

## Light and Dark

Brian Allan Skinner

We watched the storm approach from a long way off. It was west of The Gorge, maybe ten miles. At our backs, towards The Mountain, the sun still shone. First the white clouds marched toward us, thickening and growing darker. They gathered in swirling clots, curdling like milk. Their bellies turned black and ponderous. Then came the slanting rain like an intaglio of sky and, at the bottom, a distant rumbling felt more than heard.

My boyfriend, with the unlikely name of Six, never met a thunderstorm or cloudburst he didn't like. He'd make an unsurpassable Lear. As the grumbling sky began its pyrotechnic display, we hurried back down the trail to the parking lot. As the rain pelted us, I headed to the warmth and grounded safety of the car. Six handed me his flannel shirt and stood at the edge of the pavement overlooking a steep ravine. I watched him from the rearview mirror. My smudged mascara and damp hair made me look like a button-eyed rag doll.

I shivered watching the rain stream down his chest in cold rivulets. I knew they were cold because the drops hit as hard as hail on the roof and hood of his pickup. Soon his jeans and boots were soaked with icy rainwater. I pulled his shirt tighter around me.

Six has been doing this for the five years we've been living together. I never thought to question it. Standing in thunderstorms seemed as much a part of him as his auburn hair and sly dimples. It gave him simple, inexpensive pleasure and it was so much fun warming his bones in bed when we got home.

Six looked skyward and raised his arms to the first streaks of heavy rain. He danced along the edge of the precipice and spouted water like a fountain, a sign he knew I was watching him. The frequency and nearness of the thunderclaps worried me, but how many dozens of times had Six done this? I'd lost count. I grew tired of his joke about my buying a New Mexico lottery ticket if lightning ever does strike him.

As I watched him romp in the downpour, my entire field of vision exploded with a white light as hot as an incandescent bulb. The crack deafened me. Snaking branches of fire seared the asphalt. I could smell the melted tar. Six was gone.

I jumped from the cab of his pickup, not considering there may still be danger. He lay where he had stood. His left boot smoldered. The copper rivets and zinc buttons of his Levi's had been yanked from the tough denim. A patch of his hair had been singed. I reviewed what little I might remember of CPR.

As I leaned down toward him, Six sat bolt upright. His eyes flashed open.

"Wow," he said. "I have seen the light."

I knew he expected me to laugh. He already had a nasty wound on the top of his head or I might have clobbered him. I helped him to his feet. His jeans were in tatters.

He was wobbly and leaned on me for support. He needed a boost to climb into his own truck. I put his dry shirt over his shoulders and made him lie against me. I cranked up the heat.

“Keep talking,” I told him, something it wasn’t difficult to persuade him to do. I drove as fast as I ever have in my life, and chose to swerve around potholes rather than plow through them as I usually did.

I loved Six more than my life, something I never quite managed to express to him in words. For that matter, I hadn’t told myself until now.

He turned his head to look up at me.

“Yes, I know,” he said. “You are my life, too.”

\* \* \*

I was unable to sit still in the ER waiting room. Their magazines annoyed me, especially *Vapid Magazine*—Where Everything That Doesn’t Matter Matters™. I ripped it in half and threw it in the trash, considering it a community service. I emptied their coffee machine one cup at a time and wore a shiny path in the carpet. I pestered every nurse and attendant with questions. They should have done themselves a favor and given me a sedative.

Replaying every scene from the trailhead parking lot to the emergency room, I kept stumbling over the remark Six made that suggested he’d read my mind. He was rather sensitive for a guy, so maybe it was nothing more than his customary attentiveness. But it struck me nevertheless as a little creepy. His timing had been perfect.

Six claimed to remember little of his life before age ten, when he was taken into a foster home with five other children. He was nicknamed “Number Six,” and it stuck. He told no one what his birth family’s name was. After leaving his foster family at eighteen, he’d always worked for a landscaper called *Mila-grow Nursery & Greenhouse* here in Red Willow. He liked his job and was good friends with two of his co-workers, Lance and Antonio. He even got along with his boss. Everyone loved Six, especially me.

At last I settled into recalling our happy times of the last five years. Though not in a big way, marriage was on my mind the past few months. I imagined various scenarios for Six’s proposing to me, from endearing to silly.

When the doctor emerged from the surgery, I’d fallen sound asleep sprawled on the hideous lounge sofa, worse than anything in my college dorm. It was nearly two in the morning.

“Hypatia Diggs?” he asked.

It was a safe bet it was me since I was the only person in the waiting room.

“I’m happy to tell you Six is going to be fine,” Doctor Morgan said. “There was actually very little we could do for him. We dressed the wound on his foot. He will lose all the toenails, but they should grow back. The wound on his skull, while theoretically more serious, was even less amenable to treatment. The lightning bored a hole through his cranium and traveled an unknown route through his body before exiting through his left foot. The hole in the bone will probably not heal, but the scalp will close over it in time. He’s a young man and should recover completely. But we need to keep him under observation for several days. Lightning is a strange force with unpredictable results. The full damage may not be apparent for months. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Not until after I get home,” I told him. “Can I see him now?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until tomorrow to see him. He’s heavily sedated. Please contact my office if any questions arise. You’ll be instructed on how to dress his wounds.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“Please give the attendant Six’s surname. We need it for our records.”

“Six is it, Doctor Morgan. That’s all he’s got.”

“Very strange,” he remarked, and turned away.

I left the waiting room, disappointed at not being allowed to see Six. I’d had enough caffeine to raise the dead and was too jittery to think of going home to bed. The last place open at that hour was *The Ornerly Burro*, way up on the north end of the Paseo.

I ordered a bourbon and soda, my calming influence whenever I was frazzled, a trick I’d learned from my father. Usually, one was all I needed, but tonight I could’ve stood a second. The bar was closing, though Red Willow liquor ordinance was seldom enforced. I decided I’d go home, make a ginger tea, have a hot shower, and crawl into bed.

Something seemed out of place in the house. Though I’d inherited the *casita* from my parents and lived in it my entire life except for college, it was not complete without Six bouncing around in it someplace. My face in the mirror drooped; my blonde hair looked stringy and unkempt. My white blouse was wrinkled and the shoulder blood-stained.

By the time I made it to bed I was so delirious I was on the verge of praying, something I tried never to do. My parents were hardly believers in the standard variety of slash-and-burn

Christianity, but I couldn't believe in any God except my own, and She was not speaking to me just then.

Each time I closed my eyes I saw an after-image of the lightning flash, following the path of the veins in my eyelids. I have no idea when I finally attained sleep, but when I awoke, it was nearly the crack of noon.

I put on my jeans and sneakers, dropped on the floor the night before, and took a clean but wrinkled blouse from the laundry. I dashed out the door. As I reached my car, an old turquoise pickup pulled up. Antonio, Six's co-worker at the tree nursery, stepped out. He waved me over. Six sat on the passenger side, dressed for work and, in fact, already dirty. He could stand, but was unsteady. He must somehow have got home early in the morning for his clothes.

Antonio and I got Six into the house and onto the bed. He helped me tug Six's boots off, including the left one, without laces, over his bandaged foot. I learned Six had turned up for work at the usual time. No one knew anything about his lightning accident, but they knew he was not himself. He nearly passed out twice, but would not allow anyone to take him to the hospital. He calmed down only when they told Six they would take him home to his "sweetie."

I pulled a blanket from the closet and covered Six. Then I lowered the blinds and motioned to Antonio to follow me out.

\* \* \*

Six remained at home the rest of the week, spending most of that time in bed. Dr. Morgan said it was normal. I'd no sooner gotten off the phone than another trivially important question occurred to me and I called him back. I knew he regarded me as a pest, but I couldn't help it.

Six was affectionate and aloof at the same time. He expressed no interest in sex and I didn't push it, but every time I awoke in the night or rolled over, he had an enormous hard-on that tented the bedsheet. I couldn't wait for him to get better.

The other peculiar, and annoying, change the lightning wrought in Six was that he became maddeningly literal. It was as though every idiom, expression, and colloquialism—of which English has a couple—had been erased from his memory.

"Six, please shut your trap," I urged him when his chattiness got on my nerves. His expression was both hurt and puzzled. I had to find a work-around he'd understand. "Please keep quiet, Six."

When I told him, "See you in the morning," he informed me it was not guaranteed that we would both make it through the night.

"Thanks for that cheerful reminder."

“I do not say it to be cheerful or uncheerful, Hypatia. It is just a fact.”

I switched off the light. “Good night, Six.”

“I hope so,” he said, “but I’ll probably sleep through most of it.”

\* \* \*

It was slow at *Lily of the Alley*, the antique shop where I worked part-time, giving me way too much time for thought. Six no longer seemed the man with whom I’d shared my life this past twentieth of a century. The changes in him seemed big as mountains. I was sorry I hadn’t protested his standing in thunderstorms like a human lightning rod long before the accident.

Six no longer wore any clothing with metal in it—no zippers, buttons, buckles, or rivets. They became hot whenever he got agitated, and either burned his skin or set his jeans on fire. I modified his favorite Levi’s with Velcro and found him boots without a metal shank. It was worse than what I imagined it would be like having an infant around the house.

I was grateful when his boss agreed to let him work half-days at the tree nursery, giving Six any jobs not involving steel or barbed-wire. He became their resident expert on wooden fences, raised planting beds, and stone walkways. I owed his buddy Antonio, too, for urging Six to get up and get moving.

Six’s literalness got him in trouble at work, too. We were afraid he might even be fired. It was a real-life enactment of an age-old joke.

Six was putting up a split-rail fence for a corral at a customer’s *hacienda* out on the Mesa. A Texas tourist with a wide-assed pickup pulled over on the side of the gravel road. He wanted to cut across the corral to gather wild flowers for his wife.

“Go right ahead,” Six told him. “The horses are in the pasture.”

“I ain’t worried about horses, pardner. I’m from Texas. What about your dog? Does he bite?”

“Nope,” Six told him. “Argus is pretty friendly.”

The Texan no sooner had his leg over the top rail than the dog jumped up at him, grabbed his ankle, and pulled him down to the ground. He scrambled through the fence with the dog still attached to his boot. He managed to kick the dog off, but the German shepherd made off with the heel of his fancy tooled boot.

I pictured Six’s startled innocence, his dimples suggesting he wasn’t entirely innocent.

“I thought you said your dog doesn’t bite, you asshole.”

“He doesn’t, mister. But that’s not my dog.”

The Texan was a rootin’-tootin’ Teuton with no sense of humor. He reported the incident to Red Willow County Sheriff Warren Pease, who drove out to investigate.

“I got a complaint your dog bit some rich Texan and he’s pretty worked up. Came limping into my office cussing in German, that’s how mad he was. He lost a boot, like as he’d rather lose a testicle. I’m afraid I’m gonna have to impound your pooch.”

“Argus is at home, Sheriff. It’s Hypatia’s day off and she was going to take him to the river, but maybe she didn’t.”

“Then who the hell’s dog nailed the Texan?”

“I don’t know, Sheriff. That dog was hanging around all morning.”

“Maybe the dog belongs to the owner of this here spread?”

“Doubt it. He took his dog Charlie quail hunting up on the ridge. Won’t be back until tonight.”

“Well, I got my eye on you now, Six. Better toe the line.”

Six told me Sheriff Pease, thoroughly confused by the incident, left holding his hat and scratching his head. The Sheriff probably got a couple splinters.

\* \* \*

Evenings after work, Six went over to Antonio’s place for a couple beers and conversation, and maybe a game of cards. Sometimes he stayed for supper. He worked with this guy all day. Wasn’t that enough? Was it Antonio’s fantasy to seduce a straight man? Was Six’s turning gay a result of the lightning? I phoned Dr. Morgan.

“No, Hypatia, dear,” he told me. “It’s not lightning that turns people gay. It’s rainbows that make you gay.”

And with that he hung up the phone on me.

I guessed I’d have to confront Six about what was going on. I’d never known him to tell so much as a white lie. I decided to get right down to it that night over supper.

“Six, have you ever kissed Antonio?”

He nodded while chewing his tamale.

“Did you like it?”

“It was OK. About like kissing one of my brothers good night.”

“How many times did you and Antonio make out?”

“Just that once.”

“And when was that? Last week, right?”

Six laughed, almost choking on his mouthful.

“No, Hypatia. It was a long time ago, when we were teenagers—way before I met you.”

“So why do you spend so much time over there?”

“I like him. Antonio is my friend.”

“So, what am I, Six?” I knew the chopped liver remark would only confuse him.

“You are my very *special* friend, Hypatia.”

He smiled at me, dimples on high, and I was struck speechless. At last I let him get another bite into his mouth. I felt a little bit ashamed of myself.

\* \* \*

Six’s interest in sex had flagged so dramatically after the accident, I thought of contacting Dr. Morgan yet again. But I knew he’d only repeat his mantra of giving Six time to recover. If I complained to the doctor how horny I was, I’d only convince him I was a selfish bitch. He’d tell me to satisfy myself. But when I did, it felt as much like cheating as if I’d rendezvoused with another man at a backroads motel. Six had become my life. I’d learn to be patient until he was healed—and console myself with gourmet ice cream and thoughts of an engagement ring.

My tolerant attitude changed when, about to shower, I caught Six masturbating. He, too, was naked. He held a nail file in the electric outlet. The lights dimmed when he saw me. Little tendrils of blue lightning crackled across his skin, and all his hair stood on end. His eyes rolled back in his head. I knew better than to touch him. The noise he made was like a coyote’s yowl.

“So that’s why you have no time for me, you selfish bastard.”

“No, Hypatia, I am protecting you. The lightning has made me very powerful.”

“You gave up on me without giving it a try? How about if I tell you if it’s too much?”

“All right, Hypatia. My teacher tells me this would be the safest time to engage in sex with another person.”

“Your teacher?”

“Yes. I met him at Antonio’s. He’s a shaman. The old man says when I have just satisfied myself my energy will be lower and I won’t burn you.”

“Nice to know our love life is being discussed by strangers.”

“Hypatia, please shut your trap.”

Six lifted me up, cradling me in his arms, and carried me to the bedroom. His skin was very warm, but he was not sweating. He laid me down so gently it was like floating onto the bed. He kneeled down over me and caressed every square inch of my skin, starting with my breasts. At times it felt like he had more than two hands. There was a definite undulating electricity coming from his fingertips, but it was pleasurable, not painful, though it was always on the edge of pain. He had lit my fuse. I was ready to explode then and there.

With both hands at the small of my back, he lifted me up until he had penetrated me. My head hung backwards over my shoulders and my feet dangled off the edge of the bed. It was the perfect posture for an ecstasy, and nothing I had ever had with any man, including Six, equaled those long, slow minutes. I’d grown hoarse from moaning and hollering. After my second orgasm, I didn’t care. He could finish me off anytime. I was ready to die.

Then I received a jolt from his penis that crossed the border deep into pain. It radiated outward like a black tsunami, engulfing every pleasurable sensation I had just had, negating them by waking me from the dream. I could not gather enough breath to scream. At last Six looked deeper into my eyes and saw what was happening.

He lowered me back onto the bed, gathered me in his arms once more, and carried me to the shower. The water was ice-cold, but still it hissed and sputtered on his skin. What looked like a tiny geyser shot from the top of his head where the lightning had pierced his skull. I felt the sting of the water around my vagina and knew I’d been burned. I can’t say Six hadn’t warned me. At least I was no longer horny.

Six helped me into a cotton nightgown and pulled back the covers. I lay against the stack of pillows he’d propped behind me. He brought me ointment from the bathroom. I reached into the night table drawer for a contraband cigarette. Rather than commencing a lecture, Six leaned over and lit it with his finger.

I felt pampered again, like I was in a French movie, enjoying the after-sex cigarette. The burn proved no worse than a yeast infection and I recovered in a few days.

\* \* \*

I'd wondered ever since Six returned home what he would do during the next thunderstorm. I knew what I would do: hide whimpering under the bed with his dog Argus. We'd had a month-long drought, not much rain and no lightning or storms. But it was now monsoon season in Red Willow and that was about to change.

It was Saturday and Six was off work. The air felt thick; haze shrouded The Mountain. By early afternoon, the sun was no more than a bright patch in the pervasive cover of clouds. They grew dark, congealing, as thunder rumbled from far away. The sky took on the appearance of a watercolor, dripping and spreading and mixing, from rose to silver to black, eventually resolving into a clear storm front from the southwest. It was mesmerizing.

Not dissuaded by my lecturing and hectoring, Six slipped into his Velcroed Levi's and moccasins, and walked to the end of the long gravel driveway, about as far from the house as one could go without standing in the middle of the county road. He turned around to look for me.

I came up to him and wrapped my arms around his chest, facing the storm with him.

"I'm staying with you this time, Six."

"No, you're not, Hypatia."

A crack of thunder and a flash of light brilliant enough to read with my eyes closed, exploded over our heads. A pelting rain descended on us.

"All right," I told him. "Next time."

"Thank you, Hypatia."

I couldn't imagine the impossible odds that he'd get struck twice by lightning. I pulled my nylon jacket over my head and high-tailed it back to the *portalo*, where I watched Six and the storm grapple in the deepening dark. Part of me—most of me—did not believe what she was seeing. I felt unplugged from reality.

Six raised his arms to the black-bellied cloud above us. From each of his fingers a tendril of light rose skyward, thickening and branching like a river engorged with a flood of fire. When it reached the cloud, the sky responded in kind, sending the tines of a hellish pitchfork to the ground all around Six. My breath caught in my throat as gravel and dirt spat upward, the lightning creating little craters and setting a patch of sagebrush ablaze. If not for the torrent, the

entire field might have caught fire. Six responded even more ferociously. In a thunderous song of answering back and forth, they did battle, two titans fighting for primacy.

At the next flash from Six's hands, the notion occurred to me that he was like the Norse god Thor and, if not a god himself, at least a son of Thor. From that thought sprang the idea that his family name ought to be Thorson—Six Thorson. I couldn't wait to tell him what his name was—provided he emerged the victor.

Their fury finally spent, Six put down his arms and the storm moved on, trailing tendrils of a watercolor sunset. He returned to the house and I helped him out of his wet jeans, his little friend coming to attention at my efforts. That Six had any energy left astounded me.

“This would be a good time for us to make love, Hypatia.”

I looked at him questioningly. *Once burned*, I thought.

“I understand,” he said, and put his arm around me. “I will be careful. I will not get carried away, as they say.”

He smiled, and led me by the hand to the bedroom. Big, bad Argus crawled from under the bed to greet us, drumming our knees with his tail, as though thanking us for making the bad noises stop. I dropped my clothes at the foot of the bed.

Six had only to touch me than the tingling began, soothing and pleasurable like a warm shower or a massage. Slowly he cranked up the voltmeter, whether mine or his—or maybe both—I couldn't tell. I wanted more, then more, as though all memory and fear had vanished. By the time he entered me, I was already on the edge of the cliff. His first gentle push sent me right over the precipice. I screamed all the way down.

Thinking he had hurt me, Six withdrew immediately. I reached up to smooth the wrinkles in his forehead. He leaned on one elbow and then lay down beside me. By the time I pulled up the covers and leaned towards him, resting my hand on his chest, he was breathing in the rhythm of sleep. I heard Argus' nails click on the tile floor and, with a groan, he lay down at the foot of the bed, joining the chorus of sleepers.

\* \* \*

While life settled once more into a routine, it was not the one I was accustomed to. Six still spent too much time with his work buddies. I reminded him more than once that I wanted to meet his shaman. Of course, that word to me was synonymous with charlatan. I got the notion this guy might be the same strange bird my parents followed as their shaman, though he'd be well over a hundred by now. My name for him had been Weird Santa because he had a long white beard and dressed in a strange red jacket with white trim.

It did not suit me, either, that the only time Six could make love to me was after he'd already jerked off. I felt he was holding back on me, though I recalled what happened when he let loose. I didn't know what I wanted, but this was surely not it.

One afternoon I went to the garage to get pliers so I could pull the rivets and buttons out and make Six a new pair of Levi's. All the tools and tool cabinets at the back of the garage had been piled high in a corner, freeing a space that looked exactly like a paint-splattered artist's loft. There were paintings and watercolors everywhere. Hundreds of them, each signed with Six's new moniker—Thorson. When had he had time to do all of this?

On the top of a drying rack made of one-by-twos, were several stacks of watercolors, all cloudscapes, all the same. But as I inspected them more closely, I saw there were subtle differences, as in a movie from one frame to the next. I judged them to be pretty competent drawings, and a few were quite dramatic, nearly abstract.

As I flipped through the stacks of watercolors, the clouds morphed from one shape into another, changing color as they passed across the sun. There was no landscape, just the parade of clouds across the various palettes of sky. One sequence went from a few summery cumulus clouds to a black sky full of storm and rage. The last drawing depicted a pitchfork of lightning. The heavy paper was singed along one edge.

I heard the rumble of Six's pickup in the driveway. It was after five o'clock and he was home from work. Where had two hours flown while I pored over his watercolors? As I heard his truck door slam, I ran out the side door of the garage and raced into the kitchen. I reached the sink and filled a pot with water just as Six entered and came over for a kiss.

"I'm a little behind tonight, lovey," I told him.

"Do I have time for a beer, then?" he asked.

"Maybe two," I replied.

I watched from the kitchen window as he went into the garage. A light switched on. I thought about something quick and simple for supper, a pasta with garlic and dried tomatoes. I had to find out what was going on.

In the uncanny way in which Six had been anticipating my movements and thoughts, he walked through the kitchen door just as I was about to call him in to supper. He deprived me of the chance to barge into his "studio" to announce it was time to eat.

With the pasta dish on our plates and a couple mouthfuls in our stomachs, I confronted him. I couldn't tiptoe around this.

"Where'd you learn to create all those wonderful watercolors, Six?"

He didn't seem the least fazed that I'd found out, but, then again, the garage was never locked. He shrugged, swallowing his food in a hurry.

"Nicolás thinks that's a result of the lightning, too."

"That's him! My parents' guru! When can I meet him?"

"How about after supper? I'll call over there. He's staying with Antonio."

"Is Nicolás gay?"

"I don't know about that," Six said, "but he sure is a queer fellow."

\* \* \*

Antonio's place was not the fussy and frilly house I expected a gay man to inhabit. It was simple and not cluttered with cutesy stuff. It looked like the abode a bachelor might live in: clean and tidy, but not fastidious. He had a lot of Native American pots and rugs, and old rifles mounted on the wall. He invited us into the kiva and passed a small clay pipe I suspected contained wacky weed. Both Six and I declined.

"Nicolás is on his way," Antonio told us. "How about a beer then?"

Six and I both nodded.

Antonio was a handsome bronzed mestizo with bottomless eyes and hair so black it looked blue. He brought four beers on a tray, a dark ale from the local brewery.

When I leaned forward to pick up my glass of beer from the coffee table—made from part of an old barn door—I saw the old man sitting in the wooden chair. He was dressed in an odd red jacket with white trim. I hadn't seen him enter the room. He reached for the glass of beer and his white beard unfurled from beneath his chin, nearly touching the floor. The glass emptied from the bottom to the top as Nicolás drank—some sort of parlor trick, I was sure.

"No, it's not a trick, Hypatia. I save the foam for last, sort of like dessert."

I shook my head.

"I see," the goofy guru remarked. "You'd rather remain convinced everything that is hard to explain is simply not real. That attitude greatly disappointed your parents."

"What do you know of my parents?"

"Enough to feel confident my remark is accurate."

Six and Antonio sat up straighter, no doubt convinced there was going to be a fight. If I were a cat at that moment, I would have arched my back and hissed at all of them.

“I am here to help, child. Six came to me after the lightning strike on the advice of his friend, who has been my student for nearly two years. You may not think so, but Six has received a great blessing, one that must be used and not wasted.”

“A blessing?” I asked.

Antonio took his beer and left the kiva. I heard him go outside. It was a generous gesture to leave me and Six alone with his teacher. I wanted some answers, not an audience.

“Six has received a great deal of power from the sky. He is learning how to use it, but you must be patient with him. He will share his gifts when the time is right.”

“And where did he learn to draw and paint in two months, a talent that takes years to develop?” I asked Nicolás. “Six has never touched brushes and watercolors before.”

“I do not know. Lightning is a mysterious power, hardly understood even by science. But you have seen his artwork so you believe in them. Six has always wanted to create watercolors. The lightning taught him how.”

“But when did you make them?” I turned and asked Six.

“I do not sleep much,” he said. “Not since the lightning entered me. I get up after you are asleep so I do not disturb you and return when I sense you are stirring in the morning.”

“And what about Six jerking off before we can have sex?” I asked the old guru, or shaman, or whatever I was supposed to call him.

“*Teacher* will do,” he said, reading my mind. “I am like Santa Nicolás, teaching people to be generous, to give *themselves*. That is the best gift.”

Nicolás leaned forward and took my right hand.

“Your man loves you more than his own life. You must believe that, Hypatia, and learn to trust him. He is protecting you from his raw power, a power that can kill. You must practice patience. Nothing will bend in your direction until you learn that lesson first. And, like Alice, you must learn to believe six impossible things before breakfast.”

I felt kindness and gentleness in his touch, but I also felt great resistance to everything he said. Six scooted over and grasped my left hand. Then he took Nicolás’s, completing a circle.

“How can I believe events that have no explanation?” I asked the teacher.

“Hard to explain does not mean impossible. There’s a big difference. How many things our forebears considered impossible now fill our daily lives, including the horseless carriage by which you and Six came here?”

“But how do I begin to believe in something impossible?”

“As the White Queen told Alice, ‘I daresay you haven't had much practice.’ You must practice, Hypatia. That is the only way any of us get better at anything.”

Six closed his eyes, and then Nicolás shut his. I felt like the sighted woman in the colony of the blind, except that I’d begun to believe it might be the other way around. I closed one eye and then the other, a little at a time.

I felt the electric tingle I did whenever Six touched me, but it was also coming from his teacher who still held my other hand. I felt the gnarls and wrinkles in the old man’s hand.

Wordlessly, in my mind, I asked Nicolás what his age was, since he was already ancient when my parents knew him.

*I’ve just had my hundred-thirty-ninth birthday—again.*

I wondered whether Six had also heard this. I sensed a *Yes* inside my head in his voice. It freaked me out and I pulled my hands away, breaking our connections.

“Please, dear child, practice being patient, practice for a long time. And accept some instruction from Six.”

I rolled my eyes. Nicolás frowned, and went on.

“Sooner or later, each of us must take some instruction from a man, even a man we love. It is a part of life you must accept, and use it to make you better.”

The sleigh bells dangling from the front door knob jangled, and Antonio walked in. Our session with Nicolás had drawn to a close.

Antonio and Six hugged their teacher. The old man embraced me and Six. Then he left—or, rather, vanished. I hadn’t seen any doors open or close. Perhaps he’d gone back up the chimney.

\* \* \*

Six and I made out like crazy that night after returning home, but neither of us was in the mood for fiery lovemaking. I relaxed, feeling better about Six and our future together. I lost my

concern that his gay friend was turning him gay, and that the weird old teacher was putting crazy ideas in his head. Six was capable of that entirely on his own.

When we got to bed, Six pretended to fall asleep instantly. I lulled myself with the thought that one of these days Six was going to propose to me. It seemed, if not quite impossible, at least improbable. I imagined new scenarios and found I was prepared to say “Yes” in all of them.

As I was slipping down into sleep, there was a flash. I sat instantly upright. Six had turned on his bedside lamp.

“I almost forgot,” he said, sitting up himself and turning to me, smiling.

He placed something warm in the palm of my left hand: a ring of green stone, with beautiful banding in many shades, from pale jade to deep emerald.

“Malachite,” he explained. “From an artist and jeweler in Socorro. I can’t be around too much metal. You know. Will you marry me, Hypatia?”

He lifted my hand and looked into my eyes, searching them for a hint of my answer.

“I’ll have to think about it, Six. It’s rather sudden.”

I saw his expression droop. I could no longer contain the smile waiting to burst forth.

“Yes, Six Thorson, I accept.”

He placed the ring of polished stone on my finger and I leaned over to kiss him. A tiny spark shot from my lips to Six’s. Or, rather, it must have been the other way around.

“If you doubt your powers, Hypatia, they will run away to find someone worthier.”

“Thank you, Six,” I said, and gave him another smack.

This one was stronger and made an audible crack. Six fell back against his pillow.

“That’s better,” he said, and switched off the light.

I managed not to sleep another wink that night, deciding who I would invite to the wedding—probably even Nicolás, the Goofy Guru. Inviting him was the third impossible thing—after the proposal and the electric kiss—and it was hours until breakfast. Maybe it was time to buy a New Mexico lottery ticket, too.