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## Unexpected Message

Once upon a time ... in a little town called Feilding, there was a twelve-year-old girl called Kaylee Browne.

Kaylee hung upside down from her swing, her mousey-brown hair hung, dangling in the grass. Her head throbbed from all the blood rushing to it. The thick tree trunk beside her flowed down into maze of branches, with the sky a sea of pale blue with white fluffy clouds peeking between them.

As she gazed vacantly, a strange piece of paper fluttered down between the branches to the grass at her nose. Eagerness and curiosity made her let go of the ropes she'd been holding and she slid ungracefully to the grass, bumping her head quite hard on the ground. She sat up rubbing it, annoyed and crossed her long gangly legs, only to have the wooden swing meet the back of her head rudely with a hard 'thunk'. She scowled and grabbed it, letting go once it was still.

Tuning out on the sounds of grown-ups shouting from inside her house, she began to read the old pale-brown looking paper.

*NEW BOOKSHOP OPENING IN THE  
SQUARE TODAY. IF YOU FEEL LIKE  
GETTING LOST IN A STORY AND VISITING  
STRANGE LANDS, JOIN US.*

*FIRST BOOK FREE TO THE FIRST THREE VISITORS. WE HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE.*

‘Hmmm...’ she said.

Kaylee listened to her mother’s boyfriend, Paul, shouting at her mother, Trish, about the tea-set Kaylee had accidentally smashed. It was a gift from him and he suspected she had done it on purpose.

Kaylee wished her father was still around. She still hadn’t accepted he was dead after the explosion in the mine six months ago, where he had worked. They had never found the body after all.

She loved her mother dearly but felt so lost and alone sometimes.

With the old piece of paper still in her hand, she grabbed her backpack from where it lay on the lawn and began walking to town. It was only a small town, so fifteen minutes of pounding the pavements with her red Chucks and she would be at there.

She had worked up quite a sweat by the time the quaint little shop came within sight. In a dark, narrow street it stood. It had an old stone exterior and looked squashed in there, like a skinny man wedged between two Sumo Wrestlers on a bus. She’d never noticed it before even though she’d lived in this little town since further back than she could remember.

A little bell somewhere out the back of the shop tinkled as she came through the door and that glorious smell of old books — organic compounds breaking down and releasing that intoxicating scent of ancient wisdom, paper, ink, glue and sometimes smoke — wafted over her, bathing her in its almond, vanilla and floral deliciousness.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw ahead of her tall shelves standing in three lines down the centre of the narrow shop, chock full with row upon row of books. She wandered in, wondering absently where the owner was and gazed around the various spines of the books there.

Many books were leather bound, mostly very old and intriguing.

Heaven!

There was no obvious order to separate subjects. *Well this is going to be interesting*, she mused.

Eventually, she reached up and grabbed the oldest book she could see. She loved ancient books, the ones where you could smell the old leather and the covers were a little cracked and rumpled round the edges, the writing usually in gold lettering and a fancy font.

The title on the cover said *Journey to the Five Realms*. The book was not overly large but was quite weighty. A musty smell wafted off the pages as she opened it. The first page said:

*To find your heart's desire,  
trust in the key of fire...*

‘Well, that’s just weird,’ Kaylee muttered to herself. She heard slow shuffling footsteps and looked up to see a hunched old man appear from somewhere out back of the shop. He had sparse wisps of grey hair, which seemed to float on top of his balding crown. Kaylee noticed he walked with a bit of a limp as he made his way towards the front counter — a thick dark brown slab, tucked away in the corner to her left.

He gave her the strangest of looks. A smile, but not just a friendly, how are you sort of smile. It was kind of an, *I know you from some place*, sort of smile.

*That is just ridiculous* she thought. She was about to say something to him, ‘Ah, excuse m...’, when a small breeze from somewhere out back blew open a few more pages in her book ... revealing a large ancient-looking key.

The key was a little rusty and made from a dark-brown metal, like her mother’s cast-iron pans at home. It sat nestled in a groove cut into the pages of the book, made

precisely to fit. The top of it was a beautiful intricate Celtic-knot pattern. No wonder the book had felt so heavy.

‘Can I be helpin’ you at all there, dear?’ the hunched owner asked, causing Kaylee to start as though caught doing something bad. She slapped the book shut and looked up guiltily.

‘Ah, no thank you. I’m quite alright.’ She wanted that book. She couldn’t precisely say why it was so urgent, but she wanted that book, badly. However, she had no pocket-money left to pay for one.

She approached the counter, raised the book above her head and said, ‘First three people get their books free, the flyer said?’

He nodded, ‘Yes, that’s correct. And before you ask me, yes, you are the lucky third person in today. If that’s the book you’ve chosen, there is no charge my dear.’

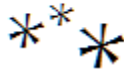
She smiled, ‘Thank you.’ Now that he had said she could have it, she was burning with unanswered questions about the key within those old pages. ‘You don’t by any chance happen to know what the key opens?’

‘A key you say? No, sorry, can’t really say that I do. But if you get your parents,’ he paused and looked at her a little strangely when he said this, as though he knew she had no father now, ‘to take you along to Mitchell’s cottage on the weekend; the tour guide Fred is an old friend of mine. He’s a blacksmith, familiar with old keys and such. He might be able to help you with it.’

Kaylee thanked the strange man once again, tucked the new, *old* book in her backpack and hurried home to ask her mother if they could go to Michell’s cottage this weekend. She was sure her mother would take her. After all, the original owners of the cottage had apparently been some ancestor-or-other of theirs, way back in the 1800’s.

She was in such a good mood now, she doubted even Paul could dampen her spirits when she got home.

How wrong she was.



## 2

### Evil Step Father

‘Where the hell have you been?’ Paul roared when she walked in the back door.

Kaylee was bombarded with questions and accusations — mainly from Paul, about where she had disappeared to without telling them.

Her mother was also upset, but mainly more worried for her safety, than angry. Trish, Kaylee’s mother, couldn’t get a word in sideways with Paul ranting on and on.

Kaylee did what she usually did, when things got hairy at home. Without a word, she headed straight for her room and slammed the door, plonking down on the bed with her school backpack clutched under her arm. She lay there trying to calm her breathing, because if she didn’t she’d probably end up screaming at Paul, which would only upset her mother even more. She put her headphones in and turned her favourite song up really loud.

Suddenly her bedroom door flew open so hard; the door handle dug a handle-shaped hole in the wall behind it.

Paul pointed his finger at Kaylee, about to start lecturing her again when she yanked the earphones off and shouted, ‘Out! Get out of my room! You aren’t supposed to come in here!’ She was now doing some pointing of her own.

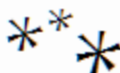
‘I pay the bills and I’ll go in whichever damn room I want to!’ He thundered back at her.

Kaylee burst into tears and hid under the blankets trying

to block out his yelling. From beneath the blankets, she heard a different muffled voice. Her mother's.

She slowly pulled the blankets down and was relieved to find that Paul was no longer there. She could hear her mother telling him off down the hall, 'That's her personal space Paul. I know she was wrong in going off like that, but you will just have to talk to her later about it. Her room is the only place in the house where she can get away from....'

Kaylee was sure her mother had been about to say '*from you*' meaning Paul, but that would have lit him up like a firecracker, so her mother tactfully changed it to '... from everything.'



Eventually the dust settled and Kaylee explained to her mother about the new bookshop. She apologised for worrying her so and asked if they could go see Mitchell's Cottage, without Paul. However, Paul was not one to be excluded from anything concerning her mother.

Still the weekend rolled around two days later and there they were.

The cottage was actually quite cool. It had been built way back in 1880, from a special rock called schist, by Andrew Mitchell for his brother John, his wife Jessie and their ten children.

Aye ... ten kids! Kaylee thought the woman was mad. One child gave *her* mother enough trouble.

Her mother and Paul were outside looking at some big rock sundial thing-a-me Andrew Mitchell had carved from solid schist, so rather than tag along where Paul could annoy her, Kaylee decided to have a nosey round inside the main house by herself.

The tour guide's name was Gerald. She had no idea

what had happened to Fred, the bookshop owner's friend. Still, she had the mysterious key in her backpack, which she took everywhere with her. It usually carried a couple of books (yes, Kaylee was a bit of a nerd) and a snack or two, a warm jersey if her mother could force it on her and a drink bottle of water, among other things.

A very funny thing happened when Kaylee walked through the cottage doorway. She felt a strange vibration run through her, almost like a tiny electric shock; not the sort that scared the bejesus out of you, just the sort you get when you whip your polar fleece off too fast and all of your hair stands out crackling.

'That's weird,' she said to herself.

She wandered around inside the old stone cottage, rubbing her arms vigorously to generate a bit of warmth. It was exceedingly chilly out on the windy plains and not long past winter. She had unfortunately ignored her mother's request to stuff a jersey in her backpack.

All the while as she wandered around, she could hear what sounded like a low humming noise; almost like a beehive somewhere. She hoped not. Flying bugs really freaked her out!

There were two large rooms and three smaller ones. Someone had put some plain furniture in there: a wooden table, four chairs and a few beds. They were there for the tourist's benefit, as the originals had perished long ago. The old hearth was still there though, undamaged by time although blackened by years of soot.

*Mum should come and see this.* Kaylee popped her head out the door to call her mother to come have a look. No one was there.

'What the bloody hell?' She said, confused and a little peeved. 'Well, that's just nice isn't it? Maybe they've gone to look at the chook-house or something.'

It was starting to snow lightly, so Kaylee sat on one of the old wooden chairs nearest the empty fireplace and closed her eyes, wishing there was a nice warm fire in that

hearth.

She heard a whoomph! and felt warmth creep up her legs. She opened her eyes and there in the hearth, which had been previously damp, cold and most definitely empty, there now roared a hearty fire! Close enough to singe her socks, in fact.

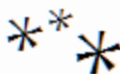
Kaylee leapt out of the chair so fast it fell with a crash to the floor. 'Holy crap! Where'd that come from?' The humming she'd been hearing ever since she came through the doorway grew louder, as if it was coming from her clothes. Her backpack, that's where it was coming from she realised with alarm.

When she opened the backpack, she could see a green glow emanating from the dark depths within. With a bit of hesitation she reached in and gingerly picked up the glowing object, not surprised to find it was the key. It was an unearthly green, like a glow-stick and it was strangely warm, almost too hot to touch.

Standing in front of this fire from nowhere with a strange key, Kaylee wondered when her mother would come back because something really weird was going on and she didn't think she was capable of dealing with it alone.

Hot on the heels of thoughts of her mother, followed thoughts of Paul. She closed her eyes again and wished with all her heart she could get away from him, as far away as possible, so she never had to see his angry face again...





3

## Not in Feilding Anymore

When Kaylee opened her eyes again, the cottage had vanished. Instead, she found she was now standing atop a mountain rather close, excessively close for her liking, to the crater of an active volcano. Smoke and hot steam rose up around her cheeks, making her break out in an instant sweat and she could hear the sounds of rumbling below her. It sounded like hot rock stew!

She leapt back again with a cry of absolute terror, clutched the glowing green key to the front of her sweatshirt and looked around in total disbelief.

What had happened? Where was this place? Surely it was not the top of a mountain; a live and very angry looking mountain. She must have fainted or something and be dreaming all of this.

However, as she gazed around her and saw the smaller hills surrounding her, the blue sea on the horizon in the distance, islands floating in front of the two moons up in the sky...

*Wait, what? Two moons? Floating islands?*

There was a solitary mountain in the distance, jutting out of the landscape, surrounded at present by a blanket of mist, but at its peak, she could just make out what looked to be possibly a castle.

To her left she could see floating islands, complete with grass covered hills. They had flowing waterfalls, tumbling over the sides until they vanished as mist. They were the

shape of inverted teardrops, with dirt, rock and root covered points at the bottom, as if they had been plucked out of a giant's garden.

To her right, beyond the solitary mountain, she could see an ocean of dark blue, which led who knew where in these strange lands. White foamy waves lapped at the beaches of a few lonely islands, far out in the Bay. Near the shore of the mainland a row of galleon ships bobbed at a small Port.

*We're not in Kansas anymore Kaylee ...* a line from *The Wizard of Oz* came to mind.

'Oh, hell, how do I get out of this mess?' Kaylee murmured. She turned to what appeared to be a shingle-covered path winding down the volcano to surrounding fields below. Fields bursting with flora and fauna, but oddly, becoming more brown and barren as they neared the distant Mountain.

Kaylee started walking, fast. That hot, bubbling rock stew looked set to bubble over and she didn't mean to be hanging around when it did.

She was glad she still had her backpack. At least she had some food and water for the walk. She realized she was still clutching the strange key, so stuffed it back inside the pack and set off.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed what at first appeared to be a black bird flying towards her. As it grew nearer though, she saw with complete amazement, it was a horse; a huge, black, flying horse, a Pegasus to be precise.

'Think I hit my head on that swing harder than I thought? Mum's never going to believe a word of this.'

The black Pegasus landed gracefully not far from Kaylee. His shiny muscles glistened in the sunlight and his beautiful ebony wings spread as wide as a truck. He trotted majestically up to her, lowered his nose and nudged her outstretched hand, snuffling a friendly 'Hello'. He knelt on one knee and waited patiently for her to climb on.

She did, of course, with great relief. He was obviously

friendly and there to help and she might not have gotten off the path in time otherwise. As she climbed up and snuggled her knees in close behind his soft feathery wings, she wondered what kind soul had sent him, or whether he had just done it as a random act of kindness to help a fellow living creature.

She clung to his long black mane, as his trot quickly became a gallop. Within moments, he leapt up and they were airborne, with Kaylee enjoying the sun's warmth on her face and the wind whipping past and whistling in her ears. She watched the green fields below, flying beneath them as though she were in an aeroplane. Her stomach dipped as Pegasus dived suddenly, heading for two enormous iron gates.

They touched down with a small jolt to her backside and he let her off in front of the gigantic gates. These towered above them as high as a two-storey house, enclosing a beautiful hidden garden. Branches and flowers escaped to wave in the breeze between the bars, all the way along the fence, in opposite directions as far as the eye could see.

'What am I supposed to do here?' She asked the Pegasus, but she discovered he could not talk. He merely pawed the dirt with his hoof and shook his head up and down, seeming to gesture to her to go on, go that way.

'But I don't have a ....'

Ah! But she *did* have a key. With an excited smile, Kaylee pulled out the huge key and stretched up on tippee-toe to slot it into a lock in the left gate.

It fit easily. She turned it with a loud clunk and it swung inwards of its own accord. Beyond the gates lay the most wondrously amazing garden, she had ever seen. Filled with foxgloves, delphiniums, lavender, roses, gardenia's and some plants she didn't know the names of — oh what a gorgeous perfume! It was an absolute rainbow of colours.

Stretched up and over a massive arched walkway, were crisscrossed intertwining vines; thick with green leaves and purple wisteria. These hung down in long bunches like

lace, for what looked like miles ahead.

The fragrances drifting round on the warm breeze were so intoxicating she almost forgot she was supposed to be looking for something. What that was, she was yet to discover but the urge to find it was growing stronger by the minute.



## 4

### Pretty, Smelly Place

Kaylee wandered slowly through the purple wisteria archway, enjoying the deliciously fragrant breeze while trailing fingertips through the velvet petals dangling about her shoulders. Her sense of urgency was still there, but these flowers were almost hypnotic.

At one point, she thought she saw a butterfly dart between the flowers. It appeared again and landed on a big red and white spotted toadstool. Only it wasn't a butterfly.

'A fairy! Of course ... it's not a butterfly.' The fairy, which had a green suit, yellow slippers and golden wings that sparkled as he flitted about, hopped off the toadstool and proceeded to pick berries off a raspberry bush nearby.

'Oh! Oh how sweet. That's so cute,' Kaylee whispered to herself. That was precisely when Kaylee saw the amber eyes glowing in the dark shadows of the bush. Large catlike amber eyes, though too large for your average house-moggy.

The eyes seemed focussed on the little fairy and Kaylee was about to shout a warning to it, not even realising that she herself was probably in equal danger, when a giant puma-like black cat erupted from the bush and pounced on the poor wee fairy, pinning him to the ground with a startled squeak.

Kaylee squeezed her eyes shut in horror, as she usually did when something horrifically terrible was about to occur. Not a great survival skill, but still, that was her first reaction.

'Oh Lordy, Jett! Ya scared the friggen' toothpaste outta me, ya big hairy brute.' The little man-fairy said in his tiny, high-pitched voice.

Kaylee opened her eyes and watched the big cat laugh at him. As he lifted his paw, she saw the only white spot on him, around his throat area. He gently helped the little madly blushing fairy back up on his feet again.

'Sorry Benjamin. Sometimes you just make it too easy. I couldn't resist. Are you alright?' Jett said.

The fairy flexed his translucent gold wings a few times and shook his head banging first one pointy ear with the palm of his tiny hand, then the other. 'I appear to be. No thanks to you. One of these days boy, you're going to squash me proper flat, you know.' He waved his finger and scorned the big cat that looked like a housecat, only jumbo sized.

'Never!' Jett replied. 'Who would I play with then?'

'Someone your own size, perhaps?' Benjamin suggested sarcastically.

Jett was about to reply when he finally noticed Kaylee standing there, giggling at them. He turned to face her, then began stalking towards her, as if she was a bird he had spied. She wondered if he was going to pounce on her too when he came right up to her, almost eye to eye and surprised her by hopping up on his back legs slightly and giving her a soft head-bump on the cheek. He began to purr loudly as he went smooching round her body affectionately, as if she was his best friend in the whole wide world.

'Ah, hello,' Kaylee said smiling.

Jett crooned. 'Hello, and who might you be?'

'My name is Kaylee Browne. I'm not sure how I got here, but I think it may have something to do with this,' she pulled the iron key from her backpack, noticing that it no longer glowed or hummed.

Jett sat back on his rump and tilted his head to one side in thought. 'Looks like the work of the gnomes beneath Mount Beaton.'

Kaylee frowned, 'Gnomes? Did you say gnomes?' She shook her head trying to clear it. 'Look, I'm from a little town in New Zealand and I'm not sure, but I think this ruddy thing,' she waved the key round irritably, 'somehow ... put me on the edge of a very frightening volcano.'

'Ah I see. Well if it has magic powers, than I'd hazard a guess that the gnomes probably had a bit of help from the dragon for some reason. Although, she is a bit of a grumpy old thing, I can't imagine she would have done it for their benefit alone. How very strange.'

*A DRAGON?* Kaylee repeated the word under her breath, tempted to pinch herself, certain she must be asleep standing up.

Jett looked around for Benjamin but the fairy had grown bored with them and flown off somewhere. Several other fairies were flitting about the beautiful garden, in and out of the bowls and petals of flowers like large butterflies.

‘Come along then Kaylee,’ Jett suggested. ‘I’ll find someone who might be able to work out why you’re here.’

Off they toddled, on and on down the shaded path beneath the long purple arch, enveloped by its floral scent which the warm midday sun had intensified. They stopped twice while Kaylee sat on a tree stump for a drink of water from her pack.

After an hour or two of pleasant strolling and chatting happily, they reached a small log cabin nestled in among a little ring of evergreen trees. Two brown and white goats bleated a welcome from behind a wooden rail fence in the yard and smoke drifted heavenward from the chimney.

Kaylee looked at Jett, ‘Who lives here?’ The sun was sinking low in the sky and nighttime’s dark shadows were beginning to creep up from the ground.

‘He’s an old friend of mine. A hermit named Dougie. He’s a nice fellow. But he prefers his own company to that of some of the local idiots in the village. Can’t say I blame him for that really, knowing most of the villagers myself. He’ll give us something to eat and a place to rest for the night.’