

3

Tala

Two bloods will bond to fight a common foe

The Book of Light

The second stream of energy rolled across the Atlantic Ocean, through the hills and plains of America to the foothills of California's Cascade Mountains, ruffling the undergrowth, sending small creatures scurrying from their burrows and fish darting from the strange currents rising through the creeks. Hot springs gushed and steamed, trickling loosened cinders down the steep volcanic slopes. Reaching the ancient forests of Mount Shasta, the energy rippled towards a small run-down cabin, pooling like syrup around the porch and lapping at the door frame.

Tala Bean ladled stew on to her plate. Her father handed her a hunk of thickly buttered bread, his face crinkling with pleasure as she dipped it in the gravy. Savouring the mouth-watering smell, she leaned forward to sink her

teeth into the warm crust. There was a loud rumble. Her father's smiling face faded away and she woke from her dream to find herself staring down at a patch of scrubbed wood and her own thin arms. Had that noise been her father's stuttery old truck swinging into the yard? Crossing her fingers, she willed him to burst through the door with some exciting story about a freak storm cutting off the mountain roads.

The only sound in the silence was the gurgle of her empty stomach.

Where was he? She'd called his cell phone endlessly but the battery must be dead. Licking her finger, she thrust it into the empty box of cornflakes, searching for crumbs. It had been three days since her father had disappeared and two since she had eaten a proper meal. She stepped on to the porch and gazed at the dying sunset glowing luminous pink, smeared with a strange purple colour. She turned back to the house, pretending the ache in her stomach was hunger, but she knew it was fear. Raw gut-wrenching fear that something terrible had happened, that her dad was lying trapped beneath his truck, that he was. . .

She pulled open the fridge, rattling the empty shelves. He'd be back any minute, course he would, *and* he'd be hungry, so she'd better stop moping and get some food. She left a scribbled note, grabbed a torch and set off for their nearest neighbours, the Holts, who lived three kilometres away. There was no wind, yet the pine trees

quivered as if touched by a breeze. In the distance the twin peaks of Mount Shasta sloped, white and glistening, towards the first stars glittering in the gloom. They looked brighter than usual. Perhaps she wouldn't need the torch after all.

The Holts ran a neat little poultry farm near the highway and Tala usually kept well away from them. Mrs Holt disapproved of Jack Bean bringing his daughter up on his own, and made it clear that she didn't think he was making a very good job of it. To her mind Tala was far too sassy for her own good and should brush her hair more often.

Tala hovered behind their barn, bracing herself for a lecture on grooming. She had just decided she would rather starve than ask the Holts for help when she jumped at the sound of a muffled bark and a shrill voice calling, "Come on out or I'll set the dog on you."

Tala was on excellent terms with the Holts' mangy mongrel but she stepped from the shadows and walked slowly towards the house.

"It's only me, Mrs Holt."

"Tala? What are you doing running wild this time of night, disturbing my hens?"

"Could you maybe let me have some eggs and bread?"

"Eggs and bread? Hasn't your father been to the store?"

"He went tree-felling near Klamath Falls and forgot to leave me money. He'll pay you back, soon as he gets home."

"You come right in here and tell me what's going on."

"It's OK, Mrs Holt. Forget the eggs, just the bread will do."

"You come in here," repeated the farmer's wife, pointing a bony finger at the floor. Reluctantly Tala climbed the steps.

"If your father isn't home, you're not going anywhere."

Mrs Holt pulled her into the kitchen. She looked Tala up and down. When she saw how pale and pinched she was, she stopped herself from commenting on the state of her tangled hair.

"What you need, child, is something to eat."

Tala was too tired and hungry to resist.

The following morning Bill Holt drove over to the cabin. When he found no sign of Tala's father, he rang the sheriff and, within an hour, two deputies were sitting in the Holts' kitchen, drinking coffee. Tala hunkered in a corner with her arms folded, glaring at them all as they whispered about emergency foster care and a protective custody order. When they saw she was listening, Mrs Holt turned away to clank cups in the sink and the officers walked outside, murmuring into their radios.

Tala hated the Holts with their pitying looks. She hated the sickening lurches from hope to despair every time the phone rang and she hated the sheriff's people and their dumb questions. Sure her dad had money troubles, sure he got depressed sometimes. What did that have to do with

anything? One of them, a thin woman with cropped black hair, sat her down, explaining that a check of the local hospitals and a search of the mountain roads by the Highway Patrol helicopter had drawn a blank, so Jack Bean was now officially classified as “overdue”. The officer reached to take her hand. Tala flung herself away, refusing to listen.

As soon as the deputies had left, she slipped out the back door and took off towards town, hoping to find someone who had passed her father’s truck on the road or spoken to him at a gas station. As she passed the store, she heard Mrs Ryan’s sing-song, la-di-da, holier-than-thou voice drifting through the shutters.

“What Jack Bean thinks he’s up to running off like that I just can’t fathom. You know he’s part Modoc or Cherokee or some such and part heaven-knows-what-else. Of course, I have nothing against these people – there’s not a prejudiced bone in my body – but they aren’t like you and me, are they?”

Grunts of agreement seemed to encourage her. “We had him round once to sort out a tree that got hit by lightning and my Jeb always says he can’t make nothing grow in our yard since that Indian’s taken up the roots.” Her voice dropped to a confidential whisper. “And then there was all that business when his wife upped and left . . . she was a strange one, that’s for sure; didn’t even take the baby with her . . . and the Lord alone knows where she came from or where she went.”

Tala stomped through the door and fixed Mrs Ryan with a cold stare. The store went quiet. Two customers started to take a deep interest in a display of tin buckets.

Mrs Ryan smiled uneasily.

“What can I get you, Tala, dear?”

“My dad’s people were living in America long before any rat-faced Ryans showed up. And the only reason nothing grows in your yard is your fat husband’s too drunk to water it. *And,*” she spat, as Mrs Ryan clutched the counter for support, “if you want to bad-mouth my mom, you’d best do it to my face!”

Tala turned and fled. Mrs Ryan clicked her false teeth and shook her head. “That just proves what I was saying – there’s bad blood there and let’s hope the good Lord finds it in his heart to forgive her those evil words.”

Tala kept running until she reached the winding track leading to her home. Panting hard, she leaned against the prickly trunk of a pine tree and prayed that when she turned the corner, the big old truck would be standing outside the cabin. Please. Please, *please*. . .

But the yard was empty.

When the fierce disappointment had subsided into the dull ache she had been living with for days, she went inside. Tacked above her bed was a snapshot of her father, taken on a fishing trip they’d made last spring. Proud and laughing, he held a freshly caught catfish towards the camera, his battered hat tipped back over his straight dark hair, his eyes scrunched against the

sunlight. A wave of misery passed over her. Quickly she slipped the photo into her diary, stuffed some clothes into a rucksack and from beneath her pillow pulled out her most precious possession: a little square box made from polished black stone that had belonged to her mother. Gently she lifted the lid. For a split second she thought the box was glowing. Puzzled, she stared at it. It must have been the light catching the glittery specks in the smoky stone. She zipped it into her rucksack and, feeling a little stronger, set off back to the Holts' farm, eager for the good news that would surely be waiting when she got there.

She saw the Holts sitting on the front porch and ran towards them. With a shake of her head, Mrs Holt said, "Don't fret. We'll surely hear something tomorrow."

Grief smashed the strength from Tala's limbs. Limp and shivery, she staggered to the bathroom and retched in the sink. Slumping on to the cold, tiled floor, she cried until she was too drained to move and lay there, refusing to answer when Mrs Holt rattled the door handle. Eventually Bill Holt unscrewed the lock and found her dozing fretfully. Gently, he slipped a cushion under her head, covered her with a blanket and tiptoed away.

That night the Holts sat up late, discussing what to do about the parentless wild child curled on their bathroom floor.

*

Tala woke late and shuffled into the kitchen, stiff and miserable. Mrs Holt, setting out her best teacups, looked up, her eyes bright with relief.

"I was just going to call you. Your Uncle Matthias is here. He's going to take you to England and look after you till . . . we know what's happening."

Tala frowned. "I haven't got an Uncle Matthias."

"It's on your mother's side, maybe more of a second cousin, but he'll tell you all about it himself and he's got the documents to prove it." Mrs Holt nodded at some papers on the table.

Tala snatched up a letter embossed with a notary seal. It stated that, in the event of their death or incapacity, Kara and Jack Bean appointed Matthias Threlfall legal guardian of their daughter, Tala.

"How did he know I was here?"

"Sheriff's office must have contacted him."

"They only found out Dad was missing yesterday morning. How come this Uncle Matthias took less than a day to get here from England?"

Mrs Holt waved Tala's questions away. You just had to take one look at the man to see they were related.

"Where is he?"

"Right here," came a low, powerful voice.

She spun round to see a tall, lean man in a well-cut suit standing in the doorway. He had thick dark hair and clear suntanned skin and as he came towards her, hand held out, she smelled the tang of expensive aftershave.

“Hello, Tala. I haven’t seen you since you were a baby.” He spoke with a faint mid-Atlantic accent and his manner was easy and assured.

Tala stayed where she was. Matthias pulled up a chair and helped himself to a freshly baked biscuit. “I don’t know much about kids, but I’m sure we’ll rub along just fine till they find Jack.”

“Dad said Mom lost touch with her family. How come he never mentioned you?”

“You know how it is. Your dad and I kept in touch for a while after Kara . . . left.” He pressed a stray crumb into the table. “But I was travelling all the time and when I moved to England we kind of drifted apart.”

“So how come you got here so fast?” she asked fiercely.

“I was already in the States, at a conference. Your dad’s attorney heard the news, contacted my London office; they called me and I came straight over.”

“What conference?”

He handed her a folder. It contained a glossy programme, listing *Dr M Threlfall* as one of the keynote speakers, and a group photo of the delegates, Matthias standing tall and imposing in the centre. She jerked her chin at the table.

“Right, and when you went to this conference you just happened to take those custody papers with you.”

“Tala, mind your manners,” said Mrs Holt sharply.

“It’s OK. She’s got a right to ask.” Matthias turned to Tala and said evenly, “My copy of the custody order is in England. I got this one from your dad’s attorney.” He

rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Look, Tala. To tell you the truth, I'd forgotten all about that bit of paper. But since your mother insisted on making me your legal guardian, there's not much either of us can do about it. So if you give me my space, I'll give you yours, and we'll make the best of it."

Tala met his gaze. She didn't like the look of Uncle Matthias and he certainly didn't feel like family. But his eyes were a strange shade of green flecked with gold. And the only face she had ever seen with eyes like that was the one that stared back at her whenever she looked in a mirror.