

CHAPTER ONE

BREAKING POINT

Lisen Holt considered herself a pretty smart cookie. She took pride in her logical mind, her killer memory and her common sense response to problems – both hers and everyone else’s. She understood the concept of “hubris” – the flaw of pride which plagued heroes in Greek tragedies – but hubris didn’t apply to her. She was no Greek, and she was no hero; she was just seventeen-year-old Lisen Holt who happened to know a lot.

She loved it here at the beach, as the waves of Malibu grabbed at her bare feet and the breeze blew through her light-red hair. She loved it here in the near dark of a slivered moon. So why couldn’t she shake the shiver in her soul at the thought that her gift of knowledge, marvelous as it was, would one day bite her in the butt?

Suddenly, a strange rush of air – not wind, but a sucking away – overcame her, and with a gasp, she knew nothing. She looked around, but it was too dark for her to see farther than a few feet. She *could* see the lights from the occasional car on Pacific Coast Highway, but in between there and here, dead darkness reigned. She turned back to look out on the ocean. Little noises of rustling sand intruded, but she dismissed them, assuming they were signs that the lost air was returning.

Too late she realized that the sounds had been a warning, but before she could react, an arm encircled her from behind, pinning her left arm to her side. A finger swooped in from the right and wiped an oily liquid between her lip and her nose, and then she was pulled back against what could only be the body of her attacker. The liquid under her nose possessed no odor whatsoever, and she relaxed, growing calm and dreamy, all will to fight deserting her. *Am I being kidnapped? What could she want with me?* Lisen knew it was a woman; her scent had told her that. *Her scent?* Lisen had never noticed people’s smells before, unless they were wearing cologne or had really bad B.O. Somehow this smell also told her that the person meant her no harm, that she cared about Lisen and her wellbeing. How did she know all this? Could it be whatever had been swiped under her nose? *No*, she thought. *It’s...it’s...*

She grew dizzy, off balance. Time slowed, and everything became irrelevant. Even what was happening to her ceased to matter. She floated and....

Limp and powerless, Lisen felt herself dragged through the sand. She could see and hear, but she couldn’t move from where her attacker left her lying on her back, and she couldn’t speak. She could finally see the woman and saw that she was middle-aged, with long, brown braids slipping from the hood of her heavy grey robes, maybe like a nun’s or something. *Exactly*, she thought. *There’s something...spiritual...about her.* She moved around Lisen in the sand, setting things down Lisen couldn’t move her head to see. The woman hummed to herself as she did all of this, a woman on a mission.

Me, Lisen realized. *I’m her mission.*

The woman stopped her puttering and held up a hand, and light appeared in it. She stepped over to Lisen who wondered if the woman had read her mind and was finally going to explain it to her.

“You have changed,” the woman said, holding the light over her. Lisen knew the woman spoke a foreign language, but she understood it as though she had been born to it. *Why?* “You look more like your mother than ever. At least you will once the enchantment has been lifted.”

The stranger moved in more closely to Lisen's face, and she realized that the woman seemed familiar. *Who is this person?* "Look at the long nose, your high cheek bones, the copper-colored hair, the sea-green eyes. And you're ready. Blessed Creators. It worked. I think it worked." Her greyish eyes mesmerized Lisen, and the hope of returning home enveloped her, but to a home that was definitely *not* Woodland Hills.

Then the woman moved, just like that, and Lisen sensed, rather than saw, her drawing a circle in the sand. Its outline lay maybe three or four inches beyond both Lisen's feet and head, making the circle's diameter over six feet, what with her being five-foot-nine and all. The woman wiped Lisen's upper lip once more with the oil, which she realized was a substance capable of altering perception. The way she thought, the way she felt, the way she saw – all of these had changed since she'd first been drugged. And they continued to change each moment by passing moment.

"To Ariannas," the stranger said softly, prayer-like, but who or what was "Ariannas"?

Then she stood above Lisen. She stood at Lisen's head and raised her arms straight up. She spoke words into the sky that Lisen had trouble hearing, and that strange intake of air began again with a squeezing that was painful. Time and existence became memories, things once trusted but no longer real. Lisen couldn't tell how long this sensation lasted. It lasted a second; it lasted an eternity. But it did end. Eventually.

When Lisen opened her eyes, she could have sworn she lay on hard ground rather than the sandy beach of Malibu. She could still hear the ocean's rhythmic roll, but rather than the melodic wash of the waves flowing in and out on sand, the sound of them carried the flash and echo of waves crashing against rock. A quote from an old movie seemed suddenly appropriate. *I don't think I'm in Kansas anymore*, she thought sadly, but with little regret, for this ocean and its beating at the rocky shore offered its own familiarity. *Why?*

She was lifted and held up like a floppy doll – her body not right, odd, not hers somehow – and passed over to someone else, someone whose warm woody scent Lisen found comforting. *Male*, she decided though she still didn't know how she knew.

"Take her from the circle and entrance her," the old woman ordered. Oblivious to it all, Lisen was pulled away from her and then allowed to sit down on the ground, the warm-smelling man sitting down beside her. The man wore a grey robe identical to the woman's except with the hood down. He wore braids as well, but he was older than the woman as his hair was grey. He also had a shadow of a beard.

Lisen watched as the strange woman strode around the outline of a circle. She paced around the circle three times in one direction, then three times in the other. Then, she picked up a large yellow flower, a seashell, a dark tree branch and a small bell, and she threw them into the water beyond the circle. Next, she scuffed out markings within the confines of the circle which Lisen hadn't noticed before. Finally, as she scuffed away the circle itself, the man put his fingers on Lisen's forehead, and Lisen felt herself relax and regain the ability to move. First, she looked at herself, at this body that no longer felt like hers. The denim cutoffs and black halter top she'd had on at the beach had vanished, a brown robe covering her now. Her chest was flat, just like a little girl's. *No breasts at all*. Or so it seemed. What the hell was going on?

"She's ready," the man said, and his voice was deeper than the woman's. The woman stepped forward, and the two strangers helped Lisen up. They urged her to walk, and once she had regained the use of her legs, they moved slowly up a dirt path, maneuvering around places where chunks of road had washed away. It wasn't difficult, this walking thing. In fact, Lisen felt a certain euphoria in just being able to manage it without falling down.

"As soon as we get her upstairs," the woman said, "you can bring her out of trance. Then I'll

restore her language.”

Despite the calming...thing...the man had done to her, Lisen grew more frustrated, “Where am I? *What* am I? What have you done to me?” she asked, but while she could understand them, they seemed incapable of understanding her.

They reached a large open space, a yard of some sort, then stepped up a couple of broad steps and into a huge building. Lisen tried to grasp its height, but dizziness prevented her from looking up any farther than at the top of the door through which they stepped. It was stone. Everything here seemed to be stone.

They climbed more stairs, and more stairs, at points brushing against carved rock, as though the building emerged from something greater than itself. They reached a room furnished with two cots, two chairs and a table, and there they sat Lisen down upon one of the cots. Lisen’s eyes focused on the fire in the hearth.

“Who are you and what have you done to me?” she demanded futilely. She ran her hands down her chest and abdomen for the first time since this had all begun and shivered at what she found. Or, rather, didn’t find.

“Where are my breasts?” she asked, but the two robed ones looked at her uncomprehendingly. “Where the hell are my breasts?” *Damn it*, she thought. *Why can’t they understand me?*

“What?” the man asked.

“Where are my...?” Lisen tried again, hoping to sound reasonable despite her rising panic, patting her chest where her breasts, admittedly only small B cups but breasts nevertheless, had been before this woman had entered her life. With the one-way language barrier, Lisen feared she’d never get the answer to what had happened to this once-vital part of her anatomy, and she felt her anger rise. She was no longer willing to pretend to be content with this.

“Lisen,” said the woman, and with a small gnarled wooden branch, she touched Lisen’s forehead and then her mouth. “I’ve removed more of the enchantment. We should be able to communicate now.”

Lisen nodded. “So,” she said. “*where* are my...breasts?” Clearly no word in their language resembled the English word “breast,” so that word had come out in English. She patted her chest with both hands where once two little breasts had resided. She desperately wanted to see what was underneath the robe, what had become of her, but she was too afraid to look.

“Oh, of course,” the man replied, “but first, introductions. We are not strangers, and soon you’ll recognize us both, but for now, I am Hermit Titus and this is Hermit Eloise. I am a healer, and Hermit Eloise is a sooth.”

“All right, Titus the Healer, Eloise the Sooth.” Lisen nodded cordially to the first, but scowled at the latter. “Now that we can all communicate, where am I? Why did you bring me here? And, again, where are my breasts, for God’s sake?” Apparently they had no God as that word came out in English as well.

“This is going to take a little time,” Hermit Titus stated. “Eloise, why don’t you and I sit.” The two of them each moved a chair so they could sit in front of Lisen and then they settled in. With them sitting there side by side, Lisen noticed that Hermit Eloise possessed a softer and less angled face than Titus, with no sign of a beard.

“I’m waiting,” Lisen insisted.

“Regarding where you are,” Eloise the Sooth explained, “you are in Garla.”

“Garla?” Lisen asked. “Where the hell is Garla? *What* the hell is Garla?” Apparently “hell” was another concept they had no need of here. Her father the anthropologist had once explained to her how language reflects culture, that the Eskimos, for instance, actually had

many, many words for snow, whereas English, whose speakers mostly lived in warmer climes, only had “snow” and “sleet.” There were other examples, but making a point, even if it were only to herself, didn’t seem all that important at the moment. “And why did you kidnap me?”

“Eloise,” Hermit Titus said, “complete the restoration. That will eliminate the need for further explanations.” Hermit Titus put a hand on Lisen’s knee. “You haven’t been kidnapped. You’ll understand in a moment.”

“I’m sure,” Lisen commented cynically.

“You were enchanted,” Eloise the Sooth explained as she pattered about with the items on the table. “We had to hide you where no one could find you. I managed to conjure a passage between this world and the one in which you’ve spent the last seven years.”

“And my parents?” Lisen asked, deciding that if she could speak their language just by the touch of an old stick and if her body had really changed as much as she was afraid it had, then she was either insane or they were telling her the truth.

“They were not your parents,” Hermit Titus replied gently. “They were your guardians. A couple Eloise found on her second scouting mission. They believed Eloise was...” He turned to her. “...what was the word?”

“It sounded like ‘ae-lee-an,’” Eloise responded.

Lisen laughed. “They thought you were an alien? Simon and Daisy Holt would never believe in aliens.”

Hermit Titus smiled. “They did believe, once Eloise showed them the physical anomalies between them and herself.”

Lisen stared at the floor to avoid the eyes of these strangers. “So they really weren’t my parents.” She looked up. “Did you say seven years? You took me there when I was ten? Why don’t I remember?”

“You will,” Eloise said. She had opened up several jars during the conversation and now began placing a leaf from one, a little powder from another, a flower from a third, all into a stone mortar. She continued until she’d placed various portions of the contents from ten or twelve jars into the mortar, and then she began the process of grinding it all down with a pestle.

“What happened to my things?” Lisen asked. “The clothes I was wearing. My shoes. My car. What about school? I had a Social Security card, a driver’s license. How did they manage that?”

“We don’t know how they managed,” Titus replied, “but they promised Eloise they would, and apparently they did.”

“Are they going to know where I’ve gone? People there disappear all the time, and *if* they’re found, they’re usually found dead. They’ll worry about me. They’ll think that something like *that* happened to me, not this.”

Lisen had begun fiddling with her fingers, nervous to the point of jittering out of her skin. This was a dream. The beach at Malibu was real, her parents were real, Earth was real; *this* was an overactive imagination. Or schizophrenia. She’d wake up soon. She was sure of it. *Wake up, Lisen. Come on.*

But she didn’t wake up. Hermit Titus reached out and touched Lisen’s hands, drawing her back into the dream.

“Hermit Eloise warned them that one night you would go to the beach and never come back. Your vehicle will be found with everything except your clothes inside, and your clothes will be found by the shore. Everyone will think you went swimming and drowned, but your guardians will know you’re all right.”

Lisen pictured Daisy Holt at the kitchen sink performing some simple domestic act after a long day of surgery and neurological consultations. Daisy – no one called her Marguerite – with

her dark hair and loving brown eyes, was second-generation Guatemalan, born in the U.S., a citizen and source of pride to her parents for her achievements. Lisen loved her father, Simon, too. He teased Daisy, calling her “Dr. Holt,” even though he was a doctor as well, with a Ph.D. in anthropology. Tall and fair, Simon had met Daisy in the Peace Corps. They’d married two years later, then waited for Daisy to finish her residency before trying to have a baby. But they’d waited too long, and so, after three years of trying, they’d adopted Lisen. Or, so they’d told *her*. And now they’d have to trust she was, indeed, all right.

Lisen shook her head to clear her mind of the image of her parents. “Can I use this passage you say you conjured up to go back and visit my parents and my friends?” she asked.

Eloise turned from her work mixing her concoction. “No, you cannot,” she said firmly. “I’m sorry, but I had to seal the route permanently as soon as you were back.”

“She never should have opened it in the first place,” Hermit Titus commented. “It was unethical.”

“I did it to save her life, to ensure her survival,” Hermit Eloise said, defending herself.

“But why?” Lisen asked wanting to understand why she of all people deserved an ethical exception. “Why me? I’m just a seventeen-year-old valley girl.”

“A what?” Hermit Titus asked.

“Nothing,” Lisen replied. “Just a phrase that apparently means nothing here.” Lisen felt hope disintegrating. She tried to convince herself that she was home and that that should be all that mattered.

“And it’s seventeen years *out*,” Titus explained. “Nearly eighteen actually. But you’ll understand in a moment. Eloise? Are you ready?”

Eloise the Sooth moved towards Lisen, a small cup in her hands.

“Wait a minute,” Lisen protested, standing up and moving down the cot away from her. “Who *are* you and what the hell are you going to do to me?” She was two distinct beings, and one of them still didn’t trust these people. The other? Well, that Lisen just sat back, content to watch and see what happened.

Hermit Titus reached up and touched Lisen to reassure her, but the Lisen of discontent felt anything but reassured—more like confused and stunned. “We are hermits,” Titus said, “members of a contemplative order. We live here, at Solsta Haven.”

“Oh, like monks. But you live here coed?” Lisen knew she’d made no sense, what with the mixture of this language she knew from the past and the English words lacking equivalents here.

“It will *truly* be much simpler,” Hermit Titus said, his tone growing impatient, “if you allow Eloise to finish stripping you of the enchantment.”

That *was* the thing, wasn’t it. Once “stripped of the enchantment,” what would Lisen remember of Woodland Hills, of Daisy and Simon Holt? Of *Lisen Holt*, for that matter?

“No,” she said. “Not until you tell me more. Why am I here? Was I here before I was there? Was this my home? Or is that?”

“So many questions,” Hermit Titus replied with a sigh. “If by ‘home’ you mean the place where you originated, *this* is your home.”

“And what will I remember after she’s done with me? I’m assuming I’ll remember my time here from before, but what about there? Will I still remember what happened there?” Lisen’s throat began to constrict, and she bit her lip to keep from crying.

“I hope so,” Eloise the Sooth replied. “But since I’ve never done this before, I can’t be sure *what* you’ll remember.”

“Forget it then. I’ll relearn what I knew before.”

"There's no time for you to relearn," Eloise said. "We've already waited too long to bring you back. The time has come for you to confront your destiny."

"That sounds intense. And pathetically cliché," Lisen replied, unable to squelch a shiver despite her skepticism. The contented Lisen was fading. "My destiny versus my memory of the last seven years of my life. I need time to think about that."

Eloise turned from Lisen with a frustrated sigh. "You reason with her, Titus. Explain to her that there is no *time* for her to think about it." She set her cup of potion down on the table and waited.

"Sit down, Lisen. Please," Hermit Titus said.

Lisen, her entire body feeling odd, complied and settled back onto the cot. "Is Lisen my real name?" she asked.

"It is the name you went by here," Titus replied.

"Then answer one question, and I'll take her damn potion." Lisen glanced at the table where the cup remained, awaiting her.

"What do you want to know?" the old man asked. Lisen liked him. She wasn't quite so sure about that sooth person, but this one she liked.

"What's happened to my body?"

Titus cleared his throat. "Uh..."

"Well?" Lisen urged.

"Eloise?" Titus said, deferring to the other hermit.

The sooth threw her hands up in the air. "Oh, Titus," she said with a great sigh. "Go. Just go. I'll explain it all."

Hermit Titus bounded up from his chair. "Yes," he said. "Thank you." And before Lisen could blink, he was gone from the room.

"He's so shy," Hermit Eloise commented as she stepped over to stand in front of Lisen. "Get up." Lisen rose with slow apprehension. "Now take off your robe while I take off mine."

Lisen hesitated, but as the hermit pulled her robe off over her head and then slipped out of her undergarment, Lisen did the same, save for the undergarment part since she wasn't wearing one. The hermit then picked up the candle and held it between them. Lisen gasped at what she saw, frightened and fascinated all at once. It wasn't the lack of breasts, the lack of nipples even, that surprised her—she already knew about that—but the woman either had the largest bellybutton Lisen had ever seen or it was something completely different. Lisen looked down at her own belly and saw what appeared to be an opening a few inches above where her bellybutton used to be. Her opening was larger than the hermit's, perhaps two to three inches wide and one inch tall, and her abdomen below that was completely covered in soft, reddish hair, all the way down to her pubic region.

"From the way your guardians described it, the people of their world breed more like four-foots," Eloise said.

"Four-foots?" Lisen asked.

"Animals that walk on four feet. The female carries the baby, and it stays with her until it's ready for the world."

"Okay. So what are we? Two-foots?" Lisen laughed, but Eloise's response sobered her.

"Exactly."

"Oh." After a brief silence, Lisen asked, "So what exactly do we two-foots do? Because I'm starting to feel like a kangaroo, and the female does all the carrying there, too."

"Kanga...?"

"Kangaroo. She carries her young in a pouch."

"Precisely. Save for one thing." And, after brusquely ordering Lisen to "get dressed," Hermit Eloise pulled up her undergarment and then slipped her robe back on over her head.

Before redressing, Lisen paused to explore this pouch, poking her fingers around inside it, stroking its soft fur lining, finding that it stretched with just a little pressure so she could see inside. "So, what did you...oh, there they are!"

"There what are?" the hermit asked as she returned to the table and her concoction.

"My breasts. They're tiny, just nipples really, and very close together." She had found them just an inch or so below the pouch's opening.

"Ah, you mean the teats."

Lisen pulled her robe back on. "What were you about to say? 'Save for one thing.' What is that?"

"Save for this. Here, two-foot males have pouches, too, and they carry babies, nearly as often as females do."

"Is there anything else I should know?" Lisen asked, wishing she could like this blunt, non-sense woman, but she didn't think she ever would. And her doubts about this world doubled with each new revelation. People with pouches? Men getting pregnant? *Dad would call them* Homo marsupialis, Lisen thought, recalling what her father had taught her about the naming of species. "Anything else I should know before I take this potion?"

"It will restore the rest," Hermit Eloise replied over her shoulder. "Then this will all start to make sense."

"It better."

"It will."

Lisen looked up to see that Hermit Titus had reentered the room. He must have been listening right outside, waiting until the facts of life had been explained before returning.

"And my destiny?" Lisen asked.

"I can only restore what you knew when I took you over," Eloise replied.

"So I didn't know anything about my destiny then?"

"No," the sooth replied. "You didn't. Only that you had one."

"Give me the potion." *And if it's a dream,* she thought to herself, *I'll be waking up soon enough.*

"Sit down," Titus said softly as he stepped to his chair, and Eloise brought the bowl of potion over. Lisen settled onto the cot.

"Titus, if you would sit beside her, hold her hand."

Hermit Titus sat down and took Lisen's left hand in one graceful movement, and the sooth took her place in front of Lisen and offered her the bowl. "It's bitter, but most truth is. Drink it all down as quickly as you can."

Lisen smiled wanly and took the bowl from the sooth with her free right hand. She took a deep breath, wishing she could hold her nose but didn't dare ask Hermit Titus to let go of her other hand. Then she put the bowl to her lips and began to suck the thick soupy stuff into her mouth. At first her throat fought it, gagging, but then it surrendered. She swallowed once, twice and finally a third time, only what stuck to the sides of the bowl left. She shook her head against the awful flavor assaulting her taste buds and returned the bowl to Eloise. "That had better be enough," Lisen pronounced, and after inspecting the bowl, Eloise nodded.

"It is enough," she said.