

Chapter 1

Isaac stopped in the alleyway he used as a shortcut to his home in the small fishing village of Batten Bay. He could hear shuffling feet behind and to the side of him. He wondered why they insisted on trying to rob him. He had already fought them off on numerous occasions. They didn't seem to learn. Isaac turned to face them.

At twenty-two years old, he had a muscular frame and stood at six feet. The wind rustled his black hair and his light brown eyes stared into the darkness at one of his soon-to-be attackers. He had proven repeatedly not to be an easy target. He didn't understand why they didn't leave him alone.

"So, I see you're going to try it again."

The leader of this band of thieves had a short, stocky build. He moved from the shadows. "I'm being hassled because I haven't taken you down yet, boy. You're bad for my reputation. Why don't you hand over that purse and your little jeweled daggers and I'll walk away. If I'm carrying your daggers around, people will assume I finally got the better of you. I can leave you alone then."

Isaac laughed. "No."

"Have it your way. I've brought some more help with me this time."

Nine men stepped out of the shadows and moved toward him. Isaac waited. He felt more eyes on him, but he didn't have time to wonder where they were. The first man approached him and Isaac struck, landing a solid hit on the man's jaw. The man went down and didn't get up. Isaac swung again connecting with another jaw and the man fell. He kicked out and caught a thief on the underside of his chin. Another was out cold.

Isaac's tunic ripped as a thief tried to grab onto him. He kicked and shattered the thief's knee. Isaac received a hit to his jaw, but he barely moved. He grasped the man's arm before he could bring it back and twisted, pulling the man's arm behind him until he

heard it snap. Isaac threw the man from him. He had been moving so fast those were the only men able to get to him. Five down, five to go.

Isaac studied the remaining five men. Three men held up their hands, turned, and fled. Isaac laughed and glared at the stocky built man. "You have to do better than that." He moved toward the remaining two men. "I've had enough of this and I'm going to end it." Isaac smirked at the men as they moved away from him. "Where are you going? I thought you wanted to rob me." The men started to run, but Isaac was too fast. He tripped one of the men and grabbed the stocky man by his shirt collar.

Since Isaac had been working on a schooner from the time he was twelve years old and had put in many years of manual labor, he had a strong toned body. He lifted the stocky man from the ground and shook him. The man stared into Isaac's cold, hard eyes and trembled in fear as if he knew Isaac could easily break his neck.

The stocky man pleaded, "Please let me go. I promise I won't ever bother you again. I swear it!"

Isaac suddenly peered around. There was someone close. He could feel it. It was as if eyes were staring into him. It was the same feeling he had earlier but it was stronger. It was rather unnerving. Where were they? They weren't part of this thief's ambush or they would have attacked him already.

Isaac turned back to the stocky man. "If you ever try to attack me again, I'll kill you. This is your last chance." Isaac dropped the thief who rose from the ground sprinting away. Isaac glanced around again. He sensed whoever was watching him had left. The silence around him was eerie.

Isaac continued down the alley then up a side road toward his small home. He wished he could afford better for his mother, but what he made from working the schooner was only enough to keep them comfortable. A smile crossed his face. He couldn't wait to

surprise his mother with his news. Captain Lassiter had given him the nod today. The first mate was up in years and had decided to retire. Isaac was the new first mate. He had worked long and hard for this. It would mean a lot more coin for them. He could afford more help for his ailing mother.

Captain Lassiter had taken him under his wing when Isaac approached him ten years ago asking for a job, from the first he treated him like a son. Captain Lassiter told him after the first couple of years, he planned to leave the schooner to him if he earned it. He had earned it.

Isaac strolled up the dirt path to his house and he again had the feeling he was being watched. He shrugged the feeling away and entered the small family room closing the door behind him. "Mother, I'm home." Isaac walked toward his mother's room and stopped in total surprise. Standing in his mother's doorway was a King's Guardsman. A noise sounded behind him, he spun as the door to his room opened and several more guardsmen appeared. He gazed in complete awe as the king himself strode into his family room. A yellow-haired woman and two men in long robes followed him. One of these men had what looked like a sword wrapped in a cloth hanging from his side.

Isaac just stared then slowly bowed his head in deference. King Elbert stood at six-two and had dark yellow hair streaked with gray and dark blue eyes. He had seen King Elbert and his guardsmen pass through town on occasion, but what were they doing in his home? The king stared back at him. Then the king moved toward him with tears in his eyes. Isaac stood in total astonishment as King Elbert grabbed him in a tight hug. He was squeezing him and it was hard to breathe.

The king said, "Jared, my boy Jared."

Isaac finally found his voice and tried to talk. "King Elbert, I'm not Jared. My name is Isaac. You have me confused with someone else. Please let me go."

King Elbert kept Isaac within his grasp, but did move away enough so that he could gaze at Isaac as he spoke. "I thought you were dead and here you are alive and well. After all these years I get my boy back." King Elbert stood a little further back from Isaac and looked him over from head to toe. "You're an extremely handsome lad. You have your mother's hair and eyes. I wish she were alive to see you. She died twelve years ago."

Isaac turned confused eyes to him. "I'm not your son. My mother is alive."

King Elbert moved further away from Isaac and took his arm in a firm hold. "Come with me."

Isaac went with King Elbert into his mother's room. She was lying on her bed with tears streaming down her face. Isaac jerked away from King Elbert and ran to her.

"Mother, have they hurt you? What's this about?"

King Elbert said in a menacing voice, "Tell him, Madam."

King Elbert's tone surprised him. How could the king address a sick woman so? Isaac's gaze went back to his mother. He tried to control the anger in his own voice.

"Mother, what's going on?"

Isaac had been leaning over his mother, but straightened in sudden apprehension at her look.

"Isaac, it's true. You're King Elbert's son."

Isaac felt the blood drain from his face. He gawked at his mother in disbelief. After a few moments, he said, "You and King -"

His mother cut him off. "No Isaac. I'm not your mother."

Isaac stared at her and took a step back in total incredulity. How could this be?

"No!" Isaac shouted in desperation. "This can't be true! Tell me this isn't true!"

"Isaac, King Elbert and your mother, Queen Muriel, used to come here for a vacation of sorts every year. I was at the shore during one of those times and I was in misery. I had

just lost my husband and we had no children. I desperately wanted children. You were playing by the water. I didn't know who you were at the time. I just saw a little boy that looked like my husband. You got up and walked my way. I called to you and you came to me. I don't know how you were so alone. King Elbert and Queen Muriel were embracing at the time engrossed in each other. I didn't even see any guardsmen near you. There were other families and I thought you belonged to one of them. You looked so much like my Simon, so I took you. I sat you down in some bushes then I removed your shoes and tunic. I wet them and placed them by the water's edge. I knew that anyone finding them would think you drowned. You were only about two years old."

Isaac continued to stare at his mother and tears welled in his eyes. He couldn't stop them as they fell from his face. This couldn't be true. Isaac peered at his mother in heart wrenching dismay and mumbled out, "No. It can't be."

"I was on my way back to my house when I heard someone running down the road shouting that the king's son, the crown prince, had drowned. I only realized then who you were, but I couldn't give you up. I had my boy."

Isaac shook his head in misery and screamed, "No! Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm dying. I sent word to King Elbert and I told him everything. You must go with him now and live the life that you should have had. I'm so sorry, son."

Isaac yelled in rage, "No! No!"

His whole world was collapsing around him. Isaac twirled toward King Elbert and hit out with his fist knocking him to the floor. He ran past him and shoved the robed man wearing the covered sword away from the door. He reached out in instinct and pulled the sword from its sheath as he barreled out of the room.

King Elbert called out orders and guardsmen closed off the route to the front door. Isaac peered at the guardsmen trying to figure out how to get past. One of the robed men shouted, "It's him! He's the one!"

Isaac turned toward his mother's room. King Elbert and the two robed men gaped at him in utter excitement. Isaac couldn't believe the elated look on their faces. He had no idea what was going on and he really didn't care. He was in shock himself, but it was in devastating disbelief. This couldn't be happening. He had such good news to tell his mother, but she wasn't his mother. What a horrible nightmare. He needed to get away. He needed to think.

No one made a move toward him. They were all standing still, stunned. He took the cloth off the sword and stared at it in surprise. It was glowing red. King Elbert and the two robed men let out a loud intake of breath. Isaac peered at them completely lost. What was happening to his life? King Elbert nodded to one of the robed men and then the man held out his hand putting his palm out toward Isaac.

"Knock him out and then kill the woman."

Isaac screamed, "No!" Something hit him hard and he flew across the room with tremendous force. He slammed into the wall and knew no more.

Isaac groaned as he opened his eyes. They were at an inn. He lay on a bed in a large room. It was the beginning of summer and an open window let in a slight breeze. King Elbert, the two robed men, and several guardsmen were in the room. King Elbert strode over to Isaac and leaned over him.

Isaac yelled in unbelievable grief as he brought up his fist, "You killed her!"

He swung, but unseen hands pushed his arm to the bed. Isaac glanced over to see one of the two robed men standing with his palm toward him. Isaac stared at him in confusion.

King Elbert said, "Prince Jared, I know things are a bit confusing to you right now, but I'll explain everything to you. And yes, I did kill the woman you knew as your mother, but she asked it of me. She was dying. She said that once I took you away she would have no one to help her. She said it was only a matter of weeks anyway and she was suffering. It was merciful."

Tears welled in Isaac's eyes. He couldn't stop the sobs that escaped him. He wept for the woman who had raised him and shown him such love. His heart broke at her unbelievable cruelty. How could she steal a child? What kind of woman was she in truth? King Elbert moved to embrace him, but Isaac pushed him away. King Elbert killed her. He didn't want him touching him. Isaac rolled over and buried his face in the pillow and his grief poured out.

King Elbert sat down on the bed and pulled his son to him.

Isaac felt drained, so he didn't fight him. When Isaac's tears subsided, he still held him.

"Jared, you don't know what it means to me to have my son back. You are my boy. Your life as Isaac is over. You are Jared, the Crown Prince of the Caswell Kingdom. There's so much to say. I hardly know where to begin. I know this is hard for you, so we'll take this slow.

Isaac or Jared, he didn't know how to refer to himself anymore. He tried to pull away from King Elbert.

"Let me go! You killed her. It wasn't merciful. It was murder!"

King Elbert held onto him. "Please, calm down. She was suffering. It's over for her now. The important thing to her was getting you back to me. She understood you needed to come home. She wanted you to know the truth before she died. You need to understand. She kept you from me. She let your mother and me think you were dead. That is horrendous cruelty. I know you loved her, but she took you from your family. I'm your father. You belong at the palace with me. It's your true home."

Jared pulled back from King Elbert and he let him go. Jared held extreme anger toward him because he killed the woman he thought was his mother, but at the same time, he felt sympathy for him because he endured years of torment believing his son dead.

"I don't know what to think. It's tearing me apart that the woman I believed to be my mother was a fraud, a fake. She did love me, but she had no right to do what she did. It's hard to accept she stole me away as a child. And then you say she asked you to kill her. Even if she begged, you still had no right to do it. I didn't know she was dying. I thought she was just sick and would get better."

Jared rubbed his hands over his face. "You appear out of nowhere, the King of Caswell Kingdom, telling me I'm your son. I don't know you. It's hard to fathom what it must be like for you to see me sitting here knowing I'm your son who you thought dead. I'm sorry for your pain, but you must understand I'm not a child anymore. I'm a grown man. I have a life I've fashioned for myself. I'm sorry, but I can't go back to the palace with you and be Prince Jared. I want the life I built as Isaac. Maybe I could visit you sometime and we could talk. It's just too late for anything else."

King Elbert grasped him by the arms. "You listen to me. You're my son. I won't lose you again. You'll not call yourself Isaac anymore. Your rightful name is Prince Jared. You're the crown prince. Do you know what that means?"

Jared tried to move back from him. "I won't be king! I can't. I don't know anything about your life. It's too late for me. I don't want that life!"

"It's not too late for you. You're a young man of only twenty-two years. You can learn and you will."

Jared jerked away from him. "No! I'm sorry, but no. I can't do what you want. Please understand. I'll visit you. I'll try to get to know you, but I must live the life I want. I don't fit in your world, King Elbert."

"Jared, your life is at the palace. You must accept it. I'm not just King Elbert to you. I'm your father. You've no idea of the pain I've suffered. When I found out you were alive, my heart soared. I had my son back."

Jared shook his head no.

"Please, son. We'll work through this." Tears welled in King Elbert's eyes. "I've missed you. I want you to know you are going home to a family. I remarried. You have a brother and sister. They're twins and they're eight years old."

Jared's eyes widened. "No! I can't go back with you. This will never work. I'm so much older. You don't need to bring me into their lives now. I'm sure your other son believes himself to be the crown prince. Leave things as they are!"

"He was thrilled when I told him of you. He's not disappointed, if anything, he's ecstatic and so is your sister."

Jared dropped his head. What a nightmare. After a few minutes, he gazed up at King Elbert. He didn't really want to hurt him, but he couldn't go with him.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do as you wish. Please, just be comforted your son is alive and happy. I promise, I'll do my best to make you part of my life, but I won't live at the palace. You must accept it."

King Elbert's eyes hardened. "No Jared, it's you that must accept you're coming home. You're in shock right now. You need time to let this sink in. This was thrown on you so unexpectedly, it's no wonder you're confused." King Elbert stood. "I'm sure you're hungry. I'll have a tray sent up."

King Elbert nodded to a guardsman. "I'm sorry I had to have you knocked out, but you were so upset. It was the best way to handle the situation. I knew you wouldn't have come with me willingly. You were too distraught." King Elbert patted Jared on his shoulder. "You've had a rough day. I want you to eat and then get some sleep. It's getting quite late. We'll talk again in the morning."

"I need to see to my mother... her burial. I want to take care of that tomorrow."

King Elbert said with a hint of steel in his voice. "There's no need. We left her body in the house. The house was burnt to the ground."

Jared stared at King Elbert in grief, disbelief, and anger. "Why? Why would you do such a thing? Surely, you knew I would want to see her and say goodbye. I know what she did was horribly wrong, but she raised me. She showed me love. I at least owed her a good burial. I'm hurt tremendously at what she did, but I loved her. She was the only mother I knew. And not only that, the house was my home. I worked hard for that house."

"I want your connection to her and this place cut. You need to make a clean break. This isn't your life anymore. I've informed the City Guard of her death. They'll take care of her body in the morning. She deserves a pauper's grave, but because of you, I left coin with them to make sure she has a proper burial. You'll have to let this go now. It's over and done."

"You had no right!"

"I have every right! That woman took you from me and I'm taking you back. I thought you were dead for twenty years. It's hard to believe you're actually sitting here alive and well. I told you and I mean it with all my heart, I won't lose you again!"

King Elbert clenched his fists. "I'm cutting all your ties here. There will never be a reason to leave me and come back. There won't be a life to come back too. I'm determined you'll come home with me and you'll spend the rest of your life at the palace where you should be. This is not the life you were supposed to live."

Jared was in agony. This couldn't be really happening. The woman he always considered his mother was dead by their hands and his only home burned. In a few short hours, they had destroyed his life. He had only one thing left, his job as first mate to Captain Lassiter. Did they know of it? Would they hurt him? Jared decided he would slip out in the morning and warn him. It was the least he could do.

He tried to understand King Elbert's thinking. He could understand King Elbert wanting his son back, but his methods so far were alarming. King Elbert wanted to wipe Isaac out of existence. Surely, he knew he couldn't turn back time.

Jared didn't have a steady lady to kill or threaten. He slept around. At least he didn't have to worry about that. Captain Lassiter was a different matter though. He was his last link to this town. Waiting until morning could be too late. He would have to slip out tonight.

King Elbert's eyes softened as he gazed at Jared. "It'll be all right, son. You're going home." King Elbert stepped aside as an inn servant brought Jared a tray and a mug of ale. "Eat. I know you must be hungry."

Jared didn't know what else to do so he ate. He glanced up at King Elbert hovering over him. How could his life have changed so in just a few hours? When he had left the schooner this afternoon, he had been so full of hope.

The sun had set hours ago and candles lit the inn room. A flame blew out from the breeze from the window. A robed man, the one carrying the sword, picked it up moving it to a different location then he raised his hand and wiggled his fingers. The wick ignited. Jared stared in astonishment. Who were these men? He had never seen anyone like them before.

King Elbert laughed at Jared's expression. "I'll explain all to you. You've a lot to learn, but we've time. I certainly don't want to overload you with information from the start."

"The sword that man carries, why does he keep it wrapped? I've never seen such a sword. It was glowing red in my hands when I held it. I don't have that much experience with those. I just carry daggers. But there is something strange about that sword, as there is something strange about your two robed friends."

King Elbert sat back down and put his hands to Jared's shoulders. "Please, give it all time. The sword and my friends are indeed different. I'll introduce you to them, but not just yet. Don't rush things. You have some major changes coming and I don't want you overwhelmed. One day at a time."

"Were you the ones watching me today?"

King Elbert looked surprised for a moment and dropped his hands from Jared's shoulder. "Yes. I didn't know how you would react to coming home seeing King's Guardsmen at your door. I thought it best if we approached you cautiously. Before I left the palace to come after you, I sent someone ahead to get some information for me. I learned of the route you took from the schooner to your home. I had you watched the whole way. I didn't want any slip-ups. I knew this was going to be hard on you, so I wanted it to go as smooth as possible."

King Elbert's eyes filled with tears. "I can imagine how you must be feeling. I know how I felt when I got the message telling me you were alive. I couldn't stop shouting and crying. I was so happy. A weight lifted from my heart. I immediately sent out missives

throughout the kingdom declaring you found alive and well.” King Elbert stood, “Well, that’s enough for now. You need to get some sleep. We’re heading for home in the morning.”

Jared slid down on the bed. He wondered if they would leave him alone, giving him a chance to slip out and warn Captain Lassiter. The Captain needed to set sail before he, or the schooner met with foul play. Jared closed his eyes. It had been one long day. He would try to get a couple of hours sleep. Besides, if King Elbert and the two robed men stayed in his room, he needed to wait until they fell asleep before he could leave.

Jared stirred. King Elbert was asleep in a chair beside the bed. The two robed men were asleep in chairs across the room. The guardsmen were probably outside the door. Jared slipped off the bed silently and went to the opened window to look down. He was on the second floor of the inn. He could climb down easy enough. Jared grasped the window seal quietly pulling himself up and climbed out. He held on by his fingertips as he felt with his feet for a foothold. He found one and inched himself down. When he was a few feet from the street, he let go and hit the ground running.

Jared raced through the deserted dark streets. He stopped every so often to slip behind a building, or into an alley, to look behind him to make sure no one was following. He didn’t want to lead King Elbert straight to Captain Lassiter.

He banged loudly on his door. “Captain Lassiter, its Isaac! Please open the door! Captain Lassiter!”

In just a few minutes, the door opened and Captain Lassiter stood before him in his nightshirt.

The Captain stared at Jared in alarm. “What’s going on, Isaac?”

“Captain Lassiter, you have to move the schooner, now! Please get dressed and -”

“Wait a minute. What’s this about? Come on in Isaac and sit down.” Jared hesitated. Captain Lassiter took him by the arm and ushered him inside. “What is it?”

Jared sat down and took several deep breaths. He gazed into Captain Lassiter’s eyes and told him of what had happened.

“You’re King Elbert’s boy, Jared!” Captain Lassiter put his hands to his face. He spoke in shock and disbelief. “Your mother, oh Isaac. He burned down your house. I’m so sorry.”

Captain Lassiter suddenly stood and strode into another room. Jared could hear him moving around and after a few minutes, Captain Lassiter came out fully dressed.

“We have to get you out of here. We’ll take the schooner out.”

“No, Captain, I can’t go with you. I thought about going, but it might not be the smartest thing to do for your sake. They’ll search for me and if they find me with you, they’ll kill you and sink the schooner. I’m going back to where my home once was. I’ll wait there until you have a chance to escape. I’m sure when they begin to hunt, one of the first places they’ll look for me is there. They’ll think I’ve gone there to grieve. I have to make it easy for them to find me so I can keep them from you. If they don’t find me at the house, the schooner will be the next place they go. I’ll give you a reasonable length of time to set sail. If they don’t find me, I’ll leave.”

Captain Lassiter put his hands to Jared’s shoulder. “It’ll take me a week to get to Cooper’s Reef. I’ll wait there for you, two days. Then I’ll depart and run our usual route, but I’ll only dock at our every third stop. So, if we miss each other at Cooper’s Reef keep moving, we’ll meet up. In two months, I’ll return here. The threat to me should be over. If they catch you, you’ll be at the palace by then.”

Jared nodded. “I’ll be there if I can. Take care of yourself and thanks for everything. I’ll miss you.”

Captain Lassiter pulled Jared to him in a tight hug. Captain Lassiter was a well-built man and he stood well over six feet. Jared found his face in his shirt.

“Keep me informed of what is going on with you if you can. If you find a way to return, your position as first mate will be waiting for you. You take care of yourself too.”

Jared stepped out the door with Captain Lassiter and watched his friend leave. He knew in his heart, he would probably never see him again. It was complete now. Everything he cared for was gone. King Elbert achieved his goal. In one day, he stripped him of his entire life. Jared turned away with a broken heart.

He stood in front of what used to be his house. There was nothing but a pile of burnt wood and ashes. He started to go and see if he could find the body of the woman he knew as his mother, but he couldn't bear it. No, the City Guard would probably be by later in the morning. Jared sank to his knees and his tremendous grief poured out through tears.

After a while, he stood and wiped the tears away. He could feel eyes on him.

Jared stared at the remains of his house. It tore at his heart to know the woman he considered his mother was dead and her body was in this mess. As he continued to look, his heart hardened toward her. How could she have stolen him as a child? He would never forgive her for that. He had a good life here and he was glad of it, but it was wrong what she did, nothing could excuse it. He couldn't forgive her for the position she now put him in. The life he loved had been a lie.

Jared stiffened when King Elbert spoke. “What are you doing?”

“I'm saying goodbye.”

“I was quite upset when I woke and found you gone. You must not disappear again. If you want to go somewhere, you let me know and I'll arrange it. Come away from there

now. We'll go back to the inn and eat breakfast then we'll head out. I don't think anyone will be able to sleep. It's almost dawn anyway." When Jared didn't move right away, King Elbert said, "Come, Jared. It's time to go home."

Jared glanced at the remains of his house one last time and then turned away with a heavy heart.

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Other Books by Joy Brooks

King's Heir - Blurb

Raised from infancy to be ignorant of his birthright and duty, Rayden is caught unawares when eventually forced into his role as king of seventeenth century Ruar. Rayden intends to refuse that unwelcome responsibility, but his most beloved and loyal companions aim to see destiny fulfilled – no matter the cost to comfort, dignity, or liberty.

Book One in a Three Book Series

King's Reign – Blurb (EPIC Awards 2017 Finalist)

Rayden is forced to live a life he never intended. As King of Ruar, he finds it is not easy to side step his responsibilities, there are too many injustices to stamp out. Not only must he strive to help the kingdom, he must face his foes, who are determined to stop him from getting what he desires most, his freedom. When turmoil between the parties escalates, Rayden's fight to forge his own destiny becomes paramount.

Fourth Son – Blurb

Twenty-One year old Grayson has been chosen to be the next Jewell and Master of the Green Stone. The Stone imparts power to control the dragons – all the dragons. As Master of the Stone, Grayson will live for 7 centuries. Bonding with the Green Stone is a torturous and necessary process. Grayson fights to escape that bonding torment and he flees from the certain anguish of losing everyone and everything that he loves over the course of 700 years.

Coming Home – Blurb

While Europe faces the ensuing Battle of Waterloo, Gabrielle Anderson travels to her brother's best friend's estate. Lord Marshall Hampton opens his home to her but Gabrielle also wants his love. Gabrielle is determined to show him how she feels, but her time is shortened when Marshall is summoned to the war front. Will Gabrielle win the heart of the only man she has ever loved?

A Christmas Wish – Blurb

Katie Holston, raised in foster homes, wants nothing more than a family to call her own. She meets the man of her dreams in Ian Stokely. Being his five year old son's teacher, she is in a position to make her dreams come true. Kyle Stokely confides in Katie his greatest wish for Christmas. He wants his widowed father to be happy again. Ian Stokely has a different view than Katie Holston and his son, Kyle. He wishes to be left alone. Can Katie and Kyle convince Ian to live life fully again?