

An Excerpt From: THE COURAGE TO LOVE

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It took several moments before she realized she wasn't alone any longer. She started violently, opening her eyes with a gasp, her fear surely greater than her situation warranted. He couldn't help but wonder what she was so afraid of.

"Hello, Kate. I'm sorry, we didn't mean to startle you."

Anthony Richards could hardly contain his astonishment at how Kate had changed in the year since he'd seen her last. She was thinner, but that wasn't what concerned him. It was the fear in her eyes, the cornered look she wore, that bore no resemblance to the confident, gay woman they'd left behind. He glanced at his best friend, Lord Jason Randall, and saw his consternation as well. What the hell had happened while they'd been gone?

Jason waited before speaking, waited until that look left her eyes and recognition took its place. He'd seen that look before, too many times, on the battlefields of Europe while they'd fought the French monster. What battles had they left Kate to fight alone? He knew a deep uneasiness in his soul, an unsettling feeling of having made the wrong decisions somewhere along the way.

"Hello, Kate," Jason said finally. He slowly moved toward one of the empty chairs. She watched them warily as they seated themselves, but said nothing. "We've missed you," he tried again. When she still made no reply, he looked at Tony, at a loss as to what to do.

Kate was stunned. Tony and Jason had returned at long last. How many times had she wished for them in the past year? She'd lost count. At one time she would have welcomed them with open arms, wept on their shoulders, let them take care of her. Now, she felt nothing. She was numb. It was as if their appearance had pushed her past that edge she'd been riding for months, into nothing, into despair. She realized they were waiting for her to say something. She could summon nothing but banal social pleasantries, when once she had wanted to bare her soul for them.

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Tony, Jason, how good it is to see you again. How was the Continent?" She unconsciously clutched her hands together and pressed them against her stomach.

Tony answered her. "Fine, but it is always good to come home again. The company

there is thin, when compared to what awaits us here.” He smiled at her in the old way, the easygoing, warm curl of his lips speaking of companionship and intimacy.

Kate did not respond in kind. She was shocked at her reaction. Anger, the hot sweep of it racing through her veins, the like of which she had never known, took over. All she could think was if they had been here, it wouldn’t have happened, which was ridiculous, really. They’d never been more than good friends, soldiers in arms with her late husband. It hadn’t been their job to protect her. She had foolishly given that right to the man who all but destroyed her—and she’d done it for money, all for the money. Her anger turned inward, toward herself, where she so often turned it these days.

Tony’s smile faltered as he saw the emotions racing across Kate’s face, the blaze of anger in her cheeks, right before she stood abruptly and turned away from them.

Without thinking, Jason stood and started toward Kate when he saw her distress. Tony’s hand on his arm stopped him.

Some inner voice told Tony that Kate wouldn’t welcome Jason’s help at the moment. He understood Jason’s need to give it, was resisting his own impulses, but recognized Kate’s need to stand alone and gather herself for a moment.

With her back to them, Kate laughed dryly. “Yes, what’s waiting at home. I see. And did you find what you’d hoped to when you got here?” The look she gave them when she turned around was sardonic and slightly bitter.

Tony hesitated before answering, but Jason’s reply was immediate.

“Yes, Kate. We found you, finally free.”

Pain slashed across Kate’s face before she could hide it. She looked at both men accusingly. “Oh, but haven’t you listened to the talk, Jason?” she returned in a voice made husky with unshed tears. “I’m not free. I cost a great deal.”

Jason’s face suffused with anger, and he took a step toward her. She involuntarily stepped back, her hands going protectively up before she could stop them. Jason’s advance was halted immediately by her reaction.

“We don’t want to buy you, Kate.”

“Well, then, you can’t have me.” She’d recovered sufficiently to calmly step back to the settee and sit down.

Jason and Tony continued to stand, unsure of what to do.

“Oh, do sit down,” Kate said waspishly. “You’ll hardly get decent conversation out of me, hulking about. You two are still too tall.”

Tony gave a sigh of relief. This was the Kate he remembered. She was still in there after all. He smoothly took a seat and gestured Jason into the other chair. Jason still looked worried; he wasn’t as good as Tony at hiding his feelings.

Kate watched them as they sat. Good Lord, they were still the most handsome men she’d ever known. Tony looked like a fallen angel, too beautiful for words. His hair was jet black, slightly long and thick, straight as an arrow. His eyes seemed even bluer than before, set against his tan. And his lips were the red of a rose, lips hardly suited to a man several inches over six feet, with shoulders to match.

And Jason, sweet, wonderful Jason. He still let his emotions rule him. His worry and uncertainty were plainly written on his solemn face. His light brown hair was turning gray at the temples, a little early since he could not yet be even thirty-five. It lent him a distinguished air, companionable with his usual solemn expression. His dark brown eyes reminded her of a fawn, guileless and warm. Framed by thick, curly lashes, they rested on her with unwavering intensity. She’d always imagined them gazing at her hotly while he sheathed himself in her, one of her favorite daydreams in the past. She gave him a small smile as he lowered himself into the chair.

Sitting there, he and Tony looked the same height, but Jason was actually a little shorter, only by an inch or so. The extra inch and then some was in his shoulders and chest, almost epic in their proportions, made to bear the burdens of his loved ones.

This last thought shook Kate from her reverie. Not her burdens, she told herself firmly. Those she had born alone in his absence. She tamped down on the anger as it tried to resurface. With Tony’s next statement, her anger evaporated, to be replaced by complete shock.

“We want to marry you, Kate,” he told her simply.

“Wh-what?” Surely she had heard incorrectly.

“We want to marry you.” Jason sat forward earnestly, clasping his hands in front of him. “Please say yes.”

Kate leaned back against the settee, completely flabbergasted. Her pose was inelegant, but she was beyond caring. Marry her? But, who? Why?

“Which one of you? Both of you? Am I to have to choose then? And why now?” Why not a year ago, a small voice screamed in her head.

Jason looked at Tony, and Tony appeared to hesitate a moment before speaking. "This is hardly the place we wanted to have this discussion, but I suppose that's my fault." He sighed, and standing up, held his hand out to her. "Could we perhaps drive you home, and discuss it there?"

Kate was too stunned to protest as he helped her up. "Yes, I think that perhaps you should."