

THE ULTIMATE CONFRONTATION

IN THE OLEVE GROOVE



ROSA VETRANO

M. 15

In The Olive Grove

Rosa (Roe) Vetrano

IN THE OLIVE GROVE
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“I, Myself, will prepare your way, levelling mountains and hills; I will break down bronze gates and smash their iron bars. I will give you treasures from dark secret places. Then you will know that I Am the Lord and the God of Israel has called you by name.”

*Isaiah 45:2-3
(Good News Bible Translation)*

For

Leandra

Christopher

Nicolas

Frankie

Joey

You stole my heart from Day One

and for

Everyone who needs a hug today

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Appreciations

Well, when I first began this project some time ago, the road seemed so very long and winding, with sharp curves and steep inclines. Oh...and lonely, as you sit and stare at a computer screen with only your own thoughts and drained imagination for companions!

But now that I can look back without panicking, I realize, as I defiantly eye the obstacles that were once frightening, that above all, I could not have managed to get this far, without the gift of grace. The road may have been long and twisted, but along the way, I was blessed with people who, each in their own manner, propelled me onward and helped make this literary quest an amazing adventure.

So I bow my head, and smile like crazy with sincerest gratitude, to those who firmly believed in this story from the start in what sometimes seemed an uphill battle! Without their unwavering support and encouragement – this project might have stalled halfway up the hill.

To *Leandra Terrazzano*, my lovely niece, and my solid sounding board through and through, whose invaluable insight and encouragement always kept me inspired.

Anthony Castelli, who invested more than time and energy in helping me keep this project, in one creative form or another, moving forward.

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Joe Sisto, writer and more than legal advisor, offered the first unbiased opinion and encouragement that this story was worth telling.

To my *precious mother* for her enduring and unconditional support and

my *loving family* and *good friends* who never missed an opportunity to encourage, challenge and rile me onward!

Thank you all, for having my back. I am profoundly grateful.

Personal Note

Have you ever had one of those days when the world around you comes crashing down and you suddenly find yourself at the bottom of a cold, dark pit wondering how you even got there?

It was on one of those days that I remember thinking, “Lord, I *really* need a hug today. Could You *please* just come down for a minute? Cos I could really use that hug!” With that mental plea, an image flashed in my mind and warmed my heart. That image would become the inspiration for *In The Olive Grove* (ITOG).

It has since been a long, slow journey, but here we are.

Initially, the plan was to write a screenplay and produce a film. I began taking steps in that direction but during that time, on more than one occasion, various people suggested that I write the story as a novel. Yet every time the topic arose, I would feel a fever coming on! I back peddled at the thought of sitting down to write and write, to create a novel *after* having put great effort and time toward the screenplay and film notion. (And being an avid cyclist, I back peddled pretty darn fast and far!)

However, as you may know, the heavens have a way of bringing you back to where you need to be until you get it. Time and again, the idea of writing ITOG as a novel seemed to pop up around me relentlessly. Eventually I capitulated. I can’t tangibly explain how changing creative directions seemed to be the right thing to do. It just did. I guess I finally “got it”!

And so the image triggered by my desire for a much-needed divine hug – an image I still look forward to seeing on the big screen someday – is first being born as a novel. Whenever I look back to where it began, I can’t help but think – only by the Grace of God. Because I can’t imagine having accomplished it any other way from where I was standing then.

And so, at last, *In The Olive Grove* – the novel – is complete.

My father was a wonderful storyteller, and as I like to explain, ITOG may not be a Shakespearean novel, fancy or flowery, but I truly hope that I have succeeded, even a smidgen, in telling a story as well as my father did.

My deepest desire is that at the very least, this fantastical story entertains...and at the most, it inspires.

Time is precious to us all. I thank you sincerely, for sharing a part of yours with me, by sharing in the adventure of *In The Olive Grove*.

Roe 

CHAPTER ONE

The Dagger

Daynia rushed out of the elevator, and excitedly pushed her way past the small crowd hurriedly heading in the same direction. “So sorry! Sorry!” she shouted, at the same time as she tried to stuff a handful of papers into her messenger bag.

Without missing a beat, she half-ran, half-skipped across the bright, sky lit lobby. Her spike heels clicked on the light-grey speckled granite floor, as she fought with the last few papers refusing to comply with her demands to stay in the bag.

The middle-aged security guard stood intently beneath the elegant 3D *Global Timeline* company logo, mounted on the aurora Marmarino wall. With a watchful eye, he scanned the dozens of people rushing to leave their workplace. His eyes crinkled in amusement as he noticed Daynia talk back to her unruly papers. He smiled at the dark-haired beauty as she hurried towards him. She is definitely in a serious rush today, he mused. But then Daynia was usually running off somewhere or another on an assignment as an associate writer for the world-renowned magazine, and she was his favourite.

From the day she began working as a junior writer three years ago, Daynia never once missed an opportunity to smile at him or ask how he and his family were doing. Many of the busy professionals who passed him each day saw him as a forgotten fixture as they busily fought deadlines in a world governed by expediency. But not Daynia, she made him feel his story was as important as the latest inventor to grace their magazine cover.

His eyes sparkled with genuine interest as the human whirlwind flew by. “Did they say yes?”

“Yes! Mr. Lagamme!” Daynia exclaimed excitedly as she grabbed the ID card hanging on her belt and tapped it to the turnstile screen. The double glass partition slid open smoothly.

“Congratulations! I’m sure it’ll be your best story yet,” Mr. Lagamme said with genuine interest.

“Thank you!” Daynia responded with a smile that beamed light as she sailed through the glass doors on her way out to the employee parking lot. She was just as excited about her assignment as she was about getting home to see her big brother.

* * * * *

Jake stepped into the living room of the home he shared with his younger sister when he wasn’t away on a tour of duty. He breathed in deeply, pausing just inside the door. The warm scent of lavender brought a smile to his lips. Daynia loved the soft scent and throughout the summer, vases filled with lavender flowers transformed their home into an indoor garden with a delicate scent; a scent that reminded him of love. He was home. Although it had only been the two of them for many years, this was a home suffused with love...and lots of lavender, he chuckled to himself.

Jake dropped his military duffel bag beside the soft leather couch. Still holding a bag of groceries in his left arm, he looked to the top of the mantelpiece, filled with family photos. He stepped toward it, always the first thing he did whenever he returned on leave. He stood quietly, gazing at every picture that lined the mantelpiece, grateful to be to be home. He missed Daynia and the comforts of home when he was away and this was his personal greeting ritual. He would stand in front of their life story, reliving moments of change, laughter, and even sadness captured in images over the last fifteen years. For a fleeting instant, his expression grew sombre. Their beautiful family of four shown in the first photos, tragically and too quickly became two, painfully evident in most of the later pictures. He noted Daynia had replaced a couple with newer shots from his last leave when they had shared her favourite treat, frozen chocolate yogurt topped with every possible kind of chocolate. Jake laughed out loud. His little sister could be such a gorging when it came to chocolate.

His expression grew serious again as he leaned forward to pick up a framed photo. It was the last picture they had taken as a family. Daynia was so

young and his parents so happy and so in love. He sighed, realizing how much he still missed them. Yet, despite the hole that had ripped through their hearts when their parents died, he and Daynia had survived. Jake touched the faces of his parents. “You’d be proud of how Daynia has grown up,” he whispered, feeling like a proud parent himself. It was a role he assumed willingly the moment he and Daynia became orphans following the fatal car accident that had claimed the lives of their parents.

Jake ran his fingers through his dark crew cut hair, taking a deep slow breath, suddenly feeling exhausted from the last six months on duty and the long trip home. He turned to make his way to the kitchen when a particular photo of Daynia, taken the day they visited the Trapezium, caught his eye. In it, she was hanging upside down over the safety net. He smiled, remembering the incident and how funny it had been and how much he and Pastor Whelan had laughed hysterically.

The memory reminded him to make a mental note to visit the pastor, who had become Daynia and Jake’s family following the loss of their parents. Jake felt indebted and thankful for the pastor’s support and friendship over the years. Having just turned eighteen, he had pleaded with Pastor Whelan to help him find a way to stay with his sister. He couldn’t bear to lose her too. Pastor Whelan had been instrumental in keeping the siblings together, but more than that, he became a pillar of strength in the wake of their family tragedy.

Jake picked up the Trapezium photo and laughed out loud, recalling how Daynia, ever the daredevil, screamed at the top of her lungs when she managed, somehow, to get herself hooked upside down on the swinging bar, her foot holding her for a short moment before she lost her grip and dropped to the safety net.

Yes, Daynia could be a handful, Jake thought, affection for his sister sending warm pulses into his heart. His mood slipped over to the bright side as he set the picture down and walked into the kitchen, laying the grocery bag on the counter as he prepared to cook her favourite dish.

* * * * *

Daynia felt she was going to boil over with excitement. She just received a new assignment, one she'd coveted for some time. To top it off, she knew her big brother Jake would be waiting for her at home. She threw her messenger bag onto the passenger side and was just about to slide into the driver's seat when she dropped her keys. She scolded herself good-naturedly. Nothing could upset her now. Not when Jake was home. She missed him terribly when he was deployed and worried endlessly.

Since the loss of their parents, he had become brother, mother and father to his little sister, forgoing his own dreams to provide for Daynia. Jake had always dreamt of studying architecture. Instead, he left school to work full-time when he was only eighteen, prior to joining the military – all to make sure he and Daynia remained united.

Daynia had been waiting six long months to see her brother, begging him to make the trip down when he was almost sidetracked with a special assignment. She chuckled as she drove out of the parking lot. Jake would make her favourite dish tonight – he always did. It had become their own special tradition to celebrate his return home. Daynia absent-mindedly bit her upper lip. The thought of his scrumptious lasagna casserole had her mouth watering. Glancing into the rear-view mirror, she caught sight of the police cruiser and immediately jerked the car to a slower speed. The chain of her colourful charms with the words FAITH, LOVE & HOPE, hanging from the mirror tinkled as the crystal charms knocked against each other.

“Whoops!” There was nothing worse than being obvious about slowing down when you've exceeded the speed limit, Daynia thought, but she realized she was too excited to be careful. “Rats!” She glanced in the rear-view mirror again and watched the cruiser turn off the road. She sighed with relief before pressing the voice activation system on her car.

“Call J-A-K-E,” she said purposefully.

The voice confirmed, “Call Jake. Is that correct?”

“YES!” Daynia shouted back at the voice from nowhere. “She” always asked that twice. “I couldn't pronounce it more clearly,” she threw back at the mystery voice.

“C’mon Jake! Pick up!” But the ringing gave way to voice mail. “Hey J! I’m so, so sorry. Our meeting ran late but you’ll never believe where my next assignment is!” Daynia paused for emphasis before blurting out with excitement, “Israel! Can you believe it! It’s about tour security. Can’t wait to tell you all about it. Maybe you could join me, just like we planned. Can’t wait to see you! And BTW, I’m starving!”

As Daynia clicked the button to return to the music, her attention was drawn to a young boy standing on the sidewalk up ahead, staring at her as her car approached. He seemed to be holding something that glowed in his hand, his head turning to follow her as she drove past. Mesmerized, Daynia swung her head backward to look at him, nearly hitting the car in front attempting to change lanes. The driver blasted his horn as he sped up, narrowly avoiding a collision.

“Sorrrry!” Daynia mumbled, realizing how close and careless that was – and she wasn’t a careless driver. “What the heck D! That was stupid! Look ahead!” she scolded herself as she rounded the corner, approaching an intersection. Again, her attention was suddenly drawn to that same boy – standing there, something glowing in his hand.

“Wha...t?” she whispered in confusion, her eyes fixed on the young boy as she drove by, wondering how he got there so fast, and wondering – what was he holding that glowed so brightly? In a déjà vu episode, Daynia’s attention was drawn so hypnotically to the boy that she failed to see the pedestrian crossing at the intersection. As before, she slammed on her brakes, just in time, barely avoiding hitting the man crossing in front of her car.

The pedestrian jumped back, stared at her angrily and slammed his fist on the car hood. “Watch where you’re going idiot!” he shouted at her.

Daynia’s hand flew up to her mouth, “So sorry!” Two near misses in two minutes was way too close, she thought anxiously, her heart beating wildly. She raised her shoulders apologetically to the pedestrian, then quickly glanced in her mirror, but the cause of her distraction had disappeared. She swung her head around to the back looking through the rear window. Daynia frowned, puzzled. There was no young boy and no glowing object.

“Of course!” she reprimanded herself, “he couldn’t get there that fast.”

She shook her head and laughed. “I’m just distracted because of Jake’s arrival.” She paused, feeling silly. “Yes, that’s what it is.” The honking of the car behind her pushed away her apprehensive thoughts. She raised her hand. “All right, all right, I’m going,” she muttered, making her way through the intersection, smiling as her thoughts turned back to Jake.

* * * * *

A clanking sound echoed from the living room. Jake glanced up, “lil sis, you’re on time! There’s a surprise!” He stopped slicing eggplants and wiped his hand with a paper towel. Still holding onto the knife, he walked into the adjoining room. He smiled expectantly, anxious to hear his little sister’s usual joyous shrieks – a delightful sound he always looked forward to. He stepped into the living room, his eyebrows raised questioningly. It was empty and eerily quiet.

Behind him a shadow loomed, increasingly larger, as ragged wings spread out and then retracted.

“D?” Jake asked, feeling inexplicably uneasy. There was no reply, only the heavy void of silence. Trying to ignore the tense feeling, Jake chuckled, “You know you could never hide from me even when...” Suddenly the hairs on the back of his neck stood up on end. He turned quickly but it was too late. A shadowy figure of a man slammed into Jake with unnatural force and sent him flying across the room, causing the knife to slip out of his hand.

Jake reacted instinctively. He jumped up and launched a counterattack. He threw a strong punch at his strange assailant, nearly overpowering him, completely unaware of the large, dark, ragged wings spreading in the shadows behind him. A dagger with a jewel-encrusted snake-handle glittered, as reflections from the approaching dusk light bounced off its blood-red, ruby stones. Jake spun his head around, suddenly realizing someone else was in the room, baffled and angry he had been deceived. Before he could react, his face tensed in shock. Jake felt the glistening blade sink deep into his back. He groaned as vicious laughter reverberated throughout the house.

He struggled to keep from falling, but the wound was too severe. As Jake

fell to his knees, images of his smiling sister floated into his mind. He fought against the pain and weakness bearing down on him, when he heard a car drive up. “Daynia,” he whispered in alarm. He had to warn her. Jake desperately struggled to get to his feet, fighting the urge to lose consciousness. He rose unsteadily, drawing strength from every fibre of his being, despite the deep wound and profuse bleeding. He faltered as he pressed his hand against the wound and staggered toward the man blocking his way. “NO! Don’t come...” He gasped in mid-sentence as the blade sank in deep for a second time. Jake grunted and fell to one knee beside the coffee table. His hand dropped against the maple wood top as he tried to support himself, feeling the energy flow out of his body as he weakened. Jake’s arm reached toward the door as he heard the keys jiggle and the lock click. He wanted to shout, but unable to utter a sound, realized it was too late.

The door swung open as Daynia stepped inside, “Hey big bro...” Her eyes widened in shock at the sight of Jake down on his knee. The man leaning over him looked up and smiled cruelly as he yanked the blade out of Jake’s back. “JAKE!!!” Daynia screamed, fear and panic gripping her as tears welled in her eyes. As Jake’s first attacker approached her, she reacted instinctively, swinging her messenger bag at his face, still screaming Jake’s name. Daynia turned to run to her brother, her mind reeling. She had to save him. Oh God, she had to save him!

As she moved toward Jake, the intruder tried to grab her and they toppled to the floor together. Frantic, she kicked at him, trying to crawl her way to Jake. Tears flowed freely as her brother fell onto the other knee and then forward with a thump.

“JAKE!!! JAKE!!!” The man with the snake-handled dagger stepped over Jake’s fallen body and headed toward a sobbing Daynia.

In a final valiant effort, Jake managed to push himself up onto his elbows, desperate to save his little sister. But he could only watch helplessly as his assailant grabbed Daynia by the hair and dragged her toward the staircase. Daynia kicked and screamed, fiercely trying to fight him off. Despite using every martial arts technique she had ever learned, she was easily overpowered by the strangely strong assailant.

Daynia stared in horror as Jake fell for the last time, a pool of blood oozing rapidly around him. She knew now – she was losing him. *Oh God, she was really losing him.* Daynia felt a cold numbness strangle her heart. Her terrified eyes locked with Jake's. His lips seemed to move in a hint of a smile. *"How could this happen? Oh God, no! This can't be happening!"* her mind bellowed.

The world around her screeched to a halt as Jake's eyes closed forever. Everything shifted into slow motion. Daynia stared, stupefied, at her brother as she was dragged roughly up the staircase, oblivious to pain as one stair after another slammed against her side. As the terrifying reality closed in like a dark shadow, Daynia lost her will to fight.

The cold numbness gripping her heart spread slowly throughout her body. The man with the snake-handled dagger hauled Daynia through the bedroom door and flung her onto the bed. He glared at Daynia with a vicious glint in his eyes, and a satisfied smirk on his lips. As he approached his prey, a rage such as she had never known before exploded inside Daynia. She screamed wildly and fought back violently as her aggressor jumped over her body. He pinned her down, pummeling her with his fist, finally breaking her resolve. Dazed, Daynia's head fell back. Her brother's killer leaned his face close to her ear, his glossy eyes intent and hateful. Daynia stared, wide-eyed and terrified at the red ruby jewels adorning the dagger's snake-handle as its slick, gleaming edge caressed her cheek. She held her breath as it cut into her skin, drawing a trickle of blood. "Patience and perseverance are always rewarded," the voice reeking with malice whispered before erupting into laughter that sounded far away.

As Daynia struggled to raise her head, her eyes caught a reflection in the mirror. She stared at it – the cross she had meticulously hung on the wall above the headboard. Time seemed to stop. A twinkling in the reflection suddenly distracted her. Daynia shifted her focus to the sparkling rubies in the snake-handle, bouncing off the mirror as her attacker lifted his arm. Her breath caught as what seemed like ragged wings spread out from behind her attacker's back. Daynia screamed. Darkness began to settle into her thoughts. Her head rolled back limply as she felt his breath on her face. "Devil's delight, Daynia, Daynia."

The voice reverberated in her mind, vicious, evil and mocking. The face

of the man metamorphosed into a demon as Daynia's thoughts plunged into total darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Higher

A blanket of white lay as far as the eye could see. Daynia spun in a 360 turn but everywhere, there was nothingness, only a barren frozen sea of white under a twilight sky. She swung around and around seeing nothing, the feeling of desolation overwhelming every sense, the fear stinging on every level. She looked again, turned again, hopelessness bearing down on her. Drifting snow and icy plateaus spread from beneath her feet into the horizon. She knew her heart was pounding but couldn't feel it, only the cold seeping in and the fear and anxiety as isolation swirled about her. A sudden thunderous roar echoed in the distance. Daynia swung around and watched in horror as the ominous ground blizzard rolled along the horizon, intensifying and mushrooming until it touched the sky. It rotated on itself as it crawled toward Daynia, the dark shadow of ragged wings riding the dust wave. Terrified, Daynia turned and began to run, desperate to escape as the drifting beast closed in.

Daynia woke with a scream, sitting up suddenly, droplets of sweat glistening on her forehead. Her heart pounded, the fear rippling through her bloodstream. She cupped her head in her hands to stop the pain and took a deep breath. *One thousand one, one thousand two.* Daynia counted until her racing heartbeat slowed to a normal rate. It was taking longer now to get herself under control as the nightmare became more vivid with every occurrence.

She looked over at the open suitcase on the bench, grateful for the distraction. A good night's rest had become foreign to her since she lost Jake nearly a year ago. And whatever shuteye she managed to get always ended with the same terrifying nightmare. Her gaze shifted to the alarm clock on the night table. She had been asleep for at least an hour out of sheer exhaustion, and now had less than a half hour before Alexis swung by to pick her up. Daynia stepped over to the dresser and reached for the dog tags lying in a

small crystal dish. She would be bringing Jake with her on this trip, the one they had dreamed of taking together. With her head hung low, Daynia clutched the dog tags in her closed fist. In what had become a habit, she pressed them hard against her heart as though pushing away the raw pain. She finally looked up into the mirror and caught a glimpse of her own hollow eyes staring back at her.

Daynia looked away quickly as she drew the dog tag chain over her head and tucked it inside her blouse. A sad sigh escaped her lips as the cell phone buzzed, startling her. She looked at the number, before responding with a quick “down in a sec.” With that, she pulled open a drawer and pulled out several pairs of sport crew socks and stuffed them in her open luggage resting on the bench by the bed.

“Plenty,” she mumbled to herself as she closed the bag and grunted, as she pulled it upright. Daynia turned to close the drawer but as she did, the items inside shifted and several bottles of anti-depression medication rolled around, bumping against the side of a cross tucked into the corner. Daynia stared at its simple wooden shape for an instant before slamming the drawer shut, her eyes glancing into the mirror, zooming in on the discoloration above her bed, a clear outline of where a cross once hung.

She grabbed her bolero jean jacket neatly folded over the side of the couch and headed out the door, rolling her luggage ahead of her. Alexis stood waiting for her, leaning against the cab beside the open door to the back seat. She watched her best friend make her way down the walkway and felt a little sad. Since they had lost Jake, Daynia had lost her zest for life. She still laughed easily and seemed happy, but it was a practiced laughter that failed to reach her eyes.

Although Daynia walked with determination and confidence, Alexis knew she was lost, her world spun out of control. She kept to herself a lot, stopped attending church and kept her distance from Pastor Whelan. The Bible she once kept by her bedside was gone, as was any reminder of the faith that had been Jake and Daynia’s strength.

Alexis snapped out of her thoughts as Daynia rolled the bag toward the trunk. While the cab driver stowed the luggage inside the trunk, the two young

women settled into the backseat.

Daynia rolled down her window gazing at her home, which had been Jake's too. It felt different now, just a hollow and lonely place. She turned to Alexis, "I just want to make one stop, okay?" Alexis smiled knowingly and nodded. She wanted to say goodbye to Jake as well.

Daynia turned back to stare out the window as the car made its way up one of the many winding roads through the cemetery. Alexis pointed out the way to the driver, "Right there, another left and we've arrived."

The car pulled to a stop under the shade of a large oak tree that covered half the road. Daynia stepped out of the car, paused and let the breeze caress her face, soothing her. She closed her eyes for an instant, mustering the courage she needed – as she did each time she visited. The tree-lined grounds, with flowers and well-tended lawns were beautiful and peaceful, but this place was Daynia's hell.

* * * * *

Daynia watched the ray of sunlight bounce off the clouds, marvelling at the landscape – a landscape where peaks and valleys of puffs offered entertaining images if you used just a little imagination. "Chariot," Daynia whispered, always ready to see beyond the practical. Her forehead leaned against the outer edge of the airplane window as she smiled softly, remembering playing 'name the cloud' with Jake when she was younger. It was during the only long-distance trip she had taken with her brother as part of a cross-country, church-sponsored youth retreat.

She had been so excited about her first airplane ride. More so because Jake had told her that since they would be flying closer to heaven, the clouds were more beautiful, with magical treasures hidden in the amazing shapes.

"What do you see?" Jake pointed to a distant cloud formation lining the horizon, hues of gold flashing through as the sun shone brightly.

Daynia's nose pressed against the windowpane. "Oh! It's beautiful!" She bit her lip as she concentrated, "Gates! They look like heaven's

gates!” She turned quickly to Jake, “Is heaven that way? Are we high enough?”

Jake burst out laughing warmly. “Yes. Far off that way,” her brother’s handsome face leaned close beside hers as they both stared out into the vastness of the sky. Daynia kept her face glued to the window staring in awe.

“See lil sis?” Jake said softly. “Up here, the sun always shines bright. Down below it may be raining, but if you lift yourself higher, you’ll always see the sun. Just always go higher sis, no matter what. Okay?”

Daynia’s finger traced the shape of the cloud on the windowpane, “uh-huh,” she said, entranced, as her brother ruffled her hair and sat back. Daynia turned to look at Jake who smiled at her, before closing his eyes to rest.

Daynia turned suddenly to see a sleeping Alexis sitting next to her. It had seemed so real – just for an instant. Sadness washed over her as she watched Alexis for a moment, before turning her attention back to the clouds, hearing Jake’s voice, “Always go higher.”

She and Alexis had been friends since grade school. They had been there for each other through the awkward teenage years and into adulthood. Daynia threw a quick glance in her friend’s direction again, feeling a pang of guilt. She knew Alexis felt Jake’s loss deeply too, but she was so lost in her own torment she hadn’t done much for Alexis’ own grieving.

Over the last year, Alexis had been her rock. *But who was your rock Alex?* Daynia frowned, suddenly feeling a deep sense of remorse as she realized she had given back so little recently. She sighed softly. “Always go higher.” Jake was that kind of person. He always looked for the best, always looking up. He would have been disappointed in her, she thought sadly. “I miss you Jake,” she whispered ever so softly, “it’s just so hard,” she said, wiping away a tear. She leaned back against the headrest, her gaze turned toward Alexis. Indeed, Jake would not be proud of how she had been handling things. She shifted slightly, returning her gaze to the window and slowly fell asleep, a hint of a smile touching the corners of her lips as she felt Jake’s face close to hers.

A voice cackled into the overhead speakers, jerking Daynia awake. "... We'll be landing shortly. Please..." The voice became background noise as Daynia looked over to Alexis who was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. As the attendant's voice filled the passengers in on information about connecting flights and arrival gates, Daynia's thoughts shifted to the trip. She decided she would do better during this trip, even though she knew it would be one of the most difficult things for her to accomplish.

When she was first given the assignment to Jerusalem, she could hardly contain her excitement because it meant that she and Jake could live their lifelong dream of traveling there together. Being on assignment would cut their costs and make it possible to stay longer. An architectural enthusiast, and devout Christian, Jake was keen on visiting the churches, in particular the Church of All Nations. Daynia's eyes shut tightly as she felt the pain ripple through her heart. He would never see it she thought, her heart aching. Instead, she would make this trip for both of them – and keep their promise. She looked to Alexis who smiled, "almost there." And be a better friend, she thought to herself.

Daynia was grateful that Alexis would be her accompanying photographer on this trip. Not only best friends, the two young women were colleagues, often coupled together on assignments. They were considered a formidable team and the fact that they were friends only made working that much more enjoyable. Yes, it would be a difficult trip, but it was her chance to let things be the way they used to – for a short time anyway. She could do at least that much for her friend. "Higher," she whispered to herself.

"What?" Alexis asked over the loud noise of engines shifting as the plane began its descent.

"Hmm? Oh nothing," Daynia replied, "just thinking of the assignment."

"Should be interesting. I did some background research to prep. Some of the best security agencies are here. Will we be covering them for the entire tour?" Alexis asked.

"Didn't you check the sked?"

"I leave that up to you. I just need to know what I'll be shooting, not the

order,” Alexis said happily. “Equipment today does it all! For this, I just have to concentrate on the hunks keeping security tight on tours these days. You do the boring job of getting facts and stats,” Alexis shot Daynia a wicked smile, “I just have to keep my eyes on them. Literally.” She nudged Daynia laughing.

Daynia nudged back, “I hope they’re females.”

“Ah! Only one – the rest are mucho males!” She grinned ear to ear.

Daynia turned to stare at her for an instant, a frown creasing her forehead. “You don’t verify the schedule – but *that* you check.”

“Priorities,” Alexis said trying to sound serious as she turned to face Daynia.

Daynia pretended to glare at her before the two broke into simultaneous laughter. As the hilarity subsided Daynia looked out the window focusing on the city that came into view as the plane broke through the clouds.

Higher. I’ll just go higher.

CHAPTER THREE

Lost

Alexis glanced happily over at Daynia as the jeep they were riding in pulled up alongside four others, the bold orange signs across their top and sides advertising “Holy Land Tours.”

“Oh this is going to be awesome! Actually, just being here during Easter is awesome!” Alexis bubbled with anticipation as she snapped pictures of the hilly landscape facing them. She flung the backpack carrying the rest of her equipment over her shoulder, jumped out of the jeep and took more pictures of the craggy landscape where desert vegetation seemed to live peacefully alongside lush greenery.

Wearing her one strap backpack, Daynia headed toward the small group assembled near the entrance to a cave. Alexis followed, zigzagging and crouching, snapping photos of Daynia at various angles. She paused a moment as she shifted the viewfinder away from her eye and stared at Daynia: beautiful, bright, bold - and broken. Alexis sighed softly, “ah...D.” She had prayed often for her friend, and she prayed that this trip could bring her heart some healing but Daynia had been unresponsive to any of the religious aspects of the trip. Instead, although there was excitement, there was also emptiness. She would catch it when Daynia didn’t think Alexis was looking – before she veiled it – that hollowness in her eyes that seemed to sink deep into her soul.

With their assignment almost completed, Alexis had given up hope that the real Daynia would somehow emerge from the experience. She pursed her lips with determination. *It’ll come! I don’t know when, but D’ll be back.* She set aside her concern and focused on the matter at hand. Despite the disappointment, it had been good for Daynia to be away from home. And they had shared some laughs. Yes, she thought chuckling, that’s what she would focus on – and do an amazing job of course! She snapped a few photos of the group before joining them, taking close-ups and various angles. She stood next to Daynia who concluded her conversation with the lead tour guide and was

studying the information on the pamphlet.

“Nice.” Alexis snapped repeatedly.

Daynia glanced up in the direction Alexis trained her camera, then turned to her friend who was smiling as she happily clicked away at one of the tour guides handing out helmets equipped with mounted lights for cave exploration.

“Exactly how many shots of Riley have you taken?” she asked, rankled by her friend’s attitude. “You do remember my focus is security?” Daynia pointed toward the two men and the woman wearing dark military body gear with added protective vests, standing off to the side, keeping a watchful eye. Recent attacks on tourists had tour companies scrambling to promote security, in an effort to re-ignite the industry, which had taken a hit.

Out of cautious habit, Alexis dropped the camera lens inward by her side, raising her left shoulder slightly to secure the strap slung over it. She turned to Daynia. “That shot wasn’t about Riley,” she said defensively, “it was about how Riley was preparing the tourists.”

“So you’re going with that story?” Daynia asked dryly.

Alexis stared straight ahead. “Yes,” she replied, feigning seriousness.

A moment of silence transpired before they both burst out laughing. “Hopeless,” Daynia said as she turned to walk toward the small group of security personnel, notebook in hand. Alexis smiled as she watched her walk away. These were the moments she cherished, she thought, as she dug into her backpack for her off-camera flash.

Daynia tugged at her T-shirt, pulling it away from her sweat-drenched torso. With the sun beating down and the sweltering heat outside, it was difficult to imagine that it was going to be even stickier inside the cave with a constant temperature of approximately 72 degrees Fahrenheit, the humidity reaching the 100 percent mark. Daynia wished she could have worn shorts as she shifted in her clinging capri jeans and lightweight hiking boots. The group stood in a semi-circle attentively listening to last minute instructions about safety and equipment. “And please remember – although they allow us to take pictures in this cave, we ask that you do not train your flashes on the bat colonies. They don’t really like it and the colonies here are large. You don’t

want to have hundreds of panicked bats trying to get past you at the same time,” lead guide Julia said with a smile.

“Bats?” Alexis turned abruptly to Daynia, “she didn’t just say bats, did she?” she asked nervously. Raising her eyebrows, Daynia grinned ear to ear. “Aw c’mon!” Alexis said in alarm. Daynia suppressed her laughter as she tied a military-style camouflage bandanna around her head before slipping on the security helmet. “Aw! Seriously!” Alexis complained as she kicked the hard sand surface unaware Riley had moved toward her from the back of the group. Daynia watched amused, as he stepped in behind Alexis. This was going to be good she thought.

“Is everything all right Alexis?” he asked, startling Alexis who swung around to face him. “Is there a problem?”

“No...not at all,” Alexis stammered as she smiled sweetly.

Daynia guffawed as she walked away and shot her friend a look of exasperation.

Alexis exchanged a few words with Riley before catching up with Daynia as the group made its way toward the entrance. She tucked a small hand towel in her belt, keeping it handy to wipe off some of the moisture from the dark caves that could affect her equipment. She secured the off-camera flash to the strap she had clipped around her upper body, and grabbed the camera in her right hand.

Daynia took a deep breath, silently counting to ten to calm her nerves. Unlike some of the more commercial caves, this one did not provide any lighting other than what they brought with them. She had worked diligently over the last several months to overcome her phobia of darkness, a fear she had been unable to shake since that awful night. She could control it, so long as it wasn’t total darkness. Beyond that, the fear could become debilitating. Daynia went through her mental ritual, and unconsciously touched her raven-haired ponytail. She wiped at the sweat beading across her forehead, as much from the unbearable heat as from nervousness. She turned to signal Alexis who was busy snapping pictures from behind the security personnel. Darkness seemed to reach out toward them as they approached the entrance. Daynia’s hand flew up to touch the light mounted on her helmet and double-checked that

it was on and working, although she'd just verified it a moment ago.

Alexis caught Daynia's nervous gestures from the corner of her eye. She would stay close but in any case, she thought, the lights from everyone's helmets should provide more than enough brightness.

She took one last close-up of Ryker, the leader of the security team, standing quietly, weapon in hand, just beyond Daynia and then stepped away from the group for a different angle of the other two armed escorts.

Following the guides, the small group stepped into the outer recess of the cave where they were suddenly assaulted by a wave of cool dampness. They exchanged excited glances as they moved forward into the shadows where they lost sight of Julia. Her voice echoed in the enclosing darkness, "remember, please stay close. There are varying levels here and it's easy to get lost." Once deeper into the cave, Julia stopped, signalling everyone to gather in a semi-circle. She waited as they assembled, their lights bouncing off formations on the cave walls, casting odd shadows. The voices finally trailed off into silence as she raised her hand. "Listen," she whispered.

Suddenly, eerie, mysterious noises echoed throughout the chamber as the sound of trickling water reverberated around them. Daynia felt a chill run up her spine while others shifted uneasily. "I'm just being silly," she reminded herself, trying to shake off a foreboding sensation.

As if on cue, Julia spoke up. "Don't be spooked by the ambient sounds down here," she said reassuringly, "they can sound a little creepy sometimes." The group giggled nervously as they all advanced into the inner sanctums. Daynia and Alexis brought up the rear, followed by one of the security personnel. The humidity was stifling as they made their way up a slippery path, stepping over rocks and wet limestone. Every once in a while Alexis stopped, detached her off-camera flash and snapped pictures of the beautiful dripstone walls, then turned her lens on the security agent. They were making their way to several spot lit chambers that were the highlight of this cave. As Alexis paused again to snap a photo of a fissured wall, she motioned the security agent to move forward, allowing her more room to manoeuvre in the narrowing pathway.

Daynia looked back and waited for Alexis while the agent made her way

past Daynia. Once the photo was taken, they began to move forward, but Alexis stopped again.

“D!” she called out in a loud whisper, not quite sure why she was whispering. Daynia stopped and looked behind her, the light on her helmet shining on Alexis crouched over. Daynia backtracked. “You okay?”

“Yes. Yes,” Alexis answered hurriedly, “just got something bothering me in my boots.”

Daynia turned back toward the direction the group was headed in. “Hurry up, we can’t lose them.”

“Trying to,” Alexis replied as she stood up and pulled off her boot, hopping about on one leg, trying to keep steady. She shook the boot, then leaned back against the wall for support and placed it back on her foot. “Okay.”

Daynia led the way, maintaining her focus on the light beam up ahead.

Although she was still unnerved by the darkness, it was manageable most of the time if she stayed focused. As they stepped out of the tight pathway into a curved one, Daynia’s heart skipped a beat. No one was there! She stopped and strained to see ahead, rising on her tiptoes so that the light fixed to her helmet illuminated a greater distance down the passageway. Like high beam headlights on a dark highway, brightness reached out and then stopped abruptly against a wall of pitch black. Daynia could feel her heart pounding as she stared at the empty and silent corridor. The group couldn’t be that far ahead. Surely they would have waited for them, Daynia thought, as she stared into the dark shadows, an alarm bell sounding in her head.

Alexis leaned into Daynia, “Where are they?” she asked nervously. “It’s only been a couple of minutes,” she said, alarmed at the thought of being lost in this underground prison.

“We must have made a wrong turn after you took the photo.” Daynia nodded toward the curve off the tight pathway. She tried to sound calm, “Okay. Let’s just stop here and call it in. We’re not supposed to wander aimlessly. They’ll come to us.” She droned on mechanically, repeating Julia’s basic instruction. Daynia held the walkie-talkie close to her mouth, “Mr. Ryker, come

in. Julia?” Her queries were met with silence. “Hello, Julia? Anyone?” she asked again, trying to ignore the warning bell blaring louder in her head. “Rats. How can we be out of range so quickly?” The contraption crackled with static as Daynia shook it angrily. After several moments of trying to contact the guides unsuccessfully, Daynia decided they should move forward. Alexis agreed and with Daynia taking the lead, they moved slowly down the narrow tunnel as Alexis rambled on, complaining being her way of dealing with fear.

“How can we be out of range at all?” Alexis muttered, walking very close to Daynia, her voice quivering. “I thought these were supposed to be state-of-the-art!” She hit her walkie-talkie. ”Aaagh!” she said loudly in frustration, tilting her head, her voice echoing, as the light on her helmet spotlighted a colony of bats in an upper crevice. Alexis yelped as a swarm of bats flew past, her hands flying up to deflect them. “You never said anything about a bat infested cave. This was supposed to be the fun part of this assignment.”

Daynia stopped suddenly and turned as Alexis slammed into her and backed up. “Can you just shut up for two minutes? Not only are we lost but we’ll be missing shots of Ryker and his team – thanks to you!” Frustrated, Daynia turned and continued stepping carefully along the slippery ground.

Alexis made a ‘humph’ sound, muttering under her breath, still following closely behind. When Daynia stopped abruptly, Alexis slammed into her back. Daynia turned to stare, her patience wearing thin at their predicament. Alexis mumbled incoherently before raising her voice defensively, “I had a pebble in my shoe. Besides, why are we in this godforsaken dungeon? What happened to the architectural wonder of Barluzzi’s church and all that? Security agents pretty much do the same thing anywhere!”

Daynia paused before replying, making Alexis uncomfortable. “This winds it up for the story. Barluzzi’s church is not part of the assignment. Just stick to taking pictures, okay?”

Alexis reached for the camera at her side, grumbling. “Now?” she asked sarcastically. Fuming, Daynia shot her an angry glare and turned to concentrate on the darkness ahead. She tried the walkie-talkie again while a solitary bat grazed Alexis’ head, leading to yet another yelp as she swatted at the air.

“You know, I agreed to be your photog on this story because it was

supposed to be an eye-opener not and eye-gouger!” she retorted.

Daynia started walking again, her steps calculated and slow, “You agreed to be the photographer because you like anywhere hot and sunny.”

“I resent...” Alexis never completed her sentence as Daynia stopped abruptly again, forcing Alexis to slam into her, shoving Daynia forward.

Daynia ignored the impact, quickly raising her hand, “Shhh! I think I hear voices,” she whispered loudly. She paused briefly before pointing to an adjoining tunnel. “That way!”

“Wait up!” Alexis shouted, fumbling to secure the camera in her backpack as she rushed after Daynia, faltering on the wet surface.

Alexis rounded the corner in a hurry and slammed into Daynia again, who was standing still, tilting her head to listen. Stumbling forward from the collision, Daynia turned to Alexis. “Seriously?” Daynia yelled in frustration, as the light on her helmet momentarily blinded Alexis, who groaned, hands covering her eyes. “Ah! Sorry!”

“Shhh!”

They both stood motionless, surrounded by silence, as they shifted their lights in a circular motion, trying to make sense of where they were, carefully listening for any sounds from the group. Not hearing anything, they stepped ahead slightly and found themselves in a large multi-level chamber that glowed with varying hues of blue.

“Whoa.” They stood on the upper ledge of the immense chamber, their voices bouncing off the dripstone walls, admiration expressed in unison. From their position, they overlooked a wide chasm that was separated from the concave wall on the other side. Audacious formations of stalactites reflected like crystal clusters, light blue rays from the water below bouncing off their tips. Shades of orange and brown shimmered across the aqua blue pool, casting shadows in waves along the chamber walls.

The knot in Daynia’s gut loosened as the beauty drew her awe-struck attention. “*That’s* why a bat-infested cave,” she said in astonishment, glancing over at her friend.

Alexis hurriedly grabbed her camera and flash gear and began snapping, “Yes!” She smiled with satisfaction as she looked through the lens. “This? Full-page material.”

A loud rumbling interrupted their revelry. Daynia looked over to Alexis who was holding her camera away from her face, listening. “That doesn’t sound right,” Daynia said, feeling jittery.

The rumbling intensified, booming deeper and lasting longer. They both looked down abruptly at the ground as it trembled beneath their feet. “Whoa!” Alexis’ eyes widened with fear

“Oh that is definitely not right!” Daynia spoke hurriedly, her own fear mounting.

They barely had the time to assess the situation when rocks began tumbling around them. They screamed as they moved backwards. With loud clinks, stalactites began snapping and plunging into the water below, which was now beginning to bubble and foam, gushing up towards them.

Daynia screamed loudly and stepped backwards, slamming into Alexis when she saw the image of a demon emerging in a rush from the spouting water. When she looked again, he was gone; nothing but rising water and echoing rumbles within the stone enclosure.

Alexis turned to run, shouting, “C’mon D!” as rocks began falling around them. The other side of the chamber was already caving in on itself.

A glowing light across the chasm caught Daynia’s attention. There, standing calmly on a jutting ledge, as the walls crumbled around him, stood the mysterious young boy she had seen on the street, holding the glowing object, staring back at Daynia. Stunned, she froze, as Alexis’ voice abated, sounding distant as her heart began to race. She shut her eyes tightly. *Not real. It’s not real.*

Daynia’s eyes shot open when Alexis’ hand clamped around her arm. “Gotta go girl!” she screamed as she pulled Daynia forcefully. Daynia resisted, straining to focus on the ledge across the chasm. Alexis followed her gaze but saw nothing and pulled again, screaming louder as the ground began to shake violently and crumbled in on itself. Alexis dragged a stumbling Daynia away,

pushing her to the front just as a massive falling rock crashed at their feet, snapping Daynia out of her trance.

Daynia let out a shriek. She stopped resisting and fell in line with Alexis, their steps now matching pace as they ran from the chamber, darkness following closely behind as the shadow of ragged wings extended slowly across the cavern ceiling.

Adrenaline pumping, they ran as fast as their legs could carry them, in spite of their steps faltering over the wet slippery ground. Alexis tripped, falling on her side. She groaned, scrambling to get back up on her feet.

Daynia looked back, stopping dead in her tracks when she realized Alexis wasn't behind her. She turned and retraced her steps, her arms shielding her head from the falling debris. "Alex!" she shouted as she leaned over to help her friend get up. Alexis stumbled again before regaining her footing and held on tightly to Daynia's hand as they took off running. A shower of rock debris hit their helmets knocking out the lights on their hardhats. They screeched to a halt as they were plunged into darkness, throwing Daynia into a panic, "I can't see! I can't see!"

"Shoot!" Alexis hurried to retrieve the small flashlight she always carried in her bag, "Hold on D! It's okay! Hold on!" She grabbed the flashlight, snapped it on and held it close to Daynia's face.

"It's okay D! Here! See?"

Daynia grabbed Alexis' hand with both of hers, her nails digging into Alexis' skin as the subtle glow from the flashlight spread across the narrow tunnel. Daynia fought to get her laboured breathing under control, struggling to regain her composure. *Just a little light. Need just a little.* Daynia glanced over at Alexis gratefully, their attention drawn back to the collapsing cave. "Let's get out of here," was all Daynia said as she released her grip on Alexis' hand.

"Great idea." Alexis sucked in her breath.

The intensity of the rumbling and crumbling increased, and a total collapse seemed inevitable. With terror mounting, the young women began running down the tunnel, staying on course, keeping to the left where Daynia

said she had heard the voices. As they approached the fork up ahead, a soft glow emanated from the right side, distracting Daynia who glanced toward it as they neared the split. In her fear and panic, she thought she imagined him again – the mysterious young boy – standing quietly on the right side of the forked split, his expression solemn, the object in his hand radiating a brightness that surrounded him. She stopped suddenly, her mind racing anxiously. Why did she keep seeing that boy? She knew he couldn't be real. But something inside nudged at her.

Alexis kept running toward the opposite tunnel, “Daynia! C’mon!” She turned back to her friend.

Daynia shook her head and looked again. The boy was gone, and imagined or not, something stirred inside her. She turned to Alexis as the cave walls shuddered.

“D! What’s wrong with you? C’mon!” Alexis shouted urgently, beckoning Daynia forward.

“This way!” Daynia cried out suddenly and headed toward the right tunnel.

“What?!”

“This way!” she shouted again, louder.

Alexis stared at Daynia with a puzzled expression.

“I think we need to go this way,” Daynia said more urgently.

Alexis gave up and turned the flashlight in the direction Daynia signalled. Daynia focused on the glowing light. The young women picked up their momentum and broke into a run again, steadier now on the dryer ground, oblivious to the shadow of ragged wings trailing closely in the darkness behind them.

Alexis screamed as a large rock fell in front of her. She jumped back, dropping her backpack but before she could pick it up, a large slab fell and crushed the bag. Alexis shrieked as more large rocks slammed to the ground. Ahead of her, Daynia faltered, hit by falling debris. Alexis rushed to Daynia who was trying to steady herself and grabbed her arm to help her up.

“I’m good, I’m good. Go.” Daynia said anxiously.

“Hell no,” Alexis held onto Daynia until they both picked up their pace, continuing in what was now a race for their lives as they rushed toward the faint glow at the end of the passageway. Behind them the cave folded in on itself, with deafening crashing sounds that sent shivers of terror through the two young women, now too terrified to look back. The faint light ahead loomed larger as Daynia and Alexis sprinted in its direction, running solely on adrenaline and instinct. As the cave came down in a deafening crash, they dove forcefully into the light, screaming as a thick dust cloud engulfed them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emergence

Daynia's eyes flew open, her hand rising to shield them against the glaring sunlight, all the while trying to control a fit of coughing. Disoriented, it took her a few moments to realize she was lying on the ground in open air. The blurry images rattling about her brain suddenly came into clear view – she and Alexis diving to save their lives. “Alexis!” she screamed, bolting into a sitting position, pain shooting up her arm. She winced, trying to ignore the throbbing and aches in her body, looking anxiously for Alexis. The tension eased when she spotted Alexis a few feet away trying to lift her head.

“Ow!” Sprawled on the ground on her stomach, Alexis tried to raise her head, resisting the pain in her chest as she coughed deeply. “Ugh!” She spat out traces of sand before rolling onto her back, clutching at the crucifix on her necklace. “Thank you! Thank you!” she said half-laughing, half-crying.

“Are you all right?” Daynia called out.

Alexis sat up, pressing one hand against her side and nodded as she looked over to Daynia, a disdainful expression on her face. “What the hell was that?!”

Daynia grimaced, leaning forward and looked in the direction of the cave.

“How about you?” Alexis' expression softened.

Daynia raised her hand and motioned ‘fine’ as she tried to subdue another coughing fit. A rumbling emanated from behind the fallen earth and rock obstructing the cave exit, blowing out a final spurt of sand and dust. Stunned, Daynia and Alexis sat immobile, watching as the dust settled with a gentleness that belied its source.

“That was too close,” Daynia finally said, still staring at the obstruction, “and unbelievable.”

Alexis turned to Daynia, feeling grateful to be alive and irked at the same time. “Why is it that whenever I’m on assignment with you all hell breaks loose?!” She struggled to reach a sore spot on her back and rubbed it, “Seriously,” she balked, “could you limit adventures to one a year – no wait, one a decade...*please?*”

Daynia slowly pushed herself up and stood looking down at Alexis. “You see, from where I stand the common factor isn’t me.” She raised her eyebrow, tilted her head and threw Alexis an accusing glare.

“Huh?” Alexis looked away, then back, “Unbelievable!” she griped as she got to her feet grunting. “Un-be-lie-vable!”

Shocked, they stood motionless staring at the boulders and debris sealing off the entrance. “Well, at least we’re alive,” Daynia acknowledged gratefully.

“Aw, rats!” Alexis shrieked, slapping her forehead with her palm, as it dawned on her, “AH! I can’t believe I lost the backpack! Oh geez!” She looked up before letting out a frustrated yell clenching her hands into fists. “*Unbelievable!* AAAGH!”

“Well that’s not good,” Daynia said matter-of-factly causing Alexis to turn toward her with a puzzled expression.

“That’s it? No upset? No anger?”

Daynia reached up around her neck and tapped the dog tags under her T-shirt. “Like I said – we’re alive.”

“I know...but couldn’t we be alive AND have the backpack? It’s a full day’s work and I had some great shots. We lost it all.”

“No thanks to you,” Daynia muttered as she rubbed her sore shoulder, “we should have kept up with the group.”

Alexis stopped what she was doing. “Oh come on. One mistake and I’m not going to hear the end of it,” she complained, following Daynia’s gaze as it was panning the surroundings.

Daynia turned toward her abruptly, “One?”

The verbal tag game had begun. Over the years, they naturally fell into the

habit of dealing with stressful situations with some light-hearted, ‘point the finger’ repartee. They had been friends long enough that it didn’t really matter who was doing the pointing – it just helped relieve the pressure.

Alexis placed her hands on her hips angrily, and swung around to face an amused Daynia, “Africa. Safari. Japan. Fish market. Moro...”

“Okay. Okay! Second...third time,” Alexis said defensively, “How was I supposed to know there was a lion in the brush and really, who keeps a giant live octopus near the cash register anyway?” she threw back at her before crossing her arms to turn away sulking. “Humph. Honest mistakes,” she muttered as she dusted herself off, coughing sporadically.

Daynia calmly untied the bandanna on her head, rolled it carefully and smacked Alexis with it. “Again, I say...who’s the common factor?”

“Ay!” Alexis rubbed at her head where the bandanna had landed.

Daynia unfolded the bandanna and wiped the dust and sweat from her face. “Well, we’ve lost the equipment, the hard-hats. All we’ve got is the clothes on our backs,” Daynia said with frustration, “and no idea in hell as to where we are. Just great.” Daynia inspected the vast expanse of what seemed like barren land. It looked completely different from where they entered the cave.

“Well, like you said...we’re alive,” Alexis replied.

Daynia, who had started walking closer to the cave entrance, turned abruptly toward Alexis who fell silent, sheepishly staring at her feet. “Ah geez!” Daynia lamented as she walked back and forth, inspecting the sealed off exit before finally crouching down and glancing at the largely arid landscape, “We must have come out on the other side.”

“So we should backtrack,” Alexis responded.

Droplets of sweat trickled down their foreheads as the heat bore down on them. “You’re right.” Alexis sounded exhausted, as they walked the perimeter of the hill trying to figure out the location of the original entrance. “It wasn’t that big a pebble. I just didn’t think they’d move away that quickly. I’m sorry for getting us into this mess.”

Daynia glanced over at her friend, a slight smile tugging at her lips, “Ah, never mind. We had no idea. Don’t blame yourself.”

There it was, that’s how their finger-pointing venting always ended, Alexis thought, feeling the guilt subside. *You. Me. Me. You. Nobody!* That was friendship – with years of practice, she thought affectionately.

Daynia stopped suddenly, worry crossing her face, “we’ve been assuming that we were in trouble and everyone else is all right. What if…”

“Oh geez! You’re right. We’ve had our little drama – it never occurred to me they might be living a nightmare too. Oh no. Riley,” Alexis said tearfully.

The silence deepened before Daynia finally spoke up with some confidence. “No. They wouldn’t have been caught by surprise like we were. These are professionals. They would have sensed the danger before we did. It didn’t collapse all at once.”

“Hmmm. That makes sense,” Alexis said, the relief in her voice tangible. “Perfect sense. I’m going with that.” A conclusion easier to deal with than thinking the worst, Alexis decided. In the end, they had been saved by Daynia’s impromptu decision to switch tunnels. Coincidence? Just pure luck? Alexis was silent as she reflected on the oddity of that decision before speaking up. “That last-minute tunnel change. Why’d you switch?” she asked cautiously, but with genuine curiosity.

Daynia said nothing for a moment, her thoughts reverting to that little boy. *That mysterious little boy with the glowing object in his hand. Imagination?* If she explained he was the reason, Alex would think she lost it. But then – what did that matter? She had already told Alexis about the boy on her drive home the night Jake… Her thoughts scattered abruptly, in an effort to avoid the painful images.

“It was the image of that boy,” she finally admitted.

“What boy?” Alexis asked, turning her head slightly to look at Daynia.

“The one I saw the night I lost Jake.”

Alexis stared silently as Daynia explained. “Anyway, it was strange… I could see that boy, right in front of the tunnel… and I just felt like we had to…”

we should head in that direction.”

“You changed direction because of a boy you saw months ago” Alexis asked incredulously, “*and* whom you don’t know, but saw here, miles from home, in the exact same cave we’re in?” Alexis stopped. She didn’t want to sound patronizing – that would set Daynia off. In the months since Jake was lost, Alexis felt like she was walking on ice, never quite sure when it would crack with an angry outburst. Daynia covered her emotions well though, Alexis thought, with her laughter and easy smile. But she wasn’t easily fooled – they had known each other for what seemed like a lifetime and were as close as sisters. Alexis saw past the fabrications when the smiles and laughter never quite reached right down to her heart. There was a corner of coldness there now, that could easily erupt into rage.

“She can’t let him go yet,” Alexis remembered Pastor Whelan saying when she sought out his advice. *“Her anger is how she holds onto him. Patience, Alexis. Patience. We’ve done all we can do. It’s time to let it go and just let God do His work in His own time.”*

Alexis stumbled on a rock protruding from the sand. She cursed, lifting her left foot to rub the ankle as she hopped along trying to balance herself on the right side.

“Forget it,” Daynia said suddenly. “I’m imagining things. It was just a lucky guess.”

Alexis pursed her lips but said nothing as they paused to catch their breath, then slowly pivoted into a 360-degree turn, still puzzled by the landscape and expanse of desert that looked so different from the place where the jeeps were parked.

“That’s so odd. We didn’t run very far out. But we’re in the middle of nowhere.” Daynia hooded her eyes against the sunlight and squinted, taking in the horizon.

They continued walking, searching for their starting point. “We should have stuck to Barluzzi’s church,” Alexis muttered, wiping at her forehead and neck.

Suffering from intolerable heat and feeling like they were going round in

circles, fuses were short. “You know it’s last on my list for a reason,” Daynia snapped back, pausing before adding flippantly, “just keeping a promise...or I’d have no use for a church visit. Now will you just look for the jeeps?” she said curtly, her patience wearing thin in the sweltering heat.

“Fine.”

Daynia walked off, forcing Alexis to rush to catch up as they rounded the slope of the cave. Making their way to the other side, Daynia came to a sudden halt at the top of the slope. Alexis’ attention was directed to her untied lace, causing her to bump into Daynia, unaware of the view that left her friend dumbfounded.

“I...don’t...think...this is...where...we left the jeeps,” Daynia said, slowly, as though in a trance. Still standing behind her, Alexis jutted her head to the left just far enough to look beyond Daynia’s shoulder. Her eyes widened in disbelief. “Uh huh,” she said, bewildered.

Standing at the edge of a ridge, they stared with incredulity at the flurry of activity in the valley below, an image of a town plucked out of a history book as donkey-driven carts rolled over dirt roads, people hurried about an outdoor market dressed in robes and tunics of a time long-ago. Echoes of shouts and laughter filtered up toward Daynia and Alexis as they watched vendors calling out, displaying their wares and children kick up dirt in their sandals. Set on the edge of the town, the surrounding buildings were mostly one or two-stories with the exception of several structures farther away in the distance. On the outskirts, toward the east, a cluster of small hills rose up overlooking the antique metropolis. They couldn’t put their fingers on it, but something was off. Like funnel vision, the brain zoomed in on what it couldn’t see but expected to – as its view widened. Where were the paved streets? The cars? The delivery trucks? The lampposts?

Alexis stared open-mouthed and exchanged a baffled expression with Daynia. Engrossed by the sight, neither girl noticed the little boy approaching, staring at them curiously. Dressed in a striped tunic, long solitary curls popping up sporadically around a head of dark unruly hair, he stepped up behind them holding the collar of his skinny Shami goat.

His eyes alert, Ishma bobbed his head from left to right trying to see what

these strangely-dressed women were looking at, “Why are you...” was all he managed to get out, as his voice shocked Daynia and Alexis out of their deep thought. They jumped back screaming, frightening the boy who let out a shriek – all the noise startling the goat who in turn released an ear-splitting bleat that made them scream louder as they turned, coming face to face with Ishma and the tall skinny goat with unusually long floppy ears. Their screams made him bleat even louder with a screeching sound that had Daynia’s heart pounding. The funny-looking goat took off, running in odd circles as the little boy darted after him, “Teeta!”

Daynia and Alexis turned to each other in shock before instinct kicked in and they raced after Ishma and the goat. Without much time to think, they jumped in to help catch the strange-looking animal. A chase scene worthy of a comedy film unfolded as Daynia, Alexis and Ishma chased the white goat with two large spots of black on his rump and neck as he bounded about in circles, long ears flapping. Screeches and screams filled the air as they shouted at the goat and at each other.

“Are we really chasing a goat?” Alexis managed to yell through heavy breaths.

“Why couldn’t you be a fainting goat?!” Daynia yelled back, her sides heaving as she lunged into a slide and tackled the goat that released a terrified loud screech. “Aaaagh!” Daynia struggled to hold on tightly to the squirming animal whose ears slapped her face as his head jerked about in a panic.

Alexis had stopped and was leaning over to catch her breath, hands on her knees, when she looked up and started laughing as she caught the slapping ears in action. Daynia fought to hold on to the excited goat. “Dang! But those ears are long!” Alexis laughed even louder as one smacked Daynia across the face again.

Ishma stood nearby, a wide grin on his face as he watched the woman struggling with his pet.

“Ayyyy!” Daynia yelled as she managed to grab the goat’s collar, “quiet already!” She just wanted the darn animal to shut up! Exhausted, she held on firmly to the goat’s collar with her right hand, as she sat on the ground and leaned against the squirming animal, trying to catch her breath. Ishma walked

up beside Daynia and simply looked down, staring at her with curiosity while Alexis watched.

Out of breath, Daynia looked up at the little boy, who seemed to be around eight or nine years old, she thought. She smiled. He had the cutest face and a spunky air about him to boot. He was clothed in a similar fashion as those in the town below. Ishma continued staring, unafraid, as Alexis approached.

“So...what’s...your name young man?” Daynia asked taking deep breaths between words.

“Ishma,” he replied promptly.

“Hmmm. Nice name. And your friend is...” she pointed behind her with her left hand as the goat let out intermittent bleats, one on cue with the question.

“...Your LOUD friend!” Alexis chimed in, out-of-breath.

“Teeta,” Ishma replied, “He is frightened by you,” he said in a matter-of-fact accusation.

Daynia looked up at Alexis amused. *That figured.*

“By us?!” Alexis shouted good-naturedly. “Young man, that scraggly creature scared the begebbers out of us!”

Ishma’s eyebrows pulled together in a quizzical expression, “What is begebbers?”

Alexis looked over at Daynia who chuckled, shifted her hold, turned to get on one knee and pushed herself up. She stepped back, still holding the collar, then extended her arm toward Ishma to hand over the boisterous pet. The little boy stepped up and grabbed the collar as Daynia released it.

“It means...ah...let’s just say ‘a lot’,” Daynia explained as Alexis stepped in alongside her. “Well you both have great names,” Daynia said warmly as Ishma looked up from petting Teeta.

“You are in your undergarments,” Ishma stated matter-of-factly as he pointed to their skin-tight capri jeans.

“You do get to the point,” Daynia said, amused.

“Smarty-pants,” Alexis scoffed while Daynia gave her a dirty look. Ignoring his question, she decided to get to the point herself. “Ishma, have you seen a group of people and some jeeps nearby?”

“What is jeeps?” he asked.

“Vehicles...trucks? They look like trucks,” Alexis explained, “there were um, five of them. Did you see them?” Alexis stepped closer, suddenly hopeful.

“What is “vikle”?”

Alexis stared blankly a moment before turning to Daynia and raising her hands in the air in exasperation. Daynia crouched down to Ishma’s level. “You don’t know what a truck is?”

Ishma shook his head.

“A car? A bus?” Daynia continued, surprised at his ignorance.

“No,” Ishma replied shaking his head.

“You don’t get out much, do you?” Alexis said grinning.

“I am always out. With Teeta mostly,” he said calmly.

Alexis directed her gaze toward Teeta, “The goat? Right. Like I said...”

“You speak strangely,” he interrupted matter-of-factly.

“Now you see, from where I stand...” Alexis began as Daynia shot her a dirty look. Alexis stared back, “What?!”

Daynia looked over toward the ridge. “Let’s get down to the town. We’ll try calling from there,” she said decisively, “rather than wandering aimlessly looking for the entrance when we don’t know where we are.”

“They ride around in donkey-carts. You really want to bank on phone service?” Alexis asked.

“Got any better ideas?”

Without a word Alexis turned to Ishma. “How do we get down to the

town? Can you show us?” she asked, ignoring a grinning Daynia. “Follow me!” he responded with excitement.

Dragging her feet from exhaustion, Daynia shook her head in disbelief as they trailed Ishma. “Are we really following a boy in a dress and a goat that looks like a walking carpet?” she whispered, glancing over at Alexis who was wiping the sweat from her forehead, wondering the same thing herself.

“This is payback, isn’t it?” Alexis turned to face Daynia. “Isn’t it?”

Daynia glared at Alexis and kept walking. They were walking away from the ridge, down winding paths and narrow passages bordered by a mix of rocky and green slopes. As they came into a small clearing, Ishma fell into step with Daynia who had moved ahead, as Teeta scurried to catch up, bumping into Alexis, pushing against her.

Alexis looked down trying to sidestep him as he jostled her. “Great,” she muttered as she nudged him away. Teeta bleated in protest. “You sound as funny as you look,” Alexis muttered, as she tried unsuccessfully to push the goat away with her leg.

They couldn’t ignore the unrelenting heat, and their fatigue began to show. Just when Alexis thought she was going to have a screaming fit, they spotted what looked like an old well up ahead. “Well, I don’t think I’ve ever seen one close up,” Alexis said as she half-ran, half-jogged toward it. “I’m parched!” she complained as she peeked into it, Ishma coming up beside her, looking over the edge. “Careful.” Alexis extended her arm across his chest protectively.

Daynia shuffled toward them, too tired to run. She stopped beside Alexis, peeking into the well, then glanced over at the nearly rotted bucket hanging from a thick rope attached to a pulley over the opening. Daynia struggled with the rope that refused to glide smoothly. The pulley creaked and moaned as the bucket was lowered, ending with a dull thud as it hit bottom. “Well that doesn’t sound good,” Daynia muttered as Alexis exhaled in disappointment. Daynia pulled on the rope to bring the bucket back up.

Alexis reached for it as it swung loosely, stretching for it, glancing over at Daynia, both knowing what would be confirmed. Alexis swung the bucket

upside down, watching as nothing came out. She pursed her lips before releasing it, sending it swinging back over the well.

Daynia ran the back of her hand across her perspiring forehead, a worried expression on her face. In this oppressive heat, they really were going to need water soon, she thought, unconsciously stroking her neck, her throat itching from dryness. As they reflected on their predicament, neither one was aware of the evil lurking nearby.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Good Samaritan

The Tribune crouched over Ariel's prone body, smirking at the Pharisee who had dared to challenge him. "Stupid fool," he muttered as he wiped the blood on his hands with his like-coloured cloak. Actually, was it truly a challenge, he wondered? The Tribune chuckled – animosity between the Roman ruling class and the local hierarchy was a constant. This time was no exception – he had just had enough friction today. The Tribune's eyes fell on the Pharisee's chest and stared at a circular ornate medallion hanging to the side of the dagger protruding from the base of the man's neck. He reached out and ripped away the ornament.

He stopped suddenly, his head turning slowly in the direction of the old dry well. He frowned, narrowing his eyes and cocked his head to one side. "Ah. It seems we will be graced with special guests after all," he said softly, a slow vicious smile spreading across his face. He drew in a deep breath and paused before turning his attention back to the medallion.

* * * * *

From behind large shrubs, Daynia's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a scream as she stared in shock at the knife jutting out from a man's neck and another dressed like a Roman soldier crouched over him smiling. She froze, too afraid to move as her mind raced. Alexis and Ishma! She had wandered away from the well first but they wouldn't be far behind. Fear struck her as she stared at the soldier's back. She had to warn them, but terror made her unable to move.

She watched as the Tribune turned his face toward Ariel, unaware that his gaze was actually directed towards her in a long sideways glance.

"You no longer have any use for this trinket," she heard him say calmly, as he turned the gold, circular, jewel-encrusted medallion in his hand. A chill ran

down her spine. “Fear not,” he continued, “I shall treasure it and the fond memories it holds.”

Daynia stifled another scream as the man in the Roman soldier outfit rose, bringing into view the prone man’s wide eyes staring up at the Tribune who kicked him, laughing maliciously. A strange sound escaped from the contorted face of the man on the ground. Daynia’s fear kicked into high gear when the killer turned toward her. He paused, then shifted direction and made his way to the stallion standing nearby.

“What have you to say now, Lion of God?” the Tribune asked sarcastically as he mounted his horse. He tilted his head just slightly towards the shrub where Daynia was hiding. He smiled softly before digging his heels into the animal’s flank, sending it off galloping, the Tribune’s laughter trailing behind him in the wind.

Daynia released her hand from her mouth, her breathing heavy as she stood watching the man in the soldier’s uniform ride off. Suddenly, a ragged-wing demon seemed to detach itself from his body and shoot out toward her. She let out a shriek and tumbled back into Alexis, making her stumble. Stunned, Daynia looked up, shielding her eyes from the sun as the shadow of wings spread out. As she focused, a flock of birds flew out of the darkness of a cloud, the span of their formation casting a shadow across the sky.

“Hey, what’s...” Alexis stopped mid-sentence as she stared at the man on the ground. “Oh God!” she shrieked, snapping Daynia out of her trance. It was the birds, Daynia reasoned – just birds. She turned her attention to the man on the ground and ran toward him.

Ishma appeared behind Alexis who pushed him behind her to shield him from the horrid scene. “Stay behind me,” she said emphatically. Ishma complied, sensing her fear and clutched at her, pressing his face into her back.

Daynia stood terrified in front of the Pharisee. She looked to Alexis whose expression silently let Daynia know she could do it – she *could* handle this. Daynia suddenly bolted into action and dropped to her knees. She clenched her fist, talking to herself as she mentally flipped through everything she had ever filed about first aid in her head. She shook the image of Jake lying on the floor of their living room out of her head as she stared at the blood

oozing from the wound, running down the man's clothes and settling in a pool of dark red on the ground. Barely alive, the fatally wounded man made gasping sounds that frightened her.

"He's alive!" a fearful Daynia shouted urgently to Alexis, hesitating. Daynia knew she shouldn't pull out the knife, which would cause greater loss of blood, but he seemed to be suffocating from the obstruction.

Keeping Ishma behind her, Alexis moved slowly forward unable to offer any advice in this situation; now wishing she hadn't postponed that CPR course so many times. She watched Daynia fold her bandanna and wrap it around the knife, pressing it to the skin to stop the blood flow. Daynia looked up to Alexis who leaned over with a worried expression, "I think he's suffocating but if I pull it out it'll bleed more!" Her eyes pleaded for direction but Alexis just shook her head, "I don't know either D...I..."

With blood still spilling from the wound Daynia rose to her knees, allowing her to apply greater pressure. With one hand holding down the bandanna, she placed the other on the handle of the knife as her mind raced with options. Instinctively, she shouted, "call 911!" Her eyes locked with Alexis as she remembered their predicament. There was no one and no way to call for help – their cell phones were lost in the cave. She exhaled in frustration turning her attention back to the man whose eyes began to flutter shut. "Oh! No no no!" she whispered frantically as he convulsed. Daynia looked up at Alexis, her brow glistening with sweat, her lips pursed. She had made her decision.

Daynia gripped the handle tightly and softly began counting from one to three to muster up the courage. On the last count she shouted "THREE!" as she yanked the knife out and threw it down, quickly moving the bandanna over the wound, pressing down hard with both hands as more blood spurted. "We need to get help!" Daynia yelled, feeling helpless.

The man shuddered suddenly, his eyes flying open as he gasped loudly. Alexis let out a scream and faltered, almost falling over a terrified Ishma, who was now tightly holding onto her T-shirt.

Daynia screamed as she fell on her behind, her hand falling on the knife she had thrown. Another scream made everyone turn their heads. Three women

stood in shock, the baskets they had been carrying on their heads tipped over on the ground, their contents spilled. They continued screaming, staring at the body and the knife under Daynia's hand.

"You killed him!" one of them shrieked.

It took a second for the accusation to sink in. "What... wait!" Daynia replied as the man made a strange gurgling sound. "Go get help!" she shouted at them as she scrambled to cover the wound and stop the gushing blood, shutting out the screaming women. "Get help!" she shouted again.

"She's killing him!" they screamed louder.

"No!" Alexis shouted back as she moved closer to Daynia. "She's trying to save him – GET HELP!" Alexis screamed at the top of her lungs.

The man opened his eyes, startling Daynia, his expression turning from shock to understanding. "Hold on!" Daynia said urgently as she turned toward the women.

She cursed silently, "Why hasn't anyone gone for help!" she screamed loudly. She turned back to the man. "Hold on!" she said again, despite realizing he had lost too much blood, her eyes glancing at the pool of dark red spreading on the ground. It flowed over her hands as she adjusted the bandanna furiously, feeling the already weak rise of his chest begin to slow. "Rats! Rats!" she whispered, realizing he was gone.

"She had the knife," one woman shouted.

"Hell no! She was trying to help him!" Alexis said loudly, standing defensively between Daynia and the women, keeping Ishma's head buried against her back.

The other women screamed, "Murderer! She killed our Pharisee!"

The women watched wide-eyed as Daynia slowly rose, blood dripping from her hands. She turned toward them, enraged, "WHY DIDN'T YOU GO FOR HELP!" she screamed as she stepped toward the women. Startled, the women shrieked and turned to run, leaving their baskets behind.

Alexis watched them run as Daynia stepped in beside her. Now safe, she

moved Ishma in front of her, careful to keep him facing away from the body. She turned to look at the man, then turned her gaze to Daynia who was breathing heavily and staring at the ground.

“You tried your best D,” Alexis said softly.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have pulled it out,” she said quietly.

“It was obstructing his airway – you had no choice. It was the only option.”

Daynia sighed deeply, admitting to herself that he would certainly have suffocated had she not pulled it out. The outcome wound up being the same, but she had to try. “Yeah. You’re right,” she said as she turned to the body, “what do we do now? We can’t just leave him here.”

CHAPTER SIX

Hunted

Piercing grey eyes narrowed as they focused on the farthest end of the marketplace. A commotion was underway, as screams and shouts filtered toward the Roman centurion. His brows furrowed as he sat tall on his steed, flanked by two soldiers. He brought his horse to a stop as he debated whether he should investigate. He was tired from an all-night operation chasing thieves and his back ached from having to spend what little time he had for sleep on the rough dirt ground.

People were always in a furor over something he thought. Things were even tenser recently, as religious factions were in rising conflict over sectarian doctrines. As the only region conquered by the Roman Empire that did not force the citizens to heed Roman religious practices, upholding the law required a delicate balance between enforcer and diplomat. He didn't understand the Jewish people's willingness to worship their one "God." It seemed preposterous to Flavius, but conquering a people was not always as simple as imposing your own beliefs. And if that were not absurd enough, of late, rumours of this God's son appearing were fuelling the ongoing internal war between their uppermost political and religious sects.

He sighed, wishing he could return to his homeland, to the paved roads of Rome and the sweeping countryside by the sea. He envisioned sitting quietly under the glory of the Italian parasol pine, reading the satire of Horace and savouring the crunch of raw chestnuts. Flavius was jolted out of his daydream by the piercing wail of a woman. It seemed he would have to check up on that commotion after all.

"Ha!" Flavius shouted as he pressed his heels into the flank of his stallion and galloped toward the burgeoning chaos, the two soldiers following close behind.

As he approached, he could see several women gesticulating wildly, one

holding her hand to her mouth and wailing as anger boiled over into the gathering group of men. Someone pointed to Flavius and the approaching soldiers. Like a wave, the group moved in unison toward the dark-haired centurion as he reined in his horse. One merchant ran up close to his horse as the others kept a respectful distance. “He’s dead! Someone has killed Ariel! By the old dried well!” The merchant pointed in the direction of the crowd and as if on cue, their voices chimed in together. “Yes! He’s dead! He’s dead!”

Flavius urged his horse onward, the crowd separating as he guided the animal through, voices now randomly shouting out as the men and women followed Flavius to the well. “Who would dare assassinate our holy Ariel?” “That cannot be. I saw him but several moments ago!” “There is evil in our midst!”

Flavius ignored them and rode on ahead.

* * * * *

Daynia stood near the body looking down, trying to think of what they should do. *Leave him here and tell someone in town?* It didn’t seem like those women were going to get help. Daynia looked up – there was not much they *could* do. Her gaze fell upon the baskets the women had dropped. One had blankets and rags strewn about it. She moved over and rummaged through the pile as Alexis looked on.

“Let me look,” Ishma tried to lean to the side but Alexis held him back. She planned to let him go once Daynia covered the body.

Daynia held up two small blankets sizing them up before returning to the body. She knelt down and trying not to think about it she quickly laid the first blanket over his chest and face. Immediately a bright red stain spread through the blanket, over the area of the wound. Daynia frowned and placed the other blanket on his lower body, leaving his sandaled feet exposed.

Alexis released Ishma who stared at the covered body, his eyes widening. He looked up at Alexis and then Daynia. Daynia smiled sadly.

“He is...”

“Yes, Ishma, he is...” Before Daynia could say more, the sound of pounding hooves and loud voices caught her attention.

Alexis looked toward the sounds as the men on horseback and the crowd running alongside came into view. Her pulse quickened as she sensed incoming trouble. She placed her arm protectively around Ishma’s shoulders. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

‘Easy’ just wasn’t going to be in their vocabulary today. Daynia glanced at Alexis with a worried expression before turning toward the approaching crowd, “I hate to have to agree.”

Flavius reined in his horse a few feet away from Daynia and Alexis, his eyes scanning the scene as the crowd gathered in silence.

Alexis and Daynia instinctively stepped in closer to each other, keeping Ishma safely between them. The silence was shattered by a solitary bleat as Teeta came running out from behind.

Eyes narrowing, Flavius’s gaze travelled slowly from their wildly strewn hair to the body-tight revealing capri jeans exposing the lower portion of the legs and the odd heavy footwear. He pursed his lips. They could only be underclothes he thought, his imagination kicking the barricade to escape the starting gate. His gaze settled on Daynia who stared directly at him, unafraid, her dark eyes sparking his curiosity. Despite the odds against her in the situation, those eyes stared at him, defiant.

Silence prevailed while Daynia sized up the man on the horse dressed as a Roman soldier. *A Roman soldier?* She considered the other two on horseback in the same uniform. *Three Roman soldiers.* Must be some festival, Daynia thought as she shifted uncomfortably under the unwavering gaze of the grey eyes.

Flavius eyed her carefully, suspicion and intrigue fighting to take the lead, before finally breaking the visual standoff. His gaze dropped, setting off alarm bells in her head, as she watched his narrowing eyes settle on her bloodstained hands.

“We were...” Daynia’s attempt to try to explain triggered the fury of the impatient mob, as the women and men began to shout and point. “SHE IS THE

ONE!” “We saw her with the knife. Murdered our beloved Ariel!” Each voice tried to overpower the one before it.

“Murderer!”

“She is the one!”

“Sinner!”

Still keeping her eyes on the man she knew could affect their fate, Daynia tried to think beyond the cacophony, exerting every effort to keep calm, but the noise intensified in her head like sonar approaching its mark. It was Alexis’ hand slowly touching hers, signalling to step back, which shifted Daynia’s focus. Alexis, just as frightened, stepped back along with Daynia, pulling Ishma backward with them as they put distance between themselves and the enraged mob.

“She didn’t kill him,” Alexis shouted, “she tried to save him.”

“Liar!” “She is the one! We saw her!”

Several men and women from the front of the crowd stepped toward Daynia, one man grabbing her arm tightly. Daynia pulled away as Alexis shoved hard at the man. Just then, a second man pulled at Alexis. She violently pulled her arm from his grasp. The women backed up further, acutely aware of the impending confrontation.

“Who are you?” one voice asked angrily, the contempt tangible.

“They must be prostitutes. Evil whores!” one woman yelled.

Alexis looked to Daynia silently mouthing, “*Whores? Evil whores?!?*”

“What the hell?!” Daynia’s anger showed in her widened eyes.

Before matters escalated beyond control Flavius nudged his horse forward, but already the mood was cresting at a new level.

Eyes fixed on the mob, Daynia reached and clasped Ishma’s shoulder. “Ishma. Get out of here. Now!” Ishma looked up not really seeing Daynia’s face, uncertain.

Both young women pushed him well behind them. “Now!” Alexis

shouted.

Ishma reacted instantly and turned to run as the crowd pushed its way closer, anger fuelled further by adrenaline. As Ishma sprinted away, with Teeta bleating loudly and chasing him, someone lifted an arm and hurled a stone at the women.

“What the hell!” Alexis turned as the stone grazed Daynia’s shoulder.

As the dire situation intensified, Flavius pulled on the reins forcing his horse to rear up. “Halt! HALT!” The soldiers pushed through with him as several men and women rushed up to Flavius.

“She killed our high priest! Murderer! She assassinated Ariel! Arrest her! Take her to the Prefect! She must be punished!”

“ORDER!” Flavius finally shouted, his horse pounding his hooves and rearing. The noise died down as the crowd backed away from the nervous beast. Flavius led his horse closer to the young women as a man standing close by grabbed Daynia. She pushed him away with all her strength, stumbling forward.

“JESUS CHRIST! Are you all nuts?!” Daynia finally screamed. The people gasped. A sudden hush fell over the crowd giving Daynia the chance to be heard.

“I didn’t do it!” She looked up to stare at Flavius defiantly but he remained silent as he approached, moving his horse beside Daynia. He looked from Daynia to the body and back to Daynia. Daynia glanced over at the crowd, suddenly realizing they had quieted down at her outburst. It seemed odd but she brushed the thought away and focused on the matter at hand.

Alexis took a step forward, “Look, there was this man. He was dressed – like you actually. He’s the one who killed him. He rode off on a horse – that way,” she explained, pointing in the direction the Tribune headed.

Flavius dismounted and moved past Daynia, his cloak sweeping her arm. She stood still as Flavius crouched down to examine the body while the women wailed in unison. Eyes were trained on the centurion as he carefully lifted the cloth Daynia had placed on his upper body. As Flavius lifted the

covering revealing the victim's face, he felt a stab to his heart. He looked into his father's face. He blinked hard and drew in his breath. When he looked again, his father was gone, in his place the Pharisee. He pushed the face of his murdered father, which had begun to plague him recently, far into the deep recesses of his mind, again vowing to keep it there.

Flavius turned his attention to the victim in front of him as he inspected the wound before dropping the cloth back on the Pharisee's face. "You say you did nothing. Yet there are witnesses who have seen differently." He never looked up as he addressed Daynia, his eyes scrutinizing the area around the body, pausing as his gaze fell on the knife Daynia had dropped. He registered that she had covered the body – a sign of respect. Odd behaviour for a killer.

"They're wrong," Daynia replied matter-of-factly, keeping her fear in check, reminding herself that no matter what it looked like, forensic evidence would easily and quickly prove otherwise. They just needed fortitude for a little while longer.

Flavius stared at the knife lying near the body before looking up at Daynia. He picked up the dagger and studied it closely. Taking in a deep breath, he straightened up and stepped toward Daynia. With his other hand, he took hold of her wrist and turned her hand over, the blood stains bright and fresh. His eyes shifted down to lock with hers, his eyebrow raised. For an instant, like a wave pulled to the shore, he felt drawn in by the tempestuous emotions in her dark shadowed eyes as she stood in defiance. But he sensed her fear too, as he fought the erratic thoughts and the flash of warmth that sparked in his chest before her voice breached his troubling thoughts.

"This is not what it looks like. I tried to help him. The evidence will prove it." Daynia stared up, thinking how tall he was as she cranked up her neck.

Someone in the crowd guffawed, "she has Ariel's blood on her hands. You must see that she is punished according to Roman law."

Daynia and Alexis both turned to the man in unison, "Roman *what?!?*"

Anxiety crossed Alexis' features as she leaned into Daynia, "What the hell is going on? Is this a joke?" Alexis started laughing nervously. "I got it!"

she said unnaturally happy as she stepped forward. “This is one of those candid camera pranks – right? Right?”

The crowd stepped back at her unexpected movement. Time seemed suspended as they stared in confusion. Flavius turned toward her, suspicious of her strange words and Daynia began to think she might just have a point. *Roman soldiers on horses...* she turned quickly toward the dead body, drawing in her breath, fully expecting him to get up laughing. From the moment they exited the cave, everything just seemed too preposterous she thought, while her brain screamed that even that sort of thinking was stupid. She desperately wanted to believe in Alexis’ theory but it still all rang wrong.

“That’s it! Right!” Alexis continued, “Where are the cameras? Where?” Before she could get a response a stone whizzed by her in what felt like slow motion. She turned in time to see it slam into Daynia’s temple and Daynia stumble backward.

“Daynia!” Alexis screamed as she rushed to her friend.

“She killed Ariel! Our beloved Ariel!” someone shouted and both women ducked as more stones flew toward them.

Flavius quickly stepped in front of Daynia and Alexis, surprising the crowd. Their stone throwing halted as their arms froze in mid-air. “Seize her!” Flavius shouted the order to his soldiers in an effort to bring order. The more quickly she was removed the safer she would be. He knew his words were only a temporary reprieve, having had more than his share of experience of how quickly mobs like these spiralled out of control. The soldiers tried to manoeuvre their horses through the crowd as Flavius jumped on his stallion.

The instant he was out of their line of fire, another kind of mayhem erupted as Alexis tried to help steady Daynia. Everything spun around her as Daynia tried to focus on Alexis, blood trickling down her temple. Alexis’ face was close to hers, her mouth moving but Daynia couldn’t hear anything as she fought the dizziness.

“Daynia! Are you okay?” Alexis grabbed Daynia’s arms as the crowd now pushed in around them, horses pounded their hooves and the world tilted out of control.

As Daynia began to re-focus, her mind clearing, her attention was drawn forcefully beyond the crowd. Beyond the blur of the pandemonium one image came into sharp focus. Like the aperture of a camera, her mind adjusted as it zoomed into the mysterious young boy holding the glowing object as he stood in the distance at the base of an ascending narrow road. As he turned and walked away up that narrow road, the sounds around her came crashing into her silence, until Alexis' voice broke through, panicked and clear.

“Snap out of it D please! We've got a situation here!”

Ducking to avoid grabbing hands as the crowd continued to push and shove, Daynia felt a surge of energy and clarity. “Follow me!” She forcefully pushed through the crowd, surprising Alexis who quickly recovered and together they practically bulldozed their way through the increasing commotion between man and beast. Daynia moved with purpose, ignoring the shouts, pulling and pushing hands away. “Alex, stay close and get ready!”

“Ready for what?” Alexis shouted back as stones flew in their direction.

The shifting of the mob created a separation between the two women and the soldiers. Flavius nudged his horse forward, trying to make his way toward the fugitives as they attempted to escape.

Daynia looked back at Alexis, with an expression that immediately conveyed her message. “RUN!” They charged in sync and pushed past some women who fell back screaming as the duo made their escape. With every ounce of energy they had left, they challenged themselves to run as fast as their feet could carry them toward the narrow road.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fugitives

Flavius reined his horse in as he watched Daynia and Alexis run off. He could see the heavy footwear kicking up dirt as they slammed their feet against the ground. Simultaneously puzzled and intrigued by their body-revealing attire, he stopped fighting the crowd, a smile touching his lips. *Courageous? Or completely foolish?* He hadn't decided which yet, but twinges of admiration poked him as he focused on the two fugitives led by that woman with the dark lonely eyes. They would never escape his army, he thought confidently. Excitement stirred as his thoughts wrapped themselves around the now inevitable chase. Yes, indeed, this could be interesting.

The crowd attempted pursuit, but in the confusion, their prey dropped out of sight as they reached the edge of the narrow road. Grumbling, people began to disperse, but not before insisting that Flavius had to see to it that justice was carried out. He glanced down at the bloodied knife he had placed in a cloth, tightening his hand around it, then glanced up in the direction of the narrow road, shutting out the roar of complaints and requests. Somewhere deep inside, something turned over. He ignored its implication as he let his mind wander. Could that strange and beguiling woman really have committed this vicious crime?

While nothing surprised Flavius, especially not the traitorous ways of men and women, something he saw in her eyes led him to question that conclusion. He turned to look back at the carefully covered Pharisee. Yes, he would need to give it more thought, but for now, he would appease the people and follow protocol. He folded the cloth over the knife and handed it to one of the soldiers with a curt order, "secure this." He looked to the other, "You. Take the body to the garrison mortuary."

"Yes, commander," they responded before galloping off.

Flavius paused a moment then smiled as he kicked his horse's flank and

took off at lightning speed toward the narrow road.

Although they had no idea how far they had run, the waning noise of the crowd behind them tempted Daynia and Alexis to slow their pace slightly, a welcome reprieve as they were rapidly losing steam racing up the steep road. Huffing, Alexis tugged at Daynia's arm. "I need a break!" Her sides heaved as they rounded a corner, stopping suddenly, falling back against a stone wall as she leaned over trying to catch her breath. "I'm serious." Realizing Alexis had stopped, Daynia came to a grinding halt a few feet away and looked back. "We seem to be doing a lot of running lately!" Alexis barely managed to breathe, holding her hand up to Daynia, focused on getting more air. She groaned, as Daynia seemed to recover more quickly. "I hate running!" she muttered.

Daynia scanned the surroundings, while catching her breath, wiping at the sweat dripping down her face. An avid runner, she was able to regain her rhythm fairly quickly, but the intolerable heat was making it much more difficult than usual. The sweat blurred her vision as she too leaned over, clasping her knees with her hands for support and forced her breathing into a slower rhythm as she inhaled in gulps. There wasn't much time, she was certain they would catch up soon. They needed somewhere to hide out fast, she thought, her mind drifting to the image of the boy. Whatever hallucinations she was experiencing, part of her wished he would turn up now and show her an out.

Her eyes fell on an elderly man and two young men leaving a lower level abode. The two men pushed the large metal and wood door shut as they slowly made their way up the few steps to the cobblestone road. Daynia backed up against the uneven masonry, hoping not to be noticed. She looked over to Alexis and lifted her finger to her lips signalling 'silence.' The men never noticed the two women as they disappeared from view in the opposite direction.

"Aaaagh," Alexis moaned as she rubbed her back. She followed Daynia who was moving hastily toward the door, rushing down the steps. "How hot is it anyway?!"

They pushed the large thick wooden door. It was fabricated from big slats of wood planks, hinged together with rough metal rods; so big and heavy, it

didn't budge. Sounds of hooves pounding the ground sent them into a panic, spurring them to shove frantically against the door grunting. "*Really?*" Alexis looked at Daynia in frustration.

Daynia stopped pushing and took a deep breath before glancing over to her friend whose face was turning beet red. It would have been funny had their lives not depended on getting behind that door. Daynia swallowed hard, "On three." Alexis nodded and stepped back with her left foot for added power. On the count of "three" both young women heaved with all their might, pushing the door open a mere sliver. Alexis turned to Daynia who raised her hand, "don't say it!" Nothing seemed to be going right – they were going to have to vacuum-pack their bodies to squeeze through that slim opening. They tried pushing again. The odds weren't in their favour with an already massive door, but the fatigue and heat had now depleted their energy and strength as well. The door refused to budge even one more inch.

Daynia nodded to Alexis who moved to the opening first and sucked in all the air she could. With Daynia pushing her, she grunted, squeezed and pressed, finally pushing through, nearly falling over on the other side of the door from the release of pressure. Daynia followed suit, Alexis pulling at her arm as Daynia finally wedged herself through.

With no time to lose, they both flung their backs against the door, grunting as they thrust their full weight against it in a meagre attempt to shut it, making no headway.

"Who'd they make this door for? Hercules?" Daynia stopped to catch her breath.

Alexis laughed nervously and grabbed her back, "Aaagh. It hurts!"

"Well it's going to hurt more, if we don't get this dang thing closed!" Daynia knocked her head against the door in exasperation.

"Go ahead," Alexis took a deep breath, "I wasn't worried enough!"

Daynia took a steady stance and pushed her hands against the uncooperative door, "One more time. One. Two. Three!" She forced her body against the immobile door for several seconds before realizing it was a solitary effort. She stopped and turned to Alexis, frustrated.

Alexis looked over. “What? You didn’t say you were going to do the count so I was off point!”

Daynia lifted her finger to point at her accusingly.

“All right. All right! On three. I’ll start,” Alexis lifted her hand to signal the start, “one.... two....”

Daynia closed her eyes to gather strength and waited. And waited. She finally opened her eyes and angled her head toward Alexis who turned to face Daynia, “I just need a minute...”

Daynia pursed her lips and smacked Alexis on the head. “You think those weirdoes chasing us are taking a minute?” And as if on cue, the sound of hooves and shouting filtered in.

“THREE!” Alexis shouted and they both dug in and forcefully pushed the door shut as the clanking of hooves on cobblestones echoed past.

Still leaning against the door Daynia slid down to the ground with Alexis doing the same a few seconds later, the back of their heads thumping against the big door.

“That was close.” Alexis pressed her hand against her face before wiping it downward.

“Déjà vu,” Daynia muttered.

They sat quietly, relieved by the brief interlude of privacy and peace in an otherwise tumultuous morning. As they each caught their breath, they looked around with curiosity. They seemed to be in some sort of cellar or storage room.

“Ah, it’s cool in here,” Alexis said gratefully as she wiped at the sweat trickling down her neck and back.

Walls of stone surrounded them. Crudely constructed pieces of wooden furniture were set in one corner and haystacks were packed on the other side. Leaning against the middle wall was a lopsided makeshift shelf with clay flasks of varying sizes. Assorted baskets were strewn about or stacked.

Daynia frowned. “Why is it that everything looks like it’s out of a history

book?” She rubbed at her forehead, slipping her fingers through her hair as strands now escaped the elastic holding a messy ponytail in place.

Before Alexis could respond, sudden bellowing voices forced both of them to go quiet and shift into alert mode.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Refuge

Flavius rounded the corner, his horse's hooves clanking on the stone road, a soldier close behind. As Flavius slowed his horse to scan doors and entryways, another soldier who preceded him shouted that the women had been spotted up ahead. Flavius glanced at a cellar door and paused briefly, before urging his horse forward.

Behind the door, Daynia and Alexis exchanged fearful glances. Neither dared move even though no sound could escape through the thick door. When the clatter of hooves and voices finally died down, Daynia closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened them and rose purposefully, motioning with her finger over her lips to be quiet and then moved toward the door to open it.

Alexis looked at her in exasperation, "*What?!*" she mouthed, before reluctantly capitulating. "We just closed the bloody thing," she argued in her head as she rose to her feet.

Together they pulled to open it just a crack. It didn't seem as difficult as it was earlier, Daynia thought, remembering how they'd exerted so much energy surviving the cave collapse and running for their lives. The short respite had served them well. Daynia peeked out and took a quick look before pulling her head back in and closing the door with Alexis' help.

Alexis moved toward a bale of hay and sat down leaning against it. "What's wrong with these people? They wouldn't even give us a chance to explain. What happened to 'innocent till guilty' and all that? They were throwing stones for God's sake."

Daynia slid down a nearby wooden pillar, shrugging her shoulders and pushing her bangs away from her eyes, revealing matted blood at the hairline just above the temple where the stone had hit her. "I'm clueless on this one."

"Hey. Are you okay?" Alexis frowned with concern.

“Just out of breath.”

“No. You’re bleeding.” She pointed to Daynia’s temple.

Daynia touched her forehead gently and looked down at her fingers dotted with blood. “Oh. In all the commotion to escape I forgot about the rock. I was wondering why my head was throbbing.”

Alexis pulled a tissue out of her jean pocket and held it out to her friend.

“Thanks,” Daynia said, as she dabbed at her wound gingerly.

Silence fell as both remembered the stone-throwing incident. Daynia stared at the bloodstained tissue, turning it over in her likewise bloodstained hands. Alexis handed Daynia another tissue, her eyebrow raised at the sight of Daynia’s hands. Daynia’s mood shifted as she rubbed vigorously at the blood on her hands, suddenly wanting them cleaned in a rush. She stroked them repeatedly against strands of hay, desperate to remove the blood, a reminder of the violence and the reality of what happened sinking in. “Ah!” Her eye caught sight of the flasks against the wall. She rose quickly, grabbed one and wrestled to uncork it, finally flushing its content over her hands.

Alexis rose and sauntered over to the collection of flasks as Daynia wiped her hands on her jeans until she was certain the stickiness of the alcohol was removed as well.

She looked up, relieved, while Alexis eyed the flasks, “I’m parched.”

Daynia furrowed her brows, watching Alexis uncork another flask, glancing up to throw her a remorseful grimace. “I’m not stealing...I’m... borrowing. We’re getting dehydrated. We need something. It’ll just have to do till we can find some water.” Alexis lifted the bottle to her lips and gulped it down, her face suddenly scrunching up as she pulled it away, spitting out fluid and coughing. “Or maybe not!”

“Drinking alcohol will worsen the dehydration,” Daynia said dryly.

Alexis shot her a look of embarrassment, “Right.” She wiped her lips with the back of her hand, staring at the flask dejectedly.

Daynia moved to sit by the pillar again and leaned her head against it,

briefly shutting her eyes. “Were people really just trying to stone us? And that man – did we just *happen* upon a murder?” She turned questioningly to Alexis who was still examining the flask before plopping it down and sat down beside Daynia. “It’s all too unreal.” Daynia reached up to lay her hand over the dog tags hidden beneath her T-shirt, tapping them as was her habit whenever she was lost in thought. Just for a second, she wondered what Jake would say. She smiled ever so softly, imagining his words, as he would shake his head with a grin, “*What mess did you get yourself into now, lil sis?*”

“I have no idea,” Daynia whispered in response, her voice trailing off suddenly when she felt a jab at her temple. She stroked it trying to brush away the pain.

Alexis turned to Daynia, eyeing the wound on her head. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Daynia stared at the door in front of them, “I’m good.” She fixated on the door as her hand dropped to her knee, her mind trying to wrap itself around the absurdity of their situation.

“You’re the lousiest liar I know.” Alexis pulled her hair away from her face, tilting her head back, groaning. “Maybe we’re dreaming.”

Daynia looked down at her hands, all evidence of blood washed away. She wanted to believe they were in a dream, but the throbbing in her temple insisted otherwise.

Alexis grabbed her throat. “Although I don’t ever recall actually feeling thirsty and dry as dust in a dream! Aaagh! What do we do now? They think you’re a murderer. We have no idea where we are. And is it just me or don’t you think it strange that we were almost arrested by a Roman centurion back there?” Daynia turned to look at Alexis, a blank expression on her face. “I know – right?!” Alexis continued, “How insane is that?”

“It can’t be a dream...but it also makes no sense.” Daynia stood up, paused, and then began to pace. When she was troubled, she had to keep moving to think. She wrote her best stories walking between thoughts.

Alexis glanced upward, her head turning to the left and to the right as her gaze followed Daynia’s movements. Daynia stopped suddenly, paused again

and looked down at Alexis, her expression resolute.

“I read somewhere that some towns have a big celebration during Passover where they recreate the Passion and such.”

“And the whole town gets in on the act?”

“Something like that. These are smaller towns on the outskirts. It has to be. What else *can* it be?” Daynia stopped. “But we didn’t walk that far inside the cave.” She paused, breathing in deeply. “It’s that or we just walked through a ‘star gate’ and travelled back in time some 2000 years.” She rubbed her temple in frustration, “and I don’t recall walking through a big round ring.”

Alexis snapped her fingers, “Ah ha! Unless we stumbled onto a theme park like that Holy Land place.”

“I don’t think chasing you down and stoning you make for good PR,” Daynia said dryly.

Alexis’ expression froze. “Right. So theory number one it is.”

“Although the lack of modern amenities....” Daynia let out an exasperated sigh. “Amish. It has to be like those Amish communities. That’s the logical explanation.”

“Aaaagh! Of all the places to run out of the cave into – it has to be an Amish copycat town! Aaaagh!” Alexis let loose her annoyance as she stood up.

“What I wouldn’t give for a cool shower right now.” Daynia cupped her face in her hands as she groaned.

“Do you think they have showers here?” Alexis asked suddenly, her eyes wide with hope.

Daynia shot her an angry look. “Don’t spoil it. Just for a second! Don’t spoil it!” She lifted her hands as she made mental calculations. “Okay...so we just need to discreetly get the hell away from here and find our tour,” she said conclusively.

“That’s it? That’s your plan?” Alexis stared at Daynia, hands on hips, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Well that should be easy. So what we’re lost AND running from people dressed like freaking Roman centurions?”

“You have any better ideas?”

Alexis bowed her head to stare at the floor sheepishly, kicking at the dirt.

“I didn’t think so!”

“Well. I’m following your lead. Somehow you saved us from a cave collapse and got us to escape. I’m with you pal!” Alexis planted herself in front of Daynia. “Call it.”

Daynia shoved her hand against Alexis’ forehead pushing her backward. “Wha...?”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

“No! I’m serious. Your instincts have been right on.”

My instincts? The image of the mysterious boy with the glowing object popped into Daynia’s head. Why did she keep seeing him? Imagining him?

Alexis said nothing as she watched an interesting range of expressions flit across Daynia’s face: reflective, puzzled, certain, sad. They all seemed to chase each other away before coming full circle to the indifferent blank stare Alexis had become accustomed to over the last year.

Daynia looked up at Alexis, hesitating before probing, “You didn’t see him?”

Alexis blinked quizzically. Daynia shuffled uncomfortably. She might as well just come out and say it – one more time, “The little boy?”

Recognition spanned Alexis’ face, “the one from the cave? You saw him again?”

“Yeah. Well...I saw an image.” She felt stupid saying it because she always seemed to be the only one who did see him, but what could be crazier than what was happening to them now?

At a loss for words, Alexis simply stared.

“So you think I’ve lost it,” Daynia said matter-of-factly. “How do you explain what’s happening right now? You lost your mind with me?”

She had a point, Alexis thought.

Daynia was silent for a moment as she frowned, sporadically rubbing her injured temple. “But he’s what made me change directions in the cave,” she said absentmindedly “and run here.” There! She said it. She admitted it. They were saved because she followed a figment of her imagination. So how crazy was that? She *was* really seeing things.

Alexis’ eyebrows pulled together as she considered Daynia’s words. Had a hallucination saved their lives? Or had it been a vision? She sighed, her tone serious. “Look. I don’t know what’s going on D. But I do know you’re dealing with a lot. You need time. And distraction.”

It did all sound crazy. Changing directions must have simply been an instinctive reaction. Jake used to talk often about how instinct kept his crew alive. Why didn’t he have it that night, she suddenly wondered? Why Jake? *Where was your instinct, Jake, where?* She finally pushed away the thought that plagued her relentlessly since that night, feeling guilty that its source was unreasonable anger toward Jake.

“Right.” She wasn’t going to get into a heated debate with Alexis about something she herself had yet to make sense of. *Back to the issue at hand.* She looked down at her jeans. “We’re going to need disguises.”

“Oh sure, let me call up ‘Costumes Depot’ and put in an order of...”

“Work with me here, okay?” Before Daynia could continue, a loud pounding at the door startled them. They froze in mid-action, like a sci-fi flick freeze-frame. The only movement in the sunken cool room was their eyes darting from the door to each other and back. Afraid to even breathe, they stood motionless for what seemed like an interminable amount of time before their eyes widened at the bang of another thump. They held their breath, terrified they had been caught.

Daynia listened for other sounds – hooves or shouting – but could hear nothing. She tiptoed closer to the door when a voice called out. “It is I.” Although not quite certain, the muffled voice sounded familiar and nonthreatening. Daynia jerked her head toward the door, motioning Alexis to join her. They braced themselves and pulled at the door. As it creaked open a

mite, Ishma's curly black hair popped through as he squeezed his face into the small opening. Daynia, who was closest to it, jumped back in alarm before realizing it was Ishma. She finally reached out, grabbed his tunic and pulled him inside, quickly turning back to the door and pushing it closed with Alexis. Just as it shut, an incessant "baaa" boomed loudly from the other side.

The young women exchanged a panicked glance and pulled frantically on the door again. As soon as Daynia could get her arm through the partial opening, she reached out, grabbed the goat's collar and yanked him forward despite his blaring indignant bleats of protest. Both she and Alexis turned back toward the door and strained to push it shut.

They leaned against the door, breathing heavily, their energy sapped as they faced their guests. Ishma stood proudly, grinning from ear to ear, his long curly hair falling over his forehead. He was thrilled to have found his new friends! It took him some time but he never relented. That's what his father always taught him. "*Do not give up Ishma, look for another way when you cannot do something.*" And Teeta proved to be the best tracker of all. The goat had already begun his inspection of the room, smelling and biting randomly.

"Ishma, what are you doing here?" Daynia asked, worried, as much for the boy's safety as theirs.

His grin widened, "I wish to help you. They are in search of you."

"Ya think?!" Alexis replied as she moved to sit on a stack of hay.

"Yes. The Roman soldiers..." Daynia paused and looked over to Alexis, "Seriously?" She couldn't believe she was saying that so casually, "the men dressed as Romans..."

Teeta interrupted with a loud bleat. Alexis jumped up toward the goat, "shhhh!" she shrieked, panicking. "Jesus, does he ever shut up?"

Ishma turned to her with excitement and cried out, "The Messiah has arrived for Passover!"

Daynia and Alexis turned abruptly toward Ishma.

"Say again?" Daynia asked incredulous.

CHAPTER NINE

Nemesis

The flight of a solitary vulture across the bright cloudless sky cast a moving shadow over the canvas blanket thrown carelessly over the back of the donkey-drawn cart. The wind ruffled the rough material, lifting its edge, revealing glimpses of the corpse of the murdered Pharisee. Moving slowly, a man held the reins of the mule loosely, his sun-scorched face turning to peek at the body, his expression unmoved. Just another thankless task he thought, as they made their way toward the garrison mortuary. He could already taste the cool brew that would be his reward as he turned his attention back to the ground, trying to keep one foot steady in front of the other. A Roman soldier bringing up the rear as an escort glanced up briefly up at the animated crowd not far ahead. He grunted in disapproval, wondering what they were fussing about as the cart moved past them. He extended his elbows outward against the backs of people at the outer edge of the crowd, forcing them to step aside as the cart rolled through.

* * * * *

The exuberant crowd walked closely behind the man on a donkey as he entered through one of the arched gates to the city as people pushed against one another, angling for a better view. The man they called Jesus exuded warmth and gentleness as He greeted the people welcoming His entrance into Jerusalem. Off to one side, a pretty young woman pulling a little girl by her hand tried to force her way through the crowd, eager for a closer look. The air brimmed with palpable excitement as young and old hurried alongside, waving palms and calling out the name of ‘Messiah’. The young woman tried to keep pace when suddenly, the little girl ran off toward the man on the donkey, ducking arms and elbows in her way, determined to reach the Messiah.

“Ruth! What are you doing?” the woman shrieked but the little girl kept running and squirming through legs, finally rushing up to Jesus. The mule He

was riding stopped as Jesus leaned over to pick up the little girl whose face beamed with victory. The crowd cheered as He seated her in front of Him.

“Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” they shouted happily, oblivious to the dark shadow outline of ragged wings spreading across the sky, and the evil permeating the atmosphere. Still holding the little girl, Jesus looked up, His expression guarded. The cheering and happy noises subsided, as He turned His attention to the distant wail of the wind. Coldness pressed against His face. He closed His eyes for a moment and sighed, letting the warmth of the sun caress His face as His eyes fluttered open. The noises filtered back in as He slowly glanced down at the little girl gazing up at Him with wide, devotion-filled eyes. He smiled.

* * * * *

Daynia repeated her question, an incredulous expression on her face. “Say again?”

Grinning ear to ear, Ishma obliged, “Jesus. He is here for Passover. I heard mother and father speak of it.”

Alexis stood speechless as Daynia crouched to Ishma’s level. She paused, inhaling deeply before continuing, “Okay. So...are you an actor too?”

Ishma’s expression changed from happy to concerned as he reached out to touch the wound on Daynia’s temple, “You are hurt.”

“Yes. No. I’m fine. Just tell us Ishma...you’re an actor, right?” Daynia asked again, trying to keep her temper in check, her thoughts swirling in confusion.

“What is actor?” Ishma asked innocently.

Alexis looked up in exasperation, “Oh, he’s good.”

“Ishma, we’re not part of your play...celebrations,” Daynia explained, “we’re really lost and we need to get out of here.”

“I want to help you,” Ishma replied. He sounded so sincere Daynia thought. *What was going on?* “The punishment for murder is great,” he

continued. “This I know.”

Mental exhaustion was setting in as Daynia sighed, “I didn’t murder anyone.”

She straightened and ran her hands through her dishevelled hair, pulling most of it out of the elastic constraint. Alexis shook her head in frustration. They were getting nowhere.

“Perhaps the Messiah can help you! Mother said He is great and powerful!” Daynia turned to Ishma who stood smiling up at her, radiant with pride.

“We don’t have time for fairy tales,” she said bluntly.

“Fairy tales?” Ishma asked.

Daynia turned to step away, “Make-believe stories. Pretend!” she snapped.

Ishma’s smile vanished and he looked down nervously, “it is not pretend,” his voice barely audible as he shuffled his feet. Alexis shot Daynia a stern look.

Daynia sighed, feeling guilty. She turned back toward Ishma, “sorry little buddy.” She smiled warmly and ruffled Ishma’s hair, coaxing a happy grin from the little boy. Daynia finally stood up and moved to the far end of the room.

Alexis crossed over to Ishma, patting his shoulder.

“Da-y-nia is angry at me,” he said sheepishly as he struggled to pronounce the name.

“No. Not at you,” Alexis said reassuringly, “She didn’t mean to shout at you Ishma. She’s just... well, we’re in trouble now... a little lost,” she looked up toward Daynia.

Ishma’s face lit up, “But I will help you find your way.”

Alexis smiled, “Yes. I’m sure you will.”

* * * * *

Shifting in his saddle, the Tribune wiped at the sweat trickling down his temple, his eyes narrowing, his expression dark, as he watched the crowd encircling the man on the donkey. The soldier beside him looked back as he heard the sound of pounding hooves. He nodded in acknowledgement as his commander approached, flanked by two comrades.

Flavius led his horse to the other side of the Tribune, glancing over briefly before turning his attention to the crowd. "Tribune." The latter responded with a grunt.

They sat in silence, studying the bustling activity as people rushed toward Jesus. "Look at how they capitulate at His feet. Each, more foolish than the other." The Tribune's words reeked of contempt. "All for a pitiful, weak, languid man who calls Himself a king."

Flavius watched the crowd of admirers as they flocked around the intended target of the Tribune's wrath, their mood bright and joyful; not the kind of adoring response expected for a 'weak', 'languid' man.

The Tribune stared ahead steadily, never shifting his gaze, "is there any worthy mention?"

"Pharisee Ariel has been murdered," Flavius said, noticing the Tribune's imperceptible flinch.

"One less pompous, self-righteous fool to waste our time."

"Perhaps. But if we do not resolve the matter quickly, the people will find more cause to rebel against our presence."

The Tribune turned toward Flavius, "Do you know he dared order me to remove our infantry from the Temple square? I cannot say that I am sorry. Have you the assassins in hand?"

"No. Credible witnesses identified a young woman but she and her companion have escaped," Flavius explained, picturing the dark-eyed beauty with the bloody hands. He pushed away the distracting image.

"Has she now?" The Tribune flashed a smile that insinuated he was privy to hidden secrets before turning his attention back to the crowd. "She must not flee," he said with finality, a dark shadow shrouding his eyes. He sighed with

sarcasm, “you reason well Commander Augusta. We cannot allow revolt. Ariel was most popular with many. Pilate would not be pleased with an insurrection.”

“We have posted sentinels at the city gates. If they are amidst this multitude, they will try to escape when the crowd disperses. Indeed, another contingent has been dispatched to survey this crowd.”

The Tribune shifted in the saddle to look directly at Flavius, “If you cannot find her, I will be forced to take matters into my own hands.”

Flavius remained silent, wondering about the Tribune’s sudden personal interest in this matter. Granted, the victim was a high-profile man but still the Tribune rarely cared about any person or thing that could not immediately benefit his standing.

The Tribune’s gaze travelled down to the deep scar running along Flavius’s left arm. “The scar on your arm has healed. Has the one in your heart?” He smiled wickedly. Flavius held the Tribune’s mocking glare, an indifferent expression lining his face, yet something in his eyes sparked before the veil of a blank stare hid it away. Flavius glanced down at the scar on his arm, remaining silent, deliberately ignoring images of a knife slashing his forearm and the gushing blood.

The Tribune laughed heartily. “Very well then. Stoic you shall remain. I should like to be advised when she is captured.” He pulled on the reins. “I should like to question this... assassin.” He broke into a cynical smile.

Flavius looked over to the Tribune abruptly. His eyes narrowed slightly. What was his Tribune up to? Why did he care about a strange woman and a dead Pharisee?

“And keep close watch over that plebeian on the donkey,” the Tribune continued.

Flavius looked toward the crowd, “He is harmless.”

“You among men, Commander, must know the danger of the wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Flavius winced imperceptibly. The Tribune watched him with a sideways glance and smiled – a frigid smile that never reached his

heart.

“A king!” The Tribune snickered, “who wears beggarly men’s garb and sits on His worn-weary ass.” The vicious laughter reverberated, playing on Flavius’s nerves, a chill running up his spine, but he displayed no reaction. There was something evil about the Tribune he thought. *Something dark and evil.*

The Tribune swung his horse around as the accompanying soldier followed suit and left, the Tribune’s laughter trailing behind them.

Flavius watched the distance between him and the Tribune widen before turning his attention toward the chanting crowd as Jesus gently lowered a little girl from the donkey’s back, and set her down before dismounting to greet the swarming crowd. “Plebeian?” He muttered softly. Perhaps, he thought. *But, a most popular one.*

* * * * *

Sitting side by side on the cold hard floor, Alexis and Ishma’s heads turned first one way then the other as they followed Daynia who was pacing to and fro. Even Teeta knew better than to make noise as he nervously glanced up from bits of hay he was chewing just to make sure the human was keeping her distance.

Daynia stopped suddenly. “Okay. We won’t get very far looking like this.”

“Hear. Hear,” Alexis raised her left hand while smiling mischievously.

Daynia looked over to Ishma, “Ishma, is there any way for you to get hold of some traditional clothes?” The young boy stared blankly. “Your kind of clothes,” she continued without missing a beat, “the kind your mother wears?”

Ah, he got it! “I can take them from my mother,” Ishma blurted, his expression brightening.

“I’m sure that’ll go over well,” Alexis replied, with a hint of sarcasm.

Daynia got down on one knee and gazed directly into Ishma’s eyes, “I’m sorry to ask you this Ishma, but we’re really in a jam here.”

“Jam? Wh...”

“Difficult situation,” Alexis jumped in. “It means we’re in a difficult situation. Not to be confused with breakfast spread,” she said dryly as she repeatedly hit the back of her head against the bale of hay behind them.

Daynia smiled, realizing the poor kid just looked more confused. “So we could really use your help.” Ishma stood up and beamed proudly. Daynia rose and placed her hands on his small shoulders. “Thank you Ishma. Thank you very much.”

Ishma’s head bobbed shyly as they walked to the door. Daynia turned to Alexis with a questioning glare.

“Right,” Alexis got up and walked to the door. “One. Two. Three!”

The women pushed until the door creaked open just enough for Ishma to squeeze through. Teeta tried to follow, but Daynia had her leg stretched across the opening, “One two Three!” They pushed the door closed.

“Does it feel like it’s getting heavy again?” Alexis complained while Teeta stood staring at the door, baaing loudly.

Daynia glanced down at the floppy-eared creature and as much as she wanted to be upset, she couldn’t help being amused by those dangling ears. “Shh!” Daynia pulled the goat toward the hay hoping to quiet him. It worked.

She turned to see Alexis staring at the flasks, “I think I’m going to pass out from thirst,” Alexis whimpered dramatically, “not to mention feeling like we’re corrupting that little boy.”

“It’s not like we have much choice.” Daynia sighed and moved to find a comfortable place to sit, “well, I guess now we just sit and wait. I need a break anyway.” Daynia shifted as she leaned her head back against a small chest and shut her eyes.

“I need a miracle,” Alexis said, dropping to the floor.

Daynia opened her eyes and stared at the wooden plank ceiling. *Fat chance* she thought, before closing them again.

CHAPTER TEN

Friends and Foes

Ishma peeked up the path that led to his house, a two-story building sitting atop an incline with a picturesque view. The sloping backyard overlooked a cluster of homes below, and just beyond, sprawling fields dotted with trees. Beside the home, a grove of trees sprouting fruits of all kinds lent an artistic flair to the simple abode. As Ishma approached the house, a sweet sounding melody wove its way through the air. His heart burst with pride at his mother's beautiful voice, a voice he so loved to listen to. Sarah was always singing, transforming their home into a place filled with overwhelming peace and joy. Most recently, she often sang about the Messiah and His love and strength. It didn't seem to matter whether she was happy or sad, the melodic voice always made him feel warm and bubbly inside. Ishma felt a tinge of guilt for what he was about to do, but there was no time to explain – his new friends were in danger.

Sarah sat on a wooden stool wiping a knife with her apron, as she dropped a peeled potato in the large cauldron at her feet. She stopped singing and gazed out into the horizon, beyond the array of homes to the area where farms were scattered randomly throughout the beautiful countryside. She inhaled nature's warm scent; thoroughly enjoying the view for a moment before picking up another potato from the basket beside her stool, deciding this would be the last batch. She was eager to make her way into town to see the Messiah who was rumoured to be arriving in Jerusalem this day. Sarah wondered where Ishma had wandered off to, hoping he returned soon because she wanted to take him along. With that thought in mind, Sarah began peeling, humming the tune to a song about undying love.

Ishma tiptoed toward the entrance, glancing at the shed off to the side of the house. He hesitated a moment, then remembered his father was supposed to be visiting his uncle. Relieved, Ishma bolted inside, took another look around and ran up the stone steps.

The second floor was more a landing with two small rooms without doors than a second level. He stepped into the room closest to the stairs and began rummaging through a small wooden cabinet, trying not to displace the neatly folded clothes stacked in rows. Ishma held up two robes, his brows furrowing together. Luckily his new friends were about his mother's size. Satisfied, he threw the robes over his shoulder and continued searching. He finally found what he was looking for and pulled out two mantles. He was about to turn and leave when he stopped abruptly. Ishma turned back and aligned the clothes in the cabinet properly so there would be no trace of his being there. He winced, alarmed, as the cabinet made a loud clanking sound when he closed it, freezing for an instant, hoping his mother didn't hear. As her sweet voice filtered into the house, he realized he was safe and rushed out and down the stairs. He jumped over the hump at the entrance door and broke into a run, praying his mother wouldn't notice the missing clothes before he had an opportunity to explain.

As he deked left and right to avoid people in his way, Ishma ran past a group of boys playing in a dirt square. They called out his name, but he didn't hear them as he ran focused on his task, a sense of responsibility washing over him.

* * * * *

Dressed in the regalia that denoted their ecclesiastical power within the community, the Pharisees walked purposefully toward the white stone steps of the massive building ringed by pillars. Revered by some, feared by others, their presence elicited hushed whispers and worried glances. *Why were their religious leaders visiting the Romans at the local administration headquarters?* The rumours circulating within the divisive groups pointed to the stoic men as the Messiah's enemy. Some citizens wondered, *Could that be the reason they were here?* They watched the three men clad in long black and white robes, headdresses wound high, and the tails draped in the back, climb the stairs with an air of authority. The Pharisees paused confidently in front of the Roman sentinels who stepped aside in unison, allowing the three men entry to the Roman Empire headquarters in Jerusalem.

* * * * *

The Tribune stood silently rigid, facing the small window overlooking the inner courtyard. His office was curiously lacking in the normal scrolls and strategic manuals expected to grace the library of a military leader. It was widely rumoured he possessed such a frighteningly accurate and long memory that he had no use for what he considered mundane practicalities. He lifted his left arm and began swinging Ariel's medallion to and fro, a slow grin spreading across his face as the sounds of a whip being wound up and released filtered through the aperture, followed by a painful scream.

A young soldier entered and bowed his head in acknowledgement, "Tribune." He waited. Unresponsive, the Tribune stood quietly then cocked his head. Another scream. He smiled with satisfaction before turning to face the soldier, eyebrows raised questioningly.

"The Jewish High priests are here and request your audience, Sir," the soldier stammered, then waited, as the Tribune moved slowly over to a tiny table in the far corner of his moderately sized office. He fiddled with the medallion, "They try my patience," he spewed out with disgust.

"Sir, they say it is of supreme importance. It concerns that Galilean and the danger his musings pose to our Caesar." Wary of the Tribune's dark temper he added nervously, "they said. Sir."

Furious, the Tribune drew his breath in sharply, "Give me a few moments, then bring them to me."

"Sir," the young soldier bowed respectfully, turned on his heel and stepped out of the office, expelling his breath with relief as his shoulders relaxed. He paused, inhaled deeply and marched off down the long stone and marble hallway to execute his orders, grateful to be away from his dreaded superior.

Still standing near the table, the Tribune carefully placed the medallion in a lidded dish made of clay, "They're concerned for our Caesar? Their greed for power perhaps," he snarled.

* * * * *

Daynia swung around, desperately seeking a sign of life, a movement, something, but was faced with nothing but desolation. Panic set in, she was utterly lost. The rumbling behind her sent an electrical shock through her. She turned slowly to see the ominous cloud of snow approach her, the ragged wings and the burning red eyes staring through her. She screamed and began running. Running but getting nowhere as an endless expanse of white under her feet stretched into the horizon. The feeling of being the only person left on the planet rendered her heart as desolate as her surroundings. She could hear the echo of her own breathing and the lonely wail of the wind. She continued running, her heart keeping pace as the distant rumbling intensified. Daynia looked back just long enough to see the dark shadow of ragged wings reach toward her, fiery red eyes burning through the dust. Terror swept through her as the wings brushed her skin.

Daynia awoke gasping, drenched in sweat, her eyes fearfully darting about the underground room. Alexis, who was resting nearby, came to abruptly. “Hey?” Concern lined her face as she leaned toward her friend. “D? You all right?” Alexis watched her friend labour to get her breathing back to normal. She had become accustomed to Daynia’s nightmarish episodes, which seemed to be getting worse instead of better. Although she’d been prescribed medication, Daynia wasn’t always consistent about taking it, making Alexis wonder if this was one of those times.

Daynia rose from the floor, re-orienting her thoughts as she slowly studied her surroundings. “I’m okay,” she said, ignoring her own blatant lie. She loathed lies, but since she didn’t want Alexis to feel badly for her, she reasoned the lie was excusable. Although her nightmares seemed to become progressively more frightening and evil, Daynia refused to admit it out loud. She preferred to believe she was strong of character, despite her breakdown after losing Jake – another fib – she fleetingly admitted. She couldn’t be certain she was fooling Alexis but she swore she would keep secret all the ominous feelings her nightmares triggered.

A knock at the door provided timely distraction. The young women froze momentarily, exchanging concerned glances. Alexis jumped up as Daynia

quietly made her way to the door, leaning her head against it, listening to see if it was Ishma or more trouble.

“It is I,” Ishma whispered loudly enough that Daynia looked to Alexis as Alexis mouthed, “Good grief!” She bolted toward Daynia, taking her stance alongside her friend as they used their combined strength to open the hefty door.

“Maybe I *should* join a gym!” Alexis muttered as Daynia grunted. The instant the door opened part way, Ishma scurried through effortlessly. The women looked at each other, annoyed at how easily the skinny little kid got through, while they squeezed and squirmed. They finally pushed the door shut and turned to catch their breaths while Ishma stood in the center of the room holding up the clothes he had secretly borrowed, grinning proudly from ear to ear.

“Did you have any trouble?” Daynia asked, suppressing her guilty feelings at forcing a little boy to steal.

“No!” Ishma said excitedly, “I was not seen! See!” He moved closer to Daynia and handed over the garments.

“Way to go my little man!” Alexis said happily, “I mean,” her voice became stern, “for this one time only. Never do that again. Okay?”

“O...k...ay,” Ishma said slowly, trying to repeat the word.

“OK,” Alexis responded with a satisfied grin.

Daynia handed over a robe and mantle to Alexis who held them up and glanced over at Ishma. She leaned in closer to Daynia whispering, “This is *soo* not cool.”

Daynia slipped the robe over her head and shrugged in resignation, “Not like we have much choice,” she whispered back. Once dressed, they looked down, scrutinizing their appearance. “Cool or not, this will have to do,” Daynia sighed.

Alexis shook her head in disbelief before looking up, “So? Now where to?”

“I guess we just...head out of town.” Daynia made her way to the door, “maybe ask for help on the way. Not like we have that many choices.”

“You’ve got a point. And the soldiers?”

Before Daynia could elicit a response, Ishma jumped in emphatically, “They are everywhere.”

Alexis looked over to Daynia, worry etched on her face.

Daynia paused before answering matter-of-factly, “Then we’ll just have to be extra careful.” She turned to Ishma and placed a hand on his shoulder gently, “can you show us which way heads out of town?”

Ishma nodded eagerly.

“Great Ishma. We’re grateful.”

“What is...?”

“Thankful. We’re thankful,” Alexis said in exasperation. Cute kid, she thought but oh, the questions!

Ishma smiled happily and moved closer to the door alongside Daynia. Teeta let out a loud bleat. Daynia stopped in her tracks, and turned to face Ishma. “Do you think you can keep him in check?”

“Wh..”

“Quiet. Do you think you can keep him quiet?” Daynia continued.

Ishma nodded.

“Aww. I got a bad feeling about this,” Alexis grumbled as she and Daynia stepped into position, gathering their strength to pull the door open. Daynia paused, then looked back at Ishma. “Little buddy.” Ishma just stared. “Ishma,” Daynia continued as Alexis laughed. Daynia shot her an evil stare, forcing her to muffle the laughter.

“Ishma can you help us pull this door?”

Ishma jumped toward the door placing himself between the young women as all three grabbed the steel bar across the door. “Okay, so I’m going to count

to three. We all pull on three. You got that?” Daynia explained slowly.

“Yes, yes!” Ishma spread his legs and prepared himself.

“I meant that for Alexis,” Daynia said under her breath.

“Eeeesh!” Alexis groaned.

“One. Two,” Daynia turned to look at Alexis.

“What?”

“Three!” They braced themselves and pulled until the door slowly creaked open, letting sounds of footsteps and voices filter in. Daynia turned to Ishma, “can you keep Teeta close to you?”

Ishma nodded as he grabbed the goat by the collar and held on tight.

Daynia and Alexis stepped out onto the small landing and looked up the narrow street. They eyed the passers-by. Daynia tugged at her robe, trying to pull it down. They were obviously a little taller than Ishma’s mother so the robes didn’t quite cover their entire length, exposing the lower portion of their legs and their laced-up boots, which were clear red flags Daynia thought. Hopefully no one would notice. “Here goes nothing,” Daynia said out loud. Exchanging glances, Daynia and Alexis took a deep breath and climbed the stairs to the cobblestone road. Ishma held on tightly to Teeta as he bounded up the stairs and stepped in beside them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Face to Face

Slowing their pace, Daynia motioned for Ishma to lead the way. Pulling Teeta alongside, Ishma headed up the incline that led into an open and very animated square. Wearing the mantles over their heads like veils, Daynia and Alexis maintained their eyes downcast, clasping the two sides of the fabric under their chins with one hand, partially shielding their faces. People looked over as they passed but seemed not to take much interest. *For the most part*, Daynia thought, unlike the two women carrying buckets on their heads who showed an acute interest as they stared at them. As they gave the pair the once over, they stopped at their feet, staring at their strange footwear. Daynia followed their gaze and realized they stood out like sore thumbs with their boots. She nudged Alexis to walk faster.

Alexis lowered her head further, her back bent over exaggeratedly.

Daynia glanced over as they hurried along, “What are you doing?!” she asked furiously.

“I’m trying to avoid drawing attention!” Alexis whispered back just as furiously.

“Well do you think you can do that without looking like you’re licking the ground?! You’re drawing more attention by looking like a nutcase! We’re already conspicuous with,” Daynia kicked Alexis’ boots, “these!”

“Ouch! What?” Alexis glared at Daynia who was looking back at the staring women. She glanced down at their boots. “Oh shoot! We missed that one.” Alexis picked up her pace, anxious to escape the probing eyes.

“Yes and we can’t do anything about it now,” Daynia pulled at Alexis’ mantle, “so let’s mingle.” Daynia nearly dragged Alexis into a small nearby crowd, keeping her eyes on Ishma who seemed oblivious to their predicament, while the stark difference in attire and surroundings became increasingly

obvious.

“This is so Amish,” Alexis complained.

“This is beyond Amish,” Daynia replied. She grabbed Alexis’ hand and squeezed, her expression telling Alexis to beware as a man wearing a Roman soldier’s uniform walked past. He glanced over, but did not stop. Alexis stared at his exposed legs, “Point taken.”

They followed Ishma across the square, making their way down winding cobblestone roads lined with dwellings that were fused together. They reminded Daynia of those picturesque European towns she loved to watch on travel shows. It would have been nice to have been here under different circumstances and take the time to explore the quaint town she thought, as Alexis’ voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Stop!” Teeta was trotting close to Alexis and butted into her for a second time. Alexis shoved the goat gently with her thigh.

Ishma laughed, the sound striking Daynia as refreshing, a sentiment sorely lacking in the last few hours. Good-naturedly, she gestured to Alexis and Ishma to hush.

They rounded a structure leading to an open area that housed what seemed to be several commercial buildings. “He is wanting to play!” Peering up at Alexis, Ishma spoke excitedly, oblivious to a small group of soldiers hovering nearby. Several of the soldiers glanced over, staring at Daynia and her friends, as they approached.

Daynia tugged at Ishma, forcing him to veer away from the soldiers, trying not to make the move too obvious.

“Try to keep him quiet Ishma,” Daynia whispered anxiously, as they neared the group. They could not deviate any further but attempted to quickly file past the curious men.

One soldier fixated on them as the two women and child hurried past. He angled his head for a better view of their faces. Frowning, he stepped forward for a closer look. Fear shooting through her, Daynia quickened her pace and glanced back, nearly stumbling over a jutting stone when she spotted the

mysterious young boy holding the glowing object, standing in front of the soldier. She quickly faced forward again, alarms sounding in her brain. She shook her head and glanced back, but there was no sign of the mysterious boy, only the suspicious glare of the soldier as he slowly turned his attention back to his comrades.

“We need to hurry,” Daynia said anxiously as they all picked up their pace.

When they finally put some distance between themselves and the soldiers, Daynia sighed in relief, realizing she had been holding her breath.

“That was close,” Alexis said, her fears allayed, as Teeta rammed into her again. She swung around abruptly to confront the floppy-eared creature, stopping it in its tracks, grimacing when it bleated loudly.

“Stop annoying him!” Daynia whispered harshly.

Alexis hurried after Daynia. “I’m not doing anything!” She turned to Teeta in exasperation, “Shhh!” “Troublemaker,” she muttered under her breath.

Teeta baaed again, staying close to Alexis who threw up her hands in surrender as Ishma and Daynia exchanged glances, smothering their laughter. Teeta suddenly picked up his trot to match Daynia’s steps. Alexis looked up at them mumbling, “traitor!”

* * * * *

Shading her eyes from the blinding sun, Alexis used part of the mantle to wipe at the sweat on her forehead. Despite the soft orange glow of the sun and the sky’s altering hues as it prepared to usher in the evening, the heat had yet to subside. Alexis stood quietly alongside Ishma, watching Daynia who stood a short distance away, conversing with a man harnessed to a cart loaded with vats of olives.

“That’s gotta be heavy,” Alexis mumbled absentmindedly as her friend smiled at the weary-looking man.

“Thank you, sir.” Daynia kept her sentences to as few words as possible

to avoid being singled out as a foreigner. She bowed slightly and headed back toward her friends. An elderly woman carrying a large basket of fruit stumbled as she crossed Daynia's path, dropping the basket, "Oh!" she exclaimed as dates and figs tumbled onto the cobblestone ground.

Daynia rushed forward and quickly bent down, grabbing at fruits rolling to escape the confines of the basket. Picking up dates and figs, several at a time, she placed them back in the basket. She smiled at the woman and holding her arm, helped her to rise, as the elderly female clutched the basket. Pressing it to her abdomen, the kindly woman leaned across the basket gratefully, "Thank you! It is always such a treasure to see compassion for an old and tired soul such as I, from one as young and beautiful as you."

"You are hardly old and it's my pleasure," Daynia replied warmly.

"May the Lord bless you child," the woman said softly.

Daynia's smile vanished suddenly. Sensing her retreat, the woman became anxious wondering if she offended the young woman given the religious and political climate of the day. "Oh, I am so sorry child! I am sometimes too forward. Forgive the audacity of this old woman," she bobbed her head apologetically as she moved away.

Daynia recovered quickly and smiled. "No. It's fine."

The woman tilted her bobbing head in response and hurried away as Daynia watched her for a moment before slowly making her way back toward Alexis and Ishma, her hand absentmindedly tapping the dog tags under her clothing.

Alexis watched the familiar change in Daynia's expression. For all of her confidence and determination, she knew Daynia still struggled with the collateral damage from Jake's loss. It wasn't a tangible thing, she thought, as she picked up on Daynia's unconscious habit of tapping her chest where the dog tags hung, a gesture Alexis now recognized as her attempt to re-focus when dealing with pain and uncertainty.

Alexis remained silent as Daynia approached with a false smile. "Okay. We're heading that way." She pointed in an easterly direction.

“You’re sure?” A couple of young boys bumped into Alexis who caught the hood of the mantle just in time, before it dropped.

“As sure as I can be, technically speaking, having no idea where I actually am.”

Alexis stared at her a moment. “A simple yes would have sufficed.”

The boys, wearing long tunics reminiscent of a time depicted in historical films, moved past them. They met up with a group of young girls carrying water buckets and began teasing them. Daynia and Alexis watched curiously, each entertaining similar thoughts. ‘*Everyone* dressed funny here.’

Daynia finally turned to Ishma, “I think we’ll be all right now Ishma, I am very grateful... thankful,” she quickly explained, “for your help. The sun will be setting soon, you really should get home before your parents worry.”

“It is that way!” he said brightly, “by the way of the Temple also, so I will walk with you still.” The women exchanged a smile.

“Very well, then,” Daynia mused, “but only as far as this temple.”

Ishma nodded and, still holding Teeta by the collar, slipped ahead, glancing behind from time to time to reassure himself that his newfound friends were still following.

As people rushed by, the young women couldn’t believe the attention to detail in the re-creation of this antiquated town, replete with rickety doors, oil lamps and animal dung on the roads.

“How can they not have one single phone tower?” Daynia narrowed her eyes, squinting to see further ahead. Maybe she had missed them.

“I guess they have the underground network.”

“Right.” Daynia stopped and turned to face Alexis. “But not one electrical box, wire, pipe or generator in sight?”

“They’re masters of camouflage?”

Daynia rolled her eyes and continued walking, her mind racing to connect the dots, as they made their way under an arch, before Alexis broke the silence,

“I was thinking, what if we hitched a ride to way, way out of town? At some point, we’d run into modern civilization, right?”

“Jacob says...”

“Who?”

Daynia tilted her head over in the direction from which they had come, “Jacob, the olive merchant says it’s not safe to head out of Jerusalem – it’ll get dark soon and we don’t want to be stranded out there at night,” Daynia explained with exaggerated patience. “The next town over is much like this one. He advised we head to the constabulary on the edge of town. He thought they could help. So that’s where we’re going since he knows these parts and we don’t even have a clue.”

“Constabulary? Isn’t that like – THE LAW – do you recall we’re being – well oh – CHASED – by the law!”

“It’s our safest bet right now,” Daynia retorted, “maybe you noticed? They’re traditional here? Very. Few have actually seen us and the last thing we need is to be flogged because we didn’t cover our ankles!”

“That’s why we should just figure out our way back. Well, we could try. Bring some water and food. Sleep in a tent. Build a fire. It could be a whole new adventure!” Alexis said excitedly.

“The area is crawling with snakes.”

“...Or we could find the local constabulary and get someone there to help us out.”

“I thought so,” Daynia said dryly, staring straight ahead as they walked along a high stone wall, running the length of the road.

The sound of a man’s voice shouting rose above the wall and trailed down toward the street. Daynia and Alexis exchanged glances, wondering what the commotion was about as Ishma led them around the cornerstone of the wall, toward an entrance into an expansive courtyard, which bordered other smaller ones.

People were pushing and shoving toward the impressive temple centered

in the courtyard, where some sort of argument seemed to be brewing. They stopped momentarily, curious at the sight of the crowd congregating near the temple steps.

“Oh!” Ishma let out an excited whoop as he bolted toward the temple, Teeta taking off after him. “Come! Come!” he shouted to Daynia and Alexis.

The two stood dumbfounded for a moment as Ishma ran off into the courtyard.

“Now what?” Daynia stepped forward, “Ishma!”

“Ah geez, he’s heading *toward* the crowd!” Alexis moaned.

“In an enclosed courtyard.” Daynia added. She looked at Alexis. They couldn’t very well just leave him there without a word.

“Rats!” Daynia and Alexis took off after Ishma, clutching the mantles tightly under their chins to keep their faces hidden, hoping no one would pay attention to their boots.

In his excitement, Ishma bulldozed through the crowd, trying to make his way to the front while Teeta bleated anxiously when hordes of spectators separated him from his master.

Alexis and Daynia approached the back of the gathering, eyes roving as they searched for Ishma.

“We lost him!” Alexis moved in closer as she scanned the crowd.

“We may have to keep going without him!” Daynia’s concern was tangible.

Before the young women could come to any decision, they were distracted by a booming, angry voice. They turned to look past the crowd as the sounds of crashing tables and the tinkling of coins rolling along the stone ground filled the air.

There was something familiar about the whole thing Daynia thought, as she found herself moving toward the altercation. Alexis followed closely, as they inched their way through the pressing crowd, her curiosity piqued as much as Daynia’s. As the crowd shifted, people seemed to move out of their way,

clearing the line of sight. Their attention was now captivated by what was unfolding on the steps of the Temple. Daynia stopped abruptly as she focused on the unfolding scene. She drew in her breath, wavering, as everything shifted into slow motion. Alexis squeezed her way beside Daynia, her eyes widening with delight.

There, on the steps a man dressed like Jesus angrily moved from one table to another.

“Looks like a terrific performance!” Alexis grinned as she clapped energetically.

Daynia turned toward her, whispering angrily as people glanced with surprised interest in their direction. “Stop attracting attention!”

“What? I think he’s great,” Alexis turned to the woman beside her, “isn’t he great?” Appalled, the woman stared at Alexis, cautiously moving away. Alexis, who had been caught up in the moment suddenly realized what she was doing and quickly turned away from the woman. She drew the mantle tightly around her face, gripping it under her chin. She glanced over at Daynia sheepishly then looked straight ahead, avoiding her friend’s angry glare.

The commotion on the temple steps saved the young women from further undue curiosity as everyone’s attention was drawn to Jesus, who moved along the temple steps, overturning tables and money dishes as merchants scrambled to get out of the way. “Take them out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

“Oh, it looks so real,” Alexis marvelled, “so very real!”

Daynia watched the man dressed like Jesus, spellbound, unable to pull her gaze away as she silently agreed with her friend. As she focused on Him, people and noises dimmed and seemed distant. It didn’t just look real. *It felt real.* A slow shiver waved its way up her spine.

The nightmare of being lost in that white expanse of oblivion filled her mind. Daynia shook her head, deleting the anxious thought as the man dressed like Jesus suddenly stopped and turned, lifting His head in her direction. Their eyes met and locked. Daynia’s breathing became shallow, tears stung her eyes and out of nowhere, anger welled up inside like a bursting dam.

Sadness veiled Jesus' eyes, as His gaze remained steady but soft. Suddenly, He shifted the direction of His gaze. Daynia followed His eyes as they moved deliberately across the crowd, settling on a tall man standing parallel to her, several feet away. She sucked in her breath when, unexpectedly, the man's head turned to stare directly at her, a slow wicked smile spreading across his face. A chill shot down her spine as his face transformed into the visage of the second attacker, who had broken into their home the night she lost Jake. As she held her breath, the shadow of ragged wings retracted behind him.

Daynia gasped, stumbling backwards, bumping into Alexis as fear exploded in her head. Oblivious, Alexis moved over slightly, still absorbed by the scene on the temple steps. Daynia steadied herself and quickly looked around. *Why is everyone acting normal? Didn't they see?* She braced herself and looked back in the attacker's direction, now seeing nothing strange or familiar about the man. His face had turned away from her as he looked ahead, engrossed with the performance on the temple steps. Daynia frowned. She must be tired she thought, needing reassurance. *I'm just really tired.*

Daynia suddenly felt stifled and desperate to get away. Anxiety kicked in as she turned to look at Jesus before frantically pushing her way through the crowd, the mantle falling away from her head.

The anger in His voice echoed in her head as she fought the rising panic.

"It is written in the Scriptures that God said 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of all nations,'" Jesus pointed to the merchants, "but you have turned it into a house of thieves!" While a few protested, most of the merchants grabbed their merchandise and hurried down the steps.

Alexis turned away from the scene, suddenly realizing Daynia was not beside her. Spotting her friend rushing off, she pressed past people, rushing to catch up with Daynia just as she breached the back of the crowd.

"What..."

"I need some air," Daynia cut Alexis off wanting to ignore whatever it was that just happened. All at once she grabbed Alexis' hand and stopped, her eyes staring ahead. Alexis froze and followed Daynia's gaze to the Roman

soldiers weaving their way through the crowd with purpose. She turned to Daynia, a look of fear in her eyes as she tried to signal with a nod. She stared Daynia squarely in the eyes and tilted her head upwards.

Daynia's eyebrows pulled together. "What?"

"Your mantle."

"My..." Daynia's eyes widened in alarm and as though on cue, one of the soldiers who had accompanied the centurion to the dry well pointed in their direction, shouting. The other soldiers reacted quickly ramming their way through the mass toward Daynia and Alexis. "There! They are there!"

With no time to spare, Daynia screamed, "Run Alex!"

Holding hands, Daynia and Alexis broke into a run, shoving their way through the crowd as the soldiers shouted and pushed their way toward them. Confusion soon ensued as the crowd reacted, people running in various directions out of fear, others hovering uncertainly. The shifting mass moved between Daynia and Alexis, separating the two friends.

"D!" Alexis shouted as she felt her arm being torn from Daynia's grip.

"Alex!" Daynia screamed as the force from a swarm of people shoved her friend further out of reach. At the far end of the square, Flavius advanced on horseback, having been informed of an uproar at the temple. He immediately directed his attention toward the shouts of his soldiers and caught sight of Daynia's dark hair billowing in the wind. His breath caught for an instant as he watched her frantically trying to reach out for her friend, the two caught on either side of the moving multitude. For a brief moment, he wondered about the trouble that seemed to be commonplace wherever these two strange women appeared, before shrugging off the thought and urging his horse forward in Daynia's direction.

Daynia and Alexis were being pulled farther and farther apart. Unable to reach each other and with the soldiers closing in, they both realized it was time for them to make a run for it on their own. Before she lost sight of Alexis, Daynia shouted the only thing she could think of, "the cave! Point zero!" She screamed as loudly as she could. 'Point zero' was their code for the location where they would meet should it be necessary. It was an expression they had

used for years particularly while out on assignment – wherever the other might be, they would eventually hook up at their ‘point zero.’ Daynia only hoped that in the upheaval, Alexis had heard her.

Forced by the swarm of people towards the opposite direction, Alexis finally broke free and darted off. Trying to hold onto her mantle, she looked back, fear shooting through her as she realized she could no longer see Daynia. Breathing hard, she caught sight of two soldiers not far behind and picked up her pace, finally losing her grip on the mantle as she slipped around the cornerstone of a nearby structure.

When Ishma realized his friends were no longer with him, he backtracked but got lost within the crowd. The chaos at the far end caught his attention and he jostled his way through the mob. His heart raced, knowing instinctively that it somehow involved Daynia and Alexis. He was elated when he spotted Alexis but his heart immediately sank as he watched her running away from the soldiers in pursuit. Guilt washed over the little boy as he ran after them, tears stinging his eyes. If only he had stayed beside them.

Racing from the temple square, Daynia rounded the edge of the crowd, stopping for an instant to see if she might catch a glimpse of Alexis. With soldiers nearly at her heels, she realized she had no time and no choice but to keep running. She took off again, making her way out of the courtyard. She didn’t stop until she found herself cornered near a building encircled by steps leading to a pillared portico. She stopped at the foot of the steps and looked back just as a soldier came to a grinding halt several feet away. He stood staring at her like a lion confronting his prey just before he pounced.

Daynia felt trapped, but her mind raced to figure out her next move as she returned her pursuer’s glare. Humans were much like their animal counterparts, she thought, aware that any slight movement on her part would surely result in an attack. Seconds passed as she eyed the portico running the length of the building. It was an estimated guess, but if her conversations with Jake about architecture served her well, this portico would envelope the entire building. She made a split second, calculated decision; her only chance for escape would be to make her way around the colonnade and exit on the other side and run past the soldier from the rear.

As they stared each other down, a slow smirk spread across the soldier's triumphant face. He was certain Daynia had no escape. She was trapped and she was his catch. He already imagined the praise he would receive from his superiors for capturing the coveted prize. Before he could relish the thought, Daynia surprised him with a sudden turnabout as she bound up the steps. With a little delay, he did the same but as he reached the top landing, she ran back down. He cursed loudly and made his way back down the steps. Just as his foot hit the last step, Daynia shot back up, this time zooming around along the landing. Joined by his comrades, the humiliated soldier raced after Daynia with a vengeance, but she had already rounded the first corner.

Flavius tried to rein in his horse, spooked by a rock someone in the frenzied crowd had thrown, finally driving the animal forward just in time to see Daynia jump off the last two steps of the portico. He watched as she doubled back and left his soldier scrambling at the bottom while she disappeared around one of the pillars, escaping his men. Flavius smiled in disbelief. "That little wench." Tugging on the reins, he turned his horse to follow that troublesome female he unexpectedly found himself admiring.

* * * * *

Alexis scrambled around a well as one soldier tried to cut her off from the other side and another foot soldier moved in toward her.

"Shoot!" She turned and ran diagonally. The soldiers veered in her direction, closing the distance between themselves and their fugitive.

* * * * *

Darkness crept in as the chase for the duo continued relentlessly. Daynia ran past a small group of men loitering, as more soldiers steered their way toward her. She clambered up a small street, stumbling as she looked back, hearing the clanking sound of hooves as one soldier approached on horseback from one side and a foot soldier from the opposite.

"Stop!" the foot soldier shouted.

Panicked, Daynia looked for another escape route and started pushing on doors. One finally gave way and she burst through it, startling an elderly couple sitting down for a meal. “So sorry!” she shouted as she ran past them hoping for a back door, but there was only a small window. “Aaagh!” She frantically twisted and squirmed, squeezing her body through the small gap before dropping to the ground on the other side of the window opening into a fenced yard. The clamour inside the small dwelling heightened Daynia’s dread as she bounced up and ran off. She eyed the obstruction ahead, thinking she was out of her mind – decided she was – and took a running jump, ripping her robe as she barely cleared the jagged wooden fence. Foot soldiers rushed back out of the house and around it, while mounted soldiers who had joined the pursuit sailed over the fence and continued the chase.

Wondering how long she could keep this up, Daynia struggled to breathe *and* keep her pace but she could feel herself slowing down as she tried to rush up a slope, staring at grazing sheep inside a haphazard enclosure. She paused an instant and leaned over to catch her breath, her mind reeling with questions. *Why am I running? Why am I scared? Who the hell ARE these guys?* The thumping of hooves put her on alert again. She turned in the direction of the approaching sound and then back toward the sheep.

“Aw hell!” Daynia threw herself to the ground just as the mounted soldiers came into view, reining in their horses and scanning the surroundings. She groaned silently as she crawled through the flock of sheep, startling some and holding back her shrieks as she was knocked about by cloven hooves. As if that wasn’t enough, Daynia fought to keep from vomiting, gagging as the stench of dung became overbearing. She wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but felt more like crying as she inched her way through the soil, moving silently past jittery sheep and spitting out dirt particles kicked up by shifting hooves. Her only consolation as she reached the opposite end of the enclosure – at least she didn’t get any poop on her! As she emerged on the other side, the soldiers spotted Daynia. They took off in her direction, trying to navigate through the scattering flock as she hit the ground running.

* * * * *

Practically flying down a narrow winding road, Alexis tried to change direction suddenly when she realized it came to a dead end. Her manoeuvre sent her slipping over the uneven cobblestones before she crashed against a stony wall, falling on her backside. “OW!” She was rushing to get up when a soldier came to an abrupt stop in front of her. Her eyes darted for an escape route but it was futile. She was trapped. Alexis sighed and finally surrendered to her circumstances. She glanced up at the soldier as one of his comrades arrived on the scene and smiled bravely, her breathing laboured, barely able to speak, “well...I...did give you a good run... for your money, eh?”

The soldier grabbed her roughly and pulled her up without a word. “Sore loser,” Alexis muttered as she tried to catch her breath, while the two soldiers grabbed her arms, practically dragging her back up the road. “What a waste of energy,” she complained out loud.

At the top of the road, hiding behind the jutting frame of a dwelling, Ishma watched, near tears, as his friend was captured. He was startled by a sudden bleat from behind as Teeta, ears bouncing about, came trotting up to him. “Shhh!” Ishma whispered, alarmed. He grabbed the goat’s collar, holding on tightly and hurried to pull him out of sight as the soldiers approached with their captive. Ishma waited until the soldiers moved well past him before following at a safe distance as Alexis was hauled away.

* * * * *

With darkness creeping in, an exhausted Daynia continued running and stumbling, not quite sure where she was headed, knowing only she couldn’t stop. She had to keep going. Anxiety tingled in the pit of her stomach as she realized she had made her way into a remote part of town, with fewer homes and almost no one around. Nearly out of steam, she was forced to slow down, fear pricking at her imagination. She swung her head around but heard nothing and wondered if she had finally dodged her hunters. Then, just as she convinced herself she was safe, the clank of hooves echoed nearby. Daynia groaned and summoning all of her strength, tried to pick up her pace but she was overly exhausted and she stumbled about erratically. Turning to see if her pursuers were closing in, she stepped forward, unaware of the craggy crevice

and the blackness beyond it.

Suddenly, Daynia's foot slipped as she tumbled down a narrow void, her screams echoing loudly in the consuming darkness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Into The Darkness

Daynia came to; her eyes fluttering open to total darkness, as she lay sprawled on the frigid dirt floor. Terrified, she screamed, scrambled to get up, and nearly fell over again as her right leg collapsed beneath her. Panicked, Daynia's hands flailed about wildly, as she sought an anchor to hold on to. She felt herself on the brink of losing her mind as she clawed desperately at the rock barrier, her lacerated fingers spurting blood, her futile attempts wearing her down. As panic yielded to fury, she found her equilibrium and pressed her back against the cold cavern wall, hurling a scream at the top of her lungs from sheer rage.

Daynia wiped angrily at the tears spilling without reserve. She felt spent and too weary to care but as she tried to collect herself, it suddenly occurred to her that there was a flicker of light in the distance. She squinted to focus on the faint radiance, lending the underground prison an eerie glow. She had obviously fallen down a hole of some sort, which seemed to shoot off into a tunnel.

She tried to think logically, despite the fog of fear clouding her mind. In the silence, she could hear the echo of her own rapid breathing. No one would come find her here – wherever here was. She had to do something. She let the craggy wall scrape her palm as she pressed her hand firmly against it, not wanting to lose contact. She moved slowly, feeling her way toward the glow in the distance. As she neared the brightness, she noticed a dim ray shot upward. Her heartbeat quickened. *Could it be an opening?* Her way out, she thought hopefully. She ignored the throbbing pain in her right leg. *A few more feet. I'll be there. Just a few more feet.*

That was when she heard it – the slow, heavy breathing – close by. She realized instinctively that it wasn't that crazy centurion wannabe who was chasing her. She stopped suddenly, frozen like a deer caught in headlights – her mind burgeoning with fear.

The voice was soft but deadly, the breath, caressing her skin as it whispered into her ear, “devil’s delight, Daynia, Daynia.”

She felt like she collided into an iceberg, all shreds of hope turning to dread as the beating of her heart slammed against her chest like a jackhammer. Screaming, Daynia bolted backwards, but as she turned, she stumbled and fell forward. The demon appeared behind her again, the shadow of its wings spreading ominously. Her right leg faltered as Daynia tried to push herself up. She began to pull at the rocks and earth with her hands, digging her left foot in for support, blood trickling down her hand from the aggravated lacerations.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” The voice sounded lethal as it hung like a dense cloud inside the dark tunnel. Daynia could feel the smirk in the darkness. “It seems I must do everything myself.”

She suddenly stopped clawing at the earth, her breathing laboured as she fought the internal struggle to give up.

“Ah, the will is weakening.” Amusement hinged on every word.

Daynia’s mind blurred as terror imprisoned every thought. She sobbed openly, defeated by the fear over which she was unable to gain control. Trembling, she opened her eyes and caught a solitary tear as it splashed onto the hard ground. As it splattered, it seemed to glitter, the shimmer drawing Daynia’s attention as it radiated light in an increasingly wider circumference. Before she could wonder about it, she heard the deep intake of breath behind her as brightness flooded the tunnel. Daynia finally lifted her head toward the intense glow that shone through what she suspected was the opening, creating a pool of light below.

As the glow seemed to rush in waves down the tunnel, a sudden howl erupted behind Daynia. She tilted toward it in time to see the demon’s large ragged wings swoosh to wrap themselves around his body protectively. Without thinking, letting adrenaline lead her, Daynia found the strength to rise, and bracing against the cave wall, she hoisted herself up. Once on her feet, she leaned backed, gingerly touching the ground with her right foot as she steadied herself, wincing as pain shot up her leg.

The light had infused her with strength despite the fear. She looked around

but was met with darkness, her shallow breathing – the only sound. There was nothing. *No one and nothing*. Was she dreaming, she wondered? Confused, she looked back toward the opening. There was no pool of light. In its place, a subtle ray glimmered. *What the...?* Maybe she shouldn't have stopped the medication she thought, wondering if she was having hallucinations. Daynia squinted. In the shadows beyond the subtle ray, she could make out the incline of a steep embankment. Her heart raced. She was getting out after all, she thought anxiously. Although she was still reeling from her experience and in pain, Daynia didn't hesitate and rushed toward the scanty light, steadying herself along the side of the tunnel. She limped toward the incline, throwing herself against the slant. She lunged upward, and clawing at the edges, climbed until she squeezed through an opening and dragged herself out.

The warm night air seemed crisp in comparison to the cavern's suffocating atmosphere. Daynia inhaled deeply as she lay on the rough ground, trying to make sense of what had happened, finally rolling over onto her back, groaning as pain stabbed at her leg. She stared up at the moon casting shadows through patches of dark lumpy clouds racing across the night sky. Alarm signals went off as she considered the implications of how the lines between reality and hallucination were blurring. Her mind tried to sort out the incongruity between recent events, unable to tie them together in a fashion that made sense. She thought of Alexis, hoping against all odds that her friend had escaped and was safe. She herself seemed to have eluded her captors for now but she needed to find her way back to the cave as soon as possible, trusting Alexis would do the same.

Wincing in pain, Daynia pushed herself up and wobbled towards a row of boulders nearby. Consumed with the thought of escaping, she hadn't considered much else, such as where she was heading. She leaned against the rocky support, its coldness sending shivers through her body as she slowly studied her surroundings. Anxiety began to take root again as she realized it was dark, desolate and she was hopelessly lost.

Daynia tried to keep the intensifying unease in check, knowing she had to weigh her options and make a plan if she was to survive the night. The wind whisked strands of her long hair across her face and as Daynia absentmindedly brushed them aside, a distant gleam of light caught her eye. A strong gust of

wind slammed against her, its howl announcing worse was still to come.

Daynia fought her way against the strengthening winds, moving steadily toward the vacillating glow, uncertain how far off it was but determined to reach it despite the deteriorating weather. That was all she needed, Daynia thought nervously, a storm to complicate matters even further, as if things weren't bad enough. Daynia pressed on, deliberately kept her rising fear in check, as she imagined the distant light becoming dimmer. Fear struck her head on as she realized it wasn't her imagination, the glow was disappearing, overshadowed by darkness oozing in like a wave. She felt panic rise as her hope of finding help diminished with the fading light. It was then, as she focused on the distant ebbing light – as if for dear life – that she heard the stomping sound of approaching hooves through the howling wind.

Flavius pulled Evander to a stop, his red mantle riding the wind erratically behind him. His eyes narrowed as he trained them on the outline of the woman up ahead. A slow smile crossed his face. *Ah! There you are.* He didn't stop to question why the satisfaction he felt was intertwined with relief and a rush of adrenaline. He held Evander steady as he watched Daynia turn abruptly toward him, her sudden awareness of him provoking a surge of pleasure.

Flavius's breath caught as a ray of moonlight broke through the clouds illuminating Daynia's beautiful face, her hair now loose with abandon in the turbulent wind. She looked frightened...and angry, he thought, her eyes staring at him as she took a step back unsteadily. Unperturbed, Flavius guided Evander forward. He was in no hurry. He knew Daynia had nowhere to go. Just beyond her lay the edge of a cliff. He would take his time and relish the capture of this most special prey.

As Daynia stumbled while taking another step back, he realized she was injured. His eyebrows furrowed together as his fascination turned to anger. *Blasted woman!* Why wouldn't she just give herself up? He realized he was intrigued as much by this wench's attire and speech as by her tenacious character – all mysteries he was keen on solving.

Daynia did an about face, nearly losing her balance as she reached out to steady herself on a giant tree stump. She felt instantly trapped at the sight of

that damned centurion on his mighty horse. Her first instinct was to run, but outrunning a horse was simply stupid – even more so with her injury. Instead, she would have to find a way to obstruct the beast’s path while she made use of the surrounding landscape. Daynia’s eyes darted about, looking for somewhere to run to where the four-legged pursuer could not follow.

Flavius looked up at the sky – the filtering moonlight now becoming dimmer as the expanse of clouds thickened. Sand shifted and rolled in waves across the ground. A sandstorm was brewing, Flavius thought. He’d best get his fugitive and head back. Clicking his heels twice, he signalled Evander who stomped his hoof and snorted, then edged his way forward.

Daynia’s eyes widened in panic as horse and rider began closing the distance between them. She leaned heavily on her left leg, keeping her hand on the tree stump and limped backwards.

“It would be foolish to try to escape,” Flavius said loudly as he led Evander toward her.

Without thinking, Daynia turned to half-run, half-limp toward the edge. Flavius kicked his heels into his steed’s flank, forcing the horse to jump forward. “Blasted woman!” he shouted as he reached out to grab Daynia but missed his mark. She dropped out of sight suddenly, her scream raising the hairs on the back of his neck. Reining Evander in to a screeching halt barely inches from the brink, Flavius jumped off in one sweeping motion and rushed toward the boundary. He peeked over the edge feeling relief wash over him when he saw Daynia on a lower ledge struggling to stand. Glancing up at the dust funnels forming, Flavius knew he had little time to save her. He rushed to Evander’s side as the horse stomped uneasily. For a split second, sensing an anomaly, Flavius turned slowly, awed by the sand swivelling around them. It was the first time he had seen it glisten as grains twinkled with specks of light. Flavius frowned and turned his attention to the urgent matter at hand, pulling his cloak up to partially cover his face against the grainy wind as he unfurled the coiled rope hanging on the side of his saddle.

Afraid to move, Daynia was acutely aware that she had landed on a jutting ledge with little room to manoeuvre. Despite the dim light, she could make out its outline and the deep blackness beyond it. Her heart pounded as

she thought of how close she had come to plummeting down that dark abyss.

“Steady Evander!” Quickly wrapping the rope around one of the saddle horns, he moved to the edge of the precipice and tossed the other end below. “Take hold of the lasso!” he shouted to Daynia. “Take hold!” he shouted louder.

A distraught Daynia looked up, relieved to hear *that* man’s voice. Being captured was definitely better than falling into that dark void. She hobbled on one leg, shielding her eyes against the blowing sand with one hand, blindly grabbing with the other, hoping it would land on the rope. Daynia let out an elated shriek when she felt its strands and firmly clutched the cable.

Flavius felt the pull as Daynia clasped the rope, letting it take on her weight. “Hold tightly!” He signalled his intent by tugging twice and wrapped the rope around his hand and elbow and turned to his horse, grateful he had taken time to train him beyond legion requirements. “Pull Evander! Pull!” The stallion neighed and snorted as he dug in against the weight of the rope and backed up, Flavius straining with him.

Daynia tightened her grip as she felt herself being lifted off the ground, ignoring the throbbing pain long enough to be thankful for that strangely attired centurion, given the alternative at that moment. Assaulted by the prickling sand and forceful winds, Daynia gagged, spitting out particles of dust as the frightening storm surged. Bracing herself against the rocky barrier, she held on as firmly as she could, struggling against the onslaught of sandy wind now burning her eyes. As Daynia was hoisted higher, the powerful wind raged war, impeding their efforts, slamming Daynia against the side of the cliff relentlessly. Unable to hold on, her screams muffled by the howling wind, Daynia’s terror heightened as she felt her hold slipping. *Not again!* Before she could align her thoughts, she lost her grip and fell, crashing to the ground, her terrified screams suddenly hushed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Entangled

Flavius tumbled backwards from the sudden release of weight. He cursed, instantly aware of what had just transpired and moved quickly to the edge, lay on his stomach and leaned over. “Merda!” Fear ripped through him when he saw an unconscious Daynia lying prone on the ground. “Woman? Can you hear me?”

Swearing, Flavius rushed to his horse and grabbed his two water canteens, hooked them to his belt, untied the rope and hit Evander’s rump, “Go, find refuge. HA!” Evander bolted as Flavius ran to the nearby stump, tied the rope around it and hurriedly wrapped the other end around his waist, faltering against the force of the wind. He rushed back to the edge, gripped the rope tightly and shutting his eyes against the sand and wind, he repelled his way down the side of the cliff. He let himself drop the last several feet landing with a thump on the ledge. He quickly untied the rope and stepped toward Daynia, dropping to one knee, beside her unconscious body.

Flavius removed his cloak and draped it over Daynia; the wind refusing to let it settle as it mercilessly buffeted the red fabric. He squinted against the sand, scanning his surroundings, looking for refuge. For a moment, a faint glow of light revealed a pathway leading to a hidden alcove. Using his body as a shield, he leaned forward, repositioning the cloak to cover Daynia’s face and slipped his arms under her body. He lifted her and angled her body against his chest, dipping his face down into hers to protect her and still make it possible for him to see. Keeping his back against the cliff wall to avoid stepping into the black vacuum surrounding them, he inched his way toward the dark recess, ethereally lit by a subtle glow.

Flavius’s eyes searched the nook for a corner where they could burrow down and wait out the storm, but to his delight, what seemed like a corner turned out to be the obstructed opening to a small cave. Flavius made his way inside and lifted his head to quickly inspect the surroundings and ascertain that

no wild beast was holed up for the night. Relieved, he glanced down at the covered bundle he was carrying suddenly realizing how her size belied her weight. An imperceptible smile touched his lips as he shifted his arms, rolling Daynia slightly away from his chest, the movement causing the corner of the cloak to slip off her face.

Flavius stared at her a moment, relishing the opportunity for a close-up look. Her face was stained with particles of dust and dirt, her hair dishevelled, her eyes closed as though resting softly despite the trauma she just experienced. He let his gaze travel to the smooth curve at the base of her neck exposed when the ill-fitting robe she wore shifted. A gust of wind blew past as Flavius stepped forward, wondering why the cave suddenly seemed darker, sparking the thought that he had been able to see just enough to make his way there despite the lack of moonlight in the storm.

As he mulled over the strangeness of it all, he tripped on what felt like snippets of bark, almost dropping Daynia as he stumbled forward in the darkness. He swore under his breath, sliding his foot backwards until it came into contact with the fragment that nearly toppled him. He kicked it into the shadows and listened for echoes that might help direct his steps. Flavius stepped forward toward the hollow sound that emanated when the fragment stopped bouncing. He stopped and made a full 360 turn then stepped forward and made another 360 turn. After several attempts, Flavius was satisfied there was enough room to set Daynia down and look for materials with which to build a fire.

Lowering his head Flavius nudged the cloak off of Daynia, letting it drop to the ground, then flattened out the fabric with his foot before setting her down on it gently. Reaching for the cloak in the darkness, his hands brushed against her body, triggering a mental picture of her curves before he swept it away and tugged at the edges of the cloak crumpled under her body, drawing them across her sides as a makeshift blanket.

Flavius stood up and began gliding his feet on the cold ground, feeling for anything that might serve to ignite a fire. After several minutes, he managed to pick up pieces of bark and broken timber, confirming his suspicion that others had already used the cave. This was good he thought. There would most certainly be other useful bits lying around. Flavius crouched down to create a

spark for the fire. Although making the wood fragments connect in pitch-blackness was proving to be a challenge, he soon mastered the timing and distance so that the friction was constant.

A spark suddenly caught and Flavius quickly covered it, adding more materials that soon had a small fire burning, its flames bringing a soft glow and soothing warmth to the dank cavern. Flavius glanced over at Daynia, the outline of her body now visible beneath the shadows of flames dancing on the wall behind her. He moved over to her, quickly deciding to scour the cave for more kindling materials after he checked for her injuries.

Down on one knee, Flavius began a slow examination of her body for any sign of broken bones. He picked up her left hand and although the lacerations were not clearly visible, he noticed that her fingers and palms were scratched. He furrowed his brows as his able hands steadily moved upward. Applying gentle pressure and movement, he felt the muscle in her upper arm, his eyebrows shooting up quizzically as he pressed the bicep, intrigued by the muscular tone. He continued, his hands moving over her shoulder and under the nape of her neck before sliding up the back of her head as Flavius felt for any open wounds. He deliberately ignored the soft feel of her hair and the urge to run his fingers through the silky strands. He concentrated on possible wounds as his hands maneuvered their way across her head and down her temples. Not feeling any injuries, he slipped his hands over Daynia's other shoulder, moving them smoothly slowly down the opposite arm. He felt a cut on her forearm, but continued applying pressure, deftly moving his hands over her ribs when his arm brushed against her breast.

Flavius wasn't prepared for his reaction and pulled back as a bolt of electricity flashed throughout his body. He paused, mentally reprimanding himself for the boyish response and re-focused his thoughts. As the examination progressed to her legs, Flavius took in a deep breath, fighting primal urges as his hands slid over her shapely legs, gliding over the smooth skin exposed below the capri jeans. Daynia stirred when he touched the lower right leg, a deep gash barely discernable in the dim light. His hands followed the outline of her hiking boots, questions popping into his head about the sturdy, man-like footwear he had never seen before. Truly, she was a stranger in this land. Flavius completed his examination, relieved she had no broken

bones. He paused to consider how he should dress the wound, then, lifting the cloak that covered Daynia, he ripped two portions of her robe. He pulled a flask from his belt and slowly poured water over the wound, dripped some on the smaller piece of fabric as well and gingerly dabbed at the wound. Once he deemed it clean, he tore the other piece of fabric into strips and bandaged the injury, wrapping the strips around the cut.

Flavius glanced up when a strange sound escaped Daynia's lips, though she remained unconscious. He paused, gazing at her intently before he turned to continue bandaging the laceration on her arm. Satisfied that her major injuries had been attended to, Flavius paused to study Daynia's sleeping face before reaching for her hands. He held them tenderly, taking pleasure from the feel of their small form in his much bigger ones, gently wiping at the lacerations and blood stains. Daynia moaned, her head rolling to the side. Flavius carefully lay her hands close to her body and leaned over for a more intimate look at her face. A long trail of blood oozed from her temple. As he reached out with the damp cloth, he felt a sharp stab in his head. He sucked in his breath and pressed the palm of his hand against the pain, trying to push away images of his mother's bloodied face and the trail of blood dripping from her temple. Anger suddenly spiked through him as he pushed away ugly memories. Flavius shook his head and cursed silently, before turning his attention back to cleaning the wound and wiping blood from Daynia's face.

When he had completed his task, Flavius leaned forward, resting his arm on his raised knee and stared down at Daynia, his eyes narrowing as they followed the curve of her lips and cheekbones. With a slight hesitation, he reached out to brush away the strands of hair that had fallen across her eyes. How angelic she looked, he thought, as she slept, a soft expression on her face concealing the truth about her fierce determination and stubbornness. A slow smile crept across his handsome face as he raised one eyebrow quizzically.

"You are becoming as troublesome as some of my most dire adversaries," he muttered under his breath as he rose to his feet.

Judging by the cave's secret location, he surmised thieves and smugglers would have made use of it. That was a good thing, he decided, as he kicked the ashes of a long-dead fire and moved about quietly, searching for more combustible material.

Outside, the lonely howl of the storm resounded as Flavius gathered up the last bit of usable stuff and dropped it in a corner before stretching out his long frame. He moved to the opposite side of the fire, across from Daynia, removed his sword and, grateful for a rest, slid down to sit on the ground, one leg extended, the other raised, bent at the knee. Daynia had not budged or uttered a sound. He watched her as he rubbed the back of his left shoulder, attacking the stiffness and ache of a long burdensome day. Flavius cursed lazily, never taking his eyes off Daynia, as he removed a rock that cut into his thigh.

“Dastardly woman.”

Taking a short gulp from one of his flasks, he wiped his lips with his forearm as he set the leather bottle down with a thump. He best settle in, he thought, as he tilted his ear toward the lamenting wind in the darkness just beyond the entrance. It was going to be a long night. He closed his eyes, letting exhaustion take over, lulling him into a light doze. His eyes suddenly flew open, his mind reeling with questions.

He turned toward the cave entrance, and the outside, obscured in pitch black. Total darkness. His mind rewound the timeline. He turned his head toward the fire then back to the darkness beyond. Complete blackness. So how was it that he was able to see the alcove, he wondered, an eerie sensation prickling the back of his neck. He only now remembered the glow, the faint light from the alcove, guiding him. Flavius sat up straighter. *There was a light was there not?* He scrutinized the darkness around him. That made no sense. Flavius was not one given to superstitions and this reeked of mythos. He shook his head and leaned it against the cold cavern wall. It felt good, like a nudge back to reality. It was just luck, there could not have been any light. He saw what he needed to see. That was that, he decided, kicking back the vexatious reasoning that hounded his thoughts.

He forcibly turned away from his suspicions by redirecting his attention to Daynia. He glanced over, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at her, ignoring the underlying thrill at the root of his thoughts. Here was a real mystery, he thought, as he watched her chest rise and fall softly, her face turned toward him. Perplexed, his eyebrows drew together. *Who was this strange woman, wearing these strange clothes?* His expression softened as he saw her lips

move as though she would speak but she said nothing. Lost in her dreams, he imagined.

“You are a beauty,” he whispered, “but dangerous I daresay,” adding softly, “most dangerous.” He remembered his emotional tangle with another beauty who had ripped out his heart. He let out a short burst of laughter. Why in the world did this fugitive make him think of her, he wondered? Flavius quickly ignored the question and shifted uncomfortably, an uneasy feeling warning him not to let his guard down around this woman. He shut his eyes again, finally finding refuge in slumber as odd thoughts of hearts and women swirled in his head.

* * * * *

The raging sandstorm outside the small window, a mere hole carved out of the stone wall, frightened Alexis as she stood leaning into the door of the dingy cell.

Lifting herself on her tiptoes, she pressed her face against the uneven wrought iron bars, feeling the coolness against her cheek.

“Hey! Somebody! Anybody!” Alexis coughed, her voice hoarse from having shouted since she had been thrown into the cramped, stinky cell hours earlier.

“Aaaaagh!” She turned and slammed her back against the door. “Ouch!”

Alexis laughed at herself nervously, trying to pretend she wasn't afraid. No explanation had been offered nor had anyone come to question her or charge her with any crime. Her mind reeled with the thought of being locked away, forgotten. She had barely moved away from the door, wary of the putrid stench that made her want to vomit when her hand flew to her mouth in an effort to stop the gagging as she made the mistake of breathing from her nostrils. *This is hell!*

Alexis hope fervently that at least one of them had been lucky and that Daynia had fared better.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Prey and Predator

Daynia stood shivering in a wasteland of white. She whipped around and around but still, nothing, no one, only herself and the eerie sound of a lonely wind whisking over the snow and ice from one endless horizon to another. She was alone and lost in a vacuum of utter nothingness. Then she heard it, that familiar rumbling. Her heart beat loudly, erratically, anticipating the shadows cast over the pristine white. Terror rushed through her as she spun around. "Run! Run!" Her mind screamed in her head. She started, and then hesitated. Which way should she run? WHICH WAY? She froze, as the slow rumbling gathered momentum. She was shivering now, but not from the cold. She turned frantically to find herself staring at the rising cloud of snow. Ragged wings stretching from horizon to horizon, flapping, emitting an odd, ugly sound. Daynia began running, running as fast as she could, away from the burning red eyes she knew were glaring. Suddenly, she heard a different sound. She stopped abruptly and looked down. She was running on ice and the ice had already been breached. She stared at the long fissure snaking its way beneath her feet. As she stared in disbelief, terrified to move, the shadow of large ragged wings towered above her, obstructing the sunlight as the wings unfolded, spreading an outline of darkness over the cracking ice. Daynia looked up and screamed.

Daynia's eyes shot open as she gasped. She frantically tried to sit up, her breathing heavy and short. Her hand flew to her temple and she groaned as pain shot through her body, and her head pounded. Beads of sweat glistened on her forehead – droplets trickling down her temples. Daynia's eyes darted to the fire, suddenly aware of her surroundings and the imposing darkness. "*Control your breathing!*" she shouted in her mind. Making an effort, Daynia stared into the light of the fire and counted silently. "*One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three...*"

Her racing heartbeat began to subside as she continued to take several

deep breaths, completely focusing on the flames, her eyes now accustomed to the glow of the fire. Like a receding wave, anxiety began to roll away, allowing her to calm down. Total darkness would have been unbearable she thought, drawing in her breath sharply, her arm throbbing. She glanced down at the bandages, frowning in puzzlement. She felt a sharp jolt, like a spear ripping through her as the realization hit her. A different kind of fear pulsed in her head now, her gaze shifting.

As her eyes focused beyond the fire, she saw him, sitting quietly in the shadows, sleeping – the man in the centurion uniform. The man, determined to arrest her. He looked relaxed, sitting with his back against the cave wall, his arm extended to rest on his raised knee, his other leg stretched out. Daynia quashed a sudden urge to slap him as she stared at him, prey and predator. An uncomfortable nervousness swept over her as she considered the danger he posed. Should she fear him, she wondered? Would he harm her? She looked down at the makeshift bandages on her arm and leg. Perhaps not. Arrest her? Maybe – but not harm her. She thought it unlikely, resisting the small nagging voice of doubt. No. He wouldn't have taken the time to dress her wounds if his plan was to hurt her. As she glanced at the bandages, wrapped symmetrically around her wounds, a warm tingle rushed through her chest. Daynia pushed her back against the wall. Her emotions ran over themselves, wavering from discomfort to fury. She didn't want to think about the reason for which she was infuriated. She hated that she had to be beholden to the man who wanted to throw her in jail. From what she had witnessed so far, she had no illusions about what might happen if she was taken to prison.

As the mist in her mind dissipated, she turned to look at Flavius, the events of that night becoming clearer. He chased her and he had saved her. Absentmindedly, she touched the sore spot on her temple. She grudgingly conceded her gratitude but also rationalized that she had to escape. Daynia glanced toward the outside, only then becoming acutely aware of the howling wind and the waiting darkness. *Am I crazy?* The thought of stepping outside sent a wave of panic through Daynia, but caught up in the intensity of the situation, she foolishly believed she had no choice and that she could do it. She need only find a hideout till morning. She decided not to think about it too much, knowing full well she would have reason to change her mind if she considered it in more depth.

Daynia glanced over at the sleeping centurion again. She studied his face and tousled dark hair. He was definitely striking, she thought to herself, but also a pain in the behind. For an instant, just an instant, she wondered about him. Who was he? Daynia shook the question away, alarmed at the direction her thoughts were headed. Re-focusing on her escape, she slowly pulled herself up, bracing her body against the rough cave wall, biting her lower lip to keep from groaning at the stabbing pains in various parts of her body. She pressed her back against the cold rock and inhaled deeply, allowing her nerves to settle. Daynia paused, looking back at Flavius, making sure he was still fast asleep. When she tried to move, her leg seemed to explode in pain. Her hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a shriek, stopping to look over at Flavius apprehensively. *Still fast asleep.* Daynia sighed inwardly. She turned back toward the cave exit and took a small painful step forward.

“You would not survive very long in that storm.”

Daynia froze mid-stride, the sarcasm in the deep rich voice setting her nerves on edge. She eyed the exit, fixated on the swirling whoosh of sand. *Stupid idea anyway.* She cursed under her breath. *Totally stupid.* She stood motionless, her back to the enemy, resignation and indignation fighting for first place in her rankled emotions. She loathed the thought of facing the smirk on that handsome face as much as being trapped.

“The suffocation will be slow and much more painful than any Roman prison.”

Ah, now he was taunting her she thought, clenching her fist. Her shoulders dropped slightly in surrender, but only for a second. Daynia took a deep breath. Right then – indignation it would be, she decided. She pulled her shoulders back as best she could while ignoring the throbbing in her arm and leg and turned slowly to face him, struggling to stand on her one good leg. She glared at Flavius defiantly for a moment.

“I beg to differ. There isn’t much that is more painful than the cruelties Romans inflicted on their victims.” Her expression dared him to object.

Flavius smiled, his left eyebrow raised. “You speak from experience?”

Daynia held her tongue, feeling contempt for his smugness swell.

It was a test of wills Flavius decided as he watched her stubbornly fight to stay upright, her eyes shooting invisible arrows at him. A strong one indeed, he mused, as he decided to go on the offensive, curiously elated at the prospect of her reactions.

“You seem most resourceful. It is believable that you could kill. Though most women would have a man do their cowardly deed,” he concluded with satisfaction.

Daynia’s eyes narrowed, “I didn’t kill that man. But if I should ever decide to do something like that, I can take care of my own cowardly deeds.”

Even in the dim light, Flavius could see the fire in her eyes. He stared at her, relishing the thought of how badly she would like to see his demise at that very moment. He was furious that she had got him stuck in that cave, but his anger was mixed with a tinge of admiration in light of her tenacity. She was as obstinate as she was honourable. *Take care of her own cowardly deeds – indeed.* Strangely, he quite believed her.

She watched him in silence, trying to gauge his dark expression, accompanied by that aggravating smirk. *That smirk.* She wanted to smack it off his face, she thought. Come to think of it, she just wanted to smack him to kingdom come.

Flavius tilted his head as he sized her up. He imagined that on a more level playing field, she could be a formidable adversary. If she didn’t look so damn sensual and enticing he would think her a man. Flavius waited for her to say more but knew instinctively she would stand there until she dropped from the pain – she would not offer more words of her own accord. *Blasted stubborn woman!* Flavius suddenly broke out into laughter, surprising Daynia and infuriating her further.

“You are a spiteful one! And lovely,” he heard himself say before pausing. “A dangerous combination.”

His flattery annoyed her. Typical male offhandedness.

“Really,” Daynia responded dryly.

Flavius shifted his position and leaned forward over his bent knee, his

arm still resting on it.

Instinctively, Daynia shifted backwards, wobbling against the wall, but he remained seated on the ground.

“Yes, most decidedly,” he said seriously, his eyes narrowing, making Daynia acutely uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

All at once, she felt fear in spite of her earlier rationalizations. She was alone in a cave, after all, and injured. Although she was a martial arts enthusiast, she had no illusions about how useless she was in this condition against a man of his size and strength. She hoped he couldn’t hear the loud beating of her heart echo as the fear swelled inside her, but he made no move to rise.

Flavius watched the emotions flit across her face. Ah, there. He saw it. For just a beat, he saw the fear. It gave him a twisted sense of power and control even as it made him uncomfortable that she should fear him. And why, the question arose, should he even care? Pushing the troublesome thought aside, he watched, amused, as she gathered her composure and her defiance returned. She feared him, but would mask that fear. *What an enigma.* He smiled. “By what name are you called?”

Daynia paused, not wanting to answer. Then she decided the wiser course of action at the moment would be to cooperate as needed until she had a real opportunity to escape.

“Depends on who is doing the calling.” She mentally reproached herself. That wasn’t the most cooperative answer, she thought, her words spilling out before she could think them through. Well, at least she answered, she justified to herself.

Flavius chuckled, enjoying the tug of war of wills, “One who holds *your destiny* in *his* hands.” The emphasis on *your destiny* and *his* was not meant to be subtle.

Without looking away, she answered confidently. “Daynia.”

He let silence hang an instant before continuing, “your sleep was troubled *Day-nia*,” the same over-emphasis on her name.

Shoot! He had been awake the whole time she considered escaping, she thought sheepishly. Feeling like a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar, she drew in her breath sharply. *I should have known! Rats! I should have known. The faker!* Daynia let out a long breath in a futile attempt to cling to her pride.

“I dreamt I was falsely accused of murder,” she replied nonchalantly, doing a little faking of her own as she shifted against the stone wall, a jutting edge poking into her back. She stifled a grunt, despite her throbbing leg and arm. She’d be damned before showing any weakness to that arrogant jerk in that blasted centurion outfit.

Daynia kept a guarded eye on Flavius as he took a swig from his flask and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. As he licked the moisture away from his lips, she was struck by how full and shapely they were. What a stupid thing to be thinking about, Daynia scolded herself.

“This causes you deep fear?”

Daynia was staring.

“This causes fear?” Flavius repeated.

Daynia pulled herself back to the moment, irritated that she had been sidetracked by the likes of him. Her eyes widened in a *‘what a stupid question’* expression. The sarcasm dripped from each word as she responded slowly with emphatic pauses. “I’m...falsely accused...of a horrible crime...with horrible consequences...duh.”

Flavius raised his eyebrows wondering at the definition of that last word – although he understood the gist of it from her tone. “If this is so, then all the witnesses gave false testimony?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “Why?”

Unexpectedly, Daynia felt the weight of helplessness, confusion and exhaustion bear down. She sighed deeply as Flavius patiently waited for a response. Daynia dropped her gaze. “Yes...they did,” her voice trailed off, “they didn’t know. They just didn’t know.” She focused on the same spot on the ground, her mind racing. *Why indeed?* What was happening? It all seemed an endless nightmare, she thought, but the pain shooting through her was more than real.

Flavius said nothing as he studied her body language and expressions. Her attempt to act strong began to fail as she faltered from exhaustion, although she remained determined. In some dark corner within, he had a nagging sentiment of regret for the plight of this beautiful yet vexing woman before him.

Daynia finally seemed to recover and looked up, “Your guess is as good as mine. But I didn’t do it.” She paused as she reflected. “It was a man dressed in an outfit like yours.”

Her language was strange, but he understood her. “A centurion killed Ariel?”

“Yes. He called the man he killed ‘Lion of God’ I think.”

“The significance of his name...” Flavius paused, wrapping his thoughts around the images of the crime scene. He caught Daynia’s questioning gaze, “It is a reference to the city of Jerusalem.”

“Well he must not have liked Jerusalem very much by the way he said it.”

Daynia shifted her weight, and continued. “Whatever your plans for me... the way things are going, I’m starting to feel the same way. Anyhow, you’ll see that the evidence will prove otherwise.”

“The evidence stained your hands,” Flavius stated matter-of-factly.

Naturally he wouldn’t say anything she wanted to hear, Daynia bristled silently. “Well – yes. I pulled the knife out. I didn’t put it in! Witness misinterpretation,” she said in exasperation, her head beginning to throb. Her eyes fell on her bandaged arm. Desperate to change subjects, she raised her injured arm slightly. “I suppose I should be thanking you for this at least.”

“Is it your intent to stand there for the remainder of this night?” he asked, ignoring her gratitude.

Daynia just stared at him blankly. *What an arrogant...!* She let the thought trail off in her mind as she fought the childish instinct to shout, ‘YES!’ Instead, she shot him a defiant glare and stiffened up against the wall.

So be it, Flavius thought. “If you are innocent, why then, did you run?”

Daynia looked straight at him accusingly, “I’ve read enough horror stories

of tourists spending months – even years in the foreign prison of some backward society – no offense. I wasn't interested in first-hand confirmation.”

“Tourist?” he asked, unfamiliar with the word. “You are most intriguing.”

His voice sounded suddenly distant as Daynia realized it was getting darker. Her eyes darted around the cave, nervously settling on the dying flames. She quickly looked down at Flavius's face, now dimmer in the growing shadows.

Strangely, the naïve fear reflected in her eyes tugged at his resolve. He imagined she was truly afraid of being there, alone with him in the darkness, unaware of the deep demons that struck in her heart and mind when complete darkness fell. Without a word Flavius rose. Kicking rocks aside, he scoured the deeper, darker recesses of the cave.

Daynia's chest began to heave, her laboured breathing echoing loudly in her head as she struggled to maintain a rein on her rising anxiety. She vowed silently not to lose control in front of him as she searched the nearby darkness for the reassurance of his presence. Her eyes followed the sporadic sounds of movement, afraid of being completely alone. She sighed with relief as Flavius stepped out of the dark recess. He paused, studying Daynia's expression. Even in the deepening darkness, he could make out the relief spreading across her face. The thought brought him inexplicable satisfaction and a surge of excitement. Flavius moved toward the fire, brushing past Daynia who instinctively sucked in her breath in an effort to back up, although there was nowhere else to back up to.

Startled by a sudden loud crackle from the fire, Daynia lost her balance and would have toppled over were it not for Flavius's hand grabbing her arm to steady her while the other dropped some material into the fire.

“Merely the echo of burning dogwood,” he said softly, searching her eyes, intrigued by the wave of emotions reflected in them. “What do you fear...?” He was intrigued, his voice smooth, as his eyes narrowed.

Daynia could feel his breath on her face and shifted uncomfortably, feeling trapped. Flavius maintained his grip, keenly aware of her warmth, her scent and her heavy breathing. He found himself uncontrollably attracted to this

odd, wily creature. He leaned in to her. “Your scent is most unusual,” he whispered hoarsely.

A sudden bolt of shock struck Daynia as Flavius deliberately tightened his hold. She knew there was no way she could fight him in her condition, her mind racing for options. Her breathing intensified as Flavius pressed in closer.

He could feel her stiffen with fear and while his mind was screaming at him to stop, he found himself unable to cease. “If you are innocent as you say, my word, on your behalf, would prove most valuable.”

Daynia shut her eyes tightly. This could not be happening. Things kept going from bad to worse. He leaned his face into Daynia’s. She drew in her breath sharply as his fingers traced the outline of her cheek, slowly making their way down her smooth neck. Daynia raised her good arm to push him away and tried to kick him. But her injured leg couldn’t support her, even as she tried to ignore the pain with a full-fledged effort of resistance. Her frantic attempt to push him away proved to be in vain as Flavius grabbed her other hand and forcefully pushed his body against hers, pinning Daynia against the cold hard stone wall behind her.

“I can save you from certain punishment.” His voice was deep and husky.

Before Daynia could scream, Flavius’s mouth slammed hers in a brutal kiss, his tongue forcing its way through her pursed lips. Her desperate attempt to bite him proved unsuccessful as the full pressure of the invasion against her mouth made it impossible for her to react.

As Daynia tried to resist, a sense of helplessness and betrayal overwhelmed her. Images of the night she lost Jake battered her brain. She had lost everything that night. She could feel Flavius’s strength and although she imagined his mouth was warm, she could only feel waves of ice flow through her. All at once, she stopped fighting. If she was doomed to suffer that indignity once again, she thought, then to hell with it. This could not compare to all she had lost that tragic, painful night.

Flavius felt her sudden surrender. He stopped and slowly pulled away. It was not the kind of surrender he sought from her, but he silently acknowledged his own abhorrent behaviour. Fighting the rippling guilt, he stepped back, still

holding her arms against the wall. He looked into her eyes, surprised by what he saw. There was no fear. No hatred. *Just a cold, distant emptiness.*

Daynia stared back, “Gods have their price – why not you?” she asked flatly.

The words stung. He had lost control and this wench cut through him instantly with a sharp sword of words. His anger suddenly swelled – as much towards himself as her. Caught off-guard, he stared blankly, checking his emotions, before pushing himself away roughly. He stepped back, eyes still fixed on Daynia, then turned abruptly and stepped over the fire, returning to his original place.

Daynia was trying to catch her breath as she watched him closely. She wiped at her lips and tried to regain her composure, not understanding why he had stopped so suddenly. Did her words have something to do with it, she wondered? Although he didn’t seem the type to care much about words, she imagined. Nervously, Daynia hobbled as far away from him as she could, staying within range of the fire’s glow.

She winced and drew in her breath as pain pricked at her leg, causing her to stumble against the wall. She crouched over to press her hand against the center of the ache. She glanced up, suddenly aware of Flavius gazing intently at her lower exposed leg, making her shift uncomfortably. She quickly straightened in an effort to re-direct his intense scrutiny.

Once again fear flashed in her eyes before she swiftly disguised it. Flavius smiled imperceptibly as she shifted again, pressing her back against the wall and gradually lowered herself to the ground, grimacing, fighting the urge to groan.

She looked up, realizing Flavius’s eyes had not wavered, like a predator fixated on its prey. Well, she’d put up a hell of a fight, she thought adamantly, as she finally settled on the ground, stretching her injured leg and resting her head against the cold rock. She shut her eyes for a second before they shot open at the sound of his voice, realizing she must have had them closed longer than she intended.

“The night will be cold.” Flavius tilted his head to where Daynia lay

earlier.

Reluctantly Daynia looked over and noticed Flavius' cloak on the ground. She ignored him and turned toward the exit. She fought the urge to shiver when she realized that in fact – she was cold.

Outside the cave, the night was noisy. The wind moaned eerily through the grating sounds of swirling sand. It unnerved Daynia, but she was too tired to care at that moment as she fought against the cold seeping into her bones. It was becoming unbearable, she muttered silently, feeling her teeth chatter as she huddled against herself, as tightly as she could, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge she could use the cloak.

Flavius watched her for a short time, then silently rose, aware that she turned to watch him like a hawk in a sideways glare.

Daynia's body tensed as Flavius stepped across the width of the cavern, to where he had laid her down earlier. He picked up the cloak and shook it aggressively before turning to step toward Daynia.

Daynia felt trickles of fear spike throughout her body, but she didn't move as Flavius stood in front of her holding out the cloak. She ignored him, shifting sideways, staring at the exit, but Flavius didn't budge. He waited patiently until her eyes darted upward for an instant before turning back toward the exit.

Flavius frowned, taking a deep breath. She was terrified of him. He disliked that notion but for a second time that night he ignored the feeling. He held the cloak out closer without stepping forward, "The dead of night brings bitter cold," he said calmly.

Daynia wanted to tell him to get the hell away from her, but reason nagged at her incessantly. She realized she was too cold to make it through the night – she would freeze if she didn't have something to warm her, if only slightly. It would still be cold, but at least bearable. A thought popped into her head. *Could this be his way of apologizing?* Reality kicked in. She doubted he'd feel sorry about anything. *Still...whatever!*

She didn't plan on freezing to death in this place with him gloating. Without looking at Flavius, Daynia reached out for the cloak, hesitating before clasping it. Flavius released it, thinking he probably deserved her deliberate

indifference. Daynia enveloped herself in the cloak, pulling it tightly to her chest with both hands.

She would not acknowledge him, Flavius decided and without a word, he returned to his spot.

Wrapped in the cloak, Daynia breathed a sigh of relief as she felt it drive away some of the chill. Sleep beckoned urgently but Daynia fought it, still nervous. Without moving her head, she slipped a sideways glance in Flavius's direction, her nerves easing when she saw that he hadn't budged from his position and was gazing at the fire. She pulled the cloak tighter and stared ahead, succumbing to the mental and physical exhaustion finally pulling her into a profound slumber, unaware the centurion watched closely from the corner of his eye.

As her breathing slowed and became more rhythmic, Flavius turned his head toward Daynia and watched her, thoughts about this mysterious and curious woman crowding his mind. Her biting words and the numb expression in her eyes were the last impressions on his mind before he too gave in to exhaustion, falling into a deep mental abyss.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Captive Defiance

Flavius stirred, distracted by distant sound, reflexively rubbing the stiffness in his neck as he angled his head. The skittish neigh came again. Instantly, he grabbed his sword and was up on his feet. He relaxed when he recognized the edgy neighing sound. He glanced down at Daynia still huddled under his cloak, fast asleep, before moving softly toward the beam of light flaring through the cave's uneven archway. He shielded his eyes as he stepped into the bright sunlight, breathing in the fresh air appreciatively. He felt fuzz against his face and smiled as the horse's muzzle rubbed against his cheek. Flavius was nudged backward as Evander, hanging his head over the centurion's shoulder, pushed against him, snorting and bobbing his head.

Flavius rubbed the horse's forehead, playing with his forelock. "How did you make your way down here?" He quickly ran his hands over the horse's frame checking for any injuries. Once assured the animal was unscathed, he stood leaning against the horse's barrel, one arm slung across his back. "So, there is an easier way out of here." Flavius studied the immediate surroundings before walking in the direction aligned with the cave. Evander snorted, following closely behind him. Flavius stopped, placed his hands on his hips and eyed the slope just beyond the hidden shrubs. The incline was narrow and steep. Not easy, but not impossible. He turned toward his horse and patted his neck. "Well done." Flavius paused to admire the striking colors along the edge of the horizon. The sun had just risen. He could relegate his prisoner to garrison officials before the noon of day, he thought. With that he headed back toward the cave, yet he found himself perturbed by the image of Daynia in prison. He refused to question why and stepped into the cave, determined to complete his mission.

He looked down at Daynia, amazed at how soundly she was still sleeping. She really did not seem a killer, he thought; then again, his belief in the innocence of another woman had nearly cost him his life. He pursed his lips, a

cold current dividing his heart. Yes, she may plead her innocence and bat her eyes, but he would only believe the truth of the investigation. He had a duty to fulfill and he would not betray that commitment. So why, he wondered, did he feel a sudden urge to protect this strange woman? Sweeping the thought away with deliberate effort, he turned his attention toward more pressing issues.

Flavius approached Daynia and crouched down in front of her as she sat, huddled against the wall, his cloak draped over her left shoulder, her dishevelled sable hair cascading across her face. She clutched the cloak tightly; her face tilted forward, her lips grazing the red fabric. The sight, an oddly sensual gesture, elicited a sudden sense of intimacy that aroused Flavius as he fixated on her lips, remembering their softness against his. He drew his breath in sharply, fighting the disturbing primal urge to gather her in his arms as he reached out to touch her. His outstretched hand brushed her cheek and gently pushed away the fallen strands of hair. Her expression was troubled. Flavius wondered what this strange, exasperating woman was doing here and why he sensed something deeply broken in her.

His hand slipped lazily down her face, tracing the outline of her jaw and neck before resting on her shoulder. Flavius nudged Daynia gently. “We must be on our way.”

Daynia stirred, shifted slightly and curled up tighter.

“Arise, it is time to depart.” Flavius raised his voice as he leaned toward her, his face close, his thoughts distracted by her lips.

Daynia’s eyes fluttered open as she awoke. She stared blankly into deep grey eyes for a flash of a second before letting out a deafening shriek. Instinctively her hand rose to strike out at Flavius as she scrambled to get up, her attempt hindered by the pain of her injuries. Flavius grabbed her wrist, blocking her blow. He then aided her in her struggle to stand as he pulled her up with him. Daynia stumbled as her injured leg wavered. Flavius reached out to steady her, but Daynia angrily slapped him away.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!” she shouted, indignant, as she fought to steady her breath and her composure.

“It is time to take leave,” Flavius replied candidly, leaning down to

retrieve his cloak.

Daynia stared at him, furious. “Idiot!” She muttered under her breath, falling silent when Flavius, who was shaking out his cloak, stopped suddenly and turned to face her. Daynia’s eyes widened, then recovered and turned insolent as she supported herself with one hand pressed against the wall. As the awkward silence dragged on, Daynia began to wish she had shut up. She caught her breath when Flavius’s arm reached out toward her, but he simply held it outstretched and smirked. When he motioned upward with his hand, Daynia noticed the flask he was holding out to her. Despite feeling like an idiot, she remained motionless, her eyes shooting up to meet his.

That blasted defiant expression! Flavius sighed in exasperation, “The sun will be scorching. You must keep hydrated.”

Daynia glanced toward the flood of light breaching the cave exit then looked down at the flask. She reached for it reluctantly, telling herself there was no sense in being stupid about it. The moment the water touched her lips, instinct kicked in as her dehydrated body screamed for relief. Daynia pressed the leather container closer to her mouth as she gulped down uncontrollably, trying to quench her acute thirst.

She resisted Flavius’s efforts to pull the flask away, until he finally tore it from her grip, leaving Daynia with water dripping from the corners of her mouth, “It is a long ride. We will need it later.” His voice held no anger as he hung the flask on his belt and turned on his heel, heading toward the cave exit. He cursed under his breath, wishing he didn’t have to rip away the flask, but it was necessary to be prudent and conserve the much-needed water for the ride back.

Daynia wiped her lips, her sides heaving from the desperation she had felt when drinking. She hadn’t realized she had been so parched, although as she thought about it, it shouldn’t surprise her. She hadn’t had anything to drink for quite some time. Daynia gazed at the inviting light, thinking of Alexis, hoping she had had her fill of water. She steadied herself and fought the urge to run, testing her leg as she shifted her weight on it. It was sensitive but better, she thought with relief, her attention turning back to possible means of escape. Now, with the pain less intense, if she put in a little effort, she could see

herself make a run for it. She stepped toward the exit, trying hard not to limp, her progress sluggish.

Daynia glanced backward to where embers from the fire rested in the shadows. A powerful surge of relief stung her eyes. She had made it through the night. She would make it through the day. Her mind nagged at her. She finally conceded, *yes*, she had made it through the night because of *him*. But now they had to part. She didn't trust the law or legal process here. Not at all, she thought. She was grateful but her focus would now be targeted on finding her way back to Alexis and then the group. Daynia gasped as sudden pain spiked in her leg. She stopped to lean over and rub the sore spot. "Rats!"

Flavius glanced over to the inside of the cave one more time as he tightened the saddle and made some adjustments. His impatience was boiling over. He stopped, turned to face the cave and folded his arms, waiting. He inhaled deeply, cursed silently and marched inside the cave halting in front of Daynia, who looked up at him with surprise.

"It's a little sti..." but before she could finish Flavius leaned down and grabbed her in his arms, lifting her easily. "What?! I was trying!" she yelled at him as he carried her outside, ignoring her protests.

Daynia's objections were silenced when she laid eyes on the big black steed. He was magnificent she thought, now that she could appreciate his form after the commotion at the well. She was in awe of what she considered a noble beast, unaware that Flavius was studying her joyful countenance as she became relaxed in his arms, her attention directed completely toward Evander.

Flavius was struck by her sudden bright smile, realizing, as he saw it for the first time, the warmth that beamed from it was finding its way straight into the center of his chest – a realization that disturbed him.

Daynia's love for animals ran deep. She was always bringing home stray cats or injured birds. *The Good Samaritan*. She could hear Jake's voice calling her by the nickname he favoured for his little sister. A pang of emptiness clutched her heart as she remembered riding the trails with her brother, both of them avid horse lovers.

Evander snorted, bobbing his head as Flavius approached, his striking

mane awing Daynia, interrupting her nostalgia.

“Down.” Flavius’s deep voice startled Daynia, suddenly aware she was being carried. Before she could resume her protests, Evander dropped forward to his knees and Daynia found herself hoisted onto the saddle. She reached out to grab one of the two horns on the saddle, as she adjusted the position of her legs. Evander rose with Flavius’s tap along his neck. Her expression guarded, Daynia stared down at Flavius, silently challenging him as she promised to go AWOL first chance she had. Flavius aligned the reins in his hand and looked up at Daynia. The gauntlet had been thrown down as their eyes locked in an unwavering glare.

The screeching caw of a golden eagle as it nose-dived toward them broke the spell. In a grand sweep, it flew low grazing the horse’s head then rushed upward, the echo of its screech rippling behind it.

Daynia gripped the horns as a startled Evander reared. Flavius reacted instantly, tugging the reins as he rubbed Evander’s neck, softly murmuring reassuring words. Daynia watched, taken aback by the tenderness, an utter contrast to what she had seen from the man so far. The sudden melting of her indignation, and the quickening of her pulse confounded her even more. Flavius glanced up as Daynia self-consciously lowered her gaze to stare at her hands clutching the saddle horns. He sensed a shift in her emotions. Irked by his inability to read them, Flavius tugged on the reins and without a word led the horse toward the steep embankment.

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Ezekiel hesitated as they reached the prison headquarter steps. Jeremiah, a long-time friend, stopped on the third step and looked back, “Come Ezekiel. Fear not.”

“Are you most certain this will work?” he asked nervously as his eyes darted around. The area was filled with soldiers and various other legion personnel.

“Calios’ greed is well-known among those who work with the Romans. We will have no trouble. Come my friend,” he coaxed.

Ezekiel sighed and followed, adjusting the bag on his back. When his precious son came running home near tears, blubbering that his friends had been captured, he thought it was simply boys at play. He never imagined it would result in an attempt to bribe a Roman prison warden. Leave it to Ishma to somehow become involved in bizarre escapades. Ezekiel could not quite make sense of the story his son had spun until he made a few inquiries following Ishma's incessant imploring.

Ishma was many things, but a liar was not among them. Ezekiel was moved by the story of the misunderstanding and the hunt for the two young women who had befriended his son and by his accounts even protected him. That alone was worthy of his cooperation, but regardless, a Roman prison was no place for two young women. Like most citizens, Ezekiel made dealing with the Romans something he avoided as best he could. They were unforgiving and arrogant, and he, like many of his countrymen, had great distrust of this grand invading force. "Very well," he sighed. If there was no other way to help the young women – then he would do what must be done.

Jeremiah paused, placing his hand on his friend's arm reassuringly, "Do not worry Ezekiel. Trust in me." He squeezed his friend's arm and smiled before turning toward the large metal doors at the top of the stairs.

The two men quietly climbed the remaining steps moving toward the motionless guard, their thoughts on their mission – to bargain for the release of the one woman they confirmed had been arrested. Jeremiah approached the sentry first.

"We are here to deliver repaired greaves requested by Calios," Jeremiah explained, holding out a stub. The guard stretched his neck to read it then grunted, signaling towards the bags. Ezekiel shifted uncomfortably as Jeremiah lifted the bag off of his friend's shoulder and held his and Ezekiel's out for inspection of the leg armor inside. The guard pulled out one greave, then another before grunting again, inclining his head in the direction of the entryway.

The two men stepped through the doors, then into a long dimly lit hallway. Its walls were framed with oil-burning lamps resembling light globules, that cast long shadows as Ezekiel and Jeremiah walked by. They soon reached a

spacious outer chamber. There, a husky man with an angry expression that seemed permanently etched on his face sat at a table strewn with bits of food. Calios chomped down on a yet another morsel of fowl, glancing up, displeased with the interruption.

Jeremiah bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Calios."

Calios guffawed. "Why are you here at this unanticipated hour, Jeremiah?" he bellowed. Ezekiel shifted nervously.

"I have come to deliver the repaired greaves," Jeremiah explained apologetically.

"Were they not to be delivered after the Sabbath?" Calios continued to chomp his food, his expression annoyed.

"Ah, but we were most efficient and completed our work early this day. I had been told of their need and so rushed them here," Jeremiah offered.

Calios licked his lips and grabbed more meat, never once looking up. "Lay them there," he nodded toward a corner of the room, where various leather sandals were thrown in a heap, before turning his attention back to his next mouthful.

After Jeremiah and Ezekiel carried the two bags and dropped them in the corner, Jeremiah stepped back towards Calios, standing in front of him quietly, waiting. Ezekiel moved to stand slightly behind Jeremiah.

There was a long pause before Calios looked up still annoyed, "Have you something to say?"

Jeremiah cleared his throat and motioned for Ezekiel to come forward, "This is my good friend Ezekiel." Ezekiel stepped up and bowed his head to Calios respectfully.

"And I should care for what reason?" Calios responded coldly.

"My friend is here with a most lucrative proposition."

Ezekiel nervously held out a small gold bar he had pulled from the bag slung across his chest.

Gold. Calios' interest was piqued. "Go on."

* * * * *

The big stallion snorted, his nostrils flaring as he struggled to climb the embankment. Flavius took calculated steps, making sure his feet landed on stable soil as he held onto the reins with his left hand and grabbed shrubs and branches with his right, using them as anchors to help hoist himself up.

"Maybe it'll help if I get down," Daynia called out feeling guilty about sitting idly in the saddle; not that she wanted to help her captor, she quickly reasoned.

Ignoring her, Flavius continued to encourage Evander, calling out familiar commands.

"Fine," Daynia muttered softly, "deal with it." She sucked in her breath as pain burned along her leg, certain she also sported a bruise the size of Manhattan on her side. Touching the bottom of her ribcage, she winced before grabbing onto the saddle horn again as she was jolted by Evander's brusque movements.

The horse neighed as he finally pulled his hind legs up the last stretch onto solid ground, stamping his hooves as he tried to regain his balance. Daynia shifted slightly in the saddle, still clinging to the saddle horns, thinking how oddly different it was to the single pommel saddles she was accustomed to. Her legs now ached, not just from her fall, but also from squeezing the horse's flanks so tightly to stay astride since there were no stirrups. It annoyed her that people here were taking re-enactments to such an extreme. Before she could consider that theory longer, Flavius took a running start to climb the last few feet and brushed against her uninjured leg as he steadied himself by clasping the closest saddle horn, his hand wrapping around Daynia's.

Daynia instinctively tried to pull her hand away but Flavius clenched harder. Feeling the warmth of her hand enveloped in his, he looked up at Daynia, purposely maintaining his grip longer than necessary. He found he enjoyed the feeling of her soft skin and the smaller, delicate hand locked in his grasp.

Irritated by the way he casually taunted her then ignored her, Daynia pulled harder, almost falling off the horse. Suddenly, he released her hand, sending her jerking backwards. Daynia bit her lip, wanting to scream obscenities at him but immediately decided it would be more prudent not to engage. She was at a disadvantage for the time being, but she was hopeful. They were out in the open now and sooner or later, she'd have an opportunity to make a run for it she thought smugly – as she mentally scoffed at Flavius, her private revenge for the moment.

Without warning Flavius placed his left hand on the saddle horn, his arm resting against Daynia's thigh. His other hand pressed against Evander's rump for resistance and in one swoop, hoisted himself up and over to sit behind her on the mount.

Daynia let out a gasp then collected herself as his arms encircled her, adjusting the reins in his hands. She became still, acutely aware of his closeness, his chest pressed against her back. The warmth of his breath seemed to stroke her hair as he settled in, his head just above Daynia's. Not sure why, it occurred to Daynia that she was nervous. She didn't fear him. By now she was more afraid of his mandate and that he would fulfill it rather than the idea that he would harm her. And it wasn't as though she hadn't been close to a man for goodness sake, she thought. Then why so edgy she asked herself, instinctively grabbing Flavius' hand as Evander jolted forward. Uncomfortable, she pulled it back just as quickly and placed it back on the right saddle horn to steady herself.

Flavius said nothing as he pondered the irrational thought that he wished she hadn't pulled her hand off of his. His eyes narrowed against the blinding sun as he fought the urge to tighten his arms around this enigmatic woman whose scent reminded him of galloping across open fields on a crisp spring day. She was odd in many ways but that only made him more curious.

As they trotted toward an open area, Daynia's thoughts rushed at her in waves of worry, puzzle and a downright questioning of sanity. Was she really riding on a horse with a man dressed like a Roman soldier? Was the re-enactment so real and so widespread as to affect daily living? Nothing seemed to make sense. And what was with that "Jesus on the Temple steps" performance? Could she still be dreaming? Daynia blinked her eyes and shook

her head slightly, but when she opened her eyes she was still *sitting astride a horse with no stirrups...held captive by a centurion hunk*. Did she just think that? Daynia silently cursed and took a deep breath, her resolve growing. One way or the other – she was going to get to the bottom of this farce.

* * * * *

Alexis kept her face glued to the small hole that served as a window to the clammy cell she had been thrown into. She inhaled the stale air of the dungeon passageway. Although stagnant, it was far better than the overpowering stench that had her gagging. Her mind reeled from the day's events, wondering what happened to Daynia and what was going to happen to her. Just as she wondered why no official had come to see about her, the distant sound of footsteps set off alarms in her head. Alexis stopped suddenly and tilting her head, listened closely. The thud grew louder as the steps approached.

“Hello?” Alexis called out shakily, straining to see outside the small hole, but no answer was forthcoming. She took a deep breath and backed away from the door, resorting to breathing from her mouth. “Hello?”

The footsteps stopped in front of her cell. “Who's there?” Alexis stepped back as far as she could, staring at the door, anxiously listening to the sound of keys being jostled in the lock. She held her breath as the clanking of turning metal echoed and the door creaked open.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Flight

Sweat trickled down Daynia's face as the heat bore down, making images of oases and Venezuela's Angel Falls pop up like a photomontage in her head. For an instant Daynia considered asking if she could have some water from the flask, but just like the little 'poof' cloud on her computer, it disappeared. *Oh hell no!* She'd just as soon pass out from heat stroke. Well how childish was that, she thought, groaning silently as she argued with herself.

"You are most reticent this day," Flavius's deep voice startled Daynia who jerked slightly. She felt his arms tighten instinctively, sending an unexpected shiver through her.

"Count your blessings," Daynia replied dryly, her throat parched, angry with herself for letting pride win over common sense. Silence settled between them, as Flavius said nothing in reply. Daynia's brows furrowed at the realization that she was waiting – wanting – to hear it again, the fluid sound of that deep, droll voice. Her eyes blinked in exasperation. *What the hell!* Daynia felt like her brain was breaking into fragments. She was aching, thirsty, exhausted and fed up. She resisted the urge to shout at the top of her lungs by concentrating with razor-sharp focus on one thing at a time. She stared at the vegetation, noticing every detail of every shrub, plant or tree they passed.

As Evander lurched up a short incline, Daynia was propelled backward against Flavius's rigid chest. His arms stiffened, keeping Daynia from losing her balance.

She glanced down at his arms and noticed a long, almost straight scar on Flavius' left forearm. She stared at it. *A knife?* Intrigued but not surprised, she imagined it was a battle scar, wondering about the circumstances. It suddenly occurred to her that she didn't even know his name.

"What do they call you?" she finally asked.

“Commander Augusta.”

Daynia scrunched her face in disbelief. “Right. I’m sure your mother spoke it with true affection.”

It was almost imperceptible, but Daynia picked up the subtle tensing at the mention of his mother. Daynia wondered if she had angered him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be sarcastic.”

Flavius finally broke the lull in the conversation. “My mother died when I was quite young,” he said matter-of-factly, pondering why he offered that information to this strange woman.

“I’m sorry...Commander,” Daynia stammered. She thought of her own parents and the mother she too, had lost too soon. Her thoughts naturally drifted to Jake and how he stepped into their mother’s shoes so Daynia wouldn’t miss the things most mothers do. A smile touched her lips as she recalled Jake shyly trying to explain the menstrual cycle until he gave up and came back the next day with a detailed book.

Flavius sensed her mood shift in the way she took a deep slow breath, her shoulders falling just so.

Absentmindedly Daynia reached for the dog tags. “Me too,” she said softly, before realizing she spoke the words out loud. She was a private person by nature, and more so since losing Jake. She disliked exposing her deepest thoughts and feelings, keeping her sentiments, and especially her scars, well under lock and key. She hoped Flavius hadn’t heard her. When no reply was forthcoming, she relaxed. She may not like to share her own life, but Daynia had a natural curiosity and caring for others that came across easily when the focus was off herself. It was the part of her that made her a great interviewer and came handy in her line of work.

“What do you remember about her?” Daynia asked, her head turning slightly.

Images of his mother lying on the cold hard floor came rushing in. Flavius staved them off by re-directing his attention to the woman whose proximity he found enticing. He was unnerved by the knowledge that he *wanted* to tell her. He had never wanted to speak of that day. And he never did. Just now however

– for an instant – he longed to, until reason kicked in. The order of things came to mind. He could not be familiar with a prisoner. Increasingly, that rule became difficult to follow.

The extended silence made Daynia uncomfortable. Okay, she was being too personal, she thought. She coughed, and covered her mouth, the dryness in her throat itching, the discomfort beginning to weigh on her nerves. Her hand reached out to rub her throat just as a flask was held up in front of her.

“You may drink a little more as we are closer to our destination now,” Flavius said calmly as he moved the container closer to her mouth, leaning over her side.

Grateful, Daynia reached for the flask but he didn’t let go of it and she finally rested her hand on his as she guided the opening to her lips.

Flavius’s eyebrow rose as she clasped his hand, drawing it close to her mouth. Her lips brushed against his fingers as she swallowed hungrily. He hadn’t let go of the flask for fear she might drop it, but now he let the pleasure of the touch sink in slowly.

Daynia tried to control her greed for water and paused, yet her hand remained firmly on his lest he pull it away. She took another gulp before loosening her grip, embarrassed by how frenzied she must have seemed. She dropped her hand, noticing the scar again before he placed the flask against his own lips and took a swig.

“Thank you.” Daynia didn’t bother wiping the wet corners of her mouth, rather enjoying the dampness under the persistent heat. She followed the motion of Flavius’s retreating arm, eyeing the long disfigurement on it with concern. Up close, the scar looked thick and deep. Must have hurt something awful, Daynia thought, wondering about how it happened.

Flavius hung the flask by the saddle, and brought his arm back up encircling Daynia as he grasped the reins from his other hand.

His arms must be getting tired, Daynia thought suddenly as they rode quietly.

She hesitated, “That scar is pretty deep. How did it happen? In the line of

duty?” Daynia wasn’t simply curious; she was trying to fill the uneasy silence. It was an oddly intimate situation, riding so close and yet, not at all. In her discomfort, she spoke quickly. Her attempt to ease the awkwardness was only amplified when she was met with silence. Daynia mentally scolded herself. She would shut up and concentrate on the explanation she would offer when she made her way to civilization, thinking too how Jake would have a good laugh about it when she told him. She pulled in her breath at the slip, a sudden pain shooting through her heart. She still made those slips but as she let her mind wander to that painful place, fatigue settling in, a deep droll voice pulled her back.

“You are most inquisitive.”

Daynia snapped out of her dark thoughts. Her recovery was almost instantaneous, something she had learned to master over the recent agonizing months. “I figure I should know a little about the man I just spent the night with.”

The implication of her words felt like ice water hitting her face. *Did she just say that! Hell!* “I’m sorry, that sounded... stupid,” Daynia sputtered. *Oh! Even more lame!* Daynia bit her lips. She hated losing her cool. Absolutely hated it.

Flavius ignored her comment, “It is a scar of battle.”

Did he not hear her? Was he being a gentleman? *Gentleman?* He hadn’t heard her, she concluded. She jumped on the chance to redeem herself with normal conversation. “Which war?” Maybe now she would get some answers, “Iraq? Israeli –Palestinian conflict?”

The cynicism in his voice cut like a knife, “One where allegiance is a weakness.”

Well that didn’t answer any questions she fumed silently. *What the heck kind of cryptic answer was that? Fine. He wanted her to shut up? She would oblige.*

So, there it was again – that chasm of silence, she thought. As she reflected on it, she wondered about his response. He didn’t seem petty, so his words would not have been spoken haphazardly. Was she too quick to anger

that she missed the underlying distress, she wondered? The resentment in her heart began to melt.

“Right,” she said softly and fell silent.

They were riding for a few minutes when Evander slipped over loose earth forcing his riders to strain to maintain balance. Daynia gasped, winced and dipped forward slightly as pain shot up from her leg into her ribcage.

“It hurts much?” Flavius asked, leaning his head forward.

The warmth of his breath against the nape of her neck was disturbing. Daynia kicked herself mentally, shaking off the unease and focused on a way to escape. The town wasn’t far off and she had to break out, so to speak, before he locked her up, she thought. Yet, she was uncertain if her motive was to avoid being thrown in prison as much as it was to avoid him.

“Yes,” she heard herself say as she her mind crowded with images of fleeing.

“We can take a short rest.”

Bells went off in Daynia’s head. They would stop. Her eyes darted about furiously at the terrain heavily punctuated with shrubs of varying sizes. “Thank you. I also need to ...well...I need to...ah...” Daynia shifted uncomfortably, realizing with a spark of hope this could be her chance to escape. She would think about what to do later she debated, as worrisome questions popped up in her head.

“...Relieve yourself?” Flavius said, a smile touching his lips, enjoying her embarrassment.

“Right,” Daynia said, irked by the smile she knew, without a doubt, was plastered across his face.

Flavius veered Evander off the main path into an area of shrubs and trees and reined him in. He dismounted then reached up with his arms.

“I can do this myself,” she said confidently, but as she leaned over and tried to raise her leg to slide it across the horse’s back, she let out a short gasp and eased herself back over again. She turned to Flavius who stood watching,

his arms now by his side, his expression amused.

He's going to make me say it! She stared straight ahead stubbornly. Daynia shut her eyes and inhaled deeply. *He's really going to make me say it.*

“Can you help me dismount please?” Daynia tried to keep her tone even, not looking at him. Before she could wonder about his reaction, she felt herself being lifted up and pulled off the horse. At his unexpected action, she let out a small shriek.

Blasted, but this woman was prideful, Flavius thought, relishing the feel of her small waist in his hands as she twisted, her hands grabbing at his shoulders for support. As she leaned into him for balance, he paused, drawing in his breath as her eyes, dark as night, gazed into his. He noticed a touch of sadness there, before she veiled it with defiance. Holding her firmly, he slid her down slowly, gently, keeping her body close against his.

As her feet touched the ground, her leg buckled. Daynia grabbed Flavius's arms as his grip around her waist steadied her. She looked up into the penetrating grey eyes, uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

“I'm okay. Thank you,” she said quickly, finding her balance. Daynia released her hold on him and pushed aside the images of grey eyes filled with suspicion and...and something else. *Curiosity?* Daynia wasn't sure, except that she found it unsettling. She tested her leg, lifting her foot gingerly, before setting it down again, rubbing some of the stiffness away. She finally stood up straight as she regained her balance and strength.

“Shall I assist you?” Flavius asked, as Daynia cautiously stepped away.

“Hell no,” she shot him a disapproving glare.

Flavius grinned.

“Jerk,” Daynia muttered under her breath as she concentrated on ignoring the throbbing in her leg.

Flavius watched her limp toward some bushes, slowly disappearing behind a clump of shrubs. He turned away to adjust the saddle, “Do not stray too far.”

Daynia searched for a spot to relieve herself. She scrunched her face, “Unbelievable! How old was I the last time I peed in the woods? Five? AH!” She finally settled on a small area beside a tree, hidden by shrubs, deciding it would be the best suited for her immediate needs. She eased herself down, resting one hand against the tree for balance, groaning, as her leg throbbed. “Unbelievable.”

“Aw shoot!” She had nothing to wipe herself with and looked around fighting a sudden urge to cry from sheer frustration. “Ay!”

All she could think of was to tear the large leaves off of a nearby plant. She inspected it closely and blew on it, her thighs aching from crouching down. She rubbed the leaf with her hands, “Oh please don’t have any bugs... Aaaaagh! This is humiliating!”

As the moments passed, Flavius looked ahead to the town then back toward the shrubs and the expanse of vegetation and sparse woodlands beyond it. Just for an instant, he wondered if she might try to escape, then shook his head chuckling. She didn’t seem that idiotic. *Where could she go out here?* He leaned back against Evander and crossed his arms watching the shrubs, “Have you concluded?”

Daynia balanced herself against the tree while pulling her T-shirt down, thinking she couldn’t wait to get back home. Her stomach growled and she looked down, shaking her head. “Really...this is the worst trip ever,” she thought miserably.

“Almost done,” she replied loudly, hobbling in reverse, then turned and picked up her pace, wincing in pain as she glanced back quickly.

Flavius narrowed his eyes in Daynia’s direction. Perhaps she *was* that idiotic.

As Daynia hurried along, she stepped into a small clearing but missed the rotting stump protruding from the ground. She stifled a scream as she stumbled and fell backwards onto her backside. “Oh geez,” she cried, her exasperation reaching dangerous levels. Daynia gasped and suddenly froze with fear. Chills ran up and down her spine as her eyes widened at the sight of a thick gray venomous viper slithering toward her. It crawled to a stop, sensing its prey,

then moved slowly forward. Daynia tried to scramble backward but wasn't fast enough. Afraid to even blink, she remained motionless, watching in horror as the snake slid its way up the inside length of her left leg and paused, hissing as it exposed its hinged fangs. Terrified, Daynia tried not to make a sound, driving back the explosive scream threatening to erupt from her.

She never saw the pugio flying through the air. Daynia screamed as the Roman dagger drove into the ground, slicing its way through the reptile, now writhing between her outstretched legs as she sat, frozen, on the ground, perspiration trickling down her temple. She looked up to see the handsome centurion stomping toward her; her relief equally stomped on by her sudden fear.

“Woman, you are beginning to test my patience,” he said angrily as he stopped near the snake and leaned over to pull out the dagger. He whistled as his eyes focused on Daynia who remained sitting, somewhat bewildered. She hated snakes. She hated being accused falsely. She hated that man and she hated this stupid situation in which she found herself embroiled.

Evander trotted over to Flavius who was replacing the dagger in the sheath hanging from his belt. “I should have left you to the mercy of that slithering creature. The agony of its poison seems proper punishment.” He mounted his horse and trotted it a few steps before pulling on the reins. He turned, staring down furiously at Daynia. Seeing the snake so close to her, about to strike was distressing. His mind was flooded with the consequence of what would have happened had she had been bitten by the snake. The thought that this strange woman could have been poisoned was deeply disturbing. That he should even care perturbed him further. Flavius fell silent, as he decided to settle on rage, an emotion easier to deal with and one that made sense to him.

He stared down at Daynia, who dared not utter a word while he was still fuming – the awkward silence intensifying the palpable tension between them. “I should leave you out here and spare myself the trouble,” Flavius finally muttered as he nudged the horse's flank, prompting Evander to trot away.

Daynia felt a sudden surge of anxiety and fatigue. She didn't think she could take much more. *Why was this happening?* “I didn't kill anybody. Bloody hell!” she shouted to his back. Her attention turned to the dead snake

and still shaken, she scrambled to get up. Once on her feet, she leaned heavily on her good leg as she worked to stay balanced. She watched the distance between herself and her infuriating captor widen as Flavius rode further away. She looked down at the snake, then more closely at her surroundings, realizing she had little choice after all. “Fine! Just go already!” She shouted after him, a part of her terrified that he would, indeed, just leave her behind.

Flavius pulled hard on the reins bringing Evander to a sudden stop. He veered the horse to face her and stared silently at Daynia. She stared back defiantly. *Had she no compunction?* Flavius suppressed a sudden urge to laugh. She was a brave sort, this one, he thought. *Idiotic, but brave.* He watched as she stood there fighting to stay upright and still. Her leg must be hurting he surmised, but it was clear she’d just as soon faint from exertion than act as the damsel in distress. He guided Evander in closer. Flavius ignored the subtle thrill gnawing at his resolve as his eyes narrowed dangerously, “Where did you believe to escape to out here?”

Daynia looked around slowly then dropped her gaze, “Yes, well...I didn’t quite think it through.” She hadn’t given it much thought at all, she was forced to admit to herself. *They were lost in this God-forsaken backward place, out in the middle of nowhere – in unbearable heat. No water, no food, no phone. She really hadn’t thought this one through.* An extremely stupid and dangerous thing to do, she agreed silently, but she’d be damned before she said more.

As Flavius approached, Daynia hopped backwards, uncertain, stopping when Evander finally halted almost beside her. Flavius leaned over and extended his arm to lift her onto the horse. Daynia hesitated, looking from his arm to his face and back, finally settling on his eyes. He may be her captor but there was something trustworthy about him – dare she even say, he seemed to possess integrity? Daynia looked back at the dead snake. In any case, this was definitely the better option for now, she decided. She took a deep breath and reached up, clasping his outstretched arm. He clenched his hand around her arm and easily pulled her astride sideways. She winced as she twisted her upper body forward and grabbed onto the saddle horns.

Flavius wrapped his arms around her and dug his heel into the horse’s flank. Evander leapt into a gallop, startling Daynia, who let out a yelp. Flavius

smiled with satisfaction as they galloped the rest of the way in silence.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nightmare of Day

“Thank you Ezekiel...Jeremiah. I’m so grateful.” Alexis looked over from one to the other, her gratitude unending. They had rescued her from that horrible place. The news had been delivered the night before and although she barely slept a wink in that miserable cell, she felt refreshed as she stepped into the open air – her first task of the day – to breathe in fresh air as deeply and for as long as she could. *What a horrible place.*

“I promise I’ll repay you as soon as I get back to the hotel. First though, I need to find Daynia.”

“Yes of course,” Ezekiel said, nodding his head in agreement. “We must help one another even as we are ostracized.”

Alexis looked over puzzled. She had no idea what he was talking about.

Noticing her confusion, Ezekiel smiled. “Ishma has told us of your heart for the Messiah.” He gave her a knowing glance.

Alexis bobbed her head, trying to sort out his meaning, which only perplexed her further.

“Have trust – we will find your friend.”

That, she understood! Alexis responded with a grateful smile.

Jeremiah who was walking slightly ahead of them, swung around to join the conversation, “Your friend is not in Roman custody. Calios would have known this.”

“She’s out there somewhere. She can take care of herself, but this place is a little – well – extreme. I just hope she’s all right,” Alexis’ voice trailed off.

It was a beautiful, warm day, the sky crystal clear, but Alexis hardly noticed. Her forehead crinkled with lines of worry as she hurried down the

street alongside Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Her thoughts were singularly focused on her friend. *Where could Daynia be?* She had had no news of her since they were separated at the Temple performance. She had hoped Ishma might have found his way to Daynia, but his father confirmed otherwise. Her friend was tough, but she couldn't shake the anxiety of where Daynia spent the night. They had no street lights out here and Daynia's fear of total darkness troubled her deeply.

Ezekiel glanced sideways at Alexis, her shoulder-length copper hair tangled, her pretty face set in worry. He recognized what his son had been drawn to – the straightforward, easygoing manner she possessed even as she fretted anxiously over her friend. He was glad he had elected to call Jeremiah for assistance. Freeing Alexis had been easier than he had imagined, but the business of finding her friend presented greater challenges. “First, we must make our way to the house. You can borrow one of Sarah's mantles – we do not wish more attention.”

“Good idea and very gracious. Thank you.” Alexis smiled warmly, suddenly noticing the sideways glances directed at her as she pulled the blanket Jeremiah had offered, tighter – her capris still exposed.

Jeremiah came to a stop, creating a domino effect behind him. He turned to look directly at Ezekiel, “If I hear of any news concerning your friend, I will send the littlest to inform you, Ezekiel.”

“Thank you my good friend,” Ezekiel placed his right hand on Jeremiah's left shoulder, squeezing gratefully.

Jeremiah bowed graciously to Alexis and Ezekiel before departing, leaving them to make their way to Ishma's house.

* * * * *

Daynia didn't care about the stares they elicited, as Flavius directed Evander through town toward the Roman headquarters. She was so dehydrated she might shrivel up like a dried prune, she thought. Thirsty and exhausted, she was resigned to her fate – for the moment, she emphasized mentally.

Curious and puzzled glances followed their every move, as the odd sight of the beautiful young woman riding in the centurion's embrace took people aback. Rumours of that 'foreign woman' identified as their Pharisee's murderer were already swirling within the community. The very sight of her eliciting stares and pointing fingers, prompting sly smiles and hushed whispers. She was *that* woman with the dark hair and whore's clothing, the murderess. Why had she done it? Was it personal? Professional?

Flavius ignored the gawking and murmuring, despising groundless gossip. Although the evidence against Daynia seemed incriminating at first glance, he preferred to know all the facts before making unfounded judgements about anyone. He glanced down at Daynia's arm as she held onto the saddle horn. She had been oddly quiet the entire way following the snake incident. He wasn't sure if she had been more terrified of the snake or his outburst. Her defeated disposition was disquieting. Flavius preferred her defiant and frustrating. Then at least, he could be assured that she was well.

Daynia's hair grazed his chin as she tilted her head to get a complete view of the large white building they were approaching. She was awed by the grandeur of the ancient Roman structure. Tired as she was, she could appreciate that despite the backwardness of this place – intentional or not – the edifice possessed a stunning architectural design. Encircled by grooved pillars, and ornate sculptures, it was quite breathtaking. Jake would have loved to explore the design she thought, her heart feeling heavy. Daynia continued staring at the building as Evander trotted up slowly, thinking how in total contrast, nothing beautiful awaited her inside.

Her thoughts suddenly diverted to Alexis again. She wished with all her might that her friend was safe somewhere and had heard her shout to go to the meeting point. As she thought of Alexis, she felt a surge of energy. Alexis was resourceful, and knowing her friend, she would show up: late, but present nonetheless. A smile touched her lips. Oh yes, she thought, digging deep for renewed inspiration, she was going to find a way to escape and make it back to the meeting point to find Alexis.

Flavius dismounted first then reached up to hold Daynia by the waist. She wanted to wave his hands away but dreaded a repeat of the earlier discord. She was too tired. Instead, she didn't place her hands on his shoulders and

allowed herself to become dead weight. Her little victory, she thought, anger welling up at the situation. Flavius compensated for the sudden shift in weight, realizing she had done so wilfully. No compunction indeed, he thought, as he set her down gently, concealing a grin.

Daynia steadied herself, pulling away from the help Flavius offered when he reached out to support her elbow. "I'm fine," she said brusquely. Flavius narrowed his eyes at her then stepped toward the entrance. Daynia walked a little unsteadily beside him, a perceptible limp making it a slow process. She didn't care. She would at least do that much of her own accord.

Two soldiers rushed down from their position on the portico, acknowledged the centurion and then flanked Daynia. Flavius took a rear position, irked by Daynia's stubbornness. He had a mind to snatch her up and carry her, were it not such an utterly bad idea.

Daynia paused midway up the steps to catch her breath and rest her leg. The soldiers did likewise, as she bowed her head, drew in breath and exhaled with purpose before continuing her climb.

Flavius restrained himself from commenting with cynicism, the only way he could stop his desire to protect the strange woman who stirred his senses.

Despite her situation, Daynia couldn't help but glance around with admiration as they stepped through the massive doors decorated with scenes of legion life, detailed in miniature sculptures. Inside, the marble floors and spacious chamber trimmed in white marble pillars were a testament to the marvel of palatial Roman design.

The echo of laughter emanated from the end of one of the adjacent hallways. Daynia shifted her gaze, but kept moving, bewildered by a strange prickling sensation as she tuned in to the peal of laughter. A small group rounded one of the pillars and came into view, heading in her direction. As the two groups approached each other, Daynia glanced from one face to the other. She guessed two were escorts flanking the two men in the center, one dressed in an elaborate Roman uniform, the other wearing garb similar to the man she had been accused of killing.

Daynia fixated on the two conversing loudly, as they faced each other.

There was something vaguely familiar about one of them, and it was only when he turned to face Daynia's group that she froze in her tracks, fear hitting her broadside. Flavius stopped short of slamming into her, but was close enough to notice her erratic breathing. "That's him!" she blurted out in a whisper at first. "He killed that man!" she finally shrieked, pointing to the Tribune, who feigned ignorance.

Hatred permeated her heart and ignoring the pain in her leg, Daynia moved swiftly toward the Tribune. Taken by surprise, her entourage rushed after her, grabbing her arms to restrain her.

Flavius caught up to Daynia and turned his gaze to the approaching men, "The soldier at the Tribune's left?"

"No!" Daynia said loudly.

"On the rig..." but he never finished his sentence.

"The middle! The one in the middle!" she shouted angrily, struggling against the soldiers.

Flavius frowned and looked from Daynia to the Tribune, then back to Daynia. Her words had not wavered once. She seemed most certain, he thought. She finally calmed down, glaring at the Tribune as he approached.

The Tribune stopped in front of the distressed young woman and addressed Flavius, never taking his eyes off Daynia as she struggled against her captors. "And who is this, Commander?" He smirked, his expression arrogant.

"You got me into this mess, you bastard!" Daynia shouted, turning to Flavius, her hysteria subsiding as a cold calculating calm took over. "He killed that man. I saw him do it."

Flavius looked from Daynia to the Tribune, veiling the suspicion in his eyes. Keeping his focus on Daynia the Tribune smiled and once again addressed Flavius, "This is the assassin? Most deceiving. And brave. Have you explained Roman punishment for such a crime?" He smiled, his eyes never wavering from Daynia's.

Daynia glared at the Tribune with disgust. "You're a coward and a liar."

The Tribune roared with laughter, turning to Flavius, “Commander, this little filly will be a handful I fear.” He looked back to Daynia, “but patience and perseverance are always rewarded,” he said smiling, his eyes narrowing.

Daynia felt a stab to heart as his words unlocked her own Pandora’s box of twisted fear, hatred, guilt and images she had buried to survive. She stared in shock, her gaze trailing his hand as it moved to rest on his belt, thumbs hooked over. Her eyes widened as she stared at the snake-handled dagger hanging from the belt. The precious ruby stones adorning it gleamed a frightening blood-red that punched at Daynia’s heart like invisible ice picks.

Daynia’s brain twisted in a frenzy of long-buried images and sounds.

The dagger with the garnet jewelled snake handle poised over Jake. The calm diabolical voice uttering the words she fought to forget, “Patience and perseverance are always rewarded”. The dagger above her face. The glint of the blood-red gem. “Devil’s delight Daynia, Daynia”. The demon’s reflection in the mirror, the ragged wings, and that face, smiling viciously before she was attacked. ...that same face...the very same face. The face she had locked away in her own private hell.

Daynia’s gaze shifted slowly upward from the Tribune’s hand and the snake-handled dagger to his face. The voices faded and became distant echoes as she wrestled with her memories. *That face.* Her lungs constricted, cutting off precious air as she felt her heart pound like a hammer hitting her chest. She felt suffocated as the world disappeared except for herself and the malevolent Tribune. She stepped back, gripped with fear as she stared into the fiery red glow of his eyes. He smiled wickedly and to her horror, she watched him metamorphose into the demon reflected in her mirror that gruesome night. Her scream was stifled by sheer terror. She wanted to run but felt bound to the floor. Daynia gasped when the scene from her nightmare seemed to come to life, as the dark shadow with flaring red eyes plummeted toward her, ragged wings extending. Instantly, her world went dark.

Flavius had moved to a position where he could face Daynia, stepping just behind the Tribune. He was taken aback by the sudden terror in Daynia’s eyes. Her breathing had become shallow. Her fear was real, leading him to question his own doubts about her story. She gasped for air, staring at the

Tribune, with wide eyes replete with fear. Flavius was puzzled by the horror in her expression. *What exactly had this strange woman witnessed?*

Before he could speculate further, he saw Daynia sway and falter. Flavius lunged toward her, inadvertently pushing the Tribune aside but was unable to reach her in time as she dropped, unconscious, to the floor. Flavius cringed at the loud thump as her head slammed against the marble floor. He quickly slid his hand under her neck, raising her head as he looked up angrily at the soldiers who had been escorting her. “You must be swifter than that to be in this legion,” he hissed in a quiet rage. He slipped his other arm under her legs and glanced over at the Tribune, noticing the hint of a snicker on his superior’s face.

“It is as though she has seen a demon,” the Tribune said, amused. “She is mad indeed. Away with her.” His lips slanted into a cynical grin as he turned to leave. Flavius watched the Tribune walk away, his eyes narrowing with suspicion, before turning back to Daynia. He gathered her up in his arms and barking a command to the remaining soldiers, headed down the long marble corridor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

No Retreat

Alexis frowned as she contemplated the simply constructed home where Ishma lived. She was still confused as to why everything was so antiquated, but no one seemed able to give her a straight answer. Come to think of it, even the way they spoke made her envisage how it might have been in a very distant past. Alexis looked down at the modest wooden table where she sat, held up by unevenly sawed legs. Before she could contend with that other bit of confusing detail, Sarah walked down the steps from the second floor. Smiling warmly, she held out a jade coloured mantle.

Alexis reached for it, returning her smile, “Thank you,” she said sincerely as she clasped Sarah’s hand in hers tightly, “for everything.”

Sarah sat opposite her and slid the clay bowl with bread, cheese and olives toward her. “You must keep up your strength,” she said simply as Alexis sipped more water from the large clay mug in her hands.

Alexis didn’t know what might have happened had they not met Ishma. She might still be rotting in jail. Now, sitting in his family’s modest home, she was grateful for their help and especially for the water. Alexis had tried her best not to drink too much, but it took a fair amount of fluid to quench her thirst. Grateful, she re-iterated her sentiments out loud. “I don’t even want to imagine where I would be if it hadn’t been for Ishma, and your kindness, even though I’m a stranger.”

“He is a resourceful one, our Ishma.” Sarah held Alexis’ gaze. “Ishma is a good child and very perceptive,” she explained. “If he says you are innocent, then you must be and we must help.”

Alexis stared into her mug. “That he is,” feeling a spurt of affection for the messy haired little boy. “And he *is* smart and perceptive.” She paused, glazing over the mantle, her tone sombre, “I really didn’t think I’d get out that easily.” She glanced up at Sarah and flashed a smile. “But I’m glad I did,” she

said, forcing her mood to lighten.

“Ah, when men are ruled by greed, it is not so difficult,” Sarah replied, referring to Calios. “Come, you must have some sustenance before you begin your search.”

“Thank you Sarah, but I’m not really hungry. I need to find Daynia.”

“To do so you must have your strength. Is that not so?” Sarah raised an eyebrow and Alexis could see the ‘motherly’ determination in her expression. “Go on. You will feel better.”

“I guess you’re right.” Alexis gave in and bit into a piece of bread unaware of how hungry she really was until she swallowed her first bite and suddenly felt ravenous.

* * * * *

The echo of the cell door clanking shut bounced off the irregular surface of the small enclosure. The sound reverberated in Daynia’s pounding head. She moaned, stirring softly as she lay on a hard bench carved out of the stony wall. Her eyes fluttered open, her head aching. Blinking, Daynia tried to focus, but as her thoughts cleared she suddenly realized she was surrounded by darkness. Panicked, she jumped up, and immediately fell to the ground in pain as her leg gave way, unable to bear the sudden weight. She cried out and tried to scramble up toward the ray of light filtering in through a small aperture, chiselled out of the stone wall above the bench. She steadied herself against the cold rough wall, stretching her neck, trying to wedge her face into the hole. She gasped at the stench in the cell and fought to keep the fear at bay. Tears stung her eyes as Daynia clawed at the lower ledge of the hole, trying to keep herself upright and as close to it as possible.

“One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three.” Daynia counted slowly, as she had been instructed to do to help deal with the anxiety she suffered following Jake’s loss. She continued until the frenzied panic subsided, replaced by intense despair. Frightened, Daynia turned her gaze toward the darkness then quickly back to the light streaming from the small, roughly cut out window, her rapid shallow breathing the only sound now

breaking the silence.

* * * * *

The Tribune sat at his desk, studying an unrolled scroll by candlelight as Flavius walked into his superior's office. He looked up without acknowledging the commander, then returned his attention to the manuscript.

"You summoned?" Flavius pursed his lips when no answer came. He stood silently at attention, studying the man whose orders he followed, but whom he did not hold in the greatest of esteem. His eyes narrowed as Daynia's accusations rang in his head. He remembered the pleading in her eyes and then the sudden terror. Why had she accused the Tribune? Mistaken identities? Or was there something going on that he had yet to see?

His thoughts wandered back to Daynia and he stiffened at the image of her hitting the ground. Something inside softened when he remembered her limp body in his arms as he carried her. This time, there had been no sandstorm to obstruct the lovely face or how she felt as he held her close to his chest, her head resting over his arm, and her striking dark hair dancing with every step. Flavius blinked abruptly, pushing away the invading thoughts, keenly aware the Tribune was now watching him, amused, as though he were privy to the intimate thoughts crossing Flavius's mind. Flavius shifted uncomfortably but returned the Tribune's gaze evenly.

The Tribune crossed his hands on the desk, "Prepare a contingent. We must arrest the Galilean – the Nazarene – this night."

"This night?"

"Yes. At last, it seems the Sadducees and the Pharisees have found something they despise and fear more than each other," the Tribune replied, sarcasm dripping from every syllable.

"A man of peace who seems to have caused no harm?" Here was the reason he hated this new commission Flavius thought. He was a warrior who had trained for a lifetime to vanquish enemies on battlefields in wars with unambiguous mandates. This arrest of the Nazarene they called Jesus seemed

but a power struggle in a trivial game that had little to do with his purpose.

“Ah, but he has stolen the people’s loyalty from them. Their power is in question. They now share a common enemy, this...pauper king,” the Tribune smiled wickedly, “He must be seized before the Passover.”

Flavius drew a deep breath, “In the dead of night to avoid the people’s wrath.”

“Cunning are they not? See to it,” he dismissed Flavius with a wave. Flavius acknowledged it with a bow and turned to leave.

“Have the rantings of that madwoman ceased?” the Tribune asked casually as Flavius walked away.

Flavius stopped and turned back toward his overly vain superior who feigned disinterest, his eyes downcast on the document. “Yes,” Flavius replied, red flags rising.

“Do not let her play you Augusta. She is mad. She must be dealt with swiftly.” The Tribune lifted his eyes, the cold emptiness reflected in them leaving Flavius unsettled. “We cannot incur a rebellion. Justice must be executed in short order for the Passover is upon us.”

“Sir.” Flavius bowed his head and retreated, an inexplicable chill crawling up his spine.

The Tribune watched until Flavius was lost to view, a slow smile spreading across his spiteful face. In the darkness, ragged wings fluttered behind him, the flickering candle casting shadows on the demonic eyes that burned a fiery red. “Victory shall yet be mine,” he whispered softly, then burst into hysterical laughter.

* * * * *

Alexis picked up the clay bowl of half eaten bread and rose from her seat. “No. No,” Sarah jumped up. “I will take that.”

“Thank you again Sarah. You were right. I do feel better.” Alexis smiled. At least her body did, she thought. Her mind was far from being fine.

As though picking up on her thoughts, Sarah touched Alexis' shoulder gently. "Do not fret. Ezekiel and Ishma will do all they can to help find your friend."

Alexis smiled gratefully, her thoughts straying to the confusion when they had lost each other. "She shouted something when we were being chased, but I didn't quite get it and I have no way of getting in touch with her." Alexis bit her lower lip nervously. "I miss my cell."

"You wish to return to prison?" Ishma asked, shocked, as he walked into the house.

"What? Oh. No!" Alexis chuckled, "That's my...it..." she paused at Ishma's blank expression. She finally shook her head, "never mind!"

Ishma shrugged, "Father said he would return shortly."

"Then come, we will wait on the portico," Sarah suggested but before they made their way outside, Alexis leaned over to Sarah discreetly.

"Excuse me Sarah," she whispered, "may I use the rest-room before we leave?"

"Why most certainly. At the top of the steps immediately to your left."

"Thank you," Alexis replied and rushed up the rudimentary stairs into the room to her left, stopping abruptly. She glanced around the modestly furnished, tiny bedroom, but there was no bathroom.

"Ah...Sarah?" she called out.

"Yes?" the voice filtered up from below.

"This is a bedroom. I really need a bathroom," a current of dire necessity lining her voice.

"You desired to rest, no?" Sarah asked loudly.

Alexis slapped her forehead in frustration. She checked the other room frantically, but – no bathroom. The need was approaching catastrophic urgency she thought, as she rushed back down the stairs trying to be inconspicuous. She came to a grinding halt in front of Sarah. "Ah, not really...I need to... you

know...Ah...go to the bathroom—relieve myself!” Alexis fidgeted from side to side, trying desperately to hold it in.

Sarah’s face suddenly lit up, “Oh! I see. I am most sorry, I do not always understand the meaning of your words.”

“I don’t mean to be ungracious but it’s kind of urgent!”

“Of course!” Sarah pointed outside, “beside the barn.”

Alexis’ face dropped, “Beside the barn? *Outside?*”

“Yes of course.”

“Ooooh,” Alexis ran out the door slamming past Ezekiel. “Sorry!”

Ezekiel continued walking toward his house, looking back at Alexis, a puzzled expression on his face. He stepped inside, “is there something amiss?”

“No, my love,” Sarah chuckled, “I think life is somewhat different where she is from.”

Ezekiel shrugged, still perplexed, “I see.”

Outside Teeta bleated loudly as he obstructed Alexis’ path. “Out of my way!” she shouted as she jumped, grazing past the floppy-eared goat. She rushed toward one side of the barn but saw nothing. “Of course it would be the wrong side!” she shrieked, her body blaring ‘last call’ warnings. Alexis ran to the opposite side, her eyes darting about, as she banged frantically along the slatted shed walls, searching for the door, distracted by the awful symphony of commotion Teeta was composing. A section finally gave way and Alexis jumped inside, “Aaagh!”

“*It’s a damn hole!*” she shouted, her voice drowned out by Teeta’s excited bleats.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Perception of Truth

Daynia's head felt like it was about to burst open and her body ached. Her resolve was beginning to dissipate. She wasn't sure how much more she could take as she stood on the stone bench angling her face as close as she could to the tiny hole. It afforded a glimpse of the sky and a snippet of fresh air. Daynia shivered, the dampness and cold seeping straight into her bones. Unable to concentrate, her mind bounced around from one uncertainty to another. What had she imagined? The Tribune couldn't be Jake's killer. But then – why the knife? Why the red eyes? Why the wings? Daynia felt crestfallen. She was certain she had been getting past the hallucinations triggered by that horrible night. Maybe Alexis was right – she shouldn't have stopped her medication. Where was Alexis? Was she okay? How did this happen? *What* did happen? Where was this place? Why couldn't they find anything familiar? As her thoughts ran over themselves, panic began to set in. *One thousand one, one thousand two...Her* hand absentmindedly rested on the dog tags under her T-shirt. Jake's smiling face flashed in her head. *One thousand three, one thousand four.* She stared up at the faint ray of light.

“Here. It's right in here.” Jake held his palm to his heart, crouched down looking deep into her eyes. They had just lost their parents and Daynia couldn't stop crying. She stood sobbing, feeling lost, as her brother, a mere teenager himself, tried his best to be brave. The pain was deeply etched in his face and eyes but he still smiled at his little sister. He touched her tear-streaked face then took her right hand in his and placed it over her heart. His hand cupped hers. “Here. It's right here, all the strength and courage you need. Hmm?” He pressed their hands more firmly against her chest, “Just say a prayer and trust God to help you. Close your eyes, take a deep breath and say it. ‘I can do this. It'll be all right’. And you'll see, you'll find your strength. You'll be okay D. I promise.” Daynia's heart clung to her brother's words desperately. She nodded even as she cried helplessly. “Ok. Let's do it together. Close your eyes. That's right. Now take a deep breath...I

can do this...”

“...It’ll be all right,” Daynia’s voice trailed off as she stared into the night sky. Her hand pressed against her heart as she pounded softly with each word, “I can do this, it’ll be all right. I can do this, it’ll be all right.”

Daynia took a deep breath and looked up at a tiny distant light, breathing steadily as she reclaimed her control.

A loud clanking at the door startled her. She turned toward it with a gasp, something in her gut twisting. “I can do this,” she whispered again, as the door creaked open. A warm, orange-yellow glow filled the small quarters as Flavius walked in, followed by a soldier holding up a torch. He stopped a few steps in and stared at Daynia, a wave of sympathy washing over him as he took in her state and the terror sparking in her eyes until she recognized him. He smiled imperceptibly. Ah yes, he thought, but there it was anyway, that defiant glitter in her eye, the moment she realized who he was.

“You know the Tribune?” Flavius waited for her reaction.

Coldness swept through Daynia’s heart, “No, but...” Daynia cupped her face in exasperation, “aaagh.” She finally pulled her hands away and looked back at Flavius who hadn’t moved. “...Yes. I mean, he killed that man but he was there too, in my mirror, when Jake was...”

Flavius’s eyes narrowed, “You are not speaking sense.”

“No...no I’m not,” she ran a hand through her hair, confused and angry, the gesture sending an electrical bolt through Flavius. He stared at her, reining in his carnal thoughts. “But it is him. I mean he looks like him.” She glanced at the rocky floor, sighing heavily, wishing she hadn’t stopped her medication. She finally looked up, her eyes locking with his.

“Please don’t leave me in here,” Daynia said softly.

How was this wench so defiant and so helpless all at once, he wondered? Was it a ploy to keep him unhinged? Her soft voice threatened to distract him from his purpose so Flavius ignored her question and shifted his thoughts deliberately back to the issue at hand. “He is our Tribune.”

“I don’t care who he is, or what you call him. He killed that man. He

killed Jake. And he raped me.” The words flew out before she could stop herself. “I mean...he looks like him... but he did kill that man!” Daynia immediately turned back to stare into the night sky through the tiny hole. As she stared into the night, she began to question her reasoning. No one could look so identical and have the exact same weapon – a weapon that was unique in of itself. For the first time in a year, the thought occurred to her – what if they hadn’t been hallucinations? A steady conviction grew in her heart. What if it had been – just as she remembered it? For the first time since Daynia had lost Jake, she could think back on that night clearly.

Flavius tensed. *Rape? Raped her?* It mattered little if what she spoke was truth, he realized, the thought alone provoking a dark rage. Flavius closed his eyes a moment as he fought images of his mother’s bloodied face. He opened them to see Daynia standing unsteadily, still staring out of the roughly carved opening. His chest heaved as he breathed deeply. Did she really know the Tribune? He didn’t doubt the crudity of the man, only the verity of their acquaintance. It occurred to Flavius that he was sickened by the thought of that wretch forcibly violating this woman. Still, her claims seemed absurd. Curiously at a loss for words, he asked the only question that seemed comprehensible. “Who is Jake?”

The mention of her brother’s name jerked Daynia out of her trance. Still staring at the night sky, she began to laugh hysterically, making the soldier standing behind Flavius shift uneasily. She stopped laughing as abruptly as she had begun and turned to face Flavius.

“Nothing to you. But he killed him.” She pointed toward the cell door, her certainty gaining strength. “And the man by the well. And I don’t care if it doesn’t make sense or if you believe me. He killed Jake.” Daynia turned her back to Flavius and stared out the hole, breathing in deeply. She acknowledged she couldn’t make sense of anything anymore except that something strange was going on. Something unnatural. A vise grip squeezed at her heart. She may not be able to explain this bizarre situation, but it didn’t change the truth. “I can do this,” she whispered inaudibly, pressing her hand to her heart.

“Are you mad?” Flavius finally asked, not really believing she had lost her mind, in spite of her outlandish claims. Flavius watched as Daynia twisted to glare at him before struggling to descend from the stone bench. It took all his

resolve not to rush to help her. Instead he stood quietly, waiting as waves of pain crossed her face when her foot touched the ground.

Daynia leaned lightly on her injured leg and then summoning all of her strength, stepped toward Flavius, the limp nearly imperceptible. She confronted him boldly, glaring up into his piercing eyes. She hesitated when her heart jolted, but brusquely shook off the feeling.

Flavius watched the flurry of expressions cross her face, appreciating her skill in concealing them quickly. His admiration for this strange woman surged as she stood her ground despite her circumstances, her nervous collapse, her injury and her fear.

“I may sound ‘mad’ ” she whispered vehemently, “but I *know* it’s him.”

“Ariel’s assassin,” Flavius said matter-of-factly. “And he killed this Jake person and,” he paused, “attacked you, although you have not been here before?”

Daynia said nothing.

“So you have met the Tribune elsewhere.”

“Yes.” Even as she pronounced the words, they sounded crazy, but Daynia held her ground against her own doubts.

Flavius studied her face, yearning to believe her.

“But he wasn’t the Tribune then.” She stood firm.

“So you met him years ago?”

“Last year.”

Flavius sighed. He wanted to believe her, but she made it near impossible. “Do you know how many years are necessary to gain the training, experience and support to become Tribunus Legionis?”

“No. But it doesn’t matter. It’s him.”

“The Tribune.” Flavius frowned as he stared down at Daynia before breaking the silence, “You *are* mad.” He turned on his heel and headed out the door followed by the soldier, needing time and space to consider the myriad of

suppositions ricocheting in his head.

Darkness crept back into the cell as the glow trailing the torch disappeared from sight, sending Daynia into a panic. She rushed to the door as it clanked shut. “Wait!”

Flavius could hear her voice echo behind him as he walked briskly down the lengthy hallway. He signalled the soldier to move ahead and slowed his pace, looking down at the shadows cast by the sparse number of wall torches.

Daynia felt the enclosing darkness, “Don’t leave me here...Commander. Please!”

Flavius listened as the anger in her voice transitioned to fear. Something tugged at his heart. *Could she really be mad?* His steps faltered. She didn’t act it, but she sounded it, he thought.

“Commander!”

He wanted to turn back. He shook off the uncomfortable feelings. What was he doing, he seethed, questioning his own actions and thoughts. She *must* be mad and he had a job to do. Angry with himself, Flavius ignored her pleas and picked up his pace, striding away with determination.

Daynia turned her back to the door so she could see the light filter through the makeshift window. Keeping her back pressed against the door, she racked her brain. She had to make him believe her, she thought. Her mind raced. That seemed to be the only way he would help – if he believed her. She had to convince him.

Like a light bulb switched on, an image popped suddenly into her head. She turned her face back to the small opening in the door.

“The medallion!” she shouted as loudly as she could, the echo of her voice reverberating against the stone, “he took the medallion from that man’s neck!”

Flavius stopped in his tracks.

“He took it! He took that medallion! I saw it!” Daynia continued shouting but no answer came. She paused, turning her ear to the opening, hoping for the

sound of footsteps heading back; instead, she was met only with the echo of silence. He wasn't returning.

He really isn't coming back! Daynia slammed her fist on the door as she called out again but to no avail. He had to believe her, she thought. He *had* to. Perhaps he hadn't heard her. Daynia turned quickly to set her eyes on the moonlight streaming through that makeshift window. *I can do this...it'll be all right. I can do this...it'll be all right.*

She would keep fighting, she knew, despite the helpless feeling when confronted by elusive possibilities. She ignored her throbbing head and the shooting pain in her leg. If she was going to get out somehow, she needed to be in better shape. She fought the rising fear and locked her eyes on the light once more.

Flavius waited as silence settled, wondering briefly if she was staring at the night sky, her head tilted upward, her long hair tumbling to frame her face. With that image burnt into his mind, Flavius strode away with purpose.

* * * * *

Alexis glanced around the bustling marketplace as she walked alongside Ezekiel and Ishma, trying to ignore the ridiculous notion knocking about in her head, that things *were* exactly as they seemed. She dared not even consider the implication, her mere avoidance giving it more credence. There was definitely some sort of explanation to all this antiquity she surmised, and they would no doubt, laugh about this later.

Ishma glanced at Alexis' fingers, nervously tapping against her thigh. He reached out and took hold of her hand, his little one squeezing tight. Nudged out of her thoughts. Alexis looked down to see Ishma looking up inquisitively as he held her hand protectively. She smiled warmly.

"There is concern on your face," Ishma said matter-of-factly.

"Hmm? Oh yes...well I'm worried about Daynia," she gazed at the adorable little boy, realizing suddenly what a miracle he had been for her. Her smile widened, "but I'm okay."

Ishma beamed back before looking straight ahead, still holding her hand. Ezekiel ruffled his son's head affectionately. "He is right," he said glancing at Alexis sympathetically.

Alexis sighed, her eyes shifting downward before directing them towards Ezekiel, "I'm also getting a second, less harried look at your town. Something is just...off. No offence. Something's not quite right with this - um - re-enactment." A note of distress rang with every word.

Not sure quite what she meant, Ezekiel was trying to think of something to say when someone called out his name. A man stood behind an apparel stall, waving Ezekiel over. Next to him, his young son was serving a customer.

"Ah, there is Isaiah." Ezekiel pointed to the merchant and headed in his direction followed by Alexis and Ishma.

"I pray our luck changes," Alexis whispered, hoping Daynia, at least, had somehow found her way back to the tour. She squeezed her eyes shut but when she opened them, nothing changed. Nervousness bubbled in the pit of her stomach as she realized their options were slowly running out.

Nearing Isaiah's stand, Ezekiel stopped and turned to Alexis. "We will search everywhere," he said with determination. "Come," he nodded in Isaiah's direction, "we can begin with seeking information here."

"What brings you here today my friend?" Isaiah, a stocky man with an easy smile said warmly, as they approached.

Alexis was immediately taken in by his sincere charm. She liked his cheerfulness and his Santa Claus cheeks. She returned his smile, a touch of confidence overriding the nervous bobbing in the pit of her stomach.

Ezekiel glanced at the people nearby and leaned over the stall edge for privacy, "It is a rather particular matter."

"Ah," Isaiah signalled his son to take care of customers and motioned behind the stand.

Huddled out of sight, Ezekiel spoke louder. "This is our new friend Alexis." Isaiah nodded and smiled at Alexis who bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment, thinking he really looked like Santa.

Ezekiel continued, “We are searching for information on her friend, a young woman who may be in trouble. Perhaps you have heard news of her as your eldest works at the Roman garrison.”

“As not many women are taken there,” he added.

Isaiah tugged at the tip of his white beard as he considered the question. He finally glanced from one to the other, “No. No, I have heard nothing. If she is there, he would know. It is certainly no place for a woman. No. Micha has said nothing, but nevertheless I will inquire.”

“Thank you my good friend. I will send Ishma later for word,” Ezekiel replied.

“Thank you,” Alexis added gratefully, choosing to believe that Daynia had escaped the pursuing soldiers. But then, where would she be, Alexis wondered.

“I wish you luck, my friend,” Isaiah bowed his head as the trio headed off in search of more answers.

Thoughts chased after each other around Alexis’ head. Where would she go? Where? And what would she do? “We were heading toward the constabulary on the edge of town. Do you know where that is? She might have headed back that way,” she turned to Ezekiel. “We should go there!”

“It would not be a good idea at this time. If the Romans are searching for you and your friend, they would have already sought the help of the local constabulary. We must use more discretion in our quest.” Ezekiel glanced up at the dimming sky and sighed. “The sun will soon set. Let us not lose hope. We will continue here and make our way to the desert in the morrow.”

Alexis shot him a worried glance.

“It is a promise. There is little we can do as the darkness is almost upon us. We must believe that your companion is safe.”

Alexis’ heart sank. She was exhausted from the emotional roller coaster ride of the last several hours. *Darkness*. That word brought another slew of worries. What would Daynia do? “*Oh God, please let her be okay*” she petitioned silently.

* * * * *

Daynia slid down the wall, feeling its dampness against her back, fatigue overwhelming every part of her mind and body. She huddled in the corner, hugging her knees tightly, shivering against the cold. Her eyes remained fixated on the dimming light filtering into the confining cell, but she was so mentally exhausted that she became disconnected. Daynia forced herself not to think of what would happen when the light died out completely and tried to adopt a ‘che sarà sarà’ attitude – even if it was a fake one. “It’ll be all right. It’ll be all right,” she reiterated incessantly.

She turned suddenly toward the door, startled by its loud creaking. Her heart fluttered and relaxed when she saw Flavius step inside. He was out of uniform but still wearing an ancient-style tunic, his rich red cloak slung over his shoulder, behind him, a soldier holding a torch and lamp. He’s wearing a ‘dress’ too, she mumbled, distracted, as she tried to wrap reason around that thought.

Daynia didn’t move as she waited for Flavius to say something, silently relieved by his presence. He seemed out of place in the cramped cell, standing tall and imposing, even in a dress, she thought. The glow of light cast a subtle spotlight on his chiselled features. And gorgeous, Daynia thought. *What? Did she really just think that?* She wanted to laugh at how lame that was, but was simply too tired.

Flavius stood silent as he stared, thinking how her onyx eyes shone like brilliant stars even in this darkness. He felt his heart tightened as he took in her state. The light reflected traces of tears on her face while her eyes mirrored sorrow. Irritated by the now persistent, irrational urge to gather her in his arms and take her away whenever he was near her, Flavius pursed his lips and vowed to take back control of his thoughts.

“You are calmer. I will see to it an oil lamp is brought to you.”

“Oil Lamp?” Daynia sighed, the exhaustion bringing a sense of defeated resignation that disturbed Flavius. “I get it,” she continued, “you want to stay in character, everybody wants to stay in character...please ...can I just see a lawyer?”

Flavius signalled to the soldier who stepped forward and placed an oil-lamp on the far side of the stone bench. Daynia glanced at it, keeping her soaring gratefulness in check. The antique lamp's soft glowing light offered her a small degree of solace with its subtle illumination of the hellhole in which she was trapped. It also afforded a clearer view of the centurion's tunic. Flavius followed Daynia's gaze as it travelled from the stitching at the hem of his garment, down to his legs and back up. Flavius was amused by her boldness, a faint grin touching his lips.

"Seriously. Don't you guys believe in pants out here?" she paused, "Not that you don't look...you know...good in a dress." Daynia looked away embarrassed. *Did I really just say that?* She groaned internally and tried to change the topic. "When will I be let out of here?"

"Where are you from?" Flavius asked suddenly.

Daynia carefully swung her legs over the edge of the bench, absentmindedly rubbing the ache on one side. "I told you. I'm from North America. My friend and I are here on assignment and were touring a cave when we barely escaped a collapse. We've just been trying to find our way back since. That's it." She looked up and stared at him defiantly.

He smiled imperceptibly. *There she was.* Relief washed over him along with an odd pleasant settling in his heart. *She had returned.* Was he beginning to enjoy their inevitable repartees?

"We've done nothing wrong, and all you've been is inhospitable," Daynia quipped accusingly as she purposely looked around the cell and tilted her head. "This...is why I ran." She paused. "Did you find the medallion?" She looked away, afraid to see the expression in his eyes; ambivalent about whether he had believed her.

Flavius listened, not really hearing her. He swallowed hard, finding this incessant foolish desire to hold her against him disturbing. The light from the crudely cut out window shifted, softly illuminating her features. His gaze riveted on her full lips. He remembered their softness from his forceful kiss in the cave and while she hadn't responded, their smoothness and promise of pleasure stayed with him. A bolt of desire shot through him like an electrical current, taking him by surprise. He had not harboured such feelings in a very

long time and they unnerved him – he couldn't quite remember them running so deep. Yielding to emotions alluded to lack of control and seeing this as unacceptable, Flavius' tone became harsh. "There is nothing that can be done until the morrow."

Daynia shivered and looked at him with disgust, but he could still see the fear that flashed in her eyes when he said that.

"This is a bloody nightmare," Daynia said softly, but the anger was unmistakable.

As Flavius stepped forward with the intention of wrapping the cloak around her, she instinctively tensed up. He thought better of it and simply placed the cloak on the stone bench beside her. She looked down at the cloak and before she could offer a defiant retort, he leaned forward, pressuring Daynia to do the opposite and lean back. "The cold will only intensify. Do not be a half-wit for cause of pride." Flavius leaned in a little further, enjoying Daynia's discomfort as she stretched backwards even further, holding her breath. All at once he straightened and turned towards the door, stepping past the soldier.

Daynia exhaled deeply as the door clanked shut. She turned to look at the cloak, picking it up gently and glanced back towards the door. He was as infuriating as he was oddly gallant. Holding onto the cloak, she slid off the bench and hobbled to the door.

"Did you find the medallion?" she shouted anxiously. "I shouldn't be in here. I'm innocent!" No one answered. "Wait!"

Her voice filtered down the hallway, boring a hole in Flavius' heart. Despite the pins and needles jabbing at his heart, he continued walking without flinching, his fists clenched, his expression dark.

"Aaagh!" The echo as she slammed her hand against the door reverberated, her anguished scream making his heart ache. This peculiar woman was doing strange things to him. Inexplicably, he was dismayed by the thought.

* * * * *

The agitated man stood facing the Judean priest. A sense of urgency hung in the air as a small group of high priests stood slightly further back, watching the two men intently, their grim expressions betraying the dark deed being negotiated.

Without a word, the Judean priest stretched out his hand to the nervous man. Judas looked down at the moneybag and stared in a daze. He looked up at the priest and then past him to the Pharisee at the head of the group behind them. The Pharisee nodded imperceptibly.

Judas turned his attention back to the moneybag, finally reaching out for it slowly. He turned quickly and rushed for the exit, as if trying to outrun the wave of guilt washing over him.

A smile of satisfaction spread across the face of the Pharisee as the footsteps of the man who would rid him of the thorn in his side echoed through the large marble chamber. He would soon prove that the man who called Himself the Son of God was nothing but a false prophet. Moreover – their community would be purged of His rantings. The Pharisee turned to walk away, the shadow of ragged wings flitting across the ceiling as Judas rushed out the door and ran down the steps.

He stopped suddenly at the foot of the stairs and looked up at the evening sky, sweat glazing his forehead. His eyes darted about in alarm, before he took off, walking briskly, head down, avoiding gazes as he hurried past people.

As Alexis and Ezekiel rounded a corner, Alexis slammed into the rushing Judas who dropped the moneybag, spilling its contents. “Oh! I’m so sorry!” Alexis bent down quickly to help pick up the contents.

Avoiding her eyes, Judas replied hastily, “It is fine.”

“Judas! How are you this night?” Ezekiel said happily, hunching down to assist.

Alexis froze at the sound of the name. A chill snaked its way up her spine. She slowly looked down at the coin in her hand, and then up at the man beside her. Her gaze locked onto the coins he was hastily putting back into his little canvas pouch. She stared down at her open palm, her eyes widening as she fixated on the silver coin she held. Dazed, she slowly rose at the same time as

both Ezekiel and Judas. Entranced, Alexis extended her arm toward Judas. A feeling of dread swelled in her gut as she dropped the coin into his hand and looked up into his face. She was jolted when she recognized the fear and guilt reflected in his eyes. She stared at the sweat trickling down his temple, finding it increasingly difficult to breath.

They must hear my heart beating, Alexis thought, as the sound thundered in her head.

“This is my friend Alexis.” Alexis thought it strange that Ezekiel’s voice sounded so distant. Ezekiel turned toward Alexis, “This is Judas, Judas Iscariot. He is a friend of the Messiah.”

Judas mumbled incoherently and bobbed his head before rushing off, without waiting for Alexis’ reply. Ezekiel watched him run off, dumbfounded, “He seems distracted this night.” He turned back to find Alexis staring after Judas, her breathing laboured, her face pale.

“Alexis? Are you well?”

Alexis simply stared, unable to move, the signals from her brain going haywire. Her voice was low, staccato, “there’s no audience, no reason to keep pretending at this hour.” Ever so slowly, she looked over to Ezekiel, still rambling, “I mean, nobody stays in character that long, right?” Alexis turned her attention to the now empty street where Judas had fled. “He was carrying silver coins. Old silver coins. Really old coins – lots of them – probably about 30, don’t you think?” Alexis began to sway. “I don’t feel so good.”

With quick reflexes, Ezekiel reached out and grabbed Alexis before she hit the ground unconscious.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Plan Unfolds

Flavius took a swig from the metal container, slamming it down on the table, his gaze fixed on his hand as he fought off thoughts of Daynia's defiant eyes and soft lips. He wiped at his mouth roughly, trying to erase the feel of their touch. He glanced around at the dingy Roman eatery where he sat with two companions. The room was crowded with boisterous and sweaty soldiers flirting with willing servant girls. His thoughts strayed back to Daynia. Her pleading voice rang in his ear and he tried to quell it with another gulp. *Blast that woman!* She was poking at emotional places he had long buried, tormenting him. He cupped the mug tighter, staring blankly into it, frustrated at the uncharacteristic uncertainty of what he should do next.

"You captured that Pharisee's assassin?" Attilius, looked up from the spoon he had dropped back into the stew-filled bowl. Unlike Flavius, he was still dressed in uniform, leaning back lazily as he ran his hand through messy curly hair.

Intoxicated, the third companion Decius joined in, "A most lovely temptress we have heard. I must pay her a visit."

The mug stopped as it touched Flavius's lips. He glared over the edge of the mug at Decius, his eyes narrowing menacingly.

Noticing his reaction, Decius goaded, "have you already tasted her delights Flavius?"

"Decius. Do not be foolish," Attilius warned, knowing how the bickering would end.

Decius turned to Attilius, with annoyance, "I only wish to respect my good friend and do not wish to intercede if he has already succumbed to her beauty." He turned to Flavius, "she is a beauty is she not? So I have heard," his words slightly slurred.

Flavius pulled the mug slightly away from his lips, “Heed your friend’s advice, Decius,” his calm voice pointedly keeping the rage in check, the challenge in his eyes clear as he held the other man’s gaze while he guzzled more wine.

Attilius sighed, looking from one to the other, an expression of resignation on his face.

Decius glared at Flavius as he drank, wine spilling down the sides of his mouth, slurring as he spoke. “You are right Flavius. You can speak most expertly of being foolish.” He continued with an exaggerated smile. “Yet, I thought you had turned away from their wiles since that feline ripped out your heart.” He broke out into a hearty laugh.

Flavius set down his drink gently, lifting his gaze deliberately. Decius stopped laughing as Attilius patted Flavius on the back good-naturedly, “Come my friend. Do not be so serious. Decius is not a man of caution.”

Flavius paused, took a deep breath and reconsidered. He finally held up his mug toward Decius in a salute and took a swig. Decius reluctantly accepted the gesture and backed down.

Attilius slapped Flavius on the back. “Excellent decision my friend!”

As the men returned to their drinks, a beautiful crimson-haired servant girl approached, holding a jug. She squeezed her upper body between Decius and Attilius, her full bosom spilling over the fabric drawn tightly across her breasts.

“More?” she asked sweetly, her green eyes staring directly across the table at Flavius who briefly glanced in her direction with indifference.

Decius reached out and grabbed the girl, pulling her close. She offered no resistance. “More of your charms?” Decius asked, his hands already wandering.

Rachel laughed coyly as she slapped his hand but didn’t quite push it away. She replenished their mugs, glancing repeatedly over at Flavius whose attention had returned to his drink.

Rachel tore herself away from Decius, making her way around the table to

Flavius. She purposely leaned over his shoulder, her barely covered bosom brushing the side of his face as she stretched to replenish his mug. Flavius glanced up coolly showing no reaction as Rachel rose slowly. She peeked into her jug, “Oh! I must get more.” With a sidelong seductive gaze at Flavius, she sauntered away.

Attilius looked over at Flavius, “Flavius, she has wooed you for a time. Let go of past demons. Enjoy yourself.”

Flavius looked up, watching Rachel’s sensual gait as she made her way past more leering, drunken men. Attilius leaned in closer, his voice low, “You cannot still be desiring...”

“...That is long ended,” Flavius replied cutting him off.

“I am concerned for you Flavius,” Attilius said candidly, “I miss my old friend.” Flavius turned toward his old comrade in arms. He had known Attilius since he enlisted in the Roman Legion, a young nomad with extraordinary fighting skills. Skills that helped him survive the hardships of a life that had meted out more adversity than harmony. He gazed into his friend’s sincere eyes, but said nothing.

Attilius didn’t wait long for a reaction he knew would not be forthcoming. He slapped Flavius on the back once more. If ever there was an enigma, it was this man beside him. The one thing of which he was certain: Flavius would keep his emotions buried deep. He had encountered Flavius in street battles waged for money, an easy way to earn a living for wandering men on the filthy back streets of Rome. Initially opponents, the two men forged a deep friendship over time and garnered respect as fierce adversaries. Eventually they fought their way off the streets and gained notoriety as the best chariot racing team in the Republic. Attilius swirled the spoon in the stew, watching the liquid flow in a circular motion, reminding him of the days when they whipped the chariots around the bends of the Circus Maximus arena. Flavius, who displayed an easy regard for animals, had an uncanny way of understanding their equine partners. He smiled, remembering how that probably had much to do with their illustrious wins – the beasts ran hard for his comrade.

Tilting his head, Attilius eyed Rachel as she returned, repeating her

seduction ritual, bowing low over Flavius's shoulder to replenish his mug. Attilius guffawed. Poor Rachel, refusing to give up in her attempts to seduce his friend. He felt rather sorry for the girl. She was only one of many who flocked to Flavius but Attilius knew he would never give her his heart. He might tousele with her to warm the night but Flavius could only love the way he lived – deeply, passionately and loyally. None of those emotions were reflected in his response to Rachel. Although Flavius said little, Attilius knew that the betrayal by a woman he had loved had left invisible scars that seemed not to have healed. For as long as he had known him, he never questioned Flavius's loyalty or his honour, which made his woman's treachery all the more tragic. She had coolly ripped out his heart. Attilius lifted his eyes to Rachel and considered Flavius in a sideways glance. He turned back to his stew, shaking his head. How she could not see the emptiness toward her in his friend's eyes surprised him.

Flavius could smell Rachel, drenched in overbearing sweet floral scent. He wished Rachel would move away, he thought, as he willingly tried to fill his senses with Daynia's subtle fresh citrus fragrance.

Rachel's lips brushed his ear, "How else may I serve you?" she said in a loud whisper. Pushing aside Daynia's image angrily, he turned to Rachel, his face inches from hers as he peered into her green eyes, but saw only the reflection of Daynia's dark coal gaze. His hand wrapped around the nape of Rachel's neck as he pulled her face toward him forcefully and kissed her intensely, striving to shove images of Daynia into the dark recesses of his mind. He released Rachel abruptly, and turned back to his mug, frustrated, unable to quash the images of *that* exasperating woman.

Breathless, Rachel whispered close to his ear, "I will retire shortly." Flavius said nothing as a confident Rachel smiled and walked away happily. His two companions whooped and hollered in anticipation.

* * * * *

The soft orange glow of the flame in the oil lamp helped an exhausted Daynia prevent her anxiety from spiking. Huddled in Flavius's cloak, knees drawn into her chest, she finally succumbed to a light, troubled sleep. She

stirred at the faint noise. Her eyes flew open as her brain registered the sound of a whisper. *Did she hear right?* Daynia squinted, her eyes adjusting to the dim illumination. Her gaze was immediately drawn to the moonlight filtering through, like a laser beam hitting the ground.

“How nice to see you again.” Her heart began to thud. She immediately recognized the voice but saw nothing. Daynia sat up straighter, certain she was dreaming or imagining the sound. Just a dream, she thought, the thump in heart shifting into overdrive as, with horror, she watched a shadow glide out of the darkness. Fear slammed into Daynia like a locomotive. She screamed and jumped back, looking to the closed door. *This can't be!*

Terror shot through her as the Tribune slowly approached, relishing his prey's fear as a menacing grin spread across his face, accentuated in the soft moonlight. Daynia pressed her back hard against the wall. She was trapped and terrified.

“Look at you,” he said in a slow drawl, “So lovely. But, oh, so stupid. You only drag this out.”

Daynia's mind ran amok as the man who had killed her brother metamorphosed into the demon haunting her nightmares. Daynia screamed. This could not be real. It was just her nightmare. *Just a nightmare! Yes! That was it!* She cradled her head in her hands forcing her eyes to focus on the stone floor, “Just a nightmare! Just a nightmare!” she shouted to drown out the evil laughter. “JUST A NIGHTMARE! JUST A NIGHTMARE!”

All at once, silence filled the cell, save for her trembling voice. Still holding her head, hands pressed against her temples, Daynia shakily shifted her glance from the flame and realized no one was there.

She drew her hands away slowly, her eyes sweeping the empty cell cautiously. Daynia heaved a long sigh of frightened relief. “Just a nightmare. Just a nightmare,” she repeated, not quite convincingly. Her eyes flit across the small space but still she saw nothing. She listened closely to her own heavy breathing finally find its rhythm as the pounding in her heart quieted and tension began to abate.

But then, the sudden steady pulse of someone else breathing permeated the

air. Daynia screamed at the top of her lungs, jumping up wildly in a frantic effort to make it to the door. Her foot landed awkwardly as her leg buckled beneath her sending her crashing into the hard metal slate across the door. Head spinning, she banged on the door violently, her incoherent shouts reverberating in the dark space around her. Panicked, she turned and pressed her back against the door, her eyes darting furiously around the cell. Before she could scream again, an icy hand clutched her throat, cutting off her voice and breath.

Daynia gasped desperately for air, clawing frantically at the grotesque hand crushing her throat, her thoughts muddled. The demon's menacing whisper rang loud and clear, "You cannot escape me. I am in your head. Go on. Be angry. No one would fault you. He was your brother after all. And you. You were delicious."

Something snapped at the mention of her brother, like a knife slashing across her heart. With renewed vigour, Daynia struck back wildly. The demon's hand tightened its grip around her neck forcing a strangled sound from Daynia. His face closed in, a hair's breath away from Daynia's. Her eyes widened in fear. "My patience and perseverance may soon run out. You will succumb to me, Daynia, Daynia."

A sudden wind blew in with the force of a hurricane, hurtling Daynia across the modest space and slamming her against the stone bench carved out of the wall. Daynia sucked in vital air, thinking she heard laughter as everything went dark.

* * * * *

Two soldiers entered the Roman eatery, stopping to scout the premises, one holding an official scroll in his hand. He noticed Flavius's table and leaned over to his partner pointing it out. The two headed towards the centurion, coming to attention as they reached his table.

The soldier holding the scroll stepped forward, "Commander."

Flavius looked up from his drink acknowledging the soldier with a nod and a wave of his hand to indicate he should speak. "Sir," the soldier said, as

he extended his arm toward Flavius and handed him the scroll.

Flavius unrolled the scroll, a frown creasing his forehead as he read it, rolled it up again and tucked it securely on the inside of his belt. He glanced up at the soldier and nodded. With a curt bow, the soldier turned to leave with his partner. Attilius shot Flavius a questioning gaze.

“It is time. We will accompany the temple guards to arrest this Jesus from Galilee,” he said, displeased with the task. A useless one, he thought, and a waste of their military power and purpose.

“Why of night?” Decius said, inebriated.

“The Pharisees fear a riot among his followers,” Flavius replied matter-of-factly.

“Have we not more pressing matters than to waste our time with a peasant of ill mind? My men wear battle scars,” Attilius complained voicing Flavius’s own sentiments. “We are not wet nurses to Caiaphas’ self-righteous whims.”

“Perhaps. But these are our orders,” Flavius said with finality as he rose from the bench. “I will prepare.” He would need to change back into uniform, he thought, but more importantly, he wanted to check in on that blasted woman.

Rachel watched eagerly as she waited by the exit. Flavius caught her eye as he turned toward the egress. She smiled coyly and exited, glancing over her shoulder. Flavius straightened and headed for the door.

Decius held his mug up in a salute. “Beware Augusta. Feminine wiles can pierce straight through a man’s armour into his heart with the precision of the Pilium.” He slurred his words, referring to the heavy javelin used by Roman legionnaires.

Attilius looked mortified. Flavius stopped in his tracks, turned back toward the table and in two long strides stood facing Decius who smiled foolishly, holding his mug up to Flavius’s face in a salute.

Flavius’s voice was low and threatening, “You wish to say something?”
He truly has no sense.

“Yes,” he burped, “a man who does a woman’s every bidding and is a

mere pawn in her murderous scheme is a weak fool.”

“Decius! Caution!” Attilius tried to intervene but it was too late.

“Does it still eat at your heart Decius, that I possessed the woman you lust and still cannot conquer?” Flavius smiled wickedly.

Decius rose to his feet, swaying as he kicked back the bench. “Ah, Commander,” he laughed and suddenly took a swing at Flavius, missing him as Flavius easily leaned out of the wavering fist’s path. The centurion responded with a solid punch that sent Decius flying across the next table. Flavius looked over at Attilius. “He is fortunate he is intoxicated.” With that, he rubbed his closed fist and turned on his heel.

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Flavius paused as he stepped out into the cool night, glancing up at the star speckled sky. He took a deep breath, feeling the brisk evening air refresh his senses, wondering why they made him think of that strange infectious woman again. He forcibly held fatigue at bay, knowing his night was far from over, as he headed in the direction of the headquarters. A soft seductive voice called out, distracting him from the mission list he was reviewing in his head.

“May I be of further service, Commander?” Rachel stepped out from behind the corner of the building into the soft flood of torchlight. Flavius stopped and turned to study the beautiful woman as she smiled invitingly.

* * * * *

The mood was tense as the five men of the cloth gathered in a sparsely decorated marble room, imposing pillars rounding its four corners.

“And you are certain of this?” high priest Caiaphas asked, his voice suffused with excited satisfaction.

“Yes. We are told He is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane,” one of the other men replied.

“One of His own disciples will take us there,” said another.

“This then, is the man who calls Himself the Son of God. Betrayed so easily by His own,” Caiaphas said with an arrogant smirk as he adjusted his headdress. “Yes, we will hand Him over to the Romans. Let them crucify Him according to Roman law.”

Victory. Caiaphas smiled softly and turned to walk away, a gleam in his eyes as his entourage fell in step behind him.

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Desire born of frustration welled up as Flavius contemplated the attractive woman beckoning him. In three long strides he was at Rachel’s side. He grabbed her and pulled her back into the darkness beyond the corner of the eatery, pinning her against the coarse wooden wall. A small gasp escaped her mouth before he thrust his lips against hers forcefully and kissed her fervently, his hands wandering.

“Daynia,” he whispered softly as he dipped his head toward the base of her neck.

“I can be whomever you wish.” Rachel oozed sensuality.

Flavius felt as though cold water had been thrown in his face. He pulled away abruptly, still holding her by the arms and stared into her face. The realization of where his thoughts strayed alarmed him. He continued staring at Rachel as his mind tried to outrun what felt like carnal cravings for forbidden fruit.

Rachel looked up, batting her eyes, “...and do whatever you wish.”

Flavius took a step backward, indifferent to Rachel’s inviting smile, his eyes dropping to the moonlight reflected in a large ornate pendant partially hidden in her cleavage. He reached out to take it, as Rachel pressed her chest forward against his hand. He held the pendant in his palm a moment, his eyes fixating on it, oblivious to Rachel’s soft cooing as she caressed his face. Daynia’s voice rang in his ear, “*The medallion! He took the medallion from his neck!*” How could he have forgotten, he thought furiously.

Flavius thrust Rachel’s hand aside, “I must go.” Without explanation or

apology he turned on his heel and walked purposefully toward headquarters.

Rachel stared after him, stunned. “Bastard!” she shouted, but Flavius only heard Daynia’s shaking and frightened voice echoing in the darkness.

* * * * *

The hallway was empty as Flavius, now in uniform, approached the Tribune’s chamber. Though skeptical, he would verify Daynia’s claim before dispatching his men to arrest that man they called Jesus. He paused at the entrance, checking either side once more to ensure he was alone, before stepping into the empty quarters.

Flavius stood motionless inside the immediate perimeter, his eyes carefully scanning the room before he began his search. He first moved to the desk, shifting through assorted scrolls, lifting them and looking underneath. He rummaged through a storage bench in one corner of the room. Finding nothing, he remained crouched, his eyes searching warily. Could she have been wrong? Flavius thought. Why should he believe her at all? He glanced toward the far end of the chamber and focused on the small pedestal table pushed against the wall. He rose calmly, his eyes drawn to the small, lidded clay dish sitting inconspicuously on the modest table.

He walked over and paused as he stared down, realizing that its contents could be holding the power to sway his heart definitively. Flavius lifted the lid slowly. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the bloodstained medallion before reaching for it, his heart skipping a beat.

* * * * *

Flavius hurried toward Daynia’s cell, the echo of his footsteps resonating loudly in the deserted hallway. A soft glow emanating from behind him seemed to rush forward. Flavius stopped suddenly and whipped around, but was met with the flickers of the lightly burning torch lamps on the wall. He must be weary, he thought, as he continued toward the cell at the end of the corridor. Suspicion continued to poke at his thoughts. Flavius slowed his pace, glancing behind him once more before turning back toward Daynia’s cell.

He hastily jostled the key in the lock and pushed the door open, impatient to tell Daynia the news that he had found the medallion. *Or was it more than that?* Flavius pointedly ignored the slight flitting spark of excitement in the pit of his stomach. He stepped inside the cell to find Daynia seated on the floor, half-slouched over the stone bench. She had finally found the peace of slumber he thought; relieved even as his brain registered something was amiss.

A closer look set alarms off in his head as his eyes caught sight of his cloak lying haphazardly on the floor. Flavius crouched down and leaned in, "Awaken." There was no reaction, not even a stir from Daynia. He could hear his heart thump louder as he reached out to lift her head, his fears realized as blood dripped from her right temple. Flavius swore under his breath, gathered Daynia's limp body in his arms and rushed out of the cell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Evasion

Ezekiel fussed over Alexis, gingerly patting at the blood on her forehead as they sat on stone steps a few feet from where she had fainted. The night sky was clear and the air warm. Perhaps she had fainted from the heat Ezekiel thought. “Are you certain you are all right, Alexis?”

Alexis looked to Ezekiel, her expression dazed. She just stared at him silently, her eyes searching for reason. His heart went out to her – she seemed so confused and frail in that moment. When she spoke, her words were uncertain, hesitant and fearful.

“This...all of this is real?” She never took her eyes off of Ezekiel’s, afraid that looking away might confirm the nightmare was real.

Ezekiel looked at her dumbfounded, feeling helpless. Why was she asking such obvious questions? Had she injured her head that much, he wondered. “I am not certain wh...”

Before he could finish, Alexis continued, her voice sounding robotic, devoid of any emotion that would force her to face a reality that could not be possible. “That wasn’t an actor on those steps overturning those tables...it was really Him? It did all seem so unbelievable...a whole town in on it but...I mean.” She finally looked away, a tear rushing to eyes as she digested the implication. She turned back to Ezekiel, grabbing his hand, her eyes pleading for an answer that made sense. “What else *could* it have been? I mean it couldn’t...but it was, wasn’t it?” Her voice trailed off weakly.

“Enough. Your thoughts are most confused. I will find our healer but you will rest now. Come,” his concern genuine. He helped Alexis up, steadying her when she stumbled, her hand pressed against her injured forehead. Leaning heavily against Ezekiel, they walked slowly toward his home. Alexis repeatedly turned to look at him without uttering a word. Making their way up the narrow road, she suddenly broke out into laughter, her face still trained on

Ezekiel. He wondered if she was losing her mind. Indeed, he thought, it sounded like she already had.

“That’s why it was just a hole in the ground. I mean, who’d have just a hole in the ground in this day and age?” Alexis sounded half drunk. “Except that it’s your day and age – that’s why! Oh…” She grimaced as a pain shot through her head, as much from the wound as from her chaotic thoughts.

“Yes. Yes,” Ezekiel replied, humouring her, trying to pick up the pace, anxious to get her some urgently needed help.

* * * * *

The ice tsunami closed in as Daynia raced, her feet booming loudly on the hard white surface, a sinuous crack biting at her heels. Utterly lost, she ran toward an endless horizon. Behind her, the ghostly howling of the lonely wind rushed across the wasteland of white. She didn’t need to turn around to know that in the low rumbling, fiery red eyes sought her out. Terror stuck her heart as the shadow of ragged wings turned the pristine white ground in front of her a dirty black, the shadow stealthily advancing ahead of her.

Daynia woke with a start, a gasp escaping her lips as she tried to catch her breath, staring at the smooth cedar boards in the ceiling, her head throbbing. She lay still, fighting a sudden wave of nausea, as her disoriented mind resisted the nightmarish images. Her eyes shifted sideways, blinking, trying to focus on a blurry image of what seemed to be a bowl. As her vision cleared, she saw a bloodstained cloth folded over the edge of a water-filled, large clay bowl on a nearby stand. She groaned silently at the ache in her back and the chill from the cold stone table on which she lay. When she lifted her hand to press it against the pounding in her head, a red cloak slipped down, crumpling over her abdomen. She grasped it and held it up to inspect it, penetrating grey eyes flashing in her mind. What was she doing here? Was the cloak his? She stifled a sudden shriek as she remembered the demon’s face pressed against hers in the cell. The nightmare had seemed so real. Her head ached and her thoughts swirled in confusion. Her rising anxiety was interrupted by the sound of voices. They distracted her thoughts as she slowly turned her head toward the noise, becoming aware of her surroundings as her eyes

scanned the bare circular room, bordered by pillars. Although her mind was fuzzy, she stiffened as she recognized the deep smooth voice barking orders not far outside the chamber.

“...Let the Tribune know it is urgent I speak with him.”

At the mention of the word ‘Tribune’, Daynia felt a chill bolt up her spine. She ignored the voices as unwilling images of the demon flashed in her mind. Then, the sound of Flavius’s voice grounded her again. The surreal occurrence from her cell had seemed so real, she thought, but looking back now, it could only have been a nightmare. It certainly rated as the worst hallucinatory episode to have plagued her since she lost Jake.

Yet, as her thoughts struggled to align themselves, and she tried to convince herself that the incident in the cell had been a dream, in the deepest recesses of her mind, something felt terribly, horribly wrong. She thought of the snake-handled dagger the Tribune possessed and his malicious taunting smile. Yes, something was dreadfully wrong and as she steadied her breathing, warding off another wave of nausea, she decided she had to escape. *No matter what. Right now.*

Outside the chamber, Flavius turned to the second soldier. “You. Do not leave this post.”

“Commander,” the soldier replied in acknowledgment, bowing his head slightly and taking his position in front of the doorway.

Daynia listened carefully until the sound of footsteps faded. Wincing, she cautiously lifted herself onto her elbows, attempting to sit up, catching the edge of the red cloak before it slid to the floor. She held it up with one hand. *Did he bring her here?* She felt flushed with warmth but quickly shook the feeling off. He was trying to keep her there, she remembered. She glanced toward the doorway and considered the sentry posted there, weighing the challenge he posed to her escape. She knew she had to move quickly as that infuriating centurion would no doubt return. Although moving at all seemed quite the endeavour, Daynia sucked in her breath and ignoring the pounding in her head, quietly slipped off the table, letting the cloak fall to the floor. She clutched the table’s edge tightly in an effort to steady herself and snuck a peek toward the doorway before scrutinizing her surroundings with greater consideration. She

would have to get past the guard and there was only one way she could think of to do that. She would have to knock him out – literally, she thought guiltily.

Daynia turned her attention back to the bowl. She eyed it closely. It would have to do. Summoning all her reserve strength, Daynia gingerly tested the floor with a step, wondering if her injured leg would buckle. Although painful, it held its own and Daynia quietly stepped to her left, cringing as she lifted the bowl from the stand, overwhelmed with guilt from the thought of having to smash it against the sentinel's head. With her back pressed up against the wall, Daynia moved slowly, painstakingly making her way toward the young man standing outside the chamber.

She stumbled as pain shot up her leg, her hand flying to cover her mouth and stifle a yelp. Her sudden movement caused the water in the bowl to slosh about, alarming Daynia. She had considered spilling its contents, but changed her mind for fear that it might make just enough noise to alert the guard. Now she wished she had.

Daynia hobbled as quietly as she could, approaching the sentinel, steadying the bowl to keep drops of water from dripping over its edge. As she neared the wall adjacent to the doorway, she worried that she couldn't pull off her plan. Daynia leaned her head backward, still pressed against the wall, her nerves on edge. She argued with herself, reasoning that this might be her only opportunity for escape. Finally convinced, she gathered her courage and held up the bowl, turned toward the guard, and stepped beside the door frame. But then she suddenly retreated, again stepping back around the frame and against the wall. *I can't do this!* This might be her only chance to escape, her mind shouted back at her. Daynia squeezed her eyes shut then opened them, took a deep breath and held onto her resolve, ignoring the ache in her head. *This is my only chance!* Determined, she decided to count to three for motivation.

She inhaled deeply, stepped back into position and counted silently. *One, two...* The soldier suddenly did an about-face but before he could register what was happening, a shocked Daynia shrieked, "three!" She forcefully slammed the bowl on his head; her expression shocked as water squirted her face, and the young soldier's eyes went blank.

"Sorry! Sorry!" she whispered anxiously, appalled by her own actions as

she watched his body go limp and crash to the floor with a thud. She stared at him in dismay before reason set in. She ignored the guilt and glanced up the hallway, afraid the sound would bring others, but no one came. Daynia hurriedly made her way in the direction where she had heard the footsteps earlier. The exit must be that way. She had no real way of knowing but decided she had to make a calculated guess. She would backtrack if it led nowhere.

Daynia continued moving toward voices now filtering through from the hallway. She hid behind a column, sneaking a peek down the corridor that led into a spacious hall bordered by a wide portico and steps spilling into a large square. Several arches around the square connected with the roads on the other side. The voices came from the far end, well away from where she was hiding.

Daynia snuck onto the portico, hastily taking refuge behind a massive pillar. She inched her head around the pillar and snuck a quick peek before pulling back to rest her head against the smoothly carved marble, waiting for the throbbing in her head to subside. She took a brief moment of respite and looked again. A small group of soldiers, both on foot and horseback, were assembled in the square.

Standing on the portico, Attilius addressed his subordinate, “we shall be moving out in short order. Prepare the contingent.”

“Yes commander,” came the curt reply.

Attilius turned and re-entered the building. The soldiers seemed engrossed in their personal conversations, lending Daynia the opportunity to sneak along the curving portico towards one of the archways. She scurried as best she could, not sure where to go, but not stopping. She gasped softly when beyond one pillar, two arches down, she saw the little boy again, watching her as he stood motionless, the glowing object always present in his hand.

Instinctively, Daynia hurried toward the boy, safely making it past the first arch but as she rounded the pillar near the second, she found herself alone, puzzled and a little disconcerted. She spun around searching, but the boy was gone. Again. Her frustration mounted. “The nightmares aren’t enough? Hallucinations too?”

Suddenly the little boy appeared again but this time, just inside the

archway. Daynia felt like she had been hit with a bucket of ice. Could a hallucination be that strategic?

“Who the hell are you?” Daynia cried out in a loud whisper. “What do you want from me?” A flickering light caught her eye from inside the second archway. She quickly turned toward it and began running with a hop, cringing at the pain, but spurred on by her determination to find out about that boy and the glowing object. She huffed as she began to lose speed and run out of breath but persisted nonetheless, still chasing the bright light at a somewhat slower pace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the Olive Grove

As quickly as it had appeared, the light vanished, leaving Daynia in a panic. Were it not for the curious brilliance of the sky lighting up her surroundings, she might not have been able to keep her anxiety in check. She stopped as a dizzy spell hit her, stooping over to rest her hands on her knees and catch her breath. Daynia waited for the dizzy spell to dissipate before rubbing her leg in an effort to fend off the pain. She glanced around at her surroundings and realized she was in an olive grove. She tried to zone in on the light but it had grown dim, sending a nervous ripple through her body.

A massive olive tree stood erect and imposing up ahead, its branches stretching and leaning, impressive and yet exuding a sense of serenity. Daynia eyed the tree and could already feel its support against her hand as she hobbled toward it eagerly until a low-pitched, vicious growl sent a chill coursing up her spine. Daynia froze, feeling her heart thumping as she held her breath, terrified to turn around. The growl deepened. *What do I do? What do I do?* Tears stung Daynia's eyes, tears triggered by uncontrollable fear. I can't take much more of this, she thought, distressed, feeling like she was stranded in a bad horror film. Regaining some composure, she decided it made no sense to just stand there with her back to the enemy. Biting her lip, Daynia turned around ever so slowly. Her breath caught as she stared into the eyes of a large beast that resembled a disfigured wolf. It stood braced for a kill, red eyes fixated on her, teeth exposed in a snarl that dripped saliva. Fear shot through her, as she stood immobile, her voice stuck in her throat.

Deliberately, Daynia lowered her gaze, remembering what she had learned as a child – staring would be considered a challenge. *Don't look at him! Don't look at him!* The creature took one step forward as he snarled viciously. Daynia realized it was only a matter of time before he attacked and there seemed nothing she could do about it.

In her fear and apprehension, Jake's voice popped into her head. "*The*

one thing you have control over that no one can take away – is your reaction – no matter what happens.” He was right – she could stand terrified and be an easy victim or she could summon her courage and fight. *This isn’t the same as Maryann spreading rumours, her mind screamed at her!* But she still had control of her own reaction, she decided.

Her resolve strengthened, Daynia shifted her gaze, keeping her eyes downcast. She noticed a large branch nearby, while maintaining the wolf-creature in her peripheral vision. Daynia crouched ever so slowly as best she could and stretched her arm to its fullest, her fingers reaching, but barely touching the wood.

“D..a..y..n..i..a.” The hiss was low and slow.

Daynia gasped, her eyes shooting up. She screamed at the sight of a large snake slithering across the wolf-creature’s back, winding its way to the top of its head. In a panic, Daynia lost her balance and fell backwards, her terror spiking uncontrollably. Then for a flash of an instant, she was distracted by what she thought was a glimpse of the mysterious boy with the glowing object in his hand. Before she could gather her thoughts, her gaze immediately shifted toward the sound of the hissing, as it grew louder, freaking her out. Her eyes shot back to the fallen branch and she lunged for it, twisting her body around to lie on her stomach as she scrambled, crawling frantically toward her only possible weapon as the wolf-creature advanced. She let out a shriek, her fingers clawing the ground as she reached for the branch. She looked up for a second to see the wolf-creature’s neck curving low, as the snake’s head hovered above the beast’s forehead. Daynia grasped at earth and leaves, the branch almost within reach, her fingers stretching out, nearly touching it as the wolf-creature pounced. She screamed as she shielded her head with her free arm, squeezing her eyes shut.

A thundering thud forced another scream from Daynia as her eyes flew open. In that moment, a sandaled foot slammed down inches from her face. Raising her head slightly, she stared, confused, at the criss-crossed leather bindings. From the corner of her eye, beyond the exposed ankle, the wolf-creature’s attention had been drawn away from her and was now directed upward, as he glared with hatred at the person who had saved her from certain death.

“Leave this place,” the steady voice commanded.

Lying on her stomach, Daynia’s gaze travelled up from the exposed ankle and the tunic hem to the back of the man who had stepped in between her and inevitable doom. Arching her neck, she strained for a better view and although she did not recognize him, there was something vaguely familiar about him. A loud screech drew her attention as the wolf-creature metamorphosed into the hideous demon, ragged wings fluttering behind him. Her eyes widened in fear as she lay paralyzed, unable to do anything except watch in a stupor the surreal exchange taking place. *Was she living a nightmare again?*

“Because YOU walk it?” the demon demanded, his voice dripping with acrimony.

The stranger protecting her stepped toward the demon, “You – will leave, now.”

“You are not *my* messiah,” the demon spat with deep hatred.

The reply was soft yet ominous, “Heed my warning, Lucifer.”

Lucifer? Messiah? Daynia’s head was spinning but she wasn’t sure if it was from banging her head or from sheer insanity. She pushed herself up on one knee, bracing herself against it to pull herself up when a bolt of lightning lit up the sky. Daynia let out a shriek. Her breath caught. *I’ve lost my mind. I’ve really lost my mind.* She stared heavenward in disbelief at shadows of hovering giant chariots engulfed in exploding flames, steered by an army of angels. They vanished into the darkness that draped the sky as quickly as they had appeared.

Dazed, Daynia shifted her gaze back to the standoff on the ground. Her mind seemed to be racing around in circles, unable to find an anchor of reason as she watched the enraged demon spread its gigantic ragged wings.

“This...is not finished. Tonight is only the beginning of our battle for this world.” He made a sound between a howl and a primeval scream as his wings completed their extension, suddenly disappearing in an explosive burst of flames.

Daynia gasped in shock, falling backwards on her rump. The stranger who

had saved her turned to face her, his expression soft.

“Your fear and anger are his greatest weapons against you,” Jesus said gently, evenly.

Daynia just stared at Him in disbelief before her body went limp and darkness engulfed her.

* * * * *

Daynia’s eyes fluttered open, focusing to adjust to the unusual faint glow in the night as she strained to awaken. She pursed her lips and sputtered at the gritty feeling, coughing, as she wiped the dirt away. Flashes of images struck like lightning in her head, making Daynia sit upright abruptly, wincing as the ache in her back sharpened. She tried to clear her thoughts. Her anxiety surged as the events of the evening fell into place in her mind. *It wasn’t a dream...was it?* Daynia’s eyes blinked as she searched the olive grove in the soft moonlight, her head turning slowly. That was when she saw Him.

Jesus was huddled by a boulder on His knees, bowed low, whispering in prayer, pleading. “Father. My Father. All things are possible with you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want but what you want.”

Daynia stared in shock, her mind a jumble of images from the last several hours all running into each other. Her heart beat louder. *Not a dream? Not a re-enactment? Not re-creation?* Even as her mind screamed at the impossibility, in her heart, she knew without a doubt, that it was not a dream. The realization frightened her and shook her to the very core. Daynia’s breathing became laboured as her mind tried to retreat from the imposing reality, struggling to sort out the inconceivable. *How? How in heaven’s name? How?* Daynia pulled herself up and fell back against the tree. *How could this be?*

As if hearing her thoughts, Jesus raised His head, slowly turning toward her. Daynia’s entire body trembled, her ability to speak arrested as she watched, bewildered, while Jesus rose to His feet. He took a few steps toward her and stopped, watching quietly, waiting, as her mind and heart battled out the last round to line up with reality. As it did, the pain from the shock of

betrayal that Daynia kept buried deep in her heart, pushed upward and with it, a cold numbness she had clung to since losing Jake.

She stared into the face of her greatest deceiver, images of Jake flashing in her mind, tearing open the wound she had painstakingly stitched closed with threads of denial and disbelief. Daynia wiped at the perspiration on her forehead as she pressed her back against the massive olive tree, her feet inching their way against it, needing to escape the emotional turmoil.

“You are here, because my Father willed it.” Jesus’ voice was gentle and clear.

Daynia scrambled backwards following the curve of the tree, stumbling as she stepped around it. Jesus didn’t move at first and merely stood still, quietly, drops of blood trickling down His temples bursting into brilliant white light as they struck the ground. When she finally stopped, He took a step toward her. Daynia hobbled back two. Two more steps toward her. She shuffled back three. She desperately wanted to escape the charge of emotions. The betrayal she felt after having invested her heart so deeply her whole life had left an indelible scar. Seeing Him face to face was unbearable. Intense agony rippled through her as she fought the torment of loving and hating in a singular moment.

Jesus remained still, bowing His head in exhaustion. “My disciples slumber even now.” He sighed and looked up, then suddenly in a few long strides closed the distance between them. He reached out and grasped her arms. Startled, Daynia froze. He gazed deeply into her troubled eyes, His emotions tipped with frustration. “Why...do you forsake me also? Can you not see?”

Daynia instinctively tried to pull away but Jesus held her firmly. He clasped her right hand and held it against His chest. “Can you not feel my heart?”

Daynia resisted, tearing her hand from His and stepped back, staring at the torment mirrored on His face, beads of sweat glistening. Strangely, she wanted to run to Him and yet she couldn’t outrun the deep rage of betrayal. A long moment of silence elapsed before Daynia looked away, her own personal agony washing over her.

Jesus broke the silence. “Do you not know?” He sighed sadly. “Can you not believe, Daynia?” Daynia shifted uncomfortably under His intense scrutiny and stepped back. “How my heart aches for every tear you shed? How it breaks for every step you take away from me?”

Suddenly, the world seemed to fall silent, save for the sound of His soft voice. He had no right to say that, she thought instinctively as she felt a sickness in her stomach and grabbed at her abdomen, the pain searing through. *No right at all.* She thought of Jake, his smile, his dreams – *their* dreams. She thought of how hard she had tried to do the right thing, to be the right person. She thought of how Jake had been that person. The pain in her stomach began to balloon.

Daynia finally looked up, searching His eyes. “I trusted you,” she stuttered as tears stung her eyes. “I...” Daynia bowed over groaning as the pain cut like a knife. “I...” she caught her breath, trying to control the anguish, “...trusted you.”

Jesus stood quietly, saying nothing. Time stalled as Daynia struggled with her emotions. With one hand on her abdomen and the other braced against her thigh she looked up slowly, distraught. “You betrayed everything,” she whispered softly as she thought of everything Jake had given up to keep them together, to give her the best. A soft aching sound escaped her lips as Daynia felt the bitter emptiness of never being able to give back. A tear rolled down her cheek as she sucked in her breath. There was so much she had still wanted to do for Jake. So much she still had to say. Daynia dropped to her knees; feeling blows striking inside her abdomen. She bowed her head and began to sob uncontrollably, shedding tears she had stored away from the shock of betrayal that had left her numb. That left her lost.

Jesus stepped toward her and lowered Himself to one knee. He reached under her chin and gently lifted it.

As their eyes met, Daynia’s breath stopped, overwhelmed by the profound sadness in His eyes.

“No,” Jesus said ever so softly, “I was there. Always. As I am here now. My heart breaks, as yours did. My fear is great, as yours was. As yours is.”

“W.h.a..t?” Daynia stared at Him in disbelief. She pulled her face away from His touch, her emotions swept in a tug-of-war. “Jake...I...We did everything...the best we could...we...” her jumbled words gave way to rising grief. “WHY?” She suddenly shouted. Daynia stared at the ground before sitting back on her heels. “Why?” she whispered faintly, sobbing quietly, her head hung low, knowing no answer could ever be enough.

When she opened her eyes she felt a stab of warmth on her hand as it rested on her knee. She looked down at the drop of blood settling on the back of her hand. She stared at it blankly as another fell. Gazing up slowly, her heart lurched at the sight of beads of perspiration on Jesus’ face turning to blood as they trickled down His temple to splatter onto her hand. She stared at the red droplets on her skin, frowning, wanting to feel something, yet unable to escape that familiar cold numbness.

Unyielding, she looked back up as Jesus sighed. “Some things must be. As my fate, this night.”

Daynia watched Him closely, her hollow expression reaching deep into her soul. She grimaced as she forced herself to stand, fighting the throb in her leg. Jesus rose simultaneously. She glared at Him now, her raw emotions resurfacing. She frantically wiped away the blood drops from her hand. It wasn’t enough. The answer was not enough. It felt like a copout. Daynia stared at Him with empty eyes.

Jesus looked heavenward, sighing long and deep. He turned His gaze back to Daynia. “Look beyond the suffering, my Daynia. And let it strengthen your faith, a faith that trusts amidst the pain, the storms and darkest moments.”

Emotionally spent, Daynia hobbled back, shaking her head, her hand up, “don’t.” She didn’t want to hear excuses. It all could have been different. It *should* have been different.

“Daynia,” His words gentle, He stepped toward her, “there is no reasoning this day that you can understand. But you must still believe. I never betrayed you.”

Daynia wiped her tears purposefully. She moved back against the large rock where Jesus had prayed, leaning on it for support. She smiled cynically

through her tears. "I believe this. Betrayal is the same colour under any light."

* * * * *

The sentinel who had been guarding Daynia sat on the same stone table she had lain on as the legion physician, an older man with a compassionate expression etched on his face, examined the back of the soldier's head. His mate stood nearby, quietly watching.

Flavius rushed in, his expression furious. He stood in front of the sentinel who looked down, ashamed. "Sir."

"How?" was all Flavius said, the anger in his voice palpable.

The sentinel shifted uncomfortably as Flavius stepped in front of the physician, forcing him backward.

"She surprised me from the rear," the young soldier explained, a red flush of embarrassment spotting his cheeks.

"Surprised you?" Flavius repeated sarcastically.

"He received a most significant blow to his skull," the physician interrupted, feeling somewhat badly for the young soldier.

Flavius turned to the physician, "With what?"

The older man picked up the partially broken bowl and held it out. Flavius looked down for a moment before taking it in his hand. He examined it briefly, an imperceptible smile touching his lips. *Why, that resourceful feline.* He found himself admiring her fortitude. He handed the shattered bowl back and turned to the second soldier, "and how did she evade a garrison of Roman soldiers?"

With no good answer possible, the soldier remained silent.

"I will attend to you both later," he looked from one to the other. "Now assemble a unit and find her!" Flavius directed at the second soldier before storming out muttering under his breath, ignoring the soldiers' salutations, as his footsteps echoed down the empty corridor.

* * * * *

“There was never betrayal Daynia,” Jesus said softly, despite Daynia’s unwillingness to want to grasp His truth.

She shook her head. “You abandoned us,” she said accusingly.

Jesus moved toward her slowly, stopping at a safe distance between them. “No. For every heartbeat of suffering, I suffered with you. Hear me sweet Daynia. Do not allow Lucifer to distort your faith. Loss brings great pain and with it, great fear. Resist him for if not, he will win over you,” His tone sounded urgent.

The months of pent-up rage finally came to a head. “I don’t care,” she shouted at Him.

Unperturbed by her anger Jesus replied softly, “You do. That is why your nights are troubled.” He paused before continuing, never moving. “I do not ask you to trust me because of what you see...or *do not see*. I ask you to trust me in spite of it.”

Daynia stared at Him. “I can’t,” she said honestly.

“Yes. You can. But you must first dismiss humanity’s limited and fragile reality. You must choose the greater one. My Father’s. For truth abides *there*. Absolute and irrevocable.”

Daynia shook her head. She didn’t want to hear it, unable to let go.

Jesus stepped closer, “until the moment when mysteries of life shall be made clear, the battle between good and evil is as real as your love for your brother. The conflict rages in the unseen realm. The true battle is not of flesh and blood but against the rulers of darkness of this world who will use fear to conquer. And they will strike – without mercy. Faith – is your weapon.”

Daynia bowed her head. She was tired and numb. Everything was surreal and she didn’t want to think, but again, His voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Do not be swallowed by darkness. Be the light Daynia. As you once were. You have much great work to do yet. Lucifer sees it also, and he will use

your fear to steal your joy and your faith.”

“Nothing makes sense anymore,” Daynia replied, distraught. *Was she really having a conversation with Jesus?*

“Does this night not become a night of prayer in the hearts of men, women and children for lifetimes to come? Does this night not bring hope and faith to many?”

She stared, conflicted emotions reflected in her eyes as she tried to reason with her own thoughts. “Too much...too late,” she whispered in conclusion, looking down.

“Do not confuse betrayal with fear Daynia.”

Bewildered, Daynia dropped her gaze. *What was He saying?!* There was no mistaking one for the other she thought fiercely. She had poured out her heart to Him as long as she could remember, desperately so, after being taken under Pastor Whelan’s wing. Even as their world seemed to shift violently, she and Jake had remained steadfast despite it all. Abandonment of trust *is* betrayal, her mind screamed.

As though He heard her thoughts, Jesus stepped forward, closer to the distraught young woman. “Search your heart Daynia. You know the truth. It was never abandonment. It was the scourge of this world’s darkness. And light can only shine at its brightest in the darkness.”

Daynia felt like her head would explode as beliefs collided. “Stop!” She couldn’t bear the admonition any longer.

“I will never fail you, Daynia.”

Unable to compute between emotions and rationale, Daynia screamed between soft sobs. “Just stop!” Her hands flew to her ears in a defensive gesture to block out the confusion and pain.

Jesus waited quietly for the sobs to subside. He sighed sadly, “The promise, Daynia, was never that storms will not come. It is that I will give you strength, courage and peace amidst them and that I will take you through. I know you have not forgotten this despite the pain and fear to which you now succumb.”

“No,” Daynia shook her head trying not to let His gentle voice pierce her armour – the armour that had so far kept her safe from feeling too much.

“Sweet Daynia.” Jesus paused, “Do not feel lost for I *am* the way. Keep your eyes on me and you will find *your* way. Do not do as Peter did when he asked to walk on water. Do not let fear distract you from your focus. Fix your eyes on me and not the storm. I will not fail you.”

Emotionally spent, Daynia hung her tear-streaked face low, staring at the ground. “All I can see is...” she hesitated searching for the words.

Jesus stepped closer, his fingers tenderly raising her chin. “I understand and I can help you see *beyond* the horrors of this world. I promise you peace for your torment. Fear not. Your brother was never alone even in his darkest moment. Do not fear this world’s injustices. There will be a time for justice. Until that time is upon us, fix your eyes on me.”

Daynia tried to resist the warmth His eyes exuded – the sincerity. She clung to her armour with desperation, afraid of what might happen should she release her hold, unaware her pain and anger had become her link to Jake.

Jesus stepped even closer but this time Daynia did not move away. “Fix your eyes on me and be free of the fear and the evil that pursue you,” He whispered into her ear. Daynia slowly raised her head, her eyes meeting His. Like a magnet, the tenderness in the depth of Jesus’ eyes finally drew her in. She could not pull her gaze away.

Jesus slowly stretched His arms, wrapped them around her and pulled Daynia close. Daynia gasped from the sudden burst of warmth searing through her as He sheltered her in His embrace. She was overwhelmed by His absolute love, such as she could never have fathomed, as it steadily pierced through the emotional shield she carried to avoid confronting her fears. Feeling the gentle support of Jesus’ hand cradling the back of her head, she buried her face into His shoulder. For an instant, Daynia stood motionless, eyes shut tightly, sobbing quietly, before her left arm instinctively encircled Jesus and her right hand reached up to clasp the fabric of His robe’s upper sleeve. She clutched it tightly, desperate to cling to the peace and healing that washed over her like a flood.

“You must return whence you came, before my time is done, Daynia. You must leave this place.”

Daynia hugged Jesus tighter, pressing her ear to His chest, focusing on the soothing sound of His beating heart, as her punctured armour began to fracture.

Jesus’ gaze shifted to the far right as sounds of voices and footsteps filtered toward them. “They come for me,” He said tiredly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Revelation

Jesus stood quietly, exhausted, as Roman soldiers taunted and mocked Him.

They twisted twigs into a crown of thorns and placed it on His head, the tips digging into his forehead, spurting little spots of blood.

“Hail the King of Jews!” they roared with laughter.

They shoved Jesus forward. In His fatigue, His steps faltered and He fell against the wall, sliding to the hard cold floor as the soldiers continued their mockery, ridiculing this ‘King’ and His sorry state.

The laughter filtered into the hallway as Flavius approached, the sounds of blithe provocation irking him. He preferred his men to concentrate on their explicit duties and execute them with unmitigated emotional detachment.

Flavius stepped into the chamber and paused as he took in the scene, his eyes narrowing. Suddenly aware of their superior’s presence, the harassing voices died down, as the soldiers glanced uneasily from one to the other. Their Commander’s demand for discipline was notorious among the ranks. “Commander,” they acknowledged uncomfortably, their heads bowed.

Flavius ignored the men, turning his attention to Jesus who sat on the cold floor with one knee raised, His hand resting upon it. His head was bowed low, His shoulders slumped, His eyes downcast. Flavius turned to the nearest soldier and barked the command as he stepped toward Jesus, “Bring me water!” As the soldier hurried off, Flavius crouched down in front of Jesus, despising the task with which he had been charged. This man had committed no crime, save challenge power hungry apostates, he thought. He took in the streak of blood making a slow journey down Jesus’ forehead and temple. Part of him wanted to rip away the crown and send the man home, but he struggled with years of ingrained beliefs and traditions. His thoughts were interrupted as the

soldier came to a halt beside him, holding out a cup of water.

Tilting his head toward the soldier, Flavius reached up for the cup and placed it close to Jesus' lips without uttering a word. Jesus slowly raised His head, His eyes locking with Flavius'. A bolt of lightning seemed to ripple through the centurion as he faltered, quickly steadying himself, his hand suddenly trembling, unable to turn away from the prisoner's unwavering gaze. A swift, unexpected wave of emotion he couldn't understand, overwhelmed Flavius. He stared deep into Jesus' eyes, taken aback by what he saw in them.

Despite the unwarranted accusations, the relentless mockery and physical torment, there was not a single speck of anger or hatred reflected in this prisoner's eyes. Rather, there was compassion and a nobility that stretched beyond mere titles. Flavius felt fire course through his blood as Jesus clasped the cup, drank the water and glanced back up at him. Jesus' eyes were filled with gratitude *and...something more... Love? This man showed love even in this place and time.* Flavius felt a chill in the depths of his heart as he subconsciously tried to reconcile the jarring thoughts.

He felt disquieted by this man's placid scrutiny, as Jesus' gaze reached deep into his soul, the centurion thought, making him want to flee as much as stay.

Jesus smiled weakly, "she will need you. When my hour is done. When the earth trembles, you must take her back," He whispered.

Behind him, Flavius could hear the rumbling of the soldiers, miffed at their commander's attention to the lowly prisoner. Ignoring them, he leaned closer, totally captivated by this man. *She?*

Maybe this man was as crazy after all, Flavius thought, confused by the prisoner's words, "What nonsense do you speak, Galilean?"

Jesus trembled as He handed back the cup but when Flavius reached for it, Jesus clasped his hand with a strength that belied His suffering. Fire seared through Flavius, startling him to the core as an electrical bolt shot up his arm. He tried to pull away but Jesus tightened His grip, His eyes locking with Flavius'. The centurion felt his breath catch when suddenly, live images exploded before him.

Ten-year-old Flavius stood at the entrance to their humble home, staring in shock at his mother's battered and bleeding body as it lay prone against the basin in their kitchen. His father leaned over her with a metal pot raised, poised to strike again. The little boy's fear turned into instant rage as his instinct to protect his mother kicked in. Flavius' eyes caught sight of the sickle leaning against the wooden stool in the corner. With only one thought in mind, he ran for the sickle, grabbed it and rushed toward his father to stop him. With a force borne of frenzied despair, Flavius struck his father who had turned toward him, surprised by the screams of his son. The jolt of his actions, as he stared into his father's distressed eyes, terrified Flavius. What had he done? He froze as his father keeled over the body of his mother. The little boy stood staring at his parent's bodies, feelings of terror, loss and immense guilt assaulting him relentlessly. Sobbing uncontrollably, Flavius stood in the same position for hours before being discovered and taken away.

“Surrender your guilt and anger. Forgiveness was yours the moment you repented in your heart true,” Jesus said softly, pulling Flavius out of his trance. Fear ripped through Flavius as he tried to pull away forcefully.

Without effort, Jesus drew Flavius closer. “Before the skies are silent, you will know what you must do. Take Daynia home. Follow your heart Flavius.” Jesus released Flavius's wrist, His eyes turning toward the approaching men who would soon drag Him away.

Flavius jumped up, his mind reeling, desperate to escape the overwhelming emotions. *What had this man done to him?* He had called him by name. He had also spoken that woman's name. *What manner of sorcery was this?* Flavius faltered as he stepped away, moving behind a pillar for refuge. Breathing heavily, he pressed against the massive support, struggling to make sense of what he had just *seen* and *felt*.

He turned his head to the side and watched as Jesus was lifted roughly and dragged away. Flavius leaned his head against the pillar, stunned by the onslaught of emotions that sent a shudder rippling through his body. Feeling emotionally unravelled, he shifted his focus as he struggled to temper his breathing. Realizing his hand was trembling, he glanced down, suddenly aware he was still holding the cup of water Jesus drank from. He gazed into it before

he dropped in fear, the water spilling out crimson.

* * * * *

Alexis sat at the wooden table, the dominant piece of furniture in Ishma's modest home, running her hands through her hair, deep dark circles under eyes from lack of sleep and worry. "I know she'll be there. She's angry, but she'll be there."

"You are certain?" Ezekiel asked concerned.

"Oh yeah," Alexis said, as she reflected. She looked to Ezekiel, "I can't believe I passed out. We could have stopped him. I know it's supposed to happen...but we could have tried... at least try." She looked away, realizing her thoughts were still somewhat jumbled and nonsensical. *Did she really think they could stop the crucifixion? That would change everything she believed in. But the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and inaction seemed wrong, knowing what was coming and not doing anything to stop it.* At first Alexis struggled with what felt like madness when she awakened from passing out but she finally surrendered to the current reality. She turned back toward Ezekiel, "Thank you for agreeing to take me Ezekiel," she said sincerely.

"I will take you where you wish," he smiled softly, sadness in his eyes. "Sarah, Ishma and I were to head there nonetheless." Ezekiel looked over Alexis' shoulder to his wife, who paused from doing her chores as she glanced up at her husband, a grim expression crossing her face.

Alexis looked from one sombre expression to another. It still seemed inconceivable that she was here. Now. She rose from the table first, smiling appreciatively at Ezekiel as she headed for the door. She stepped outside, breathing deeply, grateful for the crisp air as she filled her lungs. Turning her gaze upward, her thoughts settled on Daynia and how clear the sky was on such a dark day. Shutting her eyes, she let the sun's warm rays caress her skin as a heaviness she had never known weighed her down – the culmination of recent events, finding herself here, in the past and at this pivotal moment in the history of mankind. She had suffered a difficult night dealing with the impossibilities

until a forced calm was the only way to cope with the incredible realizations. Alexis turned her head toward the gentle touch on her shoulder. She smiled softly and followed Ezekiel, Sarah and Ishma as they headed toward Via Dolorosa.

* * * * *

Keep running! Keep running! Daynia raced across the frozen tundra, glancing backward at the ice tsunami roaring behind her. Panic rose, as she fought to keep ahead of the widening fissure and fiery red eyes. Lost, alone and frightened, she ran as fast as she could, not knowing at all where she was heading. Fear ripped through her as she looked up and realized she was now beneath the giant ragged wings as they blocked the light. Daynia's breath caught in her throat at the spine-chilling creak as the ice underneath her feet, suddenly split, plunging Daynia into a cold dark abyss.

She screamed, as she fell through, her body submerged in an icy grave that dragged her down, arms flailing. Just as she began to capitulate, suffocation imminent, her arm was grasped by a strong firm hold. Through the blur, she saw Jesus standing on the water, His arm reaching down toward her as He pulled Daynia from the watery snare.

Daynia awoke suddenly, gasping greedily for air, her hands clutching at the ground as she sat up in shock. Disoriented, fog clouding her mind, she struggled to align images and thoughts into a semblance of order. *Had she just woken from a dream?* Daynia scoured her surroundings, her eyes falling on the large rock. Her breath caught as her hand flew to her heart. She remembered the soothing sound of His heartbeat. The compassionate embrace. The infinite love and absolute peace she had felt as she had clung to Him desperately, the power of His gentleness easing the restriction in her heart.

It should have been a dream but it wasn't. Daynia remembered nothing after He held her but she was certain it had all been real. The realization sent an anxious current to the center of her heart. She stared at the rock, feeling the rate of her heartbeat gradually lessen. Daynia closed her eyes, searching for that purest feeling of peace once more; overwhelmed by the sense of security she had felt in Jesus' embrace.

‘They come for me.’ She drew her breath in sharply. He had whispered those words before all had gone dark. She thought back to the recent timeline of events – Jesus at the Temple, praying at the rock – and all at once it dawned on her. *They came to take Him away to be crucified!* Daynia felt a sudden deep need to see Him. It wasn’t something she could explain in words – only that she needed to assuage a powerful hunger for more of the solace she had experienced. Daynia jumped up, ignoring the fact she had no idea where to go. She looked around anxiously and began heading in the direction from which she had come.

As she neared a pathway, she heard shouts. Hurrying toward them she came to an abrupt halt, staring at the masses flocking in the same direction. Daynia felt her heart jump as she looked up at the sky. The sun was still high – thus still early in the day – there was still time. The thought spurred her onward as she ran toward the crowds. *There was still time!*

As Daynia came to a stop to avoid a passing cart, she looked down at her leg. It suddenly dawned on her – the throbbing and the aches were gone. As the thought took root, it sent a curious sensation of excitement rushing through her. She wanted to laugh and cry as she realized the pain had vanished. Completely.

Daynia began running with purpose. She had to see Him. She ran faster, oblivious to the tears stinging her eyes. She pushed through the crowd, straining to see up ahead, “Please, let me through. Let me...”

“Crucify! Crucify!” A man behind her shouted, his fist waving in the air as he pressed against her. Daynia turned abruptly and shoved him hard. He stared at her menacingly. She glared back, realizing her anger was rooted in something more meaningful than being shoved. She thought of His gentleness in contrast to the hatred flowing from that man and felt even more drawn and desperate to see Jesus.

As she maneuvered her way through the people up the winding road, she felt an anxious flutter in her heart – she was really making her way up Via Dolorosa. Just then, she saw Him. She paused before forcing her way more urgently through the crowd, her eyes fixed on Jesus as He struggled to carry the heavy cross. She had seen the paintings and sculptures so many times, but in this moment, the reality of those cruel images was heart-wrenching as she

watched Him stumble.

“Move on,” a soldier shouted. Jesus faltered and fell, the cross leaning heavily on Him, His head hanging low. A Roman soldier walking alongside kicked Jesus who flinched. Several people in the crowd who witnessed the brutality roared with delight while others gasped or cried. Daynia watched in horror as she closed the distance between, heart-stricken, the surreal scene unfolding before her; something she had seen re-created in countless movies, but was now so real.

“You!” the soldier shouted sarcastically, “help this poor King of Jews.” The soldier pushed a man toward the fallen Jesus.

Daynia finally broke through the crowd, staring dumbfounded, as Simon de Cyrene leaned down toward Jesus to pick up the heavy wooden burden. He grappled with his grip before lifting the cross over his shoulder and waited quietly until Jesus struggled upright. Together they walked slowly onward. Daynia stepped forward, so focused on trying to get close to Jesus that she never saw the soldier on horseback approaching. His whip lashed out, making a snapping sound as it struck Daynia’s arm, eliciting a yelp as she stumbled back in pain.

“Move away!” he shouted, “or do you wish to accompany your King?”

Daynia looked up at him angrily, her hand pressing against the red welt on her arm before she turned back to Jesus who had begun moving again with Simon carrying His cross. Keeping along the edge of the crowd Daynia pressed toward them, the soldier smiling wickedly as he kept a close watch on her. Daynia glanced back to see if the soldier was following. She gasped and stumbled backward as his face seemed to transform into the demon’s hideous features. For an instant, time seemed to crawl as people in the crowd pushed against her in waves, moving in slow motion. Daynia blinked against the sunlight and looked again, but the soldier, his face human again, had turned away.

Daynia shook her head and re-focused. With no time to sort out her thoughts she glanced back toward Jesus and rushed in His direction. As she neared Him, she threw a quick glance at the soldiers, hastening toward Him before they could stop her. Reining in his horse, a soldier urged the nervous

animal sideways forcing the horse's flank to slam against Daynia. The rider laughed loudly as Daynia stumbled.

The force of the impact hurled Daynia forward. She fell to the ground, landing with a thump, coming face to face with Jesus as she pushed herself upward, resting on her hands. Jesus, who had fallen to His knees, leaned heavily on one hand as the weight of the cross bore down on His shoulder and back. He lifted His head as Daynia raised hers. Sadness stabbed at her heart as she gazed into His sorrowful eyes. The noise and shouting suddenly dissipated as the world disappeared. There was no one and nothing, but Him. Daynia reached out to touch His face. She tried to speak, but no words were forthcoming. No words could convey the force of emotions replenishing her heart.

Jesus held her gaze, a discerning kindness in His eyes. He flinched suddenly as a whip struck Him with a sharp shrill sound. Daynia gasped, recoiling at the brutality, her arm now straining, fingers reaching, desperate to touch Him. A hair's breath away, Daynia felt a searing pain shoot up into her shoulder as the end of a whip looped around her arm and jerked it away. The soldier on horseback snickered as Daynia let out a cry of pain. She struggled to pull away and free her arm, keeping her eyes fixed on Jesus, watching helplessly as His face bowed low to the ground, another blow striking Him.

Daynia stared, mesmerized, as a fragment of the thorn crown broke off and hit the ground. She fixated on the fragment and never saw the woman who broke away from the crowd and rushed up to Jesus, wiping His face with a kerchief.

Jesus laboured to rise amidst taunts and tears, as soldiers and citizens spewed obscenities at Him while His followers sobbed sorrowfully. Tears spilled as the significance of the moment weighed heavily on Daynia. She looked up slowly from the fragment to Jesus, waves of emotion colliding, tears rolling down her face. As Jesus began to move away, her gaze shifted down and locked onto the bloodstained fragment. Oblivious to the commotion around her, Daynia reached out and grasped the fragment of thorn, ignoring shouts from an approaching soldier.

“Move Jew lover!” He shouted as he raised his whip to strike Daynia.

Lost in silence, Daynia heard nothing as she stared at the fragment in her hand, a tear spilling onto it, turning red as it fused with His blood. She closed her fingers, clutching the fragment tightly, unaware of the whip flung in her direction or that it suddenly stopped mid-air as Flavius caught the end with his hand and pulled, jerking the soldier's arm backward. "Is this your manner of crowd control – to beat defenseless women?" Flavius's rage was tangible as he reprimanded the soldier fiercely, throwing the end of the whip back at him. "Get on with your duty."

"Yes Commander!" the soldier replied quickly, gathering his whip and moving along with the crowd.

Daynia looked up, at the sound of that familiar deep voice, feeling a mix of relief and anxiety when she saw Flavius astride his horse, staring down at her. She jumped to her feet and began backing away, a look of fear on her face. Flavius reined a jittery Evander forward before leaning down toward Daynia. As he did so, Daynia stepped back with every intention of turning on her heel and making a run for it, thinking she could easily lose him in the crowd. Flavius reacted swiftly, manoeuvring Evander sideways to block her path.

"I mean you no harm," he said loudly, his eyes showing concern. "You must leave this place. Now!" he shouted, raising his voice above the commotion.

Daynia stopped suddenly. She looked back toward Jesus who was now nearly out of sight and then turned to Flavius, a questioning expression on her face.

"Head toward that distant hill. Time is short. I believe that is where you will find your cave." Flavius wrestled with the reins to keep Evander still as he pointed toward the east.

"Why are you doing this?"

Flavius guided Evander backward forcing people from the crowd to retreat, and without any explanation shouted "Go!"

I want to be here, she thought as she looked up toward Golgotha, hesitating.

Flavius shifted in his saddle, leaning over as far as he could, bringing his face within inches of Daynia's. His unwavering sharp grey eyes seemed to jump into hers. "*Day-nia,*" he spoke softly but urgently.

Daynia looked away seeing only the tip of the cross then turned slowly back to Flavius. Everything seemed to move in slow motion – the people, the strands of hair flowing against her cheek, the stomping hooves. She could see nothing now but his distressed ocean grey eyes.

"You must go. Now." For an instant, as he found himself lost in her mysterious dark eyes, something inside wanted to plead with her not to leave.

The eerie howl of the gusting wind made them both look in its direction – toward Golgotha, as dark menacing clouds rolled in from the distant horizon. Forced back to reality, Flavius turned to Daynia. "Please."

Everything suddenly became HD clear as Daynia snapped out of her trance. "*Before it is all over, you must take leave and return whence you came. Do not hesitate,*" Jesus' voice echoed in her head as she stared at Flavius. It didn't matter why he had decided to help her; the fact is that he did. Something felt light on the inside as she smiled gratefully. He returned her smile and nodded toward the east. With a last glance, Daynia stepped past Flavius, a feeling of loss overwhelming her on so many inexplicable levels.

Flavius waited until she was a fair distance away before urging his horse up toward Golgotha.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Final Cross

Alexis squinted against the sun trying to focus on the female figure rushing down the road a short distance from Via Dolorosa. There was something familiar about her. “Daynia?” Alexis shaded her eyes and strained her neck toward the image. “Omigosh! DAYNIA!” She took off running, startling Ishma and his parents. “Daynia!”

Daynia ground to a halt when she heard her name, turning toward the unmistakable sound of her friend’s voice. Her heart lightened as she saw Alexis running toward her. “Alex!” Her sad face broke into an excited smile as she picked up her pace, shifting course to meet up with her friend.

Both came to an abrupt stop nearly crashing into each other. Out of breath, they stared silently, relief written over each of their faces. Then, as if on cue, they hugged tightly, incredulous, that they had managed to find each other after all.

They pulled apart. “You’re ok!” both exclaimed simultaneously then paused and broke out into relieved laughter. “It isn’t a re-creation,” Alexis said quickly, wondering if Daynia had figured it out too. Daynia’s sad smile was answer enough. They hugged again, tears stinging their eyes.

Ishma ran up to the young women and joined the embrace as Ezekiel and Sarah stood close by, watching, relieved.

“Ishma!” Daynia crouched down to look the delighted boy in the eyes, genuinely happy to see their young friend.

“He was my knight in shining armour.” Alexis said gratefully, catching Daynia’s eye as she looked up. “You look,” Alexis paused, concern in her expression, “...tired, D.”

“I’m all right.”

“I wished you to be well!” Ishma clung to Daynia, his words bringing a tear to her eye. Daynia hugged him tightly before releasing him, gazing into his eager eyes, “You are the sweetest.” She flashed him a warm smile, ruffling his hair as she straightened. She reached out to grasp Alexis’ upper arms and stepped back, “how about you Alex? Did they catc...”

“I’m good D. I’m good. I was worried about you...I had help,” she placed her hand on Ishma’s shoulder and turned to Ezekiel and Sarah who smiled and stepped closer.

Ezekiel bowed his head, “Greetings. Daynia.”

“Your friend was most concerned about you,” Sarah smiled warmly.

“It’s a pleasure, and...thank you,” Daynia glanced over to Alexis and turned back to the couple. There was no need for more words. “Thank you.” She grabbed Sarah’s hands and squeezed tightly. Sarah returned the sentiment.

A thunderclap startled the group. They looked toward Golgotha as the wind began to howl. Daynia turned to Alexis, her voice sounding sad but urgent. “We have to leave. We have to leave now.”

“I was hoping to...” Alexis’ voice trailed off as she gazed toward Golgotha then back to Daynia whose expression plainly indicated it was not a good idea. Alexis wanted to ask why but decided against it as Daynia held her gaze, a sorrowful yet serious look in her eyes. “We really have to leave – now.” Alexis said nothing as Daynia turned to Ishma and his parents.

“We have to go now, Ishma.” Daynia spoke loudly, her voice trying to override the wailing wind. She leaned over to touch Ishma’s cheek as she reached for his hand. The sadness in his eyes squeezed her heart. “I wish I could take you with me.”

Concern crossed Ishma’s features. “Why? Can you not stay longer?”

“I’m afraid not Ishma. We live far away and...and,” she looked toward Golgotha then back to Ishma, feeling like a hole had been punched in her heart, “it’s important we leave now.”

Ishma clung to Daynia as he clasped Alexis’s hand. “Please do not leave,” he implored. Tears stung Alexis’ eyes.

“We’re going to miss you Ishma. Very much. You were a great friend.” Alexis said as she turned to his parents gratefully.

“You helped us so much. You are good and brave.” Daynia squeezed his little hand, her other hand clutching the fragment of thorn. “Thank you Ishma.” She looked at Ezekiel and Sarah as another boom cracked across the sky. They quickly turned toward Golgotha.

“Worry not. Go.” Ezekiel reached for Ishma, aware of Daynia’s unease. Alexis hugged Ezekiel and Sarah, “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Be safe,” Sarah smiled warmly.

The young women smiled and began to walk away quickly. “And give Teeta a hug for me,” Daynia called out.

Daynia and Alexis raised their hands as they bid their newfound friends farewell while Ishma waved frantically after them. They looked back repeatedly until they could no longer see him. As they rounded a bend, they took a last glance, a pang of sadness hitting them both as they lost sight of Ishma and his parents.

They walked a fair distance in silence, acutely aware of the gathering storm. Alexis let out a shriek as a fierce wind gust nearly knocked her down, sending her stumbling against a tree. Daynia, who had been slightly ahead of Alexis braced herself against the wind and turned to see Alexis leaning against the tree. She rushed toward her friend, the wind whipping up a frenzy around her. “I’m ok,” Alexis shouted, “Just need a break.” Alexis paused and looked back from where they came. Now an unobstructed view, she could make out the second cross going up on the mount called ‘place of a skull.’ She looked at Daynia who was fixated on Golgotha. “Are you going to tell me?” The wind had died down enough that Alexis suddenly found herself screaming for no reason.

Daynia turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

Alexis lowered her voice. “Why do we *have* to leave – *now*?” She couldn’t explain how the phenomenon of their circumstances occurred, but now that she was here, she longed to go to Golgotha. She watched the deep emotions flit across Daynia’s face as, without uttering a word, her friend

turned her attention back toward the crosses being raised in the distance. Alexis wondered what had happened to Daynia. *Something seems different.*

After a long silence, Daynia finally spoke, “Because He said so.”

Alexis stared at her friend, then back at Golgotha. “He?” She felt an anxious swell of emotions. “That hunk on the ho..?”

“...No.”

Alexis moved to stand beside Daynia as they both gazed at the crosses on Golgotha. “Then you mean...He...Him? *The Him?*”

“Mmmhmm.”

Alexis stared. “Him.” She tried to reconcile the implication. “Him.”

She turned to look at Daynia, facing her profile. “The... Him.” She turned back toward Golgotha. “Oh God.”

“Before it is all over, you must take leave and return whence you came. Do not hesitate,” Daynia repeated His words verbatim.

Alexis turned back to her friend and stared, stunned by the inconceivable notion that Daynia actually met Jesus face to face. “Perhaps it’s best.” She said finally, shifting her gaze to Golgotha. “I don’t think I could stand it anyway.”

Daynia and Alexis stood quietly, watching sombrely as the final cross was raised; while in the distance, fast approaching dark clouds cast ominous shadows across the land. Daynia’s hand flew instinctively to her chest. She pressed it against the dog tags, fighting to catch her breath, feeling like a vise grip clamped down on her heart. Alexis quietly dabbed at eyes brimming with tears. The sky crackled and the wind became increasingly enraged while the ground began to tremble with a fierce rumbling. They both let out a shriek as another loud thunderclap boomed. *“Do not hesitate.”* His words filled Daynia’s head. She grabbed Alexis’ hand and pulled. Together they ran across the terrain as fast as their feet could move, tremors intensifying with every step.

* * * * *

Evander stomped and reared nervously forcing Flavius to concentrate on maintaining control, briefly wondering why his horse was so agitated. Behind him, Flavius's cloak resembled a red wave riding the powerful wind. He turned back in the direction Daynia had fled, time and again. He had watched until she had disappeared from sight, a perplexing dull ache banging in his chest. He dismounted and pulled at Evander's reins as he stepped toward the crosses.

The wails of women distracted Flavius and he turned to face the drama unfolding atop the mount, as the third cross bearing *that* man, was raised. While the other two criminals cried out, this man remained silent, despite the excruciating pain inflicted upon Him. He watched the man they called the Messiah look down at the woman he presumed was His mother, speaking to the man next to her to care for her, His concern not on His own suffering.

Flavius thought back to the man's words, triggering a barrage of confusing thoughts. Since that curious interaction earlier, Flavius had been in a tumultuous state of mind, uncertain however, for its reason. A shiver shot up his spine as he gazed at the cross, a sudden burst of sympathy overwhelming him as Jesus hung his head.

There was something inexplicable about this day, he thought, tilting his head back to face the sudden darkening sky. From the moment they had arrived on the mount, signs of an impending storm brewed evermore stronger, particularly as the third cross was raised. His horse was jittery beneath him, and things around him were most unusual. A flash of lightning suddenly lit up the sky, its cracking sound deafening. Onlookers scurried away to seek refuge, while a small group of people remained, braving the angry storm. Although Flavius kept emotions at such times well at bay, the sight of this man's mother, huddled against the wind, weeping at the foot of the rugged wooden death brace, gripped at his heart. In truth, this man had done no wrong. Flavius sighed. More and more, he was disturbed by recent events.

Flavius looked intently from the darkened sky to Jesus, steadying himself against the forceful wind as the ground shook with a thunderous rumble. It seemed as though the world was enraged and declared its own end.

“Let go of your guilt and anger. Forgiveness was yours the moment you

repented in your heart true.” What inanities was this man sputtering, he thought, remembering Jesus’ earlier words? Images of his dead parents flashed in his mind. *Could this man possibly have known of his horrid past? Was that His reference?* Flavius felt a stirring in his heart as he thought of his father. The man was a beast, yet still, his father. Suddenly overcome by the unbearable feelings of guilt he had suffered as a child, Flavius turned abruptly to Jesus, a cold sweat breaking out. *How could He have known? How did He know of that debilitating guilt which had clung to him his entire life?*

Flavius’s breath caught as he remembered the fear of a child who had slain his own father. Pain jabbed deep into his heart as he stepped back looking up at the cross, a frown crossing his face. *What? What was happening?* The profound guilt and its ensuing anger, had festered, locked away by a child who wrestled with the antithetical emotions of love and hate for a father he couldn’t accept. Brutal emotions rose to the surface. Flavius felt like he might suffocate, his hand clutching the base of his throat. The destructive guilt buried as a child who committed the ultimate act of horror by the killing of his father suddenly burst out in a tidal wave that sent Flavius reeling. He fell to his knees and grabbed at his chest groaning.

The world fell silent save for the quickening thump of his heartbeat. Louder. Faster. Louder. Faster. He looked up to Jesus. Louder. Faster. His eyes were drawn to the trickle of blood tracing its way down Jesus’ temple, spilling onto His chest. His heartbeat began to slow, bringing a faint sense of calm as Flavius listened to his shallow breathing echoing loudly in his head. The sudden howl of the wind and crackling boom in the sky exploded in his ear. A little unsteady, Flavius stood up, ignoring the odd glances from the soldiers. He straightened, his eyes narrowing as he stared up at Jesus. *Who are You?* He suddenly recalled the man’s ambiguous words. *“She will need you. When my hour is done. When the earth trembles, you must take her back.”* Fear gripped Flavius. *“Daynia!”* His gaze shifted abruptly toward the distant horizon then back to Jesus. He struggled with his conflicting thoughts.

“Before the skies are silent, you will know what you must do. Follow your heart Flavius.”

Flavius returned his gaze to where he had last seen Daynia’s figure disappear. All at once, the decision was crystal clear. He turned on his heels

and headed toward Evander, neighing and shifting nervously nearby. Flavius mounted his horse, reined him to turn and took a last look at Jesus, his heart heavy. He couldn't explain it, but he felt free and grateful. He rode off with a last backward glance and thought. *Perhaps – could this man be, who people said He was?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When Demons Dare

The fury of the wind sounded like a mad symphony of condemnation. Darkness shrouded the sun. Lightning streaked violently across the sky, as day became night. Frightened, Daynia and Alexis picked up their pace as they raced against time.

“You must return whence you came, before my time is done, Daynia. You must leave this place.” Terror stabbed at Daynia. What would happen if they didn’t leave before *‘my time is done’*, she wondered fiercely, struggling to climb over jagged boulders, Alexis grunting with effort behind her. Strands of hair slashed at their faces as a gust of wind slammed against them. Alexis pressed in behind Daynia, grateful they had shed their robes, which would have sabotaged their climb, as they braced against the force of a wild windstorm.

Daynia sighed with relief as they stepped onto more even ground. She paused to catch her breath, clutching the thorn fragment in her hand as though her life depended on it while conjectures from every corner of her mind collided in her head. A flash of grey eyes, pleading with her to leave, suddenly interrupted her thoughts. She felt a sudden pang of yearning that took her by surprise, momentarily distracting her as she looked back in the direction of Golgotha. From intimidator to rescuer – the centurion was an enigma. *Why did he say she had to leave at Via Dolorosa? And why did she care at all?*

A slow chill crawled up her spine as a sudden familiar tormenting voice yanked Daynia from her thoughts. “Why such a quick exit, Daynia Daynia?”

Fear ripped through her as images of Jake raced in her head. Daynia stopped dead in her tracks, her heart pounding. She could hear Alexis, who was following behind her, gasp.

They stared in horror ahead, where the Tribune was standing, surrounded by dark smoke and black flames, a large snake slithering at his feet, winding

itself around his leg. Alexis' eyes widened in fear as the Tribune transformed into a heinous demon. Terrified, she faltered backwards shrieking. "Oh God!"

The demon's head spun instantly toward Alexis, as he hissed, "Do not expect much from Him." His head spiralled back toward Daynia, red burning eyes narrowing as he smiled wickedly. "Is that not so Daynia?"

Despite her fear, Daynia felt a deep stirring and before she could consider why, she stepped in front of Alexis, finding a strength and courage she had long forgotten.

"Alex...just back up and keep going."

A trembling Alexis held her ground. "No," she said firmly, digging deep for courage, remembering her Sunday school lessons. "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me," she whispered inaudibly as she moved to the side, stepping up beside her friend.

The demon locked gazes with Daynia, amused. "How sweet." His voice turned vicious as he addressed Alexis, "you should listen to your friend. It is sound advice."

A frightened Daynia stared him down, fighting to hold onto her resolve, "and *you*... can go to hell."

The demon laughed heartily, "Why Daynia? Where does this defiance come from?" He swung his head toward Alexis. "I think she is believing His fairy tales."

He shifted his attention back to Daynia, "So, where is He now? Your Saviour? Ah yes. Being crucified by those He loved. Is irony not a sweet thing?"

Daynia and Alexis let out a shriek, as the demon suddenly appeared inches away from Daynia. His face leaned into hers as she stepped back, veiling her terror. His breath burned against her lips as he whispered, "You know...I cannot let you go. And I have been as patient as *heavenly possible*," he laughed hysterically then stopped abruptly, his expression deadly, "You should have stayed angry with Him. I work better with angry."

Daynia recoiled, Alexis keeping step. A slow broadening smile crossed

the demon's face. Suddenly, an invisible force jerked Daynia upward and threw her a short distance away. She groaned as she landed with a thud, the thorn fragment flying out of her hand.

“D!” Alexis rushed toward Daynia.

In a mocking gesture, the demon touched his chest and bowed his head, then slowly looked up with a venomous smile, “True. I am patient, but I do not like having to work more than I need to.” He turned to Alexis as she reached out to help her. Before she could grasp Daynia's hand, Alexis was airborne and came crashing to the ground several feet away, where she lay motionless.

“Al...e...x!” Daynia's voice was barely audible as she struggled to get up, still reeling from the pain of the brutal impact.

“Why must you test me so?” The demon's malicious laughter reverberated into the sky and bounced back in a cruel taunt.

Panic began to overwhelm Daynia, as she felt her resolve weaken when her eyes were suddenly drawn to a soft glow, illuminating the thorn fragment that had fallen nearby. Daynia turned her head toward Golgotha, searching for the willpower to resist surrender.

The demon followed the direction of her gaze. “He cannot help you! He will neither help Himself,” he spat, with a hatred borne of the darkest corners in the universe.

Ignoring the demon's taunts, Daynia crawled toward the fragment. He couldn't read her thoughts, she reminded herself, remembering childhood lessons. He wasn't omnipotent but he was acute enough to guess a person's inclination, using their own fears and weaknesses to influence their decisions. *Your fear and anger are his greatest weapons against you.* Jesus' words rang clear in her head. Daynia prayed the demon couldn't guess her intentions as she stretched out her arm and reached with her fingertips, finally clasping the thorn, tightening her grip around it. The demon's menacing laughter echoed in the wind as dark ragged wings expanded behind him, looming larger.

Alexis groaned as she came to, her head rolling to the side, watching in horror as the hideous creature of darkness rose high, deflecting over Daynia. She forced herself to her knees and grabbed a nearby rock, aiming it at the

demon but before she could release it, the demon's hiss resonated in her ear and his clammy hand clutched her throat. Alexis grabbed at his hand, trying to pull it away, frantically gasping for air. Unaffected, the demon suddenly flung Alexis through the air sending her crashing against a boulder with a dull thump. Alexis slumped to the ground, immobile, as the demon reappeared in front of her, squeezing the neck of her limp body.

“STOP!” Daynia yelled, alarmed and tearful as the demon stopped to look at her, his red hollow eyes cold and empty.

“I grow tired of this game.” He turned back to Alexis.

Your fear and anger are his greatest weapons against you. “Let her go you coward!” she screamed as she ran toward him. Alexis' head hit the ground as the demon released his grip and rose to face his quarry.

* * * * *

At the top of the nearby hill, Flavius reined in Evander as the hooves pounded dangerously close to the cliff's edge. His heart froze as he looked across the expanse separating him from that mad woman as he watched Daynia run toward a creature that conjured up images of the dark and evil he had feared in his father. Without thought as to how any of what he was witnessing could be, Flavius's mind focused with razor edge sharpness on a single purpose – to save that strange woman whose dark eyes mirrored his own deep wounds. Flavius dug his heels in and Evander bolted.

* * * * *

As Daynia rammed into the demon, he suddenly vanished. She stopped abruptly, trying to catch her breath and whipped around as the maniacal laughter boomed behind her, then stopped. Daynia could feel her heartbeat racing in her chest as terror spread throughout her body. *Your fear and anger are his greatest weapons against you.* “I can do this. It'll be all right!” Daynia repeated like a mantra as she listened to the slow, heavy breathing approaching from behind. Clutching the thorn fragment tightly, she slowly turned to face her darkest enemy as she stared into the demon's icy dead eyes. *I*

can do this. It'll be all right! As she grappled with her overwhelming fear, the demon spun suddenly toward Golgotha. Daynia followed his gaze.

* * * * *

“It is done,” Jesus whispered as He drew in His last breath. His head rolled forward and hung low. The already opaque sky blackened even further as the earth rumbled and trembled.

* * * * *

“Ah! At last, the drama is over.” Sarcasm oozed from each word as the demon turned his attention back to Daynia whose gaze remained fixed on the last cross up on the mount. She stood silent, listening to the mournful wail of the relentless wind, her eyes stinging as tears welled. An inexplicable calmness draped her heavy heart. She tightened her grip around the thorn fragment digging into her palm.

The demon hovered off the ground, a smirk on his face, the repugnant stench of his foul breath making her want to vomit. Daynia’s nails dug into her skin as she tightened her fist and fought the urge to escape. Instead, she held her ground, glaring back at the abominable being.

Daynia shut her eyes trying to remember that night in the olive grove, drawing courage from an embrace that breathed life back into her soul. She opened her eyes and turned back to stare directly into the evil face as it neared. This, she thought, was true ugliness.

“Why Daynia Daynia. Is this defiance I see in your eyes?” The demon leaned in close again. *‘Your fear and anger are his greatest weapons against you.’* Daynia dug deep for courage. *I can do this. It'll be all right.*

“Ah” he sighed, “that will be of no use to you now Daynia Daynia.”

“Stop calling me that,” she said evenly, controlling the trembling in her voice.

The demon’s mocking turned spiteful. He was almost upon her; his

flaming eyes a breath's width away from hers. "Now," he spat in a slow vicious whisper, "you *will* heed my words."

A slow smile spread across Daynia's face as she gripped the thorn fragment, unaware of Alexis who had come to and was stumbling toward them. The demon smiled wickedly as Alexis called out. "Daynia..."

"You're wrong!" Daynia screamed and mustered her courage, plunging the thorn fragment into the demon's heart. Blackish-red blood gushed out of the wound and then spread quickly across the demon's chest, smoke rising from it as he screamed wildly.

Daynia stumbled backwards staring at the fiery demon. "I'm not afraid anymore," she screamed at him, her words lost in the gust of wind that swept past, as the sky lit up in a flash of light streaking from Golgotha.

In a fury, the demon thrashed about, flailing his arms violently as he tried to rid himself of the thorn that had touched the holy being of his nemesis. Daynia backed up, dangerously close to the edge of the cliff. The demon screamed in agony and lunged toward her as his body burst into flames. Frenzied, he pummelled at his chest, pulling at the fragment. He finally managed to rip it out and flung it to the ground. Enraged, he whipped around to face Daynia.

Fighting a dizzy spell, Alexis fell to her knees, hands on her head, as she squinted to focus on her friend confronting the burning demon. "D!"

Suddenly, the demon disappeared with a fearsome screech and a blinding explosion of flames. The impact from the powerful burst thrust Daynia backward, forcing her foot over the edge. She tried desperately, but was unable to regain her balance and fell over the side screaming, instinctively grabbing at whatever she could to hold onto. Her body slammed against a jutting boulder, breaking her fall. As she slipped over it, she clawed at its fringes and hung on fearfully. Terrified, she stared down at rocks tumbling into the darkness of the open crevice. Her mind raced. *This couldn't be how it would end. Could it?* A different kind of terror swept over her. *Not now.* Had she not been clinging for dear life, she might have laughed, Daynia thought, as the ironies of life became too real. *Not now. She was finally free to live again.*

Daynia struggled frantically to pull herself up, even as her grip began to slip. She wanted to fight, but began to sense that what little energy she had left was quickly draining away. In that instant, Daynia closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She wasn't giving up, simply accepting her fate. Like a fluttering veil, a soothing calm slipped over her as time stood still. Jesus' smile flashed in her mind. *Okay. I won't be afraid.* Daynia opened her eyes as she felt her hand slipping.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Return

As her fingers slowly fell away from the rock, Daynia thought of Jake. A sudden jerk pushed his image out of her mind as pressure clamped around her wrist. Daynia gasped at the abrupt intrusion, her eyes shooting open to see Alexis leaning precariously over the edge, her face grimacing in pain.

Alexis fought desperately to hang on even as she felt her body slipping forward over the edge, dragged by Daynia's weight. She knew she couldn't pull Daynia up but she also knew she wouldn't let go – no matter what. Daynia reached up with her other arm, trying to grab hold of the ledge, but barely managing to hold on. Alexis slid forward as Daynia lost her grip, her arm flailing about, seeking an anchor.

“Let go Alex! You can't hold me!” Daynia shouted frantically, feeling her arm slide further down and Alexis with it.

“N...o!” Alexis stammered back.

Their eyes locked, years of friendship making words unnecessary. Daynia's pleading to let her go and Alexis' determination – they were in it together, come hell or high water. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as the inevitable became more real with every slip.

A firm grasp suddenly enveloped Alexis' hand, squeezing it tighter around Daynia's wrist, pulling upward. Alexis gasped, for an instant – surprised and uncertain by what was happening, accompanied by a surge of elation. They would be saved after all! She became aware of a man's body lying almost over hers, his face next to her own. Her mind raced with questions for which she had no time to answer.

The rumbling thunder grew distant as Daynia looked up into deep grey eyes. The volume of the world was turned down as their eyes locked. *They were rescued!* The pounding in Daynia's heart raced, from relief as much as

from an inexplicable excitement.

Flavius whipped his other arm over the edge, now holding Alexis' hand in a steel grip as she held onto Daynia. He took a deep breath and heaved, pulling Daynia upward as Alexis fell back against him. The rush of fear pulsating in his blood when he had witnessed Daynia fall over the edge began to subside as Flavius adjusted his grip and pulled with all his might.

Daynia tried to help, bracing her feet against the rocky wall for resistance. She was finally just over the edge and clawed the ground, grappling for an anchor. With enormous effort she flung herself overtop as Flavius and Alexis tugged hard for a last pull. Daynia rolled onto her back, breathing heavily, tears now streaming down her face. She was alive!

Alexis looked over to the centurion whose body heat she could still feel, his hand still clutching hers and Daynia's. He finally released his grip and rose to his feet. Alexis shifted toward Daynia who was now on her knees. Tearfully, she pulled Daynia forward, and the two friends hugged tightly, sobbing softly out of sheer exhaustion and relief that the horrid ordeal was over.

Flavius stood quietly, watching the two young women, contemplating their obvious deep friendship, ignoring the thoughts of comforting Daynia himself as they wandered aimlessly in his mind.

"Thank you," Daynia whispered as she hugged Alexis tightly. "Thank you." Alexis said nothing as she clung to Daynia. "You okay?" Daynia murmured through subsiding tears. She pulled away from her friend, searching her eyes.

Alexis smiled meekly. "I'm ready to go home." Neither spoke of the transcendental evil nor of the Ultimate Sacrifice they had just witnessed. Mere words would be too insignificant and inadequate to elucidate the universal truths that had profoundly affected them.

Daynia glanced over at Flavius apprehensively. He nodded in acknowledgment and waited quietly. Daynia turned back to Alexis and broke the silence with a groan. "Everything hurts."

Alexis looked at her with a blank stare, Daynia's voiced drowned out by raging wind and deafening thunder.

Daynia raised her hand against the sand particles assaulting her face. She turned anxious eyes to Alexis who nodded. They had lost a lot of time and both silently hoped they would make it to the cave before it was too late.

Flavius extended a hand to each woman, “we must hurry.”

Alexis glanced at the outstretched hand being offered then back to Daynia, a questioning expression on her face. Daynia raised her eyebrows but said nothing, her gaze shifting upward to lock eyes with Flavius. His eyes remained trained on Daynia as he helped both women up.

Alexis glanced from one to the other, flashing an impish grin. “It’s okay. Don’t mind me,” she muttered, studying the handsome centurion, wondering where he had come from. She drew in her breath sharply when she realized where she had seen him before. “Oh gosh! You’re him! The...market... dead guy...” she stammered as Flavius reached out for Daynia, who made a misstep and stumbled, his eyes never leaving hers. Flavius steadied her, tugging a little harder than necessary leading Daynia to land against him. Time moved in slow motion as he was galvanized by her proximity. He glanced down at the dark hair brushing his chin, inhaling her soothing scent as she froze against him.

Alexis watched dumbfounded, acutely aware of the tension between the two as Daynia looked up and pushed herself away uncomfortably.

Embarrassed by the desire to relax against his chest Daynia stepped away, eyes downcast before looking up. “Thank-you,” she said loudly but sincerely.

“Yes. Thank you!” Alexis shouted above the roar of the storm.

Flavius simply nodded. “I will take you to your destination.” As he turned to move toward Evander, Daynia grabbed his arm. Flavius stopped and turned, glancing down at Daynia’s hand clasping his arm.

Daynia followed his gaze and immediately released her hold on him. Stepping back, she looked up. “Why? Why are you here?”

Flavius simply stared at her before turning his attention to the darkened sky as the rumbling and shaking intensified. “I must take you back. Quickly.” He stepped over to Evander, his foot landing on the thorn fragment. He looked

down as Alexis leaned over to Daynia.

“When did he defect to our side?” she whispered loudly.

Daynia turned from watching Flavius head toward his horse to face Alexis, “Who cares?” she said emphatically, deeply irked by his disregard of her question.

“Well that wasn’t the reaction I expected,” Alexis muttered as she followed Daynia.

Flavius mounted Evander and swung his horse toward Daynia. He smiled as he recognized that look of defiance in her dark beautiful eyes, as she glared at him.

“Oh this is going to be good,” Alexis thought as she watched them, the tension palpable.

“We’ll be fine from here on in,” Daynia practically shouted, her voice nearly drowned out by the howling wind.

Flavius looked up at the sky of a world seemingly coming to an end. “There is no time. Evander will get us there expediently,” he shouted in response.

Daynia glanced back at Alexis before responding, “we won’t all fit, so thanks but no thanks.” Daynia signalled to Alexis as she turned to walk away. Alexis looked up at Flavius and smiled sheepishly. “Thank you.” She bowed her head and followed Daynia, glancing back once to see Flavius sitting on his horse, watching.

That blasted woman! She was going to fight him at every turn. He smiled. He liked the sound of that. “HA!” he urged Evander forward thinking it was his turn to win this challenge. As Evander approached, Flavius leaned over his saddle and reached out, grabbing Daynia, who shrieked, and hauled her unceremoniously in front of him to sit sideways.

“What the...?” she squealed when her butt hit the saddle horn head. Instinctively she struggled to dismount but Flavius pulled her close to his chest, her face pressed against his shoulder. For an instant, he felt the desire to hold this way forever but quickly brushed the thought aside when Daynia began to

struggle, as he knew she would.

“He told me to take you back,” he whispered loudly, his lips grazing her ear. Daynia stopped abruptly. He could feel her body stiffen as she controlled her heavy breathing. Then slowly, he felt her relax against him. Keeping one arm around her waist, he leaned over low, extending his other arm and reached for Alexis who was standing silently, a stunned expression on her face.

“It will be uncomfortable but it is necessary.” Flavius clasped Alexis’ arm jolting her out of her trance.

“Uh-huh,” a dazed Alexis replied.

As Flavius reached out farther, Alexis clutched his arm, feeling his strong grip as his hand clamped her upper arm, “One, two.”

On three he pulled Alexis up and over the horse’s hump behind him. “Hold on tightly to me,” Flavius shouted, barely giving her a chance to settle before clicking Evander’s flank, leading him into a gallop. Alexis shrieked and quickly tightened her hold around Flavius’s waist.

The three braced themselves against the wind. Evander neighed nervously, fighting gravity as he lurched down a slope. An ominous crackle ripped across the sky startling all three. Evander’s hooves faltered on the uneven terrain, slipping and sliding down the rocky hillside, as the rain-less storm raged around them. The earth cracked open and rocks tumbled into the abyss. As they reached the base Flavius reined Evander in to a full stop. They looked back in unison, toward the now distant Golgotha, a bleak expression on their faces. Evander pounded the trembling earth anxiously.

“HA!” Flavius finally shouted above the wind, urging Evander toward the cave, now in sight. “There!” Daynia yelled excitedly, “It’s there!” As they galloped toward the foot of the mountain, Flavius wondered in awe how he had known its exact location. But then, he had wondered about much over the last twenty-four hours. Much that was inscrutable.

The earth persisted in trembling, triggering a collapse, earth breaking away from the mountainside as they approached the cave entrance. What had been obstructed in the first collapse now gave way with the earth’s quaking. Rocks and earth dislodged and tumbled, creating an opening in the entrance

that had been sealed immediately following their fortunate escape.

Flavius held onto Daynia in front of him with his left arm and reached behind him with his right to help Alexis dismount as she held onto his arm, like a firefighter's pole, sliding to the ground. He straightened before tightening his left arm around Daynia's waist, forcing her to wrap her right arm over his shoulder. He leaned slightly sideways and braced his weight against Evander, to let Daynia slip off the saddle to the ground. Flavius could feel her warm breath on his skin as the shift brought his face to within an inch of hers. Despite their circumstances, he fought a burning desire to kiss the lips playing hide and seek with silky strands of wind-blown hair.

Daynia found herself staring deep into his eyes, drawn to the raw sadness reflected in the pools of grey.

Alexis glanced up at the dark sky nervously before turning back to Daynia and Flavius. *What is it with those two?*

Flavius finally let Daynia slide down before dismounting himself.

Daynia and Alexis glanced one last time into the distance toward Golgotha before looking nervously from the opening of the cave to each other. Alexis stepped away as Daynia turned to Flavius, who was watching silently, an unreadable expression on his face. She stepped closer, shifting at the sound of falling rocks inside the entrance. They were running out of time.

Daynia looked up at the centurion, "Thank you for...everything," she said, surprised by the sudden sharp pain piercing her heart. Flavius nodded in acknowledgement, a faint smile touching his lips. Daynia smiled softly and although difficult to do, she turned to leave, her heart heavy.

She gasped when she was suddenly spun around as Flavius grabbed her arm and turned her back toward him, his other hand clasping the back of Daynia's neck. He pulled her face close, his lips closing in on hers, kissing her intensely and passionately.

"Whoa!" Alexis exclaimed, abruptly staring down at her feet, "Well, she certainly had a better time than I did," she muttered, before letting out a shriek as a falling rock brought her back to their current reality.

Amid the rumbling and cracking, time froze as Flavius slowly released Daynia, his hand slipping from the back of her neck. With both hands he cupped her face, gazing intently into her eyes, searching. There was so much he wanted to say, but could not find the words.

“I wish...I...I wish,” Daynia stammered, trying to say what she knew was impossible.

“I wish so as well,” Flavius said, his eyes flashing with understanding.

Alexis rushed up to Daynia and touched her arm, reminding her of their time sensitive plight. Daynia stepped back, as Flavius reluctantly released her, his hands slowly falling away. The women smiled at Flavius, bowing their heads slightly in gratitude before Alexis turned and stepped toward the cave first.

Still facing Flavius, Daynia stepped backwards hesitantly, her eyes never wavering from his. She glanced briefly toward Golgotha and finally turned toward the cave. As the women neared the entrance, just before stepping inside, Daynia suddenly spun on her heels and ran to Flavius, jumping into his arms, hugging his neck tightly. His arms wrapped around her in a desperate embrace, as though his life depended on it. Just as suddenly Daynia released him, did an about-face, ran back to Alexis who stood waiting, grabbed her hand and together they rushed into the cave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Undeniable

Darkness engulfed the cave; walls trembled amid explosive sounds drowning out Daynia and Alexis' terrified screams. Then silence, as dust rose from the rubble within the crumbled cavern.

Daynia coughed and tried to open her eyes, earth and stone dust sticking to her eyelashes and lips. She coughed again, feeling gritty residue on her face as her mind gradually cleared. When her eyes finally opened, a wave of panic shot through her; she was trapped in total darkness, pinned beneath fallen debris. Seized by uncontrollable fear, Daynia ignored the numbness in her chest and the pulsating in her head. "Alex! Alex!"

A powerful ray of bright light filtering through cracks in the rock pile broke through her frenzied mind. Freeing her arms, Daynia began to pull and push at the rubble frantically. Suddenly, the bright light intensified. She stopped abruptly, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the blinding glare. She moved her hand away slowly as her eyes adjusted, her mouth dropping at the sight of the mysterious young boy clutching the glowing object. He stood gazing at Daynia, his expression soft, his smile gentle, radiating warmth. Daynia fixed her eyes on him, the echo of her shallow breathing the only audible sound in the cramped space. She blinked, unconsciously smiling, awed by the splendour of the brightness enfolding the boy. Daynia's breath caught, when, within the brilliance of the glowing light, the boy metamorphosed into Jesus, in His hands the crown of thorns, softly illuminated.

"You," she whispered, a subtle calm settling over her.

Jesus extended His arm. She fixated on His outstretched hand, lifting her eyes to meet His as she reached out with both arms, desperate to grab hold of his hand. As Daynia strained, she blinked, raising one hand to shield her eyes from the ever-brightening light. A hand suddenly clasped her arm.

"Thank you," Daynia whispered weakly, just before everything went dark

again.

“I’ve got her!” a male voice shouted. He held onto Daynia tightly, as her hand slipped from his arm and went limp. Voices shouted in the background as the rescue worker quickly shifted rubble out of the way, the light on his hardhat shining brightly on Daynia’s face.

* * * * *

Sunlight brightened the room as Daynia’s eyes slowly fluttered open. They strained to focus, blinking against the intrusive light. She squinted repeatedly and concentrated feebly on a moving image that slowly sharpened and became a nurse adjusting the IV. With her attention glued to the monitor, the woman completed her task before glancing down at Daynia.

“Ms. Celeste. Good to see you awake. How is the pain?” she asked sweetly.

Daynia registered that she was in a hospital and tried to sort out her thoughts but it was too painful. “My head hurts like hell,” she said groggily.

The nurse smiled warmly, “We’ll help with that, although I’d expect as much after what you’ve been through.”

Daynia’s mind reorganized itself, as images of the cave collapse bounced in her brain. She sat up suddenly, falling back with a groan, “Oh my God! Where’s Alex?”

“I’m having to wheel myself around while some of us just lie back and relax!” Her complaining voice filtered into the room as Alexis fought against the corner of the door frame with the front wheel of the wheelchair, cursing before rolling herself into the room.

Relief washed over Daynia who turned her head on the pillow to face her friend, a faint smile touching her lips. Decker out in hospital pyjamas, Alexis rolled to a stop alongside Daynia’s bed, a newspaper on her lap, her leg stretched out, wrapped in a leg cast.

Alexis simply stared at Daynia, a warm happy feeling bubbling at the

sight of her friend conscious. She had been worried, spending hours by her bedside, sitting in the wheelchair, waiting for her to awaken. “How are you feeling D?” she asked softly, after a long pause.

“Awful,” Daynia replied weakly, “but grateful.” She slid her left hand toward the edge of the bed, suddenly realizing it was thickly bandaged and throbbing. Alexis leaned over the armrest of her wheelchair and grasped Daynia’s hand, squeezing tightly before letting go.

“You ought to be,” the nurse added, with smile, as she stepped away from the bed, “you are two very lucky young ladies.” She turned to Alexis, “now stop terrorizing the poor nurses out in the corridor,” she scolded, feigning a reprimand.

Alexis looked up at the nurse with innocent eyes, “Terrorize? Me?”

The kindly faced nurse chuckled as she walked toward the door. Alexis leaned over Daynia’s bed, whispering, “I’ve been running a race with a kid down the hall.”

Daynia laughed, then winced, “oh!”

The nurse snorted good-naturedly as she left the room. Alexis watched her leave before turning back to Daynia, “So? How’s the head? You’ve been out for a couple of days.”

“Couple of days?” Daynia’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Yup. Actually – three,” Alexis injected an amused tone to her words, trying to keep the mood light, deflecting the alarming concern she had endured over the last three days. “Hey look, we made the papers!” she said as a distraction, not wanting Daynia to think too much about it yet. Her condition had been serious and Alexis just wanted her to feel better before dealing with the details of her injury. She held up the newspaper and handed it to Daynia who grasped it with the hand of her bandaged arm, struggling to hold up the paper while her other arm remained motionless, an IV needle inserted above the wrist.

“Wait!” Alexis wheeled her chair backwards causing a commotion as it slammed into the slim recliner chair beside the night table before banging into

the night table as she tried to manoeuvre the chair around the cramped space.

Daynia dropped the newspaper on her blanket, grimacing as she turned to glare at Alexis in exasperation. Alexis shot her a determined look, “I got this,” and turned her attention back to her mission with a tenacious zeal, as the wheelchair crashed against the night table one more time.

A resigned Daynia watched with an amused expression when Alexis finally made her way to the foot of the bed, and leaned down, dropping out of sight. She heard Alexis clanking around, hitting the base of the bed. The motor kicked in as the head of the bed began to rise, Alexis’ grinning face coming into view over the end of the bed. Once the rising headrest stopped, clatter ensued as Alexis made her way back to the left side of the bed and rolled to a stop. She looked over the edge at Daynia with satisfaction.

Daynia cast her a droll look, let go of the paper and slid her hand to the bar, pressing a control button on the bar of the bed and raised herself a little more before picking up the paper again and began reading. She glanced over at Alexis’ dumbfounded expression and raised an eyebrow. The short moment of silence was shattered as the two friends burst into laughter while groaning and wincing from assorted pains.

“Just look at the darn paper,” Alexis finally said, embarrassed.

Chuckling, Daynia turned to the paper headlines; “*TOUR OF TERROR: EROSION GIVES WAY TO COLLAPSE – MISSING WOMEN FOUND ALIVE!*” She stared at the accompanying photos, including the start of the tour outside the cave as the group stood in the sunlight being prepped, to photos of her and Alexis being carried out on stretchers by rescue workers. As her eyes gleamed over one photo to another, images flooded back in quick flashes. The more she focused on the images, the more they triggered flashbacks. Missing bits of information filtered in: losing the tour, the beautiful multi-levelled cave of stalactites, the rumbling, and the mysterious boy. Daynia shook her head and stared at the photos again, her mind searching beyond them.

“Hey. You ok? I know it’s tough to be reminded.”

Daynia didn’t respond as disorienting suppositions came crashing into her head. Her hand flew to her temple as partial images of demons and wings

fused with those of the cave collapse. Daynia drew her breath in sharply at the sudden rush of fear.

Alexis leaned close, worried, “Daynia? What’s wrong? I’ll call the nurse!”

“No. No. I’m good,” Daynia turned to her, confusion lining her face. “I’m remembering bits, I guess they’re mixing in with dreams. We lost the tour, right?” she asked trying to put order to her inquisitive thoughts.

“Yes, you remember that?”

Daynia turned her attention back to the paper, frowning, “looks like it was serious but I don’t really remember.” She looked back down at Alexis.

Alexis looked pensive, “Yeah, I don’t remember all that much about the details of the collapse, myself. Except for that first rumble. Then I woke up here. You really don’t remember more?”

“Well,” Daynia searched her memories, “I remember that too – when the rumbling began and then a blinding light – loud noises and voices. Everything else is all jumbled in my head. I recall bits of my dream – strange.”

“Strange dreams?”

Their conversation was interrupted as members of the tour crew walked into the room.

“And how are the lovely ladies?” Ryker handed Alexis a gift bag. Alexis immediately looked inside and broke into a broad smile. “For both of you,” he added.

“We remembered how much you enjoyed them early on in the tour,” Julia offered, glancing over at Riley, “actually Riley suggested it.”

Alexis took a deep whiff, “Ooooh, that smells good! D, look,” she held the open bag toward Daynia who took a peek, “chocolate croissants!” Alexis turned to the visitors, “you are not only excellent guides but totally in tune!” She batted her eyes, singling Riley out. He smiled back warmly.

Daynia raised an eyebrow and exchanged a knowing glance with Julia and Ryker, “Thank you. It’s really nice of you to come visit.”

“You know you gave us quite a scare. We thought – well after that cave-in,” she trailed off, sighing deeply.

Daynia smiled softly, “I don’t remember much.”

“Not surprising, you had a pretty serious concussion,” Riley shot Alexis a long sideways glance, “I’m glad you’re both okay.”

Alexis smiled from ear to ear, her cheeks turning a bright pink, “thank you Riley.”

The nurse stepped into the room and directed her attention to Alexis. “You, wheelchair wonder,” she said sternly, grinning behind the words, “I need you back in your room to measure pressure and steal some blood.”

“You’re going to suck me dry you know,” Alexis mumbled, as she banged against the bed rail trying to manoeuvre her wheelchair.

Riley stepped in behind her and grabbed the handles. “I’ll take you.”

The pink on Alexis’ cheeks deepened. She looked over at Daynia shyly, “thank you Riley.”

Daynia smiled, glancing from one to the other wondering if she should warn Riley about the reality behind the sudden demure disposition. Alexis read it all in Daynia’s grin and raised eyebrows. Her head swivelled to throw Daynia a warning glare before turning to look up at Riley with a sweet smile as Riley pushed the wheelchair out the door. Daynia groaned. Pain shot up her side, from stifling her laughter. Once Alexis had exited, she turned to Julia and Ryker, “I’m glad you are all safe too,” she said sincerely. Daynia nodded toward the paper, “was it really just an erosion or something more sinister?”

“Initial speculation had people screaming terrorism but it turns out it was just a terrible strike of nature. The big question being asked now is ‘why didn’t anyone see this coming’? Still, we can’t ever lose a member of the tour. Our director is furious.” She paused, “you know,” Julia explained, “when we last looked, you were both there – then suddenly, you were nowhere near us or in any of the adjoining tunnels. Then the radios weren’t working which is the first time that’s happened to me in a very long time. Well not since we upgraded three years ago.” Julia paused, “I am so sorry about what happened. I just can’t

explain it.”

“It was a terrible exception,” Ryker added, “one that...” he trailed off, “you know we are so well prepared for any contingency – we can’t quite make out where we went wrong,” he ended apologetically.

“Oh don’t!” Daynia jumped in. “We got ourselves lost. I’m not quite sure myself how, we were following closely and we messed up on the subsequent protocol. We should have waited where we were but the radio wasn’t working and I was sure I heard your voices so we ran in that direction. Big mistake.” She paused, “but not yours,” she added as she realized she remembered getting lost but not why they ran off.

Julia smiled gratefully, “Thank you Daynia. I appreciate your kindness, but you were our responsibility and we have to accept that.”

“Whatever the circumstances,” Ryker added.

Daynia looked down at the newspaper. “Well I disagree – let’s call it a draw.”

Julia shuffled as Ryker smiled gratefully. “What will happen with your story now?”

Daynia sighed as she paused, “Well, I can probably get away with the photos we have so far and if you’ll grant me another interview, I think it’ll actually be more exciting given the circumstances.”

Julia looked nervous, “but,” she stopped, “we failed miserably on this tour.”

Ryker clasped his hands behind his back in a stance of attention, inhaling deeply.

Daynia regarded the two of them. She smiled, “that’s not going to be my take Julia. I’m doing an exposé and telling it like it is. Along with the information from the interview on procedure during a crisis, I’ll use this incident as the main focus. The story will be that much more interesting. Everyone loves real-life drama. I’ll totally expose what can happen when protocol isn’t followed. Even if it was unintentional.”

Julia was speechless, expecting the worst light shed on her organization.

Ryker eyed Daynia with admiration, “That’s going to be your spin?”

“Spin? No.”

Ryker frowned.

“Truth,” Daynia said confidently, “You’ll just have to fill me in on what you all did when I didn’t follow protocol. I hope you won’t mind a long phone interview.” She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow.

Relief washed over Julia as Ryker relaxed his arms. “No. No, we won’t.”

“I hear you’re heading back soon,” Julia smiled warmly, “I would have liked to offer an extended tour, on us.”

“I’ll take you up on that next time.” Daynia lifted her bandaged arm, “this kind of shortened our trip.”

“Was the cave tour the last on your assignment itinerary?”

Daynia paused before looking up at Julia, “There is one place I need to go to before heading home.”

After Julia and Ryker left, fatigue suddenly overwhelmed Daynia, aggravated by the throbbing in her head. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, then quickly opened them again. She held the newspaper loosely on her lap, staring at the picture of the rescue worker carrying the stretcher, her eyes zooming in to the brightly shining light fixed to his hard hat. The enormity of what had happened hit her hard. Daynia took another deep breath, sensing the stirrings of anxiety. She closed her eyes, counting slowly to relieve the building pressure. As the wave of panic subsided, exhaustion seeped into every bone. Turning her head to the side, Daynia closed her eyes and relaxed against the soft pillow, focusing on its soothing comfort, quietly giving way to a deep slumber.

Daynia stared at the gaping hole below her feet where the ice had cracked. Her heart was racing, but she suddenly realized she was not sinking. Her eyes shifted to her left arm being held by two hands. One clasped her elbow and the other, her hand. She could hear the raging wind

but it seemed distant. She knew the ground was trembling but couldn't feel it. She sensed fiery red eyes watching but didn't flinch. She heard the wings flap but didn't care.

Then a sudden loud boom in the sky startled Daynia. She looked up to see fiery red eyes flash in a darkening sky. The wind assaulted her, pushing her backward and pain clamped down on her feet as they sank into the icy water. Panic began to set in but before she could succumb to it, the grip on her arm tightened. Her eyes shifted to the other hand clutching hers. "Do not do as Peter did. Fix your eyes on me." Daynia lifted her gaze toward the loving voice and found herself staring into eyes filled with gentleness and compassion, a warm bright light exuding from the man facing her. Her racing heartbeat slowed. The wind no longer mattered. The sting in her wet feet was bearable. Slowly, Daynia extended her right arm to cup the hand that held hers and clutched tightly. The bright light burst and flowed in waves of warmth, spiralling around her, steadying her, infusing her with calmness.

Daynia awoke with a start. She glanced around the room, realizing she was alone. She sighed, turning to quietly gaze at the rays of sunlight beaming through the hospital window. She felt relaxed and calm. She couldn't remember sleeping so peacefully since she lost Jake. Her nightmares were shifting. She didn't wake up in a sweat, terrified. Before giving it much thought, it occurred to her that she was clutching something in the palm of her hand. She bent the arm and held her hand up, opening it slowly. She smiled softly as the chain and dog tags spilled out. Daynia frowned, wondering how they got there, marvelling that she hadn't missed them.

"Wheelchair Wonder put them there."

Daynia looked up at the nurse as she walked in with a new IV bag. "Your friend insisted they be given to you so you would have them once you woke up. So she snuck in here while you were asleep," she explained as she replaced the pouch with the depleted fluid.

Daynia smiled. "She would."

"She's resting now as well." The nurse nodded and stepped toward the door.

“Oh, excuse me.”

“Yes?”

“Is there Wi-Fi here?”

The nurse nodded and waited.

“Anywhere I can borrow an iPad?”

The nurse’s eyebrows furrowed and Daynia’s heart sank, believing the response would be negative. “Ah! I think I know who might have one and would be glad to let you borrow it.” She held her finger up in a ‘give me a second’ motion.

Daynia broke out into a smile. “Great! Thanks!”

The nurse returned shortly with an iPad and handed it to Daynia. “One of my colleagues is an investment junkie! She checks her stocks every break she gets. You have a couple of hours until she’s due for lunch. She unlocked the password.”

“Please thank her too.”

The nurse nodded and headed out the door.

Not sure why, Daynia googled the Bible story about Jesus walking on water.

As she scrolled through Matthew 14:22-33, her heartbeat quickened when she read the account of Peter asking to walk on water, “*but seeing the wind he became frightened and began to sink.*”

“*Do not do as Peter did. Fix your eyes on me.*” Daynia clicked on images for the story. A current rushed up her spine as she stared at a painting of Jesus holding Peter’s elbow and hand, pulling him out of the water. She flipped the iPad and laid it against her chest. Her nightmares had indeed shifted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Enigma

Daynia stared at the new temporary cell phone Alexis had picked out for her. Pink? She regretted not having gone along as she flipped it over. *And polka dots.*

“I’m gonna...” Daynia muttered under her breath, never finishing her sentence as an elderly couple glanced at her, a reprimand in their eyes. Daynia forced a smile and looked away. She silently vowed to make Alexis pay. Setting her vengeance aside, Daynia clicked back on the GPS screen, zooming in on the trajectory between the hotel and her destination. She had a special rendezvous to keep – the promise she had made her brother.

Daynia smiled and waited for the elderly couple to exit the elevator on the lobby floor before stepping out to find Alexis a short distance away, waving at her happily. Riley, who stood next to her, acknowledged Daynia with a raised hand. Daynia waved back while Alexis hobbled toward her, the neon art splashed across her cast attracting second glances and amused chuckles.

“D!” Daynia looked down at the cast with amusement and a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah I know. Picasso over there and buddies were trying to be funny,” she nodded toward Riley who was in conversation with two other men.

“Well, I like happy colours...don’t you?” Daynia pursed her lips, holding the back of her phone up against Alexis’ nose.

Alexis’ eyes crossed as they focused on the phone. “Mmmm...” She broke out laughing.

“It’s hardly funny!”

“But it’s so sweet!”

“I don’t do sweet very well Alex and I’ll make sure to remind you of that when I return.” Daynia forced a fake smile that spelled trouble.

Alexis’ smile disappeared. “You should be careful with that arm...it’s not completely healed.”

Daynia smacked her lightly on the nose with her phone, grinning at Alexis’ reaction.

The laughter that broke out seemed to come from a good place inside. Alexis suddenly realized she had missed her friend’s genuine laughter.

“What?” Daynia asked annoyed.

“Nothing.” The mood shifted to serious overtones, as Alexis looked Daynia squarely in the eyes. “You sure you don’t want company?” she asked softly.

Daynia smiled warmly, “I’m sure.”

Alexis regarded her friend quietly, “I’d be happy to come along.”

Daynia touched her friend’s shoulder, “I’m good. Really. I need to do this on my own.”

Without a word, Alexis grabbed Daynia’s hand and squeezed it tightly.

Daynia smiled and nodded toward Riley, “now go back to your hunk and annoy him.”

Still holding Daynia’s hand, Alexis turned toward Riley with an exaggerated grin, and then back to Daynia, “he is? Isn’t he?”

Daynia laughed, “Go on! Get out and try not to stop traffic with that leg.”

Alexis giggled as she started hobbling away, “Right. Just promise you’ll join us when you’re done and not hang out, alone, in some corner.”

“Sure.”

Alexis stopped. “Promise.”

Daynia touched her chest, “cross my heart.”

Alexis' eyes widened at the mention of the cross. "Ok then. You go finish this and we'll see you later." Alexis kept her excitement in check. She nodded, pausing to look back as she watched Daynia exit through the lobby doors. Warmth washed over her. *D's back! She's back!*

* * * * *

A canopy of shifting colors shaded the sky as evening fell quietly. Daynia stood on a busy corner oblivious to the passers-by, glaring at her cell. "It's bad enough you're polka dotted pink!" She shook it in frustration, "now you're battery's dead! Wait till I see that..." Her voice trailed off. It wasn't going to do her any good to complain just then. If she recalled the GPS points of reference, she was in close proximity to her destination. Daynia decided she would turn the next corner and if she were wrong, she would stop someone and ask. Under normal circumstances she would simply have guessed her way around, but closing time was rolling around and she was risking losing to the clock. As she rounded the corner, her breath caught. She could see the imposing triangular mosaic of the upper façade. Excitement stirred as she bounded up the street toward the Church of All Nations or Basilica of the Agony, the name Jake preferred.

Daynia stopped in front, tears stinging her eyes. "We're here Jake! We're here!" She rushed up to the high wroughtiron gates and stared in awe at the impressive mosaic set above rows of Corinthian columns. Anxiety kicked in when she pushed the gates but they were locked. *Oh no!* She had to get in, Daynia thought in a panic. She simply had to. Disconcerted, she fought the anxiety of defeat long enough for her heart to jump with hope as a Franciscan monk walked by briskly on the other side of the gates.

"Excuse me," Daynia called out, hurrying alongside the gate, keeping pace, "excuse me!"

The Monk turned, squinted as he tried to focus, and then headed toward Daynia.

"Hello," Daynia said, slightly out of breath from excitement.

"Well good evening." The monk's eyes shone warmly as he approached

the gates.

“I realize you’re closed – but – may I visit the Basilica? Please,” Daynia paused, “it’s important.”

The monk cupped his hands and sighed, “I’m sorry. I’m afraid that is not possible. Perhaps you can return tomorrow?” He smiled apologetically and began to walk away.

“I’m leaving tomorrow. Please,” Daynia pleaded.

The monk stopped and turned back toward Daynia, clasping his hands behind his back.

Daynia clutched the bars of the gate with each hand, pressing her face against cool metal rods. “I would have been here sooner but – it was impossible.”

The monk stepped closer and regarded her with interest.

“Please. I...have a promise to keep,” Daynia begged.

The monk stepped closer still, his eyes widening, “Ah. You are the one.”

“Excuse me?” Daynia asked, surprised.

“From the collapse,” the monk said, “It has been all over the news in recent days. I am most happy to see you are well.” He paused, “yes yes.” He pulled keys from his pocket, his eyes narrowing as he studied Daynia before he took in a deep breath. “I suppose an exception can be made this...one time.”

Daynia’s relief was tangible, “Thank you so much. I really appreciate this.”

“This way,” he said, motioning with his arm, “We must use the side entrance.”

Daynia walked quietly beside the short, slender man with the kindly face, uncertain of her emotions as they rushed in and ebbed from one extreme to the other. She wanted to laugh with excitement and cry with sadness.

“They say you were buried beneath much rubble,” the monk said, breaking the silence.

“It would seem. I suppose you could say we were really lucky.”

“Sometimes luck is simply a blessing in disguise,” the monk replied warmly as they walked through the garden. “As a member of the appointed guardians of this holy place, I have had occasion to witness blessings – miracles you might say. Mysteries, this pragmatic world calls them.”

He stopped and breathed in the air, his head lifted to the night sky, his eyes shut. He finally opened his eyes, “they say the Lord spent many hours of prayer here, knelt at the rock from this olive grove, now preserved inside this basilica.”

The custodian sighed softly, “I never tire of this sanctuary.”

Daynia stopped and stared at the massive olive tree that graced the garden grounds. She paused as an indecipherable image swept through her mind. She shook her head and glanced at the tree again. The image of Jesus reaching out to touch her face flashed like a bolt of lightning. Daynia gasped and stepped back.

“Are you all right miss?” The monk stopped, leaning toward her with concern.

“Yes...I just remembered something from my dream. It took me off guard,” Daynia said quickly, feeling silly. “Mixed with déjà vu I guess.”

The monk looked at her questioningly.

Daynia smiled, “like this tree. I feel like I’ve seen it, but I’ve never been here before.”

“Are you certain?” the monk asked, “You were injured after all. Perhaps you simply cannot remember?”

Daynia paused, “No, it’s just a feeling. I’m pretty sure I’ve never been here. No doubt a vivid memory of a picture from the research my brother and I had done on the church.”

“Ah. Sometimes a feeling is about trusting that still small voice inside,” he said vaguely.

Before Daynia could respond, the monk motioned toward a large non-

descript door and stepped aside. “Go. Keep your promise.”

“Thank you.” Daynia stood in front of the door and hesitated. A stab of loneliness pained her as she thought about how she ought to be doing this with Jake.

* * * * *

Daynia stepped inside the peaceful, dimly lit Basilica. The atmosphere was sombre, reverent. She held her hand over the dog tags, pressing them against her chest as she glanced about slowly. She was awed by the violet coloured glass, faintly visible in the faded light, purposely keeping her gaze from shifting upward. Jake would have immediately looked up toward the bubble-domed ceiling, adorned with the re-creation of a star-studded night sky. She breathed deeply. Tears stung Daynia’s eyes as she slowly, painfully, forced her gaze up to the ceiling.

“See. Right there along the edges. The Byzantine influence.” Daynia could hear Jake’s voice as her eyes followed the curve of the ceiling. *“Did you know Antonio Barluzzi was called the ‘Architect of the Holy Land’?”*

“No,” Daynia whispered softly.

Jake flipped the pages of the travel magazine. “He was a great architect in his time. One day lil sis – when I finish my tour – we’ll visit Barluzzi’s church in Jerusalem. You and me kid...whatya think?” He smiled warmly, wrapping his arm around Daynia’s shoulders.

The stars came back into focus as Daynia stared at the ceiling, tears brimming in her eyes. She finally looked away, her heart aching and searched the shadows in the dark church. *There it is.* Daynia stepped toward the large slab of rock near the high altar and genuflected, pressing the dog tags tightly against her heart. An image of Jesus leaning over the rock in prayer, flashed in her mind. She blinked, the picture in her mind so vivid but knew it was from the countless paintings she’d seen, although it felt so real. Daynia shook her head and glanced at it again, her eyes drifting around the shadowy church. “It’s beautiful Jake, just like you said it would be,” she whispered sadly, brushing away a tear.

Daynia jerked her head up as she caught the reflection of a bright light shining from behind her. She snapped her head around, her heart pounding. She hadn't imagined it! *A ray of light flooding into the church from obscurity.* She stood up slowly and moved cautiously toward the beam of light, the eerie silence unnerving. As she neared, the light's source seemed to originate from the exterior. She stepped back outside through the nondescript door and paused.

"Hello?" Daynia stepped further into the garden as a light flickered up ahead. She paused, feeling unsettled. Could she be having a hallucination? Her heart sank at the thought. Since she had been hospitalized a little over a week ago, she had not experienced any such episodes. In fact, she slept soundly and felt more at peace for the first time since she lost Jake. Anxious but determined she hurried after the light, now flashing near the giant olive tree. Daynia stopped in her tracks when it disappeared suddenly, the beam of moonlight permeating through the sturdy branches the only illumination.

"Daynia."

Daynia turned swiftly, her heart pounding, the voice sounding familiar yet not. "Who's there?" Her voice trembled as she swivelled, searching the shadows. Who would know her name here, she thought frantically, fear seeping into her thoughts.

"Daynia." She could make out the outline of a man stepping out from behind the tree, his face obscured by the darkness. She knew immediately it wasn't the monk. Startled, she stepped back, but the man made no move to follow.

"Who are you? How do you know my name? What do you want?" The questions were fired out, fuelled by fear and confusion. Daynia stepped back further and turned to run.

"It is I," the deep voice said simply, "you need not fear me."

Daynia stopped. Even as her mind screamed at her to run, she sensed there was no threat in the sound of his voice, its familiarity tugging at her with a magnetic pull. Despite her own misgivings, Daynia turned to face this stranger who seemed somehow familiar.

Dressed in black pants and shirt, he stepped into the ray of moonlight. Daynia caught her breath as a chill rushed down her spine. There was something vaguely familiar about his face. Her mind raced to pinpoint who he was and how she knew him. She did meet him, she suddenly realized...*in my dreams*.

Daynia stepped back slowly as she tried to reconcile images with reality. *What was happening? Was she having some sort of psychological breakdown?*

Flashes of images flooded her mind, triggering a sharp pain in her head. “The dream...” Daynia’s hand flew to her temple as she tried to make sense of visions of lightning and rocks crumbling and fiery red eyes.

The stranger stepped toward her but she instinctively jumped backward, looking up to meet his piercing grey eyes. Images of hanging from a cliff’s edge, her eyes locking with grey ones and the face they belonged to, bounced in her head. Confused, Daynia gasped and stared at Flavius in fear.

Alarmed, she turned to run but Flavius quickly closed the distance between them, grabbed Daynia by the arm and whirled her around to face him. She shrieked and tried to flee again. “It was not a dream.” His voice was smooth and self-assured. Daynia stopped suddenly and stared. “It was not a dream.” He tried to step closer but she resisted, her arm writhing, trying to break it free from his hold.

Flavius suddenly yanked her forward, against him. He forcefully twisted her hand over, unfurled it and cupped it with his own. Daynia tried to jerk it from him but he clenched it firmly. Slowly he slid his hand away, revealing the thorn fragment resting in the palm of her hand.

Daynia stopped struggling, captivated by the prickly fragment. She had seen it in flashes of her dreams. But then, here it was, in her hand. Real. Tangible. Flavius slowly released his grip on her arm. Waves of anxiety were making her dizzy. Daynia looked up to Flavius then back to the fragment. Images of Jesus in the olive grove, stumbling up Via Dolorosa, the crown of thorns, all exploded in her head. The world seemed to be spinning as she fought to make sense of her thoughts. Daynia backed up, stumbling. Flavius reached out to catch her but she faltered backwards. He fought the urge to grab

her and hold her. Instead, he stood quietly, realizing that at this moment, she needed space. He paused, watchful, as she closed her hand around the fragment, the palm of her other hand pressing against her temple. “What?” Confusion whipped her thoughts into a frenzy. She groaned, leaning over, feeling stifled.

Daynia took a deep breath and forced the images into the background. She opened her palm and stared down at the fragment. The image of reaching out to grab the thorn fragment, as Jesus hung His head low, burst in her head. “This is...it’s really...Oh God.”

Daynia fell to her knees as she fought to gain control over her breathing. She closed her eyes, desperate to keep the rising wave of anxiety at bay. *One thousand one, one thousand two...could it be? One thousand three, one thousand four...could it all have been real? One thousand five...Daynia tightened her fist around the thorn fragment. Good God, had it really not been a dream?*

As her fingers slowly unfolded, Daynia stared down at the thorn fragment, her heart beating loudly, tears spilling in droplets over the rough, intertwined remnants of the crown of thorns. She glanced up to find Flavius crouched down in front of her, his gaze fixed intently on her eyes.

He smiled softly, recognizing the emotional struggle reflected in the magnetic pools of ebony staring back at him.

Daynia searched Flavius’s eyes, her voice trembling, “I didn’t imagine it?”

“You did not.”

“None of it? You, the prison...Him?” she stammered. “It was really Him?”

“It was.” Flavius wished he could hold her tight, this beautiful strange woman. He wished he could ease her mental struggle as she came to the same realization he had himself. Nothing in his life was the same since she had wandered into it – a fugitive from another world. He thought of how he had picked up the thorn fragment on that mountain, thinking little of it at the time. He had only retrieved it because she had held it. But then it radiated an

indescribable power, the likes of which he had never known. While he could not explain it, he understood it had to do with that man – the one they called the Son of God.

He watched the expressions on Daynia’s face transition from uncertainty, confusion, wonder, and fear – to more confusion. Flavius waited patiently for her to come full circle. He knew his life would never be the same without her and gazing at her now, he knew it to be true – she had reached deep into his heart. Watching her step out of his life had caused a most excruciating pain, more so since that man – that condemned man – with the loving eyes and gentle nobility, had healed the hole in his heart.

Flavius remembered guiding Evander away from the cave, cursing the irony that his heart should be healed at the time he would meet the woman he wanted to give it to – a woman who had to leave him forever. In that moment he realized, he did not have the courage to let her go. When he had turned back toward the cave, he looked down at the thorn fragment in his hand. That’s when he had seen it – the soft light glowing inside the cave. He reflected on how he dismounted Evander, took a deep breath and decided – wherever it led – he was prepared to risk it all. A chance to be with her would be worth the gamble. Flavius patted Evander, then had turned and stepped into the cave.

He smiled, thinking how he might have missed this moment had he lost his courage and not followed the glowing light. Clasp ing Daynia’s arms, Flavius helped her rise to her feet as he straightened up. Daynia offered no resistance, her eyes solidly set on the fragment in her palm. She stood quietly, her mind dashing through all the images it provoked.

He waited silently for Daynia to find her way. She was still staring at the fragment. She looked up from the fragment to Flavius, and back to the fragment. It *was* him. The man from her dreams. Then this was really from His crown of thorns. “Oh God,” she whispered as she clutched the thorn, holding it tightly near her heart. She looked up at Flavius, her eyes tearing, “It was all real. The good, the bad, the ugly.” She stopped suddenly and laughed through tears. “I can’t believe I just said that!” she laughed and cried, “and Jake...he’s really ok...and.”

Flavius interrupted, “Are you all right Day-nia?” he asked softly, concern

in his eyes as he stepped toward her.

Daynia nodded, her emotions threatening to erupt. She took a deep breath and gazed up at the moon, regaining her calm. “I really am all right,” she whispered softly.

She turned to Flavius, wavering a moment, before reaching out shyly, her hand sending a warm rush through him as she gently eased her fingers toward his face. “It really is you...*Flavius*,” a mischievous glint in her eyes. “You’re...it’s... a miracle,” she paused, hesitant, letting what had seemed an impossible truth finally shatter her skepticism.

A faint smile touched Flavius’s lips. Could what seemed impossible be anything else but the truth? He had witnessed absolute good and ultimate evil as their two worlds collided across time and space. Cupping his left hand over Daynia’s, he pressed it closer to his skin, still awed by the strange woman with the fiery, defiant character. She was the woman, he realized, he did not wish to live without.

Flavius turned his head ever so lightly into her hand, and gently guided it with his, sliding her hand slowly along his jawline. He paused, grazing his lips against her fingertips before placing her hand firmly against his chest, treasuring the warmth. He tilted Daynia’s face upward, wanting to see her softly illuminated by the bright moonbeam. Ever so slowly, he leaned forward, his lips pressing against Daynia’s gently, before he pulled her close, kissing her passionately.

When their lips parted, Flavius held Daynia tightly in his embrace. His heart swelled with a mix of gratitude and sorrow toward the man he helped crucify. In spite of the role he had played in that death, divine intervention did bring him to this new world, giving him new hope, a new heart and a new love. “He said I was to follow my heart,” Flavius whispered as he pulled back to face the woman who had overturned his heart. “He said I was to follow my heart,” he repeated softly. He kissed Daynia lightly on the forehead, remembering the compassionate eyes of that quiet, humble man who caused a hardened agnostic like himself to shed beliefs cultivated over a lifetime. “And that is what I have done.” Grateful, he pulled the woman who had stolen his heart closer into his embrace.

Daynia wrapped her arms around Flavius, listening to the rhythmic beat of his heart as she pressed her ear against his chest. *He was real*. She sighed softly as she clutched the thorn fragment tighter in her hand.

Behind the embracing couple, a faint glow flickered as it shone through the ancient olive tree.

* * * * *

From a nearby service door the monk paused to watch Daynia and Flavius discreetly, an amused expression on his face, before continuing on his way. He smiled softly and began to hum as he walked past a small room with the door half-open. He peeked inside and marvelled at the centurion uniform hanging on a stand. He closed the door. “Miracle indeed,” he chuckled, as he walked away humming softly.

Wishing you endless blessings

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ROSA VETRANO is a freelance writer/producer/announcer, who has worked in many facets in the world of media. She's been both in front of the camera, as a television reporter, magazine program host and special events host; and behind the scenes, as a crime beat and court reporter. She has written, produced and directed special features and independent productions.

Her passion for writing has also taken her from the newsroom to the music studio. She wrote the lyrics, as well as produced and directed music videos for several Telethon theme songs, all while hosting the event.

She enjoys interviewing and quickly puts guests at ease with a genuine love of people and curiosity about life. She also lent her talents toward producing and directing several informative and promotional videos for a local leading hospital, where she became a member of the volunteer committee working to improve patient care.

Creating is a thrill, she says of writing and producing, where “random images and words become real stories.”

Rosa believes that when unexpected dark moments come along, it is faith

and laughter that bring strength and light. One of her favorite adages, “It doesn’t matter how many times you fall – only how many times you get back up.”

Humour plays a big part in her life and her writing. As she likes to say, “I believe in love, laughter and chocolate *anything!*” She loves music, adventure and sports – including horseback riding, cycling, rollerblading, hockey and F1. She even jumped out of a plane – twice – freefalling the second time. She felt committed because it was for a story on parachuting – doing it again would prove most difficult!

She continues to pursue dreams close to her heart. Next on her list – to write more novels, more lyrics, produce a film and find the biggest chocolate bar in the world!