

A Taelach Sisters Series Novel

NO SISTER'S KEEPER



Jeanne G'Fellers

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Bella Books, Inc.
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Preface

It is difficult for someone who has not lived through long-term abuse to understand why a woman might continue to live in the situation. Why doesn't she just leave? Why, indeed? If only it were that simple. Long-term abuse brings with it two things: a kind of brainwashing and a victim's mentality.

The brainwashing is subtle and begins with a harsh word here and there, indelicate jokes at the other's expense. It is near impossible to detect, especially under the guise of new love. Furthermore, the progression is slow. It's covert, and the victim rarely sees what is going on around her until she has become fully engulfed by her abuser.

What proceeds is a blame game. "I wouldn't do this if you didn't make me so mad. It wouldn't happen if you'd just listen. It's your fault. Why're you so damned stupid?"

To the victim, these are reasonable questions. She has, after all, been trained that the viewpoint of her abuser is the only correct viewpoint. So she tries harder, tries to be what her abuser wants, but it's an impossible task. Then comes a sense of numbness. Nothing matters so she withdraws, going through only the most basic motions of life. She can do nothing but focus on her abuser, be aware of what

might happen, be hyper vigilant. Unfortunately, most abused women remain this way, stuck in a vicious cycle of abuse and blame.

Occasionally, a victim finds something to fight for, but that something must be bigger than herself. Something in her must awaken and be angry enough to fight—fight for her very life if necessary. Breaking from her abuser is generally a slow process full of false starts, interrupted efforts and indescribable fear.

However, if the woman succeeds, she will bear the scars and live with the aftereffects, with nightmares, with various ailments derived from the physical and mental stress.

Admire such a woman, because her inner strength is tremendous. Value her perseverance. Honor her courage. Celebrate her survival.

Two such women exist in this novel, the first being Chandrey. Don't judge her until you hear her story, and then place yourself in the same situation, set yourself in the very context.

What would you have done? Would you have been so brave?

The second woman is me, the author. I lived with my abuser for thirteen years and am now just becoming able to really work past the trauma. Conversely, my current relationship, ten years and going strong, is one of utter beauty. My Anna tries to understand why I couldn't leave before I did, why I endured being terrorized. It is difficult for her or anyone else to understand, I know. But I managed to be one of those rare women. *I'm a survivor.*

Here's to all the victims of domestic abuse. Here's to waking up from the nightmare. Here's to survival. So listen closely, my sisters, because this is a survivor's tale.

Chapter One

Rural Farmlands of Myflar

Thrall—under the power of another; a Cleave member raised by Autlachs

Glimma and Tao had just tucked their daughters into bed and settled in for a quiet evening of soothing music and good reading when distant lights appeared through the window of their rural cottage.

“Someone’s coming.” Glimma placed her recorder and reading spectacles on the chair-side table.

“This late? They should’ve commed first.” Tao glanced out the window. Farm work was difficult and their daughters young, so they very much enjoyed their quiet evenings.

This was more of a nuisance than anything, but Tao was concerned. Her skin began to prickle.

She put her recorder aside and went to the household com, where she tried contacting the approaching launch. “Their com is either off or dead.”

“How odd,” Glimma said.

Tao looked over her shoulder at her life mate, and then back to the window. “The lights are gone. Maybe they turned off.”

“Turned off where?” asked Glimma as she looked through the window. She patted Glimma’s hand when it touched her shoulder. “Check the girls, will you?”

Glimma squeezed Tao's hand and went to the children's room where she pushed back the curtain and stood in the doorway, her back to the main room of their small home.

Tao unlocked a worktable drawer and pulled out a plasma bow which she lashed to her forearm. When Glimma glanced at her, she didn't say anything, but quickly phased the children into a deeper sleep and returned to the worktable to strap on her bow as well.

This wasn't first time they'd defended their farm from intruders, but the last time had been before the children and their enemy had been local Aut's trying to scare them from their homestead. They'd weathered that problem without scars and now called many of those same Aut's friends. This enemy, however, was a new one. There had been a local meeting concerning the two families who had disappeared, but thus far, no Taelachs were missing.

The roar of a launch became audible and the yard's boundary markers sounded an entry, but still, no lights.

"Tao?"

"I'm getting nothing." Tao squinted, trying to phase probe the occupants of the launch.

"Phase blind?"

"Don't know. I'm calling for help." Tao's fingers skimmed across the house com's interface, entering the distress codes for the local authorities, but when the com went blank and the house lights flickered, she cursed under her breath.

"They're jamming us." She squeezed Glimma's hand, which had returned to her shoulder.

"Who is it?" Glimma glanced toward the children's room. "What do they want?"

"I'm going to try the com again." Tao pressed a flashlight into Glimma's hand and pushed her toward the children's room. "They've landed."

Glimma kissed her and hurried to the children's room while Tao tried the com a final time. The distress signal went through, and a face appeared on the screen.

"Your call has been received and acknowledged." A Taelach appeared on the viewer.

While Tao breathed a little easier, she saw the woman wasn't dressed in Kinship military attire, and she wore no life or battle braids. Odd, but not totally unheard of. Like herself and Glimma, some sisters in pursuit of a simple life remained members of the Kinship, but chose to not wear the customary trappings such as braids.

"We're here to help." The woman's odd smile confused her.

She took a second to look at the woman's dress. A heavy hide jacket with back-to-back crescents on one collar, but nothing else to show her affiliation. "Who's speaking?"

"Your judgment." The woman's smile broadened, revealing a chip in a bottom tooth.

"Judgment?"

"You stand accused of living a liar's life, of failing to follow the Mother's Word, and of failing to teach your children the Mother's way."

Tao sucked in her breath. Whoever this woman was, she spoke trouble, but still no matter how she tried, she could not sense the woman's mental presence. Nor could she sense anyone else on the launch, if there was anyone else at all.

"You have a choice," continued the woman. "Let us determine whether your home is satisfactory for raising a Mother's child or die resisting."

"Some choice."

"But it *is* a choice." The woman's smile faded. "I'll give you a moment to decide before we enter." The com clicked off.

Tao turned off the screen and went to the children's room where Glimma waited.

"What do they want?" Glimma sat between the children's bedrolls, a hand on each of their daughters.

"I don't know, but they're Taelach," whispered Tao. She drew Glimma to her feet and pulled her close. "Did you phase them?"

Glimma wrapped her arms around her. "They won't wake no matter the noise."

"Did you kiss them?"

"Of course, but—"

Tao suddenly became aware of other Taelach presences—five proud, indolent presences who exuded greedy anticipation and were closing fast. She reached for her bow.

"I wouldn't do that."

Glimma gasped as Tao pushed her back and turned around.

"What do you want from us?" asked Tao. "Our belongs? Our stores? Take them! Take them all!"

The woman she had seen on the screen only laughed. "If we wanted those, we'd have already taken them." She nodded to her four companions. Before either Tao or Glimma could power their bows, they were separated and disarmed.

“Where’re your keepers?” prodded one of the invaders.

“Keepers?” Glimma gritted her teeth as one of the invaders pulled the braid running down her back.

“Answer the fuckin’ question,” another of the leather-clad women hissed in her ear.

Tao and Glimma looked at each other, seeking a logical answer.

“Why, they’re slatterns!” declared the lead woman.

Tao and Glimma were forced to the main room, and thrown prone on the floor as their attackers riffled through their belongings, upending furniture and smashing the recorders holding their readings and music.

“Thralls don’t exist without keepers.” Someone pulled Glimma by her hair until she perched on her knees. “The Mother felt pity for her pale-skinned daughters and sent another, stronger daughter to protect the fairer member of her creation.”

“We know the Word!” cried Tao as she was pulled up by her hair. “Please, let us go!”

“If you know the Word, then you know your crime.” The woman holding Glimma pulled out a knife. “You’re both slatterns. The Mother damns you for your loose ways and has given keepers the power to punish you.”

Glimma’s face grayed. Her mouth fell opened in a silent scream.

“No!” Tao threw her captor’s foot off her back and reared up, reaching for Glimma.

“We’ll be quick with her,” promised the lead attacker. “Her mind’s not as sharp as yours.”

“But you’ll witness her Sharing first,” laughed another.

Tao was forced prone again. Knees pressed harder into her back, pinning her as the others took turns making Glimma’s mind theirs. Tao flailed, trying to throw the woman off her, and almost succeeded before another keeper helped keep her down. This second woman forced her way into Tao’s mind, making her “listen” to what went on inside Glimma.

They phased in one after another, shredding Glimma’s memories, her hopes, her dreams, tearing her talented mind into nothingness, and then they turned their pain phases into sickening pleasure, taking the last of her for their own satisfaction.

When they had finished, when there was nothing left of Glimma, they withdrew, leaving Tao alone in the shambles of her life mate’s mind.

My love. Tao echoed in the void. They hadn’t said goodbye, but she chose to remain in the void, holding onto what had been even

as she became aware of them taking her as well. They weren't taking her mind, but rather her body, making it theirs. She tuned them out and hid in the quiet until Glimma suddenly shuddered and was gone, launching her back to reality.

When she cried out, someone placed a blade to her throat. "Your children will have a proper upbringing with us." A hand ran down Tao's bare, bruised side. "They'll know the Mother and their proper place. They'll never be slatterns like you."

The woman turned Tao's head so she could watch her sleeping daughters being carried away. "See?" She turned Tao further to look into her eyes.

Tao recognized the lead attacker, the woman from the screen.

The woman still smiled. "Poor little slattern." There was no true sympathy in her eyes. Lust. Greed. Want. But certainly no sympathy. "So lost. No keeper to tell you what to do. I'll end it for you now, little slattern, before the confusion gets worse."

She drew her blade across Tao's throat.