

Chapter 1

Journey

Acknowledgements (optional)

Getting my first novel published was an adventure. However, I've found out the real trick is not getting the first book out, it is getting the second, and the third, and...

So to all my fans who sent pestering emails, to my friends who politely asked about my progress, and to Lou who graciously offered to help edit this second novel – My Deepest Thanks.

I have also learned that while writing and the creative process is an internal and almost dream state for me, the support and love of my husband and daughter are the most precious and valuable commodities to the process preparing and sending my work out to the publisher.

Chapters or other Divisions (required)

Please copy and paste this page as many times as necessary based on your number of chapters before you begin to input.

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The horse kicked out and jumped aside planting his forefeet firmly in the muddy bank. With a growl Richard furiously whirled the horse around in a circle to face the ford a measure or so away. Yanking hard against the bit, it tried to bolt. Richard wrestled to gain control, cursing the farmer who'd not let the stud out for exercise for the weeks he'd had it.

Across the ford he could see Owen hunched over resting on the pommel of his saddle. His large placid black gelding had plodded across without a twitch of an ear.

"This cursed creature...Blast if I'll wade through that! Curse you horse...you will cross!"

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Looking at Richard as he steadied the plunging, fractious animal he commented, "You'd gotten just as wet wading for all the splashing, My Lord."

Richard gave him a hard cold look and snarling wordlessly sheathed his sword. He turned the gray toward White Bridge's northern gate, and urged the horse into a tight controlled gallop. The stallion continued to fight Richard for several strides.

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Henry waved to the two guards below, "Close the gate!"

"Lord," the guard pointed down the road, "Two men Lord riding like Evil itself were after them!"

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"Owen! Lord's Blood!" he peered at the other man who was dealing with the plunging gray, "Richard? Come in!"

They trotted under the gateway as Henry jogged down from the wall.

"Robert's been at the main gate nearly every day watching for you for a week. Why in Blazes this gate?" Henry stepped aside from the prancing gray.

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"He's here at the Castle. Guests from Kananur arrived a week or so ago," he said jerking the bit as the gray tried to bite.

"Kananur?" Richard frowned, "Who?"

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Richard stared at him, "One of my uncles?" He shrugged, "Henry can you get word to Robert to tell him to meet me in my room later tonight?"

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"Thanks Henry," Richard turned toward the castle as Alec drew along side. Trotting down the streets of White Bridge he turned to Owen, "Go wait for me or my message at the Silver Fox."

Owen nodded, "Take care..." he paused looking beyond to Alec who suddenly became intensely interested in his horse's mane, "Watch your back, Sire," he whispered low.

Richard only nodded in return and watched as Owen headed down one of the side streets.

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"Guess I do look rather rough," he smirked to Alec.

"That, Sir Richard is a mild description of what you look like," Alec tossed the reins of his horse to a stable lad and grabbed the gray who was snapping at the other poor lad.

Richard grunted low as he swung out of the saddle holding on as he stretched his legs, "Lord's Blood!"

Alec eyed him, "How long a ride?" still holding the horse tight.

"Since dawn and this blasted horse has been like this all day...it should be dead on its feet...I am."

Alec chuckled, "Got your legs back?"

Richard pushed straight, "Yes"

"I'll see to this idiot, Richard...go dry and thaw out."

Alec headed for the stables as Richard stiffly walked toward the keep.

Stepping into the entry hall, he could hear the voices and shouts coming from the great hall beyond where the evening meal was being served. A fire was burning in the guardroom. Richard looked down at his sodden clothes and decided to dry a bit before going to the hall.

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The guards standing by the outer door had stood ready to challenge him until he'd gotten very close and they recognized him with surprised expressions. The two in the guardroom had a similar reaction.

Richard spread his cloak on a bench and looked down at what he was wearing. Surely the fact that the hunting leathers were of Westfeldt cut was not enough to cause this. He looked at them both as he pulled off his gauntlets.

"It's your clothes and your hair, Sir Richard. You look a barbarian."

"My?" his hand went to his head.

Blast! As they'd been leaving Rose Coeur, Mora had laughingly commented he almost looked the proper Verdentfeld hunter, and all was needed was a braid or two like Osle. Kay had roared, and he had let her shove him down on the steps and braid a couple of feathers in his hair. He had tied the rest back at the nape of his neck with a leather strap. The braids and feathers hung loose and with a few days growth of beard. He rubbed his jaw.

"Yes, I guess I do look odd," Richard pulled the leather strap off and reached for the braids.

No...leave them...your Westfeld now.

Standing before the fire he could feel the two men watching him as he rubbed his hair to almost dry and warmed himself. Neither said anything, but he knew they were eyeing the sword now hanging at his side. Unlike any they'd seen he knew. In a moment or two he felt thawed out enough to head for the hall. One jumped to his feet as Richard turned snatching up his cloak.

"Should I announce you're back...Sir Richard?"

"No," he looked at the man and smiled, "It's a surprise for the Queen."

He pinned his still damp cloak back on with the dragon pin and tossed it back over his shoulders.

Kay rolled over and peered out the window, "Still dark, Blast," she muttered, and stretched her hand out to where Richard should be curled next to her. "It's no use, I'll not get back to sleep," she sat up pulling the covers up around her.

Two nights, she'd tossed and turned, waking several times, to rise in the morning tired and grumpy.

"Where is he now?" she said to the dark, "Is he at White Bridge? Has he seen Aldric? Are they meeting? Stop it you silly fool."

She had to think of something. She couldn't go on like this.

"Lord's Blood knows how many more days and nights," she groaned, "will I have to wait to know he's safe! Blast it I need to sleep."

Kay flung back the covers, and cursed softly as she paced arms crossed over her breasts. Who would have thought that seven weeks would have been enough time for it to be so familiar, so much something needed, to have his warm presence next to her? But it had, and the bed was cold and empty

without him. She woke dreaming of his arms around her, his breath soft in her ear, the feeling of him deep inside her. She shivered and cursed again.

There was no one to go and wake to talk to. Elena and Julia had left yesterday, as had the others who had not left when Richard rode out. Only her father stayed, saying he would not leave until Richard returned, and of course David. He stayed because Richard had asked him to

“David?” Kay whispered asking herself wordlessly, “No, he’d be...” She shook her head and crawled back in the bed, “Well think about something besides what Richard may or may not be doing,” Kay snapped at herself.

Not positive it would be of any help. It hadn’t the last two nights.

The others had sworn their oaths to Richard, none with the joy of Owen’s or the depth of meaning buried in David’s, but all had sworn honestly. Kay smiled remembering as each had stepped up, grasping Richard’s hands down on one knee. She had actually felt the truth of their oaths as she had rested a hand on each bowed head as they repeated the words to her.

They had all even willingly sealed their oaths with blood when Osle had asked for it. Drawing their daggers, making shallow cuts on their forearms, and letting their blood drip into the cup Mora held. Richard had watched with outright surprise, and later told her he strongly doubted if any of his stepfathers vassals would ever be willing to do the same at his coronation. When they all had finished, Mora had poured the blood on the holy fire, binding them all together.

Kay shook her head. She found it astounding as well. Not in a hundred years or more had Westfeld’s strength been so focused or so Mora and Osle had told her. Kay could almost feel it pulsing through the land. Tied and focused through Richard. She sobbed softly, wrapping her arms around her knees.

“Dickon...please Goddess, bring him back safe.”

The ache grew stronger and Kay could feel the tears welling in her eyes once again. Wiping them away she leapt from the bed, pulling her linen chemise over her head.

“Blast it...I need to talk to someone...and you’re it...cousin.”

Sitting up in a rush, he frowned savagely at the door and raked his fingers through his long jet-black hair.

“Who in Blazes?” he angrily yelled.

A soft mummer was all the response he got. Grumbling and cursing he crossed to the door, hurling back the bolt.

"What in Blazes?" David found himself glowering down at Kay, and his tone and expression changed at the pain reflected in her eyes, "Kay, what's? You can't have heard any..."

"I'm only half without him...I'm so lonely."

He silently cursed Richard, even though he understood why he had to do and be exactly where he was. David pulled Kay into a hug, ignoring the fact he'd leapt from his bed naked and was standing here freezing.

"He's fine... you'd know otherwise..." he smooth her hair.

"How?" Kay's voice wavered and the tears were close.

"I'm not...I just know you would feel it if any thing happened...look..." he held her away, "Kay let me get..."

"I need someone to talk to David...someone to hold me...I can't sl... It's so cold without him."

David stared at her puzzled and getting colder by the second, "Kay? What are you asking?"

"Just come sit with me...please?" her brown eyes imploring, "I need someone..."

David was truly surprised, Kay asking...not commanding.

"Wait let me get dressed."

Kay looked down noticing for the first time his nakedness. She smiled inwardly, no need for any embarrassment. She knew every scar; every wound on his body had been tended and stitched by her hand alone.

"Go ahead get dressed just come and sit."

Shivering David dove back into his room. Quickly yanking on a pair of pants and grabbing a shirt he joined Kay. Blast you Richard, for making her need you so much.

"Let's go...we'll sit in your study before that huge fire and you can cry on my shoulder cousin," and added silently to himself, I'll curse you for every hour of sleep I lose Richard!

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"David?" Kay whispered asking herself wordlessly, "No, he'd be..." She shook her head and crawled back in the bed, "Well think about something besides what Richard may or may not be doing," Kay snapped at herself.

Not positive it would be of any help. It hadn't the last two nights.

The others had sworn their oaths to Richard, none with the joy of Owen's or the depth of meaning buried in David's, but all had sworn honestly. Kay smiled remembering as each had stepped up, grasping Richard's hands down on one knee. She had actually felt the truth of their oaths as she had rested a hand on each bowed head as they repeated the words to her.

They had all even willingly sealed their oaths with blood when Osle had asked for it. Drawing their daggers, making shallow cuts on their forearms, and letting their blood drip into the cup Mora held. Richard had watched with outright surprise, and later told her he strongly doubted if any of his stepfathers vassals would ever be willing to do the same at his coronation. When they all had finished, Mora had poured the blood on the holy fire, binding them all together.

Kay shook her head. She found it astounding as well. Not in a hundred years or more had Westfeld's strength been so focused or so Mora and Osle had told her. Kay could almost feel it pulsing through the land. Tied and focused through Richard. She sobbed softly, wrapping her arms around her knees.

"Dickon...please Goddess, bring him back safe."

The ache grew stronger and Kay could feel the tears welling in her eyes once again. Wiping them away she leapt from the bed, pulling her linen chemise over her head.

"Blast it...I need to talk to someone...and you're it...cousin."

Sitting up in a rush, he frowned savagely at the door and raked his fingers through his long jet-black hair.

"Who in Blazes?" he angrily yelled.

A soft mummer was all the response he got. Grumbling and cursing he crossed to the door, hurling back the bolt.

"What in Blazes?" David found himself glowering down at Kay, and his tone and expression changed at the pain reflected in her eyes, "Kay, what's? You can't have heard any..."

"I'm only half without him...I'm so lonely."

He silently cursed Richard, even though he understood why he had to do and be exactly where he was. David pulled Kay into a hug, ignoring the fact he'd leapt from his bed naked and was standing here freezing.

"He's fine... you'd know otherwise..." he smooth her hair.

"How?" Kay's voice wavered and the tears were close.

"I'm not...I just know you would feel it if any thing happened...look..." he held her away, "Kay let me get..."

"I need someone to talk to David...someone to hold me...I can't sl... It's so cold without him."

David stared at her puzzled and getting colder by the second, "Kay? What are you asking?"

"Just come sit with me...please?" her brown eyes imploring, "I need someone..."

David was truly surprised, Kay asking...not commanding.

"Wait let me get dressed."

Kay looked down noticing for the first time his nakedness. She smiled inwardly, no need for any embarrassment. She knew every scar; every wound on his body had been tended and stitched by her hand alone.

"Go ahead get dressed just come and sit."

Shivering David dove back into his room. Quickly yanking on a pair of pants and grabbing a shirt he joined Kay. Blast you Richard, for making her need you so much.

“Let’s go...we’ll sit in your study before that huge fire and you can cry on my shoulder cousin,” and added silently to himself, I’ll curse you for every hour of sleep I lose Richard!