

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS



# DEVIL'S CLAIM

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**Devil's Claim**  
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## Devil's Claim

**Generations ago, he died for her. Now, it's her turn.**

Pride kept them from looking at one another, but their bodies could not lie. Recognition lived in their souls, rekindling memories of passion, love, betrayal...and death.

Apache Elder Aidan Stringfellow, V, is a very wealthy man with one wish – to free his only son, the brilliant, yet abrasive David, from the curse that has plagued his family for generations. When his controversial plan for a cure is revealed, shock and disbelief are only the beginning, for David has deadly, yet beguiling secrets of his own.

Choosing to honor Aidan's wishes, David and Katala unwittingly awaken an ancient evil desperate to lay claim to the last-born Stringfellow – David. The tumultuous consequences of a vengeful pact spanning generations, defies time, tradition, and death itself.

Katala finds herself falling in love with a man whose gaze and touch ignite long-forgotten passion, propelling her to fight for his life. She unearths one devastating clue after another on her winding journey toward the truth, but unseen forces escalate their attack as truth collides with myth. Clinging desperately to her own sanity, she must find a way to reconcile the two, for even her own identity comes into question. Trust no one. Not even David.

Time is running out. Promises will be kept, and if the devil has his way, souls will be claimed.

## Devil's Claim

1879

Tears blinded Twilah as she ran. Chelewa, the wolf, ran beside her. All the things she had neglected to tell Aidan before, flooded her mind now. She needed to tell him thank you. She needed to tell him she was sorry. There were so many things she needed to tell him, but in anger, she had cursed his entire line, not only Aidan, but from this day, every generation would be bound by her impetuous treachery. She needed to undo what she had done.

The wind brushed the deerskin skirt he had brought her when she had nothing, forcing the sturdy fabric to float carelessly behind her as she propelled her body forward. The strong connection between them had become instinct, leading her to him without thought or hesitation. She could not let Aidan die because of her, even if it meant offering her life for his.

She had removed the high-top deerskin boots to lighten the weight she carried and travel faster. Those, too, he had brought to her. He had saved her, supplied her with everything she needed, and given her whatever he thought she wanted. In response, in a childish fit of rage, she had cursed him and his seed – the very seed she carried. Now, she understood, and she raced to his side to undo the catastrophe she'd unleashed. The sound of her feet hitting the dry earth was swallowed-up by the howling wind as it swept across the prairie. The heat was oppressive, yet still she ran.

She wondered if he knew he was in danger. Aidan was not a trusting man, but his heart was filled with love. Twilah feared that it was his heart that would ultimately lead to his destruction. *No!* The word rang through her mind as she sprinted even faster. She had never wanted anything to happen to him. She needed to be sure he knew that. She needed to tell him his child grew inside her. Most of all, she needed to tell him how much she loved him.

As she came within viewing distance of a clearing beneath a large tree, she saw him. He appeared to be resting against the tree. His brother, Cade, stood over him. This was the danger she had sensed. In repose, Aidan was unguarded. Twilah felt raw hatred from Cade as he watched his brother. Chelewa snarled and ran ahead, as if he foresaw the next event. Twilah cried out as she ran toward the brothers to intercept the blow, but even Chelewa was too far away to save Aidan.

The moment the heavy blade of Cade's knife struck Aidan, Twilah felt it. In that moment, searing pain ripped through her and she was helpless, sinking to her knees without preamble. She caught a glimpse of Cade's face as he turned in her direction and abruptly away again. Twilah realized the acrid stench of hatred was too strong to have been Cade's alone. Another spirit worked through him, something dark, ancient, evil.

Twilah gathered herself as quickly as possible, but Chelewa had already leapt into action, lunging at Cade's throat and forcing him to lose his grip on the heavy

blade. Chelewa forced Cade to the ground, dragging him away from Aidan. Twilah ran to Aidan, unwilling to accept what had just happened. She knew before she reached him that his heart was slowing. She caressed his face, still responsive to her touch. The tears she had cried earlier left an empty well inside her. She had cried so long and hard, there were no tears left. She knew that if she concentrated hard enough, she might still have enough time to save him, but fear gripped her, the years of being held captive, enduring unimaginable pain. Memories flooded her mind, tearing her away from Aidan, rendering her unable to help him, unwilling to risk herself. She was not prepared to sacrifice herself for him.

Aidan's life force waned quickly. Twilah had the ability to discern spirits, but she was too distraught to focus on the evil presence Cade left behind – the *abiku*. The *abiku* had capitalized on Cade's jealousy of Aidan, using the overpowering emotion to manipulate and possess Cade. The self-serving spirit hovered, watching and waiting – waiting to claim Aidan's unborn son.

The only useful emotion Twilah could manage was detached anger – a quiet rage too great for her frame. She willed the wolf to destroy Aidan's murderer, and he endeavored to obey. She might not have the courage to risk her life for him, but she could at least bring one of his killers to justice.

Cade's cries for mercy fell on deaf ears as Twilah lost herself to grief. She vowed that even death could not sever her hold on Aidan. She searched for the knife, finding it quickly, and reverted to her native Swahili. "Chelewa, *njoo! Njoo!*"

Chelewa immediately obeyed, stepping away from Cade's weak body and trotting to her side. Twilah straddled Cade's body, fell in one quick movement to her knees, and plunged the knife directly into his heart.

It was then that she realized the *abiku* was there, a chilling breeze the only physical indication of the spirit's presence. She stood, raising her fists in the air and her voice did not sound like her own as she continued to call out in Swahili. "You would cheat me? Without him, I have nothing! Our bargain means nothing to me without him!" Her very words were an epiphany. Guilt at her own selfishness rose from her belly, nearly choking her, and she understood too late that loving Aidan was so much more than possessing him. Loving him should have given her courage to save him. Instead, her obsession with him had given the *abiku* ammunition to bring about his destruction.

Twilah knelt beside Aidan's body and pointed the blade at her heart. She wanted to make things right – to die for him, but the thought of his child growing inside her made her hesitate. She gathered her composure, turning her anger and self-loathing in the direction of her true enemy – the demon that would steal away everyone she loved unless she found a way to stop him. They all called her 'Witch', but she was so much more. Her father, the notorious witch doctor, Gullah Bo, had taught her a great deal about the 'old ways', secret lessons from her mother country, and what he had been unable to impart, she inherited. Perhaps there was still a chance for her to save her child, herself, *and* Aidan, but if she failed, the demon would not hesitate to claim Aidan's progeny, including the son she carried within her.

# Chapter 1

## *Generations Later*

An iridescent semblance of one large, strong hand remained etched on the surface of the heavy glass. Like every Stringfellow male before him, Aidan always feared that his son would be the one, the soul promised to the abiku, and now, here he stood, mourning the loss of his beloved Faith. The prophecy was coming to fruition, and her precious life served as the first blood sacrifice. Tears flowed silently down Aidan's typically expressionless face as he stood, gazing outward, seeking hidden answers. He felt as if his heart had been ripped from him, still bloody and straining for life, and the ensuing storm ahead seemed an unnecessary omen.

He peered through the glass, sightless, remembering. A large boulder juxtaposed the wall of windows in front of him. He saw Faith running toward him, a young woman less than 20, thick, wiry, raven hair immune to the wind's wiles. Her skin smooth, the slightly sweet meat of early autumn pecans. He turned to face the hospital corridor, a sharp chill wracking his bones as he faced a future without her – raising a child without her – a child he berated himself for siring.

Betrothed at the ages of 15 and 13 respectively, Aidan and Faith Stringfellow had been married for sixteen years when Faith conceived their first and only child – against Aidan's wishes. He had always feared the Stringfellow curse passed down from one of his ancestors. Rooted in the Apache tribal ways, he prayed for guidance, seeking advice from the Council, but the Council declined to give him an answer that did not involve a price too high to pay...or so he had thought at the time. Now that it was too late, he would pay any price to have her with him again.

The moment the child took his first independent breath, his mother slipped away. Over the centuries, the Stringfellow family dwindled exponentially with each generation as fear provided unrivaled birth control. The family curse was passed down from one generation to the next until children nearly became a luxury they could not afford. Once the curse was set in motion, every newborn male was a potential victim, the one who had been claimed, chosen to be the abiku's vessel. To Aidan's great sorrow, Faith's life ended with the birth of their firstborn, stolen from her by the evil living within his small, deceptively helpless frame. He was now the sole guardian of the prophecy incarnate.

Aidan stood in the noisy hospital corridor. Large windows laced the hallway from one door to the next. He stood quietly, watching. The cries, murmurs, and motions of babies were lost on him. His attention was focused on his heir.

*"A dark presence surrounds this child."* Aidan heard the voices of his mentors and elders repeat the statement. *"A dark presence surrounds him. You must be prepared. He will embody the evil of the past."* He considered the fact that this was certainly not the first time a Stringfellow had fought dark forces, and he was sure it would not be the last.

The newest Stringfellow had presently lived eight hours. Aidan watched his son, a lone tear streaming down his wisdom-worn face. His close proximity to the infants made his six-foot, five-inch, 240 pounds even more colossal and commanding. He passed on his name, Aidan David Stringfellow, the name of his father before him, and the given name of the original sacrifice, the claimed male, in a feeble attempt to bring the prophecy full circle. He barely remembered his own father, but hoped *he* would live long enough to teach the boy what he needed to know. Even more importantly, he vowed to find a way to end the curse.

Guilt wracked his body as he stared blindly into the maternity ward. Gazing at his son, he could hardly believe how close he'd come to negating his existence. A vasectomy or a pill, one little pill could have detached the baby from his beloved wife's womb, but she would have grown to hate him for taking either of those actions. She was not supposed to die, he thought. Faith was supposed to be here with him now, helping with the plans to raise their son. He knew enough to acknowledge that the curse was not the doing of his ancestors, but the words of the culprit were etched in his memory. His grandfather's notes had been sketchy at best, but those words could never be forgotten. *'I am alone. You and your seed will be alone..'* After these poignant words, the script had continued in a different language – a language unknown to his people.

"Mr. Stringfellow?"

Aidan turned to the sound of the nurse's voice.

"Hello, Mr. Stringfellow. Would you like to hold your son now?"

Aidan felt mixed pangs of excitement, trepidation, and sorrow run through him. "Yes, I would like that." He managed a burdened smile.

"Come with me." The petite young woman led him into the infant-filled room.

Again, the murmurs of other children were lost on him. He moved carefully toward his son and took him gingerly from the nurse's arms.

Tears flooded his eyes as he held his son. "Well, little Stringfellow, who are you? I wish your mother could see you. She would be better at telling me who you look like. She insisted that I name you after your great-great grandfather, so you get to recycle the same name again. I'll call you David." Watching his miniature replica made him playful for a moment. He marveled at the fact that his son's eyes, like his, were already open at birth. "Can you say 'great-great'?"

The nurse ushered Aidan and David into a room. She smiled reassuringly. "If you two need anything, I'm right here."

Aidan nodded in acknowledgment, focusing on his son again. The child grasped his finger, attempting to suckle.

"Nope, little fella, I'm afraid I can't help you there." Aidan stood slowly, making sure he didn't jar his precious possession. He checked the child's face carefully, hoping to find the hereditary facial marking, but there was nothing. As he had feared, there was no facial mark – no apparent protection for this child. As Aidan's brow creased in concern, the child's pewter gray eyes seemed to sparkle. "Aidan David Stringfellow. How about we call you David?"

*Present Day*

The sensation of spiders crawling on his bare skin woke him. He resisted the urge to swat, choosing to lift his lids slowly instead. David's veiled eyes instantly took in her soft breasts as she leaned over him. Her long dark hair spilled forth onto his shoulder, and she slowly traced the contours of his chest with the feather he had used for other purposes the night before. Vickie enjoyed toys in bed as much as he did, always eager and willing to try whatever he wanted.

Sunrays peeked into the room through sheer white curtains forming pricks of light and shadow along the empty walls of Vickie's apartment. He had known Vickie for years, and she had always been available to him. His description of their sex-based relationship was 'friends with benefits', a term Vickie hated. He continued to lie flat on his back while she leaned over and toyed with him in an attempt to arouse him again.

"You should marry me, you know." She watched him for a response.

"Right." He held her shoulders, lifting her off him, then rose from the bed in one fluid motion. The quick movements belied his tall, muscular frame – six foot four, over two-hundred pounds. Wavy, blue-black hair, floated unbound to the center of his back and fell casually around his shoulders like cashmere. David gathered his clothes from the floor. "Why, pray tell, should I do that?"

"Because I love you."

"Speak language I understand, Vickie. You know I don't believe in love. Everything I know about love serves as a warning to steer clear of it."

"Okay, then. I do what you want in bed, I know what you like to eat, I know practically everything about you and I still love you despite your crappy ass attitude. Oh yes, and I understand your customs. We would make a good match *and* make your father happy. No other woman could deal with you and your appetites, David – I know it, and you know it." She smiled, sliding a hand between her legs as she lay naked before him. "Is *this* speaking your language?"

His eyes clouded with something even he did not understand. "You don't know anything about *my* customs, and you have no idea what will make my father happy, not that I give a shit. What happens overnight to your 'no strings' speeches? If you know me so well, why do you keep asking me this same question? You already know the answer. We fuck. That doesn't mean you know me." He moved to the next room to shower.

"David, are you coming back tonight?" Vickie rose with a sigh as she called after him.

He stuck his head out of the shower. "I doubt it. There's a big..." David heard his cell phone ringing from where he'd left it on the bedside table. "Vickie, see who that is for me, please, but do not answer it. Just tell me the number." For the sake of privacy, there were no names attached to the numbers in his cellphone. His unnatural ability to memorize numbers and patterns made names unnecessary. He knew them all.

"It's..." Vickie recited the number. It says 911."

David hurried to complete his shower and dress for the day, so he could return his father's call as soon as possible. Securing his hair with a brown leather tie, he achieved an almost corporate look and decided to call his father

from his truck. He did not want to take a chance on his father figuring out where he was or whom he was with. That argument along with too many others had been rehearsed more times than he cared to remember. *Guess I do still give a shit what the old man thinks.*

\* \* \*

David arrived at his office to find several written and verbal messages directing him to call the family home. He was reminded that he had not returned his father's calls. After a heralded college career in architectural design and a few jobs in construction to develop appreciation for the family trade, nearly 26 years old, David was now president of Stringfellow Incorporated, an architectural firm with accolades too lengthy and great in number to mention. Despite the fact that his father had entrusted him with the billion-dollar business, he still knew his father watched his every move both socially and professionally. The relationship between them had been strained since his fifteenth birthday party. He still saw that same look in his father's eyes when he looked at him now – love, disappointment, and...he never could quite make out the third element in Aidan Stringfellow's piercing gaze, but the two he recognized were a painful combination to say the least.

David stepped into his well-appointed penthouse office, closed the double doors behind him, then hit favorites.

"Stringfellow residence." Aunt Skye's voice sounded strained. Obviously, she had been crying.

"Aunt Skye, it's David. My father called me a few minutes ago. What's going on over there?"

"Oh David, thank God it's finally you. Where are you? Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you..."

"I'm at the office. Again, what's going on?" Fear the size of a boulder hit the bottom of his stomach and ricocheted to his heart. *Father.*

"I need you to come home, David – not your loft, but here." David could hear Skye intentionally calming her voice as she spoke more softly.

"Where's my father?" The heavy weight of dread made each breath laborious, and Skye's reluctance to answer his question only served to heighten the biting, churning in his stomach.

"I'm leaving now. I'll be there in a few minutes." He was running to his SUV before he hit 'end call'.

His assistant called after him as he passed her in the lobby, but there was no time to stop. "Emergency. Call my cell if you need me." His mind raced to a dark conclusion as he left the building and started his black and silver Land Rover. It was not unusual for his father to track his movements, but this time it felt different. Something was very wrong. He shifted gears quickly and took back roads to get to the house as fast as he could.

\* \* \*

Katala quietly sat across from the nurses' station. The stern white walls always did something frightening to her artistic spirit, as if they destroyed all color and vibrance, and she would be the next victim of sterility. She shook her head, smiling inwardly at her crazy imagination. The book she was reading was obviously not holding her attention. Michelle, her younger sister, was in a room two doors down undergoing yet another battery of tests. The fifth floor of Mercy Memorial had become a second home to Katala over the years because of her sister's constant visits for treatments and tests. She knew every nurse and most of the doctors who frequented the floor.

One of the nurses passed by and waved as she looked up. Katala immediately picked up on a dark shadow hanging over the young woman, causing her usually bright features to gray noticeably. Seemingly the most benign of her family line's special *gifts*, Katala's ability to discern spirits was one of many she hid from outsiders. She wondered briefly what could have happened to cause the change in the nurse's pallor but decided against asking.

Katala looked up to see her mother coming toward her with coffee and doughnuts. Following their father's untimely death while serving his country, their mother, Leslie, had become the center of their world. Watching her mother's movements as she came closer, Katala was reminded again how much she resembled her – five foot six, athletic build with just enough extra padding in the hips and thighs. Physical appearance seemed to be their only commonality. With the exception of her sister, Michelle, they argued about nearly everything else. “Am I glad to see you! I was about to doze off just sitting here. They're still running tests, so we can't even see her.” Katala reached to accept a cup of coffee from her mother. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome, baby. I knew you'd already be here, so I stopped and picked this up on the way. The coffee here at the hospital is awful! They must leave that stuff open in a tin can overnight or something. You haven't been waiting all night, have you?”

“It's no big deal, Mama. I couldn't sleep anyway, knowing Michelle was in here.”

Leslie smiled, shaking her head at her daughter. “We've had this argument too many times to rehash it again now, but if it takes much longer, why don't you just go on and get some rest while I stay here? You've got to be exhausted. I'll call you when she wakes up. I mean, since you already took today off from work anyway. You really didn't need to do that. You're gonna need these days later.”

Just as she opened her mouth to respond to the unwanted appraisal of her work ethics, her mother's phone rang. A cold chill crackled along her spine. Something was very wrong. She didn't completely understand them, but her signs never lied, and based on the expression on Leslie's face, they proved trustworthy once again. “What's wrong, Mama?”

Leslie placed a calming hand on Katala's arm, signaling her to remain quiet.

The call only lasted a few moments, after which her mother clasped her hands. Looks like we're about to take a trip back to Arizona, and this time, no

matter how uncomfortable you say David makes you feel, your presence is required.”

\* \* \*

David arrived at his father’s home, the mansion he’d grown up in. Chastising himself for stopping by his office first, he dashed to the front door with his key in his hand, but Skye opened the door as he reached the top step. He stepped inside and glanced at her, but said nothing as he scanned the room for his father.

Skye motioned for David to sit next to her on the sofa.

But David ignored her, dashed up the stairs, two-steps at a time. He vaguely heard his aunt’s voice calling after him, but he didn’t stop until he’d searched every room for his father. Finally, he entered his father’s study. There, he felt it – death lingered in the room, a dark, unembellished cloak.

“Where’s my father?” Judging by his tone, a stranger would not have known Skye helped raise him, the only mother-figure he’d ever known.

“David, your father had a massive heart attack this morning. He was rushed to the hospital but there was nothing they could do.” Her voice was crisp and business-like, but her bloodshot, swollen eyes gave her away. “He was whispering your name.” Losing her composure, she whispered the final words. “We called you and paged you, but we couldn’t reach you.” She reached to hug him, then immediately shook her head and held her head down as her fingers brushed his side.

David shifted, avoiding her touch. A mere touch would shatter his composure, and the last thing he wanted was to be emotionally exposed. *‘He was whispering your name.’* Those words would stay with him forever. His father had always been whispering his name in attempts to make him better. He sat, guilt and anger warring inside him as he suited up, shielding himself from pain, at least on the outside.

“Where is he – his body? I’ll need to make arrangements.” He set his jaw and welcomed the cold stone as it covered his heart, protecting and consuming him at once. His mother had died in childbirth. He always believed her death was the reason his father had been so hard on him. Now, as Aidan Stringfellow’s only heir, the last vestiges of responsibility fell on his shoulders. He was not ready, but he would die before admitting that to anyone.

Skye moved, putting more distance between them before she picked up a large safe-box and held it out to him. “This contains your father’s important papers, his final requests.” Tears drifted slowly down her face as she continued. “Everything else is with the family attorney. He’ll contact you after the arrangements have been made and carried out.”

He felt her gaze on him, obviously trying to make eye contact, but he could not allow it. “He loved you more than he loved himself,” she said, her words tearing at his soul.

David glared at her, his eyes stinging with anger and pain. “And what is that supposed to mean? That *he* died for me, too? Like my mother? Dammit, I don’t need you to tell me how he felt!”

Skye put the safe-box down and reached for him again as tears poured down her cheeks. "I didn't mean..."

He allowed her to hold him for a moment this time, then stepped away and picked up the box, his recently stormy gaze somber.

David held the box reverently, avoiding Skye's tears. "Thank you, Aunt Skye. I'm sorry I yelled at you." His tone was devoid of emotion. Skye had moved in to help raise him when his mother died, but nothing, not even her warm smile and tender heart could mitigate the dark pall that lingered, always crouching inside him, waiting for a chance to lash out. He kept most people at bay for their own protection.

David ran his fingers along the cold hard surface of the metal safe-box and carried it up the winding stairs to the bedroom that had once been his. He had sound-proofed the room in his teens and he was grateful for that now as he closed the door. The urgency to call out was overwhelming. He wanted to wail the passing of his father who until the end, had never given up on him. No sooner had he entered the room than he fell to his knees, clutching the box. No sound, no tears, just deep, bottled agony ripped through him as he doubled over. *'Thank God you finally called. He was whispering your name.'*

He had always been a disappointment to his father, but until this moment, he'd always hoped he could make it up to him. The torturous thoughts continued to pound his psyche. Time seemed to stand still as he knelt, reduced to a helpless heap of trapped emotions there in silent mourning. This side of him, no one else ever saw. He made sure of it.

## Chapter 2

Katala couldn't seem to escape the slow, rolling sensation emanating from the bottom of her stomach. Emotional pain rushed to her lungs and heart, making it hard for her to breathe. She had never felt anything so intense. Nausea overtook her as tears began to flow from her eyes. The phone rang just as she tried to stand, fighting hard to settle her stomach and take a few steps to reach her phone on the counter.

She recognized her mother's number. "Hey, Mama." Her voice was a whisper due to her temporarily limited lung capacity.

"Hey, baby. You okay?"

"Yeah. Just a little tired. Hearing about uncle Aidan didn't help any either."

"Yes. I know how much you loved him. I'm having a hard time digesting it myself. Too bad you can't muster up some of that affection for his son. I'm sure he could use it right now."

"All I can do is try. If he's civil, I'll be civil, too."

Katala heard her mother sigh in that way she was sure only mothers could. "The doctors are going to let your sister leave the hospital for a few days. The best thing for her now is a bone marrow transplant, so she's on the list. We'll just have to pray that by the time we get back from Aidan's memorial service, good news will be waiting for us."

Katala and her mom had been tested in the past before the need became so urgent, and they were not compatible. Apparently, Michelle leaned more toward their father's genes, and he had died ten years ago. Ever since Leslie's best friend, Faith, married Aidan Stringfellow, Katala and Michelle had called them aunt and uncle. Even before Faith's untimely death, Aidan had been there, helping them financially and emotionally whenever he was needed, and now, he was gone.

\* \* \*

"David?" Skye called from downstairs.

David heard, but found himself unable to speak or move.

A few moments later, there was a soft knock on the door. "Sweetheart, are you in there? Aunt Leslie's on the phone. Can you talk to her? I wouldn't bother you, but she sounds really upset. She just wants to speak to you and make sure you're okay."

David found it hard to breathe. He was not okay. He managed to get the necessary words out. "I can't talk now."

"Okay. They're coming for the funeral, so I'll call her back after arrangements have been made."

Holding the box at his side, he opened the door and began the slow descent down the stairs to his SUV. He was grateful for Skye's silence as he passed her on his way out. He turned the radio off and drove home in silence. Thoughts of past arguments with his father, hurtful actions, defiant remarks and

disappointments all continued to haunt him. Somehow, despite his father's efforts to prepare him, he had never even considered this day would come.

He arrived at his loft, locked the door behind him, and sat on the side of his bed to look over the paperwork in the safe-box. He did not bother to go to his drafting table. Slowly, there on the bed, he sketched out an order of service for his father's funeral, complete with songs, soloists, and obituary. This was the easy part. He was a designer, a planner, an organizer, but his father had been so much more and had wanted so much more of him.

In the end, his father made the ultimate sacrifice, taking his own life to save his. He would never be able to repay him, never be able to make anything up to him, and the pain that realization conjured was a physical presence, filling the entire room, stealing his breath.

David forgot dinner, showered, and lay awake staring at the 12-foot ceiling above his bed. Despite the well of anger and sorrow coursing through him, he knew the next day would be business as usual. Work was the only thing he had ever been able to do to his father's satisfaction. Perhaps work would make the days seem shorter and less painful.

Something inside him had changed, and he knew at some level that the Council's proclamations had begun.

His life was about to change with or without his approval, and his father's death was only the beginning. He wondered which, if not all, of the Council's beliefs were true. According to the elders, for better or worse, the curse would end with him. He placed his index finger on his brow, brushing the mark *Katala* had given him years before. *Katala*. He tried not to think about her, but she was ever present, every time something tragic or monumental took place in his life.

The thumping sound startled him. He realized someone was knocking on his door. "Who is it?" he yelled. He was in no mood for an unwanted guest.

When he didn't hear a response, he rose and walked slowly to the door only to find Vickie standing there in a raincoat with her arms wrapped around her torso.

"I guess you already heard," he said, opening the door and nodding for her to come in.

She tipped up, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as she leaned into his body. "I'm so sorry, David. Let me take care of you. Just tell me what you need and I'll—"

He took a few steps back, removing himself from Vickie's possessive embrace.

She moved toward him again, her eyes beseeching. "Baby, don't shut me out at a time like this. Why can't you let me love you?"

Sighing, he gently grasped her hands. "Vickie, I appreciate you coming all the way over here to check on me, but it's time to go. Come on," he said, nodding toward the door. "I'll follow you home."

"No," she whined. "Don't do this. Why don't I just stay over until it's time to go to work tomorrow?"

"I know you mean well, but I need to be alone. I'll call you later."

She whipped open the raincoat, threw it to the floor, and stood before him naked. He glared at her as fury overtook him, rendering him immune to her charms. His reaction shocked him as much as it appeared to shock her.

“What did I do wrong?” Tears rushed down her cheeks and part of him wanted to comfort her, but that part of him was no longer in control. His father had done his best to dissuade him from indulging in this relationship, no matter how ‘light-hearted’ it had seemed at the beginning, telling him he could only give her pain. Too late, but he understood that now. With his father’s death, the least he could do was to finally honor his wishes.

“Nothing. It’s got nothing to do with you. Here.” He picked up the coat she’d thrown on the floor, shoved it at her, helped her get dressed, then ushered her out. The next few days would be difficult enough without additional complications.

\* \* \*

The sun cast a golden hue over the prairie, and the sound of the flutes was soothing and uplifting. Only the best traditional ceremony for a member of the Stringfellow family, a family of chiefs and elders. Leslie, Katala, and Michelle sat with the family throughout the ceremony. Katala kept her head down, meticulously planning what she would say when she saw him – David. Maybe he’d mellowed over the years. A girl could hope. She hated his ability to keep her in thrall, trapped by whatever emotions he chose to share. Katala felt Michelle nudge her. “Is that David?”

Katala looked up to see a tall, undeniably sexy man with golden undertones and long shiny black hair. No longer the childhood nemesis she remembered so well, he wore traditional ceremonial dress in black, and his hair fell loosely along his shoulders and down his back. Tribal symbols adorned the collar and shawl. Although she had not seen him in years, she instantly recognized him, as she had known she would.

David’s gaze fixed on her as she gazed at him, but his features were expressionless.

Subconsciously, she glanced down to assess her appearance. She wore a black and white fitted short-sleeve color-blocked mini-dress with white bodice and black bottom. Her shoes were simple slingbacks with stiletto heels that flattered her toned, shapely legs when she walked. Her braids were pulled into a black chiffon scarf trimmed in white that gave her an African princess air.

Michelle nudged her again. “Well, is that him? I can’t remember him.”

“Yeah, that’s him. You were too young.” Katala looked down again in an attempt to calm her fluttering midriff.

“Ooh my. If you don’t want him, can I have him?” Michelle giggled.

“That’s not funny, Pip.” Katala felt her heart speed up the moment their eyes met, and she had to take several breaths to regain her focus on the ceremony.

Continuing with her jibes, Pip didn’t seem to notice. “I know you two live cross-country from each other and all, but I’d figure something out! I can’t believe you didn’t come here more with Mom when we were growing up.”

“She would have brought you with her. You didn’t need me to come, you know.” Katala retorted. “Why didn’t *you* come?”

“Katala, you know I didn’t want to go anywhere without you.”

Katala smoothed the top of Michelle’s dress. “I know.” She did not need to be reminded how much her sister looked up to her, even now that they were in their twenties. She already felt responsible enough, and her inability to do more to help her sister weighed heavily, darkening her already cloudy mood.

Michelle hesitated for a moment, glancing around the yard. “Looks like he’s already taken, anyway. If not yet, he soon will be. They’ll really be on him now that Uncle Aidan’s gone. He probably gets everything, and Uncle Aidan was loaded.” Michelle motioned for Katala to look up again.

The eyes of every woman seemed to be focused intently and lasciviously on David. Katala admitted to herself grudgingly that he *was* striking in an infuriating sort of way. It seemed unfair for him to look so good.

After the pow wow that followed the ceremony, everyone moved around eating and talking. Katala turned and almost ran into David. She glanced up at him in shock, wondering if he heard her heart land in her stomach with a thud. “Hey. I’m sorry about your father. He was a great man. I’m going to miss him.” Her heart was pounding so loudly in her ears, she could barely hear his response.

David knit his brows together and stared at her. “How long did you rehearse that?”

Katala rolled her eyes and sighed. *Where the hell did that come from?*

David smiled, staring at her like a bird of prey.

“I didn’t rehearse anything! I always loved your father, and...” *Damnit, how did he know?*

David cut her off abruptly. “You had an interesting way of showing you loved him, but thank you. I’m glad you could finally come.” His words were clipped, impersonal.

Katala was sure she sensed anger from him as his eyes flashed, but he quickly composed himself so that only his smile was left. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“You never came back to see him. No matter how many times your mom came, you always refused to come with her, even during summer break. He wanted to see you. *I* wanted to see you.”

“Ha! For what? So you could pull my hair and lock me in your closet again?”

“We were eight years old, Kat. Get over it already.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that. No one else calls me that.”

“I know. I’m not like anyone else.” David’s smile deepened, evidence that even on this serious occasion, he was teasing her.

Katala’s body reacted immediately, betraying her by revealing his effect on her. Her face flushed, and a strange weakness rose up, nearly forcing her to lean into him. This must be what people refer to as swooning, she thought, as the age-old push-pull between two people ensued. He had always had this effect on her, eliciting emotions she did not want to acknowledge. Time had not dampened the effect in the least. If anything, their connection was stronger.

Despite his drool-worthy appearance, David's features were drawn, evidence that he had not slept. "Are you sleeping at all?" She wanted to slap herself for asking. Why should she care? It had always been this way. She couldn't seem to control her actions toward him. Mentally, she was uncomfortable, as if a dark cloud hovered above when she was close to him, yet physically, her body reacted with unexpected desire.

"Not really." An inquisitive frown crossed his face again as he verbalized her thoughts. "Why do you care?"

"I don't. I was just trying to be polite." She was surprised by her quick response as her voice steadied, but she still wondered if he had any idea of the battle raging between her mind and body.

David started to take a step closer to her, but before he could, another woman wedged her statuesque body between them, turned her back to Katala, and presented him with a plate. "Here honey. Try to eat something. I fixed this..."

David interrupted her. "Vickie, thank you, but if I had wanted food, I would have gotten it myself. Anyway, we were talking." He motioned to Katala, then physically turned Vickie around to face her. "Katala, this is Vickie. Vickie, Katala, a childhood playmate."

Vickie did not respond. Instead, she retreated quickly, bumped into Katala, and accidentally dropped the plate on the ground.

"I think you hurt her feelings, David," Katala said. "She was just trying to look out for you."

"She's not concerned about me. She was more concerned about being rude to you."

Katala stepped back, considering his statement. "Like I said, I'm sorry about your father. He was a wonderful man." She turned and walked away from him. The moment she saw Vickie, she had felt as if she was sinking. Jealousy? Hurt? It was obvious that David and Vickie were lovers, and the thought of him with someone else brought a rush of pain and violence to the surface that she found nearly uncontrollable...and completely irrational.

\* \* \*

Even in his state of grief, David frowned and planted his feet firmly in place to keep from following the sway of her hips and the most beautiful legs he'd ever seen. He had always thought she was fascinating, but never knew she would turn out like this – beautiful and still just as fiery as the little girl he had found in his room all those years ago. Anyway, he needed a new diversion. It was time. Vickie had become too possessive, and her immediate acquiescence had always bored him. Katala was fiery and outspoken, always a worthy challenge. He hoped she could hold his attention and keep his demons at bay for a while.

David moved away from the crowd of family and friends in search of a quiet place to be alone, but he found no such place. Thomas, one of the architects, stopped him. "Sorry about your father, man. You and your family were really nice to me when my mom died a couple months ago. You just say the word and I'll do whatever I can to help you. Can I ask you something personal right quick?"

David kept his expression neutral, attempting an acceptable level of tolerance. He had never cared for Thomas, but always tolerated him because of the kindness of his mother. She had been a true friend to his father, and her sudden death had shocked everyone. "Go ahead."

"Well, this is kind of personal, but you and Vickie – Are you two serious?"

David was confused for a moment because the question seemed so out of place, but he responded after a brief pause. "Serious about what?"

Thomas gave him a wide grin. "Since she started working at the firm, it was rumored that the two of you were seeing each other, so I didn't want to make a move if that was the case. You know, don't want to rankle the boss."

David did not respond. He had no tolerance for rumors or innuendo, and he was anxious to escape this entire day.

"I don't want to hold you up. I know with your father's funeral and everything, well, so you won't mind me asking her out then?"

Choice words ran across David's mind just begging for release, but he managed to remain calm. "No. I don't mind. Vickie is free to do as she pleases." He did not wait for Thomas to respond. His armor was wearing thin. He managed to get to his SUV and leave without being detained again. He cleared his mind as he drove towards his loft, not wanting to think or feel anything.

\* \* \*

*Damn him and those eyes. That hair was just begging to be stroked. All of him was just begging to be stroked. Why, then, she wondered, was he always associated with her bloody nightmares?*

Katala thought back to their first meeting, when David had been so insistent on touching her hair. That had been more than 16 years ago, but she could still see the scar she placed on the side of his brow, now an endearing dark brown slash that reminded her how vulnerable he could be. The woman at the funeral, Vickie, was being intentionally rude. Her inappropriateness had not gone unnoticed, but Katala couldn't understand her own conflicting emotions. Every time she was around him, she felt as if she was falling into an ever-widening abyss, yet she was drawn to him. During the years they were apart, he never stopped invading her dreams.

As Katala moved toward the center of the gathering in search of her mother and sister, she took in a sight that intrigued her. Vickie was actually crouched, picking up the contents of the plate she had dropped. It was the woman's disturbing desperation to please David along with the negative energy she exuded that kept Katala from approaching her. She found that she was confused on a new level. She shook her head, wondering why she was reacting so strongly to something that should not have concerned her in the least.

Just as she started to look away, Vickie looked up and smiled at her, beckoning for her to come over.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed David earlier. He gets so mad at me because I tend to dote on him too much at the office, at home, everywhere. He says he hates coddling." Vickie's gaze darted about Katala's face as if searching for a response.

“Oh, no. You don’t have to apologize. It’s fine. None of my business, but he should have at least helped you pick this food up.” She wondered why this strange woman in her body did not know when to shut up. She knew Vickie was proclaiming her status in David’s life. *Walk away. Walk away.* Her body wasn’t listening.

“What do you mean? His father just died! It’s just his way. He doesn’t mean anything by it really. You have to understand him. I was dating this guy who used to beat on me, and David jumped him one night and messed him up so bad he left town. David’s a black belt, you know.” She smiled with pride. “My own brother wouldn’t even help me. I’ve been seeing David ever since. He gave me a job when no one else would hire me, and he’s good to me.”

Vickie straightened up, having finished clearing the food from the ground. She looked purposefully into Katala’s eyes. “I’d do anything for him.”

Ignoring as much of Vickie’s unsolicited monologue as she could, Katala continued. “What’s there to understand? He didn’t seem grateful. That’s all I’m saying. Is there more?” Katala was finding it difficult to maintain her cool, even more difficult to keep her mouth shut, and she didn’t know why. She wasn’t sure if she was angrier with David, Vickie, or herself. Was she so desperate to gather details about David that she would subject herself to this woman’s childish game? She felt as if she was sinking even lower as she acknowledged to herself that she was intrigued by him. She wanted to know about him even if the information was filtered by the rose-colored glasses of this silly woman who was obviously and inexplicably threatened by her.

Vickie looked at Katala with an expression of amazement. “When I saw you talking to him I thought you two were friends, but you don’t like him much, huh?” She actually sounded happy about that.

“No, I...uh...” She allowed her response to trail off as she wondered again why she was even having this conversation. She composed herself. “Seeing how he treated you, I mean, he didn’t act like you two were seeing each other.” Katala smiled inwardly. Reminding Vickie that David hadn’t acted as if he cared about her felt good. Being mean-spirited wasn’t something she often practiced, but there was no denying the pleasure of it.

Vickie shrugged her shoulders and swung her long dark hair which instantly fell in place. “Yeah, well, he loves me. He just doesn’t know how to show it all the time, and he doesn’t really like to talk about our relationship and the things we do together. Like I said, he gave me a job, and he makes sure that my bills are paid and all too. Didn’t I hear someone say you were his father’s friend’s daughter, or something like that?”

“Yes.” Katala wondered why that would be important. She also had trouble imagining David loving anyone besides his father, but she reminded herself that she didn’t really know him very well.

“He never mentioned you before,” Vickie went on, “and we’ve been together for a long time.”

Her comment stung, but Katala didn’t want to acknowledge it. *David paid this woman’s bills?* Images of David and Vickie *together* flashed across her mind.

“Uh, Vickie? I’m gonna go find my sister now.” She had to look up to lock eyes with Vickie before walking away with her usual determined gait.

Katala felt the pressure of Vickie’s glare on her back until she had nearly located her family among the other guests.

Leslie reminded Katala that they were to meet with the Stringfellows’ attorney the next morning to go over the will. Since Aidan had taken care of Michelle’s medical expenses, Katala thought provisions had probably been made for her to continue treatments. “Mom, you don’t really need me there, do you? The last place I want to be is in some stuffy lawyer’s office tomorrow. I could go ahead and pack and take some pictures of the area while we’re here for my art work.”

“Your presence was requested, as was mine and Michelle’s. It shouldn’t take very long though, so you might still have time to take some pictures.” Leslie looked at Katala as if she was five years old again. “You really need to reevaluate your priorities, sweetheart.”

Katala glanced across the lawn to where her sister was sitting. With a sigh, she conceded. “You’re right. I can always take pictures later, and I’m worried about Pip. I need to be there with her. Uncle Aidan didn’t know her condition had gotten so much worse.”

“I know.” Leslie wrapped her arm around Katala’s shoulders. “The Lord will provide though, just like he has all these years. The Lord will provide.” She made the sign of the cross.

\* \* \*

Michelle leaned back in the center of the large rice bed. “Did you notice the way he looks at you?”

“Who?” Katala feigned innocence. She sat on the side of the bed, leaning back on her elbows with her legs crossed.

“You know who! He doesn’t look like he doesn’t like you to me. I’d probably need an X-rated pass to see what’s going on behind those gray eyes of his when he looks at you. It’s a look of possession. Mmm! Yum yum.”

“I never said he didn’t like me. He’s just really intense.”

Michelle sat up. “Right. You never really explained that to me either, but you did say he was spoiled. How could you not even be interested in him? He’s gorgeous!”

“Hold on. One thing at a time. I already told you. There’s something not right about him, and he always makes me feel uneasy.” She was hesitant to tell her sister about the nightmares or the emotional turmoil that accompanied close proximity to David. She hated being afraid, especially when she could not explain her reasons for feeling this way.

“Uneasy? What kind of word is that?” Michelle laughed, bending from the middle as she glanced at her sister. “You’re gonna have to give me more than that this time. How tall is he anyway? I love tall men.” She rolled her eyes as if to swoon.

“Pip, get a grip. He’s probably six-three or four. When I say uneasy, I mean, well, you know how I pick up on people’s feelings or motives, sometimes?”

Michelle nodded. "Yeah, like Momma Ree."

"Right. Well, it's like that with him, only stronger. He's angry, I don't know what it's about, and I just don't want to get close to him. I never did." She glanced at her sister and added softly, "I feel like I could drown."

Michelle frowned. "Still waters run deep?"

"Are you trying to be funny again? Anyway, from what I hear, his waters aren't so still – haven't been still since middle or high school."

Both sisters laughed at the unintentional pun.

Katala continued, sobering instantly. "Nightmares. He's in my nightmares."

"You never told me that. I just knew you had them a lot."

"Yeah, well, I just want a peaceful, normal life with no drama. I don't see that happening with someone like him. Something's there. I can't put my finger on it, but it's there. I get so overwhelmed when I'm around him, Pip. I just try not to think about it."

Michelle's soft eyes told of instant acceptance and trust. "Tell me, Katala. Mom and Uncle Aidan always said there was a connection between you two. I can see how the nightmares might have something to do with that. I've never felt it, but the stomach aches and feeling like you can't breathe sounds like something Felicia told me once about this guy she was dating. He was her first love, and she caught him with another woman. She said her stomach hurt so bad she could barely walk."

"Well, I definitely don't love him, but I still don't know exactly what causes the nightmares."

"What happens in the nightmares?"

"If you ever breathe a word of this again, even to me, I'll never forgive you."

Michelle blinked. "Okay, I won't. Now tell me what happened. Wait a minute."

Michelle frowned, placing her fingertips at her temples. "Rub right here. I'm getting one of those headaches again."

Katala quickly obliged, replacing her sister's fingertips with her own. She felt a brief ache at her own temples and in a few seconds, her pain and her sister's was gone. She smiled, happy to be able to help ease at least some of her sister's discomfort. "Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks. You should bottle that. We could sell it and get rich."

Katala smiled.

"Okay, so tell me about the dreams."

"In the dream, or nightmare, yeah, nightmare, David and I were, well, together, and..."

Michelle interrupted. "Together as in having sex together?"

Katala nodded. "That's the other part that doesn't make sense, but none of it does."

Michelle smiled. "Doesn't sound like a nightmare to me."

Katala lifted her braids from her neck to cool herself. "Let me finish. We were having sex, and then it was like I was someone else, and I stabbed him. Blood was everywhere, and I kept stabbing him! I say something, or the person who starts out as me says something, but I can never understand it. The whole time, my heart is beating really fast, like I could have a heart attack, and I wake with

this empty feeling like I've been hollowed out with a paring knife. When he got close to me today, my heart started pounding like that – just like in my dreams.”

Michelle's mouth was agape. “I'm so sorry. I had no idea. How many times have you had the nightmare?”

“Since my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, I've had it several times a year ever since. The one last night was extra bad though, because it was like I could feel my sorrow and his pain as I murdered him. It's getting harder to believe it's just a dream, that it doesn't mean anything, Pip.”

“You know, maybe you just have to stop running from whatever's supposed to happen.”

“You mean I have to kill him? What sense does that make?”

“No, Tala. I mean maybe the nightmares are a warning so you can keep whatever they're warning you about from happening. You know, so you can change something to keep it from happening. Anyway, you know you're not going to *kill* him. That's gotta be just a symbol for something. You know how things are never quite what they seem to be in dreams.”

“I'm overwhelmed by fear when I'm around him. I'm not sure if it's fear of him or fear of what's to come. I've tried staying away from him, not even talking to him. What more can I do?”

“Evidently, you're not meant to stay away from him. Maybe the things Uncle Aidan used to say about the two of you are true. He always told Mom you could save David. How can you save him if you're not even around him? You might have to be with him to keep the nightmares from coming true. If Uncle Aidan had thought you'd hurt David, he never would have tried so hard to get you two together. Does the same thing happen every time?”

Katala flipped her braids again. “Yeah. It's always pretty much the same.” She turned to her sister, feeling the need to lighten the mood. “You know, you're pretty smart for a little pip.”

## Chapter 3

“Good morning. I’m Carl Longmire.” The Stringfellows’ attorney shook each family member’s hand as they passed through his office door. He was a short, middle-aged man with silver-white hair and a stern look. Skye, David, Leslie, Katala, and Michelle were the only ones present. They sat, in respective order, around a large conference table. The quiet was deafening. Katala surmised that it was soundproofed for confidentiality.

The attorney spoke. “Let me get right to the point. Mr. Aidan Stringfellow, upon his passing, had acquired a massive amount of assets, and this estate is worth over....”

Leslie gasped when she heard the amount.

Katala had always known Aidan was wealthy, but she hadn’t imagined the extent of it. She remained silent. In her opinion, the only thing that made his money important was Michelle’s treatments.

“Those receiving cash amounts will be given all securities and investment information at the close of this meeting today.” He paused and looked at them for a moment.

“All right. Let’s break this down, shall we? ‘To my loving, devoted sister, I bequeath our home at...’” Katala became more uneasy as the attorney read the will. Uncle Aidan had left the Stringfellow home and his diaries, along with millions of dollars, to Aunt Skye, and a trust in Leslie’s name to Michelle for medical expenses. With unimaginable wealth casually being thrown around, Katala wondered briefly how much an unknown donor would charge for a bone marrow transplant for her sister.

The lawyer paused again. “Are there any questions so far?” In the absence of a response, he continued, but Katala was surprised to see a smile take shape. This same man who had been so stoic to this point, was now smiling unabashedly. He slid a white, letter-sized envelope to David before continuing. “‘To my only son, whom I love more than life itself, I bequeath upon the following conditions, the remainder of my earthly goods in the total of...’” All of the attendants except Leslie and David gasped as Aidan’s intentions became clear.

“Miss Katala Miller?” Katala spoke to let the attorney know who she was and he held up an envelope exactly like the one he’d just given David, then slid it over to her. “The late Elder Aidan Stringfellow asked that you read this and abide by his wishes...” He glanced from her to David, including him in his father’s request. “Both of you.”

Katala barely heard anything else as she sat holding the plain, white, letter-sized envelope. Who would have thought something with such a benign appearance could contain a life-altering bombshell. Apparently, she had 48 hours to read the contents of the letter and make a decision about its contents. She felt David’s steely gaze on her before she looked up.

Katala sat on a concrete and mosaic tile bench outside the Stringfellow home, formidable rust-colored buttes within visual range. She read Uncle Aidan's letter over and over again. According to the letter, the conditions by which David would inherit his father's estate were no surprise to David. He was to marry her immediately, if she would accept him, and they were to live together for a minimum of two years, with the first year commencing the morning after the consummation of their marriage.

Katala felt her heartrate accelerating. She had known for years that Uncle Aidan wanted her with David, but that knowledge did nothing to temper her surprise at the extent he had gone, even in death, to secure her for his son. The ten-page letter was a testimony of Uncle Aidan's love for David and Katala, and he implored Katala to help him. According to the letter, Uncle Aidan had felt that he could not in good conscience leave millions to David unless he was with Katala.

*Oh, the pressure.* Katala wiped at her tears as she continued to read. She frowned when she read that Uncle Aidan truly believed David would not live past his 27<sup>th</sup> birthday if she did not marry him.

Most importantly, Aidan had taken his own life to ensure that the timing of their union would be perfect. Based on the letter's contents, Aidan had not disclosed this fact to Skye. Katala and David were the only ones privy to the devastating information that Aidan had somehow induced his own heart attack.

It would take her some time to even begin to understand that kind of love, and for now, it was too much. All she could feel was sorrow and shock. Uncle Aidan's death left painful emptiness, and the real mourning had only just begun. She had questions and fears, but she could not deny being drawn to David. She folded the letter and sat for a moment, remembering their first meeting. She remembered feeling compelled to enter his bedroom, and the moment she saw him, she had wanted to touch him – much like the insane desire to touch a captive lion.

Katala stood, fists clenched, and turned toward the house to see David standing at the back door. The sudden wave of heat was unbearable, and she found it hard to breathe. *Uncle Aidan, how could you do this to me?* She knew she could say no to his request and no to his will, but Uncle Aidan had been so good to her entire family, and he had always been wise.

She felt trapped despite her desire to honor Aidan's will, but what if he was right? What if her refusal meant David's impending death? The mere thought sickened her as she stood completely still. David's expression gave nothing away as he watched her.

She took a breath to calm herself before moving toward him. If she wanted to honor Uncle Aidan, she would have to go through with this – she would have to abide by his last wishes.

David's dark lashes lifted as she approached him.

Katala stopped just in front of him, holding the letter up as she spoke. "Did you know about these letters before the lawyer gave them to us?"

"No, but I knew what my father wanted. I just had no idea he would...do...what he did to make it happen." He hesitated for a moment before

continuing. "I am willing to try it for him, so I guess you have the deciding vote." He spoke calmly, but Katala sensed something else. This was important to him. She wondered how many of her questions his father had given him answers to, particularly the one about not living past the age of twenty-seven.

*It's happening. It's time.* The words were a whisper from deep inside, but the voice didn't sound exactly like her own.

Katala stared into his eyes, those pools of gray and that delicious looking body promising her ecstasy, passion, and emotional chaos, and despite the shivers running up and down her spine, she answered. "Okay. We can try it." Katala barely recognized her own voice. It sounded breathy, and she never sounded breathy. "I owe it to your father for Michelle alone. What was that about the consummation?" Katala knew she had an additional reason, but sharing it would be unwise.

"Our minimum time together will commence the morning after the consummation." David's face was expressionless as he prattled off the details verbatim and watched Katala carefully. A surge of powerful emotions suddenly breached the surface and she struggled to decipher them. She mirrored his desire to... was it to make love to her? She couldn't be sure. The anger was there, along with fear and yes, desire – life-giving, life-threatening desire. She didn't know where his feelings ended and her own began.

"So, I guess that's good. At least we don't have to go jump in bed together as soon as we leave the church." Katala frowned, unsure if there was anything he could say to erase her concerns.

David winced, but his voice remained steady. "Right. I'd hate to put you through the agony of being with me right away."

Katala was aware that she had tapped into his defenses, but she chose to ignore it for now. Could he be so easily hurt? She didn't think so. She opted to change the subject instead.

"My sister needs a bone marrow transplant. We found out the same day your father died, so he didn't know about it. Everyone knows your dad made it possible for her to have whatever she needs, and I owe it to him to do as he wished."

After staring at her beyond the point of comfort, David finally offered a slight smile that did not reach his gunmetal eyes. "Well at least our motives are clear. So, we're both doing this for someone else – my father. The fact that he wanted us together more than life, might be enough to make us compatible for a while. Otherwise, two years is going to be a long, long time."

There was that brief feeling of emotional pain again, and she didn't dare mention his father's suicide. Even if David wasn't capable of loving anyone else, she had no doubts about his love for his father. She felt as if her insides were liquid, and her legs might give at any moment. His eyes seemed to burn through her, causing her body temperature to take on a feverish cast. After taking a moment to compose herself, Katala smiled with confidence she did not feel as she brushed past him. "I guess we're about to find out." She hated the feeling of being out of control, a feeling he intensified in spades, but she couldn't deny her

overwhelming need to know him better. It was as if he was a part of her, and she needed to know why.

In accordance with Aidan's wishes, the wedding was to take place one month later at a large Phoenix cathedral in the presence of the elders. Due to Michelle's illness, she and her mother had flown back to Carolina with plans to return for the wedding, while Katala remained at the Stringfellow mansion to make plans. Katala was pleased that David showed no interest in the planning or details of the ceremony. In fact, she scarcely saw him after leaving the lawyer's office, yet he had given her access to all of his credit cards and other financial assets. *Maybe this marriage thing won't be so bad, after all.*

\* \* \*

David sat at his drafting table in the middle of his home office. Handling each artifact with reverence as he removed it from his father's box, he recalled sitting in the large study, learning the significance of each item from his father. He always anticipated time with his father, but a certain amount of dread accompanied the lessons. His father's love for him had been unmistakable, but the impromptu history sessions had always served as reminders of his monumental role in the inescapable family legacy.

As he continued to review the artifacts he'd held hundreds of times in his father's presence, he had never felt more alone. Despite his father's comprehensive research and undeniable faith, there was no way to avoid it. No longer under the shield of his father, death smiled at him – slow, painful, and hopeless. He could not even console himself with the age-old belief that he would join his father in the spirit world. If his father was right, David knew that an ending worse than death awaited him.

Born to his fate, fear had never been a factor. It was time to fight, and that was something he had always been good at – even when he could not see his enemy. What he hated most was his dependence on a woman who agreed to their union out of obligation and nothing more. Despite his reticence about the marriage, David held no illusions about his bone-deep need for Katala. Unless he managed to rekindle her love for him, if she'd ever loved him at all, he would lose everything.

David had just begun replacing the artifacts in the box when the doorbell rang.

He walked through the archway separating his office from his living area and opened the door to find Vickie on the other side. He braced himself, knowing she would ignore his initial reaction to her uninvited presence.

"Hey, baby. How are you holding up?"

David stepped back to allow her entrance, keeping his expression unreadable. "What are you doing here? You know you're not supposed to come here unless you call first."

"Oh, you and all your rules." Disregarding his statement, Vickie wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I thought you might be ready to pick up

where we left off since the funeral is over and everything. Don't be mad, baby. I just wanted to see you, make you feel better."

David's expression never changed. "You never just want to see me, Vickie. There's always an ulterior motive, and you can't make me feel better."

Vickie backed away from David and folded her arms over her chest. "You're not in the mood because you're marrying her – that...whatever her name is." She ran a shaky hand across her forehead before reaching for him again.

David avoided her touch. He leaned his back against the door and watched her, silent and expressionless. Their relationship had always been one of convenience, and he had made that clear from the beginning.

She avoided his gaze. "I hate it when you look at me like that. I can't tell what you're thinking."

David looked down, reaching back to place his hand around the door knob. "I'm not gonna do this with you Vickie. I'll understand if you don't want to come to the wedding, but you need to leave now." He opened the door and stepped away from it.

"Please don't do this, David!" Vickie tried to touch his face so that he would look at her.

He pushed her hand away every time she reached out to him. "Vickie, this is what my father wanted. I never lied to you about our relationship." He did not like hurting her, but he knew that he had to leave her with no questions as to his feelings or intentions.

"Baby, I know. I know, but I also know that it was more than sex between us. Why else would you have helped me the way you did if you didn't really care about me, too?"

He slammed the door and moved closer to her, but his voice was just above a whisper. "Vickie, I helped you because you asked me to and I was able to. It's not a big deal. What did you say to me every time we were together?"

Vickie looked down, obviously hesitant to repeat what she had said to him so many times before. She spoke the words softly. "I always said no strings."

David leaned in to her. "I didn't quite hear you. Say again?"

Tears muddled her words as she repeated the phrase louder, almost yelling at him. "I said no strings."

"So now are you trying to tell me that you were lying to me the whole time? And if you are, why would I ever believe anything you say to me?"

Vickie reached for him again, tears falling from her cheeks. "I said it, but I didn't mean to fall in love with you. I thought that if I didn't put any pressure on you, you would want to be with me more."

David brushed his hand through his unbound hair. He hated tears, and he hated his need to soothe her. His tone softened. "You know I never did right by my father. He's gone now, and I'm going to carry out his last wishes. If this is about money, I can give you..."

Vickie began to cry loudly now. "You know this is not about money! How can you stand there and, God, when I think about the things I let you do to me, and now you think you can just toss me aside and give me money while you give that, that, that bitchy little stranger your name? Your father. Your father. Your father!"

What about *my* father! So many times he's called me your whore, and now I have to...Don't you know that I would do *anything* for you?"

"What you did with me, you did because you wanted to. At least that's what you said, so stop talking like a martyr." David took a few steps toward the door. So much for soothing her.

Vickie caught him around his waist and put her head on his back. She whispered, "You're right. You're right. I didn't mean to sound like that. I just love you so much. That's why I wanted to protect you. So many times I could have let them have you, but I, they all turned on me because of you. She doesn't care about you. She doesn't even *know* you – not really. Not like I do."

David rested his hand on the door, his back still to Vickie. "Protect me from what?" He shook his head. "Forget I asked. I don't even want to know. It's past time for you to go. You know how I feel about unnecessary drama."

Vickie remained still, but David did not face her again. He moved his head, motioning for her to come to the door. "Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

\* \* \*

Katala wore an antique lace wedding gown with headpiece. Her braids were fashioned in an intricate chignon that drew attention to her long, delicate neckline and warm, rich features. The flowing combination of Christian and Native ceremonial customs allowed David's traditional Native American attire to appear perfectly suited to Katala's despite differences.

The music consisted of flutes, strings, and voices, giving the ceremony a quiet, peaceful air conducive to meditation. Pachelbel's *Canon in D* served as Katala's processional, Manet's *Lord's Prayer* was performed *a capella* by a family friend with a glorious soprano voice, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* served as background music during the lighting of the unity candle, and Bach's *Air* served as a fitting recessional.

Katala wanted her mother's sister, Momma Ree, to assist her, but she was unable to leave Columbia on such short notice due to her work there. Skye had turned out to be a great resource to Katala in choosing appropriate post-ceremonial music and preparing for every detail of the wedding ceremony.

As Katala moved toward David, she was surprised at the calm acceptance she felt. She had been so nervous leading up to the event, but at this moment everything seemed as it should be. His dark aura was ever present, yet somehow, she knew she was doing the right thing by marrying him.

The cathedral was full. People stood around the walls at the back. Katala could hear the crowd buzzing above her in the balcony as she proceeded down the aisle. If not for the rational side of her brain periodically reminding her how strange the circumstances surrounding this union were, even she would have thought everything perfectly normal.

Her body reminded her in no uncertain terms just how very delicious he looked. He was like a Christmas doll for big girls – the sumptuous, shiny black hair, those gunmetal eyes that sometimes looked like silver clouds when he

looked at her, and that body with assets that could not be hidden by any amount of clothing. He looked so exotic in his native attire that her legs felt weak again, her insides liquid. An amazing sensation, she thought – the mixture of fear and desire.

“Who gives this woman...?” The minister asked the traditional question while flanked by two elders from the Tribal Council.

Katala’s paternal uncle had been flown in just for this purpose, and answered proudly, “I do.”

As the ceremony progressed, Katala noticed the sincerity in David’s eyes each time he looked at her and responded to the minister. Every time he said “I do”, Katala found herself wondering how real this was for him, but then, her statements sounded just as sincere, and perhaps he was wondering the same thing about her.

Katala had almost forgotten about this ceremonial requirement until she heard the words seemingly uttered in slow motion, “By the power vested in me ...I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

David’s lips touched hers in a silent request for acceptance as she felt his tongue slip gracefully inside her mouth. Electricity exploded from her core, pooled in her stomach, tickled her breasts, and ignited in her head. Just as quickly as he had touched her, he pulled away. She was trembling and weak-kneed. She cursed her traitorous body.

David wrapped his arms around her, offering support as they moved down the aisle to the cathedral entrance.

As soon as they were far enough away from the crowd, Katala turned to look at David, but seconds later, some of the wedding guests were upon them. Katala greeted them warmly, allowing them to separate her from David on the way to the limousine.

The limousine ride was quiet. Both David and Katala remained completely silent as they looked out of opposite windows and sat a comfortable distance from one another. They rode to the reception at the same Airport Hilton where the couple would stay the night. They had quickly stated that they would forego a honeymoon due to David’s imminent relocation to Carolina to run the family’s business there. Stringfellow and Associates, Inc. had expanded over the years so there was already a new office site in Carolina, but David had only visited it once. It was to become his new headquarters.

Although he was silent, Katala sensed David’s restlessness. He projected anger and need as they warred inside him, and she wanted to know more – more about the anger and more about him in every way.

They were side by side the entire evening, but no more words passed between them until they took their first dance. David held out his arms so she could step inside, and whispered to her. “Truce?”

Katala stepped into his arms, unable to keep from smiling. Her knees barely held her upright. “I suppose so.”

They danced in silence as Etta James crooned “*At Last*”. Katala felt as if she was melting into him. She wanted to forget this was simply a marriage of convenience, and there was no love between them. As they moved, the outside

of her left thigh continuously brushed against the inside of his right. The movement was driving her crazy, and she wanted to slap herself for wanting him so.

Following the dance, they were ushered back to the center table to cut the cake and feed each other. Katala wondered if this night would ever be over. Every time she thought she could relax for a minute, someone came along and told her it was time to fulfill yet another ritualistic tradition. She was tired, she was certain she must look a mess by now, and her feet hurt. Resigned to keep it together, she smiled and obliged until she and David were excused to leave the guests partying into the night.

\* \* \*

Vickie wore a white chiffon dress with lace sleeves and insets. She lay curled into a fetal position on her bed, the same bed she had invited David into so many times. She could still smell his enticing scent as she buried her face in the sheets. She spoke into the emptiness, each word choking on her tears. "That little bitch lied to me! She had the nerve to say that she had never even *liked* him. He would have been mine if she hadn't come here. She just did that to throw me off, but I knew there was something about her – the way she looked at him. She wanted him all along."

She stood, finally removing the dress. She had had every intention of attending the wedding but decided that she would have to get David back some other way. He would not be pleased to see her after the other night. She hadn't meant to get so emotional in front of him. She knew how he hated that. Everyone she knew had gone to the wedding, and by midnight, she knew every detail despite the fact that she had not been there to see it for herself.

\* \* \*

As they entered the suite, David and Katala were confronted with wall to wall presents and flowers compliments of Leslie, Michelle, Momma Ree, and Viv, Katala's best friend. Leslie had taken the time to move all the gifts to their room and decorate it with flowers. David stepped into the center of the room. "Where would you like to start?"

"Let's start on this end." Katala stood in front of a box beside the closet on the opposite wall from the bathroom.

David opened the closet and fished through his luggage to pull out a pocket knife.

As Katala accepted the knife from him, she couldn't help frowning, remembering the time she'd cut him when they were children. "I am still so sorry about..." She reached up to touch the scar on his forehead.

He interrupted her apology. "It's long forgotten." The words were spoken without a glance in her direction. "It had to be done," he added.

"What do you mean?"

He made eye contact for a moment, then looked away again. “Nothing. Let’s do this.” He smiled, handing her a pair of scissors.

She quickly turned to begin opening the presents. As David lifted one of the boxes, Katala got a queasy feeling and touched his hand to stop him. “Who’s it from?”

David turned the box over and noticed there was no name tag. “It must have fallen off.”

“Take it outside the room. Something’s wrong. I can feel it.”

David looked surprised by Katala’s request but took the package outside the room anyway. Katala Followed.

Inside the box was a black, shriveled chicken heart with a note attached. *You think because you married your little black witch you’re safe, but the Stringfellow bloodline will end with you.*

Katala stepped back, clenching her fists as she looked at David. He showed no expression but carried the box with its contents down the hall and dropped it in the waste basket. They did not speak of it further for a time.

Katala had always been told there was something mystical about the Stringfellows – that their family line and hers were entwined somehow from centuries back, but even that did not explain someone’s desire to destroy all of the Stringfellows.

“How did you know?” David broke her train of thought.

“I just felt it. It felt like something was wrong when you touched it. Why would someone want to hurt you?”

He gave her a thoughtful look and a slight smile, then changed the subject. “Do you want to shower first or you want me to?”

“Oh. I’ll go first. It usually doesn’t take me too long.” She returned his smile and started for her luggage in the closet as she put the incident behind her for the moment, though she could not rid herself of the unease.

Katala stepped into the shower and took a deep breath. This entire experience was surreal. She could hardly believe he was actually in the next room waiting for her. She hoped he didn’t expect anything tonight, especially after the heart in the box incident, but there was only one bed. She watched the tiny white bubbles pop silently on her torso as she lathered her lower body. Her nerve endings seemed ultra-sensitive and every hair on her skin seemed to stand at attention. The warm water soothed her as each drop slid along her creamy chocolate skin to mingle at her feet.

Katala emerged from the bathroom in a white cotton gown that covered everything she could possibly cover and still sleep in peace. She even wore underwear. She was not going to make this easy. David’s smile infuriated her. It was as if he thrived on her discomfort.

“Really, Kat? You look like a mummy.”

She had to laugh at her own silliness. “I don’t want you to get any ideas.”

She turned on her side so her back was to the bathroom, but she could hear the water running as David took his shower. She couldn’t help imagining his beautiful body as the water and suds touched his skin. She wondered what he did with his hair when he bathed. She tried to think of other things but the

running water seemed to drown out everything else, much like being around him made her feel like they were the only two people in the world.

Katala turned over as David came out wearing pajama bottoms and nothing else except a towel around his shoulders to catch the drops of water from his hair. “Do you wash your hair every night?” Again, why did she care?

“Yes, but I won’t get in bed until it’s dry, if that’s your concern.”

“Oh, I wasn’t concerned – just curious.”

“Are you okay?” He sat on the side of the bed.

“I’m fine.” She frowned, wondering what he was up to.

“I mean about the heart and all.”

“Oh, that. I just don’t understand why someone would do something like that, and on our wedding night of all times.”

“If I let threats and pranks upset me, I’d never get anything done.”

She gathered from his last statement that this was not the first time he had received such a threat.

A few minutes later, he lay down beside her. She noticed he took extra care not to touch her as he turned, deciding to sleep on top of the bedspread.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” She exhaled.

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# About the Authors

## Dariel Raye

An author, musician, counseling psychologist, and animal rights activist, Dariel writes interracial/multicultural paranormal romance and dark urban fantasy featuring shifters, Nephilim, angels, and reluctant demons, all filled with action, alpha heroes, and strong heroines. As a child, she could always be found curled up with her dogs, cats, and a good book, even if the book was a dictionary or encyclopedia. Things have not changed much.

Dariel is a classically trained soprano and plays more than 11 musical instruments. She also completed coursework and passed comprehensives for a Ph.D. in Instructional Design (ABD), teaches piano and voice, tutors writing, algebra, and statistics, and readily admits to being a Netflix paranormal and action series binge-watcher.

### **Read More from Dariel Raye**

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## Muffy Wilson

Muffy Wilson is a USA Today Bestselling and 2017 SWFRW Joyce Henderson First Place Paranormal Award-Winning author of provocative, paranormal, and fantasy romance. An American author of the popular Shadow Seduction Series, The Heart Series, and Ribbons of Moonlight Series, she has penned dozens of other books and anthology collections.

Muffy's father was a career Colonel and pilot in the U.S. Air Force which required the family to travel extensively. Muffy spent her formative years in Europe and 'came of age' in France forging her joie de vivre and love for books and writing. Married and living in the tropical paradise of SW Florida along the Gulf Coast, Muffy writes and enjoys life in the sun with her husband and wee Havanese pups, Buddy and CoCo Chanel while volunteering as a foster mom to rescued Havanese dogs and puppies through HALO and HRI, both 501c nonprofit charitable organizations.

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