

Alora: The Wander-Jewel

Book One of the Alora Series

Tamie Dearen

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by Tamie Dearen

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Dedication

To Nancy and Heidi who always believed in me.

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*Evil gales, dark and heavy
Gaining, growing, swelling
Gifted lost, powers waning
Vile the days our dwelling
So the gifts emerge in children
Strangers, bonded, telling
In the young, the song is sung
As evil finds its felling.*

Chapter One

KAEVIN STOPPED in his tracks as the vision overwhelmed his senses. Again. How many times had he seen this same image? And what did it mean? Always, it was a girl with long brown hair, standing under a spray of water that tumbled over her head. He could only see her head, her face, her hair. Not the surroundings. Was she standing under a waterfall? And what did her eyes look like? Her lids were always closed, but he could tell she was beautiful. Her wet lashes were thick and long. The skin on her face was flawless, glistening with droplets of water.

As it happened every time, her eyes began to open. Perhaps this time he would see them. Were they green, like his? Surely they must be. She must be his soulmate. He strained to glimpse just a hint of her eye color. But as always, when her lids lifted, the vision disappeared.

“Glare it! Every time!”

“What happened?” His best friend, Jireo, stood staring with wide eyes, his knife trembling in his white-knuckled grip.

“It’s a vision.” Should he tell his friend? So far he’d kept the phantasm to himself, hoping to discover the meaning on his own. But it must have happened six—no, seven times now. And he was no closer to deciphering the reason for the hallucination or the identity of the girl.

“What kind of vision?” Jireo asked, still brandishing his knife, his eyes darting toward the trees whose scraggly arms reached out to them from both sides of the narrow path.

“Put that away. What are you going to do with it, anyway? We’re alone.”

“I don’t know. You stopped walking and stood still for at least twenty-five breaths as if you were dead or something. I yelled at you and hit you, but you didn’t even flinch. I didn’t know what was wrong. I thought perhaps there was a shaman near.” He slid the knife back into its sheath, still glancing behind his back while drying his palms on his pants.

“Twenty-five? Are you certain? Or are you simply exaggerating? I would have said it was about five.”

“No—I’m serious. I even checked to see if you were dead, but you maintained a slow pulse. Granted, I was breathing a little faster than normal, but that’s still a long time.”

This changed everything; he had to solve this riddle. A dream incapacitating him for that long could be dangerous. “It was a vision of a girl standing under a waterfall. I’ve had the same vision seven times now.”

“What color are her eyes? Do you recognize her?”

“Her eyes are always closed, and I have no idea who she is. But I think I need to find out. I think she might be my *soulmate*.”

Jireo choked to cover up his laugh and clapped him on the shoulder. “Kaevin? You do remember you have only seventeen years? You can’t possibly have a soulmate until you have twenty-one years. And anyway, Nordamen claims there are no more soulmates—no new soulmates have been discovered for more than a generation.”

“It could still happen. Simply because it hasn’t happened in a long time doesn’t mean it’s impossible. Besides, I’m a clan leader... at least, I’ll be a clan leader in a few years.

Perhaps I might find a soulmate earlier than it's happened in the past." Kaevin tried to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"She must be pretty, or you wouldn't be wishing for her to be your soulmate. She's probably a long-lost cousin or something of that sort—some family member you're destined to find. I bet she's going to be *my* soulmate." He turned his back to Kaevin, wrapping his arms tightly around himself to mime hugging someone, moaning and making kissing noises as he groped up and down his back with his own hands.

Kaevin punched his friend in the shoulder playfully, but perhaps a little harder than he should have. Somehow, he didn't like the idea of this girl being Jireo's soulmate.

Alora fought the urge to beat on the tile wall. He'd disappeared again. Who was this boy she kept seeing? Why did he only appear when she was in the shower? He seemed so real, and she could have sworn he looked as confused as she felt. As if he was trying to figure out who she was, as well. Was he a figment of her imagination? His eyes were so unusual. They were green. Not an ordinary green, but a deep, intense jade, the color of her aunt's emerald ring. He was really cute, although he wore his wavy brown hair a little long for her taste. Yet she could only see his head—never his clothes or the background. Today he'd tied his hair back in a ponytail. Surely the fact he'd changed his hair was significant. Wouldn't a figment of her imagination have his hair the same every time?

She peeked around the shower curtain at the clock on the bathroom counter. It was five a.m. on a Saturday, and she had chores to do, feeding the horses and letting the chickens out. But it was winter, so she had plenty of time to spare before the rising sun tolled the beginning of her responsibilities. Living on a ranch in the backcountry of Montana meant cold winters, lots of work, and little time for leisure. It was the only life she'd ever known, and she usually enjoyed it, despite the heavy work involved.

But right now, she wanted another stab at seeing that boy. The image was always so fuzzy. If only he wouldn't disappear when she opened her eyes. She couldn't summon his visage at will. He didn't come every time she closed her eyes in the shower; it seemed to happen when she was relaxing and letting the water beat down on her head and shoulders. Maybe, if she were soaking in the tub, she might see his image again.

She pushed the curtain back, put in the stopper, and turned the faucet on full blast. As an afterthought, she added bubble bath, filling the tub with fragrant suds. Soon the bath was full, with aromatic bubbles foaming on top. She eased into the soothing water, closing her eyes at the blissful caress of the heat on her tight muscles. And she waited. Anticipating. Would he come? She tried to stay alert, but the relaxing warmth seeped into her skin, lulling her to sleep.

She awoke with a start to a tub of cold water. Disappointment formed a knot in her stomach—he'd never appeared. She released some water down the drain and added hot water, swirling it around until the temperature was comfortable again. She had five more minutes before she had to abandon her bath to start her workday. She lay back down, sinking below the water with her eyes closed, swishing the fresh water over her skin to remove the bubble bath film, her face floating above the surface to breathe.

He appeared. She held her breath, clamping her eyes shut tight, trying to hold the image as long as possible. Though the apparition was still slightly blurry, she could see

all of him, head to toe. She took advantage of her increased perception, thoroughly studying his image. She almost clapped her hands when her mental measurement estimated his height at over six feet. At five feet ten, she was taller than most boys her age. But she scolded herself for examining him as if he were a potential boyfriend. He wasn't even *real*. His clothes were made of supple-looking brown leather. The attire was odd—held together with ties and toggles rather than buttons or zippers. The fit was close enough that his well-formed muscles were evident. She noted his long hair was tied back, as it had been earlier. She could only see the front of him as he stood frozen, stock-still, with his mouth agape, his jewel-green eyes wide and... *moving*. His eyes were moving, up and down, as if he were scanning her body as she had done. And it occurred to her if she could see all of him, he might be able to see all of her.

She gasped, opening her eyes to dispense with the specter. But his image remained, now sharp and clear. And he seemed to be standing in her bathroom. She cowered under the water, attempting to hide under the few remaining bubbles. His eyes dropped down to her navel, and as they widened, he whispered, "Wendelle?"

She screamed at the top of her lungs, lunging for her towel on the floor. Hastily covering herself and preparing to leap from the tub, she looked up, only to discover the vision was gone—if indeed it had been a vision.

Huddled in her robe and slippers, her wet hair wrapped in a towel, Alora waited in front of the fire, curled in a tight ball, her eyes glued to her bedroom door. Her hands were buried in the fur of a large Golden Retriever who lay contentedly across her feet, occasionally lifting his head to lick her leg.

"There's still no one there," said Uncle Charles as he emerged from checking her bedroom and bathroom *one more time*. "And there're no footprints, either. And I checked all the doors and windows. No one's come into the house; everything's still locked up tight. There's fresh snow on the ground and no shoe-prints, either."

He slipped into an adjacent rocking chair near the fire. "And Bozeman would know if anyone was in the house. Wouldn't you, Boze?" He leaned over to give the dog an affectionate pat on the head. "It must have been your imagination."

"He said something. He said 'Wendelle?' like he thought that was my name." Alora tucked her chin down and let her hair fall across her face as she described the encounter. "He looked at my belly button jewel when he said it. I saw him look right at it. Did I imagine it? Am I going crazy?" Her cheeks burned at the memory of his inspection, and she blinked at her threatening tears.

"He said 'Wendelle?' Have you heard anyone else say that name?" The tremor in his voice drew her attention. His face was white and his hands were gripping the arms of the motionless rocking chair.

"No. Should I know that name? Is it my real name or something?"

"It was your mother's name." The words came out in a hoarse whisper.

"Wendelle? My mother's name was Wendelle? I thought her name was Jenny."

He turned his head away, and she studied his profile, noticing for the first time how old and tired he appeared. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "I wish your Aunt Lena were here to help me with this." He stood up and walked to the stove, lighting the gas burner. "I'm going to need some coffee. This may take a while."

Kaevin paced back and forth in front of his father, his boots clomping on the wood floor. Jireo stood behind him, fidgeting with the handle of his blade.

"I'm telling you, it had to be Wendelle—I saw the jewel."

"Wendelle is dead. I saw her body; I was at the burial. You only had two years, so you don't remember. It was probably someone who had a fake jewel. People sometimes wear fake jewels when dressing in costume." Graely, his father and clan leader, stood with folded arms. "In fact, you've never even seen a real wander-jewel."

Kaevin stopped in midstride, throwing his hands into the air. "It wasn't fake—it sparked. I saw it spark when it sent me back here. And she wasn't wearing a costume. In fact, she wasn't wearing *anything*."

"But Kaevin—"

"And how else do you explain the fact I traveled if it wasn't the wander-jewel? How did I get to that place and back? At first, I only had visions. But Jireo saw it happen; I disappeared and reappeared. I transported. What other explanation is there?" Kaevin worked to keep his temper in check. *Why won't he believe me?*

"I saw him disappear," said Jireo. "He was gone and his blade was lying in the dirt where he'd been standing."

"It couldn't have been Wendelle." Graely's eyes bored into Kaevin's as he spoke in slow, even tones. "And we haven't had a bearer since she died. We would know if there was another bearer, even if she weren't of age, because the jewel appears at birth. Was this girl an infant?"

"No, she wasn't a baby. I don't know how old she was, but she wasn't a baby. It is possible she was of age; I don't know." His face flushed with heat.

"And she was in the water? What color were her eyes?"

"I don't know. It's hard to say."

"I guess you didn't bother to look at her eyes." Jireo smirked.

"I looked at her eyes," Kaevin snapped. "But her eyes weren't blue or green. The color was something between blue and green—I've never seen anything like it. Perhaps it was simply a reflection of the water, but I can't be certain."

Graely skewered Jireo with his gaze. "You are certain Kaevin traveled? He actually disappeared and reappeared?"

Jireo nodded mutely, and Graely turned to grip Kaevin's shoulders. "Truly, you saw the jewel spark?"

"Yes, Father. There can be no doubt the girl's wander-jewel moved me to her and back to Laegenshire."

"Very well. I believe you, but I can't explain it." His father's expression bore something between elation and apprehension.

"It's a good thing. Right, Father? I've discovered a bearer."

"It remains to be seen whether this is a good thing. It depends on her alliance. You said you didn't sense any evil, right? And the water was in some kind of stone room? That must be a good sign."

"Yes, the room was almost entirely made of polished stone, something similar to marble or granite or quartz. Even the water basin was made of some kind of smooth stone." *And she didn't feel evil; she felt amazing.*

“This is good.” Graely took a swallow and set the mug down, rubbing his hands together briskly as he strode back and forth across the room, mumbling under his breath, “Who could she be? Who could she be?”

“She must be from Stone Clan. Right, Father?”

Graely sank back into his chair and spoke in a voice less certain than his words. “Surely she is. She couldn’t be Water Clan. She must be Stone Clan, even if her eyes were not entirely green. She *must* be Stone Clan.”

“Your Aunt Lena and I were on our twentieth anniversary trip when we met your mother in Yellowstone National Park.” He shifted in his chair, not quite making eye contact with Alora as he sipped his coffee. “And yes, we lied to you all these years, but please wait until you hear the whole story before you get angry.”

Alora felt her heart racing and she braced her hands to steady herself against a wave of vertigo. Everything she’d based her whole life on, her entire meaning of self, was a lie. From the corner of her eye she spied an open hand, and she followed up the arm to her uncle’s pleading eyes and trembling chin—although he wasn’t really her uncle, was he? When she didn’t respond, he turned his head away and dropped his hand.

“I’m so sorry, Alora. But we always loved you, and I still do. We just didn’t know what else to do.”

She swallowed hard and nodded.

His voice cracked as he continued the narrative. “We were hiking on a deserted trail, and we’d gone miles without seeing any other hikers. We came to a small pool that had a geyser, probably twenty-five feet tall. I remember... we were sitting on a rock, watching the water shoot into the air and commenting it was like having our own private geyser.” His glazed eyes stared through the fireplace wall, as if seeing the scene unfolding again.

“All of a sudden, there was this woman lying on the ground. She just appeared right in front of us. She was lying there, wet and moaning, clutching a soggy bundle in her arms. We didn’t know where she came from. She couldn’t have come out of that water—it was boiling hot. But then we saw the bundle wiggling, and it started crying. It was you. You were a tiny baby, all wrapped up in a cloth, and we couldn’t even see your face. We just sat there, kind of frozen. It took a few seconds, but we finally came out of our stupor. We both went to her and knelt on the ground, asking if we could help her. I remember noticing there was blood in her mouth when she tried to talk. This was before cell phones were common, so we couldn’t call anyone. And we couldn’t have gotten a signal anyway.”

“So my mother died?” Alora hated the quaver in her voice. Her uncle held out his hand again, and this time she grasped it tightly. He squeezed her fingers and lifted her hand to kiss the back of it before he continued.

“No, she didn’t die. At least, she was alive the last time we saw her. You see, I don’t really know what happened to her. This is where it gets even more crazy sounding. She was weak, and she couldn’t lift her head. But her eyes were looking everywhere, like she was worried someone was after her. Her voice was so faint we had to lean close to hear her. She rambled on and on. She told us her name was Wendelle, and then she told us never to repeat it.”

Charles stopped his discourse, staring at Alora like he was seeing a ghost. “You look just like her, except for her eyes. Her eyes were the deepest green I’ve ever seen.”

Her breath caught in her throat. *Green*—like the boy in the vision. Maybe the boy was her brother. Her heart clenched. For some reason, she didn’t want to be related to the boy she’d seen.

Charles squeezed her hand. “She begged us to take her baby and keep her safe. We tried to reason with her and tell her we’d get her to a hospital, but she said she was dying and only had a few minutes.”

“And then she left me?” Alora closed her eyes tight as her stomach churned.

“No, she disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“Yep. Poof—she was gone. Just like that.” Charles took another swig of coffee while she ruminated.

“Okay...” *It can’t be true; it’s too crazy. How can I believe my real mother appeared with baby-me in Yellowstone National Park, dropped me off with Uncle Charles and Aunt Lena, and evaporated into thin air? Maybe Uncle Charles is getting senile. He’s in his fifties; that’s pretty old. That must be it. He’s confused.*

“Okay? Are you angry with me and Aunt Lena for keeping this a secret all these years?” He screwed up his face, cringing as if she were going to yell at him.

She hesitated, not wanting to hurt his feelings. “To tell you the truth, it all sounds a bit far-fetched.”

“You mean, you don’t believe me?”

“Not exactly. You seem really sincere, and you don’t make a habit of lying to me. But I’m thinking maybe you were just imagining things.”

“Like you imagined that boy in your bathroom just now?”

“No, he was real. I promise.” *If he was real, maybe this story is real, too.*

Deep wrinkles creased his forehead as Charles swirled the coffee in his cup, staring at it like the answers lay inside the pungent black liquid. “Maybe I spoke too soon. Maybe you won’t believe me until you turn sixteen. Let’s forget I said anything.”

“I can’t really forget what you said.”

“Don’t think about it. I made it all up. Your real mother was your Aunt Lena’s little sister, who was killed in a car accident. You have her picture on your dresser.”

“Wait a minute. You can’t go back to the old story, now. And come to think of it, I don’t really look like Aunt Lena’s sister. Or did she even have a sister? I don’t know what to believe any more.” *I’ve stared at that picture day after day for hours, imagining what she might have been like. I can’t believe she might not really be my mother.*

Uncle Charles set his coffee cup down and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, groaning into his hands. “I knew I was going to screw this up. I can’t do it without Lena. I never thought I’d have to explain without her helping me.”

“Just tell me the truth. The whole truth. I’ve got to know.”

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know how to convince you, but everything I told you a few minutes ago is true.”

“Okay... okay...” She tried to find the flaws in his crazy story. “How did you explain me to your friends? And I have a birth certificate—I’ve seen it.”

“When we came back with you, we told everyone you were Lena’s niece. She really did have a little sister named Jenny who was killed in an accident with a drunk driver. No

one out here knew any of Lena's family, so no one questioned anything we said. We got Dr. Sanders and Sheriff Mason to help us get you a birth certificate. They risked their careers by doing it."

"Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you just report a missing baby to the authorities?"

"Your mother was terrified of your father. She said he'd raped her and held her prisoner until she'd had the baby, and now he was trying to take the baby away from her. We were convinced he'd kill you if he could find you. We thought he might be a drug dealer or a gang leader or something. We didn't tell Dr. Sanders and Sherriff Mason the whole story, but we said your mother was hiding her baby from the man who'd raped and stabbed her. We all waited and watched for a report of a missing baby, but nothing ever came through."

"And my jewel? You told me my mother had it put in when I was a baby, so I would remember her." Without thinking, her hand snaked up to probe the small belly button stone through her shirt.

"Dr. Sanders looked at it." Charles shrugged. "He couldn't really tell how it was put in—it was like it was connected internally. And your mother asked us to leave it, so we did."

It was unbelievable, but it had a ring of truth. *Who am I?*

"Please don't cry, Alora. I'm so sorry. We never meant to hurt you; we were only trying to protect you."

Alora touched her face with her fingers, surprised to find her face was wet. *I don't feel hurt... I feel lost.*

"Why didn't you tell me before? Why now?" She asked the question of Uncle Charles, but kept her eyes glued to her hands in her lap.

"Your mom gave us two warnings before she disappeared: don't try to take the jewel out of your navel, and don't tell you the true story until your sixteenth birthday." He pushed his hands through his short burred hair. "When I heard your imaginary boy had spoken your mother's name, it was like seeing a ghost. I guess I should've kept my mouth shut and waited until you turned sixteen."

"No, I'm glad you told me." Her voice sounded as cold and flat as she felt. It was just too much to process all at once.

"I've thought about this for fifteen years, and I'm no closer to understanding it." He took both her hands in his, but she couldn't bring herself to look at him. "The only thing I understand is you're special. Very special. I love you, and I hope you can forgive me—forgive us—for lying to you."

She glanced up to his red-rimmed, pleading eyes, and the ice melted from her heart. She lunged into his lap and hugged his neck, wetting his shirt with her tears. She was warm and safe in her uncle's arms. Maybe she could stay out on the ranch and ignore everything that had happened. She could simply pretend she was a normal fifteen-year-old girl. A fifteen-year-old girl with a jewel in her belly button and an occasional handsome male visitor to her bathroom.

Kaevin's knees were shaking. Why was he so nervous? He hadn't done anything wrong—he was simply telling his story to a group of men and women who'd watched him grow up his entire life. But he felt like he was being sized up as the future clan leader, even though he was thirteen years away from taking that position unless his father died prematurely. He glanced around the circle, trying to judge the mood of the members.

Laethan, the chief healer, was sitting calmly with his eyes closed. He was probably meditating, although he almost appeared to be sleeping. With the rash of illness that had been spreading through the clan, claiming the lives of the very young and the very old, he might be exhausted enough to have fallen asleep sitting up. He didn't move or flinch even when Graely began to address the council.

"My son is here to give testimony of an experience which could be immensely important to our future in Stone Clan. I was dubious when I first heard the tale, but after questioning both Kaevin and his friend Jireo, I've come to believe him. I'll let you judge for yourselves when you hear him speak."

Darielle was listening intently to the clan leader's introduction, subconsciously testing the edge of her knife on a piece of grass. In the past, council members had left their weapons at the door during called meetings. But a surprise attack from Water Clan during one fateful assembly had ended the tradition. Two council members were killed during that assault, including Darielle's father. As a result, she was the youngest council member, only twenty-six years of age and already chief of farsight. The other council member who died along with Darielle's father was Valor, chief of discernment. The loss was devastating, as there was no other Stone clansman with the gift. They could only pray a child would be born to someday take the empty council position.

"Perhaps you should hurry." Darielle spoke in a light voice. She looked pointedly toward Laethan's unmoving form. "It seems some of our older council members may be hard put to stay awake for the proceedings." The laughter of the other council members did nothing to rouse Laethan. Graely smiled, leaving him undisturbed.

"I will take your advice, Darielle, and let my son speak without further preamble."

Wiping his perspiring palms on his leather breeches, Kaevin made his way to the center of the circle.

His father patted him on the back. "Simply tell the story, from the beginning. Don't leave anything out."

Kaevin cleared his throat. "Well, I... uhmm.... A few weeks ago I started seeing visions. I could only see a girl's face—her head—with water flowing over it, like a small waterfall."

"What color were her eyes?" asked Chaleah. The chief judge sat forward, narrowing her eyes as she concentrated on Kaevin's response. Her gift included detecting truth and falsehood, and she watched closely to assure the accuracy of Kaevin's report.

"Her eyes were always closed during the visions. She disappeared every time she opened her eyes. The visions came on seven different occasions. And the last time it happened, Jireo was with me."

"And you've never seen this girl before? Perhaps you met her at one of the clan gatherings?" Chaleah suggested.

"No, I don't remember seeing her."

Darielle sat forward. "If you describe her, I might be able to draw a sketch. We can see if anyone recognizes her."

“Go on with the story, Kaevin,” Graely interrupted. “This is the unbelievable part.”

He swallowed hard, noting his tongue seemed to be sticking to his teeth. “Yesterday, shortly after I had a vision, something different happened. I was transported to her.”

The council members let out a collective gasp, followed by exclamations and arguments.

“How do you know you actually traveled?” asked Raelene, the oldest council member.

Kaevin tried in vain to meet her eyes, uncomfortably aware how strongly she would be affected by his story. After all, Wendelle had been her only daughter. Her official title was bearer, although her stone no longer held a spark. As an active bearer for thirty-five years, she still had valuable knowledge and wisdom to give, but the clan was crippled without a true bearer.

Kaevin remembered the story of Wendelle’s kidnapping and subsequent death, told almost as legend in the clan as a warning against complacency. Even in the face of Raelene’s obvious disbelief, Kaevin knew he must share his story. He might have been convinced the experience with the girl was entirely his imagination but for the testimony of his best friend.

“Jireo was there. I disappeared right before him. And I could see everything, feel the stone under my feet.”

More discussion from the council was peppered with questions. Morvaen made his voice heard above the others. “Where did you go? And what did you see? How long were you gone?” The robust weapons master paced in his usual manner, always seeming to have an overabundance of energy.

“I don’t know where I was. It was a very strange room, almost entirely covered in some kind of smooth polished stone.”

“An entire room of polished stone? But you didn’t recognize the stone?” Nordamen questioned, flinching as Morvaen bumped his chair with the scabbard of his sword. The weapons master apologized, but Nordamen quickly turned his attention back to Kaevin. “Was it opaque or translucent?” The chief shaman inclined his head awaiting the answer, obviously excited about the possibilities of power in the stone-covered room. His responsibilities included recognizing and training each clan member’s gifts. Beside him, although technically not a council member, sat his son, Bardamen. He was only a year from the age of thirty, when he would take his father’s place as chief.

“It was opaque—”

“Never mind that,” Morvaen interrupted. “Tell us about the girl.”

Kaevin concentrated on stilling his trembling knees as he spoke. “She was.... She was lying in a basin full of water with her eyes closed, at first.”

“She was breathing under water?” asked Nordamen. “That sounds like a gift of Water Clan.”

“No,” Kaevin bit back, clenching his fists. His face burned in shame at his lack of control. “I apologize—I didn’t mean to speak harshly. But I was trying to explain that her face was floating. She was breathing air, like you and me. And the basin holding the water was made of stone.”

“But she was in the water,” Nordamen protested.

“Let him finish,” Morvaen said. “Please proceed, Kaevin. Tell us what happened.”

He unfurled his fists, glancing back at his father who nodded assurance. “This last time, when she opened her eyes, she didn’t disappear. Her eyes were... I don’t know how

to describe them.... They were different, not quite blue and not quite green. I've never seen anything like them."

"If her eyes weren't green or brown, we should consider them blue," said Nordamen. "And she was in the water—she must be of Water Clan."

"No!" Kaevin didn't realize he'd shouted until a startled hush fell over the council members. "Again, I'm sorry, but please let me explain. She wasn't evil. She never felt evil during the visions, and when I was with her, the air was clear. There was no sense of evil at all."

"But you are young," said Nordamen. "Your gift is not fully developed. Perhaps her evil was masked somehow."

"I have seventeen years, and my gift is stronger than you realize. I am quite certain she wasn't evil." He lifted his voice over the council members' murmurings. "I haven't told you the most important part. ... She had a wander-jewel. I saw it spark before it sent me back."

"That's impossible!" exclaimed Raelene. "We know of no clan with an active bearer. Or even a bearer who hasn't come of age. Wendelle was the last. We've been praying, but none have come."

"Then she must come from a clan we don't know," Kaevin argued. "There's no other explanation."

"How did you see the jewel?" Raelene crossed her arms. "A true bearer never leaves the jewel exposed."

"She was bathing." Kaevin attempted to hide his discomfort by pacing. "I think perhaps she's just come of age, and she's untrained. She didn't seem to know what she was doing, and she screamed when she realized I was there. That's when I saw the jewel spark, and I returned to where Jireo was waiting."

"It's possible." Nordamen tapped a long slender finger against his chin. "A true innocent with no idea of her gift might accidentally transport someone." He leaned forward and steepled his fingers. "But why would she transport Kaevin? Raelene, can you transport someone you've never met?"

"Honestly, I can only say I've never heard of it before. I've never known anyone who would try such a thing. If this girl is truly unaware of her gift, we've got to find her and train her before she hurts herself or someone else."

"Yes, and before Vindrake or anyone in Water Clan finds her. Imagine the disaster that could result if he could control a bearer." Morvane's eyes grew wide, realizing the impact of his words. He glanced at Raelene's drooping head. "I apologize, Raelene. That was unthinking for me to remind you of your loss."

"No, your words are only the truth. We all know Vindrake would stop at nothing in his attempt to attain a bearer of his own." She blinked hard, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"These thoughts mirror my own." Graely strode to the room's center. "I feel we need to formulate a plan to search for this girl. I want Kaevin to describe her to Darielle, as she suggested. If we had a drawing, we might be able to locate her. Perhaps she is close by, but no one is aware of the jewel—a foundling or an orphan from one of the wars. And Kaevin, I want you to talk to Raelene. Describe the stone in detail to ensure what you saw was truly a wander-jewel."

Kaevin's jaw tensed and he opened his mouth to object, but Graely held up his hand. "I know you don't believe there's any other alternative; however, we must be certain. And if the girl is truly a bearer, you must be prepared to help her should she transport you again."

Laethan finally opened his eyes and spoke. Kaevin supposed this proved he'd been listening rather than sleeping. "I need to speak with Kaevin about possible illnesses she could have. Any illness will worsen in transport, so I assume the plague is no different. If she's sick, she must not be allowed to travel by the stone. And we must keep Kaevin from possible exposure to plague when he could be transported against his will at any time."

"The rest of us will devise a plan to search for the girl." Graely grimaced. "We must work together with all the other clans throughout Tenavae. They will assume we mean to claim her since Kaevin discovered her, but she belongs to whatever clan she lives with."

Kaevin felt his chest tighten. "But what if she wishes to come with *me*? Perhaps that's the reason she transported me."

"You're far too young to marry."

"I didn't say anything about marriage." He ducked his head to hide his burning face. "But she might be afraid. Perhaps she would feel more comfortable with our clan."

"I doubt seriously she'll wish to leave her clan and move to a new one," said Raelene. "But since I'm the only one who can train her, she might live with us temporarily."

Kaevin's breathing eased. It somehow seemed extremely important to have her nearby.

"I had another thought," said Raelene. "We can't know why she transported Kaevin, apparently by accident. She could do the same with someone else or something else. Someone or something dangerous. I believe it's imperative to find her quickly."

Kaevin felt a heavy knot in his stomach. Was it the idea of her being in danger? Or was it simply the idea she might transport someone else to her—someone besides him?

Chapter Two

IMAGES OF THE BOY invaded Alora's sleep all night long. She had no idea whether it was another vision or simply a fantasy she'd made up in her head, but she dreamed she could see him sleeping in a dark room. Despite her fright from his sudden appearance in her bathroom, Alora felt an urge to try it again—this time, with clothes on. The problem was, she didn't know exactly how it had happened. She only knew the water seemed to help.

"Uncle Charles?" she asked, with a tremor in her voice. "Would you be willing to help me with an experiment?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Maybe. But it depends on what you want to do."

"I'd like to see if I could make that boy appear again. But this time, I don't want to be alone. I want you with me. You could even have your shotgun, in case he's dangerous. But I think he's safe, and he seems to know something about my mother. So I'd like the chance to talk to him."

"How are you going to do it?" A deep furrow appeared between his brows.

"I was thinking we could go outside to the hot tub. Since it happened when I was in the water, I think that could help. It might take a while, though, because I don't know what made it happen."

"Okay. I like the idea of having a gun, just in case. I'll get my hat and coat. It's in the twenties out there."

Alora had on shorts and a T-shirt over her swimsuit. She slipped her feet into her boots and pulled on her coat to cross the patio to the hot tub. Charles, dressed in warm layers, settled in a chair next to the tub with his shotgun balanced across his lap and a book in his hands. Bozeman curled up at Charles' feet, sniffing the air before laying his head on his paws.

Once inside the hot tub, with the water warming her frigid skin, Alora sank up to her neck in a corner. She rested her head on the side, attempting to relax while watching for the boy to appear. She tried closing her eyes and loosening her muscles. She even tried rubbing the stone in her navel, but nothing happened.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Charles. I don't think it's going to work. Are you getting cold?"

"I'm warm enough for now. Bozeman is keeping my feet warm for me. Are you getting waterlogged?"

"My feet are getting pruny. Maybe I'll just try a few more minutes before I give up."

Her mind wandered over the details of her uncle's revelation of the truth. Did her mother really look like her? She tried to imagine herself with deep green eyes like the boy's. And she wondered about her father. Was he really a bad person? Maybe after all these years, he had changed. Or was he even alive? Maybe he'd been killed in some kind of gang war? Maybe she could have a DNA test and put it up on some website that helped people find their long-lost relatives. All these years she'd thought he was dead, but now she might have a chance to meet him. What did he look like? Did she get her height from him? And her eyes? Her mind drifted. All was quiet except for the occasional scolding call of a chickadee.

One second she was gazing at a pine tree with snow-laden boughs, and the next second she was looking at him. Not in full form, only that disembodied head. But it wasn't the boy—it was a man. A man with long jet-black hair and a beard. A man with piercing blue eyes. He was attractive, almost compellingly so. Alora felt drawn to him, drawn to his power and presence. And he seemed a bit familiar. She stared at him, mesmerized, until Bozeman's growl caught her attention.

"Uncle Charles?" she whispered. "Do you see him?"

Charles dropped his book and grabbed his shotgun, raising it with white knuckles, his eyes scanning the area. "No! Where is he?"

"To whom are you speaking?" asked the man. "My name is not Charles."

Alora ventured another look at her uncle, who apparently couldn't hear the man's voice either. She tried to keep her voice steady even as her heart pounded rapidly in her chest. "I wasn't talking to you. What's your name?"

"I am called Master Vindrake." He seemed disappointed at her response to his name. "And what is your name? You look very familiar to me, and I do wonder why you have called me. However, I must admit I don't remember your name."

"I'm..." She paused as some sense of unease prevented her from saying her name aloud. "I'm... Lena."

"Lena? I've never heard of this name." He was staring at her through squinted eyes when his brows flew up and his mouth formed an "O." He stretched his lips into a smile, and his voice caressed her with smooth velvet. "Wendelle. Your mother was Wendelle. Hello, Lena. I am your father. And I am extremely pleased to meet you."

She gulped air as she responded, "My f-father?"

Her fear must have been evident on her face and in her quivery voice, because his eyes began to water and he pressed a fist to his trembling mouth. "Lena? Are you afraid of me? I'm your father. I love you. I don't know what poisonous lies you've heard about me, but I assure you they are merely that—lies. Your mother stole you away from me and, all these years, I believed you were dead. I would never have neglected you or your training had I known you were alive."

Alora glanced at her uncle, who now stood with his shotgun at the ready, listening to her stilted one-sided conversation. Bozeman continued his deep growl with an occasional snarl, his nose toward the apparition.

"Lena." Vindrake's face seemed to lean forward, although the disembodied head came no closer. "Where are you? I can bring you here with me to the safety of my kingdom. You will have much to gain by coming to me."

"I don't know if that's a good idea. I need to discuss it with my uncle." She tucked a stray curl behind her ear with trembling fingers.

"A part of you must know you belong with me. Otherwise you would not have contacted me. There is no need for you to travel. Simply tell me where you are, and I will come to you. Give me an opportunity to prove myself to you. Then you can determine for yourself whether you wish to come home."

"I need some time to think."

"You need me, Lena. You are obviously very powerful. You were able to call me despite my considerable protective wards. Almost, I was pulled into your transport. But a powerful gift is dangerous without knowledge of how to control it—how to utilize it safely."

A fog clouded her head. His smooth voice and enticing words drew her into his web. But her heart hammered in her chest and chills rippled up her backbone. She wanted him to go away. No, she needed him to go away. But since her eyes were already open, she had no idea how to dispense with the specter. On impulse she stood up and stepped out of the water, but a glance told her Vindrake remained.

“I see your breath condensing in the air. It is no wonder I was unable to locate you. Your mother took you very far away, indeed. Yet you have enough power to reach me from a great distance. You are truly amazing! Will you not consider my offer? I only want what is best for you—to protect you and train you and pass on your inheritance.”

Alora faced her uncle. “Uncle Charles. Would you mind shooting something? Anything will do.”

He nodded his head, firing a shot in the air. Alora flinched and turned to find the image was gone. Now she stood wet and shivering in the freezing air.

“Do I need to shoot again?”

Alora rushed to throw her dripping form into his arms, almost dislodging the shotgun.

“Whoa! Careful!” He locked the safety on the gun before swinging her up into his arms, and carrying her into the warmth and safety of the house. Bozeman followed, sending one last growl behind him before slipping inside.

Laethan grabbed Kaevin’s shoulders, turning him around to feel his forehead. He seized his hands and turned them over, examining his wrists. “You have no fever and your wrists are clear of rash. The first sign of plague is a strong headache, weakness, and high fever. After about three days, the rash will start on the wrists and ankles, moving up to the legs, arms, and body. About one of every four becomes unconscious and unable to drink water, even by reflex. Once they reach this stage, they will usually die.”

“All right,” said Kaevin, unsure what to do with this new, frightening information.

“So, if you find someone with these symptoms, you must keep your distance. If the girl transported you when you were even slightly ill, you might not survive the travel. And, if she had any of those symptoms, she would need to avoid transporting as well.”

“Believe me, I have no desire to be exposed to the plague. Is it spreading into the town?”

“No. At this point it’s primarily out on the farms. I’m concerned it may be spread by animals.” He wiped his brow and squeezed his tired eyes shut. “And I must get back to work. I’ve been called to Waenshire.”

Kaevin jumped when Raelene touched his arm. “Kaevin, can you tell me about the stone? Did you see it clearly?”

“I believe I can imagine it in my mind.”

“Describe it to me, if you will.” Though her question was innocent enough, he could read the doubt in her expression.

He closed his eyes, remembering the beautiful stone. It wasn’t too difficult, since the scene had replayed over and over in his head all night, keeping him awake. “It was about the size of my thumbnail, only rounder. Small facets all around with a circle of inward facets in the middle. It wasn’t quite gold, like I thought it would be. It had something like a red center with gold surrounding it. But when it sparked, it sparked red instead of gold.”

Raelene's eyes were wide, but her lips trembled. For a moment, she looked as if she couldn't breathe. "That's amazing, Kaevin."

"Amazing good or amazing bad? Does it sound like a real wander-jewel to you?"

"I believe you not only saw a genuine wander-jewel, but you saw one of a rare color. All wander-jewels are gold with a contrasting color in the center, usually white or blue. Red is the strongest color but, as far as I know, only one bearer in several lifetimes has had a red-centered stone, although for many years in the past it was common." She blinked rapidly, biting her lips. "The only other red-centered wander-jewel in the past two generations was Wendelle's."

"I apologize for reminding you about losing your daughter." Kaevin kept his eyes trained on his hands as the heat rose in his face.

"You can't help what you observed, Kaevin. I realize that." She patted his arm, and he looked up, relieved to see she wasn't crying. "Actually, it feels good to talk about her. My friends try so hard to spare my feelings, they never speak of her. It's as if she never existed."

"Can I ask a question," he ventured, "about what happened?"

She answered with a nod.

"I always wondered... why Stone Clan couldn't have rescued Wendelle from Vindrake? Did we not try?"

"When Wendelle disappeared, we had no idea what had happened to her. She went out to tend the garden and never returned. Your father launched a rescue party the moment we suspected Vindrake had taken her."

"But we failed?"

"No, we didn't fail. We called off the attempt." She hesitated, checking behind her for eavesdroppers. "This is not common knowledge, for we don't wish to instill fear in our citizens... Vindrake sent a messenger to inform us of the evil work of his shamans. He placed a killing ward on her... a curse. If she left the caverns, she would die." Her lips blanched together in a grim line.

"And you believed him? But what if it wasn't true?"

"We didn't know for certain, but we couldn't risk it. And now, I believe his warning was accurate. You see, Wendelle was gifted in gresses; she could open locks. Even if Vindrake's lair were warded against transporting, she should have eventually been able to find a way to escape."

"But she did escape, didn't she? She must have escaped if she transported to you."

"Yes, she transported to me a year after she was taken." Her voice was bitter. "Only to die a few breaths later in my arms. There was blood coming from her mouth, but not a mark on her body. Laethan and Nordamen both felt it was a result of a the curse."

"I don't understand. Surely our shamans are as gifted as Vindrake's. Why can we not place a killing ward on Vindrake? We should make him pay for his actions." He slammed his fist into his palm.

"Bite your tongue, Kaevin. You know not what you're asking." She whispered her words in a hoarse rasp. "To place such an evil curse, one must align themselves with demons, and innocent blood must be shed."

He felt the blood drain from his face and swallowed hard. "I didn't realize."

"Of course you didn't. You're young and brave and full of valor. Before you take your place as Stone Clan leader, you'll have many opportunities to learn the dangers and

pitfalls of making your end goal the most important factor in your decisions. The temptation to battle evil with evil means is a constant enticement. But the moment we do that... the moment we turn our backs on God's commands, we may win the battle, but we have lost the war."

"Never fear, Raelene. I'm not so rash that I would ignore all I've learned from my father and the council. I would never betray my faith."

Raelene smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "I believe you, Kaevin. You'll be a fine leader when the time comes. But we're not here to discuss your future; we were speaking of the wander-jewel you saw. It's worrisome that the girl possesses such a powerful stone."

"Are you not glad she has a red-centered stone? She'll be strong once we train her. Or rather, once *you* train her."

"Yes, if we locate her before Vindrake, we'll be thankful for the strength of her jewel." She chewed on a fingernail. "However, there is another problem. The more potent the stone, the harder it is to control. She'll be prone to continue haphazard transports without even trying. It's imperative I work with her in person; I couldn't possibly explain to you how to teach her to manipulate such a powerful jewel."

"But, what do I tell her if I see her again?"

Raelene grasped both his arms. "You must tell her it's extremely important she remains calm—she mustn't be overly excited."

"If she gets upset, her wander-jewel will spark?" asked Kaevin.

"No, it's not that simple. But accidents tend to happen as a young bearer's emotions start to rise or as they fall off."

"So my responsibility is to explain to her about her power in a calm and soothing way?" How would he accomplish such a task?

"I realize that sounds daunting. Hopefully, you won't have to deal with her by yourself for very long."

"You're assuming Kaevin will be the one to find her." Darielle interrupted. "She might not transport Kaevin to her again. When we send out scouting parties with her image, she'll likely be found by someone else, so we need to warn everyone about the danger."

"And we must find her before Vindrake discovers her existence. Otherwise, even our scouting parties will be in danger."

"Then we should expedite our work on that drawing," said Darielle.

Kaevin was prepared to give a description of the girl. He remembered her clearly in his mind. During the night, he'd even sensed her presence. He couldn't see her, but he could almost hear her talking to him. He was definitely obsessed with the girl, a fact for which Jireo had teased him interminably. So now he kept his thoughts to himself.

Darielle had a parchment and sheepskin-wrapped graphite to draw the image. "If you will allow me, I can look in your mind and link to her. I can trace to her location and see her for myself. I won't be able to communicate or ascertain her location, but I will have a clear view of her face."

"What will it feel like if you do it? And what else will you be able to see in there?"

She laughed. "I promise to use great discretion. I can't read your thoughts, anyway. I can only follow links to past events. And then I see the actual event, not your memory of it. It's almost like a transport, and it only feels like a slight tickle—not painful at all."

“Very well, then. We can attempt it. But if it’s unpleasant, you have to get out of there.”

With an assuring nod, Darielle placed her hands on Kaevin’s forehead. “Now, simply think about the occurrence when you were transported to the girl, and I will follow you.”

He relived the moment in his mind, as he’d done numerous times, focusing on the moment she’d opened her eyes. He felt only the lightest touch in his mind, and it wasn’t uncomfortable at all.

“Are you concentrating?” asked Darielle.

“Yes, I promise. I can see her in my mind perfectly; I paid close attention to the details.”

“It’s as if the link is blocked. I follow it straight into some kind of wall. I can’t find a way around it, and I can’t see anything.” She took her hands down. “Let’s try something else. Imagine you are standing with Jireo, before the event occurred.”

Kaevin pictured himself on the trail with Jireo and their discussion of breakfast right before he’d disappeared.

“Yes, I can follow that link perfectly. I can see Jireo. But now there’s nothing.” She pulled her hands back and huffed, running her fingers through her hair until several golden strands were pulled from her plait. “I can’t follow your link to her—she must be warded. We must simply do it the hard way.” She picked up the graphite. “Describe the shape of her face...”

“He told me my mother was lying about him. And then he said some crazy stuff about me being powerful and him needing to train me. Are you sure you couldn’t hear him?”

“No, I couldn’t hear anything. Nothing at all. I couldn’t see anything either, but I felt something. And so did Boze—he was growling the whole time.”

“He told me my mother hid me from him, and he didn’t even know I was alive. I did notice one thing. He said Wendelle *was* my mother. So, I guess she really didn’t make it after you saw her disappear.”

“That’s what I thought. If she’d been alive, I know she would’ve come back and found you somehow.” Charles averted his eyes.

“He didn’t really look like a drug dealer to me, not that I’ve ever seen one in person. I guess he could be some kind of gang leader. He talked about bringing me to his kingdom, whatever that is. I would’ve asked more questions, but I was so freaked out. I wasn’t prepared to meet my father.”

“I didn’t see him or hear his voice, but something felt wrong to me. Did you feel it? You said the boy didn’t feel dangerous. What about your father? Did he feel dangerous?”

“I don’t know. I can’t decide. It’s like part of me recognized him and wanted to like him. I know you believe what my mother said about him, but I can’t help wanting to believe she was wrong. I hope he’s actually a good guy. Maybe he’s changed.”

“Just be careful, Alora. I love you, and I don’t want to see you get hurt.” His brow furrowed as he reached out to take her hand. “I’m afraid you’ll get your hopes up and then find out he’s into something dangerous or illegal. What if you found out he’s into human trafficking or something like that?”

“I’m just going to make sure I don’t get back in the water anytime soon. No hot tub. No bathtub. Just quick showers. I need some time to wrap my head around all this before I talk to him again. Hopefully, he won’t be able to figure out where I am. I don’t want him to show up uninvited on the front porch.”

He squeezed his arms around her. “You know I love you, right? I love you even more than if you’d actually been my niece. You’re my daughter as far as I’m concerned, and you always have been. And now that Lena is gone—” He turned his face away, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“Uncle Charles, I love you too, and I loved Aunt Lena. None of this changes anything. I’m only curious about my father. Even if he turned out to be a great guy, he’d never take your place in my heart.”

She returned the fierce hug, and his hand made sploshy sounds as he patted her back through her sopping wet clothes.

“I’m almost as wet as you are, now. We should both go change into dry things.”

“And afterward, I’ll go tend the horses. I could use the exercise.”

By the time Alora mucked out the stalls and put out hay for the horses, she’d worked out a lot of her anxiety. Nothing like hard work and fresh, cold, country air to clear her head. She wandered out to check on the chickens and then on impulse she decided to climb her favorite tree. It was a pine tree that had fallen over against another tree, but maintained enough root system to stay alive. So she could scale the huge slanted pole at an angle into the second tree and then scramble up to about thirty feet before the limbs became too flimsy. From this vantage, she could see for miles. She used to sit on the limb and pretend she was a queen, surveying her kingdom, while imagining all sorts of great adventures that would take place if she traveled farther than she could see.

After descending from her throne, she decided to relive another childhood game. The fresh snow had left a beautiful undisturbed white blanket, a perfect palette for making a snow angel. She jumped out and fell on her back, swishing her arms to the sides and her legs below her. Then she climbed up carefully and jumped back to her starting point to survey the results, but her bulky coat had mussed the form so that the impression in the snow was anything but angelic. Pulling off her gloves to quickly unbutton and slip off her coat, she leapt out again onto a fresh patch of snow. Focusing on the warmth of the sun on her face rather than the chill of the snow, she swept her arms and legs in the snow to make the classic angel form. She laughed as the fluffy dry snow around her head collapsed on her face.

She flinched when a shadow passed over her. She squinted up, and a cry of surprise slipped from her lips. Her eyes latched onto the boy, standing in the snow, watching her with obvious curiosity.

“Hello.” He spoke in a low tentative voice. “I’m Kaevin.”

“I’m Alora,” she replied, realizing too late she’d given her real name. But somehow, it seemed okay to share it with him. She stared, drinking in his image, storing it in her mind to retrieve after his inevitable departure. She felt a warm fuzzy feeling in her stomach and resisted a sudden urge to giggle.

“Where are we?” asked Kaevin.

“We’re on my uncle’s ranch.” A shiver rippled through her as the snow began to melt and soak through her sweater.

“You must be cold. Would you like a hand up?” He reached down, offering his hand.

Moving slowly to ensure he didn’t somehow vanish, she stretched to take the proffered hand. When their fingers touched, a spark flew out between them, sending a shock down her arm. She pulled back reflexively. And he was gone.

“Everyone step back,” shouted Graely, stepping into the fray. “He can’t answer all your questions at once. Give him an opportunity to tell the story.”

Kaevin was still a bit dazed from the shock of touching her. Someone handed him some water, and he drank it gratefully. Squeezing his eyes shut, he attempted to clarify the details in his mind.

“We were outside on the edge of a huge field. There were tall trees behind us.”

“What kind of trees?” asked Nordamen.

“I saw some kind of cone trees. And before you ask what was growing in the field... it was covered in snow, so I don’t know.”

“Snow? How cold was the air?” This question came from the weapons master.

“I don’t know. Well below freezing. The snow was dry and came halfway to my knees. And there was no sign of melting even though the sun was out.” He tried to suppress a smile. “She was lying in the snow—simply playing, I think.”

“With that much snow so early in the season,” remarked Morvaen, “she must be quite far to the north. Were there mountains nearby?”

“Possibly, but I didn’t notice. I was watching the girl.”

“Did she speak to you?” asked Raelene.

“She seemed really surprised to see me. I told her my name, and she told me hers.” He glanced about; everyone in the room appeared to be holding their breaths. “Alora.”

A rowdy discussion arose between the council members, but no one recognized the name.

“Go on. What else did she say?” asked Graely.

“I asked her where we were, and she said, ‘We’re on my uncle’s *ranch*.’ I don’t know what that word means. And then I offered her my hand to help her up. And when she touched my hand, it sparked. And it hurt a little, but then I was back here again.”

“Quick,” said Darielle, her eyes wide and bright with excitement. “Let me see if I can follow your link this time.” She placed her trembling hands on his forehead while everyone watched with wide eyes. The room was so quiet Kaevin could hear his heart beating in his ears. But her hands fell away as she sagged in defeat. “Nothing—still a wall. She must have a very powerful ward. Perhaps this uncle of hers has some strong powers.”

“Could it be because she’s so far away?” asked Graely. “She could be beyond the mountains with that much snow.”

“No,” Darielle replied. “Distance alone couldn’t cause a complete block like that. It must be some kind of ward, so I can’t see her. But we’d almost completed the drawing when Kaevin transported.” She handed it to Kaevin. “Do we have it now? Does this look like her?”

He stared at the picture, his heart warming at the sight. “Yes. This is her. This is Alora.” He liked the way her name sounded on his lips. When his father reached for the drawing, Kaevin found himself reluctant to let it go.

Taking it from Kaevin’s hands, Graely studied the graphite sketch. “Glare!” he exclaimed with wide eyes, handing the parchment to Raelene.

She gaped at the paper, which trembled in her hands. “It’s... it’s *Wendelle*.”

Graely retrieved the parchment, holding it high so the rest of the council could view it. All who were old enough to remember Wendelle agreed the girl looked much the same as Raelene’s daughter.

“Is it possible that she’s come back to life somehow?” asked Graely.

“But what about her eyes?” asked Kaevin. “Her eyes aren’t green. And she’s young—perhaps sixteen or seventeen.”

“Or fifteen,” croaked Raelene, dropping to a chair. “She must be fifteen. That’s the only explanation. Wendelle had a baby.”

Uproar arose between the council members. Graely’s hands were on his hips as his voice rose above the clamor.

“We have to find her. It’s even more important now. We must bring her home... to her grandmother.”

Alora dreamed of Kaevin again. But Monday morning dawned, and the weekend was over. School and responsibilities intruded on her dreams and daydreams. Life as usual. Her uncle drove her to the bus stop. She hadn’t told him about seeing Kaevin outside in the snow, and it seemed too late to tell him now. Would she see a different man every time she got her hair wet? She chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Charles asked, pulling to a stop beside the bus.

“I’m just glad I’m not on the swim team.”

“Yes, I guess that could be a problem. Especially if one of those guys showed up in bodily form.” He smirked, hugging her goodbye. “Seriously though, I hope maybe we can find a way to avoid all those visits. I’m thinking about you, okay? Have a good day.”

“You too, Uncle Charles.”

She jumped out and ran to greet her best friend on the bus. Close buddies for as long as she could remember, they were almost inseparable, although she’d outgrown her friend by about eight inches over the last four years.

“Hey, Beth.”

“Hey, Alora. Are you going to the dance on Friday? I know I said I wasn’t going, but Mom changed her mind and said I could go. So now you’ve just got to go. Please say yes.” Her imploring brown eyes, dancing with excitement, were framed by shoulder-length auburn curls.

“Maybe I can go. I’ll check with Uncle Charles.”

“You know your uncle will let you go. He’ll do anything you ask him to do. And guess who’s going to be there?” She lowered her voice. “Wesley Franks.”

“I don’t care whether he’s going to be there.”

“Last week you told me you thought he was the hottest guy you’d ever seen. And Riley said he said the same thing about you.”

“He said I was a hot guy?”

“You know what I mean.” Beth’s eyes narrowed. “What’s going on? You don’t like him anymore? Did you hear something bad about him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I changed my mind. I think maybe I’d like an older guy.”

“But doesn’t your uncle have a rule that you can’t date a guy more than a grade ahead of you?”

“I’m only talking about what I like, not who I want to date.”

“There aren’t that many guys to choose from at our school. I guess maybe Justin; he’s a cute senior. I think he’s going with Shanna Wallace right now.”

“Uhhh, I don’t know. I think I’ve decided I like longer hair.”

“Like Eric Matheson?”

“No. Even longer than Eric’s. Long enough to put in a ponytail. And wavy. And green eyes.”

“Okay, now I know you’re just making someone up. Or are you talking about a movie star or some guy you saw in a magazine?”

“No, it’s just someone I dreamed up. And don’t roll your eyes at me.”

“Okay, but unless you’re on a date with Dream Boy, will you go to the dance Friday night?”

“Sure. Why not?” But she’d rather be with Dream Boy if she actually had the option. Kaevin. She’d never heard the name before, but she really liked it. She wondered, not for the first time, where he lived. And why wasn’t he surprised he kept materializing in front of her? Her life seemed a bit surreal after her strange weekend. On the one hand, she was a normal fifteen-year-old girl, awkward and embarrassed, having crushes and gossiping with her best friend. On the other hand, she’d been miraculously visited twice by some cute guy and once by her supposedly evil father, and had discovered she wasn’t related to her aunt and uncle. But that episode in the snow... now that was something.

“So, what’s his name?”

“Who?”

“You were smiling. You must have been thinking about your dream boy. Why did you suddenly decide you liked long hair? You’ve always said you liked it short before. Were you watching some movie that made you change your mind? No, forget that—you never watch movies. It must have been some book. Why am I not surprised?”

“You know me too well.” Alora scrambled to change the subject. “So, what are you wearing to the dance?”

“Listen to me, Jireo. She must be my soulmate,” insisted Kaevin. “Why else would it spark when we touched?”

Jireo’s gaze rose to the sky as he crossed his arms. “Did anyone on the council say that’s what it meant?”

“No, but perhaps they simply weren’t paying attention. They were all excited about her being Wendelle’s daughter.”

“Yeah, about that. Who’s her father?”

“Well, no one said it out loud in the council meeting, but everyone thinks her father must be—”

“Vindrake? That’s what I thought, too. Who else could it be? Will that make her partially evil? Can you inherit that?”

“It’s not possible. She’s totally innocent.”

“And you know this because she spoke, what? *Five* words to you?”

“Seven words, actually. But I can sense these things with my gift, you know. And I could tell by looking in her eyes.”

“I thought you said her eyes were a weird color.”

“Not weird—just unusual.” Kaevin tried to squelch the urge to punch his friend. He imagined Alora in his mind and added softly, “Beautiful.”

“I think you like her because she’s the first girl you’ve ever seen without clothes on. And I won’t pretend I’m not a little bit jealous.” Jireo grinned. “Please, please... can’t you simply do a description so Darielle would add a little more to that sketch she drew?”

Kaevin started to give an angry retort, but when Jireo dropped to his knees and clasped his hands in prayerful pleading, he laughed instead.

“I don’t even think about that,” he lied, bending over to pick up a rock, hoping to hide the rush of blood to his face. He threw the rock as far as he could. “I’m angry they won’t let me go on the expedition to find her. I believe I should be the one.”

“You know why they won’t let you go. For one thing, you’re the next clan leader, so they have to keep you safe. And, if she transports you again, they need to question you. Anyway, we both get to go question the shires close by, even though we don’t have the minimum eighteen years. Arista threw a fit over that when I announced it at supper last night.”

“Ha! Your little sister could never stand being left out of a quest. Perhaps it’s because we teased her all her life with impossible stories of the great adventures we encountered every time we left the house together.”

“What? After she tormented me at every possible opportunity? You don’t believe she deserved a bit of teasing?” Jireo adopted an expression of deep injury, before bursting into laughter. Kaevin knew, for all his harsh words and bantering, Jireo was deeply attached to his sister.

“She shouldn’t be jealous of this particular journey, for we will find nothing in the nearby shires. I already know she’s located somewhere with a lot of snow on the ground. Alora can’t possibly be in any of the close shires. Wendelle probably hid her somewhere as far as possible from Vindrake.”

“Well, Master Soulmate.” Jireo bowed in mock humility. “We’d best get these snares set and hurry back, or we’ll miss the chance of going on even the close scouting trips. And I, for one, plan to make up a grand story to tell Arista if we don’t experience one in real life.”

Alora made a new habit of wearing a swimsuit when she took a shower—just in case. But Kaevin didn’t appear during her brief showers on Monday or Tuesday night. She kind of missed him, although she was relieved her father hadn’t reappeared. She planned to wait as long as possible before deciding whether to meet with her father. After all, she was only a sophomore in high school. She wasn’t even close to being a grownup. She had plenty of time to make these adult-type decisions.

All this stuff hadn't helped her confidence at all. She was already taller than all the other girls and most of the boys in her class. Her uncle wouldn't let her date a boy who was more than a year older, so dating one of the tall senior boys was out of the question. Discovering her mother and father had a strange, violent background and she had some freaky power she didn't understand only added more insecurity. Kaevin was the first boy who'd ever made her feel special, and he'd done it with hardly any words. It was in his eyes.

She'd developed a pounding headache that hadn't responded to repeated large doses of ibuprofen. It seemed to be draining her appetite and energy as well. She reasoned that a long relaxing shower might make her feel better. If there was the added benefit she might get to see Kaevin's beautiful green eyes again, that was okay with her.

She stood under the hot water, letting it pound on her tight shoulders. Then she moved to let the water flow over her head, trying to relax her body. She tried to empty her mind, but she couldn't do it. Her head was flooded with memories of Kaevin standing over her in the snow and reaching out for her hand. She could picture him in exacting detail. The waves in his hair. The deep green of his eyes. Abruptly, she realized she was actually seeing his image, not imagining it. She kept her eyes shut, knowing he would disappear if she opened them.

She knew the moment he recognized her. His gaze was intense and she thought she read her name on his lips. But something was wrong—she could tell. His eyes looked glazed-over. His face was pale. His eyelids closed.

"Kaevin!" she called. His eyes fluttered open again, and he blinked as if trying to focus. "What's wrong?" Again his eyes flashed open, but immediately drifted closed. In a panic, she opened her eyes, but he was gone. Her heart was racing and her headache was back with a vengeance. He was sick and he needed her.

She tried to reason with herself. *Why do I think I can help him if he's sick? I don't have any medical knowledge.* But she couldn't overcome the conviction she needed to bring him back to her.

Graely felt a tug on his arm.

"There's nothing else you can do right now." Laethan pulled him away from his son's bedside. "Nordamen has warded him, so he can't be transported. I'm certain he'll recover with enough rest, as long as Alora can't move him. Tell me again how the symptoms started."

"Two nights ago, he complained of a headache. By last night, his head hurt so badly he refused to eat dinner; he went to sleep early. And this morning, he didn't have the strength to get up. I thought it was simply a lack of energy because he hadn't eaten. So I forced him to sit up and drink a bit of broth. He slept most of the day, and whenever he woke up he'd swear he was feeling better."

Graely glanced toward Kaevin and lowered his voice. "But I don't believe it was true—I think he said it so I wouldn't worry. By this evening, I couldn't rouse him. He keeps muttering about Alora in his sleep."

"Well, the last thing he needs now is another visit with Alora. In his debilitated state, that might be enough to kill him."

“But what’s wrong with him? Do you believe it’s the plague?”

Laethan shook his head slowly as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I simply don’t know. He doesn’t have the rash as of yet. But he has the headache and fever, and he’s weakening steadily. Still, he’s young and strong—he should recover.”

“I fear I shouldn’t accompany the expedition. We leave in two days. If he’s not improving by then, I cannot take the risk.”

“We’ll do everything we can. Surely he’ll show some signs of recovery.”

“His friend, Jireo, is begging to see him. Do you believe Kaevin is contagious?”

“I truly can’t be certain. I shouldn’t even allow *you* to be with him, but I cannot deny his own father. However, I recommend you bathe in the sulfur springs when you leave here. I’ll allow Jireo to visit as soon as we’re confident it isn’t the plague.”

“I wonder if Alora has attempted to transport him again.”

“We’ll never know. Nordamen’s wards will prevent the transport. He’s spoken her name several times, but I believe that’s delirium.”

“Please. You must save him. He’s all I have, since Denalae died giving birth to him.” He blinked at his threatening tears. “If I were to lose him, I don’t believe I’d have the will to carry on.”

“I’m doing everything I know to do. But the clan needs you.” Laethan gripped his shoulder. “Especially knowing we must prevent Vindrake from obtaining Alora as a weapon. Little good will result from saving Kaevin from this illness should Vindrake find Alora before we do. If that happens, his life will surely be forfeit, along with the rest of the clan.”

Wednesday morning, Alora woke with her head pounding so hard her eyes refused to focus.

“It started maybe Monday night. It wasn’t too bad until last night,” she told her uncle. “I’ve been taking ibuprofen like crazy. That usually works for me, but this morning it’s even worse. I can’t see straight, and I feel kind of dizzy.”

“Maybe it’s a migraine,” said Charles. “I’ll go to town this afternoon and get something from the pharmacy. You stay in bed today and try to rest. Are you missing anything crucial at school? Maybe a test?”

“I’m okay as long as I don’t miss on Friday. I’ve got a big Chemistry test. Actually, the review is on Thursday, so I really need to go tomorrow.”

“I already called the school. Did you call Beth?”

“Yes. She’s coming by after school with my assignments so I won’t get behind. I think I’m going to try taking Tylenol with the ibuprofen and drinking something with caffeine. That’s what Beth said she does when she gets a migraine.”

“Beth can’t drive yet, can she?”

“No. I guess she’ll just ride over on Petra.”

“Can I get you something else to eat or drink?”

“No. I drank a cup of tea already. I’m going to try Beth’s formula and drink a Coke. But I’ll get it myself. Maybe I’ll feel better if I sit by the fire.”

An hour after swallowing four ibuprofen tablets and two Tylenol along with a coke, Alora’s head was no better. She retreated to her bedroom and closed the shades to darken

the room. Sleeping fitfully, off and on, images of Kaevin dominated her dreams. A sense of dread settled in her stomach. He'd seemed so ill in her last vision. Was her compulsive worrying causing this awful headache? Maybe she needed to try some meditation or relaxation exercises. She grabbed her laptop with the intention of searching for methods of meditation, but the letters swam on the screen before her face. Admitting defeat, she put the computer aside, struggling to ignore her throbbing head before slipping back into welcome unconsciousness.

"Alora? Hey, Sweetie. Beth is on her way here, so I'm heading into town. I'll be back in an hour and a half or so, and I'll bring something for your migraine."

"Uhhh, okay," she mumbled, gazing at him through sleep-glazed eyes. "Thanks, Uncle Charles."

"Do you feel any better at all? And are you hungry?"

"No and no. I'm definitely not hungry."

"You need to drink something, though. You haven't touched this water." His scolding tone didn't hide his concern.

"I'll drink some water. At least, I'll try." Pushing up on her elbows, she managed two swallows before her head flopped back onto the pillows.

"Okay, I'm leaving you here with Boze until Beth comes. I won't lock the back door, so she can come inside when she gets here."

"Thanks." She squeezed her eyes against a new spike of pain as she tried in vain to relax. She stared at the ceiling while the room spun around her, forcing her to close her eyes against the vertigo. Unbidden, thoughts of Kaevin assaulted her mind again. A strong feeling of... what was it? Worry? Fear? Foreboding? Hopelessness? Her breaths came quickly, and the room swirled around her. Her heart raced, her head pounding with every beat. She moaned with the pain and fought the nausea welling in her stomach. How could she be nauseous? She hadn't eaten anything. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe she needed to force herself to eat something.

She swung her legs around to the side of the bed, gradually pushing into a sitting position. Her head was throbbing, but no worse than when she was lying down. She stood, bracing herself against the bed, and took a few wobbly steps toward the kitchen. Just short of the door, her knees gave way, and she collapsed to the floor. She might have hurt something during the fall, but she couldn't tell because her head demanded all her attention. Lacking the strength to move, she lay where she'd landed, drifting in and out of consciousness.

"Alora!"

She heard Beth's voice through a dense fog.

"Wesley! Help me!"

She was vaguely aware Beth and someone else were lifting her by her elbows and walking her toward the bed. Over the hammering of her head, she was overwhelmed with desperate thoughts of Kaevin. She pried her eyes open, struggling against the arms propelling her forward.

"No. Wait." Her voice sounded weak in her ears. "Please don't take me to the bed. I have to go outside."

Beth and Wesley exchanged a troubled glance. “Alora, it’s cold outside. There are two more inches of fresh snow.”

“Please. Please, it’s important. It’s a matter of life or death, I think.”

“You’re not even making sense,” said Beth. “Did you even notice Wesley came with me today?”

Alora tried to focus her eyes on the tall boy holding her right arm. “Please, Wesley. I have to go outside. If you don’t help me, I’ll crawl out there myself.”

“I think she’s hallucinating,” whispered Wesley.

“Let’s humor her,” replied Beth. “Once she steps out the door and the cold hits her, she’ll come back to bed willingly enough.”

With her two friends supporting her weight on either side, she made it to the back door. Wesley kicked it open, and she pushed outside, into the freezing cold.

“Don’t you want your coat and boots?” asked Beth.

“Ah!” She cried out as an icpick drove into her head. “Please. We have to hurry, or I’m going to pass out.”

“Where do you want to go?” asked Wesley, jutting out a determined chin.

“Anywhere out in the yard, in the middle of the snow.”

“Okay! Hang on!” Suddenly, she was scooped into his arms and carried out into the fresh untrodden snow. “Here?”

“Yes, lay me down. Right here,” she croaked.

He lowered her to the snow. She welcomed the numbing cold of the snow on her bare feet and arms, seeping quickly through her flannel pajamas and distracting her from the pain in her head. Again, her mind flooded with her last vision of Kaevin, his eyes glazed with sickness, barely able to focus on her.

Wesley yelped. “Who’s that?”

“Where did he come from? Is he alive?” asked Beth.

Alora cracked open her eyes, but a wall of snow blocked her vision. “Where is he?” she gasped.

“Right next to you. On your left.”

With the last of her energy, Alora stretched her arm out blindly across the snow. She felt an arm and followed it down to grasp his limp hand. And then the world was black.

