

SPELLBOUND

AN EPIC ROMANCE ACROSS TIME



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SPELLBOUND

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PROLOGUE

In the early 13th century, Lord Rogan, a tyrannical, greedy sorcerer, forcefully took Emerald Castle from Lord Brannon, who became insolvent in addition to the lands owned by neighboring Lord Broxton while he was away at war. He also seeks to own the land along the northern seacoast owned by Gerard Kellan, a free man with three adult sons, and offers to purchase it from him, but Gerard refuses. After several offers, a hateful rift arises between them, and Lord Rogan resorts to using the hand of his beautiful daughter, Kayla, to lure them into a deadly ambush

SPELLBOUND

CHAPTER 1: O'LEARY TOURS

The tour bus was about to leave for Emerald Castle off the coast of Ireland. Twenty-three-year-old Caitlin Evans of Indiana and her friend Linda Harding, also twenty-three, made their way to the last two seats available at the rear of the bus. It was the most recommended tour at Donnelly Inn. Caitlin happily took the window seat, unaware of how visiting the ancient castle that cloudy Thursday morning was about to change her life. William O'Leary, the tour guide, greeted the group and passed out tour pamphlets as they boarded. He promised them not only a memorable experience but a colorful account of the castle's ancient history.

William was in his mid-sixties, with a friendly face and sparkling blue eyes. His auburn hair, now mostly white, added to his Irish charm, but it was his knack for storytelling and his ability to transport audiences to times gone by that filled the seats.

Caitlin and Linda, students at the University of Bridgeport, had been looking forward to their trip to Ireland for months. Having

grown up near her grandfather, Joseph, in a small Indiana farm community, Caitlin had become fascinated with his tales of Emerald Castle and their Irish ancestors. She had dreamed of visiting Ireland with him someday, but sadly, her grandfather passed away before that was possible. After her high school graduation, Caitlin moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut, to attend college. There she stayed with her great Aunt Mavis, who was her grandfather's younger sister. Mavis lived alone in a stately two-story home and welcomed Caitlin's company now that she was a widow. Caitlin, however, was rarely home. When not in school, she worked part-time in an art gallery that specialized in fantasy art and Celtic mythology. Instead of joining a local fitness club, she took up archery, fencing, and horseback riding, which complemented her fascination with living in another time. She had talked her best friend and colleague, Linda, into opting for an Irish castle tour of Emerald Castle instead of a student group tour to Florida for spring break.

CHAPTER 2: JARED KELLAN

As the bus began its journey, William welcomed the group, “Welcome to O’Leary Tours, ladies and gentlemen, and of course, welcome to Ireland. My name is William O’Leary, and I’ll be your tour guide for today. I hope that you shall not only take a few pictures home with you, but an awakening of the magnificent past of Emerald Castle, and remember to tell your friends.” William went on introducing his staff and going over the tour schedule, which included a medieval dinner later at the Inn to be served by staff in medieval costumes. Then he began telling them about the castle’s history.

“As stated in your pamphlets, Emerald Castle was built in the 12th century. Its legends are full of intrigue, mystery, and blood, as well as the paranormal. To this day, there have been many accounts of strange activity taking place in and around the castle, so don’t be alarmed if you see or sense anything strange.

I will begin by telling you its most famous tale, that of the notorious Lord Rogan and the Kellan family, Jared Kellan, in particular. In the early 13th century, Lord Rogan became the new Lord of Emerald Castle after confiscating it from Lord Brannon, who became insolvent

and could not pay his debt to him. In his effort to pay his dues, Lord Brannon had been selling parcels of land to surrounding Lords, but mostly to Lord Broxton, who lived across the mountain. Lord Broxton had anticipated becoming the new Lord of Emerald Castle. However, Lord Broxton had gone to war with another adversary, and during his absence, Lord Rogan confiscated Emerald Castle and all its lands, including those purchased by Lord Broxton.

Gerard Kellan, a free man, owned a parcel of land along the sea coast, north of Emerald Castle. He and his wife Anya had three adult sons and a teenage daughter, Derrick, thirty-two, Marc, thirty, Jared, twenty-eight, and Lara, who was sixteen.

Lord Rogan wanted to own the lands north and south, along the sea coast, but did not like how the Kellan's land got in the way. He then offered Gerard Kellan a larger inland parcel of land in exchange, but Gerard refused the offer. Lord Rogan then offered him a higher price, but Gerard still refused. Gerard's refusal angered Lord Rogan, and in retaliation, Lord Rogan began to charge them a tax when they needed to travel south through his land to sell their crops. The Kellans were forced to take a longer, more time-consuming route around Lord Rogan's land, so they secretly hired some of Lord Rogan's tenants as couriers to deliver goods or purchase supplies. When Lord Rogan found out, he was outraged and had the people they hired arrested and punished; some were never seen again. He was so angry that he blocked their passage and ordered that anyone caught transferring goods for them be executed. He also increased rents and taxes on tenants who had helped them as a punishment. Residents, who complained or refused to pay the tax increase, were arrested or even killed; the people feared him not only for his severity, but because he was said to be a warlock who practiced black magic. The rift between the Kellans and

Lord Rogan grew over time, and so did the abuses against the villagers, until it took a toll on the Kellans, and they planned a revolt.

Gerard Kellan had been a military man in his youth and trained his sons to fight against injustice and resist oppression. The villagers looked to them for leadership and protection. When the Kellan's called the villagers to unite behind them and end the tyranny, they readily agreed and offered their support. They then turned to Lord Broxton for his support. While Lord Broxton was sympathetic to their cause and was interested in taking back his own lands, he was still at war with another adversary and could not offer his full support at that time. Due to the lack of manpower and resources, the revolt was unsuccessful. Those captured by Lord Rogan's guard were killed and displayed in public as a warning; others were never seen again. Although Lord Rogan had been the victor, his guard and tenants, who tilled the land, had been reduced. The loss made Lord Rogan furious; he continued to blame the Kellan's, not only for the revolt but for blocking his plans to own the lands of the North Sea shore. He knew they would be a continuous hindrance and a threat to his security, and soon they would try to revolt again, perhaps with greater support next time.

He needed a less bloody solution to get rid of the Kellans, so he devised a plan. He had a beautiful daughter named Kayla, whose hand he had expected to give in marriage to the highest bidder. Instead, however, he decided to use Kayla temporarily as bait to draw in the Kellans. Initially, she would be a peace offering to gain their trust by giving her hand in marriage to Derrick, the eldest Kellan son. He would also relax the stringent tax laws on his tenants and allow the Kellans' passage through his land for the time being. After a given time had passed, he would accuse them of misusing his daughter and take

her back. He would set a trap for them when they came to claim her and have them killed, then confiscate their land.

Lord Rogan lost no time sending his message of peace to the Kellans. He offered his daughter, Kayla's hand in marriage to Derrick Kellan, the eldest son, together with a substantial piece of land and livestock as her dowry. In addition, he offered to put to rest his desire to purchase their land. To his tenants accused of helping the Kellans, he offered leniency. Gerard distrusted the sudden generosity and peace offering, but Derrick readily agreed, for Kayla was a beautiful young woman with thick red hair, fair skin, and blue-green eyes. Kayla, however, was unaware she was being used as a pawn by her father to trap the Kellans.

As planned, Kayla and Derrick were married, and a great celebration took place. Although unwilling at first, Kayla changed her mind upon meeting the handsome Derrick Kellan. Their union restored the peace among them for a time. Gerard Kellan, however, kept a watchful eye. He sensed Lord Rogan had underlying motives, but Derrick was blinded by love for his beautiful new wife. Jared, who was the youngest of the Kellan brothers, had also secretly fallen in love with the beautiful Kayla, but out of respect for his oldest brother, he only admired her from afar.

Aaron, a friend of the Kellans, also had eyes for Kayla, and his open friendship toward her was the object Lord Rogan used against them. He had Kayla brought back to the castle and accused Derrick of allowing his wife to be peddled as a whore among his men, and took her dowry back as well. Shocked at the accusation, Derrick attacked Aaron, but his brothers held him back, assuring him the charge was made in error. Derrick told his father he would set out to meet with Lord Rogan to resolve the issue peacefully and get his wife back, but

Gerard would not allow Derrick to go alone. Jared, Marc, and the others also gathered behind Derrick and Gerard.

Under the ruse of being offended, Lord Rogan would lure the Kellans within the castle gates. Once gathered inside, he would have them ambushed and killed.

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When the Kellans arrived at Emerald Castle, Lord Rogan sent Kayla out to greet them. Except for the two guards who gave them passage, she was alone. Unknowingly, Kayla assured her husband and father-in-law that her father meant to resolve the issue peacefully inside because he had taken ill.

Derrick crossed the gate first. Hesitantly, Gerard passed behind him. Derrick dismounted and walked toward Kayla, who smiled and reached out for him. Jared remained on horseback. He and Marc also hesitantly crossed the gates. Aaron and the others followed behind them. Once all the Kellans were within the castle grounds, the gate drew closed, leaving the rest of the men outside. Derrick, who was about to embrace his wife, was struck by an arrow and killed, followed by his father, Gerard. Kayla yelled, "No!" Kayla's scream caused Trey, Jared's horse, to rear on his hind legs, and Jared was struck by an arrow in his shoulder instead of the chest. Being nearest to the gate and on horseback, he managed to grab the rope that opened the gate, and Jared pulled himself up over the entrance gate wall. He turned and watched in horror as his other brother, Marc, was struck several times, and Kayla was taken away screaming.

Muscular and swift, Jared made it out alive and rejoined his men outside, who shot arrows at the guards in his defense. Moments later, the gates opened so the guards could pursue them. Jared had mounted with a friend and whistled for his horse, Trey, who came running out. Once Trey was close enough, Jared jumped onto him, but being vastly

outnumbered, he and his men were forced to flee without his kinsmen or Kayla.

Jared was now the last surviving male of the Kellan family, as they reached safety across the river and into the forest, his heartache intensified. He mourned his murdered father and brothers, but nothing would be more painful than having to tell his mother and sister of their tragic loss. As Jared approached home, his mother and sister came out. She looked past him, looking for the rest, and then realized Gerard, Marc, and Derrick were not with Jared and the others. Anya looked at him for a sign, but Jared somberly looked down. Anya began sobbing and collapsed onto her knees as she realized what had happened, and his sister Lara screamed in sorrow. What started as a great celebration only months earlier had now ended in tragedy.

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The days that followed were agony for Jared as his heart filled with hate and he could think of little else but vengeance. He vowed to kill the treacherous Lord Rogan, but felt conflicted about Kayla. He had secretly loved her, but as his brother, her angelic looks had blinded him. Now he was convinced she was a conspirator, as deceitful and wicked as her father.

At twenty-eight, Jared was more familiar with anger and sorrow than with the warmth and love of a woman. Kayla had put a spell on them all. If not for her, his father and brothers would still be alive. She was a witch with the face of an angel, but angel or not, she would be made to pay for her treachery.

Injured but not broken, Jared turned to his friends and followers. He would avenge his slain family members and destroy Lord Rogan and his daughter.

Together with his men, he headed across the mountain to meet with Lord Broxton, who had lost land to Lord Rogan and had recently

returned a victor from his campaign against another adversary. Jared planned to offer their allegiance to him in exchange for his support and weapons of war, such as the catapults and cannons. Access to such weapons would take Lord Rogan and his guard by surprise. Lord Broxton saw it not only as an opportunity to take back his land, but to take Emerald Castle and agreed. He knew the Kellans had many followers. Lord Broxton's support gave Jared confidence in getting his vengeance.

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After their meeting across the mountain with Lord Broxton, Jared and his men returned home to plan their retaliation. During his absence, his younger sister Lara feared she might lose the last male member of her family, and went to the forest in search of Rowena, the old woman known to conjure spells. Rowena was partly blind and hard of hearing. In tears, Lara told Rowena that her brother would soon go to battle and pleaded for a spell that would protect him. Rowena asked Lara what she had brought for her. Lara placed a freshly slain chicken, some eggs, and some honey on her table. Rowena smiled, savoring the thought of a roast chicken for dinner. She turned and smiled, then told Lara she would give her something very powerful. She went outside and moved a rock, where she withdrew a lavender crystal, tied a rope around it, mumbled an incantation upon it, and gave it to Lara. She told her the crystal amulet needed to be worn around the neck by her intended to fall over his heart. Rowena explained that she had placed a protective spell on it and that it must continuously be worn to protect him from death. Then Rowena gave Lara the crystal amulet and sent her off. Lara ran home to tell her mother. She couldn't wait to place the protective pendant around Jared's neck. When Jared and the men arrived back a few days later, Lara came running out, happy to tell him that she had a special gift that would protect him. Lara placed

the amulet around his neck and made him promise he would not take it off. In truth, Jared wore it more to appease his young sister's naïve beliefs that the amulet would protect him than because he believed in any powers it might hold. He kissed his sister on the forehead and promised he would not remove it.

CHAPTER 3: FIRE AT DAWN

At the dawn of the planned attack, Jared and his men surrounded the castle alongside Lord Broxton's men. With the weaponry in position, they began bombarding the castle walls not only with fireballs but with boulders that had ropes tied to them for climbing the walls. Lord Rogan had not anticipated they would have access to weapons of such destructive force, nor did he expect Lord Broxton's involvement.

Emerald Castle's guard retaliated with a rain of arrows and the firing of their cannons. Lord Rogan had Kayla shut away in another part of the castle. He then climbed to the castle's highest tower, knowing Jared would come looking for him. There, he would use his dark powers to put an end to him.

Jared and Aaron made their way through the storm of arrows and climbed the ropes up and over the top of the wall. Slashing down his resistance at every turn, Jared's hatred for Lord Rogan made him an unstoppable force. At one point, he noticed the amulet lit up, and his opponent's sword seemed to hit an unseen shield. Relentless, he continued and slew each opponent until he reached and climbed the

winding stairs to the tower. He was ready to thrust his sword into the man who had violated him in such a personal way as to take the lives of his father and brothers by using his daughter to lure them.

Meanwhile, Aaron went in search of Kayla; he overcame a guard and forced him to lead him to her. Kayla, filled with sorrow for her dead husband and resentment toward her father for using her as bait to kill Derrick, willingly took Aaron's hand and left with him.

On the other side of the castle, Jared reached the top of the tower; he kicked the door open and saw the tall, thin, bald Lord Rogan with his goatee and piercing dark eyes, standing calmly waiting for him. As Jared charged him, Lord Rogan said something and threw powder into the air. Then a thunder-like sound was heard, and a lavender glow illuminated the room and hallway, followed by a howling wind. In an instant, Jared Kellan was surrounded by a swirling wind and vanished.

The fighting outside continued, but Jared was gone. Lord Rogan then recited an incantation that all men attacking Emerald Castle would no longer have use of their hands and blew more powder out the window. The men outside started dropping their weapons; some ran away in fear, without the use of their hands, they had to retreat. Once again, Lord Rogan was the victor; all the Kellans were gone, but so was Kayla. He would need to get her back.

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Upon hearing of her missing brother, in tears, Lara went to tell Rowena that the amulet had not protected her brother. Rowena at once corrected Lara that the spell was not intended for her brother; it was intended for her lover! Rowena had mistakenly heard "lover instead of brother". She gave Lara one consolation, "Jared is not dead, but cast in a spell that only love can break." When Lara heard this, she put her head down and wept, knowing her brother had no lady love.

In truth, his heart was now too filled with hate toward Lord Rogan and Kayla. Without a lady's requited love, there would be no release from his spellbound state. Jared would remain, protected from death, but trapped in another dimension...forever!

According to legend, whenever a howling wind is heard around the castle walls, it's believed to be him, Jared Kellan, still imprisoned in the crystal amulet and the winds of time."

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Everyone clapped, including Caitlin and Linda, at William O'Leary's dramatic account of the magical tale.

"How romantic, do you think it's true?" Linda asked Caitlin.

"Of course not, very entertaining though, made the bus drive shorter," Caitlin said.

Caitlin and Linda laughed as the bus arrived at Emerald Castle. It was a cloudy, chilly day with the possibility of rain and thunder, and the girls dressed warmly. Caitlin's thick red hair swirled in the wind as she stepped off the bus. Caitlin had turned the heads of the other passengers when she boarded with her blue-green eyes, long, thick red hair, and fair skin. She wore a waist-length black leather jacket over a navy blue long-sleeve dress with a cowl neck top and flowing skirt, as well as high-heeled black leather boots. Linda was of mixed African American and Irish descent. She was beautiful, tanned, with hazel green eyes, and shoulder-length dark hair. She wore a fitted gray leather jacket and light colored jeans tucked into warm, flat gray boots. To keep her hair secured, she wrapped her light blue scarf around her neck and over her hair. Each girl had attracted glances from more than one male passenger on the tour. Linda, who had the aisle seat, had struck up a friendly chat with an attractive young man sitting across the aisle

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CHAPTER 4: EMERALD CASTLE

William O’Leary’s story, a legend about Jared Kellan and Lord Rogan, had generated much interest among the passengers who were still discussing the tale as they left the bus. Caitlin and Linda made their way behind the other tourists. Caitlin’s hair continued to swirl in the wind, making her sorry she didn’t bring something to tie it down with. The group moved toward the castle’s entrance. Once empty, the bus began moving away. Suddenly, a rush of wind came upon them; it seemed to encircle Caitlin, and for a moment, she was paralyzed. The wind was so strong that it lifted her flowing skirt well above her thighs. She gasped and instinctively tugged down at it and was thankful she was at the rear of the group. No one saw anything except Linda, who giggled as Caitlin struggled to pull down her skirt.

“Wow! The bus sure stirred up some wind.”

“You sure it was the bus, Caitlin?”

“Yesss!” She shot her a sarcastic look. “I knew I should’ve worn jeans!”

“Maybe it was Jared Kellan trying to look up your skirt, you are a redhead!” Linda joked.

“Haha, very funny, I knew you’d say something like that.”

“Okay, okay, I’m joking, c’mon let’s catch up with the others,” Linda chuckled.

Both girls hurried to catch up to the other tourist now entering the castle. The day and clouds had grown darker, and Caitlin couldn’t help feeling a bit spooked by the need to look over her shoulder. Finally, she shook her head, dismissing Linda’s silly comment. They followed the others inside the castle; William O’Leary continued his storytelling, pointing out various details, artifacts, and points of interest within the lobby of the castle’s entryway. The stone walls seemed to transport them back to another time. Caitlin was fascinated. Red ropes guided them on the tour, but closed off areas under renovation. Caitlin and Linda took pictures and videos as they walked through the castle. They listened to the tour guide and reviewed their booklets that summarized much of William O’Leary’s accounts.

Since Emerald Castle had a bloody history and had been under attack throughout the centuries, there were torture chambers down below, which they would soon see. As Caitlin followed through the tour, she began to feel an uncomfortable presence as if she was being watched or followed, causing her to look back; it was starting to make her skin crawl. The sudden sound of thunder made Caitlin jump.

“Damn!” Caitlin exclaimed.

“What’s wrong?” Linda asked.

“Nothing.”

“You sure? You look spooked.”

“I’m fine, well just a little creeped-out, I guess, with all the gory history and stuff.”

“Yeah, it gives me goosebumps too, and the weather isn’t helping.”

Caitlin and Linda continued the tour until they arrived at a section that read, INTERMISSION. It was a large room, once used as the guard dining hall, now set up as a souvenir shop and coffee bar. William invited everyone to use the facilities or get coffee and snacks. Most of the tour group scattered through the shop; others quickly lined up for coffee and restroom breaks. Linda lined up to use the facilities also. Caitlin purchased a bottle of water and then moved around the shop looking at the different souvenirs while Linda waited in line. Due to the long restroom line, Linda was taking a while.

Caitlin wandered outside the shop and walked down the corridor when she noticed a flickering torch at the end of a long hallway that was roped off for renovation. She walked toward the flickering light to get a better look and then felt a gust of wind. It was less intense than the one she felt outside earlier, but it seemed to push her forward. The wind swept past her down the hallway. She wondered where the draft came from since there were no open doors or windows. Caitlin felt a bit tense, but grew curious at the flickering torches; she looked around to see if anyone was watching and stepped over the rope. She followed the long corridor, turning right, away from the lobby, then turned left and went down another long hallway. She kept walking until she came to a low-lit winding staircase. She hesitated there for a minute, thinking she should go back. Linda would be wondering where she went. She looked back, but it was quiet, then she stepped away from the staircase. Suddenly, the torches lighting her way back blew out, darkening the hallway. But the ones that ran up the narrow staircase glowed brighter. She froze; Caitlin felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. The flames dimmed, but continued to flicker softly again as if gently coaxing her to climb the stairs. Fearful but curious, Caitlin took a breath and took the first step up. Slowly, she climbed the

winding staircase. Finally, she came to a room at the top of the stairs where there was a large wooden door ajar. She was suddenly reminded of William O'Leary's story of the tower, wondering if this was the room in the story. She took a deep breath and pushed the door open slowly; it creaked slightly. Except for a large wooden armchair and an open window, the room was empty. She exhaled and stepped into the room, then walked over to the large open window and looked out. It was an amazing view of miles of green countryside. Down below, she saw several horses and men dressed in period clothes. A medieval re-enactment unit, she assumed, like the ones her brother took part in, back home. She wondered where the tour bus parked there earlier had gone.

As she stood there wondering, the door slowly creaked open behind her. She spun around and saw a towering, blood-splattered man, only half-dressed in medieval clothing and wearing a sword on his hip, coming toward her. Caitlin screamed as she stepped back, twisting her heel in a groove on the rough stone floor, causing her to lose her balance and fall back. Instinctively, he came forward to steady her, and she grabbed at the pendant around his neck and tore it off him before she lost consciousness.

“Kayla!”

Jared caught her in his arms as she fell back. Her red hair dangled below his arm. Then a fresh breeze blew from outside, and he breathed in the intoxicating fragrance of her hair. His heart quickened at the close contact. She was even more beautiful than the last time he saw her. He placed her in the chair. A moment later, he heard voices outside the door and vanished.

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A short time later, Caitlin opened her eyes and looked around. She was sitting on the big chair in the tower. Then she saw Linda

and another man with light hair and glasses who spoke with an Irish accent. He was not the man she saw earlier.

“What happened?” Caitlin asked

“We don’t know... you tell us,” Linda replied with a shrug.

Suddenly remembering the man with the sword, Caitlin sat up abruptly.

“Who was that man?” Caitlin asked.

“What man?” Linda asked

“... The man who came into the room!”

“You mean Mr. McBeal?” Linda squinted and pointed at the man with the glasses on Caitlin’s left.

“No, a man with dark hair up to here...” Caitlin pointed to her shoulder. “... he was wearing a—”

“Oh, you mean the staff member who found you. He said he saw you going up to the tower and then heard you scream.” Linda interrupted.

Caitlin suddenly felt something in her hand and remembered pulling something off the man’s neck when she lost her footing. She quickly hid it in her skirt pocket. Linda continued, “Well, I know this much: I couldn’t find you, so I went looking for you. However, one of the staff saw you walking down the hallway and followed you until he lost sight of you up the winding staircase. A few minutes later, he heard you scream from the tower, and when he reached you, you were in the chair, unconscious. Do you remember what happened?” Linda asked.

Caitlin handled the pendant in her skirt pocket. It had a crude rope tied around it, and she pictured the man who was wearing it; he was a striking-looking man. Tall and muscular with shoulder-length dark hair and intriguing blue eyes. Only half dressed, with blood on his shoulder, wearing medieval clothes and a sword on his hip. Caitlin realized she would sound like a crazy woman if she told them that, so

she decided to change her story. Besides, the man she saw was probably a re-enactor anyway, she concluded.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure what I saw; it was dark. I just remember climbing up the stairs and coming into the room," she paused, trying to think of something, "I shouldn't have been snooping around, and when the attendant caught up to me," she shrugged. "I got spooked, that's all. I'm sorry if I upset anyone."

"I'm Lawrence McBeal, the curator here; I'm hoping you're feeling better, Miss. You gave us quite a scare."

"I'm terribly sorry about that; I thoroughly apologize for the disturbance I caused."

"No harm done, Miss, it's nice to have a little excitement from time to time."

Feeling guilty and embarrassed to face the rest of the tour group, she asked that they not mention her awkward ordeal, but instead explain she had merely taken a fall and bumped her head. Caitlin and Linda rejoined the group and continued the tour of the castle. She noticed some of the other tourists glancing at her and whispering to each other. Caitlin did not wander off again, but continued to feel a presence and turned back often when the others weren't looking.

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That evening back at the Inn, Caitlin declined to go to dinner with the group; she was still feeling self-conscious and preferred to avoid any embarrassing questions. She would just dine in her room, relax, and catch up on her reading. She was glad Linda had struck up a friendship with a good-looking guy on the bus tour and his father. They had invited her to dine with them at their table. After Linda had left for dinner with her new friends, Caitlin took a warm shower, dried her hair, and got into her white mini night slip and

put on her warm lavender robe. She had dinner brought to her room and some hot tea. After brushing and flossing her teeth, she took out her book and turned on the lamp on the nightstand between her and Linda's bed. She sat and thought about her earlier ordeal. Caitlin turned and reached for the crystal pendant in her purse, and wondered what really happened. Could she have actually encountered Jared Kellan, the spellbound warrior in William O'Leary's story? William did mention that strange things could happen. Caitlin shook her head and dismissed it. She'd been hearing too many stories. Tomorrow she would inquire about the re-enactors she saw, but for now she needed to put it out of her head and enjoy her book. She placed the pendant on the lamp table, next to her purse, and turned on the music app on her iPhone. It began playing, "Don't Fear the Reaper" by Blue Öyster Cult. Caitlin thought it was strange since she had not listened to that playlist recently. She scrolled to more relaxing music, but it kept going back to it; it gave her goosebumps. Then the sound of thunder made her jump; the events of the day had made her edgy, so she decided to turn off the iPhone and put it aside. She fluffed up her pillow, then picked up her book and began to read. The day had grown dark, and it was rainy and windy outside. Flashes of lightning could be seen in the distance. After an hour, Caitlin fell asleep, and the book fell out of her hand.

CHAPTER 5: DO NOT FEAR ME

It was just past dark when the crystal pendant began to glow. As a lavender glow surrounded the crystal, the glass door clicked and slid open. The curtains started blowing with the wind, and the flashing lights in the distant sky outlined a man's silhouette through the billowing curtains. Jared stood on the balcony, not sure how he arrived, but he felt a compelling force to enter. He stepped into the room. He had never seen a place like this before, with a light that did not come from a torch yet glowed like one. At once, his eyes focused on Kayla sleeping on the bed and the fluorescent crystal amulet on the table next to her. He picked up the amulet and put it on.

He was here to take vengeance on the woman who betrayed his family; he told himself. He believed the amulet had led him to her for that purpose. He tightened the grip on his sword and stood by the bed, looking down at her. The soft light from the strange torch softened her features, making her look angelic as she slept, with flowing red hair, rosy lips, and creamy skin, beautiful, but evil. He reminded

himself that because of her treachery, his family members were dead. The memory of that day was burned into him like a fiery arrow in his side, but something seemed different about her—or was he under her spell? Why could he not take his vengeance on her now that she slept? He remembered how she had wickedly reached out for Derrick, knowing he would come to her and be killed. Only someone with a cold, wicked heart could be so treacherous, then sleep so peacefully. He would have once killed for her, but now it was she who deserved it. Yet he could not even bring himself to hate her. Instead, he found himself caressing her hair and running his fingers over an exposed soft shoulder. His body ached to feel more.

Suddenly, she stirred and opened her eyes. Instinctively, he covered her mouth with his hand before she could scream. She struggled beneath him. Then he said to her,

“Do not fear me.”

Slowly, he released her. Alarmed, Caitlin sat up and recoiled from him.

“What do you want?” She asked as she gasped for air.

Caitlin reached for her purse on the lamp table, pulled out the pepper spray, and pointed it at him as she got off the bed.

“Get back or I’ll use this on you if you don’t leave!”

At the sound of voices in the hallway, Caitlin turned toward the door. In one swift moment, Jared, who was facing her, grabbed her right hand, holding the pepper spray, and spun her toward him. Caitlin gasped as her back slammed against his chest, and his left arm wrapped tightly around her arm and waist while he secured the other. Caitlin was now locked in his hold. Then his alerted state released the amulet’s protective powers, and a lavender glow encircled them. A moment later, the door swung open, and they vanished in a gust of wind and a flash of light.

CHAPTER 6: THE AWAKENING

The lavender glow surrounded them; their movements were slow and heavy, and their breathing difficult. Suddenly, they fell on the grass outside near some trees and a stream. They coughed, trying to catch their breath as if they were drowning. On her back, Caitlin pulled away from him, feeling drained of strength. The pepper spray fell from her hand, but she immediately retrieved it and put it in her robe pocket.

“What’s happening? Who are you? What do you want with me? I have no money! I’m a student, here on tour.” Caitlin exclaimed from the ground; Jared moved toward her and held out his hand to help her up, but she withdrew from him. “Do not come any closer! Leave me alone, or I’ll call the cops!”

The cold alerted her to look down at her bare legs exposed up to her thighs. She gasped and covered herself by wrapping the robe tightly around her. It was then she realized she was outside in her robe and mini night slip, barefoot and without her cell phone. “You’re one of

those re-enactors, aren't you? I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but I suggest you take me back to my room at the Inn, or I'll charge you with kidnapping, assault, battery, and whatever else possible!" She yelled.

Jared quietly observed her. She spoke differently from Kayla, did not sound Irish, and her speech made no sense to him.

"What is your name?" Jared asked, moving his head to the side.

"What is yours?" She demanded.

"Jared."

"Not your character name, your real name!" Caitlin yelled.

"My name is Jared Kellan, and yours?" Jared said calmly.

"No, that's not possible! Stop playing and tell me your real name!" Caitlin insisted.

"Were you hoping I was dead?"

"What? What are you talking about? Look, this isn't funny anymore. I know you work at the castle, and someone is putting you up to this. You probably have a camera in a tree somewhere, and there's a room full of people, having a good laugh, but it's late and cold, and I'm barefoot, and I need to get back to my warm room, so stop this now!" Caitlin yelled.

Jared didn't answer her; he was puzzled by her. He didn't know who she was or what to make of her. One thing he was certain of now was that she was not Kayla, but she was like her reflection. "Well, since you're not a man of many words, I'm leaving. Caitlin began to move away slowly. Thank you for not hurting me. Just stay where you are, and if you can direct me toward the Donnelly Inn, I'll forget this ever happened..." Caitlin was shivering. "...and I won't charge you with anything or file a complaint against you, this way you won't lose your job at the castle. Okay?"

The fact that he was calm and not coming after her or forcing her into anything was a good sign. However, she didn't know where she was, and she was so cold.

Then Jared calmly said,

"I do not know how to get you back to your room, and you cannot stay in the woods; you shall freeze by morning. My home is near." He began coming toward her again.

"No! Don't come any closer!"

"I do not mean to hurt you. Forgive me for frightening you earlier, but I believed you to be someone else."

"What? And what do you mean, you do not know how to get me back? You came into my room! You held me down; you dropped us off the balcony, plus you're wearing a sword on your hip, and you're dressed like someone who popped out of battle from the 13th century. Not to mention you're covered in blood! You're delusional if you actually think I would come home with you! Your place is the last place I'd go to if tigers and bears were chasing after me! So thank you, but I think I'll pass." She blurted sarcastically as she kept walking.

Jared simply listened to her strange speech, thinking that talking faster than she could walk might keep her warm for now.

Caitlin continued walking and talking to herself, wrapping her robe as tightly as possible around her. She turned and saw him trailing behind her; she walked faster over the cold grass; she could see her breath. She looked desperately for some form of civilization. How the heck did they get in the woods so fast, she wondered?

Jared whistled for Trey. A few minutes later, a black horse came running toward him. He allowed Caitlin to continue walking and talking, knowing she was cold, and soon she would be forced to accept his invitation. Trey went toward the stream for water. Caitlin kept walking as fast as possible; her teeth were nearly chattering. She walked

deeper into the forest, hoping to lose him by winding her way through the woods, when she heard noises. Thinking it was Jared, the crazed re-enactor, she continued walking, and suddenly a man appeared before her. He came toward her. He looked unkempt, in tattered clothes, wearing a blanket. The man smiled at her, showing wide gaps between his teeth that made him appear as if he was missing some, but she thought perhaps he might be helpful, and asked him,

“Hello, Sir, I’m lost, and I’m trying to locate the Donnelly Inn. Could you help me find it, please? I’m freezing.”

“I have no knowledge of a place by that name, my Lady, but you look cold, come, I have a fire.”

Caitlin looked back and no longer saw Jared. She was afraid of this new man, but he seemed friendly and said he had a fire where she could warm up, so she followed him. Then he said,

“Give me your hand, my Lady.”

Caitlin was hesitant but gave him her hand. Then they came to the area where he camped. There *was* a fire, but there were also two other men there, eating some kind of meat. She tensed, feeling apprehensive, but the man assured her they were friends.

“Lads, we have been graced with the company of this lovely lady.”

“Welcome, what brings such a beautiful lady into our midst?” One of the men sitting by the fire asked.

The man who brought her offered her a seat near the fire. The warmth from the fire felt good on her skin, and she came closer to it.

“She’s lost, looking for an inn.” The man she came with replied and winked at the other men.

“What might be your name? My lady.”

“Um... Caitlin,” she replied with apprehension.

She swallowed hard as she caught sight of the wink and thought she had better leave soon. The man next to her began caressing her

hair, telling her how beautiful it was and how good it smelled. Caitlin sprang to her feet and announced,

“I thank you for your hospitality, gentlemen, but I must leave; my husband is probably looking for me,” Caitlin lied.

“A husband who lets a beautiful lady like you wander in the woods is not a worthy husband. Tis warm here, we have meat, and we look forward to knowing you... *better*.” He tried to pull her down to sit. Caitlin resisted.

“No, I’m sorry, I have to go.”

The man stood. Then abruptly, the man tried to kiss her. Caitlin resisted and jabbed him in the groin with her knee. The man grunted and doubled over in pain, cursing her. She tried to run away, but the other two men blocked her. She backed away from them, but one of the men grabbed her left arm. Caitlin then reached into her robe pocket with her right hand and pulled out the pepper spray and sprayed the two men directly in the face. They rubbed their eyes and began coughing and choking from the sting and swore they’d kill her between coughs. Caitlin developed wings on her feet and took off running as fast as she could. The man, on the opposite side, recovered from being kneed in the groin and ran after her, cursing and swearing. Caitlin continued to run; she wasn’t even cold anymore, but the man was gaining on her. She ran through the woods and gasped, “Aah!” as she ran into the cold stream. Then she stepped on a sharp rock and screamed in pain, lost her footing, and fell forward into the icy water. She screamed as she hit the freezing water, feeling like millions of knives stabbed her chest. Fortunately, the stream was not deep, and upon looking up, she saw the clearing. Thanks to the rush of adrenaline, she sprang up and ran toward the open space, but the disgruntled man was nearly upon her when, out of nowhere, she was

swept up by a man on horseback. Caitlin screamed again, not realizing who it was until she heard him say,

“Tis not good for a woman to wander into the forest alone. My apologies for losing sight of you.”

Caitlin looked up and recognized Jared’s handsome features in the moonlight. She was actually relieved to see him again. She was shivering uncontrollably; as she realized her vulnerable situation, she was freezing wet, barely dressed, barefoot, phoneless, and lost.

“Okay, I’m ready... to accept... your invitation.” She managed to say between shivers.

Caitlin rested her head against Jared’s warm chest until she fell asleep. Then Jared rode off with her to his forest home.

CHAPTER 7: ANOTHER WORLD

Jared approached his hut-like dwelling with Caitlin on his lap. He, his father, and brothers had built it as a midpoint place to stay when they traveled south. He dismounted Trey and carried her inside. He laid her on his bed of animal skins and blankets and removed the wet robe, then covered her with another blanket and removed the smaller, thin white garment. He began the process of starting a fire. He heated a pot of water and added lemon leaves to it. Then he warmed more water and washed off the splattered blood on him. He looked over at Caitlin: she was still shivering. He had her drink some of the hot liquid. Then he stood behind her, undressed, and reached for another blanket. He lay on her backside and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, in a spoon position. The emotions and desire he felt were undeniable. It would be torture to lie next to her all night and not possess her, but he was comforted knowing she trusted him enough to accept his hospitality.

With the warmth of his body, Caitlin drew close and was able to sleep through the night, unlike Jared, who could not sleep lying next to such an exquisite female but delighted in the fragrance of her hair and the softness of her neck and shoulders. Throughout the night, she pressed her back against his warm flesh, trying to keep warm. Each time, Jared forced himself to overcome the burning desire to make love to her.

In the morning, daylight seeped through the cracks in the wooden door. Caitlin opened her eyes, and the previous day's events came flooding back; then she tensed upon realizing she was not alone, and that she was nude under the blanket. She also remembered being soaked from the fall in the stream. She should be outraged at the thought that he undressed her, but she knew it was the right thing to do if she was freezing wet, yet he had not taken advantage of her in her vulnerable situation. Caitlin found herself admiring his gallantry.

However, out of modesty, she moved away from him as he slept. The light seeping through the cracks fell over him. He was quite an alluring male, tall and muscular, but had several scars across his chest and back. Who exactly was this gentle giant, she wondered. More importantly, what happened the day before? Time travel wasn't possible—was it? Was Jared a re-enactor—or the real thing? He certainly seemed out of place, she thought.

Jared opened his eyes. A streak of sunlight shone across his face, enhancing the blueness of his eyes. She sat across from him with her arms around her knees, clinging to the blanket.

“Good morning,” Caitlin said.

Jared raised himself onto his elbow and then rested his head on his hand.

“And a good morrow to you. I see you are not shivering anymore.”

“No, thank you for your hospitality.”

"But you are still afraid of me." He said and smiled.

"Why do you say that?"

"You moved away from me, last night I thought you'd come through me." He stated with a quizzical brow and continued smiling.

"I was cold."

Embarrassed, Caitlin smiled back and looked away.

"Then perhaps tonight I shall not light a fire." He flirted.

"Tonight? Oh no, I really need to get back. My friend Linda has probably already called the Irish National Guard by now if there is one here in Ireland."

Jared looked down and answered,

"Your world is different than mine."

"Different, how is it different?"

"I have seen many strange things among the people who visit Emerald Castle. Your world does not need horses to travel on, and people talk to small objects they hold in their hands. I was there for a long time, but you changed that, and now I am back in my world."

"In your world? What do you mean?" Caitlin sat up, suddenly her skin crawled.

"When you are ready, I shall show you something. I placed your clothes near the fire; they are dry. I shall make you something for your feet."

Caitlin tensed—was he telling her—that it was she who was now in his world? Dear God! She stood up too fast and accidentally stepped on the edge of the blanket, which pulled it off her. She gasped at being naked in front of him and instantly reached for it. Jared didn't look away, but boldly admired her instead. Then he, also being nude under the blanket, stood up, showing her how she affected him. Her mouth dropped open, and looked away.

“Now you have seen me—in my natural form. You are a beautiful woman, and I look forward to the day you are comfortable in front of me—in yours.”

He dressed and walked out. Caitlin plopped down on a nearby stool with her head in her hands,

“Oh, God!”

Her emotions were in complete turmoil; on one hand, she feared what she might find once she walked out the door, and on the other, she wondered how this seemingly primitive stranger was affecting her. She shook her head and put her thoughts aside, then slid on her mini night slip and put on her robe. She side-swept her thick hair and combed it out with her fingers, letting the rest fall into thick layers down her back. She opened a small back window to let some light in. After a while, Jared came back in and was awe-struck at how beautiful she looked in the soft light. He asked her to sit.

“Give me your foot,” Jared instructed as he held out his hand.

He had two pieces of bark, then cut a gray blanket into strips with his sword and wrapped one piece around one foot and calf like a bandage, and held it in place by tying rope all the way up to her knees. He repeated the process with her other leg. She watched him work and thought of how they spent the night there together, basically nude under a blanket, yet they never even kissed. She admired his smooth jawline and full lips and found herself wondering what it would be like to kiss him. Caitlin was suddenly breathless. Then he looked up at her and said,

“These shall warm your feet until we find something more suitable.”

She avoided his eyes and looked down at her feet. Caitlin was amazed; he made her boots. She held out her legs and admired her new footwear. She rather liked them.

“Thank you,” Caitlin said, happy for the splash of reality.

He was getting to her in a subtle way. So far, she had only been exposed to the pushy, male apes she kept dating back home. Yet this man, with his powerful build and heavy dose of masculine charm, had not even tried to seduce her as she lay next to him naked under a blanket all night. His attention may have been gallant and kind, but it was his heated glances full of unreleased passion that told her otherwise. It was driving her crazy. Did she have to make the first move, she wondered?

Jared smiled, then put an iron plate on the fire and cracked two eggs on it. When done, he handed it to her with a goblet of mint tea.

“Where did you get the eggs?”

“I went hunting, but came across a nest of duck eggs.”

“Duck eggs? They taste just like chicken eggs; they’re good, thank you.”

Jared smiled at her and also ate. Caitlin thought back to her last boyfriend, Dylan. He had never cooked for her or made her anything, and he certainly never swept her off her feet while riding a horse, not to mention how Dylan had chided her for delaying intimacy. She suddenly appreciated this man a whole lot more. After finishing their meal, he stood up and pulled her to her feet.

“Is there something I can use to scrub my teeth with?”

Jared gave her some granules of sea salt and mint leaves to scrub with, plus a goblet of water to rinse with, outside. He did the same.

“Thank you for everything, Jared, and I’m sorry for yelling last night. I was—afraid.” Caitlin admitted hesitantly.

“I am glad you are—more comfortable—with me. You never told me your name.” Jared stated.

“Oh—um, it’s Caitlin, Caitlin Evans.”

“A beautiful woman deserves a beautiful name. Come with me, beautiful Caitlin.” Jared said and smiled.

Jared took her hand. Caitlin walked with him. He lifted her onto his horse, Trey, and mounted behind her. It was a sunny but chilly day. Caitlin was glad she at least had her warm robe and was grateful for the warm footwear Jared had made her. His closeness and physical contact as they rode were affecting her thoughts.

“Where are we going?” Caitlin asked, trying to break the silence.

“I will show you in a little,” Jared replied.

They continued riding for a while. Jared asked her about the weapon she carried. Caitlin took it out and told him it was called Pepper Spray. She explained that it was an unpleasant, eye-stinging mist that caused temporary coughing, choking, and burning once released, and how it had helped her escape the men in the forest. Jared thanked her for not using it on him. Then they came to a beautiful location with trees and a stream. He dismounted and helped her off. Caitlin was in awe of the natural beauty.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Caitlin said and smiled as she looked around.

“This is the location where we fell last night after being in your room. It is the location of the Inn you want to return to.” Jared told her.

In shock, Caitlin spun around and looked at him.

“No! It can’t be! We must be in the wrong place!” Caitlin exclaimed.

Jared looked at her,

“Before going to battle, my sister Lara gave me this amulet for protection. It has saved my life more than once. I do not know how it happens, but from time to time, I have traveled to Emerald Castle in your world, but have never been able to speak with anyone until you came. You were the only one able to see me. When you fell unconscious

and tore the amulet from me, I remember only placing you on a chair. Later, I arrived outside your room, but I do not recall how I got there. I never meant to bring you here against your will, but when I feel a threat the amulet glows, and it shields me or takes me to a place I feel safe if I am ready to go. When you held your weapon against me, I reacted on instinct by holding you down. I meant only to disarm you, but the emotions inside me were strong, and the voices outside the door made them stronger. Then the amulet's glow surrounded us, and its powers brought us here. In truth, I cannot say I regret that you are here. I only regret that you are not here by choice." Jared explained.

"Oh my God, you wished us here?"

"Not intentionally."

"So it was a subconscious wish?"

"I am not familiar with that word."

Caitlin faced him and stated,

"So you wanted me to see you and to come here? As if you—already knew me before you met me. But how could that be? Caitlin asked, trying to understand.

Jared avoided the question and removed the amulet, and placed it around her neck.

"The amulet has powers I do not understand. I want you to wear it for protection." He said.

"Thank you. It's beautiful." She looked at the lavender crystals of the amulet, and then she remembered something. "You said you believed me to be someone else—who? Is this woman dead or someone you cannot be with?" Caitlin questioned.

Jared regretted having to explain about Kayla and looked away.

"She is my brother's widow, Kayla. I loved her, but she was never aware of it. I believe she helped her father set a trap for us at Emerald Castle. Her father is a powerful man and a sorcerer. He made a false

accusation and took Kayla away. My brother Derrick was devastated. When we came to the castle to get her back and resolve the matter peacefully, she greeted us and assured us we were safe. She reached out for Derrick, and when he was about to embrace her, he was struck by an arrow and killed, followed by my father and my other brother, Marc. I was also struck across the shoulder, but I managed to escape.” Jared explained.

“Dear God—so it’s true—I am so sorry,” Caitlin said as she placed her hand over her mouth.

Jared stepped away for a moment, reminded of the painful memory, breathed uncomfortably, and continued.

“After that, I swore I would avenge their death—I planned an attack on Emerald Castle. That’s when my sister gave me the amulet for protection. I had planned to kill them on the day of the attack. When I reached the tower, her father was waiting for me. I believe he used his magic to try to kill me, but the amulet shielded me. After that, I lost consciousness and could not return home. I would find myself throughout the castle encountering strangely dressed people, but they could not see me or hear me until you came to Emerald Castle. I had believed you to be Kayla, at first, and when you took the crystal, it led me back to you.” Jared concluded.

Caitlin looked down in thought—and after a brief pause, looked up at him and asked,

“So you came to my room at the Inn—to kill me because you thought I was her?”

Jared looked away, wishing she had not asked that.

“Aye,” he admitted hesitantly.

“Oh my God,” Caitlin said as she took a step back.

“But I could not do it,” he said instantly and took a step toward her.

"You were going to kill me, in my bed while I slept, because you confused me with someone from your past?" She asked, sounding anguished.

"But I did not—because it felt wrong!"

"So you could have killed me at the castle up in the tower if someone hadn't interrupted us?"

"No! I have killed men in battle very swiftly; if I had wanted to kill you, then I would have done it. But I could not!"

Caitlin suddenly felt sick to her stomach as she absorbed only the negative side of his explanation. She continued backing away from him. "Caitlin! I mean you no harm, you must believe me!"

Jared reached for her, but she pushed him away.

"Don't touch me! I'm sorry, but that kind of information is not easy for me to dismiss, nor can I be around someone who plans to kill someone else! Did she run away from you? Is that it?" He came closer, "Get away from me, leave me alone!" Caitlin yelled.

"Caitlin, I want to help you, not hurt you!"

Caitlin covered her ears, thinking this was all a big lie, and yelled,

"You're a liar! This isn't real! You brought me here to confuse me and make me believe the impossible! Using a 13th-century legend to trap me! I heard about men like you, tricking unsuspecting foreign women, then selling them on the black market to be sex slaves! But it's over, I'm leaving, I'll find my own way back!"

"I cannot allow you to go! You are not familiar with my world! You shall not survive here!" Jared exclaimed.

He came toward her; Caitlin turned and started running away from him, but Jared caught up with her in a few paces and lifted her off the ground as she kicked and screamed. He put her down, holding both her flailing arms behind her to keep her from scratching his eyes out or using her pepper spray on him, and pinned her between himself and a

tree, trying to calm her. He was much too strong for her, and she finally gave up from exhaustion. She panted against the tree and looked up at him towering over her. The nearness and friction between them ignited a burning inside as he gazed down at her, still holding her hands behind her back. After sensing her relent, he instinctively lowered his head and kissed her. Caitlin was unprepared for the sudden flood of emotion that came over her and responded to his passionate kiss in a way that betrayed her earlier actions. Jared released his hold on her and entwined his hands in her hair. She was lost in the arms of a man she didn't trust or understand. The heated exchange had awakened every cell in her body. Then Jared broke the embrace, swept his arm under her knees, and carried her off to his horse. He lifted her onto Trey as he mounted behind her and rode back to his forest home.

In the distance, behind a tree, was a man watching them. He also mounted his horse and rode to alert the other members of the guard.

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He cradled her in his arms while they rode back to his home; the need to possess her mounted with each kiss, and he sensed as much need in her. Deep inside, Caitlin knew she desired him more than she feared him from the moment she saw him at the castle. The passion he stirred in her filled her with anticipation of coming together over his primitive bed of animal skins and blankets. There was a gentleness about him that contrasted with a presumed warrior lifestyle. She blamed her fear of possibly finding herself in a primitive world, but she pushed it all aside. The only thing that mattered now was their union and the safety she felt in his arms—they felt good, they felt right.

Once they reached his home, Jared and Caitlin could barely keep apart as he dismounted, and she slid off Trey directly into his arms. Holding her off the ground, he carried her inside and laid her down on

his bed of animal skins and blankets. Jared covered her with his own body as he kissed her when they heard horses outside.

CHAPTER 8: LADY KAYLA

“Lady Kayla, we have orders to bring you home!” A member of the guard announced.

Jared tensed and stood up. He looked through the door cracks. Caitlin sprang to her feet as well.

“It is the guard. They believe you are Kayla, Lord Rogan’s daughter.”

“Oh no! Well, we must just tell them they’re wrong.”

“They shall not accept that,” Jared assured her.

“Do they know you?”

“I know not because, I know not how long I have been gone.”

“Won’t they go away if I tell them I’m not who they think I am?”

“No, this is my world!”

Jared looked through the door cracks, and before he could stop her, Caitlin stepped outside.

“No!” Jared exclaimed.

“Gentlemen, hello, I’m sorry, but I am not Kayla. You have the wrong person. My name is Caitlin Evans. I’m a student here on tour.”

Jared stood inside and drew his sword, waiting to see the guard's reaction, which was exactly what he expected.

"Seize her!" Brahms, the guard in charge, ordered from his mounted position.

Two men on the ground came toward her and took her by the arms.

"Hey, what are you doing? Let go of me! I told you, I'm not Kayla! Don't you people understand English?" Caitlin demanded.

Jared went out through the small back window. While Caitlin yelled and screamed, Jared whistled for Trey, who immediately came toward him. Jared mounted him and circled the back, then came charging toward them as he slashed at the guard holding Caitlin. Caitlin screamed and ran from the man, but the man chased after her.

"Jared!" She screamed.

The other man on the ground drew his sword and mounted his horse to chase after Jared on horseback. Jared turned and charged him. They slashed at each other while on horseback, but Jared was fast and deadly with a sword and overcame the man quickly. Brahms, the head guard, pointed his bow and arrow at Jared from atop his horse and ordered the man on the ground to bring Lady Kayla. After finishing off his previous attacker, Jared attempted to sweep Caitlin up, but had to swerve to avoid the arrow. Caitlin was struggling with the man on foot when she saw the man on horseback shoot an arrow at Jared. She screamed in terror as the arrow narrowly missed him. It was then that she realized this was real; Jared was real! Then the crystal lit up, Caitlin knew what would happen next; she reached for her pepper spray and flung it through the air at him,

"Jared!" She yelled and then vanished.

CHAPTER 9: HOME AGAIN

As before, a lavender glow surrounded her. Caitlin couldn't breathe, and her movements were slow and cumbersome. Then she fell on a bed. She gasped for air and felt drained of energy. She sat up with difficulty, then realized she was back in her room at her great Aunt Mavis's home,

"No! No! Jared!" She cried out for him.

She had traveled through time, but without Jared! The loss was heavy on her heart, as she wept, not knowing what had happened to him. After a few minutes, she calmed herself, looked up, and saw her suitcase. She ran over to open it and flung all her clothes out. Then she saw her cell phone, but it was dead. She plugged it into the charger and turned it on. She had text messages and missed calls. The last text message was a warning that the service would be disconnected due to a lack of payment.

"What?!" Caitlin cursed and threw her cell phone; she had just paid for it when she left for Ireland.

She turned on her laptop, but she had no internet service there either. She went downstairs, calling for her Aunt, but nobody was

home. She picked up the landline in the kitchen and called Linda's cell phone. She got her voicemail and left her an urgent message. Five minutes later, Linda called back.

"Hello! Hello! Linda! It's me, Caitlin!" There was a long silence on the other end. "Hello, Linda?" Caitlin asked.

"Who is this?" Linda asked back.

"Caitlin!" She replied.

Then Caitlin heard the dial tone. Linda had hung up on her. She redialed Linda's cell phone, but got her voicemail again. She left her another urgent message,

"Please, Linda, it's urgent!" Caitlin exclaimed.

A few minutes later, the phone rang. Caitlin picked up immediately.

"Linda?" Caitlin asked.

"Yes," Linda replied.

"Linda, it's me, Caitlin! Why won't you talk to me? I need your help!" Caitlin exclaimed.

After a pause, Linda replied,

"This can't be Caitlin unless you're calling me from the dead."

"What? I'm not dead! I'm at my Aunt Mavis's talking to you. Why would you say something like that?" Caitlin asked.

After another pause, Linda replied, "Because—I attended your funeral."

Caitlin went numb, dropped the phone, and then lost consciousness. She woke up sometime later; Linda and her Aunt Mavis were with her.

"Linda, Aunt Mavis!" Caitlin exclaimed.

"Caitlin, honey, oh my God, I'm so happy to see you're alive, but where have you been and how did you get here? Linda asked.

"What do you mean, alive?" Caitlin asked.

“Darling, you went missing during your trip to Ireland. The Irish authorities pronounced you dead! We were all heartbroken; Linda had to come back alone.” Mavis added.

“But I was just gone a few days,” Caitlin stated.

“Honey, it’s been a year,” Linda informed her.

“A year? Oh my God! Jared!”

“Who’s Jared?” Mavis asked.

Linda stared at her in shock and said, “He’s the man in the legend they spoke of during the tour of Emerald Castle.” Linda told Mavis.

“Linda, he’s real! I was with him! He had this crystal amulet—” Then Caitlin looked down, and she gasped, seeing she still wore it. It gave her hope again. “This one, it lights up, and you travel through time!” Aunt Mavis and Linda looked at each other. “I know you both think I’m crazy, I would too if I hadn’t lived through it, but it’s true, you have to believe me!” Caitlin cried.

“Perhaps we should call Palmer,” Aunt Mavis told Linda.

Palmer was Mavis’s son and a psychiatrist.

“No! He’ll just have me committed or something, because my story is pretty unbelievable, but it’s true! Let me just tell you what happened.”

“Well, I would certainly want to hear what happened first. I see you’re wearing the same clothes I last saw you in and some strange-looking boots, but tell us! What happened?” Linda pleaded.

Caitlin retold the whole story to them up to the present moment. Linda was the most convinced as she recalled the events of the time she went missing.

“When I came in the room, you were gone, but I do remember a gust of wind and a flash of lavender light in the room, but it was so brief. I assumed it was due to the glass door being opened and the lightning, so I went and closed it and drew the curtains. Your purse

was there, but you were gone. I called your cell phone, and it rang from inside your purse. After a while, I called the authorities. They did a full search for you, and they never found a trace of you. I knew you were forced to leave because your clothes were all there except for the clothes you're wearing, but your slippers were by the bed. The authorities believed your assailant came in through the glass balcony door and took you in your night clothes. I had to call your folks and tell them what happened. They immediately flew out; they were a mess. Due to the investigation, they stayed longer, but I didn't have the funds to continue staying at the Inn, so I had to return home alone. It was horrible. The police couldn't figure out how someone got up to our balcony on the third floor and then took you out the same way."

"Linda, I have to get back!" Caitlin exclaimed.

"How?" Linda asked.

"Darling, you need to calm down. Why don't you lie down and get some rest? I'll make some tea. Linda, can you help me bring up some hot tea and some pie, please?" Mavis said, urging Linda to come downstairs.

"I'm not hungry. I need to go back to Ireland right now! Where are my car keys?" Caitlin demanded.

"Your car was sold, darling," Mavis informed her.

"Oh my God, how am I supposed to get around or communicate with anyone? It's as if I stopped existing."

"Well, you did to us, dear, that's why everything is as it is, but I deposited the money in your bank account, because I still had hope you would turn up," Mavis informed her.

"Thank you, Aunt Mavis."

"Caitlin, you need to think this through. Let's not make any rash decisions. I'll be back in a minute." Linda said

Linda went downstairs with Mavis. Once downstairs, Mavis asked Linda,

“You don’t really believe that crazy story, do you?”

“Well, I do remember she was feeling spooked during the tour of the castle, and I remember the gust of wind around her twice. The first time, I thought it was funny because it lifted her skirt in the air. I even joked that it was the legendary Jared Kellan, trying to look up her skirt, and then I remember the gust of wind in the room when she went missing.” Linda claimed.

“Well, it’s a great story, but it’s nonsense. I thought you said she fell and hit her head during the tour at the castle.” Mavis stated.

“No, that’s what we told everyone, but how can she just reappear here out of nowhere and in the same night clothes she was wearing the night she went missing? Also, I brought back all of her things, including her purse and wallet.” Linda added.

“Well, it’s possible she developed amnesia, or someone drugged her and kidnapped her, then brought her back. She needs a medical exam and a psychiatric evaluation. I’m calling Palmer in the morning. It won’t hurt for him to evaluate her, just don’t say anything to her.” Mavis warned.

“But Palmer is going to declare her mentally unstable if she tells him that story.” Linda insisted.

“Palmer shall do what is best for her. Now you promise me you won’t say anything to her regarding him until he’s here. I don’t want her running off somewhere crazy. Do I have your word?” Mavis requested.

“Um, perhaps he shouldn’t be called just yet; let’s give her a few days.” Linda urged.

“Can’t you see she is unstable? You heard her, she plans to go back to Ireland as soon as possible. She’s going to end up dead for real if we

don't intervene. If you're her friend and you don't want her to run off and disappear again, then help her stay put. Her great-grandfather was schizophrenic. That's why Palmer became a psychiatrist. He loved his grandfather and wanted to help him." Mavis claimed.

"Oh, I didn't know; she never mentioned that to me before," Linda stated.

"Well, that's not exactly something to brag about regarding your family. The poor dear is probably schizophrenic, too. She listened to a storybook legend about some long-ago hero and became delusional. Also, you must remember she had a bad breakup with Dylan after she found out he was cheating on her, and this dashing hero, Jared Kellan, the castle people told you about, became his replacement. Look, Palmer shall just do a quick evaluation. So I need you to give me your word that you shall not tell her that her cousin Palmer is coming here to see her tomorrow. Just play along with her for now, promise?"

Linda hesitated, "Okay." Linda replied weakly.

"Okay?" Mavis asked.

"Alright, yes, you have my word," Linda assured her.

"Good, let's go have some tea with Caitlin," Mavis said.

Mavis prepared the tea, and while Linda wasn't looking, Mavis dropped one of her Valium pills in it. Then both Linda and Mavis went back upstairs with the tea and pie.

"Caitlin, we have some tea, dear, and some of my homemade pie," Mavis said and smiled.

"Thank you, Aunt Mavis, but I'm not hungry," Caitlin stated and turned to Linda. "Linda! I know how to get back!" She said excitedly.

"You mean how to get back to Ireland?" Linda asked.

"No, I mean I know how to travel back in time!" Caitlin exclaimed.

Mavis shot Linda a look.

"How, Caitlin?" Linda asked.

“Well, the crystal lights up and transfers you to a place you feel safe when the person wearing it feels threatened,” Caitlin told her.

“Threatened? So what do you intend to do?” Linda asked.

“I’m not sure. I may have to do something a bit drastic.”

Caitlin said.

“Like what?” Linda asked, getting concerned that perhaps Mavis was right about her.

“Maybe jump in front of a bus or threaten a cop with a gun or something,” Caitlin said.

Mavis and Linda exchanged looks. After hearing that, Linda decided Mavis was right about Caitlin being mentally unstable and should get a psychiatric evaluation.

“Jump in front of a bus, threaten a cop? My... that is a bit drastic. Honey, I think you need to rest tonight, okay? And stop talking like that, you’re scaring me. I have to go, but I’ll come by tomorrow after work. Don’t do anything crazy. Just rest for now, alright?”

“Darling, Linda’s right, you need to rest tonight. The best thing is you’re home safe again; your parents shall be ecstatic.”

“No! Don’t tell them!”

“Caitlin, they have a right to know! They were crushed when you went missing and almost went broke trying to find you!” Mavis scolded. Caitlin put her head down, not realizing how her disappearance had affected them. “Now rest, darling, tomorrow we’ll help you put your life back together. It’s all going to be fine.” She hugged Caitlin. “It’s good to have you back home, dear. Now have some Chamomile tea and a slice of my homemade coconut cream pie, and tomorrow we’ll straighten all this out. I’m going to walk Linda out. Please drink your tea and have a good night, darling.” Mavis said and smiled.

Linda hugged Caitlin, "I'm so happy to see you again, Cait. Please just get some rest for tonight, and I'll see you tomorrow. Okay?" Linda asked.

"Okay, Linda, thank you for being a good friend, goodnight," Caitlin said.

Mavis and Linda closed the door and went downstairs.

"What do you think now?" Mavis asked Linda.

"I think you're right. Palmer needs to evaluate her." Linda told Mavis.

CHAPTER 10: THE BRANNICKS

Jared turned to Caitlin when she called out to him and caught the pepper spray as she vanished. His heart felt a sudden emptiness. Her disappearance was more painful than being struck by a burning arrow, but he was forced to react as Brahms, the guard on horseback, yelled and charged at him with his sword in the air, causing Trey to rear on his hind legs. He got close enough for Jared to spray him directly in the face with the pepper spray, and then kicked him off the horse with his foot. Brahms fell to the ground, choking and coughing. The third man, spooked by Caitlin's disappearance and the strange weapon, mounted his horse and sped away. Jared looked down at the head guard choking on the ground; he decided to spare his life and rode off in the opposite direction.

§

Once away, his thoughts centered on Caitlin. Most of his life had been a constant battle to survive and protect. The brief time he spent with her was the greatest joy he had ever experienced. She was a light in

his dark world. How he longed to hold her again. He hoped the crystal would lead him back to her. If not, Lara needed to take him to the old woman who conjured spells. She was his greatest hope in finding Caitlin again. He headed to his home to meet with his mother and sister in haste.

When Jared reached his home site, he saw crops, but his home was no longer there; fear came over him regarding his remaining family's whereabouts. He went looking for Aaron, but he was also gone. He then headed toward the Brannicks. They had been loyal friends of his and his family.

Leland Brannick was chopping wood when he saw a man on horseback approach. He took a defensive stand and held his ax steady, and then he squinted in disbelief.

"Leland, tis I, Jared!"

"Jared? Jared Kellan? Good heavens, I thought you dead, lad. Where have you been? Were you being held? Leland asked.

"Tis difficult to say, but Yei, I was being held. Where is my family?"

"Lord Rogan confiscated your land and forced them out. They are with Aaron and Kayla."

"What? What do you mean they are with Aaron and Kayla? Are they together?" Jared asked in shock.

"Aye, they married after Aaron brought her back from Emerald Castle. They have a child."

Jared tensed with anger and exclaimed,

"A child! Then Aaron is an equal traitor and no friend of mine! He knew Kayla and her father set a trap for us at Emerald Castle because of her; my family is dead!" Jared yelled.

Jared clenched his jaw as his blood boiled.

"No, lad, she mourned Derrick a long time. She ran away from her father by choice, and Aaron helped her and offered to marry her, but

she was not ready to remarry until the following harvest after your brother's death. They named their son Derrick after him. You must believe this, lad, tis the truth."

Jared's heart pounded in his chest, and his hand tightened around his sword.

"Where are they?" Jared demanded.

His eyes were cold and dilated.

"Jared, I'll not tell you their whereabouts if you be thinking of slaying them! You need time to cool your blood, lad."

"If you'll not tell me, then I'll find someone who shall!"

"You'll not force anyone here to tell you anything, Jared. I know your strength with the sword, but you'll have to go through me if you've come back with murder in your heart. You have known me since you were a wee lad, you know I mean what I say and say what I mean. Kayla and Aaron did not betray your family."

Jared clenched his jaw and panted with anger.

Tyra, Leland's wife, came out.

"I cannot believe it! Jared Kellan! You are alive! Where have you been, lad?"

Then she noticed the tension between Jared and her husband.

"What is wrong, Leland? We should be celebrating, we must tell our sons!"

"Tyra, wait! Jared believes Kayla and Aaron betrayed his family. He means to slay them."

Tyra turned toward Jared, with an anguished look, and said,

"What? Jared, no, you must not believe such a wicked thing. I know you have been gone a long time and hold much anger inside for what happened, but you must believe us, lad; your family was not betrayed by Kayla or Aaron. Kayla was horrified at her father's evil deed and vowed never to return to him or Emerald Castle. Instead, she

willingly returned here with Aaron, but she was wretched. Her heart was broken when she lost Derrick, and because it was by her father's hand, she felt responsible. Her sorrow became too great to bear, and one morning, Aaron found her nearly drowned in the river. He helped her, but it took a long time before she accepted him. During this time, Aaron also took in your mother and sister after Lord Rogan put them out and confiscated your land. Grateful is the only thing you should be feeling, lad." Jared listened and began to back off. "Please, lad, open your heart to the truth, not to hate, and Leland shall take you to them, but you must honor your father's memory and not kill blindly."

Jared calmed down after Tyra's speech.

"They live over the mountain. They are in hiding."

"Lord Rogan has been looking for Kayla, so they often move."

Jared looked down at the ground, still feeling perplexed.

"I must see my mother and sister. Can you take me to them?"

Leland looked at him and then at his wife, who nodded, and Leland consented.

"Come, Jared," Leland placed his hands on Jared's shoulders. "Your father and brothers were good men and good friends, as are you; I miss them still. Sup with us tonight, lad, and on the morrow, we shall go over the mountain."

Tyra came out to the fields and told her three sons, Hagan, sixteen, Tobin, nineteen, and Tristan, twenty-two, of Jared's return. The three young men immediately came to greet Jared. They ate, and Leland told him of the battle and how Lord Rogan had cast a spell on the men's hands, making them useless. That evening, Jared shared very little about where he had been; he only told them he had been cast to a distant place. He did not mention Caitlin. Instead, he spoke of getting his land back.

CHAPTER 11: JOURNEY ACROSS THE MOUNTAIN

Jared and Leland left to go over the mountain at dawn. It was a cold, misty morning; they arrived six hours later. They approached the small community of villagers. Some greeted Leland. They arrived at a small wooden structure, and Jared knocked and called to his mother and sister. Lara opened the door at once and nearly fainted when she saw Jared standing there. Anya, also shocked, came out directly after. Both his sister and mother became ecstatic and embraced Jared in tears of joy. They couldn't believe he was there in the flesh. Leland stood back and smiled at the joyful reunion. They came inside the wooden dwelling, having to lower their heads as they crossed the doorway. There were only a few stools around, a small wooden table, and a blanket used as a partition between the sleeping area and dining table. The warmth from the fire felt good on their cold skin. His mother got busy making them food. It saddened Jared to see his mother and sister reduced to such a confined space, but he was happy to see them in good spirits. Lara had blossomed into a beautiful young woman with

long dark hair and violet-blue eyes, and his mother was still a vibrant lady. He asked them about Aaron and Kayla. Lara warmed some bread for them. His mother informed him that they had to leave because her father had sent his guard looking for her again, and she was now heavy with a second child. Jared had not realized how long he had been gone

.

“Jared, for a long time, we thought you were dead, so the crystal did protect you! But brother, where have you been for so long?”

“The only thing that matters to me is that Jared is not dead, but home again, so now we must celebrate.”

His mother cried and hugged Jared once again, then went out back to bring some eggs from the chicken pen.

“I was in a distant place. Tell me how was Kayla when Aaron brought her back from Emerald Castle?”

“She was heartbroken like mother and me. It was very hard on all of us.”

“For a long time, I was under the belief that she helped her father trap us,” Jared stated.

“No, Jared, she loved Derrick and missed him terribly; she would not eat or do anything; she blamed herself for believing her father’s lies. She was overwhelmed with sorrow, and one morning, Aaron found her in the river and brought her out; if not for him, she would not be here. She has been hiding from her father since then.”

Lara’s words regarding Kayla were reassuring. However, he was determined to get back what was taken from his family, but first, he needed to get Caitlin before more time passed.

Jared ate, feeling more comforted and at ease as Lara spoke.

“How have you survived with no land to till or crops to sell?”

"We brought some of the livestock with us and have been helping village women during childbirth. It is not much, but we do not go hungry."

"I will get our lands and our home back, but it is about the crystal amulet. I must speak to you now. I need you to take me to the old woman who gave it to you."

"Oh, Jared, please do not fight Lord Rogan again now that you are back. He is too powerful; we don't want to lose you again. Please!"

"Forgive me, sister, I did not mean to fill your head with worries. You gave me a great gift. The amulet has saved my life many times, but I would like you to take me to the old woman who gave it to you."

"You mean Rowena?"

"If that be her name, yes."

"She lives back over the mountain where we lived before. But I have not seen her since you went missing. Is it very important? She was old, and now she could be dead." Jared tensed and looked away, trying to hide his discomfort. "But someone here told me a villager received some herbs from her not very long ago."

"Then I want you to take me to her."

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

"What is the urgency? I see you no longer wear the amulet. Did you want her to give you another?"

"Perhaps, you must gather your things. We leave on the morrow at dawn."

"Jared, I cannot leave mother alone; there are two village women ready to deliver children. She needs my help. Why must you see Rowena so urgently?"

Jared looked away. He stood and led her outside. His mother cooked over the burning fire, and she and Leland chatted in the background.

“Something happened to me while I wore the amulet. It took me to where I met a woman who shall not be born for many winters to come. This woman was with me just yesterday morning. I placed the amulet on her to protect her, but later, during a struggle with Lord Rogan’s guard, she vanished.” Lara gasped. “She goes by the name of Caitlin; her appearance is like looking at Kayla’s reflection.”

Lara pressed her fingers to her lips in amazement.

Jared was silent for a moment. Then began telling Lara the way he had met Caitlin.

“Oh my, so she was about to be killed, and she vanished?”

“No, she saw a guard strike an arrow at me.”

Just then, a child came running toward them and interrupted their conversation.

“Lara, my mother, is screaming in pain; you must come and help her!”

Lara turned to the boy and then to Jared and said,

“I will get my things! Jared, Mother, and I must go to her.”

Lara ran inside for her mother.

“Jared, there is still plenty of warm food; we will be back later. I am so happy to see you again.” His mother said.

Anya wiped her tears as she hugged him once more before leaving.

“If this child is born today, then only one village woman remains with child, and Mother can attend to her, and I can go with you on the morrow.”

Lara and Anya left with some cloths and a bucket of hot water.

Jared nodded and went back inside with Leland. Lara and her mother returned later that evening then Lara prepared to leave with Jared and Leland at daybreak.

CHAPTER 12: ROWENA

Jared, Leland, and Lara set out to go back over the mountain the next morning. They arrived back at the Brannicks' home near midday. Tyra and her sons welcomed them back; she had prepared a large meal for them, but Jared was anxious for Lara to take him to see Rowena and left, promising they would be back shortly. Lara requested to take some grilled fish and baked bread with them when Jared attempted to stop her from bringing the food. Lara told him Rowena would expect some compensation, and then he agreed. Tristan, who was pleasantly surprised at Lara's transformation from the skinny, freckled-faced girl he formerly chased after with toads or frogs, offered to accompany them.

They arrived at the old woman's home just past midday. Rowena lived in a cave-dwelling hidden in the forest. Lara knocked on her door, which opened. She stepped inside, but it was empty. Lara came out and looked around, but there was no sign of her.

"She is not here."

Then there was a noise coming from the bushes. A small, hunched-over, old woman stepped out of the bushes, aided by a walking stick. She carried in her hand a basket of herbs.

“Who might you be?”

Jared and Tristan let Lara do the talking.

“Rowena, ‘tis Lara Kellan, do you remember me?” Lara asked loudly.

“Child, at my age, remembering how to get home is my biggest concern.”

Lara smiled at Jared and Tristan.

“Rowena, this is my brother, Jared. You gave me a crystal amulet a while back to protect him from being killed in battle.”

Rowena tilted her neck, trying to look up at Jared. She signaled for him to come closer; Jared dismounted Trey and came toward her. Then she reached for him and pulled him down to her level.

“Come down here, lad, you make my neck hurt.” Jared squatted. She touched his face, his hair, and his arms. Then she turned toward Lara and said, “Well, he lives. What else can I do for you?”

Rowena turned away and headed for her door.

“Wait! You see, when he was about to be killed, he was shielded from death but trapped within a castle for a long time. Then the crystal led him to a woman, a woman who has not been born yet. She was recently here with him, and he placed the crystal amulet on her to protect her. When she saw he was about to be struck by an arrow, she vanished. Why has the crystal not led him back to her?”

Jared was about to speak when she stopped him.

“Aah!” Rowena put up her hand. “What have you brought for me?” Rowena asked.

Lara then went into her sack and brought out the food.

"I have some bread, fish, potatoes, honey, and berries for you," Lara told her.

Rowena smelled and tasted the food, then signaled them to follow her inside.

"Mm, very tasty, I am quite hungry. I do prefer roast chicken, but fish will do fine, thank you, lass. 'Tis very hard for an old woman to fish or hunt," She continued eating, then turned and said, "So this very tall one is your brother who wore the crystal amulet?"

"Aye."

"Who is the other lad, your lover?"

Rowena asked, referring to Tristan. Lara blushed, feeling embarrassed.

"No, he is a friend."

Rowena pulled her hand,

"He is taken with you, lass," Rowena whispered in her ear.

Lara smiled at her comment and looked away.

"Why does it not lead me back to the woman who carries the amulet? It did before. Do you remember the spell?" Jared asked.

"I remember it, lad, I do not help warriors often, and it is why I gave your sister the most powerful crystal I had in my possession, but the spell has been broken! That is why it will not lead you back to her. You are released from it because the woman who wears it has fallen in love with you, and that is the good tiding. Unfortunately, she is not a local woman; my apologies, I did not foresee that. The crystal amulet now protects her while she wears it, but she is not under any spell.

"Released? So does that mean I will never see her again?" Jared clenched his jaw as he asked.

"Well, there are two ways. Remember that the amulet is meant to protect. The first one is by the lady being threatened, and if she thinks of you, then the amulet shall bring you together, but she must be

wearing it. The second is by placing an incantation on the other half of the crystal, which shall also bring you together, providing you bring it to me first.”

“There is another half?” Jared asked.

“Yes—I broke the original in half because the crystal was too large, and—because folks tend to lose things. However, it is with a very powerful and evil sorcerer. He shall not give it freely, but if you truly want it, then you must confront him—and bring me his—” Rowena was explaining when she was interrupted.

“His head!” Tristan blurted out, excited over the story.

“No!” Rowena replied.

“His heart!” Lara exclaimed.

Rowena turned and squinted at them for the outburst.

“The two of you are rightly matched, I see!” Rowena declared.

“Where does he keep the other half?” Jared asked.

“On his finger, he set it into a ring.”

“How did he get it?” Lara asked.

“When I was a lass, a good, but dying sorceress, gave me the crystal as a gift. She had taught me many spells to help those in need. It was an icy winter, and she asked if I could bring her firewood that was too heavy for me alone, so I asked my older brother, Mort, to help me with it. As compensation for bringing her the wood, she told me she would give me a great and powerful gift, and I should keep it safe. She showed me a large lavender crystal that came from the sea and told me the crystal was capable of protecting and granting the wishes of the heart, as well as drawing out more of your true self.

The crystal was large, and it harbored too much power as one piece, so she advised me to break it in half and keep them separate. I was a naïve young lass, and when Mort stated he should keep the other half as compensation for helping, I conceded to it, but it had a strange effect

on him. The crystal turned him into a cold, greedy man. He did not help people; he used them to keep himself young.

“So the crystal keeps him young?” Lara asked.

“No, he uses the crystal to draw out their youthful essence to keep himself young. Mostly, he uses his opponents or captured enemies.”

“He delights in taking prisoners or arresting his opponents; many are never seen from again, and so he ages slowly and grows stronger.”

“He only requires doing this, four or five times per year, but he shall never stop so long as he has the crystal.”

When I found out about his evil deeds, I tried to get the crystal back, but I could not. I had become an old woman while he remained young. He attempted to get the other half from me once, the one I gave your sister, but I hid it from him here in the forest.

I never used the crystal in the past for anyone because no one had such an extraordinary request as your sister’s, to shield you from death in battle. However, I remember hearing she needed protection for her lover, not a brother, so I recited an incantation for a lover—my apologies.”

“Where do I find him?” Jared asked.

“He is Lord of Emerald Castle as well as most of the land in this area.”

Lara gasped.

“Your brother is Lord Rogan?” Tristan asked.

“I denounced his relation to me many winters ago. He is well protected and grew more powerful when he married the sea witch, Serena, by using the crystal to continually draw out her powers.”

“So the crystal turns your heart to evil?” Lara asked.

“No, the crystal strengthens your true nature. I have seen his aura; it is dark.” Rowena told them.

“Is his daughter Kayla a dark sorceress like him?” Jared asked.

“She is not his true daughter. Kayla is the offspring of Serena, a sea witch, and her husband, Finian, a sorcerer of the forest. During a time that Lord Rogan took ill, Serena visited the castle and brought him magical potions and remedies while she was with child. He was impressed with her and her healing abilities, but was even more impressed to know she was expecting a child sired by Finian, a known gifted sorcerer of the forest. He knew their child would be powerfully gifted, and wanted access to Serena and her child’s gift, so he devised a plan to have Finian killed and make it look like an accident. Once dead, Lord Rogan would marry Finian’s grieving widow and have access to both Serena and her child’s magical gifts. As planned, Finian was pushed over a cliff one day when he was out collecting mushrooms and herbs. Serena mourned for her husband, and Lord Rogan consoled her by offering to marry her and protect her child. Serena was initially shocked, but having few resources, she had no choice but to accept his proposal. After some time, Serena herself vanished; it is said she was discovered with a lover. Then only Kayla remained in the castle.

I met Kayla in the forest once with her caretakers. She was very young, and I saw her aura. It was faint but light. However, she is not aware of her gift because he has used the crystal to draw it continually out of her, as he did with her mother. He is powerful so long as he has his wealth, the crystal, and Kayla. The good tiding is that her powers can be restored, but she must go down into the sea from where the crystal and her mother came. There her aura shall burn bright once again, and her powers shall be restored.”

Lara gasped, and Jared and Tristan listened intently.

“So Kayla—is a sorceress and not Lord Rogan’s blood relation!”

“Correct, but she believes she is.” Rowena clarified.

“Now I understand why Lord Rogan continues to seek her,” Lara stated.

“He uses her gift through the crystal that becomes stronger with age,” Rowena said.

“She has been away from Lord Rogan a long time now. Does she have some of her powers back?” Tristan asked.

“Perhaps, but they shall be weak. I am sure she is aware of it by now. Her emotional state shall cause unusual disturbances to occur more and more frequently.” Rowena replied.

“Well, Kayla and Aaron now have children and are happy. She fears magic and water, and I am sure she shall not be diving down into the sea to restore them,” Lara stated.

“Who is Aaron?” Rowena asked.

“Her husband, why?” Lara asked.

“Hmm? The name is close, but ‘tis not the one that connects with the lady Jared seeks.”

Lara crinkled her forehead in confusion.

“What about her children? Do they share the gift?” Tristan asked.

“I do not know, but ‘tis possible,” Rowena said, then turned to Jared and said, “However, tis a certainty that Kayla is a blood relation to the lady you seek.”

“How do you know this?” Jared asked.

“I sense it. Where did you come upon your lady?” Rowena asked.

“At Emerald Castle, while I was cast within the spell.”

“Then your encounter with her, as well as her similarity to Kayla, is not by chance. The crystal shall bring more clarity to this matter later.” Rowena stated, pointing a bony finger at Jared.

“Then I shall get the other half of the crystal. Lord Rogan killed my family and took our land, and now he controls the access to the woman I... the woman who holds the other half of the crystal.” Jared hesitated from saying the woman he loved, but Rowena knew better.

“Aah, the woman you love. Come.” Rowena corrected and smiled, then motioned that he follow her.

They followed the old woman outside. She reached under a large rock and withdrew two smooth black stones. Rowena went into her pocket and took out a small cloth sack.

“These stones shall help shield you from any magic when you rub them together. If you confront Lord Rogan, they shall make it a fair fight. His powers are strongest at night, so you must confront him at daybreak when his powers are weakest. However, the stones shall not protect you from a sword or an arrow as the crystal did.” Rowena warned Jared.

Jared nodded and took the sack from her bony fingers.

“Thank you. Once I have the other crystal, will it take me to the woman who wears the other half?”

“Aye, once I place a spell on it if it is your heart’s desire. The crystal protects and responds to the emotions of the heart.”

Jared took the sack with the smooth black stones and tied it to his side.

CHAPTER 13: LORD ROGAN

The guard who ran away after Caitlin disappeared, headed to Emerald Castle and alerted Lord Rogan of sighting his daughter, the Lady Kayla, in the woods. Lord Rogan had offered a sizable reward to whoever found her whereabouts.

“My Lord, I have seen Lady Kayla in the forest with her lover. We tried to bring her back, but she vanished into thin air.”

“A lover, how do you know this?”

“They kissed. We followed them to a small wooden dwelling in the forest and called out to her. She came out, but her lover attacked us and slew Ennis, then he used a stinging mist toward Brahms’s eyes and got away on horseback.

“Is Brahms dead?”

“My Lord, I meant only to alert you upon sighting Lady Kayla as you requested.”

“I see, so Brahms is dead?”

“I—I believe so, my Lord.”

“Aah, so you assume he is dead because you left in such haste that you did not bother to confirm it?”

“My Lord, the man was very swift with the sword. I believed myself to be the only one left to give you word of her sighting.”

“Yes, yes, of course, and I am glad you have alerted me.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” The man bowed.

“Unfortunately, I have no use for cowards in my guard. Execute him!”

The man was immediately apprehended by other members of the guard and taken outside to be executed. The man pleaded for his life as he was dragged away.

Lord Rogan pondered the thought that Kayla had taken a lover. “Mindless lass, just like her mother.” Although not his blood relation, Kayla had qualities that sustained him, and her hand was greatly sought after by the wealthy Lord Heller. He immediately ordered several members of his guard to search the area for her. He was growing weaker with each passing day.

He wondered who the man was who had overcome at least two members of his guard so swiftly, and how was it possible for Kayla to vanish into thin air? Had she gone to Rowena for a spell, he wondered, or—had she discovered her powers? She had been away for some time, and he had not drawn power from her. Perhaps he needed to pay his dear sister a visit. Of course, he needed to be careful. Rowena was a powerful sorceress, and she had the other half of the crystal.

He had procrastinated too long; he thought. Luckily, his sister had not chosen to take the essence of youth as he had, and she had aged much. Soon she would be dead, and he needed to get the other half of the crystal before it was lost forever.

The crystal’s powers were much too potent to entrust to anyone, so he would have to dress as a commoner and go to her dwelling in the forest himself. To ensure her welcome, he would bring her food, firewood, and warm blankets.

CHAPTER 14: MEDIEVAL LADY

Mavis walked Linda to her car and thanked her for coming out. Linda was still a bit unsure about Mavis calling her son, Palmer, to come and check Caitlin's mental state. She couldn't believe she was schizophrenic. It just didn't add up. After saying goodnight to Mavis, she walked to her car and drove off.

Caitlin felt edgy, then Mavis came back in the room to urge her to drink her tea and rest. Caitlin knew if she didn't get into bed, her Aunt would not leave her alone, so she went along with her.

"Drink your tea, it shall soothe your nerves so you can get a good night's sleep, dear."

"I will; thank you, Aunt Mavis, for your hospitality."

She remembered using that word with Jared just hours before, it seemed. She felt such a strong sense of loss, but how could that be? He was a stranger, maybe even a ghost. Had she fallen in love with a ghost, or was she going crazy? The only thing she knew is that she couldn't stop thinking about him. He had bewitched her. Then she thought of

something, Jared had wished them back to his time and world before, perhaps if she concentrated and wished hard, she could do the same and travel back in time to him, or perhaps he might come to her. She got into bed and started to concentrate, clutching the amulet.

Caitlin suddenly sat up; this time, she would change out of her night clothes and get into something more time-appropriate. She remembered the “Medieval Lady” costume she wore to a Halloween costume party when she met Dylan years before. Caitlin jumped out of bed and ran to her closet. The dress hung far off to the side, together with her hooded cloak, still in the clear plastic from the dry cleaners. The costume party had been her first date with Dylan after meeting at the gallery where she worked. He had purchased some fantasy art, and they had talked for hours. After their breakup, she had been so depressed that she meant to sell it, but now she was glad she had not.

She took them out of the plastic and placed them on the bed, then put on the dress. It was a beautiful, long, dark blue velvet dress with a low, round neckline and navy blue satin trim. A decorative black satin rope tied the bodice together from the waist to her chest, enhancing her cleavage, which got her plenty of attention on the night of the party, mostly from Dylan. The snug-fitting long sleeves finished with a point over the back of her hands. The long sleeves would keep her warm. Then she put on the dark blue cloak and pulled up the hood. She pulled forward her long red hair. She just needed some proper shoes, which meant not wearing the 5-inch heels she initially wore with it. Instead, she chose to wear the black slipper-like gym shoes that she often wore around campus.

After putting on the shoes, she turned on the radio, which played “Starrider” by Foreigner. She stood and looked at herself in the mirror, then turned off the light and walked out on the balcony. Caitlin stood in the moonlight, staring at the night sky and the stars, and pictured

Jared in the moonlight as he had swept her off her feet and onto his horse while she ran from the man in the forest. Caitlin sighed and wondered if she would ever see him again or if it had all been just a dream.

Silently, Caitlin went back inside and closed the sliding glass door. She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling a bit hungry, so she drank the tea and ate the slice of pie Mavis left for her. Then she lay down and clutched the amulet Jared gave her and held it to her heart, hoping it would take her back to him. She closed her eyes and began to go over the unbelievable encounter she had with the legendary Jared Kellan.

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Unaware of the Valium Mavis put in her tea, Caitlin started getting sleepy. About an hour later, Mavis went to check on her and gasped upon seeing Caitlin asleep but fully dressed in medieval clothes. She was really gone, poor thing, all dressed up like her youth's favorite rock band, Fleetwood Mac's singer, Stevie Nicks, Mavis thought as she pressed her hand to her lips; she even wore her shoes to bed. She saw the empty cup and plate. Mavis tapped her on the shoulder, but there was no response. She removed the amulet from her and put it into her vest pocket, then took the empty plate and cup and locked the door behind her with the key to ensure she wouldn't run away during the night. She went downstairs, put the dishes in the sink, and grabbed the kitchen phone.

"Palmer, it's me, sorry to call you so late, hun."

"Hi Mom, what's going on?"

"You're not going to believe this, Caitlin is back!"

"What, how?!" Palmer asked, sitting up in bed.

"What's wrong, hon?" Ann, his wife, asked.

"Caitlin, she's back!" He said, covering the phone, then signaled her to wait with his hand."

Ann gasped as she got goosebumps.

“It’s a long story, but you need to come tomorrow. It’s urgent.” Mavis continued.

“H-how is she?” Palmer stuttered, shocked to hear such news.

“Well, she’s not exactly herself; she’s delusional. I mean, she doesn’t have her coordinates together. I’m afraid she’s just like—father.”

“What makes you think that?”

“As I said, it’s a long story, but to make a long story short, she thinks she traveled back in time and met a legendary warrior she heard about at the castle she visited with her friend Linda last year. She thinks she was only gone for a few days. She was in the same night clothes she went missing in. Now she’s changed into a medieval outfit she wore to some costume party a few years ago, but the most terrifying thing is that she told us she knew how to travel back in time. She’s wearing this crystal amulet that she claims will light up if she’s threatened, and it will transport her to a place of her choice. Then she told her friend Linda and me that to feel threatened, she needs to do something drastic, like jump in front of a bus or threaten a cop with a gun, so she can travel back in time. I think she is completely gone, Palmer. I want you to come tomorrow and evaluate her.”

“Well, that’s certainly a concern, mother. Make sure she doesn’t go anywhere; lock her door to be on the safe side. I’ll come by tomorrow morning. How did she get there?”

“Well, she was on the floor in the kitchen when I got home. She had been talking on the phone to her friend Linda. Linda freaked out and came right over, and together we carried her to her room upstairs. She was very edgy earlier, and I gave her one of my Valiums so she could sleep.”

“Good. I’ll be there first thing in the morning. Did you notify Jim and Helen yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Okay, good, just wait until I examine her. Telling them now will only complicate things.”

“Right, okay, hun, see you in the morning.”

“But call me if anything happens.”

“I will, dear, good night.”

“Goodnight, mom.”

CHAPTER 15: MISSING

The sunlight woke Caitlin as she opened her eyes, then she saw that she was still in her room at her Aunt Mavis home. A wave of depression came over her because nothing happened, and her eyes began to water. She felt hopeless. Would she ever see him again, she wondered? Then reached for the amulet and realized it wasn't there. She sat up at once. It was gone! Caitlin panicked and went to open the door, but it was locked.

"Aunt Mavis! Aunt Mavis! The door is locked, please open it!"

She got no answer—she continued to call for Mavis. Downstairs, Mavis heard her yelling to open the door, but she ignored her and called Palmer on her cell phone instead. He immediately picked up. It was just past 8:00 a.m.

"Palmer, are you on your way? She's up and going ballistic, yelling and screaming that I open the door."

"Yes, I'm almost there, hang tight mom."

"I haven't answered her, so she thinks I'm not home."

"Good, go out the back way, so she doesn't see you—then we can both walk in together."

“Okay, hurry.” She whispered.

A few minutes later, Palmer pulled into the driveway. Caitlin heard the car and ran to the window. Then she also saw her Aunt Mavis walking down the street, and then met Palmer as he got out of the car. Caitlin calmed down a bit, thinking she must have gone for a morning walk, that’s why she wasn’t answering, but felt anxious over her missing amulet and uncomfortable that her door was locked. She decided she would go stay with Linda for a while. She remembered her grandfather’s warning that Mavis was a skeptic and an alarmist, and being the youngest, she had witnessed her father’s mental state deteriorate firsthand. She saw Palmer outside, which added to her concern. Mavis had apparently called him. He was wearing his office clothes instead of jeans like he usually did when he paid a social visit.

Palmer and his mother walked into the house. Caitlin began to call out to her Aunt.

“Aunt Mavis, can you please open this door? And my pendant is missing. Do you have it?”

“Just a second, dear, Palmer was so happy to hear of your safe return that he came right over to see you.”

“That’s very kind of him, but why is my door locked, and where is my pendant?”

“Darling, you were so upset last night, your talk, about rushing off to Ireland, concerned me, so I did lock the door. Please forgive me. Your pendant has some sharp edges, and I removed it while you slept so it wouldn’t poke you.”

“Thank you kindly for your concern, Aunt Mavis, but can I please have it back now?”

“Of course, dear,”

Mavis came upstairs and unlocked the door.

"I appreciate your concern, Aunt Mavis, but please don't lock the door again."

"Sorry, dear. My... you look lovely in that—costume, but—why are you wearing it?"

"Well, I remembered it was in my closet and wanted to see myself in it, that's all. Can I have my pendant?"

"I see—oh yes—it's in my room. By the way, I thought perhaps you could change into jeans so that we can run some errands and get your life back on track. And don't worry, your pendant is safe downstairs, and so is Palmer. Come say hello while I make coffee."

Caitlin breathed out impatiently and came downstairs; she did feel a bit awkward to greet Palmer in the medieval dress, being a psychiatrist, he could be judgmental. Still, she didn't change and went downstairs dressed as she was. She wanted to be ready to travel back to Jared's world.

"Caitlin, sweetheart, it's so good to see you back. The news was shocking, but in a good way." He embraced her. Caitlin smiled and hugged him as well. "May I add that you look stunning in this—dress? Is there a reason why you are wearing it?" Palmer asked, trying to be casual. "Jim and your mother shall be so happy to know you're back. I look forward to giving them the happy news."

"Thank you, Palmer. Medieval times fascinate me, and I remembered I had this outfit, so I was just trying it on, that's all, but thank you for coming, Palmer. As you can imagine, I am anxious to get my affairs straightened out as soon as possible, so I would like to get going soon." Caitlin turned to Mavis. "Aunt Mavis, can you please get me the pendant now? Linda said she would be coming today."

"Honey, Linda is working and probably can't be here till after six o'clock," Mavis clarified.

"Well, perhaps she'll come earlier. Can I get my pendant now—please?"

"Why is the pendant so important to you, Caitlin?" Palmer asked.

"It was a gift from a friend I met in Ireland."

"I see. Caitlin, I don't mean to be insensitive to your wishes to get your life back on track, but you said some things last night that made my mother and Linda very concerned for your safety. It's only natural that we're all a bit baffled by your sudden appearance. Can you help us understand what happened to you?"

"Palmer, I can't because you wouldn't believe me if I told you, and I don't want to get defensive, trust me, I'm fine. Well, it has been great to see you again, Palmer. I am touched by your concern, and thank you for coming. Make sure to say hello to your wife for me. Now, please excuse me so I can get ready." Caitlin turned away, looking for Mavis.

"Aunt Mavis, did you get me the pendant?" Caitlin said, sounding a bit agitated.

Mavis looked at Palmer.

"Oh, yes, I'll get it, hun."

"Thank you. Palmer, perhaps you could give me a ride to Linda's. I know she's at work, but I know where she keeps the extra key to her apartment."

"Honey, Linda moved out of her old apartment and moved to Jake's home when they married a few months ago."

"Married? She didn't mention that last night."

"No, she was too shocked by your sudden appearance, just like me. She married the young man she met during your trip to Ireland. She said you met him too; he was on the bus tour with you."

"Wow! I do remember she met someone. I guess it's my turn to be shocked."

"I know this must be difficult for you, dear, there are so many changes."

Caitlin suddenly refocused on the pendant, which Mavis was hoping she would forget.

"Well, anyway, if you can please get me my pendant now, I would really appreciate it."

"Who gave it to you?" Palmer asked.

Caitlin started losing her patience with them.

"Palmer, I really don't want to explain anymore—I would simply like my pendant so I can get to Linda's right away. She was with me, and I have things to discuss with her."

"I would like you to calm down first—you seem very agitated."

"Stop this! I just want my pendant! Aunt Mavis, get it now!" Caitlin stood up and yelled.

Palmer turned to his mother.

"Mom, bring her the pendant."

"It's more than a pendant—it's an amulet." Caitlin corrected.

Mavis went to her room for several minutes, then came out and said,

"I'm sorry I had it in my pocket, but I was outside watering the plants earlier, and I must have dropped it in the garden. I'll look outside."

"This is ridiculous, you're hiding it! I should never have told you anything!"

Caitlin rushed to Mavis's room. Palmer tried to stop her by blocking her passage.

"Caitlin, this is not prudent. Control your temper. This is your aunt's home."

"Perhaps you should rest a bit, you're getting agitated, and you're upsetting my mother. Now, please sit and calm down," he said calmly.

“Leave me alone, Palmer! I’m not your patient! Aunt Mavis, give me my damn amulet—now!” She yelled.

“Caitlin, I won’t allow you to yell at my mother like that—you need to go to your room and calm down!”

“Stop patronizing me, Palmer. I’m not your child either. She took my amulet, and I intend to get it!”

“Fine, but you must calm down first. Perhaps you should rest, and I’ll have my mother bring it to you.” Palmer said, lowering his voice.

Caitlin’s nostrils flared with anger. She was outraged that she was once again feeling helpless and lost in her own time and amongst her own relatives, but she didn’t have much of a choice; she needed to calm down, especially in front of Palmer, who had the power to put her away.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Mavis; I’m sorry, Palmer. Please, forgive me. I’m just feeling a little edgy. Aunt Mavis, if you can please bring me the amulet, I would really appreciate it.”

Mavis looked at Palmer, who gave her a nod.

“Alright, dear, I realize that whatever happened to you has caused you much stress and some kind of memory loss. Here, it scared me to hear you talk the way you did last night. I only meant to help.” Mavis said.

Mavis took out the amulet from her vest pocket and handed it to her.

“Thank you, Aunt Mavis. I appreciate it, and I’m so sorry for freaking out like that—it won’t happen again.”

Feeling self-conscious, Caitlin turned to her cousin Palmer and said,

“If you’ll both excuse me—I think I do need to go lie down a bit,” Caitlin told them.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Just remember that we only want to help you, Caitlin.” Palmer assured her.

His words suddenly sounded familiar as she climbed the stairs. She was reminded of her encounter with Jared. It seemed she made enemies of everyone trying to help her. Maybe—she was crazy. She shook her head, dismissed the thought, and focused on going to Linda's later. She thought she'd better confirm with Linda that she was still coming over later. She went downstairs again to call Linda from the kitchen phone when she overheard Palmer and his mother whispering.

"Don't take the pendant away anymore; she'll get neurotic on you again."

"Well, she didn't tell you the things she told Linda and me, but what are your thoughts on her?"

"Well, suggesting to you and Linda that she would put herself in danger to travel back in time, and the fact that she condensed a year of her life into a few days, is reason enough for concern. Plus her erratic behavior over a missing amulet, pendant, or good luck charm, and wearing medieval clothes to bed—yes, I'd say she's very unstable. She can't stay here with you, Mom; she showed signs of aggression. I am going to recommend that she be placed under observation. And Mom, do not call Jim and Helen yet, you know they'll rush out here on the next plane. Out of love, they'll only interfere with what's best for her, and I want to run some tests on her first.

"She'll hate us for that, you know."

"It's more important that we stabilize her before she puts herself in danger."

"How do you plan to get her to the clinic?"

"Put another Valium in her tea as soon as possible, and I'll have her picked up later. I'll need to use hypnosis to help her remember the last year in her life."

"But Linda is supposed to come by tonight."

“Call her and tell her not to come because she’s getting a medical evaluation.”

After hearing that, Caitlin’s translation was that she was getting put away for being mentally unstable. Caitlin knew she needed to get out of there as soon as possible. She grabbed her cloak, her cell phone, and an extra pepper spray and placed them in a concealed pocket within her cloak. She waited till Palmer left, then tied a sheet to the metal on the balcony and climbed down as far as possible, then jumped off the last few feet. The most important thing was that she had the crystal amulet.

After a while, Mavis prepared a cup of tea with a Valium in it. She noticed the door was locked, and it was quiet.

“Caitlin, honey, I have some tea for you—can I come in?”

Mavis knocked, but Caitlin didn’t respond, so she opened the door with her extra key and realized Caitlin was gone. She immediately rang Palmer’s cell phone.

“Hello, mother is everything—”

“Palmer, she’s gone!” Mavis interrupted.

“What?! What do you mean, gone?!”

“I went upstairs to check on her, and when she didn’t answer, I tried the door, and it was locked, so I used my key, and she was gone! I looked out the window, and there was a sheet tied to the balcony. She must have overheard us talking.”

“Damn! Alright, I’ll have to have her picked up now. It shouldn’t be too hard to spot a redhead in a medieval outfit in the middle of a spring day.”

CHAPTER 16: RUNAWAY

Caitlin didn't have any money on her and wished she had brought some jeans before she left. Since it was past three o'clock, the residential streets were quiet. She walked a few blocks and got a few stares from passersby. Then she saw a teenage girl texting from a bench at a small residential park across the street. She approached her. The girl looked at her strangely.

"Hi, can I borrow your cell phone for a minute? It's kind of an emergency. I'm in a Shakespearean play tonight, and I forgot my purse on the bus. I just need to call my friend so she can pick me up."

"Huh? Oh yeah, sure, here..."

"Thank you so much!"

"Woe—cool outfit, what play is it?"

"Um—A Midsummer Night's Dream,"

"Cool."

Caitlin stepped away from the teen and dialed Linda, but got her voicemail, so she texted her to call her back urgently at that number. The phone rang back in a few minutes.

“Linda! It’s me, Caitlin—listen, I’m in a real pickle here—I need you to come pick me up A. S. A. P., please! I’m at a neighborhood park not far from my Aunt Mavis’s home.”

“Caitlin, I’m still at work, and your Aunt called me and told me not to come by today because you were getting a medical checkup.”

“It’s not true, I’ll explain everything later, can you pick me up, please?”

“Well, um—I had one more appointment, but okay—where exactly are you?”

Caitlin gave her the address of the house across the street from where she was standing.

“Oh, and Linda—um, I’m wearing the medieval dress and long hooded cape I wore to the costume party on my first date with Dylan.”

“Oh God, why?”

“It’s a long story, please, just hurry!”

“Jeez, Caitlin! Okay, I’m coming from downtown, just try and stay out of sight with that outfit, alright? Oh, by the way, I’m driving a black Nissan.”

“Yes, I’m trying, and okay, I’ll be waiting impatiently.”

Linda shook her head and hung up, wondering if Caitlin did belong in a psych ward. Earlier, out of curiosity, Linda had called William O’Leary and asked him about any recent paranormal activity at Emerald Castle. He said no, but went on for a while, sounding entirely convinced that the legendary warrior haunted the castle. She didn’t say anything about Caitlin’s claim, merely mentioned she was writing a paper about it. However, after listening to him, Linda became more partial to Caitlin’s story.

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Caitlin thanked the teen for letting her use her cell phone, and the girl unexpectedly took a picture of her in the medieval dress.

"I have to show this to my friends, bye!"

Caitlin started walking away, hoping she wouldn't regret it later. The teen girl's ride came to pick her up, which was apparently the girl's mother. The lady looked at Caitlin strangely, too.

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About twenty minutes after Mavis called Palmer, two guys from his clinic, which was much closer than Linda's job, showed up at Mavis's home. She showed them a picture of Caitlin and told them what she was wearing. The men left in a black sedan. They were dressed in regular clothes so Caitlin wouldn't freak out.

Caitlin sat on a park bench with the crystal amulet on her lap, redoing the knot on the rope where she tore it off Jared's neck. She anxiously kept getting up whenever she heard cars approach, but hid behind a tree if it wasn't a black car. When she finally saw a black car approaching, she jumped out to flag it down, thinking it was Linda. Upon realizing it was not her, she quickly went back to the bench, but the car approached slowly and came to a stop.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else," Caitlin stated.

"It's alright, Miss, are you okay?"

"Oh yes, I'm just waiting for a friend."

"Okay. Nice dress." The man said and smiled.

"Oh, thank you, I'm in a Shakespearean play tonight, and I was so excited that I forgot my purse on the bus."

"Oh, I see, so you probably need a ride there, we can give you one if you like?"

"No, that's okay; my friend is on her way."

"Where is she coming from?"

"Downtown."

"Well, there was a bumper-to-bumper accident involving four vehicles; luckily, no one was hurt, but traffic is at a snail's pace."

“Great, no wonder she’s taking so long.”

“It’s getting late, and to be honest, you look a bit out of place. Why don’t you let us give you a ride? Just tell us where you need to go. We’re not in a hurry.”

Caitlin began to suspect that these guys weren’t going to take no for an answer.

“Oh, there she is, thanks, guys!” Caitlin said, pointing in the opposite direction, and the men turned away to look.

Caitlin jumped off the bench, dropping the amulet, and took off running across the park, never noticing that the pendant had fallen from her lap. The men got out of the car and chased after her through the park. They caught up with her and wrestled her to the ground. Caitlin screamed and yelled that she dropped her pendant, and an elderly black woman looked out the window from across the park as one man covered Caitlin’s mouth, and the other took out a syringe and gave her a shot to tranquilize her. The elder lady came out of the house and shouted at the men to leave her alone, but the men carried Caitlin back to the car and left. The elderly woman hurried inside and called the police from her landline, but they came too late.

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A while later, Linda pulled over by the house number Caitlin had given her, but she wasn’t there anymore. She started calling out to her.

“Caitlin—I’m here, where are you?”

Linda continued to call her name and then started knocking on the doors across the street from the park. It had grown dark and cold, and Linda hoped that someone had seen Caitlin. At the first door, the people had just arrived from work and didn’t know anything. At the next two doors, there was no answer. She knocked on a couple more doors until she knocked on the door of the elderly black woman who had seen the men tackle Caitlin down.

"Hello, ma'am, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering if you had seen a young woman with red hair and dressed-"

"Yes, I did, some thugs chased her in the park," Rita interrupted. "I came out and yelled at them to leave her alone, but she fainted, and they took her in a dark car. I called the police, but by the time they got here, they were gone. I pray they won't hurt her."

"Oh my God, do you know what kind of car they had, or get the license plate number?"

"No, darlin', I can't see very well. All I saw was a dark car and two men."

"Can you describe the men?"

"One looked to be Hispanic, the other was a bald white guy; they were both rather big."

"What were they wearing?"

"They wore jeans, one had a blue sweatshirt; the bald one wore a green and black plaid lumber jacket. Poor child, she reminded me of Little Red Riding Hood, except she was wearing blue, not red."

"Well, I appreciate all your help, ma'am."

"I wish I could have helped more, darlin'. I'm so sorry, I hope she's okay, and I hope you find her."

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," Linda said as she turned to walk back to her car.

Then the old woman opened the door again and said,

"Oh, I almost forgot! Your friend kept telling the thugs who took her that she dropped something, but they didn't listen."

Linda realized that Caitlin was probably referring to the amulet.

"Oh my gosh, thank you so much, you're a blessing!"

"You're welcome, darlin', by the way, my name is Rita Carmichael in case you need anything."

"Thank you so much, Rita! You're a sweetheart!"

Linda went across the street to the playground. It was going to be hard to spot the amulet in the dark in such an extensive area. She turned on the lights from her car and the flashlight on her cell phone. She wandered around but couldn't find anything. Then Rita came out with a flashlight too. Linda smiled and thanked her. Together they looked for about half an hour, but couldn't find anything. Linda and Rita finally gave up the hunt.

Linda went to Mavis's home to find out what happened to Caitlin. Mavis was vague at first, then she told her that Caitlin was safe and had been taken to Palmer's clinic so he could run some tests on her after she went ballistic over not having her pendant on her. Mavis warned Linda that she would not be allowed to see her at such a late hour.

Linda went home disappointed that she had not been able to help Caitlin, and now she was apparently in the psychiatric ward where Palmer worked.

§

Caitlin arrived sedated at the clinic and was placed in a locked room for observation per Palmer's instructions. The next morning was chaos for Caitlin as she woke up, finding herself in the worst place possible, a psych ward, probably put there by her own relatives, who thought she was crazy. But the worst thing was that she had lost the amulet. Her only possible connection to Jared, Caitlin couldn't stop crying and refused to eat, change, or meet with anyone.

§

The next day, Linda tried to get a hold of Caitlin at the clinic, but was not granted permission to speak to her. Thankfully, she was getting off work early, so she decided she would go to the clinic and go directly to Palmer, who was the clinic director. If he gave her a hard time or some excuse why she couldn't see Caitlin, then she would contact Caitlin's parents in Indiana.

Around three o'clock, as Linda was getting out of work, she got an unusual call.

"Hi, is this Linda?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"I'm Tracy, um, you don't know me, but yesterday a girl in a medieval dress on her way to a play called your number from my cell phone. I just got out of school, and I was waiting for my mom to pick me up from the park bench like I always do, and I found the pendant she was wearing under the bench. I know it's hers cuz I took a picture of her in her cool costume so I could show my friends, and she was wearing it."

"Tracy, oh my God, I could kiss you! Thank you so much for your call. That is a very special pendant that was given to her by a long-lost friend of hers. She'll be so happy to know you found it. Thank you so much for calling, hun. Where can I pick it up for her, please?"

"Well, I'm already home. I live near Brookhurst Boulevard. I can meet you at the 7-Eleven. I have shoulder-length blond hair, and I'm wearing jeans and a white sweatshirt with a cartoon of a cat in curlers doing her nails that says I don't do dishes."

Linda laughed at the funny description of Tracy's sweatshirt.

"Great! Thank you, Tracy. I will call you when I arrive; it will take me about forty minutes. I'm a brunette, and I'll be in a black Nissan. See you soon."

About forty minutes later, Linda called Tracy, who was outside the 7-Eleven like she said she would be, and gave Linda the amulet. Linda thanked her for waiting and gave her some snack money. Linda looked at the strange crystal and put it in her purse, then headed to the clinic.

Linda arrived at Golden Hill Psychiatric Center, went to the front desk, and asked to speak to Dr. Palmer Thorington, but was told

he was not there. She then requested to speak to Caitlin Evans. The receptionist informed her that she was not able to take visitors. Linda asked why, but the clerk merely told her those were her instructions. She wondered why they were all being such jerks.

“Miss, can you please at least give Caitlin a message for me?”

“That depends on what the message is. She has been very emotionally unstable.”

“Trust me, the message shall cheer her up. Just let her know I have her pendant.”

“Oh, okay, yes, she’s been crying about a lost pendant. That probably will cheer her up. I’ll tell her, and don’t worry, Dr. Thorington is taking excellent care of her.”

“Thank you.”

After that, Linda had decided she would call Jim and Helen and let them know that Linda had returned, but their cousin Palmer had locked her up in his psych ward for testing and would not allow her to talk to Caitlin. Linda looked at the crystal amulet, put it back in her purse, and went home.

§

The front desk secretary went to Palmer’s office and told him that the woman had left, but had insisted that she give Caitlin the message that her pendant had been found. Palmer instructed the secretary not to tell Caitlin anything because any emotional imbalance might interfere with his tests.

After Palmer reviewed Caitlin’s cognitive aptitude and emotional state of mind, while she might have been reasonably upset so far, the only thing that he could psychologically claim was that she was depressed, not schizophrenic. The bigger picture, however, was that she had been missing for over a year, proclaimed dead, and the media had followed the story of a beautiful American girl gone missing while

touring a castle in Ireland, whose body was never found. Once the news broke out that the missing girl was suddenly back from the dead and under his care, together with her wacky story about castles and a spellbound warrior, the media would eat it up. He would finally get the kind of media attention he longed for. Jim and Helen might be her parents, but he was a doctor as well as a relative, giving their daughter the best care possible. How could they say no to that? He would eventually release her, and she would go back to her normal life, but for now, why waste such a precious opportunity for a celebrity status that would catapult his medical career? Just a few months were all he needed as he dragged out the therapy and later proclaimed his treatment successful. Palmer smiled to himself and leaned back in his chair as he envisioned the media attention he was about to receive.

CHAPTER 17: THE CRYSTAL

Jared, Lara, and Tristan went back to the Brannicks' home after meeting with Rowena. The old woman had shocked them by disclosing that Lord Rogan was her brother, whom she had denounced because of his wicked heart, in addition to the news that Kayla was powerfully gifted and not Lord Rogan's blood-borne daughter. But the most encouraging news was the existence of the second half of the crystal. Jared's clearest thought was that Lord Rogan was a thorn in his flesh that he needed to permanently remove, and so he would.

Jared asked Leland and Tristan if they might be able to accompany his sister back over the mountain without him. His thoughts were to encounter Lord Rogan alone at dawn during his weakest hour, as advised by Rowena. The smooth black stones would keep Lord Rogan from using his powers on him, and Jared would have to fight fairly; that was enough for Jared.

Leland disliked the idea of Jared facing Lord Rogan alone, and he and his sons offered their allegiance. Jared thanked them for all their help and support, then told them he needed to go to his home by the stream first, but would be back by dawn. He had purposely misled

them into believing he would return. He planned to visit Emerald Castle alone. Enough blood had been spilled; this was his fight, now. He told Lara to tell their mother that he would get their land back and promised to make it safe for everyone to return, including Aaron and Kayla. He took out the pepper spray Caitlin gave him and gave it to Lara

“This is a weapon that delivers a stinging mist; it will blind and choke an attacker temporarily. Use it only to defend yourself.”

“Did she give it to you?”

“Yes.”

“Be careful, Jared. We don’t want to lose you again,” Lara cried.

“Do not worry, sister, you shall not.” He assured her.

Jared smiled and kissed her forehead. They hugged, then he mounted Trey and rode away. Lara cried as Jared departed. Tristan was there to embrace and comfort her, and Leland saw the signs of a mated pair.

§

Jared went to his forest home by the stream and lay down on his bed of animal skins and blankets, waiting for the time to pass and set out to kill Lord Rogan, get the second half of the crystal, and find Caitlin. Then he would get his land back and his family back together. His thoughts focused on Caitlin and the night they spent there together, yet never even kissed. However, it was the vision of her face and the heat of her response the following day that made him not only desire her but also gave him the motivation to go forward.

Jared rose just before dawn and prepared for his confrontation with Lord Rogan. He took the cloth sack with the black stones, his sword, a shield, a bow, an arrow, and a rope. He mounted Trey and set out for Emerald Castle.

He got as close as he could to the castle and dismounted. He could see a member of the guard patrolling the gate. Jared had one important fact in his favor: after his disappearance, Lord Rogan had relaxed the guard around the castle. This would work to his advantage. He approached the soldier standing guard outside the gate as he came up behind him; the soldier turned, and Jared knocked him out with a rock, then climbed the gate unseen. He threw another rock to distract the other guard inside, who quickly went to investigate the noise, and Jared went the opposite direction. He took the arrow and tied a rope to it, then shot it over a tree branch near a ledge, put them together, then, holding each, pulled himself up onto the tree branch, then jumped across to a ledge and climbed to the second level. There, he made his way through the hallway and came face to face with another guard whom he quickly disarmed and held a knife to his throat and forced him to take him to Lord Rogan's quarters. Once there, the guard managed to free himself and reached for a concealed knife on the side of his leg, which he tried to stab Jared with, but Jared turned it on him and was forced to kill the guard before he alerted the others. Panting, Jared then turned toward the door to Lord Rogan's quarters, but it was locked, so he went back out on the ledge, gripping the side of the wall till he reached Lord Rogan's balcony. Jared took out the black stones and rubbed them together before entering his quarters. Lord Rogan was sleeping, but the member of the guard whom Jared knocked out at the gate recovered from the blow and sounded the horn to alert the others that an intruder had penetrated the castle grounds. Lord Rogan opened his eyes and at once realized Jared was in his chamber. He yelled out and tried to use his magic, but it did not work. He panicked as Jared came toward him. Then he reached for a sword, and he and Jared engaged in a sword fight, but he was no match

for Jared. Lord Rogan kept trying to use magic and spells, but nothing worked. Then Jared knocked the sword out of his hand.

Lord Rogan ordered the guard to break down the door. However, the door was nearly impossible to break through. He couldn't understand what was happening, why his magic was not working. He continued to run from Jared and hide behind various pieces of furniture. Jared was about to run him through when he saw the ring on the table by his bed. He went toward it, and so did Lord Rogan as the guards broke through the door. Lord Rogan then reached out for the ring first, but Jared slashed his hand off with his sword and took the ring. Lord Rogan yelled and grunted in pain as he bled profusely and took a cloth and tied it around his bleeding left wrist.

Wearing his shield on his back, Jared turned and went out the balcony as the guard tried to reach him. They shot arrows at him on the ground. There he was confronted by another guard whom he fought and slew, then climbed up the gate rope as he did before and went over the wall. He whistled for Trey, who came running toward Jared, and he mounted him, but instead of going into the forest, Jared took a chance and went to the seaside of the castle, which could be deadly since it was a dead end facing the sea. Moments later, the gate opened, and several members of the guard rode out toward the forest. Lord Rogan had recognized Jared and directed the guard to his forest home by the stream. Jared waited and then rode out behind them, but headed toward Rowena's cave dwelling on the hillside, which was in the opposite direction.

He had only been partially successful; he had not been able to kill Lord Rogan, but he did get the other half of the crystal. Jared promised himself he would not rest till Lord Rogan was dead.

Jared reached Rowena's hidden cave dwelling within the thick of the forest. He pounded on her door. The old woman jumped at the fierceness of his knocks and yelled out, angry for being awakened.

"What in all-the-stars-in-heaven do you want with such knocks at this hour?"

"My apologies, madam, I am Lara's brother, Jared. You said I needed to bring you the other half of the crystal. Caitlin, the woman I—love has the other half, but she lives in a world many winters ahead. I have brought you the crystal as you requested so that I might travel to her."

"Ah, the woman who controls your heart, I am glad you made quick news of it, lad, I nearly turned you into a toad for waking me from my slumber."

"You must hurry; the guard is searching for me!"

"And Mort?"

"Who is Mort?"

"Ah, yes, you know him as Lord Rogan, have you slain him?"

"No, I only cut off his hand before I was overcome by members of his guard, then narrowly escaped with the crystal."

"We must hurry then; your essence shall draw him to you, but I will deal with him. I see that you used the stones; good, otherwise you would be dead, lad. It is good that he is weak now, not having either the crystal or Kayla; however, he does possess a keen sense of human essence, but he shall grow weaker and older each day he does not have the crystal. He is not the one with the gift, you see, it is I. I was born with it, like his sea witch wife." Rowena smiled. "Now give me the crystal ring; it must lie over your heart."

Once again, Rowena tied a rope around it. "Mort is still a powerful enemy. He is wealthy and has his guard to do his dirty work, but you have greatly vexed him tonight, so I will cast a similar spell like the

one before so that it shall again protect you from death. Now place it around your neck and mount your horse. As soon as I finish the spell, you shall travel to her world and be united with your lady love.”

The old woman recited the incantation, but nothing happened. She did not understand why. She recited it again, but still nothing happened. Then she realized the gold setting and the blood had Mort’s essence; they were interfering with the spell. In the distance, horses could be heard approaching.

“Loosen the crystal from the ring, lad, hurry! And cleanse the blood from it!

Jared took the ring and dipped it in a nearby pot of water she had for tea, then he took his sword and began to slash at the ring with all his might. The crystal started to loosen from the gold setting. Then Lord Rogan’s men appeared in the background, charging toward him. Rowena dug her hand into her pocket for a handful of pebbles as she mumbled a spell upon them and flung them at the guard. The pebbles turned into arrows in mid-air, striking several men down off their horses, but more men kept coming. Some of them dismounted and came toward Jared with their swords drawn. Jared gave Rowena the ring back as he turned to defend himself. Rowena took the ring and placed it on a rock, then continued hitting it with another rock till the crystal was released from the gold setting. Once again, she tied a rope around the newly freed crystal while Jared fought fiercely against his attackers, but there were too many of them. One of the guards slashed at Jared from behind, making a long gash across his entire back. Soon, he would be down. Then Rowena flung the crystal tied with a rope at Jared and yelled,

“Put it on and place it over your heart, lad!”

Jared caught the rope and crystal and continued fighting and slaying a good number of his opponents. Rowena closed her eyes, raised

her hands, and began reciting the incantation. As he fought back, the crystal was slashed from his hand and landed near Trey. Then Lord Rogan rode in with his left wrist wrapped in a blood-soaked cloth, clutched against his chest. In a Murderous rage, he pointed at Rowena with his good hand and yelled,

“Kill her, she’s casting a spell!”

At once, a guard turned and fatally struck Rowena with his sword. Jared froze as he saw the old woman struck down, causing him a moment’s distraction. Then he felt the sharp stinging of a sword pierce his heart, and he fell back against Trey. Fatally wounded, Jared gasped for air as he clutched at Trey to keep from falling. He dropped to his knees when he saw the crystal and reached down for it and placed it over his heart. Then, from the ground, with her last breath, Rowena finished the spell, and Jared and Trey vanished!

CHAPTER 18: JARED MEETS LINDA

Linda drove home, anguished that she had not been able to see Caitlin. She pulled into her driveway, thinking that at least Caitlin would have some peace of mind after she got the message that her pendant was found. Tomorrow, she would call Caitlin's parents, Jim, and Helen. She stepped out of the car when a lavender flash of lightning surrounded her momentarily, then she heard a horse. Linda spun around and was completely taken aback when she saw a half-dressed man face down and bleeding on the grass beside a horse. She gasped and put her hands over her mouth. The man moaned; he was alive, lying on his stomach, covered in blood. She called the ambulance and asked them to turn off the siren as they arrived. Linda then looked frantically for her house keys and ran into the house for a towel. Her husband, Jake, was out of town for a week, so she was alone. She came back out with a towel and covered the man up while the ambulance arrived. It was early dusk and a bit chilly in her quiet residential street; nobody was out.

The ambulance arrived, and the paramedics looked at Trey, who was off to the side, then saw Jared on the grass and began to treat him.

“What in the world happened to him? Is that his horse?” One paramedic asked Linda.

“I don’t know, I got out of my car, and suddenly I saw lightning, and when I turned around, he was just lying there next to this horse.”

Linda began to suspect that it was no coincidence that a medieval re-enactor could end up injured and passed out from a sword fight right in front of her house.”

They lifted him and placed him on the gurney. The first paramedic, who was breaking open a package of gauze, asked the second paramedic, taking a blood pressure reading, “Looks like he was in a heck of a fight,” the first paramedic commented.

“Do you know him?” The second paramedic asked.

“No, he’s not from around here.”

“Did you see the sword?”

Linda turned and saw the tip of the sword sticking out from under the towel on the side of the ambulance, which helped block her from their view. She immediately covered the sword with the towel, took it, and placed it in her car while the paramedics were working on the man, then she replaced the towel where it was on the grass.

After a moment, the second paramedic turned and peeked over the side of the truck and commented,

“What sword?”

“The one on the grass, hey, where did it go?” Asked the first paramedic and looked over at Linda, who shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

“I didn’t see one.” She replied.

“I don’t see one either,” The second paramedic making a report answered.

“This is getting weirder and weirder. How could it just disappear?” Claimed the first paramedic and looked over at Linda. She looked away.

“Not only is this man’s back slashed from his neck to his waist, but get ready for this—he’s been stabbed through the heart, but he’s still alive!” The second paramedic said in amazement.

“What?” The first paramedic asked in shock.

At this point, Linda decided she would follow them to the hospital. Upon arrival, the bizarreness of the incident aroused the attention of everyone in the emergency room. The doctors were all trying to figure out how a man with that kind of injury was still alive.

After a long while, Linda asked about a man with a stab wound to the heart, and a nurse called the doctor, who came out and asked,

“Are you Caitlin?”

Linda froze.

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Jared is stable now. He’s an incredibly lucky man. We can see the life-threatening injury from the outside, but the X-rays and MRI show no internal damage. He’s been stitched up and given antibiotics and an I.V. He was very dehydrated. He’s doing fine now, but he’s asking to see you. Come with me.”

Linda was beside herself, good God, it was true, Jared was real; Caitlin was telling the truth! But why would he appear to her, she wondered? Then she remembered she had the amulet, and she was guided inside through the labyrinth of hospital hallways to see Jared. Then the doctor left her there. Linda moved past the curtain and closed it. He was battered up, but still strikingly handsome. His chest was full of scars, and the one over his heart had a fresh dressing on it. He was hooked to an I.V., which was nearly empty, and wore a blood pressure cuff on his opposite arm.

“Jared?”

“Aye,” he replied curiously.

“I-I’m Linda, Caitlin’s friend. I traveled with her to Emerald Castle last year.”

Jared stared at her for a moment, then replied.

“Aye, she mentioned you. Where is Caitlin?”

“She’s um; she’s in—another place.”

Jared looked at her, not understanding. Linda spoke in a low voice.

“Her aunt and cousin think her mind is not well because she claims to have met you and because of where she claims to have been. I, too, did not believe her because—you’re someone who lived a long time ago, and to us that’s impossible. The people here helped you, but they won’t understand or believe you either, so you must not tell them the truth, or they will lock you up too. It’s best to tell them you are part of a re-enactment unit, and I will help you, I will take you to Caitlin.”

“Take me to her now, please.”

“I can’t, I mean, I know where she’s at, but they wouldn’t let me see her today.”

Jared sat up and began taking off everything attached to him, then reached for the bag holding the crystal pendant.

“What are you doing? Don’t take off the I.V.! You can’t leave yet!”

“I must go to Caitlin. Where is my sword?”

“It’s in my car.”

Jared looked at her.

“It’s what we travel in.”

Jared stood up.

“Wait, Jared, please, they will get alarmed.”

“Take me to her, please.”

He was determined.

Linda said, "Okay, but you must do what I tell you, wait here, please!"

She went past the closed curtain to an office. She had passed by earlier and saw a white lab coat hanging on a hook on the wall. She made sure no one saw her and took it and then stuffed it in her bag. She went back to Jared and made sure the curtain was fully drawn.

"Put this on, and I'll distract the attendant, then when I signal, you come out and close the curtain behind you."

Linda went around to the opposite side of the round counter. The attendant was in the center, entering information into a computer. Linda picked up a paperweight and threw it at a flower vase within the central office, and broke it. The attendant bolted from her seat to investigate what had happened. Linda signaled Jared, and he came out wearing the white lab coat, which looked a bit snug on him, and closed the curtain. They walked down the hallway through several doors and finally outside. Jared removed the tight-fitting lab coat and threw it in the bushes.

"Follow me. My car is in the back."

"Where is Trey, my horse?"

"He's back at my house, feasting on my lawn."

"I must get him."

"Why?"

"I do not want to leave him here."

Then Linda realized she might never see Caitlin again. After a pause, she asked,

"So, once I take you to Caitlin, are you taking her back with you?"

Jared turned his head slowly toward her and replied,

"That—is why I'm here."

CHAPTER 19: THE TWO AMULETS

Linda swallowed and looked away, but she knew Caitlin desired to be with him just as much. She continued to ask questions as they walked to her car in the back.

“So you’re going to ride a horse to get Caitlin?”

“Aye.”

Linda bit her bottom lip, worried, thinking how it would work out, but was thankful it was late evening. She would need to go through the residential streets. Then they got to her car.

“This is my car.”

She clicked the door locks open. Jared just stared at it. Linda came over to his side and opened the door for him to get in. Jared got into the strange contraption. Then Linda got in the car too, pulled the seatbelt, and clicked him in. She started the car, and the radio came on. “Kashmir” by Led Zeppelin was playing on the radio; it was loud. Jared reached out to the screen panel displaying bright blue bars jumping up and down as the music played. Linda lowered it. Jared watched her

move the knob, then he reached out and toyed with the knob; he was fascinated. Linda smiled and began to drive away.

“Do you like the music? Linda asked.

Jared just continued playing with the volume, finally leaving it on high.

“It’s a classic rock song by a great band—you would fit right in with a guitar,” Linda chuckled. “Actually, some of the lyrics rather fit you—since you are a time traveler.” She looked over at him. Jared looked out the window in silence. After a moment, she said,

“Well, you sure don’t talk much, but that’s okay, Caitlin talks enough for the both of you,” Linda said, trying to be conversational.

Jared was distracted by the lights on the panel and by looking out the window. They arrived at her house, and Trey was eating grass as she said. Linda pulled into the driveway and unbuckled Jared, then reached across him to open the door. Jared stepped out of the car, looked over at her, bowed slightly, and said,

“I am grateful for your assistance, my Lady.”

Linda’s face lit up upon hearing him address her as “My Lady.”

“You are welcome, Sir,” she replied, trying to sound as formal as him.

“Oh, your sword!” Linda gasped.

She reached for it in the back seat and turned it over to him. He put it in his holster and mounted Trey,

“I am in your debt, my Lady, now please take me to Caitlin.”

“Okay, now follow me, I will go through the quieter streets,” Linda said.

Linda drove off, and Jared and Trey followed behind her through the residential area till they arrived at the clinic. Some passers-by raised their eyebrows upon seeing a half-dressed man with a sword on his hip riding on horseback down the street.

When they arrived at the clinic, Linda parked down the street, and then Jared and Trey came up behind her.

"This is the back entrance to the clinic. Stay here with Trey. I'll bring Caitlin out through here," She hoped. "Oh, by the way, here is Caitlin's amulet," Linda stated.

"Please place it around her neck to lie over her heart," Jared told her.

Jared took out the crystal amulet from the hospital bag and put it on.

"This is the other half of the crystal." He told Linda.

"Wow!" Linda gasped.

Linda was amazed. The whole thing was like a fairy tale or a movie. Her friend was about to be broken out of a psychiatric ward by a legendary sword-armed warrior on horseback and wearing the other half of a magical crystal. She reached for her cell phone before this was over; she had to get a picture of them together.

CHAPTER 20: GOLDEN HILL PSYCHIATRIC CENTER

It was late evening when they arrived at the psychiatric ward. Jared and Trey remained in the back as Linda instructed, so they wouldn't attract attention. She went around to the front entrance. The glass doors were locked, but there was a night attendant inside. She knocked on the glass door. The attendant came to the door.

"Visiting hours are over; we're closed, you'll have to come back tomorrow."

"I can't, it's very urgent."

"Emergencies are on the north side of the building; this is the clinic side. I'm just working a little late."

"I need to see Caitlin Evans. Her husband is here." Linda lied.

"I'm sorry I can't help you. You'll have to come back tomorrow and speak to Dr. Palmer Thorington."

Linda went on a while pleading with the attendant when Jared, who had come up behind her after having grown impatient with the

attendant, slashed at the glass door with his sword and shattered it. Linda screamed as the sword crashed through the glass.

“Oh, my God! Jared, stop!” Linda shouted.

“What the hell! Are you crazy?!” The night attendant shouted as he ran toward the phone.

Jared came after him. The attendant rang for security, and the alarms went off.

“Take me to Caitlin Evans, now!” He commanded as he approached with his sword drawn. The attendant raised his hands in surrender.

“Alright, man, take it easy! I-I gotta’ look up her room number, what—what’s her name again?” The attendant stuttered.

“Caitlin Evans,” Linda said.

He looked up Caitlin’s room number while Jared pointed his sword at him.

“Jared, this is crazy. The police have been called, they’re on their way!” Linda exclaimed, forgetting that he was not familiar with the modern term for authority.

Suddenly, the security guard came toward them, pointing his gun.

“Put the weapon down and get back, or I’ll shoot!”

“Oh, my God! Don’t shoot! We’re not criminals! He’s just trying to get his girlfriend!” Linda yelled. Then Linda saw Caitlin’s room number on the chart. “She’s in room 124!”

“Take me to her!” Jared demanded and threatened the attendant with the sword.

The security guard opened fire on Jared and Linda, but the bullets didn’t hit either of them. Linda screamed, and the attendant, now terrified, tried to run away, but Linda blocked him and grabbed his leg to keep him from running away, and both fell.

“Just give us the damn key!” Linda yelled as she held on to his leg.

At the shots, Jared turned and glared at the security guard for firing at Linda and came toward him. In disbelief, the security guard then fired several more shots at him out of fear, but none of the bullets hit Jared. The amulets were shielding both Jared and Linda, but they were not ready to leave without Caitlin. Enraged, Jared charged the security guard, who cowered on the floor. As he looked up, he saw the battle-scarred warrior coming toward him with his sword drawn and thought he was about to be slashed to death by the superhuman madman.

“Jared, no, stop! Come this way, she’s over here!” Upon hearing Linda’s voice, Jared stopped himself from releasing a deadly blow upon the security guard cowering on the floor and turned back toward Linda. “But we’ll need a key from him to open the door,” Linda said, pointing at the night attendant also cowering behind the counter.

Jared turned and came toward the night attendant, who was holding his hands up.

“Get the key!” Jared ordered.

“Okay, okay, calm down, it’s not a key, it’s a digital code.”

Jared pointed his sword at the night attendant, and the night attendant took them to Caitlin’s room. Then sirens began ringing in the background. The attendant halted and looked down the hallway. Jared pointed his sword at the attendant once again.

“Open—the door.” He ordered in a low, menacing tone as he held the sword high, ready to strike.

Linda looked over at the building’s rear double door. It had a digital lock on, too.

“You need to open the back double doors for us, too,” Linda told the night attendant.

The night attendant opened the door to Caitlin’s room. Caitlin was sedated, still wearing her medieval dress and a hooded cloak.

“Jared, don’t let him go; he needs to open the back door for us! I’ll wake Caitlin.” Linda shook her. “Caitlin, wake up! Wake up!”

Jared held the attendant hostage while Linda woke Caitlin.

Caitlin opened her eyes, but was still in a fog, under the influence of a mild sedative. Linda took out the amulet and was about to put it around Caitlin’s neck when Caitlin suddenly sat up, shocked to see Jared. Just then, the police started calling out from speakers, telling them to come out with their hands up.

“Jared!” Caitlin called out.

“Come on, honey, we have to go out the back, hurry!” Linda urged her. Caitlin stood and came toward him. Jared embraced Caitlin briefly but had to turn and catch the attendant trying to run away. He towered over him and grabbed him by the back collar and jerked him toward the back double doors. Linda and Caitlin followed.

“Linda, how did you ever meet Jared?”

“It’s a long story, Cait. You’ll have to get it from him later.”

“I don’t know the code!” The attendant claimed.

“Yes, you do, I’ve seen you open it! Put in the code!” Caitlin ordered,

“You’re crazy, lady, the place is surrounded. They’ll shoot us all!”

“Do it!” Linda seconded Caitlin’s demand.

“I need to get Trey,” Jared said.

“Who the hell is Trey?” The night attendant asked.

“It’s his horse. Then just let him come in!” Linda stated.

“What? Who the devil are you people?” The attendant demanded.

“Open the door.” Jared pointed his sword at him.

The attendant pushed some codes, and the double doors swung open. Jared whistled for Trey, and he came running in, but so did two cops who pointed their guns at Jared.

“Freeze!” The first cop ordered.

“Put the sword down!” The second cop demanded.

Caitlin, who got blocked by Trey, brought out her pepper spray from within her cloak and sprayed it at the two cops over Trey’s behind. Both cops were unprepared for a hit of pepper spray and had to go back outside, choking and coughing to get air, and the doors locked automatically behind them. Then Jared mounted Trey and helped Caitlin mount behind him.

Linda stepped away from them, took out her cell phone, and snapped a picture of them. Then they heard heavy foot stomps coming through the building. The SWAT team was coming down the hallway from the front entrance. Linda shouted out to Caitlin,

“I’ll miss you, Cait!”

“I’ll miss you too! Tell my parents I love them!”

Linda started video recording as the SWAT team came around the corner and came face to face with them, and then Jared charged them, and the SWAT team opened fire upon them.

“No!” Caitlin yelled.

Linda, who was still holding the other crystal amulet while video recording, screamed at the gunfire, and a second later, Linda, Jared, Caitlin, and Trey all vanished in an electric-like lavender flash of light, leaving the officers, pointing their guns at thin air, completely baffled.

Linda gasped as she fell on her bed at home, still holding the amulet on her arm and her cell phone, then she looked at the video, which only recorded up until the SWAT team fired at them. However, she did capture a picture of Jared, Caitlin, and Trey, her only proof that she didn’t imagine the whole thing.

CHAPTER 21: BACK IN TIME

Jared, Caitlin, and Trey once again were surrounded by a lavender glow as they traveled back through time. As before, their movements were slow, and the air was too thick to breathe when they landed on solid ground. The landing was a bit rough. Trey snorted and seemed confused and scared. Jared got off Trey and helped Caitlin off, and then they lay down on the grass to recover and catch their breath.

“Caitlin, how is it with you? Are you injured?” Jared asked.

Caitlin coughed as she struggled to catch her breath.

“No, but I’m so tired, are we back to your world?”

“Aye.”

Caitlin was still under the effect of the sedative they had given her at the clinic after she became irritated with the staff when they wouldn’t let her call Linda. She could see Jared breathe deeply as he pushed himself off the ground, but couldn’t hear him. She lay her head down on the grass and closed her eyes. After a few moments, Jared recovered. He looked over at Caitlin, then at Trey, who had wandered off. He whistled, and Trey came toward him. He lifted Caitlin and mounted Trey with her and headed to his home by the stream.

As he drew close to his forest home, he saw that it had been burned down. However, it seemed like it had been like that for a long time; there was tall grass and weeds among the remains of the dwelling. Then he remembered Rowena's home in the forest and how she had been killed just outside of it. He mourned the old woman who had died trying to help him. He looked at Caitlin, nestled in his arms; she seemed to be in a deep sleep, and he headed toward Rowena's cave dwelling.

Her home was well preserved; outside was a stack of rocks and the remnants of flowers long dried out over the raised area on the ground. It appeared that someone had buried Rowena outside her home. Jared dismounted Trey with Caitlin in his arms. He pushed the door open and carried her inside. Everything looked orderly. There were blankets and animal skins for the sleeping area, a small wooden table, and even a fire pit. He laid Caitlin down over the animal skins and blankets. He removed her cloak, and as before, he started a fire that quickly warmed the small room. Jared lay down next to Caitlin and wrapped his arms around her, thankful that the old woman had helped him get Caitlin back. He would always be grateful for that. Jared looked over at Caitlin. He admired her beauty and recalled her positive reaction when she saw him. He toyed with her hair and then kissed her forehead. Then her ears and her neck until Caitlin opened her eyes and welcomed his affections. They had crossed the barriers of time together twice, and now they could finally continue what had been so rudely interrupted.

Caitlin, still slightly sedated, sat up slowly and welcomed his caresses. Jared trailed his hand over her neck as he exposed a soft shoulder. Then she closed her eyes as he leaned forward and kissed her lips. He gently pulled down the dress past her shoulders, then further down to

her waist, and slowly pressed her down onto the soft blankets, where her hair encircled her lovely face like an aura.

It had been a long time since he had made love to a woman, but none as unique and breathtaking as Caitlin. Knowing she desired him as much as he desired her heightened his arousal as they came together. At that moment, nothing else mattered but the beat of their heart, the friction of their bodies, and the ecstasy that followed.

For Jared, making love to Caitlin was not just a physical act, but a confirmation of life and the validation of being a man. Not only had he won the heart of the woman of his dreams, but he had won her over to his side of time; nothing could bring more satisfaction than that.

Caitlin's experience was that of clarity; it was clear to her that she had fallen madly in love with this primitive man who placed her above everything else, including his own life. She had never experienced such devotion, loyalty, or care from a man. She couldn't give enough of herself to him that night; his arms were home. They came together until they were fatigued from exhaustion in the morning hours.

§

Music suggestion: Watermark – Enya

In the morning, sunlight slipped in through the cracks, and Caitlin woke up, noticing that Jared was gone. She sat up, wondering where he had gone so early. Were 13th-century men no different than 21st-century men? "Good Lord," she thought. Then she heard Trey, and she got up and pulled up the cover of a small window and saw Jared skinning an animal. Caitlin cringed at the disturbing sight. She dressed and walked outside.

"Good morrow, I thought you might be hungry once you rose," Jared stated as he smiled at her.

Caitlin was in awe of him; he was providing for her every need. There were no men like this in the 21st century, she thought, at least none that she ever encountered.

“Good morning,” Caitlin said, trying not to cringe at the bloody sight, not being accustomed to hunting for food. “What is it?”

“Tis a rabbit, I warmed up some water and placed some mint leaves for drink. I am sorry to say there is no bread, nor eggs.

“Wow! I forgot there are no grocery stores out here.”

“Grocery stores? You have many comforts in your world; I pray you will adjust to mine.”

“I’m sorry; I’m just being silly. The only thing that matters is that I’m here, with you.” Caitlin smiled and looked away.

Jared smiled and was thankful she had come back with him, of her own accord.

“Whose home is this?” She asked.

“It was the old woman’s home, Rowena, the one who conjured spells and who gave her life trying to help me find you.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. How did it happen?”

Jared told Caitlin everything that happened after she vanished. How he came to meet Linda and how she had helped him as well. Caitlin was horrified to hear he would be dead if not for the old woman finishing the spell as she lay dying.

“That’s horrible, I mean, I’m glad you lived because of her, but I never in my life imagined that kind of violence beyond movies. I thought that what I witnessed, before I vanished, was severe enough. You’ll have to bear with me while I adjust because I’m not accustomed to such a violent world.

Caitlin approached him. Jared washed his hands off and embraced her.

“Yes, my world is violent, but I will give my life to protect you and keep you safe. I will help you adjust because you are my light, Caitlin. After you vanished, my world went dark without you.”

Caitlin looked at him; her eyes began to water, she had never heard words like that before—was she dreaming? She closed her eyes and lay her head against his chest.

“I admit I feared you at first because I just couldn’t accept what was happening to me. But I confess, even though I feared you, I was also drawn to you from the first moment we met. Then, when I vanished and fell on my bed at home, I was terrified, terrified that I would never see you again. I became so erratic that my Aunt Mavis and her son thought I was crazy, even Linda thought I was crazy at first, but part of her just couldn’t accept that, and I am so glad for that.” Caitlin sighed .

“As am I. When you vanished was the first time I felt real fear. Finding you again became my reason to live and fight, but I could not have found you without Rowena and Linda’s help.”

Jared lowered his head and kissed her. Caitlin embraced him as her heart pounded against her chest.

“Once we eat, we will head to the home of a friend. He shall tell us what has happened since I left. Then travel to the home of my mother and sister, where you shall be safe. I’m afraid I have been gone for some time. I pray we may find them well.”

“Yes, I remember thinking I was only gone a few days, and Linda telling me I had been gone a year.”

Caitlin helped Jared prepare the food, and so began her training in living off a raw environment. Once they finished their meal, they gathered some things to take with them. Jared mounted Trey and had Caitlin mount behind him, and they began their journey to the Brannicks’.

When they arrived, the house looked different to Jared, and it seemed rather quiet. As they got closer, a woman with a child came outside. The woman called her husband when she saw them approach. A man came out.

“Can I help you, lad?”

“Is this not the home of Leland Brannick?”

“No, we have been on this land since last winter. The home of the family who was here before us burned down. I am Daniel, and this is my wife, Larissa.” After hearing that, Jared tensed, feeling responsible for the Brannicks losing their home, possibly because they were his friends. (Behind them, a man approached on horseback to visit the family and waited in the background.) “I believe they moved across the mountain. Were they friends of yours?”

“Aye, do you know the reason for their troubles?”

“It is said they angered Lord Rogan. Their home was set on fire during the night.”

“Was anyone killed?”

“Not that I know. The man and his eldest son were on a journey, and the wife and younger sons were able to get out. They traveled across the mountain. Would you like to stay and sup with us?”

“Thank you, Sir, but we must be on our way before nightfall.

“What is your name, lad?”

“It is of no importance. My apologies for disturbing you. We shall be on our way.”

The man just nodded.

“Pardon me, Miss, but are you not the Lady Kayla?” The woman asked Caitlin.

Caitlin hesitated at the unexpected question.

“No, I’m sorry; I do not know the lady.”

“My mistake, Miss. My mother was a kitchen helper at Emerald Castle many winters ago. I played with her as a child, and you resemble her.”

Jared immediately began to move away.

“We must take our leave, Madam... Sir,” he bowed briefly. “Have a pleasant day.”

“Goodbye,” Caitlin said as she waved.

Jared hurried off, moving east toward the mountain.

“Is something wrong?” Caitlin asked.

“No. I was just concerned that the lady mistook you for Kayla, and I do not want to leave it to chance by staying.”

As Jared, Caitlin, and Trey went forth, the man who waited in the rear approached the family and dismounted. Daniel greeted the rent collector.

“Good morrow, Fergus, I shall be back in a little,”

Daniel told the man as he and his wife went to gather the payment due for the use of the land and returned promptly with their dues.

“You had a visitor, Daniel?”

“No, just someone looking for the Brannicks,”

“Who was it?”

“He did not say,” Larissa stated.

The man turned toward the departing figures, but could only see Caitlin’s red hair and the backside as she rode sitting behind Jared.

Once he collected the dues, he rode off. There were several more homes to visit, but he made a mental note of the couple on horseback and of Daniel’s wife’s comment.

§

Jared, Caitlin, and Trey arrived at his mother’s and sister’s home at dusk. He called to his mother and Lara. His mother came to the door.

"Jared! My son, where have you been?" His mother became emotional and then embraced him and asked again,

"Where have you been, Jared? Why do you keep disappearing? I was so grieved when Lara came back without you." Then she looked over at Caitlin. In shock, she asked, "Kayla?" Anya looked at Jared for answers.

Jared shook his head and quickly motioned his mother to lower her voice, and then he and Caitlin went inside, and Anya closed the door behind them.

"It is not Kayla, mother."

"Not Kayla?" Anya looked over at Jared. "How is that possible? She looks the same?"

"Tis a long story, mother, she is Caitlin."

Anya approached Caitlin, who smiled at her and held out her right hand, ready to shake Anya's, but Anya just took Caitlin's hand into both of hers and looked at her curiously.

"My dear, you are Kayla's very image; is she a relation to you?"

Up to this moment, Caitlin had not considered a possible relation to Kayla. Was it possible that Kayla was her ancestor, Caitlin wondered.

"I do not know, ma'am, but I am glad to make your acquaintance."

"Yes, forgive me, dear, but your similarity with—Kayla is so striking," Anya said, in amazement. "Lara did mention Jared had met someone like you, but to see you in person is fascinating."

"Where is Lara?" Jared asked.

"Your sister is with Tristan Brannick, her husband. They married soon after the whole family moved here. You now have a new brother, and they have a child."

"Lara and Tristan have a child? And where are they?"

"They live not far from here. Leland and Tristan were in the process of bringing Lara back when their family members joined them here after their home was burned to the ground in the middle of the night. Tyra and her two younger sons were lucky to get out alive. They have been here ever since. Upon hearing the news, Leland and the lads wanted to return to pursue those responsible. Leland left in such a rage that when he went through a thickly wooded area, he lost control of his horse, fell off, and broke his leg. I believe breaking that leg might have saved their lives. How could he and the lads alone go against Lord Rogan's guard? They had to build a new home here; it's been difficult."

"Much has happened since I left," Jared said, looking away.

"Aye, but you must tell me where you have been and about this young woman. On the morrow, I will bring Lara and Tristan."

"I would like that very much, mother, and where are the Brannicks?"

"Good, and the Brannicks live down the hill near the stream. Lara shall be so happy to see you and amazed by this young lady. But you must be hungry. I will warm some food for you and Caitlin, whom I would love to learn much about."

Caitlin and Jared sat while his mother warmed bread and soup. Jared talked about getting their land back, but Anya changed the subject. She dreaded any talk of battle. It had become dark, and Anya gathered animal skins and blankets for Caitlin to lie on at one end and some for Jared to lie on the opposite end of her small wood dwelling. Then she drew the blanket that divided the room into two sleeping areas.

Caitlin worried about her intimacy with Jared; these were primitive times and primitive people. Sleeping together out of wedlock was not the norm here, but what happened between them could not be

reversed. She could also not deny the pleasure she derived from their union nor the fact that she desired it again. However, she didn't want to be thought of as a loose woman or a rebel. In time, things would fall into place, but for now, she needed to heed to their lifestyle and create some distance between her and Jared. Caitlin got up and made her way across to the area designated for her to sleep in. Jared reached for her hand; Caitlin looked at him, smiled, and let go of his hand.

Anya blew out the candles and bade them good night. She had many questions for them, but she needed to be patient and let things unfold naturally. It was hard for Caitlin and Jared to sleep apart after the passion they shared the night before, but in time, sleep did come. At dawn, hurried knocks were heard at the door. Anya got up and opened the door.

"Anya, 'tis Dannic, please come quickly, my child is about to be born," said the expectant father.

"I am coming, Dannic, I shall get my things," Anya told the man.

"Jared, I must go. I will be back later." Anya told him as she took a sack with supplies and left.

Caitlin woke up upon hearing the knocks and sat up as Anya walked out the door. Caitlin got up and lifted the covering to look out the window.

"Where is she going in such a rush at this hour?"

"She helps the villagers deliver their children."

"She's a midwife?" Caitlin asked, turning toward him.

"Aye."

Jared came up behind Caitlin as she stood staring out the window and encircled his arms around her waist. He kissed her shoulders, then her neck. Caitlin pulled away.

"Jared, we need to hold back, this is your mother's home—"

He pulled her toward him and kissed her passionately, then coaxed her back to his sleeping area and brought them down to their knees, where he slowly removed their garments.

“What if she returns?” Caitlin asked breathlessly.

“She shall not,” Jared said as he continued to kiss her neck.

Caitlin was heated to the core by Jared’s passionate nature; right or wrong, she could not stop that nature, nor her own.

CHAPTER 22: FERGUS THE DUES COLLECTOR

After Fergus had collected the dues from Lord Rogan's tenants, he hurried back to Emerald Castle to turn them in and get paid for his work. Fergus had overheard the conversation Daniel McClintock and his wife, Larissa, had with the man and the redheaded woman on horseback. They were headed across the mountain, and they had inquired about the Brannicks. Then, upon hearing Larissa ask the woman if she was Lady Kayla, Fergus had taken an immediate interest and cautiously looked around to see if anyone else was in proximity. If it were Lady Kayla, he was about to make a hefty sum, for he knew the reward for finding her had grown, and so far no one had claimed it. He had never given it much thought since the charge of searching for her had been mainly given to the guard and higher-ranking staff, but now the opportunity had presented itself to him. Fergus would finally collect worthy pay and stand out from the rest. He despised being looked upon as a lowly rent and tax collector.

With no other duties, Fergus, who was not part of the guard, planned to follow the couple at a distance. He had no intention of sharing the reward with anyone, so he quickly gathered some things together for the long journey across the mountain. He would follow them at a distance, making sure he was unseen or followed.

§

They arrived at the village near dusk. Fergus had not been able to see much of the woman since she wore a hooded cloak until they knocked on the door of a small wooden cottage, where they were greeted by a middle-aged lady. He heard the woman call out their names, Jared and Kayla. This was the confirmation he was waiting for. However, he was concerned it might be Jared Kellan. He brushed the thought aside. He needed to lie low and keep a watchful eye on them in case this was not their final destination. He set up a tent near a tree by the roadside and made a campfire. The day grew dark, and no other travelers passed through. Fergus had knowledge of herbs that caused a deep sleep and brought some along to put to good use now that he found Kayla.

CHAPTER 23: BETROTHED

It was mid-morning when Lara came running over after her mother had stopped by her home to inform her that Jared had returned and had brought with him a lass resembling Kayla. Lara arrived out of breath from the run and found Caitlin heating a pot of water outside. Lara's mouth dropped open.

"Heavens, you must be—Caitlin?"

"I am, are you Lara?" Caitlin replied, shocked at Lara's sudden arrival.

"Yes." Lara came forward and embraced her. Caitlin was surprised at Lara's warm greeting.

Anya arrived shortly after, carrying some freshly slain chickens. She smiled at the pleasant view.

"Did I not tell you how similar she is to Kayla?" Anya stated.

"Mother, when can we take her to meet Kayla?"

Caitlin merely smiled and looked over at Anya.

"That I do not know you shall have to ask Jared."

"And where is my brother?"

"He went hunting," Caitlin said.

"Whatever for, did he not see I have plenty?" Anya asked Caitlin.

"I believe he did not want to deplete your stock," Caitlin replied.

"Well, Jared is a hunter and provider at heart, and you are very special to him."

Anya's words touched Caitlin. They were such warm and humble people.

"Come, lass, come inside where it is warm," Anya said.

The three women sat inside talking and asking Caitlin questions. Caitlin told them that Rowena had died trying to save Jared. Lara then explained that after Jared had not returned to the Brannicks', they had gone to his forest home and found it burned down, they feared him dead. Then they went to Rowena's cave dwelling on the hillside and found her slain body and buried the kind old woman outside her home. Lara mourned the loss of her friend.

Then Jared arrived with a slain rabbit, a pheasant, and some fish; he placed them down along with his bow and arrow. Lara jumped up and ran outside to embrace him, nearly knocking him off his feet. Jared smiled and hugged his sister.

"Brother, I am so happy to see you! I think I should not let go of you, or you shall vanish again!" Lara exclaimed.

"I shall not vanish, sister; I promise. I see you have met Caitlin." Jared said, smiling down at her.

"Jared, Caitlin is so beautiful, she even has the same hair color as Kayla! Jared, when can we take her to meet Kayla?"

"I do not know where Kayla lives."

"She lives deep in the forest with her husband, Aaron, and their children. They never leave the forest. She is in hiding from Lord Rogan."

"Does she know Lord Rogan is not her true father?"

"I told her what Rowena said; she was both surprised and relieved to know that he is not a blood relation, but she does not want to risk him finding her for fear he might take her, or one of her children, as a ransom to force her to come back. She does not wish to lose a loved one again, so we go visit them as often as possible. Mother and I helped her with the birth of her two children, Derrick and Lorie." "

"Yes, I was told she named her firstborn son in memory of our fallen brother."

"Aye, Derrick left us his legacy." Lara nodded, and her eyes began to water.

Jared went numb and tightened his hold on Lara.

"What? What do you mean, legacy?"

"Kayla was with child when Derrick was slain. He has a son, we have a nephew, and mother has a grandchild. Young Derrick looks very much like his father with dark hair and blue eyes."

Jared was shocked by the unexpected revelation that young Derrick was Kayla's son by Derrick, not Aaron. The revelation warmed Jared's heart.

"How old?"

"Little Derrick passed two summers, and Lorie shall reach her first winter soon—his hair is dark like Derrick's," Lara said as she wiped away the tears. "...and Lorie's hair is red like Kayla and Aaron's," Lara added.

"Come now, let us prepare our meal," said Anya, whose eyes were now also moist. "We do not want such gloomy faces in front of Jared's—"

Anya suddenly stopped, not knowing how to address Caitlin regarding her relation to Jared. She looked over at Jared, at a loss for words.

“Betrothed, if Caitlin agrees,” Jared filled in as he reached for Caitlin’s hand. Caitlin was shocked at Jared’s response to his mother. After a moment, Caitlin smiled and nodded at Jared.

“Well, then this is a truly happy day,” Anya said as she broke the silence and turned to embrace Caitlin, followed by Lara, then both turned to embrace Jared.

Could this actually be happening? It seemed surreal. Caitlin stepped away from them and went inside the small wooden home. She needed a moment to catch her breath and pinch herself. A moment later, Jared stepped inside and reached for her; Caitlin turned and embraced him and laid her head on his chest. Jared lifted her chin and kissed her sweetly on the lips. They heard voices outside, and Jared and Caitlin stepped out. Tristan had brought his and Lara’s son, as well as his parents, Leland and Tyra, and his brothers, Tobin and Hagan. The Brannicks immediately greeted Jared. Then Jared introduced Caitlin as his betrothed. Everyone marveled at her resemblance to Kayla.

Then Lara introduced her son, “And this is my son, Gerard. We named him after father. Now you must name your firstborn son, Marc, after our fallen brother—that is, if Caitlin agrees.” Lara quickly added.

Lara smiled and turned to Caitlin, who smiled back, reached for Lara’s hand, and nodded in agreement. The rest of the afternoon was a happy reunion. Life was moving on.

§

Fergus paid close attention during the gathering; he recognized the Brannicks and learned that the woman with Jared was not Kayla but had a close resemblance to her. Things had become more attractive now that he learned that Kayla had children and lived deep in the forest. He began to devise a plan. Fergus decided it would be far too difficult to kidnap a grown woman; he now focused on capturing one

of Kayla's small children instead; that would assure Kayla's return to Emerald Castle as well as his reward.

Fergus had brought herbs that caused a deep sleep. However, he was unsure of the amount he would need for a child, but it had to be enough to keep the child asleep for the long journey back to Emerald Castle. Fergus smiled at how simple his plan had become.

CHAPTER 24: CAITLIN MEETS KAYLA

Caitlin was trying to adjust to her new predicament; she was now betrothed to Jared. Truthfully, she felt a bit overwhelmed. Hadn't they just met a few days ago? No, not according to changes in both their worlds, Linda had married during the time she was missing, and Jared had a two-year-old nephew. Yet things seemed to be happening fast. However, she was thankful for the warm welcome she received from Jared's family and friends, but missed having her own parents and friends during this joyful time. She missed them so much, yet she looked over at Jared talking to Leland; she could not picture life without him now. It was she who was now under a spell, his spell. Nothing mattered anymore, not even the fact that she would not graduate from college. She had given all of it up to be with Jared and to raise a family with him in this ancient world. At least her knowledge of herbs and naturopathic medicine would come in handy.

Lara insisted on plans for Caitlin to meet Kayla. Jared also wanted to meet his fallen brother's son, so Tristan volunteered to go to Aaron

and Kayla's forest home and announce their visit in the coming days. Due to Lara's playful nature, she made her husband promise not to reveal Caitlin and Kayla's strong resemblance to each other, for the benefit of surprise.

The next few days were awkward for Caitlin around Anya. Jared had grown accustomed to their passionate union while Anya was away, so Caitlin devised a plan to engage him in a more manly pastime by challenging him to swordplay and archery, after all, she had taken both up while in college and had become quite good at them herself. Jared was surprised by her sword and archery skills. However, her plan backfired; her challenge to duel with him only stimulated his passionate nature even more. She had forgotten that Jared was a born warrior and hunter; he lived for the challenge. Caitlin, however, was not terribly vexed; their lovemaking became even more ardent than before. Thank goodness there were no video games or football to compete for his attention, she thought and smiled.

§

Three days passed, and Jared, Caitlin, Anya, Lara, and her husband, Tristan, as well as the rest of the Brannicks, made their way to Aaron and Kayla's home deep in the forest. Kayla was a nervous wreck. She was about to meet with Jared, who strongly resembled her fallen husband and his lady love. Kayla knew that Jared had once admired her from afar; she felt guilty for being anxious to see him again. She reminded herself that Aaron had been kind to her, and she was grateful, but she knew she would never love him as intensely as she had loved Derrick. Things could have been very different if Jared had not gone missing.

Aaron also prepared to meet his longtime friend, even though he was secretly glad for Jared's absence after Derrick's death. He knew that Jared had been in love with Kayla and that Jared, being so close

in resemblance to Derrick, Kayla would have inevitably turned to him for comfort. However, it was encouraging to know that Jared had returned with a lady love of his own.

Meanwhile, Lara had insisted that Caitlin's likeness to Kayla remain a secret, so neither Aaron nor Kayla was aware of that minor detail.

Kayla combed young Derrick's hair and tried to keep him clean for as long as possible. Lorie clung to her mother while young Derrick immediately rolled in the autumn leaves. Kayla sighed in defeat at trying to keep him clean.

§

It was midday when they arrived just outside the forest. Lara, Tristan, their baby, Gerard, and Anya rode in a horse-driven cart. Lara, who held the baby, handed him over to his father, Tristan. Then she jumped off the cart and went running into the forest. Lara was so excited that she couldn't wait to see the expression on both Kayla's and Aaron's faces when they met Caitlin. Then Anya commented,

"Lara may be a married mother, but at times I think she's still a lass of 13, just look at her turn her child over to Tristan and run off, 'tis good that Tristan is patient with her," Anya complained to Jared and Caitlin as they rode on horseback off to the side.

"She's just young at heart, 'tis all, I mind it not," Tristan responded with a smile.

"Well, perhaps I should go and see what she is up to." Anya declared, then got off the cart and ran off too.

"And she wonders where Lara gets it from," Tristan said.

They all laughed. Caitlin and Jared were on horseback and dismounted as they got closer to Kayla and Aaron's forest home.

"I think they're adorable. Lara reminds me of my own sister," Caitlin sighed and looked down in thought.

"You have not talked about your family," Jared stated.

“No. I haven’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I will start to miss them,” Caitlin said as her eyes became watery.

“I am sorry if I hurt you by taking you away from them.”

After a brief moment, Caitlin composed herself.

“No, Jared, I am here by my own choice, and I am happy.” She smiled at him. Jared leaned over and kissed her.

The Brannicks pulled up behind them in another horse and cart. They all got off and started walking through the dense forest. Young Derrick’s laugh and a baby crying could be heard just ahead. Then Lara came running and pulled both Jared and Caitlin to the rear of the group, and pulled Caitlin’s hood up. The element of surprise was a fun game for Lara, who was mischievous and impulsive by nature and was preparing Caitlin for the thrilling revelation.

“Are you ready to meet your reflection?” Lara asked excitedly.

“Yes, I must confess; I am a bit nervous.”

Jared was also tense; he desperately wanted to forget the last time he saw Kayla, but the image was burned into his brain. He wanted to get past that and embrace his friend Aaron, his former sister-in-law, and their children, but was especially looking forward to meeting young Derrick.

The group started to greet each other, then Lara, who had taken little Loriel from Kayla, went to the rear of the group and brought Caitlin and Jared front and center, and pulled off Caitlin’s hood. Kayla gasped upon seeing Jared and a woman who looked exactly like her own reflection. It was like looking at Derrick and her once again. Was this a trick of nature, or was there some purpose to this strange coincidence? Kayla asked herself. Aaron, too, was shocked at Caitlin’s likeness to Kayla. Caitlin smiled and extended her right hand to Kayla,

forgetting that shaking hands was not the custom here, but Kayla's emotional state exploded when Caitlin's hand came in contact with her own. Caitlin froze as an electric-like shock went through her, and she entered into a trance. Then the wind started to blow, escalating in intensity, causing the trees to sway and the leaves on the ground to swirl around them very fast. While Caitlin was in a trance, she had a vision of Kayla sinking in the water in a flowing pale green dress with her fiery red hair floating around her.

"Mama, what's happening?!" Lara shouted.

Lara's cry broke Caitlin's trance-like state, and she came to. Everything looked surreal. Then the wind began to calm down, and tiny flowers resembling snow began falling all around them. Everyone looked at the little flowers falling from above. Even Jared was able to forget the dreaded image burned into him. The group marveled as the small flowers dissipated once they reached the ground.

"Oh, 'tis beautiful, mama; Kayla, are you doing that?" Lara asked.

Then Kayla lost consciousness and fell on the grass.

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Aaron immediately laid Kayla across his lap; everyone remained in the background except Lara, who still held Loriel and knelt near Kayla as Aaron tried to wake her.

"Kayla, my sweet, wake up," Aaron murmured.

"Was the wind caused by Kayla?" Lara asked Aaron.

"I believe so, strange things happen when she gets emotional, but she knows not how to control it," Aaron replied.

"Oh dear, Rowena did tell us she had a magical gift, but it would be weak. However, she also said it could be restored by taking the crystal down below the sea." Lara stated.

Upon hearing that, Caitlin turned to Jared.

"I saw something when I touched Kayla's hand, a vision of her sinking in the water."

"Was the vision of her—or you?" Jared asked, sounding concerned.

"Lara said Kayla needed to take the crystal down below the sea to restore her powers," Caitlin replied.

"Yes, I remember Rowena telling us," Jared responded.

Caitlin reached for the crystal around his neck, but Jared held her hand away.

"No! Hold it not. I fear it might take you away where I can no longer find you. Remember, the other half of the crystal remained with Linda."

"Yes, that's true. Then you must give this one to Kayla."

Aaron, who heard their conversation, replied,

"No! Kayla does not want the crystal, nor does she wish to restore any powers." Aaron declared.

"Why?" Caitlin asked.

Then Kayla, who was now fully conscious, said,

"Because I am happy with my family as we are. I do not want any more strange occurrences like what just took place. My whole life, I lived in fear of my father's sorcery and all its evil. I do not want it to bring harm to my family or me."

Everyone was so focused on Kayla that they forgot about young Derrick, who had wandered off chasing after the little falling flowers and had come directly into Fergus's path.

CHAPTER 25: DERRICK'S ABDUCTION

Fascinated by the tiny falling flowers, young Derrick pulled away from Aaron to chase after them. Then Kayla fainted and fell, and everyone's attention turned toward her. Derrick ran further away as he pursued the flowers, and suddenly came in front of a man with short dark hair and a beard. The child stood still and was about to run back to his parents when the man showed him a miniature carving of a horse he had to lure him.

"Here, lad, a little horse for you," The young boy reached for the small figure of a horse in the man's hand. Fergus allowed the child to play with it. "Would you like to see it run?" Derrick nodded. Fergus got down on his knees and demonstrated how the tiny horse ran on the ground as he lured Derrick further and further away. Derrick smiled and laughed as he chased after Fergus with his little horse till they came a good distance away. Then Fergus brought out a small vial with a concoction he had previously prepared. It would cause the child to fall into a deep sleep. He tried to get Derrick to drink it, but Derrick

didn't like it and tried to run away. Fergus grabbed the child and made him drink the liquid, then covered his mouth with his hand. He held the child as he struggled until he stopped moving. Once Derrick lost consciousness, Fergus removed a garment and sprinkled it with animal blood, then quickly wrapped Derrick in a blanket and carried him back to his horse and left the area.

Fergus knew he only had a small window of time to get away with the child before the adults, who were many, came looking for him. To confuse them, he scattered the boy's clothing in an easterly direction. Fergus then rode away with Derrick at full speed, heading the opposite way. While traveling across the mountain earlier, he came across a large, hollowed-out tree. He placed shrubbery around it and left markings to help him find it later. He would spend the night there with the child. By morning, the child would wake, and he would give him more of the concoction to keep him asleep. Fergus was glad there were no dogs to trace Derrick's scent. He hoped the adults would assume the child had been eaten by a wild animal and not continue searching, but it was unlikely. One thing did concern him. He now knew it was Jared Kellan, who was thought to be dead, who had returned. He also knew Jared was fast and deadly with a sword, and if he came after him, it would be himself who would be dead. Perhaps he should leave the boy in the forest, but he had come too far. Now that he had the boy, the mother would follow, and soon he would have his reward. Upon getting his reward, he would leave the area and never be heard from again.

CHAPTER 26: THE SEARCH FOR DERRICK

Kayla stood up with Aaron's help; she turned and looked at Caitlin, then Jared. He reminded her so much of her slain husband. Young Derrick shared many similarities with his father and Jared. She stood frozen in front of them. Everyone waited quietly for Kayla to speak.

"I sense a blood relation to you," Kayla told Caitlin.

Caitlin looked over at Jared.

"How do you know this?" Caitlin asked in astonishment.

"I felt a warmth when we touched, as I feel with my children."

Caitlin was in awe.

Then Kayla turned and looked at Jared. Kayla could not hold back the tears as she looked at him and was reminded of her slain husband and first love. It was then that Jared knew in his heart that Kayla was indeed innocent of the evil that transpired that star-crossed day. Kayla reached out to both Caitlin and Jared and smiled, then said,

"I feel we have much to share." She told Caitlin, then turned to Jared and said, "Now, young Derrick can look upon you and know his father's face. You must meet him."

Kayla turned toward Aaron, assuming he had young Derrick by his side. "Aaron, bring him."

Aaron looked down his side but did not see him.

"Derrick!" Aaron called out.

At once, Kayla turned and looked over at Aaron, then she realized little Derrick was not with him. A look of fear came over her.

"Aaron, where is he?" Kayla asked anxiously.

"He was just here before you lost consciousness."

"I saw the wee lad trying to catch the tiny flowers," Leland added.

"Yes, I saw him too. He was just behind Aaron. We were all so distracted. He cannot be far." Tyra offered.

Naturally distressed, Kayla turned in circles calling out for him.

"Derrick! Derrick!" Kayla yelled. "Aaron, he's gone! He's gone! Someone has taken him!" Kayla cried as she frantically ran to her wooden home, hoping to find him playing inside.

"We shall find him, my love; he must have wandered into the woods," Aaron replied.

Jared immediately started moving toward Trey.

"We need to move fast. If someone has taken him, he's still in the area. Caitlin, stay close to Lara and mother."

Jared mounted Trey and rode off to circle the area.

"Let us all go in different directions," Leland announced. "Tobin, you go north, Hagan, you take the south, and I'll go east."

Everyone began to call out for Derrick as they looked through the forest.

Loriel and Gerard both cried for their mothers, then Tristan handed his son, Gerard, to his wife, Lara.

“Lara, take him so that I may help search for Derrick. You and Kayla stay here with the children,” Tristan told Lara.

In an anguished voice, Anya turned and said,

“Caitlin, come with us, lass.” Anya was near tears, “Why has this happy day turned grim? I cannot bear it.”

“We shall find him, Anya, I will help you look!” Caitlin offered.

It was a chaotic scene as everyone scattered through the forest in search of young Derrick. Aaron ran to the stream, which was not deep enough to drown anyone, but he knew Derrick liked to play there.

Jared, who was circling the area on horseback, noticed something in an open field that appeared to be a small bloodstained cloth. He tensed as he got closer; then he dismounted Trey and squatted over the cloth and realized it was a child’s blood-stained garment. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. Could fate be so dark as to again cast another shadow over his family? He had not even looked upon the face of his slain brother’s only child, and now he might also be dead. He clenched his jaw and picked up the stained garment. He dreaded having to tell Kayla of the horrific finding, so he decided to approach Aaron first.

Jared returned to Aaron and Kayla’s home site; he dismounted Trey and saw Caitlin coming toward him. She saw that Jared had something in his hand and gasped upon seeing the blood-stained cloth, and put her hand over her mouth in shock. Tears came down her cheek for the child whose sweet laughter she had only heard once. Then Caitlin put her hand on the garment and gasped loudly as a vision of horse hooves running through the forest at a great speed flashed in front of her.

Kayla saw Caitlin’s reaction and immediately handed her infant daughter, Loriel, to Anya and came running toward them. Jared hid the garment and called out to Aaron.

“Aaron!”

Aaron was already coming toward them.

“What is it? Did you find something?” Kayla asked anxiously.

“I am not certain,” Jared replied.

Jared turned toward Aaron,

“Jared, we did not even have a chance to greet one another, and now I fear you may be the bearer of bad tidings.”

Then Caitlin interjected.

“No! It is not what you think!” They turned to Caitlin. “Before Jared reveals what he holds, I touched the cloth, and I saw something. I believe your child is being taken on horseback through the forest this very instant. Jared is holding a garment covered in blood, but it is not the child’s blood! Derrick is alive!”

Everyone focused on what Jared held in his hand. Kayla looked at the garment and began to shake as she recognized it and saw the blood, and then Caitlin took Kayla by the arms and reassured her, “It’s not Derrick’s blood! He’s alive!” Caitlin said, nearly shouting.

“What?” Kayla asked in shock. “How do you know this?”

“I saw it, I don’t know how it’s happening, but since you touched me earlier, I’ve had two visions.”

“What two visions?” Kayla asked her.

“In the first vision, I saw you in the water, and just now when I touched the garment, I saw your child being taken through the forest on horseback toward the mountain.”

“How do you know he is alive?” Aaron asked.

“I could hear his breathing, and I could hear his heart, I’m sure of it,” Caitlin said.

That was enough for Jared. He re-mounted Trey and announced he was leaving.

“I shall go west, Caitlin. I want you to stay with Lara and my mother. Whoever it is who has taken my brother’s child, I will hunt him down.” Jared stated.

"I shall come with you, Jared," Aaron announced.

"Jared, I have to go with you, too!" Caitlin urged.

"No, Caitlin! You must stay here! Tristan, take care of the women!"

Tristan nodded, and then Aaron turned to Kayla, who was crying, and tried to reassure her, saying,

"I shall return with our son, my sweet. I love you."

Then Aaron hugged Kayla and mounted his horse, and he and Jared rode off.

Caitlin became angry that they did not take her with them. Living in a man's world could be terribly vexing at times, but she was a resourceful girl and was not about to sit around waiting for the men to resolve all the issues, especially after somehow being empowered by Kayla's heightened emotional state, with the ability to have visions of the present and future.

"I need a horse!" Caitlin announced.

"Caitlin, 'tis best you stay here with us, lass." Anya insisted.

"I can't, Anya. I'm familiar with healing, and if the child has been hurt, I may be able to help him. I feel I need to go, so please, is there a horse?"

Kayla nodded and said,

"Yes, you can take my horse, Violet; she is in the back."

Caitlin followed Kayla toward the back of her wooden home. Violet stood tall and ready with her burgundy mane as Caitlin approached and mounted her. Then Leland said,

"Tobin and I shall trail behind in the cart, lass, but we must travel home to get our horses first." Then he turned and told his youngest son, "Hagan, you and Tristan stay here with the ladies and children and make a fire, 'tis getting colder and soon it shall be dark."

"Father, I should go with you!" Tristan insisted.

"No, Tristan, you have a family to care for now—you, stay."

Tristan hesitantly obeyed his father.

Caitlin rode away on Violet, and Leland and his middle son Tobin followed behind in their horse-drawn cart.

CHAPTER 27: ENCOUNTER WITH THE GUARD

Jared and Aaron rode through the forest, certain the child was probably being taken to Emerald Castle.

“Thank you, Jared. I am glad to see you back. We all thought you were dead.”

“You need not thank me, Aaron; it is I who should thank you for taking my slain brother’s child as your own and caring for Kayla as well as my mother and Lara.”

“I do confess, I was surprised at Caitlin’s resemblance to Kayla. Someday, I would like to learn more about your whereabouts after your disappearance and how you came to meet such an impressive lady.”

“Twas in the stars, Aaron.”

Jared did not mention his initial reaction or intentions upon finding out he was married to Kayla, nor did Aaron admit he was secretly glad for his absence after Derrick’s death, in regards to Kayla. They both continued riding in silence for a time till they heard horses. Then

suddenly they were surrounded by several men on horseback, but they were not Lord Rogan's men. Due to a half-moon, lighting was minimal, and visibility was difficult.

The man in charge asked,

"Who might you be, and where are you off to in such haste?"

"I am simply a man in search of his kidnapped nephew," Jared replied.

"My young son has gone missing, and we fear he may have been taken across the mountain," Aaron added.

"A kidnapped child, hmm, I must say you look more like you're headed into battle." The man circled behind Jared. "Those scars tell me you are either strong with a sword or very fortunate. What might be your names, gentlemen?"

"Perhaps you would be so kind as to share yours as well," Jared stated.

The head guard hesitated and then smiled. Seeing that the two men were outnumbered by him and his men, he said,

"I am Merick Dunlary, Captain of Lord Broxton's guard."

"Merick? Then perhaps you remember me, I am Jared Kellan, and this is Aaron Magnon, your men helped me fight Lord Rogan some winters back."

Merick approached to get a better look.

"Jared Kellan? Are you back from the dead or a ghost haunting these woods?"

"None, I am flesh and blood."

Everyone relaxed as the word filtered through to the men at the rear.

"When did you return?"

"Five days past."

“Five days, well seems you have good timing. We have confirmed that Lord Rogan has lost his powers, and Lord Broxton is eager to take back his lands. Can you be persuaded to join us?”

“That depends on what lands Lord Broxton is eager to take back. Lord Rogan killed my father and brothers, then confiscated our property and put my mother and sister out of their home. He also burned the Brannicks out of their home because of their allegiance to me. So I would be interested in taking back what he has taken from my friends and me and avenge my kinsmen. If Lord Broxton agrees to that, then I shall not hesitate to join him, as before, I assure you many shall pledge their allegiance to me.”

“Then you must return with us to Broxton Castle at once. Lord Broxton shall be most interested in speaking with you.”

“That I cannot do at this time, the child, who was taken, is Kayla’s son. Lord Rogan means to use the child as leverage to get Kayla to return to Emerald Castle.” Jared stated.

“Why would he use his own grandchild as leverage, and why would his daughter need so much persuasion to return home?”

“Kayla is not his true daughter. She was the daughter of a sea witch and a forest sorcerer, from whom she inherited her magical gifts. Lord Rogan had her parents killed and raised Kayla so he could draw out her powers. He has been drawing them out since birth. He lost that power when Kayla ran away from him after he had her husband, Derrick, slain, who was also my oldest brother.

When I returned recently, I came across the mountain in search of my family and was informed that Kayla had borne Derrick’s son and lived hidden in the forest. We then set out to meet with Kayla and her family at her forest home, but someone must have followed us there, and now the child has gone missing. The boy possesses certain magical

attributes like his mother, and 'tis the reason we must keep the child from reaching Lord Rogan." Jared lied.

Upon hearing this, Merick crinkled his brow with concern.

"When was the child taken?"

"This afternoon," Jared told him.

Merick looked at his men, then turned and said,

"How many of my men do you need to help find him?"

Jared and Aaron exchanged looks at the unexpected good tidings.

"As many as you can release to me."

"Very well, Jared, take with you seven of my men to help you locate this kidnapper before he gets the child to Lord Rogan. I will report back to Lord Broxton and return with reinforcements."

CHAPTER 28: THE CROSSING

Caitlin rode Violet at full speed till they reached Anya's home. Leland and Tobin separated as they went toward their own home to get their horses and gather their weapons.

Once she reached Anya's home, Caitlin dismounted Violet and went directly to Jared's arsenal of weapons. She took a bow and a sack of arrows, as well as a sword and holster. Caitlin found herself wishing she had brought some jeans with her; it would be difficult to do anything in a dress, then she thought of something. She rummaged through Jared's clothes and found a green long-sleeve garment, then found some dark leggings-like trousers. For her feet, she cut a blanket into two strips to make herself boots like the ones Jared had made for her before. She bandaged her feet right over her slipper-like gym shoes all the way to her knees using whatever pieces of cloth and rope she could find to hold the cloth wrappings together. She stuffed some blankets in a sack, and for warmth, she removed her long dark cloak, took another gray blanket, cut it lengthwise, and made a slit in the

middle for her head. From the piece that was left, she cut a long strip, then wrapped it around her waist to hold the garment down and tied it. This would keep her warm. She also remembered to take her pepper spray from within her cloak pocket and stuffed it into her bra. Feeling ready, she went outside to remount Violet, but her hair was blowing all around her, so she made a long braid to keep it in place. She turned when she heard Leland and Tobin arrive on horseback. They were surprised at her change of attire.

"A lass with the heart of a warrior, I assume you shall not be persuaded to stay?"

"No, Leland, I shall not. My future husband needs me."

Leland and Tobin exchanged looks, thinking the lass was a bit foolish to believe a lethal warrior like Jared might need her help. Both kept their thoughts to themselves and merely nodded.

"Leland, can you please lead the way since I don't know my way around here."

"Thought you'd never ask, Lass," Leland replied.

With Leland in the lead, they rode west once again. It began to get darker and colder, and they stopped to allow the horses a short rest and to get a drink of water from the stream.

"Any more visions, Lass?"

"No, perhaps we should walk through the forest a bit."

"Lass, walking will slow us down; we will not be having a full moon tonight, and there shall be very little light, so we must cross as much of the forest as we can now."

"Please, Leland, I feel strongly about this. I need to walk a short distance."

"Here are a few more arrows," Tobin said as he handed her the arrows.

"Thank you, Tobin," Caitlin said, then turned to Leland, "and thank you both, Leland, for coming along."

"No need to thank us, we all rally together during struggles, tis the only way to survive, lass."

Leland's words struck Caitlin, making her realize how people here either tolerated abuse or fought back; there were no authorities to call on for protection. It was a bone-chilling fact of life here, but also an invigorating one.

Leland looked over at Tobin, and both began walking for a few minutes, then Caitlin stopped.

"What is it, lass, do ye see a vision now?"

"No, but I sense the child is getting weaker. We must hurry!"

The three mounted and continued to ride with the limited moonlight they had till morning, stopping only to let the horses rest.

"We're about to cross into Lord Rogan's territory, so we will have to be extra careful."

"Fortunately, the forest is dense, and we can easily hide," Tobin said to his father.

"We can also quickly lose sight of one another, so we must stay close," Leland replied.

"How much more forest is there?" Caitlin asked.

"Some, but tis the clearing that causes me worry. We should stay north, Father," Tobin suggested.

"Yes, you're right, Tobin, there is more forest on the northern side of the mountain pass. We need the woods to help us stay out of sight."

The three continued their journey. Then they heard horses,

"Tis Lord Rogan's guard, Father!" Tobin whispered excitedly to his father.

"Hold still," Leland whispered back.

Caitlin tried to be still, but the sound of approaching horses got louder. In an effort to hide, Caitlin rode off in the opposite direction. It had grown dark and hard to see, but Caitlin kept riding through the forest, thinking Leland and Tobin were somewhere behind her. When she realized Leland and Tobin were no longer with her, Caitlin stopped and dismounted Violet. She realized she was alone and was momentarily gripped with fear. Caitlin called out for Leland and Tobin, but there was no reply. She realized she would need to continue alone. Caitlin continued riding through the night and into the morning hours. She had now crossed the mountain pass alone.

Drowsiness slowed her pace, but she knew time was of the essence and forced herself to continue riding. Her eyes felt heavy from lack of sleep, and for a few seconds, they closed when she heard something. It was a man's voice. Caitlin opened her eyes and shook her head to wake herself up. After a few minutes, she quietly dismounted from Violet, leaving her behind, and began walking toward the voice. Then she stepped on something. She knelt and picked up what appeared to be a small wood carving of a horse. She immediately felt a warm sensation on her fingers. It seemed to direct her path. In the distance, she saw another horse. Caitlin knew at once that the child was near. As she got closer, she saw a man holding a small limp body. Fergus crouched with the child in his arms near the hollowed-out tree where he had spent the night. Caitlin could make out that the man seemed to be trying to feed the child something. She readied her bow and arrow as she came closer. Once she was within striking distance, she said,

“Put the child down and put your hands in the air— scumbag!”

Fergus jumped after being startled by her voice and turned toward her.

“Who's there?” He demanded.

"I said put the child down if you don't want an arrow in your eye!" Caitlin ordered.

He shielded himself with the child.

"Who the devil are you?"

"An archery champion asshole put him down!"

"I'm not afraid of you, you're just a lass!"

"Yeah, but I can take your eye out from here if you don't put that child down. Jared is also hunting you down as we speak, and he is near, so if you know what's best for you, put the child down!" She repeated.

Fergus stubbornly continued holding young Derrick, and then quickly jumped behind a tree. He needed to get to his horse. Fergus wondered how the woman had found him, but was glad she was alone. A woman he could handle, it was Jared, whom he feared. He knew at once it was Kayla's look-a-like, for her voice did not sound Irish. He thought of something; they were now near Lord Rogan's territory; they were bound to run into the guard patrolling the area. He could tell them that he had sighted Lady Kayla in the area. He knew she would soon be hunted down by an army of reward-hungry men.

Caitlin was frustrated that the dim lighting was sabotaging her search for the dirtbag who had taken the child. Then she saw Fergus jump onto his horse, and Caitlin pointed her bow and arrow and yelled,

"Stop or I'll strike you down!"

Fergus ignored her warning and rode off, and she struck him with an arrow that pierced him through the back. He fell off the horse, with the child landing on the grass, which cushioned the fall.

"Dammit!" Caitlin swore as she watched him fall off the horse, fearing the child might have been hurt.

Caitlin ran toward them and took Derrick. The day was overcast and cloudy, and Caitlin lay Derrick's small body over her lap as she

tried to wake him, but he was unresponsive. She pulled his eyes open and tensed when she saw that his pupils were dilated. She mourned for the child, whatever that bastard gave young Derrick; it had put him in a coma. Tears ran down her cheek as she lowered her head and hit the ground with her fist. Then she heard horses and looked up and saw several members of Lord Rogan's guard coming toward her in the distance. She stood up with the child and ran toward Violet, still in the woods, but it was useless. The guards on horseback chased after her, and soon she was surrounded. One of the men dismounted and went to examine the man on the ground. When he rolled him over, he leaned over him and heard the man say,

"Tis the Lady Kayla and her son—Jared Kellan—is near," Fergus uttered before he expired.

The guard informed Brahms, the captain of the guard, of what the man said. Brahms immediately looked around for Jared, then ordered them to bring Kayla and the child, and sent a search party to hunt Jared down. He then ordered another man to ride ahead and inform Lord Rogan that Jared had returned and was in the area. Brahms approached Caitlin and said,

"Lady Kayla, you have been gone a long time; your father is most anxious to see you and has ordered that we bring you to Emerald Castle. He shall be surprised to see you have a son."

Caitlin remembered he was the head guard who shot an arrow at Jared on her first visit.

"Wrong again, asshole, I'm not Lady Kayla! I don't talk like her or even sound Irish!" She yelled.

"The name is Brahms, my Lady." He replied in a cold, calm tone.

Caitlin was emotional and tearful.

"Whatever, this other asshole gave the child, it put him in a coma! Now he won't wake up, so leave us alone!"

Caitlin yelled as the tears flowed.

“I do not know why your speech is different, but you are not in a position to demand anything. Now, kindly get on your horse voluntarily, or you shall be made to obey. Now choose!” He ordered.

Brahms gave the signal, and the guards closed in on her, leaving her no choice but to mount Violet with young Derrick.

CHAPTER 29: THE SOUTHERN PASS

After Jared, Aaron, and Lord Broxton's men parted ways with Merick, Jared felt renewed vigor with the unexpected addition of seven of Lord Broxton's men at his command. They rode through the night, staying on the north side of the forest, stopping only to rest and water the horses. It was during one of these stops that they heard the hooves of approaching horses and hid. The limited moonlight continued to be a hindrance to their eyes. The men stood ready with their bows and arrows as they surrounded the two men. Then Jared came forth and realized it was Leland and Tobin.

"Rest your bows, lads, they are friends."

The men put their bows and arrows down.

"Jared, you gave us quite a scare, lad."

"That we nearly killed you is what vexes me, Leland—why did you come?"

"I am afraid that what I will say to you shall vex you even more. We came because Caitlin would not stay! She claims to have insight into

the child's whereabouts and knowledge of healing. We all urged her not to go, lad, but after hearing this, Kayla offered her horse, Violet. Caitlin then rode to your mother's home, changed her garments, and armed herself with your bow and arrows, so we accompanied her. When we heard horses earlier, she separated from us in the dark, and we were not able to track her to let her know it was Lord Broxton's men who had met with you and Aaron earlier.

Jared tensed, clenching his jaw, knowing Caitlin was alone.

"Then I must ride south. Aaron, you and the men, stay on the north side of the pass where you are less likely to be seen."

"Jared, the guard, shall be sure to see you in the daylight hours through the open field," Leland warned.

"Not if I hurry and cross the river while 'tis still dark," Jared replied

"The terrain across the river is slanted, and the water shall be icy cold, lad— it will be very difficult," Leland insisted.

"Yes, but there is more forest across the river, and knowing that you, Tobin, and Lord Broxton's men all encountered us and Caitlin did not tell me she is likely on the south side of the pass," Jared assured.

"Then we will come with you, lad," Leland told him.

"Take three men with you, Jared; you shall now be at a greater disadvantage. Good luck," Aaron stated.

Jared nodded and wished him the same, and then he, Leland, Tobin, and three of Lord Broxton's men took the more hazardous southern route across the pass.

CHAPTER 30: CAITLIN MEETS LORD ROGAN

The guard sent ahead arrived at Emerald Castle and requested an audience with Lord Rogan, stating he had urgent news. Lord Rogan, who was in the midst of preparing to journey south the following day to meet with a potential ally against Lord Broxton, came at once.

Upon hearing the news that Lady Kayla and her child were being escorted to the castle and that Jared was in the area, Lord Rogan clenched his jaw. His lust for Jared's blood, to be spilled, was even more compelling than knowing he would have Kayla back to restore his power. He immediately ordered twenty members of his guard to hunt Jared down and bring him in alive. He had plans for him.

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Caitlin observed young Derrick as she carried him on her lap during the ride to Emerald Castle. His young angelic face shared similarities with Jared's. It was almost like holding her and Jared's child. Her eyes began to water, and tears streamed down her cheek. The sound of

thunder broke, and it started raining hard. Caitlin tried to cover young Derrick with the blanket she brought, but they were getting soaked in the pouring rain.

When they arrived at Emerald Castle, Caitlin looked up at the monumental entrance gates and recalled Jared's story, how he and his family had been ambushed and killed upon entering. It sent shivers down her spine, and she suddenly empathized with Kayla's loss, having to witness the love of her life taken from her so cruelly. She closed her eyes; she could not bear the thought of losing Jared or living without him.

As they crossed the gates about thirty feet, young Derrick jumped. Then she realized this must be the very spot where his father's life was taken. Suddenly, she felt warmth radiate through her, as opposed to the cold chill typically reported when encountering ghosts. Derrick's little hand opened briefly. Was his father here, happy to see his child, she wondered?

As they arrived, a guard helped her get off Violet and led her into the castle. It was the same entrance, she remembered from the tour. Caitlin clutched the child to her as she was escorted into a freezing room, then she came face to face with Lord Rogan's tall, thin form. His pale skin contrasted with his piercing dark eyes and goatee. He was far more intimidating in person than she expected. She shivered more from the encounter than the cold. Her eyes batted erratically as he came closer, almost as if she could not look upon him. She looked away and hugged little Derrick closer to her.

"My Lord, we found Fergus dying in the field from an arrow in his back, but before he died, he told us he found Lady Kayla and her child and that Jared Kellan was near. I immediately ordered six of my men to search the area and sent another to alert you, my Lord," Brahms stated.

“Well done, Brahms. At this very moment, twenty more men are searching for him, but ‘tis a pity that she is not Lady Kayla. However, I do sense a blood relation to Kayla from her and the child.” He turned away and examined his wooden hand. “I have no doubt Kayla shall come for her child soon, but to know that Jared is distressed and searching for his lover makes this a monumental find. How unfortunate, Fergus lost his reward; it would have been a fine one.” He turned to Brahms. “Brahms, now I will double the reward to you if you bring Jared to me alive. He may even come voluntarily once he knows his lover’s head shall be the ultimate price for his absence.”

“You murderer,” Caitlin cried out.

“Oh, she speaks. I would be more prudent with that wagging tongue—if you wish to keep it,” Lord Rogan threatened.

Caitlin gasped.

Lord Rogan approached her and tried to run his bony right hand over her head, but Caitlin moved away in disgust. Then he brought out his left wood-shaped hand and held it in front of Caitlin’s face.

“This is what your lover took from me last time we met. Now he shall pay for that with his head—or receive yours in exchange if he does not make an appearance on the morrow of the day after, by first light.”

Caitlin’s blood went cold as she realized her predicament. Now she understood why Kayla hid from him and why Jared wanted him dead. He was a cold-blooded, ruthless killer. Caitlin started to panic, but she did not want him to see her cower and turned away from him. Lord Rogan turned to one of his staff,

“Have Larissa show our lovely guest to her kin’s former quarters; for the time being, she can enjoy my hospitality.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Lord Rogan left, and the chill in the room seemed to leave with him. Caitlin was now shivering, but more from the threat than the cold. Then Larissa stepped into the room and gasped upon recognizing her.

"Hello, Miss," Larissa said as she checked to see if they were alone. "We... meet again."

Caitlin, still terrorized by the threat, only partly heard Larissa, then turned toward her and recognized Larissa as the same woman who had asked her if she was Lady Kayla back at Leland's old home site.

"Hello. You're the woman from the farm I met the other day. Why do you work here? He's evil."

Larissa looked around and then signaled Caitlin to whisper.

"We must keep our voices very low, Lord Rogan has keen hearing." She whispered so low it was barely audible. "My husband did not complete the taxes owed on the land, and he has gone to try to sell more of our crops. I came here to work after he left so I could help him reduce our debt. I fear for my family if we cannot satisfy our debt soon." Larissa stated, sounding anguished, then asked, "You are not from here, are you?"

"No, I'm—from another place. Where is your child?" Caitlin asked, changing the subject.

"With my parents, but come, you are both soaked to the skin. I will take you and your child to Lady Kayla's former quarters. There you can change into some dry garments and footwear, and I will take your wet clothes."

"Thank you, but he's not my child, he's Kayla's child—and he's in a coma."

"Kayla's child?" She asked as she turned in astonishment toward the child, and then asked, "What is a coma?"

“Well, he’s asleep but can’t wake up, I’m afraid for him because sometimes they never wake up again,” Caitlin told her and looked away.

“I am so sorry,” Larissa replied, then, after a brief pause, she said, “Perhaps the water from the well shall help him.”

“What water from the well?”

“Well, it is more of a deep sloping tunnel that connects to the ocean; it was used to escape by sea by previous Lords when under attack. Many summers ago, when Kayla and I were children, I sometimes came to work with my mother, who helped in the kitchen, and I would play with Kayla. One day, while playing outside, Kayla dropped her wood-carved princess down a hole that led to a tunnel under the castle. We both climbed down and saw this tunnel, but it was dark, wet, and slippery, and it sloped. Her wooden figure was caught in some shrubs. I slipped and fell, got scared and climbed out, but Kayla kept trying to reach her wooden princess and slipped. She went sliding down the tunnel screaming horribly, but it was so dark I could not see her, and I dared not go back in. I went running for her nanny, and everyone came running, but they could not get to her. Lord Rogan sent men down the tunnel, but they could not find her. They say the tunnel leads to the ocean, so everyone thought she had drowned. Then the next day, she was found on the beach alive.”

“Oh my God, what happened to her?”

“Well, she made me promise not to tell anyone, but she said that the ladies in the water helped her. They took her to a lavender colored wall below the sea that sparkled like stars, and she was able to swim with them after. Then they took her to a beautiful place deep down where everything sparkled like stars. They told her the walls and rocks had healing powers, and she could come any time she wanted, but they

warned her not to tell the adults. Then she just remembers waking on the beach and being freezing wet.”

Caitlin’s interest peaked; Larissa’s description of the wall sounded like the crystal amulet Jared wore around his neck, but the ladies—was Larissa referring to mermaids?”

“Are you saying mermaids helped her?”

“Well, I believe they were sea-maids, but she did not say. Kayla did say they swam like fish. Also, I heard her mother was a sea witch.”

“Can you show me this tunnel?”

Larissa saw a guard come to escort them to Kayla’s former quarters and whispered,

“Lord Rogan is traveling south to meet with a very important man, and he has left orders that you not be allowed to leave the room.”

Larissa and Kayla walked toward Kayla’s old quarters with the guard following behind. Upon arriving, Larissa opened the door, and they stepped inside the room. It was a large room with an elegantly adorned white bed and a canopy made of sheer white material. Off to the side were two wooden doors that led to a balcony. The opposite side was a large fireplace, which warmed the room. Caitlin was momentarily captivated by the room’s magnificence. Then she turned to Larissa and asked,

“Will I be locked in?”

“No, but the guard shall remain outside the door after I leave.”

Caitlin placed the child on the bed and removed his wet clothes. She wrapped him in a warm blanket and put him under the covers while Larissa went to the closet. She brought out a brilliant yellow-green dress, which was the only dress left beside some night shifts and a black cloak.

“This is the beautiful dress that, unfortunately, Kayla wore the day her husband was slain; I believe she meant to leave it behind. There

isn't anything else except some night shifts and a cloak, which you can use as well."

Then Larissa placed the brilliant yellow-green dress on the bed. When Caitlin turned and saw it, she gasped. It was the same dress she saw in her vision of Kayla sinking in the water, or—was it a vision of herself she wondered? She glared at the dress.

"What is wrong? Do you not like it?" Larissa asked.

"No, I mean yes, it's very beautiful," Caitlin said, sounding a bit speechless.

She did not mention the reason it startled her. Larissa helped her change out of the wet garments, and Caitlin put on a nightshift. Then the guard announced that it was time for Larissa to leave.

"I must go, but I will come back on the morrow."

"Larissa, please, can you help me?"

"Miss, I am but a lowly maid and kitchen helper; I have no power to help you," Larissa said sadly and looked away.

"Please, Larissa, he plans to—kill me at dawn the day after tomorrow," Caitlin exclaimed, sounding terrified. "Can you lead me to this tunnel tomorrow? Please?"

"Oh, my lady, there are guards everywhere, and the tunnel has been boarded up for years after Kayla fell."

Larissa looked down, feeling anguished; she could not help. Then Larissa looked up at Caitlin, with an expression that seemed to light up the room, and said,

"My Lady, I think I know someone who can help you, my brother, Aidan! He is a member of the guard. I shall ask him tonight!"

"A member of the guard—no! Please, don't!"

"My lady, you must trust me. My brother dislikes Lord Rogan's abuses. He is only a member of the guard because he was obligated to serve after our parents could no longer work to pay taxes to Lord Ro-

gan. I know he shall help. He told me he plans to pledge his allegiance to Lord Broxton soon.”

“Are you absolutely sure about this?” Caitlin asked.

“Yes, my lady—I am sure of it. When I come on the morrow, I will have him keep watch so I can take you down to the tunnel.”

“Wait! Lord Rogan said he sent several members of his guard in search of Jared; is he not among them?” Caitlin asked.

“No, Aidan was sent on an errand early this morning and is not part of the search. He told me before leaving here this morning that he would visit our parents tonight.”

Caitlin closed her eyes and thanked God for Larissa and prayed that Larissa was right about her brother being willing to help.

“Can you ask your brother to get a message to Jared regarding Lord Rogan’s plans and to bring Kayla here?”

“I shall ask him, but my Lady, to bring Lady Kayla here would be a mistake; Lord Rogan wants to marry her to Lord Heller, the man Lord Rogan is meeting with on the morrow. Also, how can Kayla help?”

“Lord Rogan has been drawing out her powers for years, but they can be fully restored to her if she goes down to the lavender wall you mentioned under the sea.”

“You mean she is a sorceress too?”

“Yes.”

Larissa gasped as she covered her lips with her fingers,

“That explains much.”

“Her powers are slowly returning since she’s been away from Lord Rogan, but they are weak. I witnessed it yesterday, but she does not know how to control them.” Caitlin said.

“I do remember she was made to take long naps as a child. I would sneak by her quarters, and there would be a lavender light under her door. I would lie on my stomach to try to see, but I could never see

anything. I was reprimanded more than once for it. That must have been when Lord Rogan drew out her powers. But, how did you come to know about her powers, my Lady?”

“A sorceress named Rowena told Jared and his sister.”

“Rowena, the old woman in the forest, aye, I knew of her. Then the story of Kayla’s mother being a sea witch is true?”

“Yes.”

“But my Lady, Kayla, is afraid of the water; she shall not go.”

“She shall if she wants to save her son—he’s dying.”

The guard outside the room called for Larissa to leave.

“I must go. I shall send Petal to bring food and water for you and the child, and I shall do everything I can to help you, my Lady.” Larissa assured her.

“Thank you, Larissa.”

“You are welcome, my Lady, good night.”

Larissa bowed, picked up the wet garments, and left.

CHAPTER 31: AIDAN

After Larissa had left her post for the evening, she climbed aboard her horse-driven cart and rode off to her parents to pick up her child and to meet with her brother Aidan. She hoped she would find him there for the evening. Upon arriving, she worried when she did not see his horse. She went inside and was greeted by her three-year-old son and parents. She greeted them back and kissed and hugged her son, but her mother noted her anxiety.

“You look troubled, child.” Her mother said.

“Mother, where is Aidan?” Larissa asked anxiously.

“He has not come in days; was he to come today?” Her mother, Lily, asked.

“Yes, he told me so this morning at the castle before he left on an errand for Lord Rogan.”

“He may be paying a friend a visit.” Edmond, her elderly father, suggested.

“What friend?” Larissa asked in an almost demanding tone.

“That we do not know,” Lily replied.

“What is wrong, child? Why do you inquire about his whereabouts? He is a young man; he could be with a woman,” Edmond chuckled. “Tend to your child and let young men do what young men do,” her father reprimanded.

“Tis very important that I speak to him,” Larissa exclaimed.

“What is so important, sister?” Aidan suddenly asked from the doorway.

Larissa spun around at the sound of his voice. Aidan had quietly approached and stood in the doorway, listening to them.

“Aidan! Oh, thank heaven you are here! I need your help!”

“Calm down, sister, and tell me what troubles you so?”

Larissa went to the door and looked out to make sure no one was near, then pulled Aidan inside and closed the door.

“You must first swear to me that you shall not betray my friend or me!”

“Betray you? Why would I betray my own sister or her friend?”

“Aidan, Jared Kellan is on his way to Emerald Castle...” Aidan took a more serious tone. “...in search of Lady Kayla’s son, but Caitlin, his lady love, who found the child was mistaken for Lady Kayla and was apprehended by the guard, together with Kayla’s child, and both are now being held at Emerald Castle. Lord Rogan knows she is not Kayla, but is using her as bait to lure Jared there and kill him. He means to behead Caitlin at dawn, two days from now, if he does not show himself, then kill Jared and use the child to force Lady Kayla back to Emerald Castle. She has been the source of his powers since birth. He lost those powers when she left. Now her powers have been slowly returning, but they are weak. However, Lady Caitlin knows where she can fully restore them. That is why she is hoping you can meet with Jared and have him bring Lady Kayla here at once so she can stop Lord Rogan and save her son as well as the Lady Caitlin before ‘tis too late.”

"That is quite a task, sister. I do recall hearing that Lord Rogan's powers were weak, but I was not aware that Lady Kayla was the source of them. How is she to restore her powers at Emerald Castle without Lord Rogan finding her?" Aidan asked.

"Once she is here, we can take her down to the tunnel she fell in when she was a child. Kayla told me once that there is a wall down below made of sparkling lavender crystals, and Caitlin, the lady who shall be executed, knows this to be the source that shall restore her powers." Larissa said.

"Below what?"

"The sea,"

"The sea? That shall be a monumental challenge. I heard she is afraid of the water." Aidan replied.

"Yes, she is, but her son's life is at stake."

"I see. Where is Lady Kayla now?" Aidan inquired.

"Over the mountain, but if you can just get the message to Jared, he shall send for her."

"Over the mountain, 'tis a coincidence—or fate—that I also am traveling across the mountain to pledge my allegiance to Lord Broxton tonight. His men have been scouting the area and mean to attack Emerald Castle soon. That is why Lord Rogan is seeking allegiance with Lord Heller, whom he is meeting with on the morrow. I came here to see father and mother before I take my leave."

"Oh, Aidan, please, can you give this message to Jared tonight, but return and help me get Lady Caitlin to the tunnel? You're her only hope." Larissa pleaded.

"Where is Jared now? Is he alone?"

"I do not know, but he is near," Larissa replied.

"Jared and his family protected the villagers against Lord Rogan's abuse; I know Jared has many followers. I am one of them. If he is back

in the area, I will find him tonight and give him your message; perhaps Lord Broxton shall find his visit useful as well, but I cannot return,” Aidan told her.

“What about Lady Caitlin? I wanted you to help me get her to the tunnel on the morrow, so she could escape!” Larissa exclaimed.

“Listen carefully, Lord Rogan leaves at dawn on the morrow. Is your friend under lock and key?”

“No, she is staying in Lady Kayla’s former quarters with a guard standing outside her door.”

“Good, there shall be a change of guard standing watch outside her door when they break the fast; then you shall have a little time before his replacement shows up. Be ready, and when the guard leaves his post, you must get your friend out and take her down to the south side of the castle. There shall be another change of guard on the other side as well. Watch for it, and when that guard leaves his post, go out the door or cause a distraction to get them away from the entrance. Once outside, go around to a narrow path that circles around the seacoast side of the castle. It can be a bit slippery with the dew and moisture from the sea, but there are no guards back there. Just be careful. Once you get to the north side of the castle, look for the large bush that covers the hole and leads into the tunnel.” Aidan concluded.

“Slippery? Is it not too dangerous? We can fall into the sea!” Larissa exclaimed.

“Yes, do not fall into the sea,” Aidan warned.

Larissa turned away, worried; Aidan would not be there to help her with Caitlin, and she knew the path around the back to be narrow and slippery with only a few shrubs along the way to hold onto. If they were to get caught, she would also be executed, but she had to do something to help Caitlin. Larissa paced, trying to think of something to distract the guards. Then she thought of something; perhaps she

could use food as a weapon of distraction; the men had always loved her cooking.

“Take some rope. He cannot kill her if he cannot find her, but she shall have to wait down in the tunnel for a time. I must go now, sister, be brave, I will get the message to Jared.” Aidan assured her.

He kissed his sister on the forehead, then turned and told his parents he had an urgent matter to attend to and had to leave. He kissed and embraced his mother as well as his father, who no longer walked.

“Off to see a lucky woman?” Edmond chuckled from his chair.

“Edmond, you rascal, Aidan is not like the likes of you!” Lily scolded her husband.

“Aidan, wait, change out of your guard uniform!” Larissa warned.

CHAPTER 32: ENCOUNTER WITH LORD ROGAN'S GUARD

Jared, Leland, his son Tobin, and three of Lord Broxton's guard went south and took the more challenging route in search of Caitlin, leaving Aaron with the other four members of Lord Broxton's guard. Not long after Jared and the others left, Aaron and the men with him encountered several members of Lord Rogan's guard searching for Jared. It was a small group, and Aaron and the men fought them, losing only one man, but had to disperse in the forest as more kept coming. During the clash, one of Lord Rogan's head guards called out for Jared.

"Jared Kellan, if you be among the men here tonight, show yourself now if you mean to save the Lady Caitlin and the child! She shall be executed at dawn on the day after the morrow, and the child is now near death. So spare the blood of those in your company as well and show yourself!"

"Jared is not among us! Your words are wasted here," Aaron replied.
"Then what business brings you into Lord Rogan's territory?"

"We merely come to visit our kinsmen. Why do you quarrel with us?" Aaron asked.

"Then why do you travel with Lord Broxton's guard?"

"I have answered your question, but you have not answered mine."

More of Lord Rogan's guard arrived. Aaron decided the interrogation would not end well and told the remaining three guards with him to separate and go south to join Jared and the other men. The only thing helping them was the dim lighting. The men scattered into the woods, and Lord Rogan's men came after them but lost their trail. Then the man in charge of Lord Rogan's Guard called them back. It was too dark; perhaps the news of Lady Caitlin's planned execution would draw Jared out. If Jared was making his way through the more difficult southern pass across the river, he would soon come to the bald spot in the forest and into view, where they would be waiting for him.

Aaron looked back; they had stopped following them. He and the men continued their journey to join Jared. However, Aaron became troubled upon hearing that Caitlin was to be executed. He remembered Kayla's reaction upon meeting with Jared and thought that if Caitlin were slain, the chances of Jared and Kayla drawing together would be high. Aaron tensed, and his thoughts became dark. Perhaps everything happening could work in his favor, such as Jared dying in battle. That was certain to eliminate all possibilities of Kayla and Jared ever coming together, and if young Derrick were to also perish, the Kellan's connection to Kayla would finally be removed. Aaron then began to devise a plan to ensure his thoughts became a reality.

CHAPTER 33: AIDAN MEETS WITH JARED

Once changed into common clothes, Aidan armed himself and mounted his horse. He rode out, not quite sure what direction to take. It was dark, and knowing the guard was out searching for Jared, Aidan knew he had to lie low. More than likely, Jared would be toward the north side of the pass, where the woods provided more cover. It was only a crescent moon and the lighting was dim, so he decided to ride through the field so he could see better and ride fast. Aidan rode for a long time, but saw nothing and no one. He began to wonder if Larissa was right about Jared and the guard being in the area. He continued to ride when he heard horses on the south side of the field. He realized he was being watched.

Jared pointed his bow and arrow at Aidan from behind the trees when Leland said,

“Jared, no, ‘tis Aidan, Edmond’s son, he is alone.”

Leland held back that Aidan was a member of Lord Rogan’s Guard. He knew Aidan was only serving as required to keep his family from

famishing, and for the most part, Aidan was not in uniform and was alone.

“Aidan! Tis Leland and Tobin Brannick! What brings you out this way, lad, and what other company do you keep?”

“None, Leland, I am alone. I seek Jared Kellan. Is he among you?” Aidan replied.

“Why do you seek him?” Jared asked.

“To give him an urgent message sent by a lady my sister befriended at Emerald Castle, a lady by the name of Caitlin.”

Jared immediately put down his bow and arrow and looked at Leland, wondering if he should trust Aidan. Leland approached Jared and nodded.

“Aidan, if you have news from the lady, please approach. We cannot come to you in the open field for obvious reasons.”

Aidan came closer into the shadows, but did not cross the river.

“I bring news from the lady, but not good news,” Aidan said.

“What news do you bring?” Jared asked.

“Lady Caitlin is being held at the castle with Lady Kayla’s son, who is near death.”

Jared realized he spoke the truth and crossed the river.

“I am Jared. Why do you risk so much by coming here and giving me this message?”

“I will be honest, I am a member of Lord Rogan’s guard,” Aidan confessed.

Immediately, Jared drew his bow and arrow.

“Tis a trap!” Jared exclaimed and backed away.

“Jared, no wait!” Leland yelled.

“I have not come here to fight you, but to join you! Why would I come alone and confess to you that I’m a member of the guard, so you could kill me!” Aidan exclaimed.

“Jared the lad is right—it would make no sense for the lad to come here in the middle of the night alone and confess his status to you so that you could kill him. Listen to what he has to say, lad.” Leland urged Jared.

Jared backed down.

“What is the urgent message and why would you risk your life to bring it?” Jared asked.

“Lord Rogan means to kill Lady Caitlin on the morrow at dawn if you do not show yourself, and the child is dying. She is requesting that Lady Kayla come urgently because she knows where Lady Kayla can restore her powers and stop Lord Rogan.” Aidan stated.

Jared tensed.

“What part of the castle is Caitlin being held?”

“Currently, she is staying in Lady Kayla’s former quarters with a guard standing outside her door. On the morrow, my sister, Larissa, shall help her get to the tunnel below the castle grounds during the change of the guard. There she hopes to hide her till the Lady Kayla comes. Lord Rogan sent twenty members of his guard, not including me, to search for you today. However, there is one good tidings; Lord Rogan is journeying south on the morrow to meet with Lord Heller. They are planning to join forces against Lord Broxton. As for me, I mean to alert Lord Broxton of this and join forces with him as soon as possible, but upon my sister’s urgent plea to help with Lady Caitlin, I felt compelled to first bring you this message to have Lady Kayla brought here at once as a pledge of my assistance.” Aidan concluded.

“Aidan, you make me proud, lad,” Leland told him.

“Bring Kayla here? Would that not provide you with an excellent reward? Also, even if she did come, how would she get to Caitlin without Lord Rogan getting to her first?” Jared asked.

"I am not interested in any reward; I am interested in justice and honoring my sister's request to help her friend, but if you cannot trust me, I will continue my journey and pledge my allegiance to Lord Broxton as planned. However, Lady Caitlin shall lose her head because of your lack of trust." Aidan exclaimed. Jared clenched his jaw upon hearing how Lord Rogan was planning to retaliate for cutting off his hand and was silent. "I know of a secret entrance to the castle." Aidan offered.

"If you speak the truth and have knowledge of a secret entrance to the castle, then it must be you who should bring Kayla across the mountain as swiftly as possible," Jared stated.

"I meant only to advise you to have Lady Kayla brought here because I must go alert Lord Broxton at once. Also, I do not know where to find Lady Kayla."

"Tobin can take you to Kayla," Leland said.

"Tobin, you must go alert Lord Broxton so that Aidan can bring Kayla here, you must assure him that it is the child who is magically gifted," Jared stated.

Aidan hesitated for a moment, frustrated with the change of plans, then said,

"Very well, then we must leave at once. Be aware that there are twenty members of the guard now searching for you. Good luck!"

Aidan tugged on the reins and then nodded at Tobin.

"Tobin, be on your guard, lad," Leland advised his son.

Then Aidan and Tobin rode off in haste across the mountain.

CHAPTER 34: AIDAN MEETS LADY KAYLA

Aidan knew he only had a certain amount of time to get Lady Kayla to Emerald Castle while Lord Rogan was away and before Lady Caitlin's execution. He finally felt proud of what he was doing, even though he knew death by quartering was the execution faced by those caught as traders. Due to Jared's presence in the area, Lord Rogan's Guard was out in force in addition to Lady Kayla's reward. That alone would draw greedy men like flies to honey. No matter the risk, Aidan somehow felt in his heart that this was right, and the stars would be on his side tonight. Once out of Lord Rogan's territory, Tobin and Aidan stopped to rest and water the horses. They started a fire to warm themselves and talked briefly.

"Have you met Lady Caitlin?" Tobin asked.

"No, my sister only mentioned her to me yesterday."

"She is like looking at Lady Kayla's reflection. Jared told father she comes from another world."

"What do you mean?"

"She is a magical lady, like Lady Kayla. Have you met Lady Kayla?"

"No, I joined the guard after Lady Kayla left, but I heard of her tragic story. How are Lady Caitlin and Lady Kayla related?"

"I do not know. What about her husband, Aaron Magnon? Do you know him?" Tobin asked.

Aidan looked over at Tobin, surprised to hear who Lady Kayla was married to. Then turned away and simply said,

"Yes. I know of him."

Aidan only had unpleasant memories of Aaron cheating during a tournament and of him pursuing his lady love while they were all still lads. Aidan did not comment further regarding Aaron. He just gave him a half smile and said,

"Let us get some rest; we shall need it."

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An hour later, Aidan and Tobin mounted their horses and continued their journey east until they got to the forest. They slowed their pace, and Tobin led the way to Kayla and Aaron's home site. The sound of crying children could be heard as they approached. It was the middle of the night, and at the sound of horses, Tristan came out. Upon recognizing his brother Tobin, he came toward them. Both Aidan and Tobin dismounted.

"Brother, what news do you bring, and where is father?" He looked over at Aidan and nodded. "Hello, I'm Tristan. Tobin, what news do you have? We are losing our wits here!" Tristan urged.

"Father is well, he is with Jared. This is Aidan. He was a member of Lord Rogan's guard but has chosen to abandon his post. Now I shall let Aidan explain." Tobin told his brother.

"I am Aidan, Edmond's son; your father, Leland, helped build my parents' home. We played together as children." Aidan told Tristan.

“Yes, I remember. That was many summers ago. Welcome, Aidan, so what news do you bring?” Tristan insisted.

Everyone began to gather around them.

“There is some good news and some bad. I urgently need to speak to Lady Kayla.”

Then Kayla came out with her daughter, Loriel, in her arms.

Aidan was immediately captivated by her stunning appearance. He had not expected to see such a beautiful woman. She approached him.

“I am Kayla, Sir. What news do you have of my son?”

“My Lady, your son, is with Lady Caitlin.” He told her, and Kayla gasped and smiled, then a moment later, he added, “But he is not well.” Kayla’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“What do you mean? What is wrong with him?” Kayla asked, sounding anguished.

“I do not know my Lady, but I have come here to bring you back. The Lady Caitlin sent a message that your son is—dying.” Kayla gasped and began to cry. Suddenly, a large branch broke off a tree and fell. Aidan turned toward it in amazement and then turned back to her. “Lady Caitlin urges that you come with me as soon as possible. She says she knows where you can restore your powers.”

Kayla shook with fear upon hearing of her son’s condition. Then looked at Aidan and said,

“But my father shall not allow me to leave once I am back at Emerald Castle. I am afraid he shall use my powers against us. Please, Sir, is it possible for you to—bring my son back to me?” Kayla cried.

“My Lady, if it were possible, I would, but there is no time. Lady Caitlin shall be executed at dawn on the morrow, and your son shall die.”

Kayla looked at him and gasped, and covered part of her face with her hands in shock.

"No!" Kayla cried.

"Please, my Lady, we must leave at once." Aidan urged.

"And my husband Aaron, where is he?"

"I only met with Jared, my Lady. I do not know your husband's whereabouts."

Kayla cried, then nodded her head and turned to Anya, who stood behind her. Kayla kissed her baby daughter, Loriel, and handed her to Anya. Loriel began to cry for her mother, but quieted down in Anya's arms.

"I will get my cloak," Kayla said.

"How are Jared, Aaron, and Leland?" Anya and Tyra asked.

"I met with Jared and Leland; they are well, but the guard is looking for Jared," Aidan said.

"Is he wearing a crystal around his neck?" Lara asked."

"Aye, he never takes it off," Tobin confirmed.

Aidan turned to Tobin.

"Tobin, now you must go on your own and alert Lord Broxton that Lord Rogan is traveling south to form an allegiance with Lord Heller on the morrow. Go swiftly!"

Aidan instructed.

"I will come with you, brother. Hagan, help mother, Anya, and Lara, and keep the fire lit," Tristan told his youngest brother.

Tristan kissed his wife and baby. Hagan scoffed at having to stay with the women and children.

Tyra and Lara brought them some bread to take with them. Kayla returned wearing her cloak and carrying a small sack containing some clothes for little Derrick. They gave her a sense of warmth and connection to her son.

"There is a secret entrance to the castle where I can get you in—I will not let Lord Rogan keep you a prisoner there. I promise." Aidan

told her. Aidan mounted his horse and then helped her mount behind him. "Lord Rogan's Guard is searching for Jared, so we will be riding swiftly. You must hold on tight," Aidan instructed.

Kayla was feeling a little awkward at the close contact with the handsome, dark-haired Aidan and placed her hands on his back over his shoulders.

"Give me your hands, my Lady," Aidan requested. Kayla timidly brought down her hands to his waist level. He took her small, soft hands in his and wrapped them tightly around his waist. Aidan turned back and looked at her and nodded, then said, "Now hold onto me tightly, we will be riding hard and fast." He warned.

Aidan took unexpected pleasure in saying those words to her, as well as the close contact with the beautiful Lady Kayla. She had unconventionally affected him. He felt their lives had crossed for a reason, yet she was a married mother of two children as well as a bewitching beauty, a magical combination. Aidan turned to the task at hand as he and Lady Kayla rode off in haste.

CHAPTER 35: A SPECIAL MEAL

At daybreak, Larissa rose, not being able to sleep, but was encouraged that she had a plan. She had left her three-year-old son with her parents so that she could leave early. She went out back and gathered the rope her husband kept outside. She undid the braid and let her red hair loose, then put on her gray cloak. She climbed onto the cart and tugged at the reins. It was a cold, foggy morning as she rode to Emerald Castle. Larissa wondered if Aidan had met with Jared. She pulled down her hood as she got closer to the entrance gates. Larissa decided to leave her cart in the woods nearest the shore. The guards opened a side door so she could enter. She greeted the guards.

“Good day, Larissa. Where is your cart today?”

“My mother had need of it. Good day, Sir.”

She went directly to Kayla’s quarters to see if Caitlin was awake. She saw the guard standing outside the door.

“Sir, I am here to inquire after the child who is ill. May I come in to offer my assistance as Lord Rogan ordered?”

The guard merely nodded and allowed Larissa to go in. She stepped into the room, which felt warm, and she saw Caitlin sitting next to the child. Caitlin immediately stood up upon seeing Larissa.

“Good morrow, my Lady, I pray you slept well.” Larissa signaled her to whisper.

“Hello, Larissa, no, not a wink, but did you speak with your brother?” Caitlin whispered.

“Aye, he left last night; he came to see our parents before departing. He was on his way to pledge his allegiance to Lord Broxton. However, he told me he would seek Jared first and give him your message. He instructed me on how to get you to the tunnel and to bring a rope. We must wait for the change of the guard, which takes place when the guard breaks the fast. I will make an appetizing meal for them. It shall draw them like flies to honey. When I come back with your meal, I will tempt the guard with it. Hopefully, he shall leave his post early. Then you must wear my gray cloak. I must go now, my lady, but shall return shortly.”

Caitlin cried and hugged Larissa.

“Thank you, Larissa, you’re an angel,” Caitlin told her.

Larissa smiled and said,

“Petal, the young girl who helps me, shall sit with the baby after she is done serving meals.”

Larissa left and went downstairs to start the morning meal for the men. Caitlin went to get the brilliant yellow-green dress waiting for her in the closet. She sat next to little Derrick with it and wondered if she would be going for a swim soon.

Larissa went to the kitchen, gathered the eggs, meat, and flour, and began to make and cook the morning meal for the men. She opened the kitchen doors so the smell of the food could fill the nostrils of the hungry guards outside. Finally, she started serving the appetizing meal

at the service tables reserved for the guard. The guards at the castle began to file in as they changed the guard at various posts throughout the castle. Finally, Larissa prepared a steamy tray of food for Caitlin and covered it. She told Petal to bring the baby blankets and stay with him after she finished serving meals. Then Larissa went upstairs to Kayla's quarters with the aromatic tray. It was a bit early, but that was her plan. She met with the guard standing outside the door. The aroma got the guard's attention.

"What do you have there, Larissa?"

Larissa uncovered the aromatic meal consisting of eggs, meat, warm bread, butter, and honey. She made sure he got a good whiff of it as she brought the tray up close to his nose. She heard his stomach rumble with hunger.

"Sir, I am here with the Lady's meal. There is more for you and the men downstairs. I told your replacement not to tarry because 'tis going so fast. I pray they shall leave some for you while he tends to a nature call."

The guard looked at her and crinkled his forehead with worry, then nodded.

"Who is my replacement this morrow?"

"I believe 'tis Devan, Sir," Larissa told the guard, knowing Devan was notorious for taking long nature calls.

Larissa walked in, happy with the guard's reaction, and placed the tray on the table. "Eat quickly, my Lady," Larissa whispered to Caitlin.

Caitlin wasn't very hungry, but managed to eat a few morsels of food for energy. Then Larissa very carefully pulled open a small wooden door and peeped out at the guard. It worked; he was gone. Larissa gave Caitlin her gray cloak.

"Please, put this on my Lady. Everyone saw me with this gray cloak and my hair down. Fortunately, we both have long red hair."

Caitlin put on the gray cloak and asked,

“What about little Derrick?”

“I told Petal to bring blankets and stay with the child after she finishes serving meals.”

Larissa covered the tray and told Caitlin to carry it and follow her. Larissa opened the door and went out first, then signaled Caitlin to come out. They made their way down the hallway and down the winding stairs. Then, at the bottom of the stairs stood one guard and another across from him at one of the side doors near the dining hall. Larissa signaled Caitlin to wait on the staircase and took the tray from her. She went down with the tray. At the bottom of the stairs, she turned right past the guard and around the corner. Once out of sight, Larissa dropped the tray and threw herself down and screamed. The two guards immediately came running to see what had happened as Larissa cried on the floor. They helped her up and picked up the tray, and scattered dishes and spoons. Caitlin came down and looked around the corner at Larissa, who signaled Caitlin to run past them as she continued to scream harder to keep the guards' attention on her.

“Pull yourself together, lass!” One guard stated as he picked up the scattered dishes.

Bernard, an older guard, came out as Caitlin went past the dining room. He saw the red hair and gray cloak from the back and assumed it was Larissa and asked,

“What happened, Larissa?”

“Dropped a tray, Sir, ‘tis all,” Caitlin replied, trying to sound like Larissa, as she went past him.

“Da ya need help, lass?” Bernard asked again.

“No, ‘tis fine, thank you kindly, Sir!” Caitlin replied.

As Caitlin went past the older guard, he went back to the dining room. Then seconds later, the two guards, who helped Larissa with

the tray and scattered dishes, went back to their posts. Then, Larissa walked past the dining room door, sobbing, and Bernard, the older guard, came out and saw Larissa walk by again, but this time without the gray cloak. He blinked and turned and looked down the hallway.

“Did you not just walk past me in a gray cloak, stating you did not need help, Lass?” Bernard asked.

“Me? Oh yes, I flung it off, and I dropped a tray full of dishes after getting intensely warm.”

“Warm? I could see my breath lass, but I do remember my dear mother suffering sudden waves of heat. However, she was much older than you, God rest her soul.”

“Yes, yes, ‘tis a terrible time for us ladies. Alas, I have many dishes and pots to wash. Thank you kindly, Sir, and good morrow to you!” Larissa bowed and walked away.

Bernard stood there for a moment and then once again returned to the dining room. The other two guards were now back at their posts when Larissa exclaimed,

“Oh my, I am missing spoons! Oh, please, Sirs, I implore you! Can you go and check for me? They are of fine silver, and my eyes are blurry.” The two guards went back around the corner to check for spoons, and Larissa ran out the door. She went to the far end of the castle by the seaside and turned the corner. There she saw Caitlin staring at the narrow path along the seaside of the castle. Then Larissa realized she had forgotten the rope. She closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip in dismay.

“Larissa, I can’t make it across this; I’ll slip and fall in the water,” Caitlin exclaimed.

“Aye, it looks quite difficult,” Larissa admitted.

Caitlin decided she had to try, and she removed the gray cloak and handed it to Larissa. Then she removed the loose-fitting slippers she

had been wearing. She started inching her way along the narrow path. Caitlin clung to the wall and shrubs and branches along the way. Her hair blew in the wind, and she panted with the fear of falling. Larissa watched as her hair also blew in the wind, then said,

“Wait, I will go get the rope!” Larissa exclaimed.

Suddenly, she heard a guard calling out from around the corner.

“What are you doing there?!” A guard yelled.

Caitlin turned at the sound of the guard’s call, causing her to slip. Caitlin screamed as she fell into the sea. Larissa, who was watching, also screamed. It was like reliving Kayla’s fall as a child. Then the guard caught up to Larissa and pulled her back and away from the edge. It was Bernard, the fatherly guard, who had followed Larissa outside and caught sight of a part of her dress blowing from around the corner on the seaside of the castle.

“What in the name of heaven are you doing, lass?” Bernard asked Larissa.

Larissa was terrified. “She fell! She fell!”

“Who fell?” Bernard asked.

“Um... the Lady Kayla,” Larissa lied as she buried her head in his chest.

“What, Lady Kayla is here?” He asked.

The guard and Larissa stared down at the sea. Larissa cried as Bernard pulled her back and away from the edge of the castle.

“Come, lass.”

Larissa looked at the fatherly-like guard with pleading eyes,

“Please, Sir, have mercy and do not speak of this to Lord Rogan.”

“Not a word, lass, but come away, let us go back inside.”

CHAPTER 36: JARED RIDES AHEAD

Now faced with the possibility of losing Caitlin and his brother's infant son, Derrick, Jared knew he needed to move quickly, and that meant he had to get to Emerald Castle alone. He could not wait for Aidan to bring Kayla, as Caitlin requested. He would die fighting before he saw Caitlin butchered by that villain. He still wore the amulet; it would protect him.

"Perhaps that was Aidan's plan, to come and tell me Caitlin's form of execution and draw me out," Jared stated.

"Aidan is a messenger, Jared, that is all. Why do you doubt those who try to help?" Leland asked.

Then Jared remembered Caitlin's initial distrust of him. He bore down on Trey's reins in thought.

"Leland, I want you to stay here and wait for the others. I will go alone." Jared told him.

"What others?" Leland asked.

Merick said he would send reinforcements. They should be here soon."

"You cannot go alone! You'll be killed!" Leland yelled.

"I have the amulet that Rowena cast a protective spell on; it will protect me like before. I will travel along the edge of the forest on the south end. Lord Rogan's Guard shall be searching for me in the north. Leland is in charge, he told the others. Now I must go!" Jared announced.

Jared tugged on Trey's reins and rode south. A short time later, Aaron and the other men caught up with Leland and the men with him.

"Where is Jared?" Aaron asked.

"He has gone ahead. He plans to ride along the south till he reaches the seaside and gets into Emerald Castle on his own." Leland stated.

"Why?" Aaron asked.

"Because Lady Caitlin is to be executed on the morrow, if he doesn't show himself, but because he wears an amulet that protects him, he believes he can do it alone."

"What amulet?" Aaron asked.

"An amulet the old sorceress Rowena gave him. She cast a protective spell on it."

Aaron now knew how he could ensure that Jared died in battle. He simply had to remove the amulet from Jared. To show concern, he said, "Tis foolish, he'll be killed. We encountered Lord Rogan's guard to the north of the forest. If we ride out now, we shall have time to meet Jared before the guard does. He shall need backup." Aaron offered.

Leland, who disliked Jared riding out alone, agreed with Aaron.

"Very well, we must ride swiftly—'tis getting late," Leland told the men.

As agreed, they traveled along the south edge of the forest.

CHAPTER 37: LORD BROXTON

Merick arrived at Broxton Castle hours after meeting with Jared and Aaron. He was eager to tell Lord Broxton that Jared Kellan was back and was willing to form an allegiance with him once again if his land and that of the Brannicks were left out of his conquest. Lord Broxton questioned why Jared had not come himself. Merick informed him of the situation with Lady Kayla being the primary source of Lord Rogan's power and how her gifted child had been kidnapped. Jared was attempting to rescue the child before reaching Lord Rogan. Merick then informed him he had left seven of his men under Jared's charge to aid him in the search. Lord Broxton was glad for Jared's intervention and knew his influence among the villagers was crucial since so many of them followed him.

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After Aidan left with Kayla, Tristan and Tobin rode off to Broxton Castle to inform Lord Broxton and Merick that Lord Rogan was away, traveling south, to meet with Lord Heller so he could ally against

them. They had taken the place of a defecting guard named Aidan, who, upon meeting with Jared, agreed to change course and bring Kayla to her dying son since he knew of a secret entrance to the castle. Meanwhile, Jared would go to Emerald Castle and get the boy and his lady love before Lord Rogan extracted powers from him and executed his lady the following day. Jared also needed confirmation of the reinforcements Merick promised during their accidental encounter at the crossing.

Lord Broxton was receptive to their report and plea, but had one concern, that Kayla might side, as a sorceress, with her father. However, Tobin and Tristan assured him that it would not happen. They informed him that she was not Lord Rogan's true daughter; she had run away from him after he had her husband, Derrick, killed, which resulted in the loss of his powers. Later, after she learned he also had her parents killed, she wanted nothing to do with him. Kayla was now only returning to save her dying son.

After hearing that, Lord Broxton decided to move quickly and take advantage of Lord Rogan's absence. He would finally take Emerald Castle and get his lands back. He then turned to Merick and said,

"Merick, send word to Jared and Aidan that they can count on our support and weapons, and tell Jared to gather the villagers. Now have the men prepare for battle. We need to attack Lord Rogan while he is at his weakest."

"Merick immediately wrote out a message to be delivered to Simon, one of the guards with Jared."

The messenger mounted his horse and left. Later, the messenger came across Jared's group and gave the message to Simon, who traveled with Aaron.

CHAPTER 38: CAITLIN'S FALL

Caitlin let out a blood-curdling scream as she fell and just missed the rocks below. She was unconscious once her body hit the water and slowly began to sink. Her red hair spiraled in the water, circling her face like an aura. The brilliant yellow-green dress flowed around her. It was early morning, and the sun's rays illuminated her form in the water. The further she sank, the darker it got. Then tiny lights began to surround her, and several hands reached out to her. Caitlin was surrounded by the ladies of the sea who sensed a connection to Kayla and her mother. They took her deep beneath sea level and swam fast toward a glowing light that got brighter as they approached. It was the same crystal wall where they had taken Kayla as a child. Caitlin began to awaken with the energy going through her. She opened her eyes and faced a sparkling lavender wall that was so bright it was hard to keep her eyes open, but she could breathe in the water. The mermaids placed her hands against it. Then an electric-like energy flowed through Caitlin, and she entered into a trance. When

Caitlin opened her eyes, she was on a horse riding behind someone, a man, but it was not Jared.

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Aldebaran - Enya

Kayla and Aidan were riding at full speed when Kayla momentarily fell forward onto Aidan's back.

"My Lady, are you alright?" Aidan asked, but Kayla did not respond.

Aidan kept riding at full speed.

Down below the sea, Kayla opened her eyes. She realized she was in the water facing the brilliant lavender wall she had visited when she was a child. Like before, Kayla could breathe in the water, then she turned and saw the same sea ladies who brought her there so many winters ago. She was awestruck at their long, flowing hair, half-human form, and billowing tales. They smiled and greeted her by touching her hair. They seem to say things she could not hear. Then they took her hands and swiftly swam with her for a long time until they came to a place where the water looked sky blue. It was a warm and beautiful place beneath the sea. They swam through many caves and tunnels until they came in front of a beautiful lady who sat behind a wall of sea flowers. She had long flowing red hair like her own and reached out to her. Kayla instinctively reached back. The lady's hands were warm to the touch. Kayla felt safe here; she felt loved and wanted to remain. She tried to get closer to the lady behind the wall of flowers, but she could not. Then Kayla realized this was her mother's soul, and could not come to her. Kayla wept for her mother, who was taken from her as a child. Her mother told her she had a gift for her. Serena pressed her hand against Kayla's. Then Kayla closed her eyes, and the water began to swirl around them very fast, and an electrifying shock of energy radiated through Kayla as a bright aura was cast around her.

Slowly, the water returned to a gentle swirl. Even though she was in the water, Kayla felt her eyes water, and her mother wiped Kayla's eyes and showed her how her tears sparkled on her hand.

"Your tears shall heal, and your powers will be strong, tis mine and your father's gift. Use them wisely." Serena told her daughter.

"Is my father Lord Rogan?" Kayla asked.

"No."

"Who is my father?" Kayla asked.

"Finian ."

"Where is he?"

"He is not here; he was not of the sea," Serena told her daughter.

"Where can I find him?" Kayla asked. Then Serena began to let go of Kayla's hand. "No, wait!" Kayla cried.

Kayla tried to hold on, but her mother let go, and a second later she was gone.

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Music suggestions: Caribbean Blue, Water Shows the Hidden Heart - Enya

Other suggestions: One yellow Rose – Celtic Dreamtime,

CHAPTER 39: CAITLIN AND AARON

Aaron, Leland, and six of Lord Broxton's Guard rode south along the edge of the forest. Jared sensed horses coming toward him, then Leland called out to him.

"Jared, wait, lad, Aaron, and his men have joined us from the north to ride together, which I believe is best. We have good tidings, lad. We received word that Lord Broxton is sending his full support and weaponry and expects you to gather the villagers."

"Excellent news, Leland," Jared replied.

Then, as Leland, Aaron, and Lord Broxton's men rode toward him, one of the men was struck by an arrow and fell from his horse. Jared turned and saw several of Lord Rogan's guard who were out searching for him ride toward them. They prepared for battle and drew their swords from atop their horses.

The clash was instant as they tried to defend themselves against Lord Rogan's guard. Aaron noted that one of Lord Rogan's guards

tried to thrust Jared with his sword, which seemed to hit an unseen shield. Aaron continued to fight, as did Leland.

"Spare the blood of your men and turn yourself over, Jared Kellan!" The head of Lord Rogan's guard shouted.

"I would if it were only my blood to be spilled, but I know of the Lady kept at the castle Lord Rogan plans to execute."

"Lord Rogan shall negotiate her freedom for yours!"

"Lord Rogan's word is worth less than the ground you stand on!"

They continued to fight. Jared slashed through several men, as did Aaron, Leland, and the other men. Then one man kicked Jared off Trey, and two men came toward him on foot. Aaron was nearest to the men approaching Jared on the ground, but Aaron turned away from them. Jared got to his feet and was forced to fight two men, but noted that Aaron turned his back on him. In disbelief, Leland, who also noted Aaron's betrayal, turned and lunged at one of the men in Jared's defense, but the man swerved and thrust his sword into Leland's chest. Stunned at seeing his friend fatally wounded, Jared swiftly killed the other man, then turned to pursue the man who slew Leland. Then Aaron treacherously rode behind Jared and tore off the amulet. Jared realized Aaron was betraying him, but continued to fight the man who slew Leland until he thrust his sword into him and killed him. All the men were down except Jared, Aaron, and one of Lord Broxton's men. Baffled by Aaron's treachery, Jared turned and shouted at Aaron, "Why are you doing this?"

"I cannot lose Kayla, Jared!" Then Aaron lunged at Jared but missed. They both slashed at one another.

"You mean to betray Kayla and your son as well?"

"Derrick's son, not mine!" Aaron shouted back. "Truly twas, not my wish to kill you, Jared; had you not been wearing that amulet, you would be dead! Now you can no longer cheat death!" Aaron charged.

Then, from the woods, Aidan and Kayla, still switched into Caitlin, rode in. Upon seeing Aaron fighting against Jared, Caitlin grabbed the bow and arrow on the side of Aidan's horse and yelled,

"Stop!"

Aidan immediately halted, and Caitlin jumped off the horse before he could stop her. He watched in amazement as she ran toward Aaron and pointed an arrow at him, just before he pierced Jared with his sword. Jared had stumbled back over a dead body as she yelled,

"No!"

Aaron turned and saw Kayla running toward him, pointing a bow and arrow.

"Kayla!" Aaron exclaimed.

"It's Caitlin!" She yelled back as she released the arrow, hitting him in the chest. Jared and Aidan were stunned as Aaron was struck in the chest and fell dead. At that moment, down beneath the sea, Serena let go of Kayla's hands, and Caitlin switched places with Kayla. Then Kayla lost consciousness and fell near Leland, and both Jared and Aidan ran to her.

CHAPTER 40: THE EMPOWERMENT

Aidan knelt over Kayla. She awoke with a lost look in her eyes.

“Where am I? What happened?” She asked.

“What is your name, my Lady?” Aidan asked.

“Kayla,” She answered and looked up at Jared approaching.

“Caitlin?” Jared asked as he knelt by her.

“No, ‘tis Kayla,” She repeated as she looked up at Jared.

Both men looked at each other in confusion. Then they turned as Leland moaned, Kayla gasped as she turned and saw Leland’s bloody chest.

“Leland, my friend,” Jared went over and lifted his head.

“Oh, Leland,” Kayla cried upon seeing him gasping for air. Kayla reached out to the kind older man who had been a good friend to all. Then she remembered what her mother told her, “Your tears shall heal and your powers will be strong, tis mine and your father’s gifts.” Kayla moved closer to Leland, who panted for air, and she wiped her tears, which sparkled and smoothed them over Leland’s wound.

The wound began to heal as Jared and Aidan watched in amazement. Then, tearfully, Kayla turned and told the surviving member of Lord Broxton's guard,

"Sir, take him to his family, please." The guard nodded and immediately approached Leland, and he and Jared helped him up and onto his horse. Then Kayla stood up, and as she turned, she saw Aaron lying dead on the grass. Kayla gasped as she placed her hands over her mouth and began to weep for him. She approached him and fell on her knees beside him and took his hand and said, "Oh Aaron, my husband..." she cried, "...I am afraid my tears are too late for you..." she breathed deeply as she wept, "...I am so sorry." She continued sobbing gently. She quieted down for a moment, then sniffled and said, "He was good to me, but his heart was too filled with resentment because I loved Derrick more than he." With her head in her hands, Kayla mourned her dead husband. After a few moments, she closed his eyes and kissed his hand. Then Kayla composed herself and raised her head in resignation. She looked up at Jared and said, "Caitlin is on the beach. Go to her quickly." A moment later, Jared mounted Trey. Then from atop his horse, he turned to Aidan and said,

"Know this: Lord Broxton's 700-man army and weaponry are now on the way—good luck to us all." Before departing, Jared turned to Kayla and said, "My Lady."

Kayla looked up at him as he bowed, then he rode away. A moment later, she stood up and then turned to Aidan and said,

"Now, please, Sir, take me to my son." Aidan nodded, and he mounted his horse and helped her get up behind him.

They rode off so fast they appeared blurred to the eye.

CHAPTER 41: BEWITCHED

After helping Broxton's man get Leland onto a horse and thanking Kayla, Jared himself mounted Trey and rode off as fast as he could to Emerald Castle, but he was baffled after witnessing who he believed to be Kayla call herself Caitlin and kill Aaron in his defense. Both ladies were a powerful duo.

As Aidan and Kayla got closer to Emerald Castle, Aidan advised Kayla,

"My Lady, I know of a secret entrance where we can get into the castle. It is on the north side-

"That shall not be necessary, Sir, please go to the front gate." Kayla interrupted.

"But my Lady, the guard shall apprehend us," Aidan warned.

"They shall not, I promise," Kayla assured him.

After having witnessed a few amazing things by her, Aidan obeyed. They arrived at Emerald Castle. Aidan and Kayla dismounted, and Brahms, who was watching them, wondered how Lady Caitlin had gotten past the guards. He ordered the men to apprehend her, but was baffled by Aidan's appearance. Had he captured the lady Caitlin as

she tried to escape, or had he found Lady Kayla and now wished to claim his reward?

“Bring her!” Brahms ordered.

Then guards immediately started coming toward them. Kayla, who was in no mood to explain or be further delayed from getting to her dying child, became furious. Dark clouds stirred above her as the wind became violent and lightning struck around them. Her hair blew in the wind, giving her an almost diabolical appearance. When Kayla approached the gate, she merely flicked her hand up, casting a lightning stream from her hand, and the gate rose instantly. Then guards came toward them, but with each wave of her hands, Kayla cast the same lightning streams and flung off every guard attempting to apprehend her or Aidan. After that, nobody outside tried to stop them as they made their way through the gates. Kayla continued to fling off guards that got in her or Aidan’s path within the castle. When she reached her quarters, the young guard standing outside her door decided to get out of her way rather than be flung off the balcony. Kayla came into her old quarters and saw Petal lying down next to her baby. Petal immediately stood and moved away as Kayla took her unconscious child in her arms and began to weep, kiss, and hug him. As her tears came in contact with his angelic face, after a few moments, little Derrick opened his eyes and saw his mother and hugged her back as he smiled and said, “Mama!”

Tears of joy continued to stream down her face. She couldn’t kiss and hug her baby enough and was thoroughly exhilarated to hold him in her arms again. Aidan stood back and smiled as he watched the touching mother and child reunion.

Aidan looked out of the balcony and saw Jared riding in the distance; soon, he would be surrounded by the guard. Aidan then turned to Kayla before he left. Petal, who was holding the little carving of the

horse, drew young Derrick's attention, and Kayla put Derrick down. Then she turned to Aidan.

"I am glad to have witnessed such an endearing moment with your child, my Lady. Now I must take my leave and join Jared, who has arrived and requires backup."

Aidan bowed and turned to walk out the door when Kayla, not wanting to see him go, called him back.

"Sir, wait!" Kayla exclaimed.

She approached him and took his hand. She swallowed, not knowing exactly how to hide her attraction for him, "Thank you."

"I am at your service, my Lady." Aidan bowed and kissed her hand.

Kayla put her hand on his sword and said,

"May this sword keep you safe."

The sword suddenly glowed, and Aidan was in awe of her,

"Thank you, my Lady."

Aidan bowed once more and turned to leave, then hesitated at the door. He took a deep breath, turned back, and took her in his arms and kissed her. Then Aidan turned and walked out, leaving Kayla in a daze. She had not felt like this for a man since meeting Derrick. Petal gasped in the background, but kept her thoughts to herself.

CHAPTER 42: APPROACHING ARMY

On the Northside of the woods, one of Lord Rogan's guards, scouting the forest, heard horses and hid in the bushes. Then he saw Lord Broxton's army riding west. He immediately rode back to inform his superior and report the vast army now headed to Emerald Castle. In turn, the scout's commanding officer sent him to warn Lord Rogan that they would now need more than twenty men.

CHAPTER 43: THE BEACH

Downstairs, Larissa, who was heartbroken after watching Lady Caitlin fall, was aided by Bernard, the fatherly guard, who assured her he would not say anything and had brought her back to the castle. After Larissa had composed herself, she remembered how Kayla had been found on the beach as a child. Larissa went to get a blanket and made her way outside the castle and out to the beach, which was cold and windy. She did not see her the first two times, but on the third, she noticed something far off on the north side of the beach. Larissa recognized that it was Lady Caitlin. She approached her and placed the blanket over her. Slowly, Caitlin began to wake. She complained of feeling cold and sat up and wrapped the blanket around her as she shivered in her cold, wet clothes. Then she started remembering part of what she saw, but she wasn't sure if it had been real or a dream. Then Larissa said,

“Oh, my Lady, I was so scared for you, I am so happy to see you well.”

“Thank you, Larissa.”

“Did the ladies help you like they helped Kayla?”

"Yes, they did, I saw the wall, but then I lost consciousness, and then I woke up riding a horse, mounted behind a man, but the worst part was that I killed a man. I hope it was just a dream."

"You killed someone? How is that possible, my Lady, if you were under the water?" Larissa asked.

"I do not know Larissa, but it seemed very real. He threatened to kill Jared, and I struck him with an arrow." Caitlin confessed.

"Twas probably a dream, my Lady,"

Then, behind them, two armed guards approached.

"There she is! Apprehend her and execute the maid," ordered the guard in charge.

Guards came toward them. One drew his sword and approached Larissa, who screamed. Then another guard came forward and said,

"You shall have to go through me," stated the fatherly guard, who had befriended Larissa.

"Are you a traitor, Bernard? Remember that a traitor's execution is by quartering." The guard told Bernard protecting Larissa and Caitlin.

"I would worry more about your own head, Seamus. I am not an old man because I am weak with the sword." Bernard threatened back.

Bernard began fighting both guards as Larissa and Caitlin tried to get away, but another man arrived on horseback, and Larissa screamed.

Caitlin looked up and realized it was Jared who called out to her, and he dismounted.

"Caitlin!"

"Jared, watch out behind you!" Caitlin warned as a guard approached him from behind.

Jared turned at once and he and the guard began slashing at each other furiously. Then Jared realized the older guard fought against the same guards.

"Who might you be?" Bernard asked.

"I am Jared Kellan. I am here for Lady Caitlin."

They both continued to fight against the members of Lord Rogan's Guard, but more guards kept coming. Then Aidan, who saw Jared from Kayla's balcony, joined them.

"Jared Kellan, I am Bernard, as of this moment, I am no longer part of Lord Rogan's guard."

Then Aidan approached and said,

"Jared, we meet again!"

"Aidan, have the ladies persuaded you as well?" Bernard asked.

"Larissa is my sister, and I believe I briefly met with Lady Caitlin earlier," Aidan replied.

"How many more guards are we to expect?" Jared asked Aidan.

"Lord Rogan and Lord Heller and their men are on their way. We need to get the ladies away from here."

The three men slew the guards they fought against, then Aidan said,

"Come, the secret entrance is over in the back. The ladies can hide there for now."

Jared approached and lifted Caitlin, who shivered in the wet clothes.

"Why is it that you are always falling in the water?" Jared asked and smiled.

"It draws me in."

They kissed as Jared lifted her. Caitlin was never happier to see him.

"Oh, Jared, I thought I'd never see you again."

"Then you have much to learn about me."

"Jared, your amulet, where is it?!" Caitlin asked in alarm.

"I believe it is in the field. Aaron had torn it from me before he was killed."

"Oh my God, then it's true!" Caitlin exclaimed.

“What is true?”

“I dreamed that I killed Aaron.”

Jared looked at her and confirmed,

“It was not a dream.”

CHAPTER 44: THE AMULET

Brahms became alarmed upon seeing Kayla's empowered return. No one could stop her, and no one dared to come near her or Aidan. Brahms at once dispatched a guard to alert Lord Rogan. For the moment, he took comfort in seeing she was only concerned with reaching her child. To assure his and the men's safety, they remained on the ground floor away from her.

§

In the field, other members of Lord Rogan's guard encountered the bodies of several fellow guardsmen slain during the clash with Jared, Leland, Aaron, and Lord Broxton's men. One of the guards checking the fallen soldiers for signs of life came across the crystal pendant. He immediately recognized it as the crystal Lord Rogan previously wore as a ring. The guard took it and set out to report to Emerald Castle.

Upon arrival, the guard brought the crystal amulet to Brahms, who also recognized it. Brahms took it from the guard and smiled. He knew Lord Rogan had used it in the past to draw out both Kayla and her mother, Serena's powers. Now he could draw out Kayla's powers once

again. Brahms sent another messenger to Lord Rogan but decided to hold onto the pendant for safekeeping.

§

Once alerted to the approaching army coming from the east, Lord Heller mobilized his men to set out north. Lord Rogan felt confident that, although he no longer possessed magical powers to control the outcome of the war against Lord Broxton, he now had the manpower to fight him, with the help of Lord Heller, who signed an allegiance. Not only had he promised much land to Lord Heller, including the Kellan's and the Brannick's land, but he had also promised Kayla's hand to him. Lord Heller had always desired Kayla and cared not that she was already married to another man. However, since Kayla was still unfound, Lord Rogan had a better solution. He had now changed his mind about killing Caitlin. Kayla and Caitlin were, after all, like each other's reflection. What could vex Jared more before he was executed than knowing his lover would be handed over to Lord Heller?

Then the first messenger sent by Brahms encountered Lord Rogan and Lord Heller on their way to Emerald Castle. He informed Lord Rogan that Lady Kayla had arrived at Emerald Castle with such overwhelming powers that she could not be stopped. Lord Rogan froze at the unexpected news. He tried to hide his concern from Lord Heller. Perhaps he could reason with Kayla. He knew her to be... a gentle lass.

While Lord Rogan was deep in thought regarding a solution to Kayla's empowered presence at Emerald Castle, the second messenger arrived approximately an hour later. He informed him that the crystal he wore as a ring had been found in the field and was now in safekeeping with Brahms at Emerald Castle. Lord Rogan could not believe his ears. This was truly unprecedented good tidings. He smiled. Everything was about to change in his favor. He needed the crystal immediately. The messenger informed him that Kayla seemed to be

solely there for her son. He was also advised that the other lady had escaped.

Lord Rogan, however, had a bigger dilemma; to draw out Kayla's powers, she had to be asleep. He remembered that Kayla's child had been given something by Fergus that put him into an indefinite sleep. He was familiar with the herbs Fergus carried with him, but he needed to devise a way to get her to take them. Kayla had always feared and respected him, but now, unfortunately, she distrusted him. However, he merely needed to gain her trust long enough to get her to drink the concoction. He would need to remind her of the home he had provided for her and tell her that he only wished to ensure that she was the rightful heir to Emerald Castle, where she and her child could be provided for, and her family could grow in safety.

He informed Lord Heller that his presence at Emerald Castle was urgent, and he needed to ride ahead. Lord Rogan then set out with seven members of his guard and took the route along the seashore.

CHAPTER 45: THE SECRET ENTRANCE

More guards were alerted to the struggle taking place on the beach on the north side of the castle. Meanwhile, Aidan led Jared, Bernard, and the women to the secret entrance. He slashed at the bushes that shielded a secret door. Caitlin and Larissa went in first, then Aidan, Jared, and Bernard. As the door closed behind Bernard, the other members of the guard arrived on site. They saw the fallen guardsmen, but nothing else, and rode off to search elsewhere.

Once inside, Jared announced that he would set out to gather support from the villagers, who had long endured Lord Rogan's abuses. Caitlin, fearful that Jared no longer wore the crystal, pulled him back and kissed him,

"Jared, be careful."

"Tis you who keeps me alive," he said and smiled at her.

They kissed once more, then he turned and left. Jared made his way outside the castle and whistled for Trey, who came running toward him. He mounted Trey and headed north toward the village to gather

those who had previously followed him into battle against Lord Rogan.

§

Aidan and Bernard urged Caitlin on, and she and Larissa were escorted up the narrow staircase into the castle. The entrance had been made after closing up the well Kayla fell through as a child. Aidan had been part of the team that dug it out. Even Bernard was not aware of it. Unlike the well, which led to the sea, the entrance led into the interior of the castle. Lord Rogan had it built so that he could leave and enter without being seen.

They went up a winding staircase entirely hidden between the walls of the castle. It led to the same floor as Lord Rogan's personal chamber. Kayla's quarters were on the other side. Aidan sent Larissa, who was accustomed to walking freely through the castle, and instructed her to take Caitlin to Kayla's quarters. Then he and Bernard planned to take out as many members of the guard as they encountered until Lord Broxton's men arrived.

Larissa went into the hallway but saw no guards. She knocked on Kayla's quarters and announced.

"Lady Kayla, it is Larissa. Lady Caitlin is with me."

Kayla at once had Petal open the door. Caitlin and Larissa stepped inside. Aidan and Bernard began assessing the number of guards surrounding the castle. They climbed to the roof, looking for guards, but found no one. They positioned themselves as snipers.

CHAPTER 46: DECEIVED

A short time after, Lord Rogan arrived with his selected guard and entered the castle. He met with Brahms, who had the crystal. Brahms turned it over to Lord Rogan. He took it and smiled, then sent for one of the kitchen maids. Myrna, who helped in the kitchen, was instructed to deliver a note to Lady Kayla. Myrna went promptly to Kayla's quarters and handed her the message, which read:



"Dearest Kayla,

My child and heir to Emerald Castle, I only want you to know that you are welcome back and that I have no intention of keeping you here against your will. I have missed you. The past few years have been empty, since your departure, and I have heartfelt regrets. I want only to see you and your child well and to offer whatever assistance you will take from me. Allow me to make your life and that of your family and friends better. Please join me in my study so that I may look upon you once again, and so that I may make my amends to you. I promise I will not keep you here or from the life you have chosen.

Forgive me,

Lovingly, your father,
Lord Mortimer Rogan”



Upon reading the note, Kayla was thoughtful. Knowing that she was now empowered with her parents' gift gave her confidence. He was powerless against her now, and he knew it. She did not want to see him. However, she decided to meet with him because she was confident she could prevent war and bloodshed and had questions regarding her parents. Kayla told Caitlin and Larissa that she was going to meet with Lord Rogan and make her demands known. Caitlin objected to her meeting with him, but Kayla assured her that she had every intention of preventing war and ensuring their release, in addition to demanding that he return the lands that he had unjustly taken. Kayla kissed her child and left him in their care.

Kayla arrived at her stepfather's study, and Lord Rogan greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. Kayla merely looked down. He welcomed her and began to express his false-hearted regrets to her in such a way that it caused Kayla to weep for her slain husband, Derrick. Lord Rogan assured her he was a changed man and that he had only made an allegiance with Lord Heller to protect himself from Lord Broxton.

The kitchen maid brought them a tray of soup, freshly baked bread, and a pot of tea and placed it on the table. Lord Rogan brought out two silver cups and reached for the pot of tea, and poured each of them a steaming cup of tea. Kayla reached for the tea and drank, unaware that, in advance of their meeting, Lord Rogan had poured into her cup a vial of the concoction Fergus had used on her child. After nearly finishing the tea, Kayla fell from the chair. Lord Rogan smiled and called one of the guards and instructed him to deliver a message to Lord Broxton's men.

CHAPTER 47: THE MESSAGE

Merick and his men had been riding all night when a scout, who was sent ahead, was given a message to be delivered to his superior. It informed Merick that Lord Rogan had regained his magical powers through his daughter Kayla, and that Jared Kellan and his lover had been executed. Merick crushed the letter. Then turned it over to Jeremy, his second in command.

“Tis false, my Lord,” Jeremy declared.

“But how can we be sure?”

“We cannot turn back now, my Lord.”

“If we proceed, we can face the same fate we walked into on our last visit.”

“Then we must not all go,” Jeremy recommended.

Merick paused in thought, then turned and said,

“That is acceptable.”

Merick ordered that only one-third of his cavalry proceed.

“What about the catapults and the cannons?”

“They stay behind.”

Jeremy turned in shock and looked at Merick.

“My Lord, if you send them without weapons, you are sending them to their doom,” Jeremy exclaimed.

“The loss of one-third of the cavalry rather than the whole of the cavalry is acceptable.”

“Tis madness, what will they fight with?”

“If Lord Rogan has, in fact, gained the magical powers, he may cause the men to lose the use of their hands once again, and in so doing, we will have to leave our weapons behind. Empowering Lord Rogan with our weaponry is something I wish not of.” Merick declared. Jeremy was forced to agree and nodded.

CHAPTER 48: THE VILLAGE

Jared rode fast and hard toward the village. As he approached, many began to recognize him and gasped. Some called out to him. The villagers started to gather around him, and Jared climbed on the roof of one of the wooden structures.

“For those who do not know me, I am Jared Kellan. My father, Gerard, and brothers, Derrick and Marc, were slain by Lord Rogan because we would not sell our land to him. He devised a plan to give his daughter, Kayla’s hand in marriage to my eldest brother, Derrick. Later, he made a false accusation and took Kayla away. When we came to claim her peacefully, he set a trap for us and sent his daughter to welcome us and gain our trust. Then he had us ambushed, and my father and brothers were killed. I managed to escape, and it is why I am here. I am here to ask, how many of you have suffered abuses at the hands of Lord Rogan and his mercenaries? Perhaps lost loved ones or saw them abused! Made to pay excess taxes, been put out of your homes, or forced to give up your tilled land and crops! ”

Many of the people began to raise their hands, some yelled out the abuses or the names of the family members and friends who had suffered at Lord Rogan's hand or who had even been slain.

"Then I am not alone, and that is why I am here to tell you that Lord Rogan, whose army is 200 men strong, has formed an allegiance with Lord Heller, whose army numbers above 500 and is now headed this way. As compensation for his allegiance, Lord Rogan has promised him much of your lands. This means many of you shall soon lose your property and your homes to Lord Heller, and some of you shall lose your freedom, your loved ones, or your life.

So I ask every man here who is not willing to hand over what he has sweated and toiled for, to join me now and fight for what is ours and to protect our homes, our loved ones, our rights, and our freedom!"

The crowd yelled and cheered as they held up their picks, axes, and pitchforks in the air. It was growing dark, and the villagers lit torches as they continued to gather around Jared. Then someone asked how 200 villagers armed only with pitchforks and axes were going to fight against an army of 700 soldiers? Then Jared told the crowd that Lord Broxton's army was now coming with over 700 men and was bringing with them their catapults and cannons. He assured them that if they joined him, together they would outnumber Lord Heller and Lord Rogan's armies. The crowd cheered, and Jared gathered supporters, including several women, and began to make a plan of attack.

CHAPTER 49: MYRNA'S DISCOVERY

Myrna, who had served the food, returned to pick up the tray and dishes, but Lord Rogan ordered her out. She immediately turned and left the room, but noticed Kayla's chair in front of his desk was empty and caught sight of her hand sticking out from the side of the couch.

"Guard! I do not want to be disturbed!"

"Yes, my Lord."

Lord Rogan lifted Kayla and placed her on the couch, hidden by the backrest, where he would begin the process of extracting her powers. According to Brahms's reports, her magical powers were very potent; he anticipated a lengthy process. He needed to begin immediately.

§

Back in Kayla's quarters, Caitlin worried that Kayla had been gone for approximately thirty minutes and had not returned.

"Petal, since you can move freely through the castle, please go and find out what is keeping Lady Kayla."

“Yes, Miss.”

Petal immediately left and made her way across the hall and down the stairs to the kitchen. She noticed there were no guards near Lady Kayla’s chamber. Downstairs guards rushed past her. She entered the kitchen and saw a buzz of activity among the kitchen maids.

“Petal, I thought you were gone, child! Hurry, we must go down below, a war is about to begin!” Ingrid, an older kitchen maid, exclaimed as she packed food and water containers into pouches to take with her.

“Ingrid, do you have news of Lady Kayla?” Petal inquired.

“Only that she’s a diabolical sorceress—everyone is keeping their distance,” Ingrid replied.

Then Myrna approached Petal quietly, knowing that Petal had been assigned to watch over Kayla’s child, and said,

“I brought Lady Kayla and Lord Rogan food earlier, and when I returned to pick up the tray and dishes, her chair was empty, but I saw the tip of her hand on the floor on the side of the couch,” Myrna whispered to Petal, as she looked over her shoulder.

“Where”? Petal gasped.

“In Lord Rogan’s study,”

“How long ago”?

“At sunset,” Myrna replied.

Petal rushed back to give Caitlin her report. Caitlin jumped to her feet, anxious to hear it as Petal entered the room,

“Petal, what did you find out?”

“Miss Caitlin, Myrna the kitchen-maid, who brought food for Lord Rogan and Lady Kayla earlier, told me that when she returned to pick up the tray and dishes, she saw Lady Kayla on the floor in Lord Rogan’s study at sunset.”

“Oh my God—sunset? That was more than thirty minutes ago. He’s extracted her powers!” Caitlin exclaimed in anguish.

“I do not believe he could have it so fast, Miss,” Larissa told her. “I am not certain, but in the past, when I believe he extracted her powers, a lavender light would filter out from below the door and window. It always lasted a long time, and he would order that he not be disturbed.”

“Well, then we must disturb him!” Caitlin announced.

“But Miss Caitlin—”

Caitlin interrupted her, “Go get your brother Aidan and the other man on the roof, we might need their help—oh, and I need a sword!”

“A sword?”

“Yes, can you get one for me?”

“I believe so, but do you really intend to use it?”

“If I have to, yes,”

Larissa was shocked to hear her say that, and she then said,

“Oh my, alright, I know where I can get one for you—down in the kitchen, one of the cooks travels with a sword for protection,” Larissa stated.

“Good.”

Caitlin turned to Petal and said, “Petal—do you know where the sword is?”

“Yes, Miss, I do.”

“Get it and hide it under your skirt and bring it to me, please. Oh, and Petal, pass by the study and tell me if you see lavender light filtering from below the door.”

Petal stared at her in disbelief, then she nodded and turned to leave the room. Petal did as she was told and retrieved the sword, hid it under her skirt, then brought it to Caitlin.

"Thank you, Petal, you're a brave girl. Did you pass by the study?" Caitlin asked as she approached from the fireplace, with her hair and dress now dry.

"I did, Miss. I passed by the study and saw the faint lavender light."

Caitlin breathed intensely, then, with a determined spirit, took the sword from her and turned to Larissa,

"You must get Aidan; we need his help."

"What do you plan to do, Miss?" Larissa asked.

"Fool Lord Rogan into thinking I'm Kayla."

"How, Miss?"

"We'll have Lord Rogan called away, then I'll switch places with Kayla, but I'll need your help exchanging garments with her."

"But Lord Rogan has a keen sense of essence, Miss."

"Yes, but I'll be wearing Kayla's clothes, with her essence all over me. Lord Rogan won't be able to extract any powers from me." Caitlin stated.

"Oh, Miss, I hope it works."

"Yes, so do I, but I want this sword by my side in case it doesn't." Larissa's mouth dropped open in awe of her boldness. "Now go get Aidan, so he can help us bring Kayla back here."

Larissa left to get Aidan. Caitlin turned and prepared herself mentally. She told herself she would not wait for her or Jared to be executed by that butcher. Like Jared, if she were to die, she would die trying. Caitlin closed her eyes and said a silent prayer.

CHAPTER 50: THE SWITCH

Aidan and Bernard stood overlooking from atop Emerald Castle. They tensed when they saw the approaching armies. Lord Heller's army could be seen approaching from the south. They aligned themselves with Lord Rogan's smaller army. However, it was Lord Broxton's army that concerned Aidan; they appeared greatly outnumbered and without catapults or cannons. Aidan turned desperately in all directions, then spotted Jared approaching from the north with an even smaller number of villagers, mostly on foot.

"Lord Broxton has betrayed us!" Aidan announced.

"What, why?" Bernard asked in shock.

"Perhaps Merick believes Lord Rogan has regained Kayla's powers."

Larissa approached,

"Aidan, you must come immediately!"

"What happened?" Aidan asked.

"Lord Rogan is here!"

"Where?"

"In his study—with Kayla!"

“Good Lord.”

Aidan and Bernard started moving toward the staircase when Larissa called them back.

“Aidan, wait! Lady Kayla went to try to make peace with Lord Rogan, but she did not come back, and one of the maids saw her on the floor.”

Aidan tensed,

“Has he slain her?” He asked.

“No, he needs her to be asleep to withdraw her powers. Lady Caitlin wants to stop him and switch places with her, but we need Lord Rogan to be called away. Perhaps you can deliver a false message and draw him out, then take Kayla back to her quarters.”

“How long has she been in his company?”

“Since sunset.”

Aidan looked at Bernard and clenched his jaw.

“All the guards we fought on the beach are dead. No one knows I defected. I will deliver the message and stand guard while you take Lady Kayla to her quarters.” Bernard told him.

“Agreed, after, I must go and warn Jared that Merick has betrayed us,” Aidan replied.

“Agreed,” Bernard replied.

They all made their way down the stairs and encountered two guards whom Bernard and Aidan were forced to kill. Larissa covered her eyes.

“Larissa, go and get Lady Caitlin!” Aidan ordered.

Larissa went to Kayla’s quarters to get Caitlin.

“Miss, ‘tis time to go!”

Caitlin grabbed the sword Petal brought her, but before walking out, she looked back at little Derrick, who had fallen asleep. She wondered if she would ever see him or Jared again, then pushed away the

negative thoughts entering her head—she had to stay positive and walked out the door.

Bernard approached Lord Rogan's study and pounded on the door. Lord Rogan had placed the crystal on Kayla's midsection as she lay on the couch and had begun the process of extracting her powers. A bright, lavender light streamed from Kayla into the crystal. Lord Rogan fumed at the interruption. He still needed to withdraw the energy from the crystal and transfer it onto him.

"What is it?!" He yelled.

"My Lord, Lord Heller has arrived," Bernard stated.

Lord Rogan was annoyed, but he knew he would need to speak to Lord Heller at once. He looked over at the couch and was satisfied that Kayla lay hidden behind the backrest and left the room. Then asked Bernard,

"Where is Declan?"

"I replaced him, my Lord."

"Keep guard and let no one enter."

"Yes, my Lord."

Lord Rogan left, and as he turned to go down the stairs, Aidan, Caitlin, and Larissa came around the corner. Caitlin and Larissa went into the room with Kayla while Aidan and Bernard waited outside. Caitlin was shocked to see the lavender crystal over Kayla's midsection. She immediately took it. Then she pulled off the pale green dress, and Larissa handed her Kayla's white dress. Together, they dressed Kayla in the yellow-green dress.

Larissa let Aidan in. Now that Caitlin's hair was dry and she wore Kayla's white dress, Aidan was shocked to see how much Caitlin and Kayla together truly resembled each other. He approached the couch and reached for Kayla, then draped her over his shoulder and carried her out. Before he left, he turned to Caitlin and said,

"Tis very brave of you to do this, my Lady, but we have a long night ahead of us. Bernard shall remain standing guard outside. I will be leaving to join Jared. I wish you luck."

"Thank you, Aidan, good luck to you also." Caitlin couldn't help noticing the warmth she felt around him, and before he left with Kayla, she asked, "Aidan—what's your full name?"

"Aidan Evans, my Lady," he bowed his head gallantly as he carried Kayla over his shoulder and left.

Caitlin froze and got covered in goosebumps when she realized her connection to Aidan and Kayla—they were her direct ancestors! Aidan left, but avoided telling her that Lord Broxton had betrayed them.

Caitlin lay down on the couch, still tingling over her discovery. She hid the sword between her and the backrest and covered it with the dress. Larissa arranged Caitlin's hair to look like Kayla's. Then Caitlin looked at Larissa, who she realized was also her ancestor.

"I must go now, Miss. Please be careful."

"Larissa, call me Caitlin—please."

Looking anguished, Larissa replied,

"Be careful, Caitlin."

Caitlin took Larissa's hand into both of hers and said,

"Thank you, Larissa, you have been an angel."

Larissa bowed humbly.

"Now go!" Caitlin urged.

§

Aidan stepped out of the study with Kayla draped over his shoulder and said to Bernard,

“I will take Lady Kayla and the other women down the secret entrance. They shall wait there for you and Caitlin, then I must ride out swiftly to warn Jared.”

“Godspeed to you, my friend,” Bernard replied.

Aidan bowed, “Likewise, Bernard.”

He proceeded to Kayla’s quarters and told Larissa to bring Petal and the child, and they all followed him down the hidden stairway. Larissa brought a blanket and placed it on the ground where Aidan lay. Kayla down. She looked so beautiful that it was hard for him to part. He leaned over and kissed her hand before leaving.

“When Bernard and Caitlin join you, take them to the cave we played in when we were children. Be careful and tell father and mother I love them—if I do not return.” Aidan instructed Larissa.

Larissa cried as they hugged, then Aidan turned and left. He mounted his horse and tightened his grip on his sword, which Kayla had placed a protective spell on. He then rode north to meet with Jared, now headed into doom if he did not warn him of Lord Broxton’s treachery.

CHAPTER 51: LORD ROGAN MEETS WITH LORD HELLER

After being informed that Lord Heller had arrived, Lord Rogan rode out to meet him.

“I hope you have concluded your affairs,” Lord Heller said.

“Nearly—once my business is completed, any resistance shall be of little concern if any.”

“Well, Lord Broxton has indeed sent an army—an army of one, it seems.”

“An army of one?” Lord Rogan inquired.

“Forgive me,” he laughed, “It seems he has only sent enough men to swat a few flies,” they laughed. “However, a few villagers are approaching mostly on foot, armed only with picks and axes. I believe you overstated your concern, Lord Rogan, and I have wasted much manpower coming here.”

“But you must agree that a show of force can be most compelling and possibly the reason for so little concern today.”

“Indeed.”

“I must conclude business in my study now. My guard is at your disposal.”

“Very well, carry on. I shall have these troublemakers on their knees within hours. Please give my regards to Lady Kayla. I look forward to her lovely smile.”

Lord Rogan nodded and rode back to Emerald Castle.

CHAPTER 52: CONFRONTATION WITH LORD ROGAN

Lord Rogan returned and informed Brahms that there was little to be concerned over and ordered that he not be interrupted again.

“Lord Heller is more than adequately prepared to handle the resistance. See him for any concerns. I expect to be in my study, completing the lengthy process I began earlier.”

Lord Rogan turned and went up the stairs to his study, where he once again met with Bernard standing guard, which was unusual since Declan was his regular watch guard.

“Bernard, why are you still standing guard, and where is Declan?”

“I believe he has taken ill, my Lord.”

“Taken ill? He’s as strong as an ox! Very well, I want no interruptions! Lord Heller is about to stomp out a few rodents outside.”

Caitlin heard Lord Rogan talking to Bernard outside the study. She tensed and closed her eyes, holding the sword tightly on her right side. Then she said a silent prayer, it was about to begin. Lord Rogan came into the room; she had forgotten to place the crystal on her stomach and quickly put it there while he closed the door and locked it. She replaced her hand on her side as he turned. She hoped her plan would work.

Lord Rogan approached her and held his hands above the crystal to continue drawing out Kayla's powers, but there was no lavender light as before; he did not understand why. He kept holding his hands over the crystal, but nothing was happening. Had he drawn out all her power before meeting with Lord Heller, he wondered? However, he did not feel empowered. He looked her over, then noticed something. Kayla had a distinct birthmark on her right ankle, and he did not see it. Then he realized this was not Kayla, this was the imposter, Jared's lover. She was wearing Kayla's clothes with her essence, and he had not noticed. With his good hand, he reached for the crystal, then took out a concealed dagger from inside his garment pocket. When he was about to stab her, Caitlin sensed danger, opened her eyes, and hit the crystal and dagger out of his hand. The crystal fell and rolled across the floor as Caitlin sat up, twisting her body away from him, trying to jump over the backrest. She screamed as Lord Rogan grabbed her and both flipped the couch over in the struggle. He landed on top of her and tried to strangle her with both his wooden hand and his right hand. The wood was painful on her throat, but Caitlin, who had taken self-defense classes in college, thrust her hands between his arms and hit his throat, then twisted her body to the left, and he loosened his hold as his wooden hand fell off.

Upon hearing the struggle, Bernard burst through the door and pulled him off her. Caitlin coughed and crawled away toward the

crystal, then got to her feet and reached for the sword on the couch. Bernard drew his sword, but Lord Rogan knew he was no match against such a large and skilled warrior and ran down the stairs calling for the guard. Bernard then picked up the couch and threw it down the stairs, followed by a table to block their passage. He and Caitlin went down the secret entrance, where they met with Larissa and Petal, who had little Derrick, but Kayla remained unconscious.

“We must leave, Larissa. Where is your horse and cart?”

“I left them in the woods.”

“Then I’ll take Lady Kayla on my horse, the rest of you go with Larissa.”

It was now dark, which helped conceal them. Larissa, Caitlin, and Petal, who carried little Derrick, ran through the woods until they reached the horse and cart. When they were a good distance from the castle, Bernard told them he would place Kayla in the cart so that he could ride back and join Aidan and Jared. While Bernard carried Kayla and laid her down in the cart, Caitlin mounted his horse and said,

“Bernard, I’m sorry, but I need your horse! Protect the ladies!”

“What?! Where are you going?!”

“I have to find Jared!”

“Are you mad?! You’ll be killed!” Bernard yelled.

“I don’t think so!” Caitlin assured him, feeling confident now that she had the crystal.

“Come back!”

“I can’t, I’m sorry!” Caitlin said as she rode off in haste.

CHAPTER 53: AIDAN ALERTS JARED

Once Aidan reached Jared, he alerted him to what had taken place at the castle. How he and Bernard had been at the top of Emerald Castle and had seen Lord Broxton's disappointing army. Merick had failed to send the support he agreed to send. Jared tensed. Then they saw Lord Heller and Lord Rogan's armies approaching. It was too late; they prepared for battle.

"Aidan, go and speak with Merick—go!"

CHAPTER 54: LORD HELLER ATTACKS

“Well, we came to complete a task and ‘tis high time we let these peasants know they are trespassing on my land.” He told his captain of the guard, “We need only the first and second divisions for now. If Lord Broxton’s puny army decides to participate, send the third division as well. That should put a stop to them.”

Lord Heller then gave his captain of the guard the nod to attack. The cavalry yelled as they charged toward Jared and the villagers.

§

Upon seeing Lord Heller’s cavalry charging toward them, Jared raised his sword and yelled,

“Those who shall not live under tyranny and oppression, follow me!”

At Jared’s yell and tug of his rein, Trey reared on his hind legs, and they followed him into battle.

CHAPTER 55: AIDAN MEETS WITH MERICK

Aidan rode in haste toward the east in search of Merick. Lord Broxton's men stood in line awaiting orders for battle. Aidan approached and said,

"I have a message for Merick!"

"He is not among us. What message do you have for him?"

"Lord Rogan did not extract any powers from Lady Kayla! He gave her something to cause a deep sleep, but we got her out and hid her in the forest."

"How was she taken and by whom?"

"Her look-alike took her place, and sympathizers like me helped get her out of Emerald Castle. But if Merick does not send his full support... You and every one of us here are doomed. Lord Heller's army is waiting to pounce on us like a cat on a mouse."

"And who are you?" The lead guard asked.

“I am Aidan Evans; I am with Jared Kellan, who has arrived with approximately 200 villagers, but they are mostly on foot and ill-equipped to fight over 700 armed soldiers.”

Then the guard ordered one of his men to have Aidan escorted to Merick. Aidan followed the guard as they made their way through the regiment.

Aidan met with Merick and Jeremy and told them everything he knew. Merick, however, did not want to risk his entire cavalry on one man's story. Aidan put his head down, knowing what that meant. He turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Jeremy asked.

“To fight alongside Jared and protect those I love until I can no longer stand.” Aidan mounted his horse, then turned and said, “Do not think that by not fighting today you shall be spared in the future. Lord Rogan and Lord Heller shall not rest until they have control across the mountain.” Aidan replied and rode off to rejoin Jared and the villagers.

§

The clash was immediate. As Jared fought one man after another, he turned and saw that Aidan had rejoined them and fought alongside him. Jared noted that Aidan's sword glowed at certain angles. It was shielding him.

“Merick refused?”

“Yes! He believes Lord Rogan is empowered by Lady Kayla!”

Jared clenched his jaw and thought of Caitlin, then saw that the villagers were getting slaughtered and grew angry at Merick for his betrayal; he fought more fiercely, but he knew that soon they would be overcome. Then Aidan said,

“Lady Caitlin is a brave lady—I believe she would be fighting next to you if possible, and Lady Kayla has stolen my heart. If I should fall in battle, please let her know this.”

“Aye, Caitlin is magnificent—she has bewitched me, but it shall be you who must let Lady Kayla know your heart, my friend,” Jared told him.

They continued fighting, trying their best not to lose heart.

§

CHAPTER 56: CAITLIN'S CAPTURE

Caitlin rode southeast at full speed, wearing a rope around her waist as a holster for the sword, and mentally prepared herself to use it. She placed the crystal in her bra since it no longer had a rope to wear it as a pendant.

§

Meanwhile, upon Lord Rogan's call, his guard came forth, but they found the staircase blocked by the couch and table. By the time they got past the blockade, Bernard and Caitlin and the rest were gone. Lord Rogan ordered several of his men to hunt down Kayla's imposter and bring her back alive, as well as find Lady Kayla and bring her back also. Ten men rode out in search of Caitlin and Kayla.

Caitlin traveled east, hoping to encounter Jared, but a short time later, she heard horses behind her and turned back, seeing several of Lord Rogan's men coming toward her. She tried to outpace them, but it was useless. They surrounded her, and she was apprehended. They

rode back to Emerald Castle with her and took her directly to Lord Rogan.

“You fool, did you actually think you would get away?! Give me the crystal!” Lord Rogan yelled.

“I don’t have it, and if I did, I wouldn’t give it to you!” Caitlin shouted back.

“Then perhaps your lover shall bring it forth! Bring her!” Lord Rogan ordered the guards who held her.

They made her climb the stairs to the top of the castle. A guard pushed her, causing her to fall on the steps, and the crystal fell out and dropped down a deep gap in the stone staircase. Caitlin tensed, realizing what that meant.

“Bring me a rope!” Lord Rogan told one of his men.

“Tie her hands behind her back and put a rope around her neck, then fasten the other end to a post!” Lord Rogan ordered.

They pushed her to the edge of the castle and made her climb onto the ledge so she could be seen from below. Caitlin stood on the ledge of Emerald Castle. Looking down, she could see everything from that height. Suddenly, she recognized Jared, who was fast and deadly with a sword, fighting on the ground.

CHAPTER 57: MERICK

Jared knew they would soon need to retreat before all the villagers were slaughtered. Then Aidan looked east and called out to him in astonishment,

“Jared, look!”

Jared looked up and saw Merick leading Lord Broxton’s entire army into battle. They were amazed. In contrast, Lord Heller clenched his jaw and ordered all his divisions into battle.

Then, at the sound of trees and branches crushing, they turned and watched in astonishment as the catapults and cannons emerged from the forest and Lord Broxton’s men placed them in position. Jared and the men’s moral state soared as they yelled and cheered at their arrival. Encouraged by the show of force, Jared swung harder than ever until he looked up at Emerald Castle, and his heart stopped when he saw Caitlin standing on the edge with a rope tied around her neck. Jared immediately began running toward the castle through the middle of battle, slashing at whoever stood in his way. He looked up at Caitlin once again, and they made visual contact. Her heart beat like thunder in her chest as she saw him approach.

"It's a trap, Jared!" She yelled, but he could not hear her.

He went to the secret entrance at the rear of the castle and ran up the hidden stairs, then pulled himself up through the trapdoor. He then climbed the winding staircase leading to the top.

"Jared, it's a trap!" Caitlin warned as he burst through the door.

She desperately tried to free her hands tied behind her back as Jared was attacked by several members of the guard. Enraged, he slashed every man down. After Jared had thrust his sword into the last guard, Lord Rogan panicked that none of his men had stopped him and threatened,

"Come any closer, and I'll push her off!"

Caitlin had small hands and had managed to free one of her hands, then untied the other. She waited for Lord Rogan, who stood with his back to her, to get closer. Then she took off the noose around her neck and put it over Lord Rogan's head. At once, Jared pulled Caitlin toward him and simultaneously pushed Lord Rogan off the edge. Lord Rogan grunted as his neck broke when he fell off and dangled over the side of the castle for all to see.

Jared took Caitlin into his arms and kissed her. Holding each other tightly, Caitlin cried tears of joy.

"It's over; it's finally over." She cried.

Tears streaked down her face, and they continued to embrace. As Jared caressed her hair, he suddenly fell forward into her arms. Caitlin felt his full weight on her; she was momentarily confused. Then her hands became warm and slippery. Caitlin looked at her hands and gasped to see them covered in Jared's blood. Upon looking up, she saw Brahms standing behind him. He had come up quietly while they embraced and stabbed Jared in the back.

"Oh God no! Jared! No!" She cried out.

Caitlin couldn't hold him up as she hunched over trying to keep him from falling from her arms, and she knelt over him on the floor. Caitlin cried in pain, which quickly became anger, then hate. Looking down, she saw Jared's sword on his side and took it. Then, from her kneeling position, she stabbed it into Brahms, who stood behind her. Taken by surprise, Brahms keeled over and fell. Caitlin then turned and unleashed all her fury upon him, stabbing him several times using both her hands until he was dead.

CHAPTER 58: CONNECTING SOULS

After killing Brahms, she placed Jared's head on her lap, as he gasped for air and she caressed his face.

"You brought light to my world, Caitlin—thank you for being my love."

"Jared, please don't leave me. I can't do this without you. Please!" She cried.

"I am with you always—my beautiful Caitlin."

Jared's eyes closed, and Caitlin let out a blood-curdling scream as she embraced him. Her pain was so intense that Kayla, who was still unconscious and hidden in the cave, suddenly sat up, feeling Caitlin's agony. It was the same pain she experienced when she lost Derrick; she had connected with Caitlin's soul and consciousness. Kayla could see Jared dying through Caitlin's eyes and immediately raised her hands to her temples and squeezed tight as she mentally instructed Caitlin to wipe her tears, which would sparkle, and then smooth them over Jared's heart and wound.

Caitlin heard Kayla's voice and instructions in her head and immediately wiped the tears from her eyes. They sparkled like she said they would, and she desperately smoothed them over Jared's heart and wound. Caitlin embraced him as she cried and continued wiping her tears on him as he lay in her arms. Then, after a moment, she felt the lightest touch of his hand on her face. She sat up and looked down at him, and he slowly opened his eyes. Caitlin gasped for air as tears of joy streamed down her cheek and she caressed his hand on her face.

"Thank you, God," Caitlin closed her eyes, "and thank you, Kayla," She sobbed as she looked down at him and caressed his face. "Jared, I love you so much."

Jared looked up at her and replied,

"I love you more."

As Caitlin and Jared continued to hold each other, the dark cloud that overshadowed the land moved away, allowing sunlight to come through, and a rainbow formed across the sky in the distance as if confirming victory.



CHAPTER 59: A DAY WITHOUT RAIN

Down below, Aidan, whose sword had protected him, had also survived. He was happy to see that Lord Rogan was no longer a threat. Lord Heller, seeing the overwhelming show of force from Lord Broxton in addition to witnessing Lord Rogan's execution, was obliged to retreat.

It was early morning, and Merick and his men took over Emerald Castle. Jared and Caitlin came down holding each other tightly. Aidan met them in the courtyard as they all gathered at the castle gates, including Trey, whose mane Jared lovingly petted. Aidan approached them and placed his hand on Jared's shoulder in triumph, then turned and took Caitlin's hand in both of his and said,

"Jared—my Lady, 'tis good to see you both upright,"

"Yes," Caitlin said and smiled.

"Same here, my friend," Jared also replied.

Bernard, who had arrived on foot due to Caitlin taking his horse, had sustained a leg injury. However, he was happy to report that the

ladies were safely hidden in a cave, and he would go for them if not for his leg wound. Aidan quickly volunteered,

“Do not be troubled, my friend, I know exactly where they are; tis where Larissa and I played as children.”

Aidan mounted his horse and went to the cave in the forest, which had hidden Kayla and her son, Derrick, as well as Larissa and Petal during the battle. Aidan arrived outside the cave and called out to Larissa,

“Larissa, ‘tis over, thanks to Merick and Lord Broxton’s army, we have claimed the victory!”

It was Kayla who stepped out first and said,

“I believe you had much to do with that victory, Sir.”

“My Lady ‘tis always a pleasure, but I would very much prefer that you call me Aidan.”

Kayla smiled and replied,

“I believe I shall—Aidan— and also very much like it if you called me Kayla.”

“Very well—Kayla, may I offer you a seat on my horse, and this time you can ride in front, and I shall be the one holding you tight,” he flirted.

Kayla looked over at little Derrick; he had become used to his playful new nanny, Petal, who constantly made him laugh. He was already in the cart with her and Larissa, who smiled happily at the pleasant view.

“I believe I would like that very much, Aidan.”

With his help, Kayla mounted his horse, and he mounted behind her. Together, they rode back to Emerald Castle. And so began Kayla and Aidan’s courtship.

CHAPTER 60: TOAST TO THE STARS

Kayla, the heiress of Emerald Castle, as stated in the note Lord Rogan wrote her, requested a meeting to take care of the matters at the heart of the conflict. She returned the parcels of land forcibly taken from Lord Broxton, the Kellan family, and the Brannicks. Kayla also released Larissa and her husband of all tax liabilities, and for her invaluable assistance, Kayla provided her with a parcel of land as well as the position of head of housekeeping.

Upon Kayla's insistence, Jared and Caitlin wed at Emerald Castle, and a great celebration took place. Caitlin had never looked more beautiful in a white satin gown, worn off the shoulders, with a wreath of white baby's breath as the headpiece. Jared, in his medieval black leather attire, stood proudly next to his stunning bride.

A sense of peace came over the village. Kayla gained much popularity among the people who considered her the kindest and prettiest white sorceress in the area. Greedy Lords respected her, and villagers were fascinated by her and Caitlin's likeness to each other. Jared,

Aidan, and Bernard became the area's peacekeepers. Jared continued seeking Leland's counsel, whom he considered to be as wise as his father Gerard had been.

Even though Caitlin and Jared were given their own quarters at Emerald Castle, she and Jared chose to live on Jared's restored parcel of land, where they rebuilt his home.

Anya, Lara, and Tristan, as well as the Brannicks, all moved back to their restored parcel of land, and together they also rebuilt their homes.

A few weeks later, while Kayla and Aidan planned their wedding, Kayla invited Caitlin and Jared to Emerald Castle.

"Lady Kayla, I can never repay you for what you did for Jared and me, and I pray that you forgive me for my past action as well," Caitlin stated regarding Aaron.

"You already have been; you did what you had to do, and in so doing, Aidan and I fell in love."

"Thank you, My Lady, but I believe you and Aidan were written in the stars. Caitlin reached for both Aidan and Kayla's hands and asked, "Do either of you know what my full name is?"

Kayla and Aidan looked at each other and said,

"Caitlin Kellan."

"Well, that is now my married name," she said as she smiled at Jared. "But I mean my full maiden name?"

Kayla and Aidan shook their heads while Jared smiled in the background.

"No, I'm afraid we never asked, and please just call me Kayla."

"Very well—Kayla, my full maiden name is—Caitlin Adel Evans."

Aidan and Kayla looked at each other.

"Is that a coincidence?" Aidan asked as he crinkled his forehead.

"No, you are both my bloodline, my direct ancestors, many times my grandparents. That is why Kayla felt warmth from me, and I felt one from you, Aidan."

Aidan's mouth dropped open.

"I am from the two-thousandth millennium. Jared brought me here by accident, and I released him from his spellbound state after falling in love with him." Caitlin smiled at Jared.

Then Caitlin turned to Jared and asked,

"Jared, remember when you asked me about my family?"

"Aye."

"Well, now I can gladly tell you that Kayla and Aidan are my family—a few years removed."

Kayla and Aidan marveled at Caitlin's revelation, then Kayla lifted her wine cup and said,

"We must toast to this good riding and to the combined efforts of everyone here—as well as those stars!"

"Oh, I'm afraid I cannot drink wine," Caitlin announced.

"Why is that, dear Caitlin?" Kayla asked.

After a brief pause, Caitlin smiled as she took Jared's hand and placed it over her midsection, then looked directly at him and announced,

"Because I am expecting Jared's child, who is also your descendant," she smiled at Jared, then turned toward them.

Jared's mouth dropped open as Kayla gasped and Aidan smiled. Kayla then picked up her cup.

"Then the rest of us must toast to this new life as well, and to you, dear Caitlin, for coming here and releasing us all," Kayla stated.

Jared stood and pulled Caitlin to her feet, giving her a back-arching kiss, as Kayla and Aidan stood and raised their cups.

The End



Fast forward to modern times, several years after Caitlin's rescue from the clinic, a teenage boy, fascinated by castles and medieval history, went on a tour of Emerald Castle with his school. While walking through the castle, taking pictures, he separated from his group and wandered off on his own. When he came to a dark winding staircase, his curiosity peaked and he began to climb the stairs. It was dark, so he turned on the flashlight on his cell phone. As he climbed the stone stairs, he caught sight of something shiny at the bottom of a deep gap between some steps. He squatted to get a closer look and shone the flashlight on it. He could see it was a sparkling lavender crystal. Jake was fascinated and immediately tried to reach it, but the gap was too narrow for his hand, so he used the straw from his drink, then dug his hand into his pocket for a stick of gum he had and unwrapped it. He chewed the gum and attached it to the end of the straw and tried to reach the shiny crystal again. After a few tries, he got it and pulled it out. As he inspected the crystal, he heard Mrs. Crenshaw, one of the teachers, say,

"We're missing someone."

"Who?" Her assistant asked.

"Jake Kellan!"

Jake heard his name and immediately put the crystal in his back jeans pocket, then went downstairs to rejoin the group. He never noticed the crystal glowing or a lavender light streaming into him. As he got back in line, Ellie, his pretty classmate walking behind him, said,

"Jake—um, your butt is lit up like a Christmas tree."

Jake looked back, and his jaw dropped.

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