

Happy Slumbers

by Tom Lichtenberg

Copyright 2012 by Tom Lichtenberg

Smashwords Edition Copyright 2012 by Tom Lichtenberg

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author

One

Alex Kirkham returned to Spring Hill Lake one summer morning. He was sixty one years old, had taken early retirement a few months earlier and had been doing nothing at all with his life. Then his brother Argus turned up missing. There were no clues, none at all. Argus' wife knew nothing. His son knew nothing either. It was totally out of character, because Argus had been as stable as the moon, following a strict routine, and completely avoiding any risks. Alex had nothing to go on, except for some weird vivid dreams of a giant space-bubble creature extending out through the asteroid belt, past Mars, floating in space and slowly breathing in and out, shifting and reshaping continually, its extremity lightly touching the surface of the Earth.

"If it thinks it can talk to me through dreams," Alex thought, "it's got a lot to learn. No one knows anything about dreams, how they work or what they mean, if anything. There are many theories, and there's been a lot of research, but all of it has lead nowhere. The thing has got to do better than that if it wants to tell me anything. If there is such a thing in the world." But Sapphire Karadjian had never returned, and his uncle, Charlie Kirkham, had never re-appeared again either, and now Argus was gone. Had the thing now taken him too? It had come in the form of a bus for Charlie, who had been a bus driver. What had it been for Sapphire? A war? She was always attracted by those. Alex chuckled to himself as he sat on the park bench along a gravelly path, surveying the greenery that was now Sea Dragon Park, its gently rolling lawn interrupted only by the occasional oak for shade, and a few picnic benches strewn about for the rare families who would challenge the daunting Arizona heat.

"It was a jungle," somebody said, and Alex turned to see an old lady sitting on the next bench over. Had she even been there a moment ago? He didn't know who she

was. He was a stranger in this town, even though he'd grown up there. He had abandoned it in his youth, so many years before. His job for the state as a railroad crossing inspector had brought him back around quite often, but other than his brother and his brother's family, he knew almost no one in the city, and he wasn't exactly a favored guest at his brother's house, for that matter. He had garnered their indelible disapproval due to the broken state of his own ex-family.

"At least it sounded like a jungle," the old lady continued. She had turned her head to look at Alex, who was staring at her, with her crown of bright white hair and her blue print dress of a fashion from decades before, matched with shoes he was certain hadn't been manufactured in ages. Her face seemed not so much older than himself, however. A woman in her seventies, he figured, but dressed like her own grandmother might have been.

"I'm sorry," Alex quietly said. "Are you talking to me?" Had he been babbling out loud? It wouldn't be the first time, he silently admitted.

"Yes," the old woman replied matter-of-factly. "You said something about Sapphire. You said it must have been a war to pull her in. But it wasn't a war. It was a jungle. That's what reached her, you know. That was her place, her refuge, her key."

"Key?"

"The thing that does it. For me it was a garden, " the old lady waved her hand as if swatting away a pesky fly. "It's hard to explain."

"So is that what the newspapers said?" Alex asked, and sat back against the bench. He'd come to the conclusion that the old woman was merely repeating one of the stories that had been circulating all those years since the day his childhood friend, Sapphire Karadjian, by then a world-famous war correspondent, had walked into the flaming pit which had ruptured beneath the very ground where Alex and the old lady now sat. It had been a major news story. Everyone knew about it, especially there in Spring Hill Lake. Theories abounded about what had 'really' happened, into any number of which his brother and even himself figured into in some tangential aspects. They had both known Sapphire and even seen her in the days before she'd disappeared hand in hand with The Burning Girl (as that mysterious child was known) as they'd stepped off the edge of the cordoned-off zone and gone, literally gone, as if a light switch had flicked them both into nowhere.

"I was there," the old woman said after a time. Alex turned back to her.

"You worked security?" he guessed, and she shook her head and smiled.

"I was inside," she told him. "I've only been out for a little while now," she added as if to herself, and kept on muttering so vaguely Alex had to strain to make sense of her words.

"It doesn't understand about us. It doesn't know about time, not our kind of time. It thinks it can just put us back where it found us, but what remains when it does? Everything we knew is gone. We know where we are, but ..."

Her words trailed off, and then she just fell asleep right there on the bench. He waited for some moments for her to open her eyes and start rambling again, but she didn't. Alex sat back, wondering what to do. Part of him was yearning to stand up and walk away, give up on this whole pointless quest. So his brother had run off. Didn't middle-aged men do that sort of thing all the time? Leave the wife and kids and start up a whole new life? Okay, it wasn't like Argus to do it, but who could be sure about anyone, anyway? And the police were looking into the matter, or at least they said they were. Alex would find out more from them later. He had an appointment set up for that afternoon. They probably had the same idea he did. Guy takes off, probably there's another woman, wife without a clue. Sitting in a park wasn't exactly ace detective work, either. Nor was chatting with a crazy old bag lady.

Not that she had any bags, or seemed especially crazy. No, she looked and sounded normal and sane, if a bit old-fashioned. "I've got nothing else to do right now," he said to himself. "I might as well sit here and wait."

Two

At least it was a nice day outside. Alex had driven up from Tucson earlier in the morning for an uncomfortable reunion with his brother's family. They'd met at a coffee shop in a rest stop off the highway, Peggy's way of making sure the visit wouldn't last very long. Of course he didn't call her 'Peggy' to her face anymore. He knew she hated it and he'd broken himself of the habit years before, but he still said it to himself in his mind. Margaret, then, had not only arranged the place and time of the meeting but had also set the ground rules, including its duration. They were not to discuss the past, their own past in particular. They were not to talk about "it", no matter what. There was not much left to say, just the facts.

Margaret wanted Alex to know that the last time she'd seen his brother, he'd seemed fine. He'd been full of enthusiasm for his latest project, an arena for three-dimensional holographic classic sporting events, re-creating in gigantic fashion the most famous athletes of the past. His input was considered crucial to the architectural design, which was very near to completion. He'd been nominated for yet more prestigious awards to add to his already notable collection. The very park, for one, where Alex now sat. Although Argus' plan had originally been rejected as not profitable enough, the city had finally relented after a few failed attempts to build any structures whatever on the seemingly cursed property. Nothing would stay put in the ground except trees. They had tried to establish a performing arts center, only to see its foundations beginning to sink even before adding the ground floor. They then attempted a simpler visitors' center, but its pillars had vanished without a trace, as if swallowed up by quicksand. They even attempted a tent-centered farmers' market, but no vendors would agree to come, not after everything they'd heard about that location. It was haunted, so blighted it couldn't even function as a tourist attraction. In the end, they had turned it over to Argus, who designed the whole park while refusing to come anywhere near it. He had only seen the finished product in photos, videos and on TV.

The morning he vanished, a few days previously, Argus had kissed his wife goodbye and stepped out the front door, like every other work day. He would walk the mile or so along the waterfront to his office, as he had done for more than twenty years, since the days he'd accompanied his son, Arvid, to school. Arvid was now a serious young man, very much like his father had been, and came along to the meeting with his mother to make sure that his mean Uncle Alex would be nice to her this time. He sat across the table nursing his coffee drink and scowling at his uncle, who did his

best to ignore the young man. Peggy - er, Margaret - was talking.

"He never arrived at the office. No one has heard from him since. That's all I know." she concluded.

"What about his phone?" Alex asked. He had tried the number himself, reaching only its voice mail, but he figured he'd ask anyway.

"No answer," Margaret shook her head. "And no, I don't know anything else so don't even bother to ask."

"Okay," Alex shrugged. Margaret was already getting up and Arvid jumped to his feet to join her. The conversation had lasted approximately fifteen minutes. They might as well have left their car engine running, Alex said to himself. He knew they'd never liked him, but this was almost too much. The one thing they had in common - Argus - was missing and possibly in danger or trouble. They could at least be a little less rude than usual. "Oh well," he told himself, "I probably deserve it."

"I don't know what to do," he confided, looking up at the pair as they prepared to walk out.

"You don't have to do anything," Arvid snapped. "We don't even know why you're here."

With that, they departed, without even a simple goodbye. Alex's drink was nearly empty, so he decided to get another, and a pastry along with it. He knew he should be watching his calories, but at the moment, he didn't really care. His waistline was the least of his concerns at the moment. He had only one idea. With nothing else to go on, he knew he had to go "there", to that place where "it" was.

"Sheesh," he thought, "after all the trouble it's caused over the years, you know it has to be up to its old tricks again. Argus wouldn't go near it, but that never stopped the thing from harassing him before, sending out agents or whatnot."

Alex reviewed the litany of historical events in his mind. When they were children - he was ten and Argus five - they had first discovered the place on a bus map. They'd gone to explore and found nothing but a vacant lot and a crazy old man who claimed his wife had vanished right into it. Alex's own Uncle Charlie had shown up and said he'd done the same thing. It was nuts. People don't disappear into thin air, but these people - his uncle and the old man - said it wasn't just thin air. It was something else entirely, some kind of invisible black hole or something. Only certain people could see

it, and only some times, and it appeared to be something different to each person. Or something like that. Alex was never quite sure what they meant. He'd assumed that his uncle had just gone crazy. He sure acted that way, and then he was just gone again, and no one ever saw him again after that.

The vacant lot was bought out and all the houses around it were torn down as well to make room for a football stadium, which in turn was torn down several years after that. Some time later the gigantic sinkhole opened up, smoldering like an inverted volcano. That's when people say a little girl on fire walked right up and out of the pit. Alex had seen her himself, in the hospital where they'd kept her before she sneaked out and somehow got Sapphire to go back in the sinkhole along with her. Multiple legends sprung up about that, and even more rumors going way back in time about the lunatic billionaire gangster who'd gone on a crime spree of sorts, even trying to kidnap his brother at one point. Alex had never gotten that story straight. It was maddening how Argus would refuse to say anything about Snapdragon Alley. It was like his brother was a sort of mysterious black hole himself. He only wanted to live his normal little life, and blocked out anything that didn't accord with that.

"It has to be here," Alex murmured, glancing over at the still slumbering woman on the next bench over. She was still fast asleep and now slouched over, very still and very quiet. At least she didn't seem to be in danger of falling off the bench. Looking around at the park, he did not get a sense of anything out of the ordinary. It was a pleasant green park, that was all. The few trees here and there looked like they'd been there forever. The paths were kept clean and the grass was as groomed as a golf course. It was hard to think it was the very same place he'd seen all those years ago on TV, a deep hole filled with red, glowing rubble surrounded by barbed wire, guards and armored vehicles. Or even before that, as the place where, as a young man, he'd come to watch an occasional pro football Sea Dragons game.

"Time erases all things," Alex sighed. He had no idea what he was going to do next.

Three

The park was remarkably empty. He'd seen no one else, heard no one else until the old woman had spoken up, and now that he thought about it, the silence was all-encompassing. There were no birds, no squirrels even. It seemed like the loneliest park in the world. It was all the more surprising to him then when he turned back to look at the old woman and saw another woman standing over her. This one was younger, middle-aged perhaps, extremely short and even more extremely thin, with a heap of long black hair hiding her face as she bent over the sleeping form and nudged its shoulders.

"Eh, Etta, Etta come on," this new person was saying, over and over again as she gently shook the old woman. Alex almost said something, but changed his mind, deciding it was none of his business. It was clear they knew each other, those two. The black-haired woman turned toward him and he couldn't tell from her expression if she was angry or merely rude.

"You can help, right?" the woman said to him.

"I can what?" Alex replied in unconscious imitation of her accent. She was probably more native than Spanish, and he briefly wondered what her original language might have been, and from what small village south of the border she had come from.

"She's too heavy for me," the woman told him, making gestures for Alex to come over and help her at least get the old lady to her feet. What then, he had no idea, but he stood and found himself standing beside, and towering over, the tiny figure.

"We're going over there," she gestured toward the edge of the park. "Happy Slumbers," she added. Alex nodded as if the words 'happy slumbers' meant something to him. He was feeling like a clumsy giant. An idiot clumsy giant at that.

"I'm Josefa Sanchez," the woman said, tapping herself on the chest.

"Alex Kirkham," he responded with a similar gesture.

"Etta here, she has to go home now," Josefa said, turning back to the old lady and shaking her by the shoulders again. The old woman opened an eye at this, and then the other. For a brief moment she wore the expression of a startled newborn wondering where in the world it had come to. Then the light of recognition settled on

her face as she gazed fondly at Josefa.

"Hello, Jo," she whispered. "I was dreaming again, wasn't I?"

"I don't know about dreaming," Josefa said, "but sleeping for sure."

"I do that," Etta murmured, now noticing Alex and seeming to apologize to him for having taken a nap in public.

"That's all right," he felt compelled to reply, feeling even more like a foolish ogre than ever. At Josefa's insistent gesture, he leaned down to offer his arm to Etta, who grabbed it with both hands, and pulled her up to her feet.

"We live right over there," Etta told him as she took a few steps by his side. "At the Happy Slumbers Motel. Josefa works there and she's letting me stay in her room."

"With my family," Josefa added proudly, tagging along just behind them. "I found her, you know. Right over there, by that tree." Josefa pointed to one of the solitary oaks. "She was walking around it. Around and around. So lost, the poor thing. So I took her home."

"She's been looking after me," Etta explained, although Alex already realized that.

"Somebody has to," Josefa added. "My daughter Rosario and her daughter Elma, they help."

"Such beautiful people," Etta sighed, then fell silent, concentrating all of her attention on her feet. Every step seemed tentative for her, as if she wasn't certain that her foot, once lifted off the ground, would ever return to it. Alex held her as steady as he could, while at the same time keeping his eyes peeled for the alleged motel. He thought he could make it out just at the edge of the park, a low squat collection of huts looking more like a trailer park than a hotel. A blue and white sign in the shape of a cloud rested above what had to be the entrance, but its writing was old and worn down. He couldn't make out the lettering, even as they drew closer.

"So you live there?" Alex asked Josefa behind him. "It's a residential motel?"

"I clean the rooms," Josefa informed them, "and for part of my pay they give me a cabin. Me and my daughter and hers. It isn't much to look at."

It wasn't. It took several minutes to cross the far section of the park and navigate the sidewalk as well, and when they came to Josefa's abode, Alex could barely conceal his dismay. It was a small, single room, about ten feet by twenty, containing a twin bed against the far wall, a narrow couch along one side, a fold-out cot by the door, and a hot plate resting between the sink and the tub in the miniature bathroom. Alex could tell right away that Josefa had given the bed to the old woman, while she and her daughter and what had to be a small child (there was simply no room for anyone larger) must be sharing the couch and the cot and the floor. For someone with nothing to sacrifice even that was astounding to him. He couldn't help but think of his own two bedroom apartment in Tucson, with its balcony, which by itself was larger than this room the four females called home.

"Rosario's working," Josefa explained, "So Elma is also with her."

Alex was unable to speak. He helped Etta to the bed, where Josefa was pointing, and between the three of them they managed to get her seated upon it.

"Would you like some tea?" Josefa offered, and Alex shook his head but Etta was nodding and smiling, so Josefa headed to the bathroom where she pulled out a kettle from under the sink, filled it with water and set it to heat on the hot plate. After a little more rummaging she pulled out two cups and a saucer, and also a tea bag from somewhere. Alex looked around awkwardly, finding nowhere to sit. Eventually he settled on leaning against the door. No one said anything while Josefa prepared the little sustenance, finally bringing out a cup on a saucer for Etta, on which there was also a sort of a biscuit she had made to appear. Etta took it gratefully and sat quietly, sipping once or twice, while Josefa plopped herself down on the floor and indicated to Alex that he could do likewise. He did and sat with his back to the door, facing Josefa a few feet away.

"She's been touched by the angels," Josefa said. "She's a true saint," she added, tilting her head towards Etta, as if Alex didn't know who she might have been talking about.

"She's certainly old," was all he could think of to say. Josefa burst into a brief, loud laugh.

"If you believe her," she said after recovering her breath. "Did she tell you the same?" Alex shook his head 'no'. Josefa leaned over and whispered.

"She says she's a hundred and twenty three years old. Ciento veinte tres," she repeated in Spanish. Alex whistled.

"I thought she was maybe ... seventy five?" he guessed.

"I thought so too," said Josefa. "Me I'm fifty and my mama was just about seventy five when she died. I thought maybe the same. But no. She says it and she believes it. A saint. Maybe immortal." Josefa nodded and made a slight clucking sound with her tongue.

"But cursed," she added. "Bad witchcraft for sure."

"Why do you say that?" Alex asked. Etta was nodding off once again, and Josefa jumped up to grab the saucer and cup out of her hands before they both fell to the floor. Alex also got up and together they helped her lie down with her head on a pillow. Josefa pulled a blanket up over her, then looked up at Alex and said, very quietly,

"There's a devil inside her. It talks when she sleeps in the night."

Four

Josefa bustled around the small room while Alex backed up against the door again to make room for her. She darted this way and that, picking things up, moving them around, arranging the blankets on the bed, propping the pillows on the couch, cleaning up the tea stuff, disappearing into the bathroom and emerging moments later in full maid regalia, a pale yellow apron packed with tools in its pouches.

"I have to go to work now," she announced, "but my daughter will be home soon. She will look after Etta."

"I should be going," Alex stammered uncertainly as Josefa approached the door. She stopped and looked up at him curiously.

"You won't stay and listen?" she queried.

"I, I don't know," he replied.

"But you are Alex Kirkham."

"Yes," said Alex, very puzzled. Had she heard him say his name? He didn't think she had been there at that time. Then how did she know who he was?

"And that means what?"

"Stay and listen," she said, and patted him on the arm. "You will see. Rosario will be here soon. Please, sit down. Over there," she pointed at the couch which she had just straightened up. "Etta will be okay. She will sleep for an hour now."

With that, Josefa left the room, leaving Alex alone with the peacefully slumbering old woman. "They named the place right, at least for right now," he thought to himself, as he followed Josefa's instructions and placed himself on the narrow red couch. He sat there, hands folded on his lap, legs crossed, eyes inspecting what little there was to see on the walls of the room. There was one of those Jesus pictures with him holding his glowing heart and smiling beneficently directly across from him. There was a seascape of a port and a sailing ship on the wall to his right. To his left, above the bed, was a simple ivory crucifix. He thought of Josefa's words about the devil, and the old lady being a saint, and wondered how people always maneuvered everything into their own frames of reference. Had they been ancient Neanderthals there would have

been different categories and words but the same essential ideas.

He kept still, expecting the woman Rosario to enter with her daughter in tow at any moment. He thought of his own daughters, briefly. He hardly knew either one. The older one, Charlotte, had taken after her mother and married a man she despised, got herself two children with him, then took herself and the little ones off to another state, communicating only with the father through the magic of direct deposit. Alex had never even met those grandchildren, and wasn't quite sure he even remembered their names correctly. They were in Maine or Nova Scotia, as far away as they could get. His younger daughter, Constance, had taken after him to some extent, in the sense of never wanting kids and staying on the move. She had run off to join the Navy, as she'd intended since childhood, changed her name to Cookie and eventually settled into a life of globe-trotting do-gooding, working for one international charity after another, dispensing medicine or food or clothing or else building shelters. She apparently believed in endless giving. It was her own personal religion. She wrote to him occasionally, listing those works and locations but saying nothing at all of herself.

He had never had the parenting gene. It hadn't helped that his ex was one of those wives and mothers who squeeze the father out of any involvement, keeping all the work and glory for themselves. Of course it always takes two variables to form any equation, and his side of the ledger was a blank. He hadn't made a real effort. The marriage hadn't lasted long in any case, and in all the many years since he had never repeated that choice, but managed with a string of short-lived affairs, none of which carried any risk of serious attachment. He was, after all, on the road all the time, inspecting railroad crossings up and down the state, living in motels more or less like the one he was rooted in at the moment.

"Less," he murmured, nodding to himself in agreement with the thought that he would never voluntarily stay in a dump like the Happy Slumbers Motel.

"That's what she said," came a weak voice from the bed. Alex glanced over but the old woman was still sleeping. He looked back at the door but it was still closed. Rosario had not come in yet.

"What did she say?" Alex asked out loud after a moment, but there was no reply. He sighed and wondered again what he was doing, sitting there in that room, watching over this old woman he didn't even know, waiting for the arrival of still other strangers, and all for no reason he could think of.

Five

Minutes passed but no other sound came from the sleeping woman's lips. Alex waited patiently, expectantly, for some sort of demonic utterance or at least a meaningless whisper, but there was nothing. The silence built up a sort of tension in the tiny room which existed only in his mind, and he knew it, but he felt he could almost sense the presence of another being there with them, and it wasn't the Lord. He nearly jumped out of his chair when the door banged open, and in barged a pair of jabbering females.

As thin, frail and graceful as Josefa was, her daughter Rosario was precisely the opposite, large and clunky and clumsy. Where Josefa was half-hair, Rosario had hardly any. In contrast to her mother's narrow, birdlike face, Rosario's was wide and blotchy and full of teeth. At her side was a very small girl, five years old with her grandmother's mane, as bright-eyed, pretty and cheerful as any little girl has ever been. It was Elma who ran up to Alex and grabbed hold of his large hand with her small one and piped up.

"It's the man, mama! It's the man!"

Rosario grunted as she brushed by them and made her way into the bathroom. Alex was frozen in place, caught between staring down at the little girl and up at her massive mother.

"You must be Rosario," he managed to blurt out while looking at the girl.

"No, silly. I'm Elma!" the girl reprimanded him and giggled.

"My mom says your the old lady's husband or something," Rosario sang out in an unexpectedly soft and velvety voice. She emerged into the room carrying a glass of water, which she handed down to her daughter. Elma took the glass, letting go of Alex's hand and backing off exactly two paces, where she stopped and peered straight at him over the glass as she sipped.

"No, no," Alex protested. "I don't even know the old lady. I'm certainly not her husband."

"Or boyfriend or whatever," Rosario carried on, ignoring his comment. She strode over to the bed and to Alex's surprise, and even disapproval, began to shake her by the

shoulders just as Josefa had done in the park.

"Do you think you ought to be doing that?" Alex spoke up.

"It's been an hour, right?" Rosario snapped at him without looking back. "The old lady's on a schedule, as you should know. It's time to get her back to the park."

"Schedule?" Alex found himself standing up. Elma gasped at how tall he was and had to strain her neck to see his face again.

"Three hours in the park, three times a day," Rosario explained as she roused Etta, who was now sitting up and dangling her legs off the side of the bed. Etta looked around at the three other people in the room and cast faint smiles at each one of them in turn. It seemed that she did not recognize any one of them. She looked foggy and disoriented, but in a moment, while holding on to Rosario, she stood, and the two of them began to walk together towards the door. As they passed Alex he asked,

"Doesn't she need to, you know?"

"Not once," Rosario glanced over at him. "Not in all this time. How long's it been, baby?" she asked her daughter.

"Eleven nights and twelve days," Elma recited. "Tonight it will be twelve nights too."

"Not one trip to the bathroom," Rosario clucked. "Not one bite of food, though we give her a biscuit or a cracker. She never touches them. Sips a little tea and that's it."

Rosario and Etta had reached the door and, Elma pushing it open with all her might, they walked out into the daylight. Alex followed, surprised by the light. He had forgotten it was still morning. It was not even lunchtime yet. Sitting in that little room had completely scrambled his sense of time. Etta and Rosario crossed the street, Alex now noticing that it was called Sleeping Dragon Way, in another nod to the legend. The city had certainly tried to capitalize on the legacy of epic failure around the property. "When life hands you lemons," he mentally recited the old refrain. His musings caused him to lag behind and he had to jog a bit to catch up.

"Where are you going?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Got to be two benches side by side," Rosario's answer surprised him with its precision. "Then we leave her there, park her for three hours exactly. She might nod

off, might stay awake. You never know. It's always something when we come get her. Today it was you."

"Me?" Alex had pulled up alongside Rosario and was matching her stride for stride. Rosario stepped awkwardly as she maneuvered her way through the path and Alex had to keep dodging to avoid being knocked over. Etta managed just fine, however, seeming to glide along gently, with Elma keeping pace from behind, furiously counting steps in a frenzied whisper.

"They say there were Indians buried down here," Rosario said.

"They say a lot of things about this place," Alex agreed.

"All bad things!" Elma piped up from below. "Like ghosts and such."

"Have you ever seen any ghosts?" Alex looked down at her and she glowed with the attention and nodded vigorously.

"She's one!" Elma wagged her finger at Etta. Alex didn't reply. They came to a single bench but kept walking past it, then another. At the third, they stopped. There were two benches, side by side, apparently meeting the criteria sufficiently, for Etta stopped, let go of Rosario, and carefully took a seat in the middle of the first one. She folded her hands on her lap and looked straight off into the green field before her. Rosario turned to Alex and said,

"Three hours. Understand?"

Alex nodded as if he knew what she was implying. Rosario made a slight clicking sound, enough to catch Elma's attention, and the pair took off, walking much faster in the direction they had just come from. In moments, Alex was alone again, except for the immobile and silent old lady on the bench. He checked his wristwatch and saw it was nearly eleven.

"Might as well think about lunch," he said to himself. He didn't know why, but he knew he'd be back before two.

Six

Alex returned to his car, climbed in and instructed it to take him to the Burger Joint nearest to the downtown police headquarters. His appointment was for noon so he figured he might as well make just one trip. While he was at it, he told the car to order him a number eight meal with a Raspberry Iced Tea, then sat back while the car took itself off and navigated the course it had settled on. The interview was just a formality in his mind. He had no hope that the cops would tell him anything useful, if indeed anything at all. Experience told him that police rarely communicated honestly with civilians.

The number eight meal was more than sufficient to build up his calorie count, and as he sat by a corner window munching it down, he was suddenly by two persons who wordlessly took the seats on either side of him. To his right was a dark, Nortena-looking woman with short black hair accented by crisp bangs cut just above her brows. Her large brown eyes were not terribly friendly and she looked as though she hadn't smiled in weeks. She introduced herself gruffly as Lieutenant Liliana Vasquez.

"My partner, Sergeant Romo," she added, indicating the wide man to his left, who sported a shaved head with a tattoo of a black rose etched into it just above his right ear. He looked more like a suspect than a detective to Alex, and spent the entire conversation with hands on the table, slowly twiddling his thick thumbs and saying nothing. Alex turned back to Lieutenant Vasquez, who was holding up a flat square something and aiming it at him.

"Retina scan," she uttered as the panel-type object clicked and she lowered it to the table top.

"Confirmed," she nodded. "Alex Kirkham. So we meet at last."

"Do you know me?" he asked her and she nodded the affirmative.

"I have an appointment with a Captain Lucius," he said and at this she shook her head in the negative.

"Canceled," she informed him. "The Captain sent us in his place, being on the task force and all."

"Task force?" Alex asked to no response.

"Of course we know you," Vasquez appeared to grimace, or so it seemed to Alex. He had the definite impression that these officers did not like him, and it seemed to be unusually personal.

"Let's review." Vasquez was now trading glances between her tablet and Alex, looking down and up again rapidly as she listed from the information she apparently saw on the thing. Alex strained a little to get a better look but was unable to position himself so.

"Quite a long record," she said, "or should I say 'trail'. More like it."

"About my brother," Alex began but Vasquez put a hand up to silence him.

"Yes, when your brother was five years old," she narrated, "he was witness to the disappearance of his uncle, your uncle too, yes? Charles Kirkham. Allegedly boarded an invisible bus in the middle of a deserted and rubble-filled lot."

"I didn't see anything," Alex put in.

"I said your brother was witness, not you," Vasquez snapped. "According to Sapphire Karadjian, in an interview conducted several years later. Your brother claimed to have no memory of the incident."

"He didn't like to talk about it," Alex said.

"Nor about the later incident, from what we know, when the late entrepreneur Daniel Fulsom allegedly orchestrated a complicated scheme to trap your brother and have him, what are the words? Oh yes, have him 'fed to the beast', a direct quote from Fulsom's mental hospital deputation."

"Guy was a nut," Alex shrugged.

"Bread crumbs," Vasquez murmured.

"Excuse me?"

"A trail of bread crumbs. That's how Fulsom described his plot. Quite intricate it seems. Very strange."

"I knew nothing about it," Alex said.

"Yes, we know what you knew and what you didn't know," Vasquez corrected him. "We know that you had contact with Ms. Karadjian in the days before her own disappearance. We know that you witnessed the Burning Girl first hand. Very few people did, you know. Very few. If it wasn't on film, no one would believe she even existed. Plenty of people don't as it is. What do you think?"

"About what people believe? Who knows?"

"About your friend Sapphire. About what happened to her. Do you have any theories?"

"Alien abduction?" Alex suggested and Vasquez nodded emphatically.

"A lot of people think so, yes. Or that the whole thing was a hoax, trick photography, stuff like that. So you really believe the alien abduction theory?"

"No," Alex said.

"Then why'd you say you did?"

"Just my way of saying I have no idea," Alex offered. "How should I know, anyway?"

"Well," Vasquez began. She leaned toward him and put the tablet down. She moved her face in uncomfortably close to his own.

"Seems to us on the task force that you and your brother and your friend Sapphire seem to crop up an awful lot in this situation. You're all over the files, and over a long stretch of time. What is it, now? Fifty years? Why do you think that is? Why you? Why your uncle? Why your brother? Why Sapphire Karadjian?"

Alex pulled his head back and tried to think of the best way to answer those questions. He had his own theories, of course, but was it best to share them with these officers at this moment?

"Mostly it was my uncle," he ventured. "That's how we got involved. The rest is just history, I guess."

"Just history, huh," Vasquez was clearly not satisfied with that answer. "Well, it sure wasn't money," she snorted. "Every one who ever put a penny into that little property

there has lost it a thousand times over." She paused and gave him a serious look and then bluntly said,

"You were there this morning. Why?"

Alex was startled for a moment. How did they know that? Come to think of it, how did they know he was here in the Burger Joint. Then it occurred to him. They had probably intercepted his car's net connection. In which case, they could track him, but only to a point. They didn't know what he was doing at Sea Dragon Park, and they wouldn't have known about Happy Slumbers either.

"I was just looking for my brother," he said.

"And that's the last place on Earth he would have gone," Vasquez snickered. "You know that and we know that. However, it seems you didn't find him."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No idea," she quickly answered. Then just as abruptly as they'd arrived, the two officers stood up and prepared to leave.

"You do know," Vasquez said as she was walking away, "that tomorrow it will be exactly seventeen years since the day that Sapphire and the Burning Girl were, what? Abducted by aliens as you say?"

"Yes," Alex replied. "I did know that"

Then, after the officers had left the building he added, aloud,

"But you knew that I knew that, didn't you?"

Seven

While he chewed on his remaining french fries, Alex re-considered his plans. He had intended to go straight back to the park after his meeting with the captain, but now saw matters in a different light. On the one hand, he did not want to raise suspicions, but on the other hand, he was not at all happy about the ease in which they tracked his movements. It was not just the car, he realized. They could also track him through his phone and through his credit cards. As long as he remained plugged into the network, he was theirs to trace at will. And yet, he hadn't 'gone native' in ages. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd left the house without all that connected equipment. He was resolved to do so now. Let them be suspicious, he thought. I'm not going to actually do anything, and it'll only be for one day.

The next problem was money. If he was going to leave his credit cards behind, he was going to need cash. Outside the Burger Joint, he spotted a branch of his bank across the street, and on the way to it he calculated how much he might need and in what denominations. If he took out too much, that might look strange, but if he didn't take out enough, then he wouldn't be able to do what he intended. He settled on five hundred, with enough in small bills, and waited patiently in line for the single teller available, while multitudes helped themselves to cash in bulk at the automated machines.

The next step was to take the car in the opposite direction, and leave it. It had to be somewhere relatively safe, since he planned to keep his phone and wallet locked up in it there, and at the same time it had to be convenient to transit. He hoped, and then confirmed at a nearby stop, that the old Venezia line still ran out towards the former Sea Dragons stadium. It did, though it was no longer a bus but a subway-surface rail line. He smiled in satisfaction as he discovered he now did indeed possess the exact change required. Things were going his way.

He had the car take him all the way down to the waterfront, near the turnaround of the Venezia line, and there find a parking spot with no neighborhood timing limitations, and no street-cleaning for at least forty-eight hours. The car, as always, performed its duties admirably, and he found himself on a side street near the wharf, parked in front of some newish looking townhouses backed onto the water. The next task was to filter the belongings he'd packed in his suitcase. He did not want to lug the whole thing all the way across town by hand, so he removed the smaller duffel bag from within it and re-packed the bare essentials he would need for a day or at most two. This took some time as he had already brought what he considered to be the minimum and it was hard to choose among that. Finally he decided that enough

was enough, zipped up the duffel bag, stowed his phone and wallet in the glove compartment, and zapped the door closed with the dongle on his key ring.

He strode off toward the nearest stop, and although it was only two blocks away, he felt nearly suffocated by the intense heat. He sweltered in the futile shade of a useless urban tree-let while the Venezia train refused to arrive. Only then, looking back into his memory of the glass screen on the transit stop he'd consulted downtown, did he realize that the Venezia ran only every ninety minutes during the day. This location had no screen and no schedule posted anywhere. It was going to be a long hot wait.

And then, while standing there practically melting, Alex realized with a sharp pang of disappointment in himself that his well-intended plan had missed one crucial point. It was going to take too long. He was certainly going to miss the two o'clock appointment he'd mentally made with the old lady at the park. She would not be there when he arrived. He only hoped he'd be able to find her at the Happy Slumbers, and that she would, what? He stopped his reverie in mid-thought. What did he expect from her?

He couldn't answer that simple question and his mind remained a blank for the rest of the time he stood out there on the sidewalk, the only passenger for the train that finally arrived and carted him off. A few other riders did ascend and descend during the thirty minute, multi-stop trek across town, but Alex didn't notice them. He was staring out the window at the streets that looked both familiar and unknown, filled with memories, ghosts and new things he'd never noticed before, like random images overlaid on top of each other and compressed into a jumbled collage. He was right about one thing. When he finally arrived at the end of the line, it was already past two-thirty, and there was no one in the park.

Eight

Alex decided to remain calm and to continue as planned, so he did not linger at the park but proceeded to the dingy Happy Slumbers lobby and rang the bell on the deserted desk. He felt in his pockets to make sure the wad of cash was still there, and studied the rate chart taped to the top of the counter. He had to ring the bell two more times before a rickety old man staggered out from behind the wall. He was as small as Josefa, as dark as Rosario and as bald as Sergeant Romo. His face was so wrinkled that Alex couldn't help but wonder just how many centenarians there were lurking around the area. The old man made his way, slowly, to the desk and flashed a sly grin at Alex as if hinting at some secret only the two of them knew about.

"Yes, sir!" he proclaimed in a loud steady voice.

"I'd like a room," Alex said simply. "No, wait. I'd like the best room you've got", while thinking to himself, "or at least what qualifies for 'best' in this place."

"For how many nights, sir?" the old man inquired. Alex hesitated.

"I'm not sure. At least one, maybe two. Is that okay?"

"Certainly, sir," the old man pulled a binder from under the desk and plopped it onto the counter. He flipped through a few ragged pages, apparently seeking the most recent unscrambled-upon one. He seemed to take his time, though, as if studiously reading the book's entire contents. His lips trembled as he thumbed through it, mumbling names like he was reciting their past.

"Annabelle Smith, yes, sir," he said. "Oh, Lawrence Peters, yes, Mister Peters. I remember him well."

"Do you have any rooms?" Alex asked, impatiently, causing the clerk, whose name was Rolando Sparks, to look up and partly snarl in response.

"Oh, we've got rooms. We're a motel, sir. Rooms is basically what we do have, if you know what I mean."

"I'd like one," Alex snidely remarked and Rolando snickered.

"How many guests?" he said slyly.

"One," Alex answered, "no wait, make that two," he added, and Rolando nodded as if he thought as much and had already anticipated it.

"Number nine," he said, turning around for a key. The motel was that old, Alex thought, that they actually had metal keys to the rooms, and kept them on hooks. He hadn't seen anything like it in many, many years.

"How many beds are there in that room?" Alex asked. "I was hoping for two."

"Got two beds," Rolando nodded, "if you count the sofabed which I do. Count it, I mean. Got your queen and you got your sofabed too. It's a suite."

"Good enough," Alex replied and fished for his bundle of money. "How much for that?"

"Be two hundred a night," Rolando said. Alex stopped with his hand in mid-pocket. Had he heard that correctly? Two hundred? That was definitely going to put a dent in his wad. And he hadn't seen any listing higher than one-fifty on the sheet.

"I was thinking one fifty," he said out loud, without meaning to.

"All right, one fifty," Rolando countered with a dry cackle. He didn't care. Most nights that room remained vacant, like most of the other rooms in the place on most nights. One fifty was plenty and certainly more than nothing. Alex counted out the money and placed it on the counter. Rolando turned the binder around and, pointing at a line, handed Alex a pen and told him to fill it out while he took the money and stuffed it into a shoe box. When Alex was done, Rolando handed him the key along with an illegibly scrawled receipt, and told him the room was outside, make a right, and three cabins down. Alex thanked him and dragged his duffel bag back with him.

He didn't go to room nine, though, but continued on to room twelve, where he tapped very gently on the door. After a few moments, Josefa opened it and beckoned him inside. Etta had already had her two sips of tea and was snoozing quite peacefully on the bed, not making a sound. Alex took his old seat on the sofa as Josefa went to briefly check on the old woman.

"I have a room now," Alex told her. "She can stay there tonight. That way your family will be more comfortable."

Josefa looked back at him and gave him a sad smile.

"Oh, we couldn't do that," she said. "You stay in your room. We'll be fine. Besides, Etta has to be here. She cannot go to another."

"Why not?" Alex asked. "It's a bigger room. At least I think it is. It's number nine. Is that a nice one? I didn't go in yet."

"Number nine is just fine," Josefa chuckled. "You will like it. It's cozy."

"Why can't she go? You need a break. I can look after her. I promise I'll take the best care of her."

"No. She has to be here," Josefa insisted, and pointed at the crucifix above Etta's head. "He wants her here," she continued. "He's protecting her from the, from the ..." she was reluctant to finish, as if by saying the word she would be summoning the creature. Alex had a sudden inspiration.

"Well, at least your daughter and grand-daughter can stay in number nine," he suggested. "That way at least they can be comfortable."

"And you?" Josefa asked. "Where will you sleep?"

"I could stay here," he said. "On the cot. I can sleep on the cot."

Josefa shook her head, then after taking a few moments to reconsider, shook her head again, but then said,

"Okay. Rosario and Elma can stay in number nine for tonight, but you must have the couch. I am used to the floor. I will sleep there."

Alex was unable to convince her otherwise and finally relented and accepted her terms. By that time the nap hour had come to a close and Josefa was waking up the old woman. Etta once again roused herself and made ready to resume her vigil in the park. She smiled at Alex this time, seeming to know who he was but not saying anything to him. He greeted her and tried to make small talk about the weather, and wasn't she awfully warm sitting out there in the sun, and wouldn't she rather find a bench in the shade, but she ignored him as the three walked back out into the park, directly to the benches where he'd met her earlier that day.

"At least it's the last shift of the day," Alex said, and noticed, or rather imagined a slight breeze had kicked up. He gave his new room key to Josefa who had to get back to work, and took a seat on the bench next to Etta, just like he had in the morning. He thought maybe she would say more, so he prompted her with remarks about Sapphire and Argus and Daniel Fulsom and anything else he could think of that might get a response out of her, but nothing had any effect. She stared straight ahead and paid no attention to him. She might as well have been hypnotized.

"They tell me you say you're a hundred and twenty three years old," Alex said. "That's pretty old, you know, unless you're a tortoise. I've heard those things can live a really long time. How'd you get to be so old, anyway? I see you don't eat and barely drink. Is that your secret? Starve your way to immortality? Could be an exciting new diet fad!"

Still no response came from the old woman, and Alex began to feel more and more ridiculous. She was clearly out of her mind, he thought, but was he as well? He probably looked like a fool to everybody else, except there was nobody else. The park remained absolutely deserted, not even a gopher disturbing the lawn. It was eerie. Surely the law of averages would have brought somebody here at some point. The city had hundreds of thousands of citizens, and there were residential streets on all sides of the place, yet no one walked even on the far sidewalks, and no cars were driving themselves down those streets.

"How much?"

The old woman had suddenly spoken, but just those two words. Alex repeated them back to her.

"How much what?"

"How much would you pay?" she continued, not looking at him. "When all you can spend is your time?"

"I don't know," Alex replied after a long moment. "I guess it depends on what you're buying with it. We spend our time on all sorts of stuff," he considered. "We spend our time at a job in exchange for money. We spend our time in a movie in exchange for entertainment, or in a book for its story. You want to go into it, get lost for a while. It's worth some time for that."

"Dribs and drabs," Etta nearly spat out those words. "A little bit here and a little bit there. How much would you pay all at once?"

"I guess it depends," Alex said, sitting back. Etta was not looking at him but seemed to be communicating, definitely. He figured he didn't have to look at her either, but once he turned his eyes from her, she fell silent once more, and nothing he said evoked any response. He shifted again to look straight at her and talked, trying to get her attention again.

"You can go on vacation," he said, "spend your time at the beach. Is that all at once? Does that count?"

Etta did not reply, nor did she say another word for the rest of the entire three hours. Alex attempted to speak now and then, even got up and stood right in front of her, then sat down beside her, then wandered behind the benches, still talking, but to no avail. She had spoken all that she was going to speak in that vigil, and eventually he grew too hot and had to return to the Happy Slumbers lobby and the soda machine he had seen there. He came back minutes later but nothing had changed. Etta remained motionless and did not respond to his offers of a cold beverage. In the end he gave up

and took his place on his bench and waited for Josefa or Rosario to come when the shift was officially over.

Nine

Finally, Josefa arrived to take Etta back to Happy Slumbers. She did not seem at all surprised to see Alex sitting there, but when he got up to accompany them, she shook her head and waved him away.

"It's cleaning time," she told him. "I will give her a nice bath and wash her clothes. You can come back later. Two hours," and with that she dismissed him and, holding Etta by the elbow, left the park with her charge. Alex was annoyed, but mostly with himself. It was impossible to be angry with Josefa, who was as dedicated and as steady as a nun, and was obviously taking the best care possible of the old lady. Alex realized he was hungry after doing practically nothing but sweating all day. He thought of several decent restaurants he knew downtown, then remembered that he'd left his car several miles away and didn't feel like taking another long rail ride. He figured there must be something in the neighborhood out there and decided to walk around and see.

The park was only four square city blocks, covering almost exactly the area where the weird volcanic sinkhole had been. Alex walked all the way around the perimeter one time before deciding to head off on a random side street that looked like it might have some commercial establishments a few blocks down. All he found was a bakery that was closed, and an Asian Fusion restaurant that was much fancier than he felt comfortable about, and was pricier than he'd counted on. Nevertheless, he was tired and still had enough cash in his pocket so he went in and ordered the first thing he saw on the menu. He didn't want to think about anything. He only wanted to get back to the room and find out whatever he could from the old woman. The idea had taken possession of him and he could think of nothing else. He replayed in his mind every word she had said during the day, trying to make some sense of it all. He was certain she had the answers that everyone had been searching for all of those years.

He was the only customer in the restaurant, yet still the service was unbearably slow. Everything seemed to take much longer than it should that day, from the train to the vigil in the park to the noodles and sauce which only required a little boiling and re-heating, as far as he could tell. He sat staring out at the quiet neighborhood where only an occasional car drove by. He wondered how any business managed to survive in this sleepy residential backwater of the town. It had only been a bustling area once, when the Sea Dragons stadium was on the site where the park was located now, but that was such a long time ago and nothing had taken its place.

Alex was in a much darker frame of mind when he finally gobbled his food and left far too many of his remaining dollars behind. At least the long meal had used up a good chunk of time, and he really had nothing else to do, so it shouldn't have bothered him

so much, but he was restless, and cranky and growing more irritable with each passing moment. He had to force himself to slow down, to walk calmly on his way back to the motel. When he got there, he knocked gently on the door, hoping not to wake up the lady if she was sleeping. Josefa opened and silently beckoned him inside. Etta was indeed sleeping, looking refreshed and relaxed as she dozed on the bed.

"Good you are here now," Josefa whispered. "I am going out. I will be back, in an hour or two at the most. She will sleep the whole time. Do not worry."

"I'm okay," Alex told her, and after she'd gathered her apron and tools and had left, he settled back down on the narrow red couch and resumed his own personal vigil. Right away he felt more at ease in his mind. He was where he should be, where he wanted to be, and everything would come to fruition as planned. He felt this so strongly that he even lay down, if just for a moment, he thought. But instead, he promptly fell into a very deep sleep.

Instantly he was plunged into a dream. He was in his own car, yet not the same car as the real one. In this one he had his hands on the wheel and was actually steering, and had his feet on the pedals and was actually controlling the vehicle's velocity. How long it had been since he'd had this sensation! Self-driving cars were not only the norm, they were also the law and had been for a while. How he loved the old ways. He had basically driven for a living, always out on the road, chasing the railroad tracks from one junction to the next, making sure and then doubly sure that they were all in perfect condition, every joint, every switch, every rail. If he had ever felt truly at home, it was in his own car, all alone on the road. The dream began with that feeling, but quickly it changed.

He had been driving in the desert on a straight flat highway going seemingly nowhere, but then the road veered off into the mountains and became much more windy and steep. Now it swerved and it dropped, now it twisted and turned, heading up, swerving left and then right and Alex had to grip on to the wheel, hold it tight and maneuver as best as he could. Daylight flashed into night, and then back into day in rapid succession. The weather changed too, now a fog, now a drizzle, and the road became icy, then wet. Out of the mountains he dropped and onto a narrow cliff road that wound around beaches and the next thing he knew he was driving straight into a blizzard and couldn't see anything but white all around. He felt the car buckle and slide and he clutched the wheel tighter and drove by sheer feel and by guesswork, amazed that the car still went forward, still had tires on the ground that were spinning.

The road had developed an attitude and clearly it wanted him off it. It bucked like a bull at a rodeo as the wheels left the road, then clambered back down with a bang. The drive became a chase, only what he was after he never could tell. He only felt there was something right up ahead, outrunning him and trying its best to elude him. He stepped on the gas and relished the chase. "You won't lose me now", he yelled at the invisible thing, and back into the mountains they ran, up and down and skittering along the edges of sheer drops that seemed a thousand feet deep. The sun and night sky were talking turns in sudden alternations and the wind was whipping furiously around the car as its engine frantically roared and whined. All at once the car stopped and Alex felt in his stomach that moment before total free fall and knew that the road was now gone, that there was nothing beneath him but air and all he could hear was the pounding of wind in his ears.

Ten

The pounding was coming from the door to the room, and it was loud and angry and constant. Alex tumbled off the couch and awoke with a sharp pain in his shoulder as it took a few moments for the fact of the knocking to register. He got to his feet and looked over at the bed, where Etta was somehow still snoozing away undisturbed. Rubbing his eyes, he went to the door and opened it. There, with his fist raised for yet another bang, was Sergeant Romo and he did not look happy. He pushed right past Alex into the dark room, and turned on the light switch next to the door. Alex backed up to let him pass, still not completely awake.

"What's going on here?" Romo demanded, taking in the room at a glance. "Who's the old woman? What are you up to?"

"Sleeping," Alex mumbled. "It's a motel. Where you sleep?"

"Then why?" Romo turned and came right up into Alex's face. "Tell me this. Why are you not in the room that you rented? Who are those people in that room, why are they there, and why are you here?"

"Why are YOU here?" Alex snapped back, instantly regretting his tone, but Romo was making him angry and he was not yet alert enough to control his temper.

"Doing my job," Romo snarled. "Or maybe you think it's all funny. Listen up, Mister Kirkham. This is serious business. Your brother is officially missing, and you are a person of interest. Now you go off and deliberately try and conceal your tracks, parking across town, ditching your phone, not using your cards, withdrawing a whole lot of cash from the bank."

"It wasn't that much," Alex weakly protested. Romo was practically spitting in his face, forcing him back to the wall so his head was practically touching the Lord's heart in the painting.

"What? You didn't think we were following you? I wonder just how stupid you really think we are. We've been on you all day, like tar on the road. Now you're in here and we want to know why. Who is the old bag, anyway?"

Romo snorted and walked over to the bed, where he began to poke at Etta's arms trying to prompt her awake. She didn't show any response, not even when he started pushing her harder.

"Leave her alone," Alex cried, but Romo ignored him. He picked up one of her arms and held her wrist between two of his fingers and stood still for several moments.

"This woman hardly has any pulse," he declared, dropping her hand back onto the bed. At that moment, Josefa came rushing into the room and running up to Romo began jabbering at him in what Alex assumed had to be Spanish. He felt like an idiot, then, spending nearly all of his life near the border and never bothering to pick up more than a few words, and most of them names of various foods. Romo backed away from the tiny maid, but she pressed forward, stabbing her finger into his chest and most definitely cursing up a storm. Romo looked bewildered and hardly got a word of his own into the

conversation, and before Alex knew it, Josefa had bullied him out of the room, back onto the sidewalk, and as she did so she turned off the lights and closed the door quickly behind her. Alex sighed in relief, and felt his way back to the couch. He felt a strong urge to sit down and just catch his breath.

Eleven

The moment he sat down something grabbed at his hands and held on with a grip like powerful claws. Alex yelled and turned to see what it was. It was Etta. Somehow she was not only awake but sitting beside him on the narrow red couch, clutching his hands in hers with a strength he didn't believe possible. It was pitch dark in the room but he could see her quite clearly, her halo of white hair glowing like phosphorus and her brown eyes somehow shining at him.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Listen to me. Do you have what it takes? Are you one of us?" She seemed to be searching his face for an answer but it couldn't give any. His expression was blank.

"Never mind," she went on. "You can dream. That IS what they want. We're like candy to them, like a crop to be picked, a cow to be milked, but forever, or at least a long time." She chuckled to herself as if recalling a joke.

"Like candy," she decided. "Like a lollipop. That's how they do it. They suck on our dreams. Imagination, human imagination is their favorite food, though they do sometimes indulge in other creatures, it's true, but they'd rather have us." Here she snorted and paused.

"Who are 'they'?" Alex managed to ask. Etta heard him, or at least she answered his question.

"Who can say?" she replied. "They're so vast and there are so many of them. They overlap one another, it seems. Hard to tell. I feel them inside, all at once, but also as one at a time. They're not even here, or anywhere, really. They float. They're light as a feather and filmy as paper. They want to keep the spot clear for their traps. Their little lobster cages. It's how we go in. Oh, we want to. We certainly do. And such bliss! Oh, when you're in there, how wonderful, what joy! You feel so lost yet so perfectly found. You sink into it and you don't know where you are and don't care. Who would ever say no? Ah, but what are you willing to pay?"

Etta drifted off into silence again, and Alex felt tense, as if the time was running out fast like the bottom-most sands of an hourglass. He pulled on hand over on top of her other one and pressed down, hoping to prompt her for more. She perked up.

"What if they made us?" she wondered. "Planted us here. Sugar cane. No, they say no, they just found us one day and they stayed. It's so slow, like an all-day sucker and their days are so long, very long. We dream and they relish the flavor. What flavor am I, lemonade? I like to think I am like lemonade. Sour yet sweet like my dreams, like my love. Where is my love? Are you here?"

Etta suddenly released Alex's hands and got to her feet, looking around in the darkness, and calling out, over and over again, "are you here, my love? Are you here?"

"There's nobody here," Alex told her, now also standing and trying to get her to sit down again, but Etta seemed stuck on her notion and pushed him away, but after several more queries she did return to the couch and quieted down. Alex sat down beside her and asked her again.

"Who are they?" he asked but she shook her head.

"Might as well ask yourself who are the stars?" she muttered.

Twelve

"Put your hands up, both of you!" barked Lieutenant Liliana Vasquez as she burst into the room, followed closely by her partner, Sergeant Romo.

"On your feet, hands in the air!" Romo shouted, "Now!"

Alex did as instructed at once, but Etta seemed not to hear or comprehend, and before Alex could turn and encourage her to follow their orders, Romo barged forward and, grabbing her by the elbow, yanked her to her feet.

"Tranquilo!" came a pleading voice from the doorway and Alex saw Josefa hovering just outside.

"That's enough out of you," Vasquez yelled without looking around. "You've jerked us around enough as it is."

"If you know what's good for you, get lost!" Romo added, and launched into what Alex assumed was a similar tirade in Spanish, but he didn't have to get very far because Josefa was already backing away and leaving the scene with her palms up in front of her face. Alex caught her eye for a brief moment, and thought he detected a slight shake of her head and felt he understood the message.

"Move it!" Romo said and Alex saw that in his free hand he was holding a gun. Confused but not stupid, Alex headed for the door still holding his own hands up high. Romo shoved Alex's shoulder from behind, causing him to stumble out onto the street, and marched Etta out along with him.

Vasquez herded them into the waiting police van and locked them in the back, while she and Romo climbed into the front and ordered the vehicle to return downtown to headquarters. Alex wisely decided this was not the time to ask questions, but inspected Etta closely to make sure she was essentially unharmed. Etta was in a fog, completely unaware of her surroundings. Alex thought it likely she was still fast asleep, and that she had been the entire evening.

He resigned himself to waiting, and as it turned out, he had a lot more of that yet to be done. At the station, he and Etta were separated and he was locked into a small office by himself for several hours, with only the steady ticking of a large wall clock to keep him company. Again he had time to consider and reconsider everything he'd heard from the delusional old woman. The creature, he thought (or was it creatures, plural?) was speaking through her. That's what Josefa believed, and she believed it was evil. Alex wasn't so sure. He didn't know if morality even entered the equation. If it did, then according to Etta the creature paid a fair price for the trade it was

offering. Everything costs, even if you only pay with your time. Who is it once told him, he wondered, that time is really the only true currency we possess?

How much are you willing to pay? Etta had said this more than once, and it occurred to Alex that so many people confuse value with money. They absorb the common myth that all things are measured in coin, and the more the thing costs the more worthy it is, and yet you never pay cash for what matters the most. He sighed, thinking of the few dollars that remained in his pocket until the desk sergeant took it away. He realized now he'd been foolish with his earlier antics, and had only drawn more attention to himself. Nevertheless, he figured they would probably have gone through pretty much the same turmoil regardless of how he'd returned to Happy Slumbers. The police had their reasons though they refused to share them with him.

At least they hadn't yet. He slept for a time, though the chair he was stuck in was extremely uncomfortable. He was thankful not to dream any more. At around four in the morning, the door opened and Lieutenant Vasquez walked in, bleary and tired and definitely not cheerful herself. She pulled up another chair and sat close to Alex, leaning over to peer into his face.

"Is there anything you need?" she asked but leaned back with a sniff, as if daring him to ask her for anything at all.

"No, I'm fine," he retorted. He was not going to give her any cause for complaint.

"So, tell me about the old woman," she said.

"There's not much to tell," he replied. "At least not from me. I just met her today, or yesterday by now. The maid told me her name was Etta and she claimed to be more than a hundred years old and she liked to sit in the park but mostly she slept." He shrugged and added, "and that's all I know."

"Her name," Vasquez informed him, "was Henrietta Henry, and she used to live on a street called Snapdragon Alley, with her husband, Mason Henry. She was friends with one Charlie Kirkham and she vanished more than fifty years ago, according to official police records. Does any of that ring a bell?"

Alex blinked a few times, processing the data. "Of course," he said to himself. "I should have known that's who she was. Wait, did she say 'was'?"

"Did you say 'was'?" he asked her out loud. Vasquez nodded.

"Henrietta Henry died about a half hour ago. Apparently she'd had nothing to eat for a long time, according to the physician who examined her. Decades, in fact."

"Decades," Alex repeated as tears formed in his eyes. "Died", he said to himself. "Passed away. Gone." He did not want to believe it.

"Now," Vasquez continued, "as you sure you have nothing to tell me? Considering that you knew all the parties involved, had been to their house, was present at the scene when your uncle disappeared apparently in the same manner and fashion as this alleged old woman?"

Alex shook his head.

"I've told you all that I know," he said. "I never met her, you know. Her husband, yes, I knew him. We visited him at that house, that is true. He gave us root beer, I think. We liked root beer."

"How nice," Vasquez scoffed, then she stood and pushed her chair back.

"We've got nothing," she admitted. "So you're free to go. We'll be watching you, though. You can be damn sure of that. Now get out of here. The sergeant will take you wherever you want to go, back to your car or that stupid motel or wherever, within reason, of course."

Alex didn't reply, and didn't bother to check in with Romo, either. He gathered his keys and his cash from the desk, and wandered out into the street. There was no one around and he looked up and down for a cab, figuring he'd ask its driver if he had enough cash to get back to the park. In the meantime, he walked in that general direction. The late night was gloomy and dripping with dew. His footsteps echoed in the empty downtown.

Thirteen

Alex reasoned it was about three miles to the park, so it should have taken about an hour to get there, walking at a normal pace, but he found it took much longer though he felt his pace was fine. He couldn't trust his senses, however, after only a few ragged hours of partial, lousy sleep. He probably looked like a zombie, staggering around out there on the otherwise vacant sidewalks. At least his good sense of direction remained unimpaired, and he was going the right way. Near the break of dawn he reached the bench he'd claimed as his own since early the previous morning. It felt good to sit on it, as if the green metal mesh had settled in to greet him. The idea was laughable, but he found he wasn't even able to smile. He was simply too tired.

He felt the presence of the old woman on the bench next to him, and therefore wasn't surprised when he heard a voice speaking. It was several moments before he realized that the voice belonged to a man, and that the man was his brother, Argus.

"Good morning," the voice was saying. "I had a feeling you'd be here."

Alex turned and rubbed his eyes, not believing in what they were telling him. It truly was his brother who, despite being formally dressed in a brown suit, light blue shirt and purple tie, looked as exhausted and bedraggled as Alex imagined he himself appeared.

"What?" he managed to stammer. "How?"

Argus softly chuckled, stood up, and came over to sit next to his brother. The two men studied each other's faces, speechless for a time.

"I admit, I saw you earlier," Argus finally spoke. "With Henrietta. That was Henrietta, I assume."

Alex nodded, thinking, "how could he have seen us? I was certain there was no one around. Then again, I didn't notice the police on my tail either. Guess I'm not so observant after all."

"She passed away," he said with a muffled voice, choking back sudden tears. Then he couldn't hold them back any longer, and began crying in earnest. Argus patted his brother's hand and sighed.

"Well, she was pretty old," he said, trying unsuccessfully to cheer Alex up.

"She was happy," Alex sobbed. "Such bliss, she said. She was so happy."

"I'm glad," Argus said. "Mason would have been glad, too. It's all he ever wanted for her."

"Mason," Alex repeated, remembering the old man they'd met so very long ago. He had missed his wife so much, waited for her to come back, every day. Long gone, now, done in by that greedy bastard, Daniel Fulsom and his vicious assassins.

"Did you see Sapphire too?" Argus asked with a sudden seriousness in his voice. Alex shook his head.

"She must still be inside," he said, "or maybe she's dead too. Who can tell?"

"I think she's okay," Argus said. "I hear it, you know." Alex looked up at him, bewildered

"It's true," Argus said, "I've always been able to hear it, to see it, at least the way it shows itself to me. I understand that it's different for everyone. How is it for you?"

Alex shrugged.

"It isn't," he said. Argus nodded.

"Maybe not, or maybe just not yet," he replied. "I see it there now. It's calling me again. Do you see?" he pointed out into the park, and Alex followed with his eyes but saw nothing but the grass and the occasional oak tree. He shook his head.

"I don't see anything."

"It's just for me," Argus said. "The palace of my heart. It's like a Grecian rotunda, very high, very orange, pillars and temple and all, with a moat all around, and four swans. It knows I would like that. Funny thing."

"Lobster cages," Alex murmured and Argus asked him to repeat it.

"Henrietta called them lobster cages. It goes fishing, that's what it does. We're its food, or something like that. Candy, she said. Like a tootsie pop. It sucks on our dreams."

"On our dreams," Argus echoed. "So that's what it is."

The two fell silent for several minutes, Argus apparently admiring the architecture displayed only for him by the great interstellar sea dragon.

"I always say no," Argus said when he spoke up at last. "I've wondered for years what it wants. Now I know, but the answer's the same."

"She was so happy," Alex repeated. "You should have seen the look on her face. So at peace. Such bliss. Those were her words."

"I don't want it," Argus said. "The world as it is, that's good enough for me. I have my work, my family, my friends. Sure, I'm not blissfully happy every minute every day. I don't want to be, either. Might as well end your days in an opium den."

"Happiness is for moments," he went on, "Not forever."

"Maybe it could be," Alex said. "I'm no expert, that's for sure."

Argus looked closely at his brother, understanding his meaning. Alex had never been the bouncy, joyful type. Always taciturn, passive to extremes, he'd merely let his life happen, every step of the way, not taking control, not willing his way, not demanding a life pre-defined. Could he even be happy, Argus had wondered more than once. His own joys were small and quiet enough, he knew well, but he savored them all nonetheless. He had learned what to value and since that time had never once underestimated their gifts.

"Things can change," Argus said, standing up. "There's always hope," he added.

"But for right now," he continued, "I think you could use some sleep. You look like you've been up for days."

Alex nodded and got to his feet.

"You can come home with me," Argus said. "My car is right over there. I miss Margaret and Arvid. I shouldn't have left the way I did, but I was tempted. This time, truly I was. The thing almost got me once and for all. If you hadn't been here," he shook his head. "I don't know what I might have done."

"Glad to be of service," Alex mumbled, "but no thanks. I've got a room over there, in that little motel."

"Happy Slumbers?" Argus laughed. "Is that place for real? It looks like a dump."

"It looks good to me," Alex said. He paused to give his little brother a hug.

"Go on home now," he told him. "They'll be happy to see you. And you're right. I do need some rest. If I'm lucky I'll sleep for a week."

Argus gave his brother one more pat on the back, and then left him alone once again in the park.

Fourteen

Alex watched long enough until he was sure that Argus had gotten into his car and had it pull out and drive away, and then he waited a little bit longer. Daylight was coming on full and it didn't feel right to be going inside to sleep at that time, no matter how weary he was. Besides, he couldn't face Josefa, not yet. He knew how upset she would be, saddened and angry, and perhaps mad at him most of all. It seemed like he'd made it all happen, or at least that Josefa would see it that way, as the cops seemed to do too. He tried to convince himself that he'd done nothing wrong, that all he had done was show up in this place, and then stay, and come back, and then stay a little more, and then come back again.

"All I wanted to do," he pleaded his case to the park, "was to hear whatever it was that she had to say, and I heard. Did she really have to die?"

Deep down he already knew the answer, that by rights she should have been dead long ago, that only the thing, whatever it was, had preserved her as long as it had. Sea Dragons, he thought, without oceans or wings but still breathing fire and scorching the ground. This park, that looked so peaceful now, had seen many changes over the years. He hoped that it was as tranquil as it seemed, that the days of upheaval were over.

"I want to go in," he said, and he walked back to the bench and sat down. In the daylight the silence was even stronger than it had been in the dark.

"I want to," he said once again, and he knew in his heart that he meant it. "How much am I willing to pay? Everything. All of it. All of my life. What is my life anyway? A series of episodes strung together by time, each one all its own, with its version of me and its versions of the others involved. You can take them apart, one by one, and put them under the most intense scrutiny. They stand on their own, my various scenes. Each with its start and its end, each with its own set of rules, with its knowns and unknowns, with its questions and answers and unanswered questions. Why do I not know my own children? I knew them both once, why not now? Why am I all alone? I wasn't before, not always before. Where did Gwendolyn go? Where's Carmela? Where did my old bosses go, those Anthonies and Carolines and Samuels and Dans? Where are those jobs I once had, those tracks I once crossed, those homes that used to be my home?"

"I've lived many lives and each little one had its duration, its boundaries. Outside of those lines those lives don't exist, they're all gone. So what can I do? Read some more books? I've read enough books. Watch another movie? How many movies do I have to

see? Meet someone new, fall in love, yet again? How much do you need? How much are you willing to pay?"

"I don't want to go back," Alex said to the sky, to the grass, to the bench, to all things existing around him. He had nowhere to go back to. Home was Tucson those days, but just an address, an apartment, a stupid and boring routine. To trade it all in, now that would be nice, to trade it all in for 'such bliss', like she said.

"I want to go in," he repeated out loud, and he strained his eyes for any indication, anything shimmering, glowing or new, but there was only the grass and the plants and the trees. "What would it look like for me?" he wondered. "It was a garden for Etta, a bus for Uncle Charlie, that castle for Argus, a jungle for Sapphire. What is my trap? What is my place? What is my key?"

There wasn't an answer, and in the silence, he knew. It wasn't for him. His brother could hear it, calling to him. Sapphire must have been able to too.

"I don't have it," he thought. "It isn't for me. I don't know why, but it isn't."

The realization brought tears to his eyes, but they couldn't emerge and flow down. He even started to laugh just a bit, and that was the moment he knew it for certain. Alex stood up and slowly walked off. He turned back one more time and saw that the bench was only a bench, just a plain old park bench in this loneliest of places. He felt sorry for it, and then he quickened his pace, to go see Josefa, to tell her what happened, and to offer her whatever comfort he could give.

