

# CLOUD WHISPERS

by Sedona Hutton  
Sample Chapters

## Chapter 1

“I’m Nathan Loncar, attorney for Gwendolyn Shelton,” said the deep voice on the other end of the line.

With a heavy heart, Katie Callahan clutched her cell phone tight. She’d heard about Gwen’s death from her father. Seemingly in good health, her cousin had suffered a heart attack and died shortly after. But why on earth was Gwen’s attorney calling her?

“I’m contacting you because you’ve been named guardian of Ms. Shelton’s daughter, Savannah.”

The heavy feeling sank, settling in the pit of Katie’s stomach as she sucked in a shocked breath. Why would her cousin, whom she had only met once, select her as guardian of her daughter? Mr. Loncar had to be mistaken. Sure, she loved kids. She had a beautiful step-daughter and she and her husband, Liam, had been trying to have children of their own. But Gwen wouldn’t have known any of that. She was a distant cousin, her father’s aunt’s kid’s kid or something like that.

“Ms. Callahan?” Mr. Loncar demanded. “Are you there?”

Another child for her to mother. An eager fluttering arose in Katie's breast, but she was also confused. Something didn't add up. Biting her lower lip, she dragged her attention back to the attorney. "Yes, sorry. But why? Why me?" she asked, easing onto a chair at the kitchen table. "I've never even met Savannah."

"Ms. Callahan, I document whatever my client wants. I don't ask for explanations." He sighed heavily, and then proceeded to walk through the legalese. His words barely registered as Katie's mind raced. She and Liam both wanted more children, maybe this was God's way of granting her deepest desire. But how would Liam feel about taking on her distant cousin's kid? Unless....

Her head—and heart—flashed back to her days in Belize as a seventeen-year-old exchange student, to the child she'd given birth to there. Could Savannah be the child she'd given up for adoption twelve years ago? As light shone through the east-facing windows, shimmering and dancing on the kitchen table, hope unfurled in Katie's heart, bright and joyful as the rays of sunshine.

"How old is Savannah?" she asked interrupting the attorney.

Papers rustled. "She's twelve years old."

Katie's chest squeezed tight, but she would have to talk to her father to confirm what she already knew in her heart.

Mr. Loncar was speaking again, something about trust funds, but she wasn't paying attention. After years of wishing and yearning, she might finally have the opportunity to reunite with her daughter. The hope in her chest swelled, making her feel as warm and fluffy as the cotton-ball clouds floating past the French doors.

“That sums up the key terms,” Mr. Loncar said. “I’ll send you the documents, but do you have any questions?”

Still in shock, Katie couldn’t come up with anything. Mostly because she hadn’t been paying attention. But if Savannah really was her daughter, the rest of it was just a bunch of mumbo-jumbo.

“Ms. Callahan?” Mr. Loncar sighed again as if she were trying his patience. “Do you have any questions,” he repeated.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to focus. “Uh, when, and what happens next?” “Ms. Shelton stipulated if she passed during a school session, Savannah should finish the semester in Texas. She attends a private year-round school. Classes end on July 28th, so she can be placed in your care any time after that. Until then, she’ll stay with her grandparents.” Someone came into Mr. Loncar’s office and he barked out orders before returning his attention to her. “Where was I?” He shuffled papers, muttering under his breath. “You’ll need to carefully review and consider the material I’m sending you. It’s critical that you call me back no later than next Friday to advise if the terms are acceptable. Otherwise, custody will be awarded to Gwendolyn’s next of kin.”

She agreed, ended the call, then dropped her phone on the table. She was so engrossed in thought that she didn’t notice Liam had come into the room until he wrapped his solid arms around her from behind.

After a long moment, he pulled up a chair. “What’s going on?”

Katie inhaled deeply as she looked up at her husband. Worry clouded his whiskey-colored eyes and a line creased between the brows of his ruggedly handsome face.

Even though she and Liam had been fighting a lot since her layoff, he was her best friend, her greatest ally, her rock.

“Oh, Liam,” she said softly, resting her forehead against his.

“What’s the matter?”

The truth ached inside her as if trying to force its way out, but she hesitated. She’d held her shame deep inside for all these years, unable to face her decision to give up her own child. How could she expect Liam to forgive her, when she hadn’t forgiven herself? “It’s...well...” Only half aware of her movements, she reached for a handful of hair that had fallen over her shoulder and twirled it around her fingers.

“Just tell me.” Liam touched a large, warm hand to her cheek. “Whatever it is, we can fix it.”

But this wasn’t a normal fix. It would be a major change for their family. Still, they could handle it. Liam was capable of handling anything. The jittery nerves pricking her belly weren’t because Liam couldn’t handle the situation, he was strong and giving, and he loved kids. She was nervous because she hadn’t been honest with him. She’d never told him about her child.

They were interrupted by the click, click, click of nails rushing across the hardwood floor. Their black Labrador retriever pushed between them and tipped his head up, his soulful brown eyes beaming hope. When he nudged against Liam’s leg, Liam sighed and bent down.

“Hey, Pan,” he said, rubbing the dog’s head. “Not the best timing.”

Pan’s tail thumped.

Katie scratched Pan’s back. *Perfect* timing, she thought.

Liam’s cell phone rang. He wavered before pulling it out of his shirt pocket, glancing at her, then the phone. Finally, he answered.

“Damn it, we ordered six speeds, not five.” Katie listened to Liam’s side of the conversation, still twirling her hair around her fingers. “I know. Thanks, Seth. I’ll be right down.”

“Problem in the shop?” she asked.

“Yeah, I need to go help Seth with this order.” Liam ran a hand down his short ponytail. “But first tell me what’s wrong.”

“I’m fine. Go help Seth and we’ll talk later.”

Liam’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“*Really*, I’m fine. I’m gonna go visit with my folks. I’ll be home in a few hours.”

Liam continued to study her with a concerned expression. When she didn’t budge, he sighed in resignation. “Okay then, tell them I said hi,” he said on a low, half laugh, leaning in to kiss her cheek.

She shook her head at his sarcasm. They both knew her parents hated him.

A few minutes later, Katie jumped into her car and made the forty-five minute drive from rural Gem Valley to her parents’ home in the bustling D.C. suburb of Bethesda. After pulling into the drive of her palatial childhood home, she tapped in the security code. The ornate wrought iron gate opened, and she drove up the long white gravel drive toward the house. Maybe she should have called before trekking the whole way up I-270, but her father usually worked from home on Fridays so he could golf in the afternoon and she needed him to shed some light on Gwen’s request.

Pushing through the front door, she called out, “Mom?...Dad?...Hello!”

Her mother sailed gracefully down the long hallway with a bright smile on her face.

“Katie, what a nice surprise.” She kissed one of Katie’s cheeks and then the other. “Why didn’t you call first? We could’ve had lunch.”

“What’s all the ruckus?” Katie’s father rounded the corner. “Oh hi, Kathryn.” The corner of his mouth ticked up ever so slightly, the equivalent of a smile for Mitch Patterson. “What brings you our way?” His eyes, a dark menacing gray, sharpened and narrowed. “You don’t look well. Did you finally leave that no-good husband of yours?”

She rolled her eyes. “Dad, please. Give it a break.”

“Mitch! Katie just arrived. Don’t give her a hard time.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“But did you?” her mother wanted to know.

“Ahhh!” she huffed, half regretting her trip.

Her father raised a dark brow. “Then to what do we owe this spontaneous honor?”

“I need to talk with you.” She took a deep breath and tried to relax. “About my cousin Gwen.” She watched for a reaction, but her father maintained a poker face. “Her lawyer called and—”

“Come with me,” he said, grabbing her arm. “We’ll talk in my den.”

“But Katie just got here.” Her mother’s smile faded.

“I’ll return her shortly,” Mitch said. Without waiting for a response, he escorted Katie through the foyer.

She half-jogged to keep pace as they passed the grand, curved staircase and the social hub of the house, her mother’s tea room. At the windows, they veered left and took the back corridor to her dad’s office.

Katie flopped on the Chesterfield that had been handcrafted and shipped from Britain as her father made his way to the bar. The hardwood floors, mahogany shelving, and closed blinds cloaked the room in an uncomfortable darkness.

“Brandy?” he asked, holding up a crystal decanter.

“Dad, it’s eleven o’clock.”

“And your point is?”

Shaking her head, she got up and walked to the windows. “What I’d like is some light.” She picked up the remote and pointed it at the blinds.

“I prefer it dark so people can’t see inside.”

“Who’s gonna see?” She continued to raise the blinds, nodding at the enormous enclosed back yard. “The gardening staff?”

With a grunt of displeasure, her father made his way to the Chesterfield with his drink. “Come, tell me about this call.”

Katie spun around and slapped her hands on her hips. “No, Dad—you tell me!” A sound of frustration escaped from low in her throat. “Why did Gwen leave custody of her daughter to me?”

Mitch took a slow sip of his drink. “I wondered if that might happen.”

“And you never thought to tell *me*?” she demanded, stalking to the sofa. She wished she had a better relationship with her father, one that included two-way communication instead of his dictatorial, dole-out-information-as-he-deemed-needed approach. “Is Savannah my daughter? Tell me straight up.”

“Calm down, Kathryn, and sit.” Irritation pricked at every nerve ending in Katie’s body as her father stepped over to the bar and poured a second glass of brandy. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she inhaled deeply. Why couldn’t he just answer her question?

Her father returned and pushed the glass into her hand. “Drink up. It’s good for you.”

Used to giving in to him, and needing the drink to tamp down her annoyance, she tossed back a swig and then stared at him expectantly.

“Savannah is your child,” he confirmed, easing down next to her.

Relief coursed through her veins even as anger and resentment squeezed the air out of her lungs. Why hadn’t he told her? Maybe the adoption agreement didn’t allow him to do so, but surely, he could have told her after Gwen’s passing. Had he told her, she wouldn’t have been shocked and blindsided by Mr. Loncar’s call.

He could have answered her previous questions about the adoption instead of brushing her off with BS responses like, “that’s best left in the past.” She’d thought about her daughter every single day since she had given her up for adoption. He could have given her a little more information to ease her burdened heart. She clenched her jaw tight, biting back the angry words that had crawled up her esophagus. Still, she needed answers.

“Why didn’t you tell me? All these years I’ve wondered, I’ve worried,” she said. When she had given birth while living in Belize, she’d been practically a child herself. Scared and alone, with heavy coercion from her father, she’d made the heart-wrenching decision to give her child up for adoption. He had handled all of the details in his typical fashion—quickly, quietly, authoritatively. “You told me we didn’t know the woman.”

“Never said that.” He swirled the brandy in his glass. “I told you the woman who adopted your child passed the requisite checks.”

“*Insinuating* we didn’t know her.”

“I can’t be responsible for what you inferred.” He took a sip of his drink.

Even though it was a typical Mitch Patterson comment, exasperation shot through Katie. Why did he have to make her feel small? She wished her dad was more like her friend Vicki’s father. The two of them had a nurturing, loving relationship, and Vicki’s dad treated her like an adult, like an equal.

“What difference would it have made anyway?” Mitch said. “I kept my promise by arranging for your daughter to be adopted by someone with prominent standing and the financial means to take care of her.”

Another knot of anger arose in Katie’s throat, but she swallowed hard. Her father was right, at least in part. She’d heard that Gwen had been a big enchilada in high-end real estate so she certainly had the financial means to raise a child. Katie took another sip of her drink before pushing the glass aside. She had to drive home, and she needed a clear head to converse with her dad.

After all these years, she finally had the opportunity to unite with her daughter. Joy bubbled in her heart even as darkness hunkered in her gut.

Why hadn’t she told Liam?

“What are you going to do?” her father asked, tossing back the rest of his brandy.

She raised her chin. “I’m going to go home, tell Liam, and we’re gonna go to Texas and get my daughter.”

“You have no job, no money of your own.” Mitch Patterson let out a harsh laugh. “You think your husband, *the mechanic*, is going to support all of you? Gwen was a wealthy woman. Savannah’s accustomed to the finer things in life.”

Her father's words deflated her confidence, because the part about her having no job and no money was true. But he didn't give Liam enough credit. "Liam's business is doing well. I keep telling you that, and you know I'm looking for a job. Try being supportive."

"I've hired a top-end job agency to help you to find the right job. But you're going to have to do your part, too. You won't find good work in Podunk." He tipped back his glass as if searching for any last drops of alcohol before placing it on the table. "You'll have to commute and put in the hours to make a name for yourself. As we've discussed, you could stay here through the week to ease your commute."

Katie tried not to feel frustrated but it slapped at her anyway. They'd been through this before. She'd like to think her father was trying to help, rather than using her layoff as another ploy to drive a wedge between her and Liam. But it sounded like a ploy. Regardless, she loved her husband and had no intention of living anywhere but with him and her step-daughter, Cara. Besides, how was she supposed to raise Savannah, not to mention, Cara, if she lived in Bethesda during the work week? She opened her mouth to respond, but apparently her father hadn't finished.

"Do you really think that husband of yours will want your daughter?" he asked, his mouth set in a hard line. "He's just going to take in another man's child, no questions asked?"

Of course he would. Wouldn't he? Liam loved his daughter dearly, and they both wanted more children. Still, Savannah wasn't his and she'd never told him about her. What would he think now? Apprehension unfurled in Katie's gut, growing faster than the potato vines in her front porch flower pots. Damn her father for planting that seed of doubt.

Lifting her shoulders, she summoned up a confidence she didn't fully own. "Liam's kind and loving. Of course he'll want Savannah." She reached over and patted her father's cheek, a

gesture he despised. “Thanks for your enlightening insights,” she said, then scurried out of the house promising her mom she’d stop by over the weekend.

She got into her car and drove toward home on autopilot. Savannah was her child. The words reverberated through her mind, body, and spirit. She felt light, joyful, and free as a bird gliding across a serene sky. Soaring effortlessly through the clouds, bliss danced in every fiber of her being.

Until she got close to home.

Exiting off I-270 onto the less traveled I-70, her shoulders sagged, heavy with shame as the reality of her situation rose to the surface. She couldn’t fully embrace her happiness until she eased her guilt by telling Liam the truth. She expected him to be supportive but the doubts her father had planted took root and grew stems of uncertainty. Even the purple rise of South Mountain and the green hills of her quiet community, which usually filled her with a sense of peace, didn’t ease her troubled heart.

In Gem Valley, she passed by the neighborhood park with its charming walking trails. Even though it was a beautiful summer day, not a soul could be seen. Not surprising since most people were still at work like she would have been had she not been laid off. A full month had passed since then and Katie didn’t miss her old job one bit. The only thing she’d enjoyed at American Security Bank was the community outreach program which had led her to Liam. She had only gone into finance to please her father. Given her druthers, she’d be in an altruistic field, but those jobs didn’t pay well if they paid at all.

Absently, she rubbed her wedding band. Now that she knew Savannah was her daughter she had to tell Liam the truth.

She'd wanted to tell him before, and she had almost told him many times. But family was of the utmost importance to Liam, and more than once he had made comments like, "How can a father not want to see his daughter?" and "How could any parent give up their own child?" What would he think of *her* once she told him she'd given up her baby girl at birth without ever holding her, hugging her, nursing her?

In the past, she had justified her silence with the knowledge that her baby had been adopted by someone with the emotional and financial means to support her. But that was no longer the case. Her heart squeezed thinking about her daughter out there all alone grieving the only mother she'd ever known.

Pulling into her long driveway, she passed by the ancient sprawling oak trees, and her breathing slowed. When she parked next to the warm stone building that she'd called home for the last five years, her anxiety lessened.

She slid her gaze to the far end of the drive where Liam's business, Callahan Cycles, peeked over the rolling hills. An old barn converted into contemporary architecture, it had been renovated and expanded over the years as Liam's business had grown.

Liam worked hard, and he'd had a particularly busy week. She would tell him about Savannah, just not today. She'd tell him tomorrow because Saturdays were always good days.

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The first thing Katie did on Saturday morning was check her emails. In her inbox, she found a response from the employment agency her father had hired with proposed interview dates and times for the position in D.C. they'd discussed earlier in the week.

Her chest puffed with pride—the second largest bank in D.C. actually wanted to talk with her—and then slumped with indecision. Did she really want another job in banking; one with

more responsibilities and a longer commute? Her gut shouted *no*, but her head intervened. What choice did she have? She and Liam would need the money for Savannah and because she still wanted to have more children.

She hit print, and made her way from the computer nook to the calendar in the kitchen.

“What’cha got there?” Liam asked, glancing up at her over the morning paper which he had strewn across the farmhouse table.

Dangling the paper in her hand, Katie let out a heavy sigh. Liam wanted her to find a local job. Obviously, that would be her preference too, but there weren’t many open jobs in their area, and none of them were in banking, the only field where she had any experience. It was an issue that had been a source of tension between them since she’d been laid off.

“Interview times for the investment banking position,” she said wishing she could avoid the confrontation that was suddenly brewing between them.

Liam put down the paper. “The one in D.C.?” he asked, his voice incredulous.

“Yes.” She lifted her chin. “I *need* a job. It’s been over a month and things are gonna get tight.”

“We’re doing just fine,” he said, with an edge to his voice. “We don’t have bills piling up and my business is growing.”

“Cara will be in college in a couple of years, and if we’re ever gonna get pregnant we’re going to need in vitro.” Katie pressed a hand to her belly, the desire to conceive was so great she could feel the quiet calling. “Do you know how expensive that is?”

“You’re only twenty-nine, we have plenty of time,” he said in a calm, almost placating tone that plucked at her nerves.

She rolled her eyes. After almost five years of trying, it had become clear it wasn't going to happen by natural means.

“What we need is for you to be less stressed,” Liam said in a tone that sounded almost accusatory.

A shard of pain jabbed at her heart. “So now it's all my fault?” Even though she'd had that thought more than once, it hurt to hear Liam say the words. “I need coffee,” she grumbled.

“You know that's not what I meant,” Liam said, rising. “Sit, I'll make the coffee. You want cappuccino?”

Lowering to a chair at the table, she nodded.

As Liam steamed milk, Katie tried to massage the frustration out of her temples. Why couldn't he understand? She was only twenty-nine, but he was thirty-seven and his daughter was sixteen, practically a young adult. How long would he be willing to try for another child? And now she had Savannah to consider. Granted, Liam didn't know about her yet, but she needed a job so she could support her daughter. Besides, at twenty-nine she couldn't quit working altogether. Even though her job at the bank had been stressful, she could hardly sit around and do nothing for the rest of her life.

“Here we go,” Liam said, delivering two frothy mugs. Easing down, he handed her one of the drinks.

“Thanks.” Katie placed both hands around the mug, and stared at the artful marble of coffee and milk. She took a couple of sips, allowing the warmth to soothe, the caffeine to rejuvenate. Then she put down her drink and lifted her eyes to meet Liam's.

Liam slid over, cupped his hands around her face, and kissed her long and tender until she was completely lost in him. When he drew back, they were both a little breathless. She

wished she could encapsulate that lost-in-love feeling, hold on to it tight, and carry it with her. But when she came down from her Liam-high, her problems hadn't disappeared. Even so, she was a little calmer, a little less annoyed when she met Liam's gaze for round two.

It took her a full minute to remember where they had left off. "It's not that I want to commute to D.C., but there aren't jobs around here." She took another sip of her hot drink. "You know that, even if you don't want to admit it."

Liam reached for her hand. "That's why I'm suggesting you take a break to figure out if that's the kind of job you really want." This time his voice was gentle, encouraging. "Then, if you decide that's what you want, go back to finance." He rubbed the pad of his thumb over the top of her hand. "But things happen for a reason. Maybe you got laid off to give you this time to think.

"I'll think about it." She would, but she also had to think about Savannah. "But I should keep interviewing. It's a tough market and it'll take a while to find a job."

"Why don't you take a break and help me at the shop?" Liam suggested. "I hate office work and you're good at it. Marketing, too. I'm still getting business from that ad you ran in *American Biker*."

Katie's mouth formed into a yes, but she pressed her lips shut. Sure, it was tempting. She loved helping Liam when she could spare the time. They were doing okay financially now, but eventually they would need another salary. For in vitro, for Savannah. "I love working at Callahan Cycle's, but I need a real job."

Liam raised a brow. "My company's not real?"

“You know what I mean. An important job. I mean....” As soon as she said the words, she wanted to take them back, but a lump of remorse clogged her throat making it difficult to speak. “I mean....”

Liam’s eyes darkened and locked with hers. “I think that *is* what you meant, but that’s your father talking, not you.”

It most certainly was not what she’d meant. But was it her father’s voice in her head?

Liam pulled her onto his lap, and wrapped his arms around her. She crumpled against him as a fresh wave of guilt squeezed her chest. He was so good to her and she’d been nothing but moody and snarky because she hadn’t yet shared her secret. *Sorry, Liam.* She made the apology silently, but committed to telling him soon so she could get back to her normal self.

“Think about it,” he whispered. “I don’t want to fight, Katie-Cat. I just want you to be happy.”

She allowed herself to relax in Liam’s strong arms and came up with a plan. First, they’d take a motorcycle ride to blow away their negativity, then she’d tell him about Savannah. Maybe tomorrow she’d spend the day researching work options. She’d ask her sister to help. Liz was organized, resourceful, and had tons of contacts.

Liam pressed a kiss to her forehead. “How ‘bout we take a ride?” he said as if he was inside her head.

Half an hour later, they were whizzing away from Gem Valley, their small town in the hills of western Maryland, edging toward the Pennsylvania border, passing corn fields and barns, houses with wide sweeping porches. Katie’s body vibrated with new life as they roamed scenic country roads, her body snuggled tight against Liam’s, the wind blowing her worries away.

Liam took a leisurely route, which suited her just fine. It was a beautiful June day with the Blue Ridge Mountains soaring in the distance, a bright yellow sun glistening overhead. She used the time to figure out how she would tell Liam about Savannah. Her mind and spirit were noticeably lighter when they headed toward home several hours later, twisting and turning down Bear Mountain.

As they neared the entrance to Beaver Falls, a massive pickup truck made a left-hand turn, barreling toward them. Katie sucked in a breath as her heart jumped into her throat. With a steady stream of traffic all around them, there was nowhere to go to avoid collision. Panic assailed her as the world shifted into slow motion.

She gripped her arm rests so tight that her knuckles turned white. The truck's driver slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. Her chest tightened, her heart froze. As the monster truck skidded toward them a million thoughts filled Katie's head in the seconds before impact. *We're gonna die! What about Cara? Savannah? Pan?* Her breath grazed her husband's neck. *Liam—my everything!*

She squeezed her eyes shut as she braced for the impending crash, fear paralyzing her body. The shrill, piercing sound of metal smashing into metal reverberated through the air, through her very bones.

Pain followed, throbbing and excruciating, shooting up and down the right side of her body. A split-second later, everything was black.

## Chapter 2

Katie awoke with a jolt, sweat beading on her forehead. Whooshing out a breath, she clutched the blankets to her chin. She couldn't remember her nightmare, but a feeling of fear lingered inside her.

"Let's try for a good dream this time," she murmured, slipping under the fluffy covers.

But she couldn't get back to sleep. Rolling to her side, she stretched and peeked out the window. The sun lifted above the horizon, glazing everything in hues of pink and purple. The sparkling ball continued to climb, transforming from orange to bright yellow, a dazzling contrast against the blue sky.

Rising, she leaned forward to take a closer look...and gasped.

She was *in* the sky, floating on a big, white puffy cloud.

She squeezed her eyes shut, then blinked them open again.

Nothing had changed.

Had she died in her sleep? Anxiety gripped her throat in a stranglehold, making it difficult to breathe. *I can't die! Who will take care of Savannah? Cara? And Liam....*

She sucked in a gulp of air. "I love you, Liam," she said in a rough whisper. Gloom and regret gnawed at her as she relived their last argument. She'd told Liam she would think about taking time off, but she hadn't told him she loved him. A single hot tear trickled down her cheek.

She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked back and forth, taking in the surreal surroundings. Fear threatened to consume her, but suddenly her heart filled with a warm, comforting sensation that slowly spread through her entire being.

Her cloud floated effortlessly, occasionally passing other clouds, and she soaked in the tranquility as she hummed along with the birds that were chirping their morning melody. She passed by clouds shaped like a heart, a cat, and the silhouette of Starbucks's green goddess. The next cloud resembled her and Liam's Harley, and memories of the accident rushed back. The motorcycle ride. Beaver Falls. The monster truck.

Her heart pummeled. "What's going on?" she asked, even though no one was around to answer. "And where's Liam?"

Drawing in a long, shaky breath, she took in the implausible view.

Bright. White. Fluffy. Cloud.

Had she died and gone to heaven? That didn't seem likely. She hadn't seen the bright white light or pearly gates. Besides, if she was in heaven, surely there would be others here. Maybe she was in the hospital on some really good meds....

A loud pop sounded behind Katie. She jumped and whirled around in time to see a brown, furry head poke its way through the middle of the cloud. The head shook, flinging white puffs to both sides.

Bear! Her heart squeezed with joy at the sight of her deceased dog. What the heck was going on? Bear was dead...did that mean she was too? The panic returned closing in on her like a vise, squeezing the air from her lungs.

Across the cloud a paw popped out, then another, followed by the rest of his furry body. Bear shook again, sending more white puffs flying about.

Pulling in long breaths, Katie scurried over. As she scrutinized her dog, delight pushed her anxiety aside. He looked healthy, happy, and vibrant, not at all like the last time she'd seen him, when his body had been weak from the quick-spreading cancer, when she'd made the heart-wrenching decision to put him down.

"I can't believe it's you!" She threw her arms around the brown, curly-haired dog.

She smothered his head and face with kisses, and he lopped his tongue over her cheek with just as much enthusiasm. They hugged and rolled around on the cloud. Then Bear flopped onto his back, extending his paws straight up in the air.

Katie lightly scratched the dog's underside. "I've missed you so much."

The dog nuzzled against her and then stuck his head into the cloud. He popped back with a battered toy that he dropped at her feet.

Picking it up, Katie smiled. "Your favorite." She ran her fingers over the tattered material. The fuzzy puppy with long floppy ears and squeakers had been Bear's first toy. He had played with it, slept with it, and carried it to the door every day to greet her when she came home from work.

"You buried it with me." Bear gazed at her with his big, soulful eyes. "It's still my favorite—even up here."

Her mouth fell open in shock. "Did you just *talk* to me?" She half laughed at the insanity of her question.

Bear climbed onto her lap like he'd done thousands of times in the past. His front paws and chest lay across her legs while his back half flopped over her side. Although he had grown to be over eighty pounds, he'd always thought of himself as a lap dog. Lifting his head, he locked his brown eyes with hers. "Take a deep breath."

*He's speaking again.*

Then she realized her dog hadn't spoken at all. Not in the traditional sense, anyway. It was like the messages had just appeared in her head.

Bear gave her a doggie grin. "Now you're catching on."

Katie rubbed his soft ears. He was every bit as adorable as she remembered. How she loved his head, the way the flat brown hair on his snout gave way to curls mid-way across his crown, and the curly coat that covered the rest of his body.

She'd never seen a curly-coated retriever before Bear. At first sight, she had brushed him off as goofy-looking, with his oversized paws and milky eyes he had yet to grow into, and the mass of kinky curls. But after their first few days together, she'd decided he was the cutest dog ever.

"Aw shucks," Bear said.

She laughed. "Is this where you live?"

"No, I live in heaven." As she had suspected, this wasn't heaven. "I just came to keep you company while you're here."

She hugged her dog. "Where are we?"

"In Tranquility, a transition dimension." Bear met her gaze, his eyes wise and compassionate. "A place for people who are in between life and death."

What did that mean? Sheer black fear swept through her. Had she died? Was she in purgatory? "Did I die?" Her breath clogged in her chest as she twirled a long strand of hair around her fingers.

“You haven’t died.” Bear nuzzled his head along her arm as relief whooshed into her lungs. “But your physical body is in pain so this is a good place for you to be. Friends will join us soon and....”

Bear’s explanation trailed off as two beings materialized on the cloud directly in front of them.

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Liam woke up feeling like a ton of bricks had fallen on his chest. Cursing under his breath, he batted his eyes open, taking time to adjust to the light. A sharp pain sliced into his ribs as he pushed up to survey his blurry surroundings. His arm got caught in a tube on the side of the bed, and he accidentally hit the call button.

The door to his room flew open. A plump nurse with dark streaked hair dashed over to the bed.

“You’re awake!” She smiled down at him. “How you feeling?”

He rubbed his aching right side. “Like hell.”

“You sure look better.” The nurse moved to his side and examined the machine next to the bed.

He ran a hand over his head and winced. He found his ponytail holder, and tied his hair into a short tail. What the hell was he doing in the hospital? Heart pounding, he closed his eyes and concentrated hard. A few seconds later, memories of the accident slammed into his already throbbing head. The massive truck barreling toward them, the knowledge that they were going to collide. The paralyzing fear and the horrific sounds of metal smashing into metal.

“Katie,” he said, his voice cracking. “Where’s my Katie?”

Preoccupied with his meds, or shielding him from bad news, the nurse didn't respond. Liam pressed two fingers into his temple, trying to get the accident out of his head. He'd tried to maneuver the bike out of the truck's path while at the same time avoiding oncoming traffic. He'd somehow managed to swerve out far enough to prevent a T-bone hit, but the truck had slammed into the back of the bike, and sitting behind him, Katie must have taken the brunt of the hit.

Damn it—he should've been paying more attention to the road instead of reliving his and Katie's last argument. Had he been fully focused, he might have been able to avoid the accident altogether. Guilt kicked at his chest, then fear ripped it wide open. Where was Katie now?

He must have been knocked out by the crash because he couldn't remember anything else. Now he had to find his wife. He gripped the bed rail, and sat upright.

"Be careful," the nurse said, turning to help him disentangle his arm from the IV tube.

"Katie...where is she?" he repeated, swinging a leg over the side of the bed. "I have to find her."

The nurse's eyes widened. "What are you doing? You can't get out of bed."

Dropping his other leg to the floor, Liam groaned. His right leg ached, but he couldn't let that stop him.

"Mr. Callahan! You're going to hurt yourself."

Ignoring the nurse, intent only on finding Katie, Liam pushed the rest of the way off the bed.

"I'll call for help," the nurse said, pushing a call button on the wall. "You shouldn't be out of bed."

Liam stumbled forward anyway, dragging the IV stand along with him. The nurse rushed to his side, and at the same time, the door swung open and his brother Shane entered.

Shane hustled over, and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “Good to see you, but what the hell?” Shane took his arm. “Let’s get you back to bed, bro.”

A couple of nurses hurried into the room, but Shane held up a palm. “I got it.”

“I have to find Katie.” Liam snatched his arm back. “Where is she? How long have I been here, and who’s watching Cara?” He blew out a long breath. “I don’t even know what fucking day it is.”

Shane rubbed a palm over his cheek. “Let’s get you back in bed, then I’ll tell you what’s going on.”

Liam didn’t budge as fear closed in on his heart. He gave his brother a no-bullshit look. “Is Katie okay?”

“Mr. Callahan, you really need to get back to bed,” the nurse said, waving her helpers over. “I’ll call the doctor, see if he’s willing to release you, but in the meantime, I need you back in bed.”

A small muscle under Liam’s left eye twitched in frustration. All he cared about was finding Katie. Why didn’t they understand?

“If he goes back to bed, can you give us a few minutes of privacy?” Shane asked. “Maybe while you call the doc.”

Liam’s heart sank. If Shane needed privacy to answer his question it couldn’t be good news.

“Deal,” she said to Shane, then she crossed her arms and stared at him.

“Fine.” He only agreed because it was clear he wasn’t going to get answers—or any help—until he did as Shane had suggested.

He allowed his brother and the nurses to escort him back to bed even as worry snaked through him. If Katie was okay, wouldn't Shane have said so? How would he go on if she hadn't survived? An unbearable sadness weighted him down and he found it difficult to move.

Lumbering slowly toward the bed, he took a sidelong look at his brother. Shane's dirty blond hair, usually styled with every piece in place, an intentional tumbled look held together by a ridiculously expensive gel, was disheveled. Shane typically looked stylish even in his damn jeans, but today he had on wrinkled clothes. His eyes were pale and anxious, and his face closed, as if guarding a secret.

Liam finally reached the bed and eased to a sitting position.

Shane lowered next to him. "Give us a few minutes?" he asked the nurse.

She pinned a no-nonsense look on him. "Don't go anywhere," she said, wagging her finger in front of his face as if that would intimidate him, and then she disappeared along with the two younger nurses.

Clasping his hands together, Liam tried to prepare for what he was about to hear. It couldn't be good, or Shane would have blurted it out already. His brother was a direct, cut-to-the-chase kind of guy. "How is Katie?" he demanded, swinging his legs back and forth off the side of the bed. He was in a lot of pain, but the movement helped release some of his pent-up anxiety.

"She's alive," Shane said quietly.

Hope bloomed in Liam's chest bright as the sun rising over the mountains. Katie was alive! But Shane didn't look happy, he looked downright miserable. The sun formed into a hot ball of anxiety that burned in Liam's gut. Was she alive-alive, or hanging on by a string? Was

she conscious or unconscious? Brain dead, paralyzed? He pressed his hands to his head to stop the madness.

Then he turned to Shane. “I’m going to need more fucking information,” he said, his voice pure steel even as fear sliced his chest open with the endless bleak possibilities.

“I know, I know.” Shane heaved out a breath. “But I’ll start with your other questions first.”

What the hell? Irritation welled up inside Liam and the muscle under his eye began twitching steadily.

“Cara’s doing well,” Shane said. “We were with you last night, but you were in and out of it. I took Cara to my place after we left the hospital so she wouldn’t be alone. Liz drove up early this morning and she and Sabby are with her now. They’ll be in later this morning”

Liam nodded, still irritated, but also grateful that Katie’s sister and niece were with Cara.

Shane stared down at the bland linoleum floor—another bad sign. Shane never flinched or avoided eye contact. “It’s Sunday, you’ve only been here overnight. They ran a bunch of tests, and I talked with the doc. Your ribs are bruised, your right leg is pretty banged up, but there’s no real damage. You’re lucky, Liam.” Shane rubbed his hands over his face as his voice cracked. “Real lucky.”

The knot in Liam’s gut twisted as he glared at his brother, waiting for the rest. “And Katie?”

“She’s here, downstairs.”

Thank God. Relief washed through him like a spring river after a heavy snow melt, but when he turned and caught the look of tired sadness straining his brother’s features, he crumbled inside.

“She’s in a coma,” Shane said quietly.

Liam felt an instant squeeze of pain as relief plunged into despair. A coma. Did she have any consciousness in her now? Would she ever come out of it, and if she did, would she be okay? He pressed both palms against his heart as a wild grief ripped through him.

“I’m sorry, Liam.”

The door to his room opened and the doctor came in.

Shane rose. “I’ll head to the waiting room at the end of the hall and wait for you there.” He waved his cell phone. “If you need anything call.” Then he disappeared.

Liam went through the motions with the doctor. Numb and grief-stricken, he insisted he be released so he could be with his wife. After the doctor relented and he got through the discharge paperwork, he changed into the jeans and T-shirt Shane had brought and then joined his brother in the waiting room.

“Sure you’re ready?” Shane asked looking him up and down when he entered the room.

The tension in Liam’s chest had spread to every pore of his body, but he nodded anyway. He had to see her.

He followed Shane to the elevator. On the second floor, they were buzzed into the ICU. Once inside, Shane spoke quietly with a young woman at the nurse’s station, then they walked down a long hallway of patient rooms. Each step was agonizing and only in part because of his physical pain. Shane had prepared him for what he’d see, but Liam wished like hell for something else. At least she was alive, he reminded himself. He needed to stay focused on the positives.

But it was hard on this floor with patient rooms that all looked the same—bland and dreary. The smell of sterilized sickness, the dull expressions of nurses and visitors alike, and the occasional moans drifting on the stale air didn't help either.

Shane stopped at the end of the hallway and tipped his head toward the last door on the right.

Liam stepped inside slowly, his mind and body numb. When he saw Katie, still and lifeless on the hospital bed, he froze in place, paralyzed by the sight of her. Time screeched to a halt for several agonizing seconds before pain crawled up his right leg and into his ribs, jarring him forward.

Looming over the bed, he stared at his wife. Her right cheek was bruised, and stitches had patched a long gash above her eye. Tubes and wires connected her to monitors that seemed to be tracking her every function. Guilt and sorrow tore at his chest. He sunk onto a nearby chair and scooted it close to the bed.

“I'm so sorry, baby.” Swiping away a tear, he lowered his head and repeated the apology. Squeezing his hands into fists, he let out a long stream of curses. He cursed God, fate, and the world at large for hurting his beloved wife. Mostly though, he cursed himself. He should've been more careful. Then he put his head in his hands and let himself cry.

When he finally pulled himself together, he studied Katie again, this time taking in every minute detail. Despite the bruises and medical equipment, she was as beautiful as ever. Long brown lashes rested on closed lids concealing her eyes, the color of dark chocolate. She had high cheekbones, the right side scarred from the accident. If he could blink away the scars and machines, he would have thought she was just sleeping. Rays of light drifted through the

window, resting on her sandy brown hair, illuminating her golden highlights. He couldn't resist caressing his fingers through her long wavy locks, just like he did every night at home.

He pressed his lips to her hands. *Come back to me, baby.*

He hated that their last conversation had been an argument. Up until a month ago, he and Katie had rarely fought. In the five years they'd been married, their relationship had been full of love and a sweet tenderness that Katie had brought into his life.

Then, a month ago, she had been laid off from her job at the bank. Over the years, her work had become increasingly stressful as colleagues were downsized while Katie's responsibilities grew. Even so, after her own position had been eliminated, she'd begun searching for another job in the same field, which would entail the same level of stress and likely a long commute to Washington, D.C.

He'd encouraged her to take time off before rushing into the same job scenario. She'd been hesitant, mostly because her father had been pressuring her to find an *important* job. Liam was confident she would figure out what was right for her—if her father would give her the time and space to do so.

But now she was in a coma, and their last conversation had been a fight about it. If he could do it over again, he would support whatever she wanted. Guilt continued to claw at his insides. How could he have been mad at her—*fought* with her—over something as inconsequential as a job?

*Please.* He lifted his gaze to the ceiling. *Please bring her back to me.*

He returned his gaze to his wife. She'd be okay. She *had* to be okay, because he didn't know how he'd survive without her.

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On the cloud, Bear woofed and thumped his tail, flicking white puffs here and there. He brushed his body back and forth against the man and woman who'd appeared in front of them and was rewarded with rubs.

Intrigued, Katie watched her dog interact with the strangers. While she was sure she had never met either of them before, they somehow felt familiar.

The woman bent down to kiss Bear's head, her long platinum blonde hair falling over his side and merging into the cloud. She rose gracefully, smoothing down the layers of her golden dress. Stunning eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea connected with Katie as a sense of calm flowed into her chest.

The man looked like an ancient warrior with his bronze complexion, chiseled jaw, and long, glossy raven hair. Wearing tan pants and cowboy boots, he knelt down to touch his forehead to Bear's, and his unbuttoned shirt flapped open in the breeze, revealing a sculpted chest. When he straightened, he directed his midnight eyes at Katie radiating warmth and welcome.

Bear waved a paw at the woman. "Katie, this is Posie, your spirit guide." He nodded at the man. "And Black Eagle, your guide and protector."

She had spirit guides? She had a million questions but before she could ask any of them, Posie approached her with open arms. "Welcome," she said, her voice soft and musical.

Katie stepped into her arms. Posie kissed each of her cheeks before moving aside to allow Black Eagle to greet her.

He took her hand and brushed his lips over it. "Katie, my dear, good to see you."

The warm vibrations emanating from her guides soothed her. Even so, she couldn't shake the niggles of fear slinking up her spine. She had no idea what was happening. Bear had said

something about transition. Was she in the process of dying? Her heart twisted. What about Liam? Who would look after Cara? Savannah?

“It’s a lot to take in.” Posie touched a hand to her arm, and a calming sensation whooshed through her. “Let’s have a seat and we’ll explain.”

Posie and Black Eagle sat cross-legged, and Katie joined them, forming a small circle with Bear in the middle, who rolled over to expose his belly. With a half-smile, Katie rubbed her dog. A lot of things were changing, but at least this was familiar—Bear had always loved his belly rubs.

“We’ll begin by answering your questions,” Posie said.

Confused, Katie bit her lower lip. “But I haven’t asked any.”

“We heard them nonetheless,” Posie said. “Language is not required here.”

“But you’re talking now.”

“I’m only using words to make you feel comfortable.” Posie lightly scratched Bear’s belly as she spoke. “Still, we know what you’re thinking through your vibration, just as you’ve been able to understand Bear through his vibration.”

Katie nodded, absently rubbing Bear’s head.

Posie gave her an angelic smile. “With regard to us, like Bear said, we—” Posie waved a hand between herself and Black Eagle “—are your spirit guides.”

Feeling extra special—because, wow, she had *spirit guides*—Katie tipped her head to one side. “What does a spirit guide do?”

“We help you along your path, provide guidance when you need or want it,” Black Eagle said. “Throughout your life on Earth.”

“Well, thanks. Do you help lots of people?”

“No.” Posie touched a hand to her arm. “Black Eagle and I are entrusted to care for you and only you.”

Katie’s hand fluttered to her heart, humbled and awed that these angelic beings were dedicated to helping her. “I don’t know what to say.”

“No words are needed.” Black Eagle tapped a fist over his heart. “We’re connected to you, Katie. We feel your love.”

Katie closed her eyes for a moment, awed and amazed that she could feel the connection too.

When she opened her eyes, she smiled at her guides. Then she thought about Liam, Cara, Savannah...her life on earth, and her heart tugged. How could she feel wonderful and pained at the same time?

“It’s normal,” Posie said, reading her mind—or her vibrations. “Tranquility is an in-between dimension where you can experience both the love and light of the spirit world and at the same time maintain your tie, thus your emotional connection, to your Earthly existence.”

Katie nodded, understanding at least intellectually. “So, Liam...is he okay?”

“With the exception of minor injuries, he’s fine physically,” Posie said.

Katie breathed a sigh of relief that he had made it through the accident unscathed.

“But his heart aches for you.” Posie gently rubbed her arm.

Katie felt the same ache so she shifted her focus to Posie’s soothing touch. “Is everyone who comes here like me?”

“People come for many reasons,” Posie said. “Some, like you, come because their bodies are in pain. They spend time here until it’s determined whether they’ll return to physical life or transition. Others have already transitioned.”

Katie scrunched her nose. “What do you mean by transition?”

“We prefer the word *transition* over *death*,” Black Eagle said, “because the soul never dies.”

*Die?* Did that mean she was going to die, after all? Katie pressed a hand against her chest to stop the welling panic.

Black Eagle put a hand on her shoulder, and immediately, a sense of calm blanketed her.

*Everything will work out as you desire, but you must believe.* The words sounded in Katie’s head and swirled through her heart. She didn’t know where they came from or what they meant, but they lessened her anxiety nonetheless. When she glanced up, Black Eagle continued.

“Some come here before moving to their next phase because they have unfinished business. There are countless reasons why souls come to Tranquility, but I like to describe it as a holding place, a peaceful space between Earth and other dimensions like the spirit world.”

Katie glanced at the empty clouds around her. “Where is everyone else?”

“There are other souls in this dimension.” Black Eagle rubbed Bear’s armpit as he spoke, and the dog snorted in satisfaction. “But you don’t see them unless there’s a reason. This gives you the opportunity to be with your guides without distractions.”

“Black Eagle, Bear, and I will be with you throughout your time here,” Posie said.

“Whether it’s your time to transition or whether you return to Earth, we’ll be here to guide you.”

This time Katie maintained an inner calm despite Posie’s mention of transitioning. She nodded, trying to take it all in, where she was, what her fate would be. She was grateful that her beautiful guides were here to help her.

“It’s a lot to process.” Posie gave her an encouraging smile.

“What does everyone think happened to me?” she asked, waving a hand at the green-blue ball rotating beneath them. “You know, down there.”

Black Eagle placed his hand over hers. “On Earth, you’re in a coma.”