

TRAVIS EXCERPT:

Beth lay motionless. If she'd died, then when she opened her eyes she would be at the pearly gates. Every muscle in her body ached. It hadn't hurt this much since she'd fallen off a horse as a child and bruised every part that touched earth.

A buzzing in her ears made her dizzy, but a bird singing sweetly nearby comforted her. At least she wasn't dead. Unless they had birds in heaven to serenade you. Good grief, now she was raving nonsense.

Warily she opened her eyes. The branches of a tree curved above her, not clouds. With a hand to her temple Beth slowly turned her head, first one way then the other. She lay out in the open, and the tree above her was one of half a dozen in a small glade. Bracken grew waist high all around her. The air was crisp, the grass beneath her cold and damp. She shuddered.

Perhaps she'd had a funny turn and passed out, then wandered outside in a trance. What was she doing when she began to feel dizzy? Ah yes; the attic and the cloak! Peering down warily, she ran a hand over her front. She still wore the strange garment.

This couldn't be happening. She was going mad. This wasn't a glade, and these weren't real trees. She must have bumped her head and was hallucinating. That was the only explanation. Her mind veered away from the obvious answer. She'd been studying the engraving on the badge before the lightning flash. Touching it, she twisted it until she could read the inscription and clearly see the markings. Was it like Aladdin's lamp, one rub and a genie appeared? Or in this case, you were propelled into another dimension.

No, that was just plain silly. The likeliest explanation was that she'd had some sort of blackout and wandered out of the castle and into the surrounding countryside. She wanted to believe that one. The first person to pass would verify the date and time and that this was the month of May. She sat up, massaging her thighs. At least her legs felt normal now, although her muscles still ached as if she'd run a mile. The dizziness had subsided and the ringing in her ears was gone. Rubbing her face she glanced around. Everything seemed normal and the few cattle grazing about a hundred meters away added to that normalcy.

Beth tried to remember the lie of the land on their drive back from the airport but couldn't recall seeing any cattle near the McAlister's castle. But that didn't prove anything. She could have wandered aimlessly on the far side of the estate while in this stupor, or whatever ailed her. It certainly looked wild and rugged—but perhaps the countryside was like this over most of Scotland. In Australia you only traveled a short distance from some towns to find oneself in the outback.

She must have passed out. This was the only feasible answer to the feeling of flying helplessly through that vortex. Between the hurtling sensation and the blackness, all she could recall was the cold. And it had been freezing when that strange wind blew up.

"Come on, be practical." She stood and slapped at her sides. She'd always been level headed. Boring and unimaginative, that was Beth Anderson. She steered away from the

answer that was emerging, crying out to be heard. “No. I’m still near Liz and Andrew’s estate. As soon as someone comes by I’ll prove it.”

With a definite nod of the head Beth looked about, trying to get her bearings from the position of the sun. What time could it be? It was just after ten when she left her room after donning the thick sweater. So, depending on how long she’d been in this strange state, it could be anywhere between ten thirty and eleven. The sun wasn’t quite at its height, which proved she was more or less right. It was streaming in her window this morning, which meant the castle had to be...

Beth turned about. This was so stupid. How on earth could she work out which direction to take? A city girl didn’t have to worry about such things. There were street signs in the city and always someone to ask for directions. Here she was surrounded by trees, the few cattle, and bracken. As she pondered which way to walk, the thundering of hooves disturbed the tranquility. Thank the lord. Beth breathed a sigh of relief—now she’d find out where she was. A hand shielding her eyes, she faced the rider. A giant of a man rode one of the biggest horses she’d ever seen. Black flowing hair streamed out behind him, and he rode as if all the devils from hell were on his heels.

As he neared Beth saw that he had a beard as black as his hair. He wore some sort of strange garment, like a philabeg, the old Gaelic version of a kilt. A claymore hung at his side, and leather strapping bound his calves. It was Andrew. Relief flooded her. Why hadn’t Liz told her he was taking part in a highland pageant? She laughed out loud as he saw her, and lifted her hand to wave.

He skidded the horse to a standstill. It was then, as the man controlled the wild, panting beast, Beth recalled something Liz told her last night. Andrew wasn’t a good rider. Her throat dried up, and she couldn’t swallow. The rider stared at her as if she was a ghost just risen from the earth. His mouth worked but no words came out.

Some sixth sense told her exactly who this stranger was.

“Travis.” A hand covering her mouth, Beth whispered the name hoarsely. Dizziness swamped her, and vaguely she heard him use a Gaelic curse before she toppled into oblivion.