

☀ S H A L E M A R ☾

POETRY OF  
DAYS

SHALEMAR: BOOK TWO

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Seneca King stared into the lens of the camera. It was a remote stare, filled with sadness and longing. It spoke of other times and other places, of lost loves and lost horizons ringed with fire. It spoke of a hidden world where the sun rose and set only once each year. Her demeanor and unusual coloring had made her famous as the face of Silver & Gold Cosmetics.

Her overnight success had taken six months. The exotic redhead had come from out of nowhere to represent the medical cosmetics company whose product line had grown from concealer for scars to fashion skin paints and hair pieces. Their products had gone from the medical aisle, next to knee braces and elastic bandages, to the cosmetics department, next to false eyelashes and glitter polish.

The theatrical makeup and hair extensions were a good match for a woman whose gaze was so haunting. Her silver eyes told of things she had seen and done that were beyond the imagining of a typical Silver & Gold fashion customer, a twenty- to thirty-something made up for a night of clubbing with green and magenta curls and a spangling of golden stars across her face, or perhaps a spider web drawn across her neck and chest with the arachnid disappearing in her cleavage.

Shara appreciated the irony.

Seneca King was the alias she had assumed since returning to the Outside World eighteen months ago, after fleeing Shalemar through a spider-infested tunnel. She hadn't been Shara Kennington for a long time. As far as the world knew, Shara Kennington had perished three years earlier when she had fallen through the ice while on a scientific mission in Antarctica with her father, earth scientist and US Senator James Kennington. Media interest had faded with time, replaced by a

new tragedy, then ten, then a hundred others—old news forgotten by everyone but those closest to the Kennington family.

Tall grasses had grown up around the memorial stones Chad Kennington had erected on a hill with a stunning view of the Wind River Range at the family's ranch in Wyoming. The elements had begun to wear away the names and dates of their passing. Shara Kennington had died a 20-year-old college student.

Time had continued. Life had continued. Research in Antarctica had continued. Shara's classmates had graduated. The US Senate had sworn in a political appointee in James's place. Chad had finished law school and had passed the bar exam. The sun had risen and set hundreds of times in the Outside World and twice in Shalemar.

Shara angled her hips and squared her shoulders toward the camera. Her reign as the face of Silver & Gold Cosmetics had helped boost the company's sales. Scars that were rumored to have come from her being in a motorcycle accident had become something Shara could wear proudly with products popularized by hip trendsetters. She had not quelled the rumors. They suited her need to disappear in the public eye, to hide in plain view of anyone who might be looking for her.

The photographer checked the light with an electronic meter, while a stylist stepped forward to make minor adjustments to Shara's makeup and hair. She remained perfectly still like the mannequin she was. Standing well over six feet in the metallic sandals that complemented the red and gold beaded gown, what remained of her natural curls had been teased to the mane of a lioness with the aid of red and purple hair extensions. Her silver eyes were rimmed heavily with kohl and face paint. An artful design of metallic powders snaked their way from her uneven hairline and across her chest, disappearing into the plunging neckline of the gown, and reappearing on one arm and the leg that was exposed by the gown's full slit.

Shara Kennington would have never recognized herself.

The production assistant put on music and the photo session began. The shutter whirred and clicked, immortalizing the mysterious redhead and her imaginative costume. The final pictures would appear

in fashion magazines, on the sides of city buses, and in Internet banner advertisements. It was far different from the life Shara had known.

Chad was now a young associate in the Palo Alto office of an international law firm. In his grief over the loss of his father and sister, he had focused on his schooling, graduating at the top of his class. He had the pick of jobs and chose the high-tech world that included San Francisco and California Wine Country as his playground. It meant he could drive his vintage BMW convertible to work, many days with the top down.

He did what he could to give his sister a new identity, the necessary papers to allow her to drive a car or get a job. She needed a life, but in the Information Age he had difficulty constructing the vital documents that would pass the highest levels of background checks.

Where Shara could have asked a half-dozen of her college friends to help, Chad's lawyer friends were of little use at skirting the system. The best he could do was give her a new profile using their mother's social security number. Having a dead girl's brother ask underground computer whizzes for help would have aroused too much suspicion.

Shara's dream of working as a scientist in a secure environment would be impossible. It would be a low-wage, unskilled job, or nothing. Shara took the GED as Seneca King, hoping to be able to enroll in a non-degree program at a community college. A full-time academic program was out of the question. The risk of being discovered was too great.

In the meantime, she wanted to work. Based on her reported skills, some of her job choices included assistant in a flower shop, hostess at a restaurant, or clerk in a bookstore. She could sign on as an entry-level administrative assistant, but she had never worked in an office and lacked basic administrative skills.

When she had first returned from Shalemar, she had insisted on staying at the ranch, waiting for Joffrey to come for her. She could live in hiding, protected by acres of wide open space that bordered US Forest Service lands. She knew she had told Graham where to find her. She had made sure of it. But after spending one year in rural Wyoming waiting for Joff, she had nearly lost hope. The horizon

remained empty day after day. Over time, everything she loved about her childhood home seemed to conspire against her: isolation, loneliness, boredom.

She had a clear memory of an argument with her brother on the anniversary of her return to the Outside World. “When are you going to accept that they’re not coming for you?” Chad had said to her, in an eerie reversal of the conversations she had upon her arrival in Shalemar. “I’m sorry. But you must face it, Shara.” Chad had slapped her with reality as he saw it. Every day she was back in America meant another day that no one had come from Shalemar to bring her home.

Something must have happened. Joff must be dead—or he must have ordered the executions of Graham, Harrison, Warder, and the others. When more than a year had passed with no sign of anyone from Shalemar, she began to concede her future was here, in America. Her brother was right. His unwillingness to believe had eroded hers. She needed to think of the future and make a life for herself in the Outside World.

Reluctantly, she had tested cities on both coasts, hoping to blend in with the masses in an urban environment. None of them was a good fit. None was the ranch. None was Shalemar.

While contemplating her future, Shara had traveled to Mendocino with Chad and his then-fiancé, Lily Chen, hoping to vacation in an out-of-the-way place where no one would know her or question who she was. They had figured half of the visitors to the quaint town on the northern California coast would be stoned from the area’s prolific crop or tipsy on wine from the nearby Anderson Valley, and the other half would be distracted by the scenery and lack of cell service. It was the perfect place to come out of hiding.

The bed and breakfast where they stayed had a hundred chickens roaming the property. Fortunately, none of them had taken any interest in Shara. She could stroll to the water’s edge and gaze out to sea with no one breaking her reverie. But all that had changed when they went to Sunday brunch at a café overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Shara had become aware she was being watched when the waiter had set a flute of rosé sparkling wine before her. She had looked up to toast the day with her brother and future sister-in-law when she had noticed a handsome man watching her from across the restaurant. Not looking at her in passing, but scrutinizing her from afar. He had said a few words to his male companion and soon they were both watching her. Shara's throat had grown tight with alarm.

The good-looking stranger had made his move when Shara had walked to the ladies' room. He had followed her and she had quickened her pace, her heart beginning to race.

"Excuse me, Miss?" he had called after her.

She had ignored him and hastened inside the door marked with an abstract wire sculpture of a ballerina.

Indefatigable, he had followed her inside.

"I just need a minute of your time."

Shara had turned to face him with a start. Her eyes had darted around the ladies' lounge, looking for a potential weapon. It had been a while since she had killed a man.

"This may sound strange, but you've got great scars," he had said.

Shara had stared back, unsure of how to react. She could break a mirror and create a blade from one of the shards, but something about his unexpected gambit had given her pause.

"Garland Silverman, Profile Cosmetics," he had introduced himself, extending his hand. He had a firm handshake. "Our company makes products to conceal scars and hair loss, and we are branching into a new market with colorful versions of some of our medical products. We have been looking for a beautiful woman with real scars to become the face of our new fashion venture."

"I'm not sure what you mean," she had replied, deciding maybe she did not need a weapon after all. This man did not seem to be one of Malina's goons. He was too well groomed.

"I'd like you to come to New York where we can take some pictures of you, possibly for our new ad campaign."

"Seneca King," she had introduced herself, still shaking his hand.

“Great name,” he had replied. His assertiveness was softened by his sophisticated charm. He had refused to take no for an answer, and finally convinced her to come to New York to test for the role of Silver & Gold’s new face. The thought of being handed a career with no questions asked had its appeal. Shara had accepted, seeing it as a chance to create some semblance of a life under her new identity.

Seneca King. The blinding flashes captured her every movement as she arched and sculpted herself into an object of living art. The more she thought about the turns her life had taken, the more distant her expression became, and the more she became her character as the face of Silver & Gold.

*Shalemar*, she thought wistfully. *Joff*.

Lost dreams seemed to give her the perfect expression for what Garland wanted her to project in her unattainable demeanor.

*Graham, Harry, and Eve*.

You, too, can be mysterious and otherworldly.

*Lourdes, Flavia, Carlos, and Crete*.

You, too, can be the belle of the ball, the painted princess of the party. Just use your imagination.

*Warder and Pilar. Genevieve*.

You can be anyone you want to be.

“Beautiful,” the photographer said to encourage her.

Shara was pleased with the infrequency of these product photo shoots, for she knew if she spent too much time soul-searching in front of the camera she would eventually erect walls that concealed her emotions, and that would be bad for business. She liked Garland and his company’s products and wanted to do her part to make them a success.

Garland had the reputation of being a playboy who dated only models. Seneca King was the model of the moment. Shara preferred his real persona of a gay man devoted to his partner of ten years, Eric Fairborne. The couple had become close friends despite her chiding Garland to own up to the open secret about his sexuality. But he came from a conservative family. The stylish redhead was good cover for a private life he chose to keep private. This arrangement

worked equally well for Shara, who had no interest in cultivating romantic attachments. Her supposed involvement with Garland served their mutual benefit.

What's more, she had come to treasure him as a friend. They always had a good time when they were out for a night on the town. Her public face was inscrutable; she had learned to give nothing away. She was his unfailingly perfect escort, but no one could say why. Perhaps that was what had made her so popular. She was a cipher, a woman with secrets. Garland loved that about her. It made them a natural pair.

Over time, Garland had come to regard Shara among his inner circle of friends. As intimates, she took to calling him by his nickname, Guy, a name his mother had bestowed on him. "She was a Francophile," he had explained, noting the French pronunciation.

"Beautiful, Seneca," the photographer purred. A dozen more frames were completed. "That's a wrap."

"Oh thank you, Miss King," gushed the public relations representative from the gown's designer. "It's going to be your best ad yet. The dress was perfect."

"Spectacular," a familiar voice called from the wings. Its sexy timbre could only belong to Garland Silverman. The entire room directed its attention toward Profile Cosmetics's chief executive.

Women swooned at his presence when he stepped into the light. He was tall, nearly six-foot-three, with casually styled chestnut-colored hair and penetrating doe-brown eyes. A smattering of freckles danced across the bridge of his nose. He spoke with a French accent from his years of study in Paris.

At age 31, he was considered one of the most successful young bachelors in the world. For him, Profile Cosmetics was a creative outlet. His real sphere of influence was in the petrochemical industry, where he managed Silverman Holdings for his ailing father. Profile Cosmetics was a minor subsidiary that had become a welcome diversion from the day-to-day challenges of running a multinational corporation.

“Hi, there,” Shara grinned at him, exchanging an affectionate kiss. “How was your day?”

“Crazy,” he answered with his trademark smile that appeared in the society pages of newspapers and magazines. “The phone won’t stop ringing.”

“Thanks, Seneca,” the photographer said, shaking her hand. “I’ll have these ready by Thursday.”

“Mr. Silverman,” a young female voice called from behind him. “I’m so glad I caught you and Miss King. I wanted to show you the spread for our holiday print ad.”

She laid it out on a table and the three of them leaned forward to examine it.

Shara looked at the image and all natural color drained from her face. Her carefully cultivated mask shattered to an expression of horror. Caught unaware, she had no time to control her reaction.

“What is it?” the assistant looked at Shara with alarm.

The image in the ad had been designed to show her astride a silver unicorn. Where her curls ended and the silver mane of the creature began was unclear. She looked to be emerging from the sun, her red-gold and silver curls spiraling from the sun’s rays. In her hand, she held a beam of light that scattered in a showing of the silver and gold body powder the ad was promoting. It looked like a copy of the mural on the crumbling wall in Llewellyn.

What was missing was the hand of a king holding hers at the source of the light.

Shara was transported back to the scene as if it had happened only a moment ago. She had been wandering through the streets of Llewellyn, taking in the details of the city like a tourist: the houses built closely together, the musicians in the market, the children running around the booths. She had seen the burned-out remnants of homes belonging to King Mason’s loyalists. There had been mansions and hovels, and streets filled with tidy shops. She recalled seeing a painting of workers who had no mouths. And cats, feral cats everywhere.

Then she saw it, the crumbling wall that bore a fading mural. It was a fragment of what had once been a longer wall. The painting was a depiction of The Prophecy. The sun had emerged from darkness. Its rays became the red and gold curls of a woman astride a silver unicorn. The woman held the hand of a king. A brilliant light shone where their hands were joined, and Shara recalled not knowing whether the woman had given the king the light, the king had given it to her, or if it was a product of their union.

“Are you the lady?” a ragamuffin had asked.

“At last you have come,” an old woman had pronounced, staring at Shara’s red hair. “We have waited for you for so long.”

The old woman’s words seemed to echo across time.

*We have waited for you for so long.*

“Are you all right?” Garland asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It’s a beautiful ad,” Shara said, regaining her composure. She wanted to sob. She wanted to vomit. But she could give none of this away. “It shows the hair extensions and powders very well.”

“We wanted to emphasize the product’s ability to transport you to a fantasy world of your making, to become anyone you want to be,” the assistant said.

Shara suddenly felt unwell. “Where did you get this idea?”

“We polled our employees informally and this was the image that won. A boy in the mail room suggested it.”

“Mail room,” Shara repeated. “What’s his name?”

“Griffin, I think.”

“Griffin—.”

“I don’t know his last name. I can find out if you like.”

“Thank you. That would be great,” Shara said absently. She didn’t know a Griffin. “Well, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll get out of this dress,” she said, regaining her sense of humor. “It’s a little much for noontime, don’t you think?”

“I like it,” Garland pronounced, running his hand over its exquisite craftsmanship.

“But for lunch?” she smiled coyly.

“It that a hint?” he laughed.

“I’m starving,” she replied, looking up at him through her gold-dusted false eyelashes. “I’ll be ready in a few,” she changed her tone, excusing herself to her dressing room. A quarter of an hour later she emerged wearing New York black from head to toe: black knee-high boots, black leggings, a body-conscious black cashmere sweater, and black cloche pulled over her chin-length hair. All traces of the metallic powder were gone from her face and body. Joff’s golden heart was her only adornment.

Although she had lost her appetite, they shared a quick lunch at a popular Midtown eatery. Garland knew the owner well and they had no problem being seated without a reservation. In an odd way, Shara felt like royalty whenever she was with Garland. It was a far cry from the life she had known as the Queen of Shalemar, but it was fun nonetheless to enjoy the trappings of being associated with a player on the Manhattan social scene.

Garland was one of the princes of New York. Doormen and maître d’s in every corner of the city knew him and appreciated his business, not to mention the buzz the restaurant or club earned because of Garland being seen—and even better—photographed entering or exiting the venue. In some ways, it reminded Shara of a day in Shalemar, the notable difference being that few cared much about her being seen with Garland, while in some ways she had been more of an attraction than Joff.

They took their seats at the best table in the restaurant. It had just received favorable reviews, so it was packed with a waitlist during the lunchtime rush.

“Are you coming to the Hamptons this weekend?” Garland asked. “It’s supposed to be a gorgeous fall weekend. Not a cloud in the sky.”

“I’d love to. I never get tired of looking at the sea.”

East Hampton, located on the eastern end of the South Shore of Long Island, was a summer destination outside the city, with hordes of weekenders flocking to it on Friday evenings. Garland and Eric had an oceanfront home with a private beach that was beautiful year-

round. Shara accepted every invitation to join them. It was the closest she could come to a weekend away at the Royal Residence by the Turquoise Sea.

“Would you like to hear our specials, Mr. Silverman?” the waitress asked, doing her best to show him her model smile. She mentioned a stuffed quail dish with kumquats and kimchee, roasted fennel soup with Roquefort garnish topped with toasted walnuts, and barnacles with lemon aioli.

“Barnacles?” Shara asked, looking up suddenly.

“Yes, goose-neck barnacles prepared in seaweed-infused water and served with lemon aioli for dipping.”

First the mural, now barnacles. Shara felt afraid for the first time in a long time. Were these signs, warnings, or merely coincidences?

“They taste of the sea, the barnacles,” the waitress explained. “The meat is hot pink. Mother Nature’s artistry.”

Shara would have agreed to eat all the barnacles in the Turquoise Sea for the chance to go back to the way things were before Malina’s visit. If only she had said “no” when she had cast the deciding vote, putting a stop to Malina’s taking control of Joff, seizing the throne, and unleashing a torrent of evil on the people. Shara had never heard of eating barnacles until she was in Shalemar. Now this.

Shara opted against what she knew to be slimy creatures, choosing instead a grilled salmon salad with kale and toasted quinoa in a pomegranate vinaigrette. It was topped with dried figs and charred hazelnuts—something she never would have eaten in Shalemar.

“I have good news,” Garland announced. “Profile Cosmetics now represents five percent of Silverman Holdings. That’s thanks largely to you.”

“It’s a great product line. It’s kind of a funny thing when people with flawless hair and complexions embrace products designed for those of us with real flaws.”

“Darling, all your flaws are beautiful,” he teased. “This business has been a revelation. Thank you for your part in it.”

“Do you think someday I could spend a little time in the business office? I would enjoy getting to know the inner workings of the company.”

“Of course. You know, you are very unusual. In all the years of working with one model or another, you are the first to ask to get to know the business. I’ll arrange time for you to spend with one of the accounting staff,” he said.

“I’m rather fond of Profile Cosmetics.”

“I might have guessed. What do you think of Steampunk?”

“Steampunk?” she asked blankly, taking a bite of salad.

“You don’t know what Steampunk is?”

“No,” Shara replied, shaking her head, wondering if he was talking about some rock band she must have missed.

“H.G. Wells, Jules Verne—20,000 Leagues?”

“I didn’t know it was called Steampunk.”

“It’s a style. Eric wants our Halloween party to have a Steampunk theme this year.”

“So, I should come dressed as a submarine with a giant octopus attached to it?”

Garland laughed. “No. Corsets, fishnet stockings, short poufy skirts, and mechanical parts. Very sexy.”

“Like a wind-up doll?”

“You really have no idea, do you?”

Shara shook her head and took another bite of salad, spearing one of everything to get a complete bite.

“Talk to Eric. He’ll dream up a costume for you. I’d ask for extra gears and cogs. Maybe even a mechanical arm.”

She had the passing thought of Shalemar’s astronomical clocks sounding a bit Steampunk. She could almost hear the mechanical wizardry working, the gears turning in perfect time. She wondered what had become of the project to rebuild the clock in the Throne Room. If there was a Throne Room.

Their lunch was interrupted by the first of several Manhattan elites who came to their table to talk with Garland. Shara found it amusing to be so invisible, and astonished by people's rudeness, just dropping by to bend Garland's ear. It seemed everyone wanted a piece of the young tycoon.

As lunch wore on, she began scanning the restaurant, looking to see if anyone was watching her. This Griffin fellow could be anyone. Her distraction was just beneath the surface. She would need to be more vigilant. She had been complacent for too long.



Shara turned down a ride across town from Garland in his chauffeured car, opting instead to walk in the overcast October weather. She wrapped a woolen shawl over and around her head before finishing her ensemble with a pair of oversized dark sunglasses. Some of the paparazzi followed her for a few feet after she strode away from the restaurant, but they lost interest in her and headed off in their cars and motorcycles to hound the next celebrity target.

Shara felt safer under her yards of fabric and black glasses. She could study the world better when less of her was visible.

She was restless. The streets of New York had become a menacing place filled with unknown legions watching her. Who was Griffin? One of Malina's spies? How much did he know about her? How long had he been watching her? Was he watching her now? She pulled her shawl farther over her head to help shield her face.

From behind her tinted lenses, she looked at the people around her on the street. Most were typical New Yorkers caught up in their lives, hailing cabs, talking on their phones, dashing to appointments. Only a tourist mother and daughter seemed to notice Shara, and then they seemed more interested in having seen a real, live New Yorker dressed in signature black than in her identity. No one seemed to be watching her. But she knew he was there.

In a way, she had been waiting for this day. She had thought it would have come sooner. Someone had found her and was alerting her to their imminent contact. She would need to be more attentive to her surroundings.

Shara stopped to take a fencing class on the way home. It was good exercise and she enjoyed the discipline. It also prepared her for her possible return to Shalemar. Being able to defend herself with a sword could come in handy. She traded head-to-toe black for head-to-toe white and entered the studio.

Fencing seemed equally romantic and practical. It reminded her of Shalemar and the workouts Joff had put her through after her imprisonment in the Castle of Din. It freed her imagination the way riding had always done for her. It became a private expression of her frustrated desires to return to Shalemar.

Fittingly, she had become a student of a school of Spanish swordsmanship, La Verdadera Destreza. Even though it dated to after the founding of Shalemar, Shara felt closer to its origins than to those of other schools of fencing. She liked the idea that to learn this technique was to learn something more than combat training, a mindset of art, science, philosophy, and experience that had evolved from master swordsmen, the earliest of whom—Don Jeronimo de Carranza—dated to 1569. Whenever Shara put on her fencing pants and jacket and took her Spanish rapier in hand, she felt as if she had been transported back to Shalemar. It was a good feeling.

Shara took her place on the periphery of a circle, the “Magic Circle,” painted on the floor of the studio. It was bisected with multiple lines at various angles. She saluted her opponent before the two pulled their masks over their faces and she extended her sword straight out from her shoulder.

On that day, she needed an intense workout. She was a little afraid of what being discovered would mean. Who would make first contact with her? An assassin or an ally?

She took out all her fears on her opponent in her first match, making him beg for mercy. She performed well. Her footwork and

downward thrusts were precise. But this was a class, a recreational activity, not a fight to the death.

“Ms. King, please don’t kill your opponent,” her instructor said, but there was a sharp warning in his humor. “Destreza.” Skill.

Shara’s instructor teased her for fencing as if she were in some pitched battle, so great was the intensity of her effort. With a good-natured chuckle, she explained it away as stress at the office. She said it with a smile, knowing how silly it sounded.

She performed for a camera for a living, a job dismissed out of hand by her fellow students, most of whom were Wall Streeters, doctors, and lawyers. She underwent some good-natured ribbing about the stress of standing in front of a camera for an hour.

“When you wear one of those beaded dresses you worry you’ll step on the hem and tear loose a thread, releasing millions of tiny beads all over the floor. Stress.”

Her fellow fencers laughed at the idea of a model being stressed out from work. “I’d like your stress,” one of the male students called over his shoulder.

“Anytime,” Shara finished, taking satisfaction in knowing that of all the students in their class, he would have been the least able to handle it.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” the instructor called, clapping his hands to gain their attention. “Good work today. Let’s wrap up by revisiting the basics, to center your practice on the fundamentals. Step into your circles. Where are your feet? Correct the placement to have a favorable angle of attack. Position your body at a 45-degree angle from your opponent. Check the angle of your arm. It should be at 90 degrees.”

He walked among the students, using his blunt practice sword to tap on the students’ imperfections and encourage them to adjust the position of their shoulders, hips, feet, and chins. In all he was pleased with the skill of the group. He called out numbers and the students moved to positions in a drill, aligning their swords and bodies with the lines in the circle, using geometry to define their movements. Their

actions were precise, moving their feet and bodies and swords around the circles in prescribed fashion.

Most of the students studied a fixed point on the exposed brick wall. Shara envisioned Drolan soldiers, facing them one at a time until she had vanquished them all.



“You were on fire in there,” Joyce Du Marc said as they walked to the women’s locker room. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” Shara replied, smiling nonchalantly.

Joyce gave her a wry look that told her she didn’t believe a word. The statuesque lawyer had an earthy understanding of the way the world worked, and could call a spade a spade. Her perception of a situation was unfailingly on target.

She had been a promising Martha Graham dancer when a knee injury prompted her return to school for a law degree. Joyce possessed the confidence of a litigator and the elegance of a dancer. She wore her clothes better than most runway models. To say that she sparkled did not do justice to her exuberant personality. Shara admired her for her accomplishment and effortless style, as well as her wit and independence. She reminded Shara of Eve.

Shara spent her days in the company of people a decade older than she was. She had learned to act like a young Manhattanite from watching other women, observing them for behavioral cues. She studied everyone from the c-level executives at Garland’s companies to the young professionals who picked up their lattes at the same time of day as Shara, to fashionable women she saw on the city streets.

Joyce had emigrated with her parents from Haiti when she was ten. When they had arrived in New York, her father had worked as a taxi driver. Her mother had spent nights attending college classes and cleaning high-rise offices. After her father had died in a taxi accident, Joyce’s mother had graduated and gone to work as an assistant to the principal of an art consulting firm. Now she worked part-time as one of the firm’s senior art consultants. Etienne had seen to it that Joyce

stayed in school all the way through law school. It had been Joyce's father's wish that his only daughter become educated as a professional.

"What's new at Big Law?" Shara quizzed, using Joyce's term for her large corporate firm.

"One of our cases went sideways, crashing almost four months of work, weekends and all. We're going to trial, which is the worst outcome for a corporate litigator. The senior associate is pissed. He's watching his shot at partner trickle away."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"He deserves it. He's an ass. As for me, I already got assigned to another matter."

"Your mother calls your firm a sweatshop for a reason."

"All in a day's work, making the world a safe place for large corporations," she said flippantly.

"Any word from Robert?" Shara asked about her friend's most recent crush.

"Not a peep. I think he's moved on."

"Men," Shara laughed. "There are three things you must remember about all men," she said. "First, allow them a second chance. It often takes them another go at matters of the heart to get them right. Second, things are not always what they seem. Men are distracted by the affairs of the world. What may seem highly personal to you may in fact be quite the opposite. And third, men are easily led. They need constant guidance—all in subtle degrees, of course, for it is of the utmost importance that men believe they rule their own destinies."

"Wise words."

"From a wise woman."

"Your mother?"

"A beloved aunt," she said. It made her feel good to invoke Genevieve. How she missed her.

"That new Cinderella movie is opening this weekend," Joyce commented. "If you have time, let's fit it in. I could use a reminder about true love and happily ever after—not to mention a Cinderella

moment with a fabulous dress and a grand entrance down a long staircase.”

Shara smiled thoughtfully. “That does sound fun. Maybe Robert will come around and meet you at the bottom of your staircase.”

Joyce gave an exaggerated sigh in response. “From your mouth to God’s ears. In the meantime, remember we have the opening of the abstract expressionist exhibition next week at the Guggenheim.”

Shara had been pleased with the invitation to something she knew nothing about. She was looking forward to viewing art with Joyce’s mother, who could explain what they were looking at and why it was significant enough to be included in the exhibition. Etienne Du Marc was always eager for the opportunity to share her knowledge of art and art history.

Four more blocks and they reached a beaux-arts building and navigated the construction site outside the main entrance. After crossing a plywood bridge and following a maze above a work camp set up by the utility company, they stepped into the lobby.

“The gas line repair is getting old. I hope they have it cleaned up before the snow flies,” Shara commented.

The doorman greeted them with a shrug. “Three weeks. Three weeks, they said, and that was a month ago,” he complained with his thick Bronx accent. “Have a good evening, ladies,” he finished as the elevator door closed for its journey to the ninth floor.

Joyce put her key in the apartment lock. The door opened and the two women were met with a warm smile from Etienne, who had a happy baby boy perched on her hip.

Joffrey greeted Shara in the face of his nine-month-old son, Chaucer. He looked just like him.

“Hello, little bunny,” Shara cooed delightedly, her expression brightening with a smile worthy of her Shalemaran days. Chaucer returned her joyful greeting and reached for his mother. Shara cuddled him, rocking back-and-forth and planting a noisy kiss on his cheek. He responded with a fish kiss and eyed his adoring fans, waiting expectantly for their praise.

“Thanks, Etienne,” Shara said, focusing her attention on her son’s middle-aged babysitter. “How was he today?”

“Perfect, as always,” she replied in her lilting Haitian accent. “He’s eating better now with that new tooth. Such a good boy.”

“I am forced to agree,” Shara laughed, smoothing Chaucer’s black curls.

He buried his face in her chest then looked up quickly at the women, confident they were watching him. Which they were.

“What time do you need me tomorrow?”

“About 5:30 pm,” Shara replied just as Chaucer gathered a fistful of her curls and gave them a good yank. Without missing a beat, she untangled his dimpled fingers. “My guess is that it will be a pretty late night. Garland’s secretary said last year’s gala and its after-party didn’t break up until after 1:00 am.”

“We’ll see you about 5:30 pm. Have a nice night with your mom, Chaucer,” she said, giving the little boy a fond pat on his head. He smiled at his babysitter and babbled happily, his turquoise eyes alight.

Etienne radiated more warmth and compassion than almost anyone Shara had ever met. She was just the kind of person Shara wanted her son to know. Etienne had a sincere affection for Chaucer, and he seemed to adore her in return. If Shara had to leave her child with someone, Etienne was more than she could have wished for. A chance meeting with Etienne in the elevator had led to a friendship and the ideal solution to Shara’s child care needs.

“What are you doing for dinner?” Shara asked. “I got overly enthusiastic at the farmer’s market and am swimming in vegetables, so stir-fry is on the menu.”

“It sounds a lot healthier than Aunt Paulette’s fried chicken, but that’s where we’re off to,” Joyce replied. “Emphasis on the fried.”

“Well, you ladies have fun. Thanks again. Say ‘bye-bye’ to Etienne and Joyce. ‘Bye,’” she raised Chaucer’s little arm to wave. He gurgled something that sounded almost like ‘bye,’ and they were all enthralled. Shara smiled again before returning to the elevator to climb the final three floors, rubbing noses with the Prince of Shalemar.