

—The—
Four Corners
—— of Darkness ——



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The Four Corners of Darkness

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For my sister, Jen. When I wrote the first book in this series, I set out to create a character who is the greatest sister in the world because that's what Kinsey needed. It turns out writing Tatum was easy because I had the honor of growing up with you. So, thanks for being awesome! I probably don't tell you often enough but, I tell other people all the time what an amazing sister I have. So, I thought I should make sure you knew I felt that way as well. Seems only fair. Also, I still miss those cinnamon tortilla roll-ups. Those were pretty awesome, too!

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by C.S. Elston



PART ONE

Normal

CHAPTER ONE

The Snyder Kids

“Maybe hurdles,” Kinsey told his sister as they rounded the corner, taking a left from Crown Street onto Orchard Avenue, about three blocks down the road from where their journey used to begin at Ronald Reagan Elementary School. This next stretch of their walk had been part of the route they had taken home for years. The Crown Street leg, however, had been added last year when Kinsey made the transition to Lincoln Junior High School and Tatum had moved on to Roosevelt High School. She used to meet him at the elementary school when the final bell rang but, now he got out earlier than she did. So, Kinsey’s after school routine began by saying goodbye to friends as he gathered up his stuff, walking to the high school, and meeting Tatum in the courtyard at the flagpole. From there, they resumed their tradition of walking home together.

“What makes you want to try hurdles?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he admitted as he took a couple of seconds to ponder the question. Then, finally, shrugging his shoulders, he added, “Just looks fun. Plus, I’m no distance runner and I’m not as fast as some of the other kids that I hear are going to try out for the sprints. But, I figure I just might be able to rule the hurdles.”

“Sounds smart,” Tatum acknowledged.

“Then I might also try a field event. Maybe pole vault or something. We’ll see.”

“Pole vault seems kind of scary.”

“Nah. Most of the places you could fall are covered by a mat. Looks fun to me.”

“When are try outs?” Tatum asked with a smile forming because of her little brother’s ever-increasingly adventurous spirit. She had always been more naturally athletic than her little brother, and yet, here he was the one preparing to try out for a school sport.

“Two weeks from yesterday. I think I’m going to find some hurdler exercises online when we get home so I can start practicing.”

“Good idea. Just get your homework done first.” Even though the family dynamics had changed over the last three years, reducing the need for Tatum to perform many of the motherly

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duties, she hadn't lost the instinct to help keep her little brother in line and Kinsey kind of liked it that way.

"I know. I think Adam's going to come over and practice with me. I told him to wait a couple of hours though."

"Good. How'd that math test go, by the way?"

"I got a ninety-four," Kinsey said with a smile.

"Good job," Tatum said proudly as they exchanged a high-five. "Hey, change of subject . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I'll be getting my driver's permit next week."

"Oh, yeah . . ."

"Do you realize that means we're about six months away from me being able to drive us to and from school?"

"Yeah," Kinsey said but without the enthusiasm Tatum expected.

"You're not excited about that?"

"I am. It sounds cool. It's just that . . ."

"Just that, what?"

"I'll miss these walks."

"Not when it rains you won't."

"Even when it rains," Kinsey insisted as he looked up and noticed the mostly clear sky the Pacific Northwest was offering as winter began transitioning into spring.

"We'll still get to have our chats. They'll just happen inside

a car.”

“True. They’ll be shorter though, too.”

“Fair point. Maybe we’ll have to find a longer route to take home. Or, we can stop at a coffee shop or something. In fact, maybe I’ll try and get a weekend job at a place like Joe Flows so I can get us a discount.”

“Deal,” Kinsey said with a smile. “That sounds like fun.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“What kind of car are you going to get?”

“Unfortunately, I think that’s more up to mom and dad than me.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“I’m just hoping I get one. Might be borrowing one of theirs for a while.”

“I’ll help you start dropping hints.”

“Teamwork,” Tatum stated as she put her hand up and they exchanged another high five just before they rounded the corner and turned onto Strawberry Street.

“Homestretch,” Kinsey announced.

“Homestretch,” Tatum agreed as she quietly appreciated how much her brother had changed since they had returned from Kadosh. Sure, his physical appearance had changed some. He’d hit a growth spurt that stretched him out by several inches and slimmed him down. But, the biggest change was in Kinsey’s

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general attitude toward his whole life. It wasn't just this new track and field endeavor. He was embracing his life at every turn. Tatum would go so far as to say he had even become gregarious which, a few years ago, is not a word that she thought she would ever use to describe her little brother.

Tatum's changes were far more subtle than Kinsey's had been. First of all, she had grown about another three quarters of an inch and then stopped. Plus, she had always been rather gregarious herself and that hadn't changed at all. But, where she would once take life's lemons and make lemonade, she was now receiving a lot fewer of those lemons and, therefore, was able to take the time to enjoy a much wider variety of fruit. For, that, she was truly thankful.

The terrifying expedition that the Snyder family had been forced to take to the foreign world of Kadosh had ended about three years earlier. Although it was the most trying experience of their young lives, both Tatum and Kinsey counted it as one of the best things that had ever happened to them. They came back changed. Although they had settled back into a routine, the change had stuck with them and the experience was far from a distant memory. Nothing would ever be the same because of their time in that awful place. Life was now better and they wouldn't trade that for anything that they could imagine.

Tatum and Kinsey continued to talk as they finished their

walk home. Kinsey got the mail out of the mailbox as Tatum approached the front door and unlocked it. As the door opened, Kinsey hurried up the steps and they both walked inside. They were immediately greeted by the welcome smell, of a pot roast and its surrounding vegetables, that was filling the whole house as it cooked. Tatum shut the door behind them as Kinsey immediately exclaimed, “Oh! That smells awesome!”

“Yeah,” Tatum agreed. “It does. Mom said she was throwing a roast, potatoes and veggies in the slow cooker with some onion soup mix this morning before heading out.”

“Well, I was already looking forward to dinner. Now it can’t come fast enough. That smell is going to make it hard to concentrate on homework.”

“Want a snack to tide you over?”

“Cinnamon tortilla roll-up?”

“Sure.”

“I’m always up for one of those.”

“Get started on your homework and I’ll bring it up to you.”

“Deal. Thanks.”

“You bet,” Tatum said as she walked into the kitchen and Kinsey bounded up the stairs toward his bedroom.

Kinsey had always maintained a pretty well-organized space. But, as he had gained new interests and become more

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socially interactive with his family members over the last few years, he had been spending less time in the room and it had become a bit less picked up and clean than it used to be. He walked into the room and set his backpack on his bed before unzipping it. He pulled out his algebra, world geography, and Spanish textbooks as well as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

After a mental *Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe*, Kinsey selected his world geography textbook and took it with him as he sat on the floor with his back against his bed. He opened the book up to where he had dog-eared it and began to read about the seven country region known as North Africa. By the time Kinsey started the fourth paragraph, Tatum was walking through his open door with a tortilla rolled up with melted butter, cinnamon and sugar inside.

“Here you go,” she told him as she handed him the plate.

“Thanks,” Kinsey told his sister as he took the plate and set it down beside him.

“You bet. Now I’m going to go do my homework. Need anything else before I get started?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

“Awesome. See ya.”

“Bye,” Kinsey said as he took a bite of his tortilla. He was immediately comforted by both the delicious flavor and the routine of this situation, and went right back to reading about the

Atlas Mountains that are part of the fold mountain system running through much of Southern Europe and extending across a large portion of Morocco, Northern Algeria and Tunisia. His mind, however, was a bit distracted by the anticipation of both his workout with Adam and the arrival of his parents. Plus, no matter how good his sister's cinnamon tortilla roll-up tasted, and it was utterly delicious, the smell of slow cooking pot roast permeating his nostrils would have him fantasizing about dinner until the first bite had been taken. But, Kinsey wasn't the only hungry Snyder in the foursome . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Mr. & Mrs. Snyder

So much had changed in the Snyder family since they returned from Kadosh. Kinsey had more confidence. Tatum had more freedom to be the person she wanted to be and to do the things a teenage girl should be able to do. Grant and Jill were genuinely happy together. After years of quarrelling and strife, the Snyder home had finally become a relatively peaceful one.

It would be easy to say that the time the Snyders had spent in Kadosh had changed them. And, that experience was certainly the catalyst. But, the truth is rarely that simple. Especially when it comes to relationships. Many of the big changes happened for the Snyders after they returned home and most, if not all, of them could be traced directly back to Grant and Jill's marriage. Of course, it hadn't all happened at once. It had required some adjusting on both of their parts. But, they came back from Kadosh devoted to working it out. And, the work had truly paid

off.

It started with a commitment to having all four of them around the dinner table six nights a week without a television on, no cell phones, tablets, computers, or digital devices of any kind. No distractions. Just conversation and the opportunity to enjoy each other. Not that it always went that way. At times there was some arguing. Especially in the beginning when Grant and Jill were still hanging on to some bitterness from their time before Kinsey's disappearance. Slowly but surely, the walls had come down and the bitterness had faded away. Replacing it was the new routine of a fun family dinner.

Grant and Jill began to like each other again. As the family became cohesive, the fire of the love Grant and Jill had for one another before they got married was rekindled and new habits formed. On Sundays, they even had game night after their dinner. Kinsey's favorite was the board game "Sequence," Tatum's was the board game "Life," Jill's was the card game "Oh Well," and Grant's was the board game "Monopoly." Saturday nights became movie night for Tatum and Kinsey and date night for Grant and Jill.

Occasionally, that date night meant a movie for Grant and Jill, too. It always included dinner out and they had gradually determined their favorite spots. Most of them were a bit of a drive from home. The closest was in Mukilteo which was about

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a twenty-five-minute drive in the evening on a Saturday. Once in a while, Jill could even talk Grant into driving south to Seattle and going to a more upscale restaurant. But, that didn't happen more than every other month because it took twice as long to get there, even longer if the Mariners were playing that night, and the meal always cost several times as much. Grant was a bit more frugal than Jill and heavy traffic drove him crazy.

But, instead of getting frustrated with one another, the couple had learned to accept their differences as quirks. This decision gave them the opportunity to love each other despite those differences and, in some cases, even because of them. For the first time in a long time, they were happy together. Where they used to avoid talking to one another, they had come to a point, much like a couple in a new relationship, where they could hardly wait until their next conversation. Sometimes, they even spoke multiple times during the work day and they always talked to one another on their way home even though they would be together by the time they hung up their phones. This had become another habit and the day before Kadosh came calling again was no exception.

"Isn't the conference in Chicago that same week?" Jill asked her husband through the software application that allowed her to use her phone through her car stereo as she eased her foot onto the brake pedal and slowed her approach to a line of cars

stopped at a light.

“Yeah,” Grant agreed as he walked across the parking lot and climbed into his car. “But, I’ve got Xavier covering that for me.”

“Didn’t he cover it for you last year, too?”

“He did.”

“I thought you guys agreed to trade off.”

“We did,” Grant conceded as he started his truck and allowed the Bluetooth technology to connect his phone to the stereo system. “But, I don’t really want to travel without my family anymore. So, I told him I was going to need him to take over most, if not all, of those duties from now on.”

“How did he take that?”

“He seemed excited about the increased responsibilities.”

“I hope they came with a raise,” Jill said as the light turned green and she started to move forward.

“What?” Grant responded, playfully, as he finally set the phone down on the passenger seat now that his wife’s voice was coming through the speakers. “Who’s side are you on?”

“Yours,” Jill flirted. “Always yours.”

“Good. And, yes, Xavier got a ten percent pay increase.”

“I’m sure that helped his enthusiasm.”

“It seemed to. He’s come a long way since he walked into the Lynnwood store looking like the modern incarnation of Vlad

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the Impaler.”

“He just needed someone to give him a shot. That someone was you. I can understand why he’s loyal.”

“He should be loyal to Kinsey then because Kinsey was that someone, not me.”

“Kinsey reminded you what the right thing to do was. You were the one who was in a position to actually do it and you did.”

“You’re right. I am pretty great.”

“I didn’t exactly say that.”

“You were thinking it.”

“Maybe,” Jill said, still flirting. “You know the kids are old enough to stay home overnight by themselves now. If you do need to go on a business trip, at some point, I could go with you. Make it half work and half romantic getaway.”

“That sounds a lot more appealing than two nights alone in a motel by the airport.”

“Something to think about.”

“Indeed. So, what’s on the agenda tonight?”

“Pretty typical evening. Dinner’s in the crockpot. Kids have homework, I’m sure.”

“Huskies are playing the Beavers tonight.”

“I might be willing to sit through a basketball game . . . now that the Huskies are finally good again.”

“Careful, honey. Fair-weather fans aren’t real fans.”

“Your devotion is one of the many things I love about you but, that doesn’t mean watching a team that hasn’t made the Sweet 16 in over a decade any easier.”

“Maybe this is the year.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“You never know. March Madness starts right after the tournament. Let’s see how they do.”

“Uh-huh,” Jill purposefully mumbled.

“I’m just impressed you know how long it’s been. And, that you’re willing to watch. I’ll take it.”

“As if you have a choice.”

“Good point. Devotion and what not.”

“Exactly.”

“So, what’s in the crockpot?”

“Chuck roast with potatoes, carrots, onions, celery and some onion soup mix.”

“Oh, that sounds great. I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving. What’d you have for lunch?”

Grant was quiet.

“Your silence is speaking volumes.”

“Just concentrating on the road. You wouldn’t want me to get into an accident, would you?”

“What’d you have for lunch, Grant?”

“Salad.”

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“No, you didn’t. What did you really have?”

“Fruit bowl.”

“Grant?” Jill asked with a playful sternness in her voice.

“Burger.”

“That’s more like it. Keep going. What size was the burger?”

“Half a pound.”

“Cheese?”

“Yeah.”

“Bacon?”

“Yeah.”

“Fries?”

“Yeah.”

“Still hungry, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course you are.”

“I wasn’t when I ate the burger but that was four hours ago.”

“You poor thing. You must be just famished.”

“That’s the support I was looking for.”

Both Jill and Grant started laughing. They continued their playful conversation until both cars pulled into the driveway of their house. They gave each other a hug and a kiss on the lips before walking inside to greet their children and sit down for

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dinner with no idea the happy world they had finally managed to develop was on the verge of changing once again.

CHAPTER THREE

The Snyder Family

Just over three years earlier, the Snyder household had been in a state of impending collapse. Grant and Jill had reached a point in their relationship where they couldn't see past their own walls of resentment to experience any other feeling toward one another. As a result, anything resembling "family time" had essentially ceased to exist and the household was made up of four people who were dwelling together but living lives marked more by isolation than togetherness. Grant and Jill barely spoke to one another. When they did, it primarily consisted of angry yelling and screaming. So, Grant and Jill mostly kept to themselves.

Their oldest child, twelve-year-old Tatum, inherited the role of principal caregiver to both herself and her nine-year-old brother, Kinsey. The resulting relationship shouldn't have to exist between siblings but, under the circumstances, that relationship probably saved them both from even more emotional suffering

than they were already experiencing.

The rage and bitterness that had been building between Grant and Jill for years had reached a pinnacle during a shouting match over a refrigerator door that had been left open for, what Jill had estimated, was at least the two hundredth time. Ultimately, the word “divorce” had finally been uttered and it appeared that both Grant and Jill were in favor of the idea. That was the moment when Kinsey, who had been bottling up all his frustrations, fears, and, most of all, sorrow, for years, finally let them come exploding out of him.

When the emotive time-bomb detonated, it was so extraordinary that it opened a portal to another world. After Kinsey physically disappeared through that portal, his family went searching for him. Their grief and anguish over his vanishing was so extraordinary, that they disappeared through the very same portal. The four of them each found themselves in a world where the emotional separation that they were experiencing back home had manifested itself physically and, it seemed, permanently. They had each awakened alone in separate parts of this strange place that they would later learn was called Kadosh. It was made up of a vast ocean and five islands created for the sole purpose of separating men, women, boys and girls by Raum, the demon-ruler of the world, who lived on the desolate island in the center of the other four.

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The adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder proved to be true for the Snyders. Once in Kadosh, their self-imposed emotional walls began to crumble as they each realized how desperately they wanted to be with one another. This realization, however, meant they had to defy the odds and fight their way to a reunion with the rest of their family. Before their separate journey began, they convinced others on their respective islands to go with them. Unfortunately, some stayed behind and, among those who went, not all survived. Along the way, they had to battle with wild animals, terrifying creatures, and severe weather, all of which were under Raum's command. And, finally, they had to do battle with Raum himself.

The process showed them just how badly they wanted to be with one another. They were willing to fight for it through extreme danger in Kadosh. Therefore, they had to be willing to fight for it back home where the circumstances were far less severe. And, the three years since their return from the harrowing journey in Kadosh had given them the opportunity to work on creating strong relationships with each other, resulting in a healthy and happy home. All four of them would agree that they had never been better-off. As treacherous as their experience had been, each of them was surprisingly thankful for it. Put simply, life was better because of it.

This evening was no exception. It was a prime example of

what life had become for the Snyders. Getting up and ready in the morning, followed by breakfast together, school and work, then dinner together, talking, laughing, homework for the kids, a little time in front of the TV as a family and then it was off to bed so they could repeat it the following day.

Of course, the routine was not always an exact science. There were often exceptions. For example, on this evening, Kinsey's friend Adam had come over after dinner, as planned, to do some drills in the backyard in preparation for the upcoming track and field tryouts at school. The drill that they spent the most time doing was the closest they could get to practicing actual hurdles. They raided the garage and set up a couple of Grant's saw horses and practiced running and jumping over them for about an hour.

When they finished their workout and Adam went home, the routine quickly got back on track. There was still time for Kinsey to catch the second half of the Huskies and Beavers basketball game on TV with his sister and parents, who had watched the whole thing from the beginning. The Huskies won, which they had been doing a lot that season, and the family celebrated together with root beer floats.

Standing around the butcher-block styled island in the middle of the kitchen, all four of the Snyders spooned vanilla ice cream, in puddles of root beer, into their mouths and Kinsey

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decided that this was a good time to keep a promise he had made to his sister earlier that day.

“What kind of car are you going to get for Tatum?” Kinsey bluntly asked his parents.

Tatum shot her little brother a wide-eyed look as if to say *That’s not the subtle kind of hint I had in mind.*

“None of your bee’s wax,” Jill shot back.

“So, you are getting her one.”

“None,” Jill said firmly.

“Car or bee’s wax?”

“Tatum’s birthday is six months away,” Grant chimed in with a chuckle. “And, your input on her present has not been requested. So, let it go.”

“We’ll get her whatever we decide to get her and you’ll find out what that is the same day she does,” Jill stated emphatically. “On her birthday.”

“Which is six months away,” Grant added again.

“For the record,” Kinsey started as he jumped back into the conversation, “I know when Tatum’s birthday is. That’s why I thought we should start planning now.”

“We,” Jill said with emphasis, “don’t need to start doing anything. This is up to your father and I.”

“She’s going to be driving me to and from school,” Kinsey argued. “Seems like I should have some kind of input.”

“I drive you places,” Jill told Kinsey. “Do you think you should have input on what kind of car I buy myself next time?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Kinsey said, ponderously. “Maybe I should. I need to be kept safe so, let’s go big but practical.”

“Now you’re out of control,” Jill said with a laugh.

“Big time,” Grant agreed. “What part of ‘let it go’ wasn’t clear enough for you?”

“All of it,” Kinsey said, chuckling. “Doesn’t compute.”

“Obviously not,” Grant agreed as he scooped up a spoonful of ice cream and plopped it on his son’s nose.

“Hey!” Kinsey shouted as he started to try and get his dad back by scooping some ice cream up for retaliation.

“No, no . . .” Grant said, stopping Kinsey. “We’re not starting a war here because I know who will have to clean it up.”

“Yeah,” Jill said, “me.”

“Exactly,” Grant agreed. “Your mom is innocent in this matter and we can’t do that to her.”

“Fine,” Kinsey conceded, “even though you’re the one who already started it.”

“You’re right,” Grant said, also conceding. “I did.”

“Why are you so quiet?” Jill asked her daughter. “Your birthday is what’s driving this conversation.”

“That’s why I’m so quiet,” Tatum insisted. “I’m staying

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out of it because I don't want to discourage you from getting me a really nice present. Preferably in red."

"Smart girl," Jill said with a smile.

The playful conversation continued until Grant and Jill put the kids to bed and then went back downstairs to watch a little more TV before retiring for the night themselves. They were happy and planning for the future. But, unfortunately, the future they had planned would begin changing by morning.



PART TWO

Abnormal

CHAPTER FOUR

The Call

Kinsey went through his normal routine of getting ready for bed that night without any inclination that the night would turn out to be far from normal. He brushed his teeth while he picked out the clothes he would be too tired to decide on in the morning. He laid them over the back of his bedroom chair, went back to the bathroom and rinsed out his mouth before saying goodnight to his parents and sister. Finally, he flipped the switch to turn off the overhead light in his room and closed the door before switching on the bedside lamp to provide some reading light.

As he crawled into bed, Kinsey picked up his Bible from the nightstand and opened it to where he had left off that morning, before getting ready for school. Reading his Bible had become important to Kinsey since he returned from Kadosh. It had become important to the entire Snyder family.

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Their conversations over the days that followed their return seemed to consistently circle back to the light they had experienced on Raum's island. The light that was so bright that they had to turn away from it. And, when they felt the warmth of the light vanish, they had opened their eyes to discover that they had been armed for battle against Raum. They needed to know where that light had come from and why it had aided them the way it had.

Driving past a church in Snohomish one Saturday, Grant had noticed the letter board sign out front that announced the sermon that would be preached the next day, "The Light of the World." Although the sign made it clear that the sermon would be taken from the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John in the New Testament, Grant's mind raced to the Old Testament. More specifically, he suddenly remembered a Sunday School class his grandparents used to take him to when he was a few years younger than Kinsey and the light reminded him of a lesson the teacher had taught, using an old felt board. The lesson was about Moses asking God, on Mount Sinai, to show his glory and God responding by saying that no one could look upon His face and live. But, finally God had allowed himself to be seen from the back and when Moses came down off the mountain afterward, he was so radiant that the people were afraid of him. The memory was not exactly the same type of event but, it was enough to cause

Grant to begin seeking answers in the Bible. Eventually, he read a passage in the book of Ezekiel that sounded a lot like what they had experienced on that island. This led to regular attendance at the very same community church where the sign had been and, where the Snyders hoped to find more answers. On the fourth Sunday, the pastor delivered a sermon on the Armor of God in Ephesians chapter six and everything started to truly click.

They continued to search but never found any specific reference to Kadosh in the Bible. However, they found plenty to convince them that what they had experienced was known to God and consistent with how He had chosen to reveal Himself in the Bible.

It was Kinsey who first told the family he had come to understand that they didn't have to find all of the answers. It was okay if they didn't understand everything because he knew that God did. He also knew that all the answers they did need could only be found by following Jesus. That's also when he told them that he intended to be baptized. At first, his family looked on with wide eyes but, by the time he was done talking, they had all agreed to be baptized together and found themselves in the middle of a family prayer time full of thanksgiving for the grace and mercy of God.

Their baptism was nearly a year ago and Kinsey had read at least a portion of the Bible every morning, usually before getting

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out of bed, except when he woke up needing badly to pee first, and then again every night before falling asleep. On this night, he found himself starting the book of First Peter and, perhaps because of the exercise he had undertaken with his friend Adam earlier, he was very tired and fell asleep after only one chapter and nine verses of the second chapter. So, the last thing he read was the second half of First Peter 2:9, which reads: “. . . that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

After that verse, he was sound asleep with the lamp still on. And, as he drifted into unconsciousness, the glowing ball from the lamp on the other side of his eyelids faded into nothingness. But, soon, another light appeared in the distance. Quickly growing closer, at a much faster pace than the previous one had disappeared. Kinsey realized that although he could have felt afraid of it, he was strangely drawn to it, and even comforted by it, instead.

The sphere of light charged forward as if it was going to bowl Kinsey over but, instead, stopped abruptly in front of him. Unlike the light on the island, Kinsey was able to look directly at this one. Of course, he was dreaming this time, too. The battle he had fought in Kadosh, and everything leading up to it, had been anything but a dream. It wasn't even a nightmare. It had been far too real.

Kinsey studied the light as he felt a heat emanating from it that was unlike anything he had felt since the massive light had briefly visited the island. This sphere wasn't quite as hot but it was the closest thing he'd experienced since. If the light on the island was like sitting at the perfect distance from a crackling fireplace, this was like being tucked into your own bed with a warm blanket. He considered reaching out to touch it but was stopped by the sound of a voice.

"You have been called out of the darkness," the voice boomed, "only to be called back. Not to remain in the darkness, or of the darkness, but to be the light of the Lord that leads others out of the darkness from which you first were called."

"I know," Kinsey replied as he quickly looked around before realizing the voice had come from within the light. And, know he did. Or, at the very least, he had strongly suspected from the moment they returned that they would be called back. He had no idea when or how. But, he was confident the call would come and, finally, it had.

"When?" Kinsey asked with a smile.

"Soon," the sphere replied. "You are being prepared."

Before Kinsey could ask how he was being prepared, how he would know it was time, or any of the other gazillion questions that were racing through his mind, the light sped away even faster than it had arrived.

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“Wait!” Kinsey yelled as he sat straight up in bed, suddenly wide awake. He looked down at the Bible in his lap and re-read the verse he had fallen asleep reading: “. . . that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

By the time he was done reading it, his door was opening and Tatum stepped inside.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, he answered. “Just fell asleep reading. I think I was dreaming.”

“Okay,” she responded as Kinsey closed his Bible, set it on the nightstand, and turned off the lamp. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Tatum closed the door and Kinsey laid back down. He turned onto his side, facing the lamp. He could still see his Bible in the glow of the alarm clock. He stared at it, wondering if a dream is all it was or if the call had finally come. His eyelids fluttered and finally closed as sleep drew closer.

Suddenly, he saw light again. He opened his eyes and the lightbulb in the lamp pulsed on and off three times before finally turning off for good.

Kinsey smiled. It wasn’t just a dream. The call had finally come and the Snyders would be returning to Kadosh.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bona Fide

It wasn't that Kinsey was excited to return to Kadosh. On the contrary. He dreaded the idea of being separated from his family again, which he could only assume would be the case. He also dreaded the idea of facing Raum and everything under the demon's command. But, he was excited to feel useful to God, whom he had come to know as a direct result of his first trip to Kadosh. He was excited and honored that God would choose him. And, he was excited to tell those who had stayed behind, when he led the exile from camp and the quest to find his family that there was indeed a way out. What it really came down to was, Kinsey wanted to finish what he had started.

His mind raced with considerations of what the second trip would be like and, as a result, it took him over two hours to fall back to sleep. Even after he did, he was restless for the remainder

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of the night. He must have awakened at least a dozen times and, each time, his attention was already on Kadosh. It was permeating his dreams and consuming his waking thoughts.

Finally, after reading the rest of First Peter, Kinsey decided to get out of bed and get ready for the day while everyone else in the house was still asleep. Typically, on a weekday such as this one, Kinsey would be the last one out of bed. But, on this Friday morning, Kinsey would be out of the shower and ready for school before his sister took over their bathroom. In fact, it was Grant who heard the water turn on, wondered who was already taking a shower, looked at the clock and, realizing that his alarm would be going off in less than twenty minutes anyway, decided to get up, too. Jill soon followed but Tatum was sound asleep until she heard Taylor Swift's voice coming from her alarm. She turned it off, rolled over, let out a yawn so big she briefly feared her jaw was going to break, stretched and flexed her muscles to wake them up, and ripped the covers off so she could roll herself out of bed.

While Tatum was getting ready, Kinsey, who had already dressed and packed his bag for school, was downstairs in the kitchen preparing breakfast for the family. As Grant, Jill and Tatum strolled into the kitchen, one-by-one, they discovered Kinsey sitting at the table. He had set out four bowls, four spoons, four glasses, four boxes of cereal, a carton of milk, a

carton of orange juice, a roll of paper towels to be used as napkins, and a sugar bowl which had a fifth spoon sticking out of it. However, he hadn't poured anything.

"Good morning," Grant said to his son as he walked into the kitchen, closed the hatch on the single-serve coffee machine and hit the button to start brewing his coffee with the mug already in place below the dispenser.

"Good morning," Kinsey answered.

"You get my coffee ready to go for me?"

"Yep."

"And, breakfast too, huh?"

"Yep."

"What's the occasion?"

"I'll wait until mom and Tatum are down here."

"You got an announcement to make or something?"

"Yep."

"Well, now I'm really curious."

Kinsey didn't respond.

Grant's mind started working overtime to try and come up with possibilities but nothing seemed to satisfy him. He walked his coffee over to the table, spooned two scoops of sugar into his mug and stirred in silence as he watched his son who didn't flinch. Grant took a seat at the table and sipped his coffee as they both waited for Jill and Tatum.

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“We should probably teach you to make bacon in case this ever happens again,” Grant finally said.

“We?” came Jill’s voice as she entered the kitchen. “Do you know how to make bacon, Grant?”

“I could probably figure it out,” Grant answered with a sly grin.

“If you made bacon,” Jill started, “it would be in the microwave. Not the same.”

“Probably true,” Grant agreed.

“Very true. It’d be all rubbery.”

“Okay.”

“In case what happens again?”

“What?” Grant asked.

“You said, we should probably teach Kinsey to make bacon in case this happens again. Clearly, he put out breakfast for us. So, what has happened?”

“He has an announcement to make.”

“What announcement?”

“Ask him.”

Jill looked at her son, expecting a response.

“I’m waiting for Tatum,” Kinsey finally stated matter-of-factly.

Jill looked at her husband who simply shrugged his shoulders as if to tell her she knew as much as he did. She raised her

eyebrows in concession and walked over to the coffee machine. After making her coffee, she walked back over to the table, scooped a spoonful of sugar, poured a couple of tablespoons worth of milk into her mug and stirred it with the spoon Kinsey had set out. Everyone sat in silence, glancing at one another, until Tatum finally walked down the stairs.

“Come on in here and sit down,” Jill politely yelled.

“What’s going on?” Tatum asked as she walked in to a familiar setting that, suddenly, felt anything but familiar.

“Your brother wants to tell us something.”

“Okay . . . ” Tatum said, skeptically, as she took the only remaining seat at the table and everyone’s eyes shifted to Kinsey.

“We’re being called back to Kadosh,” Kinsey quickly blurted out.

“What?” Tatum and Grant both asked, almost in unison.

“How do you know?” Jill swiftly questioned.

Kinsey described his dream in great detail and Tatum remembered checking in on him afterwards. She asked why he didn’t tell her then and he explained that he needed time to think the whole thing through. Everyone went silent for a moment until Grant finally broke in.

“I think, maybe, it was just a dream, buddy.”

“It wasn’t,” Kinsey insisted.

“I have to agree with your dad on this one,” Jill added.

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"I wondered if that was true at first too," Kinsey admitted. But, then my light flickered on and off three times before turning off for good. It was a sign."

"Or," Grant suggested, "a bad light bulb."

"No," Kinsey stated emphatically. I had turned the light off before it even flickered back on.

"Are you sure?" Jill asked.

"Yes," Kinsey stated with increasing frustration. "I'm sure. Not that it seems to matter."

"Hey," Jill started, "we're just trying to understand."

"Understand this," Kinsey insisted as he stood up from the table, "it was more than a dream. We're being called back."

"If we're all being called back," Grant began to ask as Kinsey went to a kitchen drawer and pulled out two plastic bags, "why are you the only one who had that dream?"

Silence.

Tatum watched her brother fill the bags with dry cereal and knew immediately that, if nothing else, while she couldn't be sure whether or not it was anything more than a dream, Kinsey definitely believed what he was telling them to be true. She recalled watching her brother disappear three years ago and how she ran back to the house to get her parents' help but they didn't believe her at first. She didn't blame them. What she told them sounded outrageous and, even with what they had been through

since that moment, her brother's story sounded pretty outrageous, too. Still, she knew how it felt to know what you were saying was true and have them not believe you.

Kinsey handed one of the bags to his sister and walked over to pick his backpack up.

"Faith like a child," Tatum exclaimed.

Everyone looked at her. Even Kinsey was a bit puzzled.

"What's that?" Jill asked.

"Maybe the first step was notifying Kinsey because he was the only one listening."

Grant and Jill exchanged looks that suggested they were ready to wrap this conversation up. Grant followed the exchange up with a glance at his watch.

"We should probably get you kids off to school," he announced.

"Yep," Kinsey said as if to say that their skepticism would not deter him. He got up from the table and grabbed his backpack.

Tatum silently followed her brother. Grant and Jill got up to walk their children to the door, feeling a little sheepish. As they did, they could see out the windows that the wind was picking up and the trees had begun to sway.

"Getting a little windy out there," Grant stated. "I don't remember that in the forecast."

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Kinsey reached for the doorknob, turned it and opened the door.

The wind gust tore through the house and the howl quickly turned into the sound of specific whispered words, “Out of the darkness.”

As quickly as the wind had burst into the house, it was gone and it pulled the door shut as it went.

Everyone stood in stunned silence until Grant broke it once again, “Everyone heard that, right?”

They looked outside and noticed that everything was eerily calm. No swaying trees. No floating leaves. Even the clouds looked still.

Kinsey looked everyone in the eyes, one by one to make sure he had their undivided attention before asking, “Do you believe me now?”

CHAPTER SIX

An Old Friend

The walk to school that morning was far quieter than normal. After hearing the wind whisper the exact words that Kinsey had heard in his dream, Tatum was now convinced that her little brother was right and they were being called back to Kadosh. Her silence was the result of being terrified by that fact. Tatum's mind had become flooded with memories of how difficult the journey was the first time, how she had become friends with girls who didn't make it back, and how close she knew she had come to not making it back either. She felt blessed to be among those who had returned home and was uncomfortable with the idea of tempting fate by making a second trip.

What if, she began to wonder, one of us doesn't make it back this time? What if none of us do?

Kinsey, on the other hand, had already begun to think of

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things he would do differently on this second journey. Most of his thoughts were review because he had already played the scenarios through in his mind on multiple occasions over the past three years. The one that always remained consistent was the fact that he intended to start recruiting the moment he arrived and he hoped that he would be able to convince everyone to make the trek to Raum's island this time around.

With their minds on the same subject, but looking at it from completely different angles, Tatum and Kinsey hugged and said goodbye before departing for different schools and carrying with them very different attitudes. Tatum was perplexed and anxious. Suddenly, the always positive and even jubilant girl was worried and somber while the once quiet and demoralized young man who had become, as Tatum had thought the previous day, gregarious, was even more enthusiastic than either of them had been in a long time.

Kinsey started the day in his homeroom class, which lasted for the first three periods. When he walked through the door, he said good morning to his friend Adam as he took a seat at his desk. As he did, he was surprised to discover an adult he didn't immediately recognize sitting at Mrs. Larson's desk in the front left corner of the room. Typically, the overweight, forty-year-old Caucasian woman would be eating her yogurt as she prepared for the day. Instead, Kinsey was staring at a tall, thin, African-

American man, who looked closer to fifty. The man finished reading a note from Mrs. Larson through his black horn-rimmed glasses, took a sip of what Kinsey assumed was coffee from a travel mug that had a University of Southern California logo on the side of it, stood and walked to the front center of the classroom where he turned to face the white board and write his name on it with a blue marker. The bell rang just as the man finished and spun back around to face the students.

“Everybody get in your seats and get settled,” he told the class. “I know you weren’t expecting a sub today but, Mrs. Larson felt sick yesterday afternoon and decided to take the day at home. Hopefully, she’ll be back after the weekend. I’m Mr. Ewing and I’ll be filling in for her today. Let’s start by taking roll.”

Kinsey continued to watch as Mr. Ewing walked back over to the desk and picked up a spiral notebook that was already open. He lifted it in front of his face and began to read off the alphabetical list of names and wait for a hand to raise and someone to announce their presence so he could mark whether they were there or not before continuing to move down the list. With twenty-eight kids in the class and a last name of Snyder, Kinsey had to wait through twenty-three other names before it got to his. As he watched and listened, he thought about how Mr. Ewing had started to seem familiar. He tried to remember if he had ever had him as a substitute teacher before but didn’t think

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he had. He couldn't figure out where he knew him from and it was starting to drive him a little crazy by the time his name was called.

"Kinsey Snyder," Mr. Ewing asked as his voice got higher toward the end of Kinsey's name. "Wait, Kinsey Snyder?"

"Yeah," Kinsey said as he rose his hand, a bit confused by the reaction to his name. "Here."

Mr. Ewing tipped his glasses down, blinked a few times, then pushed them back up his nose. "I knew a Kinsey Snyder once," he finally said as a smile formed on his face. "Cool kid."

That was all Mr. Ewing said before moving on to the last four names on the roll call. Then he taught the three periods like any other substitute teacher would. The one exception being the occasional glance and smile he gave Kinsey. It was like they knew each other but Kinsey couldn't figure out how or why. It seemed like Mr. Ewing had figured it out but Kinsey was still in the dark. Then it hit him.

Kadosh.

Mr. Ewing must have been one of the men who made it to Raum's island. By the time the bell rang to signal the end of the third period, Kinsey couldn't wait to approach Mr. Ewing in private. While everyone else funneled out of the back of the classroom, Kinsey told Adam he would see him later and raced to the front where his substitute teacher sat, smiling back at him.

“You figured it out, didn’t you?”

“Kadosh,” Kinsey blurted out.

“Kadosh,” Mr. Ewing agreed as he leaned backwards in his chair.

“Are you . . . ?”

“Am I, what?”

“Not what, who.”

“You haven’t figured out who I am?”

Kinsey shook his head, glanced at the floor, then back up at Mr. Ewing. “Are you, Ray’s dad?”

“Ray’s dad? No, man. Close, but no. Kinsey, it’s me. Ray.”

“But,” Kinsey hesitated, “you’re old.”

“Thank you. I’m aware of that fact. It’s been forty years, man.”

“It’s been three years.” Kinsey quickly corrected.

“For you, it’s been three years. For me, it’s been almost forty.”

“How?”

“Did you notice when you got back that a single day hadn’t passed while you were gone?”

“We did notice that. But, forty years?”

“I went back to my time. You went back to yours. I grew up. Got old. So will you.”

“Have you been here this whole time?”

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“Here?”

“Snohomish?”

“Snow-what?” Ray asked, knowing that was his exact reaction to the word when they first met in Kadosh, causing them both to laugh.

“It’s really you,” Kinsey said as he shook his head in elated surprise. He then lunged forward and gave Ray a hug. Letting go and standing back to look at his old friend who had aged forty years since he last saw him three years earlier, he asked his question again. “So, have you been here in Snohomish this whole time without coming to find me?”

“No. I was still in Long Beach until just a few weeks ago. Needed a change and I was looking at a map and saw this crazy word . . . Snohomish. I loaded up the car and started driving. Here I am.”

Suddenly, another bell rang and Kinsey realized he was late for his next class. They traded phone numbers and promised to catch up over the weekend before Kinsey sprinted to the gym and Ray pulled his sack lunch out of his brief case. Neither of them could believe they had re-connected outside of Kadosh. And, neither of them would have believed what that connection would lead to before the end of the weekend that was mere hours away from getting started.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gifts

At first, Kinsey couldn't wait to tell his family about Ray. But, as he thought about it throughout the rest of the school day, he decided he wanted to make it a surprise. So, at dinner that night, he asked if he could invite a new friend from school over for dinner on Saturday. Grant was quick to remind him that Saturday was movie night for the kids and date night for the adults. Kinsey asked if they could make an exception but his parents were unwilling to negotiate. Their only compromise was allowing him to invite his new friend over for dinner on Sunday instead.

Kinsey accepted their offer and made the arrangements with Ray over the phone immediately after helping his dad rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. From there, it was a pretty normal weekend. The kids both did some homework on Saturday, Kinsey and Adam practiced their hurdles some more,

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Grant mowed the lawn for the first time since early November, and Jill had an open house from 1-4p.m.

In the evening, Grant and Jill went to a long dinner at Ivar's, right next to the ferry in Mukilteo. The dinner was extended while they finished the bottle of Viognier they had ordered before the meal, then decided to share a chocolate hazelnut mousse and two cups of decaffeinated coffee as they talked the night away. A significant portion of the conversation was focused on Kadosh, their son's dream, and the mysterious wind that sounded as though it had howled the precise words Kinsey had said came to him in his dream.

Meanwhile, Tatum and Kinsey made popcorn and watched the two most recent *Star Wars* movies. The whole franchise had become a favorite of Kinsey's and he promised that Tatum she could choose the movies the following week. Although she liked *Star Wars*, she didn't care for it half as much as her brother did. So, she was already planning next week's agenda and knew it was going to include the 2017 live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast*. She smirked at the thought of watching her brother squirm when she made the announcement.

By the time Grant and Jill returned home, Kinsey was fast asleep on the couch and Tatum, through happy tears, was watching the end of their second movie alone. Grant carried Kinsey upstairs, briefly considering how much heavier his son

had become over the years and that he might not be able to carry him up a flight of stairs much longer. He put Kinsey in bed while Tatum washed out the popcorn bowl and Jill folded the blanket her kids had been sharing. Tatum was in bed twenty minutes later and her parents were not far behind.

Sunday morning was all about church. Two different services were offered, one at 9:00a.m. and the other at 11:00a.m. Although the kids would have preferred to sleep in and go to the later service, Grant and Jill nearly always woke them up and made them get ready in time to attend the earlier one, usually offering brunch afterwards at The Nest, across the street from the church, as an enticement. This day was no exception.

Although the church the Snyders attended was at the edge of the downtown area of Snohomish, it looked like a quaint, country church. It was white, had a lot of angles, a black roof, a red door, a turret with a bell that rang five minutes before each service and a big, beautiful cross on top that was spotlighted every night. One of the many things the Snyders appreciated, as newer believers, was that the head pastor, Dr. Quinlan, took an expository approach to his sermons. This means that they selected one book of the Bible at a time and went through it, verse by verse. It was educational, applicable, and the preacher didn't shy away from topics that might be controversial. But, he didn't go looking for controversy either. He simply called a spade a spade, as Grant

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often said.

On this Sunday, they found themselves about three-quarters of their way through the book of First Corinthians. Other than a brief departure for the first eight verses of the twelfth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, the pastor remained in the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians and preached a sermon that compared the members of God's church, that is the entire Christian community, to a human body. He explained that a body is made up of many different parts with equally different purposes. In the same way, the church is made up of many diverse people, to whom God has given many distinct gifts and abilities, also for different purposes, but all to make the body, as a whole, function properly.

It was a sermon that connected with the Snyders. They had seen the truth of it play out in their own family since returning home from Kadosh. It was easy for them to take their own experience in their small family and apply it in broader strokes to the much larger church. But, the most interesting part of the church service happened after the sermon had concluded.

Grant had noticed an elderly gentleman, in the pew across the aisle, looking over at him and smiling during the service. At one point, he even asked Jill if she knew who he was. She said she had seen him before but she didn't know his name. So, when the congregation had been dismissed, Grant felt the need to go

and introduce himself so that he could politely inquire about the unwarranted attention. But, before he could, he was stopped by one of the church administrators who was asking if Grant would consider joining the Sunday volunteer team to serve as an usher. Grant told the man he would consider it and then pointed out the elderly gentlemen who was slowly walking, alone, toward the exit and quickly explained why he wanted to talk to him. The administrator said that the man's name was Ulrich and told Grant that, referencing the sermon of the day, the man's gift was prophecy. Grant thanked him, told Jill he would meet the family outside, and hustled out of the building to catch up with the elderly gentleman.

"Ulrich," Grant shouted as he bounded down the steps.

Turning around, Ulrich looked at Grant with the same smile he had been sporting during the sermon.

"My name is Grant Snyder," Grant continued but then stopped, unsure of where to go next.

"Pleasure," Ulrich said as he extended a hand. "How can I help you?"

Grant stared blankly for a moment while he tried to figure out how to respond. "I'm not sure, actually. I just . . . I noticed you looking over at my family during the sermon."

Ulrich nodded in agreement.

"Was there a reason for that?" Grant finally asked. "It's just

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that . . . well . . . I was also just informed that you . . .”

“The Lord has seen it fit,” Ulrich began, “from time to time, to use me to speak on truths not yet known.”

“Right,” Grant said even though he wasn’t completely certain they were on the same page. “Is now one of those times? Might that be the reason you were looking at us during the service?”

“It is and it was.”

“Okay.” Grant waited for more information but Ulrich was not quick to give it up. “Do you have something you want to tell me?”

“Two things.”

“Great. Go for it. Whenever you’re ready. Tell me everything you think I should know.”

“It’s time for you to accept what your son is already aware of.”

“The calling?”

“Yes.”

“I thought that might be where this was heading. What’s the other thing?”

“The calling is to a journey some would say has already been taken. But, much has changed and much more will still change. The journey will be different this time and you’re all being prepared for it. God gives all of his children different gifts. Mine

is the gift of prophecy. You will each find yours in the days to come. In fact, you'll know yours by the end of today. And, someone you don't know yet, but your son does, will be there to help you figure it out. God bless you and your family. God has great plans for all of you. Good day."

Ulrich walked away, leaving Grant nearly speechless. "Yeah. Thanks. You, too."

Seconds later, Jill approached with the kids and, Grant slowly turned around to greet them.

"Kinsey," Grant asked, "who exactly is it that you have coming over for dinner tonight?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Reunion

Grant was behind the house, on the patio, grilling two big slabs of flank steak that combined for a total weight of almost three and a half pounds, while the other members of the Snyder family were in the kitchen preparing the side dishes and dessert. Jill was putting together a Caesar salad, Kinsey was roasting both corn on the cob and fingerling potatoes in the oven, and Tatum was placing her ramekins filled with a baked crème brulee mixture into the refrigerator where they would remain until after dinner when she and Kinsey would take turns blow-torcing an added top layer of sugar. Everyone was focused on their individual tasks but, no one was so focused that they didn't hear the doorbell.

Everyone froze, albeit for just a nanosecond, before their eyes went wide and their heads swiveled toward the door. Kinsey tossed his oven gloves on the counter and ran to open it, leaving

the other three to wait impatiently before they could find out who his mystery guest would turn out to be.

Grant, Jill and Tatum all watched and listened as Kinsey greeted his friend and invited him inside. They were surprised to see that it wasn't a boy Kinsey's age but a man who appeared to be older than Grant.

Kinsey led his friend inside and immediately introduced him, "This is Ray Ewing. He was my substitute teacher in homeroom on Friday."

Everyone looked on with faces that didn't hide their confusion very well as Jill extended a hand to greet the stranger. "Nice to meet you, Ray. I'm Jill."

"It's nice to meet you, as well."

"Forgive the surprised expressions," Jill continued as Grant came inside and also greeted Ray. "Kinsey didn't tell us who his guest was and this is the first time he's brought one of his teachers home."

"He was also with me in Kadosh," Kinsey finally added after a brief and uncomfortable moment of silence.

It was as if a shockwave rumbled through the kitchen. Other than Friday at school, also between Kinsey and Ray, this was the first time since they returned that the word Kadosh had been uttered by any of the Snyders in the presence of someone outside of the four of them. Kinsey ended the stunned quiet by beginning

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to explain what Ray had told him about how almost forty years had passed since he had left Kadosh. Ray picked up the pieces and occasionally filled in the blanks.

Grant almost burned the flank steak, listening to his son and this stranger instead of paying attention to the grill. Jill reached into the bag of croutons and started eating them like popcorn. Tatum, simply took a seat at the table. None of them spoke. They just listened.

Soon, it was time to gather around the table and pray before dinner. It was the first break from the topic, which had begun to include Ray and Kinsey talking about their time together in Kadosh. Of course, Kinsey's sister and parents had heard it all before but, this was their first opportunity to hear any of it from someone else's perspective. When Grant finished praying, however, he shifted the conversation slightly by asking Ray about his family both before and after his time under the rule of Raum.

"Two very different stories," Ray admitted. "When I ended up in Kadosh, there were six of us. My parents and three sisters. God had always been important to my mom. She had us in church every Sunday. She was always a sweet woman. Still is. Warm and kind. My dad was essentially her opposite. He was cold and mean. But, there he was, every Sunday, right there with us in that same pew. He believed in God but, I think he also blamed Him for everything that was hard in his life."

Grant and Jill exchanged a look of mutual empathy for the story they were hearing and the environment Ray had grown up in.

“So,” Ray continued, “as kids, we didn’t really understand how those two people sat in that same pew every Sunday and had completely different responses to what we were all hearing preached. My sisters and I figured God must not make a difference and our parents were who they would be, with or without Him. Or, at least three of us did. I was the third child. My oldest sister, Adrienne, was just like my mom. She had an unwavering faith that truly affected who she was. Sheila, she was older than me but younger than Adrienne, she was the one who took my dad’s bitterness the hardest. She became quietly angry. Maybe even took on some of that bitterness herself. There were times I didn’t hear her speak for multiple days in a row. So, when my other sisters decided to set out to find us, she refused to go.”

“She’s still there?” asked Tatum.

“Assuming she’s still alive,” Ray started to answer, “yeah. She’s still there. Adrienne and Deanna, she’s my little sister, both made it to Raum’s island. Only Deanna made it home though. Adrienne died shielding Deanna from one of those crazy, leafy monsters with all the teeth.”

“I remember them,” Tatum stated, reflectively. “Your sisters, I mean.”

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“I’m so sorry,” Jill added.

“Hey,” Ray injected with his usual positive attitude, “four of us made it home. And, my dad was forever changed. The tragedy of losing two sisters was rough. But, life for those of us who made it back, in spite of that loss, was better than it had been before Kadosh. When my dad died, he was actually excited about meeting his Maker. That wouldn’t have been true before our experience. You take the good with the bad and accept that God has a purpose for all of it.”

“What about now?” Grant asked. “Any family of your own?”

“No,” Ray stated matter-of-factly. “Not anymore. I was married to the love of my life for twenty-two years. She passed the day after this last Christmas.”

“Again,” Jill started, “I’m so sorry.”

“I appreciate it,” Ray responded. “But, honestly, don’t be. I’m not. I had twenty-two years of partnership with my best friend. Too few people can say that. And, the best part is, I’ll see her again.”

The Snyders all stared at Ray but shared a collective smile with one another.

“That’s wonderful,” Jill stated.

“It is,” Ray agreed. “It was. It will be again. Twenty-two years with only one regret. So, I squared everything away, sold everything that wouldn’t fit in the car, said goodbye to my mom,

my sister and her family, and hit the road about a month ago. I'd seen Snohomish on a map before I left and thought of Kinsey. I knew in that moment that I just had to come check it out. The first job I've had since my wife passed was subbing for Kinsey's class. I figure that had to be fate. So, here I am. I don't know what happens next but, I do know this is where I'm supposed to be."

"You said you only have one regret," Grant began, "do you mind if I ask you what that is?"

"Grant," Jill admonished, "that's private."

"No," Ray reassured everyone, "that's okay. Really. My only regret has nothing to do with my wife. It's that I couldn't go back to Kadosh and save Sheila."

The Snyders finally broke their trance with Ray and glanced around the room at one another.

"What?" Ray asked, noticing the change in the room. "What'd I say?"

"What if I told you," Kinsey started, "that chance might still be possible?"

CHAPTER NINE

The Answer

As everyone finally began to eat their dinners, Kinsey told Ray about the dream he'd had, the light that had been turned off but blinked at him three times, the voice in the wind the next morning that spoke the same words from his Bible reading and which had also been used in the dream, and the fact that Ray was his substitute teacher that very same day. While his parents and sister already knew everything he was explaining, Ray was in awe as he heard it all for the first time.

"It's even more amazing when you say it all together like that," Grant injected into the conversation before taking a bite of his steak. After chewing and swallowing, he continued while cutting another bite. "Plus, this morning, at church, I had a man, who is apparently known to be some kind of a prophet, tell me that Kinsey's calling is real and that we're all being prepared for

it.”

“That’s why God brought me here,” Ray finally said as tears formed in his eyes. “First, he brought me out of Kadosh. I was able to grow up and spend twenty-two years with an amazing woman who is now at home with Him. And now, He brought me here, so I can go back to Kadosh with you, and I can find Sheila. And, this time, I can bring her back with me.”

“You have been called out of the darkness only to be called back,” Kinsey said, repeating the words spoken to him in his dream verbatim as he stood up from his chair, pushed it out behind him and walked around the table with a beaming smile on his face. “Not to remain in the darkness, or of the darkness, but to be the light of the Lord that leads others out of the darkness from which you have been called,” Kinsey finished as he threw his arms around his old friend and tears fell down both of their cheeks. They squeezed each other tightly as their breathing grew deeper and Ray’s tears became heavier.

“I’ve waited so long,” Ray said after about twenty seconds. He squeezed Kinsey even tighter and patted him on the back, silently thanking him for the friendly, compassionate hug.

“It won’t be much longer,” Kinsey said as he finally let go, still smiling, and returned to his seat.

“You all can’t possibly know what a gift this is to me,” Ray added as he used his napkin to wipe the tears from his face.

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“I can only imagine,” Tatum admitted as she considered how badly she would have wanted to return if Kinsey hadn’t come back with them. She had to lift her own napkin and dab her eyes as tears welled up in the corners.

Ray was still for nearly a minute as he contemplated everything he had just been told. In that moment, he finally processed what Grant had said about the prophet and had to ask, “What did the man at your church mean when he said we’re all being prepared?”

“Well,” Grant started as he finished chewing his bite of potato and swallowed, “he said that God gives all of his children different gifts and that we would each find out what ours is in the days to come. Then he told me that I would know mine by the end of today. Which, to be fair, I was told this man is a prophet but that hasn’t happened yet and the day is just about over. Actually, Ray, you’ll appreciate this, he said that someone I don’t know yet, but my son does, would be there to help me figure it out. Any idea what my spiritual gift is?”

“Can’t say I have any insight to offer on that,” Ray admitted. “Of course, I don’t know my own, either. So, despite what that guy told you, I’m not sure I’m the best person to ask.”

“Guess that about seals the deal on that then,” Grant sighed just before his body suddenly stiffened. He swiftly sat up straight in his chair. His chest puffed out and his head tilted up. He was

looking directly in front of him but at no one in particular. Without another warning, his eyes closed and he began to speak, but not in his native tongue.

“Unjala skiata mukiliata skiata makatia,” he stated as if in a trance. “Don koraroo duesuekoo sawdinki karere doemoemoemoe soso. Shan vumoomoomoo sokose eepee kinomoton teekaron tekilabow leinkeikei seekeiralow.”

As Grant’s body slumped forward and his eyes opened, he immediately started looking around the table. Jill and the kids stared back at him in both puzzled disbelief and deep concern.

“What was that?” Jill finally asked.

“Yeah,” Kinsey added, “at first it sounded like you thought you were at Starbucks, trying to order some kind of specialty macchiato. But, then . . . well, then you started making some weird cow noises and talking about a tiki torch or something. You really lost me, Dad.”

Ray quietly watched the group, puzzled by what he was hearing.

“I’m not sure what I just said either,” Grant admitted, a little nervous and shaken up by the incident. He wasn’t scared though. It was a strange sensation and one that left him feeling totally without control over himself for a moment. But, the take-over wasn’t a hostile one. If anything, it was comforting.

Ray continued to watch and listen, becoming even more

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confused.

“Maybe we’re just discovering dad speaks Parseltongue,” Tatum quipped, just as skeptical as the rest of her family.

“First,” Kinsey responded, “I don’t see any snakes. And, second, probably more importantly, this is not the wizarding world of Harry Potter.”

“Then what was that?” Tatum shot back.

“Are you guys serious right now?” Ray finally asked. “No one understood what he was saying?”

“It was complete gibberish,” Jill asserted.

“No,” Ray insisted, “it wasn’t.”

“Then do you speak whatever language that was?” Jill asked.

“You mean English?” Ray asked, getting more animated as he became even more perplexed.

Kinsey looked at his friend with a furrowed brow. “That was not English, Ray.”

“Well,” Ray began to shoot back as his words trailed off and his mind pondered the possible explanations, “it sounded like English to me.”

“Then what’d he say?” Kinsey demanded.

“I’m not even sure it was him doing the talking,” Ray admitted as he began to figure out what they had just witnessed.

Kinsey stared at Ray for a moment, then glanced at his dad before returning his gaze to his friend. “Who, exactly, do you

think it was?”

“The Holy Spirit,” Ray calmly stated.

“He’s right,” Grant said as he looked around the table. “I could feel it. Like the warmth of the light on Raum’s island. But, instead of the heat being on the outside and touching my skin, it was moving from the inside out. Nothing else could do that.”

“Considering what you all were just telling me,” Ray commented, “that was pretty timely.”

“Timely?” Grant asked.

“I think we just figured out what two of those gifts are,” Ray told Grant. “You just spoke in tongues and I have the interpretation.”

“What is it?” Kinsey asked.

“Yeah,” Grant blurted out in agreement with his son, “what’s the interpretation?”

“What did he say?” Kinsey asked again but, instead of being skeptical like he had been a moment ago, he was waiting in great anticipation for the answer. He wasn’t the only one. All four members of the Snyder family stared at Ray with bated breath.

“In a nutshell?” Ray began. “He was praising God and telling Him that the preparation was complete and we would be leaving in the morning.”

CHAPTER TEN

Departure

The moment everyone realized that they were heading back to Kadosh the very next morning changed the course of the rest of the evening. The Snyders all knew it was coming but, none of them had realized it would be coming so soon.

Ray called his little sister, Deanna, and talked to her whole family. He told everyone he loved and missed them. For him, it was goodbye without saying the word or sounding any alarms. For them, it was just a nice call from Uncle Ray.

The Snyders were blessed enough to be there to say goodbye to one another in person. Before their last trip to Kadosh, they were in utter turmoil. This time, the tears were from a place of love instead of sorrow. Sure, there was fear, but it wasn't the same kind of fear they were experiencing the last time. Before, they didn't know Kadosh existed, let alone the fact that they were

about to be transported to it. Fear, the last time, was for the future of a family that was tearing itself apart. Now, it was for the future of a family that had decided, together, to take the upcoming adventure out of obedience to the One who was calling them. The One who was responsible for the love they felt toward one another. And, the One whom they were trusting to bring them back so that they could be together again.

That trust, however, didn't alleviate all of the fears. But, it did make them easier to deal with. They knew that, whether they survived Kadosh a second time or not, they would be together again eventually. In the meantime, they were fulfilling the purpose for which they had been called. It wasn't easy. But, it was worth every bit of the anxiety they felt.

Ray didn't go home to his new apartment that night. He stayed on the Snyders' couch. But, he didn't sleep. No one did. Rest would have been an appropriate course of action but, each of the five of them slowly realized that it wasn't up to them. With their minds racing, a single minute of sleep wasn't an option. Instead, each of them picked up a Bible and read it.

Kinsey was the first to realize he wouldn't have that book anymore when he got to Kadosh. But, he was also the first to realize that, while that was physically true, he actually would have it with him because he had spent the last couple of years hiding the book in his heart, just as he had learned to do from the

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eleventh verse of Psalm 119, by reading it before and after he slept each night. The thought gave him great comfort.

By 4:00a.m., the Snyders and Ray were all back at the table where they had been eating dinner the night before. This time, everyone but Kinsey was drinking coffee. Kinsey opted for chocolate milk instead as the group discussed the game plan for their time in Kadosh. By 4:45a.m., Grant had decided to prove he could make bacon – without a microwave. He did a good job, too. Jill was so impressed that she added some scrambled eggs and toast to the mix and everyone enjoyed a nice breakfast as they realized it would be their last good meal for a while. By 6:00a.m., they all agreed that it was time to lock the house up and walk out into the woods where the Snyders had vanished three years earlier.

It was still dark so, Grant brought a flashlight to help guide them. They were quiet as they took the same path through the yard, the cul-de-sac and into the woods as they had done previously. Instead of jogging like they had before, they found themselves walking quite slowly, as if trying to delay the inevitable separation they all knew was coming.

But, as they got deeper into the woods, the spot where all four of the Snyders had disappeared and, ultimately, reappeared came into view.

“There it is,” Grant said as he pointed with the flashlight.

The group's collective heartrate increased significantly as they approached the spot and glanced around at one another without saying a word. Everyone felt the same nervousness but there was also a certain level of excitement.

Ray was particularly excited, after almost forty years of waiting, to go find his sister, Sheila. He had spent a significant amount of his quiet time, over the course of the night, thinking about what it would be like when he finally encountered her. He knew he would want to embrace her immediately but, assumed she wouldn't recognize him and didn't want to freak her out.

Grant interrupted the silence when he asked the group to grab hands so he could pray as the first light began to peek into the night sky. He turned the flashlight off and shoved it in his back pocket as he took his wife's hand in his. He squeezed it tightly, knowing it would be the last time for a while, before then grabbing Kinsey's hand and doing the same.

The group formed a small circle and Grant began to thank God for the opportunity that lay ahead of them. He thanked Him for choosing them and then asked for wisdom, guidance and protection on their journey. It was during the prayer when all five of them felt the same warmth billow up within them that they had felt on the outside when the light visited them on Raum's island. It was also the same warmth that Grant had felt the night before when he suddenly spoke in a language that only Ray had

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understood. Soon, it felt as though the warmth was gushing out of every pore on their skin and the volume was increasing until they felt like they might explode into a billion pieces. But, it wasn't scary, it felt so good they didn't want it to stop. Slowly, with their eyes still closed from praying, their hands released from one another and they felt themselves float off of the ground.

~

Suddenly, Kinsey became aware of a rushing sound as if someone had just opened the window in a car going a hundred miles per hour. But, he noticed that he didn't feel any wind pushing against him. It still felt as though what was inside of him was bursting out instead. He gradually opened his eyes and that's when he noticed the beauty that surrounded him. It was all light and represented every color he'd ever seen, and hundreds more that he was seeing for the first time.

~

The light seemed to have a movement to it. It wasn't just the fact that Tatum was traveling through it, although she was, the light also had a rhythmic, steady pulse to it. Like a heartbeat. The light was contracting and expanding ever so slightly.

~

Jill was disappointed to see the light begin to dissipate, and with it, the warm feeling that had been teeming out from within her. However, as the light was replaced by darkness, it dawned on her that darkness was what she had immediately seen the first time she had been transported to Kadosh. Then she woke up without a memory of the trip. She briefly wondered if she would forget this time, too. But, then she reasoned that this trip was different. Her family had been called to Kadosh by Raum before. This time, it was God calling them. That's why they were awake and that's why they both felt the warmth and saw the light.

~

As the feeling within Grant returned to what he would consider normal, he also noticed that the brilliant light was completely gone. All that was left was the pale glow of the moon above him. It was about the same time that he felt his feet gently touch the ground.

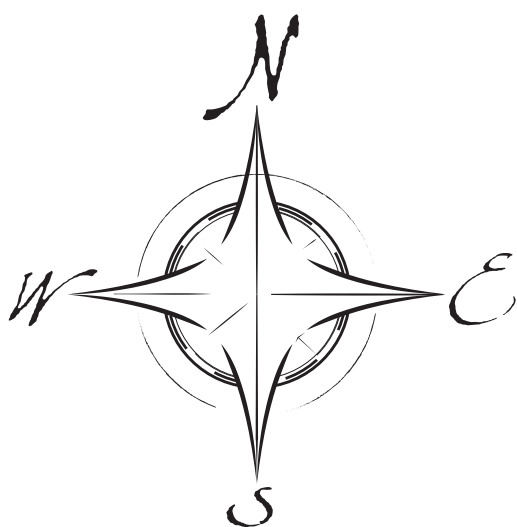
“We made it.”

Ray's voice startled Grant, who didn't expect anyone to be with him, almost as much as the touch of Max's hand on his back had shortly after his arrival the first time. Grant stared at Ray

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who was looking at their surroundings.

“We’re in Kadosh.”



—The—
Four Corners
—— of Darkness ——

by C.S. Elston

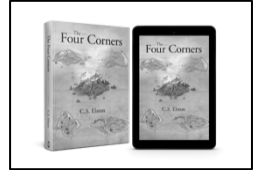
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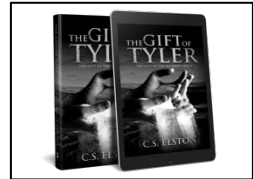
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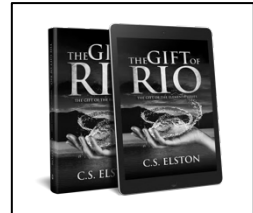
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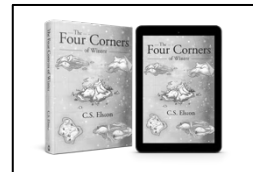


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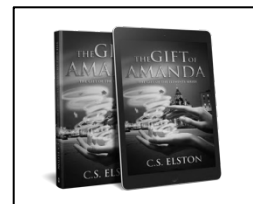
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“The Gift of Matias”



“The Gift of Amanda”





After award-winning stage work in the nineties, Chris Elston moved to Los Angeles where he wrote more than two dozen feature film and television screenplays. He has been invited to participate in screenwriting events for Cinema Seattle and Angel Citi Film Festival. In 2013, Chris left Los Angeles for the suburbs of his hometown, Seattle, Washington, to get married and start a new chapter in his own story. Five and a half years later, the journey of the chapter that followed landed he and his wife in Prescott, Arizona where they now reside.

