I told you I sense things about people. I recognized the good in you at once. You’ll be a big help in all of this, I know.” Her eyes glowed, dark brown and shining bright at the same time. For a moment her whole body seemed to radiate a golden luminescence.

Ian swallowed. “Lady, you got the wrong guy. I’m no hero.”

She gave him that heart-stopping smile again as she looked into him and apparently right through him, making him feel transparent. “Maybe you don’t know yourself as well as you think you do.”

“Naw. I’m pretty sure I’m not one of the good guys.” Ian thought of Haskell’s red face as the man gasped for breath on the floor of Manny’s restroom.

“I’m a pretty good judge of character,” she said. “That’s why I was sent to investigate Brody.”

“Why didn’t those guys shoot you when they had the chance and take the box back?” He changed the subject. “Would have been a lot easier.”

“I’m not sure.” Mira frowned. “Brody must have told them to bring me back alive so he could question me.”

Suddenly Ian was uneasy, thinking of the men who’d chased them and wondering why they’d been so easy to shake. But if the guys had tailed them here, surely they would have made themselves known by now.

His skin itched and the hair at the base of his scalp prickled and stood up. He felt more trouble coming and despite the fact he’d denied his extra sensory powers to Mira, he always trusted his gut instincts. They rarely steered him wrong. Pushing away from the counter, he turned toward the source of his anxiety--the apartment door--and reached for Mira’s hand. “Something’s not right. We have to go. *Now!*”

The door burst open, the wood splintering along the latch as it was kicked in. Two men in suits exploded through the doorway into the apartment.

## Chapter Two

Mira only had a moment to register the men’s entry before Ian seized her wrist in his vise-like grip and thrust her behind him. She remembered the box on the counter and grabbed it, hugging it to her.

“Fuck!” Ian muttered then launched himself at the intruders. Charging toward them, he aimed low and rammed his shoulder into one man’s gut, driving him back into his taller partner. The tall man staggered into the doorframe, and caught at the wall to keep from falling.

Tackling the first man to the floor, Ian started punching. The attacker who was still standing kicked him, catching him in the side and knocking him off his partner.

Mira saw the knife Ian had used in his attempt to pry open the box and seized it. She hesitated, poised to throw at the tall man who now straddled Ian, punching him. She’d never deliberately harmed anyone in her life. It was absolutely foreign to her nature to cause physical harm to another living creature.

Closing her eyes, she prayed for her aim to be true and her heart to be free of anger or hatred for the attackers then threw the knife across the room. It struck a glancing blow off the shoulder of the man pummeling Ian and distracted him, giving Ian the opportunity to squirm out from under him.

The tall man caught Ian’s legs as he crawled away and pulled him back.

Mira stopped watching the struggling pair because Brody’s other henchman was back on his feet and coming for her. She dodged left, scurrying out of the kitchen and weaving around the couch, dodging her pursuer. She knocked a stack of boxed DVD players into his path.

The man tripped and sprawled over them.

Ian had gotten the upper hand in his fight. Wrapping one hand around the man’s throat, he drove a fist into his face with a grunt. Glancing up at Mira, he shouted, “Go! Get out of here.”

Mira checked on her pursuer. He'd regained his feet and was finally pulling a gun from his shoulder holster. Why hadn't they come in with guns drawn?

Leaping over the toppled stack of DVD boxes, she darted toward the open door. "Ian, run!"

He jumped up, aimed a last kick to his opponent's stomach then raced after her into the hallway. Together they clattered down two flights of stairs and out into the street.

Ian grabbed Mira's hand and once more pulled her down the sidewalk behind him.

She felt like she'd been dragged along like his shadow all night and stumbled as she tried to keep up with his long stride, dropping the box. It hit the cement, but still didn't break. The wood seemed impervious to destruction. Mira guessed it was under a protective enchantment. "Wait!" She stopped dead, pulling Ian to a halt. "The box."

"Leave it. Let 'em have it and they'll quit chasing you." He tugged at her hand.

"No. It's too important." She broke free from his grasp and stooped to pick it up.

"Jesus," he cursed, grabbing her wrist again and practically jerking her off her feet.

They sped down the pavement and around the corner. About a half block from the apartment, Ian stopped in front of a building. The sign above the door declared in flickering red neon, "Bar." He shoved through the door.

Mira followed, unable to do otherwise with her wrist practically crushed in his fist.

Both of them were winded and panting. Ian had blood trickling from his nose and smeared across his cheek. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

The bar's patrons glanced over at the newcomers with either apathetic or curious eyes.

Drawing a deep breath, Ian turned to Mira. "Okay. You wait here," he pushed her toward a vacant booth near the door, "I'll get a car."

She nodded and collapsed on the seat.

He started for the door.

"Ian," she called.

One hand on the door, he turned to look at her.

"You will come back?"

The moment of hesitation before he answered and the flicker in his eyes let her know he'd considered bailing on her. "Yes," he said gruffly. "I'll be back." He pushed through the door and disappeared.

Mira's heart pounded from the adrenaline rush of their escape. She took the opportunity of the minutes alone to slow and steady her breathing. Closing her eyes, she turned her gaze inward and up. Instantly calm settled on her, enveloping her and bringing her back into balance. Her heart rate slowed and a sensation like the coolness on her tongue after sucking a breath mint flowed through her.

She sat in silence, oblivious to her surroundings. Both of the men in suits could have burst through the door and seized her before she would have noticed. After several seconds of attuning to inner peace, she prayed for guidance in choosing the right path and offered a prayer of thanks for Ian's unexpected appearance in her life.

"Hey. Come on! Car's waiting." An irritated voice broke her concentration.

She opened her eyes.

Ian stared at her with a bemused expression. He offered his hand once more.

She took it and he pulled her to her feet.

“Out the back.” He strode rapidly through the bar, down a dark back hall to an exit door.

In the alley behind the bar, next to dumpsters and piles of trash, a rust-riddled, blue Camaro idled with a rumble like a jet ready to take flight. Ian went around to the driver’s side and slid behind the wheel.

Mira pushed a pile of junk--fast food bags, a baseball cap, and beer bottles--from the passenger seat onto the floor before she scrambled inside. Before she even had the door shut, Ian backed out of the alley. She searched for the seatbelt and finally found it pushed deep inside the seat. When she tried to click the buckle together, it was broken.

The car turned onto the street and sped down the road.

Mira glanced around the interior. There was a scapular of Jesus of the Sacred Heart hanging from the rearview mirror. Across the back window was a plastic stick-on message proclaiming something in Spanish. She looked down at the steering column and saw there was no key in the ignition. “This is your car?”

“Yes.” He stared straight ahead, out the windshield.

“No it isn’t. I don’t feel comfortable about this.”

He glanced sideways at her. “Would you feel more comfortable gagged and tied up in the trunk of those goons’ car?”

Mira conceded the point and fell silent. She peered out the window at the passing city lights.

Ian obsessively checked the rearview mirror, but the headlights behind them gave nothing away. He made a number of turns, zigzagging through the city blocks until they reached the highway. No one appeared to be following. “San Francisco, huh?” he asked.

“You can’t go back home. You won’t be safe until this is resolved.”

He grimaced. “Thanks so much for dragging me into it.” He pulled onto the on-ramp of the highway and sped up until the Camaro blended into the never-ending river of traffic.

Mira borrowed his phone again and checked in with Justin Foster, the Protector she was to meet. She explained they were on the way to San Francisco.

“Are you being followed?” Foster asked.

Mira glanced at Ian whose gaze darted from the road before them to the rear and side mirrors--vigilant, nervous. But she sensed his vibration was always high, like a tension wire ready to snap. Even in repose she was willing to bet he never truly relaxed. “I don’t think so,” she answered Foster.

“I’m already on my way. I’ll keep in touch and meet you part way.”

“All right. Thanks for coming.”

“It’s my job. Glad to do it.” The man’s voice was warm and reassuring.

Mira hung up and fell silent for a while, staring out at the window at the passing lights and traffic signs that loomed then faded from view. “Thank you again for helping me,” she finally said to break the silence.

“What’s your organization’s policy on reimbursement for damages and destruction of property?” he asked dryly, maneuvering the car into the passing lane. “How about personal injury

and mental trauma? Loss of income?”

Mira seized on that. “What exactly *do* you do for a living?”

“I’m an entrepreneur. I have a lot of businesses.”

She let that sit for a moment, watching his profile in the flickering light and shadow. Ian was good-looking. Straight, even features, tousled jet-black hair, quizzically arched eyebrows and a permanent sardonic twist to his mouth. His eyes were deep brown like hers; the smile that came and went on his lips never touched them. Mira sensed the pain and loneliness he tried to hide from the world behind sarcasm and wise-ass remarks.

He reached out and flipped on the radio to fill the silent void in the car. A thumping bass beat out a rhythm and a screaming guitar filled in the melody. Soon both of them were head-bobbing along with the music.

Ian glanced over at her. “*You* like Boomtown Rats?”

“They were an underrated band,” she replied. “You needn’t sound so surprised. Did you think I’d only listen to Ravi Shankar or something?”

He grinned.

Mira’s pulse sped up. She was sure he used that lop-sided smile to topple women into bed like ninepins and imagined it would be effective. Her nipples tightened and it had nothing to do with the air in the car being chilly.

“Your sketches,” she said. “They’re very good. How long have you been drawing?”

Ian’s smile extinguished, replaced by a scowl. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to poke through other peoples’ stuff?”

“Sorry. But they were quite wonderful.” Mira thought about the brief glimpse of frozen moments of time, slices of city life, snapshots of people and places, and tried to find the perfect word to describe Ian’s work. “Very intimate. Soulful.”

He scowled harder, glaring a hole through the windshield.

She reached out and touched his arm. “That’s a compliment. There’s nothing wrong with being an artist. Nothing wrong with interpreting how you see the world on paper.”

His gaze dropped to her hand on his arm then lifted back to the window. “Shut up.”

Mira took her hand from his warm forearm. “Shutting up,” she said with a teasing lilt to her voice.

They drove about twenty minutes with nothing but the radio filling the silence between them, then the car suddenly veered left. Ian fought the wheel as the car waffled back and forth across the lane. “Shit!”

Mira looked out the back window, thinking it was some evasive maneuver and they were being chased. But as he brought the car under control and steered into the breakdown lane, she realized they had a flat. The car came to a halt, tilting drunkenly to the left.

“Fuck!” he cursed again and hit the wheel with both hands. “Goddamn, mother-fucking, fuck!” He put the car in park and opened his door to get out.

“Careful,” Mira said. Cars streamed by, as noisy as swarming hornets.

Ian closed the door behind him and stood for a moment, staring at the tire.

She opened her door and got out. Gravel crunched beneath her feet as she walked around to

the back of the car. Together they stared at the closed trunk, the trunk for which they had no key, assuming there was even a spare tire inside.

The engine purred. Choking exhaust fumes rose and Mira covered her nose and mouth with a hand while looking around at the busy highway and barren country on either side.

“Goddamn it. We’re going to have to drive this to the next exit.” Ian kicked the bumper.

Mira looked up and saw the exit wasn’t more than a half-mile away.

They got back in the car and drove slowly, bumpily along the shoulder. The car shook with the speed of passing vehicles.

When they’d crawled safely up the off-ramp, Ian pulled over and turned off the car. “We’ll walk from here.” He rummaged in the back seat until he found a hooded coat, which he tossed at Mira.

She put it on, breathing in the stale odor of sweat and pot smoke embedded in the heavy, olive drab jacket. She was grateful to have it. The night air was cold. “What about you?” There was no second jacket.

“I’m fine. Turn around.” He took the box from her and nestled it in the hood, drawing the ties up tight to create a carrying pouch.

They got out of the car and walked toward the lights of a service station a ways down the road.

Mira glanced back at the abandoned vehicle, feeling a twinge of guilt about the car’s owner, who would probably get it back at some point but was still inconvenienced by the theft. She looked over at Ian, his stiff-backed posture radiating irritation, and wondered if he was even capable of feeling guilt for taking the car. His sense of right and wrong appeared pretty warped, but underneath, Mira sensed innate goodness. He was like an antique brass urn, which only needed polishing to bring its golden luster to the surface.

The gas station was closed.

They walked around it but found no used tires or handy tire iron anywhere.

Mira drew her hands up into the sleeves of the jacket as the frigid breeze cut through it. Ian shivered. He wore only a T-shirt and in the glow of the security light, she could see his arms were goose-pimpled, the fine, dark hairs standing up. She moved in close and took his arm, wrapping the loose sleeve of the jacket around it and hugging it to her body.

Ian glanced down at her, eyes widened in surprise, but he didn’t pull away. “Looks like a motel over there.” He nodded at another group of lights a little farther up the dark road.

They walked toward the outpost of civilization. Mira’s legs felt leaden and sore as she trudged along. She was exhausted, freezing and ready to collapse. They had to pound at the door of the motel office to rouse the owner from his room in back.

Ian paid cash and the man didn’t question his lack of transportation. The guy was probably grateful to get any customers at all. The motel was set back a little too far from the highway to get freeway traffic. The room looked like it hadn’t been updated since nineteen sixty something. The pulsing blue, black and white swirls on the drapes and bedspread were painful to look at. Mira shuddered at mankind’s capability for bad design sense as she crossed the matted blue carpet and sat on the bed. She reached behind her to loosen the drawstring on the hood and

remove the box.

“Here, let me.” Ian took the box from the hood and ran his hands over the glossy cherry surface inlaid with a darker wood that might have been walnut or teak. He shook it, held it to his ear to listen then handed it to Mira. “What do you think it is?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but Brody was holding it for his father. Algernon Brody is one of the most dangerous men in the world. If the contents of this box are important to him, it can’t be good.”

Ian sat on the bed next to her and drew the edge of the ugly, shiny bedspread around his shoulders. “So, for now, only the TV preacher is after this? He’ll try to keep the fact he fucked up and lost it a secret from the big guns as long as possible.”

“I think so.” She pulled Ian’s phone from her pocket. “I’m going to call Justin once more and tell him where we are. He should be able to get here in a few hours.”

“The cavalry. Great.” Ian tapped his finger on top of the box lying on the bed between them. “How do we know this thing doesn’t have a tracking device in it? I haven’t seen anybody following us, but I didn’t last time either and look how well that turned out.” He stood and walked to the window, separating the slats of the vertical blinds to peer through.

“I suppose it’s possible,” Mira said. “But I don’t think so. There was no time for Raymond to attach any kind of device before I took it and he didn’t expect it to be stolen. He was simply supposed to hold it. I think we’re safe here for a little while. You could probably relax.” Ian’s jumpy demeanor made her feel more frazzled. “Sit down and warm up.”

He ignored her, still gazing out the window. “God, I’d kill for a cigarette right now.” Smoothing the cheap vinyl slats back in place, he walked over to the nightstand, picked up the remote and clicked on the TV. Sound blared from the box and a blurry picture wavered on the screen. Ian stood, staring at the television.

Mira wanted to snap at him to sit down. Instead, she got off the bed and went to the bathroom. When she came back, he was back at the window again. He glanced at her then began wandering around the room--pacing like a trapped cat.

Shrugging off the borrowed jacket, she kicked off her shoes, turned back the slippery bedspread, thin blankets and sheets and climbed under the covers to get warm. Ian watched her from the corner of his eye, but never stopped his restless movement.

The TV was tuned to a poker tournament. Mira gazed at the discolored image.

Suddenly Ian spoke. “So, besides saving the world, what do you do? You got a day job?” He leaned against the edge of the low dresser, arms folded over his chest, looking at her.

“I’m a psychic therapist. My family emigrated from India when I was a child. I grew up in California. My practice is in Oakland. Because I work for myself, I can take breaks as needed to perform jobs for KOTE.”

“A shrink.” Ian gave a small snort.

“You have a problem with that?” Mira raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “No. I just don’t take a lot of stock in that stuff. Too many people spilling their guts, bitching and moaning about their lives, what daddy did or didn’t do. It’s...” he paused looking for the right word. “Weak.”

“There’s nothing wrong with weakness, being vulnerable and working through problems with the help of another person. Everyone needs help sometimes.”

“Whatever.” Ian pushed off the dresser and started pacing again--back to the window, to the motel door where he re-checked the locks, back to the center of the floor to stare at the TV, into the bathroom, then back out into the motel room. He jittered around the enclosed space like a strung-out junky.

“Ian!” It came out a little sharper than she intended. “Why don’t you take a rest? Sit down, or better yet, lie down and nap until Justin gets here.”

“About this Foster guy, have you met him before?” He stood, remote in hand, flipping channels like shuffling a deck of cards.

“I’ve met him a couple of times, but I haven’t really spoken to him before. I’ll recognize him if that’s what you’re getting at.” She patted the bed. “Here. Sleep.”

“I don’t sleep.” He tossed the remote on the bed and walked back over to the window.

“You might feel better if you did.”

“I’m fine.”

“I can see that,” she soothed. “How long have you had trouble sleeping?”

He glared at her over one shoulder, brown eyes snapping. “Did I *say* I had trouble sleeping? I just choose not to. I don’t need it.”

“All right. But humor me. Come and sit down a minute ... please.”

Ian walked a few steps toward the bed then stopped.

“There’s a technique I use with some of my patients. It might help with your insomnia.” *Among other things.* “Will you let me try it?” He still hesitated, frowning. “Trust me.” Mira smiled and held out her hand. “You’ll like the results.”

Ian crossed the last few steps to the bed then sat on the edge looking at her warily. He reminded her of a dog that had been kicked too many times and must be cajoled to come near.

“It’s all right. Turn and face me and give me your hands.” She seized the remote from his hand and turned off the TV.

“This is fucking weird,” he grumbled, drawing his legs up under him on the bed and holding his hands out as if she were going to put cuffs on and arrest him.

“Humor me.” Mira took his hands in hers and held them lightly, resting their joined hands on her lap and closing her eyes. Breathing in and out, slowly and deeply, she focused her concentration then reached out with her mind to touch Ian’s. She felt along the edges of his consciousness the way a blind person fingers Braille. It was like touching the tossing waves of the sea. His mind was a swirling mass of thoughts, emotions, energies--unfocused and restless.

Mira frowned and prodded a little deeper. She knew immediately when he registered her presence because his hands jerked against her grip and his mind clenched tight shut. “Shh,” she said, stroking the backs of his hands with her thumbs. “It’s all right. Let go. Trust me.”

He settled and didn’t flinch the second time she gently probed his mind. She felt around in the dark, unfamiliar house, touching walls of doubts, bumping into chairs of fear, shame and guilt until she had a general idea of the shape and dimensions of the room. It was a very cluttered place. Mira prepared to do some spring-cleaning.

She exhaled once more, extended her figurative hands inside Ian's mind, and began to draw away the heavy burden of pain and anxiety he carried with him every day. Channeling his emotions, she experienced each one as she took it on herself. Without directly experiencing the details of his past, she got the general impression of his chaotic, painful life. A part of Ian was still the traumatized child he'd once been, bewildered by the world. He believed the defensive wall he'd raised between himself and other people was strong and thick and would keep him safe, but she crumbled its weak mortar easily, releasing him from his troubles for this one evening.

"Oh God," he murmured, his voice thick.

Exhausted from the effort of the healing, Mira broke concentration and opened her eyes.

Ian was frowning, his eyes squeezed shut. Suddenly he opened them and looked straight into hers, gazing at her with near reverence. "What did you do?" His tone was full of awed wonder. "Jesus."

"Not quite," Mira teased. "I call that a soul colonic." She kept her tone light. It made her uncomfortable when clients treated her like a demigod. "I told you my gift was spiritual healing." She shrugged. "It's just what I do, like the way you draw. Everyone has a talent."

"God," he repeated, "I've never felt so ... light." He blinked and gazed around the ugly motel room as if on a hallucinogenic high. "It's amazing." His gaze settled on Mira. "It doesn't feel like me."

She smiled and squeezed his hands before letting them go. She would have liked to hold them longer. "This *is* you. The self that's buried beneath all your doubts and fears." Mira scooted back on the bed, plumped up a pillow against the headboard and relaxed into it. She didn't embellish her explanation. Sometimes it was a pain being a spiritual teacher, especially when a man you were interested in looked at you like you were a saint instead of a sexually desirable woman.

Ian sat for another moment, seemingly overwhelmed then his habitual smirk quirked the corners of his mouth. "You must have a thriving practice. If I'd known therapy was like that, I'd have gone for it a long time ago." He rose and walked to the window to look out once more, but without palpable nervous tension radiating from him like before. He turned toward Mira and looked at the bed covers opened invitingly next to her. "I guess lying down for a little bit couldn't hurt."

She was embarrassed that her stomach jumped and pulse quickened at the idea of him sleeping next to her. Clearing her throat, she laid the pillows flat and stretched out full length on the bed, pulling the covers over her this time. A yawn cracked her jaw and a slight headache throbbed behind her eyes. Healings always took a toll on her.

Ian turned off the light and climbed into bed.

Mira closed her eyes, but was conscious of the weight and warmth of his body settling beside hers. She was tense and aroused by the faint whiff of male animal exuding from his skin. She closed her eyes and willed herself to stop feeling like a junior high girl with a sudden gut-twisting crush.

His weight shifted on the mattress and he breathed out.

Mira remembered the brief, tense moments he'd held her in his arms in the little cave in the hillside. She'd like to feel those sinewy arms around her again, feel his warm breath on her neck. Desire swelled in her.

She turned on her side with her back to Ian, wondering if she could pretend to fall asleep and then casually roll next to him. They would wake up snuggled together like a couple in a cheesy road trip flick. Hollywood made those movies for a reason--the concept was irresistible. Opposites collide and fireworks erupt before the inevitable melding together of two dissonant spirits into a coherent whole.

Ian was human, not Terran, and an unlikely match for her in every conceivable way, but stranger things had happened. Who could explain why opposite elements sometimes made a perfect pair?