

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

THE TOWER OF FIRE

Ellie Black

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE TOWER OF FIRE

By Ellie Black

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THE TOWER OF FIRE

By Ellie Black

Photo Description

A young, blond man is sitting casually, holding a sword in his hands with a sense of familiarity. Four cats with different colorings surround him, looking protective and threatening. In the distance, the setting sun is half-hidden behind a tower, making it look like the tower is exuding fire and coloring the sky red. The man looks confident and determined.

Story Letter

Dear Teller of Stories,

You think you have problems? All you need to worry about is your inkwell running dry and the popularity of your tales.

The Warrior's Guild wants to oust me for practicing magic. The Wizard's Council complains because I carry a sword and know how to use it. And their newest decree says mages should only have one familiar. Idiots. I need four. And they chose me. Now people keep trying to abduct one or more of my feline friends—unsuccessfully I assure you—and I am tired of cleaning up after the would-be thieves.

Furthermore, one of the princes—yes, the middle one, why do you ask?—has been imprisoned in the Tower of Fire. I need to rescue him. No, you shouldn't believe the rumors that there is something going on between the two of us. But if anyone is going to kill the egotistical, deceitful, infuriating boor, it's going to be me. And I need him alive to do that. Plus, we might have a little unfinished business...

My familiars and I will think of a fool-proof plan. Well, at least a plan. Have you ever tried to keep magical cats from going someplace they want to go?

Here, take this phoenix feather quill and come back another time, unless you want to help write me out of this dilemma.

Your humble servant,

Jean Reads

P.S. Absolutely no cliffhangers unless you want to be cat bait.

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mage, warrior, magical cats, non-explicit, friends to lovers, gay for you, captivity, mythical creatures, royalty

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THE TOWER OF FIRE

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Chapter One

Nate walked into his house and found broken glass, torn curtains, his favorite picture on the floor with a broken frame, a man on the sofa with his hands and feet bound by pieces of the curtain cloth, and a black cat sitting on his chest, glaring at him threateningly.

The sad thing was, he wasn't even surprised. He'd walked in to a similar scene twice already this week. The only things that changed were the men, the cat, and the extent of the damage.

The freaking picture had ended up on the floor all three times.

Nate sighed and went into the mess that was the living room. Like the previous times, all he'd do was make the guy clean the mess and pay for all the damage and then let him go, without even confronting the Council about him (because really, what was the point?), but that didn't mean he wasn't pissed off. Like all the crap he'd taken recently wasn't enough, he didn't even get to rest at home anymore. No, he had to spend the time worrying about his cats. Not that any of these people would ever succeed in harming them or taking them away. (They weren't even mages, for God's sake! He actually felt offended on his cats' behalf.) No, what he worried about was the extent of his cats' patience. If they got annoyed enough to actually hurt one of these men, there would be nothing he could do to save them from being taken away.

He picked up the black cat and kissed her head, ignoring the man who started struggling as soon as the cat was removed from his chest. He took her away from the couch before she decided the thief—no, kidnapper—deserved worse.

"You know, Jo, you could've tried to make less of a mess," he said. "I'm getting the feeling you guys don't like that picture much."

Jo's look was unmistakable. "*Ya think?*"

"Come on. Riley was my friend. I was devastated when he died. I just want to keep his memory alive. I'm sure you guys would've loved him if you met him," he said. He didn't want to take down the picture of his old dog just because his cats were speciesists. His cats were proving to be such dictators. He was supposed to be their boss; sometimes, though, it felt like they were the ones ordering him around.

He put Jo down in the kitchen, where the other three cats sat and stared at him with scolding eyes. He was aware that his cats blamed him for the kidnapping attempts, but there was nothing he could do. He'd been fighting the council for weeks, trying to make them understand the number of familiars was not of a mage's choosing, but it was hard to persuade them when most other mages had only one, or no familiars at all. He managed to get two other members to support him, but there were nine votes in favor of the decree and three against, and so they issued the decree prohibiting licensed mages from having more than one familiar. They thought if they took all the additional familiars a mage had and distributed them among the mages with no familiars, it would even out the powers within the mage society. Idiots, is what they were.

There had been some protest from a few mages with two familiars, but they didn't have much choice except to agree to train one of their familiars with the skill of the other one and surrender the other one to the council. They had been given a month.

The deadline loomed, but Nate hadn't even tried to do as the decree said. He had argued with the council members every day, trying to get them to make an exception for him. The mages with two familiars would have to pick the familiar with the skill they needed the most, considering trained skills were nowhere near as strong as inherent skills in familiars. His problem was his cats were very specialized. He had four familiars. No one else even had three. He couldn't do with one familiar who was good at one skill but mediocre at the other three skills. Besides, his cats were sisters. He couldn't separate them. The chosen cat would feel betrayed and would never trust him again.

The council had firmly denied his request, though. They didn't want to deal with the protests that would follow if they were to make another exception for Nate. They had already allowed him to be a part of the Warriors' Guild, even though no other mage was allowed to do that. Nate was already stronger than most other mages, so he had to, as Zachary—head of the council—said, "*kindly suck it up and stop arguing.*"

Nate was running out of time. He didn't know what he could do. He had four days before the one month was over and he would be forced to surrender three cats. He had to come up with a solution fast. He was quickly getting down to his last option, and he really didn't want to have to do that. He would ask Will for help only if he was certain there was no other way.

After feeding the cats, he went back into the living room, freed the guy, and showed him where to find the supplies he needed to clean up the mess. Then he calculated the cost to fix the damage—alarmingly, the damage got worse each

time, which meant the cats were getting impatient—wrote the number on a piece of paper and gave it to the man, who pocketed it without question. Obviously, he knew how the previous attempts had gone and what he had to do. Afterward, Nate decided to restudy the *Wizards' Guild Book of Rules* in case there was something that could help his situation that he'd missed when he'd read the book the first time. Anything to not have to ask Will for help.

When three uneventful days passed, and Nate was no closer to finding a solution, he had to admit defeat. There were no rules or clauses that would help him. His situation had never occurred before. The most number of familiars any mage ever had was two. Other mages blamed him for being so different from the norm and causing such problems. But honestly, what was he supposed to do when, one day after earning his license to practice magic, he'd opened the door of his house to find a determined mother cat with four sleepy kittens looking curious and adorable? The mother cat had looked at him meaningfully—*I'm leaving my kids with you, you'd better take care of them*—and left, while the kittens hurried inside as though they owned the house. Although they were each a different color (God knew how that happened; nothing was simple with familiars), it was obvious from how protective they were of each other that they were siblings.

Nate loved his four cats. They were noisy, playful, and as different from each other in personality as they were in color. He had been in the middle of reading *Little Women* when he met the four sister kittens for the first time, and he decided to name them after the March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Meg was the wise one, with protective skills. Jo was the smart one, with offensive skills. Beth was the kind one, with healing skills. Amy was the determined one, with shape-shifting skills. They each had a mind of their own and they never really listened to him, but they always came through when he needed them. Together they were ten times stronger than any other familiar, and they worked so well together, as if they'd been trained to work as a team for decades. In the three years since they'd chosen him, they had saved his life more than once. There was no way he could let any of them go.

Which was why he was standing outside the Warriors' Council chamber, waiting for their meeting to end so he could talk to Will. Will, who had been his rival in the Warriors' Guild, the only person who could defeat him with a sword. Will, who had been his closest friend for years. Will, who had stopped the warriors from kicking him out every time someone decided Nate shouldn't be allowed to be both a warrior and a mage. Will, whom he had not talked to

after their fight two months ago. Prince Will, from whom he was about to ask for a favor.

The meeting was taking longer than usual. Nate was nervous. He'd barely seen Will in the past two months. Now he was about to just walk up to Will and ask him to get the council to let Nate keep his cats. Will was a prince. He wasn't next in line for the throne, but he was powerful enough that the council might listen to him. He also never let Nate down. Still, Nate just wanted to get it over with.

As he waited for the meeting to end, quietly reading the *Wizards' Guild Book of Rules* for what felt like the hundredth time, a group of warriors came into the main hall from the practice room. He recognized the sound of Peter's laughter. If there was one person Nate absolutely hated, it was Peter, and the feeling was mutual. Nate kept his gaze on the book, hoping Peter would just walk by. He was in no mood for Peter.

"Look who it is," said Peter loudly, immediately squishing any hope Nate had of avoiding him.

"Fuck off," said Nate, without sparing Peter a glance.

"Or what? You'll turn me into a cat?" said Peter with a sneer. Nate ignored him.

Peter seemed in a chatty mood. "Have you read the latest *Warrior*?" he asked. The *Warrior* was the paper the Warriors' Guild released every week. It was filled with fighting technique pointers, as well as all the gossip. Warriors *loved* their gossip.

Nate hadn't read the news that week—he'd been too busy trying to save his cats—but he wasn't about to ask Peter what was in it.

Peter, however, didn't need an incentive to tell Nate all about it. "Looks like you're finally gonna get axed. Apparently the council's going to vote on kicking you out. Now that you don't have your best friend on your side, it might even be a unanimous vote," he said cheerfully.

Nate couldn't ignore that. He looked at Peter and the other warriors standing with him. They didn't look particularly interested in the conversation. One of them—Troy, if Nate remembered correctly—rolled his eyes and said, "You don't know that it's true, Peter."

"It probably is," said Peter. "He's only here because William convinced the two councils to let him be a member of both. Now that he's managed to piss even William off, there's no one to speak up for him."

“Come on, man. It’s just gossip,” Troy told Nate before turning back to Peter. “Leave the man alone. Let’s go get some food. I’m starving.”

After they left, Nate couldn’t focus on the book. He closed it and leaned against the wall opposite from the door of the council chamber. He knew he shouldn’t pay attention to the gossip, but he couldn’t help but wonder why such a rumor would start in the first place. Had Will said something? Had he somehow indicated that he didn’t care if Nate stayed in the Guild or not? Will knew how much being a warrior meant to Nate.

Joining the Warriors’ Guild and staying in it had been harder for Nate than anything else he had ever done. Not because he wasn’t a good warrior—he was better than most even without the help of his magic—but because the warriors hadn’t been happy with having a mage in their midst. They had been much harder on Nate than anyone else, hoping to make him give up. He hadn’t, though. Nothing could stop him.

Nate’s father had been a warrior for twenty years before retiring. He trained Nate from an early age, hoping his son would follow in his footsteps. Nate had been happy to learn. He wanted nothing more than to be like his father. When he started showing magical skills in fifth grade, he tried to hide it. However, his magic was too strong to be hidden, and soon his teacher contacted his father to inform and congratulate him. There were not many mages in their country, and being a mage was a source of great pride. His father had been happy and told him he was proud of him, but Nate hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that he was somehow letting his father down. He went to the School of Magic and soon came to love his powers, but he asked his father to continue to train him. His father agreed.

After college, even though it’d been more than two years since his father’s passing, Nate was determined to honor his legacy and join the Warriors’ Guild. He’d already become a member of the Wizards’ Council by then. The warriors were against him joining, but he had insisted on signing up for the warriors’ recruitment camp, which was open to whoever was physically up to the challenge, hoping to change their minds. As it turned out, the head of the council, Will, had been more than willing to give Nate a chance. During the years, there’d been lots of complaints about Nate being a mage, but Will never paid them any heed.

What if Will had finally given up trying to save Nate’s place in the Warriors’ Guild? Even though they hadn’t talked for two months, Nate never doubted that they would eventually make up and put it behind them. What if Will didn’t agree?

A crowd coming out of the council chamber's door indicated the end of the meeting. Nate waited impatiently for Will to come out. He didn't have to rely on the gossip. He would ask Will directly whether or not it was true.

Nate saw twelve of the council members walk out of the chamber room and out of the building. When it became apparent that Will had no intention of coming out of the chamber, he decided to go in. The door was slightly open, and Nate was just about to open it fully and walk in when he heard his own name. He hesitated, knowing how ridiculous it was to eavesdrop, but too tempted to announce his presence.

"...and the others are insisting on having a meeting about revoking Nate's warrior status," said Will.

"When are they going to stop trying to kick Nate out? They spend way too much energy trying to get rid of him. I don't get it," came Quinn's voice. Will was talking to his cousin.

"The way they see it, Nate has an unfair advantage. With a little help from magic, he can defeat all of them. They can't stand that," said Will.

"That's ridiculous," said Quinn. "In a war, they'll be fighting side by side. They should be happy to have Nate's skills working in their favor."

Will made a noncommittal sound.

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Quinn.

"I'm letting them have their meeting," said Will. Nate gritted his teeth in anger. "They seem too determined. So I figured, you know, why not let them have it? He definitely deserves it, the jerk."

"Come on. Give the poor guy a break. He has enough to deal with as it is," said Quinn. "You know about his cats, right?"

"Of course. Who doesn't? He's been talking about them nonstop. Even I've heard about them, and I've been doing my best to avoid him."

"And you're not going to do anything about it?"

"I tried. I sent some of the new recruitment candidates to steal them, but apparently the cats were too strong for them," he said disgustedly. "Sometimes I wonder if our recruitment program is effective at all."

Nate could hardly believe what he was hearing. It was *Will* who had sent those idiots to steal his cats? Why would he do that?

"Did Nate catch them?"

“Yeah. Apparently he assumed they were sent by the Wizards’ Council. Good thing, too. The last thing I need is him throwing a fit over it.”

“Well, you *are* trying to steal his cats,” said Quinn, amused.

“It serves him right for being a dick for two months,” said Will. Nate could hear the smile in his voice. He couldn’t stand there anymore.

He barged in, leaving the door to close behind him. He was so angry he barely noticed the expression of shock on Will and Quinn’s faces.

“You are a deceitful douchebag, Will,” he spat, getting close enough to poke Will’s chest with a finger.

“Nate—” started Will.

Nate didn’t give him a chance to talk. He couldn’t stand to hear Will’s excuses right then. He was too mad, too *hurt*.

“We’re done. For good,” said Nate, and then turned around and walked back to the door. “And stay the fuck away from my cats,” he shouted behind him, leaving the room. He was so furious that he didn’t even notice where he was going until he stopped and realized he’d been walking in the wrong direction for ten minutes. Cursing, he turned around and went back home, all the time ignoring Will’s calls.

Nate spent that evening wallowing in helplessness and anger. Helplessness because he truly had no options left to save his cats, and anger because... well, because of Will.

Nate was furious. He felt betrayed. Will obviously agreed with the decree. He had tried to *kidnap Nate’s cats*. Why would Will even involve himself in a matter of the Wizards’ Guild? Was he that determined to deprive Nate of everything he loved that he’d go through that much trouble to make sure of it? And all of that because of a stupid fight?

Because it *had* been a stupid fight. Sure, the reasons behind the argument, on Nate’s part, came from feelings deeper than he cared to admit, but why would Will take such offense as to actively try to hurt Nate?

Two months ago, Will had casually brought up a matter that Nate had known would come someday, but that he’d tried not to think about. They were sitting in Will’s living room, eating takeout, which they sometimes did after fencing practice. They’d been quiet for some time when Will suddenly said, “I’m thinking of getting married.”

Nate had known that Will would have to think about marriage soon—after all, he was a thirty-year-old prince, and there were expectations—but he'd expected Will to at least be in a relationship before he said anything. And Will hadn't dated anyone after his disastrous breakup more than two years ago with Mandy, who was beautiful, smart, a reporter, and who absolutely hated Nate's guts.

"You do realize that it takes more than one person to get married, right?"

"No, I didn't. Thank you for correcting my lifelong misconception of marriage," said Will dryly.

Nate decided to treat this like the idiocy that it was. "Well, you're lucky you have me, or else you'd find yourself in the middle of a wedding with no bride, and Christopher would never let you live that down."

"Well, if that happened, I could just make you wear a white dress and stand at the altar. No one would even guess you weren't a girl."

"I'm way out of your league and you know it," said Nate, batting his eyes. Then he went back to his food, pretending what Will had said didn't even deserve to be discussed. He should've known better. When Will decided he had something to say, he said it no matter how many turns the conversation took.

"I'm serious. I'm thirty. The longest relationship I've had has been five months. I can't stay a bachelor forever, and I don't think I can marry for love. If I marry now, at least my father will have one less thing to worry about. Besides, he doesn't have much time left. If I'm going to do it, I might as well do it while he's still alive."

Nate gaped at Will for a few seconds. "You want to get married to someone you don't even know yet because your father has cancer? Do you realize how crazy that sounds?"

"Does it, really? My father is going to get more joy out of me getting married than I will. At least someone should be happy about it."

"Why the hell are you saying all this martyr bullshit? No one's forcing you to get married. You're not next in line for the throne. David is, and he already married the person *he's in love with*."

"It's not bullshit, and I'm not being a martyr. David can't have children, and people need the assurance of young blood in the royal family. I can give them that. Besides, I don't really care who I marry. I doubt it'll make much of a difference in my life."

“Are you insane? Of course it makes a difference! I don’t understand. What made you suddenly decide you can’t fall in love?”

“I never said I can’t fall in love.”

“What is this, a riddle I have to solve? You just said you can’t marry for love.”

“Yeah. I didn’t say I can’t fall in love with someone, just that I can’t marry them.”

“Them? Just how many people do you plan to fall in love with? And why the hell can’t you marry *them*? Because your life is too easy and you’re trying to create problems outta thin air?” Nate was getting mad now.

So, it seemed, was Will. “My life is too easy? You know what? I don’t have to explain myself to you. You’d never understand my reasons.” Will stood up, throwing his half-eaten food into the garbage can with more force than necessary. Nate stood up as well.

“Do *you* even understand what you’re saying?” He was raising his voice without realizing it. “I can imagine a sixteen-year-old emo boy in the middle of puberty saying those things. You’re a thirty-year-old man, for fuck’s sake. You’re in control of your own actions. You can’t just do things because your daddy—”

“What the hell is *your* problem anyway?” Will was actively shouting now. “Why do *you* care if I want to marry some girl I don’t know? You’re my *friend*. You don’t get a say in why or who I marry.”

“I do when you’re being so ridiculous that—”

“No, you don’t. You *never* get to tell me why I should or should not marry. I have enough people to please as it is. I don’t get a choice where my dad’s concerned, but I don’t have to answer to *you*. You’re just my friend.”

“Well if that’s what a friend means to you, I don’t think I want to be your friend.”

They glared at each other, each waiting for the other to give, both afraid to make the next move. Finally, after it became evident Will wasn’t going to say anything, Nate gathered his fencing equipment and left.

Throughout the evening, Nate spent his time alternately trying to come up with some way to keep his cats and fuming over Will’s words. By night he was

exhausted, but he had come to a decision about his familiars. After a lot of thinking, he decided that the only truly unacceptable option for him was to give up his cats. So tomorrow, he'd resign and give up his license. He'd no longer get paid for magic services or be involved with official matters concerning magic, but he'd get to keep his cats and use magic in his everyday life. It made him sad to think he'd no longer have the challenge of making spells that seemed impossible to make, that he'd no longer be able to help people with his magic, but it was the only option he could live with.

The next morning Nate went to Zachary's office early and handed in his resignation. Zachary tried to talk him out of it; after all, Nate was a member of the Wizards' Council and a very powerful mage, even without his four familiars. Nate made it clear, however, that he was determined to keep all his cats and nothing except letting him keep them would change his mind, Zachary had to give up and accept Nate's resignation. It didn't take more than half an hour before Nate walked out of Zachary's office, no longer an official mage. He tried not to think about what he had just given up. Instead, he thought about how the warriors wouldn't give him so much crap anymore. They would no longer be able to kick him out of the Warriors' Guild, now that he was just a warrior like the rest of them. Somehow that thought didn't really cheer him up.

Nate knew he needed to talk to Will, at least to give him a chance to explain. Even so, he decided to give himself the day to feel sorry for himself. The next day he'd find Will and give the deceitful bastard a piece of his mind.

Chapter Two

Finding Will proved to be a lot harder than Nate expected. He went to the Warriors' Council chamber, which was full of council members arguing with each other. They seemed to be in the middle of a meeting again. Nate managed to take a look from the door before he was told to "please step outside" by the guards. Will wasn't there, which was strange, seeing as all the other council members appeared to be present, including Will's brothers. He tried the warriors' gym and Will's house, with no luck. He tried calling him, but Will didn't pick up.

By noon, he was ready to give up and go home when he received word that all mages and warriors were to go to the convention center meeting room immediately. He headed toward the convention center, hoping to find Will there.

There was a large crowd in the meeting room; mages, warriors, and the royal family were all gathered in the big room. Nate tried to find Will in the crowd, but he couldn't see him anywhere. He wasn't standing with his family or with other council members. He must not have gotten there yet.

After Nate stopped looking for Will and paid attention to the people gathered in the room, he started to feel the tension. There were a lot of whispers among the crowds of mages and a lot of heated arguments among the warriors. The king was sitting in silence, his face filled with worry. He looked even sicker than usual. Nate could see Prince Christopher and Prince David quietly talking to some of the Warriors' and Wizards' Council members. He tried to find Sarah, Will's girlfriend of less than two months, but she was nowhere to be found.

It was obvious that something had happened. He'd been so busy trying to find a way out of the new decree that he hadn't really talked to other people in the last week. He seemed to be the only one who didn't know what was going on.

He walked to where Christopher and David stood with Zachary, Quinn, and Drew, the newest member of the Warriors' Council. It looked like the four warriors were arguing with Zachary, but when he got close enough to hear them, the warriors sounded closer to pleading than arguing. When Quinn spotted Nate, he said, "There you are! Where the hell have you been?"

"Looking for Will. Do you know where he is? I've looked everywhere."

Quinn looked at him strangely.

“You mean you haven’t heard?”

“Heard what? What’s going on?” Nate was getting really tired of being in the dark.

“Nate, Will’s been kidnapped.”

Nate looked at the five of them. They all looked grim and very serious.

“What do you mean kidnapped? Who could even kidnap him? He’s the best warrior we have.” Nate was still half-certain they were messing with him, despite how serious they all looked. Will was the head of the Warriors’ Council. No one had ever managed to beat Will. There was no way anyone could kidnap him, right?

Quinn’s worried eyes suggested otherwise, as did his next words. “No one has seen Will since last night. Someone took him sometime between midnight and this morning. We don’t know who or how.”

“How about Sarah? His girlfriend should know where he is, right?”

“She’s not his girlfriend,” said Christopher, Will’s younger brother, irritably. “And we haven’t been able to find her. We don’t know where she is, but we don’t think she’s with Will.” There was concern in Christopher’s eyes. “She and Will haven’t been spending much time together recently. Besides, she’d never hurt Will.”

Nate was getting really angry really fast. “So you’ve known that he’s been taken for hours and you don’t know who has taken him or where he is? What the hell have you been doing since this morning? Have you tried the finding spell? Because if you can’t find him with that spell, if he is somehow cloaked by magic, then it means that the kidnapper is a mage, or at least he has help from a mage. I mean, they’re probably a mage, anyway. No one can beat Will without magic.”

“We do know where he is,” said Drew, sounding resigned. “Whoever took him wasn’t that concerned about us knowing Will’s whereabouts. Zachary did the finding spell this morning.”

“And? Where is he?” asked Nate impatiently.

This time it was Zachary who answered grimly. “The Tower of Fire.”

Nate could only stare, dumbfounded. Will was the head of the Warriors’ Council. No one ever managed to beat him. How could anyone have kidnapped him and taken him to the Tower of Fire?

The Tower of Fire was a place of great magic. No one knew much about it, except that it had been under a very powerful spell for as long as anyone remembered, and that it looked harmless until someone went inside. The moment someone entered the Tower, fire would roar to life—fire that could not be put out. It would burn until the moment the person inside died, which usually took about an hour; then the fire would suddenly cease to exist and leave behind a smoke that would go away in the course of a few hours, leaving no trace of the fire that consumed the Tower.

Many years ago, people used to willingly enter the Tower, warriors trying to prove themselves and mages trying to understand its magic, but none of them made it out alive. Even mages who used protection spells only managed to survive the Tower's fire for a few hours. When it became apparent that the Tower's magic was too strong for anyone to face, they left it alone. The Tower remained in its place just outside the city, but people avoided going near it. They tried to monitor it with cameras, but its magic prevented any cameras from working.

"Is the Tower still burning?" asked Nate, wanting to make sure. He was pretty sure that Will was still alive. If he wasn't, they'd be having a funeral, not a meeting. Did that mean that Nate's protective spell, the one he'd made Will for his birthday last year, was protecting him from the fire?

"It is. No one has ever managed to stay alive in there for that long. It must be because of the spell you made for him. Do you know how long it will work?" asked Zachary.

The spell would probably last a couple of days, but Nate decided not to tell them that. They didn't seem to be in much of a hurry as it was. He didn't want them to think they had more time. "I don't know. It depends on what it has to protect Will from. So why haven't you sent anyone after him yet? Why are you wasting time with a meeting?"

"It's not that simple," said Quinn gently.

"Screw that. It is that simple. He's your prince. What could be more important than bringing him back? We *know* how to do that."

A few years ago, someone started kidnapping people and taking them to the Tower of Fire. While the police department investigated the case, the members of the Wizards' Council had tried to come up with a way to get the people trapped inside the Tower out and succeeded. It required a great deal of power, because they didn't know what the inside of the Tower was like and where

exactly the trapped person was. With the help of all forty-three members of the Wizards' Guild, they managed to get the serial killer's latest victim out of the Tower in little more than an hour. The woman had been in bad shape and had been admitted to the hospital. When she finally woke up in the hospital, she managed to tell them enough about the kidnapper to help the police identify him. The man had committed suicide before they could arrest him.

"We may know how, but that doesn't mean we *can*," said David, speaking for the first time. He looked the most composed of them all, almost as if the situation hadn't much affected him. Nate had always admired David's ability to keep a cool head in difficult situations. It made him a good warrior and a great leader. Right now, though, Nate wanted to shake him and break his composure and see that David understood that his brother could be *dying* as they were standing there, wasting time by talking about the problems standing in the way of *saving* him. "We think he's been captured to create a distraction. Whoever kidnapped him counted on us doing anything we can think of to get Will out of the Tower, including using all the mages to defy the Tower's spell. With our mages otherwise occupied, we'll be vulnerable to any attack on us. Without our mages protecting us, our enemy will be able to use guns, while their mages protect them from any bullets we shoot. We won't have a chance if our warriors are dead before they even get close enough to the enemy to use their swords."

"If all the mages help, it won't take them long to get him out. They won't be gone for more than two hours. You can't honestly think anyone's going to attack us right this afternoon!"

"That's exactly what I think. We received word that the Northerners were getting ready for an attack a while back, and two days ago, our informant sent word that they were ready. It can't be a coincidence that Will gets taken right as we are about to be attacked. This has to be a part of their plan. It distracts us and takes our best warrior from us at the same time. It's the only way they can win a war against us."

"Why the hell didn't I know about this? Last time I checked I'm still a warrior, even if I'm not a mage anymore."

"It wasn't that we didn't want to tell you," said Quinn kindly. "It's just that you weren't around much, so I guess you didn't hear the news."

Nate was mad at himself. He'd been so distracted with the decree and busy with his magic and his duties in the Wizards' Council, and after his fight with Will, he hadn't even felt the eagerness to go to practice much. That's why he hadn't heard a thing about the threat. Maybe everyone was right. Maybe he

shouldn't have been allowed to take on the responsibilities of both a mage and a warrior. Maybe he should have been made to choose.

Nate was taken out of his thoughts by David's voice.

"Did you just say you're not a mage anymore?" asked David.

"Yeah, I handed in my resignation yesterday morning."

"Do you mean you're no longer an official mage, Nate?" asked David, who still seemed to be processing that information.

"Yeah," said Nate again. He heard Zachary sigh loudly.

"What were you trying to achieve by lying to me?" asked David, staring daggers at Zachary.

"I didn't really lie to you." Zachary sounded calm and confident, which was impressive considering Nate had never heard David's voice so cold before. "You asked me if I would assign one of my mages to rescue the prince, and I refused."

"You failed to mention that said mage was no longer yours to assign. Nate doesn't need your permission. You've been wasting my time."

"Considering the current situation, we need his magic more than ever. Nate only resigned yesterday. If you hadn't insisted so much on secrecy and told me about the imminent attack before then, I would not have accepted his resignation."

"That doesn't change the fact that as of yesterday, he no longer works for you. I understand that we need our mages. No one understands that more than I do, which is why I haven't made you send a group of them to save my brother already."

"You can't make me do—"

"Of course I can. I'm your prince, and I've been taking on the king's duties since my father got sick. I can do anything I want. And we're talking about *my brother's life*." David's voice was getting lower and scarier with each word. Nate had never seen David so angry. "I care about the safety of my people. I care about protecting them. But one mage wouldn't make that much of a difference in the face of a war. He might, however, be able to save my brother's life. So I would appreciate it if you try to be of more help next time, especially when it's not even your decision. The only one who can refuse me is Nate. He's a strong mage and a strong warrior, he has the advantage of the familiars

you've been trying to take from him, and he cares about Will. If we want to send only one person after Will, Nate's the best option. I won't make him, of course. He has a choice."

David looked at Nate expectantly. He wanted Nate to go to the Tower of Fire to save Will. Alone. It was practically suicide.

"There's nothing you can do to stop me from going after him," said Nate, without hesitation. If anyone was going to kill Will, it was Nate.

David smiled. "That's what I thought," he said. "Time is of the essence, and seeing as I don't have to spend any more of it pleading with Zachary, I think you should be off immediately. We've already sent some of the warriors to the borderline. This meeting is going to be about the final war strategies before we send the rest of our troops. You should go before the meeting starts. I'd rather not attract too much attention to your mission. We don't yet know who's behind the kidnapping. I trust you'll all be discreet?" He looked at Christopher, Drew, Quinn, and Zachary, who all nodded.

"I'm going to need some spells that I don't have ready. I'll also need the vanishing spell," said Nate.

"Take anything you need," said Zachary, handing him the key to the storage room. "Be safe, Nate."

"I will," said Nate. Then nodded a good-bye to the warriors and went in search of the spells, his sword, and his cats. He wouldn't waste any more time than he had to. The protective spell he'd made for Will was powerful; it'd taken him a year to make, and he'd gone through a lot of trouble to make it as strong as possible, but no spell could ward off direct fire for long. He doubted he'd have more than two days, and more than half a day had already passed. Even though the odds were against him, Nate was determined to do all he could to get Will out of the Tower of Fire alive.

Chapter Three

It didn't take long to get all the things he needed. Fortunately for him, he had two familiars with the rarest skills, protection and healing, so he didn't need to worry about the Tower's fire. Meg would protect him, and Beth would be able to heal him when Meg fell short. Still, he thought it'd be wise to take a healing spell with him, for Will's sake. The spell wasn't nearly as strong as Beth's magic, but it could be helpful. Seeing as his biggest challenge would be defeating fire, he took all the cooling spells they had in storage, which wasn't that many. With the invention of coolers and freezers, cooling spells weren't all that high on the list of spells to keep on hand. He also took the vanishing spell that would help him disappear from one place and appear in another. Nate had invented it recently, after years of trying different combinations of magic and ingredients. It was a very useful spell, extremely hard to make, and it took a lot of energy to use. He wouldn't be able to use it to get to Will (he could only appear in places he'd already been), but he could use it to get them out. After taking a few bottles of water, some energy bars, and some cat food and using the unimaginatively named "refrigerator spell" to keep them cold despite the fire, Nate was ready to go.

The Tower of Fire was just outside of the city, and there wasn't a road for the last mile or so, which meant Nate had to walk for another fifteen minutes after the fifteen-minute drive. The entire time driving and walking to get to the Tower, he couldn't stop thinking about the very real possibility that both Will and he might die in the near future. He thought about the last two months, how he had picked up a stupid fight with Will because he'd been too much of a coward to admit he was in love with him. He also thought about the conversation he had overheard the day before. Nate set his jaw; if for nothing else, he would save Will just so he could ask him why the hell he'd done what he'd done. He just hoped he wouldn't end up killing Will himself when he heard his answer.

As Nate got ready to walk inside, his four cats started meowing loudly. They could feel the magic of the Tower and seemed to be warning Nate. He sighed and kneeled to pet them.

"I know it's dangerous, but we can do this. The plan is simple. We go in, Meg keeps the fire from burning us, Beth heals our lungs and eyes enough to

allow us to breathe and see. We find Will, and we use the vanishing spell to get out.” He didn’t know who he was kidding. There was no way it could be that simple. “If everything goes to plan, you two won’t even have to do anything.” He smiled at Jo and Amy, petting their heads. Then he stood up, took a deep breath, and walked in.

Chapter Four

Inside the Tower wasn't what Nate expected. Maybe it was because of the scary stories, but he'd assumed everywhere inside would be filled with fire. Compared to that, the reality was much less scary. Of course, Nate could smell the smoke enough to know that without Meg and Beth's magic, he wouldn't live for more than an hour. Still, Nate was surprised to see the inside of the Tower. He'd expected worse.

Upon entering the Tower, there was a narrow hallway that led to a big, round, empty windowless room with a very high ceiling. Fire covering the stone walls created enough light to see the empty room. Despite the smoke, Nate could see a door leading to another room, as well as a staircase. He was willing to bet that Will was on the highest floor of the Tower, because life just seemed to be that much of a bitch lately, so he made straight for the stairs, his cats walking as close to him as possible.

There were a lot of stairs between the two floors. The second floor seemed much like the first, except the fire was more intense. After climbing the many stairs to the third floor (this place was in serious need of an elevator; any other building and he'd be on the sixth floor already), he was marveling at the simplicity of his task when he was met with his first real challenge.

There was a huge animal blocking the stairs to the next floor. It was at least ten times bigger than Nate. Nate suspected that if it stood up, its head would reach the high ceiling. As it was, though, the animal was lying down, lazily leaning its head on its paws and blinking drowsily. When it saw Nate and the four cats, it raised its head in alarm, but didn't move otherwise. Neither did Nate and his cats.

"Really? Well, at least I'm winning a hundred bucks. That is, if I'm not dead first," said Nate under his breath. He stood there for a moment, trying to come up with a way to defeat a dragon by himself. The animal didn't move. It just continued staring at the intruders.

"Jo, Meg, back me up," said Nate, drawing his sword as quietly as he could. The dragon still didn't move. It made Nate feel guilty for planning on attacking it. He didn't want to hurt the animal. Even though he'd always argued with Will that they did exist, he'd mostly done it to disagree with Will. He hadn't really believed they existed. He certainly hadn't expected to ever see one. It was beautiful and glorious. Unfortunately, it was also standing in his way.

As soon as he took a step forward, the dragon fully stood up, made a warning noise, and blew a big fireball in Nate's direction. Nate barely managed to jump out of the fire's way. He ran toward the dragon, dodging another fireball before getting to it. He was hoping the dragon wouldn't move, because while Meg's magic could protect him from fireballs, nothing could save him from being squished under a dragon's giant feet.

Fortunately, the dragon wasn't inclined to move yet. It followed Nate's movements with its eyes, waiting to see what he would do. Nate's first thought was to move past the dragon. If there was a way to avoid going head-to-head with the enormous thing, he would try it. The dragon wasn't having any of it, though. As soon as Nate tried to walk behind it, it lazily moved its leg, blocking Nate's path. Then, with the tiniest movement of its toes, it sent Nate flying back.

Nate got up immediately and decided to try a different approach. He got one of the cooling spells out of his pocket. The spells were kept in small marbles. In order to activate them, they had to be broken. Nate put the spell on the floor and stepped on it, focusing his energy to capture the magic of the spell. Then he threw the magic at the dragon's head, managing to confuse it with the cold blast. The dragon kept shaking its head, trying to get rid of the freezing cold air that had surrounded its head. Nate ran toward the dragon, calling for his cats to follow. Again, he tried to circle the dragon, going for the staircase it was protecting. He had almost made it to the stairs when a particularly strong ball of fire hit him. The fire didn't burn him—Meg had made sure of that—but the force of the fire pushed Nate down on the floor. Before he managed to stand up, he saw the dragon's head right above him. It looked pissed.

The dragon was clearly done playing nice. Nate could only watch as it brought its paw down, intending to squish the creature that had interrupted its afternoon nap. Before its paw made contact, though, a series of large gashes started appearing on its arm, as if made by blades. It drew its paw back, howling in pain. Nate said a silent prayer for Jo; she had saved him by attacking the dragon.

Despite its arm, which was now bleeding, the dragon was determined to not let them pass. It came at Nate again. This time, Nate was ready. He ducked and jumped forward, swinging his sword and hitting the dragon in the leg. The dragon wobbled—backward, much to Nate's relief—but it was still not enough to stop it.

Nate managed to climb three steps when he felt the dragon taking hold of his waist and pulling him up. His feet left the ground, and soon he was face-to-

face with the dragon. The dragon blew fire at him, looking puzzled when it had no effect on Nate. Finally, the animal seemed to get tired of Nate and opened its mouth. Nate looked in horror when he realized that the dragon intended to eat him.

Nate was close enough to smell the smoke on the dragon's breath when it suddenly froze. Nate was held like that for a moment, clutched in the dragon's paw, inches from its teeth. Then the dragon collapsed with a very loud *thud*, shaking the entire place. Nate, safe from the impact of the fall in the Dragon's paw, got up and stepped out of the animal's clutch.

The dragon wasn't dead—Nate could see the smoke that came out of its mouth with every exhale—but it appeared to be unconscious. Nate looked around, wondering what had happened. Jo couldn't just knock people—or dragons—out. She couldn't have done this.

In the silence that followed the fall of the dragon, Nate heard the sound of slithering. He looked around. There was a big snake slowly crawling toward him. Nate backed up, alarmed. Where the hell had *a snake* come from? It must have paralyzed the dragon. If it could take down the huge dragon, God knew what it could do to him and his cats. Nate turned around, shouting for his cats to climb the stairs quickly, when he noticed that there were only three cats looking back at him. He turned back toward the snake, but there was no trace of it. In its place sat his small orange cat.

"Amy, you are a genius!" he said, relieved and more grateful than he could say. He'd been saved, yet again, by one of his cats. Amy, with her magic of shape-shifting and her impeccable talent to know what animal to turn into, had efficiently and effectively defeated the dragon and saved Nate in the process.

Shifting always took a lot of Amy's energy. Now, meowing in front of Nate, she seemed tired and in need of food. Before Nate fed her, though, he needed to know if the dragon would recover. He kind of hoped it would. It would be a shame for such a unique animal to die.

"Did you permanently paralyze him?" he asked Amy. Amy shook her head, telling him that the venom's effect would go away. Nate felt relieved that the damage to the dragon wasn't permanent, but it meant that the dragon would eventually go back to being able to kill them by simply taking a step. He didn't know how long the effect of the venom would last, so he didn't waste any more time. He picked Amy up and went around the dragon to the staircase taking them to the next floor. The other cats followed him.

Once they were safely on the next floor, he fed Amy and the other cats—they were all tired, especially Meg who had been using her magic since they walked into the Tower—and gave them a few minutes to recuperate. After twenty minutes of rest, he stood up, ready to continue his mission. Amy was strong enough to walk on her own by then, and so they climbed the stairs to the fifth floor.

On the next floor, the fire was wilder and there was so much smoke that he couldn't see more than a few steps in front of him. Even though he was trying not to use his magic (he was trying to save his energy so that he could use the vanishing spell as quickly as possible once he found Will), he had no choice but to use it to clear the air around him. He focused on sending the smoke back toward the walls and felt his magic pulsing in the air. After a few minutes, the air had cleared enough for him to see the staircase.

It was a good thing he hadn't tried to find the stairs blindly. The entire room was surrounded by fire, including his way to the next floor. The fire was also blocking the doorway he'd just used to enter the room. The room must have been spelled to trap any intruder inside with fire. It had succeeded. Nate was trapped.

That did not mean he was helpless, of course. He could probably walk through the fire and survive it, but it would take too much of Beth and Meg's energy to protect him from direct fire like that, and he didn't know how much longer he'd need their help. He couldn't take the chance of them running out of energy before he found Will. He had to use his magic to help his cats.

He walked toward the staircase until he was inches away from the fire. He was sweating like crazy and the smoke burned his eyes, causing tears to wet his face. He took out another one of the cooling spells he'd brought with him. The spell wasn't strong enough to cool the fire enough for Nate and his cats to walk through. Nate had to amplify its effect.

He threw the spell into the fire, causing it to turn slightly green. He guided his magic toward it, willing it to cool down more. He waited a few minutes, and when it became cool enough to bear, he and his cats walked straight through it and came out the other side. As soon as they walked out, he stopped using his magic. It had taken all of fifteen seconds, but Nate felt as if he'd been running for ten minutes. He wasn't too tired, not by a long shot, but he decided to take some time so he and his cats could rest and eat something. God knew what they'd have to face on the next floors.

The next two floors turned out to be exactly like the one he'd just passed. Fire would trap them as soon as they walked into the room, and he'd have no choice but to use a cooling spell and charge it with his own magic so he and his cats could safely walk out of the fire. After he'd used his fourth and last cooling spell, he sat down to rest. The magic he'd used was starting to tire him, and he had no time to nap, so he just sat down for a while, ate an energy bar, and drank some water. He also fed his cats again, all of whom looked as tired as he felt. If the next floor was like the previous ones, he'd be screwed. He had no more cooling spells. If he used only his magic without the help of the spell, it'd drain him. He'd have to sleep for hours to gain his energy back, and he didn't want to wait that long before saving Will. He didn't know how many more floors were left. He guessed he was pretty far up, considering how high the ceilings were. There could still be more than a few floors left, though, for all he knew.

After half an hour, he felt well enough to start climbing the stairs, praying he wouldn't have to face yet another fire. To his surprise, the next floor, like the first two, were completely safe, aside from the mild fire covering the walls. It was as if the person who had spelled the Tower counted on any intruder to have died by the dragon or the fire on the previous floors. Whatever the reason, Nate couldn't be more grateful.

The next floor was covered in darkness. There was no fire on the walls to light up the room. Nate felt more nervous by the lack of fire, even though his eyes had finally stopped burning and he could breathe easier. He used his magic to make some light, enough to see the room. His jaw dropped at what he saw. It wasn't empty like the floors below. There were kitchen cabinets, a refrigerator, an oven, and even a microwave in one section of the room. He could see a dirty plate on the cabinet next to the sink. In another section was a sofa and a TV. He could see some DVDs on the floor next to it. Another part of the room was shaped like a study, with a chair, a desk with a laptop on it, and several shelves filled with books. There was also a section that clearly worked as the bedroom. There was a dresser with a mirror on it; there was a poster of the ocean on the wall beside it; there was a nightstand, and there was a bed. The bed was occupied.

Chapter Five

“What now? Isn’t it enough that I’ve had to do fire control all day?”

The woman who was getting out of bed—apparently she was woken up by the light Nate had made—was maybe in her mid-twenties. She was short and thin, with long blonde hair that was sticking out every which way. She was wearing pink pajama bottoms and a white T-shirt with a picture of Garfield on it. She looked cute. She also looked pissed and was still quietly fuming. Nate kept staring at her in shock. In no scenario had he imagined running into another person. He had definitely not thought of the Tower as someone’s home.

When she saw Nate, she narrowed her eyes and took a step toward him. When Nate started to take a step as well, she raised her hand slightly, and suddenly Nate felt himself unable to move a single part of his body. He was glued to the floor.

“Who are you? What do you want?” she asked suspiciously.

If Nate could have rolled his eyes, he would have. Why was she asking him questions when she had made sure he couldn’t move his lips to talk?

“Oh, right,” she said, seeming to suddenly realize that Nate wasn’t able to talk. She brought her hand down a little, and suddenly Nate could move his head and face. Everything below his neck remained as still as a statue.

“My name is Nate. I don’t mean any harm. I’m looking for my friend,” he managed to say.

She contemplated him for a minute. She must have believed him because she dropped her hand, and with it, the force keeping Nate from moving.

“Do you... Do you live here?” he asked hesitantly, after he’d recovered enough to be able to form a question.

“I do. How the hell did you get up here? Oh my God, are those your cats?” As soon as the woman saw Nate’s cats, she seemed to forget about her anger and suspicion. She sat down in front of Jo, bringing her hand forward to pat her head. Jo hissed and glowered at her. The woman ignored Jo’s hiss and went right on petting her, scratching behind her ears. Not only did Jo not harm her, but after a while she purred, seeming to enjoy herself. Nate was still gaping at the scene before him when the admittedly weird woman moved on to Beth, who was eagerly waiting to be petted.

“What the... Who the hell are you?”

The woman turned to him and blinked, looking as though she'd forgotten all about his presence. She stood up and kept on looking at him for a while, evaluating him. Then she said, “I'm Kitty. I live here. How did you get up here?” Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she narrowed her eyes and looked at him furiously. “How did you get past Sebastian? You'd better not have hurt him, or you'll wish you'd just let him eat you and had it over with.”

“Sebastian? You can't mean... Do you mean the dragon?” The situation was getting more and more ridiculous by the second. Nate was actually having a hard time not laughing at the woman with a cat obsession who talked about a dragon like a mother talking about her kid. He might've laughed if he didn't think Kitty would dismember him for it.

“Of course I mean the dragon; who else? What did you do to him?” She was getting red in the face, and her eyes were gleaming dangerously. Nate raised his hands to calm her down.

“I didn't kill him.”

“I know you didn't kill him, idiot. I would've felt it if you had.”

“Oh. Well, I didn't harm him either. I'm sure he's okay.” Nate tried to sound more confident than he felt. He didn't know how long it would take a dragon's immune system to fight off a snake's paralyzing venom.

“You better hope he is,” she said, walking to the nightstand next to her bed. There was a small crystal ball on the nightstand, and she put her hand on it and closed her eyes. After a few seconds she opened her eyes again, surprised.

“He's actually fine. How is that possible? Why would he let you pass?”

“Um... He didn't really have a choice. We paralyzed him.”

“You did *what*?”

“Temporarily. We paralyzed him temporarily. Only enough to get past him without him squishing us,” Nate added hurriedly.

Kitty seemed to consider hurting him anyway, but decided against it. Instead she walked to the kitchen and filled a bowl with cereal, adding some milk from the fridge to it. She paused, looking at him hesitantly, then said, “Want some?”

“No, thanks,” said Nate. “I'm actually looking for someone. I have to find him as soon as possible.”

“Oh, the guy I took in last night? Tall, black hair, really hot?”

“That would be him.”

“He’s been a real inconvenience. I don’t know why he hasn’t died yet. The entire tower smells like smoke, and I don’t like walking in fire, so I haven’t fed Sebastian the whole day.”

So that was why the dragon was ready to eat Nate. It figured.

“You’re waiting for him to *die*? Why not take him out of the Tower?”

“Well, I brought him up here. Taking him outside would kind of defeat the purpose, don’t you think?”

“You’re the one who kidnapped him? Why the hell would you want him dead?”

“Oh, I don’t want him dead, and I definitely didn’t kidnap him. I don’t care about him one way or the other. It was my job to bring him to the top of the Tower, and that’s what I did.”

“Someone paid you to do that?” Nate’s head was spinning. “Why?”

Kitty shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care. Someone brought the hottie here, told me to get him up the Tower, wrote me a check, and left.”

“You’re kidding me! He wrote you a check? Can I see it?”

“Why would I get a good customer in trouble?”

“Customer? He’s a kidnapper and a murderer. Oh wait; he’s not the actual murderer. That part would go to you.”

Kitty looked at him with annoyance. “What I do and why I do it is my business. I really don’t care about you judging me. If you want to save your friend, go ahead. The sooner he’s outta here, the sooner the fire will go out. He’s upstairs.”

Nate could not believe what was happening. “You’re just going to let me get him out? I thought you were paid to kill him.”

“No, I was paid to get him up the Tower, and I did that. I’m not gonna go through the trouble of stopping you. If you managed to get past Seb, the fire, and get up here, I say you deserve to get to your friend. But I’ll be watching you on the way out. If you so much as lay a hand on Seb, you’ll be dead. Oh, and there’s a spell that stops intruders from getting out of the door of the Tower. You’ll have to break it.”

It was clear she didn't think Nate could break the spell on the door. Nate wasn't worried about it, though. He had the vanishing spell. He walked to the staircase, finding it hard to believe he'd actually done it. He also couldn't believe the woman who had taken Will up the Tower, knowing he'd die in it, was letting Nate save him without trying to stop him. The woman was an enigma.

"Who are you?" Nate asked, looking back at Kitty from the staircase. "You're a mage, but I've never seen you before. How long have you lived here?"

The woman smiled at him, looking amused. "I'm not a mage, dear. I'm a witch. And I've been living here for over two centuries."

Nate stared at her, not sure if he should believe her. He'd only heard of witches in old stories and legends. They were supposedly incredibly powerful. They were also immortal. There was something about Kitty, though, despite her youthful and cute appearance, that made Nate believe her. He took one last look at the strange woman quietly eating her cereal, and then started climbing the stairs, his cats close behind him. It was time to get Will out of here.

Chapter Six

Nate didn't know why, but he'd expected to find Will comfortably abed in a room similar to the previous floor where Kitty lived. He realized his mistake halfway up the stairs. It was as though the smoke suddenly appeared out of nowhere. One second he was breathing clean air, and the next he could barely see anything around him but smoke. Kitty must have used magic to keep the smoke away from her living quarters. It made sense that Will was in a room filled with fire, of course. She'd brought Will up here to die, not rest.

The last floor seemed to be exactly what Nate had imagined inside the Tower would be like before entering it. The doorway was completely covered in fire. He could not see anything inside the room except the deadly flames. He brought the vanishing spell out of his bag, keeping it ready to use as soon as he got to Will. Then he looked at his cats.

"This is it. Meg, Beth, use all your energy to keep us from the fire. If we do this, I swear I won't ask anything from you for a month."

He received a meow from Beth and a wink from Meg. Then he walked inside.

The room was hot, and he started feeling nauseous immediately. He was also having trouble seeing anything but the flames. Meg was doing a good job of stopping the fire from blinding him, but there wasn't anything his cats could do to allow him to see through the fire. That didn't mean they were useless, though. Amy immediately turned into a dog, without Nate having to tell her. She knew Will's smell from all the time Will had spent at Nate's house. She started walking forward, and Nate hurried after her. Soon she stopped and barked. Nate reached out his hand, but there didn't seem to be anything in front of him. He looked at Amy, who was looking down. Nate bent and reached forward again. This time his hand touched what was undoubtedly an arm. He was filled with relief. He'd done it. He'd found Will.

He didn't waste any more time. He told his cats, including Amy who looked like a cat again, to hold onto him and gripped Will's arm. With his other hand, he broke the marble containing the spell and closed his eyes. The vanishing spell had not only been hard to make, but it also required a lot of strength to use. Nate focused on his magic and tried to imagine them all standing next to his car. It took a few minutes before he felt the autumn breeze on his skin, indicating they were no longer surrounded by fire. He opened his eyes. The sun

was low in the sky, indicating they had been inside the Tower for a few hours, though it felt like less. It was light. He could see his car parked on the side of the road. He could also see the man whose arm he was gripping as though his life depended on it.

Will was dirty and naked, his clothes ruined by the fire, his body covered in soot. He was unconscious. Nate could see the reason for that on Will's forehead, where blood had trickled from his hair down his face. Whoever kidnapped him must have hit him hard in the head to knock him out. He was breathing, though. That was all Nate needed to know. It was less than a half hour drive to the city. Despite his tiredness from using the vanishing spell, he was determined to get Will to a hospital before he did any form of resting.

His weakened body made it difficult to carry Will to the car, but he used every bit of energy he had to get him to the front seat and fasten his seat belt. He helped his cats to the backseat and then filled their food containers (he'd learned to carry cat food and containers in his car years ago) so they could eat while he drove. Beth and Meg were too tired to even walk, and Amy and Jo were just slightly better. The rescue mission had taken a bigger toll on his cats than on him.

He was about to sit in the driver seat when he noticed something on the windshield. It was an envelope. He opened it and took out a letter. It was from Zachary:

Nate,

If you have managed to save the prince, I need you to hide him and keep him alive. The Northerners attacked us not an hour after you left. They seemed to have inside information of our strategies, and the war is getting out of hand. Someone is trying to kill the princes, though we have yet to find out who they are. Prince David has been poisoned, and we do not know if he will survive. Christopher has gone crazy with rage and wouldn't agree to sit out of the war no matter how much his father and I pleaded with him. If the worst happens, and we lose David and Christopher, Will needs to be kept alive and safe. If whoever kidnapped Will catches wind of him being alive, they'll send people to hunt you down. You can stay at my cabin outside the city. It is protected by magic and can only be entered with one key. I will put the key inside this envelope and have Bo deliver it to you. Don't leave the house. We don't know

how, but word has spread about your mission to save the prince. If they see you alive, they will start looking for Will, and my cabin's magic, though strong, is not unconquerable. Be safe.

Zachary

Nate read the letter twice before folding it and putting it in his pocket. God, he'd been gone for less than four hours and already a war had started and David had been injured. What was worse, someone on their side was feeding information to their enemy. Zachary was right. Nate had to keep Will from going back to town. It wasn't going to be easy to convince Will, especially when Nate was itching to join the war himself. Still, Zachary had taken the time to write him a letter and have Bo, his familiar, deliver it to him even though he had no way of knowing if Nate would succeed in saving Will. He and Zachary might not always agree, but they trusted each other. If Zachary thought the best course of action was for them to stay hidden, that's what they'd do, even if Nate had to use magic to keep Will from leaving the house. To be honest, he would probably welcome the chance to throw a punch or two at Will.

Of course, it all depended on Will's condition. Nate didn't know how bad Will's head wound was, or how well the protective spell had protected him from the fire. He had brought a healing spell with him. He could try to use his own magic on it, but healing spells usually couldn't be amplified much. If Will didn't wake up even after using the spell, Nate would have no choice but to take him to the city.

Nate sat in the car and started driving. He'd been to Zachary's cabin before and knew the way. It wasn't too far from where they were. He'd use the spell and then wait an hour for Will to wake up. He could use the rest himself.

Zachary's cabin was small and charming. Zachary usually used it when he was trying to come up with a new spell or when he was experimenting with new magical stuff. Nate had been there once when he and Zachary were trying to create an accuracy spell for their archers' arrows. It looked like any other cabin, but Nate could feel the magic surrounding it, protecting it from unwanted intruders. He used the key Zachary had sent to him and opened the door, leaving it ajar for his cats to go in and going back to the car to bring Will inside. He was covered in sweat when he finally dropped Will on the floor just inside the cabin. He closed the door and sat down next to Will, breathing heavily. He had to start training again. He was a freaking warrior. The two

months of barely even making it to the gym had affected his strength. Even tired from the magic like he was, it shouldn't be this hard to carry Will the few steps it took to get from the car to the cabin.

He reached out his hand and ran his fingers through Will's short black hair. He'd always wanted to do that. He stayed like that for a few minutes, catching his breath and patting Will's head. He was beyond grateful that Will was alive. At that moment, their arguments and Will's betrayal didn't matter.

Nate had first met Will in college. Nate had been the weird boy who had applied to the Warriors' Camp even though he had magical skills and was a member of the Wizards' Guild. Warriors weren't too fond of magic. They saw it as a way to cheat in physical fights. Nate's classmates shared that opinion for the most part, so they either avoided him or tried to rough him up in hand-to-hand training. At first, Nate tried to stick to the rules and not use magic in his fights, but then he started to see how everyone used their advantages to gain the upper hand, whether it was their intelligence or their size. At six feet tall and 170 pounds, Nate was smaller than most of his classmates. On top of that, everyone seemed to take special pleasure in beating the shit out of him. It just seemed unfair that he was expected to ignore his advantage, while everyone else used their own. After a while, he'd had enough of getting beaten up, and he decided that no matter what the rules were, he would use all his skills to become a great warrior, including magic. After that, he never lost another fight, until he met Will.

In the third month of training, he had his first fencing class. Will, who was a couple of years older than Nate, was their instructor and the person who supervised their training. Fencing was something Nate was really good at even without using magic, but with its help, he was invincible. Not a month into their fencing class, complaints were being filed about Nate's use of magic and how that made him impossible to beat. Nate was expecting to be called to the Commander's office (he'd been there so many times he actually had a favorite chair), when one day Will gathered them around and beckoned Nate forward. He told Nate to get ready to face him and to do his best. Nate was not sure what to do. He considered not using magic in order to avoid trouble, but immediately discarded the idea. He had never hid his use of magic from his instructors. The reason he hadn't been kicked out of the school yet was the Commander's fondness for him, which was a mystery in itself. He would not pretend that magic wasn't a big part of his excellence in fencing. When he beat Will, even he would have to admit that Nate's methods, however unorthodox, were effective.

That did not turn out to be the case. He did his best, and he used magic a lot more than he usually did when fencing with his classmates. None of it seemed to matter. It took Will less than fifteen minutes to beat him. After Will had Nate on the floor with his sword pointed at Nate's heart, he reached a hand to help Nate get up, before offering a grin.

“Good job. You need to work on the strength of your sword arm.”

Then he turned to the rest of the class, who looked dumbfounded. “The fact that none of you managed to beat Nate doesn't mean he is invincible. It just means you suck. I suggest you use the time you waste on complaints to practice more.” That was the first time Will had stood up for Nate, and he didn't even know him at the time.

All through camp and then the Warrior's Training, Nate had continued getting into trouble with his total disregard for rules against using magic, and Will had been the one to come up with excuses to get Nate off the hook. When Will was selected as the head of the warriors two years ago, he'd sat Nate down and asked him to stop making so much trouble because as the one in charge, Will couldn't treat Nate differently than the other warriors. However, he did exactly that when Nate used magic in the middle of fencing training not a week after their talk. He just laughed and shook his head, not even acknowledging Nate's rule breaking. There were lots of protests from the other warriors, who complained about Nate's unfair advantage. Will killed their protests by saying, “He's using all the skills he has. Do you think your enemies won't do the same? What if you have to fight warrior mages like Nate? You can't make *them* stop using magic to kick your asses now, can you?” The warriors stopped complaining after that, at least where Will could hear.

Thinking back on all the times Will had had his back against all reason brought a smile to Nate's face. He'd known how he felt about Will for years, just like he'd known there was nothing he could do about it. He thought he'd made peace with it. But then Will had brought up marriage, and Nate had felt like he was losing Will, so he'd snapped. He'd learned his lesson, though. He couldn't begrudge Will his happiness with someone else just because he could never have that himself. He could, however, be pissed that Will had actively tried to hurt him by taking his cats from him. Being pissed was better than being worried.

He stood up and carried Will to the couch, before finding a blanket in the bedroom closet and covering him with it. Then he felt Will's head for the injury and found a bump on the top of his head. This couldn't be good. He went for

his bag and took out an energy bar, ate it to gain back some of the strength he had lost when he used the vanishing spell, and then brought the marble of the healing spell to Will. Praying the spell was enough to heal Will, he broke the marble and concentrated on increasing its effect. His magic did little to help, but it was better than nothing. After he'd used the last of his magic on the spell, he sent it toward Will.

He'd decided to wait an hour before trying to wake Will. He settled on the ground, too tired to even walk to the bedroom. He looked around for an alarm clock—in Zachary's cabin, much like Nate's workplace, there were a bunch of alarm clocks in all the rooms to use while making spells. He soon found one on the coffee table, set it for one hour, and went to sleep.

Nate gently touched Will's shoulder and called his name twice before Will opened his eyes.

"Nate?" he asked hoarsely, looking confused. Nate couldn't help but smile. He was so relieved. In that moment, he didn't care about what Will had done.

"Yeah, it's me. How are you feeling?"

"Um... okay, I guess," he said before sitting up and looking around. Then he raised his hand and touched his head, wincing. "My head hurts. What happened? Where are we?" He wasn't very alert.

"We're at Zachary's cabin. And you were hit on the head."

"Hit? When?" He looked at Nate confusedly for a second, and then his eyes grew wide as he remembered.

"The Northerners. The attack. Why are we here? We should have a meeting to brief all the other warriors." He was trying to get up, not caring that Nate was trying to keep him down.

"Will, calm down. Just sit and I will explain."

Will, who had noticed his own nakedness in the process of getting up, sat back down, covered himself with the blanket again, and arched an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, an explanation would be good. Why am I so dirty anyway?"

"Because you were in a burning room for almost eighteen hours."

Will looked at him expectantly. "I don't understand."

Nate sighed and sat down next to Will on the couch. "What is the last thing you remember?"

Will frowned. “We had a meeting about the imminent war. The meeting lasted until midnight. We decided to brief everyone the next day. I was coming to your house, to talk to you. On the way I ran into Sarah. She wanted to talk, but I wasn’t really in the mood, so I told her we’d talk another time and walked away.” He hesitated a moment, frowning deeper, then looked back at Nate. “I don’t remember anything after that.”

Nate was taken aback. “Sarah?” It didn’t add up. Sarah was the petite, young mage Will had started dating less than two months ago. Nate had never met her, but he hated her on principle. That didn’t mean he’d thought she was capable of kidnapping Will, trying to have him killed, and feeding information to the enemy. How would she even know about their war strategies? Only the warriors knew that information.

“Yes, Sarah. Nate, what the hell is going on?” Will was getting fed up with him and it showed. Nate started explaining; he told him about how he was kidnapped and taken into the Tower of Fire, but survived because of the protective magic Nate had put in his tattoo ink. He told him how David was certain his kidnapping was done as a distraction by the Northerners who planned to attack that day, and how he’d asked Nate to go after Will. He told him about Sebastian the Dragon and Kitty the Witch and about Zachary’s letter. Will listened silently until Nate finished his story before declaring, “We’re going back to the city.”

“The hell we are. Did you even listen to me? You have to stay hidden.”

“You don’t have to come with me, but I’m going back. You can’t stop me.”

He stood up and, reminded of his naked state, turned to Nate. “I need some clothes.”

Nate stood up as well, ready to do whatever it took to get Will to stay in the safety of the cabin. He’d try reasoning first. Will was stubborn, but he was also reasonable.

“Will, please. Zachary is right. Can you imagine the state our country would be in if it tried to deal with the casualties of a war with a sick king and no princes? Your father won’t live for much longer. What will happen when he’s gone?”

“Quinn will be king. He’s no David, but then again, neither am I. Quinn can be as good a king as I can. So can the rest of my cousins, for that matter.”

“It won’t be the same and you know it. People know you and they trust you. They can accept you as king a lot easier than any of your cousins, even Quinn.”

“Maybe, but that all depends on us winning this war. I won’t hide here like a coward while my brother and my friends fight, not if I can do anything to help.”

Will walked to the bedroom, looking for clothes. He opened the drawer and pulled out a T-shirt that was at least two sizes too small. Frustrated, he threw the T-shirt on the bed and searched the drawer again until he pulled out an old gray T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants that seemed like they would fit him and started getting dressed despite the fact that he was dirty and still smelled like smoke. Nate just watched him quietly from the doorway, waiting until he was clothed before continuing the argument. Once Will was clothed in the admittedly tight T-shirt and sweatpants, he paused a moment, looking at Nate. Nate walked up to him and placed his hands on Will’s shoulders.

“I know you want to help. Trust me, I get it. I want to be there as much as you do. But you’re a prince. You don’t just get to do what you want. You have to think of what’s best for your country. They’ve already tried to get rid of you once.”

“Look, you saved me, and I’m thankful for that. But my brothers need me, Nate. David might not live. I can’t just wait here for him to die,” Will said pleadingly. He knew Nate was right, but the urge to help on the front line was fighting against his common sense.

“Will, your brother would want you to stay safe; you know that. I know it’s hard, but you have to think of your country before your family. That’s what David wants you to do.”

Will looked at Nate. Nate looked back into his eyes, willing him to understand. Finally, Will sighed in defeat.

“What about you? I can tell you want to go. I don’t expect you to stay here for me.”

“You don’t have to. I already have my orders.”

“Since when do you care about orders?” asked Will.

“Since I agree with them. I won’t do anything to jeopardize your life, no matter how much I want to be in the field. Your safety is more important.”

“Because I could end up being the only living son of King Henry?” asked Will bitterly.

“Yeah. That and I don’t think I could bear it if something happened to you.”

Will looked surprised by Nate's admission. He stared at Nate for a minute. Nate didn't say anything. He just looked back, trying to make Will see that he meant what he'd said, despite everything. Forgiveness happened a lot easier when you got that close to losing the person you were angry with. It also helped that, feeling betrayed or not, Nate was madly in love with Will.

That didn't mean Nate wasn't expecting an explanation for Will's actions. Will didn't make him wait long.

"Nate, I never meant to hurt you by trying to steal your cats," said Will gently. "I know how much they mean to you, and I knew you were running out of time. So I thought if they were stolen, you wouldn't have to give them to the Council. I would wait until you found a way to keep them, and then I would return them to you." Will shrugged sheepishly. "Of course, I had underestimated them. They did *not* want to be stolen."

Nate digested what Will had just told him. He should have known Will would never try to hurt him. Like always, Will had been trying to help. If anyone had found out what he'd planned to do, Will would be in a lot of trouble with the Wizards' Council, but it hadn't stopped him from doing it, despite his less than friendly relationship with Nate in the past two months. Nate felt ashamed for having doubted Will.

"It was a great plan," he said sincerely. "I'm sorry I got so mad. I shouldn't have doubted you."

"It's okay," said Will with a gentle smile. "I know how it must have looked to you."

Nate smiled back. Then he remembered his conversation with Peter. "There's something else," he said. "Did you really plan to let the Council kick me out?"

"What?" asked Will, surprised. "I would never let them do that. You know I wouldn't," he said, narrowing his eyes. "What made you think I would?"

"Peter said there was something about it in the *Warrior*—"

"You believed something *Peter* said over *me*?" asked Will in outrage. He was clearly pissed at Nate.

"Not exactly. I was going to ask you about it, but then I heard you tell Quinn that you were going to let them have the meeting and that I deserved it..." Nate shrugged.

“I was angry when I said those things. And yes, I was going to let them have a meeting. I’m sick of them trying to kick you out every time they get bored. I thought I’d let them discuss all their problems with you being a warrior, and then make them understand once and for all that warriors have to stand up for each other, not blame each other for their own shortcomings.”

Nate shook his head at his own stupidity. Now that he was actually talking to Will, he was having a hard time believing he had let himself doubt Will. Will had never let Nate down, and he never would.

Nate smiled easily. It felt good to have everything out in the open. Being mad at Will had been one of the hardest things he had ever done.

“Well, in that case, I can now say with sincerity that I’m glad I saved you,” said Nate teasingly.

Will grinned back. “Good to know,” he said, sitting on the bed. “So now what?”

“Now, we wait. In the meantime, I think it would be a good idea for you to take a shower, don’t you?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t bring your phone,” said Will. They were eating the sandwiches Nate had made while Will was in the shower. It was a good thing the cabin’s fridge was stocked. They were both starving.

“Your life was in danger. I wasn’t thinking past getting you out of the Tower. There’s no reception in the cabin anyway. Too much magic.”

“It would have been worth the risk of going out for a few minutes to get information about what is going on.”

“No, it wouldn’t have. It’s not necessary, though. We have something better than a cell phone. We have Amy.”

“Your cat Amy? What was her superpower again?”

Nate raised his eyebrows. “Superpower? What are you, twelve?”

Will rolled his eyes. “Skill. Whatever. The concept is the same.”

“If you say so,” said Nate, trying to keep a straight face. Will’s lack of magic knowledge never failed to amuse him. “She can shape-shift.”

“See? Superpower.” Will grinned. He was getting back to his normal self.

Nate laughed at Will's attempt at humor. It was good to see him playful. "I'll have her deliver a letter to Zachary tomorrow when she wakes up. I have to tell him about Sarah."

Will's laughter faded from his face. "Sarah's not the traitor."

"But you said—"

"That she was the person I was talking to before I was knocked out. That doesn't mean she tried to kidnap me."

"I know you don't want to believe she could do this, but she was right there. And she went into hiding after she took you to the Tower. That's why no one could find her this morning. It has to be her."

"Why would she hide when no one even knew she'd seen me last night? I'm telling you, Nate, she has nothing to do with this."

"Why? Because she's your girlfriend? You've known her less than two months. As much as you like her, you don't know her all that well."

"She's not my girlfriend," said Will quietly, looking at his food. "You're right. I don't know her well. I barely know her at all. But my brother does, and I trust his judgment."

"Why would your brother know her better than you? You're the one dating her."

"We may have gone on a couple of dates, but Christopher's spent a lot more time with her than I have, and he trusts her."

"I don't get it."

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that she didn't do it. Besides, she's a mage. She doesn't have access to the kind of information she'd need if she were to help our enemy."

Nate was certainly not convinced, but he decided to let it rest for now. He was still determined to write to Zachary about Sarah. Even if Will was right, it was still worth looking into. The Northerners didn't have enough soldiers to last even a day against their many skilled warriors and powerful mages. The only reason they were able to cause trouble at all was because of the information they had. That meant finding the traitor was their number one priority. If there was even a small chance Sarah was, or knew about, the traitor, Zachary had to be informed. That didn't mean he had to continue arguing about it with Will. He was tired and too happy to have Will back.

Guessing the reason behind Nate's silence, Will changed the subject.

"So, tell me about this witch you met. Was she hot?"

Nate grinned. "She was hot, all right. I don't think I've ever met anyone scarier."

"Hot *and* dangerous! You should've asked her out."

"Yeah, I was afraid if I did something to annoy her on our date, she'd feed me to her dragon. Speaking of which, you owe me a hundred bucks."

"Right. I can't believe they actually exist. I can't believe you *saw* one. I am so jealous."

"You should be. It was glorious."

They grinned at each other like idiots for a few seconds. Despite everything that was happening, Nate couldn't be happier to have Will back. Will's thoughts seemed to be along the same line, because he said, "I'm glad we're talking again."

"Me, too. I'm sorry I was such a jerk that day," said Nate, talking about their fight two months ago. "It wasn't my place to judge."

"Yeah, well, it's not all on you. If I wasn't so stubborn, we would've made up weeks ago. And I'm sorry I made you think I was going to let them kick you out."

"You're not the one who has to apologize for that."

"I'd spent two hours in a meeting, trying to get the rest of the council to stop joking around and listen to me. They weren't taking the war seriously. Even Quinn seemed to agree with them. It was pretty frustrating."

"Man, I wish I had been there. I would've put a silence spell on them. They would've been so mad. I guess that's one of the reasons they never let me join the council."

"Probably. The problem was, I kept thinking the same thing during the meeting. I was so annoyed I kept imagining you using all sorts of spells to shut them up. Guess it reminded me of how much I missed you. Yet another reason for my bad mood."

Nate felt all warm inside from Will's admission. He tried to brush it off. "Aw! That's almost sweet. You missed me. I mean, you missed my ability to shut up the people around you, but still. I'm flattered. Kind of."

“You dork,” said Will fondly. “For a smart guy, you’re pretty stupid, you know that?”

“Wow, the compliments are piling up,” said Nate dryly. “As much as I love to know what you’ll come up with next, I’m beat. You don’t think you have a concussion, do you?”

“Nope. I’m actually feeling okay. My head hurts a little, but it’s not too bad.” In camp and training, they’d learned all about concussions. Will would know if he was concussed. Thank God he wasn’t. Nate badly needed a good night’s sleep. He was used to sleeping for hours after intense magic use, and the one-hour nap had not been enough.

“Look in the cabinet above the sink. There may be painkillers there. You take the bed. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“You don’t have to sleep on the couch, you know. The bed’s pretty big.”

Sharing a bed with Will was not going to happen. Nate wasn’t that big of a masochist. “Thanks, but I’ll stick to the couch. You snore.”

“I don’t snore, but as you wish. I’ll just say ‘I told you so’ when you’re all stiff tomorrow.”

Nate started to open his mouth, but Will knew him too well. “Do *not* make a joke. God, you are so immature.”

Nate just laughed and walked to the couch. Things could definitely be worse.

Chapter Seven

The next morning, Nate wrote a letter to Zachary, informing him that they were alive and safe in Zachary's cabin, as well as telling him about Will's encounter with Sarah before he was kidnapped. He made sure to mention Will's certainty of Sarah's innocence. He might be jealous of Sarah, but he knew better than to dismiss Will's gut feelings. A well-rested and fed Amy was ready to deliver his letter. She shifted into a pigeon and waited for Nate to attach the letter to her leg before jumping out of the window and flying toward the city.

Nate had just started making breakfast when a disheveled Will walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning, sunshine!" said Nate cheerfully. Will, the inherent morning person, was usually the one annoying Nate with his energetic greetings in the morning. It was his turn to annoy Will.

Will grumbled, walking straight to the medicine cabinet and downing two pills with water from the sink. Then he sat down on a chair behind the small dining table, holding his head with both hands. Nate walked to him worriedly.

"How bad is it? Do you need a doctor?"

"It's a headache, Nate. It needs rest and pain meds, not a doctor," snapped Will. Nate didn't say anything, just stood next to him, his hand on Will's shoulder. Finally, Will sighed and said, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Nate assured him. "Why don't you go lie down on the couch, give the meds time to kick in? I'll make breakfast. We can watch TV while we eat. We can catch up with what's going on before Amy comes back."

Will, who seemed to just then remember they could watch the general news on TV, walked out of the kitchen without another word. Nate went back to making breakfast. As much as he wanted to know what was going on outside the safety of the cabin, he preferred to hear the news from Zachary.

They ate breakfast in silence, Nate focusing on his breakfast and Will focusing on the TV. The news was disturbing. He didn't know how that much damage could be done in less than one day. It looked like wherever their warriors had planned to camp, they'd been attacked by an army waiting for them. The newscaster stated David's condition as critical. Nate looked at Will. He had barely touched his breakfast.

“Don’t torture yourself, Will. He wants you to be here.”

Will sighed and turned off the TV before turning to Nate.

“I just wish I could see him.”

“I know,” said Nate sympathetically. He didn’t know what else to say. He’d never been in Will’s situation. He’d never had a family member in critical condition when he couldn’t get to them. When Nate’s father had passed away, he’d spent his father’s last days in the hospital with him. He couldn’t imagine what Will was going through.

After they finished eating, Will washed the dishes while Nate took a shower and shaved. When Nate was out of the shower and in Zachary’s clothes (luckily for him, he and Zachary were about the same size), they sat down, and Nate went over the events since Will’s kidnapping one more time, while he listened carefully.

“So here’s what we know. Someone wants the Northerners to take over our country badly enough to betray us. They have enough information about our military to cause some serious problems, which means our traitor is probably a warrior. They kidnapped me and took me to the Tower of Fire, hoping David would order all our mages to save me at exactly the time the Northerners had planned to attack. Maybe if David had done that, they could have had a chance of winning this war, but with our mages protecting us against firearms, there is no way they can defeat us, even with the information they were given. They don’t have enough man power. So why keep feeding them information? Why hurt David?”

Nate shook his head. He had thought about all this before and hadn’t come up with an answer. It just didn’t make sense.

The sound of Amy knocking on the window with her beak had Nate jumping out of his seat and opening the window to let her in. Will frowned.

“I thought no one could come into this cabin without the key.”

“They can’t, as long as they are human. The magic doesn’t work on animals,” said Nate distractedly as he freed a letter from Amy’s leg, allowing her to turn back into a cat before going to her food container. He opened Zachary’s letter and read out loud.

Nate,

I’m glad you are both fine and in hiding. I’m counting on you to remain that way. Things are quite hectic around here.

The Warriors' Council members, under the leadership of Christopher, spent all of last night coming up with new strategies, and they set off for the northern borders this morning. Hopefully, with the new plans, we will end this war soon.

David woke up just twenty minutes ago. The doctors are monitoring him for complications, but they are hopeful. We don't plan on releasing that information yet. Whoever tried to kill him doesn't need to know he is alive. The king is doing the best he can, but it's taking a lot of energy out of him. If the war goes on much longer, Christopher will have no choice but to return to the city and take on his father's duties.

As for Sarah, Christopher sent a group to look for her all of last night, but they were not successful. He seems to agree with Will. If anything, he is quite worried about her. I will send more people to look for her. We can't just ignore that she was there when Will was taken. Either she is our traitor, or she was taken along with Will. I assume you didn't find her in the Tower?

Take care of yourselves and check in every day. With Christopher in the battle and David barely awake, I would welcome any decisions Will makes. I may be the head of the Wizards' Council, but at the end of the day, I am just a mage. Tell him to send me his orders as soon as possible.

Zachary

Nate was frowning after reading the letter. Will looked unsure. After a moment, he said, "Looks like David is going to make it."

Nate summoned a smile. He knew how worried Will had been, even though he'd tried not to show it. "Yes, thank God."

"What's wrong?" Will asked after a few more seconds of silence.

"Sarah..." started Nate, not knowing how to continue.

"Not that again! I thought we established she was not the traitor."

"No, *you* established that. I just went along with it because I didn't want to argue."

"For the hundredth time, Nate, she has nothing to do with this."

"She's the best suspect we have. She's the *only* suspect we have!"

“She’s not a suspect at all,” said Will exasperatedly.

“How can you be so sure?” Will’s stubbornness was really annoying Nate. Why couldn’t he just admit that there was a chance Sarah could be the one behind all this?

“I just am,” said Will, as if that was perfectly reasonable.

“God! What is it about her that makes her so fucking special?” Nate was getting mad. As much as he didn’t want to be a jealous prick, he didn’t know why Will was so certain that Sarah wasn’t the one behind the kidnapping. Unless... he couldn’t be in love with her, could he? That would certainly explain him defending her.

Nate was determined not to show how much the answer to his next question mattered to him. He tried to calm down and sound casual when he asked, “Do you love her? Is that what this is about?”

“No, it’s not,” said Will, rolling his eyes. “God, Nate, were you even present for that God-awful fight we had two months ago?”

Despite Nate’s resolve, he felt himself get worked up again.

“You mean the fight when you went on and on about your inability to love?”

“I mean the one with you condemning me for not being able to love a girl.”

Nate froze. “What?”

Will froze as well. He clearly hadn’t planned on saying what he said. He looked at Nate with hesitant eyes for a few seconds before looking down. Then, he shrugged and looked back up, determined.

“You heard me. I don’t know how you failed to notice this long. I wasn’t exactly subtle about it last time.”

“Will,” said Nate finally. “Are you saying...” He couldn’t bring himself to finish his sentence.

“That I’m gay? Yeah, that’s what I’m saying.”

Nate exhaled a breath he hadn’t been aware he was holding. All this time, he’d never even suspected. Will had never looked at a guy with wanting eyes. He hadn’t been a player, but he’d dated his fair share of girls, though none of them for long. He’d always seemed into girls. If Nate had known... No, it wouldn’t have changed anything. Just because Will was gay it didn’t mean he wanted Nate. Still, Nate didn’t know why Will hadn’t told him the truth sooner.

“You don’t have to say anything, but you can stop looking at me like that. I’m not gonna bite, you know.”

That got Nate out of his thoughts. God, he was acting like an asshole.

“Sorry. I was just wondering why you didn’t tell me sooner. We’ve known each other for eight years. Did you think I would judge you? There are a lot of gay people out there, living openly. It’s not as big a deal as it used to be. Did you really think I’m that much of a jerk?” Okay, so maybe Nate was a bit hurt. He was also a huge hypocrite, but he would think about that later.

“I didn’t tell anybody. Christopher’s the only one who knows. Nate, I’m a prince. I’m expected to marry a nice girl and have a couple of nice kids. There was no point in telling anyone, because I simply *can’t* be gay. I’d made my peace with it until you challenged all the fucked up things I’d spent so much time trying to accept. You were right, of course, but God I wanted to punch you for saying those things.”

Will sounded so sad and resigned that Nate couldn’t stay angry at him anymore. Will shouldn’t have to hide himself just because he was a prince. He spent all his time serving his country. You’d think people would be more supportive of him because of that, but that simply wasn’t the case, and it would stay that way until someone changed it.

“You don’t have to hide it, you know. If you tell them, some will hate you for a while. Some will love you for it. Your personal life will become everyone’s business. It’s gonna suck. But, Will, it’ll pass. People will get used to it. Sure, you’ll always carry *gay* like a title. *William the Gay Prince*. But isn’t it worth it to live your life the way you want to? You can’t just accept a lifetime of lies because you’re afraid of how people will react.”

“Believe me, I’ve thought about all of this. But it’s so much easier said than done.”

“I know that. I’ve been where you are. You’re the gay prince, I was the mage warrior. Do you remember how much trouble I went through for not putting magic aside? It was terrible. But then I met you, and you acted like it was no big deal, and you got me out of trouble more times than I can count. That’s all you need to get through it, Will; one person to accept you and have your back no matter what. And you have that. Trust me; you have a lot more than just one person supporting you.”

“I guess you’re right. It just doesn’t really seem worth the trouble, though. It’s not like I have someone to come out for.”

“But you will. Just think about it. I’m here for you no matter what you decide.”

“Thanks,” said Will. Then he laughed. “I can’t believe we’re talking about this now of all times.”

Nate was still too shocked by the revelation to laugh with him. A part of him wanted to tell Will how he felt, to take the tiny chance of Will returning his feelings. A bigger part of him was scared of screwing up the most important thing in his life. He just couldn’t think about it right now, though. There was still a question he needed the answer to.

“So what does that mean about you and Sarah?”

Will sighed. “I asked her out mostly to piss you off.”

“Me?” asked Nate with surprise. He hadn’t expected that answer.

“Yeah,” said Will. “You said all those annoyingly true things. I guess I just wanted to show you that I wouldn’t change my plans just because you disagreed with them.”

Nate couldn’t help his smirk. “Who’s immature now?”

“Yeah, well, I was still pretty angry. I regretted asking her out almost as soon as I did it, but I couldn’t back out of it. Told myself it was for the best.”

“Where does Christopher come in all this?”

“I wasn’t really all that thrilled about my second date with her, even though she was lovely. I asked Christopher to come with us for dinner. She was pretty taken aback by my brother showing up on our date, but they seemed to hit it off. After that they kept spending time together, and I joined them sometimes. The three of us knew that Christopher was actually the one dating her, but people kept referring to her as my girlfriend, and Christopher asked me not to correct them so that he could spend some time with Sarah without everyone making it their business, so I just went along with it. I’m pretty sure he’s in love with her.”

“Oh,” said Nate, unsure of what to say. He was certainly happy that Will wasn’t dating Sarah, but he was worried about Christopher’s involvement. Christopher was a smart guy, but he also tended to fall fast. Even without the jealousy, he still wasn’t so sure about Sarah.

“Will, I know Christopher trusts her, but what if she fooled him, too? If Christopher loves her like you think he does, he could’ve told her all kinds of

things. He could've talked to her about the strategies. He could've told her about your tattoo."

"I guess, but why would she betray us? She loves Christopher, too. It's pretty clear."

"Or she could be a great actress. I'm just saying, it makes even more sense now. We really need to find her."

"Why don't you just do a finding spell, like the one Zachary used to find me?"

"She's a mage. Finding spells don't work on mages. Our magic cloaks us."

Will seemed to be considering it. Nate hated to make things worse, but he had to tell him.

"There is something else," he said. Will looked at him, waiting for him to continue. "Zachary asked if Sarah was with you in the Tower."

"She wasn't. You would have brought her out." Will sounded certain.

Nate took a deep breath. "She could've been there for all I know. The room you were in was completely covered in fire. I couldn't see anything. I only managed to find you because Amy helped by going after your scent. I just touched an arm, and I grabbed it. If she wasn't the traitor, she could very well be dead."

The next few hours, while Will paced and tried to gather his thoughts enough to write Zachary a letter (he had hours before Amy was strong enough to deliver another one), Nate worked on making an invisibility spell. As undecided as Will was then, Nate knew him well enough to know he wouldn't be able to stay in the cabin for much longer. Nate wasn't so sure that hiding was that good of an idea anymore. The king was too weak to be able to rule his country in the time of war, and as much as Nate wanted to keep Will safe, he was starting to think Will was needed too much. He also really needed to do something himself. The thought of having left Sarah in the fire kept eating at him.

Invisibility spells didn't take long and were pretty easy to make. The problem was, no one but a mage could use them. A mage's inherent magic was what triggered the spell to work. It didn't take too much energy for the mage to stay invisible. Nate could probably do it for a day without passing out. The

tricky part was cloaking someone else. If Nate planned on keeping both Will and himself from everyone's eyes, he wouldn't be able to do it for more than a couple of hours. Barely long enough to get to the town.

He was so absorbed by what he was doing that he almost jumped out of his skin when Will touched his shoulder. He looked at the clock on the wall. It was two o'clock. No wonder he was starving. He was also very tired. In addition to the invisibility spell, he'd made a muting spell. Muting spells prevented any noises you made from being heard by anyone who wasn't also using the spell. This way, when he and Will were invisible, they could easily talk without scaring other people and giving themselves away.

"I made us lunch," said Will.

Nate, who was in the process of putting some ingredients he'd used for the spells away, stopped and gaped at Will. "You cooked?" He was pretty sure Will hadn't cooked a thing in his entire life.

Will rolled his eyes. "I said I made lunch. I didn't say anything about cooking."

Curious, Nate followed Will to the kitchen. There were some sandwiches on two plates on the dining table.

"Help yourself," said Will smugly. He looked so proud of himself that Nate couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"You made PB and J sandwiches? I'm not even sure that counts as a proper meal."

Will's face fell. "Of course it does. I spent the last half hour making them."

That definitely didn't get Nate to stop laughing. "Half an hour? What the hell were you doing for half an hour?"

Will glared at him. "Remember that time we were going to the beach and your car broke down, and I had to fix it for you because you didn't even know how to open your car's hood? I definitely should've made more fun of you."

"I'm sorry," said Nate, raising his hands to show he was serious. It didn't help that he was still laughing.

Will shrugged. "Everyone's got their weaknesses. Mine's cooking."

"But you weren't even—"

"Cooking, making sandwiches. It's the same thing."

“If you say so,” said Nate, who still had a grin on his face. He wasn’t that good a cook himself, but Will was just so adorably helpless in the kitchen. It was probably the only thing he had ever truly sucked at.

“Okay, then. Let’s eat these amazing sandwiches that took half an hour to make,” he said, sitting down.

The sandwiches were good—even Will couldn’t screw up PB and J—and he happily ate his sandwiches while Will told him what he’d been thinking about all morning. Will finished with, “I understand Zachary’s concerns, but I just don’t think I can stay here anymore. I really think we should go back to the city.”

“Okay.”

Will looked at him suspiciously. “You’re not gonna argue with me?”

“No. There’s too much going on for you to hide. I get it.”

Will sighed with relief. “Good. We can get going right away.”

“Actually, I think we should wait until tomorrow. I’m going to need all my energy, and I already used some of it to make a few spells to help us get into town undetected.”

Will smiled. “You knew I would decide to go back.” It wasn’t a question, just an observation.

“Of course. I know you, remember?”

“Right. So we go tomorrow morning. It shouldn’t take us more than twenty minutes to get there, right?”

“Try an hour and a half. We’ll have to walk. We can’t drive a car when we’re invisible.”

“We’re gonna be invisible?”

“Yes, and I think we should make a stop first.”

“Where?”

“The Tower of Fire. I think we should talk to Kitty.”

“Your witch friend Kitty?”

“She’s not my friend,” said Nate unhappily. “I wish she were. She would’ve helped us a lot more easily.”

“Why do you want to talk to her?” asked Will gently. He knew Nate as well as Nate knew him.

“She knows who kidnapped you. She referred to him as her ‘good customer,’” said Nate, making air quotations.

“And?” asked Will when Nate didn’t say anything further.

“And I want to ask her about Sarah. Will, I just have to know if she was in there with you,” he said pleadingly.

“Nate, you have to stop feeling guilty. You don’t even know if she was in there. You were pretty sure she was our traitor just a few hours ago.”

“And I still think it’s very possible. But what if she *was* in there?”

“You still wouldn’t have been able to help her. She wouldn’t have survived the fire.”

“You’re right,” said Nate. “I know you’re right. But I just need to know.”

“Okay,” said Will. “We’ll talk to her.”

Nate smiled at him. Suddenly, he was filled with an intense need to hug Will and just hang on to him. In an effort to distract himself, he got up and took his plate to the sink. When he turned around, Will was right there. He pulled Nate into his arms, holding him tightly. Nate melted into him.

They stayed like that for a minute, just holding each other. Nate felt all the fear he’d felt since Will had been kidnapped finally disappear as he clung to Will, inhaling his smell. All too soon, Will straightened, ending the hug. He stayed in Nate’s personal space, raising his hands and cupping Nate’s face.

“I wish...” Will didn’t continue, but there was something in his eyes that made Nate throw away all his concerns and just go for it. He stood on his toes, gently touching his lips to Will’s. Will didn’t even hesitate a second. He kissed Nate back. Nate stopped thinking altogether. He felt Will’s tongue push against his lips and opened up, kissing Will for all he was worth.

Kissing Will was unlike anything else Nate had ever experienced. He could feel the excitement and the pure joy of finally connecting to Will like this running through his entire body. At that moment, he didn’t care about the war, he didn’t care that, come morning, they’d be heading on another dangerous mission. All he cared about was his lips and Will’s and the intense feeling he could not ignore anymore.

When they finally came up for air, they were both breathing heavily. They looked at each other, pupils dilated. They hesitated a second before attacking each other's lips again, this time not planning to stop.

When Nate woke up, the room was dark, and he was alone in the bed. Will must have woken up already. Nate made enough light to see the clock on the nightstand. It was no surprise. Nate had slept for well over four hours.

He stayed awake in bed for a while, not ready to face Will. He didn't know what had come over him after lunch. He didn't even remember making a conscious decision to kiss Will. He had just done it. And despite how complicated things were likely to get, he couldn't quite bring himself to regret it, not with the way Will had responded to him.

Thoughts of what followed their kiss brought a smile to his face. Back before he decided he was in love with Will, he had slept with a few girls. It had been nice enough, but nowhere near as amazing as it had been that afternoon. With Will, he'd felt insatiable, like he couldn't get enough of kissing his mouth and touching his skin. He hadn't known it could feel like that.

After a while, he got out of bed. He didn't know how he was supposed to act around Will, so he decided to follow Will's lead. He prayed Will didn't regret anything. Nate wouldn't be able to go back to the way they were, not when he knew how right it felt to really be with Will.

Will was sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee in his hands, watching the news. When he noticed Nate coming out of the bedroom, he smiled.

"There you are. I was getting worried you were dead or something. Come here," he said, gesturing for Nate to sit on the couch next to him as he turned off the TV.

"What can I say? You wore me out," said Nate, winking at Will before sitting down and taking his coffee from him, sipping it gratefully.

"Sure, help yourself to my coffee," said Will with a mock glare.

Nate grinned. They were silent for a minute before Will said, "So..."

Nate just looked at him, waiting for him to continue. He had been the one to initiate the kiss, so he was determined to wait until he knew what was going through Will's head before he said anything. After a minute of silence, Will finally spoke.

"It was fun, right?" he said hesitantly.

Fun wasn't exactly the word Nate would have used. Not that it hadn't been fun, but there were so many better words, like *amazing* and *mind-blowing*. Still, he said, "Sure, it was fun."

Will, who was aware of Nate's less than enthusiastic reply, reached for Nate's free hand. When Nate squeezed his hand back, Will relaxed visibly. It was no declaration of love, but it meant that, at least for now, things were okay.

"Why didn't you tell me this morning?" asked Will quietly. "I told you I was gay; you could have done the same."

"Yeah, I should have," said Nate. "It's just that I'm not sure I'm gay."

Will raised both eyebrows, but didn't say anything.

"I've only ever been with girls, and I liked it," explained Nate. "I've never felt an attraction strong enough for a guy to do something about it, until now."

"You've never been with a guy?" asked Will with surprise. Nate shook his head.

Will looked uncertain, not knowing what to say. Nate hurried to reassure him. "But I wanted to. With you."

Will smiled with relief. Nate stayed quiet, waiting for Will to say something. Will seemed in no hurry to say anything else.

They were interrupted by Amy's return. Nate sat on the couch, looking with shock at Will who went to open the window.

"How did you get her to change? She never changes for anyone but me."

"I didn't do anything. As soon as I was done with the letter, she turned into a pigeon and offered me her leg to attach the letter to," said Will, opening the letter. Nate was still surprised by Amy's behavior, but he would have to think about it some other time.

"You didn't tell Zachary we plan to go back tomorrow, did you?"

"No. I told him to ask Quinn to come back to the city. I'm going to need someone to tell me about the new strategies and only the council members know them. I can't ask Christopher to return; the warriors need a leader on the front line. So I asked for Quinn," said Will, before he started reading out loud.

William,

I don't know what to think anymore. Our new attack plans seem to already be in possession of the Northerners. We have

lost more than three hundred warriors in the course of a day. I contacted Quinn, and he agreed to come back. Your father passed out this afternoon and was taken to the hospital. David is heavily sedated and under no condition to make any decisions. I need to know your orders. Send them to me as soon as possible.

Zachary

“How the hell does he expect me to give orders from *here*?” said Will with frustration. He paced the room for a while before sitting down next to Nate again. He looked as concerned as Nate felt.

“Will, how did they know the new plans?” asked Nate worriedly. There was only one answer left, and Nate desperately wanted it to not be true.

“It’s one of the council members,” said Will quietly. “It has to be.”

“Yeah,” said Nate. He couldn’t believe one of the members of the Warriors’ Council was a traitor. Warriors had to pass several physical and psychological tests to be eligible to join the council. Even if they passed all the tests, they needed a unanimous vote of acceptance from the council members. Very few people could pass the tests, and even fewer could get the vote. Nate had passed all the tests three times, but never received a unanimous “yes” vote from the members. Council members were liked and trusted by all the warriors, which was why Nate was having such a hard time coming to terms with the new information.

“This is insane,” said Will, echoing Nate’s thoughts. “There has to be another explanation.”

But there wasn’t, and they both knew it. No one except the council members knew about the new strategies. Nate shook his head, trying to think past the concern he felt.

“At least now we know where to look. There are only fourteen council members. Putting aside you and your brothers and cousin, that leaves ten people you have to order back immediately.”

“Fuck, Nate, what if we’re wrong? What if none of them is behind this? They’ll never forgive me for doubting them.”

Nate gripped Will’s hand. He knew how hard this was for Will. “They’ll understand. Will, we have to find the traitor soon, before we lose any more people.”

Will nodded, squeezing Nate's hand before standing up. "You're right. I have to write to Zachary."

"You know what? I've had enough sleep. We don't have to wait until morning. We can leave now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. The Tower's on the way. We can stop and talk to Kitty. Maybe we can get some information from her to help us narrow down the suspects," he said as he walked toward the bedroom where he'd left his sword, stopping on the way to pet his cats.

"Get ready, girls. We're leaving in ten."

Chapter Eight

The walk to the Tower took half an hour. Will carried a sleeping Amy, while Nate focused on cloaking himself, Will, and Amy with the invisibility spell. (It would be weird to see a sleeping cat moving in the air, apparently carried by nobody.) The other cats were visible, but hopefully even if anyone saw them, they'd look like just three ordinary cats. They hadn't yet activated their muting spell—they planned to do that after their talk with Kitty—which meant they had to stay silent. It wasn't too hard. They were both lost in their own thoughts.

In his head, Nate went over all ten of the council members. Not all of them were his friends—in fact, he was pretty sure some of them actively disliked him, hence the lack of a unanimous “yes” vote for him joining the council—but he respected all of them. They were brave men and great warriors. They were willing to sacrifice their lives for the safety of their country. Well, apparently not all of them were.

He was also trying to come up with a way to get Kitty to help them. He doubted *doing the right thing* would be much of an incentive for a two-hundred-year-old witch who toasted people for a living. Threatening would also not work, because she was probably a hundred times more powerful than Nate and his cats combined. That was assuming his cats would even *want* to help him against her, which considering their reaction to her last time, he couldn't be so sure of. The only thing he could think of that might tempt Kitty to help them was money. Kitty was a mercenary who didn't seem to care about the morality of the job as long as she was paid. It was a matter of concern, because while they definitely had however much money Kitty could demand, they didn't have access to it *right then*.

Of course, that was all assuming they actually got to talk to Kitty. The protective spell in Will's tattoo was mostly gone. It was too risky for him to enter the Tower, but Nate couldn't leave him outside either. He wouldn't be able to cloak him with the invisibility spell if he wasn't close. The only thing he could think of was to have one of his cats take a message to Kitty.

As it turned out, that wasn't necessary.

“You're kidding me! The place has a fucking doorbell? How on earth did I not see it before?” he whispered, before reaching his hand to press the small button. He looked at Will, who was looking at the door skeptically. Neither of

them actually believed it would be as easy as ringing a doorbell. That is, until a cheerful Kitty opened the door with a big grin.

“Look what the cats dragged in,” she said before picking Beth up and kissing her nose. She then looked straight at Nate and said, “To what do I owe the pleasure, gentlemen?”

“So I guess that means you see us?” asked Nate, not bothering to keep his voice down.

“Oh please,” said Kitty, rolling her eyes. “I’m not as easily deceived as you humans. All your spell does for me is make you look pale.”

She walked back in, leaving the door open, as if expecting Nate and Will to follow her as the cats did. When they didn’t, she turned and frowned. “Aren’t you coming? I assumed you wanted to talk but if you only came to visit... or maybe ask me to babysit your cats for you?” she asked hopefully.

“Definitely not babysitting,” said Nate quickly. “We want to talk to you, but we’d rather be alive for the conversation, you know?”

“Oh, you mean the fire,” said Kitty. “Don’t worry. The Tower only burns as a defense mechanism against unwanted intruders. I invited you in, so you’re gonna be fine.”

Nate looked at Will questioningly. This seemed too good to be true. He didn’t trust the witch, but she had no reason to trick them. She could kill them a lot easier if she wanted to. Will apparently agreed, because he nodded and took a step in. Nate exhaled when nothing happened and followed.

Inside the Tower was as Nate remembered; a round and empty room with very high ceilings, except without the fire covering the walls and smoke floating in the entire room. Despite the lack of fire and lamps, the room was light enough, probably from Kitty’s magic. Kitty waved her hand toward the center of the room, and a round table appeared with three chairs around it. She took a seat, placing Beth in her lap, and waited for Nate and Will to be seated as well. They complied after putting Amy down to rest on the floor.

“So,” said Kitty, before waving her hand again. A pot of coffee and three cups appeared. Kitty looked at them expectantly, obviously waiting for them to talk, before pouring them coffee. Nate took a breath and started talking.

“Before we tell you why we’re here, I need to ask you a question.”

Kitty didn’t say anything, just handed him his coffee and waited for him to continue.

“When Will was here, was he alone? Or did whoever brought him here bring a girl with him?”

Kitty looked surprised. “You think someone else was with him in that room? Why would you think that?”

Nate hesitated a moment. Then he decided to just tell her the truth. He’d probably have to tell her everything if he wanted her to help anyway.

“When Will was kidnapped, he was with someone, a girl. So either that girl was helping his kidnapper, or she was taken with him.”

“Oh,” said Kitty. “No, there was no one with him here.”

Nate felt so relieved he couldn’t talk for a few seconds. He hadn’t left an innocent girl to die in the Tower. It was a weight off his shoulders.

“So did she bring me here?” asked Will. They knew by then that Kitty wasn’t the traitor, but Will was hoping for Kitty to inadvertently give them a clue as to who was.

Kitty just smiled sweetly. “Nice try,” she said. “I already told your friend I’m not telling you who brought you here, so if that’s what you’re here for...”

“What if we paid you?” asked Will. “Then it’s just a job, right?”

Kitty was looking pissed. “I may not be too picky about the jobs I take, but I do have some standards. I’m no snitch,” she said coldly.

“Oh, so leaving an innocent man in here to die is fine, but your conscience won’t let you tell us who the murderer is?” Will asked angrily.

Nate didn’t think it was possible, but Kitty sounded even colder when she said, “You know what? I’m not sure even the company of your cats is worth listening to you.”

“Wait! We’re sorry,” said Nate quickly. Kitty arched an eyebrow and gave Will a pointed look. Nate kicked Will under the table.

Finally, Will sighed and said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have judged you.”

Yeah, right! Even Beth could tell he didn’t mean that. Kitty contemplated Will’s apology for a minute and then shrugged. Apparently, the sincerity of the apology wasn’t of much importance to her.

“Now that we’ve established I’m not gonna tell you what you want to know,” she said pleasantly—the witch changed moods so fast, it made Nate’s head spin—and sipped her coffee. “Do you care to tell me why you’re here?”

“We have a big problem, and we could really use your help,” said Nate. He hesitated, looking at Will, silently asking him if he thought this was a good idea. Will nodded.

“Go on,” said Kitty. Apparently patience wasn’t one of her virtues.

“We’re looking for a traitor, someone who’s been giving information to our enemy and causing an ugly war,” he said. “You know about the war, right?”

“Of course,” she said impatiently. “I may not go out much, but I do own a TV.”

“Right. Since you refuse to make our job easy and just tell us who it is,” said Nate pointedly, “we’re going back to the city to find out. The problem is, whoever it is, he’s been after the three princes, and going back is going to be dangerous for Will.”

“Oh, right!” said Kitty suddenly, looking at Will. “You’re one of the princes. I *knew* you looked familiar!”

Will arched an eyebrow. “You didn’t know? I thought you owned a TV.”

“I do, but I have better things to do than watch TV all the time.”

“Like what? Killing people and playing with dragons?” asked Will sarcastically.

“What I do is none of your business,” she said dismissively before turning back to Nate. “You’re boring me. Get to the point.”

“We need you to help us find the traitor. You don’t have to tell us who it is,” he said hurriedly before Kitty could interrupt him. “All you have to do is come with us and protect Will if someone tries to harm him.”

Kitty was silent for a few minutes, contemplating their request. After a while, she said, “I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“But—”

“It’s not negotiable,” she said, interrupting Nate’s protest. “I don’t like leaving my house and Sebastian for long, and I don’t like exposing myself.”

“It’s not like anything’s going to happen to your ‘house,’” said Will, drawing air quotes with his fingers. “Anyone who enters it will burn.”

Kitty ignored Will. “Like I said, I won’t do what you ask. But I may have another way of helping you. That is, if the price is right.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Nate.

“You won’t be able to keep your friend invisible for much longer. I can help you with that.”

“You can keep him invisible?” asked Nate excitedly.

“Not exactly. I can give him a disguise. I can make him look like someone else.”

Nate looked at Will. A disguise wasn’t as good as invisibility, but it would make their job a lot easier. If they didn’t have to worry about keeping Will alive, they could concentrate on finding the traitor.

“How long will the disguise last?” asked Will.

“Depends on how much you pay. You can have it as long as a week.”

A week was more than enough time. Nate tried to contain his excitement.

“How much will it cost?”

“A hundred grand.”

Nate arched his eyebrows. “A hundred grand for a spell? Are you serious?”

“Take it or leave it,” said Kitty, smirking. She had the upper hand and she knew it.

Will rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

“Perfect,” said Kitty, clapping her hands. “How will you be paying?”

“Um... We don’t have any money right now,” said Nate.

Kitty frowned. “How exactly did you plan to hire me if you have no money?”

“It’s not that we don’t have it,” said Will. “We just don’t have access to it right now. We can definitely pay you once we get to the city, though.”

“And you expect me to just trust you on that?” asked Kitty skeptically.

“We’ll give you the money. You have my word,” said Will confidently.

Kitty blinked. “Is that supposed to reassure me?” she asked.

“Of course!” said Will confusedly. “I gave you *my word*.”

“I don’t think it counts until you pinkie swear on it,” said Kitty sarcastically.

Will narrowed his eyes. “I *never* go back on my word. Everybody knows that,” he said angrily.

“I don’t know that. I don’t know that at all,” said Kitty with a shrug.

Will looked ready to argue further with Kitty and defend his integrity when Nate decided he’d had enough. Before Will could utter another word, Nate asked, “Look, can we draw up a contract or something?”

“A contract,” said Kitty thoughtfully. “That could work. Definitely more reassuring than *his word*.”

Will inhaled loudly but, much to Nate’s relief, decided not to argue further. “Okay then. Let’s draw up a contract and have it over with.”

“I can’t believe she made us bind the contract with blood,” said Nate, looking at the closed gash in the palm of his hand, where he’d drawn enough blood to sign his name on the contract.

“I can’t believe she made me bald!” grumbled Will, rubbing his head. Not a single strand of Will’s beautiful black hair was left. His head was so bald, it was reflecting the moonlight.

“Yeah, she really doesn’t like you,” said Nate, looking at Will’s undeniably unattractive appearance, barely able to keep himself from laughing at the ridiculous mustache Will was sporting.

“I gathered,” said Will.

“On the plus side, you don’t look like you’re wearing your childhood clothes anymore,” said Nate. “With your new build, Zachary’s clothes are actually big on you.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” asked Will, trying to sound annoyed but failing to hide the amusement in his voice.

Nate grinned. “Immensely. I’m tempted to tell everyone who you are just to see them make fun of you.”

“Well if you do tell them, don’t forget to mention the part where I agreed to pay a hundred grand for this hideous look,” said Will dryly.

“Hideous? I think you’re positively glowing,” said Nate teasingly, kissing Will’s bald head before Will pushed him away.

“Dork,” said Will, laughing despite himself.

They’d been walking for more than half an hour. A few more minutes and they’d get to the town, where they’d agreed it would be safer to split up. Will

would go to Zachary's house and wait while Nate went to the hospital to talk to David. Neither of them was happy about it, but they couldn't risk anyone questioning Will's identity.

In the past half hour, it had been just like old times between them; there was an ease and a playfulness that Nate had missed, and he was happy to have it back in his life. Will hadn't brought up what had happened between them earlier, and though a little disappointed, Nate had to admit it was for the better. He needed to stay focused on their mission.

They parted ways just inside of town, Will walking toward Zachary's house, trying to draw as little attention to himself as possible despite the four cats walking close to him, and Nate hurrying toward the town's biggest hospital, sans the cats, where he hoped David was admitted. It was late, and there weren't many people in the streets, but Nate decided to remain invisible. This way, it would be easier to slip into David's room.

He didn't know which room David was in. He didn't want to drop the invisibility spell to ask the admission clerk where David was, and he doubted the clerk would answer him even if he asked. David's condition wouldn't remain a secret if anyone could just walk to his room and see him.

Not having another choice, Nate did the only thing he could think of; he exploded two windows with a booming sound, making sure the pieces of the glass didn't injure anyone. The room went into a state of frenzy, and everyone started running outside, including the admission clerk, leaving the computer for an invisible Nate to use and look up David's room number.

Getting to David wasn't that easy, though. He was staying in a secluded section that had a spell as well as a guard to prevent anyone from going in. Nate might be able to get through the spell, but there was no way he could get past the guard without giving himself away.

Just as he was about to let the invisibility spell drop, the door the guard was sitting next to opened and Zachary walked out. He looked tired, stressed, and in a hurry.

"I have to go. Someone's broken into my house," he told the guard.

"How do you know—" started the guard with a frown. Zachary interrupted him impatiently.

"My familiar knows how to warn me in case of an intrusion. Don't let anyone in this room until I'm back."

“Yes, sir,” said the guard as Zachary walked away. Nate followed Zachary, waiting until they were out of the sight of the guard before dropping the spell and touching Zachary’s arm. Zachary turned around in alarm. His expression turned to relief when he saw Nate, before turning concerned again.

“Nate, what are you doing here? You’re supposed to stay in my cabin! Where’s the prince?”

“Breaking into your house, I assume,” said Nate.

Zachary frowned. “Breaking into... Oh, he’s the intruder Bo warned me about? What’s he doing in my house?”

“We thought it’d be safe if he stayed hidden, and we were worried our houses were being watched by whoever’s trying to hurt Will. You’re the only one we know we can trust, so...” said Nate, shrugging.

“Why did you even come here? You were supposed to keep Will safe *away* from here. The last thing we need right now is something happening to Will.”

“No one knows we’re in town. I’ve stayed invisible, and Will has a disguise. We couldn’t stay away with everything that’s happening. Will needs to be *here*, not hidden away in some cabin.”

“He also needs to stay alive,” said Zachary heatedly.

“I know. We’ll be careful. No one has to know he survived the Tower, or that he’s in town,” said Nate.

“But what if—”

“Zachary, we don’t have time for this now. I need to speak with David. We should go back in there before anyone sees us.”

The guard looked confused at Zachary’s quick return, but he didn’t say anything. Zachary held the door open long enough for Nate to slip inside before following him into the room. He placed the protective spell back on the door as soon as it was closed.

“What happened?” asked David weakly. “I thought you said someone was in your house.”

“I figured out who it is,” said Zachary. Then he looked around the room, waiting for Nate to appear. Nate complied.

“Hello, David. How are you feeling?” asked Nate, trying not to sound too worried. David looked barely strong enough to talk.

“Nate,” said David, surprised. “How did you get here? Where’s Will? Is he okay?”

“Relax, David. He’s fine. He wanted to help out, so we came back. He’s waiting for me and Zachary at the moment. He’s at Zachary’s house.”

“Oh. He shouldn’t have come back,” said David. “But I understand why he did.”

Nate smiled. “I imagined you would,” he said. “How’s the king?”

“Not well. He’s in the hospital. He’s drugged and unconscious. As much as I want Will safe, he couldn’t have picked a better time to come back,” said David.

Nate nodded. “Have you made any progress in finding who is betraying us?”

David shook his head slowly. “Just that it has to be one of the members of the Warriors’ Council. It sounds impossible, but they’re the only ones who knew the new strategies.”

“Yeah, Will and I figured as much,” said Nate. “Did you tell Quinn to come back?” he asked Zachary.

“Yeah, I called him as soon as I read Will’s orders. We need to have the whole council come back, though, now that we know one of them is working with the enemy. David called Christopher an hour ago. Told him to send the council members back. They should be back by morning. Quinn will be here sooner.”

“Good,” said Nate. “We need to decide how we’re going to find the traitor without them finding out Will’s back. With David and the king in the hospital and Christopher in battle, Quinn is their leader now. He can carry out Will’s orders, pretending he’s the one making the decisions.”

David nodded. “You should have a meeting as soon as Quinn gets here. Decide how you’re going to go about this. Is there a spell you can use to let Quinn hear Will’s orders without the others hearing it?”

Nate nodded.

“Good. That way Will can tell Quinn what to say when he interrogates the council members,” said David, closing his eyes. He was clearly running out of energy.

“You said Will’s using a disguise? How good is it?” asked Zachary.

“It’s good. No one can tell it’s him, and it’ll last for a while. He’s good to go about town; people won’t know him. But he can’t go around giving orders. For one thing, no one will listen to him because he doesn’t look like Will, and for another, we don’t want him to draw any attention to himself.”

“Introduce him as an old friend to the others,” said David. “He may be able to tell if anyone’s acting suspicious. After all, he knows them better than anyone.”

Nate nodded again. He had his orders. It was time to go back to Will and leave David to get some rest.

“Tell Will that I trust whatever decision he makes,” said David before Nate and Zachary walked out of the room.

“I will,” said Nate, smiling.

“And, Nate?” said David. “Thank you for saving him.”

Nate nodded once before turning invisible and following Zachary out the door.

“How long till he gets here?” asked Will as soon as Zachary hung up the phone.

“Less than half an hour,” replied Zachary.

For the last hour, they’d been sitting in Zachary’s living room and trying to think of a way to find the traitor as fast as possible. They had decided to introduce Will to the members as a friend of Quinn’s who was a detective and was going to help them. The plan was to sequester the council members as soon as they arrived and interrogate them one by one using a lie detector. They were waiting for Quinn to arrive to go over the questions they were going to ask.

In the meantime, Nate and Zachary were going to look for Sarah. If she had seen her kidnapper before being taken, she could save them a lot of trouble by telling them what she knew. That was, of course, *if* they could find her. Zachary hadn’t had any luck so far.

“Good,” said Will. “Zachary, can you please secure the interrogation room for when the members arrive? We’ll also need someone to escort them there from the airport.”

Zachary nodded, retreating to his study to make the calls.

“Anything you need me to do?” asked Nate.

“Help me make dinner?”

Nate snorted. “You mean I make dinner while you sit down and watch, pretending to supervise?”

“Well, I did make lunch, so it’s your turn anyway,” said Will.

“Right, the PB and J. How could I forget?” asked Nate with a smile. He stood up and walked to Will, who was still sitting on the couch with a lazy grin on his face.

“If I have to make dinner, the least you can do is keep me company,” said Nate, pulling Will’s hands to make him stand up. Will complied, but didn’t release Nate’s hands once he was standing. Instead, he used them to draw Nate closer.

“Are we ever going to talk about what happened earlier?” he asked, trying to act casual but failing miserably.

Nate grinned. “I was starting to think you’d forgotten all about it.”

“Forgotten? We’re in the middle of a war, and I’ve barely thought about anything else these past few hours,” said Will.

“That’s good to know,” said Nate, trying not to sound quite as relieved as he was.

“And?” asked Will with an arched brow. As confident as he was trying to appear, Nate could see right through him. Will was nervous. Nate decided to use the opportunity to tease him a little. It wasn’t every day that he saw Will second-guessing himself.

“Well, you weren’t quite as bad a lay as I thought you’d be,” he said seriously.

“What?” asked Will, taking his hand off Nate’s hip.

“I figured, you know, since all the girls you dated dumped you so fast...” said Nate, shrugging.

Will stared at Nate for a moment before realization hit him. “You’re teasing me!” he said, astonished.

Nate grinned. “I couldn’t help it. It was too easy,” he said before placing a chaste kiss on Will’s lips and walking toward the kitchen.

“You are going to pay for that,” said Will, following Nate. Nate laughed. There were few things he could think of that were more appealing to him than that.

Chapter Nine

Zachary, Nate, and Will had just finished dinner when Quinn arrived at Zachary's house. He looked dirty and tired, but that didn't stop him from grinning happily upon seeing Nate.

"Well, I never thought I'd be this happy to see you," he said, surprising Nate by pulling him into a hug. "I'm glad you're alive."

"Yeah, me too," said Nate, returning Quinn's hug.

"So what happened? When I didn't hear from you after the Tower's fire went out, I thought you were dead."

"The fire went out when we got out of the Tower," said Nate.

"We? You don't mean...?"

"I do," said Nate happily, looking at Will meaningfully.

Quinn looked confused. "Where is he then?"

"Right here," said Will with a wink. "I may be an uglier version, but it sure beats burning to death."

Quinn frowned. "What's going on?" he asked Nate, annoyed. "Is this a joke? Who is that?"

"It's Will. He's wearing a disguise spell. We thought it'd be wise to keep his identity a secret for now," said Nate.

Quinn looked from Nate to Will. "You actually saved him?" he asked skeptically.

"Don't sound so surprised," said Nate, rolling his eyes. "I *am* one of the best mages in the country."

Quinn looked at Will hesitantly for another moment before breaking into a smile. "I should've known you'd get out of there without a scratch. You *have* gotten infinitely uglier, though," he said, pulling Will into a hug.

"You don't like the new look?" asked Will once Quinn stepped back. "I'd like to think I pull it off."

"That's because you're delusional," muttered Nate. Will grinned.

"How'd you get so ugly anyway?" asked Quinn.

Will looked at Nate.

“I have my ways,” said Nate vaguely. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to tell Quinn and Zachary about Kitty, it was that he couldn’t. The witch had added a clause in the contract that prevented them from ever mentioning her to other people. After she made them sign the contract with their blood, Nate had understood why they had never heard of the witch who lived in the Tower.

Quinn shrugged. “Well, not that I’m not happy to see you,” he said to Will, “but if you’re alive then why did you ask me back? I should have stayed and helped in the battle.”

Will explained their plan about the council members. Quinn frowned deeper with each passing second. When Will told him about interrogating the other ten members of the Warriors’ Council, Quinn shook his head firmly.

“No, I won’t do that,” he said angrily. “There is no way any of them betrayed us. There has to be something you’re missing.”

“I don’t want to believe it either, but they’re the only ones with access to the information that was given to our enemy,” said Will.

“They wouldn’t,” said Quinn heatedly. “They’d rather die than do what you’re accusing them of. I won’t interrogate them for something they’d never do.”

“Yes, you will. You’ll do as you’re ordered,” said Will coldly.

“Is there any improvement in David’s condition? Can I talk to him?” asked Quinn just as coldly.

“No, he’s not awake. For all we know, he may never wake up,” answered Will. It was best if Quinn didn’t know that David was feeling better. Will didn’t need Quinn to run to David every time he didn’t like Will’s decisions.

Quinn squared his shoulders. “Then I would like to speak with the king.”

“My father is in the hospital as well. He is in no better shape to make any decisions than David. I’m the one in charge, and you will obey my decisions, no matter how much you disagree,” said Will gently but firmly. He understood Quinn’s loyalty to his fellow warriors, but he had to make sure he had Quinn on his side before they faced the other council members.

Quinn hesitated a moment before nodding curtly.

“Good,” said Will.

“What about Nate and Zachary?” asked Quinn. “Will they be helping us?”

“They have other matters they need to attend to,” answered Will.

“What could be more important than this?”

“We won’t be much help to you guys anyway,” said Nate. He didn’t want to tell Quinn about Sarah. Quinn would jump on the chance to accuse someone who wasn’t one of his warrior friends, and Nate didn’t want him to have any other suspects.

“We’ll have a meeting here tomorrow at noon. We’ll make our decision then,” said Will, standing up. “The others will get here in a couple of hours. I suggest we use this time to rest. Tomorrow’s not going to be an easy day.”

Nate woke up early the next day to an empty house. Will hadn’t woken Nate up when he’d left to meet the council members, for which Nate was grateful; he’d needed the sleep to regain his energy. Before he went to the kitchen in search of breakfast, he called Zachary, who told him he’d accompanied Will and Quinn to the interrogation room two hours ago. Zachary promised to come back immediately before hanging up. Nate fed his cats and ate breakfast and was ready to start their search when Zachary got back fifteen minutes later.

They had decided to start their search with Sarah’s apartment. She lived in a small but nicely decorated place about twenty minutes from Zachary’s house, which had a spell protecting it from intruders that took Zachary and Nate half an hour to break. Nate had to give it to her. The spell wasn’t bad for someone who’d been practicing magic for less than a year.

Based on the information in the Wizards’ Guild database, Sarah didn’t have a familiar. Things would have been a lot easier if she did. As it were, Nate and Zachary had decided to try to perform a finding spell in the hopes of infiltrating the magic that prevented any mage from being found. It was a long shot, but they were out of options.

After an hour of trying, they were both getting frustrated. What they were doing seemed useless; no matter how much magic they put into the spell, it wasn’t strong enough to find a mage. They’d known there was a big chance of failure, but that didn’t stop them from being disappointed.

“This is ridiculous. There has to be a way to find her,” said Nate, dropping down on the couch.

“Well, there’s the good old-fashioned way,” said Zachary.

“So much good *that* has done so far,” said Nate.

“We can’t search every house, Nate,” said Zachary. “We tried, but—”

“Wait,” said Nate suddenly. “Did you search the council members’ houses?”

Zachary looked thoughtful. “Do you really think they’d keep her in their house?” he asked skeptically.

“Not really,” said Nate. “But it’s worth a shot.”

Zachary called the police department who sent them twelve men to help in their search. They split into four groups, and with Zachary and Nate’s help, it took less than two hours to search the houses of the ten council members who were currently being interrogated by Quinn. Nate hoped Quinn had found something, because their search had been utterly useless.

“I’d never seen magic as a liability until now,” said Nate. They were sitting in Zachary’s car outside Drew’s house. “Sure, it’s good to have the magic cloak when we don’t want to be found, but it’s fucking inconvenient if someone decides to kidnap us.” It wasn’t even ten o’clock yet, and Nate was already feeling helpless.

“Yeah,” sighed Zachary. He looked pretty tired. He hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before.

“We should go home. There isn’t anything else we can do.”

Zachary went to bed as soon as he got home. Nate, however, couldn’t just do nothing. He decided to call Will and see if there was anything he could do to help. But when he looked for his cell phone—Zachary had kindly retrieved Nate and Will’s cell phones for them that morning—he couldn’t find it. He cursed under his breath. He must have left it in one of the houses he’d searched. He had no idea which one.

He got some ink and a piece of paper from Zachary’s study and set about finding his cell phone. Finding spells didn’t require any ingredients; they just required a clear image with details of the person or thing that was to be found. The more detailed the mental image was, the sooner the item was found.

It didn’t take Nate long to find his cell phone. In less than five minutes, the ink he had poured on the paper started moving and shaped into an address. Nate had left his phone at Sarah’s place.

He took Zachary’s keys and drove to Sarah’s apartment. On the way, an idea started forming in his head. What if he didn’t have to look for Sarah to find

her? What if he could use the spell to look for something that Sarah had *with* her?

He found his phone on the table in Sarah's living room. He called Will immediately. The phone rang a few times before Will answered.

"Nate?"

"Hey. You got a minute?"

"Yeah, Quinn is taking a break."

"How's it going? Did you find anything?"

"No," sighed Will. "They all deny it. The problem is I believe all of them."

"You know whoever it is has to be a damn good liar to have fooled everyone this long, right?" asked Nate gently.

"Yeah, I know. We're going to talk to them some more, maybe interrogate them in groups. I'm not sure how much longer Quinn will cooperate, though. I can feel his frustration. He thinks we should stop," said Will. He sounded resigned.

"Don't worry, Will," said Nate. "No matter how good this person is, sooner or later he'll give himself away."

"I hope so," said Will. "How's it going with you guys? Are you any closer to finding her?"

"Maybe," said Nate. "You're the last person who saw her. Do you remember if she was carrying anything? A handbag? A cell phone?"

Will thought about it for a moment. "She wasn't carrying anything, not as far as I remember."

"Oh," said Nate, disappointed. He had really hoped to be able to find Sarah this way.

"I do remember what she was wearing, if that helps," said Will.

"You do?" asked Nate. He hadn't thought of clothes, mostly because clothes weren't usually unique. Even if Will managed to describe Sarah's clothes perfectly, there could be the exact same clothes in dozens of stores.

"Yeah, I remember because she was wearing a cardigan that was incredibly orange," said Will.

"Can you describe what she wearing? Anything you remember can help."

“All right, well, she was wearing a black top. I couldn’t see it well because she had on this open front cardigan over it. It was bright orange, as I said. Long sleeves. It was pretty simple. She was wearing jeans. I don’t remember her shoes.”

“Okay,” said Nate, trying not to sound too disappointed. There was no way he could find Sarah by the clothes Will had described. They were too general. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. She was wearing these custom-made earrings that Christopher had bought for her. I remember because Christopher wouldn’t shut up about how he’d come up with the design.”

“That’s perfect,” said Nate excitedly. “Can you tell me exactly how they look?”

“I can do better. I have a photo of her wearing them on my phone. I can send it to you.”

“Yes, send it to me right now. If they’re Christopher’s design and custom-made, they shouldn’t be hard to find. I just hope she’s still wearing them.”

“Okay,” said Will after a moment. “I sent the photo. Let me know how it goes.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks, Will,” said Nate. As soon as he hung up, he looked at the photo Will had sent him. The earrings were specific enough for Nate to find. He went to Sarah’s bedroom in search of ink and paper. There was paper and a bottle of ink on the desk. It was never hard to find ink in a mage’s house.

He poured the ink on the paper and stared at the photo of Sarah, concentrating on the earrings. He kept a mental image of an orange cardigan in his head as well, hoping to speed up the finding process. It still took almost half an hour before an address was shaped on the paper. Sarah—or at least her earrings—was kept in the outskirts of town, not too far from the Tower of Fire.

Nate didn’t waste any time. He called Zachary, who answered sounding very much asleep, and told him to get ready. Fifteen minutes later, he had picked up Zachary and was driving toward the address he’d found. On the way, he explained to Zachary how he had found the address. Zachary sounded impressed.

The address Nate had was a barn just outside of town. It was old and seemed vacant. Exactly the kind of place you would expect a kidnapped person to be kept. The door was locked, but it took Nate less than thirty seconds to

open it with a spell. The kidnapper definitely wasn't a mage. A mage would use a spell to keep people put, not a lock.

Inside, the barn was as empty as it seemed; there were no animals. The place had the heavy silence of old and abandoned places. Nate broke the silence.

"Sarah?" he called loudly. "Are you here?"

No one answered. Zachary walked farther inside the barn. Nate followed him, calling for Sarah again.

"Sarah? It's Nate, Will and Christopher's friend. I'm here with Zachary. We came to rescue you."

This time, Nate heard the unmistakable rattling sound of a chain. He went in the direction of the sound, Zachary following him closely. As he got closer, he heard a muffled sound. It was coming from one of the stalls. Nate ran toward the sound.

Sarah was sitting on the floor, her mouth gagged and her hands chained to the wall. Nate went to her, untying the cloth gag while Zachary used a spell to open the lock on the chain. As soon as she was free, Sarah started crying. Nate held her, trying to comfort her. After a while, she stopped sobbing. Nate helped her up, but she wasn't steady on her feet. She looked too weak.

"Have you been here the entire time?" asked Nate.

Sarah nodded. "He left me here and took Will with him. I couldn't stop him. I tried to free myself with magic, but the chains are too strong. Have you found Will?" she asked, tears running down her cheeks again.

"Yeah, I found him. He's safe."

Sarah looked relieved.

"Have you been here this whole time without food and water?" asked Zachary.

Sarah nodded again.

"Come on," said Zachary. "Let's get you somewhere safe and get some food into you. With the magic you used to try to free yourself, it's a wonder you're still conscious."

He took hold of Sarah's hand, while she put her arm around Nate's shoulder, letting him carry most of her weight. Soon they were in the car. Nate sat with her in the backseat. He couldn't wait any longer to ask his question.

“Sarah, I know you’re tired and weak, but I need to ask you something,” he said gently. Sarah nodded.

“The person who kidnapped you and Will... Did you know him?”

Sarah looked alarmed. “You mean you haven’t caught him yet? When you said you’d found Will, I thought...” She didn’t finish her sentence.

“Will didn’t see the person who attacked him. He’s trying to find him right now, but if you know who he is...”

“I do know who he is,” said Sarah, sounding disgusted. “It’s Will and Christopher’s cousin, Quinn.”

Chapter Ten

When Will and Quinn got back to Zachary's house, Will was tired and frustrated; he'd spent the last six hours posing as a detective, interrogating his closest friends, accusing them of something that had them all enraged. It hadn't done a bit of good. As much as the circumstances suggested otherwise, he could feel it in his gut: they'd all been telling the truth.

The house was empty except for the four cats who were sitting in a circle, as if having a meeting. He owed his life to those cats, but they were fucking weird.

"What now?" he asked Quinn, who was standing next to the kitchen stand, looking at Will thoughtfully.

Quinn shrugged. "I told you it wasn't them. All you've done by bringing them back is pull ten of your best warriors out from a battle when they are needed most."

Will was sick and tired of Quinn's rebuke. He'd been showing his disapproval of Will's methods the entire morning, and Will had had enough.

"Look, unlike you, I don't have the luxury of being able to ignore all the evidence and defend my friends. I have to find whoever's done this, and I have to do it fast. It doesn't matter how much I *don't* want to do it. You're not in my shoes, so you don't get to judge me," he said angrily.

"See, that's why you can't be a good king," said Quinn matter-of-factly. "You trust too deeply. You *know* none of them have betrayed you, but you are so blind in your trust that you won't even allow yourself to think of the other people who had access to that information. You trust other people more than your logic."

"What are you talking about? You've been mad at me the entire day for *not* trusting my warriors..."

"No, I've been mad because you accuse them even though you know they have absolutely no motivation to give information to the enemy. You refuse to think of the people who *do* have motivation out of an ill-placed loyalty. All you've done this morning is prove that I've done the right thing," he said, sounding disappointed.

"What are you talking about?" Will asked again, puzzled.

"You still refuse to see it, don't you?" asked Quinn with disgust.

Will just stared at him. He didn't sound like the Quinn he knew and had grown up with.

Quinn drew a sword and pointed it at Will.

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Will, gaping.

"Doing what I should have done from the beginning. I shouldn't have let my affection for you get in the way of my plans."

Will was still too dumbfounded to even think about defending himself. Surely Quinn wasn't implying that he had been the one behind all this?

"Quinn, this isn't funny," said Will, holding on to the last shred of faith that told him Quinn wouldn't betray him; Quinn wouldn't try to kill him. This had to be a joke.

"No, it's not. I don't want to hurt you. You've been a good friend. And I am sorry I have to do this," he said, looking determined.

"Do what? Kill me? Why would you want to do that? You're my friend, my *cousin!*" said Will, scanning the area around him at the same time. There was nothing there he could use to defend himself.

"I don't want to, and if David could have children, I wouldn't. But our country needs a good ruler, and neither you nor Christopher are strong enough to take on that role," said Quinn, bringing the sword close to Will's throat.

It suddenly became clear as day to Will. Quinn had talked about motivation, and he had a very good one; if Will and his brothers were dead, Quinn would be the next in line. Quinn had never shown any interest in ruling the country, but the need for power made people do crazy things. Still, it didn't explain why Quinn had fed information to the enemy and taken Will to the Tower of Fire. If David hadn't refused to send the mages to save Will, there wouldn't be a country for Quinn to rule.

"And you think you would make a good king? *You*, the person who's been betraying his people by feeding information to the enemy?" asked Will. For one thing, he was really curious, and for another, so long as Quinn was talking, he wouldn't cut Will's throat. He didn't know how long it would take Nate and Zachary to come back, but the more he stalled Quinn, the better his chances got.

"I only did that so the war would be long enough to kill off all three of you. David is already out of the picture, and soon you'll be, too. The Northerners

will receive very clear information tonight about when Christopher will be the most vulnerable and how to get rid of him. Come tomorrow, I'll be the person in charge. With the king in the hospital, I'll be the one guiding our forces in the war, and people will love me once they see how fast I can win it."

"Two birds with one stone, huh? Get us out of the way and gain people's admiration and trust. Gotta give it to you, it's a neat plan. What I don't understand, though, is why you took me to the Tower. Why not just kill me? Why risk David sending the mages to save me?"

"That was sentimentality on my part. I didn't want to be the one delivering the killing blow to you. And there was never a chance of David sending the mages after you. I made sure David's spy heard of the imminent attack and then personally convinced him he needed the mages right here in the city. I knew Nate would volunteer to go after you, but I never thought he would succeed."

So Will was alive because Quinn hadn't thought he would have any chance of surviving the Tower. It wasn't the first time someone had underestimated Nate and been proven wrong.

Thinking of Nate reminded Will of Nate's mission. "What did you do to Sarah? Did you kill her, too?"

Quinn frowned. "Despite how it may seem, I don't enjoy killing people. I locked her up. Once all this is over, I'll get her memories altered, and she can go back to her life."

Quinn didn't elaborate on how he would change Sarah's memories, but he didn't need to. He'd pay Kitty to do it. Of course, neither of them was allowed to talk about Kitty.

"So it's only me and my brothers you want dead," said Will disgustedly.

"I don't want you *dead*. I just don't want you ruling this country," said Quinn, shrugging coldly.

"Why not?" asked Will. Quinn talked as if he hadn't done this to become king *himself*, but rather to prevent Will and his brothers from taking their father's place.

Quinn sighed. "Christopher is too sentimental. He could never rule this country; even you have to admit that."

Quinn paused, as if waiting for Will to agree with him. Will continued glaring at him until he continued. "David is a good king, but he can't have

children. With his death, the crown will be yours. Despite your tendency to trust too easily, I always thought you'd make a good king. That was until I saw your relationship with Nate become more and more intense. People will not accept a gay king, not to mention the fact that you and Nate can't have children either."

Will could only gape at Quinn. It figured that the only person who had figured out Will's secret was the person who was ready to kill him for it.

Quinn went on, "Your family will just create complications in the politics of this country. People need a stable king, someone they can count on."

"And let me guess: that person is you," said Will sarcastically. Out of all the reasons in the world, he would never have thought that his sexuality had anything to do with the mess their country was in.

Quinn shrugged. "I'm as good as anyone else," he said. "Now, as much as I like to continue chatting, I don't really fancy having to explain myself to your boyfriend."

Will looked frantically around, but there was nothing he could do. He was better than Quinn with a sword, but he couldn't do anything empty-handed. All he could do was try to get away from Quinn. He needed to distract Quinn for a moment to do that.

As if in answer to his prayers, his phone suddenly began to ring. He'd placed it on the coffee table and from where he sat, he could see Nate's picture pop up on the screen. He didn't have the time to take it, but the ringing of the phone created a momentary distraction for Quinn. That was all Will needed.

He jumped up and away from the couch and Quinn's sword. He would never get enough time to open the door—which thanks to Zachary's paranoia, automatically locked as soon as it was closed—and get out of the house, so instead he went toward the bedroom. If he could lock himself in, it would give him a few seconds to come up with an impromptu weapon before Quinn kicked in the door.

Luckily for Will, the bedroom door had an old-fashioned lock that only required the turning of a key that was already in the lock. No sooner had he locked the bedroom door than Quinn slammed into it. Will looked hastily around the room; Zachary's bedroom was pretty basic. Will didn't have much choice of weapons. He spotted the curtain rod which at least seemed to be made of metal, if a little thin for his liking. He managed to get it off the wall and get the curtains off it before Quinn kicked the door in, barreling inside.

Zachary's bedroom was pretty big. It was a good thing, considering the length of the curtain rod; the thing was longer than a sword and would have been harder to maneuver in a small place. Even so, some of the space in the room was taken by the bed and other stuff, making it not exactly a great place to fight.

Quinn looked at the curtain rod and smiled with amusement. "I should have known you wouldn't go down without a fight," he said. "Still, that is just desperate. That thing's not going to last against my sword."

Will was very much aware of that, but he was damned if he was going to be a sitting duck for Quinn's sword. He wasn't going to make it easy on Quinn. He didn't need to win a fight against his cousin; he just needed to stall long enough for Nate and Zachary to get back. He just hoped they came back soon.

Quinn didn't waste any time coming at him. Fighting against a sword with a curtain rod wasn't easy, but they didn't call Will the best warrior in the country for no reason. He blocked the path of the sword, using the contact to push Quinn back. Quinn attacked again immediately. Will ducked, swinging the rod to hit Quinn's legs. Quinn didn't fall down. He wobbled for a minute before steadying himself. He came at Will with more intent, and Will did all he could to block attack after attack. Quinn managed to slit his left arm. He retaliated by hitting Quinn in the back.

After a few minutes, they were both breathing hard, but neither was injured seriously. They were in the living room—In an attempt to avoid getting cornered, Will had tried to inch toward the bedroom door and into the living room. As they continued fighting, Will could hear his phone ringing again and again with Nate's ringtone. He was too busy to wonder what Nate wanted to tell him, but he hoped Nate would know something was up when he failed to answer his phone and would come back.

Despite his heavy breathing, Quinn didn't take a second to catch his breath. He seemed to be getting more and more determined to finish it with every passing second. Will did his best to deflect his swings, but a curtain rod did not have the best holding place. After a few more minutes, Quinn managed to send the rod flying out of Will's hands with a well-placed blow.

The room was silent except for the sound of their breathing. Nate seemed to have finally given up and stopped calling. Will heard the sound of the rod hitting the floor and backed away immediately. He ran for the kitchen counter, throwing everything he could find on it toward Quinn. It didn't stall him for

long. A heavy bowl hit him in the chest, which made him pause for a second, but then he was moving again. Will looked frantically around. He was getting cornered, and there was nothing he could do to stop Quinn from killing him.

“Don’t do this, Quinn,” he said desperately. “What are you going to tell Nate and Zachary? They’ll find out. You won’t be able to get away with this.”

“I’ll just tell them last I saw you, you got frustrated with the interrogations and went for a walk to clear your head. No one will question my story. They all share your blind trust,” he said, getting ready to deliver the final blow. “I’m sorry, Will.”

The loud sound of the door blowing up made them both look toward the house’s entrance. Will recovered faster, again using Quinn’s distraction to push him away. Quinn made to come after him, but then he stopped suddenly, looking at his sword before dropping it with a shout. The handle had gotten red with heat. He recovered immediately, getting ready to throw a punch when a voice stopped him.

“I wouldn’t do that, Quinn,” said Nate from the doorway. Will had never been happier to see him. “The police are on their way. It’s over.”

Quinn frowned at Nate. He was obviously trying to determine whether or not Nate was bluffing. Will could practically hear the question ringing in Quinn’s head: *How could Nate have figured it out?*

There was a pause before someone else came in, stepping carefully over the debris. Quinn’s eyes filled with the sudden realization that it really was over.

“Sarah!” said Will happily. So Nate had actually found her. “Thank God you’re okay.”

Sarah offered a weak smile. She looked tired and dirty, but at least she was safe. So was Nate. He sighed in relief.

“You had to wait till the very last second, didn’t you?” he asked.

Nate flashed him a grin. Before he could say anything, the room was filled with police officers, followed by Zachary, who seemed relieved to see Will alive. As soon as Quinn was cuffed and was no longer a threat, Will went to Nate. Nate touched the gash in his arm gently.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, thanks to you. Again. Do you know how many times you’ve saved my life these last few days?”

“I’m aware,” said Nate with a smile. “I’m waiting for you to make it up to me.”

“Gladly,” said Will, cupping Nate’s face and kissing him sweetly, right there for everyone to see.

“You realize you just outed me, right?” asked Nate amusedly.

“I outed *myself*,” said Will. “That’s front-page news right there.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, Will, but you did no such thing. All these people see is a bald guy with an ugly mustache kissing me.”

Will, who seemed to just remember he was wearing a disguise, shrugged. “Well, it’s the thought that counts.”

Nate laughed wholeheartedly and kissed Will’s bald head. He walked out of the house, Will right there beside him. All things considered, things hadn’t turned out too bad after all.

Epilogue

“It was a pleasure doing business with you guys,” said Kitty cheerfully. She had just finished examining the check Will had given her for one hundred thousand dollars.

“I can’t say I feel the same way,” said Will, faking a pleasant tone. “The disguise did not do us a bit of good.”

“Well, it’s not my fault you decided to reveal your identity to the one person you shouldn’t have,” said Kitty.

Will arched an eyebrow. Kitty rolled her eyes. “I *do* read the news. Sometimes. And you two have been in the news so much these past two weeks that you’re starting to star in my nightmares. If it isn’t about you heroically arresting a traitor and saving the country, it’s about you coming out and dating. It’s rather sickening, actually,” she said, frowning.

Nate grinned. “Well, you ended up helping the good guys for once. You should think about doing that more often. It can be very rewarding,” he said, winking at Will. “People tend to forget to judge you if you’re known as a public hero. It’s even more effective than being a prince.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll stick to my own ways. In the meantime, make sure you don’t mention me to anyone. Not that you can, of course. Your blood will turn against you if you do. Now *that’s* what I love about my job. It’s great to always have the upper hand in your business transactions, don’t you think?”

Nate sighed. They were never going to get Kitty to see the light.

“How are your cats, by the way?” asked Kitty as she escorted them to the door.

“They’re great, actually. No longer in danger of being separated from me or each other,” said Nate. “Perks of being a national hero. Having the king put in a good word for me didn’t hurt either. It’s not always bad to have a prince as a boyfriend. Sure, he may get kidnapped and you may have to rescue him from a tower full of fire, but when you have a decree you want vetoed, his dad’s the go-to guy.”

Kitty looked at him, puzzled, as she opened the door. “What are you talking about? I was only asking after your cats.”

Neither Nate nor Will answered. They stood just outside the Tower, staring at each other with grins on their faces.

“*Oh for God’s sake.* It’s even more sickening up close than it is on TV.”

Will took his eyes off Nate long enough to glance at Kitty, say a quick good-bye, and close the door, effectively saving their moment from being ruined by Kitty’s less than enthusiastic remarks.

“Boyfriend, huh?” he said, circling his arms around Nate’s waist and pulling him close.

“Mmhm,” said Nate, standing on his toes for a passionate kiss.

“Get a room!” came Kitty’s shout from the other side of the door. Will rolled his eyes and sighed. Closed door or not, Kitty seemed determined to ruin the moment.

“Let’s go home,” said Will, taking hold of Nate’s hand. They walked to the car.

“I kind of miss the mustache,” said Nate, grinning.

Will snorted. “I can always grow one.”

“You can’t grow one *exactly* like the disguise. *No one* can. It was hideous,” said Nate. “Thank God it was only for a few days. I mean, I love you and all, but I could not have dealt with you looking like that,” said Nate.

Will suddenly stopped walking. Nate turned around. The expression on Will’s face was one of pure joy.

“You love me?” he asked, arching a brow.

“Of course I do. I have for a long time. What did you think this was about?”

“It’s good to hear it,” said Will, placing a sweet kiss on Nate’s lips. “I love you, too.”

Nate smiled and took hold of Will’s hand again. As they got into the car and drove toward Will’s house, where Nate had slept every single night in the past two weeks, he couldn’t help but think that having Will was well worth the trouble he’d gone through to rescue him from the Tower of Fire. After all, how many couples could claim they had literally been through fire together?

The End

Author Bio

When not busy with university, I like to hang out with my friends and family, watch TV, or curl up in bed with a book and get caught up in the lives of people who are much more interesting than I am. I've been writing short stories and poetry since I was in high school. Aside from writing, I like chocolate, good music, cats, and happy endings.

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