

Dragon Town

by Tom Lichtenberg

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One

"Really?"

Sapphire Karadjian shook her head decisively, as if her boss on the other end of the line could actually see it. She hoped that at least the scorn in her tone would get through, but Meyer Stanwood was impervious to her tones by now. He knew damn well he could give her any assignment he wanted to and she would have to take it. Where else was she going to go? Theirs was the only serious news agency left on the planet, as far as he knew. All of the others had gone down the lucrative path of contractual sensationalism. Stories you could hear about were nothing but stunts, all bought and paid for, while actual events went unreported by everyone except United Press Services.

"It's a joke", Sapphire spat at the phone.

"This one's for real," Stanwood insisted. He was relaxing on his white leather couch, gazing out of his high-rise window at the flat blue Indian Ocean below.

"You don't even know," she insisted. "Just like the last time, 'the village that vanished'? Remember that, huh? This one's for real is what you said then!"

"So they were in hiding," he sighed. "You don't have to remind me."

"But this time it's different," she countered. "That's what you want me to believe. But I don't go around wanting to believe. It's not my thing."

"Nothing but the truth, so help you God," he sighed. "Yes, yes, I know." Stanwood didn't like it, but he had orders to follow, just like anybody else, a phrase he kept repeating to anyone who would listen. It's not like there was a shortage of real life to be reported about, but where was the market? Who wanted to hear it? That's what his bosses kept pestering him with. Gone were the days of facts and figures. They were undeniably boring.

"Let me go back to Guyana," Sapphire pleaded. "The coup is imminent. People are rioting. It could really be happening this time."

"It can wait," Stanwood insisted. "Look, I promise to let you get back to it soon, but first, you have to go cover this story."

"How can you call it a story?" Sapphire asked. "It's a fake. Got to be. I know how it works over there. Those people are beggars for attention. They've done it before, am I right? I didn't even know they'd rebuilt that stadium! It wasn't enough they destroyed it the first time?"

"You know a lot more about it than I do," Stanwood said. "After all, it is your home town."

"One I'd be glad to never go back to," she replied. "Since my father retired I haven't set eyes on the place and I was hoping I wouldn't have to ever again."

"That bad, huh?"

"Dreary," she said. "Did you know there's no 'spring' in Spring Hill Lake? There's a hill, I'll give you that, but there is no lake either. What a pit that place is!" Stanwood knew her resistance was already broken, and it was only a matter of time. No other outfit would let her do what she loved doing most - and what she did better than anyone else - covering civil unrest in the most obscure places. Sapphire had been a war correspondent since she first got out of journalism school, and more than two decades later she was unmatched in courage or correspondent skills. She spoke at least seven languages, had been practically everywhere at one time or another, and had contacts that spies could only dream about. The world was still an incredibly dangerous place, and a woman alone was hardly safe anywhere, but Sapphire was completely undaunted. She had earned all her scars but what frightened her most was the fact that most everywhere nobody cared about anyone else. Her audience was vanishing and she knew it. She reported now for the few and the scattered, and United Press Services were slowly but surely pulling the plug on her mission in life.

And now this, assigned to cover some trivial matter of a sinkhole that swallowed a stadium. As far as Sapphire was concerned, every football stadium in America could be swallowed by sinkholes and it would only have been an improvement. It meant nothing to her that it was Sea Dragons Stadium in the city she happened to come from. She had enough bitterness in her memories about that location. As a child, she had seen a ruthless billionaire wipe out a neighborhood in his lust for that spot, even murdering an old man she cared for to get it. Then, when his precious stadium and shopping mall turned out to be a financial fiasco, the same wealthy crook hadn't hesitated to tear it all down and turn it into rubble again. She thought that the football team was still in Nebraska or some other ridiculous place. She hadn't heard they'd come back, that a new swindler had somehow managed to bilk the taxpayers into rebuilding the football emporium, and she wasn't the least bit interested. President Elbert Gambeaux was about to be thrown to the lions by a furious mob and she couldn't be there? For this? For a hole in the ground? It was stupid.

Still, Sapphire was packing her bag. She had always traveled light, and this time would be no exception. A few tops and a spare pair of boots were about all of the luxuries she afforded herself. She kept her hair short to the point of near-baldness so she wouldn't have to be bothered to carry a comb or a brush. She could get a new pair of jeans anywhere so there was never a need to pack up an extra. As for her jacket, she'd worn the same beaten brown leather

affair for the past decade or so. Everything else that she needed she found on the screen of her hand-held device - her keys, her wallet, her books and her maps. The size of a credit card, the gadget served all of her worldly needs. She flashed it at the airport gate kiosk and all that was left was the waiting. In the meantime she did some research.

Spring Hill Lake, Arizona. Founded in 1909 as a railroad depot and harbor stop down the river from Wetford, the nearest bigger city. Destroyed by a fire in 1913. Rebuilt by one man, single-handedly almost, in 1919. Jakob Bruin, a former furrier from Winnipeg. 'That seems odd', Sapphire said to herself. She inspected a dark, grainy photo of the man on the very small screen. Bruin was wrapped up in some kind of hairy coat, which made sense and brought a smile to her face. His own face, nearly buried by an overgrown beard, showed a pair of serious, narrowing eyes, the look of a man who could never be stopped. Sapphire imagined him with his bare hands killing the thing he then wore on his back. Behind him, in the photo, was a shell of a train station, hosting a peeling, painted wooden sign with the words 'Spring Hill Lake Depot' barely visible. It didn't look to be very auspicious, and indeed, the entire locale was burned to the ground once again, this time in 1926. Jakob Bruin had perished in the flames.

The town was brought back to life one more time, and this time it stuck. It was rebuilt as part of a public works project during the Great Depression, and took off, in its own meager way, as a trucking depot and warehouse plantation. Big brick buildings had sprung up right out of the ground, or so it appeared to Sapphire as she scanned the historical documents. By the fifties the town was doing quite well, had a mayor and a new city hall, and a lot of new roads and new housing. A generation or so later, when Sapphire was born, it was a small city like any other American one, with teams and parades, colors and trivial lore. It had had its good guys and bad guys, corruptions and scandals, and she was certain there were things she had missed, but she'd left the town the next day after graduating from high school and never looked back. Now that she thought about it, she remembered once being impressed by the town, as a child, when along with a friend she'd explored the whole place, taking buses all around it, as she recalled. She smiled as she thought of their plans to traverse the whole city, marking down on a map every street they'd gone down, planning to do it until the whole map was filled. Of course they hadn't made it that far. The city was bigger than they had thought, and after a while they lost interest. It happens.

Alex Kirkham, that was his name. Sheesh. Alex Kirkham. She hadn't seen him in years. 'Just how many? I don't know, twenty?' she conversed with herself. 'Maybe more, even.' They'd been pretty close, way back when. Sapphire had no siblings herself, and lived all alone with her dad, who had to go to work early, so on school mornings he'd drop her at Alex's place, and she'd be taken to school by his family, an arrangement that lasted for years. By high school they'd drifted apart, but still said hello and smiled and waved. His adventurous days were over by

then. Sapphire had taken a serious turn, whereas Alex, formerly the more pensive, had gone in the opposite direction, becoming lighter and breezier - 'more shallow' was how she had judged him back then. It was as if he had reached a certain point in his life, looked ahead and didn't like what he saw unfolding before him, and decided to veer off in a simpler direction. He'd gone on to play baseball, a sport he'd formerly derided, and she thought she remembered he'd made a big splash of it somewhere along the line. She looked him up now, but there was nothing about baseball in his on-line details.

'Railroad Safety Inspector?' she blurted out loud in her seat on the plane.

Two

"It's a living," Alex shrugged. He was seated with his back to the door, across the table from Sapphire in the only diner in Two Forks, Arizona. He wasn't terribly surprised how quickly she'd tracked him down. He'd always known Sapphire to get what she wanted, whenever she wanted. She told him it had only taken one phone call to find him there in what anyone would say was the middle of nowhere. Two Forks was not even a bend in the road, but a ditch on the side of an empty straight line that went on for miles. Alex and Carmela, the waitress, were the only two people in the town that afternoon when Sapphire arrived by rental car. She didn't know why she hadn't gone straight to the scene of the story but had detoured at least a hundred miles to see her old friend. Maybe she thought he could fill her in on some angle that would be more interesting than the one being plastered all over the TV and news outlets by the other seven thousand reporters who'd gathered around the damn sinkhole. At this point, she hadn't even admitted to him why she was there.

She'd come into the diner, spotted a balding, slightly chubby middle-aged man examining a sandwich and figured it had to be Alex, so she walked over and planted herself in a chair and took a closer look. Same pale eyes but that was about all she could recognize. Alex, however, knew her in an instant.

"Well, well, Sapphire Karadjian, right here in Two Forks. Who'd a thunk it?" he smiled, and held out her hand. They shook briefly and she smiled back.

"So you're a railroad safety inspector," she said.

"It's a living," he shrugged, "and anyway, it suits me. I get to travel around," he added with a wave of his hand, indicating the desert around them, "and I get to meet people," he continued,

nodding in the direction of Carmela, who was busily washing a spoon. She waved back but didn't speak.

"Carmela's good people," Alex mentioned confidently.

"But what do you do?" Sapphire persisted.

"Always the ace reporter," Alex winked. "Curious about everything, always. Same as it ever was. Same as it ever was."

"I'm supposing you inspect trains," she went on undeterred.

"Crossings, mostly," he said, "making sure that they work. You wouldn't want cars getting themselves launched by a freight because the arm didn't go down or the bells didn't sound. You want to make sure things are shipshape forever."

"And you cover a region, I suppose?"

"The whole state," Alex said. "Know it backwards and forwards by now."

"Knowing you, you've probably marked it all off on a map," Sapphire laughed.

"Oh, I have," he replied, "only now I've been everywhere so many times it's hardly worth bothering about. Funny thing, though. I've hardly been out of the state. Been to Mexico a few times but that's about it. Texas, once. California."

"What about family?" Sapphire wanted to know.

"Well, I know all there is about you," Alex said. "See you on TV now and then. Guess it's only fair you wouldn't know a thing about me."

"It goes on," Sapphire shrugged.

"That's for sure," he replied. "Say, would you like a cup of coffee? Carmela? Cup of coffee, por favor?"

"Dos," he continued as Sapphire nodded and Carmela came over swiftly with their order.

"I have seen you on the TV too," she told Sapphire. "You're even more beautiful in person."

"I am?" Sapphire blinked a couple of times. "Nobody ever says that!"

"I do," said Carmela as she walked slowly back to the counter. Sapphire shook her head a couple of times, wondering if she'd really just heard it.

"Gets pretty lonely out here," Alex quietly said, and then louder, after taking a sip, he went on.

"Myself, I'm divorced. Father of two, though, father of two. Teenagers, both of them, Charlie and Connie. Good kids, more or less."

"A boy and a girl, eh? Every parents dream."

"No, they're both girls," Alex said. 'Charlie is short for Charlotte. Wanted a boy, you know. Wanted to name him after my uncle, but a girl's what we got, so we made it as close as we could. She always liked being called Charlie, you know. Connie, on the other hand, wants to be called Cookie these days. Says she's going to run off and join the navy just as soon as she can."

"How old is she now?"

"Fourteen," Alex said, "and Charlie's seventeen. Both of them got minds of their own, tell you that. Got it from their mother, Gretchen. She's a piece of work, I'll tell you."

"Would I know her?" Sapphire asked. It was possible, after all. She might have gone to school with the girl.

"Doubt it," said Alex. "I met her at college, in Tucson. She'd come there from Boulder, which is where she is now, with my girls. Don't hardly ever see 'em these days, but I'm well aware of them each and every payday, when more than half of what I get I don't get."

"Been divorced long?" Sapphire knew she was prying.

"Oh yeah," Alex said, "been a very long time."

"And you never re-married?"

"Not hardly gonna do that again!" Alex laughed. "I can hardly afford the first one, so what would I do with another?"

"You're looking good, though," Sapphire said, feeling she had to say something more friendly.

"I look in the mirror every morning," Alex chided her. "But you didn't come here for this. Come to think of it, I can hardly imagine what you did come here for? I thought you were out there in the Republic of Guano or whatever it is."

"Guyana," Sapphire said. "I wish I was there."

"No offense," she added quickly, sensing her faux pas. "It's great to see you. Really, it is."

"You didn't come here for me," Alex repeated.

"Not only," Sapphire put her hand to her forehead. It was certainly sticky and hot in that place.

"It's the sinkhole," she muttered.

"The sinkhole?" Alex seemed to be surprised. "They assigned YOU to a SINKHOLE? Who's going to do the real news if not you?"

"Thanks," Sapphire managed a smile. "I appreciate the sentiment."

"But I mean it," Alex added. "I was thinking there must be some global conspiracy happening right around here, since you showed up, but the sinkhole? Hell, it's a hole in the ground. So it's volcanic, I get it. The thing is unusual, but they've got the place covered with cameras. It's a tabloid affair. Not for you. Not for Sapphire Karadjian!"

"Just following orders," she murmured sheepishly, but inwardly she felt gratified that someone at least recognized her true value.

"It's probably because of the girl," Alex said.

"The girl?"

"Yep, the girl," Alex sat back in his chair. He had information, and knew it, information that someone like Sapphire would pay for. He sat there wondering how much he should charge. After all, she WAS an old friend. There might be a discount in that.

"Not many people actually know about her," he continued. "It's sort of hush-hush. Those who do know have been told to clam up. I've been told to clam up. Not supposed to be mentioning it, especially not to someone like you," he said, and then he clammed up. Sapphire was a veteran at this. It was as if she was reading his thoughts.

"There'll be something in it for you," she promised. "Guaranteed. The bosses pay my expenses. So tell me, what about this girl?"

Alex considered for a few moments, looking away from Sapphire. He turned to his left, and then shifted his chair to the right. He caught sight of Carmela and grinned. She grinned back, and then he looked back at Sapphire and said,

"Let's go for a walk."

They got up. Alex left a twenty-dollar bill on the table - far more than a sandwich and coffees would cost - and with a slight bow to the waitress, walked out of the diner, followed by his childhood companion.

"I might take another look at that crossing," he said, pointing down the road to where some old freight tracks came over the highway. Sapphire got the picture. Alex wanted no witnesses. Maybe there was something to this story after all.

Three

"It was early in the morning, or so I am told," Alex related, as he pretended to inspect the switches at the railroad crossing. Sapphire stood behind him, secretly recording his words with her hand-held device. "The site is under extremely tight security, has been ever since the first day it happened. Of course then it was mostly for safety. Million tons of concrete and steel had come tumbling down, fortunately in the middle of the night when no one was there. But when they went in for the cleanup, that's when the weird stuff started to happen. Every one of them sworn to secrecy know - police, fire, security, feds. Place is fenced off. You can't get within spitting range. Even stopped the news copters from flying overhead. It's a total no-fly zone. It's the secrecy that's attracting the buzz. Always does. All you've ever got to do is tell people they can't go into some place and BAM, it's all anybody wants to be doing after that. Going in there, I mean. They wouldn't tell me too much."

"How come they told you anything?" Sapphire wanted to know. "Was there a railroad or something in there?"

"Very funny," Alex laughed. "I see what you're thinking, though. Why would someone like me be having anything to do with something like that? Tell you the truth, it wasn't me. It was Argus."

"Your little brother?"

"You remember him, then?"

"Sure, I do," Sapphire said. "We looked after that tyke, you and me. He used to follow us everywhere. Odd little kid, always quiet and big eyed. There was that one time ..." Sapphire began, but trailed off. She wasn't sure what Alex recalled of that day. She wasn't even sure of her own memories. It had seemed she had saved the little boy from something, somehow, but from what? It was weird.

"You thought he'd get hit by a car," Alex offered. He hadn't really witnessed the event. One moment he'd been sitting there, chatting with old Mason Henry, the next thing he knew there

was Sapphire, yelling and running off into the street, grabbing Argus and holding the kid while he struggled and cried.

"In the meantime, Uncle Charlie disappeared," Alex added.

"He did," Sapphire nodded. "He never came back?"

"Never saw him again," Alex frowned. He'd missed his uncle, had really loved the man.

"I wonder what happened to him," Sapphire queried. "I didn't really notice. I was only going after Argus. I don't even know why. It seemed like the right thing to do, and then, when it was all over, I couldn't explain. I thought he was in danger, but was he? There was nothing out there in that old empty lot. And your uncle, where did he get to?"

"He must have just wandered off," Alex said. "He was acting pretty crazy, you know."

"I guess," Sapphire said. Uncle Charlie had been obsessed, kept talking about a place where he'd been, a place that wasn't actually a place, or a time, or something like that. They never knew what he was talking about. The old man, Mason Henry, he had an idea, but then again he might have been kind of nuts too, missing his wife who had vanished, facing threats from the mob about selling his house and all that. It was never explained. The only thing Sapphire had ever been certain about was that she'd acted on instinct, and she'd do it again. She had never once doubted herself since that day.

"You were saying?" she prompted Alex to go on.

"Argus, right," Alex said. He'd also been sifting through the images of that long ago afternoon. "It was the girl I was telling you about, but let me back up. I told you about all the security, right? Because from the very first day when the hole opened up and the stadium collapsed, the place erupted in fire. In the beginning they thought it was all of the wiring in the structure, but it wasn't. They put out those flames, but the burning went on. They started pulling out rubble but, and here it gets strange, the metal, it wouldn't come out. The concrete, they managed to get some of that, but the metal, the steel, it stuck to the dozers, and then pulled them in. Anything metal got stuck and went in, and when I say 'went in', I mean into the hole. Trucks started going into the hole, like they were being pulled down by something, like there was a huge magnet that was sucking them in, and the whole thing - that's a joke, get it? The 'hole' thing? It was like it was feasting on trucks and tools and equipment and whatever it could. Some of the workmen say they felt it was tugging at them as they scrambled to get the hell back up to the street. That sinkhole was eating the stadium, literally! Like it was not just a hole that somehow opened up in the ground and whatever was sitting on top of it fell. Uh-uh, it's like it is a lot more than that. The concrete and steel began vanishing into the depths, and it's a

big hole, I'm sure you know. More than seventy yards in diameter and deeper than that and still falling. Well, once the stadium was literally digested - and by then it was only a week and there was no one left who dared go in there - they got to seeing what was really down there. It's like an inverted volcano. I mean, seriously, there is magma, and lava and it's all flowing down. It's "derupting", that's a term they've been using these days. Have you heard it?"

"Nope," Sapphire shrugged. She hadn't heard any of this, only that the hole was said to be expanding with no end in sight, and that security was strict and no one really knew why.

"But what's all that got to do about Argus?" she wondered.

"I'm coming to that," Alex said. "You see, into the second week the whole thing was wrapped up. No more information coming out and the people who knew were paid not to talk. The authorities were trying to cover it up, and I mean actually trying to cover it, with tarp, or fabric, or anything they could think of, but nothing would work. It would all get burned off or somehow done away with. The thing doesn't want to be covered. It's hard to explain. Impossible, really, but there's something about it that seems to have, I don't know, call it 'a will'. The thing has a mind of its own. I know it sounds crazy. It's only a hole, but believe me, it isn't just only a hole."

Alex paused to wipe his brow. He knew that it sounded insane. He'd been telling himself the same thing for a week now, ever since the day he was summoned.

"So the only people who were in there one morning, inside the perimeter I mean, were a handful of guards and a guy from the department of energy who was trying to figure out if you could harness the thing like a source of renewable energy! Deep down in the hole it's all rubble - rocks, dirt, gravel and a few bits of steel from the structure that are still being consumed by the heat. One of the guards heard some rattling. He looks down, way down in the hole, and he sees a little bit of a landslide, some pebbles and dirt falling down in the hole, nothing special. Then he looks over a bit to the side and there is this girl coming out of the hole. Literally, I mean it, scrambling up from the rocks and the rubble. This girl's maybe nine, maybe ten, got short hair like yours and her head is on fire. That's what the witnesses said, the few that there were. The guard, he calls out to the others and the scientist too and they see her, working her way up the side and her hair is all smoldering red, and her overalls, she's wearing overalls, are smoking too with bits of flame flashing up now and then. She's got a serious look on her face, her very smudged face, by the way. The girl is all filthy and charred but she comes up quite calmly and clambers over the side of the hole to the street, where the guards all gather around her. They're towering over this girl but she's calm as can be, she looks over them one at a time and then, in a very plain voice, she asks them, 'which one of you is Argus Kirkham?'

Four

"No kidding!" Sapphire said, and then after a pause, she added, "Are you putting me on?"

"God's honest truth," Alex swore, and even held up his hand and placed it over his heart.

"How else do you think I would know about any of this?" he asks.

"I have got no idea," Sapphire exhaled. She double-checked her device to make sure it was getting all that.

"Argus called me up," Alex said. "After the authorities got to him. He didn't want to have anything to do with any of this. You know Argus. Well, maybe you don't. You haven't even seen him since when? Since he was maybe twelve?"

"Around that," Sapphire agreed. "Or maybe thirteen. He would've been in the eighth grade when we graduated, right?"

"Seventh," Alex corrected her. "But he's never changed much. Like anyone, he's had his share of ups and downs, but mostly he's always kept to himself. For a while I didn't know what he was going to do with himself, but hell, I didn't know what I was going to do with myself, either! You're the one with the straight line and the yes and the no. Anyway, he did go on to college, then kind of burned out and worked some lousy jobs for a while. By the time I finished my civil engineering, he'd decided to do something with his architect degree after all, and he's been doing that ever since. You might even have heard of something he did. He invented a kind of micro-portable home out of some fiber or something. They use it for shelters now, for homeless underneath bridges and such. I think it's even gone out to Africa and places like that?"

"The 'Foldaway House?'" Sapphire asked.

"Yeah, that's it!" Alex told her. "That's my brother's invention."

"He ought to be proud," Sapphire said. "I hear really great things about that."

"Argus proud? Not my bro. Humble as pie is more like it. Spends his time mostly sketching out the office buildings of the future - it's how he puts it - when really he'd rather be doing more of the charity work. Still, he's got a wife now, and a young son - Arvid, that's the boy, must be six, and Peggy, that's the wife. A house full of idealists, I call it. Even Arvid. That little guy is always 'playing at paradise' - seriously, that's what he calls it. His toys are all lined up for happy-ever-

after-land. There's no fighting or even disagreements in that boy's make believe. Kind of cute, when you think of it. Chip off the old block, I'd say."

"Sounds adorable," Sapphire agreed, while thinking the boy would probably have gender confusion anxiety someday. She suddenly had a sense of being watched, and looked around. There was no one and nothing in sight. She realized she hadn't seen or even heard another car on the road since she'd gotten out of her own. The silence was impeccable. There was not even the sound of a bird or a lizard scampering through the dust.

Meanwhile, Alex was catching his breath. He couldn't remember talking so much in quite a long time. 'Easy now, boy', he said to himself. 'This isn't the time to set about reviewing your various misdeeds and wrong turns in life.'

'But just look at her', his other side said, 'she's still the same. She hasn't changed, it's all straight ahead and no nonsense for her'.

'You don't really know that,' he replied to himself. 'It's just that we've been seeing her all along, on the news and all that. Of course she has changed. We all do.'

He saw she was looking at him, waiting for him to go on.

'It's all about the story', he reminded himself. 'Remember that's what she came here for. Nothing else.'

"Yeah, so anyway," Alex continued, "there's Argus, minding his own business, sitting home smoking his pipe and reading the paper - or he would be if he was our father back when - and all of a sudden there's a knock on the door. Peggy opens it up, the federales come in. All very hush hush, not even allowed to tell the wife, which of course he does later. Peggy's in charge in that house! They tell him pretty much what I just told you, plus they tell him they've got the girl in quarantine, she's in a hospital security ward all locked up, and what they want now is for Argus to go pay her a visit. He says 'no way'. They say 'way'. He says, 'at least can I bring in my brother?' They don't like the idea but Argus is stubborn and eventually they let him call me. So that's how I end up going to see this weird girl in her little glass room, this girl who insists on being called 'Nameless'."

"Nameless?"

"She doesn't say much, this girl. All that they know is she wants to be called Nameless, and that she has a message for the one they call Argus Kirkham. She won't speak to anyone else or say anything else. In the meantime, they keep her locked up. She won't eat. She won't drink. She doesn't try to escape. She just sits there on the hospital bed and stares out the window, which happens to look toward the sinkhole. She won't look at anything else. They've brought in all

kinds of experts. They've tried to examine her every which way and come up with nothing and no clues at all. The girl is still burning, they told us. Her temperature seems to be way over normal and her skin is still hot to the touch. No one knows why. The whole thing is simply incredible. If I hadn't of seen it myself, I'd say I was making it up, but I did, and I'm not."

Alex by now had long since discontinued pretending he was inspecting the crossing. He stood face to face with Sapphire, both of them sweating in the hot desert sun. His story was followed by silence. Sapphire knew there was more but waited for him. Alex had, after all, seen the girl, and she knew he had much more to tell.

Five

"So what was the message?" Sapphire got to the point. She was already worrying about time. It had taken her more than a day and a half just to get here and now, and she was due to report to Meyer at six. That would be nine in Guyana, she reminded herself, and eight in the morning in Qatar where he was. Logistics were always rattling around in her mind. She would need gas and she had seen a station some twenty miles back. She would make it. The diner was not too appealing food-wise. She would wait for that too. She thought she might well have the whole of part one all wrapped up, depending on what Alex could tell her.

"Nobody knows," he replied. Sapphire thought she didn't hear that correctly.

"What did you say?"

"Nobody knows what the message is yet," he repeated.

"But didn't you say that you went to see her with Argus? And she said she had a message for Argus and what? She didn't tell him? Why not?"

"He wouldn't go in," Alex said, calculating in his mind a deduction from whatever he might be getting from her. He'd already known it wouldn't go over too well, but what could he do? It was the truth, after all. He took a deep breath and went on.

"Of course when Argus called me I agreed to go with him. It was out of the blue. We don't talk too much. Fact is, we hardly ever see each other anymore. I'm over in Flagstaff when I'm not on the road, and anyway, his wife and I don't get along very well. She hates me, you know, because I'm divorced and not with my kids. It's a really big deal with her. Staying together for the children and all. As if it was entirely my choice. Anyway ..."

'She doesn't even want to hear about that', he chided himself. 'Stick to the story, okay?'

"I went. We met up at a place where we both used to go, by the docks. Maybe you know it? It's a sort of floating restaurant slash casino boat called Jimmy's. It's an item of interest itself. Whenever it's time to go gambling they let off the ropes and go sailing about twenty feet off the shore. That way it's legal and all. For dinner and dancing they pull her back in, tie her up. Do you know it?"

Sapphire shook her head. It wasn't of interest to her. She'd been traveling so long that all things American only seemed quaint to her now, their little corruptions and bigotries paled compared to the professional rackets in charge in most countries. Here the payoffs were sheltered, if barely, cover provided by obscure regulations. Elsewhere it was all strictly cash and you knew who to pay and how much.

"It's the same people who own the Sea Dragons," Alex went on, but he realized her attention was drifting. 'Same old Sapphire', he said to himself, 'focus or die.' In their long-ago friendship it was always a chore to keep Sapphire on the same page for a while. She wasn't an ADD kid, as they called it back then, just impatient. He wondered how it squared with her life as a reporter. How did she ever keep still long enough to do a proper job of it? No wonder she was always in the middle of action. Wars and such didn't require a whole lot of sitting around, he imagined, but how would he know? Maybe they did. Maybe there were aspects of Sapphire he couldn't conceive of.

"Anyway," Alex realized he kept saying that word. He was the one who wasn't staying on track. "We met up at Jimmy's and he started to tell me what it was all about. You see, on the phone he didn't say, only that he needed a big favor and hated to ask but would I come over and see him? He was under a lot of pressure, he said. It was the FBI, he told me, and he motioned his head towards a couple of guys at a table nearby."

"They're on me like maggots on trash," he tried to make a joke of it.

"What did you do?" I asked him. "You realize I had no idea at the time. When he told me it was all about the sinkhole, I tried to joke back and asked him if he'd done it and that's when he started to tell me about the girl."

"He didn't get far. Actually, all he said was, 'there's this girl', and that's when the agents came over and told us to get up and come out with them. I wasn't going to say no. I could tell that Argus was pretty upset. We followed these goons to the quay where they made sure that no one could hear us. Agent Phipps did the talking. He's this really huge guy. You'll know him when you see him. Biggest guy I ever saw, that's for sure. The other one, Hawkins, just stood there

looking serious. That one is only our size, I mean Argus' and mine. He's a little bit shorter than you I would say."

'Why am I babbling all of a sudden?' Alex inquired of himself. The longer he spent out there with Sapphire alone, the more nervous he felt he became. He wanted this meeting to end, to say their goodbyes and get back to himself, to go home and forget all about it. His part was done, or almost, he wanted to think.

"Phipps is the one who told me the story I told you about Nameless. He said she was in this glass room and we were going there, pronto. He actually used the word 'pronto'. So we did. I was expecting some kind of obvious black limo to come pick us up, but instead the agents just had an old pickup. We had to squeeze in the back seat. Nobody said a word on the way over. It was weird. When we got to the hospital, Phipps led us up to a little room that looked into the room where she was. It was like one of those interrogation scenes like you see in the cop shows, right down to the two-way glass and all that. There she was. Sitting on the bed staring out of the window, just like they said that she would be. We had only a side view of her."

Glancing up at Sapphire, Alex felt a sudden strange jolt. She had turned slightly away and he had the same angle on her as he'd had of the girl in the room. 'Not now', he said to himself, and pushed the thought away as he tried to keep himself focused.

"So that's her," Phipps was saying. "Do you recognize her?"

Argus shook his head. Of course not. Why should he? You see, the feds had the idea that somehow the girl had known Argus somehow. They'd poured over his past. They'd been questioning him quite intensely. I hadn't even thought about that. They didn't believe a word that he said.

"You can go in anytime," Phipps commanded, but Argus didn't want to. It occurred to me this is why they'd used Phipps instead of somebody else, because of his size and his aura of power. People would just naturally do what he said. They didn't know my brother, though. He was struggling, but he was stubborn as ever.

"What if I don't?" he asked and from the way that Phipps sighed I realized it wasn't the first time. Argus had been resisting from the start.

"You going to arrest me?" he asked.

"Of course not," the officer said. "It's entirely your choice. I don't understand it, but there you go."

"It's none of my business," Argus said. "Some random girl pops up out of nowhere and mentions my name, and now this? She probably picked it out of a phone book or something."

"Phone book?" Phipps scoffed. Such things don't exist anymore, as you know. "Look," he went on. "We know as little as you claim to know. Help us out, why don't you? Help us all out."

"No," Argus said. "I don't want to."

Six

"And?" Sapphire asked after Alex had paused again. She felt there were several missing parts to his story. He was rambling, not totally coherent.

"And that's all I can tell you," he said, holding up his hands. "The rest of what I know is pretty much nothing. Argus refused to go in. I offered to go in myself and pretend I was him, what the heck, I had come all that way and I was curious myself, but apparently they'd already tried it with somebody else, and she knew. She wouldn't be fooled. Phipps kept pressuring Argus, reminding him of previous discussions. It seemed he had promised or anyway made them believe that if they would let me come with him, then he would give in and go in the room. He'd changed his mind, he told them. He would never go in, he declared, and unless they used force it wouldn't happen. Phipps looked like he wasn't beyond doing that. I kind of expected him to just grab hold of Argus and throw him in there with her, but he didn't. He tensed up but then he relaxed and he said we could go. First he swore us to secrecy which as you know I've already broken, just now with you."

He gave her a questioning look and she reassured him.

"Don't worry," she told him, "no one will hear it from me."

"I believe you," he said, and he glanced down the road at the diner. It was time to move on. Sapphire sensed it as well and they started to walk back together.

"So when was all this?" she asked on the way.

"What is today? Wednesday? That was last Friday. I talked to him Monday. Nothing had changed. They're on him, though, continually. The feds are not taking no for an answer forever. Since Phipps didn't work they've brought in some others, trying to find the right combo I guess, someone who'll get through to Argus. Good luck with that is all I can say. Once he's made up his mind, that's about it."

'They'll get to his wife', Sapphire thought to herself, and realized that was what she should do. She asked Alex for Argus' address, which he gave her, and wished her good luck.

"You might as well try," Alex said. "He's the key to the thing, after all."

"And the girl," Sapphire added.

"And the girl," he agreed.

They stopped at their cars, which were parked side by side. The silence was awkward but just for a moment.

"I'll be in touch," Sapphire said. "It's been good to see you," she added, since the first part came out too professional sounding.

"Anytime," Alex answered, "and likewise. It's funny to see you in person after all of these years. I mean, after seeing you on TV all this time. You're even more you than I thought."

"TV makes one look different," she commented.

"Right, that's what I meant," Alex said, though it wasn't. He meant she was not the same person at all, or rather, she was but wasn't his friend anymore. He was just someone who gave her an angle. After an awkward attempt at a hug, she got into her rental and took off down the road. Alex was not in a hurry. He went back into the diner, where Carmela had nothing to do and was sitting at the counter, cutting up lemons.

"All done with business?" she asked, looking up.

"I guess so," he said. He returned to the same table he'd been sitting at previously, and Carmela came over to join him, sitting where Sapphire had.

'You never told me you knew her,' she said, placing her hand upon his.

"We were friends growing up," Alex said. "We were best friends, you know, for a while. She practically lived at my house."

"Everything changes," Carmela offered wisely and Alex chuckled and smiled.

"Everything and nothing," he said. He lifted her hand to his mouth, and he kissed it.

Sapphire had the gadget transcribe Alex's narrative and dispatched both the audio and text up to storage. She played it back as she drove, pausing and rewinding a few times at the parts that seemed most confusing. That the girl had climbed out of the pit. No one saw her go in. Where'd

she come from? That her hair and her clothes were on fire but her skin was undamaged? Alex said nothing of medical reports but maybe he didn't know. He only had part of the story. Argus could tell her some more, but not much, she decided. She would need to get some more sources. And she wanted to get to the girl too, of course. Who did she know in the bureau? Who did she know who knew someone? Phipps and Hawkins were the names he had given her. She sent off a memo to Meyer to get her some intros somehow. Doctors and nurses, firemen and cops. Security guards. These were all possible venues of entrance. Peggy Kirkham as well, if not Argus. Would he even remember her? He would probably take her to be just another nuisance, another unwelcome poker and prier. She had to approach him somehow. She would have to have something to give him, but what?

As usual, her planning crowded out all other thoughts, but suddenly it occurred to her that Alex had never once asked about her. 'Is it so obvious?' she thought, 'that I never settled down, got married, had kids? How would he know about that? Has he been looking me up on-line? There's precious little there aside from my stories. Maybe he assumes that I'm gay. The waitress in the diner back there sure did. Must be the hair. Maybe it's nobody's business! Funny how no one these days seems to know there's a line between you and what's none of your business. Maybe that line doesn't exist anymore. Maybe everything's everyone's business.'

She recalled what Alex had told her what Argus had said, that the sinkhole, the girl, was nothing to him. He didn't want to get involved. At least there was one person left who had the idea. She remembered how quiet he'd been as a child. Half the time the two of them didn't know Argus was even there in the room. He hid under his blankets on the bottom bunk in the room that he shared with his brother, and rarely peeked out. He kept books under there, and his toys. He would be building whole cities with Legos and such, she recalled. Once in a while she would ask him about them, but he'd try not to answer, he'd say, "oh it's nothing." A private little guy, if there ever was one. That day she'd chased him down in the street, and pulled him away from, from what? From nothing it seemed to her now, but he'd kicked and he'd struggled but she was too strong, and afterwards he'd cried for what seemed like hours, the first and last time she'd seen him like that.

Sapphire recalled a story she'd done, where she'd had to return to a village somewhere - Sri Lanka she thought, after a decade had passed. She had come to know everyone there the first time, when she'd stayed for a month, researching a band of mystical warriors who were said to be planning to commit remote terrorist strikes with their minds. It was said they had already caused a tsunami by chanting nonstop for a week. She'd lived in the village with a family of nine, a father and eight children, all boys. The boys looked exactly the same to her then, except for their heights, which were consistent with each of their years. Going back, ten years later, the boys were all grown and were now all the same height as each other, the same as their

father, yet she picked each one out by their name, missing none. She could tell by their smiles, by the tone of their voices, by a host of subtle traits. She prided herself on that skill but had to admit to herself now that she probably would never have picked Alex out of a crowd. He was more alien to her than any one of those remote village boys she had barely even known. Where had her whole childhood gone?

'You turn your back on a place', she thought, 'and the place turns its back on you too.'

She wondered what Spring Hill Lake would be like. The last time she was there she had barely paid any attention - she was helping her father move out to his luxury retirement community. She had been in a hurry, and didn't care to notice the town. She remembered the airport and that's about all. She had taken a taxi to the old neighborhood where her father had remained all those years, but she hardly looked up, and when she got there she got down to work, making calls and bossing people around. It hadn't been fun to see her father becoming more and more helpless, a man who for all of her life had always been the one giving orders. She scarcely remembered her mother, only the father who worked his late hours and never had time for his kid.

'I would never have time for one either,' she said to herself, remembering her most well worn reason for not having children.

'Whatever, I hated that place,' she considered as she was approaching the outskirts of town. She would stay by the airport, in that same hotel, the one with the faded red carpeting. She had already made reservations and by the time she'd checked in and flopped down on the bed, it was time to call Qatar and Meyer.

Seven

"Why didn't you tell me about the girl?" was the first thing Sapphire asked. Meyer laughed on the other end of the line.

"I was going to," he promised. "How did you find out about her anyway? It's supposed to be like super top top secret, according to my source."

"I want that source," Sapphire demanded.

"Certainly, of course," Meyer said. "But how did you find out? I'm curious."

"I have my ways," Sapphire replied. "And my ways require payment sometimes. This is one of those times."

"Just send me the bill," Meyer laughed.

"I need to know more," Sapphire became serious. "Don't hold back on me, boss. Whatever you know, I need to know now."

"Take it easy, no worries," Meyer said, and Sapphire could just picture him in his high-rise penthouse patio, probably sitting by his custom rooftop pool in the shade of his swaying bamboo forest. His position had its perks but it also made him soft and lazy and his lackadaisical responses drove her crazy, and he knew it, and he knew that she knew that he knew it too.

"You can get it straight from Agent Sneed," he told her, "Cindy Sneed. She and I go way back, went to college together at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, you know."

"This Sneed is here in Spring Hill Lake?" Sapphire cut in. She also hated it when he began to reminisce about his snooty university days.

"What? Oh yes," Meyer said. "I'm sending you her contact info now."

"And you've got nothing else for me?"

"Wait, wait a bit, don't hang up," Meyer chided.

"Meyer, I'm tired. I'm going to turn in. If all you've got to say is Sneed, then all I've got to say is goodbye."

"No, wait, first tell me how it's looking out there. All I see is the national feed and it's nothing but the usual circus as far as I can tell."

"I'm seeing what you're seeing," she told him. "I've got the local news on now. Looks like there's a bunch of tanks and soldiers surrounding a high barrier, and outside of that there's a lot of tents where the so-called reporters are sipping margaritas and telling dirty jokes. That's what they call the news around here. Oh, and there's Kris Kintoja of the Frantic News Network, babbling as usual. Wait a sec ..."

Sapphire put the phone down and turned up the TV to hear the world's most famous beauty contestant turned anchorstar.

"No one should be alarmed", Kintoja was practically screeching, "but could this be The One? Is it The Sign? Have the End Times finally begun? As we know, it is from a small acorn that the

giant oak trees grow, so we must be ever vigilant for the roots of the cataclysm which we know for a fact is impending and impinging upon us on every turn."

Sapphire could swear that speech sounded familiar, as if she'd heard Kintoja repeating an earlier broadcast from some other pre-fabricated freak-out.

"It's just the apocalypse," Sapphire reported back to Meyer on the phone.

"There's been a lot of that kind of talk," he replied. "It doesn't help that it's a gaping hole belching out the fires of hell. Doesn't leave much to the imagination, you know."

"I see it," Sapphire said. "They're showing the sinkhole now, I thought they weren't letting cameras at it anymore."

"It's likely old footage," Meyer said. "As of last Friday there's been a complete blackout. Even satellite images are being blocked. Not quite sure how they managed that. Could be a story in itself, you know. But ever since the girl there's been no live shots permitted. Things leak out, though, and rumors, no shortage of rumors to be sure. Some are calling it a black hole now, saying that things simply vanish within it. Some are calling it The Pit of Doom. All very dramatic and such."

"What does your source call it?" Sapphire said, "Or should I just get it from her?"

"By all means," Meyer replied. "She's waiting for your call."

"Is that Amy Dragberry?" Sapphire blurted out.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh nothing, just someone I knew from school, I think. Looks like she's a local reporter now. Not too surprising, I guess. Anyway, if that's all you got, boss ..."

"You haven't told me how you found out about the girl."

"And you never told me about her," Sapphire retorted, hanging up. She was already punching in Cindy Sneed's direct line. The scene on the TV had shifted away from the sinkhole and was now displaying some local carpet cleaner's commercial. The last bit she had noted showed brown smoke billowing up from the hole. At least that much had been visible from beyond the security fences. She wondered if it still was. She peered out of the hotel room window in the direction she thought the sinkhole would be, but in the darkening dusk she couldn't make out much, so she turned away. Agent Sneed's phone was not picked up and there was no answering machine.

"Terrific", Sapphire snorted, and put the gadget away. The TV news returned but had moved on to sports, so she flicked the remote and searched through the channels. It was past the regular news hour so mostly there were game shows and reruns coming on. She did find one program talking about the hole, but it was just a televangelist trying to raise as much money as he could before the clock ran out and reality came to an end.

She looked up Argus Kirkham and found his number and address. She was surprised to see he lived down by the waterfront, near the old harbor warehouse district. She remembered the neighborhood as being pretty ugly and rundown, a poor part of town, home to derelicts and squatters. She guessed it must have been gentrified enough for solid middle class citizens to return. She called him, but there was no answer there either.

'Now what?' she said to herself. 'Dinner?'

It seemed a reasonable notion, considering she hadn't eaten all day. Heading outside, she began to regret her decision to pick this hotel near the airport, because there wasn't much of anything else around. The hotel itself was connected to some kind of twenty-four hour diner that reminded her of the one in Two Forks. The global traveler in her had become a food snob in some ways. She lived on street food as much as she could and here, in America, there was really no such thing. She gagged at the thought of chicken-fried steak and fries or a burger and fries or anything and fries for that matter, but she'd had enough driving for one day. Reluctantly she entered the diner and sat down at one of the many empty booths. 'Not a good sign', she noted, the fact that there was practically nobody in there. Even so, it took a long time for the waitress to notice her. She had memorized the menu already, eliminating practically everything from consideration. In the end she settled on chicken noodle soup. The waitress asked her if she wanted salad or fries with her soup.

'Fries with soup?' Sapphire thought to herself. 'What kind of hell is this?'

She ordered salad, but when the soup came, after another long wait, it was accompanied by fries. And the soup was too salty. She could hardly eat any of it. Sapphire, disgusted, threw down some money and walked out of the place. Standing again outside on the pavement, she surveyed her surroundings. Behind her loomed the hotel and the airport. Across the long driveway lay a field of strewn rubble. Beyond that was the city, beginning with a handful of giant discount stores and gas stations, followed by some office parks and then, beginning perhaps a mile away, the concentration of bland houses and hideous high rises that made Spring Hill Lake what it was.

'Dismal,' she said to herself. 'No wonder I always hated this place.'

Eight

The call came in at four in the morning. Cindy Sneed was ready to meet with Sapphire, but it had to be now, and it had to be at Seventeen Seventeen Seventeenth Street, which turned out to be an old abandoned warehouse near an old abandoned railroad bridge at the edge of the old abandoned pier. Sapphire had a little trouble finding the place and arrived more than ten minutes past the time Cindy Sneed specified. Sneed was extremely annoyed by this. As a federal agent, she expected to be obeyed to the letter, especially by someone of such lesser significance as a reporter. She was tapping her toes on some cobblestones behind the building when Sapphire finally appeared.

"You're late." Cindy snapped.

"No excuses," Sapphire responded quietly, and with that, she had Agent Sneed mollified. Sapphire looked around and couldn't see much. It was still dark, but she'd been able to confirm her sense that this was a place of complete solitude. Agent Sneed must be very afraid.

"This is all completely off the record," Sneed said. "No recording. No transcribing. No names, dates or places are to be mentioned, not now and not ever."

"Understood," Sapphire nodded. Even if the Agent were to conduct a thorough inspection, she'd be unlikely to discover the mechanism Sapphire was using to capture the entire encounter. She had her ways, and one of her ways was a particular gadget inventor operating out of San Francisco, who'd come up with devices that law enforcement officers would happily kill to discover.

"How much do you know?" Sneed asked her.

Sapphire examined the smallish redheaded agent. She wondered how well Sneed was trained. Talking to reporters was not a good sign. Was she even a competent agent? Could she be trusted. or even believed? Sapphire sized up Sneed as a relatively recent dispatch to the field, an office-worker mainly, paper-pusher most likely, out of her depth on assignment out here. Sneed, for her part, knew all about Sapphire, and thought that therefore she had the advantage.

"I know about the girl," Sapphire said. "I know that you have her locked up in a room, that you tried to get Argus Kirkham to see her, and that he refused."

"Oh, he saw her all right," Sneed replied. "He wanted his brother with him, wouldn't go there without him, which didn't make sense to any of us, but whatever. We got him his brother."

Everything was kosher by then, till we got to the side room. He looked through the glass. Know what he said?"

"No, what?"

"It's Sapphire. That's what he said."

"What?"

"He said it was you. That the girl was you."

"That's not what he said," Sapphire blurted out.

"I was there," Sneed insisted, "I know what he said."

Sapphire was confused. This was not at all what Alex had told her. She searched in her mind for his words, something about Argus simply refusing to go in, just because some girl had popped up with his name, or was it? She was certain that Alex had said nothing about the girl being her, whatever that meant.

"Actually, what he said was, 'it's supposed to be Sapphire,' the agent continued. "Those were his exact words. It's supposed to be Sapphire. Do you have any idea what he meant?"

"You've got me," Sapphire stammered. She wanted to tell Sneed what Alex had told her, but she knew she was bound by her oath. It would get Alex in trouble, even put him in danger. Why hadn't he mentioned this detail? Hadn't he heard it?

"About the girl," Sapphire managed to say.

"What about her?" asked Sneed.

"What else can you tell me? I heard that she was on fire or something like that."

"I should ask where you got your information," Sneed replied, "but I won't. I can guess, but it's not that important. Maybe you talked to Argus. Maybe you talked to his brother. I don't care. Don't even tell me."

Sapphire gulped. She had to play stupid for now, let Agent Sneed think what she would.

"Yes the girl is on fire, in a way," Cindy said. "Put it this way. Nothing and no one can get anywhere near her, really. We've got practically nothing. At first she was cooperative. She let them lead her away from the scene. She got into the ambulance all on her own, got out and went with the guards to her room, even said a few words. She said she didn't have any name.

Someone joked that maybe they should call her Nameless and she said, yes, call me that. She repeated that she was a message for Argus Kirkham."

"Had a message," Sapphire corrected.

"No," Agent Sneed corrected her back. "She said she IS a message for Argus Kirkham. Exact words? I am a message for Argus Kirkham."

"What does that even mean?" Sapphire said, thinking out loud.

"We were hoping that he would tell us," Sneed replied. "Kirkham's idea is that it's a joke. She must have got my name from a phone book, he said."

"A girl that age would never have seen a phone book, or even heard of one," Sapphire commented.

"Exactly," said Sneed. "Kirkham is not being helpful."

"What do the doctors say about her?"

"I was just getting to that," Sneed snapped. "Like I said, at first she was being cooperative, but then when they told her they wanted to run a few tests, she demanded to see Kirkham, and when they told her that would take some time, she said she was done until then. She sat down on the bed in the hospital room and just sat there, staring out of the window. She's been exactly like that for more than a week now, not moving, not eating, not drinking, not using the bathroom, nothing, not even a word. The doctors who tried to get near her, well, let's say they got burned. More than that. Their instruments melted. Anything mechanical in that room either blew up or burned out. They had to remove every single thing, except the bed and a chair. One doctor who got close lost the use of his hand. It went numb. A nurse who tried to touch her was knocked off her feet as if she'd received an electrical shock. Well, after that, let's just say precautions were taken."

"So they know nothing about her?"

"Not a thing," Sneed confirmed. "No medical readings at all. They've got nothing about her heart rate, her blood pressure, her temperature, even her weight is only a guess."

"And Argus said she's supposed to be me? What do you think it means?"

"We found some pictures of you at her age, or what we think is her age, around ten. There are some definite similarities, but it's no perfect match. She wears her hair short, like you did, and still do, I see. She is rather tall for that age, four eleven or so, and somewhere around a hundred pounds, they estimate. She's a bit browner than you, and her eyes are also much

darker than yours. The nose isn't right either. No, she isn't quite you, but Kirkham never said that she was, only that she was supposed to be you."

"Didn't you ask what he meant?"

"Of course. He said it was the best way he could describe it. Oh, and he also said he didn't believe in her, whatever that means. Exact words? I don't believe in her."

"I don't get it," Sapphire shook her head.

"Why do you think we're talking to you?"

"Because you know Meyer?" Sapphire guessed. "And because you think I can get more from Argus than you can?"

"First one wrong, second one right," Sneed said. "I know you might think I brought you out here at this time and place because I'm sneaking out secrets unofficially. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We're here to avoid the rest of the media, that's all. They're watching us closely. They know we are keeping something from them. Hell, it's obvious! We've got the place bricked off with the army, for Christ's sake! We've brought you in under the highest authority. We don't know how much time we have got. That thing out there - that hole, that whatever it is - is changing, it's growing, and we cannot know what to expect. Then there's the girl. We think she's the key. You're here because we need you to get through to Kirkham."

Sapphire nodded thoughtfully and was quiet for several moments. The story was turning and turning around in her mind. She had more questions and was trying to find them.

"What do you mean that it's changing and growing?"

"I can tell you this much," Agent Sneed lowered her voice. "The girl is not the only thing that's come out of the hole, and whenever a thing has come out, something else has gone in. Two days ago a little brown bird came fluttering up from the pit. Within moments, a raven came soaring down from the sky, chasing the bird. That raven, it vanished. Like that, it was gone. I saw it myself. I was there."

"A raven?"

"Yes, a raven. Or would you call it a crow? A big black bird."

"Yes, I know what a raven is, but they're not raptors. It doesn't make sense." Sapphire wearily replied. "Never mind," she added. "I was just thinking out loud."

"You have a habit of doing that," Sneed informed her. "You might want to watch it. Be careful what you say around here. We're counting on your discretion, and it could go heavily against you. Consider that to be advice as much as warning."

"Got it," Sapphire said.

"Now we'll be in touch," Sneed seemed to snicker, and as she turned and stalked off Sapphire realized the agency already knew about her meeting with Alex, and she also decided that they already knew about her friend in San Francisco as well. She would have to assume that her every move was being monitored now. She was beginning to feel like that little brown bird, when she would rather be hunter than hunted.

Nine

"Well, this is great," Sapphire thought. "Four thirty and I'm wide awake. Thanks for that, Agent Sneed!" She knew she wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, but she drove back to the hotel anyway and was pleasantly surprised to find the breakfast buffet was already being set out. Although it wasn't quite open yet, the ladies putting it together let her go in and help herself to some cereal and orange juice. As she sat there in the otherwise deserted room, she tried to plan out her day. It wasn't helping that the ladies had turned the television on to some more apocalyptic babbling on the part of some so-called reporters. The current trend had begun not long before, with the "Singularity Scare" of the "Renegade Robot", some alleged mechanical contraption that was said to have outwitted the entire United States government by failing to be captured and dismantled. The absence of the thing was taken to be the proof of its existence, and it had turned out to be quite a profitable angle as far as the news business was concerned. The End Times were still all the rage, and there was money to be made.

Sapphire considered three choices: to go see the girl in the hospital, to go to the sinkhole itself and try to get in past security, or to go and see Argus Kirkham. She figured she would do all three, so it was only a matter of which one first. She could be sure of making the attempt of the first two at any time, but she had no idea about Argus' schedule, and since he was still not answering his phone, she decided to go there, to camp out if need be, as it was still too early for a regular social call.

The harbor-front neighborhood had indeed changed dramatically, as she had expected. Instead of the old rundown bungalows there were now rows and rows of fairly new town-homes, each with its own fenced in garden with walkways and playground and pool, each following a slightly

variegated color scheme so the people could tell whose was whose by the shades of its beige, brown and green. Argus occupied the left bottom half of a split-level condo. Sapphire was able to park right out front and waited, in the slowly emerging dawn, for a light to come on, or some other sign of awakening. Eventually a curtain was pulled aside near the front door, and she took that as a good enough omen. She hopped out of her car, dashed up to the house and knocked. It was Argus who opened, an Argus she would have known anywhere. His eyes were exactly the same as they'd been as a child - bright and yet dark, too big for his head, which was otherwise normally proportioned. His thin brown hair was parted just off to one side, the same as it was when Argus was five. He was still shorter than Alex, therefore much shorter than her, but unlike his brother, he was still trim and looked considerably more youthful. He recognized Sapphire as well.

"I assumed you would come," he greeted her unsmilingly. "Well, now that you're here, come on in"

It was not the warmest of welcomes, but Sapphire wasn't surprised. She followed him into the kitchen, where she saw a miniature version of Argus seated calmly at the table. Little Arvid looked up at her with exactly the same look on his face as his father. It was almost like stepping right into the past, and Sapphire nearly had to catch her breath.

"You must be Arvid," she said with a smile.

"I know who you are," the child replied. "You're the one who rescued my daddy."

"Nobody rescued anyone," Argus snapped with a frown, but immediately went over to his son and patted him on the head, regretting the tone of his voice.

"Sapphire is an old friend," he said quickly, "she used to practically live in our house."

"It was better than mine," Sapphire said. "I was an only child," she explained, and immediately realized she'd said the wrong thing, but it was too late.

"I'm an only child too," Arvid said, "but my home is just fine."

"I'm glad to hear that," Sapphire said. She was still standing in the doorway. Argus had not asked her to sit, nor offered her anything as he went about cleaning his son's dishes. There was a long silence, filled by a staring contest between Arvid and Sapphire. She knew she should talk but was uncertain of where to begin. Then she heard footsteps approaching behind her. She turned to see a fair-haired, young-looking woman.

"You must be Peggy," Sapphire said.

"Margaret," the woman replied.

"She hates being called Peggy," Argus spoke up.

"I'm sorry," Sapphire said, "it's just that Alex said ..."

"So you have seen my brother," Argus interrupted her, as Margaret squeezed past the still-standing Sapphire, and went over to give Arvid a kiss on the cheek.

"Yes," Sapphire said, "I saw him yesterday."

"It's because he hates women," Arvid spoke up, and everyone turned to look at the boy.

"He doesn't hate women," Argus said, after a moment.

"Mom says he does," Arvid insisted.

"Margaret!" Argus chided her as she came over to give him a peck on the mouth.

"Well, he does," Margaret chuckled, "at least he hates me."

"And you hate him too," Argus said and she nodded.

"Can't argue with that," Margaret said, and then to Sapphire she added, "Please, come in and sit down. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I would, thanks," Sapphire replied, coming into the room and taking a seat next to Arvid.

"You look like you look on TV," Arvid said.

"Very good," Sapphire said. She knew it was a dumb thing to say, but she wasn't that used to talking to kids, especially not blunt ones like this guy.

"Go brush your teeth," Margaret said to the boy, and he got up and did as she told him.

"He says what he thinks," Margaret explained. "He used to say nothing at all, so we're happy now whenever he talks."

"Takes after his father," Sapphire noted.

"His father approves," Argus told her. He was done with the dishes and was now reaching into the closet to pick out a jacket.

"I walk him to school every day," he informed her, "and then I'll be going to work. I know you want to ask me some questions, but really, I don't want to answer. I've had enough of this nonsense already. You can talk to the feds or whoever you want. I don't mean to be rude, but, well, actually I do. So, goodbye."

Argus walked out of the room, picked up a backpack in the hallway, and a briefcase by the front door, and with Arvid's little hand in his, walked out the front door. Sapphire had turned to watch him leave, and turned back as Margaret was placing a cup of coffee on the table before her.

"You don't have to run off now, do you?" asked Margaret.

"I guess not," Sapphire said glumly. She had expected Argus to be a difficult subject. She hadn't anticipated impossible.

"He's not angry with you," Margaret said reassuringly, seating herself where Arvid had sat, with her own cup of coffee in her hand. "It's the whole situation, you know."

"I can understand it," Sapphire said, "but I would like to hear his side of the story."

"Let me tell you what I know," Margaret said, "or at least what I think."

"I'd be glad to hear it," Sapphire said, and relaxed just a bit.

Ten

"The thing keeps coming around," Margaret said. "Ever since Dan Fulsom tried to kill Argus."

"Tried to kill him?" Sapphire interrupted. "I thought Fulsom killed himself?"

"He did, the same day, the day he was caught. Poisoned himself in his cell. He'd gone crazy, you know, kept rambling about how there were dragons living under the city, dragons that had to be fed. He'd been going around having homeless people murdered as part of his scheme. Then he laid some sort of a trap for Argus and tried to shoot him, but Argus' friends saved the day. That was luck."

"I had no idea," Sapphire shook her head. "I wonder why I never heard about that."

"They hushed it all up," Margaret said. "Fulsom had friends in high places, and since he went and offed himself, there was really no need to let everyone know what was what. Rumor had it there were officials who were looking the other way when he was only going after those street people. I don't really mean 'only'. It was awful, but you know what I mean."

"Fulsom was always lucky too, if by lucky you mean he paid everyone off. It was how he got his way every time. It was how he got Snapdragon Alley in the first place."

"Argus told me about that too, in his way. I don't think he's ever told me everything, though. That's one reason I wanted to talk to you," Margaret said. "You were there. I have my own theories, but I've always wanted to know what you thought."

Sapphire wondered what Margaret meant by 'theories'. Was she some sort of amateur sleuth? Maybe a mystic or religious believer? Maybe she had too much time on her hands. The conversation could begin to get weird, Sapphire thought. After all, she had no theories herself.

"I don't want to keep you from whatever it is that you do," Sapphire said, thinking that maybe she could get out of it now.

"Oh, I have no classes today," Margaret said.

"You're in school?" Sapphire asked. "What are you studying?"

"Not quite," Margaret laughed. "I'm a professor. I teach nuclear physics at New Harbinger College."

Oh," Sapphire said, startled. "Wow."

"Yeah, wow," Margaret chuckled. "But what do you think? What did you think at the time?"

"Well, the way I remember it," Sapphire said, "is like this. We first found out about Snapdragon Alley when Argus noticed it on a bus transit map. It was only there for one year. Alex had all of the maps. He was funny that way. The following year it was gone. We thought that was kind of weird, but actually it wasn't. It was Fulsom. He already had plans to build his shopping mall and football stadium there so the fix was in with the city, it was all a done deal. That's why it was put on the map. Only it turned out there was an old man who still lived there and he wouldn't sell, so the deal didn't go through. At the same time, Fulsom got busted for some other bit of corruption so the plan went on hold. When he got out of prison, though, he went right back to work, to get the old man out of the way. The old man, Mason, was still holding out. You see, his wife disappeared, and he said she went into what was some kind of portal, or wormhole or something, right there in what they called Snapdragon Alley. Alex and Argus' Uncle Charlie said he did too, only it was different with him. With Henrietta, the thing showed itself like a nice little neighborhood. With Charlie it came in the shape of a bus, because he was a bus driver see? And she liked gardening or something like that. Anyway, it was all probably nothing. Charlie was being really weird this one day and he ran out into the street, and Argus followed after him. I don't know why, but I got suddenly scared and ran after Argus. I caught up to him and grabbed him, he was kicking and fussing, and when he got all calmed down we noticed Charlie was gone. Now, Charlie, he had vanished before, and he could have gone anywhere. I wasn't paying attention. Alex tells me he never came back, though, not after that."

Sapphire paused to catch her breath. It was all coming back to her, as vivid as the day it occurred, and she was totally convinced now, as she was then, that there was nothing unusual about it. The boy could have been hit by a car. That had to be all she was thinking. The other stuff was just completely insane.

"That's pretty close to how Argus tells it," Margaret said thoughtfully, "only he saw the bus too, and he saw Charlie get in it."

"What bus?" Sapphire said. "There couldn't have been a bus. It wasn't even a street, and the bus didn't run there."

"He saw it," Margaret explained. "It didn't 'run there', you're right, it came out of nowhere, according to Argus. It simply appeared and then it was gone."

"I don't believe it," said Sapphire. "And I never did. Charlie was saying it was like another dimension, where there isn't any time, or something like that. There couldn't be any such place."

"Maybe not," Margaret said, "but maybe it's more like a thing than a place, a creature, perhaps, like Dan Fulsom's dragon."

"What are you talking about?" Sapphire asked. She was beginning to think her fears were about to come true, more wild-eyed, superstitious nonsense, just like all the crap on TV.

"Well," Margaret said slowly, "it's only a theory, but here's what I think. It's a creature, and somehow it's stuck. It doesn't belong in this world, or maybe it does, I don't know, but it's stuck, and maybe it's hurt. I think Fulsom was wrong about the thing being hungry, but he was right about it being a thing. I think it's alone and it's lonely. I think, and I know this is all based on practically nothing, but I think that it senses whatever's around it, it can pick up some signals, maybe brain waves or thoughts, and it sends out these snares, like the bus, like the girl. You think I'm crazy now, don't you?"

Sapphire didn't answer right away. She didn't want to offend this nice person, especially since it was Argus' wife and she was going to need her, sooner or later. On the other hand, she did think the woman was probably nuts. But she couldn't be sure. Nuclear physics? Obviously the woman was smart, and she didn't sound crazy. She talked like she'd thought the thing through, but did it make any sense? Sapphire drank some more coffee to give herself time to keep thinking.

"Why Argus?" she finally asked.

"He was there," Margaret quickly replied. "He was there when it went after Charlie with the bus, and it sensed him, so it knew something about him."

"They put a stadium there," Sapphire countered. "It must have sensed millions of people if that's how it works."

"Maybe it goes dormant," Margaret replied. She had obviously considered this angle.

"It goes dormant," she continued. "Look at the pattern. It was seventeen years after Charlie when Fulsom went after Argus, and now? It's been seventeen years again now."

Sapphire wished she'd thought of recording this conversation, but at the time it didn't seem like that was going to be needed. Now she had to wonder. Maybe there was something to this theory. At the very least it was an angle to the story. She reached into her pocket to pull out her device. She was going to ask Margaret to repeat her ideas when her phone rang instead. It was Sneed.

"We've got trouble," Sneed shouted. "The girl, or whatever it is, she's gone."

Eleven

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sapphire snapped. She was hoping she'd heard the last of Agent Sneed. "I suppose you're going to tell me it just went poof?"

"It just went poof," Sneed retorted.

"All that security," Sapphire began to say, while waving a hand at Margaret to indicate she would fill her in shortly.

"For nothing," Sneed completed the sentence. "Look, we knew there was a chance this would happen. Hell, anything could happen, that's why we kept her under wraps. At least she hasn't been spotted anywhere else, as far as we know."

"Oh, we'd know if she had," Sapphire sneered. "It'd be all over the TV by now if a little girl on fire just happened to pop up somewhere, wouldn't you say?"

"We need your help," the agent said, as calmly as she could. Sapphire was as annoying to her as vice versa. Sneed hated reporters in general, especially those who thought they were a class apart, and Karadjian, to her, was as arrogant and snotty as they came.

"You keep saying that," Sapphire told her, "but I don't know what I can do."

"You can get to Argus Kirkham," Sneed reminded her. "He won't talk to us."

"He won't talk to me either," Sapphire said. "In fact I'm sitting in his kitchen right now, talking with his wife, because he just up and walked out pretty much the moment he saw me."

"Oh, man," Sneed said. "And you just let him get away?"

"What am I supposed to do?" Sapphire nearly shouted. "I'm not the law. I'm just a citizen, remember? Somebody doesn't want to talk to me there's not a thing I can do about it. Why don't you lock him up if you want him so bad?"

She glanced over at Margaret, who was looking more and more furious by the moment. Sapphire shook her head as if to convey she wasn't being serious, but she knew her words were speaking pretty loudly for themselves.

"That would just attract attention," Sneed insisted. "We don't want that, and anyway, we couldn't hold him. People have rights, you know."

"Really? Since when? Can't you all declare war on dragons or something? Oh, never mind."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Sneed sighed, "but please, please, couldn't you try again? Just one more time? I've heard a lot about you. Sapphire Karadjian never gives up, isn't that what they say?"

"Don't go trying flattery," Sapphire snorted. "It doesn't suit you. Look, okay. One more time, all right?"

"Thank you," Sneed said. "And if there's anything we can do."

"It doesn't seem like there is," she chortled as she ended the call. She looked up at a glaring Margaret.

"Lock him up? Lock him up? Some friend you turned out to be," Margaret yelled as she got up from the table.

"Sorry," Sapphire sighed. "I didn't mean it, all right? And they're not going to, anyway. They mean well, I think, if they mean anything at all. They're worried about him, and so am I."

"And I'm not?" Margaret was still upset. Her hands were shaking as she nearly spilled her coffee on herself. "What do you think we've been doing these past few days? Waiting, that's what. Waiting for this monster to reach out and grab him. And those federal agents are so afraid of the TV cameras they won't do anything to help us. Oh, they're surrounding us, all the time. Look

outside, you can see them now. They follow us everywhere. They watch our house and what good do you think it's doing? None at all. It's all we can do to keep Arvid from even knowing what's going on. God, that isn't easy. He knows something's up. He doesn't know what but he's a sharp kid. I don't know how much longer we can take this."

Sapphire was astounded by Margaret's outburst. She'd been so calm just minutes before, while expounding on her absolutely inane theories about whatever it was, and now she was losing it. It must be stressful, Sapphire realized, just the unknown and seemingly unknowable aspect of it all.

"I don't think there's anything to worry about." Sapphire said for some reason, just to hear her voice, perhaps. She immediately realized it was a dumb thing to say. Of course there was something to worry about.

"How do I find him?" she asked. "I know he doesn't want to talk to me, but maybe I can help, somehow. I don't know how, but ..."

"He'll be walking along the waterfront," Margaret told her. "Arvid's school is only a few blocks away. Argus designed it, did you know? It's a beautiful little school. You should see it sometime, maybe when all this is over."

"I'd love to," Sapphire heard herself saying, knowing full well she didn't care at all about a school or any other building, really.

"He'll be walking along the waterfront," Margaret repeated herself. "He always walks to his office. It's about two miles, just on the other side of the old Westside Pier. Hedgeley and Kirkham. They have their own little building there on Front Street. Seventeen seventy Front Street."

"Thanks," Sapphire said, rising to leave.

"He doesn't want to see you," Margaret said.

"I know that," Sapphire said. "He's made it perfectly plain already. Trouble is, I'm not going to give him a choice."

Twelve

Sapphire drove along slowly, looking out for Argus. He wasn't hard to spot. He'd made it about halfway to work and was just crossing over the old freight tracks when she found him and pulled over. She hopped out of the car and hurriedly caught up to him. Argus was walking slowly but didn't alter his gait when she came alongside him.

"You again," is all he said.

"How about good morning?" she tried.

"How about go away?" he replied.

"You know I'm not going to do that," she said. Argus stopped and turned to face her.

"Look, I don't want to be seen with you. The last thing I need is to be caught with a major TV personality. There's media all over this town. What are they going to think? What are you doing here anyway? No doubt you're covering this story. So why are you talking with this guy? And just who is this guy? Oh, he's who? Have we ever heard of this guy? What does he have to do with all of this? You get the picture?"

"Then get in the car," she snapped, "and nobody will see you with me."

"Except for them," Argus gestured at a car across the street.

"They're the ones who sent me," Sapphire said without looking, knowing it had to be the FBI. "They don't want you attracting any attention either. It's the last thing they need."

Argus sighed and shook his head. After a few moments of silence, he shrugged and gestured for her to lead on. They went back to the car and got in. Sapphire started up the engine and pulled out into the street.

"The girl is gone," she informed him.

"Figures," he said. "It wasn't getting anywhere where it was. It wasn't going to wait there forever."

"You talk like you understand it," Sapphire said. "Margaret told me about her theory. Is it her theory, or is it yours?"

"It's ours, I guess," he said, "although she's more convinced than I am."

"What do you think?" Sapphire wanted to know. "What's your idea?"

"It's blind," Argus mumbled. "That's what I think. Blind and dumb like a worm. It doesn't know what it's doing, and the whole thing has nothing to do with me whatsoever."

"Nothing to do with you?" Sapphire nearly burst out laughing. "This crazy thing comes out of a smoking hole and it's got your name and here you are saying it's got nothing to do with you?"

"It's nothing personal," Argus continued. "If it really wanted me, it would come and find me, don't you think? But it doesn't. It doesn't know how. It doesn't know a thing about me, really, just my name, and maybe some impression it once got, once upon a time. The thing reaches out. It gets some kind of image and then it just reaches out, like it did with Charlie, like it did with Henrietta, and God only knows who else. It got to Fulsom too, you know. He couldn't take it. Drove him insane. He was already half mad anyway. But I'm not going to let it get to me. I don't care what anybody thinks. I'm not going anywhere near that thing. I already wish I hadn't let them take me to see that girl. She didn't seem to know I was there, but I don't know that for certain. It was a mistake. I won't do it again."

"I don't know," Sapphire said wearily, pulling into the parking lot of Hedgeley and Kirkham, Architects. "Nice place," she added, barely glancing at it. It was a cute little brick building, nicely trimmed, with pretty flower boxes beneath the windows, filled with lilacs and geraniums.

"Thanks," Argus said, making ready to get out of the car.

"Wait," she told him, and he settled back, as if he knew he wasn't going to be let off so easily.

"You know your name is going to get out there eventually, in connection with all of this," she said. "I mean, the odds."

"I know", he said.

"SO why did you stay here?" she blurted out suddenly. "I mean, Margaret told me what happened, with Fulsom and all."

"It's my home," Argus said. "I have my friends here, and my family. If there's one thing I've learned in my whole life, one thing. It's the people you care about that matter the most. My friends are the best. And my wife and my son, we all love it here. It's our home. And that thing? That sinkhole? That Snapdragon Alley? It's all the way across town. I never go anywhere near it. The thing, if it's really a thing, it's out there. Let it do what it does. Like I said, if it really wanted me, I've been here the whole time. Margaret, I know, she's upset, and as for me, I don't want the attention, but to tell you the truth, I really don't think there we have anything to worry about."

"Not even that?" Sapphire pointed at the door of his office. There, standing on the front stoop, staring blankly ahead, was the girl.

"Oh, man," Argus said.

Thirteen

"What are we going to do now?" Sapphire whispered breathlessly. The girl didn't seem to have noticed them yet. She seemed to be gazing off into space.

"Keep driving?" Argus suggested. It seemed like the sensible thing to do. Apparently he'd been wrong about the thing not being able to find him. All he could think now was that maybe it wouldn't be able to find him again, if he just ran away. For the first time ever he considered it. Images flashed through his mind, of moving vans and highways, maybe even an airplane or two and a continent away, and just how far was New Zealand? He'd always heard it was nice. He was so preoccupied with these visions and notions that he didn't at first notice Sapphire opening her door and getting out of the car.

"Sapphire! Wait!" he shouted. She was standing outside now, and leaned over to peer back in at him still sitting there in the passenger seat.

"Take the car if you want," she told him. "I left the keys in the ignition."

With that, she turned and walked toward the building. Now the girl saw her coming and turned to face her. 'That girl isn't at all how she's been described,' Sapphire thought. 'This girl isn't aflame, or anything like it. She's just a young girl, a bit tall for her age, with short black hair and bright eyes, a straight nose and thin lips'. She was wearing a red shirt and blue jeans.

'Maybe the red had been taken for fire?' Sapphire wondered. The girl's skin was bronzed, much like her own, but the only thing strange that Sapphire could see was that the girl didn't smile, or have any other expression on her rather nice face. She seemed calm. It was just an impression. Sapphire drew closer with each step and the girl remained passive, arms by her side, simply waiting.

Argus, meanwhile, got out of the car too. He hadn't intended to do that, didn't know why he did. Certainly he didn't want to go near the young girl, and Sapphire didn't seem to need help. He found himself standing by the car, just watching. In that he was joined by agents Phipps and Hawkins, who'd also emerged from their undercover vehicle, and now stood gaping like prairie dogs on the side of the road.

Sapphire was preparing some questions. She was going to interview this child, see what she could get out of her. First things first, she reminded herself. Who are you and where did you come from? Where do you live? What is your name, and who are your parents? She couldn't

believe that the girl was a thing, not a person. Clearly it was a girl. She must have a story like anyone else. Sapphire wasn't afraid, and recalling Agent Sneed's panic, she nearly laughed out loud, thinking of all the fuss that they had made of this child.

"Hi," Sapphire said as she came up to the girl, whose eyes met hers and seemed friendly.

"Hello," said the girl.

"My name is Sapphire Karadjian. I'm a reporter."

"I know who you are," the girl said, and held out her hands, palms up before her. Sapphire looked at them and saw nothing odd. She looked back at her face.

"Can I ask you some questions?"

"There's no need," the girl said. "Take my hands."

The girl took Sapphire's instead, grasping each with one of her own. Sapphire felt a jolt blasting through her whole body, a sensation rolled through her like a wave in her bloodstream, not pleasant but not painful either, a little bit dizzying. She felt she was losing her balance but that feeling only lasted for a moment.

"What is it?" she murmured aloud, but by then it faded and she felt normal again. The girl was still holding her hands.

"Where are we going?" Sapphire said, although they were both standing still. The girl said nothing but squeezed her hands tighter. Sapphire had the feeling that every thought that had ever passed through her brain was being juggled and shifted into different positions, rearranged and re-ordered as if to make room. For a moment she thought she was going blind, but it was only her eyes seeing flashes of white, and this soon receded as well. The girl suddenly let go, and Sapphire relaxed. She hadn't even realized how tense she had been, or that she had indeed been afraid.

"I was lying to myself," she mumbled, then laughed and looked at the girl.

"Sometimes I think out loud," she explained. The girl smiled. She actually did, and it made Sapphire feel happy somehow.

"Okay," Sapphire said. "I get it. Let's go."

Together they walked back to the car. Argus took a step back but the girl, even Sapphire, took no notice of him. Sapphire opened the passenger door, and the girl climbed inside and sat

down. Sapphire went around and got back in the driver's seat. She buckled the girl, and then buckled herself. Then she pulled out her phone and called Sneed.

"I'm going to need an escort," she said, ignoring Sneed's questions. "Your boys over here will do fine. Tell them to take me in. You know where," and hung up.

She watched as Phipps and Hawkins scrambled into their car and, putting a cop light onto their hood, drove off with the thing flashing red. Sapphire followed. They drove through the heart of the city, all the way across town. Sapphire and the girl didn't talk. As the child said, there wasn't a need. Sapphire was getting excited. Everything was going to make sense after all, and it was going to be easy. She knew it.

As they neared the sinkhole they had to slow down, to make their way through the caravan of television platforms and tents. The siren was blaring now and she could see Phipps screaming at people from behind the wheel. Barricades were moved, and trucks backed up to let their cars past the layers of fences and walls. The sinkhole was surrounded by even more of a fortress than Sapphire had thought.

"It must really be something," she said, and looked at the girl, who was only staring ahead. When Phipps came to a stop and got out of his car, Sapphire stopped and turned off her own car, and took a deep breath.

"I guess this is it," she said to the girl, who nodded and waited for her door to be opened. Sapphire got out, went around, and gave her hand to the child. Sapphire expected to be bothered by someone at this point, but nobody dared to come near her. She scanned the faces of the guards and the agents she saw, and noticed concern in some and terror in others. They kept their distance, shuffling unsteadily on their feet.

They were close to the hole, and she could see it was indeed huge, but other than that, it was nothing, it was only a hole in the ground. She couldn't see what the big deal was about. The girl took her hand and they walked toward the edge. Sapphire looked down and saw rubble and rocks and dirt and occasional trash that had probably flown in with the breeze. She felt the girl taking and squeezing her hand once again. Sapphire squeezed back and felt a surge of emotion, of warmth toward this child. She looked over at her and she smiled. The girl tilted her head and had a strange look on her face, half a smile, half a question.

"Now what?" Sapphire asked, and the girl lifted her chin toward the hole. Following the girl's eyes, Sapphire looked again toward the hole and again felt that flashing effect in her eyes. She thought now she was dreaming. She saw right in front of her a long, swaying rope bridge dangling over the sinkhole. She knew it had not been there a moment before.

"How did that get here?" she blurted out, and felt the girl tugging at her.

"Are you crazy?" Sapphire asked, but she followed as the girl took a step off the edge of the hole.

"That's like a hundred feet down," Sapphire muttered, "there's no way."

She walked onto the bridge and it held.

"I know it's not even here," Sapphire quietly said, "but it is, isn't it?"

Nobody answered. The girl was still pulling her along, and Sapphire took another step, then another. The rope bridge was swaying a bit and with her free hand she steadied herself on its railing.

"Just don't look down," she said to herself, and instead looked ahead, and saw, at the end of the bridge, and not too far off, what looked like some kind of jungle. She thought she heard birds and saw motion up there, trees maybe swaying and underbrush rustling. She kept walking. The air became warmer with each step she took. It felt good. At the end of the bridge they stepped off and were there. Sapphire looked back. There wasn't a bridge, or a sinkhole, or any such thing as Spring Hill Lake either. There was nothing but jungle around her, and the girl was still with her, and now the girl was giggling and her eyes were bright and shining and Sapphire started laughing too and she knew, all at once, all about it.

The thing wasn't sick. It wasn't stuck. It wasn't scary and it didn't intend any harm. It had something to give. It wanted to give. It was joy. It was good. It was beautiful.

Fourteen

From Agent Sneed's point of view, Sapphire Karadjian had vanished along with the girl. The moment they stepped into the hole they were gone, just like that, like the bird she had seen earlier, raven or not. It meant a headache of a report to be filed, but file it she did, and the paperwork made its long way to that vault where everything to be gladly forgotten was eventually stored. And forgotten it was, because not long after Sapphire vanished, the End Times themselves also came to an end. The fires went out in the hole. The pit stopped its burning and smoldering, the smoke cleared, and the heat went away. By the weekend it was only an eyesore.

In the weeks and months that followed, decisions had to be made. You couldn't keep the security going forever, especially now that nothing was happening and there wasn't any more point in it. First the television cameras drifted away, as the ratings sagged and viewers got bored. The number of guards was steadily whittled down to a handful. Then the fences began to come down and the city planners met and planned hearings and even more meetings. They brought in trucks with lots of gravel and dirt and filled in the hole so it wouldn't be a hazard any longer.

Eventually a contract was put out for bid. Anyone with ideas on what to do with the place was invited to submit a proposal. There was one from a firm called Hedgeley and Kirkham, Architects. It was Argus' idea to cover the thing with a meadow, no buildings or structures at all, just a field, basically, open space. This notion was rejected as impractical.

End.

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