

THE
CROWN *of*
VALENCIA

by
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CHAPTER ONE

I was flunking the eleventh century. In Spinning Yarn I gave myself a D-. Weaving was definitely an F, since it was hard to weave without yarn. Making Butter, C-. Cooking Over an Open Fire, C+. I earned the ‘plus’ because last week I did *not* scorch the stew.

But in my own defense, I’d been born nine centuries in the future, so my survival skills were meant for an entirely different era. I could zip my car through rush-hour traffic on I-95 and let the obscene gestures roll off me like water off a duck. I knew all the Thai take-outs in Chicago and half the surrounding burbs, so I was never more than six blocks from a plate of life-sustaining chicken satay. My idea of roughing it had once been to go two whole days without a tall double almond cappuccino, no foam.

Yet here I was, living in a rough wooden building with no running water and a chamber pot for a toilet, celebrating the nine-month anniversary of the day I’d met Elena Navarro. To live with Elena, I had left behind in the twenty-first century, my now ex-partner Anna and young Arturo, the child Anna and I were to have adopted.

Stretching my aching muscles after painting all morning, and feeling the beginnings of hunger in the pit of my stomach, I headed outside the barn, wondering where Elena might be. I inhaled deeply to take in the flowering tree outside my studio, grateful that spring had finally come to our corner of Spain, which was the high, dry plateaus of eastern Castile.

Elena was probably working somewhere since leisure made her nervous. While farming and serving as Duñez’s don wasn’t fighting, at least it was work. Tall, strong as a man, with black hair clipped close to her head, Elena’s androgynous features hid the truth from almost everyone. At first, I’d been afraid that I might call the “man” people knew as Luis Navarro by her real name, so I always called her Luis. But after a few months, late at night when we were huddled under our

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woolen blankets finding innovative ways to keep warm, I had begun calling her Elena. At first it had sounded odd to both of us, but soon she'd whisper in my ear every night, "Say my name again. I love it when you say my name." I no longer feared I would call her Elena in front of everyone else.

Our rough wooden house, which the Duañez locals called a castle, capped a gentle hill surrounded by sloping sheep meadows so bright green it looked as if a child had gone wild with a crayon. The rugged sand bluffs stretched north beyond the meadows, and rich, fertile flatlands reached to the south, soon to be planted with wheat and oats. After King Alfonso lifted Rodrigo's exile last fall, Rodrigo gave Luis the small holding at Duañez and temporarily dispersed his army as political tensions chilled with winter.

I squinted into the sun, but saw nothing of Elena. Farmers yelled to the sullen white oxen dragging single plows through the soil, and metal rang as the blacksmith worked in the shed nearby. Duañez pulsed with life, except for the small acreage on the next hill. I gazed up toward the neat rows of white, wooden crosses, and felt my jaw tighten.

In the dead of winter, influenza had swept through Duañez's close-knit community. Old Señora Perez was the first to die. We took the ill into our castle, where Elena kept a vigorous fire blazing in the main hearth day and night. Marta and the others tended the children, and I did what I could. I wiped the Chavez girl's perspiring brow, told stories to a fitful Manuel, and watched as, one by one, three more adults and seven children succumbed to some sort of virus that could have been cured in the twenty-first century with a handful of pills. Thank goddess I hadn't returned to the twenty-first century and brought Arturo back with me. Life here was too uncertain, too on the edge. Over nine hundred and twenty years in the future, Arturo was splashing through neighborhood puddles and would be almost through with the first grade. Most importantly, he was safe.

I wiped my hands on my now-grungy apron, which reminded me I had a pile of laundry the size of Mt. Rainier waiting for me back at the castle. Soap making, D-. Laundry, B-. I discovered by watching the other women that I could freshen our dingy undergarments by laying them out on the rocks behind the house, where they whitened in the sun. But when it came to washing the outer clothes, I still hadn't found a system that worked. When I'd told Marta I wanted to wash Luis's shirts

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and my skirts, you'd think I'd just said I wanted to stick something sharp in my ear and pull it out through my nose. Personal cleanliness had yet to become fashionable among Christians.

"Doña Kate!"

I squeaked at the sudden arrival of little Miguelito, one of Marta's dark-eyed boys who seemed to be perpetually running from place to place. He looked so much like Arturo that whenever I saw him, a sharp pang of regret pierced me, not regret that I wasn't a parent, for I didn't feel the same yearnings other women did, but regret that I wasn't Arturo's parent. He was a neat kid, and I hoped Anna appreciated her life with him. I would have made a rotten parent—I wouldn't have known how to do anything, mostly because my parents hadn't known either. No use perpetuating the Vincent Method of Bad Parenting. No, young Arturo was better off with Anna as his sole parent. That's what I told Elena and what I told myself; but now and then I'd wake up before the sun and the roosters, my face drenched in sweat, my vision filled with Arturo's face, and I would wonder what I'd given up.

Miguelito waved his brown arms, hopping from one foot to the other. "Doña Kate! Come quickly. The oven is vomiting. It is vomiting!"

"What?" My Spanish had improved greatly these last nine months, but surely I heard him wrong. "Vomiting?"

The frantic boy grabbed my hand and pulled, so I followed him around the barn and down the grassy slope toward one of the common ovens the women from the twenty-five households in the valley used to bake bread. Miguelito stopped and pointed. "Shit," I breathed. Huge billowing clouds of rising bread dough spilled out the front and dripped down the brick onto the dusty ground. The sharp smell of yeast gone wild filled the air. I grabbed my head and grunted in anger.

"My bread, oh no." I sank to my knees, watching as the oven continued to vomit the overheated dough. Marta had said to leave it in the cold oven only an hour, then punch it down, but I'd been painting for most of the morning. How many times would I have to screw this up before I figured it out? If not for Marta, Elena and I would have starved over the winter. Baking Bread, F.

Miguelito had grown quiet at my elbow, eyes wide to see the doña moaning on her knees. For his sake I stopped, heaving a sigh. "Miguelito, in the shed outside the east castle door is an empty bucket

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and a shovel. I will need them both.” Pebbles clattered as Marta’s helpful son scampered away. Cursing myself, I stood and searched through a patch of weeds for a stick then approached the mess. This was going to take hours to clean up. Beyond the oven, Marta and a woman I did not know stood by the well pulling up wash water; from where they stood they couldn’t see the mouth of the oven. That must be Marta’s sister, back from a winter working as a servant at Burgos.

The expanding dough made an awful sucking sound as it overflowed the oven lip, then landed with a wet plop on the growing pile on the ground. What a waste. What a stupid, stupid waste. This village had few resources as it was, and I just wasted half a bag of flour and all that yeast and Marta’s eggs, not to mention the generous dollop of honey I’d added, hoping to surprise Elena.

I had no business trying to bake bread. I gripped the stick and began smacking it against the oven’s domed clay top. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I yelled. When I stepped in the doughy mess and dragged my skirt hem through it, I began stamping my feet and flapping my skirt.

When Miguelito returned quickly with the bucket and shovel, I began shoveling the dough out of the oven. After just a few scoops we both heard footsteps on the rocky path behind us. Miguelito looked up, giggled, and ran off.

“So, is this how you bake bread in your century?” Elena whispered in my ear. My body quickly responded by flushing warm and going all fluttery in my belly. That Elena could affect me like this irritated me quite a bit, actually. I’d always been a practical woman, not one who went all weak in the knees, and right now I was in no mood to be needed.

I whirled and stomped my foot so hard a glob of dough splattered against her dusty boot. She stepped back, all legs and leather and wide smile. “Very funny,” I snapped. “You know very well it’s not.” I pushed back a lock of my hair and felt wet dough streak across my cheek. Damn it. I slid into English. “No, in my century we have ovens and electricity. And microwaves! I used to live a civilized life.” I waved the stick around, flinging bits of dough everywhere. Elena took another step back, her crystal blue eyes narrowed with mirth, which only fed my frenzy. “With frozen pizzas better than delivery, with ready-made tortellini and pesto, with take-out egg rolls. With a dozen choices of bread at the Happy Baker.” I flung the stick to the ground and switched

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back to Spanish. “Damn it, Luis, if you want bread so badly, you can just bake it yourself.” Why did I have to love this blasted woman so?

Marta had reached the oven by this time, her wide face brimming with concern and the same barely-contained laughter that danced across Elena’s face. “Oh dear,” Marta said as she reached for Elena’s arm. “Don Luis, perhaps you had better come back later after we’ve helped Doña Kate clean up this mess.”

Elena, at once breathtakingly beautiful and damned handsome, winked at Marta. “An excellent idea, Marta. It must be that time of the month for my lovely wife.”

That time of the month? I scooped up a glob of warm dough and aimed it at her retreating back, but she sidestepped just in time. She bled once a month just as I did, which had been a great relief, actually, in the month after Gudesto had raped her. The only two other people who knew the truth about Elena were our friend, Nuño Suárez, and the cruel Gudesto Gonzalez. Nuño had discovered Luis’s true sex years ago but had stayed silent out of love and loyalty, and since I’d stabbed Gudesto to death last fall, he no longer counted. Killing him had left me oddly satisfied, and I didn’t like the feeling.

As she moved away from me, Elena’s long green shirt and leather vest did nothing to hide her broad shoulders, but they did camouflage the narrow waist and woman’s hips below, as did her loose-fitting pants. She moved with an easy grace, to me so obviously female that it still took my breath away that no one else could see the truth. Instead, her men saw a slightly built but fierce Luis Navarro, El Picador, a man they did not want to cross, a man they trusted to lead them into battle and out the other side, still alive.

I growled rudely as Elena strode down the hill toward town. At that, Marta threw back her head, her black braid sliding over her shoulder, and laughed. Broad-shouldered, tan, and dressed in a brown homespun skirt, she would have been called a peasant by history books, but she knew more about life than I ever would. “Pay him no mind, doña. Men think bread can be created out of thin air. Come, my sister Juliana and I will help you.” I nodded to the other young woman, slighter and lighter than Marta, yet built with her same sturdiness.

Encouraged by their smiles, I sent one last glare at Elena’s back and turned to face my mess. Juliana moved in and held the bucket higher for me. “Have we met before, Doña Kate?” I shook my head,

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struggling to balance a glob of dough on the shovel. “Well, perhaps not. There is just something familiar about you.” I was grateful for Juliana’s chatter, as I had little breath for speaking myself while I scraped. “I did much of the bread-baking for the court at Burgos this winter, and this tragedy happened at least twice to me.”

I doubted her words, but appreciated her efforts to comfort me. Soon dough caked all our arms up to our elbows, splattered down our skirt fronts, and stuck in our hair. As we worked, Juliana amused us with stories of King Alfonso and his court.

When the oven was finally clean, we washed ourselves off at the well as best we could. “Thank you very much,” I said as we rested in the shade of a spreading live oak. “I may never bake bread again.”

Juliana tipped her head as she listened to me speak. “I just figured it out. You talk differently than most, and I’ve been trying to bring up in my mind who talks like you, and I think I know now.” When I had first arrived in the past, I spoke modern Spanish, so it had been a struggle to be understood. After nine months, I thought I’d altered my language and accent enough to blend in better, but I must still be using some modern phrases that sounded as foreign as Swahili to these people. “You sound like King Alfonso’s new mistress. She uses some of the same strange words that you do.”

“From what I’ve heard,” Marta muttered, “that woman has too much control over Alfonso.”

Juliana nodded. “It’s true. She has stolen Alfonso from Queen Constance’s bed, so all the queen’s ladies are furious with her.” She frowned. “More troubling, however, are her abilities as a seer. When I served the court, I overheard much, and some noblemen are worried about her influence.” Juliana stopped and crossed herself. “The woman isn’t normal. She’s been right in every prediction she’s made. She knows who will win what battle, and what the Moors will do and when.”

Curious, I leaned closer, pulling another glob of dough from my hair. “Where’s she from?”

Juliana shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Curiosity was one of my downfalls. A woman who talked like me and seemed to know the future? Could there be more time-travelers besides myself and my friend Grimaldi, who lived in Zaragoza with his wife Liana?

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After thanking Marta and Juliana once again, I headed for the house to change out of my now-filthy skirt. There I grabbed a pile of clothes and headed for the stream, my very own Maytag. After my bread disaster, I needed a success. Besides, if I didn't conquer the challenges of living in this century, how could I possibly stay?

CHAPTER TWO

Early the next morning I lay in bed, watching Elena sleep. She'd apologized last night for making fun of me and my bread, and we'd found the perfect way to help me forget my baking disaster. Lover, A+.

I began tracing Elena's eyebrows, her cheekbones, her jaw, but when I reached her lips I froze at an odd crunching sound coming from behind Elena. Adrenaline flooded my body. Ever since the lovely Moorish princess Walladah had tried to have me killed months ago in the Aljafería harem, I'd been a bit jumpy. A jumpy lesbian was not a pretty sight.

I looked over my shoulder across the room. Our door stood partially open. Crap—I'd forgotten to latch it last night. Holding my breath, I slowly sat up and peered over Elena's shoulder.

"Oh!" I shrieked.

"Wha—" Elena shot up, cursed the open door, and yanked the blanket up over her naked chest. A white ewe with charcoal freckles stood beside the bed, mouth full of the tulips and crocuses I'd picked yesterday and put in a crockery vase. Two speckled lambs, eyes black and huge, nibbled at the stems still in their mother's mouth.

"Sheep. Elena, there are three sheep in our room."

Groaning, Elena dropped back onto her pillow. "Is that all?"

I stared at the ewe. "Shoo. Go away. Bad sheep." Gold eyes with horizontal pupils stared back, then small, brown pellets dropped from her backside and rolled across the floor.

I yelped and leapt from the bed, scattering the startled sheep. "That's it. Elena, get up. These blasted sheep are using our room as a toilet." I threw on my long skirt and tunic, yanked on my soft leather boots, then tried to herd the ewe out the door. She ran around the room, lambs glued to her hips like a set of training wheels. She overturned the room's one chair, and a lamb nearly upset the chamber pot.

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Elena lay in bed, dissolved in laughter, even when Destructo-Ewe and her evil offspring leapt onto and over the bed. “Help me,” I shrieked. “These sheep are so stupid.”

“Close the door first,” Elena said, wiping her eyes. When I did, she rose, lithe and smooth and naked. As I watched, Elena bound her small perfect breasts with a fresh white linen strip, then dressed in leggings, long green shirt and a leather tunic. “Sheep aren’t stupid,” she said in her husky voice. “Why should a sheep understand the human concept of ‘door?’” I tried to stay stern, but her broad grin broke me down, and we exchanged that look new lovers give each other, the one full of amazement and delight they could be together every day.

“Now open the door and stand off to the side.” Gently clucking, Elena herded the now-frantic sheep along the wall until they had to choose between me or the door. They chose the door, hard hooves slipping on the flagstone as they fled down the hallway. Shepherdess, D.

Before we followed, Elena pulled me to her. “Good morning, my pearl.” Our deep kiss warmed me like strong alcohol, a welcome warmth since we lived in a house with nothing but wooden shutters over the windows. While I’d been happy for months to have been Elena’s pearl, Luis Navarro’s wife, I wondered if, at some point, it would not be enough. One of these days I’d get the hang of bread, and then what would I do with my time?

As Elena and I herded the sheep toward the back door, the ewe bleated. She and her lambs fled the wide open door, then leaping and kicking with relief, they dashed down the slope and joined the flock Juan tended. I waved at the young shepherd, who bobbed his dark head respectfully. “You know sheep,” I said to Elena. “Maybe you should be a shepherd instead of a soldier.”

She folded her arms and squared her stance, always a bad sign. “Why would I want to stop being a soldier?”

We’d had this identical conversation five times already, so I didn’t answer. Mercenary soldiers in this century didn’t grow old. They fought until one day their shield or their sword or their strength or their luck failed them. The thought of losing Elena forced the oxygen from my lungs.

“You are holding your breath again.”

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“Am not.”

“You are.” Elena kissed my ear and slipped an arm around me, our disagreement already dried into dust by the early morning sun. We turned back toward our home. Because it was the largest residence and sat on the highest hill, its inhabitants—that would be us—were Don and Doña to the villagers clustered nearby. I loved the worn cedar siding, which turned a warm copper after a hard rain, streaks of silver flashing through the wood grain when the sun finally came out. Two kids chased a third out the front door. We’d made it clear the ‘castle’ was open to all, so it had become a community center of sorts. As long as Elena and I could bar our bedroom door at night, we had all the privacy we needed.

Inside, someone had left four loaves of fresh bread on the table. “Food!” Elena cried and fell upon the nearest loaf, gnawing on the golden crust.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” I scolded, hands on my hips. “You get plenty to eat.” I approached the cold hearth to start a fire.

Elena wiped the crumbs off her face and reached for me. “You are right. I am still full from last night.” Right in the middle of one of those kisses that turned my kneecaps to melted honey, a grinning soldier burst into the room. I pulled away. Alvar Fáñez.

“I see I’m just in time,” he cried. “I’ll take the next kiss.” With his black eye patch and ready grin, the soldier striding across the room was a happy-go-lucky pirate, the kind who would steal your money, then steal a kiss, or more. He was also the man history claimed to be Rodrigo Díaz’s first lieutenant, not Luis Navarro, a fact I’d remembered reading in one of Anna’s history books. Not a day went by that I didn’t look into Elena’s eyes and feel the cold hand of history brush through me. Something was going to happen to Elena, and I had no idea what.

Alvar and Elena clasped arms as she threatened him with castration if he came near me, then he smoothly moved his sword aside, knelt on the dusty floor, and pressed his lips against my hand. “Oh, Kate. Your beauty outshines the sun, the moon, and the jewels of a thousand kings.”

I shook my head and leaned over the ridiculous knight. Alvar Fáñez was a man I wanted to dislike but just couldn’t. “And where did you hear that pile of bull manure?” I asked.

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Alvar winked his good eye, which was the color of green glass pounded soft by the ocean, and leapt to his feet. “I heard a minstrel sing it last week. I was sure it would charm you right into my arms.” He chuckled as Elena cuffed him across the back of the head. Hard to believe Alvar had ever considered killing Elena. He, Nuño, Gudesto, and Elena had been the last of a band of fanatical Moor-haters called the Caballeros de Valvanera. Gudesto had convinced Alvar to kill Elena, which he’d almost done on the battlefield, but at the last minute, Alvar realized which friend deserved his loyalty, and turned his sword aside. Somehow Elena and Alvar recovered their trust in each other. I’m not sure I could have been so generous.

“Enough, children. Sit down and I’ll make some eggs.” I reached for a bowl.

“Are you sure?” Elena said. “I saw Marta down by her garden. She could make—” Elena’s brows pulled together.

“Relax.” While I wasn’t Martha Stewart of the eleventh century, I could handle an easy breakfast. Cooking Eggs, A.

Alvar dropped down onto the bench and leaned against the wall. “I bring news from Burgos. Rodrigo says it is time to muster the army again and wants us all back within the week. King Alfonso plans to take Cordoba from the Almoravides and will pay us handsomely to accompany him.”

Elena whooped and banged her fist against the table, rattling the plates I set out. “Finally.” She didn’t look at me, but her flushed face told me she’d been chafing under the winter’s inactivity. “I am not cut out to be a land baron.” It unnerved me to see her brighten at a fight. While I cooked, trying not to think about Elena being sliced to ribbons in battle, the two old friends caught up.

Later, Alvar bent over his plate, smacking appreciatively. “Before we take Cordoba, Alfonso considers moving his court to Toledo to better position himself. The Queen disagrees, but Alfonso’s mistress suggested it. They say that woman keeps the king hard all night.” Alvar winked at Elena. “We should be so lucky, eh?” I bit off a smile as Elena nearly choked on her bread. Good, served her right.

“Some say the woman is a seer,” Alvar continued. “They say Paloma de Palma uses pagan signs and cards to foretell the future.”

“Paloma de Palma?” I squeaked. “That’s her name?” I’d heard that name last fall when negotiating with King Alfonso for Luis’s release,

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noticing it matched the pen name Anna had planned to use if she ever wrote a lesbian romance novel. A woman who talked as strangely as I did, who appeared to know the future, and used Anna's beloved pen name?

Alvar nodded. "Yes. Alfonso does not make a move now without consulting her."

Elena leaned back in her chair, the wooden legs protesting. "King Alfonso is a man of faith. How could he put so much store in astrology?" I turned my back so Elena couldn't see my face. Anna was an expert in medieval Spanish history and would know the outcome of every battle King Alfonso had ever fought. As they finished eating, I struggled for calm. No, it couldn't be her.

After a few minutes, Alvar pushed away from the table and belched. Elena did the same, sneaking a guilty glance at me through those thick lashes. Table manners had yet to be invented, and Elena resisted my gentle suggestion to at least close her mouth.

"How long will the campaign be?" Elena asked. "Does Rodrigo consider a siege? I should be in Burgos planning this. Rodrigo cannot make a plan to save his life. And what about Valencia?"

Alvar snorted. "At this point who knows? Whoever controls the crown of Valencia controls a great jewel. I wouldn't be surprised if one day Rodrigo himself went after Valencia."

I nearly dropped the precious pottery plate I was drying because I remembered enough history to know Rodrigo would do just that. He would take Valencia for himself, not for Alfonso, and when he did, history would twist events around and credit him with beginning the reconquest of Spain, the four-hundred year process of driving the educated, skilled, and civilized Moors from the peninsula. After the Moors invaded the peninsula in 711, the Moors had shaped Spain—its art, its language, its culture. Yet after 1492 Spain would kill or drive out both the Moors and the Jews, the best minds of their country. Anna had convinced herself this had been Spain's downfall, and that the Moors should have remained in Spain and ruled the entire country. So if Anna had really come back to the eleventh century, it made more sense that she'd be living with the Moors, not in Christian Spain with King Alfonso. I took a deep breath, trying to relax the knot forming in my belly. Paloma de Palma just could *not* be Anna.

"Don Luis." A stocky man from the village knocked on the doorframe. "Many pardons for the intrusion, but Menendez and Barela

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fight again. They are outside the mill and mean to kill each other.”

Elena groaned, rose, strapped on her sword belt, and made sure her dagger rested in its thigh scabbard. She hadn’t used either since we’d arrived at Duñez because El Picador’s reputation—good with a sword but devastating with a dagger—had preceded us. “Alvar, can you be trusted with my wife for a short time?”

“Of course not.”

Shaking her head, Elena followed the villager from the room. I turned toward Alvar, licking my dry lips. “This Paloma de Palma, have you seen her?”

“No, but she must be beautiful to lure King Alfonso from Queen Constance’s bed.” He broke off a hunk of bread and spread it with honey. “They say she’s charming and can talk people into doing her bidding, whatever that might be.” My jaw clenched. Alvar had just described my ex-lover Anna.

I lurched to my feet, fussing with the folds of my skirts so Alvar would not see my hands, which trembled not in fear, but in fury, then excused myself. If, by some horrible twist of fate, Paloma were Anna, that meant she brought a six-year-old boy back over nine hundred and twenty years to a time when a simple scratch could develop into a fatal infection.

My footsteps echoed against the stone walls as I ran down the hall and into our room. With stiff fingers I unzipped my leather fanny pack, the only thing I’d had with me the day I accidentally fell back in time. I yanked everything out: the Lion King keychain, the purple flashlight, the empty bubble pack of Benadryl. I fingered the photo of Arturo, praying he was happy in Chicago, that he loved my dog Max, that he liked his new home.

I unfolded the half-finished family drawing he’d given Anna and me the day we’d met him in the orphanage. Anna, Max, and Arturo were all complete and connected hand-to-hand-to-paw. My figure lacked a head, foreshadowing that I wouldn’t be part of their family.

I didn’t need to open the last item because I knew the yellow note by heart. The morning before I’d visited the cave and been flung back in time, Anna and I had finally connected after months of distance. I found the note after I’d showered. *Dear Kate, Have gone downstairs for breakfast. Join me when you’re up. Love, Paloma de Palma.* I closed my eyes. Of all that I’d worried about this last winter, not once

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had I considered the possibility that Anna might have figured out the secret of the Mirabueno Cave and come looking for me.



When I woke up the next morning, in the hazy blue between night and dawn, Elena lay on her side, her blue eyes black in the dark. This time her finger did the tracing as she slid down my nose, my jawline, across my lips. “I still cannot believe we found each other.”

I nibbled her finger and was rewarded with a melting kiss that sent me throbbing. “I want to go to Burgos with you.”

She raised up on one elbow, teeth white as she laughed. “You would follow the army as a camp woman? Holy Bullocks. I guess I do not know you as well as I thought.” An army on the march had a dozen or more wagons trailing behind it filled with women—for cooking, laundry, tending wounds, and for pleasure.

“No.” I pulled her down into my arms, praying she didn’t hear how fast my heart beat. “Just to Burgos. I need to deliver the painting to Alfonso.” As part of my bargaining with Alfonso for information on Elena’s whereabouts last fall, the king had requested a large painting of himself victorious over the Moors.

Elena shifted in my arms. “You said last week you still had work to do on it.”

“Minor touch-ups. I can finish them tomorrow. This is my best opportunity to get the painting to him.”

Elena rolled over on her back, staring at the heavy beamed ceiling, pulling away almost more than if she’d physically left the room. “Does this have anything to do with...with that de Palma woman?” I said nothing. “I saw your face as we talked of her.”

I swallowed. I trusted Elena with my life—that wasn’t a problem. But I’d already put her through so much last fall—running away, insisting on returning to my century, then changing my mind. She’d been strapped into the seat right next to me on the rollercoaster of my life, and I couldn’t bear to drag her on another ride unless I absolutely had to. Besides, speaking my fears would make them real. No use both of us feeling unbalanced. “I need to go to Burgos. You’re going there. Doesn’t it make sense to go together? Or would you rather I travel alone, unarmed and vulnerable?”

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That brought the reluctant smile I knew it would. “I would hardly call you vulnerable,” she said as I snuggled into her. She melted against me, saying nothing more.

Questions rattled through me, but I pushed them away, deciding to pull a Scarlett O’Hara and think about that tomorrow. To avoid exploding, all I could do was take this one step at a time.