



Chapter 1

- E l l 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 silvering 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

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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.