

Chapter 1

~ E 11 e ~

Some people believe that heaven and hell is what you experience after you die. I believe they exist right here on Earth. I have experienced them both.

Practicing karate was my slice of heaven, my sanctuary and solace next to my placid career as a novelist.

I thought about that as I entered the martial arts studio in Gig Harbor. It was more of a shed, really, with peeling paint and a sagging roof, but our sensei, Master Mac, was great, and my friends were even better. As usual, I was the first to arrive for class.

Master Macalister Kinelli Sobopriatiario held a seventh-degree black belt in Kempo; an art that cleverly integrated Judo, Jujitsu, Aikido, and Kung Fu. He was thirty-two years old, one year younger than myself. His steel-gray eyes followed me as I bowed and entered the dojo. They were a perfect match for his long silverying hair that he wore tightly bound at the base of his thick neck. I often wondered if he dyed those silver strands, seeing he was too young to have earned them himself.

“Good evening, Miss Alder.” His silky voice was well rehearsed. It was no secret that he was a player and popular with the ladies. “You look very nice,” he commented.

I looked down at my gray sweat pants and matching shirt. “Uh, thanks.” I clutched the bag hanging over my shoulder and hurried to the ladies dressing room. One look in the mirror was enough to convince me that Master Mac needed to have his eyes checked. My hair was in disarray from driving my Miata with the top down, and my face was still blotchy from the cold. I wasn’t what most would consider a striking blonde. I was actually fairly simple. I wore my thin, straight hair in a braid that fell just past my shoulders. My blue-green eyes had an almond shape to them and my lips were thin and lacked any sort of shape. My teeth, however, were perfectly white and straight —a trait from my mother’s side.

I had spent the past four hours with the police, who were interrogating me about the recent robbery of my studio apartment. I wondered if they had forgotten that it was my apartment that was vandalized and I was not the one who did it.

My nerves were shot and I hoped Master Mac had a challenging workout planned today. I stripped out of my sweats and dressed into my gi. I wove what straggling strands of hair that I could back into my braid then tucked my bag under the bench.

Jamie strolled in, already dressed and looking like an expensive doll that shouldn't be played with. Her curly auburn hair haloed her head and framed a magnificent pair of kelly green eyes. She had full lips that begged men to kiss her. She certainly didn't lack in the man-friends department.

"Hey, Chicka, what's up?" she said, her tone inquisitive. "You parked like you had a few too many. Is everything all right?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'll tell you about it after class."

She smiled with anticipation. "This oughta be good."

As a historical fiction novelist, I should be living a quiet, simple life in the woods somewhere overlooking a placid lake. Sounds simple enough—just not for me. Trouble always sought me out and found me as if I had a built-in GPS with a target marked "DESTINATION." My parents claimed I invite trauma. Honestly, I couldn't see how. I don't date or excessively socialize, and I spend most of my free time typing on my computer—hardly the disposition of a drama-seeking female.

As Jamie and I walked into the dojo, Kael ran past us, his thick brown hair plastered down by his bicycle helmet. "Hi girls," he said in passing.

We giggled.

"Is that man ever on time?" Jamie asked.

"Rarely," I muttered.

Jamie and I took our place in the front of the class next to Neal, a brown belt. He gave us a smile that looked more like a smirk. Since he outranked us, he stood to our right.

Jamie rolled her eyes. She and I were green belts, soon to test for our brown. We both knelt and fastened our belts before standing again.

Pearl, a quiet but charming young woman who liked to keep to herself, and Jim, her boisterous husband stood behind us. They were both from South Africa, very dark, and wittingly funny. It was fun to have them in class.

Master Mac stood before us, clasped his hands together and offered a slow bow. We all followed suit. "Neal," he said. "Please lead the class in a five-minute stretch."

Halfway through our stretches, Kael jogged in toward the rear of the class, dropped to his knees, and fumbled with his belt. Master Mac groaned, showing him again how to tie it properly.

"Kael," he chided. "You are a purple belt now. You should know how to tie this correctly." He tied the belt snugly, then pointed to the ground. "Fifty pushups for being late."

"Yes, Sir," said Kael.

By the time we completed our stretches and were well into our warm-up, Kael completed his pushups, red-faced and breathing hard.

Master Mac drilled us through our punches and kicks, and then told us to pair up for sparring. Neal was in the middle of asking me to be his partner when Kael grabbed my gi sleeve.

"Not this time," he said, rather protectively.

"Careful," I said to Kael. "People might think you have a thing for me."

"I do," he admitted with a smile.

I knew better than to take him seriously. We had been a little more than friends for nearly seven years and had never once kissed. I mock-punched him to the stomach, clipped his chin with my elbow, then took him down.

"Best keep your guard up," Master Mac instructed him.

"Yes, Sir."

Kael stood, rubbed his jaw, and then glared at me as he took a stance. He kicked out at me before moving in for a punch. I stepped aside, grabbed his outstretched fist and flipped him to the ground.

He groaned. I offered him a hand up.

Master Mac stepped in. "Never sacrifice your balance for speed or force," he said. With power and grace, he demonstrated his point precisely, landing me on my backside.

Kael helped me up.

“Got it,” I groaned. “Thanks, Master Mac.”

Master Mac nodded, smiling down at me as if he had enjoyed planting my keister on the hard carpet. According to him, he couldn’t afford cushy mats. Personally, I thought the carpet-covered concrete was a cruel way of teaching us how to fall properly. Despite his roguish nature, the man had a certain draw to him and he definitely knew it. “Keep your feet on the ground, Miss Alder,” he chided.

“Yes, Sir,” I replied, my face as red as the sun in the mural on the wall.

We continued to spar, then moved into some grappling and defensive techniques. The class was blissfully exhausting, exactly what I wanted—a slice of heaven.

The hot shower afterward was even more rewarding. I braided my wet hair, squeezed it with the towel, and then tucked my clothes into my bag.

“Ya gonna come out for coffee with us, Master Mac?” Jamie asked, toweling her curly head dry. Her attraction to the stunning man was no secret. Unfortunately for her, he liked his women challenging and hard to get. Jamie, bless her heart, was much too willing.

“No, Jamie. Thanks for asking though.”

She sighed and gathered her things.

“Elle?” Master Mac called out to me.

I looked at Jamie and Kael who stood waiting at the door. The glare in Kael’s eyes did not escape my notice.

I cleared my throat. “I’ll meet you two at the coffee shop, okay?”

“I’ll wait,” said Kael, his thin frame and boyish face in sharp contrast to the domineering karate master.

I shook my head before turning my attention to the devastatingly handsome man standing far too close for my comfort. I cleared my throat and took a step back. “What is it, Sir?”

“There is a test coming up next week. I think you’re ready for it.”

I frowned. Typically, Jamie and I tested together. He had never asked me outside of her presence. “Um, did you want me to inform Jamie for you?”

He shook his head. “She is not ready. It will just be you and two others.”

I knew better than to deny his offer. That would have been disrespectful. Kael and I had plans to see a movie that weekend. We would have to postpone it. “Thank you, Sir. What time should I be here?”

“Saturday, 10:00 a.m. sharp.”

I looked down and away from his piercing gray eyes. “Okay, I’ll see you later, then.” I started to walk away. He grabbed my gi sleeve.

“Miss Alder, you’ll need these.” He handed me my purse and duffle.

Again, my face heated. He had a knack for turning me into Jello and he knew it. “Thanks,” I said, taking the bags.

He smiled, as if quite pleased with his ability to affect me so easily. Then again, he affected most women that way.

Kael shook his head as I walked toward him. “Honestly, Elle, I don’t know what you see in that man. He is a player and a crude one at that.”

“I’m not interested in him, Kael, or any other man for that matter.”

“I knew it,” he said, slapping his helmet onto his head. “You’re into women.”

I laughed. “No, I’m not gay.”

“What is it then?” he asked, releasing the lock on his bike. “I’ve known you for years and have never heard you talk about a single date.”

I shrugged. “I’m just not interested, that’s all.”

He swung his bike around and stared at me with deep brown eyes. “Any chance of changing that?” His question came out as if it were only meant for my ears. He didn’t wait for an answer before pushing off and swinging his leg over the seat. “I’ll see you at the coffee shop,” he said over his shoulder.

“Okay,” I replied, under my breath and out of earshot. He was such an odd bird, Kael. A good friend, perhaps the best and closest friend I ever had. Still, I felt as if there was so much more I was missing. I just couldn’t identify it.

I tossed my bags onto the passenger seat before settling into my car. It was my liberation toy; my last defiant act against my unsuspecting parents. Daddy had bought me a very practical Mazda

GLC, silver in color, and very inconspicuous. With the phenomenal contract of my first book, Czar, I traded the reliable sedan in for a shiny new Mediterranean-blue Miata.

I drove it with the top down as often as the moody Washington weather permitted. The little rain that fell this time of year hardly ever damaged the tan leather seats. I kept them well conditioned just in case. Now that summer was just around the corner, I would have more time to enjoy my ride. Then again, this was Washington where rain was more of a commodity than a condition.

I took off down the street and headed toward Cutters Point Coffee on the other side of Highway 16. There was an accident that had just occurred, causing the traffic to jam up the overpass. I inched my way forward and finally, as I approached the wreck, I saw Kael's red bike, twisted and bent, his bags strewn over the road.

I jammed the gearshift into park, got out and rushed toward the chaos. My legs could not carry me fast enough. Kael lay still on the ground, his limbs bent at awkward angles. He wasn't moving.

Chapter 2

~A v e l~

When the High Council asked me to accept this mission, I thought they had all gone mad. Some bloke—a black wizard—had found my father's *Book of Light* and had distorted and transformed it into its exact opposite, The Book of Shadows, a common practice of alchemy. My job was to inhabit the body of a man on the verge of death, get close to the woman who had found the book, and destroy the black wizard who had altered my father's work—bloody petty mission for a Spartan warrior.

Archangel Raphael was assigned as my ward during this quest. Looking down at the mangled body about to be mine, I completely understood the Council's choice. Raphael was unmatched as a healer, especially when several miracles were in order.

“Remember,” Raphael said, “you are to blend in and assume the life of this young man. Speak in English, and try to rein in your temper, will you? Your gifts as a spirit will only linger for a few days before you become fully human.”

I sighed. “So I’ve been briefed, my friend.”

The old man stood before me, resembling the character Gandalf from *Lord of the Rings*. He completed the image by carrying an ash wood staff and wearing a long white robe. It wasn’t at all what Raphael really looked like, but as an Archangel, he could manifest any image he wanted.

“Interesting choice,” I commented, looking him up and down.

“I thought so,” he replied. “You must hurry, the body grows cold.” With that, he struck me with his staff.

The pain that followed was indescribable. It felt synonymous with being frozen alive, and then slowly thawed. Every bone and muscle screamed in agony as Raphael leaned over my damaged body and meticulously mended it back together. Bystanders stood back, mumbling with disbelief. They could not see the old Angel, of course, but they hardly missed the fact that my crumpled legs were now straight and moving. I sat up and raised my hand to my throbbing head. The bleeding had suddenly ceased and the gaping wound at the back of my scalp slowly closed.

A young woman pushed through the crowd and hovered above me. The body I now inhabited recognized her as a friend, Elle Alder. She grabbed my face between her hands. “God, Kael. Are you all right?” Her eyes scanned my body.

“Help me stand,” I said.

“No,” she replied. “Help is on the way. You need to see—”

“Help me bloody stand!” I repeated, adding a demanding emphasis to my tone.

She frowned, hesitating before draping my limp arm over her shoulder. “You really should wait until the ambulance gets here.”

“I don’t need an ambulance. Grab my bag and help me to your car.”

She slung my bag over her shoulder with a hump. Her hand gripped my wrist. “Kael, you were just in a horrible accident. You need to wait here—”

I pulled away from her and grabbed my bike. “Where’s your car?”

She pointed to a Miata with the door swung open. “Over there.”

I shifted my bike to one arm then hauled her back to the car. “Are you going to drive, or should I?”

A police car arrived at the scene. A young dark haired rookie had gotten out and was currently working his way through the crowd that was still gawking at me and my mangled bike.

“I think you should talk to him,” said Elle, apprehension in her voice. “I’m sure you hit your head pretty hard.”

I had studied the ways of this new world prior to my mission. Leaving now was sure to attract more attention than I needed. It was best to simply talk to the officer and assure him that I was in no need of medical attention.

Elle opened the car’s trunk and placed my bag inside along with hers. I lowered my bike down and waited for the inevitable.

The cocky young officer had odd-shaped facial hair that looked as if it were painted on, rather than grown. He wore dark sunglasses, despite the fact that gray clouds had rolled in. The truck driver who hit me stopped him briefly to proclaim his innocence, waving his hands for emphasis.

Several bystanders pointed the officer toward us, mumbling indistinct words and expressions. The officer pushed his way through the crowd.

“Bloody perfect,” I mumbled.

“What’s with that word, ‘bloody’?” Elle asked. “I’ve never heard you use it before.”

I frowned, not really wanting to explain right now. Besides, our mutual friend, Jamie, was waiting at the coffee shop. All I needed was for her to worry and add to the growing confusion. “Call Jamie and let her know we’re running late. I don’t want her to worry.”

“What should I tell her? ‘Sorry, Jamie, Kael was hit by a truck. He was broken to pieces, but is much better now. We’ll be joining you soon?’”

“Tell her we’re stuck in traffic, nothing more.” I left to meet the officer walking toward us.

“Are you the young man who was hit?” he asked.

I stifled a laugh at his comment about me being young. Compared to him, I was ancient. The thirty-five-year-old body I inherited, though, could have passed for twenty, maybe younger. I would have to remedy that, and soon.

“I am.”

“Care to tell me what happened?”

“No. I’m late for an appointment.”

The officer looked up from his clipboard. “It can wait.”

I recounted the incident, in grueling detail. The officer’s statement filled three and a half pages before he left to speak with the driver who slammed into me. Since I refused medical attention, and the right to press charges, I was free to go.

I gathered my crumpled bike and wedged what was left of it behind the seats of Elle’s car. When the front wheel was removed, the bike fit snugly in the cramped space, though it towered precariously high.

I sat in the passenger’s seat. “Drive,” I told Elle.

She stared at me with doe-like eyes. “I think I liked you better before you got hit,” she said, jerking the car into gear and merging into the traffic ahead, just past the scene. She reached into the glove box and pulled out a package of wet towelettes. “You might want to clean yourself up if you don’t want Jamie to ask questions.”

I pulled down the visor and inspected the damage. Good Father in Heaven, I looked much worse than I imagined. Kael’s face looked like a child. The small, delicate hands I had inherited looked like those of a ten-year-old. How in God’s great Kingdom was I supposed to face a black wizard when I looked like Harry Potter?

Elle yanked a towelette from the container and wiped the back of my head. She parted my hair and inspected my scalp. “Where are your wounds?”

“Archangel Raphael healed them,” I explained.

She laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“He was there, kneeling beside me. Did you not see him?”

“I’m driving you to the hospital,” she said, veering her car to the right.

I grabbed the wheel and forced it to stay in the left lane. “And tell them what, Elle? ‘My friend was in an accident and hit his head. There are no wounds, mind you, because he claims an Angel healed them.’”

She turned her blinker on and pulled left into the shopping center.

Slamming her hand against the steering wheel, she screamed, “I knew this was going to be a crappy day. I just knew it!”

“Your day is what you make it,” I said.

“Were you visited by Plato as well?”

I shook my head. “No, I haven’t seen him in years. He’s very busy, you know.”

“Right,” she said, sarcasm lacing her tone. She pulled a brush out of her bag. “Here, clean yourself up. You look like something my brother would be proud of.”

Images of an older man employing the looks of European grunge came to mind. “Is your tongue always so sharp?” I drug the brush through my hair trying to obtain some semblance of style.

“You never part your hair on the left,” she said.

“Perhaps it’s time for a change, yes?”

She took the brush from my hand and dumped it into her purse. “Whatever.”

Chapter 3

Jamie stood when we entered the coffee shop. Her eyes grew abnormally wide. “Dang, Kael, what happened to you?” Her eyes rested on the blood that stained my shirt, and the holes that ventilated my jeans. It didn’t help that she stood a good three inches taller than me. Spartan women rarely topped their men once they were fully grown. When had the world changed so much?

I stood straighter than necessary and raised my chin. It didn’t help much. I still had to look up into her green eyes. “I fell off my bike,” I replied.

“I’m assuming you’re okay?”

“A little bruised, but I’ll live,” I said.

She glanced over at Elle, who quietly slid into the seat closest to the fireplace.

“What can I get you ladies to drink?” I asked.

Jamie cocked her jaw to the side as if assessing a complicated puzzle. “Um, my usual.” She pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to me.

“Same here,” said Elle, pulling a five-spot from her wallet.

I filed through Kael’s memories, trying to recall the ladies’ “usual drinks.”

The young man behind the register looked me up and down. “Uh, can I help you?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes, I’ll have a black coffee in a mug, a grande decaf peppermint mocha, and a tall spiced chai, please.”

The man repeated the order back to me, forcing a smile. “That’ll be \$12.95.”

I pulled a wad of bills from my pocket and paid the man. “Add one of those coffee cakes there, will you?”

The man nodded, then recalculated the total cost.

I returned to the table with the coffees first before going back for my cake. I offered the bills back to the women, and then took my seat across from Elle. Both women looked at me as if I were a stranger about to impose on their quiet time.

“What are you doing?” Elle asked.

I took a sip of coffee and bit off a hefty portion of cake from the neatly cut piece. “Did you want some?” I mumbled.

“You don’t drink coffee, Kael, and you never eat anything with flour in it.”

Jamie quietly sipped her peppermint mocha and neatly folded the five-dollar bill before tucking it back into her jeans. “Thanks for the treat, Kael.”

I smiled, grateful for the distraction. “You’re welcome.” I looked over at Elle. She continued to eye me suspiciously. “What?” I finally said. “I feel like having something different, that’s all.”

“Uh huh,” she droned, returning the crumpled bill to her wallet.

“So,” Jamie chimed, looking over at Elle. “Tell me about your trip to New York. Is your agent cute? Is he married?”

Elle shook her head, looking at Jamie as if the woman had lost her mind. “Yes, my agent is cute. No, he’s not married, and no, I’m not interested.”

“Listen, Chicka. You can’t remain a virgin your whole life. At some point in time you need to find a man and cut loose. Honestly, you’re wound tighter than an eight-day clock. A little sex would do you some good.”

I smiled, charmed by the sudden pink that colored Elle's cheeks. It brightened even deeper when she looked my way.

She turned the cup on the table, and averted her eyes from mine. "Yes, well, I'm not looking for anyone right now."

"Elle," Jamie chided, "you're thirty-three years old. Unless you want to be a new mother at forty, you'd best get crackin'."

"Well, right now, I have other things to contend with."

"What could be more important than gettin' laid?" asked Jamie.

The color in Elle's cheeks deepened. "For starters, nosy-bit, I need to get my apartment in order."

"Whatever for? Your place is neat as a pin—the epitome of order and all that." She flipped her hand in disgust.

"Not anymore," said Elle. "You remember that book that Kael and I found while geocaching?"

"Yeah," Jamie replied.

"It was stolen while I was gone."

The cake and coffee in my gut felt suddenly heavy. "What book?"

"The one that you and I found in Tahuya last spring."

My eyes narrowed. "The leather-bound one with no name?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Dang!" Jamie exclaimed. "Was anything else taken?"

Elle took a sip of her, and then shook her head. "No, that was it. Odd, huh?"

"Take me to your apartment," I said, starting to stand.

"Now? Can I finish my chai first?"

"No." I started for the door, expecting her to follow. She didn't. Modern women were obviously defiant. No self-respecting Spartan woman would ever think twice about denying a man's wishes.

Mind your temper, Raphael reminded me, though I knew I was the only one hearing his voice.

"Bloody hell," I groaned. This mission was turning into something much more than what I had bargained for. I sat back down and studied the obstinate woman intently, hoping she would feel my impatience. She hardly noticed.

“Do you need help cleaning the place up?” Jamie asked.

Elle took another long slow sip of her cursed tea and tapped the side of her cup with her fingers. “No, thanks. It’s not too bad. I should have everything back in order after tonight. It just feels kind of creepy, you know? Just the fact that someone was in my home?”

“Very creepy,” Jamie agreed.

When Elle looked over at me, something in her blue-green eyes caused me to look away—I never look away.

“Hmm,” she hummed. “Kael, are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine,” I snapped, fighting the annoying impulse to avoid her stare. “I want to see where the book was stolen from, that’s all.”

“Why? You’ve never taken an interest in it before. When we found it, you said—”

“That was before,” I nearly growled.

“Whoa!” Jamie said, raising her hands. “Down boy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so riled, Kael.” She leaned over to inspect my head. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your noggin too hard?”

I leaned back away from her. “Forget my head. I just want to go, that’s all.”

“Earlier,” Elle started, “you couldn’t wait to get to this coffee shop, and now you want to leave?”

“Yes.”

Elle picked up her tea and grabbed her purse. “I’ll talk to you later, Jamie, okay?”

“Yeah,” Jamie said. “Good idea.”

I followed Elle out, enduring the cold silence. No words were spoken as we pulled out of the shopping center and merged onto Highway 16.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, though I doubt she heard it past the roar of the wind whipping past our ears.

She continued to drive and sip her tea in silence. Her studio apartment was on Bay Street, right across from the marina in Port Orchard.

She pulled into her carport, parked, stepped out of the car, and then slammed her door shut. I hurried around the car to catch up to her and grabbed her arm. “Hey, I’m sorry.”

She rotated her arm up and twisted it down in an attempt to loosen my grip. When her maneuver failed, her eyes widened. Again, I wanted to look away, but held my gaze. Something about her drew me in. Cobras have a similar effect on their prey, I remembered.

For a moment she froze, studying me. “Your eyes,” she murmured.

I blinked and broke the contact.

But she continued to stare. “They’re different, more hazel than brown.”

I didn’t have time to explain about the connection between the eyes and one’s soul. Kael McLeod was dead, his spirit gone. When I assumed his body, my spirit took over. My eyes, of course, reflected it. “They change in certain light,” I explained.

“Hmm, I’ve never noticed it before.”

Her eyes, too, held a knowing. I knew her as something more than a friend. Her soul was old and familiar. If I stared much longer in those blue-green depths, I feared what I would learn. I released her arm.

It took her a while to look away, but when she did, I was finally able to breathe again.

I followed her up the stairs to the small space tucked between two other apartments. For someone to break in, they would have to be extremely stealthy or risk being heard. The door was unmarred and there didn’t seem to be any signs of a forced entry.

“How did they get in?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Either through the front door, or through the slider, if they risked scaling the walls up to my balcony.”

The balcony was three stories up with cedar-shake siding; not likely it was scaled. The air in the apartment possessed a heaviness, cold and thick. “Is it always this cold in here?” I asked.

“You’ve never complained before,” she huffed. “I’ll turn the heat up.” She placed her purse and tea on the kitchen counter then adjusted the thermostat.

I looked around the cramped space. Dust littered the wooden floors and rugs. Even the furniture had a layer of what looked to be ash. I tasted it—ash indeed, with a hint of salt.

She studied me as I roamed the area looking for clues.

“So, are you a detective now?” she inquired.

The room was spiritually bound by black magic. The taste of it was like copper pennies on my tongue. “You cannot stay here tonight,” I said. “The room must be cleaned.”

“I stayed here last night, Kael. What are you talking about?”

“Has anyone tried to contact you?”

“Yeah, lots of people. I just released a new book. That’s expected.”

“What book?”

She lifted a hardcover book from the couch. “Emerald. Jeez, Kael, you practically helped me write it. What is wrong with you?”

I took the book from her hands. From the blurb on the back, it was based on the book she had found in the woods—the one that was stolen.

“Grab some things,” I told her. “You’re staying with me for a while.”

“I’m most certainly not,” she countered.

“Your home has been compromised, Elle. I’ll explain later, but for now, please just do as I ask.”

“Kael, you’re scaring me, and that is not an easy feat. Perhaps you should explain now. Ever since you mysteriously rose from that accident, you have not been yourself. I saw your legs, they were severely broken. Your head was bleeding. Now you’re walking and acting as if nothing happened?”

I didn’t have time for all this. Even if I did explain everything to her, she would not believe me.

“Elle, do you believe in magic?”

I saw her energy shift and retreat as if she were protecting something.

“You know I do.”

“The book you found was not a fake. It is real. We need to get it back.”

“Why? I don’t want it back.”

“In the wrong hands, it can be devastating.”

She shook her head in disgust as she wiped away the ash from her bedspread. “Where is all this coming from?”

“Black magic,” I said. “It leaves a residue of ash and salt.”

“Are you saying that someone used black magic to enter my apartment and steal the book?”

“I am.”

Her eyes narrowed. "How do you know this, Kael? You don't even believe in magic of any kind, be it black, white, or indifferent."

"I know more than you think I do," I replied with conviction.

She wiped her hand over her armoire. "I just cleaned this."

"The room must be spiritually cleansed and the bond broken."

"How?"

"I need to gather some things."

"What kind of things?"

"Salt, heavy in minerals, white sage, black candles, adders tongue, and a stick made of ash."

"Right," she replied, looking at me as if I had lost my mind. "And how, exactly, do you know about these things?"

"Many years of practice," I replied. It was more like centuries, but she didn't need to know that.

"Do you know where to find these items?"

"The Dragoun's Leir in Belfair will have them."

I grabbed her purse from the counter and handed it to her. "Very well, let's go then."

We found the items I was seeking and returned shortly to the apartment. We discussed the ritual that had to be done during our ride back. Her intuition and precision of questions was unnerving. She knew far more than I had anticipated about the art of magic. Her knowledge of herbs and plants was a pleasant surprise as well.

I removed the items from the bag, and shook my head at the adornments littering the simple ash branch. Using my pocket knife, I sliced the beads, ribbons, and rhinestones from the wood.

"What are you doing?" she asked, appalled by my vicious attack on the magical wand.

"I don't need or appreciate this clutter."

"It's enchanted," she exclaimed; "blessed with love and power."

I looked over at her and smirked. "Enchanted?" I scoffed. "You've been reading too many books, my dear. True power comes from the Source and must be called upon by the wielder of the tool. What empowers these tools are the emotions that infuse them."

“What do you mean?” she asked, kneeling beside me. Her curiosity was like that of a child. I found it disturbingly endearing—almost as much as her closeness to me.

“This apartment is filled with emotions. What do you feel?”

Her blush forced me to look away. “There is a side of you, Kael McLeod, that intrigues me suddenly,” she boldly stated. Her hand rested on my upper arm.

I gently pulled her hand away, but couldn’t bring myself to release it. “Whatever you feel for me, Elle, must be curbed. All that is important right now is finding that book.” I looked deep into her eyes, more pale green now than blue. That was a mistake. My heart ached as it did the day Syria took her life. Again, I looked away. “Tell me you understand that.”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “Earlier today, you wanted my attention. Now, you push me away. How am I supposed to understand that? So much about you has changed. It’s as if you are no longer Kael McLeod.”

I stood and moved away from her. “Is there a place away from here that you can stay for a few days?”

“I thought I was staying with you?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “That’s not possible.”

“But you said—”

“No, Elle, you cannot stay with me! Do you have another place to go?”

The hurt in her eyes was crushing. “Yes, I can stay at my parents’ summer house in Tahuya.”

I gathered the items from the counter and moved them to the center of the room. The ache in her heart added to the myriad of emotions that weighted the small space. I found it nearly suffocating.

I poured a small pile of Himalayan sea salt into my palm, and said a quiet prayer asking the Father to infuse His will into the salt. “Divinus sator sal salis per vestri mos.” With deliberation, I sprinkled the salt to the North, to the East, to the South, and then to the West. I held up the ash-wood wand and gathered positive emotions into it that would negate the dark, ominous feel of the room.

The apartment was infused with anger, anxiety, greed, and oddly enough, a bit of jealousy. I countered them with feelings of pleasure, peace, generosity, and trust. I ignored the emotions that poured from Elle at the moment. When my countering emotions were stored and gathered into the

wand, I pointed the wand outward and turned clockwise while saying, “*Solvo quod condeo*,” releasing the positive emotions into the room and forming a protective shield.

Next, I lit the two black candles, and then the white one. Black, as I had explained to Elle, was used to absorb negativity. The white candle was burned for protection against evil intent. As they burned, I lit a piece of charcoal and waited for it to turn gray. I then sprinkled the dried adders tongue leaves onto the burning coals. The smoke rose and wafted through the room, like hungry dragons looking to gorge on negative emotions. I lit the neatly bundled wand of white sage, let it burn for a moment, then blew out the flame. Smoke wafted up from the bundle. I circled the apartment, clearing out whatever remained of the evil that had invaded this space.

“I need a piece of red cloth,” I told her. “Something that has been close to you.”

She stood and walked toward the armoire. From the top drawer, she pulled out a pair of red panties and handed them to me.

“These are synthetic.” I told her. “Do you have something made of cotton or silk?”

“Picky, picky, picky,” she chided, retrieving her intimate wear from my grasp. She pulled out a summer top.

I propped the wand of sage up and allowed it to burn beside the coal and dried herb. With my knife, I cut her blouse into the shape of a triangle.

“Hey,” she protested. “That’s one of my favorite tops.”

“More the better,” I countered. I laid the triangular piece of cloth beside the burning coal, and then added more herbs to the pile, allowing them to burn to ash.

When the ash cooled, I poured them onto the red cloth, closed the tips of the triangle together, and bound them with red thread. “Do you have a shovel?”

“Not here,” she said.

“You’ll need something to dig with.”

She rummaged through her kitchen drawers and retrieved a large metal spoon.

I nodded. “That’ll do. Follow me.”

We headed down the stairs and toward the front of the building. I pointed to an area that bordered the property. “Dig here.”

“Why?”

“You are going to bury the sachet of ash. It will prevent the person from entering this area. He will not be permitted beyond this border.” I pointed, indicating a fifty-foot diameter around the building.

“How do you know it’s a he?”

“I have a good idea.”

I watched as she buried the red bundle and mounded the dirt over it. Her hands were shaking.

“It’ll be all right, Elle. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her eyes were dull and filled with pain. “You already have,” she said, brushing the dirt from her hands. She stood and walked past me toward the stairs. I had hurt her—that much was clear. The pain was inevitable though. There was clearly something between us, but allowing whatever it was to flourish was pointless. As soon as this mission was over, my body would die and I would return to the Ethereal Kingdom. I had already lost one love. I couldn’t stand to lose another.

Elle gathered a few things into a bag and hauled it over her shoulder. I took it from her.

“I can handle it,” she said.

“No doubt,” I replied, slinging the strap over my shoulder.

“Would you like me to take you home?” Her voice had a cold edge to it.

Common sense warned me to call a cab, but she and I needed to talk. She had to understand the importance of the book and why I needed her help. The Council had given me free rein of the information they had shared. I was instructed to gain her cooperation using any means possible.

“Yes, that would be appreciated.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened to the Kael I used to know?”

“He is dead.”

She turned and glared at me. “That’s not very funny.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”