

Chapter One

It had been four years since Kaela's father, Gillan, disappeared on the way to the city of Monover. No one knew how it happened and searchers found nothing, not even his body. Kaela was six at the time, and her memory of his image was becoming blurred and distorted, but nothing could erase the memory of his warm hug or the gentle strength of his hands. He had tilled the land and made repairs to the old wooden farmhouse and barn. Now, others tilled the land, though her mother, Erona, said she still owned it.

"Kaela," her mother called from downstairs.

Kaela, lying on her mother's bed, sat up abruptly, her blonde bangs falling into her eyes. "Here I am, Mother," she said, brushing her hair out of the way with her fingers.

"In my room again?"

"I was just daydreaming." She rose and went downstairs to the kitchen. Erona stood by the fireplace cutting up carrots and onions and dropping them into the pot over the fire. Her dark brown hair was tied up in a bun. The snowflake-shaped crystal necklace she kept under her shirt glittered for a moment as it somehow caught the light from the window.

Kaela seldom saw the necklace. She knew it had some special significance, but Erona never talked about it and told Kaela many times not to say a word about it.

"I need your help," Erona said, stepping away from the fire. "Could you walk over to the Markles' farm? Mrs. Markle said she'd give us some fresh potatoes for a dozen of our eggs."

A rustling to her left drew Kaela's attention to the cloth-draped table. The fringe lifted and a head popped out from underneath.

"Momma, can I go with her?" piped in Kihran, Kaela's six-year-old sister. She scrambled into view, gripping a rag doll in one hand. She went over to her mother and wrapped her arms around Erona's waist.

Kaela grinned. "Yes, Mother. Let her come."

"I would," Erona said, "but I have other chores for her to do." Kihran pouted. Erona's face softened as she gazed at her younger daughter. "You get to set the table."

Kihran's face brightened. She ran to the corner and set her doll on a small stool there. She returned to her mother. "I'm ready," she said, showing off her empty hands.

Kaela giggled at Kihran's enthusiasm. She grabbed the basket of eggs and set off for the Markles' farm, still grinning. The sun in the clear afternoon sky warmed her face. Rayus, the smaller of the two moons, dimly showed half his face in the eastern sky.

Shortly after topping the rise between the two farms, Kaela heard the low rumble of thunder behind her. She turned around, but the sky remained clear. She thought it was her imagination, but she headed back toward home to investigate. As the farm came into view, Kaela caught her breath. A single large black cloud loomed low over the house. It was darker than the smoke that rose from the chimney, and despite the light breeze, it did not move.

As Kaela edged toward her home, a chill assaulted her and a cold hand seemed to grip her heart. The cloud... How could that be? Her pulse raced and her throat tightened, making breathing difficult. She had to hide, but her legs wobbled uncertainly.

Kaela darted for a nearby bush and collapsed behind it, the basket falling from her hand. She lay there shivering and gasping for breath, watching the ooze from the broken eggs collect on the ground.

The thunder rolled again, but this time, Kaela heard deep-throated, menacing laughter. A moment later, the cold hand released its hold on her. She took in several deep breaths then rose. The cloud was gone. She waited to make certain her legs would support her then ran to the house leaving the basket behind.

As Kaela opened the door, the chill returned, but the grip on her heart did not. She knew she was in no danger, but what about her family? Kaela's pulse pounded.

"Mother, Kihran? Where are you?" The only answer was the sound of the fire and the smell of vegetables cooking. Her mother never left food unattended. Kihran's rag doll still sat on the stool in the corner, its usual place when Kihran needed both hands free. Other than that, she never went anywhere without it.

Kaela ran upstairs, rushing to the room she shared with Kihran. Nothing. Then she ran to her mother's room. It was as she had left it. The eerie thought of her missing father returned. Now it seemed her mother and sister had joined him. She collapsed on the bed, heaving and sobbing, her whole body aching with grief.

When Kaela's eyes went dry, she sat up and wiped her face. She tried to think what she should do, but the only clear thought was that she couldn't stay there alone. She had to leave the house.

Halfway down the stairs, Kaela spied footprints. That was nothing unusual, but the most recent trail of prints ended in a swirl. No other footprints led away from that spot. As she approached the swirl, the chill she felt intensified. The cloud. It had taken her family and she was alone.

Kaela put out the cook fire and went out back. No, she wasn't quite alone. Whitestar, the horse, was still there and the chickens, too.

Kaela's stomach turned to a jumble of knots and her head reeled. She felt she must let someone know. She ran to Whitestar and clambered onto his back. The closest farm was the Markles', but it was farther from town. Not only that, but they were an older couple and their hired help had already left for the day. Only three farms stood between Kaela and the town. She kicked Whitestar into a gallop and headed for Sillton.

Kaela hung her head low over the horse's back, trusting him to know where to go. When Whitestar came to a stop, Kaela looked up to see her good friend, Tilly Wheaton, sweeping the porch of her family's farm house just outside Sillton. "Are you all right, Kaela?" Tilly asked.

Kaela slid off Whitestar's back and walked toward Tilly. "I... I..." But she could not finish. She collapsed on the ground in tears.

"Mama, come quickly," Tilly cried. A moment later, Kaela felt Tilly's arms wrap around her. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"They're gone," Kaela sobbed.

"What's the matter?" Elsbeth said coming up behind them. "Kaela? My stars. What happened?"

Kaela could not speak. "She just said 'they're gone'," Tilly answered for her.

"Come inside the house, Kaela," Elsbeth said, helping her to rise. "Tilly, go get your father and Kendrick." Tilly left running.

Elsbeth led Kaela through the house to the kitchen in the back. There she beckoned Kaela to sit on a bench by the table. Kaela turned and sat, leaning back against the table. Elsbeth sat beside Kaela and put her arm around her shoulders.

Kaela felt comforted by the presence of a mother, even if it was not her own. The aroma of fresh bread, cooked meat and vegetables permeated the air, smelling much like the kitchen at Kaela's house. The ache returned and her tears flowed anew.

Elsbeth slid off the bench and knelt in front of Kaela. "It's all right, Kaela," she said. "You don't have to say anything until you're ready. Have you eaten yet, dear?"

Kaela shook her head.

"We've just finished, but there's some left." As Elsbeth rose, Kaela heard the back door open. Tilly rushed over, followed closely by her brother, Kendrick and her father, Leeman. Tilly plopped on the bench next to Kaela, breathing hard. Kendrick stood nearby, brushing the day's work off his clothes. Leeman went to speak to his wife, then came and knelt before Kaela.

"You wouldn't be here if your mother were available," he said. "Is she the one missing?"

Kaela swallowed hard, and wiped her eyes. "Kihran, too," she whispered.

Leeman nodded. "We need to tell Cirus. May I take your horse? He's faster than my old mule."

Kaela nodded.

"Good. We'll do everything we can to find your family. Until then, you can stay with us for as long as you need."

It took a moment for Kaela to remember who Cirus was. Erona had seldom needed the blacksmith's services since Gillan's disappearance. She did recall her mother mentioning he had recently become the mayor of Sillton.

After Leeman left, Elsbeth approached the table with a steaming bowl. Kaela swung her legs over the bench to face the table. She was not hungry, but she managed to eat half of the meal before Leeman returned with Cirus.

The blacksmith took a seat at the table across from Kaela. "We have search parties out all over the area," he began. "Your family is not the only one missing, Kaela. Tell me, did you see anything that could help us?"

Kaela was reluctant to mention how she felt about the cloud. She knew magic had been a part of the country's history, but it had been banned from Delnar for centuries. She feared she would be thought of as foolish. She thought carefully before she answered. "There was a cloud, and it didn't seem...natural. Inside, Mother and Kihran's footprints ended in a swirl of dust."

"How could a cloud be anything but natural?" Tilly asked.

Leeman grimaced. "Should we leave you alone with Kaela for awhile, Cirus?"

"Yes, I think so."

"We'll get a pallet ready for you in Tilly's room, Kaela," Elsbeth said.

"I want to stay here and listen," Kendrick protested.

"No, I think you and I should join one of the search parties," Leeman suggested. Kendrick nodded and followed his father out the front door. Elsbeth and Tilly went upstairs.

"You say the cloud didn't seem natural," Cirus said. "It made perfect sense to me. Did your parents ever tell you anything about the Campaign against the Accursed One?"

Kaela nodded. "Mother said she and Father fought in the war, but she never told me who the enemy was."

"That's because no one is sure of his identity. There's some speculation that he is a man who was thought to have died centuries ago."

"How can that be?"

"It's no more natural than your cloud. It's magic."

Kaela gasped. "I thought magic was banned?"

"Not exactly. Non-human creatures, many of which have inherent magic, were banished from Delnar, Laconia and Caledorn. Magic still exists, but has not been openly used.

"As for your cloud," Cirus continued, "many disappearances like this occurred during the last war, and a black cloud was often seen at the same time. In fact, the cloud has never been seen when there wasn't a disappearance, but most people don't know its significance. It was seen in town earlier today, but no one else realized it wasn't natural."

Kaela's mind raced. Something she had been thinking of earlier that day tried to resurface. When it did, it hit like the blacksmith's hammer. "My father. That's how he must have disappeared, too."

Cirus nodded. "Very likely, but there's no way to confirm that. And I hate to tell you this, but you should know, only one person who disappeared in this way was ever found again and she was dead. However, it is known that some of these people are still alive, held captive. We just don't know where."

A measure of hope crept into Kaela. "How do you know?"

"I'm sorry, Kaela. It's not my place to tell you, but you've been very helpful. Tell me, did you feel anything when you saw the cloud?"

Kaela swallowed hard and shivered, the memory all too fresh. "Cold," she said, "and it felt like a hand squeezed my heart."

Cirus nodded and the muscles around his jaw tightened. "I need to contact someone. We'll have a town meeting the day after the search is over."

Leeman and Kendrick returned later that night just as Kaela and Tilly prepared for bed. "We went by your house," Leeman said, holding a hand behind his back. "I think your bed might fit in here with Tilly's if you want it. Also, I found this." He brought his hand out from behind him, revealing a rag doll. "Is it yours?"

Kaela took the doll from Leeman and cradled it gently. "No, it's Kihran's."

"I'm sure you'll take good care of it for her."

Kaela slept fitfully on a pallet in Tilly's room. Though it was not very comfortable, and Tilly coughed occasionally, neither was the reason for Kaela's lack of sleep. She kept replaying the last scene with her family in her mind. There were Kihran and her mother, as plain as if they were there—Kihran, a younger version of Erona, with the same dark hair and bright blue eyes. Kaela didn't want to lose that image the way she lost her father's.

The next day, the search continued, though it proved fruitless. The following afternoon people filled the common room of the inn. Kaela, sitting on a bench with Leeman and Kendrick, looked around at the scene. The open windows let in the light, illuminating the troubled faces of the townsfolk and the dust hanging in the air. Though Kaela had lived on the farm, away from the town, she knew many of the people. She'd never seen the inn so crowded.

"Quiet, everyone, please," Cirus said, rapping on a table near the bar. "I know we're all upset, but we must have order, please. I have a list of all the people of Sillton and the surrounding area. I will call all the names. If you are here, please respond. If someone is not here but can be accounted for, please let me know."

As Cirus went through the list, it became apparent that every family was represented except those already confirmed missing. Kaela found that she was not the only person missing part of her family. A woman wept in the arms of her husband. When their names were called, the man explained their daughter had been visiting a friend when she disappeared. To Kaela's distress, her good friend Elna and her family were also among the missing.

"It seems then," Cirus continued, "that the missing do not fall along family lines, but on who was home at the time."

Kaela took little comfort from that idea. It had occurred to her that, had she gone into the house when the cloud was there, she might have been able to do something. If not, at least she would be with her family.

"There is a young woman who saw something at the time of the disappearances. Kaela, will you please come forward?" Cirus said. He had spoken to Kaela earlier that day and had prepared her for this. She was not to mention the cold hand she'd felt. Despite that, her stomach churned.

Kaela described the black cloud in as much detail as she could. When she finished, she noticed movement in the back corner of the room. There was a woman there Kaela did not recognize. She was an impressive figure with dark hair illuminated with streaks of white and she wore an air of

authority. Around her neck hung a chain with a small teardrop-shaped crystal pendant. Their eyes met and locked for a moment, then the woman put the necklace under her shirt. The crystal reminded Kaela of her mother's necklace. Was this the person Cirus needed to 'contact'?

"Did you hear me?" Cirus asked.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" Kaela stammered.

"I said, 'did you see any footprints?'"

Kaela had almost forgotten about the prints. "Yes."

"Was there anything unusual about them?"

She proceeded to describe them yet again. The woman in the back corner nodded as if she understood.

The meeting continued for a short time after Kaela returned to her seat, but she watched the woman with the crystal and paid no attention to anything else. Was there a connection between this woman and Kaela's mother?

Everyone rose to leave. Kaela lost sight of the woman for a moment, and when she could see the corner again, it was empty. "I'll be back," Kaela told Leeman. She wove her way through the crowd to the door.

Outside, Kaela looked around but could not find the woman. On a hunch, she went to the back of the inn and found the woman untying the lead rope of a white horse. The animal had neither bridle nor saddle.

The woman turned and spied Kaela for the first time. "My, my. We have a visitor. Kaela, isn't it?"

Kaela nodded.

"I'm sorry about your mother and sister. The Wheatons are good people, though. You will be well taken care of."

"Thank you." Kaela hesitated, swallowing hard before continuing. "I saw something." She brought her hand up to her chest.

"The necklace. Yes. I believe your mother had one, did she not?"

Kaela nodded.

"You do know not to speak of it openly," the woman said.

"They're magic, aren't they," Kaela whispered. "You're a magician, aren't you? And so is my mother."

"It is good you keep your voice low," the woman said. "Magic comes in many forms. Magicians and sorcerers practice only dark magic, like what you felt on the day of the disappearances. Your mother would not be the person you know her to be if she were a magician."

At the mention of dark magic, Kaela shivered. She wondered how long the memory of the cold hand would continue to cause her to react that way. Still, the woman was right about one thing; Erona was no magician.

A shimmering light interrupted Kaela's thoughts. She looked up to see the white horse. He seemed to stare at her. "Your horse," Kaela said, pointing.

"What about him?"

"He seems too clean for a white horse."

"I tend him with great care," the woman explained.

"And you ride him without a saddle or bridle?"

"They are unnecessary. He is well trained and very gentle."

Kaela edged closer. "May I pet him?"

"Of course. But I must be going soon."

Kaela stepped forward and reached out her hand to the horse's muzzle. The nose was soft and velvety, and a special warmth spread throughout Kaela. Her heart leapt. Magic. Benevolent magic this time, full of understanding and even hope.

"Kaela."

"That's Leeman," Kaela said. "I've got to go. Thank you." It wasn't until after they had returned home that Kaela realized she didn't know the name of the woman or the horse.

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Kihran shifted her position, but did not open her eyes. She could tell she was in her mother's arms. How long had she been asleep? Did it really matter? The warmth from her mother's body comforted her. Kihran snuggled deeper into Erona's grasp and tried to go back to sleep.

"Kihran?" Erona said, gently shaking her. "Kihran, sweetheart. Wake up."

Kihran opened her eyes and looked up. Her mother's worried face was barely visible in the dim light. A low murmuring surrounded them. "What's wrong, Momma? Where are we?"

"Don't you remember?"

Kihran thought for a moment. Kaela had gone to the Markles' farm. Kihran wanted to go, but her mother made her stay and set the table. Just as she finished.... "The thunder," she said aloud. And a cold hand on her heart, though she did not voice the thought.

"Yes," her mother said. "It was not a storm--it was magic. We've been taken prisoner with many others."

Kihran sat up and slid off her mother's lap onto a cold flagstone floor. Stone walls rose high above her head. At least as high as our barn, Kihran thought. Near the top of one wall, a small, barred window let in what light

it could. On the opposite wall, the scant light of a torch came through the barred window of a thick wooden door.

As her eyes continued to adjust, Kihran saw more people scattered around the room. "They're all from Sillton," she said.

"Yes," Erona answered.

Kihran looked to see if Kaela was there. Other familiar faces lined the walls--Elna and her parents, Loye and Nelda Teln and their parents, the carpenter and his son, Jeeter, and others she recognized, but did not know personally. "I don't see Kaela. Is she here?"

"No."

"Then she got away," Kihran exclaimed.

Kihran heard her mother swallow hard. "By the stars. I hope you're right." Erona said. Then she reached out and pulled Kihran to her.

Kihran's heart began to ache. "They'll let us go soon, won't they?" she said. "We haven't done anything."

"I don't think so," Erona whispered. Kihran could feel her mother shiver as she wept.