

KENDRA'S JOURNEY

CENTER LAND

Book Three

By

Eileen Sheehan

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This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Notice** Portions of this story may prove too graphic, sexually explicit, or violent for sensitive readers. This novel is intended for mature readers.

** This book has a sneak peek of another of Eileen Sheehan's fantasy romance-thrillers at the end.

This book is dedicated to fantasy and paranormal fans around the world who enjoy thrills with some romance tossed in the mix. Your support of my work means so very much.

Kendra was in a state of both confusion and amazement as she slipped through the narrow opening between two large boulders that rested with majestic fortitude against the base of the mountain after years of environmental strife and saw the maze of tunnels before her. Over the years, Ari had explored and searched the entrance to inner earth and discovered what she called a back door to the tunnels. Through this entrance, the odds of encountering a guard were next to nothing.

As she pulled her slender body through the gap between the boulders, Kendra's chocolate brown eyes grew wide at the sight that awaited her. Small, dim lights illuminated the interior just enough to offset the cave's natural darkness. While her eyes shifted from the light that was provided by the brilliance of a full moon while enroute took a bit of time, she was eventually able to comfortably see her surroundings. There were shuttle rails that spread out and wove around corners like tentacles. She followed them with her eyes until they disappeared into the darkness.

The sound of Rex's soft groan as he forced his large frame through the tight opening brought her back to the reality of their situation.

"Damn," he wheezed as he pulled his leg through and struggled to regain his balance. "I wasn't sure I'd fit through that."

"It is rather tight," Ari said in an apologetic tone. "I didn't think of that, but I'm glad you fit through. The only other way in that I know of would be the main entrance and we'd risk running into someone."

"Do they patrol it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know the schedule for coming and going."

He gave a slow nod. "So, it's a good thing I fit through."

“What now?” Felix asked as he positioned his body for Olga to tie baby Rexford onto his back with the usual make-shift carrier that was made from a sheet.

“Are you sure you want to carry him?” Kendra asked. “I can do it. Or, Rex can.”

Felix gave a look of disapproval. “You still need time to recover from your ordeal and we need Rex free to defend us. Besides... Is he or is he not my nephew?”

Olga sniffed. “I haven’t had a chance to check his genetics, but he sure looks like he came from Rex.”

“I need no testing. Kendra has accepted him as theirs, so he’s family,” Felix said with conviction. “I’m the baby caretaker in this family. I’ll care for him until I tire. Now, let’s get going.”

“The question is, where to go. This is a maze of tunnels. What happens if we select the wrong one? Do we have any idea where they lead?” Olga mused. She looked at Ari. “Did you ever step outside of this inner earth city? Do you know what surrounds it?”

Ari shook her head. “They kept a tight lead on us. We weren’t allowed outside of the confines of a wall.”

“For the entire time that you were there?” Kendra asked with surprise.

Ari nodded.

“That’s like prison,” Felix gasped.

Ari shrugged. “We were kept busy with training. Although, some were taken out and...”

When she didn’t continue, Felix pressed her to finish her statement.

“And what? Some were taken out and what?”

“Well,” she said with a thoughtful voice that hinted of suspicion and concern. “They didn’t come back. I thought they were brought to the surface, but I’ve never seen them.”

“Not one?” Kendra asked.

“Maybe they have a special place for the children who can’t cut it as soldiers and I just never thought to ask,” Ari reasoned. “Although...”

“What!” Felix said with exasperation. “Tell us, will you?”

“Sometimes they took the babies away and never brought them back,” she timidly admitted. Then, taking a deep breath, she added, “I was a self-absorbed young girl. I’m sure there are places they take them to for different training and I just never bothered to find out.”

“In the alien city, they threw babies away like garbage or ate them,” Kendra said with bitterness. “Some people were placed into servitude, but most were bred and raised for food. That’s the only reason they even want to repopulate the earth with humans. For food. They were going to throw that baby away if I hadn’t managed to get him to nurse. Of course, I was probably just fattening him up for their dinner table.”

Olga covered her ears. “I can’t hear this.”

“It’s horrible,” Ari agreed.

“It’s reality,” Kendra said with a flat tone.

Rex pulled her into a protective hug and rested his chin on the top of her head. “I was too drugged to really understand what was happening. Maybe it was a blessing. I’m so sorry you were exposed to such a world.”

“I just question what world my son is in right now,” Kendra said with a cracked voice.

She truly was concerned about Eugene’s whereabouts and wellbeing, but she was also taken aback -as well as overjoyed- by the display of protective affection from her husband. It was a long time coming.

“As do I,” Felix chimed in.

“Let’s get going and find out,” Olga said.

Without waiting, she selected a tunnel and began walking alongside the rail. After a moment, she hopped to the side and flattened her body against the wall. She asked the others to do the same while explaining that she wanted to see how much room they’d have between them and a passing shuttle, should one come their way. Satisfied that there was enough room, she continued to lead them into the depths of darkness.

As they moved deeper into the tunnels and surface lights became less visible, panic rose in Kendra and Felix. They were both never comfortable in complete darkness. Olga attributed it to a deep rooted memory of when they were young babies and the suffocating smoke from the burning of their homes blocked all visibility. It caused a subconscious reaction that only surfaced when visibility resembled that day.

He may not have been a trained soldier like Ari, but Rex was a survivalist. One of the things he had the foresight to pack was a long, heavy rope. At his suggestion, they formed a line and looped the rope around a wrist so that they would be sure to stay together. This simple, yet clever act was all Kendra and Felix needed to ease their panic.

The long, arduous hours of making their way through the overwhelming darkness forced their other senses to wake up and take notice. Little by little, their hearing grew more acute and their sense of smell told them things that they’d normally rely upon their eyes to tell them. Patience wore thin as frustration thickened. How far did they have to go through the darkness before they reached a more habitable area?

They had no idea if they’d even taken a route that would lead them to inner civilization; something that Felix openly voiced as he struggled to find the

bottle of formula to feed the baby with. Of all times for Kendra to have stopped nursing!

“We’re following shuttle rails,” Kendra reminded him. “They have to lead to something. You rest for a bit while I feed him.”

She could feel the tension coming from her cousin as she groped through the darkness until she had the baby in her arms. Perhaps if she relieved him of such a heavy responsibility for a while, he’d mellow out.

The familiar feel of the baby snuggling close to her as she held his bottle in place had a calming effect. The sound of him greedily pulling the formula through the bottle’s nipple blended with their barely audible breathing, which was the only other sound in this blackened world of nothingness.

Rex’s broad hand rested on her shoulder with such ease that she had to ask, “Can you see?”

She could hear him take a deep breath. “I can see well enough. I’m able to differentiate objects from the darkness. It’s been getting lighter. Haven’t you noticed?”

“It’s still pitch black to me,” she pouted.

“Me too,” Felix volunteered.

“It must be another wonderful result of your exposure during the war,” Olga said with envy. “I can’t see my hand an inch before my face.”

“Nor can I,” complained Ari. “I’m feeling nauseous from the constant silence and darkness. Could we at least speak while we travel?”

“We have no idea what awaits us as we move deeper into this tunnel,” Rex offered in a steady voice that he hoped would help to calm his companions. “It might not be the wisest thing to alert them of our approach; especially when I’m the only one with a semblance of vision. Even though I can see, it certainly isn’t well. What if we encounter someone or something with perfect vision?”

“Give me a moment,” Olga said in a soft voice. “I’m going to see if I can get an impression on where we are and how far we have to go before we’re out of this hell.”

“You can do that?” Ari gasped with surprise.

“As could you if you’d take the time to develop your abilities,” Olga said. Then, she emitted a low chuckle. “Rex too. In fact, every one of us has the gift of sight. We just need to develop it.”

“Is that a result of nuclear contamination?” Ari asked with suspicion.

“Were you exposed?” Olga asked with a defensive tone.

“I was born in surface Center Land,” Ari said. “The ability was something that my parent’s had.”

“As with us,” Olga said. “You don’t need to be a mutant to have the gift. It’s a natural trait for all humans if they’d just take the time to develop it. Some have it stronger than others; just like some sing better than others, yet everyone has vocal cords to sing. Now, hush while I see what I can come up with.”

The sound of their breathing echoed in Kendra’s ears while she waited with a mixture of eagerness and desperation for her aunt to come up with an answer as to how much longer they’d be forced to traverse the dark void. She nearly jumped from her skin at the sound of her aunt’s gasp. Her sudden movement frightened the nearly sleeping baby in her arms and he started to cry.

“Give him to me,” Felix impatiently said. “Rex, take him and hand him to me, will you?”

Rex quickly scooped his son from his wife’s grasp and immediately transferred him to Felix’s waiting arms. The young man cooed and caressed the infant into silence with remarkable speed.

“How do you do that?” Kendra asked with frustration.

“It’s a gift,” Felix said as his lips lovingly caressed the baby’s cheek.

“Plus, I got a lot of practice with Eugene.”

“It makes me feel like a bad mother that I can’t quiet him like that,” Kendra pouted.

“You’re anything but a bad mother,” Rex quickly interjected as he took the quieted baby from Felix and handed him back to his wife to finish feeding.

“Felix has just spent more time caring for the children because your duties lay elsewhere. There’s no shame in that.”

“He’s right,” Felix said in a supportive manner. “We needed your hunting skills to survive.”

“Not after Rex came along,” she grumbled.

“Yes, after Rex came along,” Felix persisted. “Do you forget all of the hunting trips you did on your own to provide food for us while Rex spent his time repairing solar panels and other things to make life easier? You never came back empty handed, either. You’re an amazing hunter.” He sucked in air.

“We’re a team. A unit. I care for the children because that’s where my talent lies, but that doesn’t diminish your importance in their life. Never think that.”

“Isn’t anyone curious why Olga gasped like she did?” Ari impatiently asked. “Did you even notice that she’s been silent since then?”

Rex looked to Olga. He could see her form in the darkness sitting on the ground with her back against the stone wall and her head hung low. He went to her side and knelt down to her level. Had she been able to clearly see his face, she’d have realized his concern even if he hadn’t spoken with a worried voice.

“Are you okay?”

Her voice was soft and raspy. “I just looked into the eyes of a dead man.”

Although shocked by her statement, no one felt inclined to ask Olga to elaborate about what she meant when she said that she'd looked into the eyes of a dead man for a considerable period of time. They were hesitant to learn the truth about why a dead man would contact her.

It was Ari who finally spoke up.

"So, are you saying that if we keep going in this direction we are going to our death?" she hesitantly asked. "Should we turn around and go back?"

"We've been walking this way for hours," Felix said with desperation. "Rex said that it's starting to lighten up. I was hoping we'd soon be at the end of this darkness. Now, you want to turn back into it again?"

"We can't go back," Olga muttered. "He said to come forward. We're almost there."

"Where?" Kendra asked with concern. "We're almost where?"

"To the dead man?" Felix asked with a cracked voice. "I don't have any desire to go join the dead."

"Who is this dead man?" Rex asked with a voice that sounded far calmer than Kendra's or Felix's. "How do you know that he's dead?"

A brief silence occurred while they waited for the older woman to speak. When she finally did, her voice was shaken with emotion. "His name was Arthur Kennedy. He was the love of my life."

"Your fiancé?" Kendra gasped. Although she'd said very little about her life prior to the war, Olga had mentioned her fiancé once or twice during private talks with Kendra.

"The very same," Olga managed to eke out.

"I don't understand," Ari admitted. "You can talk to dead people?"

Olga took a deep breath to help balance her emotions. "I didn't think so, but I guess I can."

"How do you know that he's dead?" Ari continued.

"He was in the armed services when the war broke out. They had him stationed in Iran," Olga said.

"That was at the heart of it all," Ari gasped.

"Exactly," Olga replied. "I was notified of his truck being blown up just hours before the bomb was set off and we were forced to go underground."

"Oh, auntie," Felix said with a compassionate groan. "I'm so very sorry."

"As am I, son," Olga said with a heavy heart. "He was, and always will be, the only one for me."

"Why would he be contacting you here?" Rex said. "Even more so, why is he telling you to continue on to your death?"

"It doesn't make sense," Olga agreed.

"Did you ask him?" Ari's tone was impatient. Things were getting far too intense and she felt sick to her stomach.

"I was too shocked...," Olga began.

"I'm sorry," Ari quickly said. "I'm not feeling well. My stomach feels twisted in knots from the tension and I long for sunlight and fresh air."

"I can't imagine we'll see much of either in the days to come," Rex said with an apologetic tone.

"If we reach Center Land, we will," Ari wistfully said. "I had no idea we were in the earth's core while growing up. The sun shines almost as bright as it does on the surface and the air is fresh and sweet. Sweeter than on the surface, in fact."

"It sounds almost too good to be true," Felix sighed.

"So, do we keep going?" Kendra said as she felt her way up the wall to stand.

Rex moved to her and took the baby from her arms. "I'll carry him for a while."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking him back," Felix assured him. "I'm rested now."

"If you don't mind," Rex continued, "I'd like a little one on one with him."

Felix smiled as he stood up. "I don't mind a bit. Just tell me when you want to switch." He felt through the darkness for his wife. "Do you need more time to rest?"

Ari shuddered from the mere thought of staying in that dark, stuffy tunnel one moment longer than was absolutely necessary. "Let's just get going. Wherever we end up... it can't be worse than here."

Rex thought for a moment before turning to Olga. Lightly touching her arm so that she knew that he was addressing her, he asked, "Would you mind terribly if I tried to connect with Arthur's ghost?"

"Is that something that you do?" Olga asked with surprise.

Suddenly, Olga realized that she was able to differentiate the movement of Rex's head as he shook it from the bleak darkness. He was right. The lighting was coming back, if only a little.

"I don't know why, but I was suddenly struck with this overwhelming desire to communicate with him," he said. "I know it's odd, but if I don't try I'll be plagued by this urge. I'm sure of it."

Olga reached out to take the baby. "Give me the child and try away."

"So, should we stand or sit back down?" Ari said with a tone of impatience.

"I know that you don't feel well, my love, but try to be a bit more amiable if you can," Felix whispered. "He might be able to shed some light on why a ghost is contacting our aunt."

“You mean your aunt,” she snipped like a child.

“I mean our aunt,” he said with assuredness. “We’re married, remember?”

She gave a weak giggle. “That’s right. We were married just yesterday. It seems like a dream I had, but it’s not, is it?”

His hand reached toward her voice and he pulled her close. “Happy honeymoon, my love.”

She lifted her face so that her lips grazed his ear and said in a barely audible whisper, “I didn’t expect this darkness. It’s so unsettling. Being in your arms. Feeling your touch. It makes all the difference.”

She sucked in air as his hand slid beneath her shirt and his fingers fondled her suddenly hardened nipple.

“How much touch do you wish to feel?” he breathed with a mischievous tone.

“Felix,” she playfully hissed into his ear. “We’re not alone.”

“We might as well be,” he chortled softly back, holding his mouth so close to her ear that his lips teased her flesh. “They can’t see. Remember?”

“Rex can,” she whispered as she arched her back and leaned in closer.

His soft words burned her eardrums. “Not good enough, my love.”

She pulled his head so that her mouth was almost inserted into his ear and said in a barely audible voice, “Then touch me more.”

His mouth covered hers in a passionate kiss as he slid his hands down the front of her pants until his long, slender fingers found her most sensitive area. It was all so erotically exciting. He could tell that she felt it too as she slid her hand down the front of his pants and wrapped them around his manhood. They pleased each other in a lover’s bliss while doing their best to kiss through their orgasms without making a sound.

When he was certain that she was satisfied, he positioned her against the wall and parted his lips from hers. He could feel the rapid beat of her heart slowly go back to normal with the hand that was still toying with her breast.

She lifted her shirt and pulled his mouth to her other breast. Like Felix, she found their naughtiness to be delightfully erotic and satisfying. She still had her hand around his manhood and could feel that he was about to burst with pleasure. Since that first day when she'd proved to him that he was able to perform like a man, he'd managed to perform on several occasions. She noticed that it was usually at times when he was particularly aroused, such as when they did role playing. It was clear that he was just as turned on by their forbidden behavior as she was.

She heard his strong intake of air from the anticipation of what he knew she was about to do when she slid to her knees and hoped that no one else had as well. Fortunately -and she was sure that it was by tortuous will- he managed to remain silent after that.

By the time Rex was finished with his psychic meditation and ready to tell the group what he'd learned, both Felix and Ari were satisfied, smug and smiling.