

CHAPTER FOUR—*first draft where Murdoch has amnesia*

The man who did not know his name blinked in surprise at the tart intelligence of the woman in the lane. Most people here did not speak so bluntly and fearlessly.

For a moment, he thought an angel had descended from the evening star, so great was her shimmering beauty. But the star had just risen on the twilight horizon, and the lady eclipsed it.

He had learned to hold his tongue about the colors of the people around him, but he saw the lady as silver and gold, with an iridescent purple layer in between. Looking closer, he decided the pale blond of her hair beneath her straw hat reflected the silver-gold of her aura. The color contrasted oddly with her sun-kissed skin, but the violet of her eyes held wells of wonder.

He batted down his lustful urges and maintained his neutral expression.

He'd learned not to approach any of the women of the village, no matter how much he longed to touch their soft skin and listen to their musical voices. He sensed the fear of the shy ones and the perverted needs of the bold ones who wished the attentions of a *saint*, and he cringed inside at the freak they saw. He returned his attention to the kitten.

He set the bread crust on a stone and returned his hand to his knee. The kitten darted to grab the crumb, then lay down in the grass and waited for more. He tore off a larger chunk of his evening meal and added a bit of cheese. "May I help you with something?"

"I...don't know." She hesitated in the lane. "I am looking for someone. An old friend."

"One you're no longer fond of," he said sardonically, unable to restrain his unruly tongue. Despite the villagers' praise, he was no saint.

He didn't have to look up to know she gaped in surprise. He waited to see if she'd back off or approach for more crumbs.

"My friend works hard at being despised," she replied in a tone as biting as his.

The kitten watched warily as the lady's dainty feet crunched the gravel path. Oddly, the creature did not run when she crouched to scratch its head.

“Yours?” he asked in surprise, looking up just as she lifted her face to study him.

Their eyes met, and a shock of awareness shot through him with the power of a lightning bolt. Even through his sudden paralysis, he could not keep quiet. “I know you.”

He hadn’t known anyone in weeks. Excitement boiled inside, but he’d learned to wait, to watch, to listen. The shock held him still while she tilted her head to study him. She considered his bearded jaw and hunched shoulders, then with her gaze reaching his eyes, she paled beneath her pretty peach coloring.

“Murdoch?” she whispered.

He absorbed the name and let it echo through his empty head. It didn’t sound wrong. It sounded of nothing. He avoided shrugging to prevent pain, but shook his head. “You know me?”

“This can’t be right.”

He was far beyond disappointment. Remembering his manners, if nothing else, he rose to offer the lady a seat. He towered a head over her, although she was tall for a woman.

“You live here?” she asked, glancing at the shed.

“I sleep wherever I am, whenever I am ready. It’s early yet.”

Uncertainty, discouragement, and fear rolled off her in waves. But the kitten had allowed her to hold it. Interesting. Even more interesting if she knew him. He didn’t see how that was possible, but he had nothing better to do but learn.

“Have you eaten?” he asked when she would not accept the stool. “I know a place where we can find a hearty soup.”

She glanced at his ragged clothes, but he had been here long enough to know the villagers did not disdain his shabby attire. He started down the path to the lane, expecting her to follow.

She did. He hadn’t realized he was holding his breath until he inhaled her sweet fragrance. It hurt to straighten his crippled shoulders, but he tried anyway. Beside him, she swayed like a supple willow, holding the kitten to her shoulder. He rolled his fingers into fists to resist touching. No touching, ever, he reminded himself.

The trees around them shivered. She glanced at the tossing branches with interest,

but he'd grown accustomed to the wind.

“If you are not called Murdoch, what are you called?”

“Abel. It seems to have some meaning to them. The priest read passages about a Garden of Eden last Sunday. There was an Abel in the tale, but he was banished from his garden and killed, so I didn't like the story much.”

“The people here named you?”

“They had to call me something, and I have no other memory of what I am called.”

She drew in a sharp breath, he noticed, but the emotions she had revealed earlier had disappeared, almost as if she had blocked them. That intrigued him. He liked puzzles, and except for his lack of memory, there was little about this life that he found challenging.

“You have no memory at all?” she asked.

“I remember how to eat and drink. I am not helpless.” That was a lie. Sometimes, he felt like a newborn babe. Others, more like the saint they called him. The villagers seemed so much more limited than he in many ways.

“Did you hit your head in an accident?”

“Possibly. The people who brought me here merely said I had a fit of some sort. They left while I was still unconscious, so I could not ask.” The longing to know loosened his already well-oiled tongue. “Have you decided if I am the friend you look for?”

His heart beat unsteadily while she walked in stride with him, studying him from head to toe. She was so perfect—it was hard to contain his impatience. Lithe and graceful, she strode boldly as no other woman in the village did. She held her head high, with her round chin stuck in the air as a princess might. Her nose was small, but straight and somewhat haughty.

His gaze had fallen to her bosom before she replied.

“My...friend...sailed away well over four years ago. He was about your height, if you stood straight. He had hair the color of rich earth, as yours is. His eyes...” She faltered again, her step slowing.

She was weeping. Abel's heart went out to her, and he halted, wickedly grasping her chin and lifting it as he should not. He still could not read her thoughts, but her eyes... They scudded with clouds of doubt over skies of crystalline blue that darkened even as he

watched.

“Your eyes are like mine,” she whispered.

He had not looked in a mirror since first waking with no mind, so he could not confirm or deny the matter. “Is that good?”

“His eyes were darker, more shadowed.” Cuddling the kitten for comfort, she shook off his hand and continued down the street as if she knew where he was taking her.

“Then I am not him,” he said. The disappointment was greater than he’d expected. He’d thought himself content with this simple life, but that had been before she’d come along, and he’d had a glimpse of a greater world.

“My memory may be wrong. Our eyes...they’re unusual.”

He closed his *unusual* eyes in relief. And felt a blast of perverted desire—not his, but from the tavern.

He held out his arm to prevent her from going further. “We must take another route.”

Too late. The *Surveillance* Committee had started drinking early this evening. The pair staggered from the tavern as if they’d been watching—which was what they were paid to do.

“The simpleton is no companion for a lady,” the larger one called. “If it’s a man you seek, we’re at your disposal.” The soldier swaggered into the street, his fist on the hilt of his sword, daring anyone to interfere.

If the lady refused, they would demand to see her papers. Abel knew what happened then. Without any more warning than that, the fire inside him that he worked so hard to bank burst into flame.

He instinctively held out his hand, as if to stop himself.

Instead of stopping, a wind roared to life, howling down the street to follow the direction of his hand. It bent tall trees, rattled doors, blew hats and tree limbs before it—and blasted the drunken fool who threatened them into the treetops.

The soldier’s terrified shriek as he flew backward brought the town running.

The wind died as abruptly as it had begun. Stepping over the debris left by the sudden windstorm, the townspeople stared at the tree from which the screams now

emerged.

The soldier dangled by his bandolier from a limb high above the tavern roof. The branch he dangled from bent dangerously low, in imminent peril of snapping.