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Seeking Crystal B-Format

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The night my life changed began with eating a truly amazing dessert: raspberry cheesecake with dark chocolate sauce. My sister and I had just arrived in America from Italy and were both battling really foul jetlag, the kind where your eyelids need to be propped up with matchsticks and your head feels so heavy it threatens to nod off your neck. Experience told us that we should try to stay awake until a reasonable hour or our body clocks would never catch up. This meant we had gone out to dine rather than fall onto our pillows as I would have preferred. And if we were going to sacrifice sleep for the cause, we at least deserved an excellent sweet reward. I had not been disappointed.

Diamond spent the last part of the meal carefully dissecting her portion, taking tiny spoonfuls, her appetite at zero. I'd already finished mine.

'Have you thought what you are going to do with yourself while I'm at the conference tomorrow?' Diamond asked. 'You could sit in at the back but I doubt "Savant Crime: Dealing

with the Offenders" would make the most riveting experience of your life.'

She knew me so well. I could do without listening to a bunch of gifted people with amazing extra-sensory perception telling us all how wonderful they are at solving the world's problems. I couldn't stop my yawns thinking about it so sitting through lectures on stuff I didn't really know much about would probably induce a coma.

'Maybe I'll give it a miss.'

'I don't think they'd mind.' Diamond had picked up the yawning from me but shrouded hers with a napkin.

'Who are "they"?'

'I told you.'

Was she really going to leave half her dessert? I eyed it speculatively, twiddling my fork in my fingers. 'You did? Sorry, must've tuned that out. You know me: I just come along for the ride.'

Diamond sighed. She had given up on getting me to focus on the stuff she thought I should know, recognizing I had a stubborn streak that meant I only listened when it suited me. I'm one trial of a younger sister.

'Then I'd better tell you again as you'll no doubt meet some of the people from the conference at the social events.' Her voice was, as ever, endlessly patient with me. 'It's been organized by the influential American Savant family, the Benedicts; several of them are involved in law enforcement.'

'And this influential family just begged international peacemaker, Diamond Brook, to be their star speaker.' I grinned at her. 'They're lucky to get you.'

'Stop it, Crystal, it's not like that.' Diamond looked sweetly flustered by my cheerleading for her brilliance. 'There are no stars in the Savant Net; we work together.'

Yeah, right. Forget what she said; we all knew she was

something special. Unlike me. I was down as her bag carrier on these jaunts, roadie on the Diamond tour.

'I don't know what I'll do. Maybe I'll go shopping.' I scraped the last remnants of chocolate sauce off the plate, making artistic swirls with the prongs of my fork. 'I need new jeans and Denver looks a good place to hunt for bargains—much cheaper than home. At least I'm good at shopping.'

My frivolous plans put that look on Diamond's face, the one where her soulful brown eyes brimmed with concern. Here came the sisterly pep talk; she couldn't resist even though we were both so tired we were drooping in our seats.

'I was hoping, Crystal, that you might, you know, take the next few days to give some serious attention to your future. I picked up a stack of brochures for colleges so you can retake your exams. They're in my case back at the hotel.'

I shrugged. I really did not want to go there, not while I was enjoying the lingering taste of chocolate.

'Or if you don't want to do that, then maybe we should start thinking about an apprenticeship? You always liked fashion and design. We could ask Signora Carriera if she needs any help for the Carnival. It would be great experience learning how to run up so many different kinds of costume so quickly. I know for a fact she has lots of work right now because she's also making some for a big Hollywood movie shooting in Venice next month.'

That did sound interesting but the chirpy waiter was back, refilling our coffee cups with an actor's flair. Maybe he was one, 'resting' between jobs like me. Though, to be honest, at nineteen, I'd not even got my career off the launch pad.

'How's your meal, ladies?' he asked, his eyes on my sister, hoping for a crumb of praise. I could tell he had already fallen in love with Diamond as most possessors of the Y chromosome did.

'It was lovely, thank you.' She gave him one of her warmest smiles, her bobbed hair swaying slightly as she looked up. Diamond had the neat dark swing cut and features of a Cleopatra, Elizabeth Taylor-style. In Diamond's case, the resemblance to the queen was genuine as our mother was Egyptian. Dad had been a British diplomat who fell in love with Mama on a posting to Cairo and whisked her away as his bride. We are a truly international family—Diamond and I now living in Venice, roughly halfway between our roots in the leafy Home Counties and the dusty banks of the Nile. I didn't feel I had a strong national identity. Italy was my adopted, rather than native, country. Maybe that sense of being rootless was another part of my dissatisfaction with myself?

All politeness, the waiter finally remembered to seek my opinion. 'And how was your dessert?'

'Yeah, it was great.' I smiled but his attention had already skipped back to my sister. He retreated, satisfied, his gaze lingering on Diamond rather than me. I didn't blame him: I had inherited the striking pharaoh looks, strong nose and emphatic eyebrows but none of the prettiness, as in my case the features were topped by the lion's mane from my father's side. Savants tend to have complicated inheritances—ours no exception. Dad had had a Venetian mother with the hair characteristic of some northern Italians: a riot of curls that included every colour from dirt brown to sun-bleached blonde. You sometimes see it in the paintings of the Old Masters but mine is not a Madonna's smooth undulating wave but a choppy sea of a frizz. Beside my sister I always felt like the mangy lioness with a sleek, exquisite pussycat.

The tourist magnet of the Hard Rock Café was filling up with students and travellers, the noise levels soaring, our waiter pulled in many directions by numerous orders. I found my eyes drawn to a glass display case claiming to contain a genuine

Michael Jackson military-cut jacket, enjoying the odd optical illusion that made my reflection look as though my head was poking out of the neck. I yawned again. What had we been talking about? Oh yeah.

'You really want me to work for Signora Carriera? It would be slave labour.' I knew the costume maker who lived below our apartment in Venice quite well as I often walked her dog when she was busy. She was a pleasant enough neighbour but would be one demanding boss. It made me shudder just to think about what demands she would make on my time.

Diamond pushed her dessert aside. 'I hate to see you waste your life like this.'

'I hate waste too. Pass that over. The cheesecake is ledge.'

'What?'

'Legendary.'

My sister sighed, biting back the comment that at nearly six feet I needed to watch my weight. It wasn't that I was fat but—how did she put it?—oh yes, I was *Amazonian* compared to the rest of my sisters, blessed with average dress sizes. I didn't care. Who was I out to impress? No boys asked me on a date because I was taller than them all and they feared the mockery. 'Beanstalk' was the friendliest of the names I had endured at the boarding school in England I had attended.

'Crystal, don't think I don't understand. It was rotten losing Dad during your A level year,' Diamond continued gently.

I forked up another mouthful, defying the flash of pain her remark sparked. Rotten didn't even begin to describe the emotional gutting I had experienced. He had been my one admirer in my family, always on my side when I was disadvantageously compared to my six older brothers and sisters. He had found my height amusing, referring to me as his 'little girl' at every opportunity even though I could see the bald patch on top of his head fringed by curls when we stood side by side. No

wonder I had crashed and burned spectacularly in my exams. His death had taken the best part of me with him.

Diamond touched the back of my wrist lightly, attempting to comfort me though the grief was out of reach of such gestures. 'Mama asked me to look after you. She wouldn't expect me to let you mark time like this for no purpose. She'd want to see you going after something that you really wanted to do.'

'Diamond, good try. We both know that Mama is too exhausted by raising the six of you to worry too much about me.' I had been born ten years after Diamond, who was the sixth youngest in our parents' brood of seven, a surprise to everyone, most especially my mother, who was beyond what she thought were her childbearing years. 'She's ecstatic being grandma. How many is it now?'

'Twelve between them: Topaz's six, Steel's two, Silver's one and Opal's three.'

'I'm glad you're keeping count; I'm a rubbish aunt. Twelve cute little grandkids to spoil and not have to take responsibility for—Mama is hardly going to get in a flap about me.'

Diamond, ever the peacemaker in our family as well as for the world, shook her head. She made that little circling gesture with her finger that had the waiter leaping to bring us the bill. 'Mama does care but her health is not the best these days. Not since Dad.'

'So that's why she moved in to that granny flat near Topaz without a spare bedroom, is it?' *Listen to yourself, Crystal.* I sounded so bitter. This had to stop. My predicament wasn't Diamond's fault. With Dad's passing, Mama had not just lost her husband; she had lost her soulfinder, as we Savants call our life partners. I couldn't really understand it, not having one myself, but I knew intellectually that that was a kind of death for a Savant. Her grief had held centre stage when he died and

Diamond was the only one who had stepped forward to give me a hand when I had stumbled out of school with a clutch of 'E' grades and no future. 'Sorry, I'm tired. You're right: I'll give your idea about the costumes some thought. I don't think I can face redoing my exams.'

'Good. You've got so much potential; I just want you to find a direction for it.' Diamond gave me her special smile. She was incredibly gifted at calming troubled souls and I couldn't help but feel a bit better for a touch of her soothing power. Her skills were much sought after in the Savant community and she was often brought in to negotiate between warring factions. We Savants are people who are born with that bit extra, perhaps a gift for telling the future, moving things with our minds, or talking telepathically, but it can lead to disputes as you get so many gifted people rubbing shoulders together like a bunch of divas at the Fenice Opera House all vying for the limelight. Diamond had the best power in our family. It was pretty cool to watch her reduce a slavering guard dog of a litigant to a fawning puppy. All my brothers and sisters had gifts to some degree. Except me.

I am the equivalent of what in the Harry Potter world is called a squib. A damp squib. As the seventh child, all had expected me to come loaded with the whole box of fireworks. Instead they got a girl who could tell you where you left your keys. Yes, that's right. I'm the equivalent of the whistling key fob. I see the stuff you are attached to like space junk circling the earth and, if needed, can give you the general direction where to find something you've lost. I can't do telepathy because when I connect to other Savants it's like flying right into the cloud of defunct satellites and I get knocked out of orbit, so I'm almost completely useless, my gift nothing more than a party trick and aid to the careless. Still, my family are quick to make use of it.

Take yesterday. Topaz rang while we were at the airport, but not to chat about me. 'Crystal, Felicity left her coat at school somewhere. Can you be a love and tell me where it is?' My sister Topaz was mother to the most forgetful girl in the world.

Within reasonable distance—this case ten miles as we were changing planes at Heathrow—my gift still works. I closed my eyes. Little bit of manoeuvring between the things whirling about in Felicity's mind and . . . 'It's fallen behind the painting table.'

'What on earth is it doing there? Never mind. Thanks, sweetie. See you soon.'

That is the kind of conversation I have with my brothers and sisters all the time. I am the Go-to Girl for life's clutter.

My gift is more a nuisance than a blessing. This is especially annoying because being a Savant already has a sting in its tail: all of us are destined to find the love that completes us only with our Savant counterpart, or soulfinder, like my parents had. They were incredibly lucky to meet each other, as our soulfinder is conceived somewhere in the world at the same time we are. Our lives are a search for that other person but the chances are low that we will find them as they could belong to any race, any country. Just think about it—your partner might die and leave you devastated as my mama was by Dad's death, or they might be already married by the time you meet them. I'd heard stories of soulfinders who had met only when in their old age. You probably won't even speak the same language. My brothers and sisters have had mixed fortunes: Steel struck lucky, meeting his Japanese soulfinder when he was twenty-five through a dating agency that specializes in Savants. His twin, my sister Silver, had not waited to find hers and had already gone through a stormy divorce. Topaz was happy with her husband, but we all knew he was not 'the one' though he

is a great guy. Opal had found hers in Johannesburg and now lived there. Our youngest brother, Peter, was like Diamond and me: still waiting.

I didn't hold out much hope for myself: if my counterpart existed, he'd either be amazingly talented to make up for my shortcomings, and that would condemn me to a life of living in his shadow; or he'd match my feeble powers and be so weak that we'd barely sense each other. I couldn't do telepathy without serious side effects; and without two minds meeting, Savants can't tell if they are a match. Sucks to be me sometimes. Well aware of my shortcomings, I preferred to avoid the company of other Savants, so perhaps a career in costume making would not be a bad direction for me to take?

Diamond settled the bill and we gathered our belongings to go. In the mile-high city of Denver, the autumn nights are cool so it took a while to button up and put on gloves and scarves. We emerged on to the street, momentarily disorientated by being in a foreign city.

'The air is so thin here.' Diamond peered up between the skyscrapers to catch a glimpse of the starry sky. 'In Venice you can always tell what you are breathing.'

'Yes, because living at sea level means it's always damp or smells of drains. If we stay there any longer, I think we'll develop gills and webbed feet.' I linked my arm through hers and began to lead her back to the hotel. It was only a few blocks away and I could find my direction by sensing where my suitcase was stowed. How strange to walk among the canyons of high-rise buildings iced with anonymous glass when we were used to streets of the ornate, quirky, and crumbling.

Diamond accepted my guidance without question, knowing I had the instincts of a homing pigeon. 'And how do you know I don't already have webs between my toes? I've lived in our grandmother's apartment for longer than you.'

I chuckled. 'I swear Nonna did. As a true bred Venetian she must have been part mermaid.'

'Well, you can't get further from the sea than Denver.' Diamond did a little twirl on the spot, semi-drunk on her exhaustion. 'It's odd but I feel so at home, like part of me has always been waiting to come here.'

'Diamond!' My warning system flared a moment too late. Three men stepped from a dark alley in a gap between shuttered shops, cutting off our retreat. I had a quick impression of dark hoodies, faces obscured by scarves pulled up over mouths, knives—shadowy, anywhere villains. One grabbed the strap of Diamond's shoulder bag and sliced it through. She foolishly tried to hang on and was swung around as he tugged viciously to get it free. I went to help but the other two tackled me; we landed in the gutter, with me on the bottom as they fumbled for my handbag. One elbowed me in the stomach as he got up; the other punched my head on the kerb.

After that, things go blurry. Pounding feet. A noise that sounded like a roar of an enraged beast.

'Police!' Click of a gun magazine being slotted into place. 'Move away from her!'

Swearing and then swift retreat of three pairs of soft-footed trainers. I lay on my back, awkwardly half-on-half-off the pavement, stars whirling.

The man who had come to our aid hurried to my sister's side. She was sitting on the ground, bag clutched to her stomach. I got to my knees, head throbbing, and pulled myself on to the kerb before I got run over by the next vehicle to pass.

'Are you all right, ma'am?' Our rescuer crouched before her.

'Yes, yes, thank you. Just a bit shaken up.' Diamond's eyes were filled with tears and she was shivering, triggering every protective instinct in a man.

He reached out to help her up. I don't think he'd even

noticed me as I was in the shadows between streetlights while she was spotlighted. When their hands touched there was a gasp of indrawn breath as they surged to their feet.

'My God, it's you! I can hear you in my mind!' Diamond gazed up at her saviour as if he was Christmas day and all her birthdays rolled into one. If I dipped into my Savant sight I could see all her swirling space junk was now centred on him, like a magnet dragging iron filings.

'Yes, it really is me.' Then, without another word being exchanged, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her.

Wow. I didn't know if to applaud or laugh. It was like watching some really clichéd romantic film—love at first sight—impromptu embrace like that famous photo of the sailor kissing the nurse on VJ Day in Times Square.

Jealous much? Of course I was.

Finally, they broke apart.

'Who are you?' At last my sister had the sense to remember they hadn't even been introduced.

'Trace Benedict. And you?'

'Diamond Brook.'

He framed her face in his hands as if he was holding the most valuable object in the world. 'I know that name. You're here for our conference. Pleased to meet you, Diamond.'

'And you, Trace Benedict.' Her gaze drifted down to his mouth.

Oh no, not again.

He bent to her again, this time giving her a sweet, tender kiss, a hello to his soulfinder. I didn't dare move. I wasn't so selfish as to spoil the greatest moment of their life by complaining that I had a slight concussion and was smeared with unmentionable stuff from the gutter. I removed a McDonald's wrapper from my leg with a flick of a fingertip. Yuck. Diamond would remember me. Eventually.

'I can't believe you walked right into my life. I've been waiting so long.' Trace rubbed his finger along her cheekbone, caressing the corner of her pretty mouth. 'I had to admit I had hoped, when I saw you on our guest list and noticed that you were my age . . . '

'We always hope, don't we, when we meet another Savant who might be the one?' Diamond smiled shyly up at him.

'I've been introduced to so many possibles with the right dates of birth; thank God that you turn out to be my one.'

I sighed and rubbed my aching temples. I feared their script was not very original but I couldn't blame them for the headache.

'Meeting my soulfinder was the last thing I expected when I accepted the invitation to come.' My sister sounded so sweet—happy and shy at the same time.

He bent to pick up her bag and handed it back to her. 'You're the peacemaker, right?'

'Yes. I have a small consultancy firm based in Venice.'

'Venice, Italy?'

'Is there another Venice?' Her eyes twinkled at him with gentle teasing.

'In America? Sure. There are probably about seven or eight. Italy, hey?' He kissed her lightly, already so familiar, unable to keep his hands off her. 'I work for the Denver police department. How are we going to work that one out, I wonder?'

Crumbs, this was fast. They had met, like, five minutes ago and already he was moving in.

'My job is easy to do from anywhere in the world; it's only Crystal I have to . . . ' Suddenly remembering my existence she pushed away from him. 'Crystal, oh my God, Crystal, are you OK?'

I waved feebly from the kerb. 'Fine. You two carry on. I don't want to spoil the hearts-and-flowers stuff.'

Diamond hurried to my side. 'You're hurt? I can't believe I left you sitting there and you're injured. Trace, please.'

I had already gathered that my brother-in-law-to-be was a capable soul. He hardly needed my sister's prompting to help me limp to a doorstep. He had a flashlight on the end of his keychain and he shone it in my face.

I blinked and shaded my eyes.

'Bump on the head but pupils responding. I think we'd better get her to ER just in case.'

An electric shock of panic ripped through me. 'I'm fine. Really. I don't want to go to hospital.' Last time I had been was my eighteenth birthday. Dad had taken me out for dinner to celebrate but had a heart attack before we'd even ordered. I ended up spending my special night in the hospital breaking the news to Mama and the rest of the family that he was gone. Even thinking about it gave me that ugly feeling like falling down a manhole into nothingness.

Fortunately, Diamond knew full well I wouldn't go willingly to a medical centre. 'She doesn't like hospitals. Perhaps we can call a doctor to check her over?'

Trace pulled out his mobile. 'I've got someone better than that. Let me call my brother. He can give her a check-up better than any machine in the ER.'