

Previously. . .

I was lying on something cold and wet, and I was naked and shivering. Afraid. Something was very, very wrong with me.

I reflexively curled in on myself, protecting as much of my body as I could, as awareness of the world washed over me in hot, pulsing waves.

Biting, frigid wind. Ice-cold sleet trailing languid fingers over my bare skin. I forced my eyes open and saw my arm lying on the ground in front of me, hand outstretched, and my skin was a pallid, blue-tinged white, red at the fingertips. Frostbite.

I ached all over, so fiercely that I felt tears well up in my eyes. And I felt *empty*, cored and thrown out like an old orange peel.

I forced myself to look beyond my own hand and saw that I was lying in a mound of cold, slimy leaf litter. Overhead, bare trees swayed and scratched the sky, and what little could be seen between the skeletal branches was grey, flocked with low clouds. The air tasted thin in my mouth.

I tried to think where I was, how I'd got here, but it was a blank. Worse, it terrified me to even try to think of it. I shuddered with more than the cold, gasping, and squeezed my eyes shut again.

Get up, I told myself. *Up*. I'd die if I stayed here, naked and freezing. But when I tried to uncurl myself from the embryonic position I'd assumed, I couldn't get anything to work right. My muscles jittered and spasmed and protested wildly, and the best I managed was to roll myself up to my hands and knees and not quite fall flat on my face again.

I heard a voice yelling somewhere off in the woods. Sticks cracking as something large moved through the underbrush. *Run!* something told me, and I was immediately drenched in cold terror. I lunged up to my feet, biting back a shriek of agony as muscles trembled and threatened to tear. I fell against the rough bark of a tree and clung to it as cramps rippled through my back and legs, like giant hands giving me the worst massage in the world. I saw sparks and stars, bit my lip until I tasted blood. My hair was blowing wildly in the wind where it wasn't stuck to my damp, cold skin or matted with mud and leaves.

I let go of the tree and lurched away. My legs didn't want to move, but I forced them, one step at a time. My arms were wrapped around my breasts to preserve a warmth that I couldn't find, either within me or without.

My feet were too cold to feel pain, but when I looked back I saw I was leaving smears of blood behind on the fallen leaves. Cuts had already opened on the soles.

I kept moving. It was more of a lurching not-quite-falling than running, but I was too frightened to wait for any kind of improvement. Had to keep going.

More shouting behind me. Voices, more than one. The hammer of blood in my ears kept me from focusing on the words. *Someone did this to me*, I thought. *Put me out here to die*. I didn't want them to find that they'd failed.

Not that they really *had* failed, yet.

Up ahead was a tangle of underbrush. My body was already covered with whip scratches and a lacework of blood against cold white skin. I needed a way around... I turned right, holding to a massive tree trunk for support, and clambered up a short rise.

Just as I reached the summit, a shadow appeared at the top of it. I gasped and started to fall backward, but the shadow reached down and grabbed my forearm, pulling me up the rest of the way and then wrapping me in sudden warmth as his arms closed around me.

I fought, startled and scared, but he was a big man, tall, and he managed to pin my arms to my sides in a bear hug. 'Jo!' he shouted in my ear.

‘Joanne, stop! It’s me! It’s Lewis!’

He smelt like wood smoke and sweat, leaves and nylon, but he was warm, oh, God, warm as heaven itself, and against my own will I felt myself go limp and stop fighting. For the moment.

‘Jo?’ He slowly let his arms loosen and pulled back to look down at me. He was taller than I was by half a head, with shaggy-cut brown hair and a long patrician face with big, dark eyes. A three-day growth of beard was coming in heavy on his cheeks and chin. ‘We’ve been looking for you for days. Are you—’ He stopped himself with an impatient shake of his head. ‘Never mind, stupid question. Obviously you’re not OK or you’d have contacted us. Listen, we’re in trouble. Bad trouble. We need you. Things have gone wrong.’

I realised, with a terrible sinking feeling, that I had no idea who he was. And then the sinking turned to free fall.

He must have known something was wrong, because he frowned at me and passed his hand in front of my eyes. ‘Jo? Are you listening to me?’

I had no idea who I was.

Chapter One

There were worse things than being naked, freezing, and alone in a forest. For instance, there was being naked, freezing, not alone, and not sure of who the hell you were. And having people depending on you.

That was worse.

Lewis – the man who'd found me, the tall, ragged-looking specimen with the cheekbones – had put my silence down to shock, which was probably not far from the truth. When I just clung to him, shivering in the frigid wind, he finally stripped off his down jacket and draped it over my shoulders. I watched him, shivering and numb, clutching the down coat hard around me. It smelt of dirt and feathers and sweat.

'Say something,' he commanded. I didn't. I couldn't. All I could do was shake. What was that in his eyes? Anguish? Fury? Love? Hate? I had no frame of reference for him, or for what he was feeling. 'Jo, how'd you get here? Where have you been?'

Jo. I waited for some kind of internal recognition, some circuit to activate. I waited for some confirmation that Jo was my name.

Nothing.

When I kept silent, he finally shook his head and glanced around, then gathered up the backpack he'd dropped on the ground. 'Come with me.' I had no reason to, but I was too cold and too weak. Lewis steered me down the gentler slope of the far side of the hill, into a small clearing. Overhead it looked like twilight, everything masked into smooth grey cotton by low-hanging clouds. *Virga* draped from them, veiling the treetops. 'Sit,' he ordered, and I collapsed onto the cold ground in a huddle. I'd lost too much body heat; the coat couldn't warm me. Lewis turned away and grabbed handfuls of fallen wet wood from the underbrush – good-sized logs, some of them – and began putting together the makings of a fire. Within five minutes he had cleared a space, dug down to the dirt, created a fire pit, and ringed it with rough stones.

It wouldn't matter. The wood was way too wet to burn.

Lewis settled down next to the non-starting fire, glanced at me, and extended a hand, palm out, towards the inert pile of soaked wood.

It burst into immediate hot flame.

I jerked backward, startled, blinking in the sudden dazzle of light, and looked at him. He didn't

seem to find anything odd about what had just happened; in fact, he barely paused before he began digging in his pack. He pulled out a rolled-up pair of blue jeans and a denim shirt. Thick thermal socks.

I started to edge away from him as discreetly as possible.

‘Foot,’ he said, and held out his hand. When I didn’t move, he sighed. ‘Jo, for God’s sake, unless you want to lose some toes, let me help you.’ I slowly extended my bare left foot. His large, long, blissfully hot fingers wrapped around my ankle and propped it on his knee. He frowned disapprovingly at the cuts on my foot. ‘What the hell happened to you?’ It was just a murmur and, by this time, obviously a rhetorical question. He was very intent on the cuts, not my face. ‘OK, these are mostly superficial, but it’s going to hurt like hell later if I don’t do something about it. So please hold still.’

I expected him to reach for the first-aid kit I could see in the neatly organised backpack. Instead, he cupped my foot in both hands, and I felt a sudden pulsing warmth go through me, followed by a dull, shearing pain. In a second or two, the pain subsided and faded altogether. My foot felt deliciously warm. Tingling.

He let go and tugged one of the thermal socks on and up to my ankle, sealing in the warmth. I wanted to be grateful, but the truth was, I was scared. I didn’t know this guy, although he claimed

to know me, and he could start fires just by snapping his fingers. Not to mention whatever he'd done to my foot, which felt really good now, but clearly wasn't *natural*.

'Next,' he said, and held out his hands again. I hesitated, then gave him the right foot. I'd need those cuts sealed up if I had to make a run for it.

Maybe he's the one. The one who kidnapped you and knocked you over the head and dumped you out here to die. Maybe, but in that case, why was he doing magical first aid? He could have just let me go. I'd have died out here without help.

Wouldn't I?

When the right foot was healed and thermal-socked, he put the blue jeans and shirt on the ground between us, and looked up into my face.

I waited for some memory to make it past the big black wall. Anything. His name was Lewis; he acted like he knew me; I *should* know him.

I didn't.

He must have taken my long stare for something else, because he shrugged. 'Sorry. I don't know where he is.'

He? There was another one? I looked down, trying not to show how tentative I was. How confused and scared.

'Jo?' He sounded grim. 'Whoever took you... did they... Ah, dammit. I'm just going to ask it, all right? Were you raped?'

Had I been? The word made me feel sick and dizzy, and I had no idea how to reply. I didn't remember my clothes coming off. I must have fought, right? I must have tried to get away. I wouldn't have just ended up out here, naked and dying in the cold, without some kind of a reason.

Abducted and raped and left for dead. I tried it on as an explanation for the panic I felt inside, but it didn't feel right.

He was waiting for an answer. I didn't look up at him. 'I don't... I don't know.' My voice sounded shockingly cracked and small. 'I can't remember,' I whispered. 'Can't remember anything.' Tears suddenly boiled up hot in my eyes, and I couldn't get words out past the constriction in my throat. The panic hammering in my chest.

Abducted and raped and left for dead. Maybe it was true. Maybe it was just one of those sad stories that filled the daily newspapers and got the TV news industry good nightly ratings.

I felt so cold. If I kept shaking like this, pieces were going to start flying off.

'Ah, God, Jo. You're in shock,' he said. 'Look, I'm going to touch you, all right? We need to get these cuts closed up and this frostbite taken care of, and I can tell if there's...anything else wrong. Just...hold on. Don't fight me.' He reached out very carefully.

I flinched. I couldn't help it. I got hold of myself

somehow, and held still as his hands closed around both of mine. He moved to get on one knee in front of me.

‘I have to... I have to get closer,’ he said. ‘I need you to lie down.’

Lie down. Lie down on this freezing ground.

Lie down, at his mercy.

Not easy. Not at all. I kept telling myself that if he could heal me – however he was doing it – then I should let him. I needed to be healthy. I needed to be able to run.

I slowly let myself sink back, holding on to his hands, until I was flat on my back. The coat didn’t go very far down. The backs of my thighs felt instantly ice-cold in contact with the damp leaves, and although the fire was casting some warmth, I could barely feel it. My shaking was getting worse, not better.

‘Easy,’ he murmured, as if I were some wild thing he was out to tame. ‘Try to relax.’

Yeah, sure. Relax. I couldn’t watch what he was doing, and the darkness behind my eyelids was too frightening, too much of a reminder of everything I’d already lost. I looked up instead, at the clouds, and saw a ghost image of a vast wind flowing like a river, separated into layers. Every little eddy and swirl was suddenly visible to me. I stared, puzzled, entranced, and then gasped as I felt Lewis start in on me.

It *hurt*. Live-wire-on-the-tongue kind of hurt, every nerve in my body sensitising and responding and burning, and I made a moan of protest and tried to yank free, but he held on, leaning closer, on his knees in front of me with his head bent. It looked like prayer. It felt like torture.

Oh, God... He was inside of me. Not in a sexual way, although there was something in it that resonated along those nerves, inside those aching spaces; no, this was more invasive than that. I could feel him moving through every part of me, climbing the ladders of my nerve endings, searching...

Out. Get out! I was aware that I was panting, groaning, and trying to pull my hands free of his. *LET GO OF ME!* I was screaming it inside as I writhed on the ground, squirming, trying to suppress the terrible feelings welling up inside of me.

I got my wish with a vengeance as a pair of hands grabbed his shoulders and *threw* Lewis across the clearing to smash against a tree trunk. Lewis yelled and flopped, rolled over and came to his hands and knees, then slammed facedown into the leaves before getting up again, more slowly. His face was dirty grey with shock and rage.

‘You asshole,’ Lewis said shakily. ‘I was trying to help her.’

I looked up at my rescuer.

For a moment my mind just didn’t want to

acknowledge what it was seeing, because...he wasn't human. No man had skin like that, like living metal – flickering copper and bronze, cooling into something that was more like flesh, but still too burnished for anything outside of a special effect. His hair was longish, like Lewis's, a barely subdued blazing auburn. Although he was dressed like a regular guy, in blue jeans and a checked shirt, I had no sense of him being anything like normal.

His eyes were *illuminated*. Backlit, the way a cat's can seem in beamed light. A rich, scary colour like melting pennies.

He was staring straight down at me, riveted.

Expressionless.

Lewis spat blood and climbed painfully to his feet. 'Make up your mind, David. Do you want her to freeze to death? Or can I get back to healing her?'

David – should I know the name? Or was he a complete stranger? I couldn't tell, because he had absolutely no clues in his expression, in those crazy inhuman eyes, or in the tense, still set of his body.

Lewis must have taken his silence for assent, because he was coming back. He elbowed David aside and reached for my hands again. I yanked them free.

'No!'

'Don't be stupid. You've got frostbite. I'm restoring circulation.' Lewis made a frustrated

sound and grabbed my wrists, hard, when I tried to pull away again. ‘Dammit, quit fighting me!’

‘Let her go,’ David said very quietly. ‘She doesn’t recognise you. She doesn’t understand.’

‘What?’

‘I can’t see her,’ he said. ‘She’s not on the aetheric.’

Lewis frowned at him and rocked back on his heels. ‘That’s impossible.’

‘Look.’

Lewis turned the frown towards me, and his eyes unfocused. For a long few seconds, nothing happened, and then a very odd expression overtook his irritation, smoothed it out, and made it into a blank mask.

‘Oh, shit,’ he breathed. ‘What the hell...?’

‘I can’t see her past,’ David said. Which made no sense to me at all, but then, this was making less sense as it went along. ‘Someone’s taken it from her.’

‘How is that even possible?’

‘It isn’t.’ Suddenly David crouched down, startlingly graceful about it, and stared into my eyes. ‘Joanne. Do you know me?’

I recoiled from him, crab-walking backward. Answer enough. For a long moment he didn’t move again, and then he smoothly got back to his feet and stepped away. He crossed his arms across his chest and bowed his head, relieving me of the

pressure of that stare, at least for a little while.

‘Who *are* you people?’ I blurted. ‘He’s got some kind of superpowers. And I don’t know what the hell *you* are!’ I pointed shakily at Lewis and then at David. I’d got farther from the fire, and I could already feel the chill biting hard on my exposed skin. ‘No! Don’t touch me!’

Lewis had started moving after me. He stopped, frowning again. ‘What are you going to do?’ he asked in a voice that sounded way too reasonable. ‘Run around in socks and a coat in an ice storm? It’s suicide. Let us help you.’

‘Why? Why should I believe you?’

‘Because you’ll die without us,’ David said. He hadn’t looked up. ‘We’ve been out here looking for you for days without rest.’ He slowly raised his head, and I saw something that rocked me back as if he’d pushed me: tears. Very human tears, in those not-human eyes. ‘Because we love you. Please.’

This time, when David came towards me, I forced myself to hold still for it. I still felt that nearly uncontrollable urge to run, to hide, and I couldn’t stop the way I flinched when he slid his arms under my shoulder blades and my knees. Unlike Lewis, he didn’t smell like a guy who’d been living rough. He smelt like fresh wind and sunlight and rain, and against my will I buried my face in the hollow where his neck flowed into strong shoulders. He felt solid and real, and he picked me

up as if I weighed less than an empty plastic bottle. Heat cascaded out of him, crashed into me, flooded me in a drunken tsunami of warmth. Oh, so good. I clung to him, my hands fisted in the fabric of his shirt, and shuddered in sheer animal pleasure.

‘I’m going to need to touch you,’ Lewis said. I glanced up into David’s face.

‘I’ll hold you,’ he said. ‘I won’t let go.’

I nodded. Lewis’s hands pressed against me, palms flat, this time against my shoulders, and jolts of electric fire began to flood through me. I might have resisted, but if I did, David was more than enough to keep me still.

When it was over, I felt nerves still firing in white-hot jerks, but as it passed a sense of numbing exhaustion took over, and I felt myself going limp.

‘That’ll do it,’ I heard Lewis say in carefully colourless tones. ‘Better get her dressed. It’s going to get colder out here tonight, and she’s still very weak.’

David’s voice seemed to be moving away from me, growing thinner and fainter. ‘Wait. What did you find?’

‘Nothing,’ came Lewis’s faint, smeared whisper. ‘Apart from nearly freezing to death, there’s nothing wrong with her. Physically, anyway.’

‘Then what happened?’ David’s question came as a ghost, lost in darkness, and then I was gone.

I didn't sleep for long, but when I woke up, I was dressed – blue jeans and a denim shirt over a thermal tee – and wrapped up in a sleeping bag next to the fire. I tried to figure out which one of them might have taken the liberty, but soon gave up. Either way, it was a deeply unsettling question.

'I can carry her,' David's low voice was saying from somewhere on the other side of the crackling fire. Night had fallen, and with it an absolutely deathly chill. Even in the sleeping bag, fully clothed, I could feel it nipping at me. 'I don't like keeping her out here longer than necessary.'

'I know,' Lewis replied. He sounded agitated. Exasperated. 'Dammit, I know! But it's more than a day's hike to the closest rendezvous point, and no matter what I do, the temperature just keeps falling. You think she's strong enough to make the trip? Like this?'

'She won't be any stronger tomorrow.'

'OK, I give. It's not just her I'm worried about. If I don't get some sleep, I could collapse on you, too.'

'You think I couldn't carry you both?' David asked. He sounded amused. 'All the way back, if necessary?'

'I'm pretty sure you could, but my pride's already taking a serious beating, and you know I love you, man, but I'm not ready for us to be quite that close.' Lewis's voice was as dry as old paper. 'And besides, if I start losing it, we start losing the

weather. If you start messing with things, they'll find you, and us, and her.'

'Ah.' Evidently a convincing argument.

'I'll put up the tent,' Lewis said. 'Won't take long.'

I peered out from under half-closed eyelids and saw David walking towards me around the fire. Something different about him now – oh, he was wearing a coat. Not a modern hiking accessory; this one was a long olive-drab affair, like something out of the First World War, and it came down almost to his boots. He looked antique. Out of place.

Beautiful.

He noticed me. 'You're awake,' he said, and crouched down beside me. 'Thirsty?'

I nodded and pushed myself up on my elbows. He unscrewed a plastic bottle and handed it over. I guzzled cool, sterile water, almost moaning with ecstasy as the moisture flooded into me. I had no idea how long I'd been without a drink. Too long.

He leant forward to move hair back from my face, and I instinctively jerked back, putting air between us. He froze. *Oh, God*, I thought. *We're lovers*. There was no other explanation for the ease of his gesture, and the look on his face, as if I'd stuck a knife in his guts and broken it off. The expression came and went in a flicker, and then he was back to safely neutral.

I took another long drink to cover my confusion, to give myself time to breathe. Lewis glanced over his shoulder at us, and I wondered what the hell the dynamics were of this life I couldn't remember. David was – I was almost certain – my lover. And he wasn't human. Lewis was human, but not my lover – at least, I didn't think he was.

Not that Lewis was exactly the normal choice of the two. He could start fires with a snap of his fingers. And heal people. Whatever it was I couldn't remember about my life, it definitely wasn't what you could ever call boring.

David wasn't much for small talk, it appeared, which was a very good thing, given how confused I felt. He handed over a couple of trail bars, packed with sugar and protein, and I hungrily wolfed them down. Nearly dying takes a lot out of you. Eating served another purpose: It kept me from having to talk. I had a ton of questions, but I wasn't sure I was ready for any of the answers.

Lewis had the tent up in record time. Outdoorsy, clearly, though I guess I should have known that from his battered hiking boots and easy confidence and the neat, meticulously packed bag he was toting around. It wasn't a very big tent, barely large enough for two sleeping bags. We were all going to get very friendly.

At Lewis's orders, I clambered out of my warm nest, dragging my sleeping bag with me, and settled

in. Claustrophobic, but at least it would be warm. I turned on my side and listened to the other two, who were still outside. Their fire-cast silhouettes flickered ghostly against the dark blue fabric of the tent.

‘I have some MREs. Maximum calorie concentration,’ Lewis said. ‘So...does she like Stroganoff or meat loaf?’ He was deliberately casual, but he sounded really, really tired.

‘Ask her,’ David said. ‘But I doubt she’d have any idea. She remembers what they *are*, just nothing about how it relates to her directly.’

‘How...’

‘He took it from her.’ David’s voice had turned hard and brittle as metal. ‘We have to get her back.’

‘I’m not disagreeing, but...look, David, what if we can’t get her back? We’ve got no idea at all what we’re dealing with here. And the last thing we should do is get into this before we know—’

‘*He’s taken everything!*’ David didn’t shout it, but he might as well have; his voice ached. It bled. ‘Djinn can see the history of things, and she has none. Do you understand? As if she never lived. The people who know her – we’re all that’s holding her here. Without us, without our memories of her, she disappears. Unmade from the world. Clearly that’s what he meant to do. *We must* find a way to undo it.’

Lewis was quiet for a moment. I heard the fire

crackle, as if he'd thrown another log on. 'Then that's all the more reason not to go running off into the woods without a better idea of what we're doing,' he said. 'We've got problems beyond Joanne.'

'I don't.' David sounded fierce and furious.

'Yes, you do, David, and you know it. We're crippled. Both of us. Between the Djinn's withdrawal and the problems with the Wardens—'

'She's the only thing that matters to me now. If she's not the only thing that matters to you, then you shouldn't be here.'

'I'm just saying that we need to take our time. Be sure we understand what's happening here.'

'Use her as bait, you mean.'

'No. I didn't say that.'

'And yet I think that's what you mean. There's something out here – you know that. Something very wrong.' Silence, and a rustle of cloth. David's shadow lengthened as he stood up. 'She always thought you were a cold-blooded bastard at heart,' he said, and ducked into the tent.

I hastily squeezed my eyes shut, but there was no way he wouldn't know I was awake. I could just... sense that. He'd be a very hard man to fool.

He settled down next to my feet, his arms propped on his upraised knees. 'You heard,' he said. It wasn't a question. 'What do you want to know?'

I sighed, gave up, and opened my eyes. 'Where have I been? Do you know?'

Either my eyes were adjusting to the dark, or there was a dim, suffused illumination running through the walls of the tent. Moonlight. I could see a vague shadow of a smile on his face. It looked bitter. 'No,' he said. 'I don't. I'm sorry.'

'Well, tell me what you do know.'

'Beginning where?' he asked. 'With your birth? Your childhood? Your first love?'

Just how much did he know about me? 'How did we meet?' I asked.

'Ah. That's a good story. I guess you might say that I tried to kill you.' He paused, head cocked to one side. 'Technically, I guess you could say I succeeded.'

'What?'

'It's a long story. You sure you want to hear it?'

I felt a bubble of panic growing in my chest, making me short of breath. 'I want to know who I am. What's my name?'

'Joanne Baldwin,' he said. 'You're a Warden.'

'A what?'

'Warden,' he said. 'You're part of a small group of humans who have the ability to channel the elemental power of the world. Control fire, earth, or weather. You control the weather. And fire, these days, although you're still learning that skill.'

'I control the... Are you high?'

That drew a strange smile out of him. ‘Try it,’ he said. ‘Reach out and feel the wind. Touch the sky.’

‘You know, those lyrics must have been lame even back in the seventies.’ But even while I was mocking him, I remembered that vivid ghost vision I’d had, of the wind running like a river in the sky. I’d been able to see curls and eddies in the flow.

Was that what he meant? But that wasn’t controlling the weather; that was...X-ray vision. Or something.

‘You’re insane,’ I declared. Which he found oddly amusing.

‘I’m Djinn,’ he said. ‘So yes. At times, at least by your standards. Try, Jo. Try to reach out and touch the clouds. I’ll help you.’

I bit my lip and thought about giving it a try. What was the worst thing that could happen? *No*, something told me inside, the same thing that had told me to get up and run, out there in the woods. *Don’t do it. You have no idea what you’re risking. What kind of attention you might draw.*

‘How?’ I asked.

David held out his hand. I slowly reached out to take it, and our fingers instinctively intermeshed.

Before I could even think about saying no – not that he was asking – he pulled me up and against him, body to body.

‘Hey!’ I yelled, panicked, and tried to push him

away. Not a chance. ‘Get off, dammit!’

He put a hand over my mouth, stilling my protest – not demanding, more like a gentle caress. ‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ he murmured. ‘If you allow yourself to feel for a second, you’ll know that.’

I didn’t. I didn’t know. He terrified me in ways that I couldn’t even begin to understand, starting with the too-bright, backlit colour of his eyes. I had pressed my hands flat against his chest, trying to hold him back from an assault he wasn’t even contemplating, so far as I could tell. He took both of my hands in his and interlaced our fingers tightly again.

‘Deep breath,’ he murmured. He pushed me back to a distance, holding me there as if we were involved in a formal box dance. ‘Not that deep,’ he said, very softly, with a wry twist to his full lips. ‘Bad for my discipline. Relax.’

Not a chance of that. I stared at his shadowed face, and I felt something beginning to unspool inside of me, as if he were drawing it out. ‘What...? What are you doing to me?’

‘Relax,’ he said. ‘Relax. Relax.’

And the world around me exploded into colour. Vivid, breathtaking colour, shimmering and trembling with fury and life. My skin glowed. David was a bonfire, glittering and dripping with raw power. Everything was so bright, so beautiful,

so *complicated* – even the fabric of my shirt was composed of tiny pinpoints of light, woven from the fabric of the universe.

I felt David holding my hands, but they weren't really my hands anymore. I was drifting up, out of my body, and the world was moonstone and shadow and neon, a confusing, bewildering, amazing place.

I soared up, out of my body, and passed through the thin fabric of the tent as if it weren't even there.

Up, plunging into the sky as if gravity had reversed itself and I was falling up into infinity...

Stars like ice. Cold-shimmering clouds, held together with a crystalline structure that was brighter and more beautiful than diamonds, and oh, God, it was so *beautiful*...

I reached out and touched the bonds that held part of the cloud together, and made it rain.

Come back, I heard David whisper, and the thing that had unspooled inside of me like a kite string was suddenly reversing, tugging me back away from the wonder of the sky, and it felt as if I'd spilt wind from my wings.

I was falling out of control back towards the forest, the tent, the fire.

I slammed back into my body with a sickening jolt, gasped, and convulsively tightened my grip on David's hands. I heard the first cold patters of rain on the fabric overhead.

Outside, by the fire, Lewis cursed, and I felt a sudden hot snap of...correction. The rain stopped.

‘Oh, my God,’ I whispered. My hands were shaking, not with weakness but with sheer joy. ‘Oh, my God, that was—’

‘Nothing,’ David said. ‘Just a taste. You used to control more than rain, Jo. You will again.’

He pulled me into his arms, and his lips pressed gently on my forehead, my closed eyes...my lips. I didn’t know if I should respond, but my body was already making the decision for me. The warm, damp pressure of his mouth on mine raised something wild inside of me, something deep and primal. I sank my fingers deep into the soft silk of his hair. He was a good kisser. Rapt, intense, focused, devouring my lips hungrily.

And then he broke free, sighed, and rested his forehead against mine. His fingers combed through the mud-caked tangle of my hair, leaving it straight and shining and clean.

‘How long...’ My voice wasn’t quite steady. I licked my lips, nearly licked his as well. ‘How long have we, you know, been...together?’

‘A while,’ he said.

‘Years?’

I felt his smile. ‘What do you think?’ His lips brushed mine when he murmured that answer. *Keep talking*, I thought. Because I was tempted to do a lot more.

‘Not years, maybe...um... I don’t know.’ All I knew was that whoever and whatever David was, he had the key to turn my engine. ‘Then why don’t I remember you? Remember *us*?’ I was fairly sure, given the intensity of the kisses, that it was well worth remembering.

‘You don’t because you can’t,’ he said, and his fingers stroked through my hair again, gentle and soothing. ‘Because someone took away your past.’

‘Then...how come I can still talk? Remember how to dress myself – OK, not that I dressed myself, bad example...’ I got lost on a side thought, and pulled back to look at him. ‘Did you? Put my clothes on?’

‘Do you seriously think I’d let Lewis do it?’ David asked, raising his eyebrows. ‘Of course.’ He gave me a slow, wicked smile. ‘Don’t worry. I didn’t take any liberties.’

I didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved.

‘In answer to the original question, certain kinds of memories are stored differently in the human mind. Memories – memories of events, of people, of conversations – these are more vulnerable. They can be taken away more easily.’

‘Why? Why would anybody do that? Wait a minute – *how* could anybody do that?’

Outside, the fire suddenly died to a banked glow. The tent flap moved, and Lewis, crouched

uncomfortably low, ducked inside. He gave the two of us an unreadable look, then crawled over to the other sleeping bag.

‘Earth Wardens could have done it,’ Lewis said. ‘It’s possible, if an Earth Warden had the right training and skill level, to remove selective memories. It’s part of how Marion Bearheart’s division drains away the powers of Wardens who have to be taken out of the organisation and returned to the regular human population. Only they don’t just take memories; they take away the core of power inside.’ He stretched out, put his hands under his head, and stared at the glow of moonlight on the tent fabric. ‘But in your case it was done by a Djinn. His name is Ashan.’

‘A Djinn,’ I repeated. ‘Like you?’ I pointed at David, whose eyebrows rose.

‘Not anymore. But yes, Ashan was Djinn, and he did this to you. He didn’t want to kill you; he wanted you to have never existed at all. And he had the power to do it. He made a good start on it.’

‘So what stopped him?’

David and Lewis exchanged looks. It was Lewis who answered. ‘Let’s get into that later.’

‘Fine. General question.’ I licked my lips and avoided staring directly at David. ‘What exactly is a Djinn?’

Lewis sighed and closed his eyes. ‘We’ve really got to get you fixed,’ he said. ‘The Djinn are

another race of beings on this planet. They can be corporeal when they want to, but their real existence is energy. They're...spirits. Spirits of fire and will.'

'Poetic, but not exactly the whole story,' David said. 'We were once slaves to you. To the Wardens. You used us to amplify your powers.'

'Slaves?'

'Subject to your orders. And your whims.' He was watching me with half-closed eyes, and when I turned I saw sparks flying in them. 'We're free now.'

'So you're...all-powerful?' I had to laugh as I said it. 'Snap your fingers and make it so, or something like that?'

He smiled, but the sparks were still flying. 'Djinn move energy – that's all. We take it from point A to point B. Transform it. But we can't create, and we can't destroy, not at the primal levels. That's why I think we may be able to undo what was done to you – because at least on some level, the energy is never lost.'

'Great! So, just...' I snapped my fingers. 'You know. Make it so.'

'I can't,' David said, 'or I'd already have done it. Time was Ashan's specialty. I was never very good at manipulating it. Jonathan—' He stopped, and – if anything – looked even bleaker. 'You don't remember Jonathan.'

I shook my head.

‘It would take a Jonathan or an Ashan to undo what was done.’

‘Can’t you just go get one of them?’ I asked.

‘Jonathan’s dead,’ David said, ‘and Ashan’s...not what he was. Besides, I can’t find him. He’s been very successful at hiding.’

‘Too bad,’ I said. ‘I was going to offer to bear your children if you could get me out of this icebox and onto a nice, warm beach somewhere.’

I was kidding, but whatever I’d said hit him hard. It *hurt*. He got up and moved back to his original position at my feet, breaking the connection, breaking eye contact. There was a tension in his body now, as if I’d said something really terrible.

Lewis covered his eyes with the heels of his hands, digging deeply. ‘She doesn’t remember,’ he said. ‘David. She doesn’t remember.’

‘I know,’ David said, and his voice scared me. Raw, anguished, fragile. ‘But I thought...if anything...’

‘She *can’t*. You know that. It’s not her fault.’

No answer. David said nothing. I opened my mouth a couple of times, but I couldn’t think what to ask, what to say; I’d put my foot in it big-time, but I had no idea why.

No, I realised after a slow-dawning, horrified moment. I *did* know. Or at least, I guessed.

‘Did you and I...do we have children?’ I asked. Because I wasn’t ready to be a mother. What could I possibly have to teach a child when I couldn’t remember my own life, my own childhood? My own family?

The question I’d addressed aloud to David seemed to drop into a velvet black pool of silence. After a very long time he said tonelessly, ‘No. We don’t have any children.’

And *poof*. He was gone. Vanished into thin air.

‘What the hell...?’

Lewis didn’t answer. Not directly. He rolled over on his side, turning his back to me. ‘Sleep,’ he told me. ‘We’ll get into this tomorrow.’

I rolled over on my side, too, putting me back-to-back with Lewis with a blank view of a blue nylon tent wall. Uncomfortably close, close enough to be in the corona of his body heat. He needed a bath. So did I.

‘Lewis?’ I asked. ‘Please tell me. Do I have a kid?’

A long, long silence. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, you don’t.’

I didn’t remember anything about my life. For all intents and purposes, I’d been born a few hours ago, on a bed of icy leaves and mud. I’d been dropped out of the sky into a bewildering world that wasn’t what my instincts told me was normal...into the lives of two men who each had

some agenda that I wasn't sure I could understand.

But one thing I knew for sure: Lewis was lying to me. I was certain of that. For good reasons, maybe...and maybe not. I didn't really know him. Lewis and David...they were just strangers. Strangers who'd helped me, yes, but still. I didn't know them. I didn't know what they wanted from me.

Deep down, I was scared that the next time I asked questions, they were going to start telling me the truth.