

# The String Bearer

*Lord of the Strings*

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## *Dedication*

Tigger, Puppy, Zak, Chaffie, Riffa, Hershey and all my four legged friends who have passed through that final doorway that we can't see beyond. I know you're all waiting for me on the other side and are standing at the side of my two-legged friends and family. I love you all still. If Heaven is without our animal companions, what kind of Heaven could it be?

*For want of a nail, a shoe was lost.  
For want of a shoe, a horse was lost.  
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.  
For want of a rider, the message was lost.  
For want of a message, the kingdom was lost.  
All because of a nail.*

## *Chapter 1*

Arlen James crept close to the wall of the abandoned warehouse glad that his partner was on the opposite side of the corridor. The smell coming off the masses of garbage and human excrement was enough to make his eyes water even under the mask and face shield. He couldn't believe any human being could live in this place and not vomit from the eye burning-stomach turning

miasma that wafted through, no, blasted down these narrow hallways in what used to be a chipped wood furniture factory.

He remembered the place when it had been a thriving, busy 24/7 business, run by local managers and with a work staff of illegal aliens busted by Immigration and shut down years ago because of labor strikes and cheap competition from overseas.

Now, crack addicts and meth dealers used it to produce product or crash until they found other accommodations. He was there at least twice a month, rousting trespassers, finding dead bodies and vagrants, watching deals go down or confiscating paraphernalia from growers.

Murphy glanced over at him, gave him a thumbs up and together they slid out of the hallway into the huge warehouse open on all sides but broken up into smaller spaces by the huge machines left bolted in place too large to move, too old to salvage. The company had left them to time and scavengers.

Murphy nodded, knowing he meant the section where massive springs were all that remained of a paper rolling press that had made laminated chipboards. It held overhead catwalks and was a favorite place for junkies to watch for intruders.

They separated, two serious men dressed in SWAT gear moving like ghosts in the dim building. Twenty minutes later, the entire team reassembled after checking all the local hangouts and found no evidence of any drugs.

The team of six pulled open their face gear and made ribald comments over the busted raid, swore to take it out on their CI for the bum lead.

“Hey,” one said. “Where’s AJ?”

They counted heads, came up one team member short so the Sergeant spoke into his collar and called.

“Arlen? AJ, where the hell are you?”

Static came back and then his voice on the radio. “Sarge, you better come back here.”

“Here where, AJ?” he returned.

“Call... meat wagon... Services,” his voice broke up. “... in the... pit... bodies.”

The entire team hiked up their gear and returned inside to the area where furniture was sprayed, where a pit built like a service bay oil change was tucked into the corner of a lonely warehouse set off to the side and away from the rest of the facility. Partially open to the sky, it was not an area well-traveled or used by transients.

Arlen was standing at the top and staring down in the hole as if the sight mesmerized him.

“What’s up, AJ?” They peered over and their eyes widened. On the concrete lay, a woman dressed in a gown of such beauty that it almost overshadowed her own stunning elegance. She was tall with a figure straight out of every man’s fantasy, with long chestnut hair and green eyes now occluded with death. Her mouth was slightly parted as if she had just taken a breath. Her chest had a hole blown clear through it and blood stained the concrete; covered a small child who sat tucked into her right arm. He sat quietly, a dazed expression on his face; his eyes were huge, two luminous green globes that glowed in the depths of the pit like a wild nocturnal animal. His hair was a riotous mix of curls and he must have rolled in the dust because it was a curious shade of rusty gray. Around both of them was a pile of brass, cartridge shells and Arlen’s professional eye marked them as 9 mm and 40 caliber. He laid his weapon on the edge and lightly jumped down into the pit, talking softly and non-stop to the child. He did not bother to check the woman; with holes that size in her chest, she could not possibly be alive.

He touched the baby, skin cold but alive and when he/she felt a warm, ungloved hand, it turned its head and screamed. Arlen picked up the baby, noted that it was a boy and cradled him close into his vest so that the child could hear his heartbeat.

“What’s your name, honey?” he asked as the boy looked at him briefly before sticking his thumb in his mouth. He looked to be about thirteen months but no more than that.

“Any ID on her, Arlen?” Sarge asked and joined him. He slid his hands under her body and searched efficiently without disturbing any of the crime scenes. He found no purse, no ID, not even a diaper bag. He did find a coin under her body of solid gold with a curious stone imbedded in the center that matched the exact color of their eyes. There was no writing on it, nothing stamped on either side.

The woman was not wearing shoes or any underwear, just a thin slip made of a translucent material that he had never seen before. The boy wore a sodden brief made not of disposable diaper but a cloth wrapped into a cunning package. His clothing was a soft, woolen like jumper, which covered his palms, feet and neck. It was an opalescent color, shifting from pearl to blue, pink, yellow and back.

The boy did not answer him but looked at his mother and cried slow tears that glistened as they slid down his chubby cheeks.

“AJ, get him outta here,” the Sarge ordered. “No point in letting him see his mom like that.”

The woman’s eyes opened and she turned her head to the utter astonishment of the two in the pit. “Save him,” she spoke with a strange accent. “Don’t let them take him. Protect...”

“Holy Christ!” Arlen gasped. “She’s alive! Get medical here!”

“Ma’am,” the sergeant knelt at her side and held her hand. “What’s your name, Ma’am? Stay with us, help is on the way. Do you know who shot you? What’s your boy’s name?”

“Too late,” she breathed. “Jadewyn. He’s called Jadewyn.” She looked at the SWAT man holding the boy, whispered with her dying effort, “Take him. Hide him. They’ll kill him.” Her eyes closed, her chest heaved once and she was gone.

“Holy shit,” he said inelegantly. “Who could live with holes like that?” he squeezed the coin in his hand and climbed back out. “Cancel the code, make it a 10-85,” he added and took the child from AJ as he climbed up. “Call Social Services to meet us at the station.”

“Sarge,” AJ stated.

“What?”

“Let me take him home.” It was said quietly and firmly, hung out there like dirty laundry.

“AJ, he’s a murder victim’s child. He must have family.”

“Whoever killed her will be looking for him, Sarge. You heard her. Franny can’t have kids and they won’t let us adopt. Let me take him home.”

The Sergeant hesitated, looked at the other team members who shrugged and pointed in disbelief as the woman’s corpse began to glow. They watched it burn, turn into a million fireflies and disappear in a cloud of sparks. Only then did the child speak. He said, “Eloahim, Madaras.”

## Chapter 2

“AJ, have you seen my wallet? I lost it, put it down somewhere and now I can’t find it,” the woman’s voice rose over the TV. The SWAT member set the five year old on his feet to get up and start looking in all the obvious places a woman might accidentally leave her personal possessions. The boy went to the vegetable bin that held carrots, onions and potatoes and pulled it open to expose her purse.

“Found it!” the man called and she came into the kitchen to stare at the little boy and his father.

“This is so strange, AJ,” she said. “Watch this---Jeddy boy, where’s Mama’s blue ring?” AJ said, “The one you lost two years ago?”

She nodded and they followed as he took them on a tour of the house to the garage and into the car where he pushed the seat back. In the track lay a one-carat blue topaz and gold ring that glittered in his palm. AJ looked at the boy’s clear bottle green eyes and then at his mama’s blue ones.

“Jade, where’s my Cross pocket knife?”

The strange gray brows furrowed, closed his eyes in thought and skittered out to the yard. There on the massive deck between two cracks, he dug out the slim blade and handed it over to his father.

“No matter what I ask him to find, he finds it,” she told her husband. “Stuff I haven’t thought of in years.”

“Lost socks, too?” he quipped.

“You can make fun of it, AJ, but I haven’t been able to stump him yet,” she retorted. “Take him to the station and try it with some of the guys there.”

“I just might,” he returned. “Jade, want to go with Dad to work?”

The boy looked up at his dad and nodded. From the day that Arlen had brought the toddler home to his wife, the child had rarely spoken and when he did, he had the same strange accent as his mother.

His hair had not been dirty from dust but was an odd dark gray, uniformly one color, an ashy tone that looked odd on so young a child.

Franny James had taken the exhausted baby from her husband, bathed and fed him, rocked him to sleep in her arms. In the next week, she took him to a PEDS clinic and had him examined from head to toe, paid cash so that there was no paper trail on the boy.

For three years, almost four, they had raised him and not one of his team ratted him out. In fact, the boy called Jade had seven uncles that doted on him.

Franny had dressed him in jeans, camo t-shirt and put his hand in AJ’s, kissed him goodbye and waved as they drove out in his 4x4 Dodge pickup.

The station was a twenty-minute drive down the highway and into Boston proper. AJ’s station was the 4-7, home of the top SWAT TacOps and counter terrorism of which he was a senior member.

He pulled into his space, parked and unhooked Jadewyn from his car seat and put him down on the concrete. The two of them sauntered into the station house like marching soldiers.

“Hey, AJ. Jade,” the desk sergeant smiled. “You on?”

“Nope, Reilly. Got the next two off,” he said genially.

“Hey, did you hear about Rosslyn’s daughter?”

“Mayor Rosslyn? No, what?”

“She’s been missing for twelve hours; they’re waiting for a ransom demand.”

AJ looked at his son, and then back to his Sergeant. “They know where she disappeared from?”

“Somewhere on BU’s campus.”

“Got a map, Sarge? Bring it into the Loo’s office. Is Murph here? Bring him, too.” James dragged his child into the Lieutenant’s office without knocking; he was on the phone and looked

up in astonishment that he was interrupted without a knock or fare-thee-well. Hanging up, he glared at his off duty SWAT member and demanded to know what James was doing.

The desk sergeant came in with a map and paused at the desk, confused.

“Put it out on the desk, Sarge,” AJ ordered and picked Jade up. He stared into those odd, large pupils. “Jade? Loo, you got a photo of Rosslyn’s daughter?”

“Yeah. On the board.” He pointed to the eraser board with the current cases listed. On the top of the board was Melissa Rosslyn, missing, the date, place and time.

“What is this about, AJ?” the Loo demanded as he handed over the photos. AJ gave it to the boy.

“Jade, this pretty lady is Melissa. She’s lost. Can you find her?”

The boy took the photo, stood still in a way that was eerily adult and headed for the door. AJ stopped him. “No, Jade. Show me on the map, can you do that?”

He looked, peered down at the metroplex map spread out on the desk and pointed to the streets Maidenhair and Culver, part of the Commons near the University. “What’s there? Can you pull up a Google Earth view of the area, down to the buildings?” AJ asked. Such was his intensity that the lieutenant nodded and turned his monitor around after he downloaded the sight. The 17 in monitor showed labs, power plant and the horticulture building on the university complex. Jade pointed to that building, to a specific location and said, “Under.”

“This is bullshit, AJ,” he said and AJ, the Sarge and a voice from the door denied it. Murphy came in wearing his work suit, chinos, sport jacket, polo and 9 mm.

“Loo, if Jade says it’s there, it’s there. What’s up, AJ?” His eyes scanned the maps, the girl’s photo and the board.

“Melissa Rosslyn? He’s found her? Jade, is she alive?”

“Murph! He’s only five years old!”

“Sorry, partner.” He laid his hand on the boy’s skinny shoulder. “Loo, Jade has been finding stuff for us the last four years. I swear if he says she’s there, you can bank on it.”

“Yeah? Ask him where my wife lost her grandmother’s diamond out of the setting?”

Jade looked up at him sideways, said in a soft, lisping whisper, “Light over your hallway. In the cover.”

“Right,” he snorted, then, “How’s he know I have a covered light in the hall?” He picked up the phone, stared at those green eyes as they stared back. He dialed. “Hi, Cappy. Look, do me a favor, will you? Get the ladder, go take off the cover on the hall light and look inside it. No, I didn’t see any flies in there and I know you changed the bulbs four months ago. I’ll wait.”

Ten minutes later, they all heard her shriek, “I found it! Mimi’s stone! I must have hit the setting and knocked it loose!”

He hung up slowly. “AJ, if he’s wrong, I’ll look like a fool.”

“If he’s right, the mayor will owe you big time.”

“Murphy, Sergeant, get my car and we’ll check it out ourselves,” he decided. “Take him with us, AJ.”

“Loo, what if she’s---”

“Keep him in the cruiser. Have paramedics standing by.”

All eyes were on them as the unlikely four descended to the car pool. They found her, buried in the compost pile in the greenhouses of the Horticulture Department. She had been raped and strangled; they managed to keep the sight from the child but he knew the outcome regardless. She must have just been placed there, the paramedics were able to revive her and the mayor met the boy and kept his secret.

### Chapter 3

My dad had retired from SWAT, he'd gotten too old and too slow to continue with the gung-ho group of dudes; had transferred to the detective division of homicide. He had an impressive solve rate and only a few knew I was his secret weapon. Of course, it wasn't so secret, all of the 4-7 knew I could find anything lost and return it to its owner.

I had just turned 15, just had a birthday and been gifted with new clothes, a laptop and a small motor bike. I had to swear I'd wear a brain bucket or Dad would take it back.

What I didn't want on my birthday was the talk my mom and dad gave me. Not that talk. I had never wondered why my eyes were green and not blue like theirs or why my hair was not brown or black, or that I stood a head taller than my Dad did. I had not remembered being found by the team next to my dead mother nor realized I was adopted. It had left me stunned and adrift.

"She said your name. Jadewyn. I looked on the Internet and found nothing, Jade, nor the words you spoke, 'Eleohim Madaras.' The closest I could come was 'Elohim'. God's Angels." He told me how my mother's body had disappeared and some of the answers he'd come up with to explain the oddities about the both of us. There weren't many or believable.

"We didn't tell anyone where or how we got you, Jade. Except for the Team. The guys were there, they know."

"You never tried to track her down or me?"

"We tried. I couldn't find anything on her or you. No DNA, no fingerprints, no missing persons. Your mother's clothes were unique and different. Sarge found a coin under her. We had it appraised. It was gold with a gemstone in the center of it. I thought it was an emerald but the experts said it only looks like one, like the coin looks like gold but is something more, something not of this...world."

"What---you're saying I'm an...alien? Come on, Dad, you know me, raised me for thirteen years. You've seen me bleed red blood, get sick with the flu, break bones. You know I'm just a kid," I protested.

"Jade---your eyes, your hair, and the way you find anything that's lost---it's not...normal."

I stared at him in horror. "Are you afraid of me, Dad?"

He rushed forward and hugged me. "NO! Never that, Jade! I'm afraid for you. If certain people find out about your...trick, they'd steal you away from us. So far, no one but the team knows what you can do and most of the missing people you've found were in my name. They think I have a knack for it...or well-placed CIs."

"You do have an impressive array of snitches, Dad."

"We wanted you, Jade. I wanted you from the second I saw your eyes," he said quietly. "And your mom and I have never regretted it for a minute."

He handed me a coin and I stared at the gold piece in my palm. An emerald the size of a dime gleamed up at me. "It's worth a lot of money, Jade. The stone is three times harder than a diamond; it will cut a diamond or steel. The gold or whatever it is will not burn, melt or scratch. It weighs more than it should and less than it seems. It won't X-ray, bounces light off it and absorbs energy. It glows in the dark and weirder---" He picked it up out of my hand and threw it as hard as he could. My eye tracked its trajectory and saw the thing fly out the window yet when I looked again, my palm stung and it was plainly sitting on my red flesh.

I closed my fingers on it and pressed the stone. Instantly, flares of light escaped from between my clenched hand and sparkled greenly around me to form a column hovering over us. Dad stepped to my shoulder and gripped it as a beautiful woman dressed in a transparent gown

of light stood before us. I was reminded of the princess from Star Wars except that there was no droid, no Han Solo and I wasn't Luke Skywalker.

"That's your mother," my dad said.

"Ya think? It's a hologram," I opened my palm and the thing spoke. In a language I did not understand save for my name. JADEWYN.

"It never did that before," Dad answered my unasked question.

"I have a feeling it only does when I touch it. Do you understand any of the words?"

"No. Smitty is a language buff. He might know," he named one of his old teammates from SWAT.

"I'm going to head downtown to the library, check it out."

"What about the Internet?"

"I don't think it's a good idea. Too many spies cruise the net checking out weird stuff. Nobody goes to the library for research anymore. It's quiet and safe."

"You need a ride? I would prefer you don't take your bike."

"Dad, I'll be careful," I smiled. "I'll wear the brain bucket, I mean helmet. Hey, you've given me a mystery with a lost item I can finally sink my teeth into."

"Yeah? What?"

"Me." I left him there, tucked the coin or whatever it was into my jean pocket. My bike was a small 250cc Vespa but I'd souped it up so it had more than enough kick for my neighborhood. I might not be able to race with the Harleys but I could hold my own with the Hondas and crotch rockets. We did some biking out along the swamp where people dumped garbage.

The library was a branch office in the town where I lived; a massive three-story brick building fashioned in the early 1800s with columns and Federal pergolas, a broad marble colonnade of steps inside. I always wanted to salute and march at attention when I climbed them.

A flag slapped at the pole on my left as a stiff breeze played with it. I heard the metal grommets chime against the aluminum of the forty-foot pole.

The doors pushed open with a slight hiss as if the air inside was not only rarefied but also pressurized and I entered into a world of dreams, fantasies and imagination only as limited as my own.

I hadn't told my Dad the entire truth; I had surfed the Net for info on stuff I wasn't supposed to know about---like the Melissa Rosslyn case 13 years ago and others but I had used the library's computers and not my own. I had an entire Internet identity where I explored strange phenomenon ranging from fish falling out of the sky to Bigfoot roaming the Northwest.

I had been plagued by dreams of the hologram woman and spent the last few months searching for mention of her or the words I had spoken to her years ago. I had not found any news of her death in the papers or in the police reports at my Dad's station house. It was if neither of us existed.

I headed now for the carrels where the public terminals were and had to wait until one was free, swiped my library card and entered the system. My e-mail was filled with 142 unread mails and I deleted all but four. All the others were spam or junk mail offers, the four were from net friends overseas who reported weird sightings for me from their own networks.

SPAWN wrote that he'd lost his virginity and would I please help him find it. I didn't bother to reply other than a generic FU.

*Just found out today I'm adopted. My Dad found me next to my dead mother at a drug dump. Said she blew up like one of those vampire movies---you know---when sunlight hits them.*

*I'm not even legally adopted; he brought me here, kept me. Suppose I should be glad, he kept me from BPS and foster care. He gave me something my real mom had---some kind of weird coin that is a hologram. My mom is on it, she speaks. Says some weird language. Words like Eloahim, Tizmat, and Arytlgeaddon. My name. Any ideas? Arrow.*

I sent it to all my contacts and went back to the research department to pull out several old books on archaic languages. One of them was so old the pages crinkled and I was afraid they might disintegrate with my touch.

Under ancient Hebrew, I found the word 'Elohim' from ancient Sanskrit meaning messengers from the Almighty. It went on to state that the Almighty did not necessarily mean 'God' as in Christian text but a mighty Being that preceded Aramaic Jehovah and was thought to be the beginnings of all creation. Funny, I thought God had created the universe or at least the Big Bang before.

My cell phone was in my pocket, I had put it there on vibrate so no ringing would disturb the sacrosanct silence of the library. When it went off, it startled me and I flipped it open when I saw my Dad's cell number.

"Jade? Where are you?"

I hid in the back of the stacks where no one could hear me. "Library." I looked up. "Research 976.5 through 998.8. 'The Strange Sexual Practices of the Somali Tribe of New Guinea'."

"Ha-ha, Jade. Don't come back here. Go someplace." He hung up and I stared at the phone.

## Chapter 4

Some Place was a cop hangout, a bar that let me in because I was AJ's boy. I parked the bike in the alley by the dumpster and slipped into the back by the delivery entrance. The kitchen was going full tilt, it was Wing Nite and the place was crowded.

"Hey, Jade," Wheeny greeted. He was retired Boston Vice who'd bought the bar and ran it like a deli. "Your dad here for Parmesan Garlic?" Dad was a legend for the number of wings he could put away. I shrugged.

"Sent me a message to meet here."

"What's up?"

"Don't know."

"Grab a plate. Help yourself." He thrust a china plate into my hands and scooped out a sampling of wings, Honey Barbecue, Garlic Parmesan and Buffalo. "Thanks," I found a corner that wasn't underfoot and went to town on the pile until nothing was left but a tower of bones.

Murphy poked his head into the kitchen, saw me and gestured. I followed him out to the taproom and was greeted by his old team.

"Where's Dad?" I looked around. Their faces were flat, grim and my heart sank. "No," I shook my head, denied it. "NO! Where's my dad?"

"You need to come with us, Jade."

"Where? Take me to Dad. Mom?"

"Where have you been, Jade?" Murphy asked me. I turned to him.

"The library. I was at the library. Dad called me, told me to meet him Some Place. I came right away."

"What time did you get to the library?"

"Why? What's this about, Murphy?"

"There's a warrant out for you, Jade. You shot your Mom and Dad and ran."

I fell to the floor, my face white, screamed denials, clawed my way up and tried to run for home. Many hands grabbed me.

“Jade, we know you didn’t do it,” he said urgently. “I need to swab your hands to prove it.”

I held them out. “Test me, polygraph me. I didn’t kill my father or my mother! My library card was swiped at the south side branch. It’s time stamped when I entered and when I left. I can prove I haven’t been home since 7am this morning when I left for school.”

“You need to come with us, Jade. We’ll hide you until we get to the bottom of this.”

“Who says I did it? Who found them?”

“Homicide from the 672. Someone called it in as a domestic disturbance. Anonymous tip.”

“Why me?” Murphy pushed me out the back door surrounded by Dad’s buddies. I felt confused, terrified, and adrift even surrounded by the most macho bunch of dudes with whom I’d ever been.

They hustled me into a dark car crammed with gear and settled around me, took off onto I95 and headed out of town towards the border.

“Where are we going?” I asked trying to make room for my shoulders. I was squished between Murphy, Reilly, Denato and Jalvers were up front, and Pierce was driving.

“Vonage’s cabin in the Berkshires,” Murphy answered.

“Tell me what happened, Murphy.”

He glanced at me and then away. “They sent a black and white. Found your dad with a bullet in the back of his head. Your mom was shot once. In the head, too. Your schoolbooks were on the table with drugs inside. And money. Over \$5000. Implications were you are a dealer, they found out and you shot them.”

“With what?”

“Your dad’s Sig Sauer.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“I know that, Jade. It’s got to be someone with a grudge or---”

“Or what?” I asked.

“Or it’s about what you can do.”

“I’ve been doing it for 13 years, Murphy,” I returned. “Why now?”

“There’s an article in the Times about you, Jade,” said the Sarge, Reilly. “Came out two days ago. Doesn’t mention you by name but it’s got enough detail to mark AJ and you if you dig a little. And someone dug. The FBI had agents at two of the precincts and they sent them to the 4-7, dug through reports and came up with AJ’s name, solve rate, and started asking a round about him and you.”

“About me?”

“Where did you come from? Where were you born? Who knew you before you just appeared at AJ’s,” Murph answered.

“Did you know I was...adopted?”

“We were all there, Jade. We saw your mom. You.”

“What will they do to them, to Mom and Dad?”

“Take them to the morgue, do autopsies, release the bodies for a funeral.”

“I have to see them, to say goodbye, Murphy. I have to be there.”

“They’ll be expecting that.”

“They who? Let me out!” I reached over and tried to open the door but they pulled me back and held me. I tried kicking and screaming yet couldn’t move an inch until finally, one of them put me in a chokehold and held me until I passed out.

I rolled over in a bed that smelled funny. Like it had been stored in a basement---sort of musty and cold. The sheets were flannel with moose on them and matched the bedroom and curtains. The room was done in knotty pine, the furniture rustic, like an old cabin. I saw rifles mounted on the walls out through the open door. Bars closed off the windows, screwed into the wood with lag bolts. I tried to get up and made it as far as my feet on the floor but my shoulders wouldn’t move. I jerked; found my wrist was handcuffed to the headboard.

“Hey! Anybody here? Hello?”

Murphy came around the corner, and stuck his head in the room. He had changed out of his uniform and wore jeans, flannel shirt and down vest. His issue pistol was on his hip. “Sorry about your head. You were hysterical, had to calm you down. How do you feel?”

I jerked the chain. “Let me go.”

“Can’t. Not until you promise not to do anything stupid.”

“Like what?” I said bitterly. “I don’t know where I am or how I got here. I don’t have any money or---” I felt in my pockets but my cell phone was gone, too. “Where is everybody?”

“Dropped the team off when we got to Worcester. Reilly took everyone home but me.”

“My Dad?”

“Cap’n is planning their funeral. He had no other family but you. And us.”

I swallowed. “They still think I did it?”

Slowly, he nodded. “BOLO out for you, warrants and VRT Team. FBI has agents looking for you, too. Guys in suits with sunglasses, blacked out SUVs and shiny badges.”

“Men in black?”

“We used to be the men in black, Jade. Are you hungry? How’s your head?”

I did have a headache and a sore throat. “I’m thirsty. Got anything?” I sat on the edge of the bed and eased the ache in my shoulder.

“Water, soda, Mike’s and beer. I don’t recommend the beer on top of a headache and getting drunk is not a smart option right now.”

“What am I going to do, Murph?”

He hesitated. “First thing, we have to find out why AJ and Franny were killed, Jade and why you were fingered for it.”

“I was at the library, looking up stuff about me on the Internet. Do you think I called them down on mom and dad?”

“No, Jade. You’re not responsible for this. Don’t blame yourself. It was the bastard who leaked the story to the papers.” He walked away, came back with a glass of Coke and two Tylenol. I took them, lay back down on the bed, and wallowed in self-pity.

## *Chapter 5*

He un-cuffed me at suppertime, brought me out to the kitchen and I sat at the table to pick at what was obviously canned chili. “Chili, Murphy? You trying to bomb me out of here?” It was a well-known fact that chili and farts went hand in hand.

“Sorry. Didn’t have time to stock the pantry,” he retorted.

“Couldn’t you go fishing or something?” I noted the fishing poles as well as the hunting rifles.

“This is Vonage’s cabin, Jade. I’ve never been here before. We’re in the Berkshires, place called Cat Mountain. Nearest town is 24 miles away, nearest store is a little convenience

place 12 miles down a trail and dirt road. Only way in is 4 wheel drive and then a two mile hike.”

“Must be fun to get the mail. Where’s the power come from?”

“Kerosene lamps. Wood stove. Gas oven. All carried in. Water comes from a hand pumped well, toilet is an outhouse, and shower is solar heated. No electricity, no cell phone coverage. You’re really roughing it out here.”

“What if one of us gets hurt?”

“Don’t. I have a first aid kit and standard SWAT Medic training.”

“Can I go outside?”

“You’re not a prisoner, Jade. Just don’t get lost. There are thousands of acres out there, wolves, bears, coyotes and mountain lions. Also, cliffs, sinkholes, caves and escarpments.”

“I find lost things, remember?” I said sourly. “I don’t get lost.”

“Yeah? Which way is home?”

I paused, went inside myself to that place where I always knew the answers and direction, pointed southeast towards the string I had put on my dad. It tugged, pulled at me with an urgency I could not resist. I came back and Murphy was staring at my eyes, his hand on my chin.

“Your eyes got huge, Jade. All pupil, big green wolf eyes.”

“Dad’s alive,” I stated. “We have to go back and get him.”

“Are you sure? The Officers who found the bodies said he was shot in the head.”

“It wasn’t him,” I insisted. “Look, there’s a string attached to everything I search for. I can find it, pull it towards me, sense it and follow it anywhere. My Dad’s string is stretched thin but it’s not broken or cut. And I can find them even when they are cut. Dead.”

“Where is he?”

“Far. Far from here.” I reached out my hand and pulled on it, made it jangle. “South. Do you have a map of the South?”

We tore the place apart, found a Rand McNally Atlas and opened it to the Southern part of the country; I put my hand on Washington, DC.

“The Pentagon? He’s in the Pentagon? Who’s after you, Jade?”

“I don’t know. I just know we have to find my Dad.”

“Franny?”

I hesitated, looked for her and found her string frayed and shredded, knew she was gone and where they had taken her body. My eyes filled with tears and I sobbed. “I never got to tell her how much I loved her.”

He held me, let me cry myself out until exhausted, I fell asleep in the armchair in front of the fireplace. He had packed what little was in the cabin; given me clean clothes from the owner’s closet. “Your dad took you for target shooting, right?” He held out a spare pistol and gingerly, I put my hand on it, pushed it back to him.

“No. I’m not taking that, Murphy. Just this.” I dug through my pockets and pulled out the gold coin Dad had given me less than 48 hours ago. His eyes widened.

“I saw that when we found your mother. AJ had it all this time?”

“Yeah. He gave it to me on my B-day. Told me I was adopted. That’s when all this started. After I downloaded an image onto the Net and asked if anyone knew what it was.”

“Let’s go. We have a hike to the SUV.” He was silent on the trek back. Bugs ate me as if I was sugar. I spent so much time and energy swatting at flies, mosquitoes and gnats that I was covered in blood and that brought more. I had tried to cover myself with bug spray yet the critters ignored it. Not a one bit Murphy.

Once at the SUV, I climbed in, shut the windows and wiped blood and bug guts off me. The itching started and drove me insane until he pulled over and dug through his med kit to give me a shot of Benadryl. That knocked me loopy.

I didn't wake up until we reached Jersey and the shore. Murphy pulled into a motel and shook me awake. "Jade, wake up. I'm tired, can't drive anymore. We need to get a room and sleep."

"I can drive."

"Yeah, let a 15 year old loose behind the wheel on the most deadly road in the nation. I don't think so."

"You got cash? They can track your credit card," I said and he rolled his eyes.

"I've seen CSI, too, Jade. The Sarge gave me cash. From the ER fund."

The ER fund was a legendary stash set aside in case a cop needed a million dollar lawyer or escape. The legend was that it was a million, it was actually closer to two, stocked by contributions from drug busts, illegal gambling and pay offs.

"You get rid of your cell phone, too?"

He nodded. "I can't take you any further. I have to go home or my wife will make waves. I was only on for two days."

"Who will take me next?"

"I called a buddy of mine from the 227 out of Atlantic City. He owes me a favor. He'll take you as far as DC."

"And the Pentagon?"

"I don't know, Jade. I have no idea how you will get to your dad. You got any other secret talents I don't know about?"

"No, Murphy. I wish I did. I wish I could just blink my eyes and be standing next to my Dad so I could whisk him away." Of course, that didn't happen.

He got us a room in the back near the beach where I could look out the window and see the breakers come in. The Taj Mahal was to the right, glittering like an exotic candle against the night sky. Fireworks went off behind it, celebrating another big winner.

I got the shower first and stood under it until my skin wrinkled, came out in clean underwear and jeans. Murphy padded in naked and actually sang in the shower. Old rock songs. He'd ordered room service and the knock came while he was still in there.

I let the dude in; paid him with the fifty he'd left on the counter and poked through the dishes.

He'd ordered a Philly cheese steak, pot roast with carrots, mashed potatoes, French fries and a basket of rolls with butter. I ate my way through it and when he finally came out, he stared at the remains of the meal. "Hungry?"

"Well, yeah. What did you order?"

He grunted, picked up the phone and ordered two specials. "I forgot how much teenage boys eat," he muttered.

I opened the door to the knock and flew backwards onto my ass when the waiter pushed the cart inside. Murphy came over to pick me up and froze as two men shoved us both back with silenced pistols.

They were short men, squat built like apes with over-muscled shoulders and biceps, dressed in dark suits. Their features were smooth, clean cut with dark hair and brown eyes with a blue flare deep in the backs. They moved like professionals, gestured for Murphy to back up and the other rammed me beyond the door with his feet. He slammed it shut behind us, pulled out

manacles and fastened them around Murphy's wrists. He raised the pistol to the level of his head and I screamed, kicked up and in my hand was the coin. I squeezed the gem and a beam pulsed out, curled around in an impossible arc and struck the two men.

They melted. Left puddles of greasy soot on the carpet and a smell not unlike ozone.

"Holy shit," Murphy said and I vomited up my dinner. That smell was almost worse than theirs was. "Jade, look in my belt. Find my handcuff key. Maybe it'll work on these. Time to get sick later. They won't have been alone, others will be with them."

I wiped my mouth and dug through his clothes, found his set of cuffs and the keys. It worked on the manacles around his wrists. He didn't waste any time but pulled on his clothes. Five minutes later, we were sneaking for the car.

He checked the hood, underneath and back seat before he let me get in or start it. Once on the road, I asked him what he'd been looking for.

"Bombs. Bugs. They had time to do both. Somehow, they tracked us." He was grim.

"They who? Who were those dudes?"

"I don't know, Jade. They didn't identify themselves and you destroyed all the evidence. I would have liked to search them."

"He was going to shoot you in the head, Murphy. Next time, I'll let you go first."

"I know. Thanks. For saving my life. How's your stomach?"

I swallowed bile, wiped my mouth. "I think it'll stay down where it belongs."

He floored the car and we merged into traffic. The lights on the highway were glowing beacons that made a distracting necklace before my eyes; I was glad I wasn't driving.

"Where are we headed? Will your friend find us? Did you call him?"

"I made arrangements to meet somewhere else if something happened. He's undercover, he knows how to keep a low profile, hide."

I sensed a new undercurrent in him and in his grim profile, deciphered it to ask with sudden enlightenment, "Murphy, are you scared of me?"

"Of what you can do, Jade," he returned, sliding the car around a corner onto an exit ramp. I saw lights behind us but so many it was hard to spot any one particular vehicle. It was a busy highway on a weekend night in the gambling capitol of the East Coast.

"You saved my life, Jade. It's how you did it that scares me. What was that?"

I shrugged. "How the hell do I know?"

"Can you still feel your dad's string?"

"Yes. He's in one spot. In a building underground."

"In DC? The Pentagon?" He accelerated onto another interchange and set the cruise at 70 mph.

"Murph, you need to go home. Before they know you're gone. To your wife and kids."

"I will. Once I get you safe, Jade. I owe AJ that. Besides, we were partners. I have to help him." He was silent the rest of the drive.

## Chapter 6

We stopped just across the border for breakfast at a McDonald's in a neighborhood that wasn't the best. Over a few blocks, I could see tall grim apartments and Murphy told me they were Projects built in the 60's so lower income could have places of their own. Now, they were filled with drug dealers and gang members and people too poor or afraid to leave.

I sat in the dining area, held my cup of hot cocoa between two palms, and did something I rarely liked to try. I searched for Murphy's string and gently tugged it, untangled it from the billions of others out there and ran it between my teeth. Something about its flavor told me

things, made pictures came into my head and let me see where it stretched. Its flavor was dark and bloody, the images sadistic. I spit it out to find Murphy smacking me on the back and alarmed people standing around us.

“Jesus, Jade,” he snarled. “You turned red, white and blue! You were choking to death! Are you okay?” He held my cup in one hand; the other was holding the back of my jacket. I wheezed and took a deep breath, gagged at cloying chocolate in my mouth and spat.

“Swallowed wrong,” I managed and the crowd sat back down staring at me. I looked for the rest rooms.

“What happened?” Murphy asked. “Too hot?”

“Need to go to the bathroom.” I stood up, wobbled and he held me steady until I managed a credible walk. I went into the family restroom where I could lock the door and be the only one inside. I stared into the mirror and saw my face, white, green eyes huge with unshed tears, and my mouth trembling. I wiped at the wetness, took several deep breaths and put the images of Murphy’s tortured broken body in the corner of my brain where I locked up all the bad memories or I would pick at them constantly like a scabbed sore.

I opened the door slowly, saw him at the table nursing his second cup and waited until Murphy’s attention was diverted by the manager. She bent over him in an animated conversation and I was able to slip out the rear door into the streets. Five minutes saw me deep into a neighborhood of concrete buildings; businesses boarded up and abandoned houses. I kept to the dark side of the sidewalks out of sight with my hand on Dad’s strings.

Walking for hours put me on service roads towards DC. I had no need of a map, merely followed the insistent tug in my hand. It became automatic to put one foot in front of the other. I used my knowledge of the strings to pick out places and people who would help me. Hitch hiking is safe when you know the lifeline of the person in your hands.

I reached DC at early morn, just as twilight faded. The sunrise over the Capitol building was impressive and bathed the dome in gold as the sun burned through the clouds. I could feel the humidity building, it was going to be a lot warmer here than in Boston.

Tourists were already gathering in crowds at the gates, the Washington monument stretched out green and peaceful with only a few bodies parked on the close cut velvet lawns.

I stared at Lincoln’s calm face and wished I could have read his string while he was alive. I could almost find and track the lost trace of it; I found some residue of him still out there in his lines of descendants.

I stood across the street from the J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building and gripped my Dad’s string tightly. He was inside and almost close enough to touch. If I could get inside.

I watched as agents arrived and entered the building using cards and a key punch. There was an entrance for visitors and I saw only a few people go that way through a set of metal detectors and a human guard who checked IDs and issued visitor passes.

Then, a tour bus with a group of high school kids pulled up and unloaded. I slipped into the back of their group, bumping a couple who gave me a curious glance but didn’t say anything.

The teachers were both women, one was a blonde with blue eyes in a neat pantsuit and looked like an agent, the other was an older woman who grumbled and carped at the kids constantly. Her hair was an improbable red and she wore fake lashes that looked like bugs crawling over her face. She held a clipboard with wrinkled papers and a cup of McDonald’s coffee.

“Alright, class,” she hollered. “One at a time through the metal detector.”

Of course, they set off the alarms with watches, belt buckles, backpacks, lunch boxes, pocketknives, flashlights and keys until they simply waved us all through.

“How many are you?” the guard asked handing out passes.

“Fifty-three,” she said looking at her list. He handed over the badges and she passed them out. I stood in line with my palm up and she gave me one without even looking at my face.

We marched en mass through the building escorted by Special Agents from their Public Information Department. They showed us the forensic labs, the VICAP in Behavioral Sciences Department amid jokes about Hannibal Lector and Clarisse Starling, the X-Files and Fox Mulder. The agents answered all the questions genially and teased back about the shows. I stayed with the group until we were taken to the cafeteria and treated to lunch.

I slipped out and took the fire stairs up to the fifth floor and rows of offices. The corridors were narrow; white walls with doors every few feet. I knew it was an inner hallway and none of these rooms would have windows.

I opened the ninth door on the left, no different looking than any of the others save that my dad’s string ended in there. I stuck my foot into the jamb and shoved the wad of napkin I’d kept from the lunchroom into the bolthole so it could not lock behind me.

AJ looked up from the table and his jaw dropped. He was alone but handcuffed to a bar on the wall. He wore a jumpsuit in orange and slim sneakers. He had a black eye.

I pulled out the cuff key I’d kept from Murphy and unlocked him, told him to strip and handed him the backpack with spare clothes.

“These are Murphy’s,” he said pulling on the chinos.

“Hurry, Dad. We have 21/2 minutes before this falls apart.”

“Where’s Murph? The guys with you?”

“Murph’s in Abbotsville, looking for me. I ditched him at the MickeyD’s.” I held the door open, stuffed the orange jumpsuit in the pack and walked out first. I gave him the visitor pass I’d swiped from another student.

We headed for the end of the corridor, turned left and I found the elevators. I ignored the cameras that I knew were tracking us, I could do nothing about them, just hoped that the watchers had gone out for a pee break or turned their head away to sneeze.

The elevator dinged open on the lobby and we walked quickly across the Great Seal, handed over our passes and were out the doors before the guard’s yells reached us. Somebody had finally noticed our passes had said Otter Valley High School Students and were both female names. I’d gambled that no one really looked at badge photos and been right. Dad grabbed me and ran across the street for the nearest underground station.

## Chapter 7

We rode the subway through the Capitol, didn’t get out until we had ridden it the entire loop. “Dad, they said you were dead. You and mom. Shot in the head. Said I did it. What happened? Who took you? “

“Franny’s dead?”

“Oh God, Dad!” I cried. “I thought you knew!”

“Tell me,” he said quietly, his voice tightly controlled but full of rage.

“Murphy said an anonymous tip came about a domestic disturbance and shots fired. Detectives found you and Mom dead, shot in the head; me missing, my books loaded with drugs and money. Your Sig Sauer missing.”

“Anyone who knows you knows you’ve never touched one of my guns. Not since I took you to the range that time. You never did tell me why you gave it up, you were damn good.”

“The strings tangled,” I muttered.

“The what?”

“Don’t ask, Dad. Just saw that if I kept practicing, something bad was going to happen.”

“I called you from the corner, saw some strange guys cruising near the house, and got a bad feeling. I called Murph, told him to pick you up at Some Place. When I drove back to the house, there were blacked out SUVs all over the place. BOLOS out for you. I was rear ended by some big beefy dude in sunglasses and whacked my head on the steering wheel. Was knocked out. Came to in some dingy cell in a government basement.”

“That was the Pentagon.”

“The---,” he stopped. “They kept asking me where you were. I was hooded and carted away. Don’t remember anything else until I woke up handcuffed to that bar in the interrogation room.”

“Are those dudes FBI, Dad?” I asked and he shook his head.

“They might be in the same building but they’re something more powerful and clandestine. I think NSA or DIA. Or worse, BlackOps.”

“What are we gonna do, Dad?”

“Get you someplace safe, first thing.”

“Yeah? Where’s that? The moon?” I retorted.

“You got a cell phone on you?”

“No. You know they can track you by cell phone towers?”

“Yes, Jade. I know that. We have to call somebody. We need a ride out of here.”

“Uh, Dad,” I said hesitantly. “I can hot wire a car.”

“Yeah? Where did you learn that little trick?”

“From Reilly.”

“Great. My Sergeant is teaching my son to be a criminal. So what did you have in mind?”

“First, we have to get off this train. Pick a station where there are many parked vehicles and no closed circuit TVs. Some of the older overhead garages are ideal places.”

“I can see I’m going to have to inspect your next year curriculum,” he said sourly. “Next stop is East DC. I don’t recommend that area because it’s a bad neighborhood. Lots of drive-by shootings and drug traffic.”

“What, you want Annapolis? By now, they must know you’re gone and the cops, the FBI will be scrambling to find you.”

“How did you get in the Hoover building, anyway?” He stood up and walked to the doors, hanging on to the strap as the train rocketed along.

We weren’t the only ones on; the seats were relatively empty but started filling up the closer into downtown we rode. “This next stop coming up is good.”

“How do you know?” he was curious.

“I can see our strings. Both of them continue on without tangles or tension,” I explained. I held onto him as the train lurched to a stop and the pneumatic doors opened.

“Jade, you are one weird boy,” he shook his head and stepped out onto the platform. We mingled with a few people, mostly professional types dressed in suits and nice clothes. No hipsters, gang bangers or t-shirt wearers. We caught a few stares but were clean enough that no one seemed overly curious.

The climb up onto the main street was an exercise in patience. I wanted to race up them yet my feet plodded like an old man’s. Dad took two steps to my one and waited for me with a frown. “You okay, Jeddy?”

I reached the top step and nodded. “Yeah. Tired. Really tired,” I paused. “Dad, I killed a couple of dudes yesterday. With the coin.”

His lips thinned. “I’m not surprised. Don’t let it bother you. I suspect they’ll do worse if they catch us. Come on. We need to get a vehicle and get out of here.

## Chapter 8

I found us a non-descript Taurus parked in the street beneath the overhead parking garage. It happened to have the window cracked enough for me to stick my hand inside and pop the lock. It took me about 15 seconds to hot wire it and shut off the alarm. Dad told me to push over and he took the wheel. We were halfway down the street when I popped the glove box and rummaged through the papers inside.

“Uh oh,” I swallowed and he glanced over at me before he searched for the Interstate signs.

“Uh oh what?”

“We just stole a senior FBI agent’s car. His personal car.”

“Great. It’ll be reported stolen as soon as he goes home.”

“Well, they do work 9-5 unlike you guys. That means it probably has a lojack on it. We’ll have to ditch it as soon as we can.”

“Any ideas?”

These streets were narrow and full of potholes, he kept turning left and I could see the Federal building complex to our right with huge parking lots of vehicle after vehicle.

“We could always steal one of those,” I pointed.

“Yeah, sure. With our luck, we’d take the VP’s.”

“Is he here?” I perked up. “I always wanted to meet the President or the VP. Be a great term paper. How I was a teenage felon and wanted by the FBI.”

He smacked me on the back of the head. “Jade, you’re an ass. Look for the I80 signs. We need to get out of the city.”

“Tell me where you want to go and I’ll do my thing.”

“Your mom’s aunt had a cabin down in Tennessee, in the Cumberland Gap. We can hide there,” he decided. “No one’s been there in twenty years.”

“Is it still standing?” I was skeptical.

“It was two years ago when the guys went hunting on it, still usable then.”

I heard the blare of horns and something hit us from the rear. My neck snapped and I flew forward into the passenger door as a big black SUV rammed us again.

Dad tried to steer out of it but he wasn’t wearing his seat belt and the force knocked him into me, squashing me against the door. I felt my ribs protest, felt a crushing, snapping sensation and all the air rushed out of me. Black spots filled my vision, my head smacked into the glass and abruptly, we were rolling around and around inside the car.

I heard finally, the drip, drip, drip of some kind of liquid and it was hitting me in the forehead and sliding down my eyes and nose. I found it difficult to breathe. I tried to move and nothing worked except for my right hand. I pushed against something soft and mushy, felt warm sticky stuff, and smelled that unique coppery odor that told me I was in blood and tasting it in my mouth. I swallowed and more came, making me gag and that scared me.

“Dad?” I wheezed. Everything took on an unreal quality as if I was experiencing everything through a sheet of plastic and slowed down to 33 rpm when it should have been 78. Faces shoved their way into the windows. I thought they were upside down until I realized I was upside down.

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