

The Call

A Journey of Discovery

By J.S. Deaton

Mail@JSDeaton.com

Chapter One

A tight sensation fluttered in Kate's stomach. She had the sudden urge to get back in the truck. "Jon, is it too late to go home?"

Jonathan frowned. "Jace and I have no intention of hauling all your stuff back downstairs." He put his arm around his sister. "It's just college. You'll love it. Trust me."

Jace sauntered from behind the truck. "He's right, Katie. It's a blast...especially if you avoid getting arrested." He turned his back on Jonathan's glare and winked at Kate.

"Enough, Jace," Jonathan warned.

"Never enough." Jace leaned into Kate and eyed a passing coed. "Katie, did I mention how great college is?"

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," she said with a roll of her eyes.

He threw his arm across Kate's shoulders. "By the way. I put all these college guys on notice – you're spoken for."

"You're not my type, Jace. And you're too old."

"Age is relative."

"The police don't think so."

Jace sneered and stepped away from Kate. "Jon, I think it's time to go where people appreciate us."

"And where would that be?" Kate said, hands on her hips.

“Far away from you.”

“Well...I guess it is about time you got started on your prestigious college career,” Jonathan said softly.

The smile left Kate’s face, and her brown eyes grew wide. Her eyes clouded with tears.

Jonathan gathered Kate in his arms. “Springville is two hours away. If you need anything, call. We’ll be here.”

“Okay.” She chewed her bottom lip.

Jace pushed Jonathan aside and met Kate’s gaze. “Anything ya need. We’re your guys.”

She forced a smile and hugged him. It was a long time before she let go.

“Now—” Jonathan cleared his throat “— you should settle in, get to practice, and make some friends.”

“We’ll be at every home game,” Jace assured her.

Kate’s face lit up for the first time since she’d arrived. “I can’t wait to get on the court.”

“And don’t forget to find a training partner. To keep up your skills,” Jonathan instructed.

“Man, you’re bossy. Let’s go already!” Jace grabbed Jonathan’s shoulder and pushed him toward the door of the pickup.

Kate backed slowly down the long sidewalk. “Call me when you get home.”

Jace winked and nodded.

Jonathan and Jace stood at the truck until she disappeared into the dorm. They stared at the five-floor building that was now Kate’s home.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Jace said.

Jonathan shrugged. “I promised myself I’d give her a normal life.”

“Nothing about her future will be normal.”

“When The Call comes, we’ll deal with it.”

Jace smiled at his best friend. “You’re the boss.”

They climbed into Jace’s pickup, and Jonathan exhaled loudly. “Two hours is farther away than I want to be.”

Chapter Two

Kate pushed through the heavy glass doors of the *Andrew P. Hall Gymnasium*. She inhaled deeply. This was a smell she knew and loved. It was slightly pungent and somewhat stale, but it was familiar, and she was filled with a sense of security. The entry to the gym was enormous. *Simpson College Wildcats* was spelled out in large blue and white letters on the brick wall opposite the entrance. A massive trophy case was situated beneath. It was filled with awards, pictures, and ribbons dating back eighty years.

Kate stopped to admire them. The trophy case back home was full of awards she had helped win. She was planning to add a few to this one, too.

The vaulted ceiling echoed the sound of her footsteps as she made her way to the practice gym. Kate wore black shorts and a white tank shirt. Her shoulder-length, dark brown hair was pulled into a ponytail, and her volleyball equipment was neatly tucked in the gym bag at her side. This was her turf, and she promised herself she would give it her all.

She followed the signs to the practice courts – down a flight of stairs, past the weight room and visitor locker rooms. She heard squeaking shoes and bouncing balls. When Kate turned into the gym, she saw at least forty young women stretching and talking. Some were practicing their serve while others passed a ball with a partner.

Coach McWilliams stood in the center, watching closely. When he saw Kate he waved and jogged over. “Hi, Kate! Are you settled in?”

“Not quite, but I’m getting there.” She scanned the room. “Is this everyone?”

“Almost. I’ve got a dozen returning players and over thirty newbies here for tryouts. Get warmed up. We start in ten minutes.”

She smiled and nodded. Coach McWilliams returned to his observation of the new recruits. Kate donned her pads and shoes, and started to stretch. The whistle sounded just as she finished.

Coach McWilliams introduced himself and his assistant, a grad student who had been one of his top players. He split the young women into two groups. The returning

players went with the assistant to the far court for warm ups and drills. Coach McWilliams stayed on the other court with thirty-two new players, each of whom was vying for one of eight open spots. Coach instructed them to pair off and do a passing drill.

Kate turned to the girl beside her. The young woman was short by Kate's standards, about five and half feet tall, with a head full of curly golden hair. It was pulled into a loose ponytail. She smiled at Kate, and her pale blue eyes sparkled. "I'm Samantha O'Neill. Everyone calls me Sam."

"Hi, Sam. I'm Kate Arnold."

They moved about twelve feet apart and began to pass the ball. Kate could tell by her easy grace that Sam was a natural at volleyball. She was betting the girl was a setter.

After several minutes, Coach McWilliams called them to the net and asked for volunteers to set. Sam was first to offer. Kate grinned. She could always pick out the setters. They were very quick and often natural leaders on the court.

Kate lined up with the rest of the young women. She felt her stomach muscles tighten involuntarily. She loved that sensation.

Kate watched Sam set each player. Sam had sweet hands. Every ball was perfectly placed on the net for the hitter. One by one they smashed it to the other side of the court; then ducked under the net to act as blocker for the next hit.

When Kate's turn came she positioned herself just behind the ten-foot line, tossed the ball to Sam, timed the set, and charged the net. Sam put it at the ideal height. Kate leapt off the floor and took aim with her guide hand as she brought her right hand back over the top of her hair, like she was parting it with her thumb. She followed through and pounded the ball. It struck within the ten-foot line. A smattering of gasps sounded from the players in line behind Kate. The gym became silent for a moment as the veterans on the adjoining court stopped their warm-ups to watch the rookies.

Sam flashed a thumbs-up. Kate smiled and mouthed the words "beauty set" when she bent to slip under the net. She blocked the next hit, again with an amazing vertical jump and well-placed, strong hands.

Coach McWilliams grinned and nodded.

After several rounds of hitting right, middle, and left, Coach divided them into teams of six for a scrimmage. Kate followed Sam in their rotation and they worked together like old pros. They tried a backset play where Kate came around behind Sam instead of crossing to the net in front of her. This threw off the defense, and they scrambled to adjust. Kate was too quick; she surveyed their coverage while in the air and placed a dink just over the double block. It fell in an undefended hole by the sideline.

Coach McWilliams applauded, his appreciation of the move obvious. Sam and Kate congratulated each other and the rest of their teammates with high fives.

Practice ran for over two and half hours. Coach finally called the weary players together. They collapsed in a scattered heap at center court.

He looked at his clipboard. “Great workout today, ladies. Here’s the schedule for the rest of the week: morning practice from nine to twelve, and afternoon practice from two to five. I’ll post the results on my office door on Friday.

“Everyone did a great job. Coach Amy and I have our work cut out for us. As you know, there are eight spots on the team, and we’ve got over thirty of you. If you’re not here every day, I’ll assume you’re not interested. If you have an emergency, please let me know. We’ll try to work it out. Does anyone have questions?” He looked around the group of players. “Okay. See you tomorrow.”

Sam approached Kate, who was picking up her bag. “That’s some arm you’ve got.”

“Thanks. And that’s some pair of hands *you’ve* got.” Kate paused. “Did that sound a little strange?”

“Only if we weren’t volleyball players.” Sam laughed.

Kate slid her bag strap onto her shoulder. “Are you headed to dinner?”

“Yes, I’m starved!”

“Do you want to meet up?”

“Sure. Us freshmen have to stick together, so we don’t get picked on.”

“I think that only happens in high school.” Kate wrinkled her nose. “I hope.”

Kate and Sam left the gym and walked in the fading afternoon light. It was a beautiful late summer day. This was Kate's favorite time of year. For August it had been unseasonably cool, which was fine with her.

"So. How long have you been a player? Volleyball, I mean," Kate said.

Sam grinned. "Since grade school. Always a setter. I went to a large high school in the Chicago 'burbs. Six hundred in my graduating class."

Kate whistled. "I had less than that in my whole high school. Small town, private school."

"Were you a starting hitter?"

Kate nodded shyly. "Four years."

"I figured. Me, too. We went to state three times and won twice. It was awesome."

Kate smiled. She felt certain she'd already made her first friend at Simpson.

When Sam and Kate arrived at the dorm, they passed the elevator and headed for the stairway.

"Stuck on the fifth floor. The downside of the freshman year," Kate huffed as they trudged up the steps.

"It stinks. After the glory of being a senior," Sam agreed.

They walked down the hall and stopped at the same door.

"No way," Kate said.

Sam unlocked the door and pushed it open. Both twin beds were piled high with boxes. "Holy cow! I didn't think anyone had more stuff than me."

"I haven't finished unpacking! It looks like more than it is."

"Yeah, sure." Sam looked around. "Actually—" she smirked "—I have another twelve boxes to bring up."

Kate's eyes grew large.

"You're kind of gullible." Sam chuckled.

"Yeah. That's what Jon says, too."

"Jon? Your boyfriend?"

"No. Jon, my brother."

“Is he hot?”

Kate dropped her bag beside her bed. “He’s tall. Lots of muscles. If you like that sort of thing.”

“Sounds hot to me.”

“He’s my brother.”

“How about hot friends?”

“Well, there’s Jace.” Kate stopped unpacking her bag and smiled. “He and Jon would make a nice pair of bookends. They’re a matched set.” Kate shrugged. “But again, he’s like a brother, so I don’t look at him and see *cute*.”

“Wow. How sad for a girl to be surrounded by hotness and be so oblivious.”

“I’ll tell you what. Play your cards right, and I’ll introduce you. Then you can decide for yourself,” Kate said.

“Are they college guys?”

“Not anymore. Actually...Jon turns twenty-four in a couple of months.”

“That’s the stuff my dreams are made of.”

Kate threw her empty gym bag by the closet. “What’s wrong with the guys here?”

“Nothing. I just like to keep a long list of potentials, so I can make an informed and well-rounded choice.” Sam raised her eyebrows several times.

Kate laughed. “Hurry up. I’m so hungry, I’m about to eat my volleyball.”

“I won’t tell Coach you said that. That’s worse than kicking one.” Sam grabbed a clean towel from a nearby box and chucked it at Kate. “And, I’m not going *anywhere* with you until you shower.”

* * *

After an introduction to the strange, universally known college dish called *mystery meat*, Kate and Sam went to explore their new surroundings.

Home to fifteen hundred students, the Simpson College campus covered an entire city block. The stately old buildings stood as guardians on the perimeter, creating the illusion that time stood still a century ago in this protected community. The only opening in the fortress was a grassy clearing between the campus security building and the men’s dorm. This was the spot where many a spontaneous game of football or Frisbee golf had been played. In the center of campus was a hundred year old fountain

surrounded by stone benches. The grounds were plentiful with oak, elm, and maple trees, some already beginning their change to fall glory. The lush grass was meticulously groomed, and large pots of red geraniums dotted the sidewalks.

Kate and Sam made a complete lap around the campus and stopped by the fountain.

“I’m going to change and head to the gym, how ‘bout you?” Kate said.

“I’m going to check out the student center in the dining hall.”

“The student *center*, or the students?”

Sam grinned and turned on her heel, without a word.

Kate shook her head and went in the opposite direction, toward the women’s residence. She needed to keep busy until this ache in her chest let up. She was certain that Jonathan was right. College would be fun – if only she could get through these first few days.

As she entered her room, a beam of light from the hallway fell across her desk. A framed photograph of her with Jace and Jonathan stood amid the mess of a half empty box. Kate smiled, remembering the early summer day they’d spent at the lake, boating and water skiing. The guys were bare-chested and buff, and she looked fit in her dark blue bathing suit. All were suntanned, with smiles that radiated their joy of life. Kate was in the middle, her arms draped casually around her two best friends in the whole world.

She missed them desperately.

Kate walked to her desk and ran her fingertips down the picture frame. This was her family. Kate’s father had died when she was an infant. Her mom died when she was only six, and Kate barely remembered her. The sad tragedy of an automobile accident took her from them. She didn’t know how Jonathan and Jace had managed to raise her when they were little more than children themselves, but they’d somehow provided everything she needed and seen to it that she felt loved and safe.

Amid her own grief, Kate also felt sad for Jace. He, too, lost his parents when he was young, and then he’d lost someone he’d come to think of as a mother.

Kate focused on his handsome face. “You’re a good man, Jace. I’d tell you how wonderful you are, if I knew it wouldn’t go straight to that big, fat head of yours.” She chuckled softly and turned toward the closet.

After changing into knit pants and a tank shirt, Kate returned to the gymnasium and went in search of the multipurpose room she’d seen in the diagram at the entrance. If she’d read the map correctly, it was near the volleyball practice courts.

Kate took one wrong turn, did a little backtracking, and finally located the room. She rotated the dial on the dimmer switch, and the area was bathed in soft light. The space was about sixty square feet and completely empty. The floor was cool and spongy beneath her bare feet.

She padded to the middle of the floor and began her nightly ritual. The movements resembled the rhythmic form of Tai Chi or yoga, but she had added several combination kicks taught to her by Jonathan over the years. Kate had started training at age eight when Jonathan insisted she learn the disciplines of the martial arts for her own growth, and because he felt it was important for her to know how to defend herself. He was an excellent and patient teacher. Along with Jace, the three had trained in their own unique form for many years.

As her breathing slowed, Kate opened her eyes and circled the room, the picture of grace and strength. She performed several long, slow stretches; then pointed her left leg behind her, bringing it straight up as she bent to touch her nose to her right knee. She placed her hands on the floor, palms flat. She gradually rose from this position, lifting her torso and lowering her left leg back to the floor.

“Wow.”

Kate startled and stepped to catch her balance, her concentration broken.

“I’m sorry. I thought you heard me come in.”

In the muted light she could barely make out the man’s form, which almost filled the doorway. He was dressed in cargo pants, shiny combat boots, and a turtleneck sweater—all black. He leaned on the doorjamb, his muscular arms folded across a well-defined chest.

He stepped into better light, and Kate saw a patch on his upper right arm. It bore the insignia of the Simpson Campus Security. She watched him with uncertain eyes.

“Commander Riley Flynn. I lead the campus security team.” His voice was smooth and his walk self-assured.

“Kate Arnold. Freshman.” She continued to study him. He looked young for a security officer; he could easily pass for an upperclassman or grad student.

He came closer, and Kate saw that his eyes were green. They were warm and sincere, and very much reminded her of Jonathan’s. She dropped her gaze. *I’m just homesick.*

“I was making my rounds. Getting ready to lock up. The gym closes at eleven, and we prefer that female students not be here alone.”

Her gaze returned to his. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

Riley’s green eyes twinkled as he smiled down at her. “No harm done.” Flynn swung his arm wide in invitation. “I can see that you probably don’t need an escort, but I’m heading in your direction. I’d be happy to drop you at the ladies’ dorm.”

Kate realized he wasn’t giving her the option to stay, but at least he was trying to make her think he was. “Okay.” She shrugged. “I’m done here.”

She waited in the chilly night air while Commander Flynn locked the gym doors. Kate enjoyed the mournful buzzing of the cicadas and listened to a breeze rustle the leaves. A full moon lighted their way.

As they approached the math and sciences building, Riley broke the silence. “How was your first day on campus?”

“Not bad. I didn’t get lost. My roommate is great, and I haven’t cried.” Kate cringed. She hadn’t meant to say that last part.

“Homesick?”

“A little. Training helps take my mind off things.”

Riley walked casually, his arms at his sides, but Kate saw his eyes constantly moving, assessing their surroundings.

“Commander, is everything all right?”

“Yes. Sorry. Most people don’t notice my *on duty* mode. You’re very observant.”

Kate looked over her shoulder. “Is this campus dangerous?”

“Not at all. It’s my job to see to it.” He paused. “But it’s always a good idea to be prepared. My team holds regular self-defense classes for students. The next one is in a couple of weeks. You should come.”

“Is it required?”

“Well, no.”

Kate caught the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

The smile broadened. “I have a feeling you could show my guys a thing or two.”

Kate shrugged and looked at the ground. The heat she felt in her cheeks betrayed her pleasure at his compliment. “I’m really looking for a training partner, but I guess it wouldn’t hurt to check it out.”

“The class is listed on the registration schedule. Come. I’ll see if I can get you a lead on a partner.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Kate knew Jonathan would be pleased.

They arrived at the dorm, and Riley bid her goodnight. He watched her weave among the sofas and chairs that filled the main lounge. She disappeared through the stairway door.

Flynn jogged past the men’s dorm, across the grassy clearing, and to the back entrance of the campus security building. Once inside, he went to his office and closed the door. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed. A voice message played. The beep sounded.

“It’s Flynn. I made contact with Kate tonight. She has no idea who I am. Call me.”

Chapter Three

It was a grueling week. Kate fell into bed each night and was asleep almost instantly. She and Sam rose twenty minutes before nine, dressed, and rushed to practice. True to his word, Coach McWilliams worked them for three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. They paused only to eat lunch and supper.

Evenings were spent in the weight room, and Kate finished the day with her training session. Other than the volleyball team, she didn't see anyone all week. Students began arriving on Friday, but Kate did not notice. In spite of her love of volleyball, she grew tired of looking at the inside of the gym.

Following Friday's afternoon practice, Kate and Sam went to dinner; then rushed back to the gym to check the team posting taped to Coach McWilliams's door. Kate hugged Sam when she saw their names at the top of the list. The week had started with thirty-two newbies, and by Friday noon the number was down to nineteen. That number had just been cut in half by Coach.

"This calls for a celebration!" Sam hugged Kate again.

"What kind of celebration?" Kate said.

"I'm not certain, but it will involve ice cream and chocolate."

"And a movie."

"Obviously," Sam said.

Giggling, the two girls hurried to the small grocery store in the basement of the administration building and loaded up on ice cream, popcorn, and chocolate stars. They rented a chick-flick and returned to their dorm room.

In spite of the small amount of time they'd spent there, they'd managed to get unpacked and settled. A small TV and DVD player were hooked up, along with computers, a stereo system, and a refrigerator. They strung tiny white lights around the perimeter of the ceiling. Kate added a potted peace lily by the window, claiming the oxygen it produced would help them think better. Sam argued it was large doses of chocolate that helped one think better.

They laughed and cried their way through *Ever After*, and teased each other about who cried sooner and more often. They stayed up until two a.m. telling stories from high school and talking about family.

The next morning was Saturday. Kate opened her eyes to bright sunlight and glanced at the clock, blinking several times before the big red numbers came into focus. It was ten.

Across the room Sam yawned loudly and sat up. She crawled out of bed and went to the door, swinging it open just as an exceptionally attractive young man walked by with a load of boxes. Sam yawned again and scratched her head, squinting at the light and noise that rushed in at her. Her curly blonde locks stuck out in all directions. The young man stopped and stared, mouth agape.

Sam blinked. “One of us is in the wrong place.”

“The ‘women only’ rule is lifted during move-in.” The young man looked Sam over from head to toe.

“Oh.” Sam slammed the door in his face and turned toward the bathroom. Kate was three steps ahead of her. The door banged shut.

Sam growled and shook her head. “I’m not a morning person! It would be in your best interest to stay out of my way.”

Kate opened the door, toothbrush in hand. “I have no *interest* in anything before noon.” She grinned.

“You’re a pain in my rear.”

“No, that’s from volleyball practice. I’m not taking the blame.”

“So this is what it’s like to have a sister,” Sam groaned. “I’m glad I never had one.”

“Me, too.” Kate curled her lip and slammed the door again.

Sam giggled. “That’s mature!”

When their morning battle finally ended in a stalemate, they dashed to the dining hall for chicken nuggets and carrot sticks. After lunch, they strolled across campus, enjoying the warm August day. They were headed toward the dorm when Kate noticed a

game of football underway in the grassy clearing beside the men’s residence. Eight burly guys were yelling, running around, and trying to knock each other unconscious. One of them was Commander Flynn.

Kate and Sam casually strolled to the edge of the field and sat down. Kate stretched her long legs in front of her and leaned back on her elbows, lifting her face to the sun. Sam studied the men intently. A smile of invitation played on her lips.

Within thirty seconds one of the men approached the coeds. “Wanna join us? We could use extra players.”

Kate glanced at Sam. “What do you think?”

Sam eyed the young man. “Never was much for cheerleading.”

He took Sam’s offered hands and hauled her to her feet.

“I’m Sam. This is my friend, Kate.”

“I’m Marcus.” He held out a hand to Kate. She grabbed it and he pulled her up, too. His eyes flirted with them as he spoke. “We’ll change to touch instead of tackle, if you’d like.”

“Don’t do anything on our account.” Sam’s eyes flirted right back.

“I don’t want to deal with Coach McWilliams if we injure two of his new star players.”

Kate caught Sam’s eye.

“I’ve seen you heading to the gym all week,” he continued. “I’ve been at football practice.”

“Come on, Marcus! Let’s play ball!” A group of impatient men stared at him.

Without a word to Kate, Marcus and Sam ran to join them.

Kate slid her hands in her back pockets and walked to where the other four men stood watching her. “I guess you’re stuck with me,” she said.

“We’ll see about *stuck*.” Commander Flynn grinned.

Riley introduced Kate to his teammates; two were football players and the other was one of his men. Flynn tossed her the ball. “You’re quarterback.”

The men huddled around. Kate did her best to recall one of the plays Jace had taught her when they were kids. They broke the circle and took their places on the line of scrimmage. One of the football players hiked the ball to Kate. She faded back,

surveyed the field, and managed to throw a rather nice pass to the open commander. Riley bobbled it as he ran into the end zone.

Flynn jogged back to the huddle. He patted Kate's back. "Nice pass."

"Nice catch, Commander."

"I'm off duty. The name's Riley."

Kate noticed how his light blue T-shirt made his eyes a deeper shade of green. She had another flash of homesickness. "Riley," she repeated.

Riley's buddy elbowed him in the back. "Let's get to it. We need another touchdown to catch up."

An hour later Sam's team remained in the lead, and Kate and Sam called it quits. They headed for the dorm. Kate overheard one of her teammates remark, "That was a well-spent hour." She threw her arm around Sam's neck and grinned. A deep sense of satisfaction bubbled inside.

After supper, Sam went looking for some Saturday evening entertainment, and Kate called home.

Jace answered on the second ring. "Katie, my girl! How are you?"

"I'm great, Jace. It's good to hear your voice."

"Yours, too. How's college treatin' ya?"

"It's been a long week. All I've seen is the inside of the gym. The good news is that Sam and I haven't killed each other yet."

"Sam?"

"Sam, my roommate, silly. I wrote about her in my emails."

"Oh, it's a girl."

"Of course. I've had enough of living with guys."

"Well, I must say, this place is a whole lot more interesting without you around. It's party, party, party, every night."

"Coming from you, I believe it, but we both know Jon's not a party animal."

"I've converted him, since you're not around to suck all the fun out of him." Jace laughed.

“I am *not* a fun-sucker!”

“Watch your language.”

“Okay, I’ve had enough of you. Where’s Jon?”

“He’s right here. Take care, Katie. I miss you...a lot.”

“I miss you too, Jace.”

There was a brief pause.

“Hey, Katie. How’s our girl?”

When Kate heard Jonathan’s voice, the homesickness she’d managed to suppress came crashing back. “I’m good, Jon. Volleyball is fabulous. If practice doesn’t kill me, I might get to start for JV in our first game.”

“That’s great! When?”

“Next Friday at 7 o’clock. Here.”

“We’ll be there,” Jonathan said. “When do classes start?”

“I register this Wednesday after the upperclassmen. We dig into the learning the following Monday.”

“Did you find a training partner?”

Kate smiled. That was Jonathan, always bringing the conversation to the business at hand. “I ran into a Commander Flynn. He’s the leader of the Simpson Campus Security. They teach self-defense classes for the students. He said I might find someone to train with there.”

“Great!”

She loved that she pleased him with the news.

“Do you have everything? Is there anything we can bring on Friday?”

“Just bring yourself and Jace. That’s all I’m missing now.”

“I love ya, Katie. Be good,” he whispered.

“Always.” She hung up the phone, contemplating the week ahead and the coming game on Friday. Kate couldn’t wait to see her two favorite guys and introduce them to her new friend, Sam.

She rose from her desk, grabbed a book, and plopped on her bed. At 10:30 p.m., her door opened with a loud bang and she sat bolt upright as Sam bounded into the room babbling excitedly. She resembled a puppy that had only recently discovered the

big new world. Kate swung her legs off the bed and perched on the edge. Sam grabbed a can of pop from the fridge and launched into a lively monologue of her evening activities.

Kate listened intently as her friend told the story of her encounter in the Simpson College Snak Shak with their football-playing buddies. Several of the volleyball team members had also been there, and the conversation turned from playful threats to an all out battle of thumb-wrestling when the volleyball players hurled one too many insults regarding the manliness of football.

“Apparently the final straw involved Maggie’s opinion on those skintight pants.”

“Masculinity was called into question?” Kate guessed.

“And only a physical confrontation could resolve the issue.”

“Who won?”

“Coach Beckett broke it up and sent the guys back to the dorm.”

“So the mystery remains.”

“We called a rematch for tomorrow night.”

“I’ll bet you did.”

Kate and Sam talked long into the night again and eventually fell asleep in mid-conversation.

* * *

Freshman registration was scheduled for Wednesday. Kate rose early and, with her packet of papers and forms in hand, began the long process of standing in line. Coach McWilliams had pulled a few strings that allowed the freshman volleyball players to register in the morning, so they could make afternoon practice.

Kate caught up with Sam at lunch and discovered they would have three classes together.

“Small colleges are so cool. With fewer class times and professors to choose from, it’s easier to stalk a hot guy,” Sam said. “Chances are much better that he’ll be in some of your classes, and it won’t be obvious that you’re actually following him.”

Kate rolled her eyes and grinned. “Is that all you think about?”

“No. Sometimes I think about world peace.”

“For about a minute and a half.”

Kate paused with a forkful of potato salad half-way to her mouth.

“What’s up?” Sam looked over her shoulder.

Two men had entered the dining hall. Both were dressed completely in black and strode with purpose. The taller of the two had short, sandy blond hair. It was thick and neatly combed. The other man was an inch or so shorter. He also had short, blond hair, but it was spiked. It was obvious both worked out regularly; their black turtlenecks left nothing to the imagination.

Sam turned back to Kate. Her grin was broad. “Friends of yours?”

Kate’s gaze fell to her plate. “They were on my football team the other day.”

“I know. Why the look just now?”

“The blond one. I met him at the gym last week. Remember?”

“They’re both blond, silly.”

Kate was certain that her sudden inability to speak intelligently was amusing to Sam. “The taller one. Commander Flynn.”

“Every time you mention him, you blush.” Sam put her chin in her hands and sighed loudly. “Men in uniform. Apparently we share a weakness for that.”

“You have a weakness for anything in pants.”

“Do you have plans to stalk either of them?”

“Are you kidding? It’s not wise to stalk a man twice your size.”

“Good. I’m adding them to my list of potentials right...now.” Sam pretended to write on an invisible sheet of paper.

“You’re a piece of work, my girl.”

Sam started to retort, just as the two officers approached their table.

“Hello, Kate Arnold. How is registration going?” Flynn said.

“It’s great. We’re done. Now I can move on to all the fun-having.”

Sam nudged Kate gently under the table.

Kate grimaced at her; then looked back at Riley. “Commander Flynn, this is my friend and roommate, Sam O’Neill. She played football against us the other day.”

Sam turned her pale blue eyes on the officer. “It’s nice to see you again.”

He smiled in acknowledgement and motioned to the man beside him. “Sam, this is my first lieutenant, Will Avery. He intercepted three of your passes.” There was a trace of mischief in Riley’s voice.

Sam smirked. “It didn’t help you win.”

Kate shook her head. “Down, girl,” she said under her breath, silently praying that someone would change the subject. She looked helplessly at Will. His blue eyes held an intensity and wisdom Kate had seldom seen in such a young man.

He smiled politely and seemed to take her cue. “Commander Flynn tells me you might join us for the self-defense class next week.”

Kate’s blush deepened. “Well, I’m not sure—”

“Of course we’ll be there!” Sam said. “Kate told me about it. I think it’s a really great idea.”

Kate grinned at her friend and looked up at Riley. “We’ll do our best. It really depends on how hard Coach works us. Sometimes we have a little trouble moving after his practices.”

“Fair enough.” Riley nodded. He and Will turned to go. “We’ll see you Friday.”

“Friday?” Kate furrowed her brow.

“At your volleyball game.” Riley smiled over his shoulder.

“Okay.” Kate watched the men walk away. She frowned at Sam.

Sam could barely disguise her enthusiasm. “They’re coming to our game?”

“They probably have to work. They are campus security, you know.”

“Working or not, I believe we have our first fans.”

Kate laughed. “Yeah. That’ll make it convenient for you to stalk them.”

The girls finished their lunch and left the dining hall. Kate glanced at her watch. If they hurried, there would be time to catch a nap before practice.

* * *

Friday arrived quickly, and with it came the thrill of game day. Kate was accustomed to a large crowd of fans filling her high school gym, but that was nothing compared to what a college sporting event offered. The bleachers were only half full, and the attendance was already twice what it would be at a game in Springville. One entire section was filled with bright blue jerseys. Two football players led the rowdy

men in a newly created cheer. A pep band played lively songs. Cheerleaders jumped around, trying to get the crowd engaged in the pre-game commotion.

Kate loved the tingle of anticipation. It was stronger than usual today; this was her first college game. She continuously shifted her weight while she waited with her teammates in the hallway by the home team locker rooms. Coach McWilliams nodded at the first player. They burst out of the tunnel and ran two laps around the volleyball court; then formed a circle to begin a passing drill. The fans went wild. Kate stole periodic glances at the crowd and finally spotted Jonathan in the third row of bleachers. He smiled down at her and waved. Jace stood and whistled loudly. She nodded imperceptibly.

After the passing drill, the team lined up for hitting. As each player approached the net and hammered the ball to the other side, the football players let out a loud grunt when it hit the floor.

Kate absorbed every sight and sound; the loud cheering, the bright lights, the faceless crowd of people. It was surreal. She was finally in college, playing volleyball, and looking forward to a long career. Even though it was JV, she felt certain that with hard work and sacrifice she could be starting varsity by the end of this season. It was a lofty goal and one for which she planned to strive.

Across the court, a pair of green eyes watched Kate Arnold. After several minutes Riley Flynn tore his gaze from her and scanned the crowd. He methodically looked up and down the rows of spectators until he found a familiar face. Their eyes met. Flynn lifted his chin in recognition and slipped into the reserved seating for staff. He looked forward to watching the match.

Chapter Four

Kate pushed her way through the throng of spectators. The matches had been close, but the Simpson Wildcats triumphed. Kate and the JV team won two of three in their match, and the varsity squad won best of five. Coach McWilliams was pleased with the wins, but had a page of notes on his clipboard; things they would improve on at practice next week. He'd gone over each item in the locker room only moments ago. Kate was too distracted about her upcoming visit with Jonathan and Jace to pay proper attention. When Coach dismissed them, she hurried out of the locker room, still in her uniform.

The mass of students showed no signs of dissipating. Large groups of fans still sat in the bleachers, or were gathered in circles along the outer edge of the court. Kate smiled and nodded as she received several pats on the back and calls of "good game!" Motion in her peripheral vision caught her attention. It was Jace; he stood on the far side of the gym, waving wildly with both arms.

Kate took off across the empty court. About two feet away she launched herself into his arms, and he spun her in a circle. When he set her down she hugged Jonathan with the same eagerness.

"I've missed you so much!"

Jonathan held her close. "Great game, Katie."

"Seven kills and five aces. Not bad for a freshman," Jace said.

Kate grinned. "You were counting?"

"Of course. Old habits die hard."

"Got plans?" Jonathan said.

"Nope. I cleared my schedule so I could hang with you."

Jonathan rubbed his hands together. "I was thinking ice cream and a play-by-play rehash of the match."

"Perfect. I just need to find..." Kate turned to look across the gym and saw Sam exiting the tunnel from the locker rooms, her long hair still damp from her recent shower. "...Sam!"

Sam looked in Kate's direction and jogged over.

Jace focused his attention on the blonde girl. He ran a hand through his light brown hair and turned on the charm. "I'm Jace Tucker, and you are?"

"Samantha O'Neill." She shook his hand.

"You can ignore him, Sam." Kate smiled. "He won't be staying long."

"Well now, that depends on if I find something worth staying for." His blue eyes danced.

Kate rolled her eyes and turned to Jonathan. "Sam, this is my big brother, Jon."

Sam smiled warmly and shook Jonathan's hand. "It's nice to finally meet the guys that Kate talks about constantly."

"It's all good stuff, right?" Jace said.

Jonathan smacked Jace's stomach with the back of his hand. "Sorry, ladies. I'll do my best to keep this guy out of your hair while we're here."

Jace gave him a hard stare. "What did I do now?"

"We'll meet you outside in twenty," Kate said.

Sam watched the men go. "Are *both* of them yours?"

"Yep," Kate answered.

Sam snorted. "You've been living right."

"Yep." Kate turned toward the locker room. "I'm going to shower and change. The guys wanna go for ice cream. Wait for me, or go chat them up if you want. Just *do not* add them to that *potentials* list of yours."

"Jace was right. You are a fun-sucker."

"Hey! I don't tell you my private conversations so you can use them against me."

"Then what good are they?" Sam smirked.

Kate waved her off and disappeared down the tunnel.

She emerged twenty minutes later looking fresh and ready for a night on the town. This would be her first trip off campus since she'd arrived, and Kate was excited. She and Sam had taken several short walks into the charming town of Copper Creek, but she hadn't been in a car in two weeks.

Jonathan drove them to the local ice cream parlor, which boasted seventeen flavors. Kate ordered a double scoop of praline caramel with extra hot fudge. The others followed her lead, and they settled into a booth.

Sam and Kate told animated stories about volleyball practice and team initiations, and students who were famous for falling asleep in class, or freshmen who went to the wrong class, but didn't figure it out until half-way through. They lamented the awful dining hall food and complained about boring philosophy professors.

Jonathan swallowed his bite of ice cream. "How do you know these things? Classes haven't even started."

Kate leaned in, speaking in hushed tones and nodding solemnly. "Urban legend." Jonathan mimicked her nod.

"What's the best part of college so far?" Jace said.

The girls answered simultaneously: "Volleyball," Kate replied. "Boys," Sam said. Jace laughed. "She takes after you, Jon."

Kate pointed at herself. "I assume you meant me, right?"

"I hope so," Sam said under her breath.

Jonathan looked at his watch. "It's getting late, ladies. I have to get you back to the dorm, and we need to get home to Springville."

Kate's smile disappeared. "Promise you'll come to our next home game?"

"None can stand in our way," Jonathan replied.

As they drove back to the campus, Kate and Sam were still full of stories. Jonathan and Jace spent most of the time smiling and nodding. When it came time to part ways, Kate gave each of them a lingering hug.

Jace hugged Sam and whispered in her ear, "Take good care of our girl."

"I will," she said softly.

Jonathan winked at Kate as they drove away.

Kate watched the Jeep Cherokee turn out of the parking lot and disappear down the tree-lined street.

"Hungry?" Sam said.

"Starved."

“I think there’s a bag of barbecue potato chips in our room.”

Kate took off for the dorm. “Last one there buys the pop!”

Sam followed closely behind. “No elevator allowed!”

They raced up the stairs two at a time.

* * *

The following Monday, Kate and Sam were introduced to the reality of college life. Their seven o’clock course was a general education class. Attendance was large and necessitated that it be held in one of the huge auditorium-like rooms. At least one hundred and fifty students had registered. Most were freshmen, or seniors who had put the course off until the last possible moment. It was also on the opposite side of campus from the women’s dorm.

Kate woke up twenty minutes before class was to start. She jumped out of bed and shook Sam awake. “Let’s move it, O’Neill!”

Sam squinted and blinked slowly. She looked at her clock, looked harder, and flew out of bed. They took the world’s quickest showers, dressed, grabbed books, and tore across campus. A maintenance man yelled at them to use the sidewalks, but Kate decided it was more important to get there on time than to use proper walking etiquette. They arrived as the clock clicked to the top of the hour. The only available seats were in the front row. Trying to maintain an air of ladylike sophistication, they casually strolled to the front of the classroom and slid into the first open chairs, just as the professor began roll call.

* * *

On Thursday, Kate reminded Sam about her promise to attend the self-defense class.

Sam, who seemed happy for the distraction from studying, stood in front of the closet contemplating her wardrobe choice. “It has to be feminine, but not say ‘I’m helpless.’ And it has to fit well without being restrictive. And it has to make my butt look really great.”

Kate rolled her eyes. She walked past her roommate and pulled out a red tank shirt and black knit pants. She held it out to Sam. “Wear this. It says ‘I’m an athlete. Mess with me and I’ll kick your—”

“Kate! I can’t wear that! I’ll look too much like you. They won’t be able to tell us apart.”

Kate put her hands on her hips and glared at her best friend. “How could I possibly be mistaken for a short, blonde girl?”

“What I mean,” Sam said, “is that we spend so much time together that people don’t know which of us is which. I want to dress differently, so people will know that Sam is the stylish one.”

“Oh, that’s *it!* I’m leaving right now, with or without you.” Kate headed for the door.

“Okay! Okay!” Sam pulled the shirt over her head and slipped into the fitted pants. “Let’s go. But if Commander Flynn calls me Kate, you’re in big trouble.”

Kate smiled. “I’ll just answer to Sam. That’ll confuse the heck out of him.”

The girls arrived at the gym with one minute to spare. Commander Flynn and Lieutenant Avery stood at the back of the room and lifted their chins in greeting when Sam and Kate entered. Kate smiled at Riley, and Sam waved two fingers at Will. They took their place in line with ten other women.

One of Commander Flynn’s men was ready to start class.

“Evening, ladies. I’m Officer Joe Shephard.”

He stood with his hands clasped behind his back and feet spread wide. He began to stride purposefully back and forth in front of his students while he delivered one of the most condescending, macho speeches Kate had ever heard. It was about the dangers of being a female, alone on a dark street.

Blah, blah, blah. Kate’s mind drifted away. She came back to reality a minute later and discovered Shephard looking expectantly at her.

“Would you do the honors?” He motioned for her to come forward.

Kate eyed him dubiously.

“It’s okay. Come and stand right here, in front of me,” he coaxed.

She grudgingly obliged, irritated by his manner. At the back of the room, Avery cocked an eyebrow at Flynn, who slowly shook his head.

“Now, I’m going to stand behind you and put one hand around your waist, like this...” Shephard slid his arm around Kate. “And the other will go around your neck.” His other arm loosely encircled her throat.

Kate felt his warm breath on her neck. She quickly calculated his advantage: a few inches in height and at least sixty pounds.

Shephard directed his comments to the group. “Now, imagine you’re walking along, minding your own business, and a mugger sneaks up on you, thinking you’re a helpless, unsuspecting female. You can be ready to give him a surprise of your own.”

Shephard spoke to Kate, his mouth close to her ear. “I’ll make a move, and you try to defend yourself. Go with your instincts. Don’t worry, you won’t hurt me. Then we’ll talk about what you *should* do.”

Kate stood with her arms at her side. She closed her eyes, steadied her breathing, and found her center. Shephard tightened his grip and shifted his weight. That was her cue. As he tried to pull her off her feet, she struck. A crushing elbow to his ribs brought a gasp of surprise, and he released her waist. Her hand flew to the arm around her neck. She grabbed his smallest finger and yanked outward. Spinning away from him and still holding his finger, she high-kicked him across his lower chest. He crashed to the ground. Kate twisted his arm, now gripping him at the wrist, and stuck her heel in his ribs. He conceded, still trying to catch his breath.

“Hello, Mr. Mugger. I’m Kate Arnold, helpless female.” She released him.

He rose slowly, his face radiating confusion, anger, pain, and embarrassment.

Kate stepped closer and whispered, “I need a training partner, not a self-defense class.”

He mumbled something she didn’t quite hear, except for the word “*women*,” which he said with great disgust.

Kate spun and saw the expression of horror on Sam’s face. The other women in the class, and even Flynn and Avery, were looking in different directions, engrossed in various points on the ceiling or wall. Flynn was smiling. Avery cleared his throat and covered his mouth.

Kate’s feeling of satisfaction melted away. She regained her place in line and lowered her head.

Shephard recovered control of the class, which continued without incident. He kept a wary eye on Kate throughout. When they finished, Kate hastily retreated from the room.

Riley caught her and Sam in the hallway. “Arnold! That was impressive.”

Kate faced the commander. She wouldn’t meet his gaze. “My brother taught me a trick or two.”

“If I’d known you could pull that stunt,” Sam said, “I wouldn’t have been such a pain-in-the-butt roommate.”

Kate stared at the ground, color rising in her cheeks. “It’s nothing. Jon taught me to take care of myself.”

“Was he planning on you needing to save the world or something?” Sam laughed. “Cause those are quite the moves!”

Flynn contemplated Kate. “About that training partner you were looking for. With your skill level, I’m afraid your only option is Lieutenant Avery or...me.”

Kate finally looked at him. “Are you sure you want to spend the time?”

Flynn smiled. “I’d be happy to. We’re always looking for new techniques, so we can stay sharp.”

Kate loved the way his green eyes sparkled. She shrugged. “Well, I guess. If you want to. I’d be free most evenings after nine.”

“Good. We’ll start tomorrow. If something comes up—” Flynn reached in his back pocket and pulled out a business card “—call me and we’ll reschedule.”

Kate took the card and studied it. “Okay. Great.”

“I’ll see you then.” Flynn excused himself with a curt nod.

Sam watched his backside as he walked away. “You are the luckiest girl in the world.”

“Why? Because I get to be thrown around by a guy twice my size every day?”

Sam put her hands on her hips. “No, because you get to spend time alone with one of the hottest guys on campus...every day!”

Kate frowned. “How old do you think he is?”

“My expert opinion would place him at mid-twenties,” Sam said.

“Well, if there’s one thing I know about you – you’re an expert in that department, all right.”

“Dang straight.”

Kate sighed heavily. “Let’s get some ice cream. It helps me think.”

“You had me at *ice cream*.”

Kate threw her arm across Sam’s shoulders. “That’s why we’re friends.”

“That, and all the free man-advice I can give your inexperienced self.”

“Whatever.”

Chapter Five

Fall in Minnesota arrived in magnificent bursts of yellow, orange, red, and brown. Kate settled into her routine -- classes, volleyball practice, Saturday football games, weekly volleyball matches, and regular social events.

She and Sam met everyone on their floor, and it was not uncommon to have a party after dorm lock on Friday nights. Each gathering was hosted in a different room. When Sam and Kate's turn came, they did their best to maintain the tradition of loud music and unlimited snacks. Kate had a wonderful time dancing, discussing favorite movies or music, and playing impromptu games of floor hockey, or having chair races in the hallway with her new friends.

Kate loved college. It far surpassed her high school experience. She'd been a great athlete and an exceptional student, but kept mostly to herself. With her focus on volleyball and grades, it left time for little else. Jonathan kept her busy with martial arts training, and Jace made it his job to entertain her whenever she felt the need for social interaction. She'd had a few close friends, although she hadn't kept in regular contact with anyone since graduation.

There had been no serious boyfriends. She'd gone out casually with two or three boys her own age or older, but she preferred to stay friends. It was a long-standing joke between Kate and Jace that she was going to marry him when she was old enough to think about such things.

Kate took after Jonathan when it came to discipline and commitment. He had sacrificed a great deal to raise her, and she was well aware of it. He and Jace had attended college, but lived at home to be available for anything Kate needed. Jonathan had turned down an MIT scholarship. Kate knew he'd done it without a second thought. Family came first.

Kate often watched people take note when her brother entered a room. He carried himself with such an air of authority and yet, was humble and compassionate in his dealings with others. And there was something about that confident smile of his.

She was aware that women, young and old alike, stared enviously whenever she threw her arms around Jonathan.

Kate's chin slipped off her palm, and she barely caught herself before her forehead hit the table. She looked around the library. A young man at the next table grinned. Kate smiled back, her cheeks turning slightly pink.

She cleared her throat and returned her attention to the book in front of her. *The Tragedy that was Rome* did not particularly interest her, but she had a report to finish for World History class. Mid-terms were next week and she wanted to do well. She couldn't believe it was almost the middle of October. Volleyball season would be over by early November, and then she would have more free time. She made a mental note to join a club, or she might try out for basketball. That would keep her in shape for next volleyball season.

The team had done well this year. With so many returning players, they didn't have the awkwardness of trying to find their rhythm. Sam and Kate had fit into that rhythm well and were now playing second-string varsity. Coach had pulled them aside this week and told them to be prepared for a first-string start before the season ended. The conference tournament was scheduled for the first weekend of November. Kate was planning to be a starter by then.

She glanced at the clock. It was close to two; practice started at three. Kate tried to focus on the Roman Empire. After scribbling a few more notes, she decided to finish her research online. She'd have the twenty-page paper turned in by the end of the week, no problem. Kate gathered her things and headed to the dorm, strolling casually amid the bright colors of the glorious fall day.

* * *

Riley Flynn glanced at the clock as he came to the top of his push-up. It was 8:55. Kate would be here any minute. He dug deep for another push, flexing the muscles of his upper body and blowing out his breath. His white cotton T-shirt stretched taut against his back and shoulder muscles.

He heard footsteps and looked up again. This time he saw Kate standing in the doorway, leaning on the doorjamb. Her head was cocked to one side; a thin smile creased her lips.

He smirked. He'd caught her admiring the view. The commander sprang to his feet. "Arnold! You ready to take me on?"

"Anytime, Flynn."

Riley grinned at her cockiness. She had bested him in last night's session, and he was determined that it wouldn't happen tonight. "Warm up and let's get going," he ordered.

Kate began a series of slow stretches, and Riley watched her move. She had a certain grace; and when he studied her, the power underneath became obvious. Flynn sensed she was completely unaware of her beauty and the effect it had on men. It gave her a certain naïve charm. It also made her dangerous.

Kate finished her warm-up, and she and Riley took their respective stances. They circled each other slowly, fists raised and muscles tensed.

Thirty minutes later, Riley's T-shirt was ringed with sweat. They were more evenly matched than he'd admit to anyone. This was unusual for Flynn. Normally he took out his opponents, no matter their size, within minutes; but this girl was well trained and had the uncanny ability to anticipate her adversary's move.

Flynn circled Kate, knowing better than to let his guard down for one second. She could take him to the ground in the blink of an eye and never lose that innocent smile of hers. As it stood, they were even in takedowns tonight, but he was still determined to come out the victor. She had beaten him in two sessions this past week, and he felt that was two sessions too many. After all, he had his male pride to consider. He decided to try a new tactic and began to taunt her after each strike.

"You're telegraphing your kicks," he cautioned.

"You're not centering yourself fully before you strike," he warned.

"*How long* have you been training?" he teased.

Kate seemed unflustered by the verbal abuse.

A couple of weeks earlier, Riley had made the mistake of asking her to show him the move she'd used on Officer Shephard. She'd happily obliged without holding back. He'd ended up in the Infirmary, where Doctor Jackson had informed him that he would need to take it easy for awhile; his rib wasn't broken, but it was badly bruised. He'd glared at Kate, and she had been unsuccessful at hiding her smile.

Flynn continued to wait for his moment, and it came a second later. Kate frowned before she lunged forward with a left hook. He deflected it, causing her to spin away from him. She countered with a back-kick aimed at his head. He arched backward, and she circled to face him. Kate shifted her weight and came at him with a high knee jab. He absorbed the impact by bending into it. While bent, he wrapped his arm around her thigh and stood, easily lifting her off the ground. Instead of throwing her to the mat – which would allow her an opportunity for a counterattack – he fell to the mat with her. They landed more heavily than he intended. Flynn heard the breath rush out of her.

“Arnold, are you okay?”

“I'm good,” she wheezed.

He rolled off of her and knelt, studying her face. She was perfectly still, eyes closed, breathing ragged.

“Kate?”

“You really shouldn't hover like that, in case I'm faking.” Kate's eyes were still closed, and she was smiling slightly.

“*Are* you faking?”

“I wish I was. Help me up, you big meanie.”

Riley pulled Kate to her feet. “How come when you kick my butt, you're a better fighter, and when I kick yours, I'm a meanie?”

“It's the old double standard, Flynn. I employ it whenever necessary.” She bent at the waist, hands on her knees, and breathed deeply.

“I'll keep that in mind.” Riley patted her shoulder. “What do you say we call it quits and get something to eat?”

“Great idea. Do we have enough time before dorm lock?”

He grinned. “I think I could manage to get you into the building, locks or no.”

She was quiet for a moment. “If Coach finds out I missed dorm curfew, I won’t be playing Saturday.”

“Okay then. I’ll have you back by eleven.” He turned away. “Fun-sucker.”

They left the gym and crossed the campus to the security building. In the parking lot sat a bright blue, 1970 Chevrolet Malibu SS convertible with custom wheels.

Kate’s face filled with awe. “That’s yours?”

Flynn puffed out his chest. “You bet. Restored it myself.”

“Wow. You’re...it’s amazing.”

Flynn grinned and opened the passenger door for her.

They drove to an all-night restaurant and filled up on cheeseburgers and fries. Kate topped off her meal with a chocolate shake, and Riley added a piece of warm cherry pie to the bill.

Flynn popped the last bite of pie into his mouth and wiped his lip with a napkin. “I appreciate your appetite. So many girls your age don’t eat enough to sustain a parakeet.”

“I’ve never been afraid of food.”

Riley smirked. “I like that in girl.”

Before Kate could reply, Flynn rose from the booth and glanced at his watch.

“Time to go. I won’t be responsible for getting you benched.”

Kate studied his back as they exited the restaurant.

They arrived at the dorm at 10:59 p.m., for which Kate politely thanked Flynn.

As he walked back to his office, his cell phone rang. “Flynn here.” He paused. “Yes, everything’s moving along as planned. I don’t foresee any problems.”

He paused again. “Yes, sir. I’ll proceed with caution.” He flipped the phone closed and began to whistle as he picked up his pace.

Chapter Six

It turned cold in early November. Kate didn't notice; she was completely absorbed in the conference volleyball tournament. Simpson College was host this year, so the team hadn't gotten to travel, which was rather disappointing for the freshmen. The upperclassmen, having spent too much time in vans over the years, were overjoyed to sleep in their own beds.

The weekend of the tournament was cold and gray with a relentless north wind that signaled the inevitable return of winter. The colorful leaves of October now littered the campus as masses of dark brown pulp. Kate huddled against the wind and ran down the long sidewalk to the gym. When she opened the door, she was greeted by a rush of warm air, cheering fans, and the sound of a whistle. Her match started in one hour. She had just enough time to change and stretch before Coach called them together in the locker room.

Jonathan and Jace should arrive any minute. They had called when they left Springville to say they were coming for the weekend. She couldn't wait to see them! It had been nearly two weeks since the last home game, and she'd only gotten to visit with them briefly before they left. She was eager for a whole weekend of family time.

Kate found Sam in the locker room. She was dressed in her uniform, setting a ball to herself. She had the softest touch Kate had ever seen.

"Hey, girlfriend." Kate shed her clothes and pulled her jersey from the equipment closet.

"Hey, yourself. Ready for your first game as a starter?"

Kate's eyes lit up. "We're starting?"

"Rumor has it that Lindsay's x-rays did show a stress fracture, and Carrie hasn't been released from the infirmary." Sam continued to set the ball over her head.

"That's a bummer, but is it wrong that I'm really excited anyway?"

"No, we wanna win, and it doesn't matter which six of us make that happen."

Kate nodded slowly.

“Have you decided if you’re going to the open Olympic tryouts with me next summer?” Sam said.

Kate pulled on her sleeveless jersey with the large blue “3” on the back. “Do you think we stand a chance?”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try.”

“Then let’s try,” Kate decided. She put on her shorts and kneepads, and slipped into her volleyball shoes. After some quick stretching, they joined the other players in the outer room and chatted until Coach McWilliams came in.

When the team entered the main arena, the home fans went wild. In what was now a tradition, Kate scanned the crowd until she found Jonathan and Jace and gave them a thumbs-up. Tonight it was a double thumbs-up, meaning she was starting.

When the announcer introduced her, Jonathan and Jace stood and whistled. She ran onto the floor to shake hands with a player from the opposite team; then jogged to the back line of the court to wait for her other teammates. The players greeted each other with high fives as they lined up.

The beginning whistle blew and the Simpson Wildcats quickly scored four unanswered points, two of which were set-kill combinations between Sam and Kate. The section of football players got louder as each point was scored. Several of them called Kate’s name or gave her private waves or cheers.

In the stands nearby, Jonathan spoke without looking at Jace. “Looks like you might have some competition.”

Jace grunted. “Not from those guys. Kate needs a mature man.”

“And in what way do you fit the bill?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Jonathan gave his friend a sideways glance and returned his attention to the match just in time to see the opposing team send a mighty spike between Kate’s hands. Sam was there to back her up, however, propelling herself horizontally in the air and popping the ball up before she fell to the ground, rolled, and sprang to her feet. The crowd reacted with a collective “oooohhh!” and then wild applause.

Jace leaned toward Jonathan. “Do you think Katie would mind if I dated her best friend?”

Jonathan laughed. “Yes, she’d mind. But on the other hand, I wouldn’t blame you for trying.”

Jace’s face registered his surprise. “Well, well, Jon. Didn’t know you saw any of Katie’s friends as dating material.”

“Oh, I notice. I just never say anything. They were off limits to us, until six months ago.”

“Wow. I’m seeing you in a whole new light, and I don’t like it.”

“Do I remind you a little too much of yourself?”

“Actually, yes. And I’ve always admired the way your level-headedness balances my dashing good looks and comic charm. Every comedian needs a straight man.”

“Uh-huh.”

The Wildcats fought valiantly, but it was not meant to be. They played best of five and lost in five sets. The loss meant they would have to play extra matches to get to the championship.

After showering, Sam and Kate met Jace and Jonathan in the outer vestibule of the gym. There were hugs all around.

“When do you play next?” Jonathan said.

“Tomorrow morning at ten,” Sam replied. “If we win, we play at six. After that we move to the trophy round on Sunday.”

“So you plan to keep winning?” Jace said.

“Absolutely,” Kate answered.

Jonathan smiled at his sister. “Are you signed out for the weekend?”

“All taken care of. Did you get us a room?”

“All taken care of.” Jonathan nodded. “You and Sam are next door to us.”

“Let’s go, brother!” Kate turned and bumped into Riley Flynn.

He caught her by the arms. “Sorry, Arnold.”

“Hey, Flynn! Are you stalking me?”

“Not very stealthy, am I?” He laughed. “Actually, I came over to say good game. To both of you,” he added, looking at Sam.

“Thanks.” Kate observed the now familiar campus security uniform. “You’re working tonight?”

He grinned. “I don’t wear this for fun.”

Jonathan cleared his throat, and Kate glanced over her shoulder at him. “I’m sorry. Commander Flynn, this is my brother, Jon Arnold, and his best friend, Jace Tucker. Jon, Jace, this is Commander Flynn. My personal trainer,” she added with a giggle.

Jonathan and Jace shook hands with the commander.

Jonathan’s manner was stiff and cool. “You’re training with Katie.”

Riley’s posture was equally rigid. His hands were clasped behind his back. “Yes, sir. About four or five times a week.”

“That seems a little much. Don’t you think, Katie? You have your studies and your volleyball to think about, too.”

Kate’s hands went to her hips. “What are you talking about? You’re the one who said I needed to find someone to train with right away. And in case you didn’t get my mid-term grades, I’m on track for the President’s list this semester.”

He spoke to his sister, but maintained eye contact with Flynn. “I know, Katie. But remember, discipline is the key to success.”

Kate turned her back on her brother and touched Riley’s forearm. “Are you coming to the matches tomorrow?”

Riley glanced at Jonathan. “No. I’m out of town for the weekend. I’ll see you Monday for training.”

Her disappointment was evident. “Okay then. Have a good weekend.”

Riley nodded and left.

Kate spun toward Jonathan. “What the heck was that?”

“I want to make sure training doesn’t take precedence over your studies.”

“That was a little severe. Even for you,” Jace said.

“Just watching out for my little sister.”

Kate scowled. Jonathan was protective, but he was never rude, and that was the only word she could come up with to describe his behavior.

Sam sighed heavily. “Starving here! Get me to a pizza joint before I pass out.”

“As you wish.” Jace looped his arm through hers and guided her out of the gym. Jonathan did the same to Kate, but there was an uncomfortable silence between them all the way to the Jeep.

By the time the pizza arrived at their table, Kate had forgiven Jonathan his bad behavior, even though he never actually apologized. She also noticed his determination to avoid the topic of her training with Flynn, despite her repeated attempts to fill him in.

Sam and Jace were entertaining enough to take everyone’s minds off the tension between brother and sister. Sam regaled them with her story about the volleyball and football players’ thumb-wrestling match during their first week on campus.

“You’ve *never* thumb-wrestled?” Sam said.

“No,” Jace replied, shaking his head.

Sam stared in disbelief.

Kate started to speak, but jumped suddenly when someone kicked her under the table. Jonathan frowned and put his hand over his mouth. Between his fingers, Kate saw the corner of his mouth twitching upward in a smile.

Sam took Jace’s hand in the classic thumb-wrestling pose. “Now, we’ll count to three. Move your thumb from your hand to mine as we count, like this...” She demonstrated the movement. “Pin my thumb and you win!”

Jace had a look of intense concentration as they counted in unison. “One – two – three!”

The battle began. Kate cheered for Sam, and Jonathan rooted for Jace, until the tide turned in Sam’s favor; then the cheerleaders switched sides. Jace finally pinned Sam’s thumb after a flurry of dodge and fake moves almost sent both of them tumbling out of the booth.

The pizza arrived before a rematch could be challenged. They dug in and continued to converse enthusiastically while ignoring the basic table manners they’d been taught as children.

After a trip to the grocery store for ice cream, they returned to the motel and watched a horror movie on late night television. The girls went to their room at midnight in observance of Coach McWilliams’s night-before-a-game rule.

The next day proved to be exhausting for everyone. The Simpson Wildcats played two matches of five sets and managed to win both matches. Kate was eager to have a quiet family dinner and retire to her room on Saturday evening. She was relieved they wouldn't have to be to the gym until after lunch on Sunday. The championship match was at three o'clock.

Kate awoke early the next morning to discover that the bed beside her was empty. Puzzled, she quickly dressed and went to the motel lobby. She found Jace and Sam sitting at a small table, sharing an intimate breakfast. She stood at a distance and watched. A minute later she sensed someone behind her.

"Well, check that out." Jonathan looked over Kate's shoulder. "Who would have thought?"

"You're kidding, right? They are two of the biggest flirts I know." Kate giggled.

Jonathan laughed as he stepped closer and put his hands on her shoulders, kneading her tight muscles. "Wow, that's some tension."

"Too much volleyball. If there is such a thing."

"Yes, there is. In fact, too much of anything isn't good for you."

"Are you getting ready to launch into another sermon?"

"No, Katie. Actually, I wanted to apologize for giving too many sermons. Especially lately."

Kate faced him. "What do you mean?"

Jonathan tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "You're a young woman now. I know that, but it's really hard to let go. I've been watching out for you since I was six. I don't want to stop. But you're more than capable of taking care of yourself."

"You've never treated me with anything but love and respect."

"I boss you around."

"Give direction."

"I question your decisions."

"Reaffirm."

"I try to pick your friends for you."

“Show discernment.”

“Sometimes I’m just a plain jerk.”

“No argument there.” She smirked.

“Go ahead, argue...please.”

“Jon, you’re my hero. You always have been. Nothing can change that.”

“Someday you’ll meet someone who will make you feel differently.”

“No one will ever take your place in my heart. But I can’t guarantee it won’t get a little more crowded.”

He laughed and hugged her. “Help me let go.”

“I don’t want you to let go; just take one step back. For now.”

“Deal. If you need more space, give me a little shove.”

“Like this?” She placed her palms on his chest and pushed him.

“No. Like this.” He returned the push.

Kate was momentarily tempted to take the standoff to the next level, but she knew Jonathan wouldn’t want to risk breaking furniture that didn’t belong to them.

Sam spotted the siblings and called to them. Kate grabbed bagels and packets of cream cheese for herself and Jonathan on the way to the tiny table. Sam and Jace didn’t seem to mind that they had to scoot closer.

Kate took a bite of her bagel. “Way to ditch me this morning, O’Neill.”

“I didn’t think you’d care. Sounded to me like you had company.”

Kate almost choked. “What?” she sputtered.

“There was a lot of tossing, and turning, and mumbling, and someone who shall remain nameless was spoken of.”

Kate’s face turned bright red. “This is the moment when I find out how valuable my friendship is to you.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Arnold. My lips are sealed.” She grinned. “Unless the price is right.”

Jace reached for his billfold, and Kate backhanded him across the arm. “Don’t go there.”

Jace winked at Sam. “We’ll talk.”

Sam nodded.

Jonathan shook his head. “I hate to always be the mature one in this group, but maybe we could pass on this topic – stimulating as it is – and find a better way to spend our time.”

“Suggest something,” Sam said.

“How about bowling?”

“Alleys are closed,” Sam answered.

“Pinball?”

“No quarters,” Jace said.

“Movie?”

Kate looked at her watch. “Theater doesn’t open until noon.”

“Badminton?”

Jace stared at Jonathan. “You’re kidding.”

“Racquetball?”

“Not before the championship game. Coach would kill us,” Kate said.

“Swimming?” Jonathan waited. “Come on, guys. It’s my last idea.”

They looked around the table. There were no objections, so they rose to go change into their suits.

“Man, small towns can really stink when it comes to entertainment options,” Kate said.

Jonathan leaned over and whispered to Jace, “Yeah, that’s probably why they have so many children around here. There’s nothing else to do.”

Jace stopped walking and gawked at Jonathan. “What’s gotten into you? You’re stealing all my material.”

Jonathan shrugged and patted his friend’s shoulder as he walked by.

* * *

After an hour in the pool, the foursome ended up in the hot tub for a long soak. Sam lifted her head and glanced at the clock. “Arnold. It’s time to get back to campus.”

Kate sighed heavily and reluctantly pulled herself from the bubbling hot water. She stood at the top of the steps. “Jon, you guys coming?”

Jonathan waved them off lazily. “You go ahead. We’ll catch up.” He appeared to have no intention of getting out.

“Um, hate to spoil the fun, boys, but you’re our ride to campus,” Kate said.

Jace opened one eye. “Try hitchhiking. You’re a good looking girl. I’m sure you’ll catch a ride in no time. Particularly if you wear that.”

Kate picked up a towel and threw it at his head. It landed on his face, the edges floating in the water.

“Ok. You take the keys. *We’ll* hitchhike,” came his muffled voice from under the towel.

“Or gee, a cab might be a practical alternative,” Jonathan mumbled.

Kate shrugged at Sam. “You heard ‘em.”

They left to get changed and packed, and went next door to retrieve the Jeep keys and hide the guys’ toothbrushes and deodorant. They returned to the pool room where Jace and Jonathan still soaked in the hot tub. Kate threw their room keys on the table and waved good-bye to the men, whose eyes were closed.

When Kate pulled the Jeep Cherokee into the dorm lot she saw Riley’s blue Malibu parked at the campus security building. She wondered if he would be at the volleyball match.

She had no time to consider it further because Sam dragged her to the gym. They were the first players ready. Coach McWilliams didn’t start them, but he did put them in for the third set. The Wildcats won that set, but lost the match in four. The upperclassmen were disappointed with second place; the freshmen thought that was pretty good for their first conference tournament. The crowning achievement was an All-Conference Team award for one of the senior Wildcats and Sam O’Neill. Kate was elated for her best friend and had Jace take pictures of them together, with Sam proudly wearing her medallion on a red, white, and blue ribbon.

After supper, Kate found herself standing at the Jeep, in the dorm parking lot, saying good-bye. Again.

Jace and Sam seemed absorbed in their own private conversation.

Kate grinned at them and pulled Jonathan aside. “Sam can’t go home for Thanksgiving,” she whispered.

Jonathan frowned. “Where’s her family?”

“Chicago. Eight hours wouldn’t be bad, but her brother and dad are going to Georgia to visit relatives. That’s too far for her to go for the weekend. She’s planning to stay here. Alone.”

Jonathan shook his head. “We’ll have none of that.” He walked to Sam and put his arm around her, drawing her away from a scowling Jace. “Sam. We’ll expect you for Thanksgiving break in a few weeks. Kate is a handful. I need someone to keep an eye on her while Jace and I are cooking.”

Sam laughed and glanced at Kate.

Kate saw profound appreciation and affection in her friend’s eyes.

“It’s an important family holiday,” Jonathan continued. “You need to be with us. Okay?”

Sam nodded. She threw her arms around Jonathan’s neck. “Yeah. That would be great.”

Jonathan kissed her cheek and climbed into the Cherokee. As they drove away from campus, he stared at the two waving girls in his rearview mirror.

“What’s on your mind?” Jace said.

“It’s not getting easier to say good-bye.”

Chapter Seven

A gentle snow fell on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. The campus was practically deserted, except for a handful of freshmen like Kate and Sam who did not have cars and needed to wait for a ride home.

Jonathan and Jace arrived just after lunch and pulled into the dorm parking lot. Sam and Kate were leaving the dining hall. Kate saw them and took off across the campus square. Sam charged after her, but despite the shorter girl's quickness, Kate's long legs gave her the needed advantage. A thin layer of snow in the parking lot made it just slick enough for Kate to surf her way to the waiting Jeep. She bumped against it and rested her forearms on the hood to steady herself. Her feet slid out from under her, and she crashed to the ground.

Jonathan and Jace hurried from the Jeep to find her lying on her back, laughing hysterically. Jace couldn't hide a grin.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan said.

"Welcome to the first snowfall of Copper Creek," Kate gasped between chuckles.

Sam arrived at that moment and skated into Jace when she tried to stop. They almost fell in a heap.

"It's beautiful. And dangerous." Jonathan laughed as he steadied Jace and Sam, and helped Kate up.

Jace popped the back hatch. "Are you ready to get outta here?"

"Our stuff's in the main lounge," Sam replied.

Jace jogged to the dorm and came back with their duffle bags and two huge, canvas sacks. He dropped them with a loud grunt. "What on earth is this?"

"Laundry. We ran out of quarters," Sam said sheepishly.

Jace loaded the overstuffed luggage into the Cherokee. "It'll give us better traction, I guess." He grinned.

They climbed into the warm Jeep for the two-hour trip to Springville. Kate fell asleep and dreamed of Thanksgiving dinner. When she awoke they were pulling into the driveway of an extraordinary, two-story house on Kalani Street. She jumped out and

gazed at her surroundings. Nothing had changed since she'd left three and a half months ago.

The white house sat on an enormous lot. There were no neighbors on either side or behind them, which added to the appearance of spaciousness. Every detail of the home was expertly cared for by Jonathan and Jace. Each window was framed in shutters painted a deep sage to match the heavy oak door. The wrap-around porch had a swing in one corner encircled by Adirondack chairs and small, wooden end tables. Usually the yard was neatly mowed, and the white picket fence was lined with flower beds where tulips grew in the spring, followed by brightly colored dahlias in the summer and early fall. Now, the whole yard was covered in a thin blanket of snow which continued to fall lightly while they unloaded the Jeep. It was late afternoon and the sky was darkening. A brisk wind from the northwest encouraged them to hurry into the warmth of the house.

Jace dropped the bags by the door and went to start a fire in the family room fireplace. Sam entered behind him and gasped in appreciation. On the outside, the house resembled a New England cottage; but inside it reflected the warm woods and heavy rugged furniture of a cabin. Jonathan directed Sam upstairs and showed her to the guestroom. The room had a four-posted log bed with a sapphire blue, down comforter. A matching overstuffed chair sat in the corner. The floors were hardwood and covered with thick, hand woven rugs. There was a large dresser and a private bath. The window had a wonderful view of historic downtown Springville. It was a quaint village. As the darkness grew, she watched lights come on up and down the street. They twinkled festively in the twilight.

Sam dropped her bag on the bed and went next door. Kate's room was equally beautiful. It also had hardwood floors, but the rugs were pale lavender to match the comforter and other furnishings. There was a large sleigh bed in the center of the room, a huge walk-in closet, yet another private bath, and a bay window filled with pillows, which also overlooked downtown Springville. The room had shelves everywhere, and they were jammed with books. Kate's dresser was covered with photographs of her family and various volleyball trophies, ribbons, and plaques. One wall was scattered with autographed pictures of volleyball players from the men's and women's Olympic

teams over the years, beach volleyball players, and several pictures of Kate’s high school team in posed and candid shots.

“Wow. Nice room,” Sam said.

“Thanks. I’ve missed it.” Kate pulled clothes out of her bag.

“Did you grow up here?”

“Yep. It’s the only place I’ve ever lived. We moved here when I was a baby, after my dad died. Jon and Jace have remodeled it over the years. Come on, I’ll give you a tour before we eat.”

Kate showed Sam through the upstairs bedrooms. Each room had a private bath, and there was also a community bathroom in the hallway. Kate opened the door at the end of the hall. Jonathan’s room was done in shades of brown and navy blue, and seemed to fit his personality perfectly. It smelled of his woodsy cologne. The furniture was masculine and comfortable looking. Everything was neatly put away.

“This used to be my mom’s room,” Kate whispered. “Jon moved in after she died.”

Sam smiled sadly. “I’m sorry that you lost both of your parents.”

“I was really young and don’t remember a lot about them. But I still miss them. If that makes sense.”

Sam touched her friend’s shoulder. “It does. I lost my mom when I was young, too.”

Kate smiled; she and Sam were kindred spirits in numerous ways.

They went next door to Jace’s room. Sam laughed at the unmade bed and the clothes strewn around haphazardly. “Now, this is a guy’s room!”

“Yeah. Jace is a free spirit. And we love him just the way he is.”

A wonderful smell wafted up the stairs. Sam lifted her nose and took a deep breath. “What is that?”

“That would be Jon making dinner.”

“It smells incredible.” Sam sniffed again. “And Italian.”

“Yes. Jon’s specialty.”

“I’m suddenly famished.”

Kate and Sam raced down the stairs and into the kitchen. Jonathan stood at the stove making his own unique sauce from scratch. Jace was cutting thick slices of warm, homemade bread.

Kate leaned toward Sam. “Did I tell you that Jon does all the cooking, and Jace does all the baking?”

“It’s a wonder you don’t weigh five hundred pounds,” she marveled.

“It’s a hard life.”

“Whatever.”

The kitchen was large, with a dining area at one end. It opened into an equally large family room. Leather loveseats and recliners were positioned around a huge television. On the back wall a roaring fire blazed in the fireplace, which also had a loveseat and two large chairs in front of it. A baby grand piano sat in one corner. The walls were pine logs that ran horizontally. The ceiling was vaulted, and two huge skylights framed the night sky. A set of French doors opened onto a deck overlooking a deep ravine filled with trees.

“Set the table, please?” Jonathan said to Kate.

She pulled the dishes from the cupboard and placed them on the square, wood table. Outside the bay window it had stopped snowing. Everything was covered with white powder. Kate saw a doe grazing in the ravine and called Sam to the window.

Sam sighed. “Will you adopt me?”

“Well, yeah.” Kate grinned.

“Katie,” Jonathan called from the stove, “will you watch the sauce while I finish making pasta?”

Sam’s mouth dropped open. “*Making* pasta?”

“You see why I get so homesick?”

“I’ll never tease you again...about that,” Sam promised. “What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. Sit here at the breakfast bar and keep me company while I *watch* the sauce. It’s kind of silly. Jon never lets me *touch* the sauce.”

Jonathan and Jace moved around the kitchen, preparing the meal. They worked with a precision that hinted at years of experience together. Very few words were

spoken between them as they created a culinary experience that left Kate and Sam thinking they'd died and gone to heaven.

After dinner they settled in front of the fire, and Jonathan and Jace told stories about Kate when she was a little girl. Kate protested that most of them were slightly exaggerated.

Between fits of laughter, Sam caught Jace's eye. *True*, he mouthed to her, and made a crossing motion over his heart.

Sam giggled and nodded.

The guys headed to their rooms just after midnight, and the girls stayed up to watch the fire burn down to glowing embers. They talked about the Olympic tryouts scheduled for the following summer.

Sam laced her fingers and put them behind her head. She threw one leg over the arm of the lounge chair. "What do Jon and Jace do for a living? I mean, they're always available to come to our games. They remodeled this gorgeous house. It's sort of obvious you're not hurting for money. Are they CIA or something?"

"Actually, they're partners in a construction company."

"That explains all the muscles."

Kate smiled. "They invested my mom's inheritance and life insurance money in their own company. It did well. Now they head up a project called *A Place Called Home*."

"What's that?"

"It's a fantastic program for struggling single moms. Jon and Jace buy a house, remodel it, and sell it for a fraction of its value." Kate smiled proudly. "It was Jon's idea. They supervise and participate in all the work. There's a lawyer who handles the legal details, and Jace oversees the accounting."

"Good looks and brains. What else is there?"

"Integrity, charm, humor."

"Cooking ability, volleyball fans."

Kate sighed and rose from her lounge chair. "Well, I'm off to bed. Jace will have cinnamon rolls baking by eight."

"Does he do room service?"

“Not for me. But you never know. However, if he’s not knocking on your door by nine, you might want to come down.”

Sam grinned. “Good to know.” She stood and followed Kate upstairs.

* * *

The next morning Sam awoke to the smell of cinnamon. She opened one eye and looked at the clock. It was 7:45. She rolled from the warm bed with a soft groan and padded to the bathroom.

Jace was pulling piping hot rolls from the oven when she came downstairs.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning. Got coffee?”

“Freshly brewed. Just ground the beans.”

“You’re a god!” She poured the piping hot liquid into a large mug and plopped onto a stool at the breakfast bar.

Jace placed a huge roll, dripping with frosting, on the plate in front of her. He tapped a container at her elbow. “Butter.”

Sam smeared a large glob on top of the roll and sipped coffee while she watched it melt and run down the sides. The kitchen was toasty and smelled wonderful, and it was absolutely quiet in the house except for Jace’s whistling as he moved about the kitchen. Sam thought she could stay there forever.

Shortly, Jonathan and Kate came downstairs. They greeted everyone cheerily. For the first time, Sam noticed how much they resembled each other. Both had brown hair, although Kate’s was darker, and their facial expressions and mannerisms were practically identical. Sam wondered which parent they favored.

Thanksgiving dinner preparations began as soon as breakfast ended. Jonathan dressed the turkey and placed it in the oven. Kate was assigned the task of snapping green beans and peeling potatoes. Sam helped Jace knead bread dough and add fresh herbs and spices to the stuffing.

When they sat down to dinner, large, wet snowflakes started to fall again. They held hands around the table while Jonathan asked the blessing, giving thanks for family, friends, abundance, and the gift of grace. He prayed for those who could not gather around a bountiful table and asked that they all be reminded to take nothing for

granted. Sam thought it was a wonderful prayer. Her eyes became misty as she thought about her brother and dad vacationing in far away Georgia. She made a mental note to give them a call later that night.

After dinner they cleaned the kitchen together and went to the family room to play an overly competitive game of Monopoly. Jonathan wiped them out. To soften the defeat, Jace served warm pieces of homemade pecan pie with ice cream and whipped topping. Amid protests of “I couldn’t eat another bite,” they devoured it and sat back miserably in their chairs.

“It’s time for a walk,” Jonathan declared. He went to the mudroom for his jacket. The others resentfully followed.

* * *

As Kate and Sam walked on the new layer of snow, Kate waved at their neighbors, who were putting up Christmas lights. In another picture window, a family decorated a tree. At least six people were gathered around the large evergreen, hanging tinsel and ornaments, and laughing and talking exuberantly. Kate noticed a big white cat pawing at a bulb. He was about to fall off his perch.

A snowball exploded on the back of her jacket. Kate heard snickers behind her.

She looked at Sam and signaled her to “go” on three. She held her fingers in front of her, silently ticking off the numbers. At the same time, they dove in opposite directions, and each quickly formed a snowball. They rose simultaneously to fire at the two men behind them. Both girls hit their mark and the war was on.

Kate and Sam tore back to the house, circled to the backyard, and hid behind the lilac bushes. They quickly made several snowballs; then peeked out, ammunition ready.

Kate saw Jonathan and Jace run between the posts of the deck and dive behind the woodpile. Jonathan sprang up and fired at his sister. She ducked as a snowball whizzed past her head. Several more flew over in a barrage.

Kate knew this diversion. She faced Sam. “Run!”

It was too late. Jace had circled around behind them and was sprinting at full speed toward their hiding place. Kate stood up from behind the lilacs and saw Jonathan charging toward her.

There was screaming, and diving, and tackling.

Kate and Sam surrendered, but not before they were covered in wet snow. The girls trudged to the house to change clothes while Jace and Jonathan congratulated each other for their superior battle tactics.

* * *

When Kate came downstairs in her flannel pants and *Simpson College* sweatshirt, Jace had four steaming mugs of hot chocolate waiting on the table by the fireplace. He and Jonathan were lounging in nearby chairs.

Kate looked at the mugs; then at Jace. She suspected it was a peace offering. And who was she to stand in the way of peace? She sat cross-legged in front of the fire and reached for a mug. She positioned herself so her back was to Jonathan and Jace. Jace pushed her shoulder with his socked foot. She continued to ignore him.

Sam joined them a few moments later and sat beside her friend in the same pose, hot chocolate mug in hand.

Jonathan's soft voice broke the silence. "I happen to know that the silent treatment is your least effective means of punishment towards me."

Kate took a sip of cocoa.

Jace chuckled. "I'm willing to bet it's Sam's too."

Sam spun on her seat to face them. "You're right. Somebody play the piano for us."

Jonathan grinned and went to the baby grand. He knew every piece Sam and Kate requested.

* * *

The day after Thanksgiving it was tradition for Kate, Jonathan, and Jace to visit the local shopping mall and perform random acts of kindness. The stores were packed with shoppers, and opportunities to do good deeds abounded. Kate thoroughly enjoyed watching Sam embrace the family tradition.

Jace tucked a fifty-dollar bill in the shopping bag of a little girl.

Kate paid for the lunch of the person in line behind her.

Jonathan helped a man with three tired children carry a load of packages to his car. He dropped a gasoline gift card in the console while the man was busy fastening his grumpy kids into their car seats.

Sam bought a book to read to a group of children in a bookstore. She gave the story to a boy who had been enthralled by the tale.

The rest of the weekend was spent touring the area around Springville. Jonathan, Jace, and Kate delighted in showing Sam the quaintness of small town America.

* * *

Kate was reluctant to say good-bye when they returned to campus late Sunday evening. The weekend had gone too quickly.

Jonathan hugged his sister fiercely. “It was good to have you home.”

She stepped back and smiled. “Thanks for everything. Except the snowball fight.”

“That was the best part.”

Kate turned to pull Sam out of Jace’s embrace. “My turn!”

“How rude,” Jace said.

“I saw you first.”

“That you did, Katie. But what matters is who sees me last.”

Kate hugged him; then pushed him away gently. “I’ll see you in two weeks.”

Sam raised her arms in the air. “One week of classes, one week of finals, and we’ll have survived our first semester of college!”

“That will call for a celebration,” Jace said.

Kate stroked her chin thoughtfully. “Yes. We’ll call it *winter break*.”

Jace rolled his eyes. “Careful Katie, you’re not so big that I can’t toss you into a snow bank.”

“Bring it.”

Jonathan stepped between them. “Well, I guess we’ll be heading home.”

“Who’s the fun-sucker now?” Jace said.

The three friends pointed simultaneously at Jonathan.

“Sometimes it’s no fun being the only adult. I get blamed for everything.”

“The *only* adult!” Jace sputtered.

Kate and Sam grabbed their bags and headed for the dorm. They left the men to their posturing, which Kate knew might take quite awhile. “Bye, guys,” Kate called over her shoulder.

Jonathan and Jace continued to argue, seemingly unaware the girls had left them.

Kate looked across the white vista of the darkened campus and saw a lone figure jogging. She recognized his gait. It was Commander Flynn. He lifted his arm in greeting. She waved in return and smiled.

Behind her, Jonathan and Jace observed the exchange and mirrored expressions of concern.

Chapter Eight

Kate awoke from a sound sleep, bathed in sweat. The dream was becoming increasingly unsettling. Every night for the past week it had been the same. A figure dressed in red appeared and spoke of things that made no sense. The first time, she had dismissed it as too much spicy food. But this was the sixth night she'd had the same dream, and it was beginning to haunt her. She was not sleeping well; it affected her concentration. She had to get some rest. Finals began Monday and it was important to be prepared. More than anything, Kate wanted to make the President's list.

She went to the bathroom to splash water on her face. She returned to the bedroom and sat on the floor between the beds. Kate crossed her legs in the lotus position. *Focus*. "Breathe," she whispered. It took several minutes to calm her pounding heart. It was beating so hard her chest hurt, and it echoed inside her head.

The door opened slowly and Sam tiptoed in. The light from the hallway fell across Kate's still form.

"Oh, you're awake," Sam whispered. "When I left at 9:30 you were sound asleep."

"I had the dream again."

Sam sat on the floor, opposite her best friend. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I just want it to stop."

"Maybe you're stressing about finals," Sam offered.

"I've never stressed about a test in my life. Why start now?"

"This is college, girl. The rules have changed."

"I hope that's all it is," Kate said. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to twelve. They kicked me out of the library."

"You shouldn't be stuck in the library on a Friday night."

"And you shouldn't be in bed by nine, but here we are."

"Somehow they made college life seem much more exciting in the brochure."

Sam laughed. "Suckered us in, didn't they?"

Kate smiled and pushed herself up. "I'm going to bed. If that dream comes back, I'm starting a caffeine diet and avoiding sleep altogether."

Sam also rose. “I thought we were already on that diet.”
Kate crawled under her warm covers and closed her eyes.
Concern clouded Sam’s face. When she came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, Kate was asleep.

The next morning, Sam was gone to breakfast when Kate woke up. She reached up and patted the headboard until she found her phone.

The greeting on the other end brought immediate calm.

“Hi, Jon.” Fatigue thickened her voice.

“What’s wrong, Katie?”

“I’ve been having this weird dream.”

“What kind of dream?”

“It’s vague and confusing. I don’t understand the words.”

“It’s not English?”

“It’s English, but I don’t know what it means. It wouldn’t be so freaky, but I keep having the same dream every night.”

There was a pause. “Do you need me to come over?”

“No. I need to get through this week. Do well on my finals. We’ll talk when I get home.”

“You’re sure?” He didn’t sound convinced.

“Yes. I might try writing it down. Maybe that will help me get some sleep.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a plan. That’s my Katie.”

She heard the smile in his voice. “I’ll see you next Thursday.”

“Jace is baking chocolate chip cookies.”

“With nuts?” Kate said.

“Of course.”

“I’m counting the days.” She closed the phone. She’d study hard, get through this week, and have a month off to regroup before second semester. *Everything will be fine.*

* * *

Kate spent the next three days in the library with Sam. Each night, the dorm hallways got louder as students celebrated the completion of a hated or dreaded course. Sam's last final was Wednesday morning. She was leaving after lunch for the bus station and a long ride to Chicago. Kate was glad Sam would finally get to see her family, for the first time this semester. Kate had a final in Principles of Coaching on Thursday morning; then Jonathan was picking her up.

The dream continued every night of finals week.

* * *

On Wednesday, a taxi sat in the parking lot with its engine running. Sam's bags were in the trunk, and all that remained to be said were the good-byes. It was more difficult than Kate expected. They had become such good friends and spent so much time together, it was strange to think of not having Sam around. Kate had never had a sister, and she'd never really wanted one—until now.

Sam hugged Kate. "Have a wonderful Christmas. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"That's a short list." Kate laughed and squeezed her friend.

"Hug Jon and Jace. Tell them not to shake the presents from me."

"Jon and I will manage, but you know Jace."

"I expect to get an occasional email or phone call."

"Likewise."

"I'll see you mid-January." Sam wagged a finger at her friend. "Be good!"

Kate laughed and nodded. "You, too."

Sam climbed into the taxi. Kate watched it pull away from the curb.

She returned to her room, grabbed her cell phone, and punched in Riley's number. "Hey, would you be interested in training this afternoon instead of tonight?"

"Sure. I can rearrange a few things. Something come up?"

Kate loved the smooth masculinity of his voice. "No. It would just be nice to have an evening off. I thought I'd stay in and watch a movie."

"Okay. I'll see you around three-ish?"

"Pick me up at the dorm?"

“I’d better meet you at the gym.” He paused. “I have a schedule to work on with Lieutenant Avery this afternoon.”

The disappointment burned. “Okay. See you there.”

Kate studied half-heartedly for her last final, keeping a constant eye on the clock. She dressed and jogged to the gym at 2:45. Riley hadn’t arrived yet. He showed up at precisely three o’clock and was all business during their training. Kate lingered afterwards, hoping for an invitation to dinner, but none came.

Dejected, she returned to her dorm room and put a DVD into the player. She ran down to the student lounge, threw a bag of popcorn in the microwave, and watched it go around in a slow circle. Back upstairs, Kate flopped on her bed and watched *While You Were Sleeping*. It only served to make her lonelier and more homesick. She drifted to sleep, still in her workout clothes.

Kate was awakened by a blinding white light. When it faded, a man dressed in red leather pants and shirt stood before her. It was the same man from her nightly dream. But now she was awake. His emerald eyes were warm and friendly. He appeared human, except that Kate had never seen anyone with such bright eyes, and he was surrounded by an aura of pale blue light. He stood with his hands clasped in front of him.

Kate shot up and scrambled away from him until her back was against the wall. She drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. Her expression was a mixture of fear and wonder.

When he spoke, his voice echoed as if it came across a great chasm. “Kathia, Jorryn, Jonavon, Ruark, Wilyam. The One calls. Sabriel is the messenger. The time of Lorcan declines. Children of Katriel. Daughter of Joakin. Leaders of the Cathal. The Gateway shall awaken and The Promise shall be fulfilled. Three may journey; Pure, Champion, Protector. Eavan will be restored. It shall be so.”

“Who are you?” Kate whispered.

The man smiled. “I am Sabriel the Ancient.”

“What do you want with me?”

“Child, the answers to your destiny reside down a familiar path.”

Kate sighed impatiently. “What’s with all the cryptic? This is Minnesota. Speak plain English.”

Sabriel frowned and lifted his hands. “As you wish, my child.” His emerald eyes sparkled. “The answers you seek lie with your brother.” He disappeared in a flash of bright blue light.

Kate sat with her mouth open. She tumbled sideways onto her bed, put her pillow over her face, and screamed. She came out for air and sighed disgustedly. “This is just great!” she yelled at her ceiling. “I’m not in the mood for a nervous breakdown!”

Sleep was impossible. After two hours of tossing and turning, she got up to stretch, mumbling angrily to herself the whole time. She grabbed her class notes and studied for her final. Even though she knew the material inside and out, it gave her a momentary distraction.

Just before sunrise, Kate went to the dining hall for breakfast. Then she headed to the gym and stomped upstairs to the second floor, where her classroom was located. It was empty. She waited for a half-hour before anyone else showed up. When the professor handed out the tests, she dug into hers and was first to finish. Kate dropped the paper on his desk and left.

She went to the weight room and spent an hour lifting weights and having an animated conversation with herself; then returned to her room and began jamming clothes into a duffel bag. As Kate stalked back and forth from her bed to the closet, she caught sight of the family picture on her desk. She picked it up, studying the happy faces. When she got to Jonathan’s, she growled and slammed the photograph face down on the desk.

Kate was sitting on the curb of the parking lot when Jonathan arrived. A scowl clouded her pretty face.

He jumped out of the Jeep. “Hey, Katie! Why the sour expression? Get a B on a test?”

Her glare was ominous. “Jonathan Arnold. You’ve got some explaining to do!”
“Oh, boy,” he muttered.

“That’s right, Mr. Arnold. You know those dreams I’ve been having? The ones that have been freaking me out? Well, I had one in 3-D last night, and guess what he said to me? Go ahead, guess!”

“What?” Jonathan wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“It seems that my *brother*, one of the few people on earth that I love and trust unconditionally, has been keeping something from me.”

Jonathan put up his hands in surrender. “I can explain.”

Kate shot up from the curb and crossed her arms over her chest. “Oh, you can explain, all right. And you will. I need to know what’s going on. I need to know that I’m not going bonkers.”

“You’re not. Trust me. Everything will be okay. I promise.”

“Oh, really? And how do you know?”

“Because you’re not the only one having those dreams.”

Chapter Nine

Kate stared out the window of the Jeep. It was the longest ride of her life. She did not say a single word to Jonathan, in spite of his numerous attempts to start a conversation.

When they pulled in the driveway on Kalani Street, she jumped out of the Jeep almost before it stopped, grabbed her duffel bag, and headed for the house.

“Katie, wait,” Jonathan called.

Jace stood in the open doorway. He frowned at the expression on Kate’s face. She gave him a half-hearted hug and mumbled, “Hi,” as she walked past him and bounded up the stairs. Jonathan came into the entryway as her bedroom door slammed.

Jace flinched. “Nice drive?”

Jonathan glared at him. “She’s not having the reaction I hoped for.”

“Did you tell her about the dreams?”

“I tried. She stopped talking as soon as I told her she wasn’t the only one having them.”

“So she doesn’t know –”

“No.”

“Would it help if I talked to her?”

“Go ahead, if you’re feeling brave.”

Jace looked up the stairs. “Brave. Stupid. There’s such a fine line.”

Jonathan patted his shoulder.

* * *

Jace stood outside Kate’s door for several seconds before knocking.

“Go away, Jon!”

“It’s me. Jace.” He waited a few moments and turned to go, just as the door opened. Kate leaned on the edge, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

“Katie.” He took her in his arms and stroked her hair.

“Why did he let me go through the horror of that dream over and over, and never tell me I wasn’t alone?” She sobbed.

“He wanted you to focus on finishing the semester. To get you home, where he could explain everything.”

“There’s more, isn’t there.” She shuddered against his chest.

Jace slowly let out his breath. “Oh, yes. A lot more.”

Kate pushed back and looked into his blue eyes. Her pain and confusion were reflected there. “Tell me the truth, Jace. Who else is having this dream?”

“Jon. Me...” He hesitated.

“And?”

“We have to sit down as a family and talk.”

“I have to know.” Her eyes filled with tears again. “I asked him what he wanted, and he said Jon had the answers.”

Jace startled. “You spoke to Sabriel?”

“Yes. In my room. Last night.”

“Let’s get something to eat, and talk.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

“Well, that’s a first.” His remark got a slight smile from her.

Jace put his arm around her shoulders and led her down the hallway.

When they got to the kitchen, Kate saw Jonathan in the family room, by the fireplace. Strewn around him were boxes of ornaments and Christmas decorations. It was their tradition to cut a fresh tree each year and decorate it together. Normally they did this the first Saturday of December, but since Kate had been away at college, she knew they were waiting for her to come home.

Jace nodded toward Jonathan. When she hesitated, he pointed her into the family room and gave her a little shove.

Kate approached her brother. He looked up, and she saw the hurt in his eyes. “Jon, I’m sorry.”

He stood and wrapped her in his arms. “You were trying to finish your first semester. I thought we could hold off until you got home.”

She melted into his strength, feeling like a little girl. “I just felt so alone.”

Jace brought a tray with teabags, mugs of hot water, and a plate of warm chocolate chip cookies. He set the tray on a table near the fireplace. He motioned to Kate, and they sat together on the loveseat.

Jonathan sank onto the ottoman opposite them. He looked from Kate to Jace and back. Kate had the feeling he was about to start the most important conversation of her life.

“We’re...not from around here.”

Kate frowned in puzzlement. “You mean Springville?”

“No,” he said. “Think a little more globally.”

She looked at Jonathan, then at Jace. “The United States?”

“No.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Please don’t tell me that we’re...aliens.”

Jonathan laughed nervously. “No.”

Kate’s shoulders sagged in relief.

“We’ve never thought of ourselves like that. We prefer the term *other worlders*.”

“What?!”

“Still human...but from another place...not...Earth.”

She stared at him. “Where?”

“A place called Eavan. It’s a region of our homeworld, Sunlee. It’s very much like this place.”

Her voice was barely audible. “Have you been drinking?”

Jonathan frowned.

“Katie...” Jace took her hand.

She pulled away. “I don’t understand. And I’m not sure I want to.” She got up and began to pace in front of the fireplace. “*This* is the dream part. Not that other stuff. I’m going to wake up, and I’ll be in my dorm room.”

Jonathan motioned to Jace. “Get the book. Maybe that will help.”

Jace left the room and came back with a leather bound volume. It was the size of an atlas and about four inches thick. Kate could tell it was old. The cover had no words, but was intricately designed with something that resembled a coat of arms.

“Sit down,” Jonathan said quietly.

Kate dropped to the loveseat beside Jace. He placed the book in her lap and opened it to the first page; it was a watercolor portrait of a family. A dark-haired man stood in the center. A lovely young woman was seated in front of him, holding an infant wrapped in a navy blue blanket. Beside her stood a young boy with neatly combed light brown hair, except for a little sprig which stood up in defiance on top of his head.

Kate studied the young woman; her dark brown hair, her beautiful hazel eyes, the way she held her head. It was her mother. Kate's eyes moved to the little boy; it was obviously Jonathan. The man standing behind them was her father – the man she'd never known. There wasn't a single photograph of him in the house, but she had vague memories of this portrait. Her mother had shown it to her when she was a little girl. She touched the page in reverent awe.

Her father was more than handsome; he was gorgeous. He was the kind of good-looking that made women go weak in the knees from a glance and a smile in their direction. She felt like she was looking into Jonathan's face, except that this man's hair was darker, and his eyes were deep brown, like hers. A hint of a smile turned the corners of his mouth. Kate's eyes fell on the tiny bundle in the woman's arms. She looked at Jonathan, and he answered her unspoken question.

"You," he said.

A single tear slid down Kate's cheek. "This is my family."

Jace put his arm around her.

"It was painted shortly before we left Eavan. When our region was at peace," Jonathan explained.

"What happened?"

"There was an uprising. An evil being called Lorcan led his legions of Cormac—demons – against the ruling family of our region."

"The ruling family?"

"Lord Joakin, our father, and Lady Katriel, our mother." Jonathan knelt in front of Kate and took her hand. This time she did not pull away. "Our father and his Number One –Jace's father– went with the Cathal warriors to do battle. Sabriel, the being from your dream, came to our ancestral home and helped Mom escape with us."

"To here?"

“Yes. We came through a portal called the Gateway. You were a baby when this happened. I was six, and Jace was five.”

“What happened to our fathers?”

Jace drew a sharp breath. “They gave their lives protecting their families. It was their intervention that allowed us to get through the Gateway to safety.”

“What about your family, Jace? What really happened to them?”

Jace looked at the floor and swallowed hard. “What I always told you. My home burned to the ground with my mother and sisters inside. But it was no accident. And I *was* at your house, playing with Jon when it happened.”

Kate’s eyes filled with pain for her friend. “So...Mom came here all alone, with us?” Her voice was a whisper.

Jonathan smiled sadly. “She came to a strange place, with two young boys and a baby, and she raised us well.”

“How did she manage?”

“She was a strong woman. Like you, Katie. She brought valuable items from our homeworld and invested them wisely. She learned the culture. When she discovered we’d be here awhile, she came to this small town and purchased a house. Then she got her part-time job at the school and started planning for our future.

“She spent a lot of time teaching us to manage money and how to make a living with our skills. And she told us stories every night about our homeworld.”

Kate’s eyes grew wide. “I remember those wonderful stories.”

“They were true,” Jace said. “You were almost old enough for her to explain our heritage when the accident happened.”

Kate nodded. “But the ice storm...and the semi...that part was true?”

Jonathan took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“She was killed instantly.” Jace choked on the words.

“I was six.” Kate slammed the book shut. “How on earth did we manage after that? You said, ‘don’t worry, we’re being taken care of.’ I believed you!”

Jonathan shook his head. “It wasn’t easy. Mom stored plenty of cash in the house, and she’d purchased some life insurance. The Mainnes, across the street, looked out for us. We kept to ourselves and told stories of uncles who came to stay with us.”

Kate was too absorbed in her thoughts to notice Jonathan's slight hesitation as he paused and caught Jace's eye.

"Eventually, the few neighbors we had stopped watching us and went back to their own lives, or moved away and forgot about us," Jonathan continued.

Kate fanned the pages of the book. It was filled with sketches and page after page of elegant handwriting – her mother's, she guessed. "What is this?"

"It's Mom's journal," Jonathan answered. "Her record of our family history in Eavan. She wrote down everything that happened from the time she was a little girl. It's tradition among our people. The first born girl in each family begins a record when she's old enough to write and keeps it until her death."

Kate stared at the priceless treasure in her lap. "Did she continue it? After we came here?"

"Yes," Jace said. "If you look in the back, you'll see her entries about our life here."

"So...my journals. They'll become a record, too?"

Jonathan smiled. "Only if you want them to."

Kate held the book to her chest and closed her eyes. "I can almost sense her presence."

Jace squeezed her shoulders. "Everything she wanted us to know about Eavan is in that book. When you're ready, you need to read it."

Kate's eyes flew open. "What's the deal with this vision? Who the heck is Sabriel? What does he want with us?"

"We need to have that conversation after supper." Jonathan rose from the floor.

Jace also stood. "How about burgers and fries?"

"And chocolate shakes?" Kate said.

Jace winked at her. "Whatever you need."

Jonathan pulled his keys from the pocket of his jeans and tossed them to Jace. "You guys go. Take the Jeep. Bring me a large chocolate shake."

Kate was suddenly starved. She grabbed her jacket and hurried outside, followed closely by Jace.

Jonathan watched the headlights of the Cherokee as they backed out. He picked up the phone and punched in a number. “It’s Jonathan Arnold. When can you come? Good. It’s time to talk.”

Chapter Ten

Kate ate her cheeseburger in silence, reflecting on the earlier conversation. When she finished her meal, she returned to the family room where Katriel's journal lay on the coffee table. Kate gently ran her fingertips across the leather cover. It was written with her mother's own hand; it was a piece of her. And it contained Kate's history, something she'd known very little of in her lifetime.

This explained why she had no loving grandparents, no kindly aunts, no entertaining uncles, no friendly cousins, no relatives at all. She had never questioned their unusual living arrangements; to her it had always been that way. There were lots of non-traditional families in the world. She accepted that and was extremely proud of hers. Jace and Jonathan had taken exceptional care of her, and she'd never experienced a day without feeling loved and secure.

Kate sat on the floor and watched Jonathan place more wood on the fire. He returned to sit beside her. Jace took a turn in the lounge chair, facing them.

"So, tell me. What's the deal with the dream?"

Jace nodded at Jonathan. Her brother repeated from memory: "Kathia, Jorryn, Jonavon, Ruark, Wilyam. The One calls. Sabriel is the messenger. The time of Lorcan declines. Children of Katriel. Daughter of Joakin. Leaders of the Cathal. The Gateway shall awaken and The Promise shall be fulfilled. Three may journey; Pure, Champion, Protector. Eavan will be restored. It shall be so."

"Yep. That's it," Jace agreed. "After two and a half weeks, I'm practically saying it out loud in my sleep."

"Me, too," Kate said. "I get the *Sabriel* part. That's the guy who came to see me. He's the messenger."

"Yes," Jonathan replied. "Sabriel is a servant of The One. The One is the Highest Being. In this world, He's called God. Sabriel helped our mom escape. He is an agent of good. We can trust him."

"Does he have special powers?"

"Only as The One empowers him."

“And this *time of Lorcan* thing?”

“Lorcan is the evil being that killed our father. He rules Nessa, an arid region of Sunlee. He gathered followers with his ways of deceit and led a revolt against the other eleven regions.”

Kate tilted her head. “So *Eavan will be restored* is a reference to a region of the homeworld, Sunlee?”

Jace nodded. “Yes. It means the time has come for good to reclaim the balance of power.”

“And I gather from the *Children of Katriel* and *Daughter of Joakin* that this restoring has something to do with us?”

“Correct,” Jonathan said. “But more specifically, you.”

“Me?” Kate’s eyes grew wide. “But I don’t know anything about this.”

“You will,” Jace said. “We’ll teach you. Actually, we’ve been helping you prepare for several years.”

Kate looked from Jonathan to Jace.

Jonathan smiled at her. “That training I’ve been so adamant about? Your knowing how to defend yourself? The form we’ve been teaching you is specific to the Cathal warriors of Eavan. When we return, you will be years ahead in your training.”

Kate got stuck on a single word. “*When?* What do you mean *when* we return?”

“*The Gateway shall awaken and The Promise shall be fulfilled.* We are being called back to Eavan,” Jonathan answered.

“What do you mean *we*? I’ve got plans for *this* world. I want to go to college, and play volleyball, and try out for the Olympics!”

Jace sighed and shook his head. “I told you we shouldn’t have waited.”

Jonathan frowned at him and returned his attention to Kate. “We’ve worked very hard to teach you the values and principles of our people, and still give you as much of a normal life as possible; knowing that The Call could come any time after you turned eighteen. Now it’s happened, and you have a destiny to fulfill. Surely you’ve sensed a longing to serve a great purpose.”

“No,” she huffed. “The only thing I knew was that I had a father I couldn’t remember, and a wonderful mom who died way too young, and a brother who took on a lot of responsibility to raise me, and a best friend I thought I could trust!”

“Hey now, Katie,” Jace objected. “That’s not fair.”

Kate pushed herself up from the floor, shaking her head as she did. “I’m going to bed. I don’t want to hear anymore.”

Jonathan nodded. “Okay. We’ll talk later.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t want to hear anymore. It’s too much.”

Jace watched her go. “I think we should have told her. Everything. From the very beginning. She wouldn’t be going through a total culture shock right now if we had.”

Jonathan shrugged. “I did what I thought was best. I still think it was for the best. She’s a smart girl; she’ll come around. She just needs some time.”

“How much time?”

“Let her sleep on it. We’ll do some normal family stuff this week. Take it slow. But we’ve got to tell her the rest by next week.”

“The sooner the better,” Jace agreed. “So she can kill us and get it over with.”

* * *

Kate was determined that her life should return to normal. The next day she dragged Jonathan and Jace to the tree farm to pick out a nine-foot, soft-needle pine. She watched and giggled while the two men tried to set it upright and get it perfectly straight. When they finally finished, it was a breathtaking sight sitting between the baby grand piano and the stone fireplace. They spent the rest of the afternoon decorating the tree and the house, and fell onto the sofa to admire their handiwork.

That night as Jonathan straightened the family room, he discovered Katriel’s journal was gone from the coffee table. He looked at Jace, who was picking up in the kitchen.

Jace pointed at the ceiling. “I saw her take it upstairs after dinner.”

“She’ll come around.” Jonathan’s smile was hopeful.

* * *

Over the next days, Kate had the uncomfortable awareness she was being watched. Jonathan and Jace invited her to a job site to help with construction on a new house. Kate pounded nails, hung drywall, installed kitchen cabinets, and primed new walls. Each evening she came home exhausted and barely able to lift her arms. She would collapse on the couch, rising only to help prepare supper, and then go downstairs to their training room. She needed time alone. Kate had tried to avoid training, but it was such a discipline for her and so helped her to relax, she couldn't ignore it.

* * *

On Saturday, Kate and Jace went Christmas shopping. The family had a rule that for every gift bought, an item of equal value would be placed in one of the many bins found in the local stores this time of year. Kate and Jace had a contest to see who could find the most inventive and unique gifts for the bins.

Jonathan stayed home and called their lawyer, instructing him to send the yearly grocery gift cards to their clients – every single mom they had helped get into a home in the past year. The gifts were sent in amounts of three hundred dollars and arrived with a personal but anonymous note from Jonathan and Jace.

The next day, Jace stayed home to work on the notes while Jonathan and Kate went shopping. After lunch they built a snowman in the front yard. Kate ran inside for carrots, a scarf, mittens, and a stocking cap to finish their masterpiece. When she returned, there was a blue 1970 Malibu in the driveway. She stopped and stared at the car.

Commander Flynn and Lieutenant Avery got out. They were dressed in jeans, T-shirts, and leather jackets. Kate thought they were particularly nice looking in their casual clothes.

She walked to the car, still holding her armful of snowman attire, and grinned broadly. “Hello, Riley. Lieutenant Avery. What brings you here?”

Flynn smiled warmly, his green eyes twinkling. “Actually, your brother invited us for the afternoon.”

Kate looked at Jonathan and noticed he was not smiling. Jace was staring at the ground.

“What...” Kate’s gaze returned to Riley. “I don’t... Why are you here?”

Jonathan's voice was quiet. "We have a conversation to finish."

Kate's expression changed from confusion to dread. "And they're part of it?"

"Yes," Jace said. "We tried to wait until you were ready—"

"No. I don't want to do this."

"Katie," Jonathan pleaded. "There's no easy way to say this."

"Let me make it easy. Somehow you managed to get these two—" she motioned to Riley and Will "—to spy on me for you?"

Flynn shifted uncomfortably.

"No," Jonathan said. "They were sent to protect you."

"By you?"

"And me," Jace added.

"And they're not from here either. Are they?"

"No," Jonathan replied. "They are Cathal warriors from Eavan. They protect the ruling family. Commander Flynn is the leader, and Lieutenant Avery is his first officer."

Kate dropped the things she was holding and covered her ears. She let out a frustrated breath, turned and ran into the house, slamming the front door behind her.

The four men followed and found her in the kitchen, her head buried in the refrigerator. They lined up at the breakfast bar, looking very much like they were standing before a firing squad.

"Sabriel sent us through the Gateway with you," Will explained, continuing the conversation.

Kate's voice was muffled by the refrigerator door. "Eighteen years ago? What were you, like, four years old?" Her tone was caustic.

"They were the same age then as they appear today," Jonathan said.

Kate stepped back and slammed the refrigerator door. She stared at her brother. "You're kidding! They don't look a day over —"

"Twenty-five," Jace finished. "Things are different in Sunlee, Katie. There, we grow normally, as children from Earth do, until we reach the age of twenty-five; then our aging process slows down. Sunleens live at least a hundred and fifty years and never look any older than fifty."

Jonathan wouldn't meet Kate's gaze. "And we've discovered that here, we don't seem to age at all after twenty-five."

Kate stalked to the sink and smashed her fists on the counter. She whirled to look at Riley. "I don't even want to do the math on this. It's too scary."

"Thanks." Riley frowned. He turned to Jonathan. "Sir, have you told her everything about the dream?"

"Not quite. We wanted you here for some of it." Jonathan looked at Kate. "Do you remember the first part?"

"Yes. *Kathia, Jorryn, Jonavon, Ruark, Wilyam,*" she repeated. "I thought it was a foreign language."

"Those are our Eavonian names. Jorryn is Jace. Jonavon is me. Ruark is Commander Flynn, and Wilyam is Lieutenant Avery. Kathia is you."

Kate rolled her eyes. "Why change our names?"

"Mom wanted to protect us. We chose new names when we were young. She told us not to use our given names until The Call came from Sabriel."

Kate felt her belligerence grow with each passing moment. "But I like my name. What if I don't want to change it?"

"Your name means the same thing in Eavan that it does on Earth. It's *pure*. Mom chose it especially for you."

Kate jerked her head. "*Three may journey: Pure, Champion, Protector.* The last part of the dream. It means...?"

Riley cleared his throat. "It speaks of those who will return to Eavan in fulfillment of The Call."

Kate's eyes grew large. "Me."

"Yes." He nodded.

"And..."

"Ruark, whose name means Champion," Jace said. "And Wilyam, who is the Protector."

Kate walked to the breakfast bar, her glare ominous. She put her hands on it and leaned forward. All four men simultaneously leaned back. "You want me to go to a strange world with two guys I hardly know and you're not even coming along!"

Jonathan raised his hands defensively. “You know Commander Flynn. He’s been your training partner for three and a half months.”

“Yes, but you set it up! Our friendship isn’t genuine!” She turned her wrath on Riley. “YOU set me up! You were never interested in getting to know me. You were just following *ORDERS*.” She practically spat the last word.

Jonathan’s look was fierce. “Katie, this is your destiny. I know it’s all new to you. But please understand that we’re alive today because our mother and father gave their lives to save ours. Father died protecting us, and Mom sacrificed everything to keep us safe. I can do no less. You are the single most important person in my life. I would give up everything for you.

“Sabriel hasn’t revealed my or Jace’s part in The Call yet. But please know that I would die to fulfill it. And these two men—” he motioned to Riley and Will “—are willing to do the same.”

Kate’s eyes flashed with anger. “I don’t want to go *anywhere*. This isn’t my Call. It’s yours. I didn’t know anything about it until two weeks ago. I can’t just give up this life and go on to a new one.”

She turned on Riley. “And *you*. I thought you were my friend.” Angry tears spilled down her cheeks. She whirled back to Jonathan as a new thought struck. It made her physically sick. “Was Sam a plant, too? Does everyone in my life know about this except me?”

She covered her mouth. Kate suddenly couldn’t bear the thought of her best friend being involved in this. The room began to spin. She couldn’t catch her breath. She sobbed as she fled the room and ran up the stairs.

Jonathan started after her, but Jace grabbed his arm. “Don’t. You’ve got to trust her. She’s not the spitting image of Katriel for nothing.”

Upstairs, Kate threw herself on her bed and sobbed mightily. Painful feelings collided inside; betrayal, anger, hurt, fear, loneliness, sadness, hopelessness. Gone was her sense of security and safety. She had spent her entire life sheltered in this house, being taken care of by two of the strongest men on earth, and now she felt it had all been a lie. It was a cruel plot to make her into something she didn’t want to be. She longed to

talk to her mom – to get a woman’s perspective. She wanted to call Sam, but she was afraid her friend was in on the charade. Kate had never felt so isolated.

Chapter Eleven

It was two days until Christmas. This was normally Kate's favorite time of year, when she was reminded of how thankful she was for all the blessings in her life. This year fate had played a cruel trick, and things she thought were blessings were turning out to be something else entirely.

She moped around the house, doing her best to project a little Christmas cheer, but her heart wasn't in it. She was going through the motions. Jonathan and Jace seemed at a loss for what to do with her. Kate could tell the distance between them was breaking Jonathan's heart. It was breaking hers, too.

On Christmas Eve they had a traditional family dinner with all the fixings; then opened their gifts. Sam called in the middle of the festivities.

Jace smiled at the receiver. "Sammy! Merry Christmas! How the heck are ya?"

"Merry Christmas, Jace! I'm good. How's everyone there?"

"We're just finishing presents. Thanks for the *Chick Magnet* shirt. I love it." He laughed.

"You're welcome. I saw it and thought of you. Don't know why."

"Well, it's perfect. I'll wear it always." He laughed again. "Under another shirt. Can't have everyone knowing my secret."

"Jace," Sam said, "it's no secret."

"Jon and Katie are jumpin' around here. I guess they want to talk to you." Jace held out the phone; Jonathan and Kate both dove for it. Jonathan won the battle by knocking Kate onto the couch and sitting on her. "Hey, Sam! Merry Christmas!"

"What's all the racket?"

"That would be Katie. She wants to talk to you, but I got to the phone first. It's good to be the big brother."

Kate squirmed beneath him. "Get off me, you big poop!"

Jonathan calmly continued his conversation while sitting in the middle of her back. "Just wanted to say thanks for the great shirt. Now Katie and Jace know that *I do my own stunts.*"

Sam's laughter could be heard by all. "You're too much! No...really."

"Want to talk to Katie?"

"Absolutely."

Jonathan handed the phone to Kate and bolted for the other side of the room. She rose from the couch, flipped her hair out of her face, and glared at him as she picked up the receiver. She was sweetness and charm with the flick of a switch. "Hey, girl! Merry Christmas. I miss you. Thanks for the flannel volleyball pjs. I love them!"

Kate ignored the nagging doubts she'd had about Sam's participation in the conspiracy against her. After all, Sam seemed genuinely puzzled by the dreams as much as Kate was.

"I miss you guys, too. And thanks for the earrings. You spent way too much."

"There's no such thing."

"Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?"

"Oh, yeah. Way more than I bargained for." The comment seemed lost on Sam, which Kate took as a good sign.

"Me, too. My dad got me a TV, and my brother bought me a bunch of DVDs. I'll bring them to school with me."

Kate left the family room to go upstairs. Even though Jonathan and Jace were busily cleaning up wrapping paper, she knew they were eavesdropping on every word. "Believe it or not, I'm actually excited to get back to campus. It will be fun to start a new semester."

"You're crazy. I haven't thought about school since the day I left."

"Oh, yeah? What *have* you been thinking about?" Kate grinned. "Or should I say *who*?"

"You wouldn't be wrong."

Kate closed the door to her bedroom. "Would his initials be Jace Tucker?"

Sam laughed, and Kate knew she'd hit the bull's-eye.

"I didn't buy him that particular shirt just because."

"I figured. But tell me, is he top on the list?"

"There is no list anymore."

"Right."

“Okay, at least it’s down to one page. And a certain handsome, blue-eyed man is currently listed at number one.”

“Well, I’ll be. For you that’s practically going steady.”

“Has he said anything about me?”

Kate laughed. “Your name has come up in conversation a number of times. Which tells me he’s got you on the brain. Have you gotten any emails from him?”

“No. I’ve gotten very few from you, as a matter of fact.”

“I’m sorry. Jace and Jon have kept me...occupied. I’ve been working construction and learning to cook.”

“Construction? Cooking? Kate, it’s called winter *break* for a reason.”

“This *is* their idea of a break. They hired me, so they could work less.”

“Have you seen Riley?”

The smile left Kate’s face. “No.”

“What’s wrong?” Sam’s voice lost its excitement.

“I’m just disappointed. I was hoping to give him his present. I guess it will have to wait until mid-January.”

“Unfortunately, it will be here before we know it.” Sam paused. “I have to go. My dad needs help setting up his new DVD player. I want an email every day and a call on New Year’s Eve, unless you’re in the middle of kissing some tall hottie. Got it?”

“Got it. And back at ya. Call me, unless there’s kissing. I don’t want to know about that.”

“Whatever! Who else can I talk to? My dad and brother think I’m still ten years old and don’t know where hickeys come from.”

Kate laughed until she snorted. “Talk to you later.” She hung up the phone; her spirit lighter than it had been in days. Sam was a great friend. And Kate was convinced she knew nothing about all the intrigue in the Arnold house. She sighed and went downstairs.

Jace was in the kitchen. He picked up an empty box and stuffed it in the recycle bin. “What’s new with Sam?”

“Nothing.” Kate winked at Jonathan. “She’s met some guy she’s crazy about.”

Jace stopped folding cardboard and stood straight. “Really? Who?”

“I don’t remember his name.” Kate nonchalantly gathered bows from the family room floor. “I think it’s Jay-something.” She could barely contain her grin. She saw Jonathan look away to keep from laughing out loud.

Jace puffed out his lower lip. He stared at Kate; then frowned deeply. “You little—” He took off across the kitchen after her.

Kate screamed and threw the bows in the air, jumped over the back of the loveseat, and bolted for the dining room. She got to the far side of the table and circled slowly. Jace came around the other side. He watched her closely, his eyes narrow slits. She couldn’t quit giggling, which proved to be her undoing. He dodged one way; she ran the other, but he quickly doubled back and caught her at the breakfast bar. As she laughed and screamed, he tossed her over his shoulder, her arms and legs flailing wildly, and took her out on the front porch. There, he dumped her in a snow bank. She continued to laugh while he smacked his hands together in a brushing motion.

“Mess with me, will ya.” He went inside and shut the door.

Kate returned to the family room moments later. She was covered in snow and wet from the back of her neck to the cuffs of her jeans. “This is war.”

Jonathan shook his head and laughed.

* * *

At midnight, Jace, Jonathan, and Kate went to a candlelight service at Covenant Church, where they sang traditional Christmas carols with their neighbors. Candlelight filled the sanctuary with a warm glow. At the end of the service, the pastor had everyone leave the pews and stand in a circle. They sang *Silent Night* a cappella. The mixture of rich tones swelled to the top of the cathedral ceiling and echoed back to the singers, falling on them like a blanket.

Kate walked home in silence. It was a clear, cold night. The stars were bright on the canvas of black sky. Snow crunched under her feet. Her heart was full of thanksgiving for her family, and her home, and this special season of giving. She had a fresh perspective on the meaning of God’s love and what it had taken for Him to send His only Son as the hope for all humanity. It was a beautiful and unimaginable sacrifice. She considered her own destiny and what she was being asked to give up. Of course,

Jesus had been in his thirties when He'd given all for her. She reasoned she still had a few years before she'd need to consider it seriously.

But He spent His whole life preparing, her heart whispered. She pushed the thought away and sighed.

“What ya thinkin’ about, Katie?” Jace said.

She gazed at the night sky. “I’m really at peace right now.”

Jonathan leaned into her as they walked. “It’s the best night of the year.”

“Full of promise and hope,” she agreed.

“Who wants hot chocolate?” Jace said as they turned into their front walk.

Kate took off for the house. “I’ll get the marshmallows!”

“That girl is a bottomless pit.” Jonathan watched her burst through the front door.

Jace grinned. “You might need to get a second job, so we can keep up with the grocery bill.”

* * *

Jonathan stoked the fire he’d just built. Behind him, Kate rummaged through the kitchen drawers looking for roasting forks. Jace dimmed the lights and put *Christmas Piano* in the CD player. They sat by the fireplace, sipping hot cocoa while Kate expertly toasted marshmallows to a golden brown and passed them to the two men. Around three-thirty in the morning, they called it a night. Tomorrow was a big day.

* * *

Jonathan was making breakfast when Jace and Kate dragged themselves downstairs.

“Do we have to serve the community dinner this year?” Jace grumbled.

“Suck it up, Jace. I’m sure your day will fly by.” Kate slouched in her chair, chin in her hands and eyes closed.

“What do you mean *my day*? We’re all in this together.”

“Good morning!” Jonathan seemed unaware of the cloud of ill-will hanging in the air.

Jace opened one eye to glower at him. “Knock it off, or I swear, Katie and I will hurt you seven different ways.”

Kate put her head down on the breakfast bar. “I don’t have the strength. How about we have a pillow fight? Emphasis on the *pillow* part.”

Jonathan set steaming plates of scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon in front of them. “Well, will you look at this? My two bundles of energy can’t keep up with me. You know what that means.”

Kate raised her head. “Yeah... No... What?”

“You’re getting O – L – D.”

“I’m okay with that, if it means I can go back to bed.”

Jonathan laughed. He placed glasses of fresh orange juice beside their untouched plates. “Come on, kids. It’s Christmas Day! The day of cheer and goodwill. Let’s show a little spirit of the season.”

“I’ll show you a little—”

“Jace!” Kate scolded. “Jon is right. Be a good boy. Sit up and eat your breakfast.”

“Traitor. I thought the plan was to present a united front.”

“Has that *ever* worked against Jon?”

“There was that one time we convinced him to buy the blue sweater instead of the green one.”

“A huge victory,” Jonathan acknowledged.

Kate nodded proudly. “Indeed.”

Jace and Kate dug into their breakfast, slowly at first, but with increased vigor as the warm food brought them to life. The three of them were dressed and standing in the Community Center kitchen within the hour, smiles on their faces, ready to coordinate the serving of the hearty Christmas Day meal to the people of Springville.

Jonathan carved freshly roasted turkeys and supervised the large group of volunteers preparing huge pots of hot, delicious food. Jace made mashed potatoes, and Kate greeted hungry visitors, many of whom came because they had nowhere else to go.

She welcomed them warmly and helped each find a seat, or walked with them through the line as they gathered their food. There was fresh turkey, cranberries, green beans, golden corn, creamy mashed potatoes, brown gravy, and warm rolls. Jace had charmed the ladies’ groups of three local churches into donating home-baked pies. An

entire banquet table was covered with slices of cherry, apple, mincemeat, pumpkin, and pecan. A local elementary school had prepared homemade ice cream, and several students and teachers were on hand to plop a giant scoop on top of a waiting piece of pie.

Kate stood near the banquet line and watched scattered groups of people converse pleasantly. Many were homeless folks, and lots were single moms with little kids. The children dodged in and out of the tables, yelling and giggling, while the mothers sat and talked together, obviously excited to have a hot meal they didn't have to prepare and a chance to get out and talk to grown ups.

Kate felt a tug on her pant leg. She looked down to see a small boy, no more than four years old, staring at her with big brown eyes.

She crouched down and smiled at him. "Hey, buddy! What can I do for you?"

His clothes were clean, but obviously worn, and his face was gaunt. His eyes sparkled. "Are you a Christmas angel?"

"No." She laughed. "My name is Kate. I live here in Springville, like you."

"Oh." He dropped his gaze. "Mommy says there are angels all around us. 'Specially at Christmas."

"There *are* angels all around, honey. We can't see them, but they're here."

He looked at Kate again, his eyes wide. "How do you know?"

"Because my mom told me the same thing, and mommies know everything."

"Matthew? Matthew?" A young woman came toward them, a look of panic on her face. "Oh, there you are."

The teenager was no older than Kate. Like the little boy, she was dressed in worn clothes and was exceptionally thin. "I'm sorry," she said. "Was he bothering you?"

Kate stood. "Oh, no. We were having a nice talk about angels." Kate ruffled his hair. He beamed at her.

His mother's eyes filled with tears. "Thank you for today. We had no place to go."

Kate tried to swallow the lump in her throat. She nodded and smiled as her eyes also filled with tears. "It was my great pleasure." She put her hand on the young mother's shoulder. The woman hugged her, and Kate felt every rib in the girl's back.

The young woman took her son's hand, and they returned to their table. Kate sighed. She turned to see Jace watching her through the large serving window of the kitchen. His eyes glistened. Kate looked at the ground and inhaled sharply. *What a great day!*

The front door of the Community Center flew open. A tall, rotund man dressed in bright red and white appeared. He was laughing cheerfully and shouting "Merry Christmas!" to the surprised and thrilled guests. There was no mistaking the hazel eyes, the confident walk, and that hearty laugh.

This was another family tradition, and until a few moments ago had been Kate's favorite part of the day. The girls and boys around the room stopped whatever they were doing and ran to greet the man in red. They were enchanted by his voice as he spoke to each one and handed them a gift from his overflowing bag.

The children dropped to the floor, tearing at the wrapping paper. Santa made his way to each of their mothers and gave her a bright red envelope. Kate knew it contained three hundred dollars in grocery gift cards. Her heart filled with love, yet again, for this man who had such a soft spot for the single moms of the world.

When Santa's work was done, he turned to go. He paused at the door to wave mightily at the kids and wink at Kate.

Kate went to the kitchen for her bag. Returning to the dining room, she watched Matthew until she caught his eye. He jumped up and ran to her, his new toy truck clutched tightly to his chest.

"Matthew, I have one more surprise for you." Kate knelt and tucked a gift card in the pocket of his jacket. "This is for your mommy's Christmas present. Take it to the store and have her pick out something she would really like. It's just from you, okay?"

"Me and my angel." He nodded vigorously.

In her eighteen years of life, Kate decided this was one of the best days so far.

She, Jonathan, and Jace returned home late that night and collapsed on the family room furniture.

Kate woke up late the next morning in the same position in which she'd fallen asleep. She shuffled into the kitchen and pulled a carton of eggs and a package of sausage from the refrigerator.

Jonathan opened his eyes when his stomach growled noisily. He lifted his nose and sniffed. "Mmmm, breakfast."

"Good morning." Kate placed a waffle and sausage patties on a plate at the breakfast bar.

Jonathan climbed slowly from the loveseat and moaned. He bumped Jace's leg, which hung over the arm of the recliner. Jace continued to snore softly.

Jonathan slumped onto a stool at the bar. "Look at my girl. All grown up and cooking, too."

"Don't get too excited," she warned. "You haven't tasted it yet."

"It's deli-fuss," he said through a mouthful.

Kate served waffles for herself and Jace. "Are you busy after breakfast?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I need to do some training. It's been over a week."

"Sure, Katie. I'm game."

"It doesn't mean I've changed my mind about anything."

"Of course. But life is full of changes. And we can't stop what's imminent."

"Maybe not, but denial is always an option."

"Not always."

"We'll see." Kate smiled and took a bite of waffle.

Chapter Twelve

On New Year's Eve, Jace, Jonathan, and Kate spent the day getting ready for a party. The Mainnes had lived across the street for years, since before Katriel moved in with her three children almost eighteen years ago. Patrick Mainne retired early from his small Springville law practice, and now he and his wife spent their days traveling the countryside in their motor home. They had only begun to gray in recent years, remaining the regal couple of the neighborhood as they gracefully aged. They loved to entertain at the holidays, when they weren't wintering in South Carolina.

It was the one time of year when Jace and Jonathan wore suits, and when Kate saw Jonathan coming down the stairs, she wished they had occasion to dress up more often. She caught her breath when she saw her brother in his black suit with white shirt and red tie. The suit was custom-made and fit every inch of his trim form perfectly. His hair was neatly parted and combed and his hazel eyes sparkled with anticipation. He smiled at her as he came down the steps, adjusting the cuffs on his shirt.

Kate unnecessarily straightened his expertly knotted tie. She placed her hands lightly on his lapels. "You're gorgeous."

"Second only to you." Jonathan winked at her.

Kate's dress was emerald green, with long sleeves and a simple rounded neckline. Her mother's diamond pendant hung at her throat. She wore three-inch heels, which made her almost as tall as Jonathan. She'd put her long hair up in a cascade of curls, with tiny wisps that gently framed her face. Like Jonathan, her eyes sparkled with the anticipation of attending the best social event of the neighborhood.

"Wow!" Jace stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at Kate and Jonathan. "Aren't we pretty." Jace trotted down the steps.

Kate grinned at the little reindeer dancing on his tie. "Construction guys clean up nicely."

"I prefer jeans and a T-shirt." Jace tugged at the neck of his dress shirt.

Kate tucked his collar over his tie and smoothed the shoulders of his navy jacket. "This suits you just fine." She smiled. "And it beats a dress and heels."

“Nothing beats that dress,” Jace argued. “I feel like a nerd. All I need is a briefcase and glasses.”

“No, you don’t.” Jonathan grinned.

The insult was not lost on Kate. She spoke to Jonathan while continuing to fuss with Jace’s suit coat. “Be good, Jon. Or I’ll leave you home.”

“No way.” Jonathan shook his head. “I look forward to Mrs. Mainne’s homemade artichoke dip all year.”

When Kate was convinced they were ready to be seen in public, they headed across the street.

The doorbell rang, and Tessa Mainne answered it before the last chime sounded. “Jace! Jonathan! Katie! Come in,” she said in her warm, southern drawl. “I’m so happy y’all could make it. We so look forward to seein’ our very favorite neighbor kids.”

Jonathan cocked an eyebrow at Jace, who smiled in return.

Patrick Mainne appeared immediately behind his wife. “Happy New Year,” he boomed to his guests. “Come in! Come in!”

Mr. Mainne embraced Kate in a hug that enveloped most of the girl. In her heels, she was a half a head taller than him. “How’s our Katie? Y’all have gotten so tall! What grade are ya now? Ninth, tenth?”

“I’m in college, Mr. Mainne. I started at Simpson this past August.”

“My heavens! Tessa, did ya hear that? Our little Katie went off to university this fall.”

Tessa glided from the bedroom, where she’d stored the coats. “My, my, Patrick. How the years do fly.”

Mr. Mainne shook hands with Jonathan and Jace, and rapped them heartily on the back. “How are you boys? Have the lovely ladies started linin’ up to marry ya?”

“Patrick!” Mrs. Mainne scolded. “It’s not proper to put these boys on the spot. I’m sure they’ll fill us in when the time is right.” She put her hand on Jace’s sleeve. “It’s been so long since we had a chance to catch up.”

“Yes, ma’am. With all your traveling, we haven’t seen much of you. Can’t wait to hear about your adventures.”

“There’s plenty of time for that, my dear. Now, come in here and get yourself somethin’ to eat. I swear! Y’all get skinnier every day. That’s how I’ll know when there’s a woman ‘round your house. Y’all will fatten up some.”

Jace laughed as Mrs. Mainne guided the two men into the dining room, where they were greeted by a rush of inviting smells. The large table was covered with a mountain of food, all hand-prepared by Tessa Mainne. They had their pick of her homemade pastries, hors d’oeuvres, candies, meats and cheeses, sauces, dips, crackers, and breads.

Jonathan tapped his lips with his index finger. “Where to begin? No one cooks like you, Mrs. Mainne.”

“Not even you,” Jace chimed in.

Tessa patted Jonathan’s arm. “I did my best to teach you boys all my secrets.”

“For which Kate is eternally grateful.” Jonathan chuckled.

Jace and Jonathan filled their plates and took a seat in the living room. Patrick Mainne was already entertaining Kate with a story about their recent visit to the Grand Canyon, where he’d gotten them hopelessly lost. It was a lively tale, made all the more captivating when told with his southern accent.

Holiday music played softly as more guests arrived. Jonathan volunteered to be doorman and take coats, so Mrs. Mainne would be free to greet her guests and show them to the food. Jace hung by the table, helpfully explaining the various snacks, but Tessa suspected it had more to do with his unwillingness to be very far from the fresh shrimp and her homemade cocktail sauce. Later, after midnight, there would be dancing, and more story telling, along with her and Patrick’s traditional sharing of the blessings from the previous year.

As the house filled with cheerful guests and noisy chatter, Kate slipped unnoticed into the hallway. An entire wall was lined with family pictures. She paused to examine each one, as she did every year.

In the center of the wall was a large portrait of a young man in a Navy uniform. It was David, Mr. and Mrs. Mainne’s only son. He was a ruggedly handsome boy, the reflection of his father. David was only eighteen in the picture, newly enlisted. Kate had not known him; he was in high school when they moved in and was involved in the

active lifestyle of a typical teenage boy. Patrick and Tessa Mainne were proud of their son, especially when he'd gone off to serve his country.

Within a year of enlistment he was dead, killed in the Middle East in a training accident, and the Mainnes had secluded themselves in their home for a year after the funeral. The only visitor they allowed was Katriel, their neighbor from across the street who understood their heartache, having lost her own husband.

When Katriel died a year later, the Mainnes did their best to watch out for her children. Jonathan and Jace told stories of family members who came to stay with them, but Tessa always suspected those poor children were trying to make a go of it on their own. She and Patrick watched from a distance, respecting their privacy, but always alert for signs there might be trouble with the authorities. Tessa had sworn to herself that if a crisis arose, she and Patrick would step in and say whatever was necessary to make sure those precious children did not have to move away from the only home they'd ever known. Tessa made a solemn promise to Katriel, over the young woman's grave, to watch out for her dear children and to see to it they had the love of a family to sustain them, even if it was from a distance.

Thankfully the children grew up well, and the Mainnes managed to find an excuse to invite them over for a weekly dinner, and for every holiday. At first, Jonathan, Jace, and Kate accepted, hungry to be around warm and loving grownups that truly cared for them. But after Jace and Jonathan started college, they began their own family traditions, which Tessa understood, even though she was sad to have no young people around at the holidays. Tessa and Patrick managed to strike a compromise by holding a neighborhood New Year's Eve party to which the Arnolds came each year.

At 11:59, Patrick called everyone together and began his traditional countdown to the New Year. The room rang with happy voices as they enthusiastically counted the last ten seconds. Tessa handed out colorful confetti in the shape of party hats to each person. When they got to "one," everyone yelled, "Happy New Year!" They threw confetti and kissed the person standing closest to them. Patrick Mainne took Kate by the waist and swung her into a deep dip as he placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. She laughed and hugged him.

Tessa managed not only to kiss Jace full on the lips, but grabbed Jonathan and planted one on him, too.

“Too much champagne,” Jonathan said from the corner of his mouth.

“Just like last year,” Jace mumbled back.

She pinched Jonathan’s cheeks and patted his face, none too gently. “Jonathan Arnold, y’all are so handsome. Get yourself married so I can stop worryin’. You, and that Jace, too!”

“I’ll make it my New Year’s resolution, just for you.” Jonathan winked at the older woman.

Satisfied, Mrs. Mainne made her way through the crowd to find Kate.

Jace grinned wickedly. “Don’t think I won’t hold you to that.”

Jonathan glanced over his shoulder. “And just where will you be living if I get myself married?”

“What do you mean? Kate and I’ll be married first, and your rear end will be out on the sidewalk.”

“If you marry my sister, buddy, you’d better be prepared to flee the country with no forwarding address.”

Jace handed Jonathan a glass of champagne. “Drink up. You seem a little tense.”

* * *

Kate and Tessa sat on the sofa and whispered conspiratorially.

“So tell me, Katie, what’s new with those two fine boys of yours?”

“Not much, Mrs. Mainne. They work all the time and hassle me about getting good grades. A lot like the old days.”

“So, no lady friends in their lives?”

“No, ma’am. I’m sort of picky about who I let them spend time with.”

“Good girl. But don’t be too selective. Every man needs a good woman in his life, and sometimes the sooner the better. You know they have trouble takin’ care of themselves without us.” Mrs. Mainne laughed.

“Don’t I know it.”

“And you, child, how are you doing at university? Any potential suitors?”

Tessa watched a wistful expression drift across Kate's face and then quickly disappear.

"No, ma'am," Kate said.

"Well, I had hoped that things were happenin' when I saw those two gentlemen come callin' just before Christmas. But then I recognized them."

"What gentlemen?"

"The two boys in the blue car. They are so nice lookin'. Always have been."

Kate frowned deeply. "You mean Will and Riley?"

"Yes, child. Your uncles. They used to come 'round when Jonathan and Jace were boys. I haven't seen them for quite awhile now. But then, we're gone all the time."

"How do you know –"

"They were always visitin' when your momma first moved here. So attentive and polite. Wavin' at me when I was out in the yard. After your momma passed, they came 'round to check on things. I didn't see them much, 'cept during the day, when you and the boys were away at school. When they stopped comin' by, I sort of forgot about them. Figured they'd moved on, until I saw them right before the Lord's birthday."

"My...uncles."

"Yes, honey. I believe your momma said they were her brothers. I always told her someone in the family must be adopted, 'cause your momma was a dark beauty, and those two were so blond and all. But then, Jonathan was light-haired in his younger years, so I assumed it was your grandpa's genes they got."

"Yeah. Grandpa," she repeated. "Did they ever come to see Jon and Jace when I was in high school? Or since I've been away at college?"

"I don't know for sure, dear. Mr. Mainne and I have been travelin' a lot the past few years. I couldn't say."

Kate patted the older woman's hand. "Thank you for a lovely party. I'm afraid I need to get home. I'm suddenly very tired."

"Oh, Katie! It's not even two o'clock yet."

"Let's get together for lunch before I go back to school," Kate offered.

"I'd really like that." Tessa stood. "I'll get your coat, dear."

Kate followed Mrs. Mainne to the bedroom and watched her dig through the mountain of garments on their large bed. She finally located Kate's leather jacket and helped her slide into it. Kate smiled her thanks and slipped quietly from the party.

Nausea overcame Kate on the walk home. She was caught again in the sickening feeling that her entire life had been a lie. She felt like a puppet – someone who had been played and controlled from the beginning. She'd tried so hard to ignore it the past days and weeks, to go back to her normal life, and it just wasn't working. She went up to her room and crawled under her thick comforter, where she hid until morning.

Chapter Thirteen

Kate was in a funk for the next week. She'd overheard Jonathan and Jace discussing her "new attitude" and her "talk with Mrs. Mainne," but whenever one of them tried to strike up a conversation about the New Year's Eve party, she'd change the subject.

On Saturday afternoon as she was packing to go back to school, Jonathan knocked on her open bedroom door. "Hey, Katie."

"Hey." She did not look up from her folding and stuffing.

"It's been a fast month."

"Yeah, like always."

"A lot has happened."

She paused to stare at him. "Too much."

"Things aren't settled."

"No, they're not. And they won't be soon." She resumed packing.

"Katie –"

She jerked the zipper on her duffel bag. "Forget it. I'm not doing this now."

"This is killing me," he said.

Kate picked up her bag and threw it by the door. Jonathan had to step aside to avoid being hit. "You know what kills me? It kills me that everything I believed about my family, and my history, and my *brother* is a lie."

Jonathan's face contorted. He lowered his eyes and left the room.

Kate came downstairs a few moments later and met Jace at the bottom of the steps.

He took her bag. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Sure." She glanced down the hallway.

"He's not coming."

"Oh. Let's go then." She walked past Jace and out the door to the waiting pickup.

They drove in silence most of the way except for Jace's occasional attempts at light conversation. Kate would discuss the weather, her plans for the upcoming semester, or volleyball, and that was all.

When they arrived at the dorm parking lot, Jace helped carry her things up to her room. They saw no signs that Sam had arrived.

He hugged Kate, resting his cheek on the side of her head. "You know that I'm here whenever you need to talk."

"I know."

"And it really doesn't make much sense for you to be mad at Jon and not at me."

"I know that, too."

He kissed her tenderly on the forehead. "I love you, Katie."

"I'll see you at spring break."

He lifted her chin and smiled reassuringly. "I'll call when I get home. We'll talk next week."

"Sure."

Kate waited for the door to close behind him; then fell on her bed and cried until she was weak. Her head and chest ached from sobbing. Her throat felt raw. And she was starved. She went to the bathroom to splash water on her face. Red, puffy eyes stared back at her from the mirror. "Maybe a walk will do you some good," she said to her image.

Kate grabbed a jacket and trudged three blocks to a small corner grocery store. After wandering the aisles for twenty minutes, she bought a frozen pizza and a box of ice cream sandwiches.

Kate was finishing her pizza and starting her second DVD when Sam burst in. "Hi, honey! I'm home."

Kate jumped up from the floor and threw herself into Sam's already full arms. Sam dropped her bag and hugged her friend. "What's up? I know you missed me, but this is a little strange. Even for us."

Kate could not answer. Tears were flowing again.

“What the heck?” Sam led Kate to her bed and sat her down. “Let’s hear it. Everything. Spill.” Sam studied Kate’s face while she waited.

Kate told Sam every detail of the last month – Jonathan and Jace’s big revelation, their history, her mother, the feelings of betrayal – and she continued non-stop through the visit from Riley and Will with more revelations, the wonderful Christmas they’d shared, the New Year’s Eve story, and the awful parting with Jonathan.

By the time Kate finished, she was sitting on the floor with her pillow clutched tightly to her chest. Sam sat on her own bed, hands clasped in front of her, staring intently at Kate.

“My entire life has been a lie,” Kate whispered.

“I don’t know what to say. This is sort of overwhelming. On several levels.”

“Tell me about it.” Kate looked at her friend, her eyes full of fear. “There’s just one more thing...” She paused, working up the courage to hear the answer she dreaded. “Did you know anything about this? Were you sent here, like Riley and Will?”

Sam met Kate’s gaze. “No.”

Kate was having doubts about her ability to be discerning, but her heart wanted to believe Sam, so her mind accepted it. “You are the only person on this earth that I trust.”

“We’ll get through this. Figure out a way to make everything all right.”

Kate’s eyes filled with tears. “That’s what Jace and Jon said. But I don’t believe it.”

Sam dropped to the floor and put her arm around Kate. “You look exhausted. How about we get some chocolate? We’ll watch a movie and just be college students for the next few days. We have to figure out our schedules and get my new TV hooked up. What do you say?”

“I say, ‘hurray for denial.’ Let’s get to it.”

Sam laughed. “At least you still have your sense of humor.”

“It’s one of the few things I’m hanging onto right now.”

“Well, now you have me, too.” Sam dropped her head sideways and rested it against Kate’s.

Kate smiled. “Aren’t you just a little freaked out that I’m an...alien?”

“More than a little. I always knew you were odd. But I thought it was because you’re from Minnesota. Besides, to you, I’m an alien.”

“That’s one way to look at it, I guess.”

* * *

Riley Flynn watched Kate for three days before he attempted to make contact. She and Sam were heading to lunch, after completing registration. Riley and Will met them at the dining hall entrance.

“Arnold,” he said. “It’s good to see you. I was hoping we’d get a chance to talk.” Sam moved between them, her back to the commander. “Do you want me to take off?”

Kate made eye contact with him over Sam’s head. “Go ahead. I’m good.”

Sam gazed over her shoulder at Flynn, her expression unfriendly. “You’re sure?”

“It won’t take long. I’ll meet you at our regular table.”

Sam continued to stare at Flynn as she and Will went into the dining hall.

A brisk north wind swirled around Kate and Riley, and she turned up the collar on her coat.

“Let’s go inside.” He reached for the door.

They sat on a sofa in the corner of the entryway. Kate stared at the floor.

Riley cleared his throat. “Are you all registered?”

“Yep.”

“Did you get any fun classes this semester?”

“Tennis, and Intro to Modern Cinema.”

“Sounds interesting—”

“What do you want?” she blurted.

“I want to see how you’re doing.”

Kate scowled. “How do you *think* I’m doing?”

Flynn could see that her anger boiled just under the surface, and he knew why it was directed at him. “I’m sorry if you thought I was dishonest with you. I never meant to hurt you.”

Kate’s expression became hard. “I thought we were friends! I spent time with you, and got to know you, and let you get to know me. I wasn’t just training with you. I

was having fun. It's hard to come to college and leave everything you know and everyone you love behind and start all over. I was scared. And being with you helped me feel safe..." She dropped her head.

"That's the purpose of my being here. It's to make you feel safe. It's my job –"

Her whispered voice came out as a hiss. "I know it was your *job*. It was your *job* to spy on me, and your *job* to get me to trust you, and your *job* to spend time with me."

Riley stood, desperately trying to maintain his composure. He glared down at her, an imposing figure in his black uniform. She cowered like a small child under his fiery gaze. "It's my *job* to protect you, Kate Arnold. It's my *pleasure* to spend time with you." He turned on his heel and stalked into the dining room, leaving her huddled in a corner of the sofa.

Kate followed a few moments later, her head lowered. She felt certain that someone's gaze was upon her. She got her lunch and managed to find Sam without looking up.

"How'd it go?" Sam said.

"Not so good. He tried to apologize. I got mad and said some things. He got mad and said some things."

"Let me get this straight. He says he's a soldier sent here to protect you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because. I've known some enlisted men in my day. That one's operating on more than a sense of duty, dear girl. He has a thing for you."

Kate's head snapped up. "According to what Jon and Jace said, he's a warrior, and his only calling is to protect and serve."

"Warrior or no, he's still a man."

Kate pondered her turkey sandwich. "I can't handle any more mind games. It's best if I just not think about it."

"It has nothing to do with *thinking*, Kate. This stuff is matters-of-the-heart territory. Good luck trying to control that!"

"Not helping, here."

“Sorry, just getting all the cards on the table, so we can counterattack intelligently.”

“Are you sure you don’t have military training?”

“Nah, I watch a lot of military movies. Those guys with the big muscles, and the big guns, and the tough talk, and the save-the-world attitudes – they’re so hot!”

“You’re right.” Kate laughed. “You are the alien, not me.”

That evening, at Sam’s urging, Kate paid a visit to the campus security building and left a small package with the night officer. He placed the brightly wrapped gift on Riley’s desk. Two days later she received a handwritten note from the commander thanking her for the glow-in-the-dark GI Joe wristwatch. She smiled as she read the note. It was a first step toward a fragile peace.

Chapter Fourteen

Kate went two weeks without calling home. She received several emails from Jace and Jonathan, but her answers were short and gave little news. She resumed training alone, or took Sam along. She hadn't spoken to Riley since their brief meeting at the dining hall. She occasionally saw him across campus and waved tentatively. It appeared that Riley had assigned himself the night shifts, so he was sleeping during her classes and working when she was free. She suspected Will was keeping an eye on her, but she was never able to catch him in the act.

On a Friday night in early February, Kate and Sam's phone rang. The halls were alive with the sounds of the weekly floor party.

Kate grabbed the phone and shut her door. "Speak to me!"

"Great phone manners."

"Hi, Jon." Her greeting was cold, but Kate's heart leapt at the sound of his voice. She missed him, and was positively starving for the closeness they once shared. A little voice whispered that it was her fault things had changed between them. She did her best to ignore it.

"How are classes?" His voice sounded carefully controlled to her.

"Good. I'm taking tennis. That's mighty interesting."

"Really? Why?"

"I need to coordinate my backhand with my understanding of angles and trajectory. It's not very pretty right now."

His laughter made her smile. She had missed that laugh, too.

"You should've paid more attention in geometry and physics class."

"I did, when I was awake." Kate snickered. She'd gotten an A+ in both courses, like she had in every math and science class she'd ever taken.

"We miss you, Katie. We miss your weekly phone calls and your charming emails."

His pained tone tore at her heart. “I know. I’ll try harder. I’ve been busy.” She knew it was a flimsy excuse.

“Jace is here, annoying me. I’ll see you soon.” Jonathan was gone before she could reply.

“Hey, Katie! How’s my bride-to-be?”

“In your dreams, Jace Tucker.”

He chuckled. “Sam tells me you two are going skiing next week.”

“You’ve been talking to Sam?”

“More than I talk to you.”

“I’m sorry. I told Jon I’d try to do better.”

The smile left his voice. “See that you do.”

Sam burst into the room with their next door neighbors, red-headed twins who loved to laugh almost as much as Sam. “Katie!” Sam yelled. “Get off the phone and get your tush out here. The chair races are about to start, and we have a trophy to defend.”

The older of the twins danced in the doorway. “I found my pompoms, and Debbie and I made up a new cheer for you guys.”

Kate covered the receiver. “I’m on my way. I have to say goodnight to my intended.” She winked at Sam.

“Hello, Jace,” Sam called out. “We miss you, and we love you. Now get off the phone, Arnold!”

Kate said good night and left the room with her friends. She sighed with contentment as she ran to the end of the hall and took her place in the chair Sam would be pushing.

In the weeks that followed, Kate did her best to bury herself in her studies and her training. Sam watched her closely, but said nothing. Kate lost her smile, her charm, and her wit. She became listless and irritable. The tension came to a head one day when she and Sam came out of the dining hall. Jonathan’s Jeep sat in the parking lot beside the dorm.

“What’s he doing here?” Kate said to no one in particular.

“You know the saying, ‘if Mohammed won’t come to the mountain’...”

Kate spun to face Sam. “Did you know about this?”

“Who do you think called him?”

Kate glared at her. “You had no right.”

“I have every right to care about my best friend and what this rift is doing to her. Talk to him. Work things out. And don’t let him leave until it’s settled.”

“It’s not that simple!”

“From where I’m standing, it’s very simple. You are closer than any two people on this planet. Fix it. Now.”

Kate stormed across campus and up to the Jeep.

Jonathan scowled. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

“I need you to leave me alone. I’m trying to sort this stuff out.” Kate knew her anger was irrational and unjustified, but it was easier to be mad at Jonathan than at herself.

“Katie, we’ve given you all the space we can afford to. We have to go to Eavan. The Call came months ago. They need us.”

“What do you mean *we*? *You’re* not being asked to give up everything for this glorious Call. And exactly who needs us? I’ve never met *any* of them.”

“You would deny aid because they’re strangers to you? That’s not the Katie I raised.”

“I don’t know the Katie you raised. You took her away when you dumped this nonsense in my lap.”

Jonathan stood straight and squared his shoulders. “This *nonsense*, as you call it, is my homeworld. My heritage. My family. They’re yours, too. I see now that I made a mistake in not telling you everything from the beginning. But please don’t punish an innocent people because you’re mad at me.”

Kate knew he was right, but she stared at him and said nothing. Feelings of responsibility, and love, and commitment bumped around her insides. They kept colliding with her pride and selfishness.

Jonathan’s shoulders sagged. He got into the Cherokee and drove away.

Kate went to her room and quietly opened the door. Sam was lying on her bed, reading a book. She looked up when Kate entered.

Kate dropped her books on her desk and flopped on her bed, letting out a long sigh. “What am I doing?”

“Throwing your life away.”

“And what do you know about it?” Kate’s retort was harsh to her own ears.

Sam sat up. “This is what I know, Kate Arnold. So listen up. I know that lately you’ve been the most miserable person I’ve seen in my life. You’re angry, irritable, listless, boring, humorless, and downright crabby.”

“Do you have a point?”

“Answer this. When you’re doing what you know is right, how do you feel?”

Kate was silent.

“You feel peaceful. And when you’re running away from something or going against what you know is right, you feel guilty, and angry, irritable, humorless — are you getting my point?”

Kate remained quiet.

“Think about your life. You’re a gifted girl. You’ve gotten straight A’s all through school. You’re athletic. You’re the quickest study I’ve ever met. There’s nothing you can’t learn to do. You know how to kick anyone’s butt. You’ve been surrounded your entire life by people who’ve not only taken excellent care to prepare you, but who would willingly die for you. How many people can say that? Exactly what do you think your destiny is?”

“I don’t know,” Kate whispered.

“Oh, yes you do. Every single gift you’ve been given; every single thing Jon and Jace have spent your whole life teaching you – especially being of service to others – all of it can be used to fulfill this Call you’re all talking about. You take the skills you learned here and transfer them to a different group of people. What’s the big deal?” Sam sighed in frustration. “How many eighteen-year old girls know what they want to do with their life? How many of us have a clue? Do you know how jealous I am? Up to this point, my only purpose has been to play volleyball and create a list of eligible guys to stalk. What’s your purpose, Kate Arnold? Oh, excuse me. You’re too busy running away to see that you have a calling to save your world.”

“I don’t want to save my world.”

“Well, too bad! It’s not about what we want, is it? It’s about what we’re created to do. The reason for our existence. Why am I here? All that philosophy stuff people spend their entire lives trying to figure out. They chase all over the globe searching for the higher purpose and their special calling. Your calling came to you, very clearly. How can you ignore it? If you’ve learned nothing else in your lifetime, surely you’ve learned that we’re happiest when we’re doing what we were born to do.”

Kate stared at the ceiling. “I just wanted to go to college...play volleyball...and have a normal life.”

Sam snorted. “A normal life is overrated. It’s boring.”

“That’s your mantra, not mine.”

“Then change yours, ‘cause mine is a whole lot more interesting. I want to live my life and say, *that was a wild ride!*”

Kate rolled to her side and propped her head in her hand. “How did you get so smart?”

Her friend shrugged. “I’ve been hanging out with you. It rubbed off.”

“So if you got my brains, what are the chances I got your sense of adventure?”

“Based on where you’re headed, I’m hoping they’re pretty high. For your sake.”

Kate smiled and closed her eyes. She consciously opened the door of her heart. The one she’d been guarding for months. From deep inside, peace began to flow. It flooded her being and brought a glow to her face.

The next morning, she and Sam went to breakfast; then Kate stopped at the campus security building. Riley was coming out of his office when she arrived.

“Might I have a moment of your time, Commander Flynn?”

He seemed confused by her friendly and formal demeanor. “Sure...Miss Arnold.”

She giggled. He’d never called her that, and she found it endearing. Riley led her back into his office and motioned for her to have a seat. He sat at his desk, folded his hands, and leaned forward. Kate noticed he was wearing the watch she’d given him. She grinned. He looked at his wrist and pulled the sleeve of his black turtleneck down, just enough to cover it. A hint of color crept into his cheeks.

She masked her smug look. “I wondered if you might be available to start training again.”

His eyes grew wide. “What do you mean?”

“You and me. Training. Throwing each other around.” She made a karate chop gesture. “You know. *Hi-ya*, and all that?”

He shook his head. “I know what you mean. But why the change of heart?”

“I had a long talk with a certain friend and discovered she’s a reincarnation of Solomon. Anyway, she talked some sense into me. It’s time to start acting like an adult.”

“So this means...”

“I’m ready to take the plunge. Climb the mountain. Throw caution to the wind. Jump in with both feet...”

“Enough with the clichés. I get it.” He laughed.

“And I want to apologize for the way I treated you. It was wrong.” She stared at her hands.

“You never need apologize to me. I am a warrior of the Cathal clan and your protector.”

Kate met his gaze. “You are my friend.”

His smile reached his green eyes. It was the look she’d been missing the last few months.

“One last thing.”

“There always is,” he said under his breath.

“You and I begin training again, but Jon and Jace are not to know. We’ll start today and meet every night this week. I leave on Friday for spring break, after my last mid-term, and I want you and Lieutenant Avery to come to Springville with me.”

“I think we can arrange that.”

“Oh, and Sam is coming too, so empty your trunk. We’ve got a lot of laundry.”

He grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

Chapter Fifteen

The blue Malibu pulled into the driveway on Kalani Street. Four adults climbed out, relieved to stretch after the drive. It was a brisk March day. The sun was shining, the trees were in bud, and blades of grass had begun to peek through the last remnants of snow.

The Christmas snowman was a bump in the front yard. The carrots had been left for the squirrels and birds, but the hat, scarf, and mittens had been returned to their storage place, awaiting next winter's first snow. There were puddles everywhere. Kate was more excited than ever to be home.

Across the street, Mr. Mainne hauled a box of groceries to the huge motor home parked in the driveway. He waved and called to them. Kate returned his enthusiastic wave and turned to run to the house. The door opened before she arrived, and a surprised Jonathan stared at her. She jumped into his arms.

He stepped back to keep his balance. "Welcome home."

Behind him, Jace pushed past the siblings with a quick "Hi, Katie!" and ran outside. He spread his arms wide, and Sam jumped into them without hesitation.

"Sammy! It's good to see you."

"You, too, Jace."

He nodded in greeting to Riley and Will, and returned his attention to the beautiful girl before him. "She's here because of you. Am I right?"

Sam shrugged casually.

"You're a miracle worker."

She laughed. "You'll get the bill."

They assembled in the family room moments later, along with a tray of Jace's homemade cookies and cold milk. All eyes were on Kate.

She made eye contact with each of them before she spoke. "I'm ready to do this."

Jace and Jonathan smiled.

"But I have conditions."

"You always do," Jonathan mumbled, and Riley chuckled.

“I want to finish my freshman year. And I want to be home for my birthday. I would like to turn nineteen in this house. And I want to know everything. No more secrets. No more protecting Katie from the truth. I want to be in on all the planning and decision making. And in return, I agree to train as much as you want. And I’ll keep an open mind. I’ll learn everything you think I need to know.”

Jonathan raised his hand.

“Question?”

“It may be a little late to ask, but I assume Sam knows what’s going on?”

“Of course. I told her everything. If I hadn’t talked to her, I wouldn’t be here now. I want her included, as much as she wants to be. You guys are great and all, and I love you dearly, but she brings a perspective you can’t.”

“But—”

“No *but*s, Jon. This is an exclusive club. If you don’t have boobs, you can’t be in it.”

Jonathan promptly closed his mouth and nodded in agreement.

Will looked at Kate. “Commander Flynn and I can step up the training immediately after spring break. It would be helpful though, if we had a fourth person.”

Kate turned to Sam and raised her eyebrows.

“Heck, yeah! I’d love to kick like you do!”

“It’s not just about kicking, Sam,” Will corrected. “It’s about discipline and learning to read your partner’s moves, so you can fight as a team. Commander Flynn and I will teach you to fight in harmony.”

“I’m in,” Sam replied just as enthusiastically.

“So, we’re shooting for a mid-May target date?” Jace said.

“Affirmative.” Riley nodded.

“And this Gateway, how does that work?” Kate said.

Jonathan went to the fireplace mantle and picked up a wooden box. It was approximately six inches square and a few inches thick. It had strange markings on the top. He handed it to Kate. “This is the Gateway. It’s made of olive wood from Sunlee.”

Kate gingerly opened the hinged lid. It was empty. “This thing opens a portal? Jace told me it was a travel-Yahtzee board.”

“It’s been used for that,” Jace mumbled.

Jonathan chuckled and shook his head. “On Sunlee, olive trees are scarce. It takes three leaves, placed inside the box, and the spoken words to open the Gateway. Fortunately, when we arrived here we discovered that olive trees are plentiful. It was one of the first things Mom bought.”

Kate looked toward the French doors, where her mother’s favorite potted tree stood in a beam of sunlight. It was as old as Kate, and she had always tended it lovingly, feeling that it was a connection to her mother.

“What are the spoken words?” Kate said.

“They’re recorded in Mom’s journal,” Jace answered. “Sunleean words. We’ll teach them to you.”

“Will I get to come home?”

Jonathan breathed deeply. “I don’t know, Katie.”

“But can I assume that at some point you’ll join me?”

“The Call has come, and we know who has to go. And the rest – we walk by faith, one step at a time.”

”That’s not a step, it’s a leap.”

“That’s what makes the journey interesting.” Jonathan smiled confidently.

Riley rose from the couch. “It’s time for Will and me to head back.”

“Stay for supper and go home tomorrow.” Kate waved her hand nonchalantly.

Jonathan shook his head. “It’s not permitted. Cathal warriors don’t sleep under the same roof as the ruling family. Their job is to protect us from harm.”

“And what harm would that be, Jon? We’ve lived here our whole lives and never even had our pumpkins smashed at Halloween. Would you like to be the poor sap that breaks into this house with five people trained in martial arts staying here?”

“Five and a half,” Sam corrected. “I’ve been involved in a blanket party or two in my day.”

“I don’t know...”

“You’re the king. Change the rules.”

“I’m not the king. I’ll be the ruling Lord of our region,” Jonathan argued.

“Whatever. Let’s have a nice dinner and a slumber party.”

“With popcorn and more of Jace’s cookies,” Sam added.

Kate frowned in determination. “Let them have a night off. Gee whiz, they have lousy benefits if they never get a vacation day.”

Jace chuckled. “Living on Earth has made her a bit of a rebel.”

“More than a bit, sir,” Riley added with a grin.

Jonathan reluctantly agreed to the arrangement. Kate and Sam immediately determined the movie choices for the evening, and Jace went to the kitchen to check their supply of snacks. Jonathan and Will searched the hall closet for games.

Riley went to the car to unload Kate and Sam’s luggage. This would be a first for him. Katriel had always welcomed the two warriors into her home and even permitted them to dine with the family on occasion, but she had been adamant that they not spend the night. She was very concerned about Eavian traditions. Riley wasn’t sure how to feel about this new freedom. Part of him believed that change could be good, and part of him was so steeped in the heritage of the Cathal, he was uneasy about things that went against their strict rules. Boundaries must be maintained, so decisions could be made in the heat of battle.

But Riley was still a man. He had feelings, and they played an important role in his calling. His sense of duty to the ruling family was fueled by respect and admiration. There was no doubt he would die to protect them if called upon to do so, and it wasn’t just his warrior upbringing that made it possible. He would have been foolish to deny that he loved this family. That made his ability to provide the ultimate sacrifice a given. He knew that if the moment arose, there would be no hesitation.

Flynn grabbed the bags and returned to the house.

Riley had forgotten how wonderful a quiet evening at home could be. Kate and Jonathan prepared a delicious meal. Sam and Jace baked a chocolate cake. He and Will were ordered to sit in front of the television and signal someone if they required anything. Kate made it clear that their guests had the night off, and she enforced it to the letter.

After a movie, they played an intense game of cards, which ended in accusations of cheating against Sam and Kate. The girls pleaded the Fifth. The men eyed them suspiciously for the remainder of the evening.

It was well after midnight before anyone suggested it was time to call it a day. Before she and Sam left the family room, Kate turned to Jonathan. “I hereby declare that every day of spring break will be a nonstop fun-fest. Jon and Jace, you’re in charge of arranging the entertainment. Good night, boys.”

Jonathan waited until the girls disappeared down the hallway. “And you said I was bossy.”

Jace snorted. “Where do you think she gets it?”

“And who taught her to cheat at cards?”

Jace leaned back in his recliner and closed his eyes. “I plead the Fifth.” A couch pillow flew across the room and smacked him in the face. “That’s mature.” He put the pillow behind his head.

Will got up from the sofa. “With your permission, sir, I’d like to retire.”

Jonathan looked at the tall blond soldier, who stood at attention. “You don’t have to call me *sir* tonight. *Jon* is fine. And you don’t need permission to go. You two can stay in the guestroom. There are extra toothbrushes and stuff in the bathroom. But there’s only one bed, so you’ll have to arm wrestle to see who ends up on the floor.”

Will looked at his commanding officer with challenge in his eyes. “Last time we arm wrestled, I beat you.”

“I believe it was a draw.”

“Respectfully, sir, it was not.”

“That’s the spirit, guys!” Jace encouraged. “Fight for it, like Kate and I did when we were kids.”

“Um, Jace, you and Kate still fight over everything.” Jonathan laughed.

Riley stood and tried to cover a chuckle. “Good night. We’ll leave you to your...discussion.”

Will bumped his commander with his shoulder; then stepped in front of him. When the first officer reached the stairs, he climbed them two at a time. Riley shook his head. Spending time with these people was a true test of their ability to maintain

discipline. *Whoever devised the rule of no fraternizing with the ruling family was a wise person indeed.*

When Kate came downstairs late the next morning, Will and Riley were gone. Now that she understood the reason for Riley's emotional distance, it didn't make it easier not to care about him, or hope for signs that he might feel the same way.

She and Sam had breakfast alone. Jace and Jonathan had risen early and were off to their newest job site. They were restoring a three-story house to be used as a shelter for battered women and their children. Construction was ahead of schedule, but Kate was certain Jonathan was anxious to get the project finished, so they could put the space to use. She'd seen a two-page waiting list of women who needed a place to stay.

At noon, Kate and Sam brought lunch, and they had a picnic on the hardwood floor of the unfinished parlor. When they left, Jace kissed Sam's cheek. She just about melted on the spot. Kate teased her all the way home.

The girls spent the rest of the week studying Katriel's journal and asking Jonathan and Jace questions about Kate's past. Kate could not absorb enough information about her homeland. There were so many holes in her history. She asked about her father, and Jonathan told her all he could remember from his own recollections and those Katriel had shared with him. Kate got a clear picture of a man who was proud, noble, and dedicated to his people. He was also a loving father and husband who gave his life without reservation to protect his family. Kate adored this man she'd never met and often studied the family portrait at the front of Katriel's journal. She never tired of gazing at the handsome man and his striking young wife, dreaming about what her life would have been like with a dad and mom in it full-time.

When spring break ended, Kate lingered in the driveway, not wanting to get into the car. She helped Jonathan load their bags, while Jace and Sam chatted intimately.

Jace held Sam's hands. "You are a remarkable woman."

"Tell me more." She giggled.

“You’re the best friend Kate could hope for. You’ve given her things Jon and I never could.”

“It’s a girl thing.”

“That it is,” he agreed. “Please take care of each other. And go slow with the training. Kate makes it look much easier than it is.”

“I will.”

He bent to touch his forehead to hers. “You’ve become part of this family. Shared a secret no one else can know. That means a lot. To all of us.”

“I’ll guard it always. Don’t worry about me. Unless I talk in my sleep, and then it’s not my fault.”

He grinned, kissed her forehead, and stepped back.

Kate pushed between them to hug Jace. “Are you sure you can’t come?”

“Wish I could, Katie, but I’ve got book work to do. You know Jon – won’t let me play until the chores are done.”

“Fun-sucker.”

“Heard that!” Jonathan called as he tossed the last bag into the back of the Jeep and jumped behind the wheel.

Sam and Kate climbed into the Cherokee and waved at Jace.

He stood in the yard and watched them drive out of sight. “I hate good-byes.”

Chapter Sixteen

April arrived with a promise of warmer weather. The Simpson College maintenance crew filled large flowerpots with bright red geraniums and lined them up and down the sidewalks. The campus came alive with color.

The trees were thick with new leaves, the birds had returned, and the coating of sand had been cleaned from the parking lots and sidewalks. As sunset came later, Kate and Sam retired their winter coats. Frisbee golf and football games resumed in the grassy clearing. Spring fever was in full bloom. The students still had six weeks of school, but there was light at the end of the tunnel. They raced toward it, and the summer adventures that waited.

Coach McWilliams scheduled Captain's practices, and Kate and Sam arrived each day at three o'clock to work on their skills and renew friendships with other players. Kate immersed herself in the joy of volleyball. She loved college; it was hard to imagine that she might enjoy only one year.

Evenings were spent at the gym working out with Will and Riley. Kate was proud of Sam – she was a quick study. Her natural grace and athleticism enhanced their training exercises.

When Kate felt she and Sam were ready, Riley introduced them to various kinds of weaponry. They trained with large combat knives and crossbows. Will took them to the country to teach them archery. Much to their surprise, they discovered that Will was an expert archer. Kate came away with a new reverence for his abilities.

On a night in late April, Will and Riley were attempting to run a training session, but Kate and Sam were giddy from lack of sleep. They had worked hard to finish semester projects and papers, and study for upcoming finals. Training was the last item on either of their agendas.

Will circled Sam as she stood with hands raised in a defensive posture. She yawned. He struck before she could blink, grabbing her right arm and twisting it behind her. He wrapped his arm around her neck and slammed her against his chest.

Sam grunted and giggled. “What’s up with that, Avery? I wasn’t ready.”

He bent toward her ear. “There’s no such thing as *not ready*, O’Neill. There’s *ready* and there’s *dead*. Choose.”

Her answer was to elbow him in the ribs and stomp on his arch. She slipped down and out of his chokehold, and raised her foot to slam it into his crotch. She stopped an inch from the target.

Across the room, Riley and Kate clapped softly.

Avery grabbed Sam’s suspended leg, yanked upward, and twisted her onto her back in midair; then let her fall to the floor. She let out a loud groan.

Riley and Kate continued to clap. “Bravo!” Kate added. “Will you be paying a bit more attention now, Miss O’Neill?”

Riley leaned over. “Don’t be too hard on her. You’re not in prime form tonight either.”

Kate attempted a half-hearted backhand of his shoulder, but he caught her wrist, stuck a leg behind her, and knocked her off balance. She tumbled to the floor much as her friend had only moments ago.

Sam was the one clapping now.

“Let’s call it a night, shall we?” Riley said. “You two obviously have other things on your mind.”

“Oh, no.” Kate’s voice dripped with sarcasm. She accepted Flynn’s offered hand. “Only finals, and spring practice, and a biology paper, and world-saving. Nothing out of the ordinary!”

“Sounds like a good excuse for ice cream.” It was Will who suggested it.

Riley shook his head. “It seems these two aren’t the only ones learning new things in these sessions.”

Will’s mildly obvious attempt to apologize for the intense training session worked. The four of them enjoyed huge sundaes at Benson’s Ice Cream Shop. They chatted about college and sports. There was no talk of destiny, training, or otherworldly adventures. There would be plenty of time for that later.

As April rolled into May, the tension on campus increased. Finals week, dubbed “the week from Hell” by the upperclassmen, was a few days away. The dorms bustled with frantic activity. Kate watched students rush around gathering class notes from neighbors or collaborating on final projects.

One night after supper, Kate ran into Riley on the sidewalk outside the men’s dorm. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

She grinned at him and watched his frown disappear. “Rough day?”

“Rough week.”

“Can’t keep up with the nightly fire alarm bandits?”

Riley chuckled. “I tell you, if I get my hands on those guys, they’re going to mysteriously disappear.”

Kate covered her ears. “I did not hear that.” She shrugged. “Can you blame them? It’s the last week of school. They’re just having a little fun.”

“False alarms that empty the women’s dorm in the middle of the night are not my idea of fun.”

“Oh, really? What is your idea of fun?”

“If I told you, you’d think I was crazy.”

“I already think you’re crazy.”

Riley laughed and glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to go. Will and I are putting two extra men at the men’s dorm tonight. I need to brief them before the shift change.”

Kate clicked her tongue. “Trouble in paradise.”

“It’s scary what stress does to these guys. There have been a lot more incident reports lately.”

“Girls usually resort to arguing or the silent treatment. But if things do get ugly, you can count on me to put to a stop to it – just to give you a break.”

Riley touched her shoulder. “Thanks. But you have a seriously unfair advantage.”

“I’ll be gentle.” Kate’s grin was wicked.

“See you later.” Riley walked away, shaking his head.

* * *

Finals ended on the second Wednesday in May. Kate and Sam had a tennis exam, which consisted of playing doubles with two classmates and taking a written test on the rules. It was what Kate referred to as a cake final, meaning it would be easy. Sam said she liked the sound of anything named after food.

They'd gone to the tennis courts at a neighborhood park for the skills portion of the test and were walking back in the cool, spring sunshine when a blue Chevy Malibu pulled to the curb and honked.

"Ladies. Goin' my way?"

Kate laughed as she approached the car. "Get a new line, Flynn! No intelligent female falls for that one anymore."

"It got *you* over here."

"There's a big difference between getting my attention and getting me in your car."

"I consider getting your attention the hard part."

"Yeah, you're right." She opened the door and hopped in beside him.

Sam stood on the sidewalk with her arms crossed, tapping her foot. "Hello! Cute, blonde girl also in need of a ride."

Kate whispered, "What will it take for you to pull away and leave her pouting?"

"Isn't she your best friend?"

"Well...yeah."

Riley leaned across Kate and yelled to Sam. "Get your cute, blonde self in the car."

Sam leapt into the backseat of the convertible and they sped off. Kate tilted her head and let the sunbeams warm her face.

"So, two days and you're outta here," Riley said.

"Yep. Baccalaureate tomorrow night and graduation Friday morning. Then we go home."

"After two of the longest services of our life," Sam complained from the backseat.

"Jace will be there to hold your hand through both of them. I don't imagine you'll be complaining then." Kate smirked.

"Well...no. Bring on the long-winded speakers!"

Kate turned to Riley. “Are you coming to Springville?”

“Lieutenant Avery and I have to help close down the campus. We’ll be over Sunday.”

Kate grinned. Monday was her nineteenth birthday.

“You didn’t think we’d miss your birthday, did you?”

She blushed and tried to think of something clever to say as they pulled into the parking lot. Mercifully, Jace’s pickup truck was parked in front of the dorm, and she diverted her attention to their arrival. “It’s our boys.”

The Malibu came to a stop beside the truck and neither Sam nor Kate used the car door. They launched themselves out of the seats and into the waiting arms of Jonathan and Jace.

“Miss me?” Jonathan said. He hugged Sam, then Kate.

“Not so much,” Sam replied. “But it makes all the girls jealous when we hug you.”

“I think there’s a compliment in there somewhere.” Jace laughed.

Riley parked his car and walked to where the group stood conversing.

Jonathan nodded cordially at him. “Commander.”

“Hello, sir.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t he ever get to call you anything besides *sir*?”

Riley tilted his head to one side. “Well, there’s *My Lord* or *Lord Jonavon*.”

“Or the less popular, *Son of Lord Joakin*,” Jonathan offered.

“How about Jon-Boy or Jonnie?” Kate suggested.

Jonathan punched her in the arm. “We’re trying to maintain a modicum of respect here, Katie.”

“I guess that means I have to answer to Lady Kate?”

“Actually, it would be Lady Kathia,” Riley corrected. “And you can call me Commander Ruark.”

“I vote we change the titles for addressing each other and keep it simple.”

Jonathan grinned at his sister. “It’s not a democracy. If you want to change something, do it. There’s no vote needed.”

Her eyes grew large. “Cool.”

“Uh oh,” Riley said. “You’ve unleashed a monster...Lord Jonavon.”

Kate pointed to each of them. “Jon, Riley, Kate, Jace, Sam. That’s my decision.”
“So be it.” Jonathan bowed gracefully and waved his hand in a circular motion.
Jace and Sam frowned at each other. “Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?” Sam whispered.

“No clue.” Jace shook his head.

Kate turned to Riley. “Do your commander-guy duties include hauling boxes?”

“Um...”

“Good. We’ll need you here after graduation on Friday morning to help load the truck.” Satisfied with herself, Kate looped arms with Sam, and they headed for the dorm. “We’re going to change. Then I think you guys should take us out for dinner.”

Riley leaned toward Jonathan. “As I said, sir, a monster.”

After dinner, Riley excused himself and went to the conference room of the campus security building. Lieutenant Avery studied several papers scattered on the table before him.

“Summer schedule?” Riley took a seat across from his first lieutenant.

Will nodded. “I think I got it figured out. Have a look.” He slid the papers toward Flynn.

Riley perused the sheet. “Looks good. Has anyone asked about our unexplainable absence?”

“No. Shephard is the only one who knows it might be permanent.”

“Good,” Riley said with a nod. “Joe is dedicated. He’ll maintain high standards of discipline and training, no matter how long we’re gone.”

“And if we don’t come back, the place is in good hands.”

On Friday morning, Kate met Jonathan in the main lounge of the dorm. They had breakfast at the dining hall and went for a walk around campus.

Jonathan took her hand. “You’re quiet.”

Kate sighed. “I’m doing my best to take in all of this, since I may never see it again.”

Jonathan squeezed her fingers.

“I’ve really come to love this campus, and my volleyball team, and my friends in the dorm.”

“And?”

Kate’s eyes glistened with tears. “I don’t want to leave Sam.”

Jonathan stopped and turned Kate by the shoulders. “I was wondering if you were going to admit that to me.”

Kate sniffed. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m worried about leaving you and Jace, too. But I’m going to see you again, at some point. Sam is my best friend, and I don’t…”

Jonathan wiped her tear. “It hurts. I know.”

Kate nodded and blew out her breath. “Yeah.”

“And telling you everything is going to be okay just doesn’t do it, in this case.”

“When you say it, I believe it.”

Jonathan smiled at his sister. “Then mark my words – it’s going to be okay.”

Kate returned his smile. “Thank you.”

After a long graduation ceremony in which the keynote speaker went over by a good twenty minutes, Kate, Jonathan, Sam, and Jace left the football field and went to the women’s dorm. Riley and Will met them in the lounge, ready to help with the moving project Kate had assigned.

“Let’s go,” Kate gushed. “Get this show on the road! Load ‘em up and move ‘em out!”

“Hold on there, cliché-girl,” Jonathan said. “Jace and I need to change. Are you packed?”

“Yeah.” Sam nodded. “Kate made me finish last night before we went to bed. She’s really bossy.”

“It’s not her fault. It’s in her genes.” Jace jerked a thumb at Jonathan.

“Enough out of you,” Jonathan warned.

* * *

As the heavily loaded pickup pulled away from Simpson College, Kate stared out the back window. A year ago she’d believed that her future would be forged on this campus. She’d arrived as a terrified high school graduate who wasn’t sure how she

would fit in. Now she was headed toward an even more terrifying and unfamiliar future. The fears of the previous year paled in comparison to what she felt now. In four days she would leave to explore a new and unknown world. She wanted to feel prepared, but all she knew for sure was that she was going, and her life would never be the same.

Chapter Seventeen

Kate woke up early on Monday. Today was her nineteenth birthday. Her best friend Sam was there. Jonathan and Jace were there. Her new friend Will was there. And Riley was there. That thought alone made her heart jump just a little.

She'd had a dream about him. It had involved training, and he was shirtless, and there had been kissing. That was new. She'd fantasized a time or two about him kissing her; she'd never dreamed about it. Kate did her best to maintain an aloof attitude when training with Riley; but after all, she was nineteen years old and felt that was certainly old enough to be kissed.

There had been a few kisses in high school, but Kate hadn't initiated them, and for the most part, didn't particularly enjoy them. Some boys just didn't know the first thing about how a girl wanted to be kissed. Now Riley, she assumed, with his vast experience in life surely knew how to take a woman in his arms and ever so gently and tenderly brush his lips against hers and...

She shivered and sat up. *Enough of that, Kate Arnold. He's off limits.* She repeated this to herself as she got out of bed, stepped over Sam's sleeping form, and went to shower.

When she came back, dressed in her favorite blue jeans and *Simpson College* T-shirt, she noticed the sun peeking through the lightweight drapes. Her room faced east, and she loved the way the morning sun greeted her each day through the large bay window.

Sam was gone, her sleeping bag a tangled jumble on the floor. She was probably downstairs helping prepare Kate's "surprise" breakfast. It was hard to maintain the surprise when Jonathan and Jace did this each year. She smiled, again realizing what a wonderfully blessed life she lived.

Kate came downstairs to a chorus of "Happy Birthday to You" and grinned at her friends' off-key attempts to harmonize. This year the breakfast consisted of a waffle covered with nineteen glowing candles, bacon, eggs, orange juice, and three flavors of syrup.

Kate closed her eyes and wished good things for everyone she loved; then blew out the candles. Her family applauded as they gathered around the dining table and dug into the hearty breakfast. Kate watched Jace and Sam tease each other about the mysterious loud snoring heard last night. Jonathan, Will, and Riley discussed each detail of how to rebuild an engine for a 1970 Chevrolet Malibu SS. She sighed happily.

After breakfast they gathered on the large deck and placed Kate's gifts in a pile. She sat on the wood planking and opened the first box, from Will. It was a beautifully crafted combat knife with an eight inch blade. One side was serrated. Kate had no doubt it would cut through the trunk of a small tree. Will had also fashioned a sheath made from a long strip of leather. It could be tied around her waist and worn like an old fashioned western holster.

"Wow." She picked up the knife to get a feel for its weight. "Thank you."

Will blushed at her pleasure with the unusual gift. "If you use it as we've taught, it will serve you well."

"Mine next!" Jace handed her a large box wrapped in pale green paper.

Kate was mesmerized when she opened it. It was a crossbow and set of steel arrows. Each arrow had navy blue fletching, her family's clan color. "It's amazing. Thank you."

Jace winked at her.

Sam passed her gift to Kate. "I'm sensing a theme here. But no one filled me in, so I got you a little something that's not as practical."

Kate tore into the brightly colored paper and laughed in delight. It was a keychain with a ceramic volleyball on the end. She studied it closely. A microscopic number "3" was painted on it. The box also contained a volleyball autographed by Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh, the world's best beach players. "How did you—"

"It's my secret." Sam glanced at Jace.

"Thank you. It's perfect!"

"Next," Jonathan said, pushing his gift closer.

Kate opened the small box. Inside was a choker of deep blue sapphires. Each was the size of a small grape. A platinum setting held the stones in place, and they

formed a circle that would encompass her throat perfectly. They seemed to glow with an internal light that radiated every color of the spectrum.

“Oh, Jon,” she breathed as she looked at him.

“It was Mom’s. She planned to give it to you when The Call came. These sapphires are from our family treasure. Our ancestors fashioned them into a necklace to be worn by the Lady of each generation.”

He took the necklace from her trembling hands and put it around her neck. She touched it gently. “Thank you.”

Jonathan nodded, unable to speak. She gazed at him, her brown eyes wide with admiration and love for him and the mother she could barely remember.

Riley’s gift was last. Kate frowned curiously when she saw the brown leather pouch with a long shoulder strap. On the flap was a symbol.

“Cathal warriors carry their possessions in this,” Riley explained. “The glyph is our clan insignia. It symbolizes our devotion to the ruling family of Eavan, and reminds us of our oath to protect her people. Only Cathal possess these.”

Kate turned the bag over, examining it closely. She was touched by the noble gesture.

Jonathan stood and grabbed a handful of torn wrapping paper. “Why don’t you all go ahead? Jace and I will clean up. We’ll meet you inside in a few minutes.”

Kate and Sam gathered the gifts and hauled them into the house. Riley and Will followed.

Jonathan waited until the door closed. He stooped to pick up a box. “Do you think Kate understood the significance of that gift from Riley?”

Jace nodded in agreement. “I doubt it. But I was pretty shocked.”

“He sees her as a warrior...who possesses all the strength, fighting ability, and wisdom of a Cathal clansman.”

“Should we find that comforting or terrifying?”

Jonathan shook his head. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

When Kate returned from storing her gifts in her room, the group stared expectantly at her. It was Arnold tradition for her to declare the itinerary on her birthday.

She put one hand on her hip and looked toward the ceiling. “There will be miniature golf, followed by go-cart racing. Then I would like to take on any worthy opponent in air hockey—serious players only, please. Then let’s do a nice steak dinner, cake and ice cream, a movie, a walk in Harper’s Woods, and a midnight bonfire.”

“Is that *all*?” Jonathan teased.

“That should do it. Let’s go.”

They piled into the vehicles and headed for the Family Fun Fair on the outskirts of Springville, where Kate conquered everyone at mini-golf and go-cart racing. At the arcade she defeated each of her friends in air hockey, except for Will.

“We have a rule about not beating the birthday girl,” Jonathan whispered.

Will blushed. “Oops. Sorry.”

Dinner at the local steakhouse was complete with more singing and a birthday brownie ala mode. They were almost late to the movie theater, but managed to arrive with time to argue over which show to see. The men went to the latest action movie, and the girls opted for a romantic comedy.

The walk in the woods was cancelled so they could rush home and have a bonfire. Kate prepared more of her famous toasted marshmallows as they sat on logs around the fire and talked. Jace and Sam were involved in an intense conversation, their foreheads almost touching while they whispered back and forth.

Jonathan and Will went down to the ravine to observe the local wildlife. Kate thought this an absurd idea since it was almost pitch black, but she didn’t protest. It left her alone with Riley. She was aware he’d been watching her intently as she toasted their snacks.

“Marshmallow?” She held out a stick with a light brown cube on the end.

“Thanks.” He took it and blew on it.

Kate straddled the log, facing him, and moved closer. Her attraction to this man had begun the moment they met. They had an easy companionship. She loved that he treated her with great respect. He was funny, and he laughed at her jokes. He was

fiercely protective. He knew how to handle a number of weapons and was a powerful fighter. He was smart, with a sense of purpose that was lacking in most of the boys she'd met in her lifetime. Riley had a calling. He carried himself with great confidence, which was mingled with humility. Kate found this so appealing, she almost melted into a puddle when she thought about it too long.

“Eat it. It won't bite you,” she coaxed.

He bit off the top of the warm marshmallow, and some of the gooey inside dripped down his lip.

Kate laughed and wiped the mess off his chin with her finger. “Haven't you done this before? The trick is to shove the whole thing in, so as to minimize the goo factor.” She popped a jumbo marshmallow into her mouth. “Fee? If's not rockit fiencie.”

Riley swung his leg over the log, so he was also straddling it and facing Kate. Their knees were touching. “You are an amazing woman.”

“Fank yoo.”

He tilted his head back and dropped the rest of the marshmallow into his mouth. His gaze returned to her. “Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“I honestly have no idea.” She paused. “Am I?”

“You are a strong fighter and a wise, compassionate person. You'll do your family proud.”

“Why is it so important for me to be a good fighter? You and Jon mention that all the time.”

“The region of Eavan was always peaceful, until Lorcan attacked. Even so, Lord Joakin made sure his people were prepared. The Cathal trained diligently, and Joakin saw to it that his family knew the ways of Maon self-defense. But we've been gone for some time. We're not sure what to expect when we return. Lorcan is a mighty warrior. He's also cunning and deceitful. We have to be ready on several fronts because we don't know his plan of attack. But I'm confident that you, Will, and I are equipped to defeat him. Sabriel will guide us, and I know the ways of good always triumph.”

“You honestly believe that?”

“If I don't, what hope is there?”

Kate grinned at the earnest man. “You are remarkable, Riley Flynn.”

He leaned in close. For a split second, Kate held her breath, believing he might kiss her. “Our future depends on the triumph of righteousness,” he said.

She let out her breath and started to speak, just as a marshmallow bounced off her forehead.

“What’s with all the seriousness over there?” Sam called. “This is a party, remember?”

Kate retrieved the marshmallow and whipped it at her friend. Her aim was off slightly, and it struck Jace on the cheek.

When Jonathan and Will returned from the ravine, they were greeted by the sight of two grown men and two giggling college girls chasing each other around the bonfire, tossing marshmallows at one another.

Jonathan crossed his arms over his chest. “Can’t leave them alone for ten minutes.”

“At least they didn’t start them on fire first.” Will’s eyes twinkled with amusement.

“You and Riley are going to have your hands full in Sunlee.”

“Yes, sir. But so will Lorcan.”

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning, Kate stood in the family room and hugged her best friend. Tears welled in her eyes. “I don’t know if I’ll see you again.”

“No, you don’t know *when* you’ll see me again.” Sam held Kate at arm’s length. Her pale blue eyes radiated admiration. “I’ll be here, waiting and hoping. You’ll come back.”

“I don’t know—”

“I do. We’ll see each other again. If not in this life; then in the one to follow. You and I are bound by friendship. That’s an eternal gift.”

Kate nodded. “Do well at the Olympic tryouts. I’ll be cheering for you.”

“I’ll do it for both of us.”

“Do you have everything?”

Sam glanced at Jonathan. “Taken care of. And Jace is driving me to Chicago day after tomorrow. My flight leaves next week.”

“Your birthday present!”

“You already gave it to me. It’s in my suitcase.”

“No peeking. Open it on the plane. Okay?”

Sam made a crossing motion over her heart. “I promise.”

Kate turned to Jace. “Take good care of my best friend.”

“I will.”

“And drive safely.”

“I love you, Katie.”

Her gaze met Jonathan’s. “I’ll miss you, big brother.”

“Maybe not for long, huh?”

“I hope we get this Call figured out, and you can join us. Soon.”

“Trust Sabriel. He is wise and speaks for The One.”

Kate nodded.

She moved to where Riley and Will stood with the Gateway. Her leather pouch was slung over her shoulder, along with her crossbow. Her new blade hung in its sheath

at her hip. Kate was dressed in blue jeans, hikers, and a navy T-shirt. At Jonathan's urging, she wore her mother's necklace. She also held Katriel's journal. Tucked in the pages were a photograph of her and Sam, and the picture she'd kept on her desk at school.

Riley and Will were dressed in the uniform of Cathal warriors – dark brown leather pants and leather boots. Their heavy leather vests were open in the front, and held together by a criss-crossed piece of leather binding. They wore no shirts. Like Kate, they had a large combat knife, crossbow, and leather pouch. Will also carried a bow and quiver of arrows.

Each man had an intricately designed tattoo on his left bicep. When Kate had pressed for the meaning, Riley explained that all Cathal bore this symbol. It was the designation of their rank. As warriors were promoted, a line or character was added until the emblem was almost as intricate as his. Only Riley bore the full markings of a commander.

Riley opened the Gateway box and held it out. Kate reached into her pouch, pulled three olive leaves from her bundle, and placed them inside. She recited from memory the words Jace and Jonathan had taught her: "Serc, Leticia, Sheeva, Cristul, Mudan, Declan, Enat, Blath, Climee."

The Gateway began to glow with a pale blue light, which expanded to fill the air. Kate looked at Jonathan, Jace, and Sam. "*I love you,*" she mouthed.

The light intensified until she was forced to close her eyes against the brightness. Even with her eyes shut, she sensed the light. She drifted weightlessly. It felt like her feet left the ground. Kate clung tightly to her mother's journal. The light filled her mind, and she heard the wind rush around her.

Just as suddenly, the whirling sensation stopped, and her feet touched solid ground. The pale blue light faded. Kate tried to get her bearings, still overwhelmed by the perception of movement. The light receded into the Gateway. She stood between Will and Riley, in a strange and darkened room. Her eyes took a long time to adjust to the dimness.

"Wow." Dizziness overtook her, and she sat on the hard floor with a loud thud.

Riley rubbed his eyes. “Kate? Are you all right?” His movements were slow and deliberate.

She felt strong arms lift her. When her eyes focused, she saw it was Will. He was smiling. “Are you well?”

“I’m good. I think.” Her voice held more conviction than her mind.

They were in an enormous room – the attic of an old house. The log rafters were high; the floor was wood and the color of honey. Furniture cluttered the space. Oddly shaped items hid beneath linen cloths. Two triangular windows overlooked a placid lake.

“We’re back at the beginning of the journey,” Riley said. He looked at Kate. “The attic of your ancestral home.”

“Sabriel brought us here, explained the Gateway, and sent us through. That was over eighteen years ago,” Will whispered, “and nothing has changed.”

Kate touched each piece of furniture and peeked under the cloths that covered the hidden treasures of a life she’d never known. As she placed her hand on the ornate frame of a gigantic mirror, the air shimmered with a familiar blue light.

“I didn’t do it!” She pulled her hand back.

A being appeared in a flash of blinding light. He was dressed in red, and his emerald green eyes were filled with wisdom and welcome. He was obviously delighted to see them. “Wilyam, Ruark, Kathia! We sensed the Gateway’s opening and your presence among us. Welcome! The One is pleased you have answered The Call.”

As Sabriel spoke, Will and Riley immediately dropped to one knee and bowed their heads.

Kate continued to stand. “Well, we’re here. What’s the deal?”

Sabriel smiled at her. “Wilyam, Ruark, you may rise.”

They slowly stood. Both frowned at Kate.

Will inclined his head. “Forgive her, Sabriel, our customs regarding the Messenger of The One are new to her.”

Kate flushed in embarrassment when she realized her mistake.

Sabriel waved his hand in dismissal. “It is fine, Wilyam. I find her directness refreshing. And she spoke much more harshly at our last meeting.”

Kate was doubly embarrassed as she recalled her last interaction with Sabriel and her angry outburst. “I’m sorry about that. I was more than a little confused.”

“But you are enlightened now?”

“I...guess.”

“Good. You have a long journey ahead. You must go to the region of Karasi and retrieve the Kalare stone. Bring it here to me.”

Kate raised her hand, a look of bewilderment on her face.

“Yes, Kathia?” Sabriel smiled in amusement.

“Um, I was wondering – is this journey we’re about to take, is it The Call?”

“It is the first step.”

“And if you don’t mind my asking, how many steps are there, exactly?”

“Three journeys. Each to be revealed at the proper time.”

“I see.” She paused. “And how long will these journeys take?”

“Your progress may be hampered by Lorcan, if he discovers your presence here.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No.”

Kate frowned and raised her hand again.

“Yes, Kathia?”

“Actually, I have more questions. If you don’t mind.”

Will and Riley shuffled uncomfortably behind her.

“So we go on this journey and bring back the rock, and you’ll fill us in on the next step?”

“That is correct.”

“And I’m supposed to just go with it? Throw caution to the wind?”

“On the contrary, my child. You walk by faith, which to the unwise appears to be foolishness. But your prize is a high calling, and you press toward it with confidence.”

Sabriel turned to Riley. “Ruark, you should find suitable attire for Kathia. You must disguise her presence. Lorcan has spies everywhere. He grows angrier each day that he does not locate the members of the ruling family.”

“Who is left?” Will said.

“All have been killed. Only Jonavon and Kathia remain. Their line must be preserved, so The Call can be fulfilled.”

Kate raised her hand once more.

Sabriel laughed this time. “Yes, Kathia?”

“So you know Mom also...died?”

Sabriel’s emerald eyes filled with sorrow. “Yes, child. But she resides in Paradise. You will join her someday, in the life that is to come.”

“When will Jon and Jace come here?”

“That remains to be seen. Much depends on your success in the journey to Karasi.”

“That faith thing again?”

“Yes, my child. The One will be with you, and I shall watch over you. Always unseen, but never far away. Know that if you are faithful to the journey, even when you stumble, you shall be made whole.”

Kate raised an index finger as she spoke. “Oh, one more thing before we take off on this mission. Promise me there will be no dragons.”

Sabriel’s smile was warm. “Dragons are not native to this region.”

Kate nodded in satisfaction. “How about flying monkeys?”

Sabriel cocked an eyebrow. “Our primates do not fly.”

“No scorpions, no poison arrows, no booby traps, no big hairy spiders.” Kate shuddered involuntarily.

Sabriel grinned as he patiently answered “no” to each of her stipulations.

“And lastly—” she sighed “—no pits full of snakes.”

“Well...maybe a few snakes.”

Kate opened her mouth; then noticed the mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Oh, great. Just what I need, a messenger with a sense of humor.”

Riley leaned over. “How about you trust Will and I, and we’ll get through this together?”

“Excellent advice, Ruark.” Sabriel raised his palms toward the ceiling. “You know the way. Go in peace. Journey well. Return here with the prize.”

He disappeared in a glorious flash of pale blue light.

Chapter Nineteen

Kate tucked the Gateway safely in the attic, along with Katriel’s journal. There was little in it she did not have committed to memory, and it would make her travel lighter if she didn’t have to carry the large book.

Riley led the way down the creaky staircase to the second floor of the huge old house. A long row of oak doors lined one side of the hallway. An intricately designed log banister graced the other. Below were a large living room, and a sitting room with an open beam ceiling. A wall of windows overlooked a lush, green countryside.

Riley motioned to the row of doors on the left. “Sleeping chambers.” He walked soundlessly to the first door.

It opened with a loud groan, the hinges rusty from years of disuse. Inside, Kate saw an enormous room with a large bed in the center. There were two smaller rooms off the main one—a sitting room and private bath with a large circular tub. Dust covered everything. Large windows let in the sun; its rays illuminated the furniture. Kate knew immediately that this was her parent’s room. Her eyes fell on a cradle in the corner, and she caught her breath. She walked to it and ran her hand along the fine, smooth wood of the rail. Kate imagined her mother watching her sleep.

Kate turned to the enormous bed and saw it was unmade, the covers and sheets in a disheveled tangle. The occupants seemed to have left in a hurry.

Riley touched her shoulder. “I know you should spend some time here understanding your heritage, but we really need to go.”

“I know.”

“When this is over, I will personally show you every square inch of the place. I promise.”

He took her hand and led her to a set of double doors. They opened into a gigantic closet full of her parent’s fine clothing. It smelled slightly musty and somewhat familiar to her.

Riley walked into the space. “You can choose something of your mother’s. I’m sure her things will fit you. I’d suggest something fitted – for ease of movement – and dark colors, to blend into the woodlands we’ll be traveling.”

Kate ran her hand over the elegant fabrics. She saw the navy blue of her father’s clan and the lavender of her mother’s. Her eyes fell on a navy blue outfit. She pulled it out. It was a pair of leather pants and a cropped, tank style top trimmed in lavender.

Riley contemplated her choice. “It gets cold at night. You’ll need a cape or jacket. We’ll get supplies from the outbuilding and be back in about fifteen minutes. Remember, travel light.”

Riley and Will left her in the quiet of the strangely familiar room. Kate undressed and put on the outfit her mother had worn. She removed the sapphire choker and placed it in a dresser drawer. In the pocket of her discarded jeans, she found the volleyball keychain Sam had given her. She attached it to the strap of her Cathal pouch and tucked it safely inside. It would be her way of taking Sam on this journey.

Kate neatly folded her jeans and shirt, and placed them among her mother’s things; then searched for a jacket. She found a navy blue wrap made of heavy cotton. It fit nicely in her leather pouch. There were no shoes as comfortable as her favorite hikers, so she kept her own boots.

When Riley and Will returned, they carried several pieces of gear – cooking utensils, bedrolls, water containers, and extra blankets. Will bent to pack the items into their pouches. Riley saw Kate and stopped in mid-stride.

She wore the dark leather pants, which fit every curve of her long legs. The matching leather tank was fitted and cropped snugly under her bust. Her lean stomach was on full display. Kate tugged at the bottom of the tank, trying to pull it farther down.

“Why would my mother own something like this?” She continued to fuss with the top.

Will looked at her. “It was practical, especially if she was going riding or working in the garden.”

“Or trying to turn Lord Joakin’s head,” Riley mumbled under his breath.

Will returned to his packing, the image of a smile on his lips.

When the gear was ready, they headed for the staircase at the end of the long hallway. Kate desperately wanted to explore each room they passed, but she told herself there would be time for that later, after they finished the journey.

They descended the staircase. It appeared as if the daily routine of the homeowners had been disrupted in mid-life; dishes cluttered the dining room table and toys were scattered across the floor. The occupants had been taken by surprise and had to flee for their lives. As they walked through the sitting room of the ancient house, Kate smelled the faint fragrance of wood, mixed with an odor of staleness. The drapes were fully open, and sunshine streamed through the dingy windows, highlighting the dust that danced in the beams of light. She saw portraits of her father and mother, and their family members, now dead and gone. She imagined children's laughter and her mother's voice as she played with them. Kate sighed. She had missed out on a great gift. Perhaps this journey would fill the empty longing she had carried so many years.

They came into the front foyer. Riley muscled the heavy double doors open, and Kate shielded her eyes from the dazzling brightness. It was warm, almost hot. The air was pungent with the sweet fragrance of unidentifiable plant life. Unseen birds sang. The area in front of the house was surrounded by rolling hills and grassy meadows, interspersed with small groves of trees. In the distance, Kate saw the beginning of a mountain range. As she surveyed her new surroundings, she was reminded of home. This place was very much like the Earth she had left only a short time ago.

They started to walk. After a few hundred yards they came to a stone wall with an iron gate. Kate guessed it marked the entry to her family's home. The archway was blocked by huge logs and rocks. They climbed the seven-foot wall and encountered a paved path made of intricately laid flat stones. It was a beautiful mosaic of earth colors, and Kate could tell that each rock had been precisely placed by a skilled artisan. They followed the path for twenty minutes before they saw the rooftops of a village.

Will nodded toward the town. "As we enter, be wary. The people of Eavan are known for their warmth and hospitality, but we have been away for many years and do not know how hard times have changed them."

"Stay between us," Riley ordered. "They will know we are Cathal, but I don't know how much respect that will command."

“It’s best if we use our Eavanian names. Call me Wilyam, and Riley is Commander, or Ruark. We will refer to you as Kathia. We’ll do our best to pass through unnoticed, but we need food supplies, so it will be necessary to visit the gardener’s shop.”

“How far is it to this Calamari stone?” Kate said.

Riley tried to hide his smile. “Kalare,” he corrected. “About four weeks by foot. The region of Karasi neighbors Eavan. The Cian cave, where the stones are found, is well inside the territory. It’s the Season of Sun, so we’ll have about eighteen hours of daylight.”

“On foot,” Kate mumbled. “I don’t suppose they have ATV rentals around here?”

“We need to travel with stealth. Cathal warriors frequently walk. It gives a certain advantage,” Will said.

“But a four-wheeler would give an added advantage. Don’t you think?”

Riley looked skyward and smiled. “No ATVs.”

“Mountain bike?”

“Some of the terrain isn’t passable by bike, horse, ATV, or SUV.”

“Pogo stick?”

“Kate.”

“Okay.” She sighed. “I get it.”

A few minutes later, they entered the outskirts of the small village. It reminded Kathia of Springville. The main street of Tarahyaush bustled with pedestrians and a few people on horses. The roadway was made of the same cobblestone as the country path. The shops were constructed of logs or fieldstone, and were neat and brightly lit. Each roof was lined with large solar panels like Kathia had seen on Earth. She guessed this was their source of power. The shop windows were inlaid with intricate stained glass designs. They gleamed magnificently in the sunshine. The lampposts lining the street were draped with fresh flowers, and trees provided pleasant shady spots where people could gather to visit. In the center of the village was an enormous fountain, spouting pale blue water. It was encircled by wood benches and shade trees.

The people were dressed in brown, black, or tan pants similar in style to Kathia’s. Some of the women wore brightly colored dresses made of a soft, cotton-like fabric.

Others wore shorter skirts with knee high boots. Everyone's top was brightly colored, and no two seemed to be the same.

Wilyam inclined his head as he spoke. "These are the clan colors we talked about. Husband and wife wear both family colors. The children wear their father's."

"It's beautiful."

"Only Cathal wear dark brown. Anyone you see dressed like us will be a member of our clan," Ruark said.

"And have that cool tattoo?" She pointed to Ruark's bicep.

"Yes." He grinned.

Wilyam turned in a slow circle as he walked. Several people had stopped their daily tasks to gawk at them. Ruark's eyes darted around the street. Kathia was unaware of the effect their presence had on the townspeople, but the two warriors immediately went into battle-ready posture.

Three older men who'd been casually conversing outside one of the shops suddenly stopped talking to stare at the visitors. They hurried to catch the strangers and stepped in front of them, blocking their advance.

"Lady Katriel!" One of them announced and fell to one knee, his head bowed in respect.

Whispers of "Lady Katriel!" and "It's her!" spread through the crowd. Soon there were a number of people all bowed in reverence before Kathia and the two warriors.

"Please get up," she said. "I'm not who you think I am."

The older man who had first bowed met her gaze. "You are the Lady of Eavan. You wear her colors, and you have returned to us after all these years." His eyes filled with tears.

The man bowing next to him spoke, his head still lowered. "It was foretold by Sabriel the Ancient many years ago. We have fought against the evil of Lorcan and have waited with great hope for your arrival to signal the coming peace."

"Wait, you're mistaken—" Kathia was drowned out as choruses of "The Lady has returned. Peace shall reign!" rose from the crowd.

Ruark raised his hands, and the people were immediately quiet. All eyes turned to Kathia. She was suddenly thankful she'd taken freshman speech, instead of putting it off as she'd wanted to.

“I am not Katriel. I am her daughter, Kathia. I have been...away, preparing for my return to Eavan. Sabriel has called, and sends me on a journey with Ruark and Wilyam. The time of peace is coming, but there is much work to be done first. I don't know all of the details myself, but Sabriel has promised to reveal all things in their time. And I have placed my trust in him and The One he serves.”

Kathia was satisfied with her speech. For her first public address as the Lady of Eavan, she didn't think it had gone too badly, especially considering she had no speechwriter or teleprompter.

Ruark leaned down and whispered, “Well said, Lady Kathia.”

“Thanks.” She turned to the villagers. “I need your help. Lorcan cannot be alerted to my presence here. Please, go on with your lives and spread the word that peace is coming, so hope is renewed.”

There were nods throughout the crowd as people gathered in small groups. They smiled excitedly at Kathia. She made her way through the crowd, greeting each person and shaking hands, allowing no one to kneel before her. As Wilyam said, they were friendly and gracious, and seemed invigorated by her presence.

A stout man bowed his head and took Kathia's hand. “How is your brother?”

“He is well, but was unable to journey with me. It took a lot for him to stay behind. He wanted to be here more than anything.”

The man smiled. His sharp eyes burned with admiration. “Your father was the greatest man I've known in this life. I expect I shall not be disappointed when I see his son as a fully grown man.”

“No. You won't.”

“Lord Joakin cared for the people of this village, and defended us with his dying breath.”

Words stuck in Kathia throat. She squeezed the man's hand, thanking him silently for his kindness.

He patted her shoulder in understanding.

It seemed an eternity before they made it to the gardener's shop. Kathia was greeted by the smell of fresh herbs and spices she couldn't identify. Bottles of all shapes and sizes lined the shelves. Each contained a variety of leaves and other substances in every color. Carts of fresh produce were scattered around the market. Wilyam and Ruark split up to peruse the shop.

The gardener appeared from the back room. She was a lovely woman with long black hair and a beautiful, but sad smile. Kathia guessed her to be in her mid-twenties, but knowing what Jonathan had told her about the aging process on Sunlee, it was possible she was much older.

“Your presence awakens our community.”

Kathia smiled graciously. “It is wonderful to be here. I was told you would have supplies for our journey.”

“Anything you need. If you don't see it, just ask.”

Kathia noticed a tiny girl peeking out from behind the shopkeeper's skirts. She had golden hair and big blue eyes. They were enormous as she stared at Kathia.

“You are Lady Kat-ee-el,” she breathed in her squeaky voice.

Kathia crouched so she was eye level with the tike. “No. I'm her daughter, Kathia.”

“You so pretty!”

Kathia touched the girl's blonde curls. She was reminded of a friend she had left in a far away place. “You are the pretty one. What's your name?”

“My name Hope.”

“What a beautiful name.”

The shopkeeper's voice held a deep sadness. “She was born on the anniversary of Lord Joakin's death. I named her as a promise for the future.”

Kathia rose. “I will do everything within my power to bring that promise.”

The woman nodded. “I know you will. Your presence here after all these years is proof enough.”

“How has the village prospered since Lorcan's attack?”

“Your father and his Number One were able to push him back. The Cathal set up a line of defense at the borders of Eavan. They’ve held Lorcan at bay, at no small cost to their ranks. Other regions have not fared so well.”

“Has Lorcan attacked all the regions?”

“Every one that resists him, and so far, all have. He has defeated several and desires to expand his influence. Journey carefully outside of Eavan. His methods are subtle and underhanded.”

“Thank you. We’ll be careful.”

Ruark and Wilyam approached the counter, arms loaded with fresh vegetables, fruits, and herbs.

The shopkeeper would not take the coins Wilyam offered. “It is my contribution. Lord Joakin was always generous to those in this valley. It gave him great joy to do things for others. Please allow me to experience that same joy.”

Kathia took the woman’s hand. “Thank you.”

“Defeat him and bring us peace, in the name of The One.”

“So be it,” Ruark returned in the traditional response.

Wilyam and Kathia packed the produce carefully in their pouches while Ruark went outside. When they joined the commander, he was peering into the distance.

“What do you see?” Wilyam said.

“I was noticing how the landscape has changed. There’s a lot more tree cover than I remember.”

“That’s good,” Wilyam said. “It will allow us to move more freely during the daylight.”

“Yes, but it also works to the enemy’s advantage for the same reason.”

Wilyam surveyed the village. “The community seems to be prospering, at least here. But the village has changed little since we left.”

“Yes,” Ruark agreed. “Times of war make growth difficult. Spirits are good, and that’s the most important thing.”

Kathia rummaged through her bag. “Do they have chocolate in Eavan? You know, chocolate is very important to a girl’s mental health.”

Ruark and Wilyam shook their heads. They walked down the cobblestone road without answering.

She continued the conversation with herself as she followed closely. “And I was wondering which of you is going to do the cooking? I’m not very good in the kitchen – not to mention that whole cooking-over-an-open-flame thing. I only work with precut veggies, and I don’t know the first thing about herbs and spices. I might blow us up. And starting a fire? I was never a girl scout. Poor Jace tried to teach me to start a fire, and I singed his pants. Which, now that I think about it, was quite funny. Although he didn’t think so.”

Wilyam stepped closer to his commander. “Does she always go on like this?”

“I can only think of one thing that might shut her up, and it’s not permitted.”

Chapter Twenty

Ruark set a challenging pace their first week. They traveled almost nonstop, and would have continued, were it not for Kathia's insistence that she needed rest. Even her exceptional physical condition did not prepare her for long days of walking, followed by short nights with little sleep. Ruark and Wilyam had trained for frequent long treks, but understood her need to take a break. They set up camp in a thick grove of trees.

It was well after suppertime, and the sun was just starting to lower. Sunset would come just before ten o'clock; sunrise at four a.m. The additional hours of light were an advantage to the journey, but not conducive to getting a good night's sleep. Thankfully, the tree cover was so heavy it blocked a good portion of the sun's rays and created a cool, darkened place for their camp.

Ruark set about building a fire while Wilyam scouted the surrounding area. Kathia watched the first officer disappear among the trees.

"Something on your mind?" Ruark said.

"What's his deal? He walks around in the dark and never trips. And he hears stuff neither of us do."

Ruark smiled. "Will has special gifts. His sense of smell, hearing, and eyesight are heightened."

"When you say *heightened*..."

"He can see in the dark."

"And he can hear things he shouldn't?" Kathia's eyes were wide.

"Yes, ma'am." Ruark smothered a grin. "So I'd be careful what I talk about when you think no one's listening."

"Thanks for the warning! *That* information would have been helpful months ago." Kathia continued to grumble as she laid out her bedroll and got settled.

Ruark stoked the fire. Within five minutes he heard deep, rhythmic breathing. He knew nothing would awaken her now, short of a freight train blasting through their campsite. The two nights he'd spent under the same roof with her, he quickly discovered that she slept hard and was not a morning person. It often took thirty

minutes to an hour for her to come fully awake, and it usually didn't happen until she had breakfast. He smiled when he remembered her birthday and the waffle covered in nineteen glowing candles.

"Something on your mind, Commander?" Wilyam stepped out of the shadows. He was the only person on this planet, or any other, who could sneak up on Ruark.

The commander nodded toward the sleeping young woman. "I was just remembering some things. It seems like another lifetime."

"In many ways, it is."

"I don't know what to do, Will. Every moment I'm with her..." Ruark lowered his head.

"I know, sir."

Ruark startled and looked up. "You're not supposed to be reading me."

"It's not my intention. But the two of you give off such strong impressions, it's sometimes impossible to shield myself."

"The *two* of us?"

"Yes, sir. Her feelings for you are just as strong."

"But she's only nineteen. How do I know they're real?"

"I know they're real. You can't fool an empath when it comes to feelings."

"That's not the problem. The problem is she's of the House of Joakin, and I'm a Cathal warrior. Her champion. She is meant to marry anyone...but me."

"We don't know that, sir."

"Our Code forbids marriage. We are chosen at age twelve. Removed from our families. Trained in the ways of war and sent on a lifetime mission." Ruark heard the bitterness in his tirade. He'd never questioned his calling, but he'd never been in this particular situation either.

Wilyam placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "We are not trained in the ways of war. We are trained in the ways of peace-keeping. And that sometimes means we fight. A contradiction, I know."

Ruark put his head in his hands. "How can I be the commander of the Cathal and lead my clan effectively if I can't get that crazy girl out of my head?"

“Your mission has not changed, sir. You fight for peace, and the ways of righteousness, and our right to love and choose freely. And you also fight for her. You always have.”

Ruark sighed heavily.

“You must trust that whatever the outcome of this, it will be for the best.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“As long as we have hope, all things are possible.”

Ruark glanced at Kathia’s sleeping form. “She really loves me, huh?”

“Almost as much as volleyball.” Wilyam smirked.

After another week of travel, the terrain changed from gently rolling hills to a stony landscape with fewer trees. They were getting close to the border between Eavan and Karasi. Ruark sent Wilyam ahead to scout for signs of danger, and instead of carrying his crossbow on his back, he loaded it and held it in his hands. At Ruark’s urging, Kathia also carried her crossbow at the ready.

The next day they came upon an encampment of Cathal warriors. Two guards were posted at the main entrance, but Ruark knew there to be at least a dozen more watching them from the surrounding area. There were probably no less than half a dozen weapons trained on each of them. Even Kathia glanced around nervously.

As they approached the camp, a man rode out on horseback. He was built like a bear. He held up his hand. Ruark, Kathia, and Wilyam stopped.

“Who are you? And what is your mission?” the man boomed in a rich baritone.

“Commander Ruark and First Officer Wilyam. We seek permission to enter.”

The warrior stared in disbelief for a moment; then leapt from his horse and hit the ground running. He almost knocked Ruark over when they embraced. “Ruark!”

His skin was dark from long hours spent in the sun. His black hair was closely shaven, and his brown eyes were creased at the corners. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, but if Ruark had done his math correctly, the general would be close to sixty.

The man shook hands with Ruark’s first officer. “Wilyam! Is it really you?”

“Yes, Donal. We have returned, and brought someone with us.”

Ruark stepped back and motioned to Kathia. “General Donal, this is Kathia, daughter of Joakin, Lady of Eavan.”

Donal dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

“Um, sir? We don’t do that any more. It’s sort of embarrassing.”

Donal stood. “Forgive me, Lady Kathia. I was unaware of the change in protocol.”

“That’s okay.” Kathia shrugged. “I just changed it recently.”

Donal frowned.

Ruark put his arm around the man’s shoulders and steered him toward the camp. “It’s a long story, General. I’ll fill you in sometime.”

“Over a mug of Eavanian ale?”

“Perhaps. But first we need provisions and an update on Lorcan.”

Wilyam grabbed the reigns of the general’s horse, and Kathia walked alongside. “Are they friends?” she said.

“Yes. For many years. Donal is Ruark’s top general. He’s been in charge of the Cathal since we left.”

“I don’t know a lot about military stuff, but doesn’t a general outrank a commander?”

“On Earth, perhaps. But here in Eavan, Ruark’s title is Supreme Commander. No one outranks him, except Lord Jonavon and Sir Jorryn. He dropped the *Supreme* part when we went to Earth. For obvious reasons.”

Inside the camp, Donal welcomed the travelers into his tent. He had food brought, and they had a humble, but delicious meal.

After they ate, Wilyam and Ruark spoke with General Donal about locations and encampments. Donal updated them on the number of Cathal warriors. He told of battles that had been won and lost, and the casualties they had sustained.

“Lorcan’s army grows in number almost daily, but we have held them back.”

Ruark smiled at his general. “I am proud of what you’ve accomplished here, Donal. I couldn’t have done better myself.”

“Thank you, Ruark. When you left to protect the ruling family, I vowed to maintain your teachings. To do my best in your absence. I had hoped you would be pleased upon your return.”

“I am. Eavan is much the same way we left it.”

“A lot can change in almost twenty years, but we have persevered. Most of your generals remain at their posts. One has passed on, and two have fallen in battle.”

“Who has fallen?”

“Thomas and Alejandro. August passed away after many years of faithful service to The One.”

Ruark hung his head, momentarily overwhelmed by the loss of his devoted men. “Have replacements been named?”

“I have appointed Acting Generals. I waited for your return to perform the ceremonies. I wanted your approval.”

Ruark rubbed his temples. “I would like to meet the newest generals. I’m sure you’ve chosen fine men.”

“Thank you, Commander. I’ll arrange it.”

Ruark nodded. “And Alexis, he still serves?”

“He is unwavering. At the nearest encampment to the north.”

“And what of the other regions?” Wilyam said. “How are they faring?”

The general breathed deeply. “Of the other eleven, five have fallen to Lorcan. One is our neighbor, Karasi. We are heavily fortified here. The ruling families of the fallen regions have been taken captive. Probably killed. Their armies continue the fight behind enemy lines. Some have joined the warriors of their neighbors, to help in the battle for their freedom. All desire to celebrate the defeat of Lorcan and a peace that will encompass the twelve regions.”

“Times are about to change. The Call has come to Lady Kathia, and Wilyam and I journey with her to fulfill The One’s mission.”

“That is good news. It’s been so long since Sabriel spoke the prophecy. Some of the men have grown disheartened.”

Ruark smiled at his friend. “According to what we’ve heard and seen, it’s a promising future for us if we hold out.”

“I trust it is, my friend.” The general rose. “I will show you to your tent. We also have something suitable for Lady Kathia. It is humble, but comfortable.”

Kathia grinned at the general. “Anything that doesn’t involve sleeping on a rock in the outdoors would be paradise to me.”

Donal led Ruark and Wilyam to a tent on the outer perimeter of the camp. It was reserved for visiting warriors. They found it quite comfortable, and Ruark was pleased that Donal had maintained his commander’s high standard of hospitality. It was important to morale.

* * *

Ruark, Wilyam, and Kathia spent eight days at the camp. The new generals arrived and met with Ruark. As the commander expected, Donal had made wise choices. Ruark gave approval for the Ceremonies of Promotion to take place, but asked that they wait until he and Wilyam could attend.

One afternoon, Donal briefed Ruark, Wilyam, and Kathia on the battles of the various regions. As they tried to catch up on nearly twenty years of history, Kathia furiously took notes on a small tablet she kept in her pouch.

During a particularly long recitation, Ruark leaned back and stretched mightily. In mid-stretch, he bumped Kathia’s writing hand, causing the perfect loop on her “L” to go horribly awry.

“Dude, knock it off,” she scolded.

Ruark smirked. “*Dude?* Since when am I *dude?*”

“Since you began acting like an adolescent.”

Ruark crossed his arms over his chest and scoffed. “I haven’t been an adolescent in over twenty years.”

“Coulda fooled me.” Kathia attempted to fix the wayward letter. She stuck her tongue out in concentration.

“That’s attractive.”

Without looking at him, Kathia’s fist shot out and connected with Ruark’s chest. He grunted loudly.

Donal and Wilyam stopped their conversation and turned to the commander.

“Sir, are you with us?” Wilyam’s blue eyes bubbled with laughter.

“Maybe we need a break. We’ll reconvene in ten.” Ruark rose and left the tent.

Donal watched him go, and turned to Wilyam. “Is he disappointed with my recollection of history?”

Wilyam shook his head. “Absolutely not, General. He just needs to stretch his legs, I’m sure.”

Donal, Wilyam, and Kathia followed Ruark outside.

That evening, Wilyam and Ruark left their tent and headed to the clearing behind the encampment.

“How do you feel the daily combat sessions are going?” Wilyam said.

“Donal’s men are well prepared. He’s done an excellent job with them.”

“In spite of the fact that Kathia has bested each warrior she’s faced?”

Ruark chuckled. “She is very...distracting. Isn’t she?”

“A deadly combination of charm and beauty. It’s really not fair.”

Ruark nodded in agreement. “But, it’s important to see how they adapt to unexpected situations. They’ve only anticipated fighting men, to this point in the battle. Now, they’ll be ready for anything.”

Ruark and Wilyam came into the clearing just as Kathia brought a man almost twice her size over her shoulder and crashing to the ground. He lay flat on his back, stunned into silence. She stood over him, grinning down at his shocked expression.

The warrior saw Ruark and sprang to his feet, although not very quickly.

Ruark looked away and swallowed a grin.

The warriors came to attention and saluted when Ruark and Wilyam entered the circle.

Kathia folded her arms over her chest and eyed Ruark.

He walked to her and bowed slightly, as a show of respect and challenge.

She bowed in return, never taking her eyes from his. “You’re next,” she whispered.

“I hardly think so. I owe you one for the *dude* comment.” He raised his hands to signal his readiness.

Kathia also raised her fists. “Do you want me to let you win, for the sake of your honor with the men?”

Ruark’s eyebrow shot skyward. “Girl, that’s gonna cost you.”

Kathia turned her hands palms up, and drew her fingers sharply toward herself. “Bring it.”

Ruark promptly charged forward and put her on the ground almost immediately. Undeterred by his takedown, she rocked back on her shoulders and sprang forward to her feet. “Is that the best you can do?”

Ruark charged again.

Later that night, Donal and Ruark stood in the light of the campfire and watched Kathia as Wilyam taught her to groom a horse.

Donal observed his commander’s face for a moment before speaking. “There is something different about you, Ruark.”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t put my finger to it yet, but you are not rough around the edges, as before. And you haven’t aged a day since the last time I saw you.”

“If you mean to say I’m soft, I will take that as a challenge to combat.” Ruark grinned.

“No, Commander, with due respect, I mean to say that your journey with the ruling family has affected you.”

“In ways I cannot begin to describe,” he said quietly.

“If you don’t mind my asking, where did you go? Was it far from here, or did you take refuge in Eavan as some have speculated.”

“No. We journeyed farther than I’ve been in my lifetime. It was a strange place with new customs. And it wasn’t without danger.” Ruark reflected on the last eighteen years. “We lost Katriel when Kathia was a small girl. Lord Jonavon and Sir Jorryn were barely of age. It was a difficult time.”

“So she and Lord Jonavon are all that remain of the ruling family?”

“Yes.”

“Then how is The Call to be fulfilled? Surely you cannot believe The One will use a girl, who is little more than a child, to accomplish it?”

“I would have agreed with you, a long time ago. But I’ve seen much in the past years, and it has taught me to look in unlikely places for the answers. I believe that is how The One foils Lorcan’s schemes. He uses what appears to be weak, to the naked eye, to defeat the mighty.”

“You mean that child?” Donal nodded toward Kathia.

“That *child* has the heart and soul of a warrior. She’s the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“For a woman.”

“For a human being.”

Donal studied his commander. “You *have* changed.”

“I’m okay with that.” Ruark smiled.

Chapter Twenty-One

The night before they set out for Karasi, Wilyam and Kathia sat at the campfire. Over the preceding weeks, Kathia had finally begun to understand his quiet ways. Wilyam had shared with her about his empathic abilities, and it now made sense why he maintained a certain distance from everyone. She thought it must be exhausting for him to constantly guard against a barrage of highly charged emotional energy coming from everyone around him. It was a miracle he had survived on a campus full of adolescents.

Kathia was quiet, content to sit in peaceful companionship with her friend. She watched the fading sun sink into the western sky. They were bathed in a pale orange glow.

Wilyam broke the silence. “How do you find the journey so far?”

“Oh, it’s amazing. I never thought I could go on an adventure like this, not knowing anything about it. I prefer a detailed itinerary, myself. But here I am! Embarking on a new experience almost daily. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that I’m accompanied by the best look...best trained warriors in Eavan.” She hoped he couldn’t see her blushing in the firelight.

“You have made the journey a delight for us as well.”

“You think so? Sometimes I get the feeling I get on Ri–Ruark’s nerves, just a little.”

“He has a lot on his mind.”

“Yeah, *commander of the world* and all. Still, do you think a guy like him could ever be interested in a girl like me?”

“Do I think...” Wilyam paused and chuckled. “Do *you* think?”

“I don’t know. I mean, he’s got so much responsibility, and he’s so capable and self-assured. He’s been through a lot in his lifetime. Seen a lot of things. I’ll bet he’s one of those guys who has a girl in every port.”

Wilyam smiled. “Cathal warriors don’t date.”

Her shoulders sagged. “Ever?”

“Not so far.” There was a twinkle in his eye.

Kathia scooted a little closer. “Say, does he ever... Has he... Do you think there’s a chance...”

“You care for him.”

Kathia studied Wilyam in the flickering firelight and sighed heavily. “Since the day we met. I’ve tried to push the feelings away. It doesn’t help that he’s so charming.”

“That must be difficult for you.”

“Tell me about it. And those eyes... And he’s so funny, even when he’s mad at me. And he makes me feel good about myself... And safe. I feel safe when I’m with him. And he’s patient and kind.”

Wilyam laughed. “Those are not words I’ve ever used to describe Commander Ruark.”

“I think I’ve seen a different side of him.”

“Obviously.”

Kathia blushed again. She realized she had been going on about Ruark like a love struck school girl, which, she understood, was exactly what she was.

Wilyam leaned in close and whispered, “You have nothing to fear. Your secrets are safe with me.”

Her smile was unsure. “Are you reading me?”

Wilyam put up his hands. “I never read the emotions of my friends or colleagues. It would be a huge invasion of privacy. I only read those we consider to be enemies. I can also tell when they are lying. But some things don’t have to be sensed empathically. Sometimes the feelings people give off are so strong, anybody could tell.”

Kathia was horrified. “Oh.”

“I can tell, for instance, that your and the commander’s feelings appear to be mutual, from my perspective. However, I am not encouraging you to act on them. You must wait to see what the future has in store. It won’t be easy. Trust yourself, and trust him. If it’s not meant to be, that will become clear to you.”

Kathia looked at the ground and sighed. “I’m probably betrothed to some prince from another region.”

“It’s not like that here, Kathia. You are free to choose your mate just like your parents did.”

Her brown eyes caught Wilyam's gaze. "But Ruark isn't."

"I'm afraid not." Wilyam smiled at the beautiful young woman. "I am always here if you need to talk." He patted her leg. "You are a strong woman; no task is too hard for you." Wilyam rose. "I'll see you in the morning. Our journey tomorrow may be difficult. We will enter Karasi by evening."

Kathia stared into the fire, her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. "Good night."

Shortly after the four a.m. sunrise, Ruark and Wilyam had their gear packed. When they arrived at Kathia's tent, Ruark heard her clattering around and grumbling to herself.

The commander spread his arm in a wide gesture. "After you," he whispered to Wilyam.

"No, sir, after you." Wilyam grinned.

"I insist."

"With all due respect—"

"Don't make me pull rank, Will."

Kathia stuck her head out of the tent. She had a serious case of bed head and a scowl on her pretty face. "Knock it off, you guys. I'll be out in a minute!" She pulled her head back inside the tent. It reappeared a moment later. "You'd better have some breakfast waiting when I get out there."

Wilyam and Ruark hustled to the chow tent.

When Kathia emerged, her face was clean, and her hair was neatly combed and pulled into a ponytail, but the scowl remained. She took the offered bread and fruit from the two warriors, who stood at arm's length.

"Thank you," she said gruffly, before digging into the makeshift breakfast.

Ten minutes later, a perky Kathia was packed and ready to begin their journey. Ruark breathed a sigh of relief. They said their good-byes to Donal and his men, and headed east.

Kathia chatted incessantly as they walked along the path to Karasi. She commented on each bird, wildflower, and blade of grass.

“At least she’s quiet when she’s grumpy,” Ruark mumbled.

“It was your idea to leave at this hour,” Wilyam replied.

Kathia glanced over her shoulder. “Will isn’t the only one with super hearing,” she sing-songed.

The men fell silent, keeping to themselves any unfriendly thoughts they may have had toward Kathia.

* * *

Ruark noticed they met almost no travelers. The closer they got to the Eavan-Karasi border, the sparser the foot traffic became. They had encountered a few legions of Cathal warriors early in their journey, but tourists no longer inhabited these roadways. Ruark remembered a time when the path was thick with merchants, and families on the way to visit relatives in neighboring villages.

After several hours on the road, they stopped for lunch. Wilyam served apple slices and sandwiches on fresh bread from the Cathal encampment. They would not start a fire, as it could draw unwanted attention. Ruark became more alert the closer they got to Karasi. He and Wilyam once again walked with crossbows ready, scanning the horizon for signs of movement. Ruark was thankful for Wilyam’s keen sense of eyesight and hearing. He knew they would have a better chance than most to defend themselves if someone tried to sneak up on them.

At supper time they stopped again for cold meat sandwiches and fresh vegetables. The Eavans had been generous in sharing their produce with the travelers, and Wilyam did a good job of providing variety in their meals. They ate and kept watch while discussing their plans.

“Our best bet is to enter through the border village and see if we can gather local gossip about Lorcan’s whereabouts,” Wilyam suggested.

“We’ll need to slip in under cover of evening shadows,” Ruark said. “Our uniforms will give us away. We’ll stay to the alleyways. Make our way through town during the night hours.”

Kathia stood on a nearby hill, peering at something in the distance. “Are we still in Eavan?”

“Yes. Why?” Ruark said.

“I’ll bet we could stop at that farmhouse down there and borrow a cape or two, to use as a disguise.”

Wilyam and Ruark looked at each other. “What?” they said simultaneously.

“There’s a farmhouse. Down there.” Kathia pointed. “And a man, hanging laundry. I’ll bet he’d loan us something. Or we could trade for it.”

Ruark walked up the incline and stood beside her, trying to hide his embarrassment.

Wilyam stood at Ruark’s shoulder and shrugged. “It’s worth a try.”

They packed the camp and headed down the hill, approaching the farmer cautiously. After some discussion, he happily agreed to provide them with cloaks.

The man stared at Ruark’s uniform. “Y’be Cathal. Aren’t ya.”

Ruark nodded.

The farmer looked past Ruark to where Kathia stood. His eyes traveled slowly over her. “And who might this be?”

Wilyam stepped forward, to put himself between the man and Kathia. “A Karasi citizen. She desires safe passage to her village.”

The farmer seemed satisfied. “Anything I can do to help harass those nasty beasts of Lorcan, I’m willing. Don’t get much excitement on my farm. Kind of disappointin’, since I live so close to the border. Thought there’d be more happenin’s here. But alas, it’s just me and my goats.”

Ruark thanked him again and turned toward the path.

The man called after him. “Tell me, warrior, what ‘er you called by?”

Ruark turned back and smiled politely. “I am Ruark. This is my officer, Wilyam. Thank you for your kindness, but we must take our leave. Are you sure you won’t accept coin for these fine cloaks?”

“Well, if you insist. They’re worth three a piece, but I’ll take two for all of ‘em. Want to do my part for the cause of righteousness!”

Wilyam dug in his pouch, pulled out two coins, and placed them in the man’s outstretched hand.

His bony fingers closed tightly around the money. “Blessings of The One on you.”

“So be it,” Ruark, Wilyam, and Kathia answered in unison.

Ruark settled the cape around his shoulders, his Cathal vest and tattoo hidden beneath the folds of heavy wool. Wilyam and Kathia did likewise.

The travelers returned to the road, and the farmer continued to smile after them.

The door of his home opened. A burly man with long black hair emerged. His eyes were the color of coal. Grotesque tattoos of dragons and three-headed beasts covered his bare chest. “Well done, my friend. Do you believe they suspect danger?”

“Not likely.”

“Did they give their names?”

“Ruark and Wilyam. The girl’s wasn’t said.”

“Supreme Commander Ruark and First Officer Wilyam. This is excellent. The woman would be Katriel or Kathia. Come home at last. I can hardly wait to give them a proper welcome.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

The border village was not crowded, which made it easy to move through unseen. It appeared many houses and shops were empty; families had abandoned their homes in search of a safer place. Some shops had been converted to drinking establishments, and a rowdy group of individuals sang and laughed in the street outside one of the taverns. Ruark, Wilyam, and Kathia ducked into an alley and watched the main road.

“Do you sense Cormac?” Ruark said.

Wilyam shook his head. “No. But the man at the farm was surely in league with them. They’ll soon know we’re coming.”

“How will these capes help if they know we’re coming?” Kathia whispered.

“They hide the weapons,” Wilyam answered.

“Good point.”

Ruark peered from behind an abandoned building near the alley. It was still relatively light, but he’d noticed that Karasi seemed darker than Eavan, even when the sun shone. Ruark believed it was the darkness of evil that Lorcan brought to the land.

He turned to Wilyam and Kathia. “We have about two hours before nightfall. We can wait here or scout the village. Opinions?”

“I’d prefer to scout and get the layout,” Wilyam said.

“I’m with him. I hate sitting around.”

“All right. Will, you circle the perimeter of the village. Stay hidden. See what you can find out. Kate, you’re with me. We’ll try a more direct approach with those people over there.”

“Roger that.” She gave him the thumbs-up.

Ruark couldn’t help smiling.

“What?” she said. “I’ve always wanted to say that.”

“That’s my little soldier.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her into the street.

“Now, that was just plain condescending,” Kathia complained.

Ruark towed her along behind him. She took two large steps to catch him; then matched his gait. As they approached the group of drunken villagers, he leaned into her heavily and threw his arm over her shoulders.

“Follow my lead,” he whispered.

Kathia wrapped an arm around his waist and tried to stay upright under his weight.

“Hello, boys!” Ruark bellowed as they approached.

The singing stopped, and twelve pairs of eyes stared at them. “Who are you?” one man slurred.

“I’m Miach. This is my woman, Katie.” Ruark mispronounced her name, so it sounded like “Ka-tee.”

“She’s a fine looking woman!” another man said.

“She’s *my* woman,” Ruark replied.

The man took a cautious step back. The commander was an imposing figure, especially under the billowing cape. The group fell quiet.

Finally, one of the women raised her cup. “To Lorcan! May we never tire of his endless entertainments.”

“So be it!” the group chorused.

Ruark and Kathia stood silently. Neither would hail Lorcan, even when undercover.

The woman lowered her mug and eyed Ruark. “I know you.” She blinked several times, trying to focus on his handsome face. “We were schooled together, as youngsters. Do you ‘member?”

Ruark tried to ignore her and converse with one of the men, but she would not be denied.

“You were the han-somest-est boy in the village. Do you ‘member?” She smacked herself in the forehead. “Ruark! You’re Ruark.”

Ruark spun and tried to quiet her, but she got louder and more animated. “They came for you. You went to be a warrior. You are CATHAL!”

With that, Ruark’s master plan crumbled. All twelve of the bar patrons went from happily intoxicated to mean drunks in the blink of an eye. Ruark threw off his

cloak and reached for his combat knife. He placed the loud woman in a chokehold while he side-kicked two attackers. The woman in his arms slumped, unconscious, even though Ruark had been careful not to cut off her airway.

Kathia whipped off her cape and threw it over the heads of two men. She then dispatched them both with a crescent kick to their faces. She delivered a quick karate chop to the windpipes of two unfortunate men and took out another by cartwheeling closer to him and smashing the heel of her hand just below his sternum. He backpedaled, his arms circling wildly, before he fell and lie gasping for air. Three men ran screaming for help.

Ruark head-butted the last remaining drunk. He turned to Kathia. “Was the cartwheel really necessary?”

Kathia grinned. “This was my first real fight, you know. It was more fun than I expected.”

Ruark rolled his eyes, thinking she was far too cute for him to hold his anger for long.

The street got noisy. Ruark grabbed Kathia’s hand, and they tore past a number of people who emerged from shops and houses. Several carried weapons, and all yelled obscenities at the fleeing couple. An arrow whizzed by Kathia’s head. Ruark pulled her to the ground as several more flew through the space where she had been standing only seconds before.

They sprung to their feet and ran. Ruark unshouldered his crossbow, loaded an arrow, and fired blindly behind him. There was a scream when the arrow struck home. While he loaded another bolt and cocked the weapon, Ruark scolded himself for not training Kathia how to use a crossbow on the run. He was thankful no one needed training in how to run for their life. She was doing a fine job of that. He let her sprint ahead of him, slowing slightly to put himself between her and the angry mob behind them.

From a nearby side street, Wilyam appeared with his bow in hand and fired at their pursuers. He dropped two men; then ran to catch Ruark and Kathia. They made it to the edge of town and disappeared into the heavy underbrush.

Ruark ran in the lead for what seemed like a mile, by his best estimate.

Kathia huffed behind him. “I’ve done...a lot...of jogging...in my day, but this...is ridiculous!”

The commander finally signaled for them to halt. Kathia bent over and sucked in great gulps of air. While Kathia caught her breath, Ruark checked the path ahead of them, and Wilyam doubled back the way they’d come. He returned moments later. “All clear. For now.”

“I think it’s safe to assume that if Lorcan didn’t know we were here before, he will now.” Ruark scowled.

Kathia, still having difficulty with speech, nodded vigorously.

“We have to find shelter,” Wilyam said.

“Agreed. We need a cave or abandoned structure. We cannot stay in the open tonight. No more than four hours. Then we move out.”

“At least Lorcan doesn’t know where we’re going,” Kathia said. “Right?”

“True,” Wilyam answered. “He is not omniscient. He would have to discover that information, somehow. And there are only four of us who know.”

Kathia shrugged. “And I have no clue how to get there.”

Wilyam turned suddenly. “We should move on. I sense a presence.”

Ruark pointed at Kathia and made the “OK” sign with his fingers. She stood upright and nodded.

Ruark signaled for Wilyam to lead the way. He and Kathia followed a short distance behind, constantly scanning the perimeter.

They had gone roughly another three miles and were entering a small mountain range when Wilyam stopped at a crude trail in the rock formations. “Commander.” He pointed. Dark, jagged rocks rose on either side of the path.

“Heads up,” Ruark said as they picked their way through the fallen stones. The rocky trail went up for a half mile and opened into a small clearing. Nightfall was almost upon them.

“There,” Wilyam called out softly. He pointed to a small gap in the side of the cliff. It was six feet high and surrounded by green foliage. The opening was barely visible.

Silently they made their way forward. Ruark drew his knife, turned on his flashlight, and motioned for Wilyam to go first; then followed closely. At Ruark's direction, Kathia waited at the entrance. Inside, the cavern was immense, the ceiling at least a hundred feet overhead. The floor was rock, covered in fine dust. Cool, dry air swirled around them. It reminded Ruark of every cave he'd ever visited.

"Kate!" he called.

She poked her head inside the cave.

"It's safe." Ruark sheathed his knife. "We'll camp here for a few hours and continue when it's light."

"When do I get to stop waiting in the wings until you declare it safe?"

Ruark studied the ceiling of rock as if in deep thought. "Next Tuesday."

Kathia growled in frustration. "There is no Tuesday here!"

"Exactly." He smiled.

"I swear, Commander Ruark, you are a pain in the—"

"Shall I start a fire?" Wilyam said.

Ruark nodded. "Please. And take Our Lady with you to gather wood. She's getting on my nerves."

Kathia stuck her tongue out as she and Wilyam left the cave.

When they returned, Ruark ordered her to get some sleep. Kathia frowned at him, but obeyed.

Ruark turned to his first officer. "I'll take the first watch, Will. Two hours each. We move out at dawn."

Wilyam nodded and lay down on his bed roll.

* * *

For three days the travelers skirted all towns and homesteads. Ruark meant to avoid contact with strangers, so as not to give any clues to their destination.

When they stopped to eat, Ruark checked their supplies. He sighed heavily. "We're almost out of fruits and vegetables."

"The hunting has been uneventful, as well," Wilyam said.

Ruark smiled. "I think something" – he jerked a thumb at Kathia, who sat nearby humming to herself—"is scaring off our lunch."

Wilyam chuckled. “She lacks a certain...stealthy...quality.”

“That’s all she lacks, thankfully.” Ruark watched Wilyam’s eyes dart constantly as they talked. “What’s wrong, Will?”

Wilyam blew out his breath and lowered his voice. “I’ve not lost the impression we are being pursued.”

“But we’ve doubled back three times and covered our trail twice.”

“I know, sir.”

Ruark looked over his shoulder at Kathia. She caught his gaze and grinned. He smiled reassuringly, even as he became convinced that whatever was following them was not human.

* * *

The village was larger than others they’d seen. They donned their capes and pulled the hoods low. It was easy to make their way virtually unnoticed. The town was heavily populated, and everyone seemed absorbed in their own business. There were no cheerful welcomes.

Ruark led the way to a gardener’s shop. It was nothing like the ones they’d encountered in Eavan. It had a much smaller variety of items, and the shop owner was gruff and unfriendly, seemingly in a hurry for them to do business and move on. Wilyam stocked up on produce while Kathia gathered cold meats. Ruark strolled to the porch to see if anyone had taken a particular interest in their arrival. His eyes took in every movement up and down the street.

Nearby, two young boys played with a ball. They argued with each other, trying to determine whose turn it was to pitch. A fight broke out, and they wrestled in the dirt of the busy street. Ruark noticed that under the thick layer of grime were the same beautiful cobblestones used to build the roads of Eavan.

From an alley down the street, a pair of black eyes watched Ruark. A sinister grin spread across the dark face. His breath came in short gasps as he anticipated the coming kill. It would almost be too easy, which disappointed him. The Cathal warriors and the girl had stayed ahead of him for too long. They were clever in their ability to

hide their trail, and they'd even lost him briefly a time or two, but his desire to please his Master drove him to pursue them at all costs.

He tracked them mostly by smell. Their warm blood left a sweet odor in the air, and they stunk of goodness, as did most possessors of souls. He loathed them and all they stood for. How dare they cling to the vain hope they could defeat Lorcan, the very face of evil. The ultimate power of Sunlee. He, Seanán, a chief of the Cormac, would bring them to their knees. Make them beg for mercy. And then look into their eyes and kill them in some painful and horrible way while the others watched. He would start with the girl. He heard her screams in his mind; his excitement mounted. She would beg. And he would gloat. His muscles tensed. He closed his eyes and trembled with anticipation. A voice ended his reverie.

“Seanán. Here you are.”

Seanán whirled and fell to his knees, his eyes to the ground when he recognized his Master's voice. “Mighty Lorcan, how may I serve you?”

The giant being stood before him, appearing in his favored visage. He was tall, a few inches shy of seven feet, and dressed entirely in black leather. Powerful arms, capable of snapping a man in half, hung relaxed at his sides. His black eyes shone with dark energy. He was a perfect specimen of manhood, except for the cold, bottomless eyes and the set of his gaze. Evil crackled in the air around him. “I have sensed your eagerness to complete your assignment. But your enthusiasm is misplaced.”

Seanán bowed his head even lower. “How have I failed you, My Lord?”

Lorcan placed a massive hand on Seanán's shoulder. The demon flinched. “You have not failed me, just misunderstood the task.”

Seanán dared to look up at his Master. “Whatever you wish, I shall do. Even with my last breath.”

Lorcan grinned. “Don't be so dramatic. The task will be much more enjoyable than you imagine. I don't wish for you to kill our friends. I wish for you to harm them in ways that will make death a pleasant alternative.”

The demon's eyes filled with confusion.

Lorcan sighed heavily. “It's so hard to find good help.” His voice was patient, as if talking to a small child. “Death is overrated. Now deceit, and mistrust, those are

powerful weapons. I want you to torture them with doubt. Divide them with uncertainty. Get them to turn on each other. They'll take care of the killing for you. And it's so delicious to watch humans kill one another, especially the ones who claim to love each other. They'll believe they are doing it for some noble cause, but the results are the same. They will fall apart and become useless as leaders. They'll live with the burden of guilt for their actions and will be hopelessly lost to despair. Defeated by their own humanity.

“That's what I want you to do to them. Sow the seeds of discord. Destroy their self-worth. Attack them where they least expect it, and we will prove once and for all that love, and honor, and righteousness have no place in this world.” Lorcan spat the last words as if they were painful to speak. “Evil is all powerful.” He looked down at himself. “And it looks mighty fine dressed in black!”

“I will do your bidding,” Seanán said.

“I want the Lord and Lady of Eavan at my service. I want to turn them. Them, and their noble Cathal, and all of their good-hearted followers.” Lorcan paused, raising a hand to stroke his thick beard. “However, if that doesn't work out, go ahead and kill them.”

Seanán bowed his head. “I understand. I will do my best.”

Lorcan glared at the demon, no longer the patient teacher. Now his eyes were filled with frustrated anger from centuries of waiting. “See that you do. Or your end will be anything but quick.”

Lorcan disappeared in a flash of white hot light. The force knocked Seanán on his back. He quickly rolled over and glanced down the street to where Ruark stood. The Cathal warrior stared in his direction, frowning. He watched Ruark abruptly turn and go into the shop. Seanán rose to follow, careful to pull his cape over the dragons and three-headed beasts tattooed on his chest.

Inside the gardener's shop, Ruark approached Wilyam. “Let's go. There are unfriendly magicks at work in this village.”

Wilyam nodded. He tossed some coins on the counter. Ruark signaled Kathia, and they wordlessly exited the back door.

* * *

Seanán followed them for four days. He took advantage of every opportunity to make his presence known, so they would constantly be on guard. Their fatigue would make his job easier. As exhaustion grew, they would become irritable and less patient with each other. Then they would begin quibbling. The Cathal warriors would not be so easily antagonized, but the girl, she was the key. She was not trained as a warrior. She was a member of the ruling family, and as such, would be the ideal target. She was soft and used to sleeping in her safe, warm bed each night. Even as he kept his distance, he could see the strain wearing on her. The chatty girl had less and less to say as they trudged through the rocky terrain. He could tell she had lost weight, and she stumbled often, a definite sign of weariness. Eventually she would let her guard down. Seanán was patient. He could wait.

After another three days of diligent observation, he determined it was time. Lorcan had been right; it was pleasurable to watch the humans deteriorate before his eyes. They were such a weak lot. He couldn't imagine how they'd survived all these centuries. They were so fragile and readily deceived, so frail and easily spooked. He took great delight in tossing pebbles into their camp at night and watching the two warriors scramble to methodically search the area. He maintained a safe distance, sneering at their stupidity. As soon as they settled again, he'd mimic the sound of a strange nocturnal animal, and they would jump up and begin searching again. Through it all, the girl slept soundly. Yes, this was a satisfying game indeed.

The next night his quarry took refuge in a cave. This disappointed Seanán, until he came up with an idea.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ruark entered the cave first, his flashlight illuminating an opening in the back wall, about twenty feet to the left. He motioned for Wilyam to check it out. The tall warrior moved noiselessly, his crossbow shouldered. Ruark circled the perimeter, weapon ready, while Kathia stood in the entrance with her knife drawn.

Wilyam returned shortly. “It’s empty.”

Kathia sheathed her knife and glanced at Ruark. “I’ve been wondering. Where’d you get the flashlights?”

Ruark smiled. “I brought them through the Gateway.”

“Batteries?” Kathia bit the inside of her lip.

Ruark’s smile quickly faded. “I forgot those.”

Before Kathia could form a snappy comeback, Wilyam spoke up. “I didn’t.”

Ruark’s grin returned. “See why he’s my first officer?”

Kathia giggled at the handsome commander. “You don’t need a first officer; you need a wife.”

Ruark’s mouth dropped open.

Wilyam stepped forward. “I’m going for firewood. Why don’t you two unpack the supplies.” Wilyam left the cave, shaking his head slowly.

Ruark turned to Kathia, hands on his hips.

She mimicked his stance. “That look on your face is priceless.”

“You’re completely enamored of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Uh-huh.”

Ruark rolled his eyes and went to the packs. He dug through one and pulled out a frying pan. Kathia unpacked the bedrolls. As soon as she had them spread out, she sat down.

“Would you hand me the...” Ruark turned to discover she was asleep, sitting up, with her head on bended knees.

He gently took her by the shoulders, placing one hand under her head and momentarily enjoying the feel of her silky brown hair. He laid her back on the bedroll.

She was so beautiful. The long days in the sun had given her a deep tan, and he could tell she'd lost weight. The muscles in her arms and shoulders were more defined, and the pants that had fit her so perfectly when she first put them on were now hanging on her. She was beginning to look like a seasoned athlete rather than the glowing, healthy young woman he had known back in Copper Creek.

He sighed as he once again admired her dedication to this daunting journey. So much had been asked of her. True enough, she'd balked at the beginning when she first learned the truth, but when she'd decided to answer The Call, she had thrown herself into it wholeheartedly, and with determination to see it through. Lord Jonavon and Sir Jorryn raised her well. There was no doubt she was a woman up to the task, and had been all along, even when she didn't know her destiny.

Ruark turned to finish unloading their gear and heard a sound like falling stones in the back of the cave, where Wilyam had been only moments ago. He followed the sound, knife drawn and senses on full alert. When he entered the dark space, the small cavern suddenly filled with a blinding light.

Ruark tried to find the source of the brilliance while shading his face with his hand. Tears stung his eyes. As he watched in amazement, the light formed into a tight beam and headed straight for him. It looked like a bolt of lightning and moved as fast. The beam hit him full in the chest. He felt it penetrate each layer of skin. It entered his blood stream and burned through his veins. His organs felt as if they would burst. The pain was white hot. He screamed in agony and crumpled to the ground. A split second before unconsciousness brought relief, he thought he saw a man with dark eyes and long black hair. He was covered in tattoos, and he sneered at Ruark.

* * *

Ruark floated on his back. He heard laughter and the splash of water. Waves rocked him in a steady rhythm. The sun burned overhead. He tried to lift his head, but it was so heavy. He heard his mother's voice call to him. "Ruark, come to shore! Tis time to eat." His heart warmed. He was at the lake where his parents had taken him when he was small. His family had spent many happy hours at Hidden Lake. He tried to lift his arms – too tired. If he could just rest a little. He took a breath. His mouth filled with water. He no longer floated on the surface; he was slowly sinking into the

waves. Voices became muffled. He tasted water. He felt the panic rise. Darkness swallowed him. Which way was up? His legs wouldn't move. His arms wouldn't move. More water filled his lungs.

Ruark opened his eyes. There was light. There was air. Relief washed over him. He tried to move. Nothing. His temples throbbed. It hurt to blink. *Come on, Commander, think.* Memories flooded back in rapid succession: the cave, the light, the pain! His eyes watered.

Slowly, he focused. Someone was standing over him. "Help me," he croaked.

The face was familiar – the hair, the eyes. It was.... It was...himself. He was looking into his own face. "Who are you?" It hurt to speak.

The figure knelt beside him. "I was called Seanán. I am now called Commander Ruark. I am you. I am your body. I have your memories, and soon I will have your Lady Kathia."

"No," Ruark whispered.

"You can do little about it, my friend. Be still. In a few days the kyara will find you. They are mighty predators."

"Wilyam... Kathia..."

"Don't worry." The man's voice was thick with menace. "I will take care of them."

Ruark slowly faded from consciousness, even as he struggled to quell the rising dread.

Seanán rose, moving slowly and deliberately, getting used to the feel of this strong new body. He flexed his new hands and expanded his new lungs. "Lorcan will be pleased with my success."

Seanán returned to the outer room of the cave and found the girl sleeping soundly. He finished unpacking their equipment.

When Wilyam entered, he stopped; a puzzled expression shadowed his features.

Seanán looked at him. "What's wrong, Wilyam?"

Wilyam shook his head as if trying to clear his confusion. "Nothing," he said finally. "I just felt..." He stopped again.

Seanán's dark eyes watched the man. "Felt what?"

"Nothing. My fatigue is clouding my mind."

"Yes. We will eat. Then you should rest. I'll take the first watch."

Wilyam studied the look of peaceful slumber on Kathia's face. He frowned.

"You're right. I need a good meal and some sleep."

Wilyam turned to the task of building a fire and preparing dinner. "Kathia will be disappointed. We haven't had a fire in several days. I know she was anticipating a hot meal."

Seanán's gaze returned to the sleeping girl. She was indeed an exceptionally beautiful creature, according to the thoughts and memories he had recently stolen. "She's exhausted. Sleep is probably more important right now." For a moment, unmistakable desire shone in his eyes.

Wilyam's eyebrow arched.

The men ate in relative silence; then Wilyam retired to his bedroll while Seanán cleaned the dishes and prepared for the morning meal. As soon as Wilyam slept, Seanán went to the entrance of the cave and pretended to stand guard. More than anything, he needed to distance himself from Ruark's first officer.

Seanán had been quite surprised to find that Wilyam was empathic. It explained much, and Lorcan would be pleased to hear this news. Empaths were rare in Sunlee and almost exclusively female. It was uncommon for the gift to pass to a male child. Seanán decided he must avoid killing this man, if at all possible. Wilyam would be quite the trophy to present to the Master. It consumed much power to shield his true essence from the empath. It would test his cunning and strength to see how long he could maintain the ruse.

* * *

Kathia awoke in the blackness of night. The embers of the fire smoldered and crackled. She saw through the entrance of the cave that the short hours of nightfall were upon them. She sat up and looked around. Wilyam slept peacefully on the other side of the fire, but Ruark was nowhere to be seen. She rose, stretching her aching muscles. How Kathia longed for just one night on a supportive mattress, with her own lavender-

scented sheets, and her favorite down comforter tucked all around her in billows of coziness.

She sighed and walked into the cool night air, still trying to stretch the kinks from her back and neck. The stars of Sunlee shone brightly, twice as big as her own stars of Earth. Sunlee's gigantic moon, almost full, bathed the rocky terrain in soft, white light. She placed her feet together, took a deep breath, raised her arms, and slowly bent forward, as she brought her arms down and let out her breath. Her palms brushed the cool grass. She filled her lungs again. A light breeze blew over her bare arms, raising goose bumps. A heavy sweet perfume lingered, which she recognized as the blooms of Kaelyn, a flower native to Karasi. Wilyam had pointed them out to her. He'd spent a great deal of time over the past weeks instructing her in the local flora.

Kathia's thoughts were interrupted when she sensed danger. She shot up from her relaxed position and scanned the immediate area. No more than ten feet away, she made out the dark form of a man, leaning casually against the cold rock of the cave wall. He watched her intently in the pale light, arms folded across his chest and a glimmer of a smile on his lips.

“Riley? What are you doing out here?”

“Guarding you, of course.”

His voice sounded different. Her innate sense of caution stirred when he pushed away from the wall and approached her. His gaze traveled over her, and he reached to touch her cheek. It further heightened her uneasiness and made her stomach flutter at the same time. The warmth of his hand filled her with a rush of emotion that swept over her in dizzying waves. She felt her heart pounding, and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She closed her eyes against the onslaught.

He leered at her. “I want you.”

Kathia's eyes flew open. “Wh—What?”

Ruark backed her to the cold slab. He placed his hands on the rock, one on each side of her head, his face inches from hers. Kathia stood motionless, eyes locked with his. She did not fully understand his intentions and did not want to act too rashly. If he meant to harm her, she would defend herself. If he meant to kiss her – well, that was another matter entirely.

He kissed her with such force that she gasped. Ruark's arms encircled her waist, roughly pulling her against him. She experienced a mingled sensation of euphoria and alarm. For the moment, euphoria was in the lead. Her hands took on a mind of their own as they crawled up his biceps and came to rest on his shoulders.

He pulled away suddenly, and she almost fell forward.

"What? What is it?" she gasped.

"I must go." Ruark turned abruptly and went into the cave.

Moments later, Wilyam emerged. "Getting some fresh air?"

"Yeah." Kathia tried to maintain her composure. It wouldn't do to have Wilyam know what had just transpired. She took deep breaths of the night air. Her mind raced with conflicting images and feelings. She employed all the discipline of years of training to gain control and restore her center. She smiled pleasantly at Wilyam and returned to the cave, determined to get a few more hours of sleep, and knowing it wouldn't be possible.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Two hours later, Kathia awoke to the smell of frying ham and fresh coffee. For a moment she was back in Springville. She rubbed her eyes and saw a man hunched over the fire. She thought she recognized the broad shoulders and strong hands of a carpenter. “Jon?”

Wilyam’s face came into focus. “Were you dreaming about home?”

A pale pink blush climbed her cheeks. “Maybe. Why do you ask?”

He bit his lip to keep from smiling. “I don’t think we can afford to drag your down comforter along on this trip.”

Kathia rose from her bedroll and backhanded Wilyam on the shoulder. She picked up a piece of warm ham from the plate beside the fire and popped it into her mouth. “You are a fabulous cook!” She glanced around the cave. “Where’s the commander?”

“He went to survey our path. We’ll be at the Cian cave in just over a day.”

“How will we know when we get there? Are there neon lights or something?”

“Not exactly. There are few named caves in Karasi. This one is unique, due to its location and history.”

Kathia frowned. “Do I dare ask?”

“It’s a cave of pilgrimage. Many travelers visit to spend time in meditation and reflection. The Kalare stones are renowned for their beauty and calming properties. It’s said to be a life changing experience to visit Cian. Of course, that was many years ago, before Lorcan conquered the region. I’m not certain what we’ll find now.”

“Sabriel said we’re to retrieve the Kalare stone and bring it back. Is that legal?”

Wilyam smiled affectionately at Kathia.

“I’m naïve, aren’t I?”

“Charmingly so.” He chuckled. “The walls of the cave are embedded with Kalare rock. It is permitted to take a fallen piece as a memento of the journey. Believe me, there are many.”

“If they’re so plentiful, why are they rare?”

“Because they’re not easy to get to.”

“That’s the catch. Isn’t it?”

“Essentially, yes.”

Kathia crossed her arms over her chest. “Let me guess...sheer cliffs, jagged rocks?”

“And wild animals.”

“But Sabriel promised me –”

“No flying monkeys, no spiders. He said nothing about the kyara.”

Kathia shook her head. “I don’t want to know. Do I?”

“A six month old kyara cub is roughly the size of a full grown grizzly.”

Kathia’s eyes were huge. “And the teeth and claws and–”

“They are very similar to grizzlies. Shrewd. Protective. And excellent climbers.”

Kathia’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Sheer cliffs, jagged rocks?”

Wilyam met her gaze. “Born to it.”

“Why haven’t we seen any?”

“They’ve been out there, watching. We’ve been careful to stay out of their way.”

Kathia shuddered involuntarily. “Remember when I told you guys I wanted to know everything? I take it back. Keep some stuff to yourself. Okay?”

Wilyam chuckled. “As you wish, Lady Kathia.”

Kathia heard a sound at the cave entrance. Ruark stood in the same casual pose she had seen in the moonlight last night. He leaned against the mouth of the cave, arms crossed over his chest, a grin on his face. Kathia didn’t know how long he’d been there. And from Wilyam’s reaction, she could tell he was surprised, too.

Ruark pushed away from the wall. “We’re losing daylight. Let’s move.”

They packed the gear in silence. Kathia’s uneasiness grew with the quiet. Something was different about Ruark. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she knew from his behavior last night, she wasn’t imagining it. There was a primal energy smoldering just under the surface. He wasn’t his usual, easy-going self. It appeared his self-control was merely a façade, and the slightest action or word from her would cause it to crumble. She caught him watching her several times. There was a darkness in his

look she'd never seen. The warm, green eyes she was used to admiring had lost their light. They were almost...empty.

Kathia determined to discuss it with Wilyam when they got some time alone.

Ruark made that impossible. He ordered Wilyam to lead them, and rather than scouting alongside of him, he hung back to walk with Kathia. The terrain got considerably rockier, and the incline increased by the hour. There were no more trees and no bird song. The air became thin and cold. Kathia noticed her breathing was labored. She stumbled more than once, and each time, Ruark was there to catch her. She quickly pulled away from his grasp. His touch was like fire on her bare skin, and the assistance was not gentle. Once, he twisted her arm painfully as he pulled her to her feet with such force she bumped against him. He drew her close, his hands dangerously low on the small of her back. Dark eyes challenged her to try and break free.

Kathia clenched her teeth. "Let go of me."

Ruark lowered his head to the crook of her neck and took a deep breath through his nose. "Lady Kathia. How long will you resist your need of me? I plan to have you, and soon. With or without your consent."

Kathia's eyes filled with anger, which quickly turned to fear. Her body became rigid against his. This man had become a deep mystery. She wondered if *this* was the real Ruark, rather than the Ruark she thought she'd come to know over the past year.

He pushed her away just as Wilyam turned around.

"This is a good place to stop for lunch," Wilyam said.

Ruark nodded in agreement. "We'll have a fire. Wilyam, let's get wood. Kathia, unpack the gear."

When the warriors returned, Kathia had filled their plates with broccoli and sweet tomatoes. Ruark warmed the roasted turkey, and Wilyam sliced the last of their bread.

After their meal, Kathia begged for a short nap. "I need a little rest. The thin air is getting to me."

Wilyam nodded. "We're making good time. An hour or two won't set us back much. There will be a lot of climbing tomorrow, so it would be a good idea to make sure we're ready."

Ruark's face filled with unmistakable disgust. "I suppose. If the girl needs rest, that's what we'll do."

"Commander—"

"Silence, Wilyam. Do not speak out of turn again. I will make the decisions regarding when we stay and how fast we move."

Wilyam and Kathia gawked at him. Kathia tossed her bedroll on the ground and laid down, her back to Ruark.

He shrugged. His smile was more of a sneer. Wilyam stared at his commander, his gaze unblinking. Without looking at Wilyam, Ruark pointed at him. "Don't even try," he snarled.

Exactly one hour later, Ruark awakened Kathia, roughly shaking her shoulder. She gave him a defiant stare and grumbled as she packed her bedroll.

"Let's go." He headed up a steep incline.

Wilyam lingered to help Kathia gather their gear before they followed. Kathia desperately wanted to speak to Wilyam, but Ruark maintained a close eye on them and only walked a few feet ahead, never allowing any additional distance to separate them.

They didn't stop again until they were ready to camp for the night. It was after ten o'clock. Wilyam was famished, as he assumed Kathia would be. He was not happy they had maintained such an exhausting pace for the entire day. Tomorrow's journey would involve a difficult climb, and he was concerned about Kathia's energy level. She was an outstanding athlete, but rock climbing was one of the most taxing activities he had ever experienced. Without safety lines, gloves, or helmets, their ascent had to be flawless.

They ate dinner in silence. After they cleaned the campsite, Kathia went directly to bed. She was asleep within minutes, leaving Ruark and Wilyam to contemplate each other in the dancing light of the campfire.

Wilyam cleared his throat. "Permission to speak freely, Commander."

During the events of the past day, Wilyam had reverted to his strict military protocols. His commander was acting strangely, and he thought it best to return to the

formal ways of communicating with his leader. It removed the emotion, and sadly, the aspects of their deep friendship as well.

“Permission denied. Get some sleep. We’ve a challenging climb tomorrow. Who knows if we’ll all survive it.” Ruark rose suddenly and walked into the growing darkness. “I’ll take the first watch,” he snarled over his shoulder. “I’ll wake you in three.”

* * *

Bright sunlight roused Kathia from deep slumber. She was surprised to find the sun already crested over the distant mountaintops. She’d slept under the heavy wool cape they’d purchased from the farmer in Eavan. As she expected, it kept her warm on many nights when she needed something more than the lightweight blanket from her pouch. She stretched her arms overhead; the cold air immediately chilled her skin. Her breath formed a billow of white puffy smoke.

Kathia had camped a number of times in Minnesota, and this morning reminded her of the backpacking trip she’d taken with Jonathan and Jace in late October of her junior year. They’d gone to the Boundary Waters and slept outdoors for three nights. It was a fabulous adventure, and she’d learned the basics of rock climbing and survival training under her brother and Jace’s careful tutelage.

She now understood their deep desire to make her a Jill-of-all-trades. They had always encouraged her to try new activities; not only every sport known to humanity, but every outdoor activity ever invented. She’d done it all; kayaking, rock climbing, hiking, mountain biking, fishing, water skiing, snow skiing, and many other sports.

Kathia had drawn the line, however, at hunting. She refused to fire a gun and was even hesitant to use a crossbow, or bow and arrow. Jace had assured her that if she ever stared into the eyes of a hungry wild animal, she’d have no problem sending an arrow flying. “You might even change your mind about guns,” he’d teased.

Kathia rolled out of her warm blanket and hurried to the fire, crouching in front of it. She turned her hands toward the flame and felt the heat crawl up her arms. The sky was pale blue this morning, much lighter than she’d seen it before. Kathia sighed. The color reminded her of a pair of eyes she hadn’t seen in quite awhile. “Sam, I wish you could be here. You would love this.”

“Yes, she would.” Wilyam’s voice came softly from behind her.

Kathia startled and spun around, falling on her seat as she looked up at the warrior. She noticed that he had lost weight. He was deeply tanned. His blond hair, normally short and spiked, was now longer, and wisps fell across his forehead and touched the tops of his ears. Stubble shadowed his chin.

He held out a large hand and she grasped it, her hand dwarfed in comparison to his. Wilyam pulled her to her feet, and they shared a moment of camaraderie – she was his equal, a fellow warrior, rather than a delicate member of the ruling family who needed his protection. They had traveled together and sacrificed much, done battle, and covered each other’s backs. She felt strong and ready for the next step.

Ruark appeared behind Wilyam and disturbed Kathia’s sense of calm. “It’s late. We should be two hours up the trail by now.”

They packed the camp and headed into the sun – Ruark in the lead, followed by Kathia, and then Wilyam, to guard the rear. There was a hint of a path in the rocky terrain, but it was narrow and necessitated they walk single file.

After an hour of silent travel, Ruark stopped and pointed into the distance. “There it is.”

Kathia’s eyes followed the line of his finger.

Up the sheer side of a cliff was a large dark dot. By her best estimate, the cave was one hundred yards off the ground.

“How long?” she said.

“An hour of walking. An hour of climbing, give or take.” Ruark glared down at Kathia. “It depends on your ability to keep up.”

Behind them, Wilyam frowned. Kathia chose to remain silent, her face an emotionless mask. She did not wish to give him the satisfaction of knowing that his rude comment had hurt.

As they walked, Kathia fell behind, getting closer to Wilyam. He increased his pace by the slightest degree, until they were two steps apart and Ruark was far ahead, out of earshot.

She casually turned her head to the side, allowing the breeze to carry her voice to Wilyam. She was thankful for his heightened hearing ability. “Do you know what’s going on with him?”

“What do you sense?”

“I thought you were the sensitive one.”

“Your connection with him is as strong as mine. What have you felt?”

“He’s not himself. There’s something dangerous about him. He’s more than mean. He’s got a whole—” she tried to find the right word “—sinister vibe going on.”

“I tried to read him. He prevented it.”

“Is that normal?”

“Not usually. But for Commander Ruark and me, because we’re close, it may be possible for him to tell when I’m reading. He knows my body language.”

Kathia struggled with her next revelation and decided it was more important for Wilyam to know the truth than to guard her embarrassment. “He kissed me.”

Kathia could not see his face, but heard no surprise in his voice. “When?”

“The other night. Outside the cave. You...interrupted us.”

“I suspected something had transpired between you.”

“There’s more.” Kathia paused. “He’s been very aggressive.”

“Has he done anything inappropriate?” Kathia heard a trace of anger in Wilyam’s voice.

“No. He’s just been suggesting...that things are going to happen between us...whether I want it to or not.”

Now the anger was unmistakable. “You will not be allowed out of my sight until we figure out what’s going on.”

“Will, that’s not necessary—”

“Yes, it is. You don’t know his strength. A man of his abilities, allowing anger to drive him, unchecked – I’m not certain I could defeat him.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Kathia, I need to be perfectly clear. If he decides to hurt you, he will.”

Kathia was stunned by the revelation. Even as she tried to dismiss the reality, in her heart she knew Wilyam was right. He was Ruark’s first officer and best friend. It

was naïve to assume she knew more about Ruark than the man who'd stood by his side for over twenty years. "I understand."

They were silent for a moment.

"He can't be permitted to get the Kalare stone," Wilyam said.

Kathia nodded.

"No matter what happens, the stone must be returned to Sabriel. It is our mission. We must accomplish it."

"What are you saying?"

"My calling is to protect your life. And I may have to protect you from Ruark. I want you to be prepared for that possibility. You must take the stone to Sabriel, with or without me. Return the way we came. You are a strong woman. You'll complete The Call."

"Stop talking like that. You're scaring me. I don't want to finish this alone."

"Sabriel didn't promise the journey would be without peril. But remember, you can call on him at any time."

"Why not call on him now to end this whole charade?"

"Because it's a worthy battle, and I'm nowhere near ready to throw in the towel. How about you?"

Kathia contemplated a moment. "I'm in. Sabriel said he'd be with us the whole way, even if I couldn't see him. So I have to believe he knows what's happening and is giving me the strength to continue."

Ruark's cold, unfriendly voice interrupted them. "What's all the chatter back there?"

"Just comparing notes on rock climbing techniques," Kathia said.

"Keep your voice down. The kyara have excellent hearing and are plentiful in these parts. They could eat a girl your size in three bites." His eyes scanned the horizon. "And they prefer to start eating their prey while it's still alive. Not a pleasant thought. Is it, Lady Kathia?"

She looked over her shoulder at Wilyam.

* * *

They stopped at the base of the cliff to rest and have an early lunch.

Wilyam looked up the mountain face. “There are several good foot and hand holds. It will be difficult, but not impossible.” He shifted his attention to Ruark.

“Commander, what is your recommendation for the climb?”

“I’ll go first. Kathia will follow. You come last. We’ll take it slow.”

“I see a ledge about two-thirds of the way up. When we get there, we can rest.”

“I’m certain I won’t need to stop. But if you and the girl feel the need, be my guests.”

Wilyam pursed his lips; then slowly let out his breath. “If we make good time, we’ll be back on the ground by early evening.”

“Provided we all make it.” Ruark looked pointedly at Kathia.

She continued to chew her apple as if he hadn’t spoken. But inside, she died just a little. What was making this man so mean? Why did she disgust him so? What had changed? Where was the warmth and consideration she normally saw in those green eyes? Why were his hands so rough and his manner so harsh? How would she make it to the top if the man she loved and respected had no confidence in her abilities?

A voice whispered to her. *I will be with you, always.*

Kathia felt her heart warm with renewed strength. It radiated outward and filled her with peace. She grinned.

Ruark cocked his eyebrow.

Wilyam smiled knowingly.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Wilyam stood at the bottom of the cliff, watching Ruark. His commander was twenty feet up the rock face, making good progress. “You’re up, Kathia.”

She came and stood in front of him, also looking up at Ruark. “You’re sure I can do this?”

“Think of it as pull-ups. A couple thousand and you’ll be at the top in no time.”

“Yeah, except after each pull-up, I have to reach for a new bar.”

“I didn’t say it would be easy. I said you could do it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. I’m going to need it.”

“Do you have your water? And your blade?”

Kathia held up the pouch and patted the eight inch knife in the sheath at her hip. “Right here. Are you sure this is all I need?”

Wilyam grinned. “No, but it’s all you can take. The rest of our gear will be safe until we return. I stored the food down the trail in case we get hungry visitors.”

Wilyam handed her a few small brown leaves, and she rubbed them on her palms as he’d shown her. They crumbled under her touch, coating her hands with a sticky substance that would prevent sweating and give her a better grip.

Kathia eyed a small rock about ten feet off the ground. “Okay,” she said without much conviction. “Toss me up there.”

Wilyam cupped his hands and bent over. Kathia rested her palm in the middle of his broad back and slipped the toe of her boot into his waiting hands. In one fluid motion he lifted her, and she reached to grasp the rock with her right hand. She swung her body and grabbed for a rock a little higher to her left. Then she pulled herself up and found her first toehold.

“Slow and steady,” Wilyam called. “Don’t rush. In rock climbing, patience isn’t just a virtue; it’s the key to survival.”

* * *

High above the ground, Seanán hauled himself up, his biceps screaming for relief. Once he found a toehold, he relaxed a little. The sticky substance Wilyam had given him

helped keep his hands dry and tacky enough to get a firm grip. Even though he didn't need assistance to complete the climb, he was secretly thankful for the tiny advantage. After all, this wasn't his Cormac body. In spite of the Cathal warrior's physical strength and stamina, Ruark would be no match in a battle with one of Seanán's demons.

Seanán looked down the mountain face. Below him, he saw the girl making steady progress, her shoulder muscles straining and glistening with sweat. It irritated him that she was keeping the pace he'd set. Soon she should tire and begin to fall behind. He didn't want her to die yet, but he was getting increasingly annoyed with her and Ruark's first officer. They were so human; it was hard to be in their presence. Their compassion for each other nauseated him. While he still wished to take his physical pleasure with her, he wasn't sure he could stomach much more time spent with either of them.

Seanán understood Wilyam's undying loyalty to his commanding officer. After all, he held the same loyalty for Lorcan. But this man's was tempered with love and a sense of honor that infuriated Seanán. It was all he could do to keep from snapping the man's neck. The only thing that prevented it was his promise to Lorcan. He needed to bring these trophies to his Master, defeated and hopeless. However, Lorcan had given him permission to kill them if necessary. And Seanán felt he may well determine it would be necessary.

He climbed on, and finally reached the ledge Wilyam had spotted from the ground. It was less than six feet wide, but would suffice as a brief resting place. Even though he did not need to rest, it would be best to wait for the others. They would soon reach the prize they sought, and Seanán was curious to discover why the Kalare stone was so important to them. What did that insipid Sabriel want with it? Seanán would make the girl tell him.

He sat on the narrow ledge, his sweaty back pressed against the cold stone. This high above ground, he could see for miles. Most of the terrain was rocky and treeless, but still beautiful in its own stark way. Lorcan ruled here, and that made it precious to Seanán.

Alone with his thoughts, he began to sift through his new memories. Most he found confusing. There were recent memories from the beginning of the journey, the

region of Eavan, the villages that had failed to fall under Lorcan's onslaught. He had knowledge of the Cathal camps all along the border. This would prove invaluable to his Master. He had seen the inside of the House of Joakin, something not even Lorcan had managed to accomplish. He also remembered Lord Jonavon and Sir Jorryn. Although in Ruark's mind, they were also called "Jonathan" and "Jace." This was strange. Wherever they had gone, they'd assumed false names. The cowards. Gone into hiding, instead of facing the Master like real warriors.

He also knew Lady Kathia as "Kate." And he found it particularly interesting that Ruark was in love with the girl. What a tragedy! A Cathal warrior in love with a member of the ruling family. It was so delicious. As a man of honor, bound by his calling to remain unmarried, Commander Ruark would never act on those feelings and thus, go through his entire life obsessed with someone he could never have. How weak and disgusting Seanán found that. While the girl was indeed worthy to be taken, no female merited entangling oneself emotionally. Seanán was glad he could separate himself from sticky human sentiment, and simply enjoy the lusts of the flesh as any self-respecting demon would do.

He brought his focus again to Ruark's other memories. There were many images that were strange to him. Images of places that were more than unfamiliar. There were memories of technology not possessed by the people of the twelve regions. There was something called a *Gateway*, and it held great power. It was somehow tied to Sabriel, and the more Seanán concentrated on it, the fuzzier the memories became.

He also knew Lady Katriel was dead. This pleased him greatly. All that remained of the House of Joakin was his son, Jonavon, and this scrap of a girl, Kathia. Lorcan would bring them to their knees in an instant. And he, Seanán, held the key to their demise. Surely his Master would promote him for his success on this mission. Perhaps he would be named second in command, answering only to Lorcan. As it stood, he was one chief of many in Lorcan's army of Cormac. But not after this. Seanán would be exalted. He would hold a place of honor. He would be invincible. Perhaps he would even dare to ask for a rulership in one of the conquered regions. Oh, the glory he would see!

"Commander!"

Seanán's eyes narrowed to slits. He moved slowly to the edge. Below him, Kathia's beautiful face was lined with fatigue, her large eyes pleading for his assistance. For an instance, Ruark's feelings for the girl overwhelmed him and he smiled down at her, a genuine picture of admiration. He saw the uncertainty leave her face. She reached up to him. Kathia clung to the cliff by her right hand and one toehold. He could easily push her off balance, and she would plummet two hundred feet to the jagged rocks below. He overcame the fleeting urge, reaching to grab her at the elbow. She clamped onto his powerful forearm, and he pulled her onto the ledge. Crawling on her hands and knees, she collapsed against the wall.

"Drink some water," Seanán ordered. "We'll move on in an hour."

Kathia drank sparingly from her water pouch; then stretched out on the hard, flat surface.

Seanán looked over the cliff face and saw that Wilyam was roughly five minutes behind Kathia. He waited, watching the Cathal warrior's progress and half hoping Wilyam would slip and tumble to his death. As the warrior neared the ledge, Seanán's hope died. Wilyam was fatigued, but was also an excellent climber and knew how to conserve his strength.

Seanán begrudgingly helped Wilyam onto the ledge and they sat in silence while they regained their energy, drank water, and stretched their tired muscles. Before setting off to climb the last one hundred feet, Wilyam distributed more of the sticky leaves.

They climbed again; first Seanán, then Kathia, and lastly Wilyam. Slow and steady. Patient and calm. They made their way to the entrance of the cavern. When Seanán arrived he found a wide, long ledge. It was twenty feet square with a smooth, polished surface that extended to the mouth of the dark cave. The rock was different from the cliff he'd just climbed; it was pale purple, but seemed to transform to a translucent shade of blue in the sunlight. He found it quite beautiful.

Kathia crawled onto the ledge a few moments later with a loud grunt and a heavy sigh. She lay there for a few seconds; then climbed to her feet and went to explore the cave opening.

Seanán approached the edge to check Wilyam's progress.

Wilyam looked up and met Ruark's gaze. He wondered if Kathia was safe. He was only twenty feet behind her, but a lot could happen in the short time it would take him to reach the ledge. Dread almost caused him to hurry; discipline stopped him. He couldn't protect Kathia if he was lying at the bottom of this cliff face, a broken mess. Wilyam steeled himself and pressed on. When he came within arm's length, he held out his hand to his friend. Just as he did, his toehold crumbled. Wilyam's body slammed into the solid rock, and he found himself hanging by the fingers of his right hand, the wind temporarily forced from his lungs. His heart thudded against his ribs. Frantic, he called out to Ruark. "Commander!"

"Shhhh. We can't have you alerting Lady Kathia of this dilemma."

Wilyam swallowed his fear and masked his expression. "Will you help me or not?"

Ruark bent one knee up and casually placed his arm across it. He looked down at the first officer. "This is a terrible way to find out what a friendship is made of. Isn't it?"

"It is indeed."

"You have served me so faithfully. And now here I am, stabbing you in the back. So to speak."

Wilyam felt his grip slipping. He now held the rock with four fingers. "I'm not afraid to die, Commander. It's been a possibility every day since I answered my calling."

"But I'll bet you never expected it to be at my hand."

Wilyam's face flinched, and Ruark sneered in satisfaction. "Betrayal is so brutal. So unexpected. So thoroughly satisfying."

Wilyam watched the man above him and knew he was no longer looking at his commander and friend. There was evil in Ruark's green eyes. He'd been consumed by it and the stench enveloped him.

Wilyam rested his forehead on the smooth stone. He asked forgiveness for the unworthy things he'd done. He asked a blessing on those he loved. He prayed for strength for Kathia, and success for the journey ahead of her. Then he called on The One to receive him into Paradise as his hold continued to slip by fractions.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Wilyam felt someone grip his arm. He glanced up. Above his head, Kathia was hanging over the ledge, holding onto him with both hands. Her biceps and shoulder muscles strained against his weight.

“Let go of me,” he commanded.

“Not on your life.”

“Where’s Ruark?”

Kathia glared at him. “Do we really have time to chat?”

“You are in danger. He has been seduced by the Cormac.”

“Duh, Will.”

In spite of his dilemma, Wilyam managed a smile.

“Get up here and help me out. That’s an order.”

Her grip was firm. He used the leverage to bring his legs up and find a tentative toehold. When he got his balance, he called out, “Hang on.” Wilyam pushed up and away from the side of the cliff as she pulled. He propelled himself over the ledge with enough force to bring his upper body onto the flat surface. Kathia let go of his arm and grabbed the back of his pants, hauling him the rest of the way. They collapsed side by side. Wilyam was exhausted and flooded with relief.

He pushed up and looked around; Ruark was nowhere to be seen. He launched himself to his feet. Kathia followed closely. He signaled for her to draw her knife, and they moved in silence toward the cave entrance. Inside, the walls glowed with lavender light. Wilyam’s eyes adjusted to the dimness immediately.

They made their way through the cave, picking a path around jagged rock formations until they came to an inner chamber. It had a smooth floor and was the size of a small auditorium. A hidden source of natural light filled the room with a ghostly luminescence. Toward the back, Wilyam saw his commander examining fallen pieces of stone. Ruark raised one and threw it over his shoulder.

“What’s he doing?” Kathia whispered.

“Let’s ask him.” Wilyam picked up a rock. He threw it across the chamber and watched it glance off Ruark’s shoulder. A thin line of blood oozed down his arm. The man cried out in pain and spun on his attacker. Rage darkened his expression.

Ruark held a stone, at least three inches in diameter. He closed his fingers around it. “Wilyam. You live. How unfortunate.” His gaze fell on Kathia. “And you’ve brought me a present. I can’t wait to open it.”

Wilyam knew this age-old tactic of taunting your enemy before combat. It was designed to make him fight from his anger, not from his training and discipline. “Commander Ruark is dead to me. You hold no power by wearing his face.”

“He’s dead to me, too. And I think that soon you will join him.” Ruark approached them cautiously, his eyes filled with arrogance and his face twisted in a look of disgust.

Wilyam shifted his weight, ever so slightly, so he stood more directly between Kathia and his commander.

Ruark smiled and shook his head. “You reek with your honor, and your integrity, and your precious call. It nauseates me.”

“Good.” Wilyam held his ten inch blade. The reflection from the surrounding Kalare rock made it gleam.

Ruark glanced at the knife. “Do not think you will stop me with that toy.”

Before Wilyam could answer, Ruark charged, his blade raised as he covered the ground between them. Wilyam sidestepped him easily, moving with the charging man’s momentum and catching him off guard when Wilyam went away from Kathia. He knew Ruark had expected him to protect her, and thus, turn toward her.

As Ruark’s attention was diverted in Wilyam’s direction, Kathia executed a flawless spin kick and caught him squarely on the jaw, snapping his head back. Ruark stumbled and went to the ground, landing hard. His knife skittered across the smooth stone floor in one direction, and the precious Kalare stone flew in the other.

Kathia dove for the stone, landing on her hands and propelling her body into a summersault. She scooped it up and came to her feet.

“Run!” Wilyam shouted.

She fled the cave before Ruark could regain himself. He began to laugh – a low sinister sound that held no humor. He rose from the floor, holding his chin. Wilyam was certain the man’s jaw was broken.

“How many men underestimate her?” Ruark slurred through the pain.

Wilyam stood ten feet away, feet planted firmly, and knife raised, ready to fight to the death. “So far, all of them.”

“She has angered me greatly. I believe I will kill her, rather than present her to Lorcan. Or I could make her long for death. I’m not sure which I would find more satisfying, at this point.”

“Let’s get this done.” Wilyam studied his commander’s face. Ruark had chosen evil. Time was short. Wilyam didn’t know how long the transformation from human to demon would take. He suspected a willful act of unspeakable cruelty – say, the murder of one’s best friend – might complete the process. Wilyam had to finish the battle before Ruark’s soul was gone.

Wilyam told himself there was no saving this man. His heart ached. They’d seen countless years together. Fought side by side. Saved each other’s lives many times. Shared a lifetime of laughter and good memories.

Wilyam remembered a certain day, many years ago. He and Ruark had sworn a blood oath as Cathal brothers. If he somehow succumbed to evil, Ruark had asked his friend to show mercy and kill him so he couldn’t take innocent lives, or turn on those he loved. Wilyam swore to uphold that promise and asked for the same. He prayed against the day he might face this man on opposite sides of the battle; but here they were, and there was no turning back. Ruark must die, to protect everything they held dear. Especially for the young woman fleeing for her life right now, alone in a strange world and still determined to see The Call through to the end.

Wilyam watched Ruark’s eyes scan the floor. With a broken jaw and the fatigue from the long climb, Wilyam knew his friend was not at full strength. But neither was he. And Ruark was well trained, with knowledge of Wilyam’s abilities. The odds in this fight were dead even.

Wilyam stared at Ruark’s eyes, watching their color. If they turned coal black, Ruark would be gone forever. As long as he saw a glimmer of green, his friend was still

human. The first officer's gaze was unblinking. Wilyam read his commander's objective as Ruark circled, trying to get closer to his discarded blade.

Wilyam waited patiently. He wouldn't go on the offense until an opportunity for the killing blow presented itself. The advantage for Wilyam, as a Cathal warrior, lie in the fact that Cormac fought from their rage rather than calculated, unemotional power.

Ruark surged toward Wilyam with a flurry of strong punches. Wilyam expertly warded off each strike. In the past, his commander had frequently bested him in hand-to-hand combat. But those had been exercises, and this was life and death. Wilyam fought for a different reason now.

They sparred for several minutes. Wilyam sensed Ruark was trying to size him up – to determine his weaknesses. For the most part, Wilyam had none. The only thing working in Ruark's favor was Wilyam's fatigue from the exhausting climb. But both of their reflexes were slower than usual.

Ruark finally caught Wilyam off guard with a head fake. The commander lunged for his knife and came up swinging. Wilyam was too slow on the parry, and the blade made sweeping contact with his abdomen. A welt of blood quickly raised on the six inch cut. Wilyam countered with a vicious slice that struck air.

Ruark smiled menacingly. "You grow weary, Wilyam. Let me finish it. I promise it will be quick."

Wilyam ignored the comment and circled his friend, weapon ready. He waited patiently for Ruark to drop his guard, even for one second. When that moment came he would strike. Wilyam allowed a flash of hopelessness to radiate on his face, a brief glimmer of regret.

Ruark rushed forward. He kicked Wilyam in the stomach and landed an uppercut on his jaw. Wilyam fell backwards. Ruark leapt over him and knelt at Wilyam's shoulders. He grabbed the first officer by the hair and held his knife to Wilyam's throat. "Nothing highlights my day like a good kill."

In the second of hesitation, Wilyam grasped Ruark's knife hand and twisted outward. He brought his leg up and kicked Ruark squarely in the face. Ruark tumbled to his back. Wilyam rolled onto his stomach, came to his feet, and seized Ruark's ankles. He pulled the man closer, slammed his knee into Ruark's chest, and stomped on the

forearm that held the knife. Wilyam grabbed the back of Ruark's head with one hand and his chin with the other. He stared into his commander's dark green eyes. A powerful jerk snapped the neck with a sickening crunch. The smile faded from Ruark's face and the spark of life left his eyes.

Wilyam lowered Ruark's head to the cold floor. He stood slowly, eyes closed and heart heavy. "Forgive me. He is my friend, even now."

Wilyam left the chamber, his shoulders sagging under the weight of his sorrow. When he came to the cave entrance, he saw Kathia. Her hands were clasped to her chest, and her eyes brimmed with tears. She met his gaze. Wilyam watched her expression change from fear to grief.

"Where is he?"

"In the chamber."

"Is he... Did you..."

"He's gone to us, Kathia. He chose the way of evil." Pain filled Wilyam's blue eyes.

Kathia tried to push by him, but he blocked her way. She glared at Wilyam. "I have to see him."

"No."

"I have to see him..." She sobbed. "I have to. He's all alone in there. I have to say good-bye."

"We must go. Sabriel needs the stone."

"I don't care about Sabriel. I care about Riley! I love him!" Kathia pounded Wilyam's chest once and lowered her head. "It's too high. The price is too high," she whimpered.

"Ruark knew the cost. It was his decision to pay the price. He did it for the future of this world and for the woman he loved."

Kathia collapsed against him. He felt her last ounce of strength drain away.

Wilyam had never held a crying woman. Truth to tell, the thought had always frightened him, just a little. But here and now, in this moment when Kathia needed to pour out her grief, he found it strengthened him to be her pillar. It helped that he could

open his grief and allow it to mingle with hers. Neither of them had to face it alone, the great mountain of sorrow.

They sank to the cold ground, and Wilyam leaned against the wall. He sat with his legs straight out and spread wide. Kathia sat between them, curled into a ball, her head on his chest. He gathered her in his arms.

Wilyam contemplated whether they should attempt the climb before darkness set in. He knew he would have no trouble seeing, but Kathia would struggle, and she was already exhausted from the events of this day. Their supplies and blankets were at the bottom of the cliff. They had no materials to build a fire. At this altitude, he knew it would get considerably colder than they were used to enduring. It was a dilemma either way – climb down and risk serious injury, at the least, or stay here and risk freezing to death. He closed his eyes and asked for wisdom. Kathia stirred in his arms, and he squeezed her comfortingly. “Stay close. It will be cold tonight.”

She sniffed and nodded.

He prayed that the cave would afford some shelter and that their combined body heat would protect them from hypothermia.

Sometime during the night, as Wilyam and Kathia slept, Sabriel appeared and gazed at their peaceful slumber. “I am so proud of all you’ve accomplished, my children. But the journey is not over.” He raised a hand, and the cave filled with a warm glow. The temperature rose steadily. He stayed with them, providing warmth until just after the four o’clock sunrise. Then he disappeared as silently as he’d come.

* * *

Kathia awoke feeling warm and strangely refreshed. She was embarrassed she’d spent the night in Wilyam’s strong arms, but she knew it was a matter of survival. And, she admitted, she’d needed the comfort of his friendship. She felt his chest rise and fall as he slept. Something on his stomach caught her eye. It was dried blood. A long, ugly gash ran from his navel up toward his ribs and disappeared under the folds of his leather vest. She crouched for a closer inspection. The wound had already closed itself and with a proper cleaning should heal nicely.

The growling of her stomach woke Wilyam. Kathia untangled herself from his arms and stood. Wilyam stretched and also rose.

As Kathia came fully awake, the warmth and peace she'd felt faded away. She thought of Ruark. A cold emptiness dug at the pit of her stomach, and she knew it wasn't only her hunger. Tears threatened, but she fought them back. There would be time for grief later. She saw Wilyam watching her and grinned meekly.

"Are you ready for the climb?" he said.

"Yes. Let's get out of here. I'm hungry. And the sooner we get down, the sooner I can have a snack."

Wilyam chuckled. "Where's the Kalare stone?"

Kathia reached into the bodice of her leather tank and pulled out the gem. The morning sunlight gleamed off its facets, sending out rays of pale purple and blue. The center of the stone shone with a bright golden light as sunbeams danced inside.

It was Wilyam's turn to blush. "Ingenious hiding place, My Lady."

"Well, I don't have pockets, and I can't carry it in my hand." She tucked it safely away again.

Wilyam walked the short distance to the ledge. He surveyed the surrounding skyline and checked the wind direction. "The wind is calm. The sky is clear. We should have a good climb."

Kathia stood beside him, nodding as she looked over the side of the mountain. She quickly stepped back. "Wow. I probably shouldn't have done that. I didn't realize how high we are."

"Just keep your eyes on the short distance as we climb, reaching for your next hand or foot hold. It's only a hundred feet to the ledge. That's nothing for a seasoned veteran like you. Right?"

"Seasoned veteran?"

"I assumed from your climbing abilities that you've done this a lot."

"Including yesterday, that would make a total of three times."

Wilyam stared at her in disbelief.

"I'm not too big on heights."

"Do they make you dizzy?"

“Sometimes.”

“Okay. I’ll go first. If you must look down, don’t look any farther than me. I’ll be your target as we descend.”

Wilyam took the last of the sticky leaves he carried in the tiny pouch at his hip and rubbed them on Kathia’s hands, then his own. He dropped his lower body over the side of the cliff, found a good toehold, and carefully lowered himself. Kathia waited until he was about twenty feet below and followed in the same manner.

Wilyam’s voice echoed up to her. “Last one down cooks breakfast!”

Kathia continued her slow and steady descent, perfectly content to let him win. This time.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Kathia sighed heavily when her foot touched solid ground. She collapsed to her seat and fell sideways, looking remarkably like a spineless rag doll.

Wilyam smiled down at her. “You are an outstanding climber, Lady Kathia.”

“I disagree. My arms and legs are currently useless to me.” Kathia lifted her arm lazily and pointed to the dried blood on his stomach. “What are we going to do about that?”

Wilyam shrugged. “A little water and a bandage. I’ll be good.”

“Wait – I think I brought a first aid kit.” Kathia crawled toward their gear. An ear splitting roar caused her to freeze. “What was that?”

Wilyam placed his index finger to his lips. He watched Kathia’s eyes grow enormous. She was staring at something behind him. He turned silently. Not more than twenty feet away was a gigantic creature with fur the color of fire. Even on all fours its shoulders were higher than Wilyam’s head. Powerful claws dug through the remains of their food sacks. It pushed its snout into one of the bags, searching for the last remnants of the meat Wilyam had so carefully packed away and placed far down the trail.

For the moment the kyara seemed taken with their leftovers, but soon it would realize there was fresher meat nearby. Wilyam needed to act fast. He glanced around – moving only his eyes. Their crossbows were uselessly out of reach. As was his bow. Kyara were keen hunters. Any second the beast would spot them in its peripheral vision, or pick up their scent.

He decided on a course of action. If his aim was off by even a fraction, instead of killing the beast he would enrage it, and there was no way he and Kathia could outrun it. Ever so slowly, he drew his knife. As the tip cleared the sheath, it caught on the leather with a pinging sound. He froze and held his breath. The kyara continued to demolish their rations.

Wilyam flipped the knife, so he held the blade, took a breath, and pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. He let out a short, piercing whistle. The massive head

rose and turned in their direction. Two black eyes stared them down as a snarl formed on thick lips. Six inch fangs showed, drenched in saliva and pieces of leftover fruit. Before the creature took a step in their direction, Wilyam flung his knife. It flew end over end and struck the beast between the eyes, slashing through flesh until the hilt came in contact with bone.

The monster roared, staggered, and fell. Wilyam rushed forward and grabbed the handle of his knife while the creature twitched. He twisted and pulled up. The animal ceased all movement.

Kathia was already gathering their gear when Wilyam returned. “Grab all you can carry. Run,” he ordered.

Kathia stared at the kyara while she slung her crossbow over her back and picked up her Cathal pouch and wool cape. “Isn’t it dead?”

“Oh yes, it’s dead. But females rarely travel alone.”

Wilyam took off down the rocky trail with Kathia on his heels. Wilyam ran with purpose – his hearing, smell, and eyesight honed for signs of danger. Kathia ran blindly as if being chased by some unknown evil. “I’m trusting you, Will. Please don’t lead us into a pack of those things.”

After a half-mile, Wilyam slowed to a jog, but continued at a fast pace, stopping only for a drink of water and to catch a breath. He was pleased that Kathia could maintain the grueling speed—the farther their distance today, the better.

Shortly, they came upon a stream they’d crossed on their way to the Cian cave. Wilyam stood at the edge of the babbling water and stroked his chin. “How are your fishing skills?”

“Excellent. With the right equipment. Without it...not so much.”

“Have you done any spear fishing?”

Kathia shook her head.

Wilyam pulled two arrows from his quiver and handed one to Kathia. “Watch. Aim. Stab. End of lesson.”

Kathia looked at the arrow and chuckled. “You should write a manual.”

* * *

Wilyam had an unsuspecting fish in his sights. As he raised his arrow to strike, Kathia shrieked. His quarry skittered away, leaving a trail of rippling water behind. His glare melted to a grin when he looked up and caught sight of Kathia doing battle with a rather large and overactive fish impaled on the end of her arrow. The thrashing almost pulled her off balance as she tried to maintain her footing on the slippery rocks of the streambed. Wilyam hurried to subdue their breakfast with one hand and steady Kathia with the other. The twinkle in her eye told him she was quite pleased with herself.

“You clean. I cook,” Kathia said.

Wilyam frowned. “I’m not much for cleaning fish. It’s sort of—” he searched for the right word “—gross.” He nodded in satisfaction that he’d found the appropriate expression for her benefit.

Kathia pursed her lips. “Oh, please. You, the killer of the big bear, afraid of a few fish guts?”

“All right. I’ll do it.” Wilyam pointed at a nearby tree. “Why don’t you get us something to go with it? The fruit at the top is the ripest.”

She studied his expression, cocking her head and putting her hands on her hips. Wilyam stared at her, eyes wide. Kathia narrowed her gaze and spun on her heel, heading toward the tree.

Just as Wilyam completed his unseemly task and was building a fire, Kathia arrived with a load of sun-ripened pears. In no time, they were enjoying fish filets and juicy pear slices.

“What’s our plan now?” Kathia said. “How long will it take to get back to Eavan? Which way do we go? Will there be more kyara? Isn’t this fish good?”

“Which question would you like me to answer first, Lady Kathia?”

“Take your pick, smarty pants.”

Wilyam’s eyes followed the stream’s path. “It would be best to track the flow. It will provide fresh food, and the fruit trees are more abundant along the shores. If we go back the way we came, the terrain will be rockier. The food will be scarce as well.”

“Is it faster this way?”

“No. The rocky path was actually faster. But we had our own food, so we were able to travel in a more direct line. Following the stream will be slower, but a little

easier. Unless we run into unfriendly wildlife hunting for a fishing spot. We're also likely to meet more people if we go this way."

"*More* people? We haven't seen a single soul in days."

"That's because we've avoided them. There are travelers all over Karasi. We have no way of knowing who's sympathetic to our cause until we meet them. And then it may be too late."

"So how long will it take?"

"It's been almost six weeks since we left Eavan. If we don't delay, we could be home in four."

"Then what?"

"We'll return to Sabriel. I can't say after that."

Kathia took a bite of fish. "When we get back, I want to have a memorial service."

"Of course," Wilyam said softly.

"We don't have time to grieve now, and I need to."

"I understand."

"I want to finish this. For him. And dedicate the journey to his sacrifice."

They finished their meal in silence.

* * *

Kathia and Wilyam walked until the darkness of midnight; then stopped for nourishment and a few hours of sleep. Dinner consisted of more fish and fresh fruit.

"I'll take first watch," Kathia said as she cleaned and packed the cookware.

"That's not necessary—" Her look stopped Wilyam in mid-sentence.

Kathia pointed at his bedroll.

Wilyam nodded and lay down without a word. He was asleep before she finished her tasks.

Kathia grabbed her crossbow and sat by the fire. She scanned the shadows around their camp. Even as she watched for danger, her mind reflected on the last few days. Why hadn't she seen the signs? It was obvious Ruark was different. What had caused the sudden shift in his personality? Had she done something to drive him over the edge? She didn't want to believe that, but a voice inside told her it was a possibility. She tried to push the thoughts away. Her eyes filled with tears.

Kathia shook her head angrily and concentrated on the distant sounds of night. She had grown accustomed to the many noises of the wilderness. She knew which clicks and squeaks were insects, and which were the shuffling of tiny nighttime beasts and rodents. She heard the whoosh caused by the flapping of large wings. She recognized a harmless breeze that rustled the leaves of the trees. Every sound reminded her of the many nights she'd spent sitting by the fire with Ruark and Wilyam, talking, laughing, and often teasing each other.

She saw his face. She heard his laugh. An image filled her mind. He was standing with his hands on his hips, trying to be cross with her, but the amusement in his eyes gave him away. She thought of his strong arms, muscles tensed as he worked to build a fire or carry heavy pieces of wood. That disarming smile of his. The way his face lit up and let her know he was glad to see her, even though he was trying to hide it. "I miss you," Kathia whispered.

Wilyam stirred. He rolled to his feet and crouched to survey the surrounding foliage.

Kathia startled. "Are you okay?"

"I was dreaming about the commander. It seemed very real."

"I was just thinking about him," Kathia admitted.

Wilyam put his hand on her shoulder. "Get some rest. We'll move on in a few hours."

Kathia nodded and went to her bedroll. As she settled down and closed her eyes, she drifted almost immediately into deep slumber. She awoke two hours later, her eyes wild and a film of sweat covering her body. "Will! I saw him. I saw Riley!"

Wilyam was at her side in an instant, his face a mask of concern. "Where?"

Kathia tried to gain control of the spinning images while she came fully awake. Her mind raced. "It was a cave... He was calling my name. But I couldn't hear him...I saw his lips moving. He needs help."

Wilyam's brow furrowed in anxiety. "Was this just now?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Why?"

Wilyam took her by the shoulders. "I've felt his presence. It's been very strong for the last half hour or so."

Kathia's brown eyes widened. "Empathically? You sense him?" Her voice was full of hope.

"I believe so." He hesitated. "Yes."

"What does it mean? Is he alive?"

"There is a definite possibility."

Kathia jumped up and gathered her things. "Where? How?"

"Kathia! Be still. Please. I need to center on him."

She froze, barely breathing. She hoped the banging of her heart wouldn't distract the warrior's concentration.

As the eastern sky turned a pale shade of pink, Wilyam fixed his gaze on a nearby mountain range. "There."

"How long?"

"If we travel without stopping, we'll be there by late afternoon. Are you up to it?"

Kathia let out her breath and frowned. "You're kidding, right?"

Wilyam reached for his leather pouch. "We need all the fruit we can carry. Fresh water and fish. We passed through those mountains no more than three days ago. We'll cut over and pick up our old trail."

"How will we know where to go?"

"As we get closer to the source of my impression it will get stronger. If it's truly Commander Ruark, I'll be more certain of it as we get nearer."

"The cave."

"Yes. Ruark started behaving strangely while we were there. I have a theory... We need to go back, quickly."

Kathia went climbing for pears, and Wilyam went fishing. Thirty minutes later they set off at a hurried pace toward the mountains. They left the rolling hills, and tree cover, and the little babbling stream far behind as they entered a steep and rocky terrain that tried unsuccessfully to slow their progress.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wilyam and Kathia made good time. They entered the foothills of the range within hours and traveled toward the jagged rocks. The landscape seemed familiar to Kathia. Wilyam paused occasionally to check the ground for their previous trail or to stare into the distance, his gaze unblinking. After the brief respite he would bolt forward, driven by an unseen force.

As they walked, Kathia broke the silence. “What are we tracking?”

“What do you mean?”

“You killed Commander Ruark. So, what are we following?”

“I *thought* I killed Ruark. Now I am convinced I killed a Cormac demon masquerading as a human.”

“They have that kind of power? To present themselves as someone else?”

“No. That kind of power belongs only to Lorcan. The demon must have called on him; to deceive us into believing he was Ruark. Lorcan knows the dark magicks. He has used them for centuries.”

“How do we know this is him?”

“His essence is pure. And the bond is strong. What I felt before, with the imposter, I was troubled in his presence and wasn’t sure why. You felt it, didn’t you?”

“Yes. It was something in his eyes. They were dark. He didn’t seem like Riley, on the inside. If that makes sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Wilyam assured her. “Lorcan and his Cormac have no souls. You saw the dark emptiness of their evil.”

Kathia stopped. “You’re sure the thing that looked like him is dead? I mean, if it was a demon—”

“In human form. He became mortal flesh to deceive us.”

“So we can’t kill these Cormac guys unless they’re in human form?” Fear made her voice crack.

“They can be killed. It takes great strength to defeat them, but they are not invincible. Cathal warriors have trained in combat since the days of old. We know how to fight them.”

“And Lorcan?”

“His days are numbered. He will be utterly destroyed.”

Kathia took comfort in the certainty she heard in his voice.

They rounded a sharp bend and discovered a small clearing.

“This is familiar,” Kathia said. Across the grassy field, a kyara clawed at the opening to a cave. “And so is that.”

Wilyam held up his fist. Kathia froze. The gigantic creature ceased digging and raised its snout to sniff the air. It turned its mammoth head and fixed a steely gaze on the intruders. The kyara stood to full height, now easily nine feet tall, and let out a ferocious roar; then dropped to all fours and bore down on them with surprising speed.

Kathia raised her crossbow. “Is the heart—”

“Aim right. Just below the jaw.”

She dropped the creature with a perfect shot. The carcass slid to a stop three feet from her boots and let out a low moan as it slowly bled to death. The light of life faded from its glassy eyes. Kathia casually lowered her weapon and motioned for them to continue. Wilyam eyed the beast suspiciously as he passed.

Kathia led them to the entrance of the cave. Her flashlight pierced the darkness of the opening, scattering the shadows when they entered.

“He’s here.” Wilyam’s voice echoed eerily.

They moved silently to a small entrance into the back cavern. Wilyam shined his flashlight around the perimeter. Kathia sucked in her breath and touched Wilyam’s forearm. He swung his light, illuminating Ruark’s still form.

Kathia rushed forward, with Wilyam right behind her. They knelt on either side of Ruark, and Kathia gently shook his shoulders. “Riley!”

His eyes opened slowly. “Kate. Is it really you?”

“It’s me. I’m here. Please don’t die.”

“Would you be a pal and get me the heck out of here?”

“That’s the plan, my boy.”

Ruark turned his head toward Wilyam. “How long has it been?”

“A few days. We got here as fast as we could.”

Ruark licked his lower lip. “I can’t move.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you fixed up.” Kathia squeezed his hand.

Wilyam handed her a water pouch and Kathia gently lifted Ruark’s head to pour the cold water into his mouth. “What were you doing back here?” she scolded. “Don’t you know it’s unsafe to split from the herd?”

He blinked slowly. “What?”

“Never mind. Rescue now, jokes later. Got it.” Kathia smiled.

Wilyam crouched down. “Is anything broken?”

“I don’t know. I really can’t feel anything.”

Wilyam ran his hands down Ruark’s arms and legs. “I don’t find any fractures, sir. I think it would be safe to move you.”

Kathia and Wilyam brought him to the outer chamber of the cave and propped him against a smooth rock. Wilyam grabbed their bedrolls and packed them around Ruark, to keep him warm and sitting upright.

Ruark watched Kathia cut fruit into bite-sized pieces.

She put a sliver of pear to his lips. “Eat this. Slowly.”

Ruark took a bite and chewed cautiously, not sure what would happen when the food got to his aching stomach. Sitting there helplessly, he thought he should be embarrassed by his need to have someone feed him. But the young woman who tended him with such a sense of necessity and desire, made him thankful for good friends. And for the fact he was still alive.

While Kathia fed Ruark, Wilyam left the cave and returned rather quickly with a plate of fresh meat. Ruark watched him cut the large slab into smaller steaks and rub them with herbs. When he was finished, he wrapped them in leaves and stored them in the back cavern, where the cold would keep them fresh.

Kathia held up another slice of fruit, and Ruark shook his head. “That’s good, for now.”

Kathia put the fruit on the plate. She stood and smiled down at him. “I’m going for firewood. Stay here.” She smirked and left the cave.

Ruark stared at his now useless hands. The last few days seemed like a bad dream. He'd spent a lot of time drifting in and out of consciousness, and believed he'd even hallucinated. He was certain he'd been close to death. He saw Sabriel one night, in the blackness, standing over him with arms raised. A bright light bathed his motionless body in a warm glow. He was sure the being was beckoning him into Paradise. He could clearly see Sabriel's smiling face and felt an overwhelming sense of calm.

Memories of Kathia had sustained him most. Ruark remembered the day she'd been born; how happy Lord Joakin and Lady Katriel were. And young Jonavon was thrilled to have a baby sister. Ruark saw her for the first time when she was three weeks old, at her public presentation. She was a beautiful, happy baby. He'd inadvertently reached to stroke her velvety cheek, and her little hand had closed around his finger. As he gently pulled away, he left his heart in her tiny fist.

Even as Supreme Commander of the Cathal warriors, it was a huge privilege to be invited to the ceremony. Lord Joakin honored him that much. Ruark always felt his relationship with Joakin was more than that of leader and trusted commander. It was a genuine friendship. He missed Lord Joakin's wisdom. A great blow had been dealt to the region of Eavan on the day Joakin fell.

In a corner of Ruark's heart lived his shame for his inability to protect the man he swore he'd die for. In his grief, he'd renewed his vow to die before allowing anything to happen to the rest of the family. Then, Lady Katriel had been taken. Again he'd not been by her side. He knew the tragedy of a car accident was beyond his control, but it did not lessen the pain or anger he felt.

He'd been left with the monumental task to protect Jonavon, Kathia, and Jorryn. While he held great respect and affection for his young Lord and Sir Jorryn, it was Kathia who had stolen his heart. She had the eyes of her father and the face of her mother. She was only six months old when they fled through the Gateway at Sabriel's urging. Ruark had been torn, wanting to fight at Lord Joakin's side and wishing to protect Lady Katriel and the children.

Katriel made the decision for him. She'd insisted he and Wilyam come with her; that she needed the two young warriors to guard the children. She was certain Joakin and Brion would repel Lorcan, and they would return to Eavan shortly. It had not been

so. Ruark and Wilyam stayed with her on Earth, waiting. Sabriel appeared to Lady Katriel in a dream and told her of the events on Eavan. Told her to wait for The Call, which would come during Kathia's eighteenth year. Katriel vowed to raise the children in safety and return to Eavan to restore the peace they had known.

Ruark guarded Lady Katriel and the children from a distance, as instructed. He watched Kathia grow from a bubbly toddler into a sweet little girl. He and Wilyam stood across from the schoolyard on her first day of kindergarten. She held Katriel's hand and tugged at the hem of her blue dress as they entered the building. She wore her long brown hair in pigtails, and her cheeks glowed with excitement.

Within a year, they watched a heartbroken little girl sit at her mother's funeral, beside her grief stricken brother and friend, and wondered how they could protect these children from all the harms this world could inflict. And Ruark had been angry. Angry for his second failure in protecting the ruling family. He lived, while the Lord and Lady of Eavan had perished. It should not be so.

Ruark observed Kathia all through grade school, junior high, and high school, as she became a graceful and beautiful young woman. The image of her mother. He attended every one of her volleyball games and somehow managed to stay hidden. Jonavon was adamant that she not know of the Cathal warrior's presence. Ruark did his best to maintain his distance and still be close enough to intervene in case of danger.

He knew he loved her the first time he saw her at Simpson College. It was that night in the gym when she performed her nightly training exercises. Somewhere in the midst of his loyalty, respect, and profound devotion to her family, he had crossed the line and fallen hopelessly under her spell. He battled with himself every day after that.

In spite of his best efforts to maintain the demeanor of a Cathal warrior, Jonavon sensed his attraction and bluntly told him to bury it. True to his code of honor, he swore to uphold Lord Jonavon's wishes and squelch the feelings. He had been a fool to think it possible. The harder he tried to deny his love, the stronger it grew. It became infinitely harder when he realized Kathia reciprocated his feelings, even though she seemed unaware of it.

The Call by Sabriel and the journey he'd sent them on had doomed Ruark to a life of longing for the one thing he couldn't have. He wanted Kathia. And it was never to be.

Since having been chosen as a Cathal warrior at age twelve, he had given up the luxury of *want* and submitted himself to the disciplines of honor and duty. He told himself this daily. But oddly enough, he discovered that love could not be starved to death. The hungrier it got, the stronger it became. It was a paradox.

Ruark's thoughts were interrupted by the object of his affection, who was staring down at him and repeatedly saying his name.

"Ruark? Commander? Ruark? Hey, you!"

"What? What is it?" Ruark gazed into her brown eyes and lost himself again.

"I said, would you like something else to eat?"

"Uh, no." He shook his head. "I'd really like to get outside, though. If you and Will can figure a way to haul my carcass out of here."

"I'll see what I can do." Kathia bent to unnecessarily rearrange his blankets. She stoked the fire; then left the cave.

Kathia found Wilyam staring at a tree. She came and stood along side of him. "Whatcha doing?"

"We need long branches."

"For..."

"To make a litter, so we can carry Ruark back to Eavan. It will take longer; but it's safer to return to the stream and follow the less rugged terrain."

"Excellent," Kathia said. "How can I help?"

Wilyam surveyed the surrounding trees. "We need two long branches, at least seven and a half feet. Sturdy. Maybe three or four inches thick."

Kathia spotted the perfect limb high above their heads. "There."

"Will you do the honors?" Wilyam cupped his hands and bent beside the trunk.

"As you wish." Kathia stepped into his grip, and he launched her into the lower branches. When she reached the bow, she pulled her knife and hacked at the branch with the serrated edge. "TimmMMM-berrrrrrr!" she called as it smashed to the ground.

"There's another, a few feet above you." Wilyam pointed.

She nodded, placed the knife in her sheath, and scaled the trunk, making quick work of the second limb. Wilyam stepped aside as the log fell to the ground beside the

first. She shimmied down the tree trunk and leapt to the earth. They hauled the heavy logs back to the clearing.

Kathia dropped her end of the branch and brushed her hands together. “Our commander wants to sit in the sun for awhile. Do you think we could carry him out?”

“Of course. The sunshine would probably do him some good.”

Kathia began to saw off the smaller limbs. “Will, what happened to the gigantic beast I thought I killed?”

“Oh, you killed it. Trust me.” He grinned. “I didn’t know how long we’d be here, so I cut some steaks –”

“Ewww! No details! Please!”

“I saved the pelt too.”

Kathia glared at him.

“We can use it for the litter.”

Kathia cut off the remaining branches and began to peel the bark. Wilyam was almost finished with the other pole. When the limbs were stripped and matched for length, they went to get Ruark.

He was dozing lightly and woke up when Kathia lifted his legs. Wilyam grabbed him around the chest.

“Gee whiz, Commander! Have you gained weight?” Kathia teased.

“It’s this life of leisure I’ve been leading.”

“Maybe you’re not as strong as you used to be, Kathia” Wilyam said.

Kathia snorted. “Fat chance. I could kick your butt if I needed to.”

“I’d like to see that.”

Ruark cleared his throat. “Um, guys, could you put me down before you get into the hand-to-hand?”

Wilyam and Kathia grinned at each other across the top of Ruark’s head.

Kathia and Wilyam gently leaned Ruark against the trunk of a sturdy tree; then sat to enjoy the sunshine. They watched a flock of bright green birds fly over, and tried to determine which creatures were hiding in the cloud formations.

Ruark asked the question that had been avoided since their arrival at the cave. “Would one of you mind filling me in on what’s been happening since I saw you last?”

Wilyam and Kathia stared at Ruark; then at each other.

Wilyam turned back to his commander. “Tell us what happened in that cave, and we’ll take it from there.”

Ruark sat silently, reliving each agonizing minute. He sighed heavily and began his story, not leaving out a single detail, except for the private thoughts he’d had about his feelings for Kathia.

When he finished, Kathia launched into their part of the story, taking him through the encounter in the inner chamber of the Cian cave. Wilyam picked up the story at that point and told Ruark everything that had transpired up until their discovery of him in the back cavern. He also left out the part where Kathia had declared her love for Ruark. She thanked him with her eyes.

Wilyam gave a slight nod.

“So the Kalare stone is safe,” Ruark said.

“Most definitely.” Kathia nodded and patted the front of her leather tank top. The movement went unnoticed by Ruark, but brought an embarrassed grin to Wilyam’s face.

Ruark eyed his best friend. “You killed me.”

“It wasn’t you.”

“You *thought* it was me.”

“I thought it was you too,” Kathia added, in a vain attempt to defend Wilyam.

Ruark ignored her. “My best friend in the whole universe killed me, without hesitation or remorse.”

“I assure you, both feelings were present when I snapped your neck.” Wilyam paused. “Like a twig.”

“If I could get up, I swear I’d take care of both of you.”

Kathia’s face twisted in mock fear. “Oooohhh. You’re scary. Big strong commander threatening us with bodily harm when a strong breeze could blow you over!” Kathia froze, her words hanging in the air. “I am so sorry! That was so thoughtless!” Her face flushed.

Ruark grinned and gingerly raised his hand to flick her arm. The effort took all the strength he possessed.

Kathia's eyes grew enormous. Her expression was a strange mixture of fury and relief. She shot up from her seated position. "Have you been sitting here this whole time—"

Ruark decided it best to interrupt her tirade and save himself, if he could. "Not the whole time. My arms and chest started tingling about an hour ago. I thought the pain would drive me crazy, but as it subsided I realized I had feeling in my fingers."

Wilyam crouched and squeezed Ruark's arms, starting at his biceps and moving to his forearms. "All sensation has returned?"

"No. But I can move, a little. And I have the tingling you get when your hand or foot falls asleep. Only it's infinitely more painful."

Wilyam prodded Ruark's chest in several places. "What can you feel?"

"My arms and chest are tender, to the middle of my rib cage."

"Perhaps the paralysis was a temporary response to the emotional trauma of your encounter with the Cormac." Wilyam stroked his chin. "We will devise a plan of physical therapy. Get you into shape in no time."

"What would you define as *no time*?" Ruark said.

"It depends on when the feeling returns to your legs."

Ruark was thankful Wilyam chose to use the word *when*.

Kathia nodded enthusiastically. "Let's get to it!"

Ruark grinned. "Can we have dinner first? I'm dying for a steak."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Wilyam and Kathia searched the nearby trees, gathering wood to build a pull-up bar, crutches, barbells – any equipment they could think of to get the commander back to full strength in a minimum amount of time.

By the next day, Kathia noticed marked improvement in Ruark's condition. He could wiggle his toes and even sit up on his own. By the end of the second day he was walking cautiously around the cave. Wilyam and Kathia assigned him a series of strength exercises. He eagerly tried everything they suggested.

On the third day, as Wilyam gathered wood and Kathia hunted for edible plant life, Ruark worked out in the cave, trying to squeeze out one more push-up before he collapsed.

Kathia walked in and found him face down in the dirt. She dropped her armful of leaves and rushed to him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

She grabbed Ruark's arm with both hands, attempting to help him to his feet.

"I don't need help."

Kathia smiled. "Whatever you say." She felt him lean most of his weight into her.

Ruark staggered and sent them tumbling backward. They landed ungracefully on the hard ground. Kathia sat up. Ruark struggled to rise, and she again took his arm and gave it a good tug.

His face was red from the effort. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Commander."

There was an awkward silence. "Why the sudden formality with my name?"

"What do you mean?"

"You keep calling me *Commander*. I kind of like it when you call me *Riley*."

Kathia glanced sideways at him. "It..." She sighed. "I... Blame that guy who was wearing your face. I ran into him outside and we were...talking and I called him Riley. It didn't feel right after that."

He eyed her suspiciously. "After what?"

“Well...” Now it was her turn to blush. She launched into a hasty explanation, not even pausing to breathe. “He kissed me and I completely dropped my guard and didn’t pay any attention to what was going on and Will was in danger and you were missing and I have serious doubts that I’m cut out for these special missions!”

“He *kissed* you!”

“Yeah...sort of.”

“You let him kiss you.”

“I didn’t *let* him.”

“Believe me, *Lady Kathia*, if you didn’t want him kissing you, he’d find himself lying on the ground with a bruised rib!”

Kathia stood to face him, hands on hips. “Listen, *Commander Ruark*, I told you already. I THOUGHT HE WAS...” She stopped, her mouth hanging slightly open.

“Me.” A grin spread across Ruark’s handsome face. He climbed to his feet with great effort, reached for her hand, and pulled her to him.

He started to speak, and paused. Then he shrugged and took her in his arms. Ruark leaned down slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. It seemed an eternity between the time he pulled her to him and the time his lips finally met hers. In that eternity, she melted into him completely.

It was the single most exquisite moment of Kathia’s life. In nineteen years she’d never felt so fully alive. The kiss was gentle and tender. She awakened to a new understanding of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Her mind exploded with new sensations, and in the middle of it all was Ruark. She felt him reach out to her emotionally. His presence bathed her in a warm glow.

Kathia wasn’t sure how long the kiss lasted; she only knew it hadn’t been long enough. She was positively hungry for more. He pulled away, and she remained weak in his arms, eyes closed. If he let go of her now, she would fall to the floor.

“I like you,” he whispered.

“Uh-huh,” she murmured, eyes still closed.

“And I wanted you to know.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And this can *never* happen again. I’ve overstepped my honor as a Cathal warrior. But I couldn’t live another day without letting you know how I feel.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Kate? Are you okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

He stood her upright, supporting her with his hands on her hips. Her palms rested lightly on his chest. She opened her eyes, entwined her fingers in his hair, and pulled him to her. This time, *she* kissed *him*.

There was passion and intensity in the touch of her lips. Ruark was entirely consumed in the storm of her feelings. Heat scattered in waves down his chest and burned in his stomach. He felt it tighten into a solid knot. He wasn’t sure his legs would sustain him much longer. He felt the long leanness of her body pressed against his. Felt her heartbeat pounding against his chest. Heard his own echoing in his ears. He knew the warmth of her touch at his temples and the soft curves of her femininity. He didn’t want to break free. He didn’t want it to end. His heart cried out with joy and pain in the same moment. He gasped when she pulled away.

“Riley?”

His eyes were closed. “Huh?”

“I like you, too.”

He opened his eyes. “Good.”

“I wanted you to know.”

He saw her soul reflected in her brown eyes. “Fair enough.”

They parted unsteadily.

Ruark’s mind raced. His pulse pounded. He was breathless.

Wilyam walked in with a load of firewood and staggered. He raised a hand to his temple and shook his head. He frowned at his commander.

Ruark frowned back and pointed at his first officer. “No lectures.”

Wilyam nodded in understanding.

Kathia stepped farther away from Ruark, her hands fidgeting uncontrollably. “I’m going...I’ll be...It’s a lovely day outside...I need to...See ya.” She waved awkwardly and disappeared through the cave entrance.

Wilyam began to stack wood by the campfire.

Ruark clasped his hands behind his back, and rocked from his toes to his heels.

“I promised her, Will. I said, ‘it won’t happen again.’ And I mean it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I’ll expect you to hold me to that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There will be no unnecessary physical contact.”

“Define ‘unnecessary.’”

Ruark frowned. “You know. Unnecessary.”

Wilyam stood and faced his commander. “Yes, sir.”

“And I won’t be alone with her for extended periods.”

“You want me to babysit, sir?”

Ruark shook his head. “No. Not that. Just don’t be too far away...for very long.”

“The Cathal Code.”

“What?”

“It’s what I recite to myself when things get...difficult for me. It helps contain the wayward thoughts.”

“*You* have wayward thoughts?”

Wilyam pursed his lips. “Not the kind you’re having. But yes, I struggle with doing what’s right. Every human being does. No matter how disciplined they are. We must constantly guard ourselves.”

“*The Code of the Cathal Warrior*. That’s your secret.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And it works?”

“I doubt anything will work for your problem. But it can’t hurt, either.”

Ruark dropped his hands to his sides. “The effort could cause emotional exhaustion.”

“Physical, too,” Wilyam added.

Ruark sighed heavily and left the cave.

Wilyam grinned.

Two days later, Ruark stood in the midday sun, feet spread wide and arms folded over his chest. He watched Kathia fasten the kyara pelt to the poles of the litter.

Wilyam walked up beside him and stood in the same pose.

Ruark continued to observe Kathia. “Will, get me out of here.”

“Sir?”

“If I have to spend another minute sitting in that cave, thinking about all the *what ifs*, I’m going to explode.”

“Would you like me to put you out of your misery?”

“Meaning?”

“I could send you on to Paradise. Purely for the sake of chivalry, mind you.”

“You’re a true friend.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

Later that afternoon they loaded their supplies on the new litter and set out for Eavan. Ruark needed frequent rest, but he gained strength each day, and they were able to travel well. By Ruark’s calculation it was one week back to the large city of Karasi, where they had last stopped for supplies. Another week would take them to the border town, and then the Cathal encampment. If they made good time, they would be back in Eavan by the middle of the Season of Sun.

Exactly two weeks to the day from leaving the cave, Wilyam, Kathia, and Ruark crested a rolling hill and laid eyes on the Cathal encampment of Donal and his men. It appeared the same as when they left, much to Ruark’s relief. It was late afternoon, and the sun reflected brightly off the canvas of the light brown tents below. Warriors went about their daily chores, and horses rested lazily in the paddock. For its peaceful appearance, Ruark knew it was buzzing with deliberate activity, and the men they couldn’t see were the ones watching them as they stood at the top of the hill.

Within seconds a group of men on horseback rode toward them, Donal in the lead. This time the burly general did not call for their identity. He rode straight up,

jumped off his horse before it came to a halt, and enveloped each of the weary travelers in a great hug.

“Lady Kathia! Commander Ruark! First Officer Wilyam! Greetings in the name of The One. I trust your travel has been peace-filled and successful.”

Ruark clapped the back of his first general. “Got some time? We have a great story.”

“Yes! Yes!” Donal thundered. “Come to my tent. I will have food brought. You will rest and tell us the tales of your journey.” His eyes fell on the fire-colored pelt of their litter, and he let out a long, low whistle. “You killed a kyara. They are not easily taken.”

A smile filled Wilyam’s bronzed face. “Actually, Kathia took this one. It was a magnificent kill.”

Kathia beamed under the warrior’s praise.

Donal shook his head. “A wolf in sheep’s garments.” He turned and led the way to his tent.

* * *

Kathia tried to be patient during the lengthy retelling of the last several weeks, but she longed for a hot bath and a comfortable bed. After a respectful two hours of talking and listening, she whispered her request to Ruark. He nodded and relayed the wish to Donal. Within an hour, three Cathal had fashioned a bathtub in her private tent and filled it with steaming water.

Kathia soaked in the soothing liquid until her fingers were wrinkled. She decided to get out before she fell asleep and drowned. *Wouldn’t that be ironic.* She laughed to herself. *The Lady of Eavan journeys half-way across the world, retrieves the Kalare stone, slays a kyara, and then drowns in the bathtub.*

Kathia dressed in a cotton shirt one of the Cathal had given her. She crawled onto her cot, with its special down-stuffed mattress. She was so thankful. Thankful for the hospitality of Donal and his men. Thankful to be out of the hard leather outfit she’d worn for weeks, and wrapped in a giving fabric. Thankful to sink into the wonderful, billowy mattress. She stretched mightily and released the last bits of tension from her fatigued body. And then, she slept. The deep, dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

Chapter Thirty

Kathia awoke the next day with no recollection of where she was. Instead of a bright blue sky overhead, she saw the heavy canvas of a tent. She smelled food cooking, although she didn't recognize what it was. Horses snorted and stomped, and the murmur of male voices drifted to her ears. She climbed from her bunk and headed outside her tent, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She had no idea what time it was or how long she'd slept.

Kathia stepped into the brilliance, shielding her eyes against the rush of light while she stretched one arm over her head and let out a loud yawn. She blinked. At a nearby campfire, several Cathal warriors were gathered for breakfast. They were frozen in various stages of eating and conversing. All eyes were turned in her direction. She recognized Ruark among them and raised a hand in greeting. Then she froze, too. A cool breeze touched her bare legs. She felt grass under her bare toes. Horror gripped her when she realized she'd stepped outside wearing only the cotton shirt. She glanced down. The shirt came to mid-thigh but was obviously not long enough, judging by the shocked expressions focused in her direction. Without a word, she took two steps back and disappeared into her tent.

An hour later, hunger finally won the victory over embarrassment. Kathia casually made her way to the chow tent. The Cathal warrior in charge was glad to oblige her bashful request for breakfast.

He smiled warmly. "Are you sure it's breakfast you'd like, Lady Kathia? I'm about to set out the lunch course."

"Have I slept the day away? Please, don't make anything special on my account. I'd love whatever you're preparing for lunch."

The man nodded graciously and handed her a plate of baby potatoes in a thick sauce and some kind of meat that resembled chicken. She took it gratefully and went to sit by the campfire. The food was absolutely delightful. Kathia returned for seconds, hoping it was permitted to request more. The warrior was only too happy to provide sustenance for the Lady of Eavan, and was pleased that she found the food tasty.

“What is your name?” she said as he handed her another plateful.

“It’s Sebastian, My Lady.”

“Sebastian. Where’s Horace? He was here when we visited last time.”

“We take shifts in the meal preparations. He’s on sentry duty this week.”

Kathia nodded. “You are a wonderful cook. Don’t tell Lord Jonavon, but your skills rival his.”

The warrior leaned forward and whispered, “I shall take the secret to Paradise.”

Kathia finished her lunch and went to explore the camp, hoping to run into some of the men she had befriended during their last stay. She went to the horse paddock to admire the beautiful creatures frolicking in the noonday sun. They seemed particularly restless. Her eyes searched the rolling hills beyond the camp. A gentle breeze carried the earthy scent of the countryside. A flock of birds rose noisily from a nearby grove of trees. They formed into a tight group and swirled into the distance. Kathia shivered. Her eyes scanned the horizon. All was still – eerily still.

She backed away from the wooden rails of the fence, suddenly desperate to find Ruark and Wilyam. As she turned to run, she collided with General Donal.

He caught her in his massive arms. “Lady Kathia. Scouts have warned of an impending attack. Please seek shelter in your tent.”

“General—”

“Please, My Lady. The Cathal will handle the crisis. We are accustomed to these border skirmishes. We must know you are safe.”

She nodded and headed for her tent, knowing she had no intention of staying there. Kathia listened to the warriors she passed, trying to eavesdrop for information. They were silent; expertly trained in the art of battle and committed to their calling to protect Eavan and the ruling family at all costs.

Kathia reached her tent, grabbed her crossbow, and strapped her blade to her hip. She slung her pouch of arrows onto her back. She checked the Kalare stone, safely tucked under her mattress, and quickly left.

The camp was a flurry of activity. Cathal warriors hurried about, gathering equipment and reporting to Donal and Ruark for instructions. Amid the chaos, Kathia spotted Wilyam and headed in his direction. Ruark was beside him. They were

consulting with Donal in the center of the encampment. The three men studied a map spread on a low table. Donal was speaking as she approached.

“My second in command has taken an extra regiment of warriors to the hill. They will assist the scouts hidden in the trees. If the enemy breeches the first line, there will be another regiment to pass through before they get to the camp. I’ll lead the charge of the second line.”

Ruark nodded. “Excellent. Wilyam and I will stay with Lady Kathia in the camp; she is our first priority. We’ll also direct the warriors here. Signal if you need us to send reinforcements for your line.”

“How many are there?” Wilyam said.

Donal snorted. “Only several hundred. But sir, Lorcan is with them.”

Ruark scowled. “He’s here to take us, not kill us. He must need to replenish his army of Cormac.”

“It’s Lorcan out there?” Kathia said.

All three men turned toward her. Donal frowned in disapproval. “Lady Kathia, I respectfully request that you return to your tent.”

“I won’t hide. I will do my part in the fight.”

Ruark stepped forward. “This is Lorcan himself. The battle will be fierce, even though their numbers are fewer than ours.”

Kathia nodded.

“There is only one way to kill a Cormac in its demon form. You must behead it.”

“Okay.” She nodded again.

“Remember, they have no souls. You cannot mortally wound them. They don’t bleed to death,” Wilyam added.

Ruark placed his hands on her upper arms and looked into her eyes. “They are very strong. You will have to call on your years of training and fight for your very life, and the life of everyone you love.”

“I will.”

Donal watched the Supreme Commander of the Cathal and the Lady of Eavan share a moment that spoke volumes. His puzzled frown turned to an expression of shock. He glanced at First Officer Wilyam, who watched him with intense blue eyes.

Donal's gaze shifted back to Ruark. "If Lorcan is among the Cormac, he knows Lady Kathia is here. He's come for her personally. He will not stop until he has his prize."

Wilyam squared his shoulders. "Let him come. We've trained our whole lives for this battle."

Ruark, Kathia, and Wilyam walked to the edge of the encampment. A line of Cathal advanced on the hill, and a second regiment waited at the bottom. Kathia's gaze moved to the crest of the ridge, and she saw them come. Even at this distance, they were formidable – a solid line of tall shirtless beings. They had long dark hair and huge broadswords. At the front of their ranks was an enormous being dressed entirely in black. He was huge, standing a head taller than the surrounding demons. Kathia shuddered. It was Lorcan. She swallowed her fear and looked at Ruark.

He smiled confidently. "Are you ready?"

"These guys only die from a beheading?"

"That's right."

"You can't stake them in the heart, or turn them to a poof of dust in the sunlight?"

"They're not vampires, Kate."

"How about if I hack off a limb or two?"

"That might slow them down, but you still need to take the head."

"Okay."

She watched the battle begin. The Cormac charged the Cathal with swords raised as they let out a piercing battle cry. Kathia observed Lorcan. He stood at the top of the hill, his arms crossed. She sensed his arrogance, even from this distance. He wouldn't lower himself to fight. Not yet. His eye was on the larger treasure, and he merely waited for his demons to clear a path.

The Cathal were pushed back, inch by inch. They inflicted casualties, but the Cormac were relentless. Within an hour the Cathal in the camp were engaged in the battle. The warriors fell back to reinforce the campsite, and the fighting was brutal. Kathia briefly considered Donal's suggestion that she return to her tent. She pushed the thought aside. That was probably the first place Lorcan would hunt for her.

Ruark sent Wilyam to hold the fence line while he stood back to back with Kathia, waiting for the attack. Several Cormac jumped the wooden rails with a loud cry and came at them, swords swinging wildly. Each demon was covered with hideous black tattoos. Their entire upper bodies were mosaics of repulsive creatures with sharp teeth and piercing eyes.

A leering Cormac fixed his black eyes on Kathia and sneered. He charged toward her. She ducked the first swing of his sword, turned into a summersault, and savagely kicked his knees when she came to her feet. She heard the crunch of bone. He screamed and doubled over, dropping his sword. She scooped it, spun, and took his head.

Quite pleased with herself, she turned to Ruark, ready to call out her triumph. She saw him simultaneously stab two Cormac, spin the blades, and behead both of them. Her victory paled in comparison. Kathia's attention was diverted by the call of a warrior. She loaded her crossbow and shot a demon through the shoulder blade as she sprinted to the Cathal's aid. She joined his battle against three Cormac.

* * *

Ruark fought with the renewed strength of a man who'd been given a second chance. He relished the feel of battle. He'd spent so much time living a danger-free existence in Springville, the rush of a life and death fight invigorated him. It was good to fight for a just cause. It was intoxicating to fulfill his calling as champion of Eavan. He felt renewed and blessed to be given a chance to atone for his failures of the past. He'd been a young warrior when Joakin and Katriel died, and although his body was still young and strong, his mind was older and wiser. He understood the mental challenges of battle as well as the physical ones.

He killed another Cormac, barely breaking a sweat in the process. His arms felt like iron. His legs carried him quickly across the camp. He moved, dodged, and tumbled with quickness and agility. He was a man possessed. Possessed by his deep sense of commitment to the cause and by the love of an exceptional woman. His mind knew she could not be his, but his heart was unaware, and he was fighting with all his heart in this war with evil.

Ruark peered through the thick smoke. Some of the tents had been set on fire by the Cormac, and he squinted to make out shapes in the blinding haze. He pushed his way through the fumes. His heart almost stopped. Behind the corral he could make out the form of his first officer, lying on the ground as a huge Cormac hovered over him. There was a bloody gash on Wilyam's leg. He held the demon off with a sword, his arms fully extended and elbows locked. But even at this distance, Ruark could see that Wilyam's arms wavered, his strength waning.

He bolted to help his friend, raising his knife as he ran. A figure in black caught Ruark's attention. He turned his head and saw Lorcan towering over Kathia. Her eyes were huge with fear. A sword lay on the ground at her feet. She held her right shoulder, and Ruark could tell from the angle of her arm that the shoulder was dislocated. Lorcan reached out a massive hand and grabbed her by the throat. Lifting her off the ground, he brought Kathia face to face.

Chapter Thirty-One

Kathia fired her crossbow and kicked her way through the ferocious attack. It didn't take long for her to realize that her arms and legs were her most effective weapons. She called on every move Jonathan had taught her. Kathia knocked a Cormac to the ground with a leg sweep, and a Cathal warrior took its head. She was grabbed from behind in a chokehold, but broke free and kicked her leg up and behind her in a move that sent the demon reeling backward. He was quickly dispatched by another Cathal. Kathia could tell the Cormac were not intent on killing her. They wanted to take her captive, and that frightened her even more.

A front flip took her out of harm's way. When she landed, she picked up an abandoned sword and swung it at the head of a tall demon, his face shrouded in thick smoke. The being raised his arm as she swung. The blade struck his forearm and stopped. The reverberation sent a shudder so strong, it caused Kathia to drop the sword.

She stared into the face of Lorcan. His black eyes saw into her soul. Kathia raised her leg to kick him, but he caught her foot easily and pulled up, causing her to do a backflip. She came down hard and off balance, but recovered quickly and raised her hand to strike at his solar plexus. He batted her arm aside and grabbed her fist when she followed through with a second punch. The pressure threatened to crush every bone in her hand. He yanked her arm down.

Kathia gasped when she heard her shoulder break loose from the socket. Hot pain shot down her arm and into her neck. Tears filled her eyes.

Lorcan smiled down at her. "Lady Kathia. At last. You have caused me no small amount of trouble."

"I'm not done yet." She tried to sound brave, but the fear in her eyes gave her away.

"Oh, but you are." He took her by the throat and lifted her easily.

She smelled the stench of evil. With her good hand, she clawed uselessly at his powerful grip. Her feet dangled.

“Where is the stone, Kathia?”

Lorcan’s gaze sent a chill down her spine. She glared at him.

“And Lord Jonavon, where does he hide?”

Kathia glanced over Lorcan’s shoulder and saw Ruark. She willed him to stay away, but he was already moving in her direction.

Even as he headed toward her, Ruark took aim and flung his blade at the demon that pinned his friend. There was a scream when the knife stuck deeply, knocking the Cormac to the ground. He reached for the handle embedded in his ribs, and Wilyam spun away and came up swinging. He beheaded the monster as it writhed in pain.

Ruark charged toward Lorcan.

As Kathia hung in the giant’s grasp, it dawned on her that Cormac had once been human men. Perhaps Lorcan had, too. She gathered her strength and kicked him squarely in the groin. He howled in anger and surprise, and dropped her just as Ruark smashed into the back of his knees. The huge being toppled to the ground. Ruark came to his feet, grabbed Kathia’s hand, and they ran. When they got to the corral, they huddled by the fence. Arrows flew all around them.

“You should have killed him,” Kathia yelled over the noise of battle.

“You tried. How’d it work out?”

She ducked as an arrow whizzed by. “So, what do we do?”

“We wait until he’s vulnerable.”

Kathia gave Ruark an incredulous look. “And when will that be?”

Ruark cracked a thin smile. “When he’s not in his immortal form.”

Wilyam slid into the dirt beside Ruark, one leg extended and one bent at the knee, like he’d just stolen second base.

“How goes the battle?” Ruark called over the din.

“They are retreating!” Wilyam said.

Kathia looked around the encampment. It was true. The Cathal were beating them back. Cormac were fleeing up the hill. Many lay dead all around. Lorcan stood where he’d encountered Kathia, and observed his demons. He glanced in her direction and caught her gaze, staring her down. The cold blackness of his eyes caused her to

shiver. He lifted his arm and pointed at her as if to say, *this isn't over*. Then he leapt the six-foot fence in a single stride and disappeared.

The sounds of battle subsided. Fires were extinguished. Wounds were tended. Dead were gathered. Ruark ordered the Cormac bodies burned outside the encampment. Wilyam found Donal, and the three warriors evaluated the costly triumph. They had lost a number of men to death or abduction, but had taken out half the Cormac. Ruark was pleased with their stand. The border had been held, and the Lady of Eavan was safe.

“How often does he attack here?” Ruark said to Donal.

“Every few months. He wants to inflict damage in relentless waves. He wishes to break our spirit. He knows the value of a trained Cathal warrior fighting for the side of evil.”

“We can count on his return?” Wilyam said.

“Undoubtedly. He wants Lady Kathia and Lord Jonavon. He knows his defeat will come through the House of Joakin. He won't stop until he conquers the children.”

Wilyam turned to Ruark. “We should move on, Commander. This encampment is a prime target as long as we stay here.”

Ruark examined the jagged cut on Wilyam's thigh. “We're not going anywhere until you can travel. We have to bury our dead and heal our wounds.” Ruark motioned to his general. “Donal, dispatch a message to the neighboring encampment to brief them on our battle. Have them send reinforcements. We'll stay here until they arrive.”

Wilyam and Donal nodded at their commander.

* * *

Kathia cradled her right arm. The throbbing pain grew in intensity with every step. She moved slowly among the long row of bodies covered in colored sheets. Underneath were fallen Cathal warriors, now draped in the clan colors of their birth. She knelt by each one and spent a moment thanking him for his sacrifice. Sebastian, the cook she'd met earlier, walked with her. She asked each man's name and repeated it as she gazed on his face. Her chest constricted when she realized that, were it not for the protection of The One, it could be Ruark's or Wilyam's face she was staring at.

Kathia remembered back a few short months to a time when she'd been a carefree college girl, and her biggest crisis was whether or not she was prepared for her latest essay test. Jonathan's image filled her mind – his expressive hazel eyes and warm, inviting smile. Kathia longed to have him there. She needed his strength and wisdom. She wanted to be the baby sister again, not the Lady of Eavan. She wanted to defer the decisions to him and hide behind his strong shoulders.

Kathia stood, her head hung in a moment of silence. A large hand fell lightly on the base of her neck. She gasped and winced when pain shot down her arm.

"I'm sorry." It was Ruark. He ran his fingers along her collarbone and down her arm. He frowned. "There is swelling. And you're already bruised. We need to get you to the med tent."

Wordlessly, she turned to walk with him.

Inside the tent were four men awaiting medical attention. Wilyam was one. He sat silently as the physician stitched the deep gash in his leg and applied medicinal herbs and a clean bandage. Kathia could tell it was an agonizing procedure, but he did not flinch.

When the physician was finished, Ruark helped Wilyam off the table. Another warrior offered to take him to his tent. Ruark hesitated.

Kathia touched his arm. "It's okay. Go with Will. I'll be fine."

Ruark shook his head. "No. I'm not leaving you."

Ruark nodded at the warrior, who left with Wilyam.

One of the Cathal waiting for medical attention nodded at Kathia. "My Lady. Please, take my turn with the physician."

"No. Thank you. I will wait." She sat on a narrow cot, Ruark by her side, and watched as each man was tended and sent to his tent for rest. When her turn came, she could barely lift herself onto the table. Ruark cradled her head and shoulders and helped her lie down.

The physician's voice was reassuring. "Let's see what we have here."

Ruark held Kathia's good hand, and she wasn't sure he even realized it.

Doctor Theodore gently straightened her arm, holding it at the wrist. He pulled firmly and waited. "I'm going to twist it slowly. Try to relax."

Kathia nodded.

Doctor Theodore continued to pull her arm and rotate it inward with a slow, deliberate motion.

She heard the joint return to the socket in an explosion of pain and grinding bones. Kathia cried out. Everything went black.

Kathia awoke in her tent, arm in a sling, and her shoulder painfully stiff. She wanted to rise, but her body said “no.” She gave into her fatigue and listened to the sounds of the camp. They were different. She heard birds in the distance and the breeze in the nearby trees, but the horses were quiet, and the voices seemed far away. From the long shadows on her tent wall, she guessed it was late evening. The sun would go down within an hour or two. Hunger gnawed at her empty stomach. She fought to sit up; then made her way to the chow tent. Sebastian was inside, putting away supplies and whistling to himself.

“Hey, Sebastian!”

“Hay? For the horses?”

Kathia laughed and shook her head. “No. I’m sorry. It’s an expression from...around...the house where I grew up. I meant to say, how are you?”

“I am well, Lady Kathia. It was a grim battle. We lost many warriors and good friends, but we live to fight another day for our peoples’ right to live in freedom.”

“Amen, my friend!” Kathia patted her stomach. “Would you happen to have any of that delicious homemade bread of yours?”

He reached into a large canvas bag on the table before him. He handed her two thick slices of the heavy, aromatic bread. The scent of honey drifted to her nostrils.

“And your strawberry jam?”

He gave her the whole crock and put his finger to his lips. “Shhh. It’s our secret.”

She nodded her thanks and returned to her tent. After her delightful meal, Kathia walked to Wilyam and Ruark’s tent. Wilyam was resting peacefully. Ruark sat on the ground, his long legs crossed at the ankles as he read a book.

“Permission to enter?” she whispered.

Ruark tucked the book under his thigh. “Come in.”

Kathia pointed at Wilyam. “Won’t we wake him?”

“He’s taken an herbal sedative. He’ll sleep until tomorrow.”

She sat opposite Ruark, her legs crossed in front of her. “Where’d you get the book?”

“I brought it from Copper Creek. I didn’t have time to finish it, and I couldn’t wait to see how it ended.” He winked at her.

“Weren’t you afraid—”

“Nah. It was worth the risk. It’s a good book.” He held it up.

Kathia’s mouth dropped open. The cover was adorned with a shirtless hunk and an immodestly clad woman locked in an impassioned embrace. She’d never figured him for a romance novel kind of guy.

He pursed his lips. “It’s *an historical novel*.”

“If you say so.” Kathia grinned.

Ruark cleared his throat. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Good. Doc says one week in the sling. Then I can start using it, gently. It should be like new in three to four weeks. Did you know that Sunleean heal marvelously quickly?”

Ruark smiled at her. “Yes. It’s one benefit of our frequently dangerous lives.”

“Cool.”

“We should be back at the House in just over two weeks. You’ll be safe there.”

“For how long? Lorcan will come after us. He knows we’re here, and he’s dying to get his hands on Jon and the Kalare stone.”

“Donal’s men will hold him back. We’ll make it to Sabriel and give him the stone. All will be as it should.”

“You sound so confident.”

“Kate, I’ve been a Cathal warrior since I was twelve. Now granted, eighteen of those years weren’t spent in Eavan, but I haven’t forgotten all the ways Sabriel and The One watched over us when I was a new warrior. And how they’ve provided for us on this journey, too. I believe in the triumph of good.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re old.”

“Hey, Lady, it isn’t about age. It’s about mileage. And if this journey is any indicator, you’re no longer under warranty either.”

Unable to formulate a witty response, she settled for making a face and sticking out her tongue.

“That’s mature.” He smacked her knee.

Wilyam moaned and rolled from his back to his side. Ruark rose from the floor and motioned for Kathia to follow him. They walked the border of the encampment as the sun lowered itself over the distant hill. The sky turned pink and orange. The clouds were a deep, bluish gray.

Kathia was suddenly homesick. “When can I see Jon, and Jace, and Sam?”

Ruark looked down at the beautiful woman, now lean and tan from their long trek. “I don’t know. Sabriel—”

“—will reveal it. In time.” She blew out her breath. “Doesn’t anyone make a decision around here without Sabriel’s input?”

“What’s your hurry?”

“I want to see my family again. I’ve never been away this long. There was this one time, I was eight. Jon sent me to summer camp for two weeks, and I almost died of loneliness. I never told him, but I tried to sneak away and call him every couple of hours. The counselors took away my phone privileges. I had to write letters. Three a day. But I only mailed one.”

“I know,” Ruark said quietly.

Kathia stopped walking and stared at him.

“I was there.”

“And you never told me!”

“Lord Jonavon wouldn’t permit me to reveal myself. But I watched you every day, all day. I made sure you were safe.”

She put her good hand on her hip and frowned at him. “I wish you would have said something. I wouldn’t have been so freaked out.”

Ruark’s face broke into a wide grin. “Oh, I don’t know. There was a certain brown-haired, little jerk who took away some of your homesickness, if I recall.”

“Commander Ruark! You were *spying* on me?”

“I lost track of you at the swimming hole. When I found you behind the chow building, it didn’t appear to me like you were missing anyone.”

“You are a bad, bad man.” Kathia covered her mouth.

“No. *You* were a bad, bad girl.”

“It was just a kiss. And my first one, if I remember correctly.”

“I know. Believe me, if he’d tried more than that I’d have snapped his wimpy little body in half.”

Kathia laughed at her big, brave warrior. “Huh. Who would have thought? The Supreme Commander of the Cathal, jealous of a nine year old boy.”

“I was not jealous. I was angry at myself for losing track of you. It has always been my highest honor to guard you...and your family.”

Kathia raised her eyebrows and smirked.

As darkness crept into the camp, Ruark walked Kathia back to her tent. He left her with a wish for a peaceful night’s sleep and a promise to share breakfast in the morning. She watched his large, well-muscled shoulders as he walked away. Then she went inside and fell swiftly to sleep, to dream about knights, and princesses, and white horses.

* * *

It took five days for reinforcements to arrive at the encampment. Donal’s men caught sight of an occasional Cormac lurking in the nearby trees. But the demons did not strike. They seemed to love these games of cat and mouse. The Cathal were tense and on constant alert.

The neighboring general, Alexis, sent a regiment to replace the men lost in battle. It would reinforce the Cathal numbers if Lorcan did attack again. He also sent a message of personal greeting for Commander Ruark. Ruark smiled as he read the note. He and Alexis had grown up in the same village and been called together to be Cathal. Their friendship was old and deep, second only to Ruark’s friendship with Wilyam. Ruark had appointed Alexis as a general just before he left Eavan. He regretted their journey had not allowed him to visit his trusted friend. He vowed that when things were settled, Alexis’s camp would be first on his list of stops.

After breakfast one morning, as the travelers packed their gear and prepared to set out, Donal came to Ruark's tent. "Permission to enter, Commander?"

Ruark smiled. "Permission is not necessary, old friend. You are always welcome in my tent."

"Thank you, sir." Donal watched Ruark stuff a pack with supplies. "You're almost a week behind in your mission, and Lorcan could return at any time. I would like to offer horses for the remainder of your journey."

"We couldn't possibly take your horses. You will need them when Lorcan returns."

"You must hasten to the House of Joakin. We will manage without a few horses."

Ruark grasped the general's hand in a sturdy handshake. "As you wish. But I will have them returned when we arrive at the House. Your horses are the finest in Eavan. It won't do to have them serving anywhere but on the front line."

Donal shook his head. "Nonsense. The Commander of the Cathal and the Lady of Eavan deserve the best horses I have. And on horseback you could cut the time in half."

Ruark scratched his chin in thought. "Yes. With steady riding we'll make the House within the week."

"I'll see to the horses." Donal left the tent.

Ruark looked at Wilyam. "He's a good man. He's sacrificed much for the cause."

The first officer watched the departing general. "Probably more than we'll ever know."

Kathia was more than a little resistant to the idea of riding a horse, especially with an injured shoulder.

"I thought all girls liked horses," Ruark complained.

"Sure. I like them. When they're over *there*, running around the paddock. And I'm over *here*, watching." She was pointing animatedly.

Wilyam chuckled. "Your horse is gentle. If it helps, you can ride between us. We'll take it slow."

Donal was trying hard to hide a grin. “So we find Lady Kathia’s Achilles heel at last.”

She glared at him, and it wasn’t all in good humor. “I’ll ride the dumb horse. But if I fall off and break my...self, you two—” she pointed at Ruark and Wilyam in a threatening manner “—will never hear the end of it.”

With a little help from Wilyam, she stuck her foot in the stirrup and swung her leg over the back of the chestnut mare. “Let’s hit the road before I change my mind.”

“Lady Kathia—”

“Hey, Commander Ruark, I remember a certain Lord Jonavon telling me this wasn’t a democracy. So, get it in gear.”

Ruark and Wilyam climbed onto their horses and bid farewell to Donal and his men.

The warriors saluted as the trio rode single file out of the encampment. “Travel in peace, in the name of The One and His messenger,” they called.

“So be it!” replied Ruark, Wilyam, and Kathia.

Chapter Thirty-Two

They stopped often. Kathia was unaccustomed to long hours in a saddle and Wilyam suspected she would soon begin to feel a significant amount of discomfort that would rival the ache in her shoulder. He did his best to choose a less rugged path. They traveled through heavy tree cover interspersed with open, rolling hills and sun-soaked valleys.

The Season of Sun was six months of perfect weather; sunshine, temperatures in the high seventies, long hours of daylight, and cool nights. The Season of Rain, the other six months of the year, was not as pleasant. It rained almost every day, sometimes torrentially. The roads often became impassable. There were fewer daylight hours, and the sky was constantly gray and clouded to downpour at any moment.

Their journey had been timed to take advantage of the best weather. Wilyam knew this was no accident. Sabriel had been aware of how long it would take Kathia to adjust to her calling. He had been patient. And she had proven to be fully up to the task. Wilyam was proud of the Lady of Eavan. She had the spirit of Katriel and the determination and sense of honor of Joakin. He couldn't wait to tell Lord Jonavon how well she had done.

After two days of travel, they came upon a small village. Kathia was relieved to find a friendly community. Once again the townspeople wanted to bow before Lady Kathia, and she would have none of it.

“Let's send a memo. No more bowing.”

“I'll get right on it,” Ruark replied with a wink.

Despite her protests, the people continued to show deference. Kathia eventually gave up and decided to get used to it. After all, it was a wonderful show of respect, and mingled with her embarrassment was a twinge of awe for the villagers who were so loyal to her family.

Their hosts took the horses to the stable and brought the travelers to an inn to wash up and rest. A meal of fresh meat and garden vegetables was prepared, and a

small band of minstrels entertained Kathia, Ruark, and Wilyam with lively music, while the locals danced happily around their table. The keeper of the inn confided to Ruark that this was the first time in ages he'd seen the villagers so carefree and cheerful. "She causes our hearts to sing."

"She has that effect on us all," Ruark agreed.

Another four days of productive travel brought them to the village of Tarahyaush, a short distance from the House. Kathia could barely contain her joy to be back in this familiar place where she already felt kindred to the community. She remembered the name of each person she'd been introduced to, even though more than two months had passed since they'd started the trip. She went to the gardener's shop to visit a special friend she'd often thought about.

The shopkeeper bowed deeply. "Lady Kathia, you again honor me with your presence."

Kathia nodded. "Our journey is almost complete. I couldn't return to the House without stopping to see my very special friend, Hope."

The woman turned toward the rear of the store. "Come, Hope! Someone is here to see you."

A golden-haired girl skipped from the back room. Her big blue eyes lit up when she saw Kathia. She clapped her tiny hands together. "Lady Kat-ee-a! You come back!"

Kathia crouched down and lightly stroked the girl's silky hair. "Of course I came back. It was the vision of your sweet face that warmed me on cold nights when I felt all alone."

Hope beamed in delight. "I pray for you every night. I ask The One to keep you and the big men safe. He hears and answers."

"He sure does." Kathia looked solemnly into the little girl's eyes.

Hope nodded vigorously. "He told me that one night, you were cold, and sad, and missing someone. He came to help. He said, 'member to pray every day.' So I did!"

Kathia's eyes filled with tears as she remembered that terrible night when she'd believed Ruark to be dead. She recalled the sting of her grief, as well as Wilyam's, as

they'd huddled in the cave and searched their souls for strength to keep going. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Hope reached her diminutive hand to fondle Kathia's sling. "What happen to you arm?"

"I was in a battle."

The blue eyes unblinkingly searched Kathia's face. "Lorcan. He hurt you."

"I hurt him back." Kathia gently placed her hand on Hope's head and smiled with enlightenment. This remarkable creature had the gift. She was empathic. Kathia rose to face the girl's mother. "She's a gem, Lilly. You are so blessed."

"I know. Since her father passed on, she's been my daily delight."

Kathia suddenly understood the aura of sadness that surrounded the woman, and her heart went out to the young mother. Even in this world, the heartache of having to raise a child alone, when it wasn't your choice to do so, seemed inescapable. "Sabriel waits for our return. We have fulfilled the first step of The Call."

"Not yet! But soon! Happy day! Happy day!" Hope sang as she skipped to the back room to resume her play.

Kathia watched her curiously. Lilly handed Kathia a small jar filled with yellow herbs. "Mix this in your tea, once a day. It will speed the healing of your shoulder. And it has a wonderful, sweet flavor."

Kathia thanked her.

Ruark and Wilyam were waiting with the horses when she came outside. They rode for the House of Joakin at a far quicker pace than they had in days.

Kathia's breath caught in her throat when she saw the stone gateway to the property. The villagers had cleared the logs and boulders from the entrance. The iron gate had been polished and oiled in a sign of welcome to the weary travelers, and in the belief they would surely return from their long journey.

Ruark swung the gate wide for Wilyam and Kathia. After carefully closing it, he mounted his black stallion and took off at a gallop. Wilyam followed closely. Kathia was content to trail behind at a light trot.

When she came in sight of the House, Kathia knew she was home. The enormous lodge welcomed her with its log and fieldstone front and large windows surrounding the entry. In the background, a line of snow-capped mountains framed the structure.

Immediately surrounding the vast open lawn was a thick grove of trees. She could see several buildings on the perimeter of the grounds; a stable, storage sheds, two small cottages. She couldn't wait to go exploring. She remembered Ruark's promise to show her every inch of the place.

When she arrived at the porch, Ruark came down the steps to take her horse. Kathia patted the gentle animal and thanked her for an uneventful ride. She sat on the stone steps and waited for Ruark and Wilyam to groom and feed the horses. Their gear lay all around her feet. Kathia didn't have the strength to take it inside.

Ruark and Wilyam returned shortly and hauled their belongings into the entry. Kathia drug herself into the immense sitting room. She collapsed on the nearest sofa.

Ruark crossed his arms. "Um, your Ladyship. We need to call on Sabriel."

"Isn't he all-knowing? Surely he can come to us." She waved a hand as her head lulled lazily to one side.

"Don't make me carry you upstairs."

"I'll give you five bucks if you do."

Without a word, Ruark crossed the room and swept Kathia into his arms, being careful not to bump her bad shoulder. She snuggled against his chest, happy to be in a warm, safe place. Wilyam carried the gear, and they made their way back to the beginning of their journey.

The attic was as they'd left it. Ruark set Kathia on her feet, and she peered around expectantly. "So, now—"

The room began to glow with a pale blue light. Sabriel appeared. Wilyam and Ruark went down on one knee and bowed their heads. Kathia knelt beside them and lowered her head, too.

"Greetings in the name of The One. Rise, my champions! You have returned in triumph. The way was long and often treacherous, but you succeeded as I knew you would."

They stood. Kathia smiled at Sabriel. “It’s good to see you again. There were times I wasn’t sure I would.”

“Kathia, there may have been fear in your heart on occasion, but you never wavered in your commitment to The Call. You are truly Pure. And Ruark, the Champion, you served The One well. You fought bravely and prevailed. Wilyam, the Protector. You sheltered Lady Kathia with your very life and sacrificed friendship in the name of righteousness. The hardest of choices.”

“We brought the stone.” Kathia reached into her pouch and took out the shiny rock.

“First things first.” Sabriel stepped forward and touched Kathia’s shoulder.

She felt a warm glow, which strengthened to a swirling sensation of heat. The constant ache she’d felt for days subsided immediately. She removed the sling and rotated her shoulder. There was no pain. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “Now, the stone.” He held out his hand, and she placed it in his palm.

Sabriel lifted it to the light. A kaleidoscope of color shimmered in the center. The outer layers alternated between bright blue, and light and deep purple. It was breathtaking. “A rare and exquisite token. It will make a lovely addition to your collection.”

Kathia’s face was a mask of confusion. Wilyam and Ruark looked equally puzzled.

“Huh?” Kathia said finally.

Sabriel handed her the stone. “I have no need of it.”

Kathia’s confusion turned to exasperation. “Please don’t tell me we went half-way across this world for a worthless piece of junk.”

“It is not worthless. On the contrary, Kalare stones are extremely rare and valuable. There is only one place in all of Sunlee they may be procured. And as you know, it’s no easy task to get there. They make stunning pieces of jewelry.”

Sabriel stood silently, his hands folded in front of him, a pleasant expression on his face. Kathia looked at Wilyam. Wilyam looked at Ruark. Ruark looked at Kathia.

“The Call was not about the destination,” Sabriel explained. “It was about the journey.”

Kathia stared at him blankly. “Say again?”

“The journey has changed you. Revealed you.”

“Yeah. I’m ten pounds lighter, and I’ve got a tan most bimbos would kill for, and I can scale a mountain in record time, but I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

Sabriel, the infinitely patient one, continued in calm tones. “What else did you learn?”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Give us something to work with here.”

“What do you know about yourself? What happened in the cave of Cian? What did you say to Wilyam? What cherished desire of your heart did you reveal?”

Kathia hoped they weren’t heading down *that* path. Her eyes filled with dread. She glanced at Ruark, and her face immediately flushed. “Well, I said...I said... It was a very emotional moment and I... What do you want from me?” she said loudly.

“I want you to speak the desire of your heart. It was the purpose of your journey.”

Kathia hung her head in humiliation. “You want me to admit I’m in love with Riley.” She prayed that only Sabriel heard her.

“Exactly, Kathia. Thank you.”

Sabriel turned to Ruark. The commander straightened his posture. “And Ruark, what did you learn? What was revealed to you?”

He shrugged. “What do you mean?”

“As you lay in the cave, thinking you would never be whole again. Wondering how long it would take to perish. What brought you strength? And hope? And encouragement?”

“You did.” Ruark nodded decisively.

“And who else? Who did you long to see? Who did you wish to touch one last time? Who—”

“Kate! Okay? I’m in love with her! I have been since her first day at Simpson College. Are you happy now?”

Sabriel chuckled. “My happiness is irrelevant. Yours is my concern.”

Kathia stifled a laugh. She could see Ruark was annoyed by Sabriel's cryptic speech. Maybe now he would be more sympathetic to her impertinent outbursts at the ancient messenger.

Sabriel lifted his hands. "The first journey of The Call was a journey of discovery. You were to ascertain your love for each other and bring it to fruition."

"What do you mean *fruition*?" Kathia demanded. "It's not permitted for us to be together! Riley said so. Will said so. Jon and Jace said so. Even Sam told me to back off, and she never recommends backing away from anyone so hot."

Ruark grinned before turning to Sabriel again. "Tell me how this is possible. It's been forbidden since the beginning."

"Traditions of men," Sabriel answered.

"It's written in the Cathal code."

"Traditions of men."

"It was prohibited by Lord Jonavon, personally."

"Traditions of men."

"Jon told you to stay away from me? What a jerk!" Kathia interjected.

"But," Ruark continued, "I would have to give up my calling."

"Traditions of men."

Kathia started to get the picture long before Ruark did. "Riley."

Ruark was absorbed in his logic. "How can I be the Cathal commander and have a *wife*?"

"Riley."

"What about my obligations? What about my warriors?"

"Riley."

"And does this mean everyone can run around getting married and throw their calling away?"

Riley!"

Ruark turned to Kathia, finally aware she'd been calling his name. "Yes?"

"Marry me."

"But..." Ruark looked helplessly at Sabriel.

"The decision is yours, Ruark."

He stood silently for a long time. “Yes,” he answered, finally. “Of course I’ll marry you. I can’t think of a better way to fulfill my call to protect you than to be by your side every day for the rest of my life.”

Kathia took his hands and tipped her head up, inches from his lips. He lowered his mouth to hers.

Sabriel lifted his arms. “It is done. We will make preparations for the joining.”

Kathia pulled away from Ruark and raised her hand timidly.

Sabriel laughed. “Yes, Kathia?”

“I have one small request.”

“Anything for the Lady of Eavan.”

“I would like Jon, and Jace, and Sam at the joining. We can’t do this without them.”

“Of course. It will be taken care of it immediately.”

“And one last thing.” Ruark turned to Wilyam, who had remained stoic during the events of the past several minutes. “Just exactly how much of this is a surprise to you?”

Wilyam’s face was an impenetrable facade of innocence. Only the laughter in his eyes betrayed him. “I had my suspicions, sir. I will implore the Seventh Right of the *Code of the Cathal Warrior*.”

Kathia eyed him suspiciously. “He just pleaded the Fifth, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Ruark said.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Samantha O'Neill could not sleep. She tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable. The bed was unfamiliar, even though she'd slept in it for two months now. She'd been at the Olympic volleyball complex in Colorado Springs since early June. She'd made the team and fulfilled her lifelong dream. Somehow, the dream seemed hollow and unsatisfying since her best friend in the whole world was not there to share it with her. She missed Kate. She missed her hometown. She missed her dad and her brother. She missed Jonathan and Jace. She missed Copper Creek and her college. It had been a difficult decision to not return to Simpson College in August. Sam hoped it was the right one.

Modern technology allowed her to stay in constant contact with friends and family, all except for Kate. As she lay in her darkened room on the uncomfortable bunk bed, she wondered where Kate was and what she was doing. Was she thinking about Sam? Or had she forgotten all about her friend, while on her new and important quest? She wondered about Riley and Will. Were they safe? Would they ever come back? Her throat burned as tears welled in her eyes. It was hard to swallow. For the first time in her life, Sam was scared and wanted to go home. Sam had always been the girl who would try anything once, twice, endlessly, if it gave her a rush. Maybe she was growing up. Maybe this was what it felt like to be an adult. Suddenly, people and places mattered more than they used to. Friends and relationships were priceless. It wasn't all about the fun anymore. It was about roots, and heritage, and the deeper meaning of life.

She sighed loudly and heard her roommate rustle in the bunk below. Maybe it was the darkness that made her insecure. Perhaps she would feel better in the light of day. Yes. That was it. She'd get over it, if she could just get a good night's sleep and a hot meal. They had practice at eight o'clock. If she slept now, it would be a good four hours of rest before she had to eat breakfast and get dressed for the morning session. It was enough for a young, energetic girl like her.

Her racing mind slowed, and she drifted into a pre-slumber state of quietness. An image filled her mind. She and Kate were playing beach volleyball. It was the

Olympics. They were in the gold medal match. She heard the roar of their fans. Chants of “USA!” filled the air. A blanket of humidity hung around them. They were sweaty and covered in sand. When Sam moved, it felt like treading water. Everything happened in slow motion.

The beach disappeared, and she was alone, beneath a bright spotlight. A man dressed in red entered the large circle of light. His eyes were the color of emeralds. Sam thought he was particularly handsome. “Hot” was the word she would have used if Kate had been there.

The man smiled as if he read her thoughts. She blushed.

“Hello, Samantha.”

She startled. “How do you know my name?”

“Your friend Kathia told me. Forgive me. You know her as Kate.”

“Kate? Where is she? Is she safe? Can I see her?”

“All in good time, Samantha. I am Sabriel the Ancient. I called Kathia, Ruark, and Wilyam on their journey. The time has come to celebrate the journey’s end. They wish for you to be part of that celebration.”

Sam’s heart raced. “When? Where?”

“Return to Jonavon. Wait patiently. They will come for you.”

Sam could hardly contain her excitement. “I will! I’ll leave this weekend!” She paused. “Will that be too late?”

Sabriel smiled at her enthusiasm. “No, my child. Travel safely. The One and His messenger will watch over you.”

Sabriel disappeared in a flash of pale blue light. Sam was immediately awake, amazed that it was already morning. It felt like she’d only slept a few minutes. She leapt from her bunk and began to pack her duffel bag.

Her roommate sat up, rubbing her eyes. “Whatcha doin’?”

“I have to go back to Springville. It’s a...family emergency.”

“I thought you were from Chicago.”

“Oh, yeah. I am. Long story.”

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s excellent!” Sam headed to the bathroom.

After placing a call to the head coach, she called Jonathan. “Jon! It’s Sam. Guess what?”

Jonathan’s voice was full of amusement. “You got a message from Sabriel?”

“Yeah! He wants me to come to Springville. I’ve got a pass. I’m packed and ready to go. I just need –”

“Go to the airport. There’s an e-ticket in your name at the Northwest counter. Your flight leaves at eleven. We’ll pick you up in Minneapolis. Don’t forget your ID.”

“On my way!” She hung up before Jonathan could say good-bye.

When her plane landed that afternoon, Jonathan and Jace were waiting at baggage claim. Sam rushed into Jace’s arms.

He squeezed her tightly. “Sammy! How in the heck are ya?”

“I couldn’t be better. Prepare yourself for a non-stop talkfest from here to Springville.”

Jonathan laughed and hugged Sam, too. “I’ve got earplugs.”

Jace frowned at Jonathan. “*I’m* excited to hear about your adventures at the training complex, Sam.”

Sam laughed. “And I’m excited to hear what Sabriel had to say to you.”

Jonathan grabbed Sam’s bag from the carousel and threw his arm across her shoulders. “I’m kidding, Sam. Fill us in. I’m dying to hear every detail.”

She talked all the way to the Jeep.

When they finally arrived at the house in Springville, Sam breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn’t grown up there, but it sure felt like home.

Jace took her things upstairs, and they settled in the family room while Jonathan put the finishing touches on supper. In her excitement, Sam had forgotten to eat, and the smell of pork roast and potatoes almost made her swoon. Jonathan had had the good sense to throw something in the Crock-Pot before they left for the airport. Sam was thankful for his thoughtfulness. He always took care of everyone’s needs. It seemed to be his gift.

After a delicious dinner, they returned to the family room and stared at each other for a few minutes.

“What now?” Sam said finally.

Jace shrugged. “I’m not sure. I guess we should find something to do while we wait.”

“Monopoly?” Jonathan suggested.

“You always clean us out,” Sam complained.

“Charades?”

Jace wrinkled his nose. “Not my favorite game.”

A familiar voice sounded behind them. “How about spin the bottle?”

Jonathan turned. A young woman stood on the far side of the family room. She bore a striking resemblance to his sister, except this woman’s hair was much lighter, her skin much darker, and there wasn’t an ounce of body fat on her lean frame. Each of the muscles in her arms and shoulders was distinctly outlined. On either side of her stood an equally tanned and mighty Cathal warrior.

“Katie,” Jonathan whispered. He scaled the back of the loveseat to hug her.

Jace was right behind him, with Sam hot on his trail. She screamed excitedly and jumped into Will’s arms. For once, the warrior dispensed with his formal behavior, laughed, and hugged her. Riley was also the recipient of Sam’s enthusiastic greeting, and lastly, Kate.

“Where have you been?” Sam scolded her best friend. “I’ve been waiting for over two months.”

“It felt more like six. And Sam, we don’t exactly have email, remember?”

“Of course I remember. I just didn’t expect to miss you so much.”

“Back at ya.” Kate returned her friend’s ferocious hug.

Sam squirmed uncomfortably. “Kate, I’m sort of needing my rib cage in one piece.”

“Sorry.”

“Sit down, everyone,” Jonathan said. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Jace went to the kitchen for snacks while the rest of them settled in the family room. Riley laced fingers with Kate, and they plopped on the loveseat.

Sam stared at Kate and Riley's hands. She grinned broadly. "I gather there's a long story you're dying to tell us?"

Jace brought cookies and before Kate said one word, she ate a half dozen of the little home-baked pieces of heaven. "I've missed these more than anything."

Three frowning faces glared at her.

Kate grimaced. "I was speaking strictly from a food perspective. You guys know I missed you the most, in the *people* sense of missing."

Sam put her hand up, palm flat, and arm extended in Kate's direction. "Whatever."

"Tell us about the journey," Jonathan said impatiently. "We want all the details."

Will, Kate, and Riley took turns retelling their tale of adventure. Whenever one of them left out some seemingly important detail, one of the others would interrupt their dialog to add the vital piece of information. The result was that Sam, Jonathan, and Jace appeared to be watching a tennis match as they turned their heads back and forth, focusing on whomever was telling the story at any given moment.

When Riley came to the end of the account, he stopped and looked helplessly at Kate.

Jonathan's gaze traveled from Riley to his sister. "This is the part where you tell me you're getting married, right?"

Kate smirked at him. "Yeah. Only it's supposed to be a surprise."

"Well, Sabriel told me about it. Apparently, he felt I needed some time to adjust to the idea. He indicated you two presented a pretty fine argument against it. But in the end, I had to admit – the reasoning was sound."

Kate's relief was obvious. "We want the joining to be in Eavan. In the village of Tarahyaush, near our ancestral home."

"I take it we're all traveling back for this?" Jace said.

"Yes. We only have a week to get everything planned. I want Jon to give me away. And Sam," Kate turned to her friend, "if you're willing to come with us, I'd like you to be my maid of honor."

"Heck, yeah! I'd love to see this place you've all been talking about. I just have one detail to take care of. Then I'm all yours."

* * *

When they arrived in the attic of the ancestral home, Jonavon was overcome with emotion. A flood of childhood memories returned in an instant. He vividly recalled the last time he'd been in the room. He'd been six years old then, and it seemed like yesterday. He remembered the fear in his mother's eyes, even as she told him in soothing tones all would be well. He remembered holding his baby sister as she gurgled happily. He remembered his earnest oath to protect her.

Jonavon watched his friend Jorryn and knew he was having a similar experience of recollection.

Samantha stood in the center of the room and looked around in awe. She pinched herself and giggled loudly.

Kathia, Ruark, and Wilyam guided them through the attic and down the stairs, showing them the bedroom suites, dining room, living room, sitting room, and main entrance. Jonavon saw that the House needed much work. He was already planning how to fix this, and restore that, and modify the vast spaces. His carpenter's eye was bright with possibilities.

* * *

Plans for the celebration consumed the next six days. The community joined in the preparations wholeheartedly. Shop fronts were cleaned, and stained glass windows polished until they dazzled in the bright sunshine. Vines interwoven with brightly colored flowers were draped on every lamppost of the main street, and the cobblestones were scrubbed to a lustrous sheen.

Kathia worked with a local dressmaker to design and sew her and Ruark's special garments. Jonavon, Jorryn, and several townsmen scoured every corner of the ancestral home and surrounding property, in preparation for the reception. The House of Joakin had not hosted a banquet since the joining of Joakin and Katriel, over twenty-five years ago.

When Samantha wasn't busy performing her maid of honor duties, she spent time with Wilyam or Jorryn, exploring the town and surrounding countryside. She quickly fell in love with the picturesque region of Eavan and its people.

One day as she and Jorryn walked through the village, the dressmaker called to them from her shop doorway. “Sir Jorryn, Mistress Samantha. Come, I have a surprise.”

Their curiosity piqued, they entered her quaint shop. She went to the back room and came out with something in her hands. Jorryn stood still, his eyes wide. Samantha’s brow furrowed. “What is it Ja...Jorryn?”

The woman held a long royal blue dress, the color of the Sunlee sky. It was made of satin-like fabric and shimmered in the muted light of the shop. The top was sleeveless, with a bateau neckline.

Jorryn’s voice was no more than a whisper. “Where did you get that?”

The shopkeeper’s expression was full of warmth. “T’was your mother, Jacquelyn’s. She ordered it made just before...” Her voice faded away. “I finished and kept it. I knew you would come back for it someday.”

Jorryn lightly touched the fragile fabric. His eyes filled with tears. “It’s amazing.” He turned to Samantha. “Would you wear it? For the joining?”

“But...it was...your mother’s. I couldn’t possibly hope to do it justice.”

“I want you to wear my clan color. To help me represent my family. To honor them and their memory. Besides, what else have you got to wear?”

Samantha looked from the dressmaker to Jorryn and back. “I guess I could try it on.”

The dressmaker motioned for Samantha to follow her to the back room. A few moments later, Samantha emerged. She was a vision in the deep blue dress. It fit as if it had been made for her alone. As she came closer to Jorryn, the soft lights of the shop framed her golden hair like a halo. The angelic effect was heightened by her ivory skin in the iridescent dress.

Jorryn touched her cheek. “You belong here.”

Samantha beamed under his intense gaze. “There’s just one problem.” She raised the hem of the dress. Her bare toes peeked out. “I don’t have any shoes.”

“Problem solved,” Jorryn said. “Women don’t wear them at joinings. It’s tradition.”

Samantha scoffed. “Please don’t tell me it’s that barbaric *barefoot and pregnant* thing rearing its ugly head.”

“Not at all. It’s symbolic of a woman’s power. She is a being of great mystery, kindred spirit to the earth. Not created to be tamed, but to move freely, like the wind. And to be loved unconditionally by the man on whom she chooses to show her favor.”

Samantha nodded vigorously. “That’s what I’m saying. Here’s to Girl Power!”

Jorryn laughed and turned to the shopkeeper. “What do we owe you?”

“It is my gift. My payment is to see it worn by a beautiful woman at such a blessed event. Go in peace, in the name of The One.”

“So be it,” Jorryn and Samantha answered in unison.

Chapter Thirty-Four

A pan flute played a happy tune as Hope strutted down the grassy aisle, tossing an occasional tulip petal. Her mother stood proudly in her place among the townspeople. She and the other guests would remain standing until the bride and groom joined hands. The community, dressed in their finest, watched Samantha and Sir Jorryn follow Hope down the walkway. Samantha wore the lovely royal blue dress, and Jorryn was clad in black leather pants with a royal blue vest. They walked arm in arm and moved to Sabriel's right.

Sabriel stood under an archway, thick with cascading white and dark blue wildflowers. To his left stood Commander Ruark and First Officer Wilyam. Wilyam was dressed in the dark brown of his Cathal warrior clan. Today, he wore his ceremonial sword. It hung at his side, the sun glinting off the highly polished blade.

All eyes turned to the end of the aisle where Lady Kathia stood with Lord Jonavon. She wore navy blue silk. The square neckline of the dress was trimmed in chocolate brown. Her only jewelry was her mother's stunning sapphire necklace. Her hair was in French braids, with brown leather cords and white wildflowers intertwined throughout. Wisps of cinnamon-colored hair fell on her forehead and cheekbones, and lifted in the gentle breeze. The sun glistened on the bronze skin of her bare arms. She positively glowed with the radiance of joy. Jonavon stood proudly beside her. He was exquisite in his navy blue leather pants and vest. His hazel eyes were bluer today, and a charming grin lit his face.

Kathia glided down the aisle at Jonavon's side. Her feet were bare, and she loved the feel of the cool grass under her toes. *It's the best day of my life.* They made their way toward her future husband, who stood tall and noble. The sight of him left her breathless. He was dressed in the pants and vest she'd designed for him. The vest was the rich brown color of his Cathal clan and was open down the front. Along the edge of the buttonless vest was a thin ribbon of navy blue fabric. It was tradition in Eavan for a bride and groom to wear their own clan color, and the color of their mate somewhere on

their bridal garb. After the joining, the couple would wear both clan colors in honor of their union.

Ruark stood with his hands at his side. His green eyes watched his bride's every move. Kathia glanced at Wilyam, who showered her with a warm smile. When Kathia and Jonavon came to the end of their walk, Ruark winked at her.

The music stopped and Sabriel raised his arms. "Greetings to all, in the name of The One. We gather on this day to celebrate the love of two people – brought together by destiny, and kept together by their commitment to one another."

He turned his attention to Jonavon. "Lord Jonavon, do you give your blessing to this union? And do you invite the husband of Lady Kathia into your household and into your heart?"

"So be it," Jonavon said. He turned to his little sister and gave her a lingering hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek. He pulled away and took his place beside Samantha and Jorryn.

Kathia joined hands with Ruark, and there was a soft rustling sound as the guests were seated on the lush grass.

Sabriel continued. "Here you are, ready to begin your life together. I must say, I am thrilled to perform the joining for the daughter of Joakin and Katriel. And I am also honored to participate in the first joining of a Cathal warrior.

"It's unfortunate your birth parents aren't able to be with us today, but we know they are here in spirit, and you are privileged to share it also with your extended family, friends, and community.

"Lady Kathia, I was there the day you were born. I have watched you grow into a woman of great intelligence and dedication. I have also seen your fearlessness in the face of grave danger. It fills me with joy unspeakable that you have found your soul mate. I knew you would choose someone who shares your passion for life, and who displays such intensity and commitment to everything they touch.

"Commander Ruark, you are a fine officer and a good man. I have no doubt you will perform your duties as husband with the same enthusiasm, sense of commitment, and inner joy you have shown when protecting Eavan. We all sleep better at night knowing you are on the watch. You are our Champion."

Sabriel turned to Samantha. “The rings, please.” Samantha carefully removed the smooth platinum band from her thumb and put it in his outstretched hand. Sabriel turned to Wilyam, who presented a tinier version of Ruark’s ring. It was also set with three large, princess-cut pieces of the Kalare stone.

Sabriel put the thick band in Kathia’s waiting hand. “Place this on his finger and speak your vows.”

Kathia slid the heavy ring onto Ruark’s finger. “I take you for my husband.” She lost herself in his green eyes. “This is for the rest of my life. I choose to be with you because I find such purpose and joy in your presence. I know contentment and peace in the shadow of your love.”

Ruark looked down at her. Barefoot, she was several inches shorter than him. He placed the ring on her finger. “I take you as my wife,” he whispered, “for now and always. Your passion and sense of humor inspire me. I love you with all of my being and look forward to sharing each new adventure of life with you.”

They turned back to Sabriel.

“By my authority as the Messenger of The Holy One, I declare you are wife and husband. Kiss her, Ruark.”

Commander Ruark spun his new bride, leaned her back, and kissed her. The audience broke out in raucous applause. Kathia took Ruark’s hand and pulled him down the grassy aisle.

Lord Jonavon watched them with a grin and announced, “Everyone is invited to the House of Joakin for a reception.”

The roadway to the House was filled with a long procession of merry people, led by the couple. On the neatly trimmed grounds outside the main entrance were several banquet tables loaded with cake, ice cream, and other goodies. The chef of Tarahyaush had prepared a special dish of make-your-own tacos at the bride’s request. The villagers, who had never seen such a strange dish, chalked it up to the mysterious cuisine of the region where the ruling family had spent their exile. They shrugged and dug into the bizarre, half-moon shaped victuals with the gusto of a litter of kyara at their first meal.

After everyone had their fill of tacos and punch, there was a traditional cake-feeding episode. Then the bride and groom headed to the grass dance floor for their first dance. As Ruark twirled his new wife, Kathia became oblivious to the guests. She chatted intimately with Ruark, ignoring everyone, until the best man cut in on them.

“May I?” Wilyam said.

Ruark hesitated and pulled Kathia closer.

“Now is not the time to pull rank, Commander.” Wilyam grinned.

“Go ahead. I guess.” Ruark smiled at his first officer.

Kathia patted Ruark’s chest. “We’ll be right back.”

“She likes to lead,” Ruark called after them.

Wilyam and Kathia both laughed.

Before the minstrels finished the musical piece, Jorryn cut in on Wilyam. “Buzz off, Will.”

Kathia spun away from Wilyam and into Jorryn’s arms. “Later, Will. Thanks.”

After a respectable amount of time, Jonavon tapped his best friend on the shoulder and cut in when Jorryn turned the wrong way. “You’re needed in the kitchen.” Jonavon whirled away with the bride.

Jorryn stood with his hands on his hips, a disgruntled expression on his face. “Hmph,” he snorted. “I’ve got to get me some dance lessons.”

Brother and sister glided effortlessly around the grass.

“Do you remember that first lesson?” Kathia said.

“How could I forget? Your head came to the middle of my chest.”

“It was a hundred years ago.”

“Seems like it, doesn’t it?”

Kathia squeezed Jonavon’s biceps. “None of my high school partners could hold a candle to Jonathan Arnold’s moves.”

“You were a quick study.” Jonavon’s eyes became misty. “It reminded me of dancing with Mom.”

Kathia kissed his cheek.

Samantha stepped behind Jonavon, matched his sway, and tapped his shoulder. “Move along, Lord Jonavon,” she commanded.

He turned Kathia over to Samantha without missing a step. “You’re lucky I’m in a good mood.” He made his way to the buffet table, where the other dance rejects were hanging out.

Samantha and Kathia drifted around the dance floor, talking and laughing. They were gorgeous—the blonde angel in royal blue, and the dark-haired beauty in navy.

It was almost midnight before the last guests said their good-byes and headed down the path to the village. Ruark stood with his arm around Kathia and waved to the departing people. Her head rested on his shoulder. All around them, the hired staff cleared tables and put away furniture under Jonavon’s watchful eye. Kathia smiled at her big brother, who winked in return.

She turned toward Ruark and put her palms on his chest. “How long are we obligated to put in an appearance here?”

Without a word, Ruark swept his bride off her feet and carried her into the House. He took her upstairs to her parent’s bedroom and closed the door.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Over the next several days, Ruark took Kathia on a tour of the grounds. He showed her every room of the large house, and every nook and cranny of each outlying building. Kathia loved exploring the vast estate, and listened carefully as Ruark explained her history and heritage.

They paused at the stables for a roll in the hayloft before continuing their tour. Kathia giggled as she pulled pieces of hay from her own and Ruark's hair while they walked down the path leading to the House.

They entered through the back door and came into the large kitchen. It was buzzing with activity. Jorryn was giving instructions to the staff regarding the preparation of the noon meal. Women and men scurried around the enormous kitchen, trying to listen and do what they were told at the same time. Ruark took Kathia's hand and pulled her through the hubbub. They burst through the large double doors, into the relative quiet of the dining room. They ran past the long rectangular table and into the sitting room, where they found Jonavon, Samantha, and Wilyam waiting patiently.

"Are we late?" Kathia said breathlessly.

"I was about to send out a search party," Jonavon replied.

"But I mentioned it's never a good idea to go hunting for newlyweds when they're late," Samantha added.

The lovebirds took their place on one of the sofas. A knowing smile filled Kathia's face.

After a few moments of strained silence, Jorryn came in from the kitchen and sat heavily. "Let's get busy. I've got a kitchen full of novices, and I can't leave 'em alone very long."

The group watched Jonavon expectantly.

"Jace and I have discussed this House and our part in The Call. We believe Mom prepared us knowingly for our destiny. She encouraged us to be carpenters and taught us to invest wisely. Our skills and life experiences are perfect gifts for our homeworld. We want to bring Earth technology to Eavan and teach alternative ways of construction,

which will complement the knowledge of our artisans. We want to work together to incorporate the best of our culture into this one.”

“Of course, we’ll have to travel through the Gateway for awhile,” Jorryn added. “We need to sell our business, and the house in Springville, and get the paperwork settled before we can come here permanently. But that’s our goal.”

Jonavon nodded in agreement. “And the people need their leaders back. We must re-establish the House of Joakin as the ruling house. The people need to see their Lord and Lady, and Sir Jorryn walking among them – helping, guiding, acting as judge in civil matters. Sabriel has done this in our absence. But it’s our time to take back those responsibilities and restore Eavan, as Sabriel spoke of in The Call.” Jonavon turned to his sister.

Kathia squeezed Ruark’s hand. “We’d like to go back to Copper Creek, for now. We talked about it, and I want to finish college. I would like to get my degree and bring that gift to our people, too. And if I can be so selfish, I’m not ready to give up volleyball. But I’d like to travel through the Gateway as often as possible. I will come on each of my breaks. I want to get to know the people and help in the fight against Lorcan. Sabriel mentioned The Call was a series of journeys. So I know we’re not done yet.”

Ruark nodded at Wilyam. “Will and I would like to spend time with the Cathal, getting up to speed on our border positions and meeting with our generals. There are three Ceremonies of Promotion we must attend.

“But we also have loose ends to tie up back at the college. I’ll have to consider a replacement as head of the campus security, and we need to sell the Copper Creek house when the time comes. Eventually, when Kate is ready, we will come here permanently.”

Wilyam leaned forward, forearms on his knees. “Yes. There is much we can teach the Cathal. Improved tactics for battle. New methods of first aid. Training exercises. Weapons instruction.”

“What about me?” Samantha said. “Where do I fit in?”

Jorryn put his arm around her. “Where do you want to fit in?”

Samantha looked at Kathia. “I want to go back to college. But I’d like to help the people of Eavan, too. I want to be part of this. To share in it, as much as I can.”

“What about the Olympics?” Kathia said. “That was your dream. How can you give that up?”

“I achieved my dream, Kate. I made the team. To be truthful, the dream has been hollow without you. It dawned on me the other night that the dream wasn’t just about making the team. It was about *us* making the team. I’d rather play at Simpson College with you, than in the Olympics without you.”

Kathia’s heart overflowed with admiration for her best friend. “Are you sure?”

“I’m giving up a dream in exchange for a destiny. I think I’m getting a pretty good deal.”

Jonavon nodded in approval.

The next morning, after a large breakfast of ham and eggs, Jonavon headed for the stables. He still had reservations that they could hide the existence of the Gateway from the hired staff. Surely, people would get suspicious if members of the ruling family disappeared for days at a time. Sabriel had assured him they would manage to keep the Gateway’s secrets, and Jonavon vowed to be cautious.

He entered the stable and found the others waiting.

“Shouldn’t we do this in the attic?” Jorryn said.

“Sabriel said we can use the Gateway from anyplace within Sunlee. I thought we should vary the pattern. We just need to be certain the area is secluded.”

“Because we’ll come back here?”

“Yes,” Jonavon said. “Wherever we leave from, that’s where we return.”

Kathia handed the Gateway to him. “Do the thing.”

Jonavon closed his eyes and repeated the sacred words. “Serc, Leticia, Sheeva, Cristul, Mudan, Declan, Enat, Blath, Climee.”

The bright orb of light expanded around them. They were immediately enveloped in its brilliance. A moment later, the light faded and the family room in Springville appeared.

Kate checked the calendar. It was August fourteenth, a Friday. She had to be back at college by Monday for volleyball practice. She grinned and thought about Coach McWilliams asking what she’d been up to this summer. They would have to talk. It

might be hard to explain why she was suddenly married to the commander of the Simpson Campus Security.

The six of them piled into the Jeep and Riley's Malibu, and headed for Copper Creek and Simpson College. Kate had given up her plans to finish college when she'd left in May, but now that she was returning, the anticipation was intense. She longed to absorb all the knowledge she could, and take it to her homeworld and her people.

When Kate saw the tower of the administration building rising above the skyline of the charming town, her heart jumped. Instead of going to the women's dorm, Riley drove to a three-story, Victorian mansion across the street from the campus security building, and a few doors down from the dorms.

In anticipation of Kate's arrival as a college freshman, Riley had gotten his job as campus security commander and purchased the house the year before she came to Simpson. Then he'd hired Will as his first lieutenant. The house had everything the two warriors would need to maintain their privacy and keep a watchful eye on the future Lady of Eavan. It had seven bedrooms, five and a half bathrooms, a rec room, a professional kitchen, two living rooms, a parlor, a music room, a conference room, and most importantly, a cleaning staff.

In fact, when Kate saw the enormity of the house, she immediately insisted that Sam pick her favorite room and join their off-campus adventure. Sam seemed to love the idea and promptly chose a room with the best view of the men's dorm. Kate was not surprised.

Kate and Sam spent the weekend getting settled and adding a few feminine touches to the house, which caused Will to smirk and Riley to roll his eyes.

* * *

On Monday morning, Sam and Kate reported to the dorm to pick up their registration packets. As a sophomore, Kate felt much more grounded than the lost freshmen she saw wandering the campus. She couldn't believe that only a year ago, it had been her, heart in her throat, pulse racing, unsure of her abilities, who had stepped foot for the first time on a college campus. Kate had been through much more than her first year of college in the past twelve months. She couldn't wait to see what the next twelve months would bring.

That afternoon she headed for the gym to catch Coach McWilliams before the other players arrived. Kate knocked tentatively on his office door and stuck her head inside. “Hey, Coach!”

For a split second, there was a questioning look on his face; then recognition dawned with a shock. “Kate Arnold? What in the world have you been up to?”

Kate smiled, knowing she couldn’t possibly answer *that* question. She took a seat in front of his desk. She was dressed in a blue tank shirt and shorts, her hair in a ponytail. Coach was having a hard time tearing his eyes from her arms.

“I did a little weight lifting over the summer.”

“A little?”

“Yeah. I guess I got carried away.”

“Can’t wait to see you hit the ball.”

“Actually, Coach, I stopped by to discuss something a little more shocking than my exuberant summer workout routine.” She paused. “I got married a week and a half ago.”

Coach McWilliams stared at her.

“Coach?”

“I heard you.” He shook his head. “Katie, Katie, Katie. I thought you were one of my most level-headed girls. What am I supposed to think now?”

“Think it’s a good thing. A wonderful thing. I’m very much in love with an amazing man, and I plan to have a long and happy life with him.”

“Would that man be Commander Flynn?”

Now it was Kate’s turn to be surprised. “How did you know?”

Coach chuckled. “You girls think I’m a clueless wonder. But I was a young college guy once. I recognize the signs. I can see a good thing when it’s right in front of my face.”

“You’re not disappointed?”

“How could I be? I said you’re level-headed, and I don’t think I was wrong. If you got married, it was the right thing to do. You’re one of the most cautious and

deliberate people I know. In fact, I wish you'd let up once in awhile. Play more with your heart, and less with your head."

"Point taken, Coach. I'll see what I can do about that this season."

"Show me your stuff, Katie. You'll be starting this year if you can take the passion up a notch."

She rose to leave. "No problem. See ya on the court in thirty."

"Katie." Kate stopped and faced him. "That Commander Flynn is the luckiest guy alive. You tell him I said so."

"Sure, Coach."

A short while later, Kate had her shoes and pads on, and was passing a volleyball with Sam. They stretched and warmed up, and watched the new freshman try to hide their nervousness. Kate wondered if she'd been that obvious last August. There were eight returning players this year and twenty-two newbies trying out for twelve open spots. Kate made her preliminary choices, based on what she knew about Coach McWilliams.

Coach blew the whistle, called them together, and gave pretty much the same speech Sam and Kate had heard the year before. Kate bit her lip to keep from smiling, and avoided eye contact with Sam.

When they lined up to practice hitting, Kate went first. Sam was her setter. It had been several months since Kate touched a volleyball. She wasn't sure what was going to happen, but she needn't have worried. Her vertical jump had improved by three inches. Her hit was phenomenal. She slammed the ball to the floor so hard, it landed with a loud *crack* and bounced up near the rafters. Her performance left everyone in stunned silence.

"Huh." She ducked under the net to take her place as blocker.

Kate had the best practice of her life.

As Kate and Sam walked back to the house, Sam couldn't hide a grin. "So, Coach told you to play with more passion."

"Yep."

“And he knows you’re married, right?”

“Yep.”

“So now that you know what passion actually is, you can fulfill his request.”

“Oh, yeah.”

* * *

The week of volleyball tryouts and the routine of college life were a dreamlike experience after Kate’s summer adventures. She missed dorm life, but loved living in the big old house across from campus, with her husband and best friends. Jonathan and Jace had already moved their things into two of the available bedrooms and begun preparing the house in Springville for sale. Kate planned to go home for the weekend to pack, and Sam was traveling to Chicago with Jace to get her belongings.

On Monday morning, Kate awoke with a start and checked the clock. She had plenty of time. Practice wasn’t until nine. Registration for sophomores was tomorrow, so she had nowhere else to be right now. She rolled to her side and watched the steady rise and fall of her new husband’s bare chest. *Wow. I could get used to this view every morning.*

“Riley,” she called softly. He didn’t respond, but she knew he was awake. Cathal warriors were very light sleepers. She placed two fingers on his ribs and slowly walked them across his chest. The corner of his mouth twitched. He growled and rolled toward her, pinning her under his weight. “What do you want, woman?”

“We need to talk. I had a dream.”

“I was hoping for something that didn’t involve talking.” His disappointment was evident.

“First, we talk. Then we can...do other stuff.”

“You’re so sweet. You’re a married woman now. You can say the s word.”

“Why don’t you say it, then?”

“Because you’ll accuse me of only loving you for your body.”

“That could be my excuse, you know.”

“Oh, please. You love my charming personality and my sense of comic timing.”

“Don’t forget about the big muscles and great hair.” She grabbed a handful and pulled him to her.

“Where were we?” he said after the enthusiastic kiss.

“My dream.” Kate giggled.

Riley hopped out of bed and grabbed his jeans. “Let’s hear it.”

“Where are you going?” She pouted.

“I think better over here.”

Kate tilted her head down and gazed up at him, her eyes full of evil intention.

“Come back.”

“Not on your life.” Riley sat in the overstuffed chair across from her and propped his bare feet on the edge of the bed, ankles crossed. “Now, spill.”

Kate sighed in defeat. “Did you have a dream with Sabriel in it?”

“No.”

“That’s odd. We usually all dream about him together. Anyway, he said some things about The Call and our second journey, the journey of The Promise. Does that make sense?”

“Not entirely. What else did he say?”

“That The Promise was to be fulfilled in a season of ten moons.”

“Ten lunar months,” Riley explained. “It’s an ancient way of measuring the passage of time. By today’s calendar, it’s nine months.”

Riley pursed his lips and stroked his chin. “Oh, sweet Lord!” He jumped from his chair. “Get dressed.”

Kate startled at the intensity in his voice. She scampered from the bed and ran to the closet.

Kate and Riley returned in time for lunch and found everyone gathered around the dining room table, talking and laughing together. Kate watched her big brother tell one of his humorous stories about a jobsite mishap. She observed Jace struggle to not jump in and tell the punch line. She looked at Sam, who sat leaning forward, her spoon halfway to her mouth, totally enthralled in the tale. She saw Will, who was happy to be included in the warm family atmosphere of this group.

Riley held her hand as they approached the table.

Jonathan stopped mid-sentence in his story. “Hey, you two! Glad you could join us for lunch. We gave up on seeing you for breakfast.”

“You missed morning practice,” Sam scolded.

“It’s okay. I called Coach and told him I couldn’t make it.”

Jace rose from his chair and motioned to two empty seats. “Sit down. I’ll get you a bowl of soup.”

Riley held up his hand. “Not just yet. We’ve had a visit from Sabriel and wondered if anyone else did.”

They glanced around the table at each other.

“What’s this about?” Jonathan said.

“Sabriel came to me in a dream last night. He spoke about the second journey of The Call, the journey of The Promise.” Kate grinned. “The Promise isn’t an event. It’s a person.”

Jace frowned. “How do you know?”

“Sabriel told me.”

A smile slowly fell across Sam’s face. “What did he say?”

“He has a little surprise for us.”

“A surprise?” Will said.

Kate squeezed Riley’s hand. “I’m pregnant.”

She watched the news register on each of their faces.