

Open Sesame...

After graduating from college, Kateri Kovach thought her biggest worries were finding a job in a bad economy and figuring out how to break up with her college boyfriend, swordfighting gamer Alex O'Donnell.

But when she travels to Virginia to meet the O'Donnell family, she discovers that's just the start of her problems when a mysterious website discovered by Alex's dad leads to unexpected wealth, and then murder.

Kateri realizes that in dating Alex O'Donnell, she got way more than she bargained for ... and maybe that's not such a bad thing.

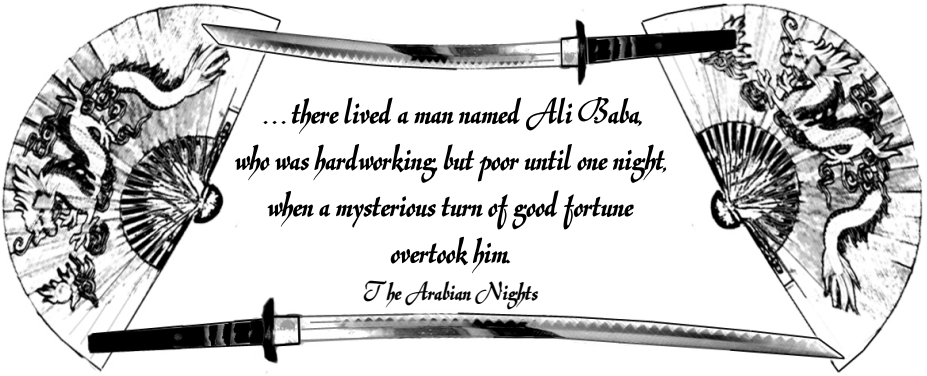
Alex
O'Donnell
and the 40
CyberThieves

a fairy tale
retold

by regina doman

CHESTERTON PRESS
FRONT ROYAL, VIRGINIA

Once upon a time...



*... there lived a man named Ali Baba,
who was hardworking but poor until one night,
when a mysterious turn of good fortune
overtook him.*

The Arabian Nights

Nighttime.

The crickets were louder than the sound of the neighbor's air conditioner, the television across the street, or the incessant shushing flow of traffic. But the man ignored them as he sat down at his desk by the window, opened his laptop and eagerly touched the ON button.

As the cheery tinny jingle of startup music began, he reached into a desk drawer and pulled out the USB drive: the battered one with a cat-face sticker grinning up at him and plugged it easily into the laptop port. He couldn't wait to take the MouseCatcher for a ride.

Sure enough, the walking cat icon began pacing back and forth at the bottom of the screen, wavering slightly as the program booted up. The man grinned at the cat as he drummed his fingers on the keyboard bank, and thought to himself that he should add some music to this long opening sequence. Maybe the Looney Tunes theme song. *Next upgrade.*

At last the computer cat arched its back and stretched its claws, and the program began. The man opened a computer browser window. *Okay, MouseCatcher: where do we go tonight?*

It was a complicated computer interface that had started as an implant on browser code but now allowed a multi-faceted access to the main hub of the internet. The servers read the MouseCatcher as a view-only admin which was fine with him. He didn't want to affect data changes or capture viewer input. He only wanted to watch.

"Thirty-three percent software engineer, thirty three percent computer hacker, and thirty three percent damned curious guy," he murmured his mantra to himself as he fiddled with the browser window. He had gone to Amazon.com, and his eyes fixed on his own little white cursor on the screen, as he changed the preferences on MouseCatcher. *Show one user. Select Show ten users. Select Show one hundred users. Select Show All Users.* He hit the enter button.

Instantly his screen was crowded with thousands of white arrow cursors flicking in and out of the screen like so many electronic flies. Maybe millions of them. People all over the world going in and out of the website, and he could see them.

But more importantly, he could follow them wherever they went.

His own cursor had changed into the shape of a cat, and he moved around the mass of darting arrows, musing. So many, so many: which one would he choose?

A random capture was always the most fun. He snagged one, and the cat emitted a red superhero cape. He removed his hands from the keyboard and sat back to watch. The ride was beginning.

The pages began to change as the user being followed clicked on icons, leapt from page to page to page. First he clicked on the bestseller of the week icon, where he lingered, either reading or comparing prices. New browser window, but the MouseCatcher nimbly leapt along with him. Search engine: maybe a title + cheapest price input? Yes, because the search results included lots of deep discount prices. *Wonder who I'm following tonight?* The man right-clicked to see if he could get any information: the cookie indicated a Kansas user with the IM name of jerry2002dknight.

Bargainbasementcloseoutbooks.com—at last the user selected one, went to the bestselling titles page, then the shopping cart—there the mouse lingered. Suddenly it flicked back and forth, as though sensing the Cat whose claws were tracking its movement.

Relax, Jerry. I don't want your credit card number; I just want to watch what you do. But he scribbled some notes on the paper, wondering if the MouseCatcher was producing a slow response time on the other user's end. *Not good.*

At last jerry2002dknight's cursor shifted through the payment screens and the "Thank You for Your Purchase" screen blinked on. The user's mouse hovered, dragged, suddenly highlighted the link at the bottom that led to a .sex site and clicked.

Abruptly the man darted to the keyboard and disengaged MouseCatcher and the flying cat became a sitting one. Curious or not, he wasn't following anyone into a porn site. *Hope you're not married, Jerry.*

Now he fiddled with the cat cursor, which strolled around the screen. Finally he retreated a step back to the homepage at the discount book site and selected *Show All Users*. As he guessed, there weren't too many cursors flitting around this site. He wondered what this site actually was. *Probably some fly-by-night site operating out of someone's basement. A slick graphic interface with inventory access to a competitor's database and a subtle redirect. A scam operation.*

He considered the thirty-some cursors flitting around the screen, some sluggish, some purposeful, and selected an odd one. *MouseCatcher, spring!* The cat leaped and its red cape flew out behind it as it cruised after the user, who halted and remained on the page an absurdly long time. Perhaps the user had gone to get a cup of coffee? The man's own stomach grumbled, but he sat, waiting, stroking his graying beard. This was part of the game.

While waiting, he right-clicked on the user, to find out who he was following. Nothing. No name, no info. With a few clicks, he tried to override the anonymous browser. Nope. The user's personal identity remained encrypted.

At long last, the cursor moved slowly up to the bar on the browser and began to add some letters to the address in the browser.

```
/admin
```

The browser clicked a login page. "Welcome to Bargain Basement Closeout Books' Employee Area." The man whistled. *How random is that? I'm following a site employee.*

The MouseCatcher had no problem reading non-encrypted passwords, so he followed the user into the administrative area of the site. He watched while the user scrolled down through lists of menus and clicked a tab that said, "SSH." A new tab opened with a black screen and white font face, a blinking green box indicating the cursor.

Ah. Wonder if he's doing a backup or something?

But instead, the user began to type something unusual:

```
>open hitechhelpdesk.com  
>Trying 127.63.228.10...  
>Connected to hitechhelpdesk.com.
```

The man tensed, recognizing the process. *No, wait. This isn't a site employee. This is a hacker. He's using this server to hack into someone else's website.*

He switched the MouseCatcher into keylogger mode so that the Cat would keep a record of everything the user did, and watched intently. *If I don't capture his passwords, I won't be able to follow him, he justified his actions to himself. Plus, I don't mind sneaking after someone who's already doing something illegal...*

The user had arrived at the server of the next site: a tech site with the label www.hitechhelpdesk.com. Quickly the user went to a directory and typed a command to "show hidden files." A new file suddenly appeared:

```
underground_access
```

Ah. That's why he came here. He's been hiding an invisible folder on someone else's site for safekeeping. Wonder what it is?

A command appeared on the black screen.

```
Underground_access>find file:sesame  
Underground_access>open sesame
```

Data flickered rapidly across the screen. Suddenly, the MouseCatcher flickered and lost his cape. The digital cat paced mournfully around the screen, and the man realized what had happened.

The user had vanished.

Bewildered, the man stared at the screen. *Where did he go? Did he log off the Internet? Or has he gone someplace where the MouseCatcher can't follow?*

Puzzled, the man checked the keylogger data the MouseCatcher had collected and scrolled through it. It took him a few minutes to understand it. The final lines read:

```
Determining remote address...
Checking http://microblogger-cool.com/ssessamme
Found current post: MTI3LAuMC4Mjc
ADDRESS: http://127.0.0.1/comboination_unique
```

The Sesame program jumped to a website, grabbed data, decrypted it, and...generated a link to a web address.

That's where the user went.

The man's fingers hovered over the keys.

...What's to stop me from going to that website too?

It was too tantalizing. Before he could help himself, he gave the command and hit the enter key.

```
>open sesame
```

Where am I?

A page had loaded swiftly: deep, utter blackness.

Purple letters began to appear on the page.

Who are you?

A security question. The man floundered, but then suddenly, the MouseCatcher, which had been sitting sedately at the bottom of his screen, began to flash, and its cape fluttered.

So the guy I was following is still here, the man realized. And the MouseCatcher's hooked right onto him again. Good cat!

An answer appeared below the question.

Hasherking, master of trees.

An image of a blowfish appeared. And the words hovered before him in long script.

What is this?

And the user the man was following typed his answer.

We are Samurai. The Keyboard Cowboys.

The black page faded into gray that became white, gleaming white. Then something came into focus. A cave with gleaming walls, in high definition sharpness.

The man whistled at the graphic interface. You couldn't see a pixel anywhere. *Nice! Must be one of these new gaming sites. This is what that guy was trying to get into.*

Suddenly a ninja in black stepped onto the screen. The ninja's movements were a bit more nuanced than those of the typical online avatar, and the man marveled at the computer engineering that had created it.

So this is what the user looks like in this environment. Wow. I can see why he wanted to get in here!

The ninja turned so that his back was to the man, and began to stride purposefully down the cave tunnel. He didn't seem to notice that the MouseCatcher, now looking pathetically pixelated in this hi-res environment, was following him.

The shining bronze walls of the cave moved around him, the scene changing like a camera following over the assassin's shoulder.

The man watched, fascinated. *Okay, a gaming site sure isn't what I expected to find. Well, I'm hooked onto this guy, going where he goes...*

They began to pass niches in the walls of the cave that looked like passages. One passage had gold coins in bags lying spilled on the floor. Another passageway had ropes of pearls and gleaming jewels cascading out of chests. A third niche was scattered with what looked like credit cards in bright colors. Another gave a glimpse into what looked like an art gallery of paintings. The

ninja ignored all of these, passing them more quickly than the man trailing him would have liked.

Oh well. But I'm just here to watch.

The ninja abruptly turned left and entered a room full of windows: each one looking out onto a different scene. One was the skyline of Chicago: another looked out on a Caribbean island: another on the ski slopes of Switzerland. The ninja paused before a window that showed the rooftops of Vienna, Austria. And nothing happened: the scene froze.

The man waited. The ninja continued to stand still. Nothing on the screen was moving. The man watched and waited, but nothing seemed to be happening. Tentatively he clicked, but there was no response to his cursor.

I bet there's a floating menu I can't see, the man guessed. He must be giving some sort of input.

He seemed to have guessed correctly because the ninja abruptly turned and strode out of the room. He was back in the passageway again before the man realized what had happened.

This game is pretty fascinating. Wish I knew what was going on. Wonder how you join?

The ninja looked at his feet and the room tilted downwards as he did. With one finger, he touched a puddle on the ground and backed up.

Out of the water, a large column of brick came with a sloping board on it, with faint surface variations that resembled a text box.

Maybe I'll get to see what happens here.

All of a sudden, grooves appeared on the rock, forming into random shapes. A string of numbers appeared, grew sharper for a moment, and then slowly sank back into the surface.

Cool, the man thought.

Then more numbers, then letters appeared, in random patterns, which sharpened and then sank down before the man could read them. He glanced at the keylogger. It hadn't captured any input this time.

Having subsumed the input, grooves appeared in the stone again which shifted and formed into a message:

ALL INPUT HAS BEEN PROCESSED AND ERASED

It sank into the blank square of the rock.

The man was watching the numbers flicker away when the ninja abruptly touched a round black stone embedded in the cave wall. And vanished.

The MouseCatcher flickered, wilted, and lost his cape again.

The guy must have logged out, and in the process, detached the MouseCatcher. That's the second time that happened. Weird.

Um—now how do I leave?

The man was tempted to just close his browser, but he strongly suspected that he'd better log out properly if he wanted to cover his tracks. Tentatively he clicked on the black rock, but in response, the square blank block in front of him glowed. The man hit an arrow key to turn around, but each time he did something, the stone merely flashed a white glow.

Ah. It's a menu, but I can't see all of it. Still, I need to close it, or give it input before I can do anything else. What does it want me to do?

He typed an "A" but the stone surface hiccupped and the A vanished.

No letters then. Number input?

Pausing for a moment, he quickly typed

123456789

The stone seemed to approve. The numbers grew sharper, then slowly sank into nothingness.

But then the stone smoothed itself out again, wanting more from him.

Trying to remember what he had just seen the ninja do, it suddenly dawned on the man what the string of numbers and letters had been.

It wants a street address.

Now the man was a bit nervous. He'd never given any personal input when he'd used the MouseCatcher before. *I'd better just shut down and go*, he told himself. But the black rock remained un-pressable. And the square rock screen glowed insistently.

Wait: it said that all data would be processed and erased. Maybe that means, if I give an address, it'll erase it.

Maybe it'll just mail more clues to the game to that address. I could find out what this place is I've stumbled onto.

It was a tempting possibility.

Almost before he realized what he was doing, the man entered the number of a post office box in his town.

The address sharpened for a brief moment, then sank down before the man could change his mind.

But the same comforting message appeared:

ALL INPUT HAS BEEN PROCESSED AND ERASED

Feeling a bit reckless, the man hit “enter” and now the large stone sank back into the pool of water and vanished. And conveniently, the round black rock on the wall flickered, as though to indicate that it could now be pushed.

Gratefully, the man pushed it.

The cave rushed by him, faded to black, then all that was left was the plain black screen with white font, with the last string of letters.

```
>open sesame
```

The man realized what he needed to do next. He typed

```
>close sesame
```

The screen responded:

```
>cleanly logging out  
>you're safe - bye.
```

The black box closed, and the session ended.

He had left the cave.

If that was a game, it was the oddest one I've ever seen.

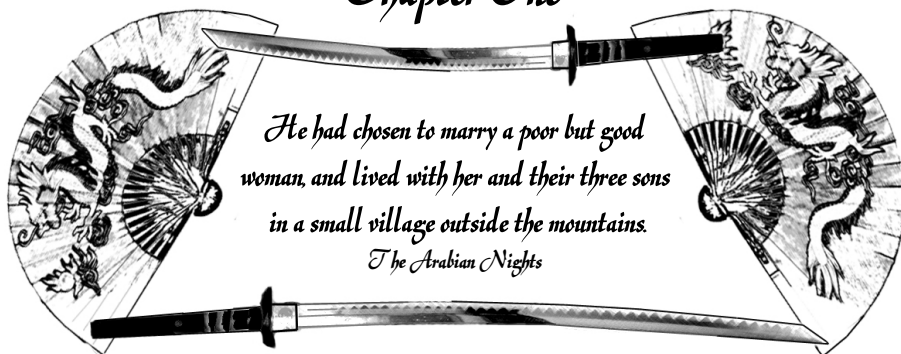
If it was a game.

Feeling a sense of worry, he re-saved his session log so he would have a record of everything he had just done, and then closed the MouseCatcher down. Then he pulled up some menus, enhanced his security, erased his browser history, made sure his firewall was in place. He closed down the browser, background programs, and the laptop. As an extra precaution, he even unplugged it from the wall.

Back in the real world, he checked the locks on the house door and closed the deadbolt before he turned into bed beside his sleeping wife.

Outside, the crickets continued cheeping, as though none of this had happened.

Chapter One



*He had chosen to marry a poor but good
woman, and lived with her and their three sons
in a small village outside the mountains.*

The Arabian Nights

Music blared from the speakers of the beat-up red Toyota as it flew down the highway, windows open, speakers cranked up. The air conditioning was broken, but at least the stereo system worked.

The young driver, steering easily with one hand, was on the shorter side, stocky, long-haired, tattooed, one ear pierced, wearing black sunglasses. He was driving just over the speed limit, fast enough to pass other vehicles, slow enough not to catch the attention of any policemen. Behind and around him, the car was crammed with stuff: books, clothes, duffle bags, a large picture of the Sacred Heart, and an odd array of boxes and cabinets and cases. One item hadn't fit into any of the cases, and lay on the seat beside him—a long Japanese sword, gleaming silver.

Alex O'Donnell was on his way home from college.

He whistled along with the music as he sped down the miles of cracked asphalt on the Pennsylvania turnpike, dexterously avoiding the potholes. He breathed in relief when he hit the turnoff for 80 East. A few more hours or so and he'd be back in Virginia, Fairfax County, the suburb of DC where he lived.

It had been a good year at Mercy College. It should have been his graduation year, but he had a few more courses to take, due to some costly prevarication his freshman year, where he'd changed majors three times before settling on his final choice, political science. He had a couple more credits to earn: no biggie. One last semester, and he'd be free. Most of his friends had already graduated, and he figured that was just as well: he'd have more time to study and less time for the goofy adventures they'd always seemed to get sidetracked by.

He shook his head, thinking of some of those adventures, which had involved near escapes, brushes with the law, even danger of death. Yes, it had

been interesting, but he couldn't expect the rest of his life to be quite as adventurous. At some point, he was going to have to settle down, get serious about life, maybe even cut his hair.

Naaah.

He checked his cell phone, wondering if Kateri was nearly home by now. (She refused to talk on a cell phone while driving, even if it was legal in New Jersey, so he knew better than to try and call now.) They'd said goodbye only an hour ago, at dawn at a rest stop where the highway forked into north and east branches just outside of Harrisburg. She was headed north: he was going east and south: their paths had split. He missed her already.

He had promised to be a good boyfriend, send her presents, call a lot. She thanked him and wondered aloud if that meant she'd have to be a good girlfriend, and what did that mean?

"It means you love me, no matter what," he had said, grinning.

She had only rolled her eyes and kissed him.

Then she had gotten into her own beat-up car, an old farm truck, gathered her long, wild black hair into a ponytail, waved a final goodbye, and driven off. As he had watched her go, he felt the same wistful longing that he always regarded her with, but it was magnified by the circumstances. Kateri was cool, almost too cool for him. She was a slight, sturdy girl with a blockbuster personality. She always wore ripped jeans and wrapped thin braids in her hair with colored thread like a Native American: lots of people thought she was Cherokee. But she was Asian—well, half Vietnamese.

And to Alex, she had about her the mystique of the Far East, even though her father was Polish-American. She had that aloofness, those dark, inscrutable eyes—and that hair! Long, black, wavy, tumbling down her back like a waterfall. And she was—well, *put together* nicely. Since Alex himself was on the shorter side, he liked that she was so petite. For a long time he hadn't been able to figure out if he just had a massive crush on her, or if this was true love, but now he decided he was willing to gamble that it was the real thing.

Back a few years ago when they had met at Mercy College, it had been a moment of no significance for either of them. Neither of them had cared much for the other. They ran in different circles, had different interests. Ironically, they only met when Alex had developed a slight crush on Kateri's roommate. Even after being formally introduced, they had spent most of their time arguing with each other. But in the course of several very colorful and fairly epic adventures, somehow he had swept Kateri off her feet—literally at one point—and, he admitted, she had knocked him off his high horse as well.

So for the past year or so, they hadn't been able to get enough of one another, and now, driving home, he was starting to wonder if that had ramifications for both of their futures.

For a person as organized and goal-oriented as she was, Kateri was fairly cagey on that point. He strongly suspected that her future plans had never included taking up with a sword-wielding martial artist from the suburbs like himself. She had just graduated—the Kovach family wasn't rich, and she'd gotten her mental health degree as quickly and cheaply as possible. Last summer she and Alex had gone to the missions in South America together, which had been another set of adventures, but this summer she had indicated the time had come for serious plans.

Alex agreed, but he wasn't entirely sure she was ready for the serious plans he was starting to think about now.

The problem was, he didn't want to be in the position of proposing marriage to a girl who was going to say no. And Kateri just might say no to him, whether she liked him or not.

He sighed as the song shuffle came to an end, and briefly clicked his mp3 player to shift to a mix of adventure movie themes. He was coming into the suburbs of DC: home. A whole different adventure. His mom's health was better these days—she had multiple sclerosis, but was surviving. Even though she could no longer walk, she had managed to keep going strong, even on crutches. His kid brothers were always in trouble, between sports, karate, and computer club. And he wondered what his dad had been up to. Most likely, Dad had figured out a new way to hack into the government computer database and reprogram their coffee makers. Or create software that would change every traffic light from yellow to purple, or something. Alex had better get home and find out.

In another hour, Alex turned off the highway and into one of the hundreds of neighborhoods that sprawled out from the DC beltway. He drove past green spaces and gated communities and gateless communities, condos and apartment buildings, tiny rows of little shops, boutique strip malls, and gargantuan big box stores separated by landscaped slabs of banked earth and color-coordinated flower beds.

He turned right, and took a highway that shunted him through several miles of woods and towering concrete sound barriers and slid off an exit into another older town of assorted stores that stood like islands on half-acres of concrete, past trees huddled like lost tourists in groups around drainage ditches, past overgrown woodland developments, and developments built hurriedly on old farmland, vinyl split-levels and ranches with strings of spindly bushes and

privacy fences dividing the lots. He pulled over to check out a neighborhood yard sale.

Then he took a bypass to avoid the shattered remnant of an old main street with one or two blocks of old-time buildings, which had survived just to sell postcards and antiques to Civil War pilgrims. He turned right into an even older development of small brick Cape Cods separated by lines of chain-link fences that were mostly hidden beneath piles of vines and embedded in hedges. This development had trees stuck at random in yards and sidewalks, some trees so old that their roots buckled the cement sidewalks and their branches spitefully dropped limbs during every storm.

Last year's hurricane season had seen the demise of the two octogenarians who hemmed in Alex's parents' house. During the tornado in the wake of Hurricane Zeno, the two trees had fallen upon each other viciously, as though motivated by a long-held grudge, and toppled into the yard, narrowly missing the roof but destroying the front porch and the chain-linked fence. Insurance and the town had paid for a new fence (green chain link) and sidewalk, and Alex's mom said she had never liked the front porch anyway, which was too small to even put a lawn chair on. The facade of the house now had slightly pinker lines of bricks flanking the front door where the posts for the porch had been, and the ragged yard had a growing fishnet of crabgrass spreading over the eight-foot circles of clay that marked the trees' graves.

Alex parked his car, levering himself into the five-foot curb space between a minivan and a compact with one practiced maneuver, and got out, grabbing several bags and his sword. With a karate yell, he leapt over the fence into the yard, instigating cries of "Alex is back!" Seconds later, the front screen door banged open to let loose two sandy-haired boys who immediately threw themselves upon Alex with yells of their own. Alex thrust the sword into the turf, dropped his bags, and tackled his first assailant, dropping him to the ground. He flipped the ten-year-old over his back, and roared in dismay, "You guys haven't been practicing!"

His brothers ignored him and went for his luggage instead. "Hey, did you get Drive Maniac III?" David said by way of greeting.

"No, I did not!" Alex swiped his backpack back from David. "Hey, leave that alone!" he said to Sam, who was swinging the sword around, decapitating tiger lilies. He yanked the weapon away and turning, grabbed a metal throwing star from David's hand. "Barbarians!"

"Did you bring me a present? Are you home now for good? What did you bring home?"

"No, yes, wait and see." Alex said, stepping inside and sliding the sword easily into the hooks by the door that marked its place. The staircase wall was

filled with weapons both Eastern and Western, and Alex's sword was positioned just between his dad's Spanish rapier and David's gladiator dagger. The messy room was decorated with bamboo scrolls and glass Japanese fishing weights that dangled in nets from the ceiling, souvenirs of his dad's army years overseas. With careful aim, Alex tossed the throwing star, and it made a new jag in the trim over the mantelpiece, which had been its home ever since it had accidentally landed there many years before, making a gash which grew bigger by the years, and to which his mother had resigned herself.

He strode through the tiny living room past the blaring video game console with the cracked screen to the bedroom next to the kitchen, meeting his mom who had struggled to her crutches to greet him. Her blond hair was cut short, and she was wearing an oversized shirt in a cheerful pink print and jeans.

He kissed her. "Hi Mom! I'm back!"

Mom accepted his hug affectionately. "Did you have a good trip home?"

"Oh, yeah. I would have made it in three hours if I hadn't stopped. Hey Dad!"

Dad was home from work—that was unusual. Maybe Mom had had a bad day? He was also intent on the bedroom computer—not unusual at all. Finishing a keystroke sequence, his dad tore his eyes from the screen and set them on his oldest son. "Alex! Glad to have you home!" His dad's black beard and sideburns had a bit more gray in them, but the eyes behind his glasses twinkled and the laugh-lines were firmly fixed in place. Mom must not be doing too bad.

As if answering his thought, Mom said, "I had a doctor's appointment today, so Alan stayed home to take me."

"Everything okay?"

"All clear."

Alex kissed his mom and dad. "Good! Hey, I'm going to run to the post office. Anyone need anything while I'm out?"

"Diet Coke," his mom said. "And green tea for your dad. Can you go by the grocery and see what's on sale in the meat section? I haven't planned dinner for tonight yet."

"How about I pick up Chinese? My treat."

Mom grinned. She always looked cute when she smiled. "Sure! I'll take you up on that."

His dad had swiveled his chair inexorably back towards the computer, but dug into his pocket. "You said you were going to the post office? Here. Check the P.O. boxes for me." He flipped the keys over his shoulder and started on the keyboard again.

Alex caught them with one hand. "No prob, Dad."

Whistling, he went out to his car. His brothers were bringing in his luggage and belongings from the car and piling them on the front room carpet. "Hey, bring that stuff upstairs!" He snatched up something wrapped in a brown paper bag, grabbed the Sacred Heart picture and propped it on top of an overstuffed bookshelf near the rosary prayer table.

"Are you going out? Can we go with you?"

"Only if you behave!"

Without answering, the younger boys jumped into the car with him and settled themselves comfortably in the back and front seats. David grabbed the mp3 player and cranked up the loudest song.

"Turn that thing down," Alex said, checking his mirrors while he reversed out of his parking spot. "So what's been going on?"

"David's grounded *again* from computer games but he's still watching me."

"Shut up!" David said. "Dad's working on new tracking software."

"How's the MouseCatcher coming?"

"Dunno. He used to talk about it all the time, but he's been quiet lately. Bet he's working on something. So how's the hot babe?"

Alex groaned. "David, let's get this straight. Women and girls are *ladies*. Not chicks, not babes, not anything else. Okay? Show some respect, or Kateri's going to slam you upside a wall when you're least expecting it."

"Is she coming down? Do we get to meet her?" Sam, the ten-year-old, cut in.

"I don't know. All depends on whether she can afford it. Life's hard when you're a poor college graduate. I might go up and see her sometime."

"Can you take us?"

"Yes. I'll enslave you to Kateri's younger siblings and you can work on the farm and learn some manners."

"Pig manners." That was David.

"You start acting like a pig, I'll let them send you to the slaughterhouse. Okay, stay here!" They had reached the Post Office. Alex grabbed the brown paper parcel and got out.

"What's that?"

"Present for Kateri. Got to mail it."

"What is it?"

"Something I found at a yard sale. Stay in the car, don't fight. At least not to the death." He strode through the glass doors to the lobby and joined the line. While he was waiting, he picked out a box and two rolls of colored bubble wrap, and packaged the present. It was going to be expensive to send, but he couldn't resist. He mailed the package, and recollecting himself, stopped by the line of boxes to check the mail for his dad.

His dad had a string of post office boxes, the result of several failed online business ventures, maintained now primarily for collecting junk mail and catalogs. After the hunt and peck of locating and emptying the boxes, Alex had an armful of junk mail. He figured he had better sort through it. No use bringing even more stuff into their crowded home.

Catalog, catalog, catalog. He kept one of each and threw out the duplicates. Mom loved catalogs, and who knows what she was into these days? Restaurant supplies, gardening, skiing? Maybe the last catalog was David's. Next he sifted out the credit card offers and tossed them. The fundraising solicitations were a bit harder to detect, but he trashed all the ones he could find. Now he had about fifteen envelopes left. Slipping into his typical role as Dad's unofficial secretary, he started opening letters and checking them out.

Ah. Several of the "serious" letters were actually money-begging letters from political PACs. He tossed those and opened the remaining handful. That's how he found the check.

It was printed, like a payroll check, from the Sundance Fun Foundation, but the memo said "Winnings." Paid to "Cash" in the amount of \$1,234,567.89.

"This isn't real," Alex said. He flipped to the back of the check, expecting to see "This is a sample" inscribed in red on the back. Nothing. "This isn't real," he said, looking for background printing, any sign that this was just a scam. "Nah. This isn't real."

But the typed amount said *one million, two hundred and thirty four thousand, five hundred and sixty seven dollars and 89/100.*

Finally, not knowing what else to do, he folded the check, stuck it in his pocket, grabbed the rest of the remaining mail, and went to the car.

As he could have predicted, his brothers were fighting, but fortunately blood had not yet been shed.

"Where are we going now?" Sam demanded between yells and accusations of David.

"Bank."

"What for?"

"Just going to try something. I'm curious."

"CKTC!" David shouted.

"Hm?" Alex was turning on the motor.

"Curiosity killed the cat.' Mom's taken to using the acronym with Dad. That's how often she says it these days."

"Interesting," Alex murmured.

In the lobby of their family bank, Alex handed over the check to the teller, folded his arms, and leaned forward on the ledge. "Can you tell me if this is a real check?"

The teller did the same thing he had done: looked it over, flipped it to the back, scanned it again. "Looks okay to me. Why?"

"I got it in one of those junk mail letters."

She nodded with a knowing smile. "Want me to try to deposit it?"

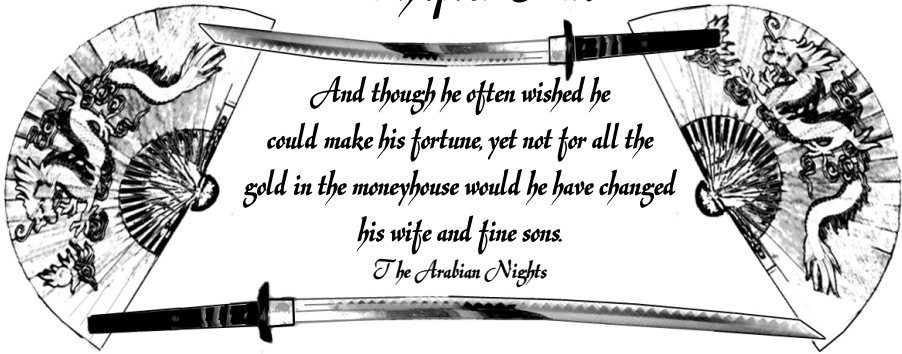
"Sure, might as well."

"With that kind of amount, they'll probably put a hold on it. Maybe two to eleven business days."

"That's fine. No rush."

It couldn't hurt to try.

Chapter Two



*And though he often wished he
could make his fortune, yet not for all the
gold in the moneyhouse would he have changed
his wife and fine sons.
The Arabian Nights*

The girl slogged through the muddy field in her barn boots and paused, looking out over the rooting animals to the hilly landscape and the silver clouds beyond. Part of her hoped that she didn't get any response from the stack of resumes she had just sent out. Working in an office just wasn't going to compare with farm work. Even farm work with smelly pigs.

Absently she poked a stick at two of the younger hogs, who were squabbling over the same banana peel. "C'mon, settle down," she said equitably.

Her attention was caught by the roar of a truck, and she looked over at the rundown little farmhouse where the remainder of her ten brothers and sisters lived with her parents. A white mail truck was cautiously backing up their winding gravel driveway.

Curious, she dumped the rest of the compost onto the grunting pigs, grabbed the bucket and the hose, and walked back towards the house, coiling up the hose as she went. Between the wet and the mud, the hose was dirty, which meant that by the time she reached the house, her hands and overalls were muddy as well. She deposited the coil of hose in its place by the cellar steps, stacked the compost bucket with the other empty plastic ones by the porch door, and walked to the truck, fully aware that she was a mess.

Wiping her hands on the wet grass helped a little. "Sorry," she said to the driver as she took the stack of mail and bulky package. Walking back to the house, she glanced at the address on the box. It was from Alex. Kateri rolled her eyes and went inside to wash up.

Inside, the farmhouse was the usual jumble of large-family detritus and farming implements. The fragrant smell of stir-fried pork with fish sauce came from the stove, where her mother, a short Vietnamese woman in a long blue

apron, was cooking dinner. Kateri set the package on the kitchen table, and began to open it. *What had Alex sent now?*

She groaned as she pulled off the last round of bubble wrap from the bulky object inside. It was an Oriental statue, super-gilded and beflowered with purple magnolias—the Chinese good-luck cat with raised paw.

“Pretty,” her mom said. “Chinese.”

Kateri sighed. “Oriental.” Alex was like most Westerners, jumbling together Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and Vietnamese culture into one thing: Oriental culture. She’d tried to explain to him that Vietnamese culture was very different from Japanese and Chinese culture but he couldn’t seem to grasp the distinction. Nor did he get that she preferred plain American to Chinese kitsch.

She read the card he had scribbled. *Miss you. Hope you can come and visit soon.* She didn’t know how to answer that. If she found a job, she couldn’t visit. But until she found a job, spending money on pleasure trips didn’t seem wise.

“What does the card say?”

“He wants me to come and visit him.”

“You should.” Mom tested the pork.

“But I’m still job hunting.”

“If you find a job, you won’t be able to go. So go now.”

“Mom!” Kateri exclaimed. “You’re so—impractical sometimes. Like Alex.”

Her mom chuckled. “Aren’t you and Alex still dating?”

“Yes. Sort of,” Kateri set the cat on the table and raised an eyebrow at it. *What exactly am I supposed to do with this thing?*

“You keep saying that,” her mom wagged a bamboo spoon at her. “Sort of dating never got anyone anywhere. Either choose or not choose. Court, or don’t court.”

Kateri laughed. “You sound like Yoda.”

The problem was, she liked Alex. A lot. And that was illogical. He was a suburban guy. White collar. Wouldn’t—couldn’t farm, didn’t have a job, couldn’t do anything practical, an expert in nothing except video games, martial arts and swordfighting.

Well, she admitted, *sometimes* those last two items were practical. Those skills had already come in handy a few times in their friendship.

She had to confess it was fun to be with Alex. They connected on a very basic level. But was that really enough?

I’m like that peasant girl in the Hiroshi Inagaki film and he’s like the samurai. Except they were Japanese. But it didn’t work out between them either.

“What is wrong?” her mother prodded.

Kateri exhaled. “When it comes to Alex, I just have too many questions about whether or not he’s right for me.”

“That is fine!” her mother said with a shrug. “Courtship is the time for asking questions! Too many people only start to ask questions after the wedding is over!”

Kateri pushed back her hair. “So what do you do if you still have questions after the wedding is over?”

“Ignore them,” her mother said tranquilly. “After you have leapt off the cliff, it is too late to wonder how high the mountain was.”

She handed her daughter a small bowl of *pho* soup, and Kateri drank it and pondered, giving occasional glances at the smiling ceramic cat. Her mother went outside to yell at Kateri’s brothers, who were supposed to be weeding the strawberry crop.

What she had to do, Kateri resolved, one of these days, was sit down with Alex and have a serious talk about their relationship. What were they going to do now, practically speaking? *I’m graduated, I’m going to get a job, and you’re going to do what? Play at college for another year, and then do what? While I wait for you?* It might be better for them both just to work, study, and go on with life. Neither of their families was wealthy: it would be more practical to focus on making a living. And if after two years, he was ready to get married and she wasn’t dating anyone else—then maybe...

The problem was, she really did like Alex.

Emitting a cry of frustration, she finished the soup, snatched up the cat, and stalked to her room.

She had shared the large bedroom with four sisters, but now they had all moved out. Only Faustina was still single, and she was living in New York and working as a secretary: Teresa and Marietta and Philomena were married. But the remnants of their tastes and souvenirs of their pasts were still scattered about on the walls: posters, photos, scrapbooks, stuffed animals. Polish flags and Vietnamese art. A large poster of an unborn baby in the womb, pro-life bumper stickers, collages from protests and slogan signs. Though the variations on themes were unique, the décor was the typical mishmash of teenage life. Kateri didn’t have the heart to take everything down and start over, even though no one else slept in the double bed with her any longer, and the daybed really was just a couch these days.

Maybe I’ll be leaving this room soon too.

The thought depressed her, even though her job search was not going well. It seemed the market was flooded with mental health majors: what had seemed like a shoe-in was proving to be scarce. No one was even offering internships. With years of pro-life experience and sidewalk counseling under her belt, she had counted on one of the crisis pregnancy centers she’d worked with being able

to hire her, but it seemed like everyone was under a budget squeeze. She'd have to move to New York, most likely, to find any kind of entry-level job. And she hated the city.

Given that her life was in such flux, her instinct was to take a step back from her relationship until she figured out where she could find a job, and what God wanted her to do with her life. It might be easier on Alex too: she knew he still didn't have a job. But how could she tell this to Alex?

Out of habit, she started cleaning the room, the best way to improve her mood. After straightening up her dresser and folding her clothes, she cast about for a space to stash the oversized cat statue. After a few minutes searching, she moved a stack of hats—random straw farm hats and soft felt hats—off the green dresser and slid the cat on its surface. Now the hats didn't fit. She was about to toss them on the floor to deal with later, when something made her put the stack on the cat's head. They fit perfectly: the cat's head was just the size of the bottom hat. And her baseball cap could dangle from the cat's upraised paw. It looked almost as though she and some decorating maven had gone out to purchase a unique hat stand and come back with the cat. A perfect fit.

Her cell phone rang with a familiar tune: the theme from *Karate Kid*. Alex was calling.

Was this the time for her to break it off with him?

She stared at the singing phone and glanced back half-heartedly at the smiling cat. Alex would ask her about her job search, she would confess her failure and inadequacy, and he would reassure her. He would brainstorm for new strategies, new ways to get a job. He was probably praying for her. No, she didn't have the heart to break up with a guy friend who was supporting her during this uncertain time. But would it be any kinder to do it later?

Growling again, she picked up the phone and answered. She'd thank him for the statue, maybe agree to come down and visit for a weekend. No time like the present. Pun resented.



So it was that one week later, Kateri was on the bus to DC. She was taking the bus because her brothers Mark and Tobias needed her old truck for their job, and the other spare car had a bad fuel pump and had stopped shifting. Alex had agreed to split the bus ticket with her, since it saved him the trouble of driving to pick her up. Even though she hated to leave the farm work and the

job hunt, she probably did need a break: she fell asleep as soon as she got on the bus, and slept until they had nearly reached the beltway.

When she opened her eyes, she stared out the window at the passing scenery in some incredulity. Obviously this had all once been farmland. But now it had become a monotonous pattern of strip mall—housing block—strip mall—housing block. Sometimes the developers had left the trees in. Other times they seemed to have sheared them all down. Either way, a completely artificial carpet of civilization had been dropped over what was once arable land: she could even spot an occasional barn marooned between lots. She felt nauseous. Or maybe that was just the fumes from the hundred thousand shiny compact cars that darted everywhere like oversized bugs.

By the time they reached the bus stop in Northern Virginia, she had counted six Home Depots and ten Bed, Bath and Beyonds, and countless supermarkets and clothing stores. So this was where Alex lived. She was ready to leave.

But there in the massive bus station was Alex, waiting for her as she stumped off the bus with her luggage. As usual, he was dressed in black—black t-shirt and trench coat, jeans, and boots. Black sunglasses, too. He was smiling at her, and holding a huge bunch of long-stemmed red roses.

She sighed: even jobless and short of cash, Alex could be so generous. And so impulsive. Too impulsive. She kissed him, took the roses, and only then noticed that he was still grinning.

“What?” she said suspiciously.

He took her arms and pulled her close.

“We’re rich.”

“Yes, in God, family, and one another. But that doesn’t—”

“No, my family. Is rich.”

She stared at him.

“We’ve come into money. C’mon. I’ll tell you how it happened.”

Incredulously, she glanced down at the roses.

Alex said significantly, “They were *not* on sale.”

Once she had gotten into the car, he told her about the money. How he had gotten the check. How he’d deposited it, on a lark. How it had actually cleared.

“So now?”

“We have over one million dollars in the bank. And we’re still not sure how it happened.”

Kateri frowned. “But if it’s a check—you must know who sent it.”

“The Sundance Fun Foundation. And here’s something weird: it closed its doors two days after our transaction went through. It’s listed as a place that

holds contests, but none of us remember entering any sweepstakes. The only thing Mom can think of is that it might have been one of those things where you're automatically entered into a drawing when you sign up for a service."

Kateri was still trying to take this in, and a feeling was growing inside her. "I don't like this," she murmured. "You're right: it's weird. You should—"

Alex shot her a look. "I know what you're thinking, Kat. I'd like to do some research, find out more, but the odd thing is, Dad doesn't want me to. Plus he doesn't want us to tell anyone about the money until he can figure out where it came from. I had to promise him up and down that you were one of those inscrutable Asian types who would never breathe a word to anyone."

Asian types. Kateri sighed again. "And of course, your dad agreed."

"You know I've told you how much he loves anything from the Far East. I know he'll love you, too."

She shifted a bit nervously, having remembered again that she was meeting Alex's family for the first time. A significant relationship moment. A sign that things were 'serious.' Again, she felt she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. "I hope I'm going to be more than just your trophy Asian girlfriend."

"Oh, absolutely, you are." Alex said. "But I've always liked trophies. They tell me that I've won big." He pulled to a stop at a red light, leaned over, and kissed her.

Why did his corny romance always give her goose bumps? "Nowadays everyone gets trophies, even if they didn't do a thing."

"The analogy holds," he murmured. "I didn't do a thing to deserve you, did I?"

Groaning, she pulled away from him. "The light's green."

He obligingly turned his attention to driving but kept talking. "Obviously, Dad doesn't want us to spend the money. Unfortunately my brothers were with me when I went to deposit the check, and we've had to threaten them with Chinese water torture to keep them from talking. But that hasn't stopped them from begging us to upgrade our video game systems, get new computers, cool cars—"

"Probably good not to rush into anything."

"Exactly. Though I can't help looking at the new Toyotas." He heaved a sigh. "Mom's been trying to persuade him to use some of the money, but he doesn't want us to touch a cent."

"What is he waiting for?"

"Federal agents to show up on our doorstep? The IRS? Who knows? Anyhow," he glanced over at Kateri. "I'm so glad you're here. You couldn't have picked a better time to visit. It's very interesting at home just now."



“Kateri,” Mrs. O’Donnell leaned forward on her crutches and took Kateri’s hands. “I’m so glad to finally meet you face to face.”

“Thanks. Same here, Mrs. O’Donnell,” Kateri said, suddenly feeling a bit shy.

“Call me Kitty. That’s what Alan calls me.” Mrs. O’Donnell was in her fifties, Irish-faced and freckled cheeks. Kateri, who had already seen enough of coiffed and manicured Northern Virginians, liked that Alex’s mom’s short blond hair was streaked with gray. Although her legs were frail, Mrs. O’Donnell’s shoulders and arms were tough, showing that even on crutches, she kept herself active. The wooden crutches were decorated with shiny painted flowers, with plaid fabric covering the tops.

“The wheelchair doesn’t fit well in this small house,” Kitty said. “So I use my wooden legs, as I call them. Couldn’t get around without them. And they keep me upright and off my duff, which is a good thing. My two younger boys are helping out at our parish’s summer festival, but they’ll be back later.” She glanced out the door. “And here’s my husband Alan. He must have beaten the traffic today.”

Mr. O’Donnell had just driven up in a battered car that resembled Alex’s red one, except that it was green. Kateri watched as a heavyset bearded man got out of the car and came slowly up the walk. Even though he was smiling, she could sense that he was burdened by some secret.

He knows, she thought. *He knows where that money came from. Did he—steal it?* She knew from Alex that Mr. O’Donnell was a computer genius who could hack into almost any computer. But would he have stolen money?

This thought certainly cast an odd aura over the “meeting the parents” moment, as Kateri shook hands with him and exchanged pleasantries. He seemed pleased to meet her, but preoccupied. *Guilty?*

“So, Kateri,” Mr. O’Donnell said heartily. “Does anyone ever call you Kat?”

“Sometimes,” she said, shooting a glance at Alex, the usual culprit.

He put his head to one side. “I call my wife Kitty, so that’s just too funny. Driving home, it occurred to me that while you’re here, we’ll have a Kitty and a Kat in the house.”

The men hooted with laughter, but Mrs. O’Donnell only rolled her eyes in a gesture that Kateri found comfortingly familiar. “See what I have to put up with? How about I show you the house?”

It wasn't much of a house to show. Two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen. But it was probably all that the O'Donnells could afford. Kateri guessed that this part of Virginia was as overpriced as New Jersey. And the house was cluttered with a jumble of necessities and knickknacks, both Western and Eastern, which made it seem more crowded. Mr. O'Donnell followed them around, pointing out curiosities in the rooms.

"We got those nunchucks on a trip to Korea," he said, indicating two black tubes dangling from a chain looped around a bedroom door. "They're pretty hard to use: unless you know what you're doing, you usually end up just hitting yourself in the face with them."

"And this is the bathroom," Mrs. O'Donnell pushed open a white door to reveal a narrow room in lavender tile hung with lots of mobiles and paintings. "Isn't the color hideous? It was like this when we got it. Alex says we should play along and paint the top of the wall yellow so that it looks like an Easter egg."

Mr. O'Donnell pointed to the hangings on the wall. "See those bamboo scrolls? Kitty and I got those from a tea shop on Okinawa in Japan. We hung out at the shop all the time when I was stationed overseas, and the owner presented them to us when he heard we were being transferred stateside. I don't suppose you can you read them?"

"No," said Kateri, repressing her sarcasm with difficulty. "I'm Vietnamese. They're, uh, very different languages."

"Long life, prosperity, and luck," Mr. O'Donnell translated, undeterred. "Beautifully done, eh? I love the brushstrokes. I believe the owner did them himself. What a culture!"

"Alex was born in Japan—did he tell you?" Kitty maneuvered out of the bathroom on her crutches with surprising fluidity. "This is the kitchen. It's terribly small but that actually helps when I can't move around so easily."

"No, he didn't tell me he was born in Japan," Kateri said, following her. With Mrs. O'Donnell, Mr. O'Donnell, and herself standing in the cluttered kitchen, the room was unbearably crowded. Every surface was packed with dishes, cookbooks, utensils, canisters, and small appliances.

"I'm still a U.S. citizen: I was born on the Army base in Okinawa," Alex said, leaning on the doorpost. "Does it explain too much?"

Again, Kateri felt she should suppress her sarcasm. *Negative humor comes from hell: send it back*, her mom was always saying. "Somewhat," she managed to say.

"We usually eat on the screened porch," Mrs. O'Donnell said. The porch had storm windows enclosing it, and a brick floor half-covered with a floppy Asian carpet. There were still dishes from the last meal on the brick-red painted

table. "I don't know what we'd do without it: we'd be really crammed into this house otherwise."

Kateri was thinking that the house would be so much less crammed if there was less stuff around, but she couldn't say that. She guessed that it was probably difficult enough for Mrs. O'Donnell to clean house on crutches, let alone declutter.

"Okay, so how did you survive in this house with three boys?" she said, hoping that didn't sound sarcastic.

"Thank God for the outdoors," Mrs. O'Donnell grinned at her.

"And there's upstairs," Alex said. "I'll show her, Mom. C'mon."

He pulled her past his dad, and Kateri was forced to sidle around him (Mr. O'Donnell was not a small person) to get through the kitchen and into the miniature hallway. Alex opened a door, revealing steps going upstairs.

"C'mon up." He gave her a hand and pulled her up the steps, which were steep and led up to a large open attic room.

Here, at least there was no congestion. An Oriental paper screen muted the light from one of the far windows ("Blocks the view of the telephone wires," Alex said). And there was no furniture. Instead, thick beige mats of springy hard foam covered nearly every surface, taped together with black duct tape. The walls were pale yellow, and neatly ordered rows of hooks held staffs, rings, wooden swords, and other Oriental weapons.

"It's our own dojo," Alex waved his arms around. "Dad and I made it together. This is where we practice."

"It's neat," Kateri breathed, giving the word its double meaning as she stepped out into the middle of the room, where the ceiling was the highest. Even with the slope of the roof, it still felt spacious. "But how can you do martial arts here? Don't you hit your head on the ceiling all the time?"

Alex unconsciously rubbed his head. "You learn to be very, very careful. It's actually been a wonderful discipline. I just repainted the ceiling, by the way. You won't believe how torn up the plaster gets when you have three guys attacking each other with wooden swords in here."

"I believe it," Kateri said, looking up. "I'm surprised the light fixtures are intact."

"Only sporadically," Alex said. "But during your stay, this will be a place for rest, not for war. Since we don't have a guest bedroom, I thought you might find it easier to sleep up here." He folded back the screen to reveal a cot bed, neatly covered with a red silk comforter embroidered with flowers. "It's small, but it'll get you out of the tumult."

"Thank you," Kateri said gratefully. She'd already pictured herself trying vainly to get to sleep in the jumbled downstairs living room. She couldn't relax in disorder. "It's wonderful."

He winked at her. "Let me go and get your stuff."



Kateri only survived for three hours in the O'Donnell's house before she began to clean. It was a nearly obsessive itch that oppressed her. The younger boys were still out, so she and Alex and his parents enjoyed a leisurely dinner out on the screen porch (with flowers and votive candles floating in a glass bowl on the table, and Japanese tea served in an iron teapot at the end of the meal) during which Kateri managed to restrain herself from helping. But when the meal was over and Mr. O'Donnell rose, saying he'd better clean up, Kateri blurted out, "I'll do the dishes!"

She attacked the kitchen with a fury, scrubbing and stacking and drying and putting away. It was all she could do to stop herself from cleaning out the refrigerator and re-organizing the cabinets. Alex, of course, was helping (after the table was cleared, Mr. O'Donnell had excused himself since there wasn't room for three people to work in the kitchen). Observing her energetic activity, her boyfriend remarked, "Making space, are you?"

"I can't imagine how you all live here."

"Like Mom said, we have the outside."

"Still!"

Shouts outdoors announced that the younger boys were home. They tore inside and pounded into the kitchen, then pulled to a halt to gape at her.

Alex intervened. "Ah. Here, Kateri, are the inhabitants of this house known collectively as the barbarian horde. As the Chinese treated the Mongolians, so we share the same territory, and attempt to control, educate, and eventually civilize, them."

Kateri surveyed the two younger boys, who were stocky, with wild blond hair spiking in every direction, and whose sports shirts and khaki shorts and sneakers bore the marks of mud, sweat, and slight ice cream stains. "Better give up and build the Great Wall."

The older one sputtered in laughter, and the younger one, with big blue round eyes said, "Are you really from the Far East?"

"No," she said with annoyance. "I'm from New Jersey."

“Cool!” He had clearly been waiting to say the word, regardless of her answer. “Can you do martial arts?”

“No,” she said. “I just use clubs.”

“Cool!”

Alex said, “Kateri, meet Sam and David. David is the older one and Sam is the smaller one. You’ll quickly be able to distinguish them because David is funnier.”

“He is not!” Sam said.

“Funnier looking, he means,” David said.

“Ha ha.”

Alex added, “I should also mention that David is completely unprincipled, particularly when it comes to video games.”

“When it comes to video games,” David grinned, “what fourteen-year-old has principles?”

“Democracy does not produce morality,” Alex said. “Kateri, forewarned is forearmed.”

They forced her to leave off cleaning and come and play video games with them, and Kateri, remembering her manners, managed to play two hours of *Super Mangan Brothers IX: Breakout of Jail* with reasonable politeness. Mrs. O’Donnell sat on the couch, crocheting something long and multi-colored, and Mr. O’Donnell had vanished.

“Dad’s on his computer, as usual,” Alex said, noticing Kateri glancing around.

“What does he do?”

“In the evenings, software programming,” Alex said.

“Code name for hacking,” David put in.

“He’s not trying to do anything illegal,” Alex said, a little sharply.

“Just because the laws haven’t caught up with him yet,” David said. “Pow! You’re dead, Kateri! Again. See what happens if you get distracted by talking?”

Distracted by talking, or even just thinking, Kateri said internally. *Neither of which seems to be compatible with this game.* With suppressed annoyance, she waited for her character, a bouncing pink fish, to attain enough Life-Force Energy to revive.

“If we had the new Super Mangan X game, you could blast right through that wall with the SuperM add-on blaster!” Sam said, apologetically. “We haven’t gotten that one yet. Yet! Right, Mom? We’ll get it soon.”

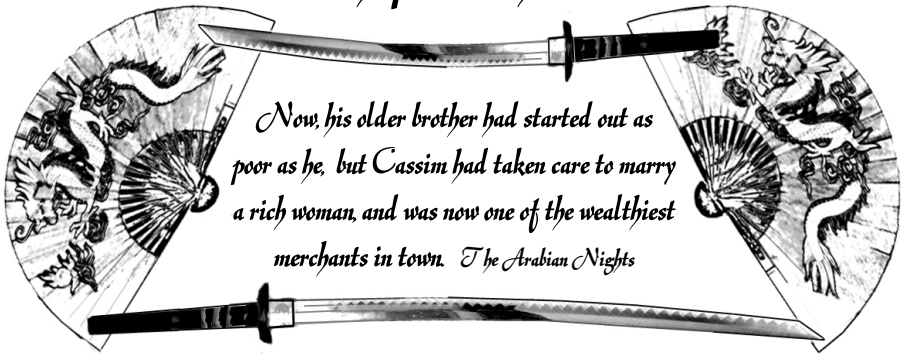
But Mrs. O’Donnell only looked worried, and Kateri gazed again at the door to the bedroom where Mr. O’Donnell had disappeared. What was he doing in there?

It occurred to Kateri that she hadn't been shown the bedroom. That was normal: many married couples didn't put their bedrooms on display. But now his behavior during the house tour struck her as odd. Was Mr. O'Donnell trying to distract her from something very obvious, and very important? *Why? Why was he afraid—?*

Afraid. Kateri closed her eyes. That was what she had caught in Mr. O'Donnell's eyes: fear.

But of what?

Chapter Three



Now, his older brother had started out as poor as he, but Cassim had taken care to marry a rich woman, and was now one of the wealthiest merchants in town. The Arabian Nights

So what's going on?"

It was extremely late at night, but Kateri and Alex were still up and talking in the dojo. The O'Donnells were night owls, another contrast to Kateri's early-rising family. The younger boys were still playing a video game, Mrs. O'Donnell had taken her crocheting to the bedroom to watch TV, and Mr. O'Donnell was apparently still on the computer. Kateri herself was tired, but she was also worried, and worry had a way of not letting her sleep.

"I wish I knew," Alex said, sitting on the steps. "He won't tell us anything."

Alex had accompanied Kateri upstairs, but out of propriety, he was sitting on the steps. Since the dojo was now Kateri's bedroom, both he and Kateri had agreed that it wouldn't be a good example to the younger boys for them to hang out alone there together at night. The door to the downstairs was open, but the video game music obscured their conversation.

"So what did he say when the check showed up?"

Alex shrugged. "I didn't tell him until it cleared. I actually almost forgot about it. Mom does the books: she saw the amount."

Kateri, who was sitting on the bed, hugged her legs to herself and tried to imagine suddenly having a million dollars. What would that feel like?

"Yeah." As usual, Alex seemed to read her thoughts. "It's really a strange situation: having money, even if we're not able to use it. There're so many things we could do with it: well, you can see how we live."

"What would *you* do with the money?" Kateri asked, trying to avoid the mystery neither could solve.

Alex inclined his head. "Ladies first. Tell me what you would do."

Kateri shrugged. "Help my parents pay off the house, settle my student loan debts, donate large sums of money to the Church and the pro-life cause."

"Yeah, pretty much the same for me." He paused, and his green eyes looked distant. "Plus get a bigger house for the family. Get Mom some more physical therapy, maybe some of the treatments we can't afford. Help Dad start another business. We'd probably lose all the money that way, but I know he hates the government contracting job he has now."

Kateri nodded. She and Alex had that in common. They were religious, idealistic, and poor. She changed the subject. "Your mom is a real trooper with her illness."

"Yeah, isn't she great?" Alex spoke affectionately. "You know, she doesn't care about not being able to afford therapy. I think she just offers everything up. I know the disease is hard for her, but she keeps on trucking. And laughing. She can't keep up with the house and with all of us, but she's always finding something to smile about. Even before this happened."

"Yeah, I can see that. Wow." Kateri burrowed her chin into her hands and thought. Even though the disorder in the O'Donnell house was driving Kateri crazy, she really liked Mrs. O'Donnell. "I can see she has a tough time with the house. I can't imagine. Do you think she would mind if I helped her out a bit? I don't want to insult her..."

"Oh, even before she got sick, the house was never clean," Alex said. "I guess none of us are very organized. But to answer your question, I bet she'd love it if you helped." He looked at her shrewdly. "I can see the nervous twitch in your eyebrow, Kat."

She rubbed her eyes. "What nervous twitch?"

"That itch you get when you want to declutter things. I saw it every time you looked into my dorm room. Well, you'd better suppress it. I bet you can't wait to get your hands on this house and de-junk it. But you'd better not throw anything out. Both my parents are pretty sentimental about their stuff. And so am I. So lay off the downsizing mission."

She gritted her teeth. How could Alex know her so well? "Forewarned is forearmed," she said. "Fortunately for you, I grew up with nine messy brothers and sisters. Believe me, I've learned the hard way that you can't force people to be as neat as you want them to be."

Alex chuckled. "Having seen the chaos inside the Kovach family farmhouse, I'm amazed that you're still sane," he remarked, getting to his feet. "Well, I'm glad we have at least one clean room in the house for you to sleep in."

"You didn't clean it up especially for me?" she looked around distrustfully.

"Oh, no. Well, I did send a couple dozen crates to the Lock N'Store down the street for your visit. I figured you wouldn't want to sleep in the same room as the rowing machine and the hanging loom." He leaned over and kissed her, laughing at her expression. "See you in the morning."

The problem was, she decided as she slid under the quilted silk sleeping bag, she couldn't tell if Alex was teasing her or not. And he knew it.



Even though Kateri was an early riser, Mr. O'Donnell was gone when she went downstairs in the morning. Alex had mentioned that his dad, like most commuters of Northern Virginia, rose earlier than farmers in order to beat the traffic into DC. The rest of the O'Donnells slept in, so Kateri went downstairs, made coffee, and, unable to control herself, started straightening up the silverware drawer.

She was trying to stack all the forks and spoons neatly in the divider without making noise when she heard the squeak of crutches on wood, and she looked up guiltily, to see Mrs. O'Donnell, wearing a pink floral housecoat and leaning on her crutches with a pleased expression on her face.

"Good morning! Kateri, I can't tell you how nice it is to have another woman in the house. One who understands that forks and knives are utensils, not weapons."

"I hope you don't mind," Kateri murmured.

"I had to surrender control of my kitchen a long time ago, back when the MS first started." Mrs. O'Donnell waved her hands. "Please. I would be delighted with anything you wanted to do. Poor Alan and Alex. They try so hard to keep things ordered, but they just don't have a woman's eye for how things should be."

Gratefully, Kateri removed three chopsticks from the pile of silverware on the counter and tucked them into the side of the drawer. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"No, my dear, allow me. Oh, this is fresh! Did you make it? Alan must have been preoccupied this morning; he usually starts it." One bound with her crutches had landed Mrs. O'Donnell beside the counter where she started pulling mugs out of the tiny dishwasher. "Do you take milk? Sugar?"

"Both, thanks."

They chatted comfortably until Alex got up, already dressed with his long black hair in his usual ponytail. He kissed each of them. "Eggs, anyone? Mom, did you want a muffin?"

"That would be wonderful," his mother handed Kateri her coffee, and then sank into the one chair in the kitchen that had nothing stacked on it. Alex fixed

his mother's coffee with milk, and set it on the windowsill beside her, then turned to the stove to make eggs.

I like that he takes care of her, Kateri thought before she could catch herself. *That's a good sign*. She growled inwardly. Why was she still scrutinizing Alex as a potential marriage partner, even as she was steeling herself to break up with him? Nevertheless, it was interesting to see this side of him.

He shook his head at Kateri, who was pulling matchbox cars out of the utensil drawer. "I warned you expressly and in great detail about cleaning," he murmured.

"I'm just curious to see what else you have in here," she said, pulling out directions for Yahtzee, a plastic mouse, and six screws.

"CKTC," he sighed.



Alex was happy. Despite his rebuke to Kateri, despite his worry about his father, and despite the Mystery Money, the fact was that Kateri was here. And so far she hadn't exploded, and the house hadn't blown up. In fact, Kateri almost seemed to like it here. Perhaps he was being optimistic. But when he had been awakened by the sound of her voice conversing with his mother's in the kitchen, it had sounded so completely natural, as though the two women had been fated to be friends from time immemorial. And he had felt as though the two halves of his world were converging as smoothly as yin and yang.

It had propelled him out of bed a full half hour earlier than usual. Regardless of what happened with Dad and with the money, if Kateri could get along with his mother, life was bliss.

Breakfast was a cheerful affair. His mother and Kateri had seemed to have agreed that the topic between them was going to be the kitchen. Kateri was admiring the furniture, cups, and plates his mom had painted. (During the course of her illness, Alex's mom had covered just about every wooden and pottery surface with flowers and designs, bringing brisk business to both the ceramics and unfinished wooden furniture stores in town). His mom was saying that she really wanted to sort through the crowded shelves of cups and get rid of the sports mugs and joke mugs among them. "The problem is, there are mugs *all* over the house."

"You're not getting rid of my Ninja Monkey mug," Alex warned her, finishing his eggs. "Paul Fester gave that to me. And the Mercy College beer steins have got to stay."

Both women glanced at each other, and Alex knew that behind-the-scene negotiations had already commenced. "All right, I'll get the mail," he said, ducking out.

The younger boys derailed the kitchen summit when they woke up and actually wanted to use the kitchen for eating. Kateri furnished them with bowls of cereal and Mom sent them out to the porch to eat. Alex turned on the television and caught up with the latest inside-the-Beltway news. The younger boys ate fast, and perhaps sensing that they were going to be pressed into service, dashed outside as soon as they finished.

At last his mom came into the living room and settled herself in her usual spot on the couch with a sigh, looking tired but happy.

"I'll just go through the lower cabinets and bring out anything that doesn't match for you to make a decision on," Kateri said from the doorway. She was wearing his mother's blue apron with the pink roses and looked all mission-oriented. He was used to seeing that expression on her face when she was organizing a massive pro-life protest.

"Wonderful, Kateri. That sounds wonderful," his mom replied.

Alex decided that if his mother was going to back up Kateri in her campaign, he was going to surrender to the inevitable, like any wise general. Link, the orange-tortoiseshell cat, who had been hiding under his parents' bed since Kateri arrived, came out purring, and leapt up into Alex's lap to have her long black-and-orange fur stroked.

"All's right with the world," Alex said, and the cat seemed to agree.

"Did you get the mail?" his mom asked, picking up her crochet needle.

"Right here," Alex said, picking up the sheaf from the end table. "Do you want it?"

"Just the newspaper. Can you sort through the mail for me? Thanks!"

Whistling, Alex sifted through the mail, and slathered a large portion of it into the trashcan. "All that's left is the phone bill, cable bill, garbage collection bill, and one actual letter." He held up the last for his mother to see.

She looked at it, and then wearily leaned her head back on the sofa. "Can you open it for me?"

Obediently, Alex pulled out his penknife, slit open the envelope, and removed the folded piece of paper. He instantly recognized the handwriting of the curt, scribbled note and understood his mother's reticence.

"It's from Uncle Cass, isn't it?" she said. "I knew he would send something. We weren't able to make the payment last month. Dad already called him to ask for an extension."

Alex read the heated note, and felt a spasm of anger himself. "You know, it's a good thing we're related, because otherwise, I'd never do business with him."

She sighed. "We did borrow a lot of money from him when the insurance didn't cover my medical bills. He just needs us to repay. That's all."

"Yeah, but I just find it a little hard that's he's been charging us interest!" Alex said bitterly. Every month for the past seven years, they were supposed to send a check to Uncle Cass, and with the interest he charged, the amount they owed seemed to get bigger and bigger, because they weren't always able to pay every month.

"Well, at least he didn't call a collection agency," she said humorously. Then abruptly she lapsed into silence, and her face took on that far-off look that Alex also recognized. She was calculating, running figures in her head. His mother was as good as an MIT professor when it came to numbers. She had worked as an actuary before her marriage.

After a few minutes, she said, "Hand me the checkbook, will you?"

Alex found it near her yarn basket, and she opened the plastic-covered book, took out a pencil, and started making marks, then was silent again for a long time while Alex turned back to the TV.

When a commercial came on, he glanced at her and saw Mom had a small smile on her face. "I think it might work. If we can use our new financial status to get a loan from the bank with a better interest rate, we can pay him back, in full. After the end of the month."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why then?"

"Because of when the interest is paid. We wouldn't have to use a cent of the money. All we'd have to do is take advantage of the fact that we *have* the money. Actually, this opens up all sorts of interesting possibilities..." She buried her head in the checkbook, and did not look up until lunchtime.



Kateri pushed back a strand of black hair from her face and surveyed her work. She had spent most of the day re-organizing the kitchen: removing books, papers, toys, and Oriental weapons from the cupboards and thinning out the kitchen materials to what the family actually used. She tried hard not to be disgusted at the amount of junk in the kitchen. *My family is just as messy*, she said to herself. *But by golly, I'm not going to have a kitchen like this when I get*

married. It was another point against Alex: surely living with him would eventually produce a kitchen as cluttered as this one.

The two younger boys, covered with dust, yelling and sweating, had returned for lunch, which Kateri made them eat at the table in a civilized manner. They seemed to be intimidated enough to avoid her afterwards. Now that the afternoon heat had settled on the suburbs in earnest, the boys were engrossed in a video game while an ancient air conditioner roared away in the living room window. When Kateri finished putting the last promotional mug into an overflowing box marked “giveaways,” it was shortly after three o’clock, and Alex had gone to the store for his mom. Mrs. O’Donnell sat on the couch next to the air conditioner’s blast, her eyes closed, her fingers moving on rosary beads. Kateri didn’t want to disturb her. So she escaped to her dojo bedroom and sat on the bed, thinking about Alex and why she had started dating him.

Kateri liked to think of herself as a person with high ideals. Whenever she imagined being married, it was usually to someone like herself: an activist, a missionary, someone who worked the land, or at the very least, someone Asian. That was an accurate description of her former boyfriends, who had been either friends from the Vietnamese Club, or practical, hands-on farm boys, or dedicated pro-life activists. They’d mostly been thin, earnest guys: short-haired, good workers, more inclined to pick up a book by Fr. Paul Marx than a sword.

In her list of qualities of a future spouse, physical attractiveness was very low on the list—if had even made her list at all. So it was utterly frustrating to her that the first thing she had noticed about Alex was that she found him *appealing*. Not handsome, not good-looking, just very...appealing.

He had first caught her eye when he and some of his roommates were climbing trees on campus: he’d been wearing a sleeveless shirt and had thrown himself at a branch above his head and swung up easily as a cat. As a farm girl, upper-body strength was something she tended to notice and appreciate.

So she had noticed him. End of story.

Of course, she hadn’t liked him: given his tattoos and long hair, she’d assumed he was a biker-wanna-be, shallow and immature. Then, later on, when she knew him better, she still thought he lacked drive and character. But all along, she couldn’t help noticing how her skin prickled every time he walked near her, how she was always aware of what he was doing in a room, even if she didn’t want to be, how her eyes kept being pulled to him as he raced around campus with his friends from Sacra Cor dorm. It was extremely aggravating, and he was source material for not a few sessions in the confessional.

At that point in Kateri’s life, Alex O’Donnell was just a distraction: a very physical distraction, and hence, annoying.

In any case, he hadn't picked up on her attraction. She kept him at arms' length and whenever they crossed paths, she made sure she found a lot to criticize about him. And he returned the favor. So it was astonishing to her, when she found herself embroiled in a dangerous situation, that it was Alex who stepped up to the plate to rescue her. That was the first time she guessed that maybe he had been pretending to be disinterested as well.

Of course, they both kept on playing the game of cool disdain, but eventually they realized that it was a game without a point. When their friend Rose was in dire trouble, saving her life had created a state of affairs where Kateri and Alex actually had to put aside their differences in order to work and strategize together.

And when it was all over, and Rose was safe, Kateri felt it was only fair to catch Alex alone to thank him for his courage and thoughtfulness, and to admit she had misjudged him. That was all she intended to do.

So at some terribly early hour of the morning after that adventure had ended, Alex had driven her and their friends back onto campus. He'd dropped off the others, and finally parked his car outside her dorm, and, gentleman-like, escorted her to the door. She'd discovered that was the difference between Alex and most bikers: Alex had impeccable good manners when it came to girls.

And Kateri, who had rehearsed her compliments in the car, found herself tongue-tied as she turned around to face Alex.

"I just wanted to say..." she began, and realized that Alex was looking at her with a curiously intense look in his green eyes. But he said nothing.

She swallowed, and tried again, "I wanted to say..."

He just kept looking at her quietly. She looked away from him, up at the sky, and realized that the stars were shining down on them, as though the angels had cued the lights. Hurriedly she glanced back at him, and that was no help. He was still looking at her with that intensely interested gaze, not saying anything. And now, she found she couldn't look away.

"...thank you?" Absurdly, it sounded like a question.

Alex took a step closer to her, and she found herself moving closer to him. And the next thing she knew...

Um, well...

She'd never thought of herself as a swooning heroine, but she came pretty close that night. And Alex certainly didn't seem to mind that she had melted like chocolate in his arms. But it was irritating for Kateri just the same.

From her point of view, marriage should be based on practical considerations, like compatibility and temperament and friendship. Well, sure, she was friends with Alex now, but she had always heard that a relationship that started out with passion was destined to fail. She was skeptical of romance novels, and now

that she seemed to be trapped in one, complete with a swashbuckling and witty hero, she couldn't help feeling that she was miscast.

For one thing, she wasn't pretty, let alone beautiful. Strong, tough, idealistic, truthful: those were the words she reached for when she thought about herself. Not a quivering, feminine mass of nerve endings who was willing to forget about her ideals for a set of marvelous biceps.

It wasn't that she disliked Alex: it was just that he didn't match up with the kind of guy she had always visualized she would marry. And she didn't know if she should stick to her original ideas, or change the picture to fit reality.

Finally, unable to find her way out of the maze of her conflicts, she threw up her hands, and decided to check her email.

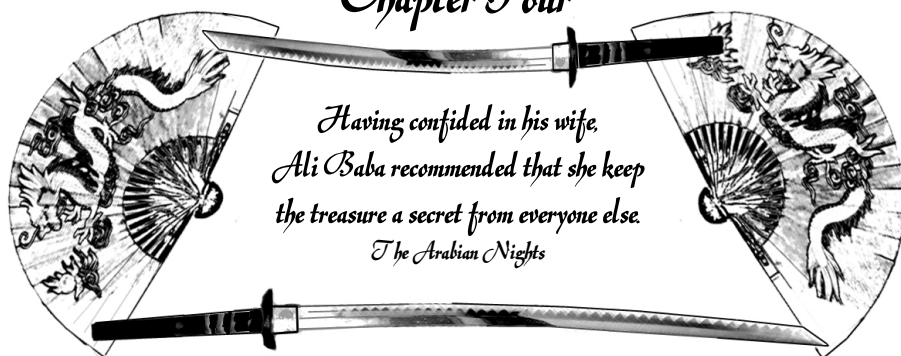
A bit guiltily, she took her little blue laptop from her backpack. It had been a graduation present, the first computer she had actually owned. Kateri didn't like to be dependent on electronic equipment: for most of her life, she had distained the virtual for the real. The laptop represented a compromise with modernity part of her resented. Compromise? Was this going to be the new theme of her life?

She booted up her email and checked her inbox. After the usual routine of deleting junk mail and organizing her folders, she went to her Facebook and began to write a note to her parents, saying she had reached the O'Donnells safely, and things were fine—when *it* happened.

An animated cat, dressed in samurai clothing with a headband, jumped right onto the screen in front of her letter, brandishing a Japanese sword. A bubble appeared over his head with writing.

Can I Has Swordfights?

Chapter Four



*Having confided in his wife,
Ali Baba recommended that she keep
the treasure a secret from everyone else.
The Arabian Nights*

Bateri stared incredulously at the supersized anime figure that was hovering in front of her text, blocking her view of the Facebook page.

“What the—” She tried to click around it, but the cat sprang into action, hitting her cursor so that it pinged off the sides of the screen crazily. She hit the ESC key, the CTRL-ALT-DEL keys: nothing. The little monster had completely taken over her computer. It even laughed at her as she hit the keys.

De Kitty Wants Swordfights.
U R Giving Me Swordfights NOW.

Emitting a yell, she grabbed her computer and shook it, then dropped it into her lap and stared at the anime cat again. It was still grinning at her and posturing with its sword.

Can I Has Swordfights?

“How do I fight you?” she exclaimed.

“Click on its sword,” David advised her, sliding next to her.

“Use the space bar too,” Sam said, coming up the steps behind him. “I love this!”

“Did you two do this?”

“Us?” David said, his eyes fixed on the cat. “Nah, Dad built him. He’s the most highly detailed override security program ever made.”

“An override security program?” Kateri shouted.

“Yeah, he’s our network security guy,” Sam said. “We have wireless internet, and Dad was trying to secure it so that no one else can get onto it. Most security

systems have popup boxes. Dad built this guy instead. The neat thing is, if you can defeat him, you can use the Internet. Otherwise he boots you off."

"But I was on the Internet!" Kateri said as the cat threw its sword rapidly back from hand to hand with a fierce grin.

"Just like the guy in Indiana Jones," David said happily. "I love it when he does that."

"Yeah, he'll let you use the Web for five minutes and forty five seconds," Sam said. "But then you have to fight him. Come on, fight him, Kateri, fight!"

Conned into playing a video game. Of course. This *would* be Alex's house. Snarling back at the cat, Kateri grabbed her mouse from her backpack and plugged it in. "What do I do again?"

"The cursor is your sword... so...what do you do with a sword?"

"Um. I don't know. Cut his throat?"

David shrugged. "That's a start."

Figuring this should be simple enough, Kateri aimed the cursor onto the cat's throat but the cat easily deflected it, sending her cursor bouncing. She managed to control it with the space bar (Aha.) and tried again. She couldn't get the cursor anywhere on the cat without hitting the cat's flashing silver blade.

"Go for his feet," David advised.

After a few seconds of fruitless effort, Kateri was reduced to banging the mouse on the side of her keyboard. The cat complained,

U R Doin It Wrong!

"That won't do anything," Sam said. "Believe me, I've tried. Neither will breaking the mouse."

"How do I get this thing to leave?" Kateri demanded.

"Well, come on," David said. "You're Alex's girlfriend. Don't you know how to swordfight?"

Swordfight? Kateri blinked at him. "What are you talking about? I'm his girlfriend, not his sparring partner."

"I thought Alex always taught his girlfriends to swordfight."

"He didn't teach me. I'm a pacifist."

"Well, that's dumb," Sam said. "What do you want to be that for? You could be learning a valuable skill. For free."

"Because killing doesn't solve problems," Kateri said.

"Um, yeah it does," Now David stared at her. "I mean, it doesn't solve *every* problem. But it solves *some* kinds of problems. Like, it stops bad guys from killing weak people. The neat thing is you don't even have to *kill* the bad guys to stop

them, just *threaten* to kill them. Don't you know that? I thought you graduated from college."

"Magna cum laude," Kateri growled.

"Well, then you should know about this stuff by now!" David said.

"David!" Sam was elbowing him. "David. Shh. She doesn't have a job. She hasn't gone out into the real world yet."

"Oh. Yeah." David focused his attention back on the screen. "Hey, Kat, shaking the mouse back and forth isn't going to do anything. Try swooping it."

"What's going on?" Alex appeared at the foot of the steps. "What are you doing, Kateri?"

"Reconsidering my position on taking human life," Kateri looked up and met his eyes. "I'm about to make two exceptions. Maybe three."

"Boys, what have you been up to?" Alex climbed the steps and looked over her shoulder. "Oh! Our little samurai security cat! Isn't he cute? I love it when this happens to guests."

"Uh, Alex. I wouldn't goad her. She's nearly catatonic," David said.

"And she doesn't know how to swordfight! What's up with that?" Sam said. "I thought this would be a cinch for any of your girlfriends."

"Let's not get into my dating history," Alex said. "Kateri, just swoop your mouse from side to side as though it's a sword blade. No, not so jagged. A little more graceful. That's it. Use the side of the screen for practice. Try diagonal—you're getting it! Okay, now go in at a right angle—there you go!"

The cat staggered to one side, blood flowing from his shoulder.

"Yuck!" Kateri exclaimed.

"Realistic, isn't it? Okay, go in from the other side, diagonal again..."

Another swoop, and the cat staggered back.

Ouchay!

"Don't worry, you don't have to kill him. Just wounding both sword arms will do it," Alex directed. "See?"

U Giv Me Good Swordfight!

U Can Has Interwebs Now.

The cat sheathed its sword and made a deep Oriental bow, then vanished. The three brothers cheered.

"You have won the privilege of using the Internet in our home," David rose and said ceremoniously, "Please resume your browsing pleasure." Cackling, he turned and hurried downstairs.

“See why you need to learn how to swordfight?” Sam said. He raised a finger. “Lack of effort is not a virtue,” he said in a deep voice that was obviously imitating his father’s. He turned and followed David.

Alex leaned against the stairwell wall, smiling. “So you’re reconsidering your pacifism?”

“Reconsidering a *lot* of things!” Kateri grabbed her laptop and scrunched herself into the corner of the bed.

“Aw, come on Kateri, don’t be mad.”

For an answer, Kateri flicked hard eyes at him over the screen for an instant.

“Want some pistachios?” he held out a bag. “I got them just for you.”

She ignored him.

“Kateri,” He stretched out her name, cajoling. “Come on! That wasn’t even a very hard fight! You should see when Dad is actually controlling the cat: then it’s really hard to beat him. I once fought that thing for forty-five minutes while you were waiting for me in a chat box.”

“What? You mean that one time at Christmas when we were chatting on the Sacra Cor website, and suddenly you vanished?” She remembered that incident. She’d been waiting at the keyboard, wondering what had happened, getting occasional messages from him that said, “Tech problems!” When he finally returned, he’d just said that they were having network security problems at the house and they resumed their serious conversation.

“You should have been here,” he groaned. “The whole family was downstairs at Dad’s computer, cheering him on while he fought me and I sat up here trying to reconnect to the internet. He made me defeat the cat no less than seven times, while Mom and the boys shouted, ‘Go Dad! Go Dad!’ That’s the last time I ever buy my parents Tequila for Christmas.” He made pathetic eyes at her. “So I’m a victim, too.”

She couldn’t help grinning at the picture of Alex so disoriented. “I guess that’s what happens in this household when you start dating someone.”

“Yeah, it goes with the territory.” He shook his head, and crossed into the dojo. Taking a wooden sword from the wall, he stretched. “But I really should teach you swordfighting.”

“Not now,” she said, returning to Facebook.

“But soon.” He bowed, stepped onto the mat, and began his *kata*, sword exercises she was already familiar with. She could sit there and watch him, but then she’d probably have to go to confession. Dating Alex hadn’t made that part any easier.

For once, she buried herself gratefully in electronic distractions without a shred of guilt.



Alex finished his exercises, feeling alert and fully rested. When he was home, he didn't do his *kata* as often as he should: it was hard to keep to a schedule. *Eh, I need either full-time school or a full-time job to keep me organized*, he reflected. His natural tendency was laziness. It helped having Kateri there. He wondered again how long she was going to stay.

She was still on her computer, so whistling, he went downstairs to get a drink of water.

"Alex?" Mom called from the living room.

"Can I get you something, Mom?" He recognized the tone of voice.

"My burgundy yarn from the bedroom? It's in the pile next to the closet in a plastic bag," she said. "Alan picked it up for me last week."

"Sure thing," Alex said. He pushed the door to his parent's room open (it always stuck on the carpet: bad hinges) and squinted in the half-dark. His dad's computer was on, with a screensaver of family photos bouncing and dissolving across the screen.

As he made his way through the room, suddenly the screensaver quivered and went off. Alex glanced at the desktop which had appeared, with a photo of Zatoichi the Blind Samurai in the background. Maybe he'd creaked the room's loose floorboard and caused the mouse to move?

But no. Oddly enough, the cursor was slowly moving across the screen, on its own.

Intently Alex watched the cursor hover and then swoop down onto an icon and click it. A menu opened, and the cursor scrolled down through the options.

There was no hand on the mouse. But the cursor was definitely moving.

Thinking, Alex grabbed the mouse, which responded to his touch, and clicked a text program. He typed in the open box:

Dad? Is this you?

He waited. The cursor began to move again of its own accord and typed.

Yes. Alex?

Alex typed back.

What's my favorite color?

The cursor responded promptly.

Chinese red.

Alex breathed in relief, and typed.

You sure freaked me out.

A second later the cursor wrote:

Sorry.
Just accessing my home computer from work.
I do it all the time. Kitty knows.

Alex typed,

Okay, just checking! See you tonight.

Shaking his head, he pushed the keyboard away.



Kateri guessed that Alex must have been watching her that evening during dinner, because when she tried to unobtrusively excuse herself from the table, she found her arm suddenly immobilized in a jujitsu hold. “No cleaning,” he said firmly, looking into her eyes.

“I want to help,” she said, with a mixture of amusement and annoyance.

“I want you to sit down and relax,” Alex said. He nodded to the others at the table. “Hey, Kateri, you should tell them your family history.”

She pushed back her hair. “I don’t want to bore them.”

He folded his arms behind his head. “It’s better than hearing Dad describe the history of the O’Donnell clan, and much less fictional.”

“Why don’t you explain the differences between Vietnamese and Japanese culture?” Mr. O’Donnell suggested. “Set us all straight so that we don’t mix things up and offend you.”

"What about the difference between Vietnamese and Chinese too?" David asked.

"And I'm confused about the difference between China and Japan..." Sam said.

Kateri shook her head with impatience as she resumed her seat. "All very different. China is a huge sprawling mainland civilization, and Japan is a little island with a superiority complex. Vietnam is a long strip of coastland and islands on the southern tip of Asia that managed to get free of China about eleven hundred years ago and went on to develop its own culture." She looked around. "How about I just tell you about Vietnamese culture, and you use Wikipedia to look up the rest?"

"That works," Mr. O'Donnell said.

"Well," Kateri ran her fingers through her hair to try to collect her thoughts. "Vietnam used to be part of China, so I guess you could say that our culture is a lot like Chinese culture. But we're still very different! We've been independent from China pretty much since the tenth century, ever since we fought for the right to govern ourselves and won."

"Eleven hundred years ago, when America was just wilderness," Mr. O'Donnell put in. "Gives you some perspective, eh boys?"

Kateri went on, "And one thing I find interesting about the Vietnamese is that many of us really took to Catholicism."

"Well, it was a French colony back in the 1800s, right?" Mr. O'Donnell said.

"Yes, but that's not how Catholicism came to Vietnam. Try the sixteenth century. It was the Jesuit missionaries from Portugal who brought the faith over. One of the Jesuits created the first Vietnamese written alphabet and we still use it today. And Vietnam wasn't a French colony for very long, by the way. We kicked them out pretty fast. Catholics were persecuted before and after the time of the colonization, but many Vietnamese held onto the faith."

"And then the communists took over," Mr. O'Donnell said.

"And everything changed," Kateri said quietly. "That's when my family came over here." She'd never been to Vietnam herself, but she had heard her mother's stories of growing up there, and she felt she shared her mother's connection to her homeland. "My mom's taught us everything she can about the culture. I speak a bit of the language. She taught us girls how to cook all the major kinds of *pho*. And how to do the Fan Dance."

"The Fan Dance? What's that?" Sam asked.

"Just one of the more famous Vietnamese dances. We used to do it all the time for homeschool talent shows and other events."

"Wow! Can you do it for us someday?"

“Maybe,” Kateri said. “But I warn you, I’m not very good at it.” That was an understatement, she thought. She had liked doing it when she was the smallest and shortest of her five sisters, when people thought she was adorably cute for mimicking them. But when she grew to be a teenager, she suddenly became all thumbs and angles, and never seemed to be able to achieve the weightless energy of her siblings. Plus there was the whole lacking-beauty thing.

“When did your mom leave Vietnam?” Mrs. O’Donnell asked.

“After the war,” Kateri said.

“Did she teach you any martial arts? The Vietnamese scissor kicks are famous,” David took another helping of stew.

“No,” she said, and thought *why did boys only think about fighting?*

“Shhh,” said Alex. “She’s just getting to the good part of her history. Don’t distract her. Kateri, tell them how your parents met.”

She glanced at Alex, who raised his eyebrows a bit pleadingly. Sighing, she gave in. “My dad was an American soldier in Vietnam during the war. They met when he was stationed near her village, and they kept in touch after he was wounded and had to go back to the States.” Kateri took another helping of salad, and wondered if her mom had started out by finding her dad physically attractive. Probably. There was a language barrier that separated them—both of them spoke only a little French—so they couldn’t have done much talking. It suddenly occurred to Kateri that her own parents might have started out having a more conventional romance.

She shook her head to focus back on the story. “Then, when the Communists took over after the United States pulled out, Mom’s family was in danger of being killed, so they got a fishing boat together with a group of other families and tried to cross the Pacific to get to America.”

“Really?” Mr. O’Donnell said. “So your family were some of the boat people.”

“Some of the *lucky* boat people,” Kateri said, trying to keep her voice cool. “My mom’s mother and brother—my grandmother and uncle—died on the way over.” Her mother had described the horrors of the journey to her, but Kateri didn’t feel the need to go into them now. “My grandfather died after they were picked up by freighter on the shipping lanes. But my mother survived. The freighter that picked them up took them to San Francisco and there she wrote to my father, who was back in Jersey with his family.”

She swallowed, “The very day he received her letter, he got on a train and came to get her. They got married within the month.”

The O’Donnells were spellbound, and she could tell that Mr. and Mrs. O’Donnell were deeply moved.

"What a story," Mrs. O'Donnell breathed. "To have that in your background—that's so romantic."

Kateri shrugged, trying to avoid getting emotional. She liked the O'Donnells, but she wasn't ready to cry in front of them. "Yes, I come from a family of romantics. Combine Vietnamese and Poles, and that's what you get."

Alex squeezed her hand. "Kateri, relax and enjoy this romantic heritage of yours."

Kateri rubbed her eyes a bit irritably. "I just hate being the center of attention. It was my parents who were the heroes. I'm just their youngest daughter."

"So, with such a romantic history, why do you always try to be so practical?" Alex teased her.

A bit surprised, she shrugged. "Reaction, I suppose. But you can't call me a pragmatist. Otherwise I'd never be an activist."

"And never gotten involved with me," Alex supplied.

She inclined her head. "I was just going to say that."

"So can you do a Fan Dance for us?" David asked.

Alex pretended to biff him on the head. "Not until you learn a better sense of timing."



Alex had assessed his campaign and decided that an intervention was called for. So on Saturday morning, he hustled Kateri out the door early. "Today we are escaping from my messy house. It's time for me to behave like a decent boyfriend and take you to DC to enjoy yourself."

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," muttered Kateri, but she let herself be pulled along to Alex's car. "I thought you said we were going to Mass."

"At the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, of course," Alex said, opening the door for her. He was pleased that she was wearing her blue summer dress and a yellow sweater, with her ample wavy hair caught up in a flowered ponytail. "But first we'll take the metro and hit the Smithsonian museums. Then noon Mass at the Basilica. Sound like fun?"

"Definitely." Alex thought she sounded relieved.

They drove through the early morning light on a mostly-free Route 66, driving over the broad bridge across the Potomac just as the sun cleared the

clouds. The low profile of the capitol gleamed in the early light, and Alex reflected that even DC didn't look so bad on a morning like this.

They parked at Catholic University and rode the metro train to the DC Mall to take advantage of the free museums. Alex relished the experience of holding hands with Kateri as they walked about the cavernous exhibits. It was like exploring a new world together, and he began to feel that this partnership with her was something he wanted to hold onto.

"Can't believe that you made the March for Life in Washington DC every year since you were three and never once visited the Smithsonian!" he chided her.

She raised her small chin to examine a model of a praying mantis. "I was out in the cold, doing what the March is all about: praying for the unborn, attending the rally, and marching."

"Yeah, but didn't you ever leave the rally at the beginning to at least visit the Museum of Natural History? You mean you actually stood in the cold for two hours listening to those speeches?"

"Yes."

"Didn't it dawn on you that the speeches are the same every year? Come on, Kateri. You should have gone into the museums at least once, just to warm up your feet."

She regarded him coolly. "To my family, the March is all about sacrifice. Making reparation. Not sightseeing."

"I guess you're right," he conceded. He stared at the insect display. "But I always thought it was a challenge to see how much of the Natural History Museum we could manage to squeeze in before the March began."

She made a face at him. "Disloyalist. Don't you know how hard they work to prepare those speeches?" But she smiled. "And this way, I can see it all for the first time, with you."

"Aww," he teased. But inside, he couldn't help rejoicing.

At noon, they returned to the Basilica, which towered into sight, massive and forthright atop its marble staircase. Alex challenged Kateri to race him up the countless steps to the top, while humming the "Rocky" theme.

"Hey, you're really in shape!" he exclaimed as she finally reached the last step while he waited for her. "You're not half as out of breath as my other friends usually are. And you hate exercising. I don't get it."

She folded her arms. "I don't exercise. I live. On a farm."

"Oh yeah. I guess that's a real workout."

"It's real *work*, if that's what you mean," she said. Despite his praise, she was slightly out of breath. "That's the problem with most Americans. They never

really work hard, so they have to create artificial work—exercise—to stay in shape. So no, I don't exercise. I work."

"Ah," Alex said, and glanced behind him. "Let's go in and explore before Mass."

"I've been here before," Kateri said. "Remember? The March for Life?"

"Yeah," said Alex, "but I bet you haven't been in the *organ loft!*"



"We're not supposed to be up here!" Kateri scolded him as they peered down over the balcony.

"Probably not," Alex agreed. "But we're not bothering anyone." He looked appreciatively over the vast expanse of the church with its stone columns, barrel-vaulted ceiling, and gold mosaic of Christ in glory on the far wall. "This is my favorite view of the basilica. C'mon down this way."

He led her along a dark, narrow passageway that ran along the upper walls of the church, pierced with arched windows that allowed them to look down on the church below. The hallway was barely big enough for one person. Alex paused when they were opposite one of the mosaics in the cross of the basilica. "Beautiful, huh?"

"How did you figure out how to come up here?"

He shrugged. "I have a friend who plays the organ on some Sundays and he invited me up. You're right, we're not supposed to be here. I guess I'm showing off."

"You are," she accused. But she gazed through the small pillared archway at the lovely mosaic of Our Lady and smiled. "Though it really *is* beautiful."

He grinned. "Okay, I got my compliment. Now we can go down."

"Is that why you men do so many off-the-wall things—just because you're hoping you'll get a compliment?"

"You won't believe the things we guys'll do for attention," Alex said. "Consider it a compliment—to *you*." He made a slight bow.

She sighed, but she took his hand warmly, so he guessed that the sigh was mostly for effect. Holding hands, they went downstairs to join the congregation for Mass.



Just to enable Kateri to see as much of the museums as possible, Alex deferred the usual native's practice of leaving DC before three to beat the traffic. Like any pair of ignorant tourists, they went to lunch, then stayed till the museums closed at five, then squeezed into a packed restaurant to wait a half hour for dinner, then drove home at twenty miles an hour in bumper-to-bumper traffic while they talked intensely about life, philosophy, and politics.

"So do you really have to leave tomorrow?" Alex asked as they turned into his neighborhood. He had brought this up several times throughout the course of the day, hoping to wear down her resistance.

"I need to find a job," she said again, rubbing her eyes. "I need to be up north, pounding the pavement, knocking on doors..."

"Why don't you stay Monday and look for a job down here?"

She glanced at him. "I don't know if I could. At least up North I have some connections. Here, I wouldn't know anyone except your family."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to try down here, would it?"

He picked up a slight hesitation in her voice. "I don't know if I'm ready to give up on being near my family yet. Don't you need to get a job?"

He shrugged. "I've already applied to work at Dad's office. They said they'll take me on in July. I already have my security clearance from last summer. Government contracting: it's a family affair."

"But I thought you hated desk jobs."

"A man does what he's got to do. But seriously, Kat, I just like having you around. I don't know how you feel about it—"

"That's just it, Alex. I don't know how I feel." She dropped her eyes.

He parked the car, turned off the engine, and regarded her, wondering if it were wise to let her continue. "Is it—anything in particular?"

She heaved a sigh. "Alex, I don't belong here. I can't stand Northern Virginia: I don't like the suburbs, I don't like video games, I don't like computers: I just don't feel I fit in anywhere here."

"So it's the place that bothers you."

"Yes, but it's more than that. I don't know—I just don't know. I don't know if I should move here."

This was a disappointment. He decided to make one last try, putting on his most wistful expression. "Well—can you stay till Monday? At least?"

Kateri pushed back her hair, and looked at him resolutely with her dark brown eyes. He became sadder, and saw her resolve waver. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to leave on Monday."

"Okay!" He opened the car door, wanting to change the subject before she could change her mind. "Let's go inside and see if the kids are still alive."

Sam and David greeted them affably enough: as usual, they were in front of the TV. His parents were gone.

"Where are Mom and Dad?" Alex asked.

"On their once-a-month date," David said.

"Aha." Alex knew his parent's routine. "When did they leave?"

David shrugged. "Sometime this morning, right after you two did."

"Long date," Alex remarked. "Did you two eat dinner?"

"We did!" they informed Alex.

"No one cleaned up the kitchen," Kateri growled, inspecting that room.

"We'll do it later," Alex said, but catching her glowering glance, he changed his mind. "Like I said, we'll do it now."

Kateri had wiped the last counter and he had just put the last dish into the dishwasher when the front door opened and the kids shouted, "Dad and Mom are back!"

Alex looked around the jamb. Dad was helping Mom through the front door. They were both gleeful, as though bursting with some guilty secret. Dad looked happier than Alex had seen him in a long time.

"Their 'day away' sure works magic," Kateri remarked.

But Alex knew that something more was going on. Suspicious, he planted himself in front of the faded purple couch and folded his arms. "Mom—Dad—what's up?"

His mom adjusted the plaid pillows, and looked at his dad, who had just sat down heavily beside her. He grinned, and spluttered. Then all at once, both of them were laughing, rolling back on the couch and throwing pillows at each other.

"Come on you two, cut it out! You've gone and done something. What is it?" Alex demanded.

Finally his mom stopped giggling long enough to burst out, "We bought a hotel!"

Alex O'Donnell and the 40

CyberThieves

by Regina Doman

Text copyright 2010 by Regina Doman.

2010 cover design and interior by Regina Doman
Photographs by Craig Spiering

All rights reserved.

Chesterton Press
P.O. Box 949
Front Royal, Virginia
www.fairytalenovels.com
www.reginadoman.com

Summary: When his computer hacker dad discovers a secret website, Alex O'Donnell and his girlfriend Kateri become embroiled in a mystery that leads to sudden wealth and murder. A modern retelling of the classic Arabian Nights tale "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."

ISBN: 978-0-9827677-0-2

Printed in the United States of America

Other Books by Regina Doman

The Fairy Tale Novels

The Shadow of the Bear: A Fairy Tale Retold
Black as Night: A Fairy Tale Retold
Waking Rose: A Fairy Tale Retold
The Midnight Dancers: A Fairy Tale Retold
Alex O'Donnell and the 40 CyberThieves

For children:

Angel in the Waters

Edited by Regina Doman for Sophia Institute Press:

For teens:

Catholic, Reluctantly: John Paul 2 High Book One
Trespasses Against us: John Paul 2 High Book Two
both by Christian M. Frank
Awakening: A Crossroads in Time Book by Claudia
Cangilla McAdams

For adults:

Bleeder: a Mystery by John Desjarlais
Rachel's Contrition by Michelle Buckman

... and more to come!