

The Jade Bear

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Prologue : The Beginning of the End

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who are you? Where are you from?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Who is the person?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing stirred and for that she was grateful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A knock on the door interrupted him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is she still an invalid?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The representative nodded her head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She grasped an arm and led her inside.

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He kissed her and relaxed.

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

"What's that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How long have you known that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I will. I'll call you soon.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Brownie is the name I use."

"Then Brownie it is."

"Have you been drinking?"

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

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

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

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

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

Brownie shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What's wrong? What is it?”

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

“Nor do I. I'm sorry, Joyce.”

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

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

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

Mr. Joseph Matkins,

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

Amanda and Jade.

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

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

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

"Did it come in the mail?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, but I never mentioned you."

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

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

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

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

"I agree there."

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

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