

Seeds in the Blood, Book 2 of the Spirit Song Series

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Sample chapter

“Rafael!” she said as she approached him, slightly out of breath, her tone of voice urgent. She turned to quickly look behind her.

“Juliana?” he said, certain it was Christina’s mother who died when Christina was only twelve.

“Yes,” she said, her expression serious. “I came to warn you and I must hurry. When you take them home be *very* watchful. There are those who will try to sabotage you and your work with Christina, and to take my daughters, and you must be prepared. You have the ability. Only you can stop what has been planned and set in motion!” she said, taking hold of his arm, her touch surprisingly warm. She suddenly turned to look behind her, as if hearing someone else. Rafe heard a deep rumbling in the distance, feeling it through his boots.

“Stop what?” Rafe asked, looking over her shoulder, but seeing nothing. “And who will do this, Juliana?” he said. “Your husband?”

“Edward,” she said as her expression grew dark. She quickly looked behind her. “Yes, he is part of it. But there is another who uses him, by far more dangerous. He wants what you have, Rafael.” She handed him a silver box with a familiar symbol on the top. “You will need this. Go to my sisters. They will help you. Stay with them, not at my daughters’ apartment.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “And please, Rafael, take care of my daughters! Protect them at all times! They are always in danger, even at my sisters’ home. As you will be. Promise me!” The dove-colored mist around them became mixed with gray spirals of smoke, frightening Juliana.

Instinctively trying to protect her, he took her arm to pull her closer and felt her trembling.

“Of course, I promise. We all love them and will take care of them.”

She looked up at him. “And tell my daughters I love them so very much.” Her hand covered her heart as she remembered some of the worst of what happened. “And that I’m sorry, so sorry. I had no choice.”

Rafe felt something rubbing against his leg. He looked to see his spirit animal, the red jaguar, standing at attention, tail curled and peering intently in the direction Juliana came from. When he turned back to her she was gone, but he heard her voice: “You must stop it! Promise me, Rafael! And tell my daughters that if they speak to me I will hear.”

“Wait!” Rafe cried. “I promise! But stop what? Juliana!” But she was gone. He looked at the box in his hand and ran his fingers over symbols on the lid. Somewhere, he’d seen them before, although the box was old, very old, he was certain. He put his finger under the lid to open it.

And as quickly as wind rushes over water, he was in the rainforest, running through tangled liana vines and thick brush. He heard the low, rumbling growl of something behind him and kept running, jumping over small streams and fallen, moss-covered trees. Fog swirled in front of him and grim-faced red howler monkeys squabbled in the trees over his head, peppering him with stones. He stumbled over a fallen tree and landed in a clay pool, the foul-smelling thick goo sucking at his boots and legs until he pulled himself out with overgrown vines hanging from the canopy. He turned to look behind him, but saw only an ominous smoky form swirling in the trees. Slowly, it took shape, huge black wings dripping fiery lava, the torso thick and heavy, and great clawed talons reaching for him.

He ran again until he reached the river and jumped in, but falling ash covered him, burning him. He headed toward the bottom and swam to the other shore, but could feel the resonance of the deep-throated growling through the water, closer now. He resurfaced, and the growl shifted to high-pitched shrieks as he felt the talons barely scrape his shoulder. He could not see its head but felt its stinking hot breath on his neck. The rains began, along with thunder and lightning so strong Rafe wondered if he would be struck and killed by it or die being torn apart by the winged monster above him.

Exhausted and unable to pull himself onto the shore, he was swept along until he approached the falls, certain he would find death far below, where the cascading water created great pools before continuing its journey north. Something grabbed him and dragged him out of the rushing water, pulling him through the muddy sand. Believing it to be the flying beast and unable to even turn his head, he began the mantras that would prepare him for death. He coughed up water and lay still, gasping for breath. Something rolled him to his side. He opened his eyes, and through the pouring rain soaking the sand, saw tanned and dirty bare feet.

And suddenly, sweating, shaking, and still gasping for breath, he was out of his shaman's journey, his awareness back in the physical world and the Andean cave he often used for this purpose. Thunder rolled across the peaks; rain was cascading into the mouth of the cave, and Rafe knew the storm in his journey was real. His chest ached from running. He gulped air into his lungs, then drank half of the water in his canteen. He looked around him for the silver box, then realized it would not have come back with him, yet noticed his boots were full of mud. He thought about the strangeness of this journey, which ordinarily meant simply traveling in consciousness to other worlds or dimensions where shamans sought answers or spoke to higher dimensional beings and gained knowledge that would help them in their practice. But this journey had turned into an other-worldly race through the rainforest, and had created physical symptoms.

He'd met Christina's mother, Juliana, who had tried to warn him about—what? Stay with her sisters, she'd said, when he took Christina back to Minnesota to settle her life there. What was it that had been set in motion, and that he must be prepared for? It certainly involved Christina and Ellen's father, Edward, still alive and apparently in service to or being used by someone—or something else. That did not surprise him, from what he already knew of this man. Was it Edward and another who would try to sabotage them? What did they want from his wife and sister-in-law? And how were they planning to get it?

One more thing puzzled him. He had been chased through the forest more than once in the past, in this world and the other dimensions shamans often visited, but this time it was something with intelligence, and a dark purpose. He understood the creature he'd seen was not its true form, and that meant the thing could shape shift, appearing first as someone you saw as trustworthy, then shifting to something else when it was ready to strike. He would journey again to find out who or what he was dealing with. But this journey was not as it usually was. He came out of it too fast.

Ayar, he asked his spirit guide, always with him. *What happened?*

Listen, Ayar said.

He listened, but heard nothing until his breathing returned to normal. Focusing, he heard someone calling. *Rafe, come home, please! I know you can hear me.* It was Christina, his American wife of just a few weeks. Something was very wrong at home.

Soon after Rafe had left home to hike up the mountain, bone-rattling thunder crashed across the peaks of the Andes. Lightning split the darkness, revealing thick gray clouds heavy with rain that pelted the earth, collected in pools and spilled out into heavy streams that rushed toward the city in the valley below. There was little wind, but the rain pounding on the roof and bedroom window woke Christina. She snuggled deeper under the covers and slid closer to Rafe's side of the bed, quickly realizing he was not in the bed with her. Lightning flickered again, followed by a thunderous crash so close to the house Christina expected to see Rafe's equipment annex behind their house in flames and that would mean an explosion, as it housed Rafe's gas tanks and tools. If that occurred, she wondered if the heavy downpour would quench the fire, or if she would have to call 911—then realized she didn't know if Venezuela had such a system. Certainly the thundering rain would bring Rafe out of the journey. He would be walking in dripping wet any minute.

Christina waited, watching the rain spatter on the windows. Five minutes, then ten minutes went by. If he was just outside near his herb garden, as he normally was, why didn't he come in? Thunder rattled the windows, propelling Christina out of bed to look outside. Barefoot and shivering in her thin pajamas, she could see little; the single-pane windows of their hacienda-style house were fogged. She ran through the house to look out the wide living room window, wiping the condensation away with her hand to see if he was on their front porch. If he was out there, she couldn't see him; the rain was too heavy. She opened the door and stepped outside, standing as close to the edge of the porch as she dared. "Rafe!" She shouted. "Rafe! Where are you?" She heard nothing but the rain pounding the roof.

Damn. Once or twice since she had been here, he had hiked farther up the mountain to a shallow cave with a view of the Catatumbo lightning over Lake Maracaibo—a phenomenon all its own and not the thunderstorm they were currently experiencing. He'd promised to take her there to see it, but they had been so busy since returning from the rainforest, it had not yet happened.

Maybe he fell asleep. No, not in this kind of thunder. She walked to the end of the porch and peered around the corner, which ordinarily would provide her with a spectacular view toward the peaks. Now, she saw nothing and only succeeded in getting drenched. “Rafe!” She yelled, willing him to answer. “Rafe!” She yelled again, louder, but a heavy crack of thunder drowned out her voice even from her own ears. *Come home, Rafe, please. I know you can hear me!*

“Crissy? What’s wrong?” Christina’s sister, Ellen, bundled in her bathrobe, stepped outside and walked toward her, hugging the wall of the house. “Where’s Rafe?”

Soaked and shivering, Christina moved back into relative dryness. Her lips trembling she answered. “I don’t know,” she said.

“You don’t—come on, back inside! You’re soaked! I’ll make us some tea,” Ellen said, pulling her toward her bedroom. She switched on the light only to discover the electricity was out. “Great. Do you know where the circuit breaker box is?”

“No. I don’t even know if there is one.”

“We’ll find a candle or something.”

Christina felt her way to the bedroom and her camping lantern, now kept behind her nightstand, and switched it on. “This happens fairly often, so I’m prepared.”

“Take those off,” Ellen ordered, pointing to Christina’s soaked pajamas, as she opened dresser drawers until she found something warmer and laid it on the end of the bed. Christina towed her hair, then the rest of her, and put on the single long-sleeved tee shirt and only pair of sweat pants she had brought with her from Minneapolis for her three month research trip to the Gran Sabana. Ellen rummaged in the closet and found her sister’s bathrobe, making her put it on.

“You’re fussing over me, Ellen,” she said, sounding agitated.

“We’ve always fussed over each other, ever since Mom died. Just because you got married doesn’t mean I’ll stop any time soon.”

Christina looked up, then hugged her sister. “I know. We needed to.”

“We still do. But why can’t you find Rafe?” Ellen asked.

“You know he goes out in the middle of the night to journey. I think he just went higher up the mountain this time. That’s all. I shouldn’t be worried. It’s just a thunderstorm. We have them in Minnesota all the time in the summer,” Christina said.

“We have thunderstorms in Minnesota, yes, but nobody sits them out on top of a mountain. We’re common sense people. We know to come in out of the lightning and rain!” Ellen said, making Christina smile, if only for a second.

“Yes, but Rafe has abilities that are—highly unusual. He’s much more tuned in to nature than the rest of us.” She sat on the bed, putting on slippers, then stood and looked out the window. All that was visible was rain sheeting down the glass.

A wicked smile lit up Ellen’s face. “Unusual abilities? Hmmm. I’d like to hear about that sometime. But can’t he journey on the living room floor? Or in his lab?” Ellen asked.

“He prefers being outdoors, in nature. It’s part of being a shaman, living as much as possible in the natural world. I wouldn’t dream of asking him to change the way he does these things. And, I shouldn’t worry. He knows what to do. But I can’t help but worry just a little.”

Ellen noticed her sister was twisting the ruby engagement ring around and around her finger. She took Christina’s hand and squeezed it. “You’re allowed. He’s your husband. Come on. We’ll find something to sip on.”

They padded into the kitchen. Christina set the lantern on the table, its fluorescent tubes casting a sickly light over a normally cheery kitchen. “I’ll get some candles. They’ll make it feel more cozy.” Feeling her way into the living room, Christina found two candles on the mantle and matches. “Ouch!”

“Crissy?”

“Ran into the corner of the sofa. I’m fine.” She set candles on the table and lit them. Their warm glow banished a few dark thoughts from Christina’s mind, but did nothing for the growing anxiety she was beginning to feel.

Ellen opened the refrigerator. “Ah. Wine! Better than tea!” She found glasses and filled them, then sat down at the table with Crissy, pushing a glass in front of her. “Was Rafe a doctor first? Or a shaman first? And why would he be both?”

“He said that when he was about eight, he went up to spend time with his grandfather, Bernardo, who is an Inca shaman. That means he is a healer, or curandero they call it, and they learn what to use for healing through interacting with nature, to learn their spirit songs for healing, and going to other dimensions and other worlds where they meet beings who give them some of their songs. That would be the beginning of his shaman’s training, I guess.”

“He goes to other dimensions? How?”

“Ah, through kind of a meditation. But it’s not really that. He goes there in consciousness, is how I would explain it. There has been so much for us to do so fast, that I haven’t asked him much more than that.”

“Do you know where he went, besides just ‘up the mountain?’”

“No, he said once it took him about twenty minutes to hike up there and that it was a shallow cave. That’s all. It’s not like there’s a little village up there and I can call the local sheriff.”

“When did he go out? Do you know?”

Christina pursed her lips. “No. I sleep right through it most of the time, now.” *God, we’ve not even been married a month. If something happens . . .* Christina put her hand over her heart and took a slow, deep breath hoping to slow down her pulse rate.

“Crissy? Are you okay?”

Christina sipped her wine. “I’m okay, really. Just trying not to let it get to me.”

“You don’t feel an asthma attack coming on, do you?”

“No, Ellen.”

“Does he take a flashlight? Would he have something in case he needed help?” Her eyes widened. “Did he take that great big knife he has?” she said, referring to Rafe’s machete.

“He probably has a flashlight if he goes up there in the dark. But what else he has I don’t know.” Rafe knew his way around these hills very well, but it was raining hard, moss-covered rocks and trails became slippery, and anyone could so easily slip on them. She tried to erase the picture in her mind that thought produced.

Ellen drummed her fingers on the table, thinking. “What about his cell phone? Would it even work up there?”

Christina looked at Ellen, then at the pens, keys, small bags of herbs, buttons, bent paperclips, tiny, dried out gourds, and further assortment of small items on the lazy Susan in the middle of the kitchen table. She pawed through it, then picked up a cell phone and held it up. “Here’s his cell phone.”

“I don’t suppose he’s used to carrying one, being in the rainforest so much,” Ellen said.

“No.” Christina said, trying not to show how worried she really was. “Everything gets damp out there. I had my notebooks and pencils in plastic bags, but they still felt a little damp when I took them out.”

“So, you don’t know exactly where he is or how long he’s been out there, what he’s got with him in case of an emergency, and it’s impossible to reach him,” Ellen asked, trying to logically state the situation.

Christina’s lips were trembling as she began twisting the tie on her bathrobe. “Yes,” she said. “That describes it, all right.”

Watching the rain pour down, Rafe paced as much as the small cave would allow. *Mierda!* Of course, the storm had awakened her. The electricity was probably out, and she and Ellen would be very worried—about him. If there were no storm, his American wife would still be sound asleep with happy dreams. He looked at his watch. Two-thirty a.m. Christina was not easily frightened after what she had gone through during her captivity by Imoro, and what they had lived through together in the rain forest in the last few months. It was more than just the storm.

He stood at the mouth of the cave. The one thing he loved about these storms was the fresh earthy smell from the rain washing the lush greenness that covered the Andes, and he breathed it in deeply now, relishing the scent. The rain was so heavy he could see little except flashes of lightning accompanied by ear-splitting cracks of thunder. Even the constant Catatumbo lightning over Lake Maracaibo was no longer visible. It would be difficult to see the trail he'd made over years of visits to this cave, and it was completely possible he could slip on a wet rock and fall in a storm as heavy as this one. He did not believe that would happen, but he thought about Christina, maybe frantic with worry now, and only her sister there with her. Would they have called his father? He hoped so, if they were that worried. But if the electricity was out, the phones were probably out as well. They would feel alone and without help. He realized he needed to be more considerate of her and stay closer to home for his journeying on nights like this.

He thought about how much of his wife's future was in his hands. No doubt she would succeed in getting her Ph.D. in anthropology. But the focus of her work had shifted because of their amazing find in the rainforest. If he were not there to read the Book of Persivann, it would never be translated, the world would not know what gifts or warnings it held, and the rest of his wife's career would never be realized. Their children would never be born, and the prophecy that surrounded the Cape of the Red Jaguar would not be fulfilled.

He thought of one thing more that brought fire to his eyes. If his beautiful and brilliant wife were suddenly a widow, he had no doubt there would be dozens of contenders to take his place in her bed—and under no circumstances was Rafael Alejandro Santiago Silva, medical doctor and rainforest shaman, going to let that happen.

“Ayar, she knows I can take care of myself. But even I do not want to try descending this mountain in this!”

Then you know what you must do, Rafael.

“Ellen, he won't try to come down the mountain in this storm. He'll wait until it's over. That could be hours,” Christina said, wishing the drumming of the rain on the roof would stop.

“Hours?” Ellen frowned. “Well, I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I can go to sleep again.”

Christina peered out the kitchen window, thinking she saw something. “Me either.”

“Do you see something?” Ellen asked, following Christina’s stare.

“I don’t know. But the wind is picking up,” she said, moving to look out the wide window over the kitchen sink. “I thought I saw—must have been an animal. So far, everything is staying put.”

The wind created an updraft through the chimney, just as the loose shutter on one of the front windows began non-stop banging against the stucco. Christina ran back to the front window, wiped the condensation off and looked out. The rain was blowing onto the porch, drenching everything. The courtyard in front of their house pooled with water and the road outside the courtyard gate had become a small river.

“My God,” Christina whispered. “I don’t know how much worse it can get.”

Something moved near the road. “Ellen! Turn out the lantern!”

“Why? You see something?” she asked, but switched it off and felt her way into the living room.

“Look out there,” Christina whispered. “I saw something—more like someone move.” She wiped the window again and stared into the darkness, broken only by periodic lightning. “There! Did you see? Someone standing in the road! Who would be just standing there in this, looking in? And why is the front gate open?” she said. She looked at the front door, still wide open. “Shut that,” she said to Ellen. “And lock it, then close the shutters. There’s a little crank on the inside for each one. I’m going to find Rafe’s shotgun! You keep watching.”

“Do you think you could actually shoot someone?” Ellen asked.

A dark memory from only a few weeks ago passed through her mind. “I can if I have to,” she said, feeling her way into Rafe’s lab. Minutes later, she came back with the shotgun in one hand, and Rafe’s baseball bat in the other. She handed the bat to Ellen. “I couldn’t find his machete. He must have taken it with him. Maybe just as well,” she said.

Ellen stared at the shotgun and bat, then stared at Christina. “Some terrible things happened to you in the rainforest, didn’t they?”

Christina smiled thinly. “Yes, they did. But something good happened to me too. I found Rafe. Or I guess I should say he found me.”

“Are you ever going to tell me about the terrible things?”

Christina faced her sister. “Yes, honey, I will. I promise. There are some things you need to know. And soon. Okay?”

“Okay. I’ll hold you to that.” She hefted the bat and watched her sister check the shotgun. “Crissy, has it occurred to you that maybe it’s not so brilliant of your brilliant husband to leave you so totally alone up here like this?”

“Usually, there are so many people around, a little alone time is welcome,” she said. “But I never thought about anything like this.” She peered out the window again, trying to see through the darkness. Another bolt of lightning allowed her to see no one was there. “He’s gone.”

“Are all the windows locked?” Ellen asked, taking hold of Christina’s arm and gripping it tightly.

“I couldn’t say for sure. Some of them won’t open at all. I suppose we better check,” she said rather matter-of-factly.

“Aren’t you scared?” Ellen asked.

An image from her weeks-long captivity in the rainforest rose in her mind, another of a fierce battle against hellish creatures followed it. “There’s scared,” she said, “and there’s terrified. I’m not there yet,” she said. Christina finished checking all the windows in Rafe’s lab, made sure the door to the outside from there was locked, then checked the door to the outside in the sunroom.

“I think there’s some way to close off the sunroom,” Christina said, looking for pocket doors in the walls. “Here,” she said. “Help me.” It soon became obvious that these doors had not been pulled shut for some time. Several minutes of pulling and tugging on the small pocket door handles had no effect. “Jeez! These are not going to move! We’ll just pull the shades in there. There are no lights, so no one outside will see anything inside anyway.”

Lowering the shades in the sunroom proved an easier task, but did little to make them feel safer. They perched on the edge of the padded kitchen chairs, the bat and the shotgun on the table in front of them. The lamp remained off and the candles were set on the countertop, giving them some comfort. They waited, Ellen fidgeting in her chair. Thunder rolled down the mountain, vibrating windows, the dishes in the cupboards, and Ellen and Christina’s nerves. Then a loud clap rattled the windows just as lightning illuminated the patio and sunroom, revealing a shadow close to the windows, trying to look in. Ellen screamed, then quickly clapped her own hands over her mouth. Her eyes were wide with fear as she pointed.

But Christina had seen it too. She picked up the shotgun and stood up, tiptoeing toward the sunroom and a view of the door to the outside, waiting for the next lightning strike. She could see nothing, but heard the door handle rattle. She put the shotgun against her shoulder. “Ellen! Stay there!” she whispered.

“Don’t worry, I’m not moving!” Ellen whispered, and gripped the neck of the bat tightly.

She sent another mental message to her husband, somewhere on the mountain behind their house. *Rafe, we need you now!* She hoped her rising fear would make it echo loudly in his consciousness.

Lightning lit the sky again, but the shadow had disappeared and the rattling of the door handle stopped. The two sisters returned to the living room and cranked one shutter open just enough to see outside. They waited for flashes of lightning. When it came, they saw nothing. Rain still poured down, but less heavily. The wind still pulled a strong updraft from the fireplace.

“Crissy, should we call Roberto?” Ellen asked, holding herself and rubbing her arms. She realized she was shaking and took a couple deep breaths to try and calm herself. She had to back up Crissy. They had always taken care of each other, always watched each other’s back, no matter what. She looked around for the bat and picked it up, hefting it once or twice.

“Maybe that’s a good idea, even though it’s so late. I don’t know if he could even get here, though.”

Carrying the bat, Ellen grabbed the phone in the kitchen and listened. “No dial tone,” she called out. “It’s out too. Should we try Rafe’s cell phone?”

“Yes. I’ll do it,” she said.

Ellen picked up Rafe’s phone and padded back into the living room. She handed it to Christina, who found Rafe’s father’s number and hit “send.” She waited.

“What do you hear?” Ellen asked.

“Nothing. Still nothing.” The display changed and Christina snapped it shut.

“What did it say?”

“The equivalent of ‘no service.’” She took Ellen’s hand and squeezed it gently. “We’re on our own, Ellen,” she said. She walked back into the living room and peeked through the shutter, looking toward the road. “Let’s light a fire. At least it will make us feel better.”

Ellen rubbed her arms again. “Yes, it would.”

Ellen placed the logs in the fireplace, stuffed paper under and around them, checked the flue, and finally struck the match. Christina, shotgun in hand, kept watch both in front and back, walking back and forth from sunroom to living room.

Ellen sat back, watching the wood catch fire. It’s crackling and spitting was comforting, reminding her of happy times in the home of their aunts on Lake Minnetonka. The sound of Christina pumping the shotgun made her turn quickly. Christina pointed to the front door. The doorknob was turning. Ellen’s mouth opened, but she covered her mouth before she screamed.

“Ellen,” Christina whispered. “This is what we’re going to do. You stand behind the door and pull it open when I say to do it. I’ll be ready with the shotgun.” She watched Ellen’s eyes widen. “Okay? Can you do it?”

“Yes, I can open the damn door! But can you really shoot him?”

Christina didn't hesitate. “Oh yes. Don't worry.”

“What if he's got a gun?”

“Then I better shoot first. Come on. I don't know why that gate is open, but he's not getting in here! Now go stand where I said.”

Ellen took her place. Christina stood a few feet back from the door, the shotgun against her shoulder, making sure she was ready. “I'm ready, Ellen. Do it!”

But before Ellen could do anything, the lights inside the house and every yard and floodlight outside suddenly began blinking like a disco ball. Every dog and goat in the neighborhood started barking or bleating; the wind suddenly picked up, blowing furniture off the porch. Empty trash cans clattered across the courtyard. Christina and Ellen ran to look out the window. The shadow outside their front door backed up, shielding his eyes from the sudden brightness, as the hood on his sweatshirt was blown back. A strong gust of wind pushed him toward the edge and he fell off the porch backward into Rafe's flooded herb garden, then yelled when he attempted to stand, his left leg obviously giving him pain. He pulled and pushed himself up using the steps. Holding his left leg, he limped as fast as possible toward the open front gate.

“Oh my God! Talk about good timing! You think he's gone for good?”

“I think so. But he could have a friend. We need to still be watchful until Rafe gets home.” Christina smiled to herself. *Somebody's watching over us.*

As quickly as that had happened, the lights went out again. The rain continued to pour down and the wind blew harder.

Fifteen minutes later, the fire was burning brightly. Ellen and Christina sat close together on the floor, backs against the sofa. Christina held the shotgun lying across her lap and Ellen still gripped the baseball bat. They stared at the windows, waiting for lightning strikes. Neither one spoke. The tick, tick, ticking of the clock could barely be heard as the rain splattered loudly on the porch, but sounded more like golf balls when it hit the roof.

Christina knew Rafe's garden would be flooded. The fire and their wine calmed them somewhat, but they had no illusion of real safety until Rafe returned. *Husband, where the hell are you?* She concentrated on seeing her husband's face, focusing on him, forcing him to hear her.

“Listen,” Ellen said, looking toward the ceiling, then outside. “The rain stopped. Just—stopped, like someone turned the faucet off.”

Christina stood and walked to the windows, peering outside. They had heard nothing else since the intruder had tried the front door. Maybe they had scared him off for good. “Ellen, I

want you to open the door, then stand behind it. I'm going to stand here ready to shoot if he's still there. But I think he's gone. Okay?" She looked at her sister, motioning to her with her hand. "Come on," she said.

"Are you sure?" Ellen said, getting up slowly.

"Yes. I—just feel like it's okay."

"Okay," Ellen said. She gripped the doorknob, made sure Christina had the shotgun against her shoulder, then turned the deadbolt and pulled the door open. No one was there. They peered outside taking in as much of the courtyard as they could see.

"Odd. It stopped. Just like that," Ellen repeated. "Strange, isn't it?"

Rain still cascaded off the roof onto the saturated ground and thunder still rumbled, but less threateningly, across the valley. Christina stepped outside. As muddy as everything looked, the air smelled clean and fresh and she took a deep breath. A cool breeze blew past her, ruffling her hair the same way Rafe often did. "Yes, isn't it, though."

Rafe slid down the last slope just behind his house, soaking himself in cold, muddy water and losing his flashlight. He crossed the normally shallow stream that ran along the edge of his property that was now thigh high and flowing swiftly. He almost lost his balance and would have been swept farther downhill, were it not for trees with plentiful branches along the edge. He grabbed one, pulling himself out and walked across the wide stretch of lawn toward the back of his house. He realized he didn't have a key, and swearing to himself, climbed a tree that stood close to the rock wall that formed the perimeter of their back patio, allowing him to lower himself to the top of the six foot wall, then jump down from there. He removed the poncho, tossing it on one of the chairs, then backed into another chair because the floodlights on the back of the house were out.

How angry is she, Ayar?

Do not worry. She will be happy you are back and not so angry that you were gone so long.

All the windows were dark telling him there was still no electricity. He stood still and listened, but heard nothing from inside. Maybe they had gone back to sleep, but if Christina was worried, he knew she would still be awake. He headed for the back door, turning the handle, but it was locked. Strange, he thought, the shades in the sunroom were closed, but if they were afraid, he could understand. He walked around to the front of his house, still hearing nothing—nothing at all. He could not see his herb garden, but knew it must be in shambles.

He stepped onto his porch. The furniture usually there must have blown across the courtyard again. The living room windows were dark and he saw nothing from inside. The front door was shut tight and he felt certain it was locked. But why was it so quiet if Christina and Ellen were

awake? He'd try the door into his lab first. He walked toward it, his boots sloshing in the water in the front courtyard. He turned the handle but it, too, was locked. Something must have frightened his wife and his sister-in-law, and given what Christina had been through in the last few months, it wasn't just a little thunder and lightning. He walked back to the front and stood silently, using his inner sight to search for clues.

There *was* something wrong. He no longer hesitated, but took the steps to the porch two at a time. He turned the knob on the front door. Locked. He was just about to start pounding on it, when it flew open and he faced Christina, holding his shotgun pointed directly at his chest.

* * *

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