

Masters of the Sex Gates

by Darrell Bain and Jeanine Berry

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DEDICATION

To Deron Douglas of Double Dragon publishing, who more than anyone else has been instrumental in furthering my career as a writer. He does nifty covers, too. Thanks, Deron.

-Darrell Bain

To the special man who gases up my car, keeps my computer running and even cooks supper now and then so I can write.

-Jeanine Berry

PRAISE FROM REVIEWERS FOR THE SEX GATES

The Sex Gates reads like the novel Heinlein should have written after *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The book has both Heinlein's no nonsense prose and his no nonsense social conscience. The central characters are the best of America, and along the way meet and survive much of the worst. They're fallible, but their humanity shines through. Plain and simple, *The Sex Gates* is a great book, one of the best science fiction offerings in years.

—*Efigments Reviews*

I highly recommend *Sex Gates* to anyone who enjoys well crafted sci-fi, a strong helping of erotica, and a stimulating plot with engaging characters.

—*Michael Thal, eBook Reviews Weekly*

This is a great story for people that like to explore “what if?”... a good read, and extremely thought provoking.

—*Reviewed by Mark Lambert for www.timeless-tales.net*

CHAPTER ONE

It was a small mob, just a few dozen young people with a smattering of other ages. Most of the young ones had that almost unbearably healthy look that told me they had recently gone through a sex gate. Leaning forward on the lounge in our media room, I watched as the events outside unfolded on the

screen. Beside me, Rita reached for my hand.

"Why is this happening, Lee?" she asked. Her voice was level, but the guarded look in her eyes said she knew something was wrong, and it encompassed more than the mob gathering in front of our gate.

I shrugged, and tried to sound bored. "It seems that the news that we're Seconders has gotten out. We'll have to stay tight in here and ride out this demonstration."

She cast a stricken look at the wall screen where people shook raised fists at our entrance gate. "Why do they hate us?"

Hate wasn't something Rita understood despite her years of studying psychology. There was too much love in her heart. She couldn't grasp the anger and jealousy that surged through the excited mob. I tried to maintain a calm exterior, although I was plenty worried.

"It's a small demonstration-probably bored Fourth Worlders with nothing to do, incited by the Church of the Gates' propaganda against Seconders. It'll turn out to be nothing."

Rita faced me with a frown. "You don't really believe that."

I rubbed my throbbing temples. "I get a sense that the pattern surrounding the sex gates is shifting, that's all."

For once, I hoped my gift of sensing patterns in unfolding events was wrong. The sex gates and the events triggered by their appearance had dominated our lives from the moment one materialized in front of us years ago. We were inexorably linked to their fate.

Rita's hand gripped mine, and I knew she felt the same way.

This day had started like any other. The first sign that it would mark a turning point came around noon. As a compulsive news junkie I always have the wall screen tuned to at least one all-news station, and the computer is programmed to scan for items of interest. So it wasn't surprising when the program was interrupted.

A voice proclaimed, "We will take you live to breaking news in Ruston, Texas."

We live just a few miles outside of Ruston, so I watched with interest. The graphic on the screen dissolved, and the next thing I saw was the Ruston sex gate. Demonstrators were gathered in front of the glowing green arch. They had their arms linked and were chanting.

"Once is enough! Once is enough!"

It was fairly obvious they were there to stop someone from going through. I couldn't believe someone had been stupid enough to let it be known that they were going through the sex gate a second time. I watched a car pull up, and a young man hopped out. His spiky brown hair blew in the wind and his thin face blanched with fear as he eyed the crowd between him and the gate.

"That's Lisa Turner!" Rita exclaimed. "Or Larry Turner now. You remember. She was injured in a farm accident last week, and they rushed her through the gate to save her life."

I remembered. She was a seventeen-year-old who was fifty years away from even considering a trip through the gate until her accident. I wondered what made him desperate enough to risk the dangerous second trip through the gate. Surely, at his young age, he would find it easy to adjust to his new sex. As Lisa, now Larry, moved toward the gate the demonstrators closed ranks in front of the green arch.

The chant, "Once is enough!" grew louder.

The graphic broke into the feed with a voiceover to let us know that the pictures were coming from a spectator. He was filming an elderly relative who was going through the gate when the demonstration started. Seeing a chance to make some money off this unexpected turn of events, he was uploading his shots to the web via satellite.

Larry stopped, his fear of the angry crowd plain.

"He should leave and come back when they're gone," I said.

"I hear he's in love with Brad Mason." Trust Rita to be up on the latest gossip. "You know how earthshaking love is at seventeen. He must be desperate to turn back into a girl."

I had to smile. As usual, the sex gates were playing hob with someone's love life. Meanwhile, Larry had second thoughts. He backed away and jumped in the waiting car. The Texas dust flew as the car screeched away from the scene.

"Well, that's that," I said, but a sharp pain in my temples told me otherwise.

My gift of pattern analysis warned me that there was more to this demonstration than met the eye. I was not surprised to see the demonstrators turn from the gate in a disciplined group, and get back in their cars. Nor was I surprised when those cars showed up in front of our massive iron entrance gate ten minutes later. Now, Rita and I were trapped inside watching our gate through surveillance cameras, and wondering how these demonstrators had learned we were Seconders.

Outside, the hot Texas sun blazed out of a clear blue sky. I saw sweat beading the faces of the crowd milling around in front of the gate. More than ever, I was grateful for our state-of-the-art security system, and the thick walls surrounding our house.

After surviving a Gater attack on this very house several years ago, I'd spared no expense. This place was a fortress, and we kept enough supplies on hand to withstand a long siege. It was not only fortified and electrified, but also wired for sound and movement. It also warned intruders that it was a licensed militia residence, meaning that I, the homeowner, was allowed plenty of legal leeway to react violently to intruders.

I noticed that several of the young people out front walked in a slightly jerky, somewhat uncertain way on the uneven ground. I recognized the symptoms. They were adjusting to bodies that didn't move in the way the mind commanded.

The memories of my first passage through a sex gate are as vivid as ever, despite the numerous transformations I've gone through since then. I experienced an identical awkwardness after I was transformed from a man into a woman. As I staggered out after the change, my mind tried to operate my body in the same way it always had. But the body that responded to the brain's commands was now female.

The first thing I noticed was how top-heavy my body felt. I soon pinpointed the cause—a pair of bouncing new breasts that threw everything off balance. My legs seemed out of place, too, attached to inordinately wide hips. When I tried to move my female body, nothing worked quite right. While I pride myself on the sexy sway I eventually developed, that first walk on my female legs was laughable. Women who go through the sex gate and become men experience similar problems in reverse. A lurching walk was a dead giveaway that someone was wearing a new body fresh from the sex gates.

The leaders of the mob unfurled a banner. The sight jarred me out of my memories. Rita wrapped a lock of her thick black hair around one of her fingers, an old nervous habit. Neither one of us said a word, but our minds touched. I slipped an arm around her, and drew her closer on the lounger. She caught her full lower lip between even white teeth and nibbled on it. Her dark eyes watched every movement on the screen while her face reflected her anxiety.

Outwardly there was nothing to cause so much alarm. The media room with the main wall screen was located in the center of the house. We were safe behind thick walls. The only mob sounds we heard came through the audio pickups. Moreover, the security system sent the video feed straight to the police station. I expected the local cops to appear at any moment.

Rita's nails dug into the muscles of my upper arm, and her voice was tense. "Shouldn't we call the chief and ask him to get them out of here?"

I turned away from the screen to reassure her, and was sidetracked by the sight of her long, tan legs in thigh-high white shorts. Her breathing was faster than normal, too, and her breasts, barely concealed by her silkskin blouse, rose and fell in a distracting way. She gripped my arm harder, her nails digging in, and my mind came back to our problem.

"I'm sure help is already on the way. In the meantime, let's see what they want."

I wasn't too worried. People who have passed through a sex gate might look young and immature, but they are fairly responsible individuals. Their youthful appearance is deceptive. Because of the risks involved, not to mention the sex change, most people put off going through the gates until they are old and sick and the gate is their only chance at life. When they emerge they are young again-most people look about eighteen years old. And they are a different sex, of course. But they still possess their memories. They can call on the maturity and wisdom they developed over a long life.

Besides, the gates themselves cull the herd, so to speak. Not everyone who goes in comes out-some vanish. No one knows where. It's part of the risk of going through. The corollary is that the people who emerge seem to belong to the more stable portion of society. Extensive studies have shown those who vanish are undesirables in one way or another-too old or sick perhaps for the regeneration process, or defective in some way that produced criminal behavior or an unalterably rigid belief system.

Still, that didn't mean I was relaxed about the mob outside. Despite the Fourth World appearance of the demonstrators I suspected the event was highly organized. Someone had found out about Larry Turner's intention to try the gate a second time and used that as an excuse to bring demonstrators to Ruston, all with the object of moving on to our house. Someone wanted to expose us as Seconders on the tabwebs that were carrying a broadcast of the event.

A car drove up to our front gate and a trunk popped open. Inside was a pile of signs. A tall man handed them out. A young woman thrust one in front of one of the cameras mounted on the outer walls surrounding my family homestead. It read: **SECONDS ARE THE DEVIL'S SPAWN.**

A couple of people grabbed the iron bars and tried to pull the gate open. The gates rattled, but I had no fear that the lock would give, and no fear that the mob could force it open. It was made of a super-strong alloy. It would hold.

I gave Rita a reassuring squeeze. This was our home. I was proud that my preparations were keeping it safe from this unprovoked attack.

Originally, the house had belonged to my grandfather. It was located in a grove of piney woods a few miles outside of Ruston. I was the homeowner of record now that my parents-young again after their own

sex change-were back in the military. Years ago, I remodeled the house to accommodate our new family, but it was forlornly empty except for the two of us. Maybe we should have been frightened-the two of us alone-but I didn't expect the demonstrators to become violent. They were the frightened ones, people who wanted answers to troubling questions about the sex gates. Unfortunately, we couldn't provide those answers, even if we wanted to.

Rita laid her head on my shoulder. Her liquid black eyes were filled with the compassion that was as much a part of her as her breathing.

"Jackson Lee Stuart, you know what they want."

By her use of my full name I knew that she was in a serious mood.

"Yes." I couldn't help sharing her sadness as I watched two men hold a banner high. "They want what they can't have."

I spotted another sign printed in red block letters against a black background. The two women holding it were wearing ersatz Fourth World jumpsuits. That told me they weren't really Fourth Worlders. I've never seen a clean Fourth Worlder jumpsuit with creases. Their banner read: **SECONDS! REVEAL YOUR SECRETS!**

I understood why they felt the way they did. Most of the people in the mob had gone through a gate through necessity, rather than choice. Because of the risk of vanishing, only the old, those with incurable illness, or bodies broken by accidents were willing to take the chance. Of course, with society in chaos, there are always those who are tossed through by rival gangs or competitors of one ilk or another. A trip through the sex gates is even considered a punishment for male criminals in certain countries. But most of the people in these last two categories vanished when they went into the gate anyway.

Given the choice, the majority of those who survived the first trip would love to go through a second time and come out with bodies of their original gender. But the second trip through a gate is more risky than the first. The first time, you have a pretty good chance of coming out, but the second time chances are about a million to one that you will vanish.

Yet a handful of people do succeed-people like Rita and me. We are called Seconders. It is not a term of endearment. The world resents those who can come to the table for seconds while they are denied that same privilege. Some of them resent us so much they want to forbid a second trip through to everyone.

Seconders have the enviable ability to pass back and forth through the gates at will, changing sexes each time. This means we are theoretically immortal-when we grow old or sick we can replace our ailing bodies with a brand-new model by going through the gate again. That alone would be enough to make lesser mortals hate us. But passing through a gate the second time brings other changes as well. Changes we Seconders are careful to keep secret. Of these, the most important is that our mental capabilities expand with each trip-a process we are still trying to understand.

Outside, the demonstrators shouted and shook their fists. Most of them were convinced there was a trick to successfully making successive passages, a trick that we Seconders selfishly kept to ourselves. That made us evil in their eyes. If such a secret did exist, it would be extremely valuable. The wealthy would gladly sacrifice a fortune to gain effective immortality. And to make that immortality fun, you could change your sex whenever you got bored and enjoy swinging both ways. For a Seconder, it was as easy as walking through one of the ubiquitous sex gates. But there was no secret to sell, and nothing we could tell this mob would appease it. Neither Rita nor I had any idea why we could pass through the gates safely while others vanished if they made the attempt.

She jerked her head up from my shoulder and looked around. I caught the touch of fear in her mind. Although I was sure we were safe, I pulled her tighter against me and voice-activated my computer, disguised as a gold sand dollar pendant hanging from my neck. But before I could connect to the police station, the big red cruiser pulled up outside. It was an old gasoline-powered vehicle, but heavily armed and armored, as most official cars are these days.

I let out a breath and relaxed. Unless those kids were carrying concealed weapons, the police would disperse the mob. There weren't going to be any nasty confrontations.

I should have been more alert, but I felt safe. These were my stomping grounds. Ruston was a rural town in East Texas, not Houston proper or what was left of L.A. Between global warming, rising oceans, and the social chaos brought by the gates, most big cities were dangerous. But in Ruston, I was a local boy. It was hard to believe anyone would harm me here. The townspeople hadn't shown much resentment toward us for being Seconders-at least so far. These demonstrators had to be out-of-towners brought in by some pressure group. I wondered which it might be, though it really didn't matter. There have always been groups and cults who oppose those they consider outsiders. They are usually driven by a few demented individuals who think they have the answers to all the evils in the world.

Rita beamed at the screen, pleased to see the police car. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck. She was in a mood to celebrate now.

"Kiss me," she breathed.

I didn't have to be asked twice. I leaned forward and the fresh scent of her lustrous hair filled my nostrils. Her sweet, full lips made a pleasant target. As my mouth touched hers the mounting sensual hum of her thoughts was interrupted by a flash of annoyed tolerance. The curve of her breast had touched the butt end of my little handgun, the one I kept concealed in the side pocket of my jirt. Rita didn't approve of weapons.

I twined an amused appreciation of her tolerance around her thought. I loved the way our minds interplayed since we'd become Seconders. Even if it was only surface thoughts-passing emotions really-we were so close it felt like mind-reading. She moved her upper body, shrugging the bulge of the gun out of her way. Our kiss deepened. As my eyelids drifted shut, a bright explosion flared on the screen and blotted out any further thought of making love.

Rita tore herself from our embrace. On the screen, metal rained through the air as the police cruiser settled back down on its base. It no longer had wheels and the interior was enveloped in flame. Both of us leapt to our feet. Bodies in the cab were twitching and jerking. Then the gas tank went with a huge roar, and all we could see was a tower of twisting fire and smoke.

"Oh, my god, no!" Rita screamed.

My first thought was to protect her. Her first thought was to help the men caught in the explosion. I grabbed the back of her blouse as she ran for the front door. She struggled from my grip, desperate to see if she could help those still alive around the cauldron of the cruiser's remains.

"Rita! Stop!"

The delicate silkskin fabric of her blouse ripped down the back. As she whirled around her eyes flashed with anger, and the remnants of the material slipped down, baring most of her breasts. I grabbed her upper arms and held on. She wriggled for a moment, and then shivered in my arms as I forced a thought into her mind. At the same time, I said it aloud.

“That was a missile! Those demonstrators didn't plan that! Another one could hit at any moment.”

CHAPTER TWO

My warning about the missile was a guess, but it seemed logical. Someone was using this demonstration to discredit us. I doubted the mob knew they were dupes. They were not innocents, however. Their Fourth World clothing must be fake. Such clothing was a uniform for the roving packs of disgruntled first passers interested in finding the secret of a second passage through the gates. Their demonstrations were almost always peaceful.

In contrast, the more militant groups thought Seconders should be rounded up and forced to divulge their secrets using any means that worked. From their actions, it was plain the mob at our gates belonged to that faction. They wanted to force us to talk. It was a simple plan with only one hitch. Seconders can't divulge information under duress even if we wanted to. Whenever we're questioned, we enter an autistic state. This change is completely involuntary. Nothing, not torture nor drugs nor endless questioning, can penetrate that aura of resistance.

The militants didn't believe that, though. They used every means they could think of to discredit us and turn public opinion against us. They believed if we were stripped of our rights as citizens the government would find a way to make us confess. They must plan to blame this missile-and the resulting carnage-on us somehow.

“Those poor people. Why would anyone do something so horrible?”

Rita stared mesmerized at the screen. Her blouse hung in tatters where it was tucked into the waistband of her shorts, leaving her naked from the waist up. The sight of her full, dark-tipped breasts rising and falling with her quick breathing held me in a trance of desire. Then my mind returned to the carnage outside.

The explosion had scattered bodies like tenpins. Flames from the burning gasoline engulfed some of them. It was a terrible sight, but it affected her more than it did me. Rita always had empathy for anyone who was suffering, and our passages through the sex gates had only enhanced that aspect of her mind. While she was growing more empathic I was developing in another direction. Now my increased ability to see and analyze patterns in any event kicked into gear.

A chill swept over me as I answered Rita's question. “Someone wants to make people think we were responsible. This whole demonstration is a set-up. I hope the chief wasn't in that cruiser.”

Apart from the fact that he was our friend, the chief would defend us from the inevitable accusations that we were responsible for the blast. He knew we would never do such a thing.

Tears slid down her coffee-and-cream colored cheeks. She is a wonderful person, warm and caring toward those who can't help their condition. But sometimes I think she takes identification with the underdog too far.

“No,” Rita sniffled, as she caught my thoughts. She smiled through her tears. “Someone has to care. That's part of what makes us human. And even if the chief wasn't in the cruiser, other troopers were.”

I was ashamed for a minute. We probably knew all the victims in the cruiser, at least casually. She was right-so far as it went. At the moment, though, all the caring in the world wasn't going to help the shredded bodies strewn around our front gate.

I placed both my hands on Rita's face and turned her away from the screen. She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against my neck. I stroked the warm, silken flesh of her back, giving her the chance to

get her emotions under control, while I kept my attention fixed on the screen.

My enhanced mental abilities warned me that ambushing the cruiser wasn't part of the demonstrators' agenda. That could only mean that someone else was using the mob to advance a bigger scheme. I reached those conclusions with lightning speed. With my ability to spot patterns I could take any situation and grasp its many interrelated aspects. That made it almost child's play to figure out what was going to happen, provided I had enough data.

As I stared at the smoking cruiser I knew that this incident was only a small part of something greater. The knowledge flooded my mind like a revelation as soon as the cruiser blew. I felt an ominous presence behind the burning destruction at my front gate—a presence that was a threat to us, and perhaps the nation as a whole. If we Seconders lost our freedom, everyone lost.

"Shouldn't we go downstairs?" Rita slumped against me, thinking about our fortified shelter in the basement. "You said there might be another missile."

I shook my head, relying on my newborn ability. "I don't think so."

Further analysis suggested that the incident was connected to the reinvigorated Church of the Gates. They didn't intend to kill us. If we died, we would be innocent victims, like the officers in the cruiser. I suspected this meant the church had some inkling of our closely guarded secrets.

I didn't need any special gift to know there would be hell to pay if the world found out repeated passages through the gates were making Seconders smarter. If people realized we could sense the emotions and attitudes of anyone standing close to us, we would probably be rounded up and locked away for our own 'protection'.

The gift was even more powerful when we were in close proximity to someone we were emotionally involved with. For instance, I can read Rita's surface thoughts a good deal of the time. When we make love, not only do our bodies join together, but our minds share a passionate union, as well. The experience goes beyond the ability of words to describe.

There was one other ability that we Seconders were developing. Perhaps I should say many abilities, for it wasn't the same for all of us. Like the autistic state a Seconder went into under questioning, some developed what used to be known as idiot-savant talents, except we are the farthest thing from idiots. These are gifts that manifest, things we can do without knowing why or how.

Rita, for instance, was developing the ability to discern exactly how much help a down and out person needed or deserved in order to begin functioning in society again. As for myself, I wondered if it was a propensity for telepathy (or maybe just enhanced empathy) that had enabled us to make the second-and subsequent-passages and turned us into Seconders.

A final chilling thought occurred to me as I contemplated the secrets we had to hide. What if the federal security boys had infiltrated the Gaters and were instigating this renewed outbreak of Gater activity? It wouldn't be the first time the government corrupted a church and used it for its own ends.

I held Rita until the tears stopped, then led her over to the big lounge. I turned off the screen, but she turned it right back on. The demonstrators had scattered, running for safety after the missile struck. That confirmed my theory that someone had usurped their demonstration for ulterior purposes.

Rita insisted on watching while more police cruisers and ambulances arrived. Medics gathered the dead, the living, and such body parts as could be found. Three of the units came from the next county. Ruston was too small to have more than one emergency vehicle, and even that one had to be subsidized by

private citizens.

Our phones beeped as the media tried to reach us for comment. I ignored them.

A split screen showed paramedics tossing a few still-twitching bodies through the Ruston sex gate. They were so horribly injured there was no chance of survival otherwise. Unfortunately, many of the demonstrators had already gone through the gate once, so there was only a million-to-one chance that they would come through young and whole again. Anyone who did would be a Second, of course, and ironically one of us.

Only one person came out the other side, and I suspected it was a first passage as soon as I saw the confused expression on the face of the newly minted woman. After settling her down, the medics waited to be sure no one else was going to emerge. The sex change is instantaneous so a few minutes was longer than necessary. When no one appeared, they departed, sirens warbling. I have no idea why they waited-anyone successfully passing through a gate was as healthy as a horse. Maybe they were simply curious to see how many of those they had tossed in survived the trip.

We watched from the comfort of our fortress home as the tragedy outside unfolded. I didn't know what to say, a frequent condition for me. Rita was hurting for those poor people. They had come to our front entrance to make a statement about something they thought was unfair. They couldn't have known the Church of the Gates intended to make a statement, too-a much more emphatic one.

"I wonder if Messler has caught this on the news, and what he thinks about it." The words slipped out without thinking.

Rita shrugged. "His thought processes are so far beyond ours. He's impossible to figure out."

I agreed. Messler Scribner was one of the first humans to make a successful second passage through a gate, and the first to deliberately return again and again. He had sensed almost immediately that each successive passage enhanced his mental abilities.

But given my intuition about this attack, I was thinking about Messler for a different reason entirely. He had founded the Church of the Gates soon after his first passage through a sex gate. He was a woman then, and called herself Messilinda.

Messilinda. Her name conjured up memories of those early days. I was a college student when the gates materialized everywhere on earth, suddenly and with no clue as to their origin. I lived with my buddies, Don and Russell. When a green, glowing archway appeared in front of us Don rushed into it, and became Donna.

In the upheaval that followed, my girlfriend-Rita-moved in with us for safety. We were a couple, but Rita had never been a possessive woman. She cared about Don and the problems that he faced adjusting to life as a woman. When she saw that Donna needed someone to teach her how to make love as a female, she volunteered me-unknown to me at the time. She spiked Donna's drink with a pheromone and once I caught the scent I all but fell into her bed. Once I was over my inhibition about making love to my former male best friend, the three of us became lovers. Later, Donna took Russell into her bed and the four of us formed our own safe family in the midst of a world in crisis.

After we finished with college I made a good living writing about the gates for the tabwebs. One of my goals was to interview the mysterious woman who ran the Church of the Gates. The world didn't know then that Messilinda was once Messler Scribner. People would have been more leery of the church if they knew its founder was a one-hundred-year-old, incredibly rich and manipulative man transformed into a sexy redhead.

With the wisdom born of a long life, Messilinda realized that the gates would bring sweeping changes to humanity. She decided we needed a new paradigm, like a religion, to funnel some of the discontent into nonviolent channels. After a hundred years of taking charge, Messler-now Messilinda-didn't hesitate to found a church.

The plan didn't work, but that wasn't Messler's fault. His second trip through the sex gate was totally unplanned. A would-be assassin shot her while she made a speech in front of a gate. The shot toppled her backward through the gate. Messilinda became an eighteen-year-old Messler, and ceased to have anything to do with the church. I'm sure he left the church to be free to explore his astonishing new mental powers. After his departure, radical factions took over.

Meanwhile, I made my first trip through the gate entirely against my will. Rita had been stabbed and was dying. I rushed her to the gate to save her life, slipped, and fell through. We both emerged-now Rez and Li instead of Rita and Lee-and learned to cope with the change in our relationship. I went from being a nondescript male with rust-colored hair and pale blue eyes to a small, voluptuous female with waving auburn locks and a sea-blue gaze beneath thick lashes. Rita turned into a handsome man with thick black hair and a smoking, sexy stare.

With Messler's departure, the Church of the Gates eventually meddled in politics and even instigated a short nuclear exchange. All four of us were hit hard by radiation from that attack. We were forced to go through the gate a second time. Radiation sickness and impending death gave us no choice despite the million-to-one risk we wouldn't survive. That forced trip cost us a lot. Russell and Donna went into the gate with us-the first trip for Russell and the second for Donna-but never came out. Their loss was a blow we still felt.

All that Rita and I cared about now was whether we would ever be able to manipulate the gates enough to find out what had happened to them. Certainly they had been no sicker than we were. And both were above-normal human beings. Russell was a brilliant scientist and Donna was a mathematician. I saw no reason why they should have vanished. But vanish they did.

We were learning a little about the gates with each passage, and not incidentally, more about ourselves as well. Learning too much, maybe. I was beginning to be leery of taking many more passages for fear that we might become something more-or less-than human. Now I wondered if someone had learned of our repeated trips through. Was that the reason behind today's demonstration?

I heard a loud sniff and looked down. Tears streaked Rita's cheeks as she watched the ambulances drive away. It was obvious she still felt all the human emotions. She reached into my shirt pocket for a handkerchief and used it to wipe her eyes.

"Why did that happen?" Rita nodded at the screen, as she handed me back my hanky. "I wish Messler were here. He always seemed to know what to do."

I pushed the hanky back into my pocket and tucked her more firmly into the circle of my arm. She continued to stare at the screen.

"Whoever did this was motivated by fear of death," I said.

"Those were kids! They had another eighty or a hundred years left."

"Uh-uh," I reminded her. "Most of them were probably old folks who went through a gate for health reasons. Becoming young again hasn't taken away their fear of death. Nothing does. Once you get old enough to start watching for the black camel to kneel by your tent, it's never far from your mind."

"How do you know, smarty? Oh. You're right, of course."

Rita nodded as she recalled the impressions she'd picked up from first-timers. We both discerned surface emotions, and sometimes whole thoughts from strangers. We had sensed the deep fear of death emanating from old people as they struggled to talk themselves into risking their first passage. We could even understand some of what they felt, although neither of us had aged beyond our twenties. We were still at that young age when we went through the gates accidentally the first time, and it was only a few years later that the damned Gaters instigated their brief war.

"There's something else involved," I said, tightening my grip on her.

She sensed it even before I said the words. "The Gaters are behind this. I'm not sure of the total pattern, but I know blowing up that police cruiser was their work."

"But why? What did that accomplish?"

"I'm not sure, sweetheart. Messler might know. He's way ahead of us."

"Well, why don't we ask him?" Rita said, with perfect logic.

"Her," I corrected. "Or at least he was a her when we talked a few days ago."

"Talk to her again," Rita demanded, her dark eyes flashing with suppressed anger.

We Seconders avoid communicating or getting together very often for fear government snoops, or worse, mindless mobs, would dream up a conspiracy and either lock us up or eliminate us completely. As a matter of fact, there were rumors of that exact scenario happening in the fractured political landscape of China, and in some Middle Eastern countries. We walked very lightly these days. Rita and I were together because we became Seconders together. We are the only couple so far that has accomplished that feat-not that we had anything to do with it, consciously at least.

"Ask him why they were here, right on our doorstep," Rita said.

And that convinced me. Why had they congregated at our place? How had the Gaters found out that Rita and I were Seconders? To the best of my knowledge, no one knew except a very few people in Ruston who had been present when we went through the gates the second time-the doc, paramedics, and a couple of others. The government security agencies knew, of course, but so far they were keeping any information they had on Seconders quiet, because they didn't know anything and hated to admit it.

That thought popped another bit of data into the pattern: what if government security agents, or a rogue section within the security apparatus, had goosed the Gaters to congregate here? That would make the government's secret agency responsible for the cruiser explosion. The whole event smelled like something they would do to shake up us Seconders. They were desperate to pry loose some information. And I would further bet the Gaters were aware of the manipulation.

Actually, I was surprised our semi-telepathic abilities had not become public knowledge yet-and I wondered how much longer we could keep the secret. However, that was something we had little control over. I tabled that thought, and wondered instead whether the feds had an official policy of harassing us, or whether this tragedy on our doorstep was instigated by a rogue cell within the federal security apparatus.

I stopped holding Rita long enough to program the phone, so that any conversation with Messler would be re-encrypted with a new algorithm. I even concealed my hand movements. If there was a bug in the house I hadn't discovered, it couldn't pick up the key that way. Then I dialed his number from the keypad

rather than talking to the phone. Call me paranoid, but once you've been gone over by federal security thugs, you become very careful.

Messler's number answered with a recorded message, encrypted for Rita and me. The phone began a faint buzzing, the surface noise of a program that turned a conversation to gibberish unless you had the key. I had it read out rather than take it vocally. We watched the words scroll up the screen: Hi Lee, Rita. I saw the news and am on my way. Meet me at the cafe by the Ruston gate after dark. Be of good cheer. Momentous news probable.

"She's coming here!" Rita said.

I could understand her excitement. We seldom saw Messler, or any other Second.

"It will be nice to have some company," I said.

Since Donna and Russell had failed to make it through the gate we rattled about the big old house like the last two crunchies in a box of cereal. When you've been part of a loving family of four, you find memories lurking around every corner, in every bed.

An amused expression crossed Rita's face. I followed her mind back in time. She was thinking about how we'd met Messler. I blushed. Messilinda was a gorgeous female. I was doing an interview with her and Rita had tagged along. Rita stayed in the outer office while I conducted the interview.

Meanwhile, Messilinda, who was richly enjoying her transformation from a tottering old man into a woman with the voluptuous body of an eighteen-year-old, got busy seducing me. Rita learned about the seduction when I replayed the interview for her. I had forgotten to stop recording when the interview ended. I was embarrassed, but she was highly amused.

"Remember when we first met her?" Rita smiled, showing her dimples.

"That was a long time ago."

"So it was. But I'll bet you react the same way now as you did then."

"Maybe. I haven't seen him as a woman in years."

I knew he would look the same, though. When we pass through the sex gate, our new bodies are constructed from our cell's genetic instructions. As a woman, he would look like Messilinda each time.

"You should talk," I added, taking the offensive. "It seems to me that you've developed a propensity for blondes since then."

Now it was her turn to blush, but she didn't. Rita wasn't embarrassed by sex. Sexual expression was as natural to her as presents at Christmas time. Over the years she had unwrapped a few delectable blond packages-while she herself was still female. In fact, Rita was so lacking in any kind of jealousy that I was a participant in most of these unwrapping sessions.

Now she grinned and conjured up a particularly memorable scene in her mind. I caught the image she was sending me, and that ended that. Almost.

"I like redheads, too," she said.

"My hair isn't red-it's rust-colored."

"Who said I was talking about you?"

I remembered then that as a woman Messler had a glorious flame of red hair. Rita was teasing me. But all these erotic memories were having an effect. I felt a stirring in my groin. I pinched my thumb and forefinger together to check the time. There was plenty of daylight left. I took her hand and we headed for the bedroom.

CHAPTER THREE

Making love body to body, mind to mind, is the closest thing imaginable to two people becoming one. Our minds merged as our bodies connected, and we melded into one organism. Like a river flowing into the sea, my sense of identity joined with Rita's and together we plunged into an ocean of bliss. The pleasure mounted to an intensity that was almost beyond bearing. I shuddered under the caresses I lavished on Rita's body and she tasted her own sweet kisses on my lips. Together we shared every delicious movement, every lingering sensation, and the incredible explosive orgasm that ended it. As always, it took long tender moments for our psyches to separate and become only one body, only one mind again.

As soon as I was able, I propped myself up on one elbow and admired Rita. She was stretched out on her back in our king-sized bed. Her head was turned toward me, and her breasts trembled with each breath she took. My gaze lingered on her exposed body, drinking in her many attractions. I never tired of cataloging Rita's erotic delights. Her slender feet and long tan legs were tangled in the bed sheet. The voluptuous curve of her hips narrowed into a small waist. Her breasts, round and firm with dark nipples, were still damp from my kisses. A wealth of thick, black hair fell down over her shoulders and her sleepy chocolate eyes smiled at me from under long, black lashes.

I offered her a lazy, lecherous leer, and she smiled back, pleased to bask in my admiration. I still can't believe that she picked me to be her lover. When Rita and I first met, I was insecure and awkward in the presence of beautiful women. She had to practically trip me outside of our biology class to get me to talk to her. Now she rolled close to me and let her thoughts play with mine. However, my mind concentrated on one thing: the delectable motions her breasts made as they shifted their center of gravity when she moved.

She pulled up the sheet with a grin, and I was forced to think about our situation again. I wondered why Messler felt such urgency to see us. It was unusual for him to risk coming here. It wasn't safe, especially after the horrible mess outside our gate. Each time before when we met him, and it had only been a few times, we gathered at a carefully arranged location, and he created some sort of diversion so that we wouldn't be seen associating together.

"Maybe he discovered something important about the sex gates," I said aloud without any explanation, but Rita had been following my mental meanderings and knew exactly what I was talking about.

"But why come here?" Rita asked. "We've always met him in North Houston."

"Maybe it's something about us he's discovered."

That could be. The fact that Rita and I both became Seconders at the same time was an unending source of conversation among us: was it simply a billion to one coincidence? From the start Messler thought there must be a reason. But none of us could pinpoint any factor out of the ordinary between Rita and me. I'd thought it must be wild chance, but all at once I wasn't so sure.

Rita stretched her arms above her head, which resulted in more interesting phenomena lower down. "Well, we'll know soon. It's getting dark."

"So it is."

I turned on the pickup from the front gate and saw that all the vehicles, even the burnt-out cruiser, were gone. There was an associated message on the pickup. The police chief wanted to see us at our convenience for questioning. I wasn't worried about that. The chief was an old friend of the family, and he knew we were Seconders. He had showed no resentment at all, nor had he bandied the knowledge around.

We both knew why Messler wanted to meet after dark. There would be less chance of being recognized. I also suspected he was planning on making another passage through a gate while in Ruston. It was an out-of-the-way place. A passage here would be safer for him.

God knows how many times he had gone through the gates by now. He never said, or possibly couldn't say for one reason or another. I distinctly remember his warning, though, back when he spoke to us after we became Seconders.

"Go through the gates enough times and you will become something more-and less-than human."

I suspected he had long since passed that point if his prediction was true. Almost from the first moment the gates appeared, Messler had used his fortune and his intelligence to interact with them. When he went through the first time, he took an enormous risk-very few so old re-emerged. The attempted assassination accounted for his second trip. After that, he chose to go through again and again, long before anyone else dared to try-deliberately, anyway. He believed that by going through, he could learn to control the transition and learn something more about the sex gates themselves-the biggest mystery in the history of the world.

Rita and I followed his lead. We had gone through almost a dozen times, gaining a bit in intelligence with each trip. We discovered that we were apparently developing idiot-savant talents without the idiot part. Finally, the last time we passed through a gate, we were able to delay the change for an indeterminable amount of time, enough to sense the existence of a super intelligence that was responsible for the gates' very existence.

Messler started to refer to this super intelligence as the gate masters. He believed they weren't aware that successive passages increased the intelligence of humans and might eventually allow us to control the gates ourselves. I wasn't so certain about that, but I had to admit he had been right about things so far. It was always a bit of a risk going through the gates, but like Messler we wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery, although we had a personal reason. We were determined to find Donna and Russell again.

But there were pleasant side effects, as well. Rita and I enjoyed switching sexual identities ever so often. The first thing we wanted after the change was to get home and into bed-and sometimes we didn't wait even that long.

Rita curled an arm around my neck and pulled my head down for a quick kiss, then rolled away. As she bounced up from the bed I enjoyed the stimulating sight of unfettered breasts swaying in response to her movements. You'd think such sights would have lost their fascination since I've been a woman myself several times, but I was a man now and my reactions were once again those of a typical male-for which I was deeply grateful.

"Let's get dressed," Rita said. "We need to get to Barney's before long."

Barney's was the local beanery, a cafe, watering hole, and general store all rolled into one. It was located close to the Ruston gate.

I dressed in my usual garb, boots and jeans, with a jirt worn over a tee shirt so I would have a side pocket to carry my little automatic. I never go out unarmed any more, nor do many other licensed

citizens. I suspect half the population of Texas packs, even though we pay for the privilege of being able to carry a gun by being subject to militia duty whenever needed. I had been called up once, and the ensuing combat was horrifying. But the prospect of being caught without a gun by some of the radicals loose in the world these days was worse.

Even Rita carried a little derringer usually tucked into in her bra or tops. During the times I was a woman, that's what I did, even though I never liked wearing a bra. Other times, I said to hell with it and simply strapped a holster on, especially if I was going somewhere dangerous to women. I had been forced to watch once while a man started to rape Rita; I had no desire to experience rape in person.

It was May and the temperatures were rising in East Texas. Rita put on a pair of white shorts and a scarlet silkskin blouse with the tails tied under her breasts. Her derringer rested in a little pocket behind the knot. With her golden-brown skin and dark hair, she looked good enough for a gourmet meal, with no need for dessert. She winked at me, acknowledging my lusty admiration, and we walked outside. I reset the security system to maximum level, since I did not want to come back home to find someone waiting for us. My phone confirmed the setting.

We drove the few miles to Ruston, and parked in front of the grocery store. Rita needed to pick up a few things. After we put our packages in the car, we decided enjoy the balmy evening and walk to Barney's.

Ruston is a pleasant place. It has a renovated downtown that has been restored to resemble a country town in the early part of the last century. There are lots of brick buildings that host small shops and department stores. The renovations weren't done to attract tourists, but rather were a town project agreed on by the taxpayers. Most of the inhabitants were old-timers (though many of them look no older than their teens or twenties after going through a gate) and they enjoyed the nostalgic look. Only the facades were old-fashioned; inside, the shops were as modern as anywhere else. But Barney's was a throwback, the real thing, but that sure didn't hurt its business.

The sidewalks were quaint relics made of cement. They rambled for miles around the central portion of the town, and sometimes degenerated into footpaths. Other places, they expanded to accommodate scooters, skaters, chair cars and other small one-person vehicles. We kept to the broadest sidewalks, walking hand-in-hand. As we walked, our thoughts and words twined in and out like a random computer program. We were both thinking about Messler, though in different ways. I was idly wondering if he was calling himself Messilinda again, since he was a woman once more. Meanwhile Rita, ever more emotional, was hoping he had discovered something about the gates which would help us find Russell and Donna.

I wanted to find them, too, but I didn't have much hope based on what we'd discovered so far. The gates remained beyond our comprehension. They resembled huge turquoise altars scattered over the earth in hundreds of thousands, or perhaps millions. And like altars, they accepted worshipers, but revealed little about whatever deity lay behind them.

We didn't pass many people as we walked, despite the balmy Texas evening. Probably a lot of residents caught the contretemps at our entrance on the evening news or from an instant tabweb broadcast and stayed in to follow developments. Those people who were out and about appeared to be in their late teens or early twenties. A young child was a rare sight indeed. A person from the twentieth century would have looked around and concluded that they were in a college town and these were students. But, in fact, many of these people had once been elderly or sick or both. The demographics of the world had changed considerably in the last decade or so.

Barney's wasn't crowded, so I spotted Messler right away, even though he was a male, rather than a

female as we had thought. He was casually disguised in work clothes and his hair was shorter than is normal for a male who had just come out of the gates. He had touched the short hair up with gray, and I saw that he was wearing contact lenses that changed his stunning green eyes to a dull shade of brown. What he couldn't disguise were the clear, wrinkle-free skin and repressed energy of a young man entering his prime.

I knew immediately why he had come as a male. Ruston was still countrified in many ways; a strange young female oozing sexuality would have attracted more attention than an unknown man. And, of course, he had chosen to meet us at Barney's because there was no recorder there, either inside or out. The locals wouldn't put up with one. How Messler knew that was another story; he had never been to Barney's to my knowledge. Probably he had it scouted by one of his minions when he decided to meet us in person.

I waved to some casual friends as we ambled over to the booth where Messler was sipping a soda while reading something on his computer. His head was down, but he was relying on a mind-touch to tell him when we arrived.

It worked. I felt the sharp presence of his mind probing mine. I almost didn't recognize his touch; he had changed even more since we had last seen him. The gestalt of his mind pattern was becoming more unusual each time I touched it. I didn't know whether that was good or bad. While I was wondering, he withdrew his mind to a cold place where I couldn't follow.

We slid into the booth on the other side of the table. I automatically guided Rita to the inside where she would be more protected. That showed my old-fashioned upbringing and drew amused mental chuckles from both of them. I didn't mind. I've changed a lot since the gates arrived, but my original male outlook still takes control a great deal of the time, especially when it comes to Rita.

"Hi," I said, for the benefit of anyone listening.

The three of us were already exchanging greetings via our new abilities, brief snatches of emotion that told him how much we appreciated his coming to us after the tragedy earlier in the day. He rolled up the computer screen and stuck it into his shirt pocket. He reached out with both hands and touched each of ours.

"Pardon the disguise. I don't want to be recognized."

My hand tingled where he touched it, and his voice sounded strange and otherworldly. Something about the rhythm of his speech had changed. Even his face wasn't as I remembered it. His eyes held the oddest look, the infinite stare of a fanatic who has had a revelation of some sort. For the second time that day I remembered the words he had voiced to us before we began trying the gates repeatedly. You may become something more-and possibly less-than human. A chill draft from the air-conditioning vent made my skin crawl.

"This is Ruston. You should be safe here," I said inanely, staring at him.

He shrugged. "You'd be surprised. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you both, and then-"

He broke off and stared out the window. From our booth we could see across the sidewalk toward the edge of town. The Ruston sex gate stood only a couple of hundred yards away, glowing in the darkness, a twenty-foot-tall enigma. He didn't have to say anything else. I realized he intended to go through that gate tonight. He always picked small, out-of-the-way gates to go through. He was one of the richest persons in the world, and a publicly known Second, so he spent an enormous amount of time trying to avoid publicity.

"What have you learned, Messler? And why come here to tell us?" This whole business seemed more and more like some sort of tabweb spy story.

He continued to stare toward the gate with fierce intensity. Abruptly, he slid out of the booth.

"Come on. I'll tell you while we walk."

I stood up while Rita touched her phone to the terminal on the table to tell the waitress we were leaving without ordering. She joined me, eyebrows raised. I shrugged.

We stepped out into the warm Texas night. The sky was clear and bright with stars. An almost-full moon lit the scene. Together we strolled across the street and onto the sidewalk that would take us to the Ruston sex gate.

"Stop where you are," a man said, coming up beside us.

He kept his voice low to avoid attracting attention, but his words had the snap of one accustomed to command. Another man stepped up to our other side. We had blundered into the arms of two federal security men. I knew that's what they were by the grim and purposeful look on their faces. Both radiated the characteristic paranoid mind pattern of the federal bureaucracy.

Rita and I froze while they presented their IDs in a perfunctory manner. They ignored us. They also ignored a young man and woman who strolled hand in hand toward us. They came up beside our group, glanced our way, and maneuvered around us. I noticed that they went a few steps, stopped, and turned back. The young man, a tall sandy-haired blond, wore a look of intense concentration.

Both security thugs dropped their identity cards onto the sidewalk with a clatter. The man who had spoken stared at Messler, his eyes blank as if he'd gone blind. His companion was stricken with the same stupid expression. The two of them wandered off onto the grass away from us.

"Come on," Messler said. "There may not be much time."

He jogged toward the gate. As he ran, the couple that had passed us closed back in on each side of him. I tugged Rita's hand, and we started after them.

"What's going on?" Rita cried. Her hand went up to the knot of her blouse where she kept her gun.

The young couple continued running, one on each side of Messler. At first I feared they might be more federal agents, but I sensed their fierce protectiveness toward him. They were bodyguards, I concluded. It was hard for me to be certain because Messler's sharper thought pattern overrode everything else around him. Once I knew they were not after us I began looking around for any other possible dangers. I didn't know what else to do, and Messler wasn't explaining.

We ran down a path and across a stretch of lawn toward the Ruston gate, our feet pounding on hard ground. I knew this gate well. My brother and parents had gone through years ago. Later, Rita, me, Russell, and Donna had staggered through, dying of radiation poisoning. Its curved green arch seemed to mock me as I ran. Two of my friends had entered that gate, never to return.

Beside me, the young man grinned in triumph as we neared the gate. I sensed his one goal was to get Messler safely there. I wondered how he and his companion had stopped the feds. Were they Seconders with extraordinary mental powers? Or was it something simpler?

Despite the demonstration at our house earlier, I knew the feds were here because of Messler. He was such a recluse and was protected by so much money and so many layers of security that ordinarily they

couldn't get near him. But tonight one of his codes had been cracked somewhere along the line, perhaps even the line into my security system. Now that they knew his whereabouts, they intended to bring him in for questioning as they had once before. They never got anything from a Secondar, but they never gave up trying. What a government can't understand, it attempts to coerce and suppress, and Seconders were no exception.

As we ran up the last rise in front of the gate Messler quickly explained what was going on, mixing words with mental images to be sure we got the picture. The bodyguards paid no attention. They scanned the surroundings, alert for another attack. If anyone else was on the scene they stayed hidden. Maybe they were frightened by the sight of their fellow agents wandering mindlessly over the lawn, or perhaps the feds only had time to send those two agents. But even so, it wouldn't be long before others arrived on the scene. Meanwhile, Messler talked as he ran.

"I wanted you two to be nearby when I went through a gate again, in case I don't make it. If I do, I want you with me afterwards. The feds are planning to engineer another crackdown on Seconders. Randy and Terri will explain more if I don't come through this time."

"Why?"

Rita and I both mouthed the word at the same time, accompanying it with the mental question. Why would you not come through on this particular attempt?

We arrived at the gate, and Messler leaned his head back to stare up at the arch, his expression grim. "The last time I passed through a gate, I got the impression that one more passage would do it for me. I hope on this passage I will be able to understand their origin, and enough of their workings to control them at long last. It's been building up and now it's come to a head. I wanted to talk to you at length, but somehow the goddamned government got the word I was headed this way."

He turned his unnerving stare on me. His eyes gleamed with fathomless intelligence and an almost childlike anticipation of events to come. He was certainly not afraid, even after his narrow escape from detention by those federal security agents.

"What do you think they are?" I asked, meaning the gates, not the agents.

A pattern was forming, one that didn't bode well. But I couldn't make it come together, and I wanted more information in case Messler did vanish. I already knew why he wanted us close if he learned anything more. He still held onto his hunch that Rita and I were something special, because we remained the only couple to have become Seconders together. Personally, I thought it was wild coincidence. But I couldn't discount the fact that Messler Scribner was a man who had made his fortune with hunches. He might have told me more, but as he glanced toward me a second time his eyes opened wider. He saw something behind me that caused him to turn and sprint into the waiting gate.

"Meet me on the other side!" Messler shouted. His bodyguards split, one running around each side of the gate. "I think they're-

Messler miscalculated, or perhaps he didn't. In normal circumstances, he would have had plenty of time to get a word or two more out, but something happened. I have watched many people go through the gates. Always, when they get to a certain point at the entrance, they simply pop out of existence on that side and reappear (most of the time) on the other side. This time, the hazy nimbus within the arch reached out and yanked Messler into it, as if some entity within the gate didn't want him to say any more. On the other hand, he was running at the gate. Maybe he dove forward and my mind completed the image. Eyewitnesses are notoriously inaccurate, and there's no reason I should be any different. At any rate, he popped out of existence before he got the last word out.

I stared dumbfounded, trying to decide if I should trust my eyes or not. After blinking a few times, I got hold of myself and followed one of the bodyguards around to the other side. My heart hammered, and I prayed that I would see Messler emerge as a female, ready to continue telling us what he saying as he entered the gates. Rita joined me and we waited.

And waited.

He never appeared. I was standing there befuddled, holding Rita's hand in a death grip, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was the female bodyguard. She was a cute young blond who was dressed in tight, semi-translucent jeans and translucent top. Many women wear such clothes to show off their assets, and hers were nothing to hide. But I sensed in this case her clothing-or lack of clothing-was designed to attract attention to her and away from Messler. As I gazed into big blue eyes filled with uncanny intelligence I also suspected that the blond curls and sexy outfit hid a penetrating mind. I examined her outfit one more time to admire the effect. I wondered where she carried her weapon, but it was only an idle thought; there were more pressing matters for us to worry about.

"Mr. Stuart, I don't think he made it through this time. We need to go before more of the feds show up. In fact-" She broke off.

I looked around for 'Mr. Stuart' for a second before I realized she was talking to me. It had been a long time since I had been addressed by anything but my first name. My glance took in another purposeful figure heading in my direction. He was a large male. His lips moved in the familiar motion of a person talking to the air. In fact, he was addressing his hidden body computer. His hand moved up to the pocket of his windbreaker, and I knew what he was feeling for. At least one more federal agent had arrived.

Whether he was calling for backup, or sounding a general alert, he should have been watching from both sides. While he had his eye on Rita, me, and the blond, her companion came up from behind and pointed a finger toward him. The agent reached up to touch his neck and blinked in a bemused fashion. I watched his face turn blank. He wandered off on some errand apparent only to him.

"Come on, let's get out of here," the cute blond said. She grabbed my arm.

"Wait a minute!" Rita shook off the touch of the other of Messler's erstwhile bodyguards, the male one.

"No time, not unless you want to talk to the feds again."

The man's deep baritone held conviction, and the mind touch he added to his words carried a sharp warning. Rita and I barely caught it, but it was enough. I suddenly realized the blond girl was reaching out to us with her thoughts, as well. A certain clumsiness to their telepathy told me they were new Seconders, in the process of learning how to use their ability, but the apprehension they broadcast was enough to grab our attention.

I got Rita's assent and we went with them. We had only taken a few steps when an electricar pulled up beside us. The driver jumped out and hurried off, leaving the car to the four of us; that was a good thing since five would have been a really tight fit.

I still didn't know which guard was named Randy and which was Terri. Their names could have been Randi and Terry, for all I knew. I found out by asking the driver, the blond woman.

"I'm Terri. This big lug beside me is Randy. After his first trip through the gate he became Randi with an 'i', which is why he talks so much."

That must have been a private joke. So far he hadn't said a word. The big lug nodded in our direction.

Randy was tall and muscular with sandy hair, cut short and slicked back. He had probing blue eyes.

"I'm Jackson Lee Stuart and this is Rita Hernandez," I told them.

"We know."

Terri brushed back a lock of hair with a quick gesture. She didn't glance at me, but kept her gaze on the road and on the rearview mirror, as if expecting trouble.

"Where are we going? And why?" Rita asked.

I hadn't even had time to think about our destination. I was still bemused by Messler's failure to make it through a gate after so many passages.

The little electricars were made for couples who didn't mind sitting close together. I was in front with Terri. Our shoulders and thighs touched, and the warmth of her body made me feel sweaty despite the cool night. She was as cute as a bug. The fact that we were on the run from danger didn't interfere with my appreciation of her beauty.

She glanced at me as she drove. "Messler left instructions to take care of you if he didn't make it. Remember how he said that the feds were cracking down? Well, they are, and the Gaters are acting up, too."

"How do you know what he said? You weren't there." Telepathic abilities weren't that good so soon after a passage through the gates, and especially not with strangers.

Terri grinned, and the cutest dimple appeared in the cheek turned toward me. "We specialize in being unobtrusive. Besides, I had a mike trained on you the whole time."

"Why?" Rita wanted to know.

"In case you weren't really you. I was matching voiceprints."

"Oh," I said, inadequately. Messler always had been thorough.

"You still didn't say where we are going," Rita insisted.

"The first thing we're going to do is ditch this car." Randy spoke for the first time. He was already opening the door on his side.

Terri pulled to a halt on a side street and jumped out. She motioned for us to follow. She and Randy herded us into a larger vehicle that was parked and waiting. We drove off again, this time with Randy at the wheel. His handsome Nordic face was set in lines of grim concentration. With their shared blond good looks, I wondered if they were sister and brother. Almost before I finished the thought, my knack for pattern analysis told me they weren't-but that they were something more than simple bodyguards. It wouldn't be long before I was to find out how much more.

Two cars later we were well beyond Ruston. Our shepherds began to relax a bit. Rita and I sat together in the back seat, holding hands. I was finally beginning to think purposefully again about our future.

"Messler said the feds were going to be cracking down on Seconders. Did he have any plans? What was he going to do about it?"

Terri turned in her seat to face us, her expression solemn. "He was going to try to protect as many of us as he could. You know he has-had-more money than God. These days that can accomplish a lot."

“He's gone,” I said.

“You're here, though, Mr. Stuart.”

“So?” I didn't get it.

“Messler designated you as his heir. It's all arranged.”

CHAPTER FOUR

After I finished college, I made my living by my skill with words. But once you've tasted the total comprehension that comes with exchanging thought and feeling mind-to-mind, words pale into insignificance. Not long after I became a Second, I gave up my lucrative career as a tabweb reporter specializing in stories about the sex gates. Words seemed useless to convey the mysteries that lay before us then.

Now I've started this chronicle of the events that led to so much upheaval. But I find myself struggling to convey the instantaneous concepts that leapt into my mind at Terri's announcement of my inheritance. It's difficult. After repeated trips through the gates, my thought processes didn't fit into the common human mold anymore. My skin crawled with the icy cold touch of premonition-or maybe my ability to see patterns. I knew Rita and I were on the verge of a graduation ceremony of some sort.

Since becoming Seconders, we had spent most of our time arranging passages through gates at places where we wouldn't be recognized. After each passage we were able to meld our minds and bodies at a deeper level. Grim experience had taught Seconders that it was necessary to wait long periods between each passage. Those who tried to go through too often vanished. We let several weeks pass between trips, and usually more.

During those weeks we tried to make sense out of our almost incomprehensible experiences inside the gate, so far without any notable success. Early on, we started to sense some presence behind the gates. But always it was a tantalizing glimpse, nothing more. After a while, we concentrated on finding a way to slow down the trip through. Normally, it is over and you are through in the blink of an eye.

However, the last time we went through, we were able to slow down the transformation process. This time it took a blink and a half, and we got a faint glimmer of what the gates were about. Both of us had felt an all-powerful and faintly condescending presence, which controlled the gates. We'd felt it before, but this time I sensed that it was not floating in space, but in an actual location-somewhere.

Somehow. Somewhere. Vague words, insubstantial, like a fog. Like I said, words were never designed to convey these concepts. The ever-mysterious sex gates were as hard to pin down as fog, too. When they first appeared in numbers estimated in the hundreds of thousands, there were wildly conflicting opinions on their origin and purpose. Scientists investigated for years, but found nothing. The gates were imperious to our technology. They even stood unscathed through a nuclear explosion.

When science failed to find an answer to the mystery, government and religion stepped into the void. They tried to control the gates for their own purposes, but when push comes to shove, hardly anyone wants to die, regardless of that pie-in-the-sky afterlife most people say they believe in. Whenever anyone tried to control the gates, the people demanded continued access.

The gates were irreplaceable. Providing you made it through, they gave you a way to avoid death for another whole lifetime. Scientists soon discovered that the gates did more than change a person's sex-they rearranged their genes so that any inherited diseases were eliminated. First-passers were no longer ill, nor could they become ill from any genetic disease. And a highly tuned immune system usually ended their suffering from infectious diseases as well.

There were two sticking points. The first was the chance that you might vanish. The older and the sicker you were the less chance you had of re-emerging. Criminal types and psychopaths tended to vanish too, though not always. The second sticking point was that most people didn't want to change their sex. They were satisfied as they were. But given a choice between dying and the sex change, most opted to change, if they didn't think about it too long.

The sex gates provoked some serious thinking among the late middle-age population, particularly considering that humans are constitutionally unable to comprehend their own death. Hence, the power of the belief genes we all carry, according to the theorists. These genes control our ability to believe in things that can't be empirically proven. The popular press calls them the 'religion genes'.

These genes compensate for our inability to comprehend death and other matters our brains aren't evolved enough to handle. They provide the ability to form a belief system to explain the unexplainable, even when there isn't a shred of proof for most of the beliefs, and even when they are contradictory to observed facts. Nevertheless, for most people, they seem to be essential, and thus must have evolved as a survival characteristic. I don't know what that says about the small percentage of people like me who see through the nonsense. Are we inferior or superior to the ones who have the genes?

The gates triggered our 'religion genes' big-time. More religions than I can count were formed, changed, grew, and declined with the coming of the gates. The most prominent and long-lasting one was the Church of the Gates, whose members are commonly called Gaters.

The Gaters' influence waxed and waned with the political and social winds. At one time, they almost caused a revolution in America, before their influence died down. Now the church was active again, moving back up from South America where the faithful had retreated for several years. If my analysis was right, the feds had infiltrated the church and were using it to advance their own agenda. That spelled trouble for Seconders.

The Gaters' newest dogma was that one passage through the gates was all God intended. Anyone who made it through more than once was denounced as abnormal, anti-religious, and deluded by the Devil. The present leader of the Gaters was a woman named Selinda. She was nominally female, as all the top hierarchy in the church had been since its formation, but those wise old eyes in the slim young body betrayed the fact that she had previously been a male. My guess was that she'd been fairly old before chancing a gate.

What really bothered me was one particular rumor that she had formerly been an extreme right-wing fundamentalist Christian. I'm frightened by fanatics of all religions. They are so sure they have all the answers to the questions, which befuddle the rest of mankind, and they show it with godlike arrogance. In their righteous certainty, they stop at nothing to try to make the rest of us believe as they do.

Unfortunately, the mind-set of the country was ripe for radicalism. After a number of years of improvement, the economy was faltering. Too many of the changed young people needed to start working again to earn the money to support the long lives they had ahead of them, and there weren't enough jobs to go around. We were entering another depression like the one we suffered after the small nuclear war started by the Gaters.

You would think that an organization responsible for so many deaths would never gain another follower. In fact, you would think they would lose all the followers they did have. But the human mind doesn't work that way where religion is concerned. Sometimes I think that the more death and misery is dealt out in the name of a particular religion, the more likely it is to survive and grow.

I woke up with a start, aware that the car had stopped. I straightened in the cramped seat and looked

around. We were in a garage, and I had no idea how we'd gotten there.

After hearing the shocking news that I was Messler's heir, I had fallen silent, my mind obsessed with the question of what he had had in mind for me-and Rita, of course. As the countryside sped by, I tried to digest the idea that I was now a billionaire many times over. It's a hard thought to get your mind around. What did a person do with a billion dollars? I already had everything material I wanted in life, and Rita was my one and only true love, despite my occasional wanderings into someone else's arms.

The only thing I really desired was to get Donna and Russell back, but money couldn't buy that. All money could do was keep us out of the hands of the Gaters and the feds long enough to find out more about the gates. If we could discover where someone went when they disappeared into a sex gate, we might be able to find our friends.

Thinking about that impossible future, lulled by the steady motion of the car, I had fallen asleep. Now I stared at the four walls of a two-car garage. Our car was the only one there. The other space was empty.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"We're at one of the boss's little hideaways. He keeps-kept-safe houses here and there," Terri said.

As she opened the car door, the inside light caught the glint of tears in her eyes. I could understand her grief. Messler was a charismatic individual, one of those people who drew others to his powerful personality. When you were with him, you developed an instinctive loyalty to his cause that swiftly deepened into devotion. I felt an acute sense of loss now that he was gone.

There certainly wasn't any luggage to carry in. We'd fled from the Ruston gate with nothing other than the computers around our necks and the clothes we were wearing. I smiled at Rita's long, bare legs as she stepped out of the car. In her case, that didn't amount to much.

The hideaway turned out to be a spacious underground bunker that was disguised on the surface as a rundown country home. Knowing the kind of precautions Messler took with his affairs, I was certain it wouldn't be listed in his name anywhere, perhaps not even on any tax rolls. Texas had abolished property taxes in favor of a flat income tax years ago.

Randy led us inside. We found ourselves in a cramped kitchen. His mouth curved in a satisfied grin as he waved his hands in a complicated pattern. Without a sound, the wall moved and the kitchen range swung out. Behind the range, I saw a set of stairs leading downward.

"I'll show you the combination later," he said. "Right now let's go on down."

I grinned in turn, but, as the four of us clattered down the steps I was busy with my own thoughts. My near-perfect memory called up the way his hands moved, and I was certain I could duplicate the movements exactly.

Downstairs, the place opened up into a three-bedroom complex, simply designed but with ample space, and all the luxuries necessary for comfort. Terri took us on a quick tour. The bedrooms radiated from a central den with loungers, and a huge compscreen dominating one wall. There was also a fully equipped autokitchen. A walk-in refrigerator/freezer held enough food to satisfy a hungry army after a forced march.

"I'll fix us something to eat," Terri said, and Rita moved automatically to help.

It no longer seemed peculiar to me that we stayed more or less in the traditional male/female roles regardless of which sex we happened to be at the time. The political correctness of the pre-gates era was

being replaced by an awareness that the sexes were different, no matter how many 'equality' laws were passed. Millions of years of evolution can't be legislated into oblivion, no matter how liberal the governing class. Men were better at some things and women at others, and neither made either sex inherently superior or inferior.

The way Randy's eyes followed Terri made it pretty obvious that they were lovers. Even if that hadn't given it away, the familiar patterns of interaction I perceived between them would have.

I suddenly realized that I was both tired and hungry, despite dozing off during our trip. Rita probably felt the same, though she has more stamina than me in most ways. It had been a long, extremely stressful evening.

Randy tore his gaze away from his lover, and looked at me. "Mr. Stuart, you and Ms. Hernandez can take any of the bedrooms. They are all fully furnished, or should be. If they're not, let me know."

"Do they have baths?"

"Of course. Two bathrooms per bedroom as a matter of fact."

I might have guessed. Messler never did do things halfway. But before we explored the bedrooms I wanted to sort a few things out. One of the first was our relationship with this young couple. I've never been much of a diplomat.

I simply asked, "What sort of duties are you and Terri supposed to be performing for us, other than as chauffeurs?"

Randy straightened, and looked me in the eye. "Messler-Mr. Scribner, I mean-left instructions to care for, protect, and obey you and Rita with the same devoted loyalty we gave to him. He suspected he wouldn't make it this time."

I heard the catch in his voice.

The lounge was comfortable. I leaned back and tried to catch his thoughts, but I didn't learn much. I hadn't been around him long enough. I did get the impression that what he was telling us was the truth.

"But why us? Did he say?"

"No. He only said you were special."

I couldn't see it, but didn't pursue the matter. Time would settle that question. In the meantime, Terri and Rita emerged from the kitchen carrying food and drink.

I accepted the glass Rita handed me and took a long, satisfying draught. It was one of my favorites, rum and coke with a dash of smoke flavor. She sat a plate down on the arm of the chair next to me. While the rum warmed my stomach, I leaned back and enjoyed the sway of her hips as she brought her own drink and plate over.

Rita caught my amorous thoughts, and winked at me. "Eat something," she commanded with a laugh.

"Where are the computer controls?" I asked around a bit of Spam and light bread

Rita knows my tastes, even though she laughs at them sometimes. I don't care. I like Spam and I dislike whole grain bread. I'm also a news junkie, and I don't mean just writing it; I'm uncomfortable if I don't know what's happening around the world, though since our intelligence has begun increasing, the news

seems increasingly childish.

Randy answered my question. "Tell your system to merge with MesslerPrime and that should do it for everything."

I did so, and the big screen brightened. It was dominated by the face of Messler Scribner. The sound of his voice startled me. It took me a moment to realize that he was reciting a sort of last will and testament to us-or to me, rather.

In his typical arrogant fashion, he began without any introduction. His recorded image looked directly at us and was so lifelike that I could almost believe he was present. He must have set the computer control so that this file would come up as soon as my computer merged with his.

When you hear this I will have gone through a gate for the last time. I have not returned. Lee and Rita, I leave you my fortune, my goodwill, and my hope that you will survive whatever convulsions may occur after my departure. My disappearance will have been recorded by my bodyguards on unalterable legal software; that software will see through the simple disguise I was wearing.

There will be no problem with my will. As you know, the Supreme Court has already ruled on legal questions concerning disappearances through the sex gates. So I am now legally dead and my will cannot be contested, most especially because I leave no descendents. I outlived them all.

He said the last sentence with a ghostly chuckle.

I believe with all sincerity that you and Rita have a destiny to fulfill as you continue to make successive passages through the gates. You will become increasingly aware of that with each passage. What that destiny may entail, I cannot say for certain. I believe the human race is on a journey of unprecedented proportions-and the aliens we first believed responsible for the gates may turn out to be not as alien as we first thought.

I remembered his last words to me as he went through the gate-words that were cut off. What was he was trying to tell me?

Randy Tendler and Terri Winsdotter are either with you now or should be shortly. Please trust them. They have been with me for more years than you have been alive and are absolutely loyal and dedicated. When I indicated that my passages through the gates were nearing the end, they purposely dared a second passage, hoping to follow me as Seconders-and against all odds, both succeeded, as you and Rita did.

Randy and Terri will introduce you to the world of great wealth. Since I am gone, I cannot control your actions, but I beseech you to use my money and the influence it brings to protect and succor any and all Seconders. Follow events concerning them closely. You will realize how important this is as you go through the gates again and again-if you choose to do so.

In any event, whether you follow my path or chart one of your own, I leave you my best wishes and warmest personal regards. Perhaps somewhere and sometime in the future we'll get around to a rematch.

Those last words were said with a chuckle. Of course, he was referring to our first encounter and damned if I didn't blush all over again. Randy and Terri tittered at his last remark. Obviously, the couple had heard the story of my seduction.

I looked across the room at Randy and Terri. I tried to gauge their reaction to Messler's statement from their surface thoughts. All I picked up was their shared determination to carry out his wishes, and

curiosity about Rita and me now that they were interacting with us in person.

Terri caught my attempt to pry. "Mr. Stuart-"

"Call me Lee. I don't like formality."

"Okay," she said.

At the same time I saw Rita smiling. She knew as well as I did that I could stand formality real easy from people I disliked, such as federal agents and Gaters. And perhaps Terri already knew I liked blondes. So did Rita for that matter.

"What were you going to say?" I asked.

"Oh. I was going to say that perhaps you might like to go over the details of your inheritance with me. I'm the lawyer of the pair."

"What's Randy?" Rita interjected.

"I'm the operator."

I raised my brows.

"Whatever you or Rita or Terri needs to have done, I see to it."

"Good. How about killing a couple dozen federal agents for me?"

"Give me their names, and I'll take care of it." He smiled like a card shark with a stacked deck.

Could he really? "Later, maybe," I said, waving my hand nonchalantly. "But for tonight, no inheritance talk. I can't assimilate it so soon. How about a little news, then let's all get some sleep?"

I started to tell my computer where to look for news, but Randy beat me to it. He brought up a general customized news clip program.

"This was Messler's service. You can change it around if you don't like it."

I settled back and watched the bits of news reeling off from the program. In North America Gaters were actively recruiting new members from among our armed forces in Mexico. Our army was in Mexico to fight the secessionist movement there. Lots of Mexicans resented the breakup of their country. I don't know why. The people in the part of Mexico we had admitted to the Union were a hell of a lot better off than they used to be.

Congress had passed some new legislation that put a huge inheritance tax on Seconders. The theory was that we were immortal for all practical purposes and could always accumulate more money. The president said he intended to veto it.

The UN was appealing for more money for Africa and Asia, what was left of them. The United States was threatening to veto any funds going to governments rather than to approved private groups. I doubted that would prevent any more corruption. The private groups were every bit as corrupt as such governments as were left.

Israel was both appealing for calm and threatening reprisals against Germany if it didn't rein in its skinheads. The Russian mob had been broken up again, for the umpteenth time. China and Taiwan were still shooting at each other. India and Pakistan were fighting skirmishes as usual. The Kashmir settlement

hadn't stopped that or even slowed it down.

There was a short segment on the dustup at my house, very short. The graphie who reported it speculated that it had been a diversion while Rita and I were kidnapped by unknown parties. There was no mention of the fact that we were Seconders, but I expected that would change before long. There was a report of a gate disappearing in Tibet. I listened to that one closely, but there weren't many details, and I doubted it was true, anyway.

Saudi Arabia's parliament abdicated in favor of another Emir King. He immediately denounced the sex gates, Gaters, Seconders, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and anyone else he could think of, and pronounced another jihad against the Sex Gates, in capital letters. As usual, his denunciation roused a few Arabs and they threw bombs at several gates. You would think they'd know better after all these years. The human race couldn't make a bomb powerful enough to hurt the gates.

"Turn it off," I told Randy, already tired of the blather coming from the screen. It was a typical day in world affairs.

"Wait!" Terri shouted.

I turned back. They had switched to a real announcer, not a graphie, and a scene that was blurry swam into sudden clear focus. A courtyard appeared on the split screen. A young man and young woman were tied to poles. Both of them had bland expressions on their faces, as if they had no idea what was happening to them.

The person doing the talking was a toothy, scruffy man with several days' worth of whiskers on his face. I recognized his attitude immediately. He was wearing a wrinkled semi-military tunic of some sort with several ostentatious medals appended to the lapels. His voice came out as a growl.

These Seconders have been accused, tried, and convicted of withholding vital information from the People's State of Tretonika. They have been sentenced to death, and all of their appeals have been rejected. Our Supreme Leader, the most worthy and merciful Junsihl Walosny, has confirmed the ruling of the court.

He paused and looked down at his computer screen, an old Goshi that I was surprised to see even working. Then he looked up again with a smirk on his face.

The Supreme Leader, however, is most compassionate. He instructed me to waive the death penalty if these two Seconders reconsidered their monstrous errors and confessed to their crime of causing grievous harm to the State. They must also release to the State the information it rightfully demands to fulfill its purpose of protecting its citizens. They were told of this offer and after many hours of gentle questioning, they refused to accept it. Therefore, it is my duty to carry out the sentence.

The speaker turned and the image widened out. Now we could see the same man standing in the courtyard holding a sword. His earlier speech must have been pre-recorded. He raised the sword and counted in a slow cadence as the five gunmen with rifles raised their weapons and took aim. They fired and the man slumped against the pole, his head dropping down.

Rita screamed, and buried her head against my chest.

"Turn it off!" Terri shrieked.

I couldn't move, nor could I tear my eyes away from the screen. The sword was raised again, the count started once more, the gunmen fired, and the young woman's body jerked as the bullets tore through her.

Randy blanked the wall screen. I held Rita as she sobbed in my arms. While my hand stroked her hair, my mind whirled with the implications of the broadcast. Tretonika was one of those rinky-dink Eastern European states that have come and gone, merged and split over the last couple of decades as the sex gates provided a convenient focus for centuries-old prejudices to run rampant. I wasn't worried about any threat from the country of Tretonika. No, the danger was that the idea they'd started could spread. If Seconders could be persecuted and executed there, the same thing could be done anywhere, once the idea took hold.

Rita's aggravated thoughts pounded at my mind. I tried to hide my own thoughts from her while I murmured comforting phrases. At the same time, I looked over at Randy and Terri. Terri was crying and Randy was holding her. They were new Seconders. Each of them had returned to their original gender, and they were acting out of the habit of years, plus the instincts of their bodies. It is strange how hormones control so many of our thoughts and actions. Had I been in a woman's body and witnessed that terrible execution I might have cried too, even though I would still have the male mental conditioning that teaches us to repress our emotions. The powerful hormones could break through that conditioning.

Brief snatches of Randy and Terri's intertwined emotions washed over me as they comforted each other. They were scared, but there wasn't much I could do about that. Hell, I was scared, too. I had been up close and personal with idiots who thought they had all the answers several times since the appearance of the gates-and if you didn't agree with them, too bad for you. Either conform to their ideology or suffer the consequences, and the consequences could range from verbal abuse right on up to being shot or pummeled to death. Those were the kind of people who hardly ever went through the sex gates; too many of them never came out.

Rita pushed herself away from me. Tears streaked her face, but the crying was over. She had caught the fear that Randy and Terri were radiating, and that had automatically triggered her nurturing nature. She was already in an emphatic mode, her concern centered on them. With loving care, she evaluated how much emotional support they needed. A brief smile touched her lips, and I caught the thought she sent to me-I should do most of the talking. Why I should take the lead I didn't know. But before I could speak, Randy looked up from Terri's bent head, his face grim.

"I'm still having a hard time believing that happened," he said. "Was it real? Could it have been faked?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I've seen people shot, from a distance and up close, too."

"Oh, yeah, you have, haven't you? Messler told us a bit about your militia service." He didn't mention the couple of other times I've shot someone, so I didn't either.

"But what does it mean?" Terri asked. "Are they going to start shooting Seconders everywhere? That's stupid. We don't know anything, and couldn't tell if we did!" She choked back more tears.

At first her reaction seemed excessive to me. The web broadcast was from a distant country, after all. Then I thought about the demonstration outside our home, the burning car, and the fed's attempt to kidnap Messler. Maybe I wasn't paranoid enough. The whole world wanted the truth from the Seconders ... except we couldn't reveal what we didn't know.

"You can't draw conclusions from one incident."

I tried to soothe her even though I knew that wasn't strictly true. My talent for patterns was already gnawing at the incident, adding other reports to it, and jumping to conclusions no one else could see. I didn't like the conclusions I was reaching a damn bit, either.

When no one said anything, I added, "Besides, we're all too tired to think straight. Why don't we get

some rest and see what conclusion we come up with in the morning?"

"It is morning," Terri said. Her soft pink lips quivered in a forlorn attempt at a smile.

I pinched my thumb and forefinger together and saw she was right.

"I'd like us to stay together," Rita purred, in a soft voice while shooting me a look that warned me to agree with her.

As she spoke, Randy and Terri glanced at each other with relieved expressions. Trust Rita to know what they needed. Terri's face had regained some of its color at Rita's suggestion. Her smile became more heartfelt.

"Well, the beds are all big enough, but the one in the master bedroom is better. We can all be comfortable in it."

I noticed that Randy didn't object to the idea that we share a bed. I wondered how long Terri and Randy had lived as Terry and Randi before becoming Seconders. Long enough, I suspected. There is nothing like a sex change to loosen up your thinking in regard to human sexuality. To tell the truth, it took me longer than most people to adjust to a new gender after I went through the gates the first time. Rita played a major part in teaching me to relax and accept my sexual feelings-whatever the sex of the body I happened to inhabit at the time.

I caught more of Randy and Terri's surface thoughts. Both were pleased at the suggestion of sharing a bed. And it was only partly because they wanted others close to provide comfort after witnessing the shocking events on the screen. Sex was on both their minds. That didn't surprise me. The threat of death somehow wakes up the reproductive urge in humans, other things being equal. And persecution always draws the persecuted closer, whether in small groups like ours, or in nations like Israel.

Rita nudged me to get me moving, breaking my train of thought. I concentrated instead on the pleasant movements Terri's backside made as Rita led her into the bedroom. Rita and I took one of the bathrooms and Randy and Terri shared the other. They finished first and were already under the sheets when I came out with Rita. She slid out of her wrap (although she might as well have left it on for all that it concealed) and snuggled into the huge bed next to Terri.

Someone turned down the lights as I climbed into the bed after Rita. As I lay back against a pillow, I could make out the dim contours of bodies and faces in the darkened room. I found the hint of mystery sensually suggestive. Despite being short of sleep and tense from all that had happened today, both the events we'd been through and what we'd seen on the screen, my body was in the mood. Judging by the slight quickening in Rita's breathing next to me, she was too.

As I said, Rita taught me to shed my inhibitions long ago. I pulled her to me and began kissing her, as if we were alone in the bed. As her hands trailed over my back and shoulders, she felt out the knots and kneaded them away. Once I was relaxed, I eased her back and explored her breasts with gentle, teasing kisses, as if I hadn't done it a thousand times already. It didn't matter. I never tired of caressing Rita's soft breasts and each kiss was as sweet as if I were doing it for the first time. Breasts were my favorite toys, and I enjoyed playing with them whether I was male or female.

Her nipples hardened into taut, erect peaks under my exploring touch. I marveled at their perfection as I brushed the tips of my fingers across the stiff little knobs. Rita moaned softly in the darkness and arched upward, pressing her full breasts into my hands. Her own long, slender fingers touched me in all the places she knew I liked to be touched.

When you have experienced sex with the same person, first as a man and then as a woman, there is never the slightest doubt about what makes sex so wonderful with each other. Since Rita had been a male, she knew how to please my male body. And I drew upon my memories of lovemaking as a female to heighten her pleasure.

I lowered my mouth and pressed a trail of kisses down her stomach while her nails dug into my back, urging me to hurry. I took my time, teasing her, paying no attention to what the other couple was doing. I could hear the enthusiastic sounds they were making, of course, and knew our amorous play had encouraged them to make love as well. I'm sure it wasn't that much different from our melding, allowing for our greater experience with sexual switching.

Our minds merged into one as completely as our bodies did. I entered Rita and gasped with pleasure at her velvet heat, while sharing her moans of joy as she reveled in each thrust into her body. Together our two bodies burned with the fire of an approaching orgasm. There was never a problem with climaxing simultaneously if that was what we wanted, and we usually did.

Her fingers dug deeper into my back, trying to grasp handfuls of skin, urging me closer and closer while her legs tightened around mine and she strained up against me. All the while I sensed her mind sharing in my urgent need as I drove into her again and again. Our bodies glowed with heat as we pressed against each other, both of us swallowed up in our mounting pleasure. With each movement we soared closer to release. We cried out in one voice and I could no longer tell whose body belonged to whom. The explosion engulfed us together.

CHAPTER FIVE

I woke up to the sound of women's voices murmuring. The whispers were so low that, as close as I was, I couldn't understand them. As I came to full awareness, I realized that I was really hearing soft little cries of assent and endearment-and was hearing their thoughts as much as their voices.

I blinked my eyes open. I was resting on my side. The lights were on, but turned to their dimmest setting. Next to me, the coffee-and-cream skin of Rita's back glowed in the golden light as she hovered over Terri. She was propped on one elbow, and using her free hand to do things I couldn't see. But the low, throaty groans of pleasure from Terri made it obvious she was enjoying them. As I watched, Rita bent to kiss Terri. I could see that the other woman's eyes were closed. At the same time, I sensed that Rita knew I was watching. It slowed her down not a whit. Terri's blue eyes opened as her whimpers of pleasure grew more intense. She looked at me, but her eyes were glazed with desire, and when I touched her thoughts her mind was wholly focused on the sensations her body was feeling.

I might have stayed and joined the action if I was invited, but I needed to get up. Besides, the sense of newborn wonder in Terri's thoughts told me this was her first woman-to-woman encounter. I figured she might want it to stay that way for now; without me, I mean.

Randy was already up and gone. I left the women to enjoy themselves and headed for the bathroom.

When I came out the big bed was empty, the covers thrown back to show rumpled sheets. I stared at it with a pang of regret. I had been thinking of going back to bed myself, since it was being used for something other than sleeping. I heard the shower going in the bathroom and toyed with the idea of joining them in there. But there was something else on my mind, something I wanted to talk over with Rita, and perhaps the other two.

I found Randy in the kitchen cooking breakfast. The smells coming from the stove made me realize how hungry I was. A hollow feeling in my stomach reminded me that we hadn't eaten for a long while. I walked up to Randy's side, and glanced at the contents of the pan.

"What are you cooking?"

"Nothing. I'm warming up some things the cook left for us."

"Cook?"

"She comes in once a week to see if the place has been used. If it has, she cleans and replenishes supplies."

"Doesn't that compromise your security?"

Randy grinned. He had a quick, easy smile. His even white teeth flashed in his tanned face.

"Nah. She thinks this is a corporate hideout for executives cheating on their wives or husbands. We've never disillusioned her, and let her gossip all she likes. We leave some names around for her to find; not ours, of course. It works. Best cover in the world."

I agreed. Sometimes the best way to hide things is right out in the open.

Randy picked up a spatula and slid it under each of four little loaves. Whatever they were, they smelled wonderful. He slid them onto plates, which he then transferred to the nearby dining table. He took juice from the fridge, added a fork to each plate, then put his fingers between his lips and let out a shrill whistle.

"Soup's on!"

"Showoff," I said.

"Huh?"

"Whistling like that. You're obviously a tongue-roller."

"Tongue-roller?"

I had him thoroughly confused. "Yeah. Most people can roll their tongues. It's a genetic trait expressed by a single dominant gene. Get two recessives like me, and you can't roll your tongue-or whistle worth a damn."

"The things you learn by eavesdropping," Terri said, from behind my back. "Does it, uh, hamper you any?"

I grinned, as I turned around to find Terri and Rita with their arms around each other. "Ask Rita. So far as I know, it doesn't, but then she could be trying not to hurt my feelings."

Rita's dark eyes danced with laughter. She stuck out her tongue at me, then rolled it so that it made a perfect U between her lips.

"Everybody is a showoff this morning. I don't know why the gate masters couldn't have fixed that while they were fixing damn near every other bad genetic trait."

"Who says it's bad?"

"No one, actually. But suppose I have to whistle real loud some day to save my life. Then where would I be?"

"You can't whistle, really?" Randy asked.

I gave him a demonstration, which sounded like a teakettle with so many leaks that it couldn't get up any pressure.

Rita pursed her lips into a mock pout. "Poor Lee. So deprived."

"You couldn't prove it by me." Randy let out a long, low whistle as he eyed Rita lasciviously.

I picked up the mysterious loaf on my plate and took a bite. Savory juices and spicy sausage and other things made a pleasant-tasting mixture in my mouth.

"Mm. Good. What is it?"

"Yeast rolls, sausage, green peppers, sweet onions and cheese, all rolled up in the dough then cut in sections like a jelly roll, then baked and frozen until we're ready for it. It makes a great breakfast."

"I agree," I mumbled, around another mouthful, "but how did you know what was in it when you say you never met the cook?"

"I took one apart one morning, out of curiosity."

Rita and Terri were too busy eating to say anything. Well, they had worked up an appetite. I wanted to get Rita alone as soon as we finished eating, but Randy had other business on tap. He got up, poured coffee, and brought a stack of papers to the table.

"What's all that?" I asked, noticing some legal terms on the top sheet.

"The papers affirming that you and Rita own and control all of Messler's worldly assets."

"I thought Lee was the heir," Rita said.

"Lee is owner of record and controlling authority, but you are co-owner and beneficiary."

The whole idea was still strange to me. "Why didn't he split it equally between us? For that matter, why didn't he leave it to you and Terri? Seems to me you deserve some consideration after working for him for so many years."

Randy sipped his coffee before answering. Although I was a male at the moment, the part of my mind that had absorbed the female perspective couldn't help admiring his sleep-tousled hair and the clef in his strong chin. At the same time, the masculine majority of my consciousness noticed that Terri looked quite fetching in the deep blue silkskin blouse she'd put on. It outlined the curve of her breasts and accented her sapphire eyes. Both of them, in fact, were young, glowing with health, and blond good looks. It appeared that Rita and I would be spending a lot of time with them-the only advantage I could see so far to all that had happened.

Randy put down his cup. "That's two questions, but easy to answer. Number one, somebody has to drive; hence you as controlling authority. As for us, we're already the two major stockholders of all the goodies, after you two, and we have enough tucked away to last until the sun grows cold."

"Oh," I said.

"Okay, let's get with it."

I tucked the last bit of the sausage roll into my mouth while Randy began shoving papers in front of us. We had to donate a pinpoint drop of blood into the little square of each set of triplicate papers. That was for a DNA record, something most legal documents used. I had to marvel at how few papers it took to

shift all those billions from Messler to us. In the bad old days, it would have taken truckloads of documents and hundreds of lawyers to accomplish the same thing. That was back before the lawyers ran their profession into the ground. They sued so often and so frivolously that they drove liability insurance for doctors, businesses, and so forth into the stratosphere. They practically bankrupted the corporate establishment and made owning a home or small business the financial equivalent of squaring off in an arena against hungry lions. Finally, a wave of protest swept new politicians into office on a legal reform ticket and they cleaned house. If I remembered right, Messler had financed a lot of their campaigns.

Anyway, legal processes were much simpler under the reformed laws, and a hell of a lot of attorneys were working as secretaries (the ones who knew how to write an understandable sentence and make coffee), or fast food workers (the ones who had never bothered to learn to spell, leaving that mundane task to legal assistants).

Since Randy had automatically been granted full power of attorney upon Messler's 'death' through a pre-recorded court action, these papers with both our DNA signatures and the court-approved Stonewall Software encrypted recording of us that Terri was making as we signed, were enough to complete the inheritance process. The whole thing was wrapped up in less than an hour.

I didn't bother looking at the papers as I signed. Randy flashed another of his amused grins at me the first time, then kept shoving them forward until we were finished. The thing is, I was already well off. Years ago I had inherited a trust fund from my grandfather, and I'd made plenty of money writing for the tabwebs. I didn't see how having any more money would change our style of living. With Rita and all the modern comforts we needed, I didn't think an extra billion or two would change things much if I goofed by not reading before signing.

So much for what I knew about great wealth.

It didn't take more than a half hour to complete the legalities. We finished by downloading copies into our computers and thence automatically to our individual storage sites on the web. That done, I shoved my chair back from the table. I wondered how to ask for a little privacy so I could talk to Rita. Then, on second thought, I wondered if there was really any need for secrecy from our new friends and (in one case) lovers. I sent the question to Rita in the form of a thought. She caught my meaning and answered me with an almost imperceptible shrug of her shoulders. I could sense neither assent nor dissent in her mind. She was letting me drive.

I started with a direct question. "How much has Messler told you about the gates?"

"Everything he learned." Randy's voice turned sober at this change of topic. "He didn't want any knowledge to be lost, in case the feds caught him again, and got a little too drastic with the questioning."

"Good enough. You know about Seconders sometimes developing wild talents, then?"

"Oh, yes," Terri affirmed.

"Sure," Randy agreed.

I opened my mouth to make my next point, but Terri held up a hand. "Wait a minute. I don't care if it is early, if we're going to get into a long discussion, let's get something to lubricate it with."

She went over to the mammoth walk-in fridge that was large enough to hold an elephant or two, and brought back a pitcher of Bloody Marys and another of grapefruit and rum. I knew what the mixtures were from the permanently embedded labels on the outside of the pitchers. What I didn't know was how she located them so quickly in that behemoth of a refrigerator.

Drinks in hand, we left the kitchen area and moved back into the living room where we stretched out on the big loungers. Somehow I found myself sitting next to Terri rather than Rita. As I gazed into the incredible blue depths of Terri's eyes I wondered how that came about. I suspected that Rita was up to her usual machinations. Back when the gates were new, and my friend Don became Donna, it was Rita who doctored Donna's drink with a powerful dose of pheromones that lured me into her bed the first time. Empathic Rita knew that Don/Donna needed me-her friend-to help her through her first lovemaking experience as a woman.

I shook off the sense of deep loss that came whenever I thought of Donna and Russell and concentrated on the present company.

"Wild talents."

Randy spoke up from his lounge, reminding me of what we had been discussing. I felt my talent for patterns slide into full gear.

"All right," I said. "In case you don't know already-and since I never told Messler, you probably don't-I have developed an ability to analyze patterns from very little data. I don't know if successive passages through the sex gates rewire our brains or simply stimulate some facility which was already inherent in us, but there's no doubt each trip brings some change. It takes a number of passages before it begins. Afterward, a Seconders gradually grows more adept at his or her particular aptitude, if one is developed. Did Messler ever talk to you about this?"

"Not about pattern analysis as one of the so-called idiot-savant talents per se, but he knew that many Seconders develop special abilities over time as they undergo repeated sex changes. He suspected that all Seconders go that route, but he couldn't prove it before he died-disappeared, that is. The number of Seconders is still small and some are kept hidden away by their governments. He couldn't talk to enough to gather significant data. And he never mentioned what his own talent was, if he had one."

To give me time to think, I took a sip of the grapefruit and rum concoction. That led to another. No canned grapefruit juice here; it had been freshly squeezed. A pattern suddenly hit me: Messler's talent, if it could be called that, had been a gift for understanding the origin of the sex gates, and possibly for manipulating them. I wondered where he was now, if anywhere, and how that particular talent could have been latent in human genes. That led to an even more startling thought, but it was barely there before I lost it while we discussed more immediate concerns.

"Okay, here's what I see happening, given the data I have so far-and Messler was ahead of me on this. Seconders are going to be persecuted, hounded, killed, imprisoned, and legislated against. For what it's worth, I don't think it will be quite so bad in our country and perhaps a few others where there is a long tradition of rule by constitutional law. But in situations that go to the very core of beliefs and instinct, a constitution won't be much protection. History has proven that, over and over."

Terri frowned. "We're civilized in this country, Lee. Surely it won't come to that."

"Civilization goes out the window when religious prejudices take over," I warned. "Religious beliefs that become intolerant prejudices against others cause most of the problems of humanity, and unfortunately, the sex gates do little to change that."

"Unfortunately?" Rita and Terri said, almost at the same time.

I shrugged. "Unfortunately for Seconders."

Randy showed his legal training by asking a logical question. "If the purpose of the sex gates is to

improve the human race, as some have theorized, why don't they eliminate the traits that lead to religious excess?"

I'd thought about that a lot, so I had an answer, one that satisfied me anyway. "True. But if the gates eliminated our capacity to believe in something-anything-beyond ourselves, where would we be? Our ability to believe-to hope-is a strong survival trait, but one that is twisted to evil purposes by fanatics of all brands."

During the thoughtful silence that followed, I got up and refilled my glass and topped off Rita's. The other two were drinking Bloody Marys. I sat down again, and got back to the facts at hand.

"So, what we have is first, the Gaters proselytizing all over the place, making Seconders the devil, so to speak. All religions need a devil of some sort to reverberate with people. In addition to that, the federal security bureaucracy is spreading propaganda that Seconders are essentially immortal and that we're concealing knowledge that would allow others to go through the gates successfully more than once. And finally, we have a majority-not by much, but a majority nonetheless-of the population that hasn't been through the gates and says they don't intend to go. They're against those of us who have used the gates, even more so than the ones who have made it through once."

Randy interrupted. "The ones who say they won't go through a gate will change their minds once they get old and sick. Trust me."

I caught a flash of memory and knew he had struggled with that decision when he had been old and ill in the not too distant past.

"Oh, yes, I know that," I said, "and you're right, most people will. The only exception might be those with the full complement of dominant belief genes who have already been glued to a particular religion or mindset, and even some of those will change their minds when the old man with the scythe comes calling."

"So what do we do? Or rather, what do you and Rita intend to do?"

"Two things, if Rita agrees. One, I want to use Messler's money to gather together a group of Seconders in one spot where they can be protected."

I looked from face to face and saw their agreement. We were all starting to feel the need for protection.

"Next, Rita and I need to go through a gate again, probably several more times. We need more information on the gates and that's the only way to get it. These repercussions are going to start happening soon. They will be bad enough. If the knowledge that Seconders are semi-telepathic ever gets out, we will see intense persecution. Seconders may follow in the footsteps of the so-called witches who perished in the Spanish Inquisition. Anything we can learn by going through the gates a few times more will almost certainly help us contain whatever happens."

Rita shivered and drew closer to Randy. I knew what she was thinking. In the past we'd risked the gate several times. But now we'd been eyewitnesses as Messler went in one time too many. What if there was a limit on the number of trips through a sex gate? What if we disappeared like he had?

Randy slipped a comforting arm around Rita's shoulders, and frowned at me. "Won't gathering Seconders in one spot increase the risk to everyone-to all of us, I mean? Wouldn't it be better to stay separated? That way, if one of us is-" he swallowed hard "-killed, others would be safe."

"Only for a time. And I have an idea. It's the result of analyzing what I know about Seconders, really. I believe if we can get a group of Seconders together in close contact, our abilities will develop more

rapidly. And that, in turn, may give us a handle on why so few people can make it to Secondar status, among other things. If we could change that situation, we could turn this impending persecution around, and have the world on our side. Everyone would want to be a Secondar."

"Hm. Close contact, you said?"

I caught his thought and saw the sparkle in his eyes. Despite the fear and worry we all felt, the sexual energy was starting to heat up in our little group. What would it be like with a bunch of Seconders together, sharing one totality of thought and feeling?

"The four of us are Seconders," Rita pointed out, as if she read my mind, which she probably did.

From the way she leaned against Randy's chest and the matching sparkle in her eyes, I knew she was eager to start the sharing process right then and there. Rita was never shy about sex, and if close contact could hasten the development of our new powers, she was willing to try.

"How about if we leave the comp on alert for anything that might affect us, and take the day off to get better, um, acquainted," I suggested.

Why not? There was a definite sizzle in the air already, and it would be a start on exploring my theory that a group of Seconders would develop faster than one or two alone.

"The comp is already set," Terri said, in a husky whisper.

She shifted her body and slid her arm around my neck to draw my lips down to hers. I pulled her close and met her enthusiasm with my own. Any time I'm not with Rita I'm partial to blondes, and I was more than ready to find out if Terri was blond all the way.

Unlike some men, I close my eyes when I kiss, so I couldn't see what Rita and Randy were doing. But I know they were engaged in the same sort of activity. Rita's mind broadcast a steady mental sensation of pure pleasure my way before I lost myself in my encounter with Terri.

Terri's breasts weren't large, but they were ample enough to fill my hand and firmly resilient beneath her top. Her nipples were already erect. Judging by the dark flush on her cheeks, she certainly wasn't wasting any time becoming sexually aroused. As much as I like to think I am a great lover, I suspected I had the renewed sexual energy that came with a recent sex change to thank for her eagerness-that and her joy of rediscovering sex in an eighteen-year-old body after living for years in an old, crippled shell.

"Let's go to the bedroom," Terri murmured.

Her warm tongue traced a damp line down the curve of my ear. I shivered all the way to my toes and opened my eyes. As we stood up, I saw that Rita and Randy were already headed for one of the bedrooms. I put an arm around Terri and pulled her close to my body. I was pressing kisses into the hollow of her neck as we stumbled into another bedroom.

Terri wasn't wearing enough clothes to matter. She was out of them with a few quick movements. I felt her small hands pulling on my fastenings, helping me to shed my clothes.

My eyes drank in the sight of her slim, young body. She was petite, but well-formed with small, pink-tipped breasts, a sweetly curved waist, a smooth stomach and a golden tuff of curly hair between her legs. She was a legal blond, so to speak. I was glad that she was blond all the way.

We fell onto the huge bed locked together, then separated so that I could enjoy the sight of her naked body. My fingers tangled in the blond hair at the juncture of her legs as I kissed my way down her lovely

curves then back up again. She gasped for breath when I stopped at her breasts, nuzzling and licking one while gently kneading the other. She moaned deep in her throat and arched her back, urging me to take her nipple deeper into my mouth.

Her hands wandered down my body, found my penis and began caressing and teasing the shaft with expert precision. My heart pounded, and I was instantly aroused. Sitting up with a hungry smile, she pushed me back on the bed and leaned over me. Her blue eyes blazed above me as she did the same things to me as I had to her. Her hot, sweet mouth kissed its way down my body. I trembled with desire as she leaned over my hips and pressed my penis between her breasts. Silky soft skin slipped and slid over me, setting me on fire. As I gasped with pleasure, she smiled, licked her lips, and took me into her mouth.

The indescribably intense sensation of a hot, moist mouth working up and down my penis seems new all over again every time a woman does it to me. It felt even better when my thoughts started to merge with Terri's. Our shared passion linked our minds and I experienced what she was feeling. I almost choked with pleasure as her tongue teased the tip of my penis and I shared her desire to swallow me whole.

I had done the same thing numerous times with Rita (when she was Rez). I moaned, my whole being aflame with my own pleasure and the onslaught of the fierce sensations Terri felt with me in her mouth, sliding in and out in a slow rhythm, moving against her tongue and lips and the roof of her mouth.

Terri was new at mind touching, but there was no way she could miss knowing that I was shuddering on the edge of a violent climax. Her hot lips closed around my penis again, sucking hard, and I felt her elation as my penis jerked and spasmed in her mouth. I almost tasted the warm fluid of my body as she swallowed it. She knew exactly how to finish the act, timing a gentle suction to my ejaculations, keeping me in her mouth until I was completely and utterly spent.

One of the incredible benefits that comes with perennial youth is that sex is not only great; it can also be repeated as often as you like. Terri went directly from using her mouth to straddling me so that I could caress her breasts and nipples. As I tried to give her the same pleasure she'd given me, she flattened herself out on top of me and moved us both to another furious orgasm. She was a great lover, who stimulated my body with experienced ease. I laid back and enjoyed her skills. As she brought me to yet another shuddering peak, I knew each expert touch came from a lifetime as a woman. Her experiences as a man had added another layer of richness, of course, but I couldn't help rejoicing that she was now a young, vital woman again. Sex is infinitely better when you have experienced both sides of the sexual equation.

While Terri and I enjoyed climax after climax, Rita and Randy engaged in their own furious mating in the next bedroom. I caught Rita's thoughts of joyful satisfaction when they finished a few minutes after we did.

I tugged Terri up off our bed and led her into the next bedroom. Rita greeted us with a satisfied smile. The four of us were obviously compatible. In fact, I suddenly realized we were forming a new family. The closeness I already felt with Terri and Randy was very much like the close-knit relationship Rita and I had shared with Donna and Russell.

I was seeing the newborn patterns again, though this one was probably already as obvious to the others as it was to me. Perhaps the other two hadn't consciously thought about going back through the gates with us, but I knew they would, from subtle nuances in their words and actions. They were having no problems at all in transferring their love and loyalty from Messler to us.

I suspected that they would have willingly gone through the gates every time Messler did. He must have

forbidden it for some reason; perhaps to keep them firmly oriented to his business affairs while he concentrated on the gates. On the other hand, I doubted that Terri and Randy had had sex with him. My take on Messler was that he would keep employees and romance separated.

The four of us spent the rest of the day indulging ourselves with sexual play in the huge bed, getting up occasionally to replenish drinks or go to the bathroom or get a bite to eat. Now and then, we talked business, mainly about where we wanted to establish a base.

"I vote for North Houston," Randy said at one point.

"Why there? The Fourth Worlders are moving there from old Houston as the sea level rises. It isn't exactly an upper level income area any more. And it can only go downhill; the government isn't paying any more to move the population inland."

As I'd come to expect, Randy had a series of logical arguments. "Messler-or you, rather-still have offices there, and the ownership is pretty well concealed. It is probably one of the last places the feds would look if they wanted to question you again. They would never imagine a new billionaire living in a deteriorating neighborhood. Besides, the Fourth Worlders tear down the gate monitors as quickly as the feds put them up. It would be safe for you to go through the gates there."

Rita and I both cringed at the mention of feds. We'd become entangled with a federal agency several years ago. They held us for questioning after we first became Seconders and the agent who'd arrested us assaulted Rita. The best thing Messler had done for us was to have that prick of an agent-named Horst-'accidentally' killed.

Horst had been an out-of-control zealot, a bully and possibly even deranged on the subject of Seconders. Once, when we were held for questioning by him, he took us to the federal office building in North Houston. I hope never to go through an ordeal like that again, even though I don't remember the worst of it. We Seconders automatically clam up under questioning and go into an autistic state. We know nothing about what is happening around us or to us. I only remember the disgust and suppressed rage on Rita's face when she realized Horst had raped her while she was in the autistic state. Although Horst was dead, I had no faith that his replacement was any better. I'd heard the man, an ex-Marine called Stephen Hess, was a tough character.

"When do we move, and when do we go through a gate again?" Terri asked abruptly, confirming my notion that they intended to be with us all the way.

I appreciated their willingness to take a risk. Even though we could theoretically pass safely through a gate again, if we took successive turns too often and too quickly, we could disappear into the mystery of the sex gates as readily as one trying it the first time.

I thought about the problem aloud. "We need to find a gate that isn't being monitored. Either that or we'll have to disguise ourselves very thoroughly. We can't walk through in the open, not with the mounting hysteria about Seconders. If we flaunt our ability in the public's face, we'll only add to the outrage."

"Don't worry about it." Randy had an outrageous grin on his face, like a puppy having its belly rubbed.

"Why not?"

"Messler figured this out long ago. He never wanted to be recognized; he had too many enemies, and he didn't want Seconders to have any publicity, even then."

That made sense. I lifted an eyebrow and waited to hear what else Randy had to say.

“We'll use a bit of deception in our looks, of course, but mainly, we control the recorders and guards and the guards' superiors at many of the gates, especially in North Houston. In North Houston, we don't even have to worry about monitors on the gates most of the time. They get torn down as fast as the government puts them up. The people living by those gates hate the government, or rather the authority the government represents. There shouldn't be any problem at all.”

Money does have its advantages. Great wealth, that is. I should have thought of that, but I'm naive when it comes to politics and the manipulation of people. Besides, I'm a very poor liar and wear my feelings on my face. I hadn't even attempted to analyze how Messler had passed through gates so many times without it being noted, or I would have seen the pattern. But now that I was considering it as a pattern, a piece seemed to be missing.

“So when do we go?” Rita asked.

She leaned back against the headboard, while one hand idly tickled my belly. The other held a glass of flavored ethanol. She had an amused, anticipatory smile on her face. I thought she was craving sex again already, but a quick mind touch told me she wasn't, or at least not directly. What she was musing about was the prospect of becoming a man. Although we enjoyed sex from both sides of the equation, for Rita it was a pure, unalloyed pleasure. She was licking her lips in anticipation as she pictured ravishing my body.

Despite an afternoon of lovemaking, I blushed at the intensity of her thoughts. Between the two of us, it was more than sexual desire. It was love and the eternal urge to merge into the joyous oblivion of the ‘little death’ when two become one.

Rita caught the touch of my mind and winked at me. I returned the wink, and felt a surge of anticipation at the idea of becoming a female again. I loved Rita, but I also loved Rez. I wanted his strong arms around me once more.

I felt myself hardening as memories of my first sexual experience as a woman aroused my male body. I wanted to take Rita and make her mine as I plunged inside her. Then I wanted to lie under her strong male body as she possessed me. The sex gates had transformed my attitudes about what it meant to be a male or a female. Sometimes it was confusing, but it was an intense and wonderful confusion.

My sexual fantasies were interrupted when the comp bonged with a news alert.

CHAPTER SIX

I sat up in bed with a start. Dread sat like a lump in the pit of my stomach. I expected bad news. And it was. The picture on the wall screen in the bedroom brightened and expanded. We were looking at a mob of turban-clad Fourth-Worlder men and women as they stormed the Israeli consulate in Iran. The reporter had to shout to be heard over the ranting of the mob. The continual stream of news service bulletins across the bottom of the screen told us this was a live feed.

According to the subtitles, the angry mob had gathered in response to a rumor that the consulate was harboring an Iranian Seconder. As we watched, the Israeli guards stood fast. At first they tried to fend off the mob with stun guns and zaps from microwave weapons, but it was useless; there were too many people pressing ever closer to the consulate. When it became clear they weren't going to turn back, guards began shooting to kill, but it was too late. The crowd screamed its rage and ran for the consulate like one huge, furious animal. The hapless guards disappeared into the swarming mass. We heard later that they were all killed.

With the guards slaughtered, the mob poured into the building. Rita turned aside in horror when

screaming men and women were tossed to the raging fanatics from second and third-story windows. If any of them survived the fall, they didn't stay alive for long. No Seconders were identified, then or ever. It was a rumor, but God's Chips, what is it in the human psyche that can turn people in a group into a hysterical, raging beast?

I've never understood it, even though Rita tried to explain mob psychology to me once she'd calmed down. Her explanations, or any others for that matter, never made sense to me. Personally, I think it is tied into the territorial instinct, combined with subconscious sexual needs for dominance, and the desire for peer approval once the spark has been provided by religious or political ravings. Rita says I'm an atavist, and I don't understand people. She thinks that with enough attention, education, and material help almost anyone but the basest psychopath can be steered into living a productive life. I believe history proves otherwise-before the sex gates, that is-but never mind.

At the moment, we were stunned by the senseless violence unfolding before us. Finally, Rita switched off. The screen came back on almost immediately, with another news bulletin that was every bit as ominous. The UN had begun debating the status of Seconders. We listened in horror as the delegates talked about us as if we were some sort of new disease. My fears mounted with each denunciation as my newfound abilities warned me that a terrible revelation was coming.

Then the one word I most feared to hear was uttered. We listened; each of us knowing that word was going to mean trouble, and lots of it.

"...and these telepathic monsters have no rights, not so long as they conceal the knowledge of prospective immortality. Until they reveal how and why they are immune to disappearing into the sex gates, while anyone else who makes a second attempt vanishes, they should be treated as the miscreants they are, and rounded up, and questioned under the most severe..."

The speaker went on and on, although I was relieved he did not mention the word telepathic again. My relief was short-lived. The next speaker began to denounce our telepathic abilities to a worldwide audience. Somehow a rumor about our powers had reached someone in the UN. This delegate announced it as gospel truth-which unfortunately it was-and ranted about the evil uses of such a power, as if Seconders could read the deepest thoughts of anyone. That wasn't true, but I knew we wouldn't be able to convince the people about that after this speech.

I switched off again and set the alert priority at a higher level, so we wouldn't be disturbed by anything that wouldn't immediately impact on us. Trouble was brewing. But I couldn't help but think how strange it was that with the prospect of a whole second life available to most people, they automatically wanted more. The old territorial instinct working again. That could be worked with, though. The other was more serious.

"I was afraid the truth about our telepathic abilities would get out sooner or later. I hoped it would be later," I said.

Randy's face took on a serious look. "Messler discovered something about our telepathy."

I stared at him in surprise. "What?"

Every time Messler's name was mentioned, some new aspect of Seconders or the sex gates was revealed. There was so much information he had told his consorts, information we needed to know.

"He said that lovers who become Seconders together developed their talents faster than single people. He believed you and Rita will be able to read the surface thoughts of other people as easily as you can each other in time."

“How could he know that?”

“He has-had-contacts all over the world. Remember? He recently heard of another pair like you and Rita-and he had Terri and me to study too, I guess, although I haven't noticed much telepathy yet. Terri and I can read each other's surface emotions, but thoughts are beyond us yet. On the other hand, Messler always thought you two were something special.”

“Damned if I know why.” I glanced at Rita. She shook her head, as puzzled as I was.

“There's one other thing, too. Messler had some of the best people in a number of fields working to discover what in the hell telepathy is, and how it develops.” Randy traded a glance with Terri. “I told him to start with old married couples who really liked each other. Anecdotal evidence is overwhelming that some sort of mental empathy develops over the years. He didn't credit the reports at first, until we talked to him about it.” A fond smile touched his lips as he looked in Terri's direction, and she nodded to confirm his statement.

I thought Randy was right to an extent: I had seen my parents start to say the same thing at the same time on numerous occasions, and both my brother Derek and I had caught them each making the same plans or doing the same thing without the other one being aware of it. Once they even gave the same self-composed Christmas card to each other. But figuring out how telepathy worked was a project for the future. Right now we had more immediate problems. We dropped the subject, and started trying to figure out when and where we intended to go through a gate again.

“Tomorrow morning, soon as we get up and about,” Rita suggested. The slow, sultry smile she directed at the rest of us suggested we might not get out of bed right away.

I thought about it. “Why wait until tomorrow? You know, when you come out of the gate you always feel completely refreshed and full of energy.”

“That's true,” Rita said. “But that's not all. Once you've gone through once and know what to expect, you come out feeling sexy as hell, too.”

Terri chuckled at Rita's provocative statement. Her blue gaze wandered over my body, and I wondered if she was trying to imagine me as a woman. She slid off the bed and began dressing, as if she couldn't wait to experience sex as a man again. I thought about showering first, but realized there was no need. If we were heading for a gate, we would come out so clean our bodies would almost glow.

As it turned out, we didn't leave right away, after all. First, Randy had to show me the codes that would let our escorts know we were moving. I was flabbergasted to find out that from now on we would always be at the center of a small army devoted to our welfare and nothing else-and very well paid for it.

In the case of the safe house we were at (and during the trip to it, for that matter), our guards had been completely unobtrusive. There were several on duty at any one time, rotating shifts from a guest cottage I hadn't seen when we arrived. And there were others who stayed on duty in vehicles; ready to follow and protect us wherever we might go.

It was a strange way to live. I wondered if I would grow to accept it as normal. Perhaps, if the guardians stayed out of sight as they were doing now. But what about when we had to go out in public? Would we be surrounded by bodyguards like some VR star or prominent politician?

That made me wonder how closely we were monitored by our guards. Were they keeping watch on the inside of the house? Almost certainly. What about the bedrooms? Probably. I tried to conceal the thought from Rita, but she caught it anyway. She grinned. I should have known it wouldn't bother her.

The computer bonged one more time before we left, but compared to the other revelations, this new bit of news seemed unimportant. It was a third-hand report from some godforsaken part of Africa that had been ravaged by decades of disease and war. Another gate had disappeared according to these rumors. I mulled over the report for a moment before putting it on the backburner for analysis later, if it proved to be correct.

I hadn't seen the number of cars parked in back of the house either; they were concealed in an underground garage. No electric cars here; they were all gas-guzzling speed machines, and probably made of composite armor and bulletproof glass besides, if my analysis was correct. We left in a convoy of sorts, although they managed to make it as unobtrusive as possible. A guard car led the way. Terri and Randy followed in the next car, while Rita and I sat in the car behind them. We each had drivers. I expect there was another car behind us, bringing up the rear.

Our driver, a beefy man of about forty, introduced himself as Carl. As soon as we were settled he raised the partition between the front and back to give us privacy. Inside, the car was the latest word in luxury. We sank down into soft seats of rich leather. A well-stocked bar was built into one side of the passenger compartment, and a screen suspended from the roof allowed us to watch the news or be entertained.

As Rita and I relaxed in the comfortable seats and watched the world slide by, we began discussing our developing relationship with Randy and Terri. That led to memories about old times at school with Russell and Don, and the years afterwards, when Russell and Donna became our lovers. All of us had changed genders over those years except for Russell.

The drive was a pleasant interlude with no worries. I wished it could last, but considering the state of the world, I knew that it wouldn't. We had decided beforehand to try and go through the sex gate on the campus of North Houston College. That gate was the very one we saw appear years ago when they first materialized on Earth. Don had walked through it out of curiosity moments after it appeared in front of us. Of course, he had no idea what would happen, and he suffered an enormous shock when he came out the other side a woman.

As we neared the gate, I was surprised at how much the area had changed in the years since we had been back there. The condition of the grounds and buildings had deteriorated. There was trash in the curbs, and empty beer cans scattered on the grass under the old oaks. Most of the students wandering around were dressed in fake Fourth Worlder garb, jumpsuits and wraparounds, with an occasional mix of togas, jeans, and miniskirts. A few of the men were wearing miniskirts, too. The sight of men in miniskirts was a strange one as far as I was concerned, but I remembered that the dressing habits of college kids never did make much sense.

What happened once we arrived at the gate was funny-in a frightening way. The student council had convinced the dean to keep government monitors away from the gate, and it appeared that the policy still held. As soon as the car came to a halt, the privacy partition rolled down. I started to open the door, but it wouldn't move, nor would the window roll down. I asked Carl what was going on.

"I've gotten a warning. I'm staying put and keeping you inside," he answered, in a clipped tone of command. "I think the feds are up to something. We may leave in a hurry."

Rita and I both looked out through the one-way glass. A woman was standing quite close to the entrance to the sex gate. Like the other students, she was dressed in ersatz Fourth World garb, but my sense of patterns sounded a warning when I noticed that she wore a pair of low-heeled, sensible shoes.

I saw Carl narrow his gaze in her direction and knew that our advance guard had spotted her as a suspicious character, as well. I'm not sure what tipped them off. Perhaps it was her shoes, or maybe

something else not apparent to me. While she had her eye on one of them who acted as a decoy, another passed close behind her and waved his hand as if greeting someone in the distance. As soon as he did that, the young woman got that stupid, confused look on her face that we had seen when Randy and Terri had guarded Messler as we approached the Ruston gate. Within a few seconds she wandered away from the gate. With a sharp glance around, Carl opened the car door and motioned us out.

I didn't stop to wonder why a fed was spying on the people who were going through this particular gate. I should have taken the time to think about it, but my heart was beating faster as I prepared myself to grapple once more with the mystery behind the gates. I grabbed Rita's hand and we headed toward that beckoning turquoise arch.

Terri and Randy walked through ahead of us. I saw them vanish, and assumed they were on the other side already. We stepped forward-

-and were surrounded, embedded, overwhelmed, and made almost senseless by the green light that engulfed us like an all-pervading fog. We were floating in a miasma so thick that you could not see your hand in front of your face. But we were not quite senseless, even though we were disembodied-or at least that's what it felt like.

In our many trips through the gates we had learned what to do. With an effort of will, we both clung to consciousness. I could feel-and sense Rita feeling-the approaching change. We linked our minds together in an attempt to hold it off. The more we fought the change, the more we became aware of the overwhelming power of the gates and the being-or beings-behind them.

Still clinging to consciousness, we groped for some new shred of knowledge about the gates. Once again I discerned the faintest hint of an alien presence. As before, it seemed vast and powerful-far too powerful to be human-but for the first time the impression I received wasn't quite so otherworldly. I couldn't be sure what was changing-the presence, or our own comprehension of it-but I hovered on the verge of a new understanding.

As before, the other gave no hint that it was aware of our presence, or the fact that we were not undergoing the change instantaneously, as we should have. I wondered at the faint hint of familiarity-in an odd sort of way-but before I could pursue the impression my thoughts were pulled to Rita's mind by a powerful surge of her emotions.

Her consciousness was consumed by one desire-to find Donna and Russell again. Her mind whirled with demands that the gate master, whatever or whoever was controlling the gates, bring our lovers back. I knew that emotion-filled demands would get us nowhere. The only way to find Russell and Donna was to keep making our slow, but steady progress in understanding the gates. But our interlude with Randy and Terri had evoked too many painful memories. Rita's patience was exhausted; she was demanding answers with all the power of her mind and will-and getting nowhere.

The force of her feelings awoke my unvoiced yearning for Donna and Russell, and swept away my intention to study the gate masters. As I struggled to concentrate, Rita's mind segued into a thought about our unborn child, the one she lost when she was attacked by a mentally disturbed man, and we rushed her through a gate before she bled to death.

I would do the same thing over again, a hundred times over. Rita means the world to me. But saving her life with the gate cost us the life of the baby. No fetus has ever made it through the gates, no matter how far advanced the pregnancy. It made sense in a terrible sort of way, for how could a pregnant woman emerge as a pregnant man?

The sorrow of that memory destroyed my concentration. The power of the gates took over, and pulled

us toward the other side. As we rushed once more through green fog, an errant wisp of data opened in my mind. Scientists had failed to learn anything about the physical properties of the gates. What if they were quantum phenomena of some sort?

And with that, the change was upon us. Instantaneously we found ourselves on the other side of the gate, naked. I was a woman, and Rita was a man.

No matter how many times you've gone through a gate, the suddenness of the change is always surprising. For most people, there is no measurable interval between going in one side of the gate and coming out the other. Furthermore, I had no idea how the gate managed to expel a person in an upright, standing position.

I took a step and staggered, as I tried to adjust to the balance of my new body. It always happened that way, but the effect was worse than usual this time, because I was distracted by that last wisp of thought before the change.

A quantum phenomena? Now how had I thought of that? I wasn't a physicist, or a mathematician, not by a long shot. All I knew about quantum theory was what I had read in science fiction novels and a few popular books. I wished once again for Russell-he had been the scientist in our little group.

I tabled the idea for the time being, and concentrated on walking. As usual, I felt top heavy. My full breasts swayed every time I took a step, and the steps were small because I had to overcompensate for my natural tendency to take the long strides of a man. A related problem was that my bottom felt extraordinarily wide, though I knew it wasn't. In fact, it was pleasantly curved, causing my backside to swivel in an unaccustomed manner. Unaccustomed since the last time I was female, anyway.

I glanced sideways and Rita-now Rez, as I was Li-gave me a wolf whistle accompanied by a big male grin. He was having problems, too. He was taking what looked like baby steps. He had his shoulders thrown too far back because he was used to the weight of breasts and all the rest of the female form.

I grinned at him; it was always like this, even though we had been through it all before. Practice does make for better adaptability, though, and I knew that it was simply a matter of the mind getting used to a new way of moving and handling things. For me, material objects would seem heavier at first, and Rez would experience the opposite effect.

Carl came up to us with two robes draped over his arm. We pulled them on as we both stepped into the car. The car started up, the partition between us and Carl slid into place, and another phenomena of the change took over, a randy readiness for sex.

We were hardly rolling before Rez started kissing me. Soon our mouths were open and tongues busy. Rez slipped his hand inside my robe, exploring my breasts, bringing my nipples to full erectness and sending a surge of urgent warm desire through the center of my body.

The sensations assailing my mind from my now-female body were wonderful and new all over again. I loved the big man Rita had become, and felt the same sweet need to be close to him and love him as I had before. I was going down on him before we were even out of the parking lot.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I had decided to take Randy's advice and move our base of operations to Messler's building in North Houston. Carl drove us into the building via a private entrance, and a private elevator shot us up to the penthouse suite. I was beginning to have a better idea where the phrase 'the high life' came from. The luxurious suite was over ten thousand square feet, several times the size of the old homestead in Ruston.

All four of us stumbled into the spacious rooms as horny as goats on the first day of rutting season. But I could see from the way Randi and Terry clung to each other that they needed to explore their new male and female bodies in the safety of familiar arms.

I understood. When I first became a woman, it was a long time before I let any man, but Rez touch me. And then, it was only Russell. Randi and Terry had risked going through a sex gate the second time out of loyalty to Messler-the whole process of changing sexes was new to them. It didn't matter. I was perfectly happy to spend the night in bed relearning the joys of womanhood in the arms of my exciting male lover.

I was the first one up the next day. Rez wasn't stirring yet. That proved the old adage that a woman can wear out a man any old day, but the opposite is seldom true. I have to admit that Rez had tried, though. Shucks, if I were a man I would have, too.

The bathroom had mirrors everywhere, so it wasn't surprising that I found myself in front of one, admiring my reflection. The difference between my male self and my female self was astonishing-and not just sexually. My short, rusty red hair had been replaced by a crown of wavy auburn hair spilling in waves to my shoulders. My face, plain as a male, missed being beautiful as a female, but not by much, and no man on earth would complain about my figure. I turned to the side to admire the swell of my breasts and my flat stomach. It's amazing how the substitution of one little X for a Y chromosome can produce such astounding changes.

In the years since they first appeared, we'd learned quite a few things about the changes the sex gates induced. For one, I wouldn't have my first period as a woman for almost a month. Therefore, I should have been safe last night, but the first thing today I intended to get an implant.

I am eternally grateful that modern implants not only bar pregnancy, but prevent the whole messy monthly business from happening, as well. Most women who use birth control, at all, use those implants now. Naturally, we have the always stone-minded minority on any subject, who insists it's wrong to get an implant because it's not the 'natural' solution-as if there has been a natural solution to anything since the day our caveman ancestors lit the first campfire. I went through the experience of having a period once to see what it was like. Damned if I was ever going to go through it again, if I could help it.

I shot a quick wink of admiration at my reflection, and returned to the bedroom to get dressed. I didn't know where the clothes had come from, but there was a selection waiting in the closet. I dressed for comfort, in clingtight shorts and a pullover. Well, maybe more for looks than for comfort; the clingtight fabric adjusts to the contours of the body and remembers afterwards. The white shorts and mahogany-colored top provided a spectacular show for anyone who cared to look. I had come to enjoy an appreciative male stare, so long as it came with a smile.

Rez was lying on his back in the bed. The sheet was pulled down to his waist, revealing his bronzed, muscular torso. He gave me a welcoming wink and motioned me closer. I sat down on the edge of the bed and leaned down to kiss him, but quickly jumped back up before the kiss got out of hand. I wanted that implant! Besides all that, I was ravenously hungry as only a teenager in the prime of life who hasn't eaten since the day before can be.

Rez took his time in the shower. That gave me a chance to check on Randy and Terri, or rather Randi and Terry. When I knocked on the door of their suite, Terry opened it almost immediately. They were both up and dressed, and a man I didn't know was in the room with them.

Terry greeted me with a warm smile. "Hello, Li. You look gorgeous today."

This was the reaction I'd wanted to create, but I felt awkward when Terry pulled me into an embrace.

The sex gates produce more than their share of confusing moments and this was one of them. Not too long ago, Terri and I spent a night making love. Now our sexual roles had switched. From the way his hands slid over my hips, I gathered he wanted to pick up where we left off.

There was one small problem with that. Despite my many sex changes, my mind clung to the male viewpoint, except where Rez was concerned. Even as Terry bent his lips to kiss mine, I felt more attracted to Randi. I could see her over Terry's shoulder. She was pulling a top back down over her head. It was the first time I had seen her as a woman, and I was immediately turned on.

That didn't mean I didn't remember how great the lovemaking had been with Terry as a woman, though. Or how close I felt to him as a result. Despite my lingering inhibitions, I was determined not to hurt him. I made a resolution to accept him as a male lover, but I knew the adjustment would take a bit of time.

Terry's lips found mine, but it was a gentle kiss, without demands. His beautiful blue eyes searched for my reaction. Perhaps he saw my reluctance, because he stepped back and waved me into the room. I realized he'd been born a woman, and become a man in his first change, then a woman again as a Second. Now he was once more a man, a role that was new and probably awkward to him. It was evident he wasn't going to make any macho demands.

I stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek, and whispered, "Soon, I promise."

Meanwhile, Randi walked up to me. I turned and she engulfed me in a hug, woman to woman. The sensation of her breasts against mine sent my blood pressure soaring. As a woman, Randi was every bit as beautiful as she had been handsome as a male. I felt a stirring in my loins, a surge of warmth between my legs. I wanted to take her to bed, even though I had spent the night engaged in round after round of lovemaking that would have exhausted most women-and despite being a bit sore. The change from male to female always leaves the hymen intact; why, I have no idea.

Randi released me, and turned to the stranger at her side. "Li, I want you to meet Ron, or I should say, Dr. Ron Neumann."

I wondered if he was a medical doctor. He appeared to be in his fifties, but was still trim and fit. His brown hair had thinned considerably in front. If he was a doctor, it was strange that he hadn't availed himself of a hair treatment. Maybe he was one of those rare persons who accept what life gives them with no complaints.

He held out his hand for me to shake. "Hello, Miss Stuart. I was Messler's physician, and I hope to be yours as well, with your permission. I'm also the medicine man for these two characters. Call me Ron, or Ronald if you want to be formal."

As I shook his hand, I craned back my neck to look up into his face. I was a bit shorter and smaller than the average woman, while Neuman topped six feet, and had large strong hands.

"Glad to meet you, Ron. Is anything wrong to bring you here so early?"

He smiled. "I thought we had better get your implant going; if you want one, that is. I was taking care of Randi's when you knocked."

He held up the little gadget used to implant the hormones.

Of course. Great wealth. Personal physician.

"I sure do!"

Women-women who were born women, I mean-may glory over the ability to become pregnant, but that's one experience I have no desire to understand better. I was perfectly satisfied to leave motherhood to those who had had twenty or so years to get used to the idea. The mere thought of ever having a baby scared hell out of me.

Most women chose a one-year deal with an implant in case they want to change their minds, but I always went for five-not that I had ever been a woman for five years in a row, except once. No sense taking chances was the way I felt; especially as unsettled as the world had been since the appearance of the sex gates.

There was nothing to the procedure. I pulled my shirt up and Ron placed the business end of the injector between and along two of my upper ribs. Once he was sure that it was properly in place, he triggered it. The injector made a little snapping noise. I felt a tingle of pain, which quickly vanished, and that was it. Modern medicine is wonderful. I pity the Third and Fourth Worlders who don't have access to any, but the most basic measures.

* * * *

The luxury suite at the top of Messler's office building was furnished in a French classical style. I felt as if I'd wandered into a palace by mistake. It took up all of one floor. I learned later that part of Messler's-now my-entourage, the guards in particular, also occupied some rooms on the floors below and above. It was all pretty spectacular, but no sooner were we settled in then I was comparing it to the old homestead, and finding it lacking in simple, everyday comfort.

I envied my parents, Edie and Eddie. Once that business in Mexico got settled (and it appeared it would be; the succession efforts were obviously failing), they would probably be discharged and move back to Ruston, unless they decided to stay in the army for yet another hitch. That was always a possibility, since military pensions were cancelled for anyone who passed through a gate. Dad had retired from the army years ago, before the gates ever appeared. Then he developed heart trouble. He had no choice, but to go through a gate to save his life. Mom followed him. Neither one of them could bear the idea that she would remain old while he turned into a young woman. When the Mexico secessionist movement started, the army accepted Dad back, even though he was a young woman. He wasn't in one of the combat arms.

One thing about the advent of the sex gates I really liked was that they went a long way toward dispelling some of the more absurd political correctness of the last century, especially when it came to gender questions. Once you've had a chance to experience both sides of the sexual equation, you get a hell of a better perspective. You realize right down in your gut that men and women are entitled to political equality (at least in America), but in many basic ways they are as different as night and day.

Anyone who doesn't recognize the fact after undergoing a change has bats in the belfry. The sexes have different aptitudes, areas of intelligence, capabilities, endurance, strengths, and so on, and most of it is not culturally induced, but inherited. A million years of evolution can't be overturned because the industrial revolution and modern science has freed women from the effective slavery they endured for most of history.

Rez joined our little group as I was pulling my top back down and adjusting the clingtight fabric to conform to my breasts the way it was supposed to. It was mahogany-colored to match my hair, and I might as well have not worn a top for all that it concealed. Once I finally adjusted to becoming a woman on occasion, I found that like most women, I enjoyed displaying myself for the male of the species.

Rez whistled and grinned. He winked and nodded at the doc, who was getting an eyeful for himself, even though he tried to act nonchalant. I suspected our doctor had gone through some strange experiences

while tending to Messler over the years, first as an old man, then alternately as a man and woman.

After Ron was introduced to Rez, the five of us sat down to watch the news while having breakfast. I was sandwiched between Terry and Randi at the table. I felt acutely conscious of both. I could smell the clean scent of Randi's long blond hair; her arm brushed against mine as she reached for her orange juice, the warmth of her flesh sending a hot wave of desire through my lower body. As the same time, Terry rested a hand on my knee. How could I object? We'd been lovers. Nor did I want to. Terri had driven me wild in bed. Now that I was a woman, I wondered if Terry possessed the same expertise as a man. So far, Rez and Russell were the only males who had ever made love to me as a woman, but as I appraised Terry's tall, strong body with a sideways glance, I became even more determined to get over that particular sexual blockage.

It was hard to find anything positive in the morning's news reports, but I was glad to note one thing. Despite the recent upsurge in popularity of the Church of the Gates, the church hadn't yet regained the powerful political influence it once had. The church lost its popularity in the United States years ago when it attempted to suppress research that could give humanity faster than light travel. Russell had been part of the research group that had solved that problem, but the church had tried to destroy the members of the group and their findings. After that shocking story was revealed to the public, the church declined in the United States, but a radical branch prospered in Brazil. They infiltrated the military there, and instigated a brief nuclear war with the U.S., hoping that the resulting chaos would stop the development of interstellar travel.

With a history like that, I was surprised the church had any adherents at all. The religious mind has always baffled me. Certainly, they lost most of their congressional seats in the elections that followed those events. When the church lost those seats, conservatives gained power. Now, on the morning news, we heard that those conservatives had passed a bill (over the objections of the Justice Department and Selinda, the High Priest of the Gaters) that would ban monitoring devices at the sex gates in America.

That was incredibly good news for us; it meant that Seconders could go through the gates without being recorded-including us. It wasn't until I heard the report that I realized how worried I had been that about that. If we were recognized, we could be mobbed or taken into custody by the feds. It wasn't that we were so famous; my face and later on Rita's had never been bandied about much while we were writing for the tabs. But we were known Seconders who had had run-ins with the feds before.

If the gates were monitored, they would be able to identify us from our DNA. It was a legally binding identification. Despite a change in gender, DNA remained essentially the same-no matter what our sex, our original identity could be pinpointed.

Of course, that didn't mean that the feds wouldn't post sentries at some gates with buttonhole recorders, or clandestinely break the law by recording with telescopic devices from a distance, but they would find it difficult to watch every gate in America.

I hoped that with this new law in place some of the growing hysteria over Seconders would die down, but it was a forlorn hope. My pattern analysis told me we had a long way to go before we would be out of the woods.

My attention wandered as I admired Randi's new female profile, and Terry's masculine face. At a gasp from Rez, I looked back and saw a cordon of fire reaching for the sky. The anchor was babbling something about Johannesburg, and more rioting and looting.

I touched Rez's mind with mine to offer him silent sympathy. I knew how his kind heart hurt whenever he saw evidence of the unending human suffering in Africa. My own attitude was more realistic, although I

tried to keep those thoughts closed off from him. That poor ravaged continent had been on a downhill slide since the middle of the last century, and was still mired in disease, war, famine, disintegrating infrastructure, and wholesale corruption of public officials. We had stopped sending relief supplies because they were used only to enrich politicians while the starving went on and on. Some of the areas of the old USSR were rapidly approaching that state, too.

My attention snapped back to the screen. The announcer was presenting another report of a missing gate. This was a confirmed disappearance so far as I could tell, and the third report of a vanishing sex gate in three days. That made a pattern. One gate had disappeared in America, one from Russia and one from Australia, and perhaps one in China, besides that one in Africa. News from that warlord-ridden country was as apt to be wrong as right.

These gates were not being removed from Earth by any method known to science. That made me think the originators themselves were removing the gates. But that didn't resonate as a pattern; it was inconsistent. If the gate masters wanted to remove the gates, they would remove all of them, just as they had sent them all at once. Instead, whoever or whatever was responsible was taking only a few, one at a time. It was a real puzzle. If the gate masters weren't removing the gates, who was? No one on earth knew enough about the gates to manage it, not even remotely.

To my knowledge, only one person had ever had an inkling of scientific understanding about the gates-Russell. But he couldn't be behind the current phenomena. He had vanished years ago, on that awful day when we were all dying from the radiation sickness. His knowledge of the gates, such as it was, went with him. His one failing as a scientist was not keeping good notes.

Where was he now? Or was he anywhere? I had no answers, any more than I knew what had happened to Messler. My only hint lay in that quick impression I'd received the last time Rita and I had been through a gate-an impression that I was experiencing a quantum phenomena. It was something I intended to try to explore on our next passage, if the feds left us alone to make another one. Not that I was necessarily right, but it was curious that this thought had come to me, since I know less about real quantum theory than a bird does about beeswax.

As I thought of the feds, the graphie started on another news item. The Justice Department was considering declaring all Seconders to be enemy belligerents, and subject to arrest and detention. I didn't see how they could get away with such an illegal action, not permanently. The Supreme Court was solidly constitutionalist right now. However, as I've noted, the bureaucratic mind is afraid of what it doesn't understand, and the idea that Seconders could read minds was rapidly gathering strength and credibility. That brought on another thought.

Suppose I went public and told the truth: that it was indeed a fact that Seconders could read minds to a limited extent-but that power was really only effective with other Seconders. To develop the ability took several passages through the gates, and a lot of practice, and even then not much more than surface images and emotions could be detected. Would telling the truth help? Maybe. I couldn't quite get a handle on the ultimate effect yet, but it was food for thought.

Perhaps it was only an eerie coincidence, but even as I was considering going public, my personal phone rang. All of us around the breakfast table stared at it in surprise. The number had been changed when we'd moved to Houston, and no one should have had it but us.

"Answer it," Rez breathed, with a nervous lick of his lips.

I pressed the button to put the call on the speaker so everyone could hear what was said. "Hello?"

"Is this Jackson Lee Stuart, or Jackson Li Stuart?" The female voice at the other end sounded amused.

My tingling nerve ends told me that danger lurked beneath that silky voice. "It is."

"Li, my name is Selinda. You've probably seen me on the webcasts. I'm the head of the Church of the Gates. I've just learned that you've inherited the fortune of our founder, Messler Scribner."

"Selinda?"

My mind raced, trying to figure out how she'd located us. If the Gaters were indeed behind the demonstration at our house, they might have trailed us all the way from there. But that seemed impossible. I was fairly certain we'd lost them when we'd gone to the safe house. Had someone in Messler's organization in Houston spilled the news of our move to the penthouse?

"You're probably wondering how I found you. And no, I'm not a mind reader, or especially talented in any way."

She laughed, but my gut went icy cold. Did she know about the idiot-savant talents we Seconders were so desperate to conceal?

"The answer is simple," she continued. "The church has made it a point to keep an eye on its founder-as, I believe, our founder kept an eye on us. We intend to do the same with his heir."

"Is that a threat?"

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. My sense of pattern analysis screamed that this woman was dangerous.

"No, threat, Li, as long as you keep quiet and don't try to advance the cause of your fellow Seconders. We, of the Church of the Gates, will have little patience with those who try to do the work of the Devil."

Her voice reeked with the infuriating confidence of a religious fanatic who knows they are right and everyone else is wrong. I wanted to argue with her, but I knew her type. An argument would only convince her that I was deluded, and needed conversion. I'd try soothing her instead.

"My only plans center around learning to enjoy spending all the money I've inherited."

"That's good news, Li," she purred. "Go on a big shopping trip, and buy some new clothes. We'll keep in touch."

The phone clicked as she hung up. The five of us stared at each other, disconcerted.

"What was that all about?" Rez wanted to know.

"It was a warning," Terry said. "She told you to stay quiet, and do nothing to help the Seconders. She's hoping to frighten you."

"I'm not frightened. If anything, that bitch just made me more eager than ever to help Seconders."

I saw Rez relax as I stated my intentions. No one was going to intimidate me.

"Still, it shows that someone has penetrated our security. We'll conduct an investigation right away," Terry assured me.

I nodded, determined that any plans we made from now on would be wrapped in total secrecy.

Randi and Terry wanted to spend the morning giving me a dog-and-pony show on Messler's-now

my-financial empire. I guess you have to have an inherent bent for the mental processes used to accumulate great fortunes to be much interested in the details of that empire, and I wasn't. What I wanted to know was how I could use that money to protect Seconders.

Rez wanted to know why we couldn't use some of that great fortune to help the Fourth Worlders in our country, as well as those starving in other places. It was hard for me to make him understand that we could give the complete fortune away to the underprivileged, and it would make little difference in the long run. The idea that all those billions wouldn't go far in America, much less the world, is counterintuitive-and that's much of the reason the rich are so often accused of 'greed'.

"But can't we do something?" Rez begged.

His big black eyes glowed with compassion. I repressed a smile at the way his original female tenderheartedness carried over into his male body. I put my arms around his neck and drew his head down so I could press a kiss against his full, warm lips.

"Of course, we can. In fact, we can probably do a lot-but not by giving money away."

My promise to find some way to help the needy was rewarded with a sexy grin. That brought back some hot memories about the night before when I lay under him in the bed. With his weight on me, he had thrust into my body with his male hardness. I had gasped with pleasure and clung to his big solid frame with arms and legs as tight as I could. There was nothing of the female to him then! Well, there wasn't much of the male to me, either. I shrieked incoherently when I came, just as Rita did when she had an orgasm. Some things are inherent with the body-thank goodness!

I wondered if I would have the same reaction with Terry. He looked young and serious as he shuffled some of the papers detailing my fortune, but his blond hair fell over his high forehead in boyish disarray. I thought about brushing it back. Then I glanced at Randi and fantasized about how her voluptuous breasts would feel under my exploring hands. My blood began to heat up in my veins. I must have radiated some of that heat because Rez's grin widened. Whatever turned me on, he knew who would benefit the most.

Meanwhile, Randi continued her lecture, oblivious to my sexual imaginings. I was grateful that she and Terry were still infants when it came to linking minds. Randi consulted her personal computer and her face lit up with a triumphant grin.

"As of a half hour ago, your personal fortune totaled a few hundred billion dollars-that's in round figures, of course."

Even one billion is an unimaginable sum. I couldn't get a handle on it. Eventually, Randi began breaking it down into more understandable terms. While some of the money was available, much of it was tied up in maintaining the empire; that is, the office buildings and factories, and service companies, and all the rest. Those types of things couldn't even be sold without greatly decreasing their value. However, even though the greater part of the fortune was tied up in hardware, so to speak, there was plenty left for what I had in mind, if it were possible.

I wanted to start bringing Seconders together to see what our combined minds could do. After pondering some of the options, I decided a fake research center might do. In fact, the more I thought about it the more I realized it didn't have to be fake. With the money I controlled I could finance any sort of research I wanted to. Maybe I could even pay for the kind of research that would satisfy Rez's eternal desire to help the downtrodden.

"Sweetheart, what would you say to a brand-new research facility, privately funded, no government need apply?"

“What kind of research?” Ron piped up.

He had been sitting on a chair in the corner reading a magazine while Randi talked. I had almost forgotten he was there.

“Oh, several kinds. Medical. Social studies. Hard science. We could call it ‘The Messler Scribner Memorial Research Center’.” I grinned, to let everyone know there was much more to the idea.

Rez was in tune with my surface thoughts and caught on immediately. His face brightened and he squeezed my thigh in appreciation. Meanwhile, I explained to the others. I asked Randi and Terry how well we could conceal the true purpose of the prospective research center.

“Damn well,” Randi said. “Just so long as the actual research takes place-and produces some results.”

I rubbed my chin, and ran my hand through my hair before I realized what I was doing. It was an old male mannerism that I tried to suppress whenever I was a female.

“Well, we can't predict when breakthroughs will occur in medicine or physics, say, but if we need results, we can always come up with something from the humanities. Sociologists and psychologists will believe most anything, if you wrap it in enough poly-syllabistic circular logic.”

Rez pretended to punch me, but there was no rancor in the gesture. He was well aware of my low opinion of the so-called social sciences. Increased intelligence doesn't necessarily make Seconders think alike. Sometimes there really are two sides to a question and neither side is wholly right or true-or practical. We would probably always differ on means, if not final objectives.

“Hold on a minute,” Terry said.

He spoke a name into the air in a monotone. He held his hand up to stay our questions for a bit. A few minutes later, Carl appeared at the door in response to the summons. He glanced at us, his eyebrows raised in a question. While we were waiting, Terry had told us that Carl was head of security for the whole Messler empire; he liked to be in on the action and left the paperwork for underlings. That explained why he'd served as our chauffeur.

“Carl, is this place secure, without question?” Terry asked the question as if our lives depended on it, and perhaps they did.

Carl hesitated. His pride wanted to assure us we were safe, but he knew-and I knew-nothing is one hundred percent certain. He frowned and shrugged.

“It is as secure as it is humanly possible to make it. Or let me put it this way: if we're not secure here, my whole operation has been compromised and everything we've done for days is known to the government. So yes, we're secure-as secure as anything ever is this day and age.”

As he finished his uncertain summation, he offered each of us a defiant stare. I sympathized. Trying to maintain security in an electronic world was like attempting to stop the ocean's tide with sand castles.

Terry turned toward me and put an arm around Randi. She snuggled up against him as if she had been a woman all her life, but of course she had been a man for most of it. In the age of the sex gates, it's easy to get confused, believe me. To my surprise, she winked at me. I came damn near to blushing, something I hadn't done for a long while now.

Her lips curved upward at my embarrassment. She was teasing me. She knew I retained enough of the male mentality-even in my female body-to be stimulated by the sight of a luscious female body, and she

certainly did have a gorgeous body. While she snuggled with Terry, she watched me watching her. That little wink carried a load of insinuation. I could hardly wait to get her alone and see how far it went.

Terry's voice broke into my thoughts. "The reason I'm being so itchy about security is that I'm going to reveal something to you two-something that only Messler, Randi, and I know. We have access to a private sex gate. We can build the research center around it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

My jaw dropped open. Terry's statement was a total surprise. A secret sex gate! Randi and Terry sat there grinning at me like two street urchins who had just lifted my wallet. Unbeknownst to each other, they both winked at me. Rez caught the byplay, and broke into a wide grin of his own. I imagined he was interested in Randi, too, but as usual, he was willing to share.

I finally managed to spit out a word. "How?"

Randi dropped into a chair and crossed her long, sexy legs. "How did Messler manage to get his own sex gate? A good question. As you know, he was an intelligent and sophisticated man, but he was prone to hunches as well. Whenever fast action was required, he followed his gut feeling. On the day the sex gates first appeared, he was relaxing at a hideaway he kept a bit north of here. As fate would have it, a sex gate appeared on the place."

I nodded. From what I knew of Messler, I had no doubt the old man had immediately seized the opportunity to make the gate his own private resource. Randi's next words confirmed my thoughts.

"Messler saw at once that having a gate of his own would be a tremendous advantage. He immediately flew some workmen in from Mexico and had them construct a barn that completely encloses the gate so that no one can observe it. There is no record of its existence anywhere, so far as we know. The workmen had no idea where they were and as soon as their work was done, they were flown back out and paid a bonus to keep their mouths shut."

"Wow!" I could hear the mounting excitement in my voice. "Our own sex gate. A gate we can use without risk." My mind started to hum, considering the possibilities.

"We can build the research center around it," Randi agreed, "and no one will know it's there. We can simply make that part of the building off limits for some reason or other, maybe bio or radiological hazards, or some such. The research center will serve as a cover for our activities there."

"I like your thinking." I shot a grin her way, and was rewarded with a radiant smile in return.

"What's really nice is that while the world was in turmoil for months after the gates appeared, Messler flew another crew in and improved on the job. His cover story was that he was building a secure retreat for himself in case of war." She ran a hand down her thigh, nearly causing me to lose interest in the sex gates altogether. "Part of that job involved constructing a tunnel from the barn that conceals the sex gate back to the main house. We will be able to come and go from that building whenever we like, and no one will be the wiser."

Damn. Messler was one smart cookie, but then I already knew that. This news sure took a load off my shoulders, though. I stood up and damn near clicked my heels together.

"Randi, I could kiss you for this."

"Be my guest." She winked at me again.

Rez was getting a kick out of our sexual byplay. "Can I watch?" he teased on our private mental channel.

"After the first time," I allowed.

I could hardly wait until bedtime. In the meantime, I did collect the kiss, but right in the middle of it I was struck by an anomaly. I stepped back from Randi, and looked her straight in the eye.

"Why did we risk coming here when you knew that you have a concealed sex gate up your sleeve?"

"I didn't think about it," she said, in a small voice. "We've worked out of this office in Houston most of the years we've been with Messler. I feel safe here."

"It's as safe here as anywhere," Carl commented. "And if you need to study this secret sex gate, we'll find a way to get you there. I didn't even know the damn thing existed-and I'm head of security for all of Messler-Stuart, I mean."

"Messler kept it close. Just one of his many secrets. He probably wouldn't have let us in on it except that-well, I was with him at the time. And I couldn't very well conceal such a stupendous event from my wife, could I? I mean I had to tell her something to explain why I was so excited after spending three days out in the woods with Messler. Otherwise she might have thought Messler had a harem out there." Randi cast a fond gaze at Terry.

She was teasing, I could tell that. Messler had been over a hundred years old at the time. On the other hand...

Randi caught a hint of what I was thinking, and giggled. "He was the original dirty old man, but I think he stopped having sex at ninety or thereabouts. I hope I can do as well if I ever get that old."

"Women always can," I said.

"Which shows you haven't been an old woman," Terry corrected.

I didn't try to argue with her, even though at that moment I felt I could keep on having sex until I was as old as Methuselah. I guess all eighteen-year-olds feel that way, though.

The six of us spent the rest of the day making plans for the proposed research center. Randi and Terry took notes as the concept solidified in our minds and initiated a lot of the necessary legal and contractual processes over the net. Like Messler, I wanted to get started right away.

Over lunch, we discussed what kinds of scientists we wanted to attract to the outer research facility, which would serve as a cover for the hidden sex gate. I intended to invite a small group of Secondors to Messler's hideaway. We would expand from there. They would be the only ones who would know about the sex gate.

By mid-afternoon, I was yawning. Rez and Carl were talking sociology with Terry taking notes. You would think that nothing would surprise me by that time, but it was still a shock to find out that Carl had a doctorate in social studies. Rez took up with him like a weatherman cozies up to his graphics. They began arguing over whether the belief gene complex caused increased antisocialism when it malfunctioned and how much of a role environment played.

Personally, I thought most antisocial behavior came from individuals who not only possessed defective belief genes, but also lacked several of the genes for intelligence. If they couldn't set up a reasonable behavioral system for themselves, or their parents didn't instill one, it seemed inevitable that they would get into trouble. Fortunately for me, my parents had a strong moral sense and taught it to me early and

well. When it came to the belief gene complex, I inherited all of the recessive genes from both parents. My genetic code didn't force me to believe in those improbable aspects of religion, which have caused so much misery in the world.

"I'm going to take a nap while the rest of you decide how large a building we will need to house all of your poly-syllable dictionaries and contradictory professors," I said.

Rez stuck his tongue out at me, a mannerism that was cute when he was Rita, but didn't have quite the same appeal when he was Rez. I thumbed my nose at him, went into the bedroom and closed the door.

I had my back to the door as I felt behind me for the seam to loosen the clingtight top. You have to grow up as a female to really become adept at this maneuver. My clumsy fingers couldn't find the spot, and I missed hearing the door open because I was cursing at my ineptitude. I was groping for the beginning of the seam for the third time when soft fingers brushed my hands away and opened it for me.

I caught my breath and my stomach tightened in anticipation. I knew who it must be. I made a slow turn, letting the anticipation build, as the person behind me peeled the blouse away from my body. Randi dropped the flimsy garment to the floor and reached out to close her warm hands around both my bare breasts. She didn't have to reach far. I met her more than halfway. Her delicate touch sent shivers of delight down my spine. I was eager to get back into the swing of loving a woman. If there is a God (which I doubt), the alluring curves of a woman's body are the most beautiful thing he ever created, and I don't care if that is simply the evolutionary urge for survival talking.

I circled Randi's waist with my arms and slid my hands over the smooth contours of her buttocks. When she tilted her hips forward against me, I gasped and pulled her close. My hands fumbled for the buttons of her blouse as we fell onto the bed. Our lips locked in a fierce embrace and our tongues danced together.

Randi's naked breasts slid against my own, sleek and soft and resilient, the sensual contact arousing both our nipples into firm erect points that invited attention. Randi broke our kiss and guided my lips down to her waiting breasts. I lost myself in the exquisite sensation of her nipple in my mouth as I rolled my tongue around it. At the same time, I squeezed her other breast with my hand.

In another moment we were both naked and yearning for release. Such was our passion that we quickly stimulated each other to a shuddering climax. Afterward, we lay side-by-side in the bed, happy and relaxed as our mouths joined in a kiss. My hands stroked her body in slow languorous movements that quickened, and quickened some more. I forgot where I was and who I was in the rising tide of our passionate embrace. I cried out her name in short sharp bursts, voicing my pleasure to the rhythm of my orgasm.

* * * *

It took several days of planning to get the preliminaries of the center down on paper. The more we discussed what we wanted to do, the more complex the concept became. Also, we had to work from plats that didn't show the buildings that were already up. Messler had cleverly concealed the sex gate inside a large barn. The barn was convincing, even in satellite photos. Always a stickler for detail, Messler even had a tractor parked in front of it.

While we were busy with the planning, I got to know Carl better. He was in and out often, helping us with the details. He had been with Messler for more than twenty years. Despite his doctorate degree in sociology, he discovered that he got more satisfaction working in the security field. While in college, he had had a job as a security guard, and after he decided to pursue security as a career he started his own private firm. Two years later Messler hired that firm with the proviso that he would be their only client.

Carl had worked for him ever since.

Carl proved to be a real gem. He was able to provide contacts we could trust with some of our needed information. He knew something about architecture, too.

As I became increasingly impressed with him I was amused one day when I caught a stray thought of his. He came to our suite to consult with us perhaps a tad more often than he really had to-and I was the reason. While I was flattered, I was afraid he was out of luck. When it came to sex, I still had a hang-up about having sex with a man when I was a woman. I only went to bed with one man-Rez. Russell had been an exception, but he was long gone. I hoped to make Terry an exception, too, but we hadn't yet gone beyond passionate kissing in our new bodies. Terry was being sweet and patient about my hesitation, but I knew he was eager for another bout of the fervent lovemaking we'd shared before.

No, I didn't need another lover at this point. However, I couldn't help wondering what Carl would look like as a woman. Not that I thought my curiosity would be satisfied any time soon. As far as I could tell, he had no plans to chance a passage through a gate even though he must be nearing fifty.

Despite the sexual tension in the air, we continued working on plans for Messler's former retreat. Once the plans were made, I wanted to see the buildings put up and the scientists (and Seconders) ensconced there yesterday-and Rez was even more anxious. We finally decided to go with composite buildings with exterior power generators to supplement the solar storage batteries and fuel cells. In East Texas, you can't run much on solar power alone. Some places in Texas are pretty wet, believe it or not.

We were in the big common room one evening, kicking ideas around, when Carl happened to bring up the subject of the feds-again.

"We're talking about moving, but no one here has said anything about how we're going to do it."

"What's the problem?" I sat up straighter. I didn't like the worried look on Carl's face.

"I haven't been able to get a handle, yet, on whether the feds know that you were with Messler when he disappeared."

"Does it matter? They've questioned both Rez and me several times in the past. Besides, you know they've never been able to get anything out of a Secunder."

"So they say, but they've never released the medical information they get while the questioning is going on. I wonder why."

Ron had been lazing back in one of the big loungers. I thought he was asleep, but he perked up when he heard that question. He looked troubled when I only shrugged at Carl's comment, but said nothing. After a moment, I decided to probe for his reaction.

"Is something bothering you, Ron?"

"Nothing, but a lack of sex. No, seriously, I've wondered about that myself. I realize that the government wouldn't make such data public unless they had to, but Messler couldn't find out much, either."

"Maybe there isn't much to find out."

"Maybe." Ron shrugged, but the expression on his face told me he didn't believe it.

"We're getting off the subject," Carl said.

“What? Oh. Whether the feds are interested in me and Rita-Rez, I mean?”

“Yeah. If they aren't, you can travel safely, or relatively so. Also, you should be able to go through a Houston gate if you want to. Are you planning to go through soon?”

I meshed my mind with Rez's. We couldn't agree. He was ready to go. I wanted to wait. I was feeling antsy about the gates, a sure sign that a pattern was about to emerge. I wanted to let my subconscious stir things around for a while before acting. We compromised on a tentative date sometime in the middle of the following month. I suggested we move up to the site of the prospective research facility before then. I wanted to see our private sex gate. Carl nodded and said that he would get security ready for the move.

Now it was Randi's turn to look troubled. “Surely the feds had pattern recognition software on them when they tried to arrest Messler. Don't you think they know we were there?”

“Not if my cleanup crew did their jobs right, and I think they did.”

“Cleanup?”

That was Rez, ever the innocent. Well, not nearly as innocent as he used to be, but still he didn't always recognize words.

Carl grinned wryly. “Cleanup. They take care of the follow-up details that the primary security crew may not have time for, like zapping recognition software the bad guys might be carrying, searching them for pics of who they're looking for, etc. Sometimes even wiping recent memory, although I hate to do that. It eventually makes a mad dog out of one who was only barking beforehand, so to speak.”

“Why can't the government just leave us alone?” Rez cried.

I patted his hand, which was resting on my thigh. Touched by Rez's empathic anguish, Carl tried to explain, although there really is no logical explanation for the insanities of government. Rez had studied psychology when we were students together. He knew that governments are always run by secrecy, and consequently, can't stand to have secrets withheld from them. It's that simple. And if a ‘secret’ is something fraught with political dynamite, like prospective immortality or telepathy, then the government will go to any lengths to make the secret their own-and then withhold it from the populace. It doesn't make a lot of sense logically until you tie it in with the territorial gene complex, and then it does. Just a dog protecting its bone while trying to steal the other dog's bone. I didn't have to like it, though, and I didn't.

Rez didn't like it either, but that was because he always wanted to believe the best about people, and governments. I turned back to Carl's last remark.

“You mean that dope you zapped the feds with can wipe memories?”

“Oh, yes. That's been around for a while. Illegal, of course, but I believe in using the best methods available so long as they don't hurt someone who doesn't deserve to be hurt. And a little memory loss in a federal agent who is trying to corral a citizen illegally doesn't bother me a bit.”

“Me neither,” I agreed. “How about dropping a powerful dose into the drinking water at the federal security building?”

“But when we start breaking the law that makes us as bad as them!”

Rez thought humans should act like saints and never understood why they didn't. For all his new

intellect-and he was pretty smart even before our repeated passages through the gates-his emotional empathy blinded him to the truth about people.

"Not when we're simply protecting ourselves," I murmured, patting Rez's hand.

He nodded. I knew he was remembering several episodes where I had fired first and asked questions later.

We had gotten into the habit of keeping the big wall screen on standby with a multi-channel search program coded to news that interested us the most, like Seconders, politics and legislation concerning the sex gates, wars, riots (since most riots nowadays involved the gates in one way or another), and so forth. I spent some of our new money making the search program the best it could be, using one semi-intelligent boss program to design the other ones to fit our specific areas of interest. It was a topnotch bit of software; seldom miscalculating, and it seemed able to filter out the tabweb stuff from real news with no problem at all. Now our discussion was interrupted by a sudden increase in volume from the wall screen. It brightened and began talking.

...announced today that Messler Scribner, the billionaire former head of the Church of the Gates, is no longer on Earth. Scribner recently failed to pass through a sex gate in East Texas. Reliable sources report that his vast fortune has been through probate already. At the request of the beneficiaries, the results have been sealed for two years. That is the maximum time period allowed before the proceedings become public record. There are rumors that his two closest associates, Randy Tendler and Terri Winsdotter, are the principle heirs, but their offices have both issued firm denials. Mr. Tendler's attorney did confirm that a power of attorney giving Tendler day-to-day control of much of the Messler empire was granted, but...

"Good!" Randi exclaimed.

"Right," Carl agreed. "The news may leak out somehow, and I suspect it will before the two years are up, but it won't be through our offices, and it won't be from the court. I made sure of that."

"But will they stay bought?" Ron asked.

"Certainly. Wouldn't you if some, uh, unsavory incidents from your past became public if you talked, and a steady income is deposited into your bank account every month that you don't?"

"I like to think that there's a limit to what I would do for money." Rez looked glum, as if the corrupt nature of humanity had finally gotten to him. Then his smile flashed again. "Most people are better than that."

Something else interested me. "Does that mean we can go out now?"

I was getting cabin fever. My young body cried out for exercise, and I needed some new sensory stimulation. We'd been locked in the suite too long. The only sights I'd seen for days were those coming at me secondhand through a screen. We had plenty of sensory stimulation of a sexual sort, of course, but even that can only carry a person so far.

Carl shook his head. "Only with an entourage, and only in disguise. You still don't realize how the proles view the bourgeois, Li. Combine that with the public knowledge that you're a known Secunder. If you got caught outside when news broke that you inherited Messler's fortune, you wouldn't live out the day."

I caught Rez's shiver from the corner of my eye. Both of us faced new dangers. With the social structure breaking down, wealthy people were often kidnapped for ransom. Unfortunately, the kidnappers seldom let their victims live. As soon as it became public knowledge that I had inherited Messler's money I could

never again go out without risk.

Any risk to me was a risk to Rita-Rez-too. Come to think of it, he would be at risk anyway, because he was my lover. What can't be cured must be endured, so the old saying goes, and I suppose a lot of people would trade places with me for a chance to endure several hundred billion dollars. Regardless, I wanted to get out of these sterile suites and into the real world while I still could. Besides, I needed new clothes.

Rez caught that thought and struggled to suppress a smile. He knew that as a man I loathed shopping and spent as little time on it as possible. But as a woman, I loved to find stunning new outfits to enhance my appearance.

Cabin fever-shopping fever-my mind was made up. I had to get out into the real world for a few hours, at least. The others felt the same way. Everyone in the group, except Carl, applauded when I suggested we go downstairs to the shopping mall, followed by a meal somewhere close. Not only was I getting cabin fever, my taste buds were becoming numb to the office building cafeteria food. I was even tired of the pizza and Chinese we ordered in.

Rez jumped up and yanked me to my feet. "Let's go!" Even in a male body, his love of shopping endured.

"Wait," Carl commanded, in his security chief's voice. "You can't go outside like you are. We need to disguise you first."

"What kind of disguise?" I asked.

"Well, to start with, I suggest you put some clothes on."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" I batted my eyelashes at him.

"Nothing, except there's not enough cloth there to cover a postage stamp."

I was wearing a white low-cut clingtight blouse with short-cuffed sleeves and matching lightweight pale blue jeans. Both molded to my body like a second skin.

Ron chuckled, and I gave him a wink. I was beginning to wonder about him. What little medicine he practiced (damn little considering how young and healthy we all were, except Carl) couldn't occupy much of his time, but I had yet to see him with a woman. I wondered if he was gay.

Randi grabbed my arm. "Come on, Li. Let's go get disguised."

She led me toward Carl's suite of rooms where all the security stuff was kept. I followed, wondering what she had up her sleeve. Randi loved surprises.

CHAPTER NINE

As it turned out, Randi simply wanted to get me alone as she had several times before. She was new to making love with a woman and couldn't get enough of it. But she was still shy about group sex.

So far, Rez was acting like a real gentleman about Randi's sexual demands on me. One of the things I've always loved about Rez is his openness about sex. Male or female, he is never jealous and, at times, has even encouraged me to learn to love someone else. When Don became Donna years ago and needed someone to love her as a woman, Rez (then Rita) urged me to initiate her into her new sexual role. So I relaxed and enjoyed Randi's flirtations, knowing Rez would want me to have fun. Between kisses and caresses, Randi showed me a number of wigs, and a stock of professional quality plastiflesh that she used

sometimes at Carl's insistence.

I had never worn plastiflesh before. The stuff was amazing. It could be molded into any shape, and it clung to the skin with a stick charge of some kind for twenty-four hours before coming loose. As it melded with the skin, it took on the same coloring as the flesh beneath. It even moved a bit with the musculature of the face (or other parts of the body) as long as you didn't overdo it. For instance, it couldn't imitate wattles very well, but making your lips larger was a simple process.

As Randi applied it to my cheeks, she grinned impishly and told me about some other uses both women and men had for it. These rather astonishing tales were new to me, since I haven't perused porn sites on the net since I was eleven or twelve. I was both amazed and amused, and laughed out loud.

"How about if I make myself bigger on top?" Randi looked at me with a playful gleam in her eye. "Would you like that?"

"Hm. Let me check."

We were standing facing each other in our panties. The rest of our clothes lay scattered on the floor. I held first one and then the other of her breasts, then turned her so that her back was nestled up against me, and slipped both hands around her to cup them.

"They're too small," she complained.

"Don't fish. They're perfect for you," I told her.

And they were, even though they barely made a handful for me. But as the old saying goes, anything more than that is all waste anyway.

She turned in my arms and we kissed, our tongues tangling in an intimate dance. Her mouth tasted sweet from the sugared coffee she liked to drink. Her face and upper body began to turn red. I eased her back on the bed and we began making love. I relaxed and let her take the lead. She was in a passionate mood, eager to please and arouse me, and soon I stopped analyzing, and began enjoying. So much so, that I'm afraid I made us late. And that might have initiated the stream of events that followed.

After a discrete knock, Carl had come in to advise us, and it turned out that he was a genius with women's clothes. He picked out the appropriate outfit, added some clever touches with the plastiflesh, and we were transformed into other people. I looked like a red-headed teenager trying to appear grown up. I had artificial freckles and a last minute pout added to my lips. I was supposed to be a sixteen-year-old girl escorting her younger sister. My sis, Randi, imitated my overdone grown-up look. It would have fooled a pattern recognition program at least fifty percent of the time.

Rez and Terry went to the opposite extreme. They both dressed to resemble upwardly mobile businessmen in high-collared tunics and shiny knee boots. I didn't think we matched, and I was afraid we would draw attention together. Carl instructed us to shop separately, and eat at different tables. He thought it would be safer that way. He already had reservations for adjoining tables at one of the fancy downstairs restaurants, but I nixed that. I wanted some regular old Southern food like fried chicken and mashed potatoes with fried okra or corn on the cob, and maybe a cobbler for dessert. All after shopping for a bit and working up an appetite. Security people don't like last minute readjustments and Carl cursed at the change of plans, but we agreed on another place, the kind where you didn't need reservations.

We took separate elevators downstairs and parted ways, agreeing to meet at 'The Pea Palace' at seven. Crossing the lobby to get to the shopping mall took us past a couple of big screens and a newsstand. I glimpsed the headlines of the paper on display as we went past. The story about the upcoming city

manager's trial dissolved, and was replaced with something closer to our situation. I grabbed Randi's arm to get her attention and nodded toward the newsstand.

GATERS, BAPTISTS CLASH AT DEMONSTRATION

FIVE DEAD, NUMEROUS WOUNDED AND HOSPITALIZED

Members of the once moribund Church of the Gates and Baptist Messengers attending the annual convention of the Southern branch of the United Baptist Church clashed in Tulsa overnight. Several pitched battles were fought with clubs and fists. Police attempting to control the crowds said the violence was started by Baptist Messengers attempting to oust Gaters from their convention hall for unauthorized entry and 'slandering the name of Jesus'.

"Should I download it?" I asked.

"No big loss, let 'em kill each other off," Randi said.

She tugged at my arm to get me going. It was obvious she wanted to go shopping instead of standing around discussing the news or religion. I wanted to read the whole article, or at least that portion I could see, but I let her lead me away. As we walked on past, I glimpsed another headline. This one said something about the Supreme Court and Seconders. I should have paid attention to that one, but Randi's remark distracted me.

"You don't like religion?" I asked, half seriously.

"About as much as I like burnt cabbage."

I laughed, but in reality I felt the same way. I sometimes indulged in a fantasy where the sex gates eliminated the malfunctioning belief genes and created a new race of enlightened, tolerant beings to inhabit Earth. But that was nothing more than a fantasy. Religion is based on our capability to believe in something more than what we see in front of us, and we need that to be truly human-even if it is often perverted into the creation of a religion. It's a damned shame. Religion-in reality a malfunctioning belief system-is the proximate cause of more violence throughout history than any amount of crime and poverty.

We stopped in front of a high-class clothing store for women; or rather I stopped and almost caused Randi to upend herself since we were holding hands. A display in the shop window grabbed my attention. Three attractive holographs of blond models moved around in an artificial room, their casual motions displaying the clothes to the best advantage. The first holographic was fully dressed in skirt, blouse and cutaway jacket, all in white and deep pink; the second holograph was the same model, only she had removed the jacket and her sandals. The third holograph, again the same model, posed in her undergarments, top and bottoms done in white with pink lace. The whole ensemble was attractive and very sexy. I wanted to see how those same clothes would look on me with my auburn hair.

I tugged at Randi's hand. "Come on. Let's look inside."

We spent a half-hour in the store preening in front of the mirrors before we finally chose our new outfits. Carrying our packages, we stepped outside onto the sidewalk and headed for 'The Pea Palace' where we planned to meet Rez and Terry.

We were almost to the restaurant when we heard a low rumble of many angry voices that quickly developed into the atavistic roar of a mob. Icy fingers danced a jig of warning on my spine. I knew there was a sex gate around the corner, and I had heard that mindless gabble of bloodlust before when I'd been caught up in other riots around the gates. The shouting grew louder as the rioters rounded a corner

and rushed toward us. I patted the little automatic pistol concealed in a side pocket. The hard outline of the gun comforted me even though I knew it would be about as effective as a popgun against an elephant if I tried to use it to hold off the mob.

Randi grabbed my arm in a desperate grip. I searched the periphery of the shoving crowd for any of our security men. Carl saw me first. He ran over and bent his head close to mine to be heard above the shouting. His whisper was harsh with tension.

"For God's sake, get out of here, before you're recognized."

I was startled by the urgency in his voice. But as I stared at the chanting mob headed our way I realized even the world's best security force could only do so much against so many. I turned to Randi who was frozen with fear. That wasn't surprising, considering her upbringing and lack of weapons training.

I turned back to Carl, and yelled above the noise. "I have to find Rez and Terry."

My eyes scanned the crowd, but standing still was a mistake. All at once we were enveloped by the mob.

"Seconder, here's a Seconder!"

I don't know who yelled it first, but as soon as the first cry rang out, the stampede was on. A jagged knife of fear twisted in my gut. Carl grabbed my arm and pulled out his gun, ready to protect me. But the mob swirled past us, as if we didn't exist. All three of us were bumped, pushed, and jostled back against the wall of the building.

I caught glimpses of the tops of heads as the mob chased and caught their victim, a young man with thick brown hair and a square, handsome face. I guessed that he had been through a gate within the last day or two, judging by his appearance. The sex gates leave you almost preternaturally healthy. All your bodily systems are so finely tuned that you glow with good health. But the youth and healthy glow that comes with a recent transit can be a giveaway.

As you would expect, we Seconders also glow with marvelous health and exuberance to an even greater degree. Fortunately, the identifying glow dies down over time. And, I was hunched over in the shadows of the building. I remembered with relief the plastiflesh that Randi and I were wearing. I hoped it hid the fresh, youthful look of our bodies.

There was no real way to tell if this young man was a Seconder, but a mob with blood on its collective mind will usually be appeased with nothing less, and he served the purpose. I watched in horror as he was carried over the heads of the mob, passed hand-to-hand in the direction of the gate. I read later that he was killed in the fighting, and thrown into the gate to see if he was really dead. He was; the gate bounced him back.

Randi started crying. Her shoulders shook with great, heaving sobs as Carl hustled us back toward our office building. As we hurried away from the mob I asked Carl if he knew what triggered this eruption of violence, and why the mob was so hell-bent on disposing of Seconders. They'd never shown us any great sympathy before, but this bloodlust was new.

"Shut up, Li. I don't know."

That was a hell of a way for an employee to talk to the woman who pays his salary, but he was terrified for us. He didn't relax until we got back inside and up to our suite. Neither Rez nor Terry was there, but Ron was sitting in one of the big loungers watching the wall screen.

It showed the mob milling around the gate. Occasionally, the press of bodies forced some unwilling man or woman unlucky enough to be too close to the tall turquoise arch to fall into it. Drunken cheers erupted when they popped out of existence. Why, I don't know. Most of them reappeared on the other side although they were naked and their bodies had changed sex. I assume they were first timers. Making it through a second time was rare. Only one person in millions could go through twice successfully. An unfortunate few who fell into the gate simply disappeared, victims of the mysterious selection process the gates still displayed. So far it was a typical mob scene.

I sat down in the lounge next to Ron and watched the mêlée with horror. It was only luck Randi and I had managed to get away without being spotted. Then, without warning, the whole gate disappeared. That was really news, more than I could digest.

I gasped, Randi screamed (I have no idea why), and Carl cursed. True, this wasn't the first gate to disappear, but those other disappearances had happened in out of the way places and were only half believed by the general populace. But there was no mistaking it or disbelieving it when the phenomena took place in front of millions of viewers.

The mob recoiled from the empty space, people screaming and hysterical. If the idea weren't so wild I would have thought someone purposefully popped that particular gate out of existence to make a point.

"I don't believe it!"

Ron got up, his face white, and headed straight for the bar. He grabbed a glass, and splashed a liberal dose of bourbon in it.

"Make that two," I told him.

As I went over to the bar to pick up mine, Randi whooped and ran toward the door. Terry and Rez stood in the doorway. Randi flung herself on Terry with bone-rattling force. My drink forgotten, I ran to Rez, and let out an enormous sigh of relief as he folded me in his arms. He laughed with relief as he clutched me against his chest.

The next few seconds were a confusion of hugs and kisses. Then I stepped back and got a good look at the pair. They were both disheveled. Blood seeped from an abrasion on Rez's cheek and his tunic was torn. Terry looked worse; he had a nosebleed and a bad cut on his upper arm.

"We got caught up in that goddamned mob," Rez explained, for the benefit of Ron and Carl. "Our security guards managed to get us out with only minor injuries. It could have been much worse."

A quick, worried sharing of thoughts had already told me what had happened. I'm sure Terry and Randi also shared their fear and relief in a swift mental exchange.

"You're lucky you weren't recognized or you'd be dead," Ron said, as he got out his medical equipment-which was kept in the suite-and began cleaning Terry's cut.

"Why?"

Ron didn't answer. He was busy, his head bent over Terry's arm as he concentrated on his work. Terry looked pale and sweat popped out on his brow. When they were done, Ron handed Terry a painkiller. Then he strolled over to the bar and reclaimed his drink.

"The Texas Supreme Court has issued a new ruling," he explained. "It's come down on the side of so-called humanity, and against you alien creatures." He lifted his glass in a mock toast to take the sting out of his words.

"You mean Seconders?"

"Of course."

Ron lined up glasses on the counter, and poured out the bourbon. He handed us drinks. From Rez's expression when he took a sip it was strong.

"What did they say?"

"They've ruled that Seconders are no longer citizens, and have no protection under the law. It's open season on you now, at least in these parts."

Rez, Terry, Randi, and I sat down on one big lounge together. We acted out of pure instinct, as if having our bodies touch would protect our little group from the world at large. It was a world that had suddenly become much more dangerous, by several orders of magnitude than it had been before, at least so long as we remained in Texas.

While we caught our collective breath and tried to think through the implications, Carl went to his office to find out exactly what the new ruling said and what methods he would legally be allowed to use to protect us (if any). The rest of us turned to the wall screen and switched away from the riot to another news show where pundits were already discussing how the ruling would affect the 'ordinary citizen'.

That got me. It wouldn't affect the ordinary citizen one damn bit unless they happened to want to shoot, hang, beat up or otherwise abuse a Seconder, and then it would protect them. As we listened to the details of the ruling I began to realize that a pet poodle now had more rights in Texas than a Seconder.

I had known that the case was in court, but none of our lawyers had thought for a second that Seconders would be declared non-citizens. The ruling came as a complete shock to everyone. History buffs were already tying up the Internet with frantic messages comparing the ruling with the way the Nazis in Germany used the law to justify their extermination of Jews, way back in the middle of the last century.

The case was certain to be appealed to the United States Supreme Court, but given the surprise ruling in Texas, no one was willing to hazard a guess on what would happen there. In the last couple of decades the Supreme Court had favored states rights heavily. The ruling might or might not be overturned. In the meantime, I wondered what kind of massive pressure and/or money had been involved to make the Texas court rule against us. It seemed a safe bet that the Gaters were behind it, although I suspected they'd had a good bit of behind-the-scenes help from the feds.

I was on my second drink, cuddled up against Rez in one of the love seats. He had his arm around me and I slipped my hand in his, taking comfort from his touch. The shock had hit me harder than I thought. A lifetime of male conditioning seemed to vanish as the female hormones of my new body took over. I leaned against Rez, and found safety in the arms of my man. Man or woman, he was the center of my life. As much as I loved to romp, every other relationship paled to insignificance beside my love for Rez.

The comp was filled with blathering pundits, some real, some only graphies. You couldn't tell the difference any more, and most of the populace didn't seem to care. The day of the prima donna news anchors had gone the same way as megabuck movie stars. A lot of them had been replaced by pixels. I don't know why we were still watching; nothing new was being said. I suppose we kept it going because occasionally there was a brief interruption telling about some sort of violence aimed at suspected Seconders. I also wanted to hear the news flashes about how the rest of the world was reacting.

Actually, the ruling in Texas was mild compared to what was happening in some other parts of the world. In several countries, known and suspected Seconders had been rounded up and sequestered months

ago, more or less in tandem with the renewed ascendancy of the Church of the Gates. On the other hand, only the Middle East and America still gave first timers a hard time, for the most part, and even here, those who had chosen to go through a gate were being accepted into normal society by all but the fundamentalist religions. Those fanatics considered it a sin against God's will.

As we continued to absorb the news, I eyed Randi and Terry. Both Rez and I could sense the fear emanating from them. They had never experienced anything like this. The two of them lived in the wealthy, very upper-class segment of society, and had never known anything else, especially after going to work for Messler. Their first reaction had been to ask Carl to call the police for protection. He shook his head and retreated to his office. Ron continued to act as our impromptu barkeeper, offering booze and what comfort he could, but there wasn't much he could say.

It wasn't long before the newsies started repeating themselves. As soon as they did, Randi and Terry got up to leave.

"We have a lot of legal contacts in this city," Randi told me. "We can get the inside scoop on how this ruling will be enforced from them."

"Not to mention how it is going to impact your financial affairs," Terry added, his face grim.

I didn't want comfort; I wanted justice, not that I was likely to see any for a long while if that ruling stood. Rez and I were conversing more by mind than voice, our emotion intertwining together in a way that I find difficult to describe. As we communed in that way, we kept coming back to the urge we both felt to go through the gates again. Rez had never been the aggressive sort, nor had he ever gone armed except at my insistence. On the other hand, I had been involved in several shootouts and militia battles when I had been inducted. I wanted us to reverse roles again so that I would be the male and could protect Rita if it came to a fight.

But beyond the question of safety, I was simply ready to go back to being male; that was my orientation. Being a female was a fascinating and fulfilling experience, but I wanted to face this particular crisis as a male. Rez had another reason for wanting to change back. I honestly believe it didn't bother him one way or another which sex he was; once used to the idea he got along fine either way, but like me, his original female orientation was calling, albeit for a different reason. Even as a male, he was feeling the nesting instinct again.

Perhaps it was just a reaction to the hate and violence being instigated against Seconders on a deeper level than I could delve, but his thoughts made it clear that his instincts were urging him to reproduce. It's an age-old phenomenon seen in times of conflict, an instinct to cheat death. Or perhaps the emotions of despair we were feeling as the world we knew crumbled around us reminded him of how we'd felt when we'd lost our baby. Several years ago Rita, then pregnant, had been stabbed and we had rushed her through the gate to save her life. The fetus did not survive her transition from a female to a male body. None ever did.

I couldn't get deep enough into his mind to know for sure, and it wouldn't have mattered anyway. I would go along, regardless. I loved Rita/Rez with every fiber of my being.

Carl came back into the room, trailed by Terry and Randi. He went to the bar and poured a shot of Jack Daniels. He didn't say anything until after he dropped an ice cube into the glass and took a healthy sip.

"Okay, kids, listen up. We've got to get out of here as soon as possible. The Church of the Gates knows you're here. Remember that call from Selinda? It's going to try to get an injunction under the new ruling to drag you into court. Some of my contacts tell me the Gaters will attempt to grab you if you leave the building."

“How the hell did anyone know we were here?” I asked.

“We must have a leak in our security.” Carl looked shaken. “I’ve been rechecking all our clearances ever since that call, but I don’t have a clue who it is. I take full responsibility.”

I patted him on the shoulder, and his face brightened. “Nonsense. It’s not your fault if someone succumbs to a bribe. I’ll bet the Church offered plenty to know our whereabouts.”

“That, and they have somehow found out this is a Messler building. So it was a good bet that you might be here. Same for you other two.” He looked at Terry and Randi. “That’s the good news.”

Rez removed his arm from my shoulders and stood up. “Good news? Then what in the name of creation is the bad news?”

Randi answered that. “Our accounts in Texas have been frozen. If the Supreme Court goes along with the Texas ruling, all of our assets will be confiscated. In the meantime, you can’t go back to your home, or anywhere else in Texas. You’ve got to get lost, and so do we.”

“Where can we go?” Rez demanded.

“The best place I can think of is Messler’s hideaway, the one with the concealed gate. No one knows about it, and it’s got enough cover that I doubt anyone will ever discover that it belongs to you. Besides that, it’s in Arkansas, out of reach of authorities in Texas.”

Carl was right about that. I knew the area where Messler’s hideaway was located. Both sets of my grandparents had lived within fifty miles or so, and I had visited the region (though not at the exact location) with my parents while my grandparents were still alive. It was nestled in the western part of Arkansas, well up into the foothills of the southern Ozark Mountains.

“But what about the research we were going to be doing?” Rez’s voice was plaintive, like a child deprived of a promised sweet.

Terry had brought some papers in when he and Randi came back into the room. Now he spread them out on a table. He had also been doing some legal legwork. Sometimes I forgot that they were lawyers, both of them.

“We can keep going with the research center,” he said. “We’ll have to stay out of sight of anyone working in the main complex, though, and never go out without a thorough disguise. And it wouldn’t hurt to run the finances through a couple of dozen dummy companies for good measure.”

“I don’t like it. You’ll be in hiding on your own property. And someone’s bound to find out you’re there,” Carl said.

I agreed, at least until things calmed down. “We’ll have to table the research center temporarily.”

Relief flashed across Carl’s face. It occurred to me that hiding a billionaire with big plans wasn’t an easy task.

“Let’s head for the Ozarks then,” I said. “Rez and I want to go through a gate again.”

We spent the rest of the evening planning the logistics of getting the six of us up to Arkansas without anyone in Texas knowing we had left. We decided to get a good night’s sleep and head for the Ozarks in the morning. It was a good plan, one that should have worked. It was no one’s fault it failed.

CHAPTER TEN

Messler didn't suffer from paranoia, but he always took every contingency into account. While planning ahead, he had foreseen that one day he might want to leave the building without alerting anyone. A private elevator descended to a basement floor not noted on the elevator buttons nor, Carl told me, on the architectural drawings.

As we busied ourselves putting on disguises again (and Carl, as well, this time), I thought about the sex gate that had disappeared. It was the first disappearance in the United States, but my gut instinct for patterns told me it wouldn't be the last. Would they all disappear, perhaps as rapidly as they had appeared? And if so, what would their disappearance do to the world?

The appearance of the sex gates had transformed society for the better, I thought, as did most rational people. Major illnesses had almost disappeared, and gender conflicts were becoming something for historians to study. Even most of the major religions had become resigned to the presence of the gates. One exception was Islam, and even there the moderates were coming around, albeit reluctantly.

Another big exception was the Church of the Gates. When the gates first appeared, arguments ranged over whether they came from God or aliens. Messler founded the church to preach the dogma that the gates were a heavenly manifestation. That was part of his plan to protect the gates from government interference, and guarantee continued access to common people. At first the new religion aroused resentment, argument, and occasionally violence from more orthodox religions. Now the Gaters rabble-rousing against Seconders upset society in other ways, intentionally, I'm sure.

I don't believe that anyone in authority in the church really thought Seconders were incarnations of the Devil; they were simply using us as convenient scapegoats to gain adherents, and power, and influence. Other religions and political parties have done the same thing with other minority groups in the past, and will in the future. It's one of our regrettable human traits.

Once we decided to run for the hideaway we didn't waste time. As soon as we'd had some breakfast the next morning, Carl helped us once again disguise ourselves. The main purpose of our disguises this time was to hide the youth and healthy glow that marked us as possible Seconders. With our disguises in place, we filed out into the alcove near the elevators.

Carl did a last minute check of our appearances, and made sure we were all carrying replacement supplies of clothing and plastiskin. He took out two revolvers and gave them to Terry and Randi with quick instructions, and a warning to be careful about pulling the trigger. The cylinders were full. I knew he had chosen revolvers for them simply because it is the easiest handgun for amateurs to fire, although perhaps not the easiest to hit anything with and not the safest, either. I was surprised he hadn't given them arms training way back when, but I suppose they thought a barricade of financial power protected them from the vagaries of a violent society. They were getting a quick and rude awakening.

I already had my little automatic, but I decided it wouldn't hurt to carry another. I really had no place to conceal it, though. Carl quickly fixed me up with an ankle holster, which was hidden beneath the long loose pants I was wearing. He had insisted that I wear pants and now I knew why. Randi was similarly equipped, although I could see the idea of carrying a gun filled her with apprehension. The men carried heavier weapons, which were easier to conceal under their clothing.

At last, we were ready to depart. Randi and Terry looked like two martyrs about to enter an arena. Rez was almost as frightened. Male or not, he hadn't grown up with guns, didn't like them, and hated to carry them. But Carl and I both insisted.

As for myself, I wanted to get to Arkansas as fast as we could. Right now, it offered us our best chance for safety. Beyond that, Rez and I wanted to change our sexes. And once we were safe, I wanted to

explore the strange sensations I had experienced the last time we made a passage.

As these thoughts whirled through my mind, Carl handed each of us a wad of money, as well as credit and debit cards to go with our new identities. A touch of his hand on the top edge of a picture frame opened a compartment in what appeared to be a blank wall. We filed in the elevator without speaking and descended to the concealed level. The elevator door opened onto an unadorned hallway. I stepped out and saw it ran straight into the distance. I couldn't see what was at the end of it. We had to walk; there was no slideway. Perhaps, that was to avoid any unexplained power usage.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked Carl, as we started down the hallway.

"If everything goes right, two electricars will be waiting at the end of the tunnel. After that, we get out of Houston as fast as we can. With luck, we'll be okay. The cars will only need one recharge between here and Mena."

Mena was the closest town to the concealed sex gate, although Messler's actual retreat was located further up into the mountains. I wondered idly how we would get up there, but let it go for the moment. Once near Mena, I figured I could find it; I had studied the maps for some time before we left, and the landmarks were engraved in my memory. I knew Rez had memorized the map, as well. All we had to worry about was getting there.

After almost a half-hour of walking we turned a bend in the long hallway, and found two cars waiting for us as promised. They were positioned one behind the other in front of a rollup doorway.

As thorough as ever, Carl checked the supplies in both vehicles. They were well equipped with preserved meals and beverages, as well as bedrolls should we want to stop at a park somewhere. I doubted we would. Parks weren't as safe as they had been in my parents' day. They had become so dangerous that many of them, especially the ones with facilities, were no longer maintained by the state or federal agencies.

Carl announced he would go with Terry and Randi in the lead vehicle. Although he didn't say so, I think he felt they needed more care than Rez or I did. Rez drove the second car and I rode shotgun. That arrangement made sense to us; he was the better driver and I was the weapons expert.

As we settled into our vehicle, I saw Carl push a button in the car ahead of us. The exit door rolled up to reveal an up ramp and another narrow tunnel. That tunnel led upward at a gentle slant. We had to use headlights; the tunnel was only dimly lit with florescent plasters every so often, as a backup for power failure. Eventually the passage leveled out and both cars came to a halt in front of a closed door.

Carl came back to us. "After we go through this next door, keep close behind me," he said. "We'll be outside in a matter of moments. It should take us about an hour to get out of Houston, but I don't have to tell you that we'll be at risk the whole time."

He returned to his car and tooted his horn. The door rolled up, and Carl drove off with Rez right behind him. To my amazement, we drove right through the warehouse of an office building, and made a hard right turn that led into a big garage. We emerged to find ourselves on a perfectly normal street some distance from the Messler building.

I hoped we were far enough away to avoid notice by the Gaters.

Rez and I smiled with relief, and started talking about how well prepared Messler had been with this escape route. We headed north, still chatting. We drove through an intersection and turned-right into the middle of a Fourth Worlder demonstration. One glance at the signs told me the demonstration had been

organized by Gaters-against Seconders.

I've been the victim of bad timing before in my life, but this was, without a doubt, the worse case. A series of 'what ifs' ran through my mind-what if we had started sooner, what if we took this turn instead of that one. But it was too late to rewrite the past.

Carl tried his best. He led our little convoy into another quick right turn, hoping to dodge the gathering crowd, but that turn brought us into the middle of a bigger group. He swerved from side to side on the street as he ploughed his way through the crowd. Caught by surprise, people screamed and dodged out of his path.

Rez and I were not so lucky. We'd lost the element of surprise, and softhearted Rez, who was not about to drive over anyone, had slowed to a crawl. The demonstrators quickly regrouped and formed a solid barricade in front of our car.

It wasn't Carl's fault. Riots broke out all over Texas that day, and for the next few weeks, wherever Fourth Worlders and Gaters were concentrated. It was hard to predict where they would occur. The Gater leaders flung out a bunch of propaganda claiming that all Seconder assets, Messler's in particular and others in general, should be seized by the people and used to relieve poverty. It was completely illegal for them to even try, of course. If the Supreme Court let the lower court-ruling stand, the State of Texas would confiscate the assets and damn few Fourth Worlders would ever see any of it. That was politics as usual with politicians and windfall money. It would give them more assets to buy votes by funding selected programs to enhance the party in power.

The fact that we were caught in this particular demonstration was nothing but bad luck. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do, except stop. We couldn't even back up without running over some of the crowd. Within moments we were surrounded.

I never did find out what happened to our secondary protection, although I assumed guards followed us after we left the garage. Likely they, too, were swallowed up by the unruly mob.

As soon as Rez hit the brake, screaming rioters surged in around us. Rough-looking men and women banged on the windows and wrenched at the doors. They were yelling slogans, but I couldn't make out the words through the pounding and yelling.

My instinct was to keep the doors locked and hope the crowd would pass us by. But the yelling only grew louder when they saw we weren't coming out. A burly Fourth Worlder armed with a club cracked the window on my side. I recoiled from the battered glass, sure that the window would give way on the next blow. I started to pull out my gun.

"No! Li, don't do that."

Rez looked scared, but I recognized the determined set of his mouth. He stared at the unruly mob with compassion, and I sensed his concern for their situation. For all I knew, they were about to kill us, and he wanted to help them.

I reached for the little automatic tucked into the folds of my blouse. In one swift movement, Rez unlocked his door, grabbed my hand, and pulled me over the console and out of the car with him. The moment we emerged the crowd grabbed us.

I was yanked off my feet, away from Rez. Hands pawed and grabbed at my body. I yelled and hit and kicked at my captors. Rez shouted my name, and tried to fight his way back to me. He struggled to keep his big male body between me and the reaching hands to protect me from the worst of the mauling. But

there were too many people clutching at us.

I never did get my gun out, and it's probably a good thing I didn't. It might have turned a mauling into something much worse. Nevertheless, it was awful. Fear ripped through me as I stared into the hate-filled faces that surrounded us. There was an inhuman emptiness in their eyes, as if all the compassion in their souls had died.

I started to shake with fear and humiliation. We were at the mercy of that mob. A couple of the stronger men held me while their cohorts kept the rest of the crowd away. They laughed and made obscene remarks as they stared at me, and I realized they weren't killers. But they were belligerent, and determined to pay back anyone the least bit affluent-looking for perceived injustices if they caught them.

We were the ones they had caught.

"Leave her alone! Leave her alone!" Rez shouted. "We're not doing anything!"

I don't know what he meant by that, but it didn't help. The mob started moving on down the street, while two nasty-looking men kept a firm hold on me and pulled me along with them. I found myself stumbling along in the midst of a constant stream of people who fought to catch a glimpse of Rez, and me and shout insults and obscenities at us. I had no idea where they were dragging me. My only thought was to try and get closer to Rez, but the men who held me delighted in letting me get just so close, then pulling me back.

When I tried to claw one of them with my nails, he slapped me hard, then grabbed my blouse and ripped. I heard loud laughter all around me. My ears rang and I kept my head down, afraid I would provoke more violence if I met their eyes. Fingers dug at my bra strap and then my bra was torn from my body.

My automatic came loose and fell to the ground with a clatter. Fear turned my guts to water. Anything could happen if the some nut in the crowd picked up the gun. But at that moment all eyes were focused on my suddenly exposed breasts. Someone let out a shout of triumph, and I glanced up to see him waving my bra over his head like a trophy. I kicked out and sent the gun sliding into a gutter.

I was numb with pain and embarrassment. A few feet away Rez yelled as others inflicted a similar torment on him. The whole thing was a nightmare, like one of those dreams where you run and run, but can't avoid the monster no matter what you do.

The mob turned onto a main street and more people poured into the shouting mass. I despaired of this nightmare ever ending. A tall, strong man had joined the thugs that held me. He had the look of someone accustomed to authority, and I suspected he was a Gater. He started moving our small group through the crowd as though he had some destination in mind.

"No, not that!" Rez shouted. "Don't do that to us!"

I had no idea what he meant or where the Gater was taking us. I was keeping my head down and my hair had been yanked until it was a tangled mass hanging in my face. I couldn't see anything, but the closest figures. My head hurt, and my breasts and thighs were bruised. The men around me laughed at my misery. As I stumbled along, they poked at my breasts and squeezed. If we survived, I would be a mass of bruises.

"Please don't! No, no anything, but that!"

I couldn't figure what on earth Rez was trying to dissuade the mob from doing, but he sounded terrified. Shaking off my fear, I struggled harder, but it didn't do a bit of good. I cursed, hating my female body for the first time, because of its weakness. When the cursing did no good, I sobbed in frustration, and hate,

and fear.

A gust of wind blew down the street and lifted my hair. I caught a glimpse of a glowing turquoise arch ahead of us. A sex gate!

"Please don't do that to us! We don't want to change!"

Rez was babbling, pleading with his captors over and over. The sight of his terror only served to encourage the rioters. I wanted to yell at him to stop begging, but a vision of B'rer Rabbit and the tar baby popped into my head. Through the haze of fear that clouded my mind, I realized Rez had managed to send that image to me, and I knew what he was trying to do. He wanted them to throw us through that gate, wanted them to think we were terrified at the idea. He hoped our terror would satisfy their craving for excitement and their resentment of the upper classes.

I bit down hard on my lip to stifle a hysterical laugh. It might work!

"Throw 'em through! Through the gate!" Someone next to Rez started the shout and within seconds the whole crowd was chanting.

"Throw 'em through. Through the gate!"

"Throw 'em through. Through the gate!"

"Throw 'em through. Through the gate!"

The chant became a roar as both Rez and I were manhandled toward the gate. I saw it only in a strobe-like way as my hair flew this way and that. I struggled with all my strength while numerous hands shoved me toward that high, glowing green arch. Like Rez, I wanted to convince them that I was terrified. They had to think it was our first time through. If they suspected we were Seconders, who knew what they might do? I jerked and fought to free myself from the laughing, dirty men and women who abused me even while frog-marching me toward the opening.

As we reached the front of the gate I caught one last glimpse of Rez slightly behind, and to one side of me. Four men were holding onto me now. A hand groped one last time at my breast as they counted together, "One, two three!" and pitched me into the gate.

I had wanted to go through a gate again, but I would have preferred a little more preparation. And for the first time in a long while, I entered the gate by myself, not hand-in-hand with Rez.

As my captors threw me toward the opening, a thick mist seemed to reach out for me. The mob vanished, and I found myself enveloped in that fuzzy glowing green universe where I felt no bodily sensations at all. It was as if my body had dissolved, and I was only a bubble of thought floating in the mist.

I asserted my will and discovered I was able to hold off the impending change much easier than before. Maybe it was because I was thrown in so quickly without time for much thought. At any rate, I cast my consciousness out in search of Rez, who would be Rita when we emerged, but I couldn't find any trace of his/her mind. Instead, a new impression assailed my consciousness. It was like hearing a million voices babbling at once in my head, a torrent of sound that made no sense. But whatever it was, it felt huge and complex, as if millions of the minds that had passed through the gates were all melded together. Yet, the sum total seemed to be confusion, like a book with the words scrambled.

I could make no sense of it although I tried to delve deeper. This was something new, and I hoped it might lead me to the maker of the gates. Somewhere in that fathomless green universe, behind the myriad

impressions flooding into my mind, I caught a flash of a thought-men and women were going into a holding pattern-holding? A holding pattern?

The thought slipped away. I tried to follow it, but it took too much effort. The change was underway. I couldn't resist it anymore. As I lost control and fell on through the gate I had a final glimpse of the very outskirts of the mind or minds controlling the gates. Somewhere in that green mist loomed another world; no, other worlds, other-

I blinked and was on the other side of the gate. Sunlight blinded me and the wind blew over my bare flesh. I was male and nude. As I gathered my wits, Rita stumbled out of the gate and grabbed my arm, as naked as I was.

My joy at seeing Rita vanished as the crowd around us began to jeer and yell obscenities about our nakedness. We were still far from safe. We faced a jeering mob without clothing, firearms, money, or transportation. Even if the crowd left us alone, satisfied with our forced change, we would be stranded in a decaying Fourth World neighborhood in a state where Seconders no longer were recognized as citizens.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At that moment, our greatest danger lay in being recognized. I turned to Rita and enfolded her in my arms while I whispered into her ear.

"Bow your head, as if you're ashamed. We need to hide our faces."

Probably what saved us from being recognized was that we were surrounded by Fourth Worlders, rather than the more affluent Gaters. The Fourth Worlders concentrated on entertainment rather than news for the most part, so they had missed seeing our photographs on the web. Neither of us was world famous, but I didn't want to take chances. Our pictures had been published as known Seconders, and I was almost certain that the feds were after us again now that Messler had disappeared.

Rita understood our danger as well as I did. She lowered her head so that her hair hung down and concealed her face. I tucked her head into my shoulder and bent over her if I was trying to reassure her.

With both of us bent down I started to edge us away from the gate. I had no idea where to go if we did manage to escape, but I wanted to move away from the mob while they were in a good mood. Rita sobbed against my shoulder and begged, in a broken voice, for someone to give her something to wear. Our apparent shame and her tears moved some of the closer bystanders. Or maybe throwing a couple of upper-class victims through a sex gate had slaked the crowd's penchant for violence.

Someone tossed Rita a dirty shirt, which she hastily donned. It covered her down to mid-thigh. A stern-faced woman, who looked as if she went to church five times a week and twice on Sunday, handed me a Gater banner with a stylized shining green arch on one side and GOD IS RESPONSIBLE on the other. I wrapped it around me, all the while keeping my head down. I didn't need to fake the stricken look on my face.

Up the street, I heard screams as the crowd latched onto some other victim. The people around us started to move away, already losing interest in us. A new victim was waiting.

A phrase from some long ago poetry popped into my mind, something like ...alone and afraid in a world we never made ... although that's probably not an exact quote. I clutched Rita closer to me and moved away from the gate. It took a while and my heart hammered with every step, but eventually the crowd thinned. We were headed one way, and the demonstrators another. Once I got us oriented, I turned toward the better part of Houston, but Rita stopped me.

“Where do you think you're going?”

I waved a hand in the general direction of north where the more affluent areas were.

“No. I'm wearing a dirty shirt and you have a banner for a loincloth. We'd be picked up as vagrants, and you know it. Either that or shot by one of the private security forces.”

I bit my lip in frustration as the reality of our plight hit home. I hadn't been wealthy for long, but I had always had enough money for anything I really wanted, and some to spare. I had no idea how we were going to cope now-naked and broke-and still stay free of the feds and Gaters. Either of them would pick us up with no hesitation if we were recognized. If we were captured by either of them we might never see daylight again.

“What do you think we should-where-?” I broke off.

A sinking feeling twisted my stomach into knots. For a change I didn't have sex as my immediate agenda after going through a gate. Despite the vibrant health the gate imparted, I felt sick. I had no idea of what to do next. I looked around the neighborhood in bewilderment. It was past dusk and turning dark. We had escaped the mob, but unsavory people stared at us as they walked by. While I stood there, lost, Rita came up with a plan.

“We'll have to go south for the time being. I know this area from the years I spent as a social worker. Maybe some of my old friends will help us.”

“Why should they? We can't do anything for them.”

Rita patted my cheek and managed an optimistic grin. “On an individual basis, poor folks are much more likely to help someone than the well-off are. All we have to do is get to them and let them see that we are people like them in need of help. In the meantime, it probably wouldn't hurt for us to change our looks a bit.”

She bent to pull up a tuft of grass, crushed some of the stems and rubbed the stains over her face in a random pattern. While I did the same, she tore off a strip of cloth from the shirt and made herself a headband. It was a style she had never liked and never been photographed in.

There wasn't much else I could do to disguise myself except mess up my hair, but I figured anyone who saw us would be more likely look at Rita than me; her body did things to that shirt that had to be seen to be believed. On the other hand, I make a beautiful woman, but as a man I am ordinary looking with a slender build, plain features, and rust-colored hair.

If no one asked too many questions about me wearing a Gater banner for underdrawers we could survive for a while. I hoped that Rita could find some of the people she'd made friends with in this area during her years as a student at North Houston University. It was another instance of Rita's empathy and love for others paying off. A psychology major in college, she had always gone out of her way to help the Fourth Worlders while working among them as a counselor.

Even back in college when we first met and my main interest was what you'd expect of any college guy, Rita had impressed me with her intelligence and big heart, as well as her physical beauty. As we moved south, deeper into the Fourth World ghetto, we talked about those days to keep our spirits up. If worries about our predicament hadn't kept intruding, it could have been a pleasant interlude. We held hands as we walked, but our minds were closer than our bodies, our thoughts entwined. We only whispered a word or two aloud to each other now and then.

It was a long, lonely walk in the dark. We were forced to take frequent detours, which Rita said would keep us away from traffic and people. For the most part they did. As soon as it got dark, people got off the streets. The houses we passed were shut up tight, those inside hiding from the dangers that darkness brought. For the most part we walked through shabby business districts that were barred and shuttered for the night. On the way I picked up an old piece of cloth I spotted in a trashcan, and made it into a fair imitation of an out-of-style toga that had seen much better days.

What really bothered us were our feet. A person emerging from a gate has no calluses at all. Add to that the fact that we were barefoot, and before long we were both limping. Our feet ached from the uneven pavement and the crumbled, broken concrete and other debris that littered the sidewalks. On top of that, my stomach began rumbling, telling me it wouldn't be adverse to something filling in it. I couldn't do anything about something to eat, other than rummaging in garbage cans, and we weren't quite that desperate yet. Eventually we found enough old rags to bind our feet and keep the worst of the pain at bay.

The moon, which had been providing enough light to walk by, had set and we were cautiously feeling our way past the gutted bowels of a one and two-story defunct housing project. It was the kind of project the government had sold off after it got out of the housing business-fifty years sooner than it should have as subsequent events proved.

We were almost past it when we were jumped.

They probably thought we were easy marks-as I said, I am small in stature and Rita couldn't hide her female curves, or her long, slim legs which weren't covered at all by the dirty shirt she was wearing. There were three of them, but our enhanced mental powers enabled us to catch their intentions before they struck. We were ready and waiting. Both of us had trained in martial arts over the years.

I caught one swinging arm by the fist holding the metal bar intended for my head and leveraged him over my shoulder and into the body of the second guy. Rita took care of the third with a simple duck-under-and-twist so that she wound up holding the person's arm up behind her-it was a her-and threatening in her deepest voice to snap it into pieces if she didn't stop struggling.

"Tell them not to try anything," she added. She jerked her head at the two men who were struggling to untangle themselves.

"Alto! No lucha!" the woman gasped through the pain of her twisted arm.

The men staggered to their feet. Rita shoved the woman at them.

"Vaya! Instatante!"

They left, although one of the men looked back over his shoulder as if he wanted to try again. I suppose they found it hard to believe that two such small, ragged intruders into their territory had turned the tables on them so suddenly. The other man and the woman tugged at him to hurry him along. I caught a last wisp of their thoughts. They were afraid we were undercover feds looking for leads to chip smugglers or illegal immigrant runners from Panama or Guatemala.

"Come on," Rita urged. "It's not far now. I hope Bonita still lives here or, at least, is somewhere in this neighborhood."

She led us down the street past barred quickshops and liquor stores. As I limped after her, she turned into an alleyway between a pawnshop and a popshop, not very well disguised as a laundry store. The alley was strewn with debris. I felt the jagged edges even through the rags covering my feet, and a mental

twang from Rita told me she did, too.

I cringed with every step. The addicts in the pophop place we had passed used throwaway dispensers for their drugs and the empty containers usually had sharp edges. I stepped with care to avoid getting cut. There were a number of diseases addicts were subject to that I had no desire to become acquainted with.

We turned a corner. We had arrived in front of a small home. In the dim light from a street lamp, I saw that it was a bit better maintained than the buildings we had been passing, or the ones on either side of it. I thought we were past the old housing project, but couldn't be certain.

A cracked sidewalk led through a gate to a six-foot-high carbonwire fence surrounding the place. I wondered about the gate until I spotted the knocker with a wire leading from it down to the ground and presumably buried along the line of the sidewalk. Rita knocked in a cryptic rhythm. When no one answered, she did it again. This time a female voice came from a speaker concealed somewhere inside the fence, but close enough to hear.

"Que esta?"

"Bonita? It's Rita."

"Rita! Es Verdad?" The speaker fairly shouted. "Un momento!"

We waited a second, and the gate opened by itself. As soon as we passed through, it closed behind us. I wondered about that; this wasn't a setup you would normally see in the barrios and slums of what remained of old Houston.

Rita breathed a sigh of relief, and gave my hand a squeeze of encouragement as we walked up to the door. It swung open and an enormously wide woman clad in a tent-like garment held out arms, which were as big as my legs, and pulled Rita to her bosom.

She had time for only a quick hug before Rita struggled loose, and whispered to the woman that we needed to get out of sight. Hurriedly, she shoved Rita inside, then grabbed one of my arms and yanked. I stumbled inside the door and stopped to check that my arm remained in its socket.

I looked up to see the woman beaming at me. She had graying hair, pulled back with a makeshift kerchief, and was dressed in a voluminous nightgown. We must have gotten her out of bed. Before I could say a word, she enfolded me in her vast embrace. It was like being smothered in pillows though I felt firm muscles beneath all the padding. I wasn't sure why she was hugging me, but assumed it was a gesture of friendship. Rita's thoughts were jumbled at the moment, filled with the pleasure of seeing this old friend.

Once I was set free, Rita introduced me.

"Bonita, this is Jackson Lee Stuart, the man who helped me and also the one who helped you. Lee, this is Bonita Duarez, the woman I told you about when I was in school."

Bonita. Of course. Rita had spoken of her often. She had long admired this woman who did so much to encourage her children to further their education beyond the pitiful offerings of the public primary schools. I remembered Rita telling me years ago about how Bonita had managed to get three sons and two daughters into the University of North Houston. Rita had helped her, of course, counseling her about scholarships and grants that were available for Fourth Worlders. In the end, only one daughter had gone bad, no mean feat for a woman raising a family in the area where she lived.

Once I had started making money from my tabloid reporting back in the days after the gates first appeared I had given Rita some to pass on to others, but had never thought much more about it. My casual gesture, meant at the time to please Rita, was coming back to help us in spades. Right now I wished I had sent more, lots more.

I looked around. The inside of the house was even better maintained than the outside, if somewhat antiquated. There was what looked like a functional fireplace with the mantle displaying a statue of Jesus Christ in a commanding position, flanked by a smaller one of The Virgin to one side, and some saint to the other, perhaps the patron saint of education given her wholehearted belief in it. The furniture was worn but serviceable, mostly stuffed couches and chairs with coffee tables scattered here and there, and bookshelves stacked with old-style printed books, worn with age. Behind a counter (I wouldn't call it a bar in this house) was a kitchen with an old gas burner and hood. On cabinet counters across from it I noticed a microwave and several other modern kitchen appliances. The refrigerator, in one corner, reminded me how hungry I was.

"Siente, sit," Bonita told us, mixing Spanish with English.

She made coffee while rattling off a rapid-fire stream of Spanish to Rita. I couldn't understand all of it, even though I call myself a speaker of the language. She spoke too fast for me. However, I caught her questions about why Rita hadn't been to see her for so long; why was she so young-looking; she must have been through a gate; which was okay; the Pope said so if you were ill or old, but it wasn't for her; were you ill when you went through; did your friend Lee go through with you, and on and on while the coffee filtered. Meanwhile, she kept casting sideways glances at the way we were dressed.

Rita smiled her gentle smile and ignored the obvious hints to explain. When the questions didn't stop, she gave in with a laugh and told our story. Bonita 'tsk-tsked' over us when she realized the rags on our backs were the only garments we possessed. She promised to find something for us to wear from the children's old clothes in closets in the back of the house where the bedrooms were.

"Bring your coffee," she said in perfect English. We did.

Bonita picked a closet for me and told me to help myself. Either she was a good judge of size or her sons had been about my size. She left me alone while Rita went with her into another bedroom.

I picked out a pair of worn, but serviceable jeans, a shirt with pockets, and a jean jacket with two good-sized side pockets in case I managed to arm myself again in the near future. I had been carrying for so many years that I really felt naked without the comforting presence of my faithful automatic. I didn't worry about the fact that as a non-citizen I would no longer be licensed to carry; half the armed citizens didn't bother with the legalities of carrying weapons, mostly because they didn't want to take a chance on being inducted into a militia. Most states required militia service of carriers if an occasion arose where the National Guard needed help. That sort of situation didn't happen often, but it did happen. I was living proof of that. I'd served in the militia during a Fourth Worlder uprising several years ago, and a few of my old friends had died in that same conflict.

I even found a pair of worn boots, which fit, and socks to go with them, and a belt to hold the jeans up. I never thought I would feel so good being dressed in secondhand clothes that belonged to someone else. There were several other things I could wish for, like scissors to cut my hair or some more plastiflesh, but already I was far beyond what I even imagined I might be only a short time ago. Everything else could wait. I opened the door and walked back up the hall to the living room.

Rita was still changing. Bonita refilled my coffee cup, moving gracefully for such a large woman.

"Now you look not like a bum," she said, and I had to agree.

"Thank you," I told her. "I would feel fully dressed if only I had a gun."

She shrugged massive shoulders. "Si. Most of the time guns are bad but you, away from home maybe it is best to carry, no?"

"Yes," I said.

"And you must protect my Rita, too, is it not so?"

"I'll protect her," I said, but wondered how.

I had no funds for a weapon, or identification even if I did have the funds. Of course, I could always get an illegal one if I had the money. I would do that if I had to, but anyone doing that takes a risk of winding up with a weapon which might have been used in a shooting-and could end up tried and executed for a crime he or she never committed.

"I will buy Juan another one, or you can return this when you are safe and have dinero again."

She reached into the huge crevice between her breasts and drew forth a lethal looking .38 revolver. She waved it around before handing it to me. I tried not to flinch. A gun is always loaded until proven otherwise, and sometimes even afterwards. A gun can load itself if you don't check on it all the time. There is magic that still works. Bonita smiled at the way I avoided the barrel of the weapon.

"A cautious man. You will not misuse Juan's pistola, eh?"

She handed it to me. I figured she must have gotten it out when we banged at her gate. The first thing I did was break the cylinder to see if it was loaded. It wasn't. I looked up to see Bonita's hand out, holding a box of shells.

"Gracias."

I took the shells and very carefully loaded the revolver. Since it was equipped with a safety, I even filled the chamber under the hammer with a load. As I held the gun, I felt like a whole man again. I believe in an armed citizenry, so long as they are required to undergo firearms training before being licensed. It makes for a very polite society, and a safer one, for the most part.

As I tucked the gun away in a side pocket of the jean jacket, I recalled a historical fact. Around the turn of the century Australia had confiscated all privately owned firearms. Their liberal legislators believed that would cut down on violent crime. Instead, crime increased. The crooks kept their guns and no longer worried about their victims taking umbrage at being robbed or raped or otherwise abused. I suppose that a society without an armed citizenry can function fine if it is led into it over years, but then there is no check on despotism or the violence inherent in bad economic times.

Once Northern Mexico was admitted to the union, their politicians became much more honest-at least about as honest as a politician ever gets, which isn't much. Sometimes I wish the Nobel Prize committee would look for a politician who always voted for what they honestly thought was good for their country and award a prize to him or her, just to set a precedent, but I'm not holding my breath. I don't believe in miracles.

Rita came back into the room wearing a figure-flattering jump suit about a size too small, especially around the bust. It was old, but with Rita wearing it I doubted that anyone would notice. She posed provocatively for us. I whistled, and Bonita said something in Spanish I didn't understand but which made Rita laugh.

"Okay, now what?" I said, around a yawn. I was exhausted, but I was afraid the hunger pangs in my stomach would keep me awake.

"First you sleep, then decide, eh? No, first you eat, then sleep, si?"

"Si!"

I couldn't keep the eagerness out of my voice at the mention of food. Bonita winked at me and disappeared into the kitchen. Rita dropped onto the big couch beside me with a sigh. Even with fresh young bodies, it had been quite a night. But after a moment she got to her feet again.

"Can I help you, Nita?"

"No. You are too tired. I will make eggs and tortillas, then you sleep."

"No one must know we are here. Okay? It is very important, not just for us, but for you, too."

"Si, si. No one will know. The ninos, they will not be here for weeks yet. No one else will come, or if they do, you will be in the bedrooms, yes?"

"Si," Rita said, smiling.

It is amazing how much two young people who have worked up an appetite can eat. I filled up on eggs and fresh flour tortillas, but went easy on the coffee. I wanted to get a few hours of good sleep before deciding how we ought to proceed, but already I felt much, much better. As I filled my stomach, I felt very grateful I had given Rita that money to help educate Bonita's kids. Still, I could see the obvious affection between the older and younger woman. She would have helped us regardless. Such people are the salt of the earth, the ones who always make you proud to be human. It's too bad there aren't nearly enough of them in this old world.

With the resilience of the young we were both awake again by noon. There was a narrow shower stall in the tiny bathroom. We took advantage of it to get cleaned up. We should have showered before getting into bed, but we were too exhausted to care. Now we really put our hearts into a good wash. With both of us crowded together in the narrow stall, wet arms and legs and chests and breasts colliding whenever we moved, it took only a few seconds before I was fully erect.

We laughed at the way our soapy skin slithered together, but soon the laughter turned to gasps of pleasure as we renewed our love in our newly changed bodies. It was wonderful to be a man again. Rita filled her mind with the sensations she felt as I caressed her, and sent those thoughts into my mind, along with the fierce longing of her female body for penetration. I gathered her close as our minds merged. The urgency of my explosive orgasm shattered our thoughts, just as Rita's more prolonged one did.

As we were getting dressed, I wondered whether Bonita had heard us. I couldn't remember exactly how loud we'd been. Rita sent me a quick thought not to worry, so I didn't.

When we came out of the bedroom shortly after noon, Bonita had a meal prepared for us: good red beans and rice, with what tasted like real sausage mixed in and fresh cornbread to go with it. I wondered why I hadn't smelled the cornbread cooking. As the thought passed through my mind, Rita sent me a quick mental image. I saw myself in the shower yelling at the ceiling. I smiled my thanks to our hostess and piled it in, the earlier breakfast of eggs and tortillas already forgotten.

Rita helped Bonita with the dishes. I offered, but she was scandalized. Some things haven't changed despite the disruption the sex gates have brought to society. No matter what, women do more of the cooking and cleaning than men, a practice that continued even after sex changes. I have no idea whether

it is genetic or cultural, or some of both; the phenomena is under debate. But I digress, since that was the least of our worries.

Once we sat down with coffee, Rita went over in detail with Bonita why we needed to stay out of public view, and why we needed to get out of Texas. Bonita reached for one of the ubiquitous photon comphones Russell had invented, and clicked it on. It was networked with a small wall screen. She voiced a few key words in English, and it began a search-delayed by a horrendous amount of advertising. I stared at the skits with disbelief; advertising was something I hadn't seen on a phone or computer screen in years. It is only the Third and Fourth Worlders who have to put up with such stuff; for the most part they can't afford the service charge for the ad-free broadcasts. At least the devices are so cheap that they allow Third and Fourth Worlders to partially join the information age if they want to, and a gradually expanding base of them did, according to the newspolls.

There were plenty of stories about the Gaters and their church activities and several items about Seconders, mostly pundits talking for and against them without real knowledge of the subject, but eager to explain how they had always known there was something fishy about anyone who could go through a gate twice. There was no mention at all that the feds might be active in Gater or Seconder affairs.

That wasn't a surprise, though; the fed security agency works hard to keep its activities out of the public eye. Nevertheless, I would bet money they were after us again since Messler's disappearance. And I would bet more money they were the ones stirring up the Gaters, though the political party in power might have a lot to do with that. Anti-telepathy was a made-in-heaven platform for any politician, even though the tabwebs were exaggerating the extent of our mind-reading skills. But still, who wants to have their minds read? No one, unless it's another Seconder, and perhaps not always then.

The big story though, was the disappearance of the sex gate. A multitude of so-called experts bandied about their theories. As far as I was concerned, they were idiots who babbled on about something they knew absolutely nothing about. Rita and I had as much experience with the sex gates as anyone (though there might be some more experienced Seconders in news-controlled countries I wasn't aware of), and I had no idea how the gate had disappeared. The next time we made a passage I intended to try to find out, though.

Rita shut off the photocomp, as the little gadgets were now called, in order to tell Bonita that we had to leave as soon as we could.

"Si, you must leave. I agree. But where? And how?" Bonita raised her eyebrows in question.

"It is best you don't know where, Nita. As for how-well, I'm not sure how we can travel without being picked up when we get out of this area. We don't have work permits and we can't claim citizenship. And it is important that we not be caught. We have things to do which I can't explain, but which must be done if the world is to become a better place."

"How soon must you be at the place which is such a secreto?"

"As soon as we can manage," I said.

Bonita shook her head. "Soon, no can do. But if you can work, you can travel with the migrantorios. No one will know."

With her dark hair and eyes, Rita could blend in, but I doubted that I could. I said so. I hated vetoing the idea. It was a good one. Neither the Gaters nor the government were likely to suspect that a Seconder would be traveling as an illegal migrant worker. We could stay out of sight, especially since no one knew for certain (as far as I knew) that we were still in Texas. Bonita aimed a huge grin at me. She must have

worked it all out while we were sleeping.

"You will be el idiota which Rita cares for. You will speak little, even as you do now. Many harvests will be ready in weeks to come. You can travel north as far and as long as you wish, or east or west."

Well, I've been called an idiot before, and I'll admit I have acted like one on occasion, but never intentionally. This would really be a new experience, but once I started thinking about it, I couldn't find much wrong with the idea. I had even done a bit of farm work as a teenager before getting a job at the Ruston library. And come to think of it, all Latinos weren't dark-haired; that was a stereotype. It really might work. All we needed was a little luck, and perhaps some skillful acting.

With her years of experience working as a counselor among the Fourth Worlders, Rita understood the culture, but I needed practice in how to act like the slow-witted farm worker I would play. For the next two days, while Bonita was making arrangements, both she and Rita helped me get into the role. They seemed to relish telling me to act like an idiot. I would be talking about something in my normal way when one of them would interrupt me.

"No, no, you have to sound like the zoquete!"

"The what?"

"The dummy. You have to sound like a stupid fool. Try harder, Lee. You can do it. I know you can." As she assured me that I could act like an idiot, Rita started laughing so hard we could hardly understand her.

Gradually, I got into the habit of keeping my mouth shut. Silence was safer. When I did say anything, I did it in as few and as simple words as possible. By the end of the next evening I thought I could carry it off, so long as Rita didn't get my dander up by referring to me as the zoquete too often.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The following morning, Bonita told us to get ready to leave. We would travel with a family group that migrated around the country doing stoop labor on the smaller farms that were too poor to afford robot harvesters or intelligent machinery. I'll confess, I had no idea what I was getting into. Bonita fixed us a huge breakfast to start us on our way. I was still trying to digest it when I heard knocking coming from the gate speaker.

Bonita went outside, cautioning us to remain behind. After a few minutes, she returned. She was accompanied by a short, nut-brown man with a thick shock of black hair shot with gray. His face was seamed with work and worry lines, and his arms knotted with stringy muscles.

Talk about stereotypes, his name turned out to be Pedro Gonzales. When we shook hands, he turned my hand over in his and frowned at the lack of calluses on mine. I could tell he was thinking I had done no manual labor for a long, long while. Nevertheless, he grinned and rattled off some Spanish too fast for me to follow.

"Seguro," Rita assented for me, although I had no idea what she was agreeing to.

I suspected the man owed Bonita a favor and was taking us along to repay it. She peeked out a window to make sure no one was passing by who would see us leave. She pushed us toward the door.

"Vaya. Vaya con Dios!"

As we passed through the doorway, she pressed a roll of bills into Rita's hand. Rita started to thank her,

but she put a finger to her lips in a shushing motion, and pointed to Pedro who had his back to us. I agreed. I was extremely grateful for the money, but the fewer people who knew we had any extra cash, the better. Keeping my mouth shut, I gave her a heartfelt, but brief hug, as I passed. Seconds later the door shut behind us.

Beyond the gate, idling by the broken curb was an ancient big-bed pickup. I hadn't seen anything like it since I was a little boy. It had a huge camping shell set into the pickup bed. Pedro headed for the cab while motioning for us to climb into the camper.

As I climbed inside, I was amazed to see kids, adults, and teenagers crammed together, along with all the accouterments and paraphernalia necessary for a life on the road. The kids bounced around and jabbered with excitement at leaving for what must be a long trip. They greeted us with wide smiles of welcome, and seemed happy at the prospect of strangers going with them. I returned their grins, but ignored the volley of questions thrown at me. Those long hours of practice at keeping my mouth shut were paying off. Rita charmed them all with her infectious smile and told them the story we'd put together with the help of Bonita.

Eventually, I sorted everyone out. Pedro and his wife, Maria, along with another adult and one teenager were riding in front. In back with us were a teenage boy and girl and two girls who appeared to be twins. I found out later they were ten. There was also one old man, Enrique, who soon made it clear that he was the disciplinarian of the flock, and a middle-aged couple who didn't talk much. The adults and the teens rode on padded benches along one side of the cab. Everyone else sat on boxes or bundles or on the floor, and took their lumps as the old truck rumbled over broken pavement. Our life as migrant workers had begun.

Our new friends saw at once that I was slow-witted. They took it in stride. No one made fun of my fake dumbness, but they expected me to help wherever I could. I was surprised by how little fuss they made about my supposed retardation. In the middle-class society where I grew up, individuals with mental challenges were usually hidden away in special homes or institutions or abandoned altogether by a society, which had given up on them. These last unfortunates usually ended up homeless, doped up on pills. These folks didn't show any qualms at all about having me along.

We camped that first night at the farm where we were to work the next day. Our journey was a rough one. The old truck rattled along on the verge of a permanent breakdown. It couldn't go fast, and Pedro had to stop several times for quick repairs. It was dark when we arrived, and Rita and I had no idea what kind of work we would be doing the next day. It's probably just as well, but even if I had known I couldn't possibly have imagined what it would be like.

The farm had two porta potties-both of them in need of a thorough cleaning with a strong disinfectant-and an outside faucet for water. Pedro, Maria, and the rest accepted these disgusting facilities as normal. Rita and I had no choice but to follow their lead. We washed under the faucet and helped bring water and gather bits of fallen branches from nearby trees for a cooking fire. I don't know what it was we ate, but there was a lot of rice in it, and of course there was plenty of water to wash it down. We slept rolled up in the old army blanket that was a parting gift from Bonita.

I hadn't camped out since I was a cub scout. No matter which way I tossed or turned, there was always a pebble (although it felt more like a good-sized rock) digging into a hip or a shoulder. The mosquitoes were terrible, too. The only way to escape their constant biting was to cover your head with the blanket, but then it was too hot. It was a long night. By the time the sun rose, I was exhausted and frustrated. But my troubles were only beginning.

Breakfast was a quick meal of cold rice and beans. I managed to gag down a handful. Still hungry, I

trudged after the rest to the fields where I discovered that we were going to pick watermelons.

Have you ever spent a long, hot day, from sunrise to sunset, stooping over and picking up round slippery objects weighing anywhere from twenty to forty pounds, and carrying them to trucks? Even better was standing at the bed of a truck and feeding them up to someone else. That required lifting each one to at least shoulder height. By the end of the first half hour, sweat ran down my cheeks and my back was one agonized knot of pain. Anyone who thinks we can get along without stoop labor, or the illegal immigrants from Southern Mexico should be required to spend a day in that watermelon field. There is a lot of farm work that can't be done by machine. Even on mechanized farms, humans do the hard labor of lifting and handing off.

Other than a quick break at noon for a meal of tortillas and beans, we sweated at this backbreaking labor all day. The women worked right beside us. The only concession they got was that they lifted the lighter melons, same as the children did. I never saw anyone else drop one, but I did, several times. That earned me a stern rebuke from the straw boss, a big African-American who worked right beside us.

I struggled all morning to make it to the lunch break. But that brief respite only made it worse. After a few moments of rest, my back knotted up into a stiff mass and refused to cooperate with the rest of my body. Agonizing pains coursed through my cramped muscles with every movement. If I managed to forget about the agony in my back for a moment, it was only because the pains in my arms and legs were every bit as bad. I had never worked so hard in my life, but I couldn't quit, not when I saw the old man and Maria handling more melons than I did.

As the hot sun finally sank lower in the sky, the women got to leave, but only so they could get the evening meal ready while they still had light to see to cook. By the time I arrived back at camp I was covered with dirt, streaked with muddy rivers where sweat ran down my arms and back. My shoulders slumped down into my chest, my head throbbed like a bomb about to explode, and I could barely put one foot in front of the other.

As I dragged myself the last few steps, with no other thought but to collapse on my blanket and sleep, Pedro and the old man and the teenagers began singing! My own throat was choked with dust, and I couldn't imagine how they had the energy to sing, much less why they wanted to, but they treated that horrible ten or eleven hours as an ordinary workday.

I had to stay awake long enough for the women to finish washing behind a blanket hung from a makeshift frame. When they were done, the men took their turn. The water was warm at first then icy cold then warm all over again. I followed the example of the men and rinsed out the clothes I had worn and hung them on a nearby fence to dry. Fortunately, I had a spare set that Bonita had insisted I take. I barely remember sprawling down beside Rita who had worked as hard as me, and helped cook supper. We hardly spoke. She was as exhausted as I was. I don't remember being bothered by mosquitoes that night, although the next day I had the bites to prove they'd visited. I slept like the dead, and they feasted at their leisure.

The next morning I could barely move at first, but we did it all over again. We finished up with that farm in mid-afternoon. I bit my lip to keep from crying out in pain as I worked my abused muscles. By afternoon I was beyond pain. I worked in a numb trance. I went through the motions like a zombie, and hoped that the day would somehow end with me on my feet. And it did, eventually.

We let Pedro collect our pay. I never even asked what we made for that muscle-bruising work. The amount he handed Rita seemed very little for what we had done.

As soon as we collected our money, Pedro hustled us into the truck; he wanted to get to another farm in

time to get a full day's work the next day. Rita and I slept for most of the journey, leaning against each other, oblivious to the bumps of the road. Once again I could barely move by the time we halted sometime after dark. At first I was relieved to see that this place had a worker shelter for us to sleep in. I didn't know if I could face another night sleeping on the ground. I should have held off on the thanks; there was nothing inside the little shack but a gas stove. At least I didn't have to try gathering firewood in the dark.

Rita and I picked a corner and curled up on the hard floor. As I was falling asleep I wondered if we would ever have the energy and privacy to make love again. Then I heard some familiar noises coming from another corner. Someone else in our group was taking advantage of the darkness to make their own privacy. I shrugged. It wasn't a problem for us that night. We were both too tired to even think of sex.

We picked melons again the next day. The day after that brought a welcome change; we got to pick peaches. After two days of lugging around twenty-pound watermelons, I thought picking peaches would be a snap, but it turned out that there was a technique. The peaches required gentle handling or they would bruise, but at the same time we had to pick them as fast as we could in order to make a halfway decent amount of money.

By the time I got the hang of it a few days later, we were farther north and it was time to start picking yet another crop. Every day was a struggle. I tried to do my share of the work and to keep up the pretense that I was dim-witted. The second part wasn't as hard as I had thought. I was dead on my feet, too exhausted to string two coherent thoughts together. When it came to handling life as a migrant worker, all my vaunted Secondar abilities were worthless. Both Rita and I were accustomed to a life of luxury and now we were peons barely scraping out a living.

After a couple of weeks on the road with the Gonzales family, I felt a great deal of respect for them. They worked hard and were thrifty with their money. One day, when we had a bit of privacy, Rita told me that a good portion of what they earned went for an education fund to be spent when they settled down for the winter. Most of the rest they saved so they would have money to live on while no crops were available and only periodic day labor could bring in anything extra.

After she told me this, I thought of the lazy Fourth Worlders in our cities. They were content to live on the barest of government doles plus whatever they might earn doing sporadic jobs. Most of the work they did do consisted of illegal activities requiring little of either brains or brawn.

As usual, Rita disagreed with me and came to the Fourth Worlders defense. According to her, they weren't lacking in ambition; it was simply that there were too many of them for the amount of work available. She claimed that month after month of being unemployed and watching your family struggle to survive on the very barest of necessities would drive almost anyone to other outlets, illegal or not.

Unfortunately, many of them became addicted to the cheap designer drugs which were taking the place alcohol had held in previous decades. The best anyone could say about the present Fourth World situation was that they had seen it worse a few years back. Now at least some Fourth Worlders were aware of the wider world, and taking advantage of educational opportunities because of the cheap photocomps made available to them through Russell's inventions. Plus, the government did provide something for the very neediest. There was hope for the future; a little bit, at least.

I don't want to dwell too long on this phase of our lives. My memories are a dark blur of long days spent working to exhaustion, and endless hours riding in the back of that disreputable old truck. To my surprise, it always got us where we were going. There were only a few occasions when Rita and I were able to find a moment of privacy to make love; we tried it once within hearing of our companions, but once was enough. We both tend to be vocal in our coupling and were teased unmercifully for a day or

two afterward. The jokes were directed mainly at me, with references to where most of my brain resided, and the like. I tried to grin like an idiot who didn't quite get the joke, but sometimes it was hard not to burst out laughing.

After that one experience, we tried to get away somewhere when we could, but it didn't happen often. When it did, our minds merged as always. Afterward, still sharing our thoughts, we would ponder the mystery of sex gates. I was convinced that I could figure them out and stay human-and on this Earth.

Rita wasn't as sure as I was. I noticed her reluctance to completely merge when my mind or conversation turned to the subject of the gates. I couldn't put my finger on what the problem might be, and Rita wasn't talking so I didn't push it. When I wasn't too exhausted to think, I tried to prepare my mind for my next trip. I was determined to resist the change long enough to understand more about the gates.

Eventually we worked our way as far north as Texarkana. We halted for a day or two in that city's large Fourth World enclave. The Fourth Worlders of Texarkana were truly destitute. Kids wearing little or no clothing ran around in dusty streets unpaved for most of a generation. The buildings where they lived were so dilapidated a strong breeze would knock them down. The shops scattered through the slum area sold cheap shoddy goods and only the most basic food items, all overpriced. Designer drugs were rampant; you couldn't go out on the street without being accosted by kids wanting to sell you drugs, or their kid sisters or brothers, or both. It was pitiful, like a scene out of Africa.

I wasn't sad to leave there, even if we did have to walk at first.

Pedro and Maria and the rest of the family saw us off with hugs and kisses (for Rita, anyway) and many expressions of, "Vaya Con Dios." I have fond memories of that hardworking, cheerful family group.

We set off down a dusty street in the Fourth Worlder ghetto early in the morning. I wanted us to be fresh when we crossed over from Texas to Arkansas. In our weeks on the road, I had neglected to follow the news, even on the few occasions where there was enough privacy to try. For the first week or so, our routine was work, eat and sleep. As we toughened up, we started to have a bit more energy, and I bought Rita and myself comphones with some of the money Bonita had slipped to us. I bought them when no one else was looking, of course. We had stopped in a small town to pick up supplies. We certainly didn't want the others to know we could afford such pricey possessions.

After such a long period out of touch, I had no idea if the status of Seconders had changed, but I didn't want to bring up any of the news channels while we were on our way out of the enclave. In the slums, that equipment would call unwanted attention to us.

My plan was to walk over the border. I was tempted to try to take a bus out of Texarkana. But even after the weeks of hard work, Rita was a beautiful woman, and I feared her beauty would call attention to us. I'd thought about trying to disguise her, but there was no way to hide those glorious curves. More than that, it was simply her inner beauty shining through that made her so noticeable, and that would never change.

Our minds communed as we walked, and Rita bumped me with her hip as she caught that thought. I turned to smile at her. I couldn't imagine ever loving anyone else as much as I loved her. It was almost enough to make me want to stay a male on a permanent basis. But the sex gates were calling. It was imperative that we go through again, and possibly again and again in order to-I didn't know exactly what, but I knew it was important. Desperately so.

We walked for miles through the outskirts of the city. The experience was an eye-opening one. I had no idea how extensive and pervasive the Fourth World areas of this city were. Other cities were every bit as bad. It gave me a better idea of the scope of the problems facing the whole country. The admission of

northern Mexico into the union was supposed to have ameliorated the situation, but instead had only made it worse. Now all the southern Mexicans and destitute peasants and Fourth Worlders from other countries tried to make it into our country in hopes of a better life. I sympathize, but there are limits. Those who say we should share our wealth with all of South America have no idea of economics, or sociology either. Even Rita admitted there were limits.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The sun warmed us as we trudged along a halfway decent state highway that headed north. We appeared to be nearing the outskirts of the city. Most of the slums were behind us. The area we had entered was a typical dirty, rundown business district. The two of us weren't talking much, simply letting our minds merge and twine around various subjects. None of them were earthshaking. I thought we might reach open country soon, so when we passed a third-rate motel which didn't look quite as bad as some, our thoughts converged on the same subject: here was a chance for privacy, and an opportunity to get truly clean for the first time in weeks.

While Rita collapsed into one of the two chairs in the tiny lobby and rubbed her feet, I approached the clerk. He was busy playing some sort of semi-pornographic game and looked annoyed at me for interrupting. He took my cash, pushed a key card back to me, and got on with his game. That suited me fine. I don't think he even saw Rita.

The room wasn't much, but it did have a queen-sized bed, which looked clean enough, and a shower. Both of us headed straight for the shower, dropping our handbags and pulling off our clothing on the way. Before more than another minute or two passed we were inside the stall and luxuriating under hot water and suds.

I insisted on helping Rita wash. She laughed as she accepted my help. The teasing sway of her hips told me she knew what I had in mind. I rubbed her breasts with soap and lingered over each one while I rinsed them off. I held the slippery mounds of flesh in my hands and watched the water run in rivulets over her erect nipples. We stood for long minutes under the stream of hot water, touching each other with a hunger long denied. Her small hands slipped and slid over my wet skin, as she brought me to the edge of climax with her urgent caresses.

I managed to hold off until we were finished washing, right up until we were half dry. It had been too long and I could stand it no longer. I lifted her in my arms and carried her to the bed. When she tickled my ear with her tongue on the way, I almost dropped her. We stretched out and lay close for a moment. Rita kissed me and grinned impishly.

"Men always go too fast the first time," she said, and proceeded to demonstrate.

I watched her head bobbing over me for a few seconds, then went into earth-shattering convulsions. The Krakatoa volcano must have sounded like me when it exploded. The orgasm seemed to go on and on and on. My whole being concentrated on the sensation of her mouth and tongue working on me, as intense orgasmic waves shook my body.

When I finally subsided into periodic jerks, shivers, and moans, Rita released me and slid up beside me. She covered my body with long, lingering kisses. The taste and scent of my semen on her mouth as our lips and tongues came together filled me with renewed lust and a desire to please her.

Rita rolled over on her back. "Come here," she commanded. "Now you can go a looong time!"

And I did. Rita wanted me in her and on top of her. Our thoughts flowed together mingling and merging, until we were one person. I knew her every desire, and my one desire was to satisfy her. I moved in

long, slow strokes at first, then gradually faster as she dictated. She let me know what she wanted with her mind, and voice, and body. Her nails dug into my back and her legs locked around mine as if she never wanted me to quit. When it finally came, her orgasm was even more intense than mine-and if possible, it became even better as my own followed.

It had been so long, that we made love twice more before either one of us was interested in anything else. By that time it was dark outside. After we'd hit the shower again, Rita broke out some sandwiches we had purchased earlier. I removed my phone from the charge slot I had plugged it into, and pulled up some news from my search programs.

"Gug," I said, around a mouthful of bread and cheese. I pointed for Rita to look at the little screen, and turned up the volume so we could both hear.

"Gug? Does that mean 'look'?"

I swallowed. "Yeah. Look."

I could have communicated with her mind-to-mind, but when we were sitting face to face, it was more natural to speak. Sometimes, as I just showed, I forgot about our mental communication completely.

We were getting commentary from a real person, rather than a graphie. That usually signified some breaking news of importance. Within a minute I figured out what the story was. The Supreme Court had overturned the Texas legislature. We were citizens of Texas again.

"That took a lot of money," I said.

"What do you mean?"

Poor Rita. She didn't understand the first thing about how politics, power, and money work together. Heck, I didn't understand it that well either, but I knew what this implied.

"It means Terry and Randi must have made it to Mena. I'll bet they poured a heap of money into a bunch of lawyers and insiders, and got a quick ruling from the Supreme Court. It couldn't have happened so fast otherwise."

"Oh, wonderful!" Rita hugged me. I was pleased, too, but...

"Sweetheart, that doesn't automatically mean that the feds have lost interest in us. In fact, the boys at the top will know, as well as I do, how this happened. It will make them even more determined to find out what we Seconders are up to. I can't imagine them leaving us alone, not after the way Carl treated their agents back when Messler disappeared. And not with the gates vanishing all over the world."

"Oh." She paused, her forehead wrinkled in thought. "Do you think we could chance taking a bus up to Mena while we still have our disguises, and old clothes, and stuff?"

I thought about it. Once out of Texas (and we were, if only barely), I figured there was little risk that the feds would pick us up on public transportation, so long as we weren't recognized. And I damn sure didn't want to walk all that way. I picked up the house phone and punched operator.

"C'n ah 'elp ya?"

"Is there a bus station near here?" I hoped the clerk could tear himself away from his game long enough to answer.

"s onny privates. Calla pho comp'ny."

And that was all I got out of him. However, it was enough. By 'privates' he meant sedans operated by individuals as long-distance taxis. They were beginning to replace the old big buses, as fuel costs came down, and insurance went up. The privates didn't carry insurance; you took your chances.

I called the local registry and got several addresses; most of them didn't have phone numbers, but that suited me. It was possible that the feds had photomoles out roving the satellite bands looking for my voice. After all we'd endured, I didn't want to take any chances. Besides, there were two privates close enough to walk to.

"Private couriers," I told Rita. "We'll try them first thing in the morning. In the meantime, let's see what else has been happening in the world."

Quite a lot had been happening, as it turned out.

The Gaters were claiming that they were responsible for the disappearing gates. I didn't believe that for a minute. There had been two more documented disappearances since we'd dropped out of touch. One gate disappeared in South America, where the Gaters were strong, and one in Europe where they were trying to gain a foothold again. Selinda, the High Priestess or leader or whatever she was called, claimed that God was sending a warning to humanity through these disappearances: repent and join the Church of the Gates and help them smite Seconders. If the world refused to listen, God would take all the gates away.

For what it was worth, several other religions claimed the same thing, though not quite so strenuously, and not with the edict against Seconders. They implored the nonbelievers to repent and be saved, or God would take away the gates he had so generously given humanity. I am talking about Christian religions, of course. More than other faiths, the Christians blamed disasters on the wrath of God. At the same time that they claimed God created these disasters, they also credited Him with saving sinners from those disasters with His loving grace.

As logic, it made about as much sense as a coloring book done by a blind man. I wanted to ignore all the religious posturing, but I couldn't. Religious fervor can become more dangerous than a full-blown war under the proper circumstances. Other religions saw the disappearing gates from other perspectives, but they all more or less blamed the phenomena on misbehaving humanity. I figured that was about par for the course.

"If there wasn't a need for someone to blame, there wouldn't be much religion," I muttered.

"You're a cynic, Lee," Rita said, but without any negative connotations.

She had told me that many times. She didn't say it quite as often these days since many of my pronouncements had proved to be on the mark.

"True, but it's better to be a cynic than to follow the ravings of idiots."

"They can't help it, Lee, as you've so often told me." Rita's eyes shone with compassion. "It's in our genes."

I drew her to me and apologized. Sometimes I get a little strident over the pronouncements and actions of religious leaders. I should know better, but these are people who have perverted a wonderful survival trait-the ability to believe in something more than what we see in front of us, and to hope for the future-into a rigid set of uncompromising beliefs.

The newscasters mentioned another outbreak of shaking disease in Malaysia. The authorities promised to have it under control soon. We had heard that before from Africa, and didn't believe it then, either. The only cure was a trip through a sex gate.

Russia was locked in a shooting war with two of the Chinese warlords on her border, although the fighting wasn't too widespread yet. Japan had sent another man into space. They now claimed the lead in the number of manned spacecraft, but that didn't mean anything, as they weren't going anywhere important.

American spacecraft were continuing to explore the galaxy using the breakthrough faster-than-light drive discovered through the study of the sex gates. Despite several years of looking, exploration teams hadn't found a livable planet or any sign of where the sex gates came from. I suspected they never would find the gate masters, but I hoped the exploration for another livable planet would continue. The Earth is a small and vulnerable world. Humanity needs to spread out, or someday an errant asteroid or a full-blown nuclear war or a stupendous volcano will destroy civilization, or even the entire the human race.

In general, the world seemed to be settling down a bit, although only a news junkie who had been following events as closely as I have for years would really notice the difference. A pattern started to form in my mind. It consisted of so many variables that I couldn't be certain, but I caught a glimpse of the future the sex gates had helped to shape.

For once, my pattern analysis offered me some good news. Barring accidental nuclear war or some other catastrophic event, civilization was gradually becoming less prone to violence and contention under the influence of the sex gates. That change would become inevitable once enough of the population went through the gates. The mental flexibility that came from learning to see events from both sides of the gender divide would make a vital difference in human relations.

Once the level of violence started to decline more of the world's capital would go toward societies' real needs rather than militaristic spending. In addition, the birth rate continued to fall worldwide. A major reason for this decline was the number of men who had become female. These new females usually had no desire to get pregnant. The population decline would help reduce some of the current fighting over resources.

There was a long way to go yet, though, and religious and territorial ambitions would inevitably slow the process. Going through a sex gate removed obviously deleterious genes, but not the ones that dealt with belief and aggressiveness. And that made sense. As much trouble as they caused the human race, those genes couldn't be removed. They were part of what made us human, whatever human means.

We lucked out. The first private was available, although we couldn't leave right away. Rita haggled about the price. We had to stay in character as a poor couple with no other way to travel. I continued to play dumb, although I didn't act quite as slow-witted as I had when traveling with the Gonzales family. Besides, the driver/owner was a Latino and Rita bargained him down quite a bit by speaking Spanish with him. Fortunately, we were the first customers that day, so we got to pick the destination, which was Mena. Now it was up to him to get some other riders who wanted to travel in that direction. Our part of the fee would go down as more passengers contracted. It would also be reduced if we agreed to side trips for others. It was a complicated business.

The only place to wait was a small shed with a couple of wooden benches inside. One side of the shed was open to the air. While we waited, we talked.

"Now maybe we can relax a bit." I spoke mind-to-mind.

"You didn't get relaxed enough last night?"

I squeezed her hand. "This is different. I don't feel like we're being hunted right here. At least, I don't think anyone will look for us in the van."

"True. I wonder what kind of people we'll get as traveling companions."

We didn't have to wait long to find out. I relaxed when I saw a family group approach the shed. There was a man and woman, presumably husband and wife, plus three kids. There were two girls, one in pigtails and one just beginning to fill out, and a boy in his teens. The kids carried small photocomps with earphones. They kept them going even as they walked, although I couldn't tell what they were watching.

We stared at each other in wary silence. With travel so haphazard, you took the measure of your traveling companions. Rita broke the ice and introduced herself as Maria and me as her boyfriend Henry. At the same time, she sent a mental jab in the ribs my way to remind me not to use my real name. Even geniuses can be forgetful about some things. Rita snorted and almost laughed at the mental image I sent back, but managed to hold her laughter in check.

The couple introduced themselves as John and Julia Loring. The kids ignored us, and their parents didn't bother to introduce them; they were so intent on whatever they were doing with their photocomps that they barely nodded. John told us the family was heading up to eastern Oklahoma for a big COG convention.

I flinched when I heard that they belonged to the Church of the Gates, but I hoped they didn't notice it. At first I cursed our bad luck, but when I thought about it some more, I realized with the Gater numbers growing again, it wasn't that unlikely. I only hoped nothing would come of it. The adults didn't seem interested in conversation, and the kids were glued to their photocomps.

After a short wait, one more passenger appeared. He was an old man. From the smell that filled the shed when he walked in, he hadn't bathed recently. He looked about seventy. I wondered why he hadn't gone through a gate so he could have a young body again. The odds of making it through were with him if he was reasonably healthy. However, a good percentage of the population remained opposed to the gates, or at least against the idea going through one themselves. Their opposition usually stemmed from religious reasons.

Although these holdouts were becoming fewer all the time, they still amounted to about half the population of America. The percentage was even higher in some countries, according to the latest surveys. Surveys are usually fairly accurate now that there are lie-detecting programs built into the polling software. On the other hand, everyone lies about sex, or everyone used to, until the advent of the sex gates. Once a person has gone through a gender change and had a chance to see what the grass is like on the other side of the fence, lies become detectably fewer.

Riding with Gaters severely limited our conversation, but we didn't mind. Our experience as migrant workers had made us adept at communicating our feelings and impressions and sometimes even complex thoughts mentally. As the private driver took us through the level bottomland of southern Arkansas, John and Julia made a few attempts to interest us in the Church of the Gates, but we put them off by telling them that we were Catholics. After some theological turmoil when the gates first appeared, the Catholic Church eventually approved a single passage when necessary.

After discussing what we should say mind-to-mind with Rita, I told John that we had been elderly and sick and had already gone through the gates. Once he'd heard that, he turned his attention to the old man and left us alone. He didn't have any better luck there; the old gentleman wouldn't even talk to him. Eventually he shut up.

As we headed north toward the Ozarks, I occupied myself by looking out the window. After a rocky

start because some people were afraid of genetically modified plants, the Department of Agriculture had finally approved planting faster-growing cotton. It was being harvested in some of the pancake-flat fields by the big robots, unattended by any humans. At the most, one human was involved, monitoring the fields in case something went wrong. In other fields, food crops were growing. Mostly I couldn't tell what they were. I did recognize a field of tomatoes; there was no doubt about them. They were the giant square variety, funny looking, but easy to pack and transport.

After the Europeans suffered through a couple of famine years, brought on by the changing weather patterns and global warming, they changed their minds about bioengineering and decided that they didn't mind eating 'Frankenfood' at all. The altered climate threw their agriculture into shambles and the genetically modified crops were all that would grow. That pretty well broke the back of the resistance. The Europeans had been the most strident opponents. Once they dropped their opposition, most of the rest of the world accepted the scientifically improved seeds and plants. If only everyone had money, there would never be a shortage of food.

After a while, I got bored with the unchanging landscape. Rita and I relaxed and let our thoughts flow together in quiet harmony as the hum of the wheels lulled us into a half-awake state. My thoughts were about the sex gates-some might call it an obsession-and I caught that unusual reticence from Rita again, but didn't delve into it. Every person is entitled to some private thoughts, even from her mind-reading lover. For my part, I believed our whole future hinged on solving the mystery of the gates, and like a dog with a bone, I wasn't about to let go. Occasionally Rita joined me in wondering what would happen next. The private didn't have a back seat compscreen, and we didn't want to display our expensive units, so we couldn't turn on the news.

For the first two hours everything went fine. I was dozing off when the driver stopped, and announced a rest break. I've forgotten the name of the little place if I ever knew it; it was some one-horse little bump in the road with one light and a couple of stores. One of them sported a U.S. Postal Service emblem from years past, back when mail was still a government monopoly.

The driver parked in front of that building and told us to take a break. Rita and I got out, stretched, and headed inside. We both needed to visit the bathroom, and we wanted to get something to eat. The driver told us we would have twenty minutes, so I wasn't worried about the time.

The men's room was what you would expect in such a small town, cramped and dirty. After relieving myself and washing up, I came back out, and waited in the alcove for Rita. As I leaned against the wall, I noticed that I couldn't pick up the mental presence of our driver. It was as if he had completely closed off his mind. Curious, I stepped out of the alcove and craned my neck to see past the store shelves to the little dining area. No one was there.

My mouth dropped open. He and his other passengers had gone off and left us. Damn it all, I should have been paying attention to those kids with their photocomps! They were the children of Gater adults after all. One of them must have seen our faces flashed on some program and told the parents. My mind raced, trying to consider all of the consequences at once. As soon as Rita stepped out of the woman's washroom I grabbed her hand and pulled her to one side while I whispered what I thought had happened.

"We have to get out of here. Odds are John or Julia is trying to reach some bigwig in the church to tell them where we are. You know they won't pass up a chance like this, to catch the most notorious Secondar in America out in the open."

"What will they do?" Rita's eyes grew round and frightened.

"Nothing, because I don't intend for them to catch us."

I fingered the gun in my pocket. If I needed to, I would act, but I decided to try diplomacy first; the green, folding kind.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I had noticed a dilapidated, gasoline-powered jeep parked almost in back of the old store when we pulled in. I went up to the man behind the cash register, and probed his mind while I talked to him.

"Are you the owner of this place?"

"Yeah. So what?"

He looked outside and saw that the private had gone off and left us. His keen blue eyes stared at me. He was curious, but his surface thoughts told me he was not in on the escapade the driver had pulled.

"Do you own that jeep out there?"

"Me and the bank."

"I'd like to buy it. The private we came with left us behind, and my wife and I have urgent business to attend to."

The man rubbed his chin as if considering, but I didn't need to be a mind reader to see the eager gleam that leapt into his eyes. He was only wondering how much he could ask for the old wreck. If the jeep ran at all, it wasn't worth a penny more than two hundred dollars.

"Five hundred." The defiant tone in his voice told me that he didn't expect to get that much.

Thanks to Bonita and our weeks of backbreaking work, we had the five hundred. But if I agreed right away, I would appear too eager and make him even more curious. I shrugged my shoulders, and did my best to look disappointed.

"Five hundred is more than we can afford. If we had that kind of money, we wouldn't be riding with a private in the first place. I could give you three hundred."

"Three hundred?" He spat out the words as if insulted. "That jeep is an important part of my business. I'll have to replace it and new ones don't come cheap."

"I see your problem."

I pretended I was concerned, and he pretended he was insulted. We were playing a game as old as time, but precious minutes were slipping away. The Gaters in that private had probably called the church to report our location already. We had to get going.

I heaved a deep sigh. "How about three-fifty, and you don't tell anyone who bought it?"

That made him suspicious, but I figured it was worth the risk. Whatever his suspicions, though, he didn't ask why I wanted him to keep quiet. From his surface thoughts, he figured we were in some sort of trouble with the law, but the idea didn't bother him. With the constant upheavals in society, lots of people were on the run for one reason or another. He dismissed our dilemma with a mental shrug. He was too busy planning how to spend his sudden windfall. I decided to clinch the deal.

"I'll give you another fifty to tell anyone who asks that we headed back east from here."

He tried his best to look reluctant, but he couldn't hide his glee. "Okay. You pay for the gas, though. It's sitting on empty."

I laughed at that. The man drove a hard bargain. I took the keys and cursed at the delay that gassing up would cause. While I hurried to the old-style pump in front of the store, Rita dug out the money. She's a good actress, and I gathered from her amused thoughts that she was milking him for sympathy. She made him believe she was handing him our last dime.

It took me a couple of minutes to get the hang of the pump; it had been so long. All the while I was trying to act as if we weren't in a hurry. Rita did a better job of it than I did. She even paused to flirt with the proprietor after paying him.

As we drove off, his mental image faded. The last thoughts I caught were full of self-satisfaction at duping the 'furriners' out of so much money.

"Where are we going?" Rita asked.

"To Mena, but by a different route."

I thought back to my childhood when we visited relatives in the area. I had a vague memory of the route my dad had taken. I only hoped the roads I remembered were still passable. But first, we had to get closer to Mena. Once again we were in desperate straits, almost destitute and likely to be pursued. The private had departed with our luggage, such as it was. Everything we owned was on our backs, plus what was in Rita's purse and in our pockets, little more than our guns.

As soon as we got down the road a piece, I turned off the main highway and onto a side road. It was not very well maintained. I had purchased a state map at the store. Rita held it in her lap and navigated while I drove. Once we were well off the main highway, we turned and headed back in the right direction, though now we were forced to take a longer way. Originally, the private driver had intended to go up into eastern Oklahoma to drop off the Gaters, and then cross over into Arkansas for the old man and us. I had Rita swing us east, then north, and finally back west.

Rural Arkansas didn't appear to have changed much since I was a boy. As we drove north, the roads got worse, the hills got higher, and the forests got bigger. Soon we were out of the commercial agriculture area and into backwoods hills. This was the domain of small ranchers and farmers and country folk who commuted to some job or other while keeping a cow for milk and some hens for eggs. The homes looked smaller and less well kept than I remembered. But I was looking at them with the eyes of an adult now.

"This is pretty country," Rita commented.

"Wait until you see the area north of Rich Mountain."

"What's it like?"

"Rich Mountain is part of the southern end of the Ozarks."

"Ozarks?"

I remembered I was talking to a city girl. "The Ozark mountains. They're a separate chain from the Appalachians. Smaller, but pretty high up compared to Houston, or anywhere else in East Texas."

"Oh, yes. I remember the name now. Messler's sex gate is somewhere in the Ozarks."

"Right. North of Mena, and thus north of Rich Mountain. That's a real landmark. There's an inn up there, or there used to be, but we won't go near there. Messler's place is a ways off."

"Won't someone pick up our trail if we leave the jeep near there?"

"If we left it there, you're right, but I hope we don't have to. Do you have any money?"

"Some. Not enough to buy a car every few miles, though." She dimpled.

I kept an eye on the rearview mirror as we talked. So far I hadn't spotted anyone tailing us.

"How about enough to pay someone to take this one back south after we reach Mena?"

"We might manage that, but it won't leave us much."

"We won't need any money once we get to Messler's hideaway. The problem is getting there without leaving a trail so we'll be left alone for a while."

"How are we going to manage that?"

"With Uncle George, I hope." That remark evoked a big mental question mark from Rita, so I explained. "I told you I have relatives up here. My Uncle George is a bit of an eccentric, as most of these backwoods farmers are. He's not ignorant though. He's a great reader, an SF fan, if I recall right. And he purely hates the government; at least he still did the last time I talked to him. I'm hoping he'll help us."

We spent the rest of that day navigating up and down the back roads of Arkansas. The people who live in the Rockies probably consider the Ozarks little more than high hills, but they are high enough to create their fair share of twisting roads. The sun was sinking behind a bank of clouds in the west and sending shadows deep into the valley when we finally turned down a long private lane. A ring of trees hid the old farmhouse from the road. Two black labs came running out of the barn and circled the car, barking a warning

"Down, Mulder! Back, Scully!"

A woman's voice called off the dogs. Surprised, I wondered if Uncle George had gotten married again. His wife, my mother's sister, had died five years ago in a car accident.

A figure emerged from the shadowed doorway of the barn. She was dressed in sturdy boots, dirty jeans, and pale blue t-shirt. The t-shirt, damp with sweat and plastered to her chest, revealed the enticing curve of high, young breasts. Her hair, a rich dark chestnut, was brushed back into a long ponytail, but one strand had fallen loose and framed her delicate cheekbones. She hooked her thumbs in her belt and walked up to the car. As she got closer, I saw that her eyes were a warm, liquid brown.

"Quiet!" she commanded the dogs.

They dropped to their haunches and eyed us, tails wagging gently through the thick grass of the farmyard. I opened the jeep's door and got out. On the other side of the jeep, Rita did the same.

"Howdy," I said. "I'm Jackson Lee Stuart. I'm looking for my Uncle George."

A wide grin spread across the woman's face. "Lee! I hardly recognized you. And I'm darned sure you don't recognize me."

"Uncle George?"

As accustomed as I'd become to the changes the sex gates brought, it's a shock when you run into someone you'd known as an older person, someone who is now young and attractive-and a member of the opposite sex. The last time I'd seen Uncle George, he'd been in his fifties, his hair already iron gray, his face tanned and wrinkled from years of working in the sun. Now a curvaceous young woman of twenty or so stood grinning at me. As I looked closer, I recognized the twinkle in those chocolate brown eyes. Her skin looked soft and smooth, but she sported a deep farmer tan, the same as Uncle George once had, and the muscles of her shoulders and arms looked well developed. Farm work does that to you, as I'd discovered during my recent weeks as a migrant worker.

"Yes, it's me, Lee." The young woman laughed. "Never seen a sex gate change before?" Her gaze shifted over to Rita who had walked up to my side. "Well, of course you have; you must have been through one yourself to look so young at your age-hey! You must have gone through twice since you're, uh, male." She colored as her eyes focused on my jeans.

"S-sorry," I stammered. "I didn't mean to stare, but you look terrific, Uncle George."

"It's Georgia now. But you can call me Georgie."

"Hi, Georgie." Rita, never shy, held out her hand. "Shut your mouth, Lee. It's hanging open. And introduce me."

While Georgie wiped her hands against her jeans and shook Rita's, I made the introductions.

"So what brings you to this neck of the woods?" Georgie asked. "I haven't seen you in what-five, ten-fifteen years?"

"It's been awhile," I admitted.

"I get emails from your mom now and then. She said she and your dad went through the gate, too, and afterward they reenlisted in the army."

"Yep. I don't see them too often, either."

"She-I mean he-told me you were living at the old homestead."

"I was, but there were some changes in Texas recently that didn't sit well with Rita and me and we had to leave."

Georgie narrowed her brown eyes and looked the two of us up and down. I grew warm as her probing gaze studied my face, my chest and my legs. Both of us-fresh from a recent sex gate change-didn't look a day over eighteen. But Georgie knew I was a lot older than eighteen by now. I knew she would put the pieces together in a minute.

"You're running from that asinine ruling against Seconders," she said. Her eyes blazed with anger. "Damn court had no right to ignore the Constitution like that. I thought the ruling was reversed, though."

"Yes. But we had to leave Texas before it was reversed, and we've been on the run ever since."

Her slim brown eyebrows drew together. "Maybe you should park that jeep back behind the barn and come in the house."

I felt a sense of relief. Uncle George-Aunt Georgie-seemed willing to take charge. I was sure she would help us.

I parked the jeep while Rita and Aunt Georgie strolled into the house, already chatting away. By the time I climbed up the steps to the back porch, and pushed open the screen door that led to the big, old-fashioned kitchen, she and Georgie were fast friends. Georgie got a pitcher of iced tea out of the refrigerator and set a plate of oatmeal cookies on the kitchen table as we sat down to talk.

The cookies vanished as I brought Aunt Georgie up-to-date on our adventures. I could see her old affection for me shining out of her eyes, so I didn't hesitate to tell her the whole truth. If she was going to help us, I wanted her to know there was danger involved.

"Lee, Lee." She shook her head when I was finished, and leaned over the edge of the table to pat my knee. "You've gotten yourself in the middle of something, haven't you? What can I do to help?"

I looked out the kitchen window. While we'd talked, the sun had set. It was dark out and silent, except for an occasional bark from one of the dogs.

"We need someone to drive us to the research facility, and then take the jeep and ditch it far away from there so no one picks up our trail again. We have a little money left."

Aunt Georgie waved my offer away. "We're relatives, Lee, although not blood relatives."

She smiled as she said this and-I swear-winked. I stared at her, wondering what on earth she meant by that. Next to me Rita smirked, her own dark eyes sparkling with mischief.

"I'll drive you in my car. We can leave in the morning after chores are done. Sounds like your facility is only a couple of hours from here. Leave the jeep to me. I can dispose of it so it's never found."

"Thanks, Aunt Georgie."

"Call me Georgie," she told me, for the second time. "Uncle George is gone and I've no desire to be an aunt. I'm a new person now and so are you, it seems."

She pulled the rubber band out of her hair and shook it free of the ponytail. Her rich, dark curls bounced around her shoulders and glowed in the warm light from the ceiling fixture. She propped her elbows on the table and stared at me again, almost as if she'd never seen me before. Her tongue came out to lick her lips.

I twitched under the force of her undivided attention. Her eyes had an intense, almost hungry look. I found myself thinking how attractive she was and wondering how she had handled all the renewed sexual energy that came with the change. It had to be frustrating, living alone on a farm back in the hills. Her soft skin cried out for a lover's touch and her breasts pressed against the thin fabric of the t-shirt, as if longing to be set free. I itched to cup those breasts and feel their weight in my hands. My growing desire must have shown on my face. Georgie leaned forward again, and touched my hand.

"It's been too long, Lee. Way too long."

I snatched my hand away. What was I thinking? This was my uncle. My uncle by marriage, true-as she had just pointed out-but I'd always thought of him-her-as part of the family. I shivered. Once more the sex gates were shaking up my thinking, as they had shaken the entire world.

Georgie dropped her gaze, and stood up. "Well, I have chores to do. As soon as I'm done, I'll fix you some supper."

"Oh, no," Rita protested. "We can cook something for supper while you're finishing the chores. Just show us where everything is."

Georgie gave us a quick tour of the kitchen, and then left for the barn. While Rita heated up the oil in the big frying pan, I peeled potatoes. Hard farm work enabled Georgie to eat hearty meals and keep her slim figure, too. And Rita and I had had so few decent meals that we were ready to eat anything.

"I think your Aunt Georgie likes you," Rita commented, as she dredged the chicken pieces in the flour and put them in the frying pan.

I shot her a quick glance. As usual, there was no trace of jealousy in her voice. Rita was a true free spirit who wanted to see everyone sexually happy.

"We used to visit the farm when I was a boy. I helped Uncle George with the chores a lot back then."

"I think she might need your help now."

Rita's words were innocent enough, but her thoughts brushed across my mind with a deeper meaning. She needs your help with more than chores, much more.

"I don't understand."

I had filled a pot with water, and turned it on to boil. Now I added the peeled potatoes.

"With your gift for pattern analysis?" Rita's dark eyes sparkled with affectionate humor. "Unless you are being blind on purpose. Georgie has gone through the sex change, but she lives alone. She hasn't had anyone to teach her what it means to be a woman."

I remembered thinking almost the same thing earlier. The look of desire in Georgie's eyes had been unmistakable. Maybe I was in denial, because she was once my uncle. What had she said? We were only related by marriage. Even so-I took a deep breath. I'd enjoyed the depth of sexual freedom the sex gates brought as a man and as a woman, but this was a huge step.

Rita's mind nudged mine with the memory of our first time together after I became a woman. I'd been afraid to experience sex in this new way. Sure, the natural desires were there, but it took a lot of courage to break through years of conditioning. If Georgie was reaching out to me for help, it would be cruel to refuse.

"I can finish up here in the kitchen. Why don't you go down to the barn, and help Georgie with her chores."

I knew that tone from Rita. It brooked no argument. She dropped the last piece of chicken in the frying pan, closed the lid, and walked over to me, wiping her hands on a towel. Smiling, she planted a big kiss on my lips.

"Go on. Help out Georgie."

I kissed her back, sending her my love mind-to-mind. Then I strode out the back door, and across the yard to the barn.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Uncle George's farm, like most places nestled back in the Ozark Mountains, was small. Over the years, he'd raised a variety of crops: some beef cows, a few pigs, a little corn, and even some cotton now and then. Once, when I was a boy, he'd explained to me that farming had come in a great circle. It had started out small, mostly people raising crops and animals that they needed to survive on their own land. Then it had gotten big in the days when America boasted it would feed the world. But with the development of the new genetic crops that would grow almost anywhere, and a worldwide market where

crops could be grown cheaper in other countries, the majority of big farming had moved overseas.

Over our oatmeal cookies earlier Georgie had told us that these days she raised only a few animals, and the food she needed for her own survival. What little profit she saw she made selling homegrown specialty crops to the local markets.

The barn smelled of cows and hay. A big-boned Holstein stood in her stall chewing on her dinner while Georgie sat on a three-legged stool at her side, squeezing her teats and squirting streams of milk into the bucket at her feet. It was like seeing the nineteenth century come to life in the middle of the twenty-first. For a moment, I was charmed as I watched the pretty picture Georgie made as she bent to her work. Then I remembered the long hours of brutal labor in the fields and shook off my nostalgia. Farm work was hard work. There was no two ways about it.

Georgie heard my footsteps and looked up. She got up from her stool, set the bucket of warm milk to one side, and rubbed her hands down the sides of her jeans.

"Lee! What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if I could help with chores, like old times."

Even as I said the words, I knew how little truth there was in them. This had nothing to do with old times. Uncle George had never looked like this.

Georgie shuffled her feet and tugged at the bottom of her t-shirt. The thin fabric stretched over her breasts. Her nipples hardened as I took a step closer.

"Not that many chores anymore." Georgia gestured to the bucket. "I do enough to feed myself and bring in a little extra money. I'm not so sure I want to live this second life the gates have given me on the farm. For one thing, it's pretty lonely here. One of these days, I'll probably sell the place and move on to something new."

I knew what she was talking about. Rita and I had been forced through the gates while still young ourselves. We'd struggled with the changes, but for the older people who underwent the transformation, the experience was even more earthshaking. Along with the sex change came renewed youth. Some stayed rooted in the old habits, but others seized the chance to live a whole new life, and try to correct the mistakes of the first one.

"Why haven't you left already?" I asked. She'd told us it had been a year since she'd gone through the gate.

The muscles in her neck moved as she swallowed, hard. "It's taken me quite a while to get used to facing the world as a woman. Truth is, I'm scared. Living alone here, there's not much opportunity to practice interacting with other people, if you know what I mean."

I knew exactly what she meant. She shot me a look that somehow combined lust and desperation. I took another step toward her. She gulped and glanced down at her boots.

My Uncle George had always been a shy man. That's why he'd been content to spend his life on this small farm buried deep in the hills. But that was years ago, and times had most definitely changed. Georgie was unlikely to find a man willing to give up his own life to move out to this small patch of ground miles from the nearest neighbor. She had to adapt to the change and move on. But it looked like she needed some help.

I knew exactly what Rita would tell me to do. I dropped a kiss on the top of Georgie's brown crown of

hair, grabbed her upper arms, and pulled her to me. She felt solid in my embrace, her muscles hard from her days of backbreaking work. She trembled, but her body relaxed as I stroked her silky hair, cupped my hand under her chin, and turned her face up to mine. I dropped another lingering kiss on her soft lips.

Her breath quickened and she pressed closer to me with mounting excitement. As I had known would happen, Mother Nature was taking over. A young healthy body has its own needs, and Georgie had denied hers for too long. We embraced and kissed, hungry for each other. She moaned and opened her lips to let my tongue enter and explore the warm, moist mystery of her mouth. My hand slipped up her side and over the curve of her breast to touch the stiff peak of one nipple. She groaned louder and pulled away.

"Over here."

She grabbed my hand and led me to an empty stall at the end of the barn. Fresh hay covered the floor. Without a word, she dropped down and reached up her arms in invitation.

I took a deep breath. Uncle George! My mind shouted at me one more time, but I ignored it. My attention was riveted on the full, lush breasts pressed against the t-shirt. I lay down beside her. As if she were the one who could read minds, she grabbed the bottom of her shirt and lifted it over her head, tossing it up onto a bale of hay. Another quick motion and her bra followed.

I lowered my head and kissed her hot mouth, her chin, her throat, and on down until the flesh rose again in rounded mounds and my lips found the hardened nipple and sucked it into my mouth. She stiffened and gasped with pleasure. My mind flashed back to the first time Rez sucked my nipples and how fire had lanced through my whole body. Georgie's hands dropped away from me and groped blindly for the zipper on her jeans. Her back arched under me as she lifted herself up and pushed them down. Her feet moved, kicking off her boots.

Breathing hard, I sat up to pull off my own shirt and undo my jeans. Our clothes landed on the hay in a flurry, and then we were back in each other's arms. Her wide brown eyes stared into mine, the fear gone and replaced by a fierce desire.

I caressed her, grateful for my own years as a woman that had taught me the intimate secrets of the female body. My hand descended to stroke the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. Her legs opened at my touch and when I dipped a finger into her velvet heat, I found her moist and ready.

She lay back on the straw, and pulled me down on her as she spread her legs wide. "I want you, Lee," she breathed in my ear. "I want to know how it feels to have a man inside me."

With a lunge, I satisfied her curiosity. She cried out with pleasure and wrapped her legs tight around me, as if she meant to hold me prisoner forever. Her mouth clung to mine as we plunged into the age-old rhythm of love. As I neared my climax, her nails dug deep into my back and she arched again, crying out her own release.

After I withdrew, we lay together in a relaxed pile on the fragrant hay, enjoying the tender aftermath. Her hand played with the hair on my chest, while my hand cupped a warm breast.

"I always wondered what it would be like for a woman, and now I know." Georgie's smile held a secret satisfaction.

I remembered how I had craved Rez's body, wanted him inside me, lusted for each thrust. Men want to penetrate and women long to be penetrated. Sex is a beautiful thing on both sides of the gate. I said as much.

"I know that now." Georgie nodded. "You've helped me over a big hurdle and given me the courage to move on. I'm glad I can help you and Rita, too. She seems like a wonderful woman."

"The best," I agreed.

I felt her nipple stiffen again. I was feeling ready for another tussle in the hay myself. But I knew dinner must be ready by now. Rita was a free spirit when it came to sex, but she didn't like to keep dinner waiting.

Georgie seemed to know what I was thinking. We got to our feet and dressed again, laughing and kissing as we brushed the hay off each other. Even so, Rita burst into giggles when we walked through the kitchen door.

"Lee, you hayseed. Better get that straw out of your hair."

But she dimpled as she said it, and I knew she was pleased from the friendly wink she gave Georgie. As I'd expected, dinner was on the table, ready to go. I found I had a huge appetite. The three of us sat down and dug in, demolishing chicken, mashed potatoes, and buttered carrots in short order.

True to her word, Georgie drove us toward the research center the next day. It was a pleasant trip. Rita and Georgie were fast friends by now, and Rita took the opportunity to pump Georgie for stories about my boyhood.

Georgie let us out of the jeep about a mile from Messler's compound. I gave her a lingering kiss before sliding out of the car.

"See you in the big city someday?"

She laughed. "You bet! Take care, Lee. And don't worry about this jeep. I'll make sure no one finds it."

We both stood and watched until she disappeared over a hill. We were on a backcountry road, deep in the Ozarks. In keeping with his love for privacy, Messler had built his secret getaway compound far from any trace of civilization. No doubt he used his private helicopter whenever he came for a visit. Rita and I were reduced to walking the last mile or so on a road that was little more than a wide cow path.

As I expected, security stopped us long before we reached the compound. One moment we were walking down a deserted, rundown road, the next a squad of men descended on us from both sides of the forest.

"Stop where you are! Hands up!"

I knew better than to argue. I stuck my hands in the air, and saw Rita do the same out of the corner of my eye.

"Mr. Stuart?"

I recognized the astonished cry. I turned to see Carl already shoving his gun back in his holster. He gestured to the others to holster their weapons as well. A relieved grin spread across his face.

"I'll be damned. We've been looking for you for weeks. I was afraid the government had picked you up and stashed you in some secret prison."

"No." I laughed, making light of our ordeal. "We just took the long way around."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Carl phoned for a car and we were soon driven up to Messler's former getaway in style. When a one-hundred-year-old man builds a private retreat for himself deep in the Ozark Mountains he spares no expense. The vehicle that came to fetch us was an antique Hummer, loaded with every option. We didn't pass any visible gates or fences on the way up to the house, but Carl assured me the place was as well guarded as it would have been with the Wall of China around it-better, in fact, since the equipment watching over Messler's retreat was the latest high-tech security apparatus.

I didn't press him for details. That was his job, and he did it well. Besides, I was too busy taking in the welcoming vista that appeared before us when we rounded the last curve in the road. Set at the end of a valley, with majestic mountains in the background, was a stunning log house. Although I call it a log house, it was no quaint cabin. This house was ten thousand square feet at least, and two-stories high. A massive stone chimney of gray river rock dominated the middle of the house, rising up to the high peak. The roof sloped down on both sides of the chimney to floor-to-ceiling windows that allowed for panoramic views of the valley, and the mountains beyond. A covered, wrap-around porch on the ground level looked like an inviting place to spend a summer evening.

The house was surrounded by trees, but as we got closer I could see beyond them to a field to the right of the house. A large red barn sat there, with a tractor parked in front, exactly as I'd been told. My pulse quickened. The sex gate was hidden inside that barn. The structure had been hurriedly built by Mexicans a few years ago, but the walls looked old. Somehow Messler's men had gotten the color to fade from bright red to the dull red-gray shade of paint that has suffered sunlight and rain for too many years. The wood was bare in some spots and looked weathered. If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn the barn had stood there for fifty years.

As Carl pulled to a stop in front of the house, I noticed two smaller houses behind it, dwarfed by the main building. I nodded at them and raised my eyebrows in a question.

"Guest houses," Carl said, following my look. "There are four bedrooms in each of them, plus five bedrooms here in the main house. Enough room for us to start gathering Seconders together like you wanted. Even though we couldn't find any trace of you, Randi and Terry insisted we get started on the project. They had faith you would turn up again."

"What about your men?" Rita asked.

I recalled the five or six security officers who had surrounded us as we made our way up the road.

"Security has its own offices and personnel quarters hidden in the woods. Believe me, Messler spent millions when he built this place. I guarantee you'll have the privacy you need here."

We piled out of the car and started up the steps. At the same time the main door of the house swung open, and Randi came running out.

"Lee! You're a man again!"

She threw her arms around me and gave me a big hug, then did the same with Rita. Terry was a step behind her and soon the four of us were exchanging excited greetings. I'd forgotten that I'd been a woman and Rita had been Rez when we saw them last. Randi and Terry were relieved to hear we'd suffered no ill effects from our involuntary sex change.

They led us into the main living room of the house, a thirty-foot-high open space with a balcony running around the second level. A stone fireplace rose from the first floor to the second. Two large couches sat in front of the fireplace. From the tall glass windows on either side of the fireplace I could see a meadow, and the mountains beyond. I sank into the depths of one of the couches with a sigh. For the first time in

weeks, I felt safe.

Rita shared the feeling. She beamed at me from the other couch as she sat back, and tucked her feet up under her. Her thoughts radiated contentment.

Carl disappeared down a long hallway and came back in a few minutes carrying a tray with drinks and snacks. As we helped ourselves, Rita and I took turns telling the story of our trip 'the long way around'.

"So, here you are." Randi gazed at me with admiring eyes. "And looking good, too. Maybe I should get rid of my gym equipment and take to the road."

I had to resist the urge to flex my biceps. Meanwhile, Terry aimed his own admiring look at Rita. Of course, Rita had always been gorgeous.

"It was a dangerous trip, but we made it."

I found myself sitting straighter and squaring my manly shoulders. I decided it was the perfume Randi was wearing. After weeks of smelling dirt fields and sweat, it had a strange effect on me.

"Thank God, you're safe." Randi batted her lashes at me.

"Safe, with only the clothes on our backs."

That would soon be remedied I knew. But from the lustful look in Randi's eyes I was beginning to hope I'd get new clothes just in time to have them torn off again.

Meanwhile, Terry tore his gaze away from Rita long enough to smile wistfully at me. Since we were both men now, he was naturally more attracted to Rita, but we both felt the echoes of the passion we'd shared when he was Terri. Those sex gates again. They forced you to be flexible. If you weren't, you'd go crazy. I winked at him. I would probably soon be female again, and he was a handsome man.

Carl's voice brought me out of my thoughts.

"I wouldn't have bet much on your chances when I saw that crowd grab you in the rearview mirror," he said. "I've been wracked with guilt ever since. You can't know how happy and relieved I am to see you."

"No one could have predicted that riot," I told him. "All that matters is that we're here, and hopefully the government has no idea where we are. Now, please bring us up to date on what's been going on with the project while we've been touring half the farms between Texas and Arkansas."

Terry sat up straighter, and his eyes took on a distant look as the efficient legal mind took over. "We decided to proceed according to our previous plans in the hopes that you would arrive safely in time, as you have. For the past few weeks we have been smuggling in selected Seconders from different parts of the country. We've brought in six since we started. We bring them here one at a time to minimize the chance that they might be traced. Also, we've put various cover stories in place to explain their disappearances. Getting them here without arousing any suspicion has been the most complicated and dangerous part of the project so far."

"What criteria are you using to select these Seconders?" Rita asked.

"What we've discussed before-people who have made multiple trips through a sex gate, and who show definite signs of developing some unusual talent. I know you'll want to meet them as soon as possible."

"We will." I smiled.

"We plan to bring ten in altogether for the first group. That will make a total of fourteen Seconders, counting the four of us. We thought if we brought in any more than that the group might get unworkable."

"You're right." As our expert in the social sciences, Rita certainly knew the ins and outs of group dynamics, so I was glad to hear her voice her approval.

"Also, we've gone down to Mexico and hired workmen to begin building the research center. The plans are in place. It will be built down in the field you saw as you drove up, right around the barn. The men will be flown up by private aircraft next week. All the materials will also be flown in from Mexico. We're keeping everything as secret as possible. We have crews scheduled to work night and day, and we expect the buildings to be up and ready to go in three months. Then the gate will be doubly hidden."

The gate! My heartbeat sped up at the mention of the sex gate. I leaned forward.

"Can we go down and see it today? I'm eager to go through again."

"No problem."

Carl rose to his feet as if to lead us there, but Rita lifted a hand to stop him. She stared at me, a look I knew well.

"If no one objects, I've spent most of the day bumping down country roads. I wouldn't mind a rest first. Are there any bedrooms left for us?" She smiled as she said it, but her voice let me know she was serious about needing a rest.

"Of course." Randi jumped to her feet too, and beckoned us toward the stairs that led up to the second-floor balcony. "In case you've forgotten, this whole place belongs to you. You'll be upstairs in the master suite. There are robes in the bathroom. While you have a shower and relax, Carl will send someone to the nearest town to buy some clothes for you."

We followed Randi up the stairs and down a long hallway to the master suite. It consisted of three magnificent rooms at the far end of the second floor—a bedroom with its own fireplace, a sitting room with comfy chairs facing a wall screen, and a bathroom half the size of our house in Ruston. I wasn't sure which looked more inviting, the private Jacuzzi or the steam shower. Repeating her promise of clothes to come, Randi left us alone in the bedroom. Rita kicked off her shoes and flopped down on the huge, four-poster bed.

"Oh, look, a balcony."

She bounced back off the bed, opened the French doors, and wandered out on the private balcony that overlooked a small lake to the rear of the property. When she came back inside, her eyes were dark pools filled with delight.

"What a beautiful place. Messler certainly knew how to live the good life."

"He was unique all right," I agreed. "I can't wait to go through his private sex gate. What do you say to showering and having something to eat? By then our clothes should be here and we can head down to the barn, maybe go through tonight." I raised my eyebrows, and leered at her. "I've been missing Rez lately."

To my surprise, Rita shook her head. The smile vanished from her face. She sat down on the bed and bit her lower lip. It's a habit she has when she is worried.

"I can't go through the gate, Lee."

“Why not?”

I don't know what I expected her to say, but I was flabbergasted by her reply.

“I'm pregnant.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I gaped at her, too stunned to speak. After a moment, I realized my mouth was hanging open, and shut it. Meanwhile, I did a quick scan of my memories to see if there was something I'd missed. A bit late, I recalled that Rita's reproductive instincts had kicked in about the time the world started to go crazy around us. And she'd had no chance to get an implant after we were thrown through the sex gate in Houston. We had no money then, nor did we dare to go to a doctor. Fool that I was, I hadn't even thought about the problem. For the past few weeks I'd been totally focused on survival.

Typical male! Rita's thought was amused. Take away the chance that you might get pregnant, and you immediately forget about it.

I thought about it now. I recalled all the dangers we'd just been through and what could have happened, and my heart stopped beating for a moment. Rita caught my fear for her and smiled with relief. To my surprise, I realized she'd been afraid I'd be angry. She patted the bed next to her.

“I'm fine, Lee. There's nothing to worry about.”

My fear vanished, replaced by a kind of stunned joy. I sank down beside her on the bed, and took her hands in mine. I looked into her eyes. To my surprise, hers were damp with tears.

“What's wrong?” I asked. “Aren't you happy?”

“Very happy. But I wasn't sure what your reaction would be.”

In answer, I leaned forward and kissed her long and tenderly. My mind reached out to touch hers, reassuring her of my steadfast love. Our thoughts flowed together as we shared poignant memories of the first time she was pregnant. She had lost that baby when a madman attacked her and we rushed her through a gate to save her life. When she emerged as a man, the fetus was gone. No wonder she refused to go through a sex gate as long as she carried this child. But that was fine with me. I had mourned the loss of our first baby. It was time for another.

Our kisses grew deeper and more passionate as we held each other close, and rejoiced in the new life we'd created. Almost without thinking, we removed our dirty clothes and let them drop to the floor. I laid Rita back on the bed and kissed my way down to her stomach. Awe overwhelmed me as I thought of our unborn child growing there. Then I covered her body with my own and we joined together into one being, our minds and flesh merging.

When we came out of the shower about an hour later we found our old clothes gone and fresh new clothes laid out on the bed. As we put them on, we laughed at each other, lighthearted with joy. We would never have chosen those particular colors, but the soft pink top Rita slipped on made me think of little girls and my heart brimmed with happiness.

Once dressed, we made our way back down to the main living room. Randi and Terry waited there, with the six Seconders they had brought to the retreat. They were in front of the fireplace, chatting over drinks and appetizers, waiting for our arrival so dinner could begin.

Terry took us around and introduced us to the Seconders. In my excitement, I embraced each one. My

gift of pattern analysis convinced me that together we would crack the mystery of the sex gates at last.

Sporting the renewed youth granted by a passage through the gates, they looked to be in their late teens or early twenties. But two of them were actually in their eighties. Their names were Gerald, or Geraldine; and Pat, or Patricia. Three of them were in their forties or fifties. Those three had gone through the gate the first time out of scientific curiosity rather than necessity. However, because of their good health and relative youth (compared to the eighty-year-olds), they'd known their chances of coming through were high. They were introduced as Scott (who oddly enough chose Ann as his female name. Usually, people at least stuck with the same first letter), Peter (Penny) and Mike (Michele). The last one was twenty-five. Robert (Roberta) had suffered from a fatal form of cancer. A trip through the gates offered him his only chance for a cure.

As we sat down to a scrumptious dinner I questioned the six on their reasons for risking a second trip through the gates. As I expected, they were varied and interesting. Anyone who took the journey through a gate the second time had a compelling reason. The vast majority of people who tried simply disappeared.

Gerald had been mugged and thrown through. Gangs had a weird sense of humor when it came to the gates. Besides, they were a handy way to get rid of a victim without leaving a trace.

Pat's son drove him down to a gate and pushed him through. He didn't relish having Dad (now a woman after the first trip through) around for another eighty years to run the family business. Not only did the gates revolutionize our lives by changing our sexes, they also created upheaval in the normal family structure. When Dad didn't vanish, but instead emerged as a man again, the son took off for parts unknown.

Like Rita and me, Scott, Peter, and Mike were caught in the radioactive fallout from the brief nuclear exchange triggered by the Church of the Gates. Like us, they were dying and had no choice but to risk a second trip through. A large percentage of all Seconders were created by that brief war.

Ironically, about a month after the gate cured Roberta of her fatal illness she suffered massive head injuries in a car accident. The ambulance personnel realized she would be brain damaged if she survived, so they drove her straight to a gate and tossed her in. Now she was Robert again.

Over after-dinner drinks, the ten of us began to plan our research into the origins of the gates. I proposed a slow series of transitions through the gates, one at a time, with all of us pooling our experiences via our mind link after each trip. Together we batted around our latest theories about the gates. Pat voiced the most popular theory on their origin.

"Aliens. Has to be. There's no country on earth even close to this level of technology."

I shook my head. "Our faster-than-light starships haven't found any trace of an advanced civilization out among the stars."

"So?" Pat shrugged. "There are thousands of stars to search."

"But so far no intelligent life."

We'd found life in abundance from single-celled organisms to vast plant structures that covered an entire planet. We'd even found creatures with about as much intelligence as your average dog. But no one on our level, or above it. It was one of the rare disappointments connected with the gates. When they'd first appeared, the whole world had been certain we were about to make first contact.

"We'll find it." Pat sounded confident.

"I'm afraid a lot of civilizations that reached our level ended up destroying themselves," Robert said. "The universe isn't a friendly place. There are a thousand and one accidents that can wipe out a civilization."

"Maybe someone sent us the gates as their last act-a bid for immortality of sorts." Rita looked wistful.

Scott frowned into his drink. "More likely some advanced civilization sent them to study our species-change everything we take for granted in our lives and see how we react. They may even have expected that our civilization would collapse under the pressure, and we'd destroy ourselves. The gates may be a weapon that failed."

Our discussion continued into the wee hours. The gates were an endless source of fascination to all of us. I was glad to see no one thought they might come from God, as the Church of the Gates argued, but more than one of us had caught an impression of some powerful presence as we passed through. We were eager to solve the riddle. As I looked at their excited faces, I was sure that we were on the verge of a new beginning. Rita's radiant smile reminded me that was true in more ways than one.

As soon as breakfast was over the next day, I was ready to go see the gate. I expected Rita to at least accompany me, but she refused.

"I'm not going near one of those things until this baby is born." She folded her arms and thrust out her chin. "I saw the way it reached out for Messler the last time he went through. I'm not even getting close."

I thought she was being a bit paranoid, but put it down to her previous tragedy and the normal jitters that come with impending motherhood. She leaned closer to me-we were sitting next to each other at the breakfast table-and dropped her voice so the others couldn't hear.

"I wish you wouldn't go either, Lee. You know that we change with every trip through. I'm afraid of what will happen to us if you start going through without me."

I took her hand in mine. Her fingers were cold. I could feel the fear building in her mind. Last night, we'd been discussing an abstract possibility, but today it was real. We'd always gone through the gate together. This would be the first time I would attempt it alone. I would be going beyond her and into new and uncharted territory. Normally, my bright, confident Rita could handle that challenge, but the pregnancy made her feel more vulnerable.

"It will be okay," I told her.

I couldn't back down now, not when I felt we were so close to solving some of the mysteries of the gates. I wanted Rita to come with me more than anything, but it was impossible as long as she carried the child. Still, a disturbing sense of foreboding began to fill me at the thought of following any path that led me away from Rita. Yet our journeys now took us in different directions-she toward motherhood, and me deeper into the mystery of the sex gates.

I squeezed her hand. "Nothing can separate us. The worst that can happen is that we'll be the same sex for a few days. Do you think you can stand that?"

Rita forced a laugh, but I saw the strain in her eyes. "As long as you come back to me as the same Lee or Li I've always known."

Everyone else was itching to see the gate. None of the six Seconders Randi and Terry had chosen had seen it yet. Randi and Terry had decided to wait for our return, confident we'd find a way to reach the hideaway.

The lower floor of the main house had a storage room that was kept locked at all times. Randi handed me one of the keys, as she unlocked the door for me. Inside, concealed behind a pile of boxes, was another locked door that led to a tunnel. The tunnel went from the house to the barn.

It was wide and well lit. There were even some electric golf carts parked on our end so we could drive the length of the tunnel if we happened to feel lazy. Randi opened the door on the other end and the nine of us walked inside the barn. Its high, peaked roof disappeared in the shadows far above us. Towering in the middle of the open space was the sex gate.

Like every other gate, it was a glowing green arch, its smooth surface without any markings. I contemplated its curves, filled with same sense of wonder that always overwhelmed me whenever I got near one of the gates. Humanity's best scientists had failed to figure out how these arches worked. None of our weapons even scratched them. Every attempt to communicate with the gate masters had failed.

I straightened my shoulders and glanced at the expectant faces all around me. I was going to try again. Was it hubris? Or stupidity?

I laughed out loud, and stepped through.

That was the first in a series of trips that I, and the others in my group took through the gates. I won't bore you with lengthy descriptions of each trip. We followed my plan. Each of us went through alone and after each trip we met together in the main living room as a group and shared our experiences, mind to mind.

Although Rita continued to refuse to go near the gate, I asked her to join these sessions in the living room. For one thing, I didn't want her to feel left out and left behind. If she couldn't pass through a gate, she could at least experience what I was learning by sharing my thoughts. For another, Rita often had an intuitive understanding that I envied. I wanted her insights into our collective experiences.

Experience had taught us how important it was to space out our trips. Anyone who went through without some time between each journey risked vanishing. So we each went in turn and then waited while the others took their turns. I soon found it was also best to allow a few days to pass between each person's trip so we had time to absorb the information gained.

Our mental sharing improved as time went on. At first we were strangers, sitting around a room, staring at each other. But as we learned to open our minds and share our most intimate thoughts the barriers between us melted. It didn't hurt that we were young, healthy and brimming with sexual energy. Rita and I shared a room, but the others had individual rooms. Soon the constant flow of sexual passion on the edge of our awareness told me a lot of bed hopping was going on.

It wasn't long before Rita and I joined in the sexual sharing, as well as the mental sharing. It was especially fascinating because you might have sex with a woman one night, only to find that person was a man the following night. Or maybe I was the one who was a man again. The sex gates may have made life more complicated, but they also made it more fun!

In the meantime, my intelligence and pattern analysis capabilities increased with each passage I made. More and more I began to sense some world or dimension beyond the green fog that greeted me whenever I entered the gates. Would we find the masters of the sex gates there? I grasped at these tantalizing hints of their presence, but on every trip I lost control and stumbled out the gate on the other side before I could break through.

Rita urged me to be careful and to take my time. After each trip, she held me close and begged me to stop until after the baby was born and she could join me again. For my part, each trip left me more in

tune with the energy of the sex gates. I began to change in ways I didn't entirely understand. It gave me pause. What Rita and I shared was too precious to lose.

Yet I felt trapped by circumstances, too. Events in the world outside left me no choice but to continue my quest. Every night we gathered in front of a wall screen after dinner to listen to the news on the tabwebs, and every night the grim toll of sex gates mounted up as more and more gates disappeared. We didn't have the luxury of limitless time to solve the mystery. Our own gate might disappear at any moment.

The sex gates caused more uproar in the outer world by vanishing than they had with their original appearance. The Church of the Gates proclaimed that God was angry because people weren't content with one trip through. Church leaders demanded that all Seconders come forward and perform deeds of public repentance.

I gathered from other tidbits on the news that the federal government was also interested in locating any Seconders it could find. Like the Church of the Gates, they had their reasons, reasons they didn't announce in public.

Naturally, any Seconders with any sense went into hiding. I was glad they did, and wished them success in staying hidden, but it made our efforts to locate a final few people to join our group more difficult.

On my fourth trip through our private sex gate I caught a hint of a mind that was familiar to me. It was like having a name on the tip of my tongue. I knew those thoughts, but I couldn't place who it was. That night, the ten of us sat around in a circle in the living room and I shared my experience, mind to mind.

Randi spoke up at once. "Messler! I'd recognize that mental pattern anywhere. It's Messler!"

The moment she said it, I knew she was right. Messler possessed one of the most original minds in the history of the human race. No wonder I had supposed his thoughts originated from some alien intelligence.

But that only left more mysteries for us to solve. Was Messler alive in the reality I sometimes sensed on the other side of the sex gates? How had he reached that unknown space/time? Did he have something to do with the disappearance of the gates?

That night Rita confronted me, as soon as we were alone in our bedroom. "Lee, I'm scared. Scared for you and scared for me."

By now, I'd heard her recite her worries too many times. I nodded, not really listening, and turned on the wall screen in our sitting room.

"You've changed, Lee, and I don't even think you realize it. You're obsessed with the gate, and you don't care about me or the baby as much as you did a few weeks ago."

"You know that's not true."

I pulled her close and planted a wet kiss on her forehead. All the while, I focused my attention over her head at the images on the screen. A graphie announced the start of a special press conference by Selinda, the head of the Church of the Gates.

I let go of Rita and turned up the volume. Selinda's image appeared on the screen. She was as young and lovely as ever, with the same too-old wisdom in her sincere blue eyes. She wore the simple white gown Messler had first made popular when he'd started the church as Messilinda. Her shining blond hair fell about her face in soft curls. She looked like an angel, but when she opened her mouth, the fires of hell came roaring out.

"My fellow believers," she began, "the warning of God is clear. We can see it every day in the continuing reports of gates disappearing. We must find the Seconders wherever they are hiding, and force them to publicly repent of their evil ways. Only then will God forgive us and cease inflicting his righteous wrath on our land." The camera focused in on her solemn face, and her intent eyes stared straight at me. "Fortunately, I've discovered the secret hiding place of several of these Seconders. These antichrists have built themselves a lair deep in the Ozark Mountains. They thought we would never find them there, but the true church of God cannot be deceived!"

My heart stopped at the mention of the Ozark Mountains. It couldn't be. Our security was too tight. Could someone else besides us be hiding in these same mountains? I wanted to believe that was the case, but the sick twist of my stomach told me we'd been betrayed.

"Brothers and sisters, we must smoke these Seconders out of their secret hiding place. Their leader is Jackson Lee Stuart, the heir to the fortune left behind by Messler Schreiber-yes, the very Messilinda who founded our church. They would pervert the work of God with their evil ways, but we will not let them. Brothers and sisters, I call upon you to rise up and join me in a march upon their compound. We will drag them out ourselves, and expose their evil plot to the world!"

I'm sure she said more, but behind me, Rita cried out in fear and burst into tears. I switched off the screen and took her in my arms. She was shaking, and her fingers clawed at my arms.

"We have to get out of here! Selinda knows where we are, and now the government will know, too."

She was right, but I didn't want to run again. Where would we go? And we were so close to a breakthrough with the gate.

Randi and Terry ran into the room.

"Did you hear?" Randi demanded.

"It's unbelievable! Impossible!" Terry's face was white, drained of all blood.

Rita dried her tears against my shoulder and straightened up. The first shock had passed already for her. She forced a brave smile to her face.

"We've got to think about what to do now. We may not have much time."

As she spoke, Carl burst into the room. His eyes were narrow slits and his face was flushed with anger.

"It was Ron," he announced, without preamble. "I just got a message from him, boasting about what he's done. He was a spy for the church, and gave them this location."

"How could that be?" Randi demanded. "He knew Messler as long as any of us. He was his doctor. Messler trusted him."

"I don't know." Carl shook his head. "Maybe he spent too much time in the church himself back when Messler started it. Maybe he never got free of their beliefs. Or maybe he went back to it for some reason."

"Or maybe he acted because of the oldest reason of all-money." Terry looked grim. "He came to me asking for a loan a few weeks ago. He said he had a problem with gambling, but that he was going to gamblers anonymous. I didn't think too much about it at the time. There were so many other urgent concerns."

Once again Rita pulled our thoughts back to the present. "It's too late to undo what he's done. The Church of the Gates knows where we are. We need to get out of here."

I opened my mouth to protest, but Carl was ahead of me. "That won't be easy. You can bet your boots the government has a watch on this place already. We'll have to come up with some plan to sneak you out, and I don't know how long that will take."

I thought of the waiting gate, of the answers I suspected were only a trip or two away. "Can we stay? Can we defend this place?"

Carl squared his shoulders. "We can give them a fight, at least. I'll call in a few favors. I've made some solid contacts with mercenaries over the years."

Money would be no object, but I wondered how soon he could get his mercenary force here and how much training they would require. From the passionate tone of Selinda's speech, I suspected the Gaters would march up our road tomorrow or the next day, at the latest.

Carl left to begin his arrangements. The four of us eyed each other, our anxious thoughts plain on our faces. A few mercenaries weren't going to be enough.

Terry ran a nervous hand through his hair. "I'll phone the governor of Arkansas and ask him to call out the National Guard. He owes us. Messler made a massive contribution to his campaign in the last election."

He went back to his own room to make the call, but five minutes later he returned to our room. The stricken look on his face told us that the news wasn't good.

"I got through to him. He could hardly refuse a call from someone who has handled the donation of millions of dollars to his campaigns over the years. But he won't call out the Guard. He says the Gaters will have him impeached by the end of the week if he tries."

Rita's eyes grew wide with alarm. She reached out and clutched my arm. Her thoughts pushed against mine, filled with fear, not for herself but for the baby she carried.

"It's going to be okay."

I pulled her closer and murmured the promise in her ear. She leaned against me and heaved a troubled sigh. I looked down at her body pressed close to mine and noticed the almost imperceptible swelling of her stomach where our baby was growing.

"I've got an idea," I announced. "Give me a few minutes alone, and I'll let you know if it worked out or not."

Randi and Terry reluctantly left the room with Rita in tow. Once they were gone, I picked up the phone and called Stephen Hess. Hess was the deputy serving under Whitley Hartz, the chief agent of the Secret Service who had arrested Rita and me more than once. Hartz was dead now, ostensibly in an accident, but in reality killed on Messler's orders after he'd raped Rita while we were his prisoners. But in the distant past Hartz had once come to our aid when we'd had a secret that the government desperately wanted. This was a similar situation, and I hoped Hess, like his predecessor, would help us, if for no other reason than to keep us out of the hands of the Gaters.

It took me more than a few minutes to get through to Hess, but the agency knew my name, and that I was a notorious Secunder. They wanted to talk to me as much as I wanted to talk to them.

"Hello, Mr. Stuart," Hess said, when he finally came on the line. "What can I do for you?"

"It's more a case of what I can do for you," I countered. "The government has tried to get information out of us Seconders for a long time. I'm willing to offer you some in exchange for a little bit of help."

"Ah—" Hess sounded amused. "I can imagine what kind of help you need. I heard Selinda's speech tonight. She's a rather passionate young woman with a strong hatred of Seconders."

"She's a crafty old religious zealot in a young woman's body," I snapped. "She's out to destroy us Seconders. The church is afraid we'll find a way to make everyone Seconders, and then why would anyone need God anymore."

"An interesting theory. Can you?"

I had him hooked. "We can do a lot of things, Hess. We're your only hope of finding out what the gates are all about before they disappear off this world."

I heard his breathing quicken. "Do you know something about that?"

"I know quite a bit about a lot of things," I repeated. "But you'll never hear any of it unless you get the army here fast to protect us. The Gaters are going to be marching on us soon, and without help we won't be able to resist them for long."

"I'll see what I can do, Stuart. I might be able to send some special forces your way."

"You'd better. If you don't, the gates will continue to vanish. No one, but us will be able to stop it."

I wondered what my great-uncle Fred would think of me, running a bluff like that one. Fred made his living playing poker.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Maybe it was my threat about the gates, or maybe it was my promise to divulge the information they'd tried to torture out of us for so long, but the next morning government helicopters settled down on the front lawn and unloaded several special forces units. Combined with a company of mercenaries Carl flew in on short notice, they made a small, but respectable fighting force.

"We need more," I told Hess, without preamble when he disembarked from the last helicopter. "With these men, we can probably scare away the Gaters the first time they try to march on us, but they'll only come back, better prepared to fight. Religious fanatics aren't easy to stop."

"I know that," Hess said. "But this is the best I can do right now. There are a lot of Gaters in the government and unbelievable amounts of Gater money involved in politics. It took a bit of doing to get even this many men here."

I believed him. I'd discussed politics with Messler back when he ran the church, and I knew how many tendrils it had buried in our government on every level.

Hess folded his arms across his chest and swept me with an appraising look. I countered his evaluation with one of my own. He was a lean, athletic man with hard blue eyes that could bore through steel. Like most government agents, his face was a soulless mask that hid whatever he was thinking.

"We can give you two days, maybe three," he said. "That should be time enough to spirit your little group of Seconders away to a safe hiding place."

Staring into his cold eyes, I saw only emptiness. I shuddered as I caught a glimpse of his plans. Our so-called safe hiding place would become a prison. I doubted any of us would ever leave it alive.

"I have a better idea. But it involves staying right here."

"Staying here is too dangerous. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't arrest you and copter you to safety right now."

"Because I won't talk if you do. And you know full well that you can't make a Seconder talk against his will."

I had him with that one and he knew it. A jaw muscle jumped, but he kept his mouth shut.

"I only need to stay here for a few days longer," I added. "My group is close to a breakthrough with the gates."

Hess was reluctant to abandon his plan. But he had no choice. Still, he wasn't about to drive anything less than a hard bargain.

"If you want these men to fight for you and gain you a couple of days to carry out your plan, you owe me some information first."

So I took him into the house, sat him in front of the fire in the living room, and told him a little of what I had learned in my journeys through the gates.

"And your plan is-?" he asked when I was done.

"My plan is to make several more trips in quick succession. I'm on the verge of a breakthrough. I'm sure I can achieve it with two or three more passages."

"Or disappear forever."

"That's a risk I'm willing to take." I was glad Rita wasn't in the room to hear me, or I would have had an argument on my hands for sure.

Hess nodded. "And if you do discover who or what is behind the gates, you will share this knowledge with the government?"

"Yes." I would have promised anything at that point.

"Okay, you've got yourself a deal."

While we talked, Carl and the captain of the special services unit deployed the men who had arrived with Hess. It turned out they were barely ahead of the Gaters.

A door flew open on the far side of the living room and Randi ran out of the office where she'd been watching the webs. "They're coming!" she shouted, her face bloodless.

Hess and I hurried to join her in the office. A wall screen showed a long line of Gaters marching down an overgrown country road. They sang hymns and carried signs that said **SECONDEES REPENT OR DIE** and **SECONDEES HAVE BROUGHT THE WRATH OF GOD DOWN ON US ALL**. I recognized the mountains in the background. They were headed for our compound. Carl crowded into the office after us. As he watched the Gaters approach, his fingers clutched a pencil so hard I was sure it would snap in two.

"They're on their way, but I have our men in position."

"You must shoot to frighten, not to kill," Hess warned.

"The hell with that. This is private property, and if they set one foot on it I'll defend it. They're going to get a bullet in the kneecap, or worse."

"Fine." Hess looked grim. "Aim for their knees. That should stop their march. But no killing."

He turned to me. "You'll have your day or two. Now go and use it."

Randi and Terry exchanged puzzled looks, but there was no time to explain. I hurried out of the office and down the stairs that led to the locked storage room. To my surprise, Rita stood in front of the storage room door, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"I saw the Gaters on the wall screen and knew you would head straight for the gate," she said. "I can guess what you're planning to do."

I had been foolish to think I could keep it from her. Our thoughts had been joined for too long.

"Please." Desperation marred her lovely face. "Stop now. For my sake, and for the baby."

"Rita." I put a hand on her cheek, and willed her to understand. "I'm doing this for your sake, and for the baby. Do you have any idea what will happen to us if the government takes us into custody?"

Her dark eyes filled with tears as they searched my face, but after a moment she accepted the inevitable. She was a strong woman. She leaned forward and pressed a tender kiss on my lips.

"I know. I love you, Lee. I love you with all my heart. Whatever happens, don't ever forget that. Come back to me."

When I reached the barn it was empty—a dark, quiet space dominated by the massive presence of the sex gate. We were alone together, the gate and I, and I faced an enemy I must conquer or die trying. The smooth green arch glowed in the dim interior, as much a riddle as ever. The empty space beneath the arch beckoned me. I squared my shoulders, and walked through.

Once again a thick green mist engulfed me. By now, I was an expert at slowing the process of passing through the gate. One part of my mind automatically fought to stay inside the gate while with the other I reached out to quest for whatever lay hidden beyond that concealing mist.

Every familiar physical sensation vanished. I could not feel my body. It's possible I didn't have a body. No one knew what happened to our old bodies when we were transformed into the opposite sex while inside the gate. Yet I experienced a multitude of mental sensations. The power that vibrated around me revealed great forces were at work. As before, I sensed another mind somewhere at the edge of my consciousness. It was like a quiet whisper in a vast cave. I heard its echo, yet had no idea where it came from.

But that had to change. The Seconders were in too much danger. I had always believed in a rational world, so I had to believe the gates were sent to earth for a purpose. And that purpose had to include changing the human race in all the marvelous ways that the gates had changed us so far. Did it make sense that the masters of the gates would abandon us now?

Yet, one by one, the gates continued to disappear. I couldn't deny that.

I reached out toward the mind I heard whispering at the edge of my consciousness. I was convinced that it was Messler. Now that Randi had identified him, I recognized his voice-the faint impression of a personality stamped on that almost inaudible murmur of thought. I could only hope that he too was trying to reach me across whatever unimaginable gulf separated me from the world of the gate masters. My fierce conviction that Messler was indeed trying to communicate with me seemed to help. My slender connection to the mind beyond the fog grew stronger.

I remembered Russell discussing physics with Donna and Rita and me years ago. I can't say that I understood half of what he told us, but now one memory came back in vivid detail. Russell sat in a lounge in our old home. He leaned forward, his face lit with that excited expression he always wore when he talked about his beloved physics. He gestured with both hands as he described how researchers had proven that the expectations of the researcher influenced the experiment.

I realized this memory had been triggered for a reason. My subconscious was telling me that the gates were quantum phenomena. On that level, thought and will and expectations were all tied together. According to Russell's theory, my belief that this was Messler out there, and that he was trying to contact me should help us break through to each other.

Messler! I'm here! I'm trying to reach you, too!

I strained with all my might to resist the passage through the gate. Tremendous energies pushed at me. I knew the transformation was complete. I had my new body and the gate wanted me out. It was time to emerge into the world once more as a woman. I fell through a tunnel toward the light. Behind me, a voice shouted in my mind: Lee! Keep trying, Lee! You're almost through!

I stumbled out of the gate, a naked woman. Long auburn hair swirled around my shoulders. My hands automatically rose to caress the satin skin of my breasts. It didn't matter how many times I became a woman. Those breasts were always a miracle to me. As my fingertips brushed over them, my nipples stiffened. I felt the fire of sexual arousal lance through my belly.

I lowered my hands to my side. As much as I wanted to, this was no time to indulge that perpetual eighteen-year-old libido. Instead, I walked to a row of pegs on one side of the barn where thick terrycloth robes hung. Pulling one around me to ward off the chill of the shadowy barn, I sat down on a bench and replayed the message that had blasted into my mind at the last moment as I fell through the gate. More than ever now, I had no doubt it was Messler. And he wanted to reach me, too, as I had hoped.

Keep trying, he'd said. That sounded as if he wanted me to reenter the gate without waiting. I licked dry lips. I knew the risks. We Seconders could go through the gate more than once, but only if we were careful to allow some time to pass between each trip. Those few Seconders who went through in rapid succession vanished. Messler himself had vanished.

Yet this mental contact suggested that he hadn't vanished into limbo, but had instead traveled somewhere else. To the world of the gate masters? It was the most likely answer. If I went through too often, too soon, I might end up in the same place. Maybe I needed to so I could talk to Messler, and find out what the gate masters were up to. But if I did reach that world, would I be able to find my way back?

The barn was deserted except for me. In the silence, I heard birds singing outside in the trees. Then, in the distance, I caught the sound of a gunshot. More followed in rapid succession-crack, crack, crack!

I muttered a quick oath and hoped that the Special Forces unit and our security forces were only firing to scare off the marching Gaters. I didn't want to see anyone die. I'd had enough of death in the brief time I fought in the militia. But the sound of gunshots reminded me that I had no choice, despite the risks. I

stood up, tossed the robe on the bench and walked naked toward the gate.

As I came closer I had the strange impression that the green glow of the arch was brighter than usual. Before I could even consider what that might mean, a shining emerald tendril reached out from within the gate and sucked me into the fog. The same thing happened to Messler the last time he entered a gate. I didn't know whether to be glad or frightened, but I had no time to worry about it. I was busy, one part of my mind resisting the passage, the other part reaching out, as before.

Lee! Almost immediately I heard his voice in my mind.

Messler! Where are you?

I sensed his laughter. I could explain-after you'd taken a couple of graduate level courses in physics. Or maybe your friend Russell could do a better job.

Russell. A fierce longing surged through me. Was Russell there with Messler? Maybe Donna was with them, too. I loved them both. I missed them both, more than I could ever say. The mental voice in my mind grew serious.

Listen, Lee. You have to be quick, before the gate pushes you out again. Focus on my thoughts. Join your mind with mine. Become one with me, and you will be where I am.

It sounded like mystic hocus-pocus. Or maybe-from what little I could remember of Russell's lectures-it was advanced physics. Possibly they were the same thing. The only thing I knew for sure was that the weeks I'd spent practicing my mental abilities with the other Seconders at the compound were about to pay off.

There was no time to argue or ask questions. Not hesitating, I reached out with my mind and let my thoughts flow into the consciousness I sensed at the edge of my reality. For a frightening moment it was like flowing into nothingness. The green fog faded away around me and there was only a whirling, dizzying sensation, and the feeling of falling through an infinity of space...

I opened my eyes and found myself sitting on lush green grass. I was in a field, filled with wildflowers. From where I sat, the ground sloped down to a crystal clear stream. I heard the water babbling as it flowed and foamed over the rocks in the riverbed. A graceful little wooden bridge arched over the stream. Beyond, on another hill, crystal buildings shimmered against a deep blue sky.

Was this the world of the gate masters?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I struggled to my feet. I was naked, and male once more. Fortunately, the air was warm and scented with the sweet aroma of the flowers. A gentle breeze caressed my bare skin. I'd known perfect spring days in Texas when the grass turned green after a long, misty rain and the sun warmed the earth from a cloudless blue sky. This was just such a day, one that felt like it would go on forever. I had the sense that every day dawned warm and sunny on this world.

The thick grass was a soft carpet under my bare feet. I walked down the hill to the bridge. Built of polished wood, it reminded me of the beautiful arched bridges in old Japanese paintings. I crossed over the stream and walked up the second hill toward the crystal buildings.

I might have believed that the sex gate had dumped me into a beautiful park on Earth, except for those buildings. Sunlight sparkled in rainbow colors over their smooth exteriors. Like crystals, they grew out of the ground and sprouted upward at odd angles. As I drew closer and saw that the knobs and spires

intertwined, I wondered if they were all one gigantic building, some organic whole that I couldn't begin to comprehend. Their shapes varied, each one unique. Some reminded me of castle towers reaching for the sky; others were like minarets. Some shot upward in a straight line, then branched like a crystal tree.

As I stepped into their shadow, I saw that there were no sidewalks or roads between the buildings-only the lush green grass that seemed to grow to an even height everywhere. About ankle deep, it cushioned each step as I walked, but wasn't difficult to move through. I'm not sure how long it took me to reach the buildings. My sense of time deserted me. There was something unchanging and eternal about this eerie crystal city.

I had no idea what to expect, but I knew with utter certainty that Messler was somewhere within those breathtaking towers. I approached them with my mouth hanging open like some savage seeing a city for the first time. They seemed to shift and shimmer, one moment reflecting the deep blue of the sky, the next pulsing with their own rainbow light.

Finally, I reached the base of the first tower. I knew better than to expect a door. The surface was smooth and shining, like glass. I reached out and touched it, then snatched my hand back in shock. It felt warm, like a living thing.

This way.

The thought filled my mind with stunning clarity. Never before had I known such a powerful mind touch. I stared at the crystal surface in front of me and the reflection of my amazed eyes stared back.

Lee, this way.

The link between Messler and me still held. I didn't have to ask-I knew. As I slipped between the towers, my bare feet moved without injury through the thick grass, and my lungs sucked in air that smelled clean and sweet. All around me, I sensed awesome power held under disciplined control.

What incredible race had created this paradise?

I came to a tall crystal outcropping that spiraled upward like an ancient tree before breaking into two branches far above my head. Violet light shimmered over its surface. My mind-linked to Messler's-filled with the knowledge I needed to survive on this world. I now knew that doors were inefficient, primitive devices. Not even breaking my stride, I walked into the purple wall and through it.

I was in a small room. It was windowless, but nevertheless filled with light. The room was empty except for one man. Messler sat cross-legged on the floor, smiling up at me.

It was an enigmatic smile, full of mystery. His eyes were different, too. Oh, they were still that startling deep emerald green, but the appraising look he gave me was no longer quite ... human.

I took a deep breath and broke off mental contact. It was obvious Messler had undergone some sort of transformation, and I wanted a few minutes to take his measure without having him in my mind watching me do it.

His face didn't change as I severed the link between our minds. Even before his disappearance, it had become an unspoken rule among the Seconders that we would allow each other mental privacy when we desired it. As our telepathic powers began to develop, it became obvious such a rule would be needed so we could each maintain some individuality.

Without waiting for an invitation, I dropped to the floor and crossed my own legs. My nakedness didn't bother me. Messler, as Messilinda, had seduced me the first time we met. We knew each other well, you

could say. Besides, the room was comfortably warm.

"Welcome, Lee. I knew if anyone could make it, it would be you."

Messler broadened his smile. He had a deep, powerful voice and a way of speaking that told you he was in charge. He'd been a rich businessman for more years than I'd been alive. Command was a habit with him. He wore a simple white robe. To my untutored eye, it looked like linen. His feet were bare.

"I had to keep trying," I told him, speaking fast. "The Seconders on Earth are in grave danger."

Messler ignored my comment. "Where is the lovely Rita? I expected her to be with you, as always."

"You know how dicey it is to go through a gate again and again in quick succession. I came on my own-risked everything-because we need the help of the gate masters. Have you made contact with them?"

"Ah, the gate masters."

Messler appeared unmoved by my urgency. Again, the mysterious smile danced over his lips. I clenched my jaw as my impatience grew. He must know the situation was desperate on Earth. He'd left me in charge of his empire with instructions to protect the Seconders. Why did he seem so disinterested now?

"Yes, the gate masters," I snapped. "We need their help. The world has found out about our telepathic powers, and they hate us more than ever. At this very moment, the Gaters are marching on your compound in the Ozarks, determined to take a group of us captive."

Messler's eyes drifted shut. I sensed that his consciousness was elsewhere, communing with another mind. Was it one of the gate masters? When he looked at me again, I saw a hint of compassion in his gaze for the first time.

"Relax, Lee. We have plenty of time."

"I don't think so. Moments before I entered the gate and made contact with you, I heard shooting outside."

"That doesn't matter." Messler held up one hand, palm outward. His emerald eyes commanded me to relax. "The usual rules of time and space don't apply here in the nexus. We can talk for as long as we please and nothing will change on the world you know as Earth. When you return, you will emerge at the same moment you left."

When I returned ... I couldn't help it. I let out a huge sigh of relief as I heard those words. So it would be possible to return. Then I turned my attention back to Messler. He hadn't moved from his cross-legged position. His gaze was serene, untroubled by the worries that I'm sure he could read in my mind.

"What is this place?"

"Speaking in Earth terms, it's a staging point for the deployment of the sex gates."

I waited for more, but apparently Messler wanted me to drag the information out of him. Okay. He was in charge. I had no choice but to play along.

"Is this the world of the gate masters?"

"No."

I stared. "Where are we, then?"

An amused chuckle escaped from Messler's lips. I was relieved to hear him laugh. It made him more human.

"I'm not trying to frustrate you, Lee. The information I have to share is so strange that you'll be able to absorb it better if I feed it to you bit by bit. And to answer your question, this is an alternate earth. You've heard of the theory of alternate worlds I assume."

I had. Russell had launched into a long explanation of it one night after we had watched a very old SF flick called *The One*. In that film, the hero had moved from one alternate earth to another while fighting his double from a parallel dimension. Of course, Russell had given us the real scientific explanation, not the Hollywood version. But in the end my impression was much the same. We think we live on the one and only Earth, but physics postulates that there are an infinite number of Earths. Every event or choice creates the potential of a division-a place where one Earth could become two. The new world would go on in a parallel universe, and we would never know of its existence.

"This world is not the home world of the gate masters, but it and their world are both on a line of alternate reality that diverged from our Earth eons ago," Messler told me. "On the gate masters' world, humanity discovered how to apply the simple steps of the scientific method during the Bronze Age-thousands of years before the scientific method was discovered on our own Earth."

I gaped at him in stunned silence. The thought blew me away. A vision leaped into my mind of how different our world would be if the scientific method had been known for thousands of years. The Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans-those civilizations would have soared to undreamed of heights. The Dark Ages would never have happened. By now we would be thousands of years ahead of where we were. Instead, the gate masters were in that enviable position.

"Exactly." Messler had followed my thoughts even without a mental link. "Adoption of the scientific method propelled the gate masters forward technologically just as it did on our own Earth, but that process started on their world fully three or four thousand years sooner than it did on Earth. It's no wonder that they were able to create the gates as well as other unimaginable accomplishments."

A chill snaked up my spine. "Are they here now?" Somehow I already knew the answer.

"No. Not only did they advance technically, but they applied the scientific method to studying the human mind as well. Eventually, they unraveled what is perhaps the greatest mystery of all-the marvelous process by which we think and create our reality. They learned how to manipulate the quantum aspects of space/time and using that knowledge, they left their original world and went elsewhere."

"I see."

I looked around the bare room, filled with light. The atmosphere seemed to pulse with a sense of power-but it was a power I recognized from my long experience with the gates.

"So the gates came from this world?" I asked.

"Yes, this world is closer to ours in the space/time continuum than theirs is, which is why they used it as a staging area to create the sex gates and send them to our earth."

I leaned forward, only one question in my mind. "Why?"

It was a simple question, but one that had haunted humanity ever since that momentous day when the gates materialized on our world.

"For me to answer that, you have to realize that the gate masters were once as human as you or I. They developed the biological capability to change a person's sex and used it for their own betterment, even though their society was never anywhere near as confused and sick as ours is-or was. As the centuries passed, they became so powerful and knowledgeable that they were almost like gods. They created a technology that allows them to watch events on any world they choose in space and time, and-like all humans, although they are far beyond human now-they are curious."

I took a deep breath. This had been one of my worst fears. "So they somehow began to watch events on earth."

"Yes. They saw we were on the brink of self-destruction."

"And they sent the gates. We're an experiment of some sort."

Messler shook his head. "More like a rescue project. They took a special interest in our world because until the Bronze Age our history was very much like theirs. But we failed to discover the scientific method and plunged into thousands of years of savagery. When we did discover science, our belief patterns had become so rigid we did not see how to use it for good. The gate masters determined that we were on a path that would bring about the destruction of all life on our planet."

I thought of the turmoil going on worldwide before the sex gates appeared. Weather changes had accelerated, and the rising seas had drowned many coastal cities. World economies were in constant flux, and besides the chronically poor Third World, a whole new Fourth World appeared in America-the underprivileged who lived in the dying cities. But most of all, I remembered the hate and intolerance that permeated everywhere. People were afraid, as if they sensed that the world was locked in a downward spiral.

The gates changed everything. In many ways the human race was still in deep trouble. How could I forget that back on my world at this very moment the Gaters were marching on our compound out of that same hate and intolerance? Yet despite that glaring exception, I believed the changes were real. Thousand upon thousands of those who had gone through the gates had emerged with a new ability to understand someone else's viewpoint. Changing sexes will do that for you. Messler's next words confirmed my thoughts.

"The gates are transforming, but limited in their effect. For one thing, less than half of the world's population has gone through. For another, not everyone who goes through is willing to learn the lesson of adaptability and acceptance the gates teach. That is why so few make it through a second time to become Seconders. But some do. There is hope for us."

"Do you really think so?" Several weeks ago I had been as optimistic as Messler. Now the memory of those gunshots haunted me.

"The gate masters thought so. That's what matters to me. They sent the sex gates to our world because they thought it was the only way to straighten out our multiethnic and multiracial-and sexually confused-planet before we destroyed ourselves." His mouth stretched in a humorless grin. "In a sense, you might say that the human belief that we were made in God's image came true after all."

"So what do they think of their little project so far?" I forced a laugh.

"Like I said, they are not here anymore. Once they had put the gates in place for us (and I presume for some other alternate earths as well), they went elsewhere. They left behind a portion of their group mind for a while to watch over the gates. You and I both sensed it when we began to make multiple passages through the gates. But even that is gone now."

"Then how do you know all this, what their intentions were, and so on?"

"The knowledge is here for anyone to see once they reach a certain level. You'll see it yourself eventually, but there's nothing left of the ones who built the gates."

My jaw dropped open. My stomach twisted with disappointment, and a sour bile rose in my throat.

"Does that mean there's no one to help the Seconders?"

Messler looked calm. "We've gone through a remarkable process to reach this place, and that is what will save us, Lee. You have grown mentally by leaps and bounds, although you haven't had time to realize it yet. I believe that Seconders are in the throes of a highly accelerated evolution. You and I are in the process of becoming the equals of the gate masters, even though they are thousands of years ahead of us in experience with manipulating the quantum reality. What they learned to do, we can learn to do. Especially since we know it can be done. In the quantum universe, knowing is the key, even though we don't understand the underlying technology yet."

"If you say so."

I wished Russell were sitting beside us. He had a knack for explaining things in simple terms, more on my level. Messler's mind was brilliant, but his ability to communicate with lesser beings needed some work.

"I am learning how to manipulate quanta." A grim expression settled on Messler's face.

"Manipulate thought to change reality, you mean." I did remember snatches of Russell's lectures after all.

"Something like that. It's hard to explain. I can communicate the concepts to you much more easily once we are linked again, mind to mind. In any case, it's possible and eventually all humans will learn how to do it, although it will take many years to teach them."

My brain ached from trying to get around these new concepts. Messler had been right to feed the information to me bit by bit. I chewed on my lower lip and considered his offer to share the knowledge mind to mind. I felt a certain reluctance to open my mind to his. It was the reluctance we all feel about placing ourselves at the mercy of someone stronger than we are. I did not doubt for a moment that Messler's mind was far superior to mine, even after all the mental expansion I had experienced by passing through the gates again and again. The man had started out as a super genius. There were no words for the level he inhabited now.

"What happens next?" I asked.

Messler interlaced his fingers and tapped his two thumbs together. It was a comforting, human gesture. "I've had some time to explore this planet, and I've discovered the central nexus that the gate masters used to disperse the gates to other worlds or bring them back here."

Something in his tone told me what was coming next. "It's you! You're the one who's made the gates disappear!"

"Yes, with Russell's help, of course."

"Russell!" The mention of Russell's name blew all thoughts about the gates out of my head. I jumped to my feet. "He is here? And Donna? What about Donna?"

Russell and I had never been lovers as men, but I had shared his bed with great pleasure when I was a woman. And when I was a man, we'd shared the love of two wonderful women-Rita and Donna.

Together the four of us had created a close family.

I whirled around and glared at the glowing white walls behind me. I wanted to charge through and find them.

"Stay calm, Lee." Messler remained seated on the floor. "You will see them soon. But first, listen to the rest of my explanation."

I clenched my hands into fists at my side and tried to control my ragged breathing. I knew Messler wouldn't budge until he completed his agenda. My only choice was to let him finish. The sooner he did, the sooner I would be allowed to see Russell and Donna. After a moment, my heartbeat slowed. I forced myself to sit down again.

"Russell is a brilliant man, as you know." A soothing note crept into Messler's voice. He could see how tense I was. "Even more brilliant than me in some ways. The very first time he entered the gates-when the four of you received that fatal dose of radiation and had to go through to cure yourselves-he understood that they were a quantum phenomena. He realized that was the reason why they couldn't be measured by outside observers, although he had spent years trying. This understanding allowed him to resist the change and that resistance caught the attention of the gate masters' group mind."

"It was still here, then?"

"Yes, it stayed until probability analysis showed that our race had changed enough to survive. As I was saying, it noticed Russell and Donna and brought them here to this staging world."

"Why?"

"I believe the masters wanted some of us to begin studying their legacy. Russell and Donna are not the only scientists transported here by the gates."

I wiped tears of relief and joy from my eyes. "So they're both here?"

For years I had hoped, yet believed them dead. I found I was shaking with relief. I wanted to see them right away, and at the same time I wanted to rush back to Earth to tell Rita the wonderful news. It was hard to concentrate on what Messler's words, but I forced myself to listen.

"They are both here. For a scientist like Russell, this is heaven indeed. He spends most of his time trying to learn about the gates, and understand the underlying technology. Donna has chosen to stay because she knows he needs her here to keep him ... shall we say ... human."

Messler's mouth twitched into his enigmatic smile again. I knew exactly what he meant. He could use someone like Donna himself, but I wasn't about to volunteer for the job. Somewhere in the vast universe of space/time, Rita waited for me.

Messler rose to his feet in one fluid motion. "Let me take you to them."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The small white room melted away around me. My rational mind understood that I was seeing the uncertainty principles of quantum physics in action, but a primitive part of that same mind screamed in terror. The world wasn't supposed to melt-or reform in a new shape.

I was alone in another room. Messler had disappeared somewhere. I had a feeling he wouldn't be gone for long.

This room was much larger. It had tables and chairs, all of them strangely organic in appearance. They looked as if they had been carved whole out of one substance or had grown up out of the floor. The walls were curved and cave-like and crystals grew out of them of every color and shape imaginable-red and violet, yellow and blue. Even with my untrained eye I realized that they were arranged in complex groups and sequences of some sort. The air throbbed with the energy they held and I knew they performed some purpose, but what it was I hardly dared to imagine. A white, circular platform stood in the center of the room. A clump of crystals hung down from the ceiling above it. Unaccountably, I was reminded of the matter transporter on Star Trek. Another clump of crystals rose up from the floor to one side. The controls?

"Lee!"

I half turned in time to see Donna literally walk through the wall behind me. Her dark brown eyes glowed with happiness, and she held her arms wide. With two quick steps she threw herself at me.

"Donna! I can't believe it. I thought we'd lost you forever."

I hugged her close, burying my face in her bouncing brown curls. I breathed deep and caught her familiar aroma. She smelled the same, felt the same in my arms.

"Wait a minute."

I put both hands on her shoulders and stepped back. A sudden suspicion stabbed at me. Was this real?

"You went through the gate after the nuclear war as Donna. You should be Don now."

Donna laughed. "Still the same old skeptical Lee. We have gates here, too. You can be whichever sex you want, whenever you want. I decided to welcome you as Donna because we've been our closest as Lee and Donna-haven't we?"

She lifted a teasing eyebrow and beamed a one hundred-watt sexy smile my way. My heart melted, and I grinned back like a lovesick baboon. Close was a laughably inadequate word for our relationship. As men, we'd been best friends. When she became a woman-and once I got over my inhibitions-I'd held her in my arms and made love to her through many a passionate night. Her radiant smile stirred up those memories-and more.

"It's been a long time, Lee, for me too."

She stepped close again. Her soft breasts pressed against my chest as her slender arms slid around my neck. She wore a loose white robe like Messler's. My hands moved of their own volition to curve around her slim waist. The silken fabric slipped easily over her smooth flesh. She was naked underneath.

I'd been nude since my arrival so there was no way to hide my joy at seeing Donna again, even if I wanted to. Not that I wanted to. My heart was swelling with happiness, and so were other parts of me.

Donna tangled her fingers in the thick hair on my chest and glanced down. Two familiar dimples appeared on her cheeks.

"Why, Lee, maybe it's a good thing Russell isn't here yet. Your arrival caught him in the middle of a complicated experiment. We have a little time to get reacquainted."

Her sultry voice made me regret the many nights we'd spent apart. I caught her face between my hands and claimed her mouth with mine. Her lips were as sweet as I remembered.

“Do you have anything as primitive as a bed in this place?” I asked.

She gripped my hand. Her thoughts reached out toward me. I'd never touched Donna's mind before. She and Russell had disappeared into the gates on the same trip that had made Rita and me into Seconders. Our telepathic abilities only started after that transformation.

Now I discovered that her thoughts were clear and concise. That wasn't surprising. When the gates first appeared years ago, Donna, then Don, was a math student. Like Russell, he had a strong scientific bent. That was probably why Donna had been willing to remain here in the nexus with Russell. She felt at home in this ordered and rational world. I wondered if I ever would.

Her hand tugged at mine. She stepped toward the wall, and I followed without hesitation. The room melted around me again. I blinked and the two of us stood in another room. This one was small, intimate. A soft, golden light filled it. An entire wall seemed to be open to the outside. I could see a mountain meadow filled with flowers and towering blue peaks beyond that reached for the sky. A bed sat in the center of the room. It was covered with silver sheets, soft as silk, and piled high with pillows. Donna pulled me down on it and snuggled close.

“You know how to dress to please a girl,” she teased.

“No one has shown me where to go to get my mandatory white robe,” I teased back.

She laughed. Bouncing up on her knees, she pulled the robe up over her head and threw it to one side. As it floated to the floor, I drank in the welcome sight of her full breasts, the smooth curve of her hips. She sank down next to me again and started playing with the hair on my chest while we kissed. Between kisses we exchanged breathless little snippets of conversation about the years we'd been apart.

“I've been here with Russell the whole time, helping him with his studies.”

“Rita and I lived in the house in Ruston until a few months ago. Then the situation got dangerous for Seconders, and we had to go into hiding.”

“Rita! How is she? Why isn't she with you?”

“She's pregnant. She can't travel through the gates.”

“Pregnant! Oh, that's wonderful.” Donna planted a gleeful kiss on my lips. She had shared Rita's sorrow when she'd lost our first baby years ago. “Congratulations, Dad,” she added, with a wink.

Dad. The word startled me. I'd never thought of myself as a dad before. I wished with all my heart that Rita could be here, with us in the bed. The three of us would celebrate our reunion in the best possible way.

But, at least, I had Donna in my arms again for the first time in years. I forgot about everything else as I drew her close. Her skin was like satin and her warm, wet kisses woke memories of the other sweet, moist openings in her body. Her hands were already exploring lower, caressing me to rock hardness.

I grinned in anticipation as I recalled Rita's advice of a few weeks ago. First a quickie to release the pent up energy from all the years Donna and I had spent apart, and then the pleasure of a long, leisurely bout of lovemaking while we explored each others bodies again, and merged our thoughts for the first time. I shared my erotic plan with her mind to mind and received her eager assent.

I rolled her on her back and she spread her legs wide for me. I mounted her and plunged inward, thrusting hard. Her legs wrapped around me as she met my pent-up hunger with her own. We both

shuddered to a climax, and sank back down into the bed. With the edge of our hunger blunted ever so slightly, we began a slow, sensual exploration of each other's bodies. My hands cupped her breasts. My tongue explored everywhere-her throat, her ears, the rigid peaks of her nipples, the dampness between her legs. Her own small hands started their teasing dance by playing with my nipples and then moved downward, growing ever bolder, until she had me moaning and begging for relief.

"Dear Lee," she murmured in my ear. "I've missed you. If there'd been a way to go back for a visit I would have gone a hundred times."

Her words sounded a dim bell of warning deep in my mind. Hadn't Messler said there was a way to return to our world? But the exquisite sensation of her hands rousing me to the edge of climax drove out every rational thought. My only desire was to enter her body once more. We made love in slow motion, holding each other close, each movement unhurried so we could savor it to the utmost. Only at the end did she cry out with longing and dig her nails into my back, urging me to thrust into her deeper and harder.

When we got up from the bed and Donna picked up her white robe from the floor, a second one lay there as well. I did not even question how it happened. The quantum universe was an amazing place. I slid it over my head and Donna grasped my hand in hers. The world shifted once more and I was back in the larger room where I'd met Donna. Russell stood in front of the circular platform, a welcoming grin on his face.

"Lee! What a wonderful surprise!"

He was the same as I remembered. His short blond hair looked uncombed, as it always had, and his dark blue eyes were filled with an insatiable curiosity about the universe. I imagined he'd found plenty to be curious about on this remarkable world.

I stepped up to him and threw my arms around him. Donna pushed her way into the circle and soon the three of us were pressed tight together in a heartfelt hug. I'm not ashamed to say a few tears were shed. We were a family again-almost. Only Rita was missing. I suppressed a pang of longing. The three of us would be reunited with her soon, I hoped. When we finally broke away, Russell and I went through the same quick exchange I'd had with Donna, telling each other about the missing years.

"This place is a treasure trove of knowledge," he said, with a sweep of his hand. "I thought I was a scientist back on earth, but I was only an ignorant savage, one step beyond the wheel."

Joy lit up his face. He almost glowed with fulfillment. After the sex gates appeared on our Earth he'd spent years as part of a team of physicists trying to figure out how they worked. Every experiment they tried had failed. No matter what approach they thought of, they got nowhere. The gates remained an enigma. Although he never inflicted his worries on us I knew those had been bitter, frustrating years for Russell.

But here he was in his element. As Messler had said, he was not the only scientist the gates had snatched away from Earth and brought to this world; there were a couple of others, but he was by far the brightest. He led the effort to unravel the mystery of the gates. Like Donna, he'd gone through the gates in the nexus a few times once they understood the mind-enhancing properties of repeated sex changes. But the increased intelligence was not that important to him; he was already brilliant. In addition, the two of them had had no need to push in order to break through into the nexus. As a result, they hadn't experienced anywhere near as many sex changes as Rita and I had.

Instead, Russell devoted the majority of his time to studying the gates. Besides their obvious purpose of transforming human beings from one sex into another, as well as healing them of any ills, the gates served

other functions as well. He was convinced that the gates were designed to be a gateway between alternate worlds. Humanity had stumbled from Earth to the nexus, but that left us like kids with our faces pressed against the glass of the candy shop. An infinite universe of worlds waited for us behind that glass, if only we could find the key to open the magic door.

Messler's arrival a few months ago had led to some stupendous breakthroughs. His quirky, but brilliant mind seemed to ask all the right questions-questions that gave Russell the keys necessary to gain some control over the gates at last.

Once they understood the process by which the gates had been sent to our Earth, it became possible to call them back. Messler proposed the idea. Russell figured out the steps necessary to make it possible. But the final energy that moved the gates from world to world was mental. Only Messler possessed a mind advanced enough to do it. He was the one who actually brought the gates back to this staging world. They disappeared one by one because he could only handle one at a time.

When we got to this point in Russell's narrative, I planted my hands on my hips. "And why on Earth-excuse the expression-did Messler think making the gates disappear would be a good thing?"

Russell looked sheepish. "I wondered about that myself. I thought it would cause too much of an uproar in an already unstable situation."

I remembered the gunshots again, and shivered. "I'd say you were right. What did Messler say to convince you otherwise?"

"He thought making the gates disappear would help to speed up Earth's evolution. He believed some of the people who'd held back would rush through the gates once they started to disappear, for fear they'd all vanish before they could go through and regain youth and good health."

I shrugged. "Maybe that will happen when enough of them disappear. But so far, all it's done is make people angrier at the Seconders."

In a strange way, I was relieved to know that Messler's plans didn't always work. Otherwise his sheer genius would be too intimidating. But he'd made two big miscalculations that I knew about.

The first was starting the Church of the Gates. That idea had gone horribly wrong, although I admit the church did serve his purpose of protecting the gates from government interference when they first appeared. I suppose his real mistake there was losing interest and leaving the church without his leadership after he became a Seconder.

The second mistake was in thinking making the gates disappear would encourage people to go through them. It seemed to me that people had only become more frightened of what the future might hold, and frightened people tend to lash out at something or someone. The Seconders had become the target for a worldwide outburst of fear and anger.

"We certainly didn't intend to make things worse for you and Rita," Russell apologized.

"Don't worry. I know that's the last thing you wanted to do. Human beings are too damned unpredictable. Even Messler hasn't figured them out yet."

Russell looked thoughtful. "Maybe it's time for the Seconders to leave the Earth behind. That group you spoke about-the one at your compound. Do you think they will keep trying to pass through the gates? If they do, perhaps Messler can reach them mentally, as he did you, and they could join us in our research here."

I shook my head. "This seems like a nice place, but I'm not willing to give up on Earth yet. I'd rather find a way to work out our problems there if we can. Besides, I thought the gate masters sent the gates to Earth to help the human race grow up. If the best and brightest of us use it as an opportunity to leave, their experiment will be a failure."

I caught a flicker of sorrow in Russell's eyes. "Sometimes experiments do fail, Lee. Maybe the human race can't learn to get along."

"The gate masters were human once, and they learned."

A voice spoke behind me. "I agree."

I turned to see Messler. I suppose he'd walked through the wall.

"We need to know more about the gate masters and how they constructed their society to avoid the problems that Earth has endured," he said. "I intend to follow them wherever they have gone."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

My first reaction was relief. "If anyone can do it, you can. Maybe they will offer us some more help."

Even though Messler had assured me he could return me to almost the exact moment I'd left, I was painfully aware of time passing and of the dangers that I'd left behind. I couldn't stay in this world forever-didn't want to.

Meanwhile, back on Earth, the Gaters were closing in on us. Although they proclaimed they only wanted to capture us and force us to repent, I had no doubt they intended to kill us during the attack. They could later claim that our deaths were accidental. If we threw ourselves on the mercy of the government, it might save our skins temporarily, but in the end we would be in an even worse situation. The secret service could make us disappear-forever.

"I hope they will offer to help." Messler glanced around at the strange crystals, and the circular platform. "They took the time and trouble to set up this world so they could move the sex gates to Earth. They wanted to give us a better chance to survive."

I laughed without amusement. "So far that's up in the air. Maybe they should have stuck around longer."

"I am certain they meant to. At present, I believe an unexpected development in their own evolution forced them to move on. But beyond that, I suspect they don't understand us, not really. They have advanced so far from where we are that it is like a twenty-first century man trying to understand what motivates an aborigine. Our cultures, our ways of thinking, are completely different."

"How will it help if you find them, then?" Donna asked.

Messler's face took on a far away look. "I hope I don't sound too conceited if I say that I believe I can serve as a bridge. I understand this quantum world better than anyone else from our planet. If I can't communicate with the gate masters and explain our version of humanity to them, who can?"

"What about the gates?" Russell demanded. "If you leave, we'll lose the ability to move them from world to world."

Suddenly Messler was staring at me. His eyes held a demand I couldn't quite understand. "I don't think so. I think there is someone else who can learn to move the gates. Lee."

"Mm-me?" I stuttered over the single word, caught by surprise.

"You've always been a mere step or two behind me, Lee. With a little training-and Russell and Donna to fill you in on all they've learned here-you should be able to take my place with no problem."

"But-but what would I do?"

"You would serve as a guardian here until I can return with whatever additional help the gate masters are willing to give us."

The mere idea of guarding such an awesome legacy frightened me. My reaction must have shown on my face because he hurried to explain.

"By staying, you can help the Seconders. The ability to move the gates is a pretty big bargaining chip. You would have to return to Earth long enough to convince them that you do have that ability. But once they believed you, you could demand that they stop all threats to the Seconders, or you would make every last gate disappear."

"Some people would like to see that very thing happen," I objected.

"Some people would. But not the people in power. A lot of them were in their seventies or eighties when the gates first appeared. They have been through a gate once already. They know what it is like to become young and healthy again. The prospect of eternal life is beginning to appeal to them. When they're old enough, they'll want to take that risk and make a second trip."

I was forced to agree with his assessment. When you were old and staring death in his cold eye, the worst that could happen on a second trip through the gates was a quick end to your misery. But if you made it through ... a whole new life waited on the other side.

Messler gave me a thumbs-up sign. "I see you're getting it, Lee. Besides those who've already gone through, others in the government are reaching those golden years. They want to know there will be a gate nearby when they need it."

He was right. Many a man or woman had sworn they'd never go through the sex gates-until death's icy breath started to tickle their neck. Then the little matter of changing sex didn't seem so important after all. Even the risk of vanishing the first time through was nothing compared to the thought of a slow, painful death.

"Okay. If I had the power to control the gates, my demands might be heard. But how do I move the gates?"

I looked around as if expecting to see a control center materialize out of the wall.

Messler shrugged. "With thought. It's a quantum experience. It could be that all creation is malleable and subject to the thoughts of the observer. Russell will explain the theory to you in greater detail than I can. Before I leave, we will share our thoughts and I will teach you everything I know about how to operate on that level. I believe you can do it, and because I do, you will be able to do it."

I suspected that this last was a quantum statement of some sort. I hoped he was right. Those emerald eyes narrowed as if taking my measure.

"There's something else you'll need to deal with while I'm gone, Lee. Another problem."

Oh, great. Saving the Seconders wasn't enough. "What's that?"

"Remember the countless thousands of people who disappeared when they went through the gate?"

They're here, on this world, but held in a kind of limbo. You have to decide what to do about them."

Maybe I lack Rita's compassion, but I had enough problems to deal with. I decided to blow this one off. "If they're in limbo, what's the hurry? They can stay there for another few thousand years for all I care."

"That's the problem, they can't. Again, Russell can probably explain it better than I can. But the quantum world is never static. It's always changing. The power that created the gates can hold something locked in a static existence for a while, but not forever."

Dread squeezed my heart in icy fingers. "Why do you think there's not much time left?"

"Because there isn't." Messler had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry, Lee. I hate to leave this responsibility on your shoulders. I believe the gate masters meant for hundreds of Seconders to reach the level you and I are at now. With our minds united, we could make the decision about what to do with the thousands and thousands of humans who failed to make it through the gates. But we took longer to get here than they imagined."

"My tough luck." I couldn't keep the bitterness from my voice.

"I don't know how long I will be gone, seeking the masters. In the meantime, you have perhaps a year to decide before those people wink out of existence."

I shook my head. It was more than I wanted on my conscience. I thought of the group of Seconders I had left behind at the compound-and of Rita, Randi, and Terry. They were my friends and lovers now-a special group of people filled with wisdom and compassion. They would help me decide. I couldn't wait for Donna and Russell to meet them. I glanced over at Russell. He was listening to our conversation with interest.

"Why don't you teach Russell to move the gates?"

Messler opened his mouth to answer but Russell beat him to it. "I'm a scientist, Lee-a thinker, not a doer. I'll build the ship that can get you to the moon, but I'll never get in it and fly it. That takes a special kind of person. You're that kind of person. You can handle the gates-and handle convincing the people in power on Earth to leave the Seconders alone."

As much as I hated to admit it, the two of them were probably right.

"I have no desire to return to Earth," Russell added. "There is simply too much to learn right here. I'll be years yet unraveling some of these mysteries-if ever."

My head ached with all the new information I'd had to absorb in the past few hours. I rubbed my temples, and stared at Messler.

"Let me be sure I have this straight. You will show me how to return to Earth so that I can strike a deal with the people in power there, and get them to leave the Seconders alone, using the sex gates as a bargaining chip."

"That's right."

"But, in order to actually control the gates, I will have to stay here, won't I?"

"Yes."

"Plus, this urgent problem with the people who disappeared going through the gates requires my

attention. And somehow I feel there will be other things as well. This is no simple task you want to give me. You're really asking me to leave Earth behind and become a gate master here, aren't you?"

Messler looked solemn. "It amounts to that, yes."

My gift for pattern analysis kicked in again, but I didn't like the throbbing headache that came with it. There'd been a lot of data, but now the picture was clear.

"There's something about this trip back to Earth that you aren't telling me. What is it?"

Messler glanced away and his voice lost some of his usual arrogant self-confidence. "I will be able to send you back as I promised. But it will be a one-time trip. Making the return trip to Earth is much more difficult than making the trip here. The gates were created in this world, and they naturally move anything that enters them here. Going back to Earth is like swimming against the tide. Like Russell, I believe the gates are portals to alternate realities, but we haven't figured out how to make them work that way, yet."

"You got me here," I objected.

"That's the easy part, like I said. Besides, it was beginner's luck! If you poke at enough buttons, something is bound to happen. In truth, though, we are like monkeys who've stumbled into a house and huddle in the sunlight coming through a window for warmth, while the switch for the central heating stays unnoticed on the wall."

I took a deep breath and tried to guess how many crystals were growing out of the wall beside me, and what their purpose might be. I saw his point.

"Basically, when we send you back it will be like walking down an escalator we don't know how to use. It will require the power of both our minds to do it. Once you complete your mission on Earth and return here, I'm going to leave. Then you won't be able to go back to Earth again until I return-which is doubtful-or you get others trained to my level."

I swallowed, hard. "I'll be stuck in this place like Russell and Donna have been."

Messler pursed his lips. "You're needed here. The future of the entire human race may depend on you."

My heart sank. "I-I can't leave Earth. Rita is there."

For once, Messler dropped his attitude of superiority. The sympathetic look on his face appeared genuine.

"I understand. Believe me, I wish I could wait. But I must start my search for the gate masters as soon as possible. Don't ask me why, but I know it. It's a deep, intuitive knowing that comes from being in tune with quantum reality."

With anyone else, I would have discounted this as the ravings of a fanatic, but if Messler said he just knew something, I believed him. Russell was a bit more of a skeptic, though.

"C'mon, Messler. You're asking Lee to make a major sacrifice. You should come up with at least one good reason."

"All right." Messler tapped a thoughtful finger against one cheek. "I suspect the gate masters are a dying race."

"What?" Russell shook his head in disbelief. "They have the sex gates. They should be immortal."

Messler shrugged his shoulders. "Even on Earth, we're already beginning to see that the sex gates can have unexpected side effects. And that's short term. I'm sure the same happens long term, too. I've studied some of the material the gate masters left behind, and if I'm not mistaken, they've experienced a precipitous drop in their birth rate to the point where children are almost nonexistent."

His words were like a bucket of cold water thrown on my faith in the gate masters. Was this the future they offered us? Rita and I anticipated the birth of our first child with growing excitement. A life without children seemed empty and barren. Messler nodded as if reading my thoughts-probably he was.

"It might right now, but when the concept that you could live forever begins to kick in, attitudes change. Who knows how many hundreds or thousands of years the gate masters have had the gates on their world? I believe they lost the urge to reproduce centuries ago."

"That doesn't explain why they might be a dying race." Russell was nothing if not stubborn. "Even if they didn't have children, their present generation would continue to live as long as the gates function."

Messler shook his finger at Russell. "I'm surprised at you. You've made a very unscientific assumption-that the number of times you can go through the gate is infinite. What if there is an upper limit?"

A chill knifed through me. Yet it was certainly possible. Were the gate masters, as a race, approaching that limit?

"All these are tentative conclusions drawn from my study of the artifacts they've left behind," Messler added. "I could be mistaken. But perhaps now you see why I feel a sense of urgency. It may take me years to find them, and time is the hardest taskmaster of all."

I hated to agree with him. I had no desire at all to be the next gate master. But I understood his point. Messler saw the reluctant agreement on my face and resumed making his plans.

"I will have to spend some time training you in quantum thought before sending you back. You must conclude your business on Earth and to persuade Rita to join you here as quickly as possible."

Messler beamed at me as if he'd offered me a great gift. Both Russell and Donna stared at me, the question plain in their eyes. They already knew. Somehow I'd neglected to tell Messler.

"Rita is pregnant," I informed him in a dull voice. "She can't travel through a gate. If she tried, she'd lose the baby."

Messler's smile faded away. I thought for a moment he would change his mind and offer to stay. But, as usual, I underestimated the old coot. He'd had things his way for over a hundred years, and once he made up his mind he wasn't about to change direction. He put a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm afraid you face a tough choice, Lee. Either convince Rita to sacrifice the baby and come through the gate with you, or say goodbye to her-perhaps for a brief time, perhaps for years. It's impossible to predict when I'll return."

"Not even with quantum insight?" My lips curled as I spoke.

Messler ignored my anger. "You're needed here. You know that."

The hell of it was he spoke the truth. What really bothered me was that when I learned to return to Earth at will, I could go back to just about any moment. No time would be lost from Rita's viewpoint. But there was no way for me to avoid the agony of spending months, maybe years, without her. I would develop

and experience many things while, from my viewpoint, time stood still for her. With a chill, I remembered how Rita had begged me not to go through the gate again. The very thing she'd feared was happening.

I'd like to say developing the power of quantum thought was simply a matter of believing it was so, and seeing it manifest-since that is the end result. But getting to that point on the road took a lot of work. Messler was my teacher and he turned out to be a hard taskmaster. Considering that I might spend a good many years there, I wanted to take some time to explore the staging world, but the times I could escape from the small white room where we met daily for training were few and far between.

I'd be glad to describe the training process, maybe even write a bestseller (Develop Your Superhuman Mental Powers), but the fact is, my trips through the gate had already changed my mind in ways a normal human can't understand. It wasn't that I felt different, either. In most ways, I was essentially the same person. My emotions were unchanged. I loved and missed Rita, and dreaded the day I would have to face her with the news that I must leave her, maybe for years.

No, what had changed was not my nature, but the power of my thought. That had risen several levels. I've already described how previously I developed the ability to see patterns in things. Now I discovered that if I concentrated on anything I had the ability to know about that thing-without instruction or other formal learning of any kind. It was as if I absorbed the essence of anything I focused on.

I still have no idea how it works. Messler muttered some theories about the uncertainty principle, and how that meant that my essence and the essence of everything in the universe was somehow the same and separate at the same time. It sounded like more mystical mumbo-jumbo, but apparently it's considered cutting edge physics nowadays. At any rate, that ability to know a thing naturally led to the ability to picture it in total clarity in my mind. Like an artist, first I saw it and then I created it. The power of my transformed mind willed my thought into reality. As for things that already existed, the trick was to picture them changing and then manifest that change in reality.

Day by day, I became a master of quantum thought.

When Messler wasn't busy putting me through various exercises to stimulate my developing talents, he spent his time among the crystal buildings searching for clues to where their builders might have gone. I've already noted that this parallel world had a timeless quality. Each perfect spring day blended into the next with nothing to distinguish them. I studied with Messler, helped Russell and his group of scientists with their projects, and spent any free time I had relaxing in bed with Donna.

Weeks-or months-might have passed. But one day it became clear I had mastered the ability to move between worlds with Messler's assistance. He congratulated me in a subdued voice since he knew I dreaded what must come next. We sat down to a meal together to observe the occasion.

I should mention that our meals weren't a product of quantum thought, but that didn't make them any less unusual. Messler theorized that the crystal buildings possessed some rudimentary level of consciousness. He believed they monitored our bodies somehow. I would notice that I was feeling hungry, and moments later a door would appear in a wall and a cart would roll out holding a tray of food. It was delicious food, too, although not usually anything I recognized.

On my last day, Messler summoned one of these carts with his will, and sat down to share the meal with me. I didn't mind. There was always more than enough food, and I had plenty of questions to ask him before he disappeared. I swirled a pile of purple fibers around a long utensil with three tines at the end. It was close enough to a fork to feel comfortable in my hand. I liked to pretend the fibers were pasta, but they tasted more like steak. And try as I might, I couldn't get the 'chef', whatever it was, to send me any booze.

Messler caught my thought and grinned. After weeks of working together to develop my mental powers, I didn't have many secrets anymore. He could read my mind at will. His mind was way ahead of mine, though. When I tried to penetrate his thoughts I ended up with an enormous headache.

He stared at the wall as if communing with some intelligence on the other side-for all I know he was. After a minute or two, the wall opened and a shelf with a bottle and two glasses on it slid out. He got up, poured the contents of the bottle into the glasses, and handed me one. He raised his glass in a toast.

"Here's to the next gate master." He tossed the contents of his glass down in one swallow.

I sipped more cautiously at mine. It turned out to be first-rate bourbon. The smoky taste filled my mouth and burnt all the way down my throat. I sighed with pleasure. Messler looked so pleased with himself that I ventured a question.

"Have you learned anything more about the original gate masters?"

I knew he'd continued to search for clues about the builders of the sex gates whenever he wasn't busy teaching me. He took a thoughtful sip of his drink before answering.

"Remember that we are talking about a race that is thousands of years ahead of ours. Their heritage is so rich that it will take us centuries to absorb. And this is not their home world, either. It's simply one of many way-stations they used for moving the sex gates from world to world."

"Do you have any idea how to get to their home world?"

"I believe the sex gates are programmed to transfer travelers there, just as they are programmed to move us from the Earth to here. If I can find the right mental keys I should be able to do it. It's the first place I plan to go when I leave here. With any luck, I will find clues there that will tell me how to direct my search for them."

He looked fearless, but I knew the risks he was taking. "You'll be making the journey through the power of quantum thought, but you have no idea where your final destination is. It seems to me that will make it difficult to materialize your visualization."

A small smile twitched on his lips. "It should be interesting, yes. The gates are quantum phenomena, but obviously the gate masters had a prescribed procedure that they followed for their transfers between worlds. We are like children, blundering around, pushing random buttons in a mental sense, hoping for the best. The fact that we have succeeded as well as we have is due to the idiot-savant abilities we've developed."

"Don't the gate masters have those abilities, too?"

His eyes danced. I'd touched upon a topic that fascinated his endlessly curious mind. "I doubt it. Their whole culture developed from their deep attachment to the scientific method. They must have evolved into a rational people rather than an intuitive race as we are."

"But the science that built the sex gates is based on an understanding of quantum physics way beyond ours and that discipline is enough to shake anyone's rationality," I protested.

"True, but by then, their rational thought processes might have been so deeply ingrained that they were blind to certain possibilities. I suspect that they never imagined the gates would stimulate our mental evolution in the way they have."

"Are you saying the gates are increasing the differences between them and us?"

"We are very different than they are already, and we grow more different each time we go through a gate. That's one of the reasons we need to find them sooner, not later, and get the benefit of their years of experience with these quantum phenomena."

The mention of his departure chilled my good mood. I couldn't help thinking of Rita and the loss I was facing. I changed the subject.

"You mentioned you were leaving some problems behind for me. One of them is the people who entered the gates and disappeared."

"Yes. They're now held in limbo here. Their essence is stored within these crystals. The gates can bring them back if you wish, or you can erase them, if you decide that is the thing to do."

I fought down my fear. That was too much power for any one human to have. But I had another more important question for Messler.

"I wonder what happens to the unborn fetuses that are lost when pregnant women go through the gate. Are they in that limbo also?"

It didn't take a genius to know I was trying to figure out a way to bring Rita back with me. Messler's eyes held sympathy, as he shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Lee. If a pregnant woman goes through the gate, the fetus is destroyed by the transformation. To make an extremely complicated process very simple, the gates disassemble all the atoms that compose your body and then reassemble them according to the genetic blueprint you would have if that one chromosome had been different. There is no place for a fetus in a new male body, so it is discarded. It's a regrettable price of using one of the sex gates."

I nodded. It was the answer I expected. I swallowed my disappointment, and moved on to another topic.

"Have you discovered why Seconders can't be questioned? Do the gates do something to block our minds?"

"I thought so, at first. I thought the gate masters had planned it that way so we wouldn't give away any of the secrets of the gates, even if we tried. But the more I study what they left behind, the less I think so. Their society was not closed and paranoid like ours. There was really no reason for them to think that way, or consider providing for the interrogation we eventually faced."

"So why do we blank out when we are questioned?"

"I think it's related to our mind-reading abilities somehow. The one thing Seconders have in common is this telepathic ability. The second successful passage through the gates opens up those areas of the mind that are normally dormant. This ability to blank out when undergoing interrogation appears counterproductive to survival, yet maybe something happens on a higher level than we realize. One thing is for sure-the more the feds questioned us, the less confident they became about how to deal with us."

"Sort of a brainwashing in reverse?" I smiled.

"We've only begun to see where these telepathic powers of ours will take us," Messler said. "In the end they may be even more significant than the ability to engage in quantum thought. It makes me wonder if the humans who constructed the gates possessed the same abilities."

"You think they didn't?" I frowned. "I thought they were thousands of years ahead of us."

"Thousands of years ahead in understanding science and the principles of quantum mechanics, yes. But beyond that, who knows? They developed on an alternative earth, remember? Our species are the same, but they traveled along different cultural lines. As a result they must have different thought processes. We are similar, but not necessarily the same."

"Do you think we could be superior to them some day?" It was a stunning concept.

"It's too soon to tell." Messler turned the glass in his hands around, staring into its crystal depths. "That's one of the many reasons I feel compelled to go in search of them. There is so much we need to know."

On the day before my return trip to Earth, I went through a sex gate on the staging world and emerged as Li. I wanted to come out of the gate on Earth as a male, so I needed to leave as a female. Thanks to my high-intensity training with Messler, I no longer needed to let a long time pass between each passage.

Russell and Donna said farewell by sharing my bed the night before my departure. I hugged Russell and clung to Donna, taking comfort in his strength and her soft warmth. If fate forced me to leave Rita behind, it was a comfort to know two people I loved waited for me.

With Messler guiding me, I stepped into a sex gate again with the intention to emerge on Earth. The green fog enveloped me. I fell into an endless emerald mist. With my new powers of quantum thought I shaped that mist into the reality I wanted. I could feel Messler's mind backing me up, as he added his own awesome powers to mine. As he had predicted, it took both of our minds to open the inter-dimensional portal to our world, but at last I stumbled out of the gate and saw the barn take shape around me. I was back on Earth.

Outside I heard the sound of gunfire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I emerged from the gate on Earth as a male. I was also naked, as usual. I grabbed a robe from the hooks along the barn wall, and headed back up the tunnel to the main house. For me, weeks had passed, and I had to struggle to get a sense of urgency back.

Inside, I headed straight to the study on the ground floor. There, as expected, I found Carl and Hess had set up an impromptu command center to direct the battle to protect the compound. Live images from cameras outside were tiled across the huge wall screen.

A computer graphic in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen showed the advancing line of Gaters. I knew from earlier reports that the church had trucked the marchers in from various cities in the southwest. They had gathered at a small country crossroads two miles from our compound. After receiving instructions and placards (SECONDER, REPENT OR DIE) from church officials, they marched up the road toward the house in a straight column, four or five abreast.

Thanks to Messler's wealth, we had our own spies in the church organization. As soon as I entered the room, Carl and Hess began filling me in on their latest intelligence. According to what we'd learned, maybe a quarter of these marchers were paid church operatives, and were armed. Selinda's plan was a crafty one. The operatives were to bide their time until the marchers reached our compound. Agitators were instructed to confront whoever came out to talk to them, and make sure that angry words accelerated into yelling, shouting, and blows. At that point one of the armed marchers was instructed to shoot his gun from a vantage point that would make it appear as if we had fired first. In the fighting that ensued, the church planned to take the compound and kill us all.

While I was with Messler, he told me that there was more to this attack than simple hatred of Seconders. The church feared his legacy, feared that he might have left behind something in writing that would

discredit the church. They wanted to smear his name first. What better way than to make it look as if his heirs initiated the killing of innocent church members on a peaceful protest march?

By the time I arrived, the plan was well under way. Carl and Hess had decided to thwart Selinda's scheme, though, by a simple expedient. They weren't letting the marchers reach our compound. Instead, they had issued a warning and started shooting defensive fire aimed to hit the ground well short of the advancing line. Any marchers who continued to advance did so knowing that they were putting themselves in danger.

As a result, most of the innocents, who were not armed, had stopped. But the church operatives, determined to reach the compound, had fired back and the fighting had begun. What the church failed to consider, though, was how well armed we would be, thanks in part to Messler's wealth, and in part to the aid I had secured from Hess.

I stared at the graphic, relieved to see that our men were not only holding the line a few hundred feet from the house, but were actually driving the marchers back. I saw images of Gaters throwing down their signs, turning tail, and running down the road. Those would be the unarmed innocents.

The infiltrators had taken shelter in the forest that lined both sides of the road, and were shooting at our defenders. But I soon saw that their training was no match for Carl's mercenaries, or Hess's Special Forces troops. I had to turn away as a Special Forces trooper, nearly invisible in his camouflage, rose up off the forest floor right behind one sniper. He had a wicked knife gripped in one hand that he was about to plunge in the sniper's back. When I looked again the trooper was wiping his blade against his pant leg. He glanced up and flashed a grin, almost as if he knew where the surveillance camera was hidden in the trees, before he disappeared into the woods.

After a tense fifteen minutes or so, it became evident we were winning. The mood in the command center relaxed. Once the fiercest fighting began, both Carl and Hess had ignored me for the most part, their attention fixed on the battle they were directing. Now Hess turned to me, a challenging gleam in his eye.

"I think you'll agree our help was crucial in driving off this attack. That means you owe me some information."

I reminded myself that he had no idea where I'd been. As far as he knew, I'd gone down to the barn to make one more desperate trip through the sex gate, and now I was back.

"Don't worry," I said. "I have plenty to tell you."

Hess glanced at Carl. "Think you can oversee the moping up?"

"No problem," Carl grunted. "But I want to warn you both, we haven't seen the last of these guys."

"Understood." Hess sounded confident. "We've got twenty-four hours, at least, before they hit us again." He shot me a significant look. "If Lee has some worthwhile information for us, I'm sure I can talk the army into sending us more troops."

I wanted some place private to talk to him, and the living room was too big and open, so I took him into the media room. We sat in the loungers where normally our group relaxed and watched movies while eating popcorn. The blank wall screen stared at us as we began our momentous discussion of the events around us.

"I was surprised to see you back upstairs so soon," Hess started out. "I thought you were going to try and go through the gate several times today."

"I did," I answered, not elaborating.

He frowned and narrowed his eyes. "You were only gone a half hour at most. That's hardly enough time."

"I traveled through the gate to another dimension. Time is different there. When I returned to earth I came back at the exact moment I left."

He gawked at me as if I had just announced I'd caught a ride to the moon and back with some friendly Martians. He opened his mouth, and I sensed a snide comment on the tip of his tongue, but he bit it off and kept our conversation professional.

"Are you claiming that you contacted the gate masters?"

"I did."

He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair, impatient with my brief answers. "If you want any further help from the government, Mr. Stuart, tell us how the gates operate. I need information that our scientists can verify."

I enjoyed watching the smug expression on his face. After my experiences with Horst I had no love for federal agents. I looked forward to the moment when I pricked his pomposity and watched him deflate like a popped balloon. I folded my arms and sat back in the comfortable seat.

"The operation of the sex gates is now under my control," I told him, in a level voice. "I have the ability to make them appear or disappear, as I will. If you don't bring in more troops to protect our compound immediately, I will make another gate disappear."

Hess was rude enough to laugh out loud. "What sort of game is this? You say you can make a gate disappear. If one happens to disappear in the next day or two, am I supposed to believe you caused it and get more troops for you? Not likely. I'm not that stupid."

"What if I tell you when and where the next gate will disappear?"

As I expected, that wiped the smile off his face. "I'm listening."

"The sex gate at the entrance to Magnolia Park in Houston will disappear at precisely five-thirty PM central standard time today." I allowed myself small smile.

Hess couldn't resist glancing at his thumb watch. It was three-fifteen.

"Only two hours and fifteen minutes away. Interesting." A sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead.

I stood up. "I think so. I need to go get dressed. I suggest we resume this discussion at five-forty-five."

I did need the comfort of something as everyday as getting into fresh clothes after my trip through the gate. But more than that, I needed to talk to Rita. It wasn't a conversation I looked forward to. For me, quite a bit of time had passed-time for me to absorb some stunning new concepts, and begin to get used to them. But, as far as Rita knew, I had gone down the tunnel to our private sex gate about an hour ago. Like Hess, she would be surprised to see me back so soon.

I found her curled up on a chair in our sitting room, her gaze fixed on the front lawn. She was pale.

"Lee!" She jumped up, as I entered the room. "I didn't expect you back for hours."

She took a step toward me—most of the time when we came together after a separation she ran up and kissed me—then stopped. Something of the changes I had gone through must have showed on my face. Her eyes grew wide.

“What's happened?” she whispered.

I'd had plenty of time to think about it, but I didn't have a clue how to broach the subject. Every time I tried to picture our conversation, it ended in disaster. I knew Rita would never abort the baby so she could come back through the gate with me. And I couldn't imagine life without her.

I had my thoughts shielded, but she caught a whiff of my fear, nonetheless. I saw her tense. Her mind reached out for mine, and the very fact that I didn't respond told her something was seriously wrong. I nodded at the lawn, desperate to break the silence in any way I could.

“Were you watching the fighting?”

Her eyes darkened at the memory. “I saw the marchers come up the road. Our defensive fire stopped them at first and I hoped it would be over without bloodshed. Then the first return shots rang out. I turned away. I couldn't stand to look.” She blinked back a rush of tears, and her voice dropped to a choked whisper. “I heard the screams, though, terrible screams. Is it over?”

“Yes, our men and Hess's special forces have driven them back, for now. We're safe for a little while.”

Rita sat down again, and clasped her hands together in her lap. She noticed the robe I was wearing and frowned.

“I thought you'd be at the sex gate all afternoon.”

“It went quicker than I thought. I was able to contract Messler almost at once.”

“He's alive?”

She didn't look happy. She was waiting for an explanation of my strange behavior.

“On his last trip through the gates he reached a parallel world in another dimension.”

“Where the sex gates are from?”

“Yes. Once I contacted him, he transported me there.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “What are you talking about? You haven't been gone that long.”

I gave her the same explanation I'd given Hess. She accepted it without hesitation. Unlike Hess, she'd had the benefit of listening to Russell's physics lessons.

“Donna and Russell were there,” I told her next.

“Oh, my god, Lee!” She leapt to her feet again, her face ecstatic. “Alive? You saw them? Did you talk to them?”

“Yes, to all of the above,” I laughed, taking a momentary pleasure in her joy despite the pain I would soon inflict.

I explained how Russell and Donna had reached that world and what Russell was doing now.

"As you can imagine, Russell is enthralled with the gates. The gate masters have vanished, but they've left a lot of their science behind. He spends most of his time studying and researching, trying to understand the simplest things. Donna is his anchor. She keeps him company, and keeps him sane."

Disappointment replaced the joy on her face. Her gaze drifted over my shoulder, probing the empty space behind me. "They didn't come back with you?"

"Moving between the parallel worlds is extremely difficult. It took the combined power of my mind and Messler's to send me back."

Rita caught her lower lip between her teeth. "Oh, Lee, I want so much to see them. I miss them. How did they look? What did they have to say?"

It hurt me to see her sad, especially when I knew what was coming next. Rita sank back into her chair. I pulled up the chair next to her and took her hands. They were cold, and I rubbed them with my own. She looked up at me, her dark lashes glimmering with unshed tears. She loved both Russell and Donna, and had mourned their loss with me.

"They send you their love."

The words seemed inadequate to convey the depths of passion Russell and Donna shared with us. But I tried to relay their feelings as best I could. We laughed and cried together as I told her about my meeting with Donna, and the lovemaking we enjoyed, and how Russell had not changed a bit, but spent most of his time in the lab fine-tuning one research project or another.

Rita drank in my words and demanded every detail about them I could remember. I had to describe the fashions in the parallel world, such as they were, and the food and the beds and the very odd way of traveling from room to room. By the time I finished, that world had become a reality to her.

"Russell is a brilliant scientist," I concluded, "but he only went through the gates once to get to the staging world and once more after he arrived. He's made quite a bit of progress in understanding the gates, but it was really Messler's intuitive genius-as usual-that brought the breakthroughs."

Rita's expression sobered at my mention of Messler. "Was he changed a great deal by his last journey through the gates?"

Something about the way she said it warned me that she was really asking about me. I couldn't put off telling her the truth much longer, but my heart sank every time I thought about it.

"There was an exponential increase in his intelligence the last time he went through. He reached what he is calling the quantum level of the mind."

"Quantum, like in quantum physics?"

Once again I was grateful to Russell, and all the time he'd spent talking about his work while the four of us lived together. I didn't have to spend hours trying to explain quantum physics to Rita.

"Exactly. He is able to influence reality-control it, actually-with his thoughts."

"That's almost godlike."

I nodded. "The human race isn't ready for such power. But then Messler isn't really human anymore."

Rita drew her eyebrows together in a worried frown. "I don't know that we will ever be ready for such

power. We would destroy each other with it."

"Someday we'll be able to handle it." I spoke with sincerity. I had to believe that, or I would go mad, knowing what I must do. "Maybe not now, but in time. The gate masters sent the sex gates to Earth to help us evolve to that level. They were human once and they made it. There's no reason to think we can't."

"Human? They were human?"

"Originally. Just as human as you or me, or anyone on Earth."

"This is too much to take in all at once. Why didn't Messler come back?"

"Messler has no interest in returning to Earth. He wants to find the gate masters. He's going to go looking for them, and I imagine he'll find them, even if he has to search the whole space/time continuum."

Rita bit her lip. "I don't know whether to wish him success or not. The idea of a quantum mind mingling with humanity is frightening."

I didn't answer-I was searching for the right words. I didn't dare link our thoughts. It was obvious something was wrong. Rita's breath caught in her throat with an audible gasp.

"What-What did he do to you?"

"He taught me what he knew. He sent me through the gates until my mind expanded to a level approaching his so far as being able to manipulate the gates goes. But I'll never be the genius he is, no matter how many passages I make."

Her hand moved to cover her stomach in an instinctive gesture of protection. I reached out to touch her other hand, but she drew it back. Her wide-eyed stare was filled with fear.

"Rita, it's me. Jackson Lee Stuart. Or Jackson Li Stuart." I tried to smile.

"No. It's not you. You're different. I've tried to link minds with you from the moment you walked into this room, but you've shielded your thoughts from me. Something is very wrong. What is it?"

I braced myself and squared my shoulders. It was time to tell her. I had no choice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Messler is leaving," I started my explanation. "He plans to search for the gate masters. He's the only one who stands any chance of finding them."

"So he's trained you to take his place."

Bless my bright girl; she'd guessed it. Her voice shook with fear, though.

"He's asked me to. Someone needs to control the gates. It may be the only way to save the Seconders-not to mention all the people who disappeared when they went through the gates. I've learned they are in a form of stasis there."

Rita's eyes brightened with hope. "Our first baby-"

I shook my head. "Fetuses never make the passage, not in any form."

My throat closed up as I spoke. It was like passing a death sentence. She pulled her hands out of mine

and lowered her head. Her face was turned away from me so I couldn't see her expression, but I could feel the mounting chill in the room. I described the bargain I was trying to strike with the government through Hess.

"If we can stop this persecution of the Seconders, there's a real chance humanity will survive and evolve to the level of the gate masters one day."

Her thick dark hair fell like a veil, hiding her face. I wanted to smooth it aside, to take her chin in my hand and turn her to face me. But her stiff posture warned me not to try.

When she spoke, her voice was cold. "You told me that travel between the worlds required the power of both your minds. When you go back, and he goes off on his journey, how will you to return to Earth?"

I'd been searching for some way to soften the blow, but there wasn't any. "I can't. I'll be stuck in the nexus until he returns, or until I-or Russell-learn more about the gates, and how to manipulate them. It could be months or years. There is no way to know."

"Or until some other Seconder reaches the quantum level of mind," Rita added. She lifted her head, and her face brightened.

"That's possible," I agreed, determined not to squash her fragile hope. "They will have to make many trips through the gates, spaced out over time, as we have done."

Her mouth twisted with disappointment. A tear slid down her cheek. "It took us years to reach this point. No one is even close to your level."

I swallowed hard, and said what I had to say. "Except you."

She had her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands. Her face was twisted in pain as she fought back tears. I don't know if she even understood my words at first. Then comprehension dawned. Her whole body stiffened. She took in a sharp breath, and turned to me.

"You want me to go through the gate again with you."

"I don't want to lose you, Rita." I put all the feeling I could muster into those few words and opened my mind again-now that she knew the worse-to send her my love.

Both hands pressed against her stomach. She looked stricken. "If I go through the gate, I'll lose the baby. You know that."

Her eyes accused me. How could I forget the agony she'd suffered when she'd lost our first baby? What kind of monster was I to even consider asking her to go through that ordeal again? I knew in that moment that I was perilously close to losing her forever.

Even now agony overwhelms me when I think about that conversation, about Rita's pain and tears, about the hopeless despair that swept through me. Had I changed more than I realized? Had I turned into an inhuman monster? Her accusation pierced me to the heart. I tried to explain why I had to return, but she wasn't listening.

"Go away, Lee!" she stormed, at one point. "Go back! I intend to stay human if I can, and have this baby!"

Finally, I decided to leave her alone to calm down. I glanced at my thumbwatch and saw that it was six o'clock. The gate in Houston should have disappeared fifteen minutes ago. I'd arranged the exact time

and place of the disappearance with Messler as a demonstration of our newfound power for Hess. I mumbled an explanation to Rita. She stayed huddled in her chair, ignoring me. I dropped a light kiss on the top of her head, and went into the bedroom. There was no reason to hurry, so I took a shower and got dressed.

By the time I walked back downstairs, Hess was standing in the living room, watching for my return. He gestured toward the empty study. I followed him in, and he closed the door.

"The gate disappeared exactly at five-thirty, as you predicted," he said, without preamble.

"Another one will disappear at eight tonight in the city of New York, in front of the Empire State building."

His lips stretched in a thin smile. "Flaunting your power?"

"No. I only want to make certain you know the disappearance this afternoon was no fluke. As I told you, I have the power to make every gate on earth disappear-or reappear."

"Complete control of the sex gates."

"Exactly."

His eyes gleamed. "I could have you eliminated. Then no one would control them."

"There are others besides me, waiting to take over." I hoped like hell I wouldn't have to back up that bluff.

"Yeah. I figured that. Okay, you mentioned protection for the Seconders. Consider it done. I've been on the phone with Washington. They accede to your demand. Troops will start arriving in about an hour. By tomorrow, this place will be a fortress."

"You'll have to promise protection for more than just the small group of Seconders here."

In my imagination I had savored this triumph, but after my conversation with Rita I was too downhearted to care. I stared at the wall over Hess's head, and wished that I could be back upstairs. More than anything, I wanted to hold Rita in my arms. Would she ever let me touch her again after the terrible revulsion I'd seen in her eyes?

"What do you mean?" Hess looked wary.

"The persecution of Seconders must stop."

He shook his head. "We may be able to do something about that in this country. Hell, I can promise you that we'll try. But the government's tried to stop persecution of minorities before with only mixed success. We can't be everywhere, watching everybody."

I sat down behind the oak desk that dominated the room, and steepled my fingers together. "I'm a reasonable man. I don't expect miracles. But I do expect any laws that discriminate against the Seconders to be changed. And I expect you to release those that you have in custody. I expect the federal government to put plenty of pressure on the states to do the same. Likewise, I expect you will threaten any country that persecutes us with whatever it takes to make them stop. Get that much done, and I'll tell you everything I know about the gates and Seconders both."

The last sentence was a bone, thrown to make him think he'd won something. I planned to tell him more,

but I doubted he would understand much of it. Mostly, I wanted to convey the idea that as the world improved, so would the chances for ordinary people to become Seconders. Although I doubted that most of the world leaders deserved a second chance at life.

Sweat popped out on his upper lip. "Maybe I can get Washington to agree to that in time. I certainly can't speak for the rest of the world."

"Leave the rest of the world to me. I'll be speaking to other world leaders before I return. They will face the same ultimatum you do. I doubt very much that Russia or China or Iran, or any country, will want to be the only one without a sex gate of their own. Especially when their leaders start to get old, and the grim reaper taps a bony knuckle on their shoulder."

His eyes shifted toward the door. I knew he, too, sensed the change in me. Since my return, no one wanted to be in a room alone with me for long. What had really happened to me? Did I want humanity to become what I had become? I would have plenty of time to think about those questions in the lonely years ahead. Right now, I needed to concentrate on making the world safe for Seconders.

"Relay my demands to Washington." I kept my voice cold. "Suggest they send a camera crew over to the Empire State building, so they can watch the disappearance live."

He nodded. His hand was already on the doorknob.

"Tell them to keep the crew there for another half hour after it disappears."

Hess stiffened. "Why?"

"Because it's going to reappear again. I don't want anyone to doubt that I can make it work both ways."

I sat at the desk for a long time after he vanished out the door. To Hess, I sounded powerful and in control, but sitting alone in the study I felt weak and lost. I loved Rita with my whole heart. I didn't want to face life without her. But I couldn't ask her to sacrifice the baby. And I couldn't refuse to return to the parallel world. The future of humanity was at stake.

A shadow fell across the desk. I looked up to see Randi standing in the doorway. Terry stood behind her.

"Lee?" Her voice was tentative. "I don't want to disturb you, but Hess tells us that more troops will come tonight to guard the compound. I gather your trips through the gate this afternoon resulted in something major happening."

I waved them into the room. They sat down in chairs in front of the desk and waited for me to explain. They had probably sat in this same room many times before, listening to Messler pontificate when this was his office. Keeping my voice as emotionless as possible, I described my trip through the gate, my meeting with Messler, and the plans the two of us made for the future.

They took my explanation calmly. They were both lawyers, after all, and I suppose they were accustomed to hearing bizarre stories from their clients. Randi spoke first with the barest hint of excitement in her voice.

"Was Messler confident that he could find these gate masters?"

"He seemed to be." I didn't mention that there was no guarantee he was coming back, even if he did find them.

"Then he'll do it."

She spoke with conviction. I realized once more how loyal these two were to their former employer. They'd spent a lifetime in his service.

"You said after his departure you'll be the only one left with a mind at the quantum level." Terry met my eyes. "I realize it takes time and dedication to develop that kind of intelligence-and the courage to travel through the gates again and again-but theoretically, any Secondar should be able to do it. Correct?"

"That right. Theoretically."

His comment didn't really register with me. I thought he was getting his facts straight, like any lawyer does. I was busy thinking about Rita, wondering if she could find it in her heart to forgive me before I had to leave. She was always so warmhearted and understanding with others. Surely, she wouldn't let me go with this hurt and anger between us.

Terry threw a quick glance at Randi and received a nod. The two of them had lived and worked together for so long that words were no longer necessary. And there was the mental link they shared, of course.

"If that's so, Randi and I volunteer to follow in your footsteps."

A weight fell off my shoulders. I hadn't realized until that moment how lonely I felt.

"That would be wonderful. Once I go back, contact will be difficult, but I'll keep watch-as Messler did with me-and the moment you reach the level where our minds can communicate when you are inside a sex gate I'll guide you on the final steps to my world."

I was babbling, excited by the prospect of companions on my journey. Randi and Terry and I had become lovers, but I'd never expected this kind of sacrifice from them. Terry caught my thought.

"We do love you, Lee, but we're really doing this for Messler. We're still working for him-even in helping you-and we want to see him again. This looks like the only way to do it."

I couldn't argue with that, or with their loyalty. We sat and talked about the best way for them to proceed and what kind of help they'd be able to expect from me, once their minds neared the quantum level. But as we talked, my gloom returned. They'd only made a handful of trips through the gate so far. As willing as they were to help, it would take months, maybe years, before they were ready to make the transition to the next level.

About nine o'clock, Hess stuck his head into the room to announce that the gate had disappeared and reappeared exactly on schedule. I smiled. Messler was nothing if not precise. I planned to start talking to other world leaders in the morning, via the webs. We had developed a schedule for the gates in each country. I estimated it would take a month, maybe two at the most, to finish my task on Earth. Rita would still be several months away from delivery. And Messler was determined to leave the moment I returned. I had promised him I would come back. I owed him a lot-and I owed humanity a chance for a future.

With a heavy heart I climbed back up the stairs, and shuffled down the hall to the bedroom I shared with Rita. I fully expected her to kick me out, but at the same time, I hoped she would be willing to talk to me. I'd fallen in love with her the moment I first saw her, and that love had never wavered. Whatever I had become, I loved her more than ever.

I opened the door and got a shock. She was in bed, and it was obvious she was waiting for me. She was dressed in a filmy red negligee that revealed every luscious curve of her body. Her long hair was loose and flowed down her back and over the pillows in a dark, silky waterfall. Her sultry eyes held an

invitation.

“Rita?”

My voice trembled with sudden hope. I stepped closer. My heart pounded and I licked my lips in sudden anticipation. The negligee was so sheer it was nearly invisible, a lacy froth of scarlet over her nakedness. Her lush, full breasts pressed against the thin material. Her nipples hardened as I watched.

“Come here, darling.” Her voice was soft, welcoming, full of love. She lifted her arms toward me.

“Rita!”

I wanted to say so much, but it was all I could do to choke out her name. I almost fell into her open arms. My heart overflowed with love as I drew her to me. The weeks of separation vanished as I touched her warm flesh. I wrapped her in a tight embrace and kissed her over and over, murmuring her name. Finally, we broke apart for a brief moment and I looked deep into her loving eyes.

“I don't understand,” I whispered. “I thought you hated me after our conversation this afternoon.”

Her warm fingers traced my jaw line. “You're forgetting that I have a special gift from the gates, too, Lee-empathy. Once you finally opened your mind to me, I could feel the terrible pain you have suffered for the past few weeks as you struggled with your options. I know how much you love me, and our baby. When I searched your mind, I realized you would never let me go through the gate, even if I agreed.”

I blinked as she said the words, but knew instantly they were the truth. I had begged her to come because I dreaded life without her, but I knew all along she would refuse and in my heart I was glad. I loved the child inside her as much as she did.

Rita stroked my arm with her fingers. “You love humanity, too, enough to sacrifice your happiness to help them. If you're not human anymore, it's because you're becoming more than human, and I'm proud of that.”

I felt humbled by the understanding she'd found in her compassionate heart. I bowed my head. “What can I do, Rita? How can I live without you?”

“You'll have Russell and Donna,” she pointed out. I hated it when she was so reasonable. She touched her belly. “I won't be the first woman in the history of the world to stay at home and have a baby, while her husband goes off and does something important to him.”

“It won't seem that long to you.” In my pain earlier in the day, I'd forgotten to mention this one bright fact to her. “When we move between parallel worlds, we can also move up and down the timeline.”

Rita's fingers had curled around a sensitive part of my anatomy. Now they tightened. I drew in a sharp breath.

“Does that mean what I think it does?”

I nodded, struggling for air. “Yes. When I return, I can come back to nearly the moment I left. Our separation will seem like an instant to you, even though it may be years for me.”

“But you'll have changed.” She voiced the fear that always haunted her.

“I'll always love you. That will never change.”

She took a deep breath, straining the fabric of her negligee. "All right. We can get through this together. We may be separated for a brief time, but the sex gates have given us an eternity to share. I intend to spend many more years with you, Jackson Lee Stuart."

Her free arm went around my neck and pulled me down to her side. I disposed of the negligee in record time and cupped her luscious breasts. I didn't think for a moment that the years ahead would be easy ones, but I intended to make some wonderful memories in the next month-memories that would see me through to the day when Rita and I found each other again.

THE END

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