



Stroke of Midnight
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*Excerpt from
Stroke of Midnight*

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Twenty-Four Years Ago, Before Damali...

Knowledge without wisdom: a chance meeting and a fine woman—a lethal combination

(In the wilderness, on the border of Oklahoma and Texas; Tara and Rider on the run)

He watched her long process of walking in a wide ring around where they'd hold up while he built a fire. He didn't mind her prayers, or that she said two sets—one in her own native language and then the only Psalm he'd learned from funerals, the Twenty-third. He watched her carefully sit and wrap the remainder of the dirt in one of his bandanas. It was like watching a grown woman make mud pies, which messed with both sides of his already embattled brain. Then she crooked a finger at him with a gentle smile, crossed her legs in front of her like a Yogi, and patted the ground for him to sit before her.



He gladly submitted. Was beginning to enjoy her strange company. “Now, what, oh learned one?” He was relieved that she laughed, because the sarcastic comment wasn’t designed to offend.

She held a bit of earth in her delicate palm and gazed at him. “I need to put a little of this against your throat. All right? And then you can do me.”

He sat down cross-legged, remembering how soft her hands were. “Yeah, okay,” he said without resistance, then waited for her touch, trying not to seem too anxious for it, yet wondering why that, of all things, would be on his mind—given everything that had just happened?

Cool earth and a soft caress warmed the sides of his neck. Dirt crumbled and fell to his shoulders and rained on his thighs and knees. Her seeking gaze captured his, and for the first time in his life he thought he could actually drown in a woman’s eyes. The feeling was disorienting, if not totally disturbing, while also exhilarating. He could feel such caring enter him, yet, he didn’t even know who she really was. And as her empty palms slid away from his neck, it left an ache so profound that he’d almost held her wrists to bring her hands back to where they’d been.

“Now, you do me,” she murmured, then signed the words with her graceful hands while speaking them softly, “man with a good heart.”

His hands trembled as he reverently gathered a clump of dirt in them. Shit, this was the kind of woman that would make a man marry her, for sure. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, exposing her throat. For a moment, he couldn’t move. Her thick, black lashes dusted her cheeks. The rich, deep, color of her skin was warmed to a glow by the firelight. And for a second his mind took a turn to envision that same expression on her face under different circumstances. An offering that he knew he’d never be able to refuse now, if she made it. But that



was foolish, wishful thinking.

He brought the earth close to her neck, trying not to spill too much on her already dirty dress. He could feel the heat from her skin as his hands neared it. She was breathing in shallow sips of air, her petite breasts rising and falling ever so slightly, and it twisted his mind when he touched her and she shuddered.

That's when it really became difficult for him to catch his breath. Lavender and her light scent fused with earth and burning fire and open grassland. She was so damned soft... he had to fight from leaning in to kiss her, or allowing his palms to run down her shoulders. But she wasn't that way, wasn't that type of woman. And for some very strange reason, he didn't want to offend or push her away.

Bits of dirt fell down her dress, and he followed it with his eyes. Blue calico had just become his favorite color. Flashy blondes a thing of the past. He had to stop touching her, and he did so abruptly. She slowly brought her head up, opened her eyes, and smiled. Her expression was like a magnet.

"Nobody ever told me I had a good heart before. Probably 'cause I don't," he said quietly. "And I've definitely never been called anybody's guardian." He forced a self-conscious chuckle and he rubbed his hands down his jeans. "When they do, it'll be because I'm standing before a judge in family court for child support evasion."

"You're too hard on yourself."

"Madame Seer, you have got to stop messing with my head tonight. I've already had it blown, thank you very much."

"You really don't know the legend, do you?"

"No, but why do I have the funny feeling you're about to tell me?" He had to stop looking at her eyes, and that perfect smile of hers. He reached for his



bottle and took out his cigarettes. “I know this ain’t your thing, but I have to confess to being pretty messed up right now. So, if you’re gonna tell ghost stories around the camp fire, after what we’ve possibly just seen, indulge me.”

She didn’t agree, but didn’t give him grief. He could deal with that. He leaned back on his elbows, took a healthy swig, set the bottle down hard, and brought a cigarette to his lips and struck a match. “All right. Shoot,” he said, dragging as hard on the butt as he’d wanted to kiss her.

“What’s your name?”

He stared at her for a second, and then laughed. “Oh, yeah. Jack Rider.”

“Jack?” She frowned. “No. That’s not right. It’s really Jake... Jacob. A Biblical name.”

He sat up slowly, bottle in one hand, cigarette in the other. *Noobody* knew that.

“You’re scaring me again, sis. Honest to God.”

She began drawing in the dirt with a twig. “There’s a being coming that my people call the great huntress. She comes from a part of the Great Spirit’s soul, is made of love and hope and faith. She’s also known as the Neteru, they say. And from all walks of life, she’ll draw people with special talents. Great warriors.” She looked up. “A tracker is among them, a man with a good heart, named Jake.”

“Aw, that’s bullshit,” he said, making him self feel relieved. “A tracker. That’s me, huh?”

“Yeah. That’s why you have the nose.”

He laughed and took a hard drag on his cigarette, making the end of it glow, then chased the exhale with a swig of Jack Daniels. “I do have a huge snooz, and snore like a buzz saw. All right. Say, for the sake of argument, that I go with this mystical legend. Then what?”



“They’ll be seven around her, a sacred number. They’ll come from all walks of life. Musicians... because music is a universal language that breaks barriers. It’s also an art, but sound, like thunder, is something that comes from the sky, Heaven. Music can be felt, words are important, the sound takes up harbor in the heart. You play guitar, right? You’ll need it.”

He relaxed and leaned back on his elbows, flicking his half smoked butt into the fire. If she could understand that about music, then maybe she wasn’t all that crazy, just a little touched. He could deal with that. He’d been around crazy people all his life—was raised by them.

“Yeah, I play,” he admitted. “Just mess around, from time to time. Won’t ever make a living at it, most likely, but as they say, music soothes the savage beast.”

“You have a gift,” she said, her stare so intense that he could barely hold it. “Whatever people told you about it being less than that, ignore them. Follow your dream.”

For a moment he couldn’t respond. No one had ever looked at him with such utter confidence. No one had ever seen something in him beyond his dirty, grease-monkey hands that could fix an engine, or beyond his roughrider biker façade. And no one had ever told him to follow his dreams, not having heard him play a lick on his axe.

“Your guitar will get you in. It will also be your weapon.”

Just when he thought he was talking to a rational person, he remembered that he was having a discussion with a chic that was certifiable. “You get put out for smoking too much peyote, hon? Since when—”

“You’re supposed to fight vampires with the great huntress’s warriors.”

He sat up and didn’t want to talk about this madness anymore. There was



no such thing as the undead. This conversation was blowing the groove.

“How’d you wind up on a bus with a bunch of religious fanatics?”

“I got in trouble.”