

I

Traitor

AD 33—Northernmost part of the land Bountiful
Sabirah

I WATCHED AS KEI TRIED to outrun my men. He thought he had escaped. But we had tracked him most of the day and knew if we could capture him, he could lead us to Princess Jamila's camp. Staying hidden from view behind the trunk of a large rain tree and giant fern fronds, I waited for the young Lamanite, who ran as fast as a white-tailed deer, to fall into my trap.

The Lord had guided me—a Lamanite woman of only ten and nine years—and my devoted, small army of men, some old, some young. They were believers of God and followed me because they loved and revered my father. Now I had to prove my worth.

My hand reached for the sling at my waist as I quickly surveyed the ground for rocks. I saw several at my feet. Then my fingers touched the ivory dagger. Asim, my elder brother—who left our people more than a year ago—had carved it from the tusks of a giant curelom, saying that when I fought, the blade would give me the strength of the mighty beast. He wanted me to use a real weapon and abandon fighting with rocks. So denying what came naturally, I pulled the dagger to the ready and waited. Without knowing, Kei headed straight toward me, dodging hanging vines and massive ferns.

Patience . . . patience . . .

And then he was in front of me. No time to think, only time to attack. I leaped onto his back, catching a firm hold on his shoulder. He grabbed my hand—as I tried to place the white tip of my dagger to his throat—and flipped me to the ground. I landed hard on my back.

“Sabirah?” Leaning over, Kei reached to take my weapon. I kicked him in the head, making him reel backward. As I rolled over, I noticed he had recovered and had already pulled a knife from his leg strap.

“Kei, why have you betrayed your people?” I had to know his reason, but he didn’t answer.

With his eyes locked on mine, I knew he thought his only threat was my knife. Good. I would let him think so. I hid a rock in the palm of my hand without him noticing. Then quickly scrambling to my feet, I threw my dagger at him as he expected.

The handle hit his body instead of the blade and fell worthless to the ground. He cackled, thinking I’d failed. With deliberate purpose, I threw the stone and hit him between the eyes. He stumbled backward and dropped to the ground unconscious.

Recovering my dagger, I knelt beside him, waiting for him to awaken. As his eyes opened, I placed my knife to his throat and said, “I know of your treason.”

He didn’t dare fight. One move and I would stab the life vein in his neck. He stared at me with hatred in his gaze. I pressed hard on the blade. “Why did you join Princess Jamila’s people?”

Realizing he was trapped, yet not wanting to admit defeat, he said, “I give no credence to a god I cannot see, nor do I fear him.” He stared at me with loathing in his eyes.

His answer caught me off guard more than the flip move he had used earlier that had brought me to the ground. Kei had been a devoted follower of my father. And though Father had been gone many years, how could Kei so easily forget his teachings? Sorrow filled my heart, though I would not show weakness, not to him . . . or to my men, who had now come to stand in a circle around us. Despite

my concern about Kei's treachery, I had to learn all I could about Princess Jamila and why she was here. "What do you know of Jamila's mission?" I asked.

Kei said nothing at first. I threatened him by pressing the dagger's blade along his throat. With eyes wide and fearful, he said, "She searches for more followers of her father."

Rage tore at my chest. How dare King Jacob, the wicked Nephite ruler of Jacobugath, send his daughter into our lands? Worry filled my heart for my people. All at once, Kei grasped the talisman hanging from my neck, and I panicked. He knew how special the token was. My father had carved the small wing-spread eagle from jade with his own hands. Kei's spite for me must run deep; there was no other explanation for why he would risk losing his arm and maybe his life by daring to take it.

My men stood breathlessly, still waiting to see what I would do. With serpentlike reflexes, I grabbed his wrist with my free hand, twisted his arm, and broke the hold he had on my necklace.

Disgusted with his pathetic attempt and betrayal, I stood and motioned for my men to bind him. Mahir, my second, quickly took charge.

Kissing the flying-eagle talisman, I let it rest again on my chest. Though my father was but a memory, the eagle kept him close to my heart. I sheathed the dagger and nervously rubbed the band tied about my middle as I straightened the ragged doe-skin tunic that hung to my knees. The nagging fear that both my father and brother had been captured by King Jacob haunted me. But why else would the king so brazenly send his only daughter to seek supporters for his cause? How arrogant and pompous the king had become to think she was not in danger.

She was!

What I had planned would surprise not only the king but also the princess, though I had to be patient. When I was a little girl, my father told me I would be tested while in my youth and that through my trials I must remain as strong as an ocean wind while

waiting for God's guidance. The Lord would send a young wayfarer to aid me when all seemed lost. This wayfarer would be a healer and foreign to my people in every way, yet he would believe in Christ.

As time had passed with no word of my father, I'd felt abandoned. His wise counsel had given our people hope that a Messiah would save us. The sign of the Redeemer's birth, which my father foretold, happened many seasons before I was born, but I remembered my father warning the people of Christ's death and that great suffering would fall upon the land. I knew this time was close, for trouble brewed both near and far. Turmoil between believers and nonbelievers grew stronger with each passing day. My people desperately needed Father's loving guidance. Ashraf, my uncle, assumed the role of counselor for our village, yet he lacked the mantle of authority and caring that had resided in my father.

So did I.

We needed the wayfarer.



AD 2015

Idaho Falls, Idaho

Tag

"YOU'RE GOING TO BE LATE, TAG," Mom called from the kitchen. She'd just arrived home. Mom believed in the motto "Do it, or get out of the way so I can." As an emergency room nurse at the Idaho Falls Hospital, she was a strong, take-charge woman.

Nothing bothered her.

Nothing made her lose her cool.

Except me.

"Coming," I yelled. Making sure I had Dad's sketchpad and drawing pencil in my hip pocket, I quickly locked my bedroom door. I hadn't always locked it when I wasn't home, but things had

changed. I had changed, too. Things weren't normal anymore. This sixteen-year-old guy needed privacy. I was no longer a little kid, and I didn't want anyone, not even Mom, snooping around in my stuff. Not that she ever had, but a guy couldn't be too careful when dealing with a well-meaning parent.

As I entered the kitchen, she handed me an oatmeal power bar. She still wore working scrubs. Small blood drops stained the hem of her pant legs where most people wouldn't have noticed, but I did. *Must have been a bad night in the ER.* She eyed me up and down, taking in my freckled face, formerly red hair now dyed jet black, black eyeliner, black nail polish (yeah, guys wear it), black T-shirt, and black baggy jeans with chains dangling from the pockets—very fly, and all of which she'd seen before, but she still looked at me as if I were an alien from the third ring around Saturn.

Her eyes grew even wider as she noticed my latest addition—a black dog collar with spikes. My persona was finally complete. I was impressed with the new me.

Mom wasn't.

"Tag, you might dye your hair and paint your face, but you can't change your blue eyes." She smiled as if remembering the kid I'd once been and then said, "I might not say too much about your appearance, but I'm letting you know right now there'll be no tattoos. You can get infection, you can . . ."

"Sure," I said over my shoulder as I left, glad she couldn't see beneath my T-shirt and find the newly applied henna tattoo of a skull with spider legs on my chest. It was temporary and would only last ten to fifteen days. Thought I'd try it out and see if it looked as good on my skin as it did on the computer screen before I went beneath the needle and made it permanent. It was four inches high and wide and fit nicely on my sternum. Glad that she hadn't insisted I lose the collar, I didn't look back to say good-bye or have a nice day. I'd come to believe that using one-syllable words was the best way to communicate with her. No arguing that way—plus, no actual conversation.

I had tried to avoid talking with her at all. But then she forced me to talk with Doctor Kenyon Bradford—the tall creep who wormed his way into our lives. His height could easily intimidate the average person, but not me. I saw right through him from day one. He might have believed he could reason a pit bull into not biting him, but he couldn't reason with me.

A few months ago, the man had started having Friday night dinners with us. Not many mixed-up kids could say their mothers were dating their therapists. But me, I'd become "special." All I knew was I wanted to be left alone, not only at home but at school, as well. I'd come to feel I didn't belong anywhere. I actually felt like I should be somewhere else. I just didn't know where . . . so I started dressing this way, thinking everyone would leave me alone. My plan backfired with my mother and with a group of dudes who wanted me to become part of their gang called Prime.

They were a bunch of losers who wanted other losers to join them.

Recently, they demanded I skip school and meet them in back of the football stadium, which was really no big deal. Skipping school was no problem. I hated sitting there talking about things that were easy and unimportant; though, I was totally cool with honors lit and the library. I loved to read books—science fiction, fantasy, even Shakespeare.

As I hurried by the seminary building, I remembered I was supposed to meet with Bishop Carpenter last night. He tried to keep a close eye on Mom and me since Dad and Tyler left. Talking with him never solved anything. Besides, whenever there was a big lull in the conversation, the bishop would encourage me to serve a mission, like my father had. Going on a mission was not on my list of things to do, especially since Dad had ditched us.

Heading for the stadium, I decided I was going to put an end to the Primes bugging me. I'd just tell them they were boring as dirt. I was sure that would go over well. Of course, since these guys weren't really a hard-core gang yet, I might have pull it off.

I continued down the worn, grassy path flanked by cottonwoods and an old wooden fence.

Stepping out near the meeting place, I saw that the Primes had someone cornered. Some poor, pathetic person was in trouble. As I neared, I stopped dead in my tracks. My heart machine-gunned against my ribs. For a brief moment, I thought the person they had trapped was my brother, Tyler: same sandy brown hair, same thin body. I did a double take. No, it wasn't Tyler; it was my stupid, always-do-what's-right cousin, Ethan.

Ethan Gordan was Aunt Crystal and Uncle Lee's son. He was the bane of my teenage existence and seriously threatened to screw up my day. Though we were both sixteen and attended the same school, we rarely had much to do with each other. Many kids didn't know we were related because of our different last names; his mother was my father's sister. Cousin Ethan, the Ivy-League-snob type, couldn't ruin his reputation by being seen with me, the whacked-out cousin.

What was I going to do? On one hand, I couldn't let the Primes torment Ethan. Technically, he was family. Besides, he looked clueless, standing there in his golf shirt and Docker slacks. On the other hand, I didn't want Ethan to know I planned to ditch the Primes.

Dino, their leader, leaned against the car, swilling a beer and smiling. His dimpled grin could make girls blush or make rival gang members shiver in their Nikes. He liked me and what I could do with a can of spray paint. He'd seen my work on the cinderblock fence near the hospital. I'd drawn the Grim Reaper taking money from a patient's wallet. Didn't take the hospital long to whitewash it. Word spread fast that I was the one who did it. Many thought my name was my moniker and stood for Turf Artist Graffiti. They didn't know my dad had named me Tag because he didn't like Taggert, which was the name my grandpa Quincy wanted to call me.

Skids twirled his pocket chain. He drove the wheels for the gang. Gordo, the muscle man, who looked as if he chewed broken

glass for a snack, didn't think I had what it would take to be a member of Prime. Pirate, the skinny, nail-biting lapdog gave his hyena cackle as he circled the victim.

"Don't tell me what I should and shouldn't do, Mormon boy," said Gordo as he flicked cigarette ashes on Ethan.

"Smoking and drinking is against the Word of Wisdom." My cousin's tanned face turned pale as he swallowed hard, but he still had a self-righteous glint in his eyes. What was Ethan thinking? Probably that he was a prophet of some type.

I tried to remember Book of Mormon prophets. My grandmother used to tell us stories from that book. All at once I realized which one he reminded me of. Ethan probably thought he was like Nephi, the prophet who preached repentance to the people before Christ appeared in America. And he probably thought God would send down an angel to protect him. Like that would ever happen. Well, I was no angel, but I *was* Ethan's only hope for escape.

"Us Primes—" Gordo grabbed ahold of Ethan's shirt collar right up against his throat "—we got our own words of wisdom."

"Hey, whats up?" I walked up to Gordo and stared him straight in the eyes.

"Choir boy—" Gordo gave Ethan a shake, "—thinks smoking and drinking is bad and said we shouldn't do it." Gordo blew a puff of smoke in Ethan's face.

My cousin immediately started coughing and wheezing. Gordo let go of him as the coughing fit grew into a choking frenzy. Ethan frantically searched his pants pockets for his inhaler, pulled it out, held the device to his mouth, and pumped. Instant relief came to his face.

"You some kind of junkie?" Gordo jerked the inhaler out of Ethan's hand, tossing it to the ground.

Ethan looked at me. Hope filled his eyes. And then the most curious thing happened; pure disappointment and sadness claimed his face.

Like it or not, cuz, I'm your only hope.

"Know what I think?" Dino walked over and took ahold of Ethan's ear, pulling hard. "I think he needs a taste of what he's missing." Dino shoved his beer can up to Ethan's mouth.

Great! Now what do I do? Finally, something came to me. "Not here. If you're going to teach him a lesson, you ought to do it at the tomb and not where Coach Madsen can find us."

"See, Gordo! We need this dude." Dino punched my arm as he let go of Ethan and headed for the car.

Now Ethan could escape. I just had to find the right moment. Skids was already behind the wheel of his souped-up Honda Civic with mag wheels, racing stripes down the sides, and a big spoiler on the back. Dino rode shotgun. My stupid cousin began to crawl into the backseat. I shoved him to the ground and spat out, "Baby-faces get in last."

Gordo kicked Ethan as he passed and then crawled into the car. Skeleton snickered and followed his idol.

Ethan slowly stood, glaring at me as if I were a traitor. I snatched his inhaler from the ground without anyone noticing and shoved him hard against the fender. Acting as though I was roughing him up, I leaned against him, planted the breathing device in his hand and, at the same time, whispered, "Take off."

He sprinted away. I stepped back and doubled over, pretending he'd punched me. Making a show of chasing him and still clutching my gut, I gave an Oscar-worthy performance of suddenly giving up. Dino jumped out of the car and came over. "You all right?"

Rubbing my stomach, I said, "Yeah."

Dino patted my shoulder. "It's okay. We have more important things to do. Today we start the ritual of initiating you into the gang."

"About that—" I dropped the charade. Now was my chance to break free of these creeps. With Ethan safely gone, I could tell them what I thought. "I've decided not to join."

Dino glared at me. "What?"

“Sorry.” I started down the path Ethan had taken.

“Think again!” Dino yelled. “I know that loser was your cousin. Why do you think we singled him out? You don’t come with us . . . well, I don’t believe he’ll keep that innocent face of his too long. He might even lose it all together. The choice is yours.”

Gritting my teeth and clenching my fists, I stared at Dino. He grinned. The Primes could and would make Ethan’s life miserable. And mine. If I joined, at least I’d be able to protect Ethan. Dino turned and walked away. Not knowing what else to do, I followed him to the car.

Skids drove to Eriksen’s Funeral Home and stopped. Dino turned to look at me and said, “Did you know that that old maid librarian, Miss Birdsell, died?”

Poor Miss Birdsell. She’d worked at the school forever. To think that her age-bent body that shuffled books from shelf to shelf would never be in the library again was sad. She’d been nice to me, even though I’d changed. The way Dino said “old maid” made me angry.

He continued, “Old Biddy Birdsell’s laid out for her viewing with no one to kiss her good-bye. So that you know I’m the boss and to kick off the beginning of your initiation, you’re going in to plant one on her stone-cold lips.”

Kiss a dead person. My stomach roiled. I stared at Eriksen’s Funeral Home. The thought of stepping across the threshold of that place made my skin crawl. The building’s aging stucco and gothic windows made me think of Edgar Allen Poe. At any moment, I expected a raven to fly by, bats to swarm above the roof, and lightning to appear in the sky. I read too much.

I stole a glance at Gordo. A sly smile creased his hockey-mask-like face. He was enjoying my discomfort. My palms became sweaty, my mouth turned dust-dry. A quivering started deep in my gut and was fast moving to my arms and legs. A multitude of ghostly fears grabbed for me. I dodged them, knowing I had to keep things in perspective. After all, this was no big deal. Wiping

my sweaty palms on my pant legs, I opened the car door and crawled out.

Gordo followed. "Someone needs to see you actually do it." He folded his arms as if he were my master.

Great. I glanced at the other Primes. Dino and Skids appeared comfortable, sitting in the front seat of the Civic. Pirate waved from the back, and I knew he was glad I was the one chosen for this fun. At least the entire gang wasn't coming with us.

I took a deep breath. A whiff of lilacs in the air signaled the last of spring and beginning of summer. I should be planning what I am going to do during the summer break that would start tomorrow instead of "playing nice" with these creeps to save my cousin's neck.

"Are you coming or not?" Gordo started toward the building.

I walked down the sidewalk and trudged up the steps. Before I could reach the door, it opened. A tall, elderly man said in an overly kind mortician's voice, "Welcome, Tag. It's been a long time. You've changed."

I didn't know why he knew me, but I could play along. "Yeah, well . . . sir, I understand Miss Birdsell, the school's librarian, is here. We'd like to pay our respects."

"Oh yes." He slowly nodded and stepped back so we could enter. A large, sparkling chandelier hung in the entryway. Overstuffed chairs and couches lined the walls. The mortician wrung his hands together, giving Gordo a good once-over as though trying to guess his coffin size. He finally said, "She's down the hall to your right, in the mourning comfort room."

I muttered a thank you and started down the plush carpeted hallway with Gordo by my side. The walls closed in. The scent of funeral flowers turned my stomach. I had a strange, déjà vu feeling.

Stepping inside the mourning comfort room, I stopped short. There it was—the casket.

Miss Birdsell was in there, quietly waiting. A nervous quaking started deep inside me. I took a quick breath as I stepped forward.

My legs were rubbery gelatin, yet I kept my focus on the coffin. All at once, the single casket blurred and became two. The room turned into the tilt-a-whirl ride at the amusement park. Nausea boiled in my stomach, tightening my throat. I couldn't take it. Surreal images swarmed me like bats frantic to escape. I held my arms in front of my face, blocking them out. Spinning around, I ran into Gordo.

"Hey!" he yelled.

I didn't stop, determined to get away before I made a fool of myself. As I burst out the back door of the funeral home, I could hear Gordo cackle. "There goes Quivering Quincy, the spineless wonder."

His words didn't stop me.

I ran . . . and ran . . . and ran.

After a while, when I was sure I was safely away from the Primes, I slowed down. Bending over, I took a few deep breaths. The nausea had left. Perspiration trickled down the sides of my face. I wiped my brow and took a cleansing breath. That was too close. Out of nowhere the thought came, *What would Doctor Bradford think of my running away?*

I didn't care. And I certainly wasn't going to tell him. Yet, a small part of me wanted to. *Stupid, confusing thoughts!* I looked around and found I was near the school.

Oh, snap! I couldn't run somewhere else? Kicking a rock, I figured I might as well go in. I'd already missed so much the principal was bound to call Mom unless I attended a few classes. I didn't need her nagging me again.

I'd planned to sneak in through the gym. Walking up the concrete steps, I pushed on the bar that opened the door. Standing before me was Principal Kinghorn—a beady-eyed, bald-headed man who seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to trouble and me.

Before I could back up and put distance between us, he placed his arm around my shoulders and ushered me inside. "Mr. Quincy, are you having a good day?"

I knew that was a trick question, so I didn't answer. I just

looked at the stern-faced man who held my fate in his giant bowling-ball sized hands.

“No answer?” He waited.

I kept my mouth shut.

“I understand you were smoking and drinking on school property.”

“What?” How in the world did he come up with that one? I’d never smoke and drink living with *my* mother, the nurse, who described in graphic detail lung and liver diseases. Someone had sold a bill of goods to Kinghorn. And that someone must have seen me with the Primes earlier and assumed I was one of them. I replied, “Sir, I can honestly tell you it wasn’t me. I don’t do that, sir.”

“An eyewitness says you did.” He guided me down the hallway.

My bacon was fried, drained, and crumbled. Someone had seen me. Coach Madsen? But I didn’t think he was the type to rat on a student. Madsen would have dealt with me himself.

The blare of the buzzer signaling the period end vibrated up and down the halls. Swarms of kids left their classrooms. They gawked and stared. Of course, they weren’t surprised Tag Quincy was headed to the principal’s office. But the fact that the man whose job it was to make me miserable had his arm around my shoulders was humiliating.

Nearing Kinghorn’s office, I peered through the large windows which allowed the “ruler” to see everything inside and outside of the school. He must have seen me walking up to the gym. Coach wasn’t in there, but someone was. Another student? He wasn’t facing me, and I wondered if one of the Primes had turned me in.

Gordo! He hated me as much as I detested him. As Kinghorn opened the door to his office, I saw the person wasn’t Gordo. For a wild millisecond, I again thought my brother stood there, and then I realized who the person was.

Ethan! Backstabbing, bootlicking, double-crossing Ethan. And sitting beside him, still dressed in her scrubs with bloodstains from the ER, was my mother.