

Chapter Two

I'm up early the next morning, dressed, and out the door before the sun rises over the walls. There are a few nuns out this early, and I am going to the library before the day starts. The way I see it, I have only a few more days before I leave, and I want to get another look at that Fire element book.

I am in the central courtyard when the main outside doors at the front entrance open. I have a feeling it is the men, my elements, and I rush across the yard and hide behind a building to watch the newcomers.

I want to see them but not show myself just yet. I am used to hiding from visitors, spending my time in the gardens, library, and even in the kitchen when people come. Traders come about once a week with goods for us to buy, and some people come for offerings or confessions.

Three men enter through the gates, all travel-worn with bags on their backs and swords and bows at their sides. Knives are strapped to their legs, and they even have chest plates of armor. Under them are dark tunics and black leather pants. They are armed with so many weapons I don't even know what some of them are called.

The largest of them is in the lead, and I don't think I have ever seen a man as large as he. He has short, dark hair and facial hair along his jaw. Muscles bulge from his clothing everywhere. He is fierce-looking with an evil-looking scar running down the side of his face and some on his arms. I can tell he is a warrior right off and a compelling one at that.

The second is tall but more slender in build. He has plenty of muscles, too, but they don't bulge as much. His long, blond hair is tied back. He is the most handsome, maybe twenty-five in age, and he has a lazy smile on his face. I bet he is the easiest going one.

The third is shorter than the other two, but his build is in the middle of them. His sandy brown hair and short facial hair make his light eyes stand out. Something about him was different as his gaze wanders over the yard in what looks like excitement.

My eyes feast on him longer than the others. I feel something stirring inside me as I watch him walk toward the main building. His stride is sure and lengthy, and I can see determination and power illuminating from him.

These men are to be my husbands, and I have to admit, I am pleased. I haven't seen many men living here in the last few years, but these three have to be some of the most gorgeous men in the world. Maybe it has something to do with the power they have in them. Whatever it is, they look like Gods.

Now, I have my way of breaking the curse, and I don't want revenge on Elizabeth for what she did. My future is now entering the great hall and will be meeting with Mother Frances. Soon she will send for me.

An urge comes over me to look my best. I leave my hiding place, running back to my room. I scramble and almost fall before sliding inside. Closing the door, I strip off my clothes as fast as I can.

I had a bath last night, but I still go to the wash station and clean my face and hands once more. Then I slip on the prettiest dress I have—the faded blue one that has little yellow flowers on the top and a solid blue skirt.

I take my hair out of its braid and brush it, letting it fall down my back. I haven't cut it since being here, and it is long, reaching past my waist. I keep brushing it even when I feel no tangles, hoping it would make it shine as my mother told me.

I brush my teeth again, taking more time, and when I look in the small mirror on my wall and smile wide to check my work. The mirror is only large enough to show my face and is the only one in the whole sanctuary.

Mother Frances had brought it to me after I came to live here. I had cried and hidden away from everyone at first, not wanting them to see the monster I was. I didn't realize that they saw my pure form

until she had given me the mirror. She persuaded me to walk outside with her after I realized that these grounds were holy, and these are spiritual people. They didn't see my curse, and that gave me a chance at a somewhat healthy and normal life.

A knock and a soft voice calls my name distracts me, and I open my door.

"Miss Celine," a middle-aged nun, Diana, says gently. "Mother Frances asked me to fetch you to her chamber office urgently. Someone has arrived to speak with you."

"Thank you, Sister Diana. I will be right there," I say, calmer than I feel as I walk out of my room. I am satisfied with my appearance, knowing the men will see me and not the monster I am. Not just now, but after we leave also. I will have to stay clear of others until I fulfill my part, which will most likely take me years to do.

Still, it is a life of my choosing, and I am ready for it. The only thing that frightens me is the ogres waiting on the other side of the walls.

The idea of leaving the sanctuary and having them come for me is scary. The ogres are trapped in this realm, just as I am stuck in these walls. But all I have to do is make it to one of the other three realms, and I will be safe from them. The best thing is, I have three powerful elements who have come for me. All I have to do is follow them, fall in love with them, and give each a child.

They are most likely still waiting in the great hall. I will have to walk by there to get to Mother Frances's office since it is closest to the nuns' sleeping chambers.

I walk into the courtyard and instantly stop. Seeing all three of them sitting on the benches in front of the doors to the great hall stuns me. I am in their presence for the first time.

Their eyes turn to me, and the smallest of the three stands up. I stare back at him, not able to look away from his intense gaze. Something inside of me stirs, and I want to move toward him, but I hold myself in check.

I force myself to look away from his eyes, not even daring to see their color. I feel if I did...I would be lost.

As the long-haired blond stands up next, I turn to look at him. He steals my breath away with a charming smile that has me tingling all over. His eyes, I do dare to look into sparkling silver eyes that stare back at me boldly. Something is promising in his eyes as they look me over. I only breathe again once I break eye contact with him and look at the last one.

He tilts his head at me with respect and a man-in-charge manner. He is not as attractive as the other two, but older and more demure. He is the one with a scar running down his face but only adds to the strength and power of him.

Looking at them all, I can tell that if anyone can get me out of this realm, it is these three men.

I watch them as I come closer. I do not speak to them, but to continue to Mother Frances. I can't help gazing over them as they did me. My pulse races at the thought of them being mine.

The door to the main lodge is just a few feet away. I reach for the handle and turn it, but before I go in, I glance back at the first man once again. He is breathing hard, and I can see he is flexing his hands at his sides like he is trying to contain himself. I feel my own hands grow tight on the door handle as we stare at each other.

His eyes are green—flakes of different color greens with a wilderness that lays inside. So familiar, my heart stops beating, and there is a sharp pain of significant loss that starts it up again.

I turn away and walk into the hall, closing the door behind me. I lean against it, taking a deep breath. I shouldn't have looked into his eyes. My hands are shaking as I hold them out in front of me. It even felt like the ground moved when I looked at him.

Getting myself together, I walk to Mother Frances's chamber office and knock on the door. She asks me to enter and tells me to sit down once I am inside.

"Celine, three gentlemen have arrived. They carry a letter from your sister, the queen, asking for you to come home and accept your place as the next queen of Clearwater," she tells me. "The queen sent the commander of her royal guardsmen, a champion fighter, and an old friend of yours, a huntsman."

I am taken aback that my sister has sent them to me. And she wants me to take the throne? At the moment, though, I am more curious about her mentioning that one of the men is my friend.

“Who is he?” I ask, starting to breathe a little hard. Only one friend I have from that old life I would want to see again. I had dreamed about him for the longest time after coming here. Could he be the one that looks familiar to me? I feel that he is too large, masculine, and too handsome to be the young man from my dreams.

“He says his name is Tate Forrester, and he knew you when you were both children,” she tells me.

“Tate.” I gasp his name, thinking of the smaller of the three men. The color of his hair is right, but everything else is different than I remember. The last time I saw him, he had been seventeen, slender, slight in build, and not yet a man or with facial hair. He has to be twenty-one and definitely a man now. Could five years change someone so much?

“So, you do know him,” she said, smiling. “I am relieved that he is your friend, as he says.”

“He is my friend,” I confirm to her. Tate is an element of Earth but still hadn’t had his powers before I left. I had grown up with him, playing in the gardens as children. Our friendship had grown into more, but before we ever had a chance, my sister broke us apart.

“He says that he has come to take you home. Your sister is ill and would like to break the curse and leave her kingdom to you,” Mother Frances says, handing me the letter.

I read it over, not believing it. It can’t be! My sister is the one who sent them to me? No, I brought them here; they are mine. I gave myself in the offering. Even Alice had seen it and had been a part of it.

“Celine? What do you think of all this?” she asks me, unsure.

What am I thinking? How can this be my salvation? The very person who had cursed me sent me the very elements I need to break the curse. No, it can’t be right, but Tate...He is an element, and my friend. He is more than that to me, and I didn’t know how to feel about her sending him.

“I...I don’t know,” I say, letting out a long-held breath before answering. “I can’t believe she sent them to me.”

“Would you like to speak with this man, Tate? Maybe he can tell you how things are in your homelands,” she says.

“Yes,” nodding to her. “May I speak to him alone?”

“Of course,” she says politely, rising to her feet. “I will ask him to come here so you can talk alone.”

She leaves me alone to wait. I read over the letter again.

My Sister Celine,

Saying I am sorry seems so small for what I did to you, but I am sorry. Whatever happened in the past, you never deserved the unforgivable treatment I made you suffer through. I regret it so much, and I don’t ask for your forgiveness because I should not have it. I only want to undo the terrible wrong before it is too late.

Please come home as soon as you can. I am dying, and though I do not expect you to care for me, I hope you will allow me to at least break the curse and give you your life back along with the kingdom. It needs someone like you, and I give it willingly in what I know will be good hands.

The men I have sent are the very best. They can see you safely home. I have given them potions that keep the curse from touching them. They are good men, Celine, and I need you to trust them.

If, for any reason, I am gone before you return, I left the spell in our old secret place. I know your power will still be locked away, but maybe you could find someone who could help. It is all I can do as I wait for you. I prepare to use the last of my strength to help you if I can.

Please hurry before it is too late. Your best chance is with me. Allow me to do this for you, my sister.

Elizabeth.

That bitch! How dare she try and take this from me too? I found my own way to break this curse, and now she was offering to save me after all these years?

I am angry but a little grateful. My approach could take years before it completely broke. Elizabeth could do it now. But that will mean I will have to see her. I will have to go home.

And if I do that, I will have to become queen.

Chapter Three

A knock at the door and I turn, standing as Mother Frances peeks inside. She opens the door wider, allowing Tate to step around her. "I will just be out here if you need me," she says, and then closes the door.

Tate stands beside it, not moving, as his eyes come up to meet mine. I gasped as I recognize him now as the boy I knew so long ago. Beautiful green eyes with multi-color hues and specks of brown. He is a man now. So different. It makes me wonder if I have changed that much to him also.

"Celine," He says my name in a soft, deep sound that makes me tremble. "Do you remember me?"

I let my eyes roam down his body, taking in the masculine aura around him. He is the smallest but in no way less manly. He stands almost a head taller than I still and can make two of me around. I remember him being much shorter and thinner. What has he been doing to look the way he does now?

His presence fills the small room, and as I breathe in, I can already smell his scent. It is woodsy and nature, fresh leaves in the rain and sun. Just as his element, Earth, should be.

"I remember a boy," I say, my eyes coming up to meet his. "You are not."

He smiles at me. "Nor are you just a girl."

I'm not going to let my sister take this from me. I have my own way of breaking the curse; I did not need her. It doesn't matter that she had sent them. Somehow fate had stepped in to make sure they would come. No matter what, they are mine. Tate is finally mine.

"I have been waiting for you," I tell him as I move closer, watching him. I seem to make him a little nervous. "For you and your friends. I am ready to leave when you are."

He looks surprised by my response. "Don't you have any questions for me?"

"Should I?" I stop a foot away from him. I look into his eyes and can't help reaching up and touching his jaw with my fingers. "I know why you are here."

He takes my hand from his face and holds it. Stepping a breath closer, he whispers, "If I had known you were alive, I would have come sooner."

“All I care about is now,” I say, leaning into him, my other hand coming up to his chest. “I cried myself to sleep thinking of you after coming here. As time went by, my tears dried up. I didn’t realize how much I still missed you until now.”

“I grieved so for you,” he looks at me with love in his eyes. His hand comes up, and he runs a finger along my jaw. I recall him kissing me once before long ago, and I tilt my face up to his, wanting him to kiss me now.

Our lips had barely touched that night in the gardens so long ago. A simple kiss before my sister had called out for me, and it was over. We had never gotten to explore the new wonders of love all those years ago. Now, he is mine, and I know it was always meant to be for him and me.

His thumb traces over my lower lip as if he is thinking about it. I flick my tongue out. He seems transfixed, and finally, slowly, he lowers his head to mine, but he stops before our lips meet.

I grasp his tunic in my fist, drawing myself closer to him until our bodies are touching. He still seems hesitant, and I pull a little harder.

“Tate.” I say his name breathlessly.

“Yes?” he whispers, looking into my eyes with the need I feel inside me.

“Please don’t make me wait any longer,” I say given him a gentle tug. “I want that boy, who has become my hero, to kiss me.”

He gives me a half-smile as he seems to remember that day long ago, too. It was a day I had never forgotten. And apparently, he hadn’t as well.

His hand moves around my neck to the back of my head, and he wastes not another second as he gently places his lips over mine.

Instantly, the ground under us begins to shake. The wood around us, the chair, and the desk creak and moan in approval. I moan, too, as his lips linger on mine. My arms come up around his neck and his embrace me. I pull myself closer as he deepens the kiss, locking our lips together.

This must be one of the best kisses ever. I see stars as Tate kisses me and I can do nothing but melt into his body and lips.

I feel us sway, and the rumble below our feet becomes louder, vibrating into my body. Tate lifts me from the floor as he gently runs his tongue along my lips. He tries to gain his balance as the ground continues to shake, all the while reluctant to break our kiss.

He darts his tongue into my mouth, barely touching mine before the door bursts open. Tate has me back on my feet and at arm’s length.

“We are having an earthquake!” Mother Frances shouts at us from the doorway. “Outside, now!”

She turns and moves down the hall quickly, leaving us behind to do as she says without question. I don’t know if she saw us kissing or not. It all happened so fast.

“We should go,” I say, my face turning hot as I take his hand to lead him out. “Mother Frances is scared to death of earthquakes.”

As I pull him toward the door and am halfway out, he pulls me back in, settles me against the wall, and shuts the door.

“Not until we finish our kiss,” he says, smiling as he presses close and leans into me. “No interruptions like last time.”

He wastes no time as he kisses me again. This time, he’s way more passionate, his tongue touching my lips and seeking entrance. I open my mouth for him and his tongue mingles with mine as the room begins to shake again. I can feel the tremors in the wood behind me as I reach my arms up to circle his neck and pull him close to me again.

He tastes fresh and clean to me now, and his smell has changed like sweet fruit from a tree. His scent is intoxicating, and I love how he is making me feel. Like I wasn’t alive until this moment, until I am in his arms. My husband’s arms. Kissing him feels natural like it was always meant to be. I relish every second of him.

I am going to fall madly in love with Tate. He has filled my childhood fantasies, and now he is mine, and I am his. I belong in his arms, and I am going to do everything in my power to make him happy and spend a lifetime with him.

He pulls back, and the ground calms down again. He looks at me, and I can already see the love in his eyes. It makes me cherish him even more.

"I would love nothing more than to stay in this room with you right now," he says huskily as his hands run up and down my sides. "But I'm afraid there is a small panic erupting outside, and a search party will come looking for us any minute if we don't show."

"You're probably right," I say breathlessly yet playfully to him.

"You should meet the others as well," he says, moving away from me but taking my hand as he opens the door.

"Yes, I should," I say as he leads me out. "Funny how we should get an earthquake just as we kiss."

"Not too surprising," he says, smiling at me all-knowing. He is the Earth element, which we both know has everything to do with it.

"Why do you say that?" I ask him as we continue to stroll hand in hand.

"I have dreamed of our kiss for so long, and I thought that I would never get the chance again," he says softly. "It seems only natural I couldn't contain the emotions I was feeling."

"Because of your Earth," I say with a blush. "You made it shake."

"I haven't done that in a long time," he says with a chuckle at me. "But yes, it was me."

"If you kiss me again, will it shake?" I ask, liking the feeling of it when it did. I felt the quakes all through my body, and it was erotic. My first real taste of pleasure and the ground had been shaking.

"More than likely," he says with a devilish smile. "Which I will make sure is sooner rather than later. No more will I be waiting to taste your lips. It was a mistake I made as a child, but I won't make it again."

A shiver runs through me at the thought of his promise. I am in agreement with him on that. I can't wait to be alone with him again.

"I know a place we can go to later," I say, blushing at him even though I don't want to hide how much I had liked our kiss. "It is in the gardens."

"You know how much I love the gardens," he says with a chuckle just as we come to the exit door. I dropped his hand, not wanting others to see us holding hands. This is the nun's house, after all.

"Oh, Celine, dear!" Mother Frances calls to me, rushing forward. "What took you so long to get out? I turned my back and thought you were gone, and then I came out here, and you weren't anywhere. I got so concerned..."

"I'm fine, Mother Frances," I tell her calmly and look to Tate. "We just needed to finish our conversation before joining you. It was just a slight tremor."

"It felt like the building was coming down!" she exclaims. "Next time do not be so foolish and take your leave at once. Earthquakes are nothing to take lightly."

"Yes, Mother Frances."

"Mother Frances," Tate speaks up now. "I want Celine to meet my friends. She needs to know who we will be traveling with back home."

"Go, then," she agrees before moving past us.

Tate leads me to the others, not touching me as he seems to understand that he shouldn't. Several nuns have exited the building we were in, but the others didn't seem to have been disturbed.

Many of them watch us as they slowly go on their separate ways. It must be weird for them to see me with visitors since I always keep myself hidden away from the people who come here.

I look to the other two men we are fast approaching. They move closer and away from the main hall but wait for us to join them.

Their eyes scan over me once more, and I soak them in, too. I am very pleased with their appearances. I of all people know beauty is always in the eyes of the beholder. True beauty comes from the inside.

"Celine, this is Brier Reef," Tate says, motioning to the biggest of the men. "He is the High Commander of the Royal Guard and is at your service."

"Princess Celine Clearwater, it is an honor." Brier bows slightly to me. "I promise to serve you well, my future queen."

“Yes, and thank you,” I say to him with a sweet smile. I can’t help but wonder if kissing him would be like kissing Tate. I have to bite my lip at the thought. He seems to like that but shows no resolve in his manners.

“This is Lindon Mountainside,” Tate says, pulling my gaze to the other man. “He has his own talents, mostly in the fighting rings.”

“Princess Celine,” he says, smiling at me and bowing. “I am honored to be here in your hour of need.”

“The honor is mine,” I tell him, wanting to see what magic he will bring me.

I bet he is Wind, so that would make Brier Water. Considering the way, he is built, it is a stronger power, and all Water elements I had ever met before had been huge men.

“Tate has informed you as to why we are here?” Brier speaks up again in a commanding voice.

I look at Tate, and we just smile at each other. There wasn’t much talking going on between us in that room, but I couldn’t say that.

“I know you have come to take me to my sister,” I say, turning back to Brier. I feel I will go along with their plans for now. I first want to get a feel for each of them.

“Then you agree to go with us?” he asked then.

“I will go with you,” I tell him as I look at each of them. “But not because Queen Elizabeth has sent you and promises to break the curse. I go for my own reasons.”

“That’s fine by me as long as you’re going,” Brier says, frowning at me. “But I do the queen’s bidding, and you are not my queen yet.”