

CHAPTER ONE—TORONTO

The August heat had persisted deep into the night. Thunder growled out over Lake Ontario, threatening a downpour. When Seph walked into the warehouse a little after 2 a.m., it was like blundering into a humid urban rainforest. He sucked in the stink and heat of hundreds of bodies in motion and squinted his eyes against the smoke that layered the room.

It was his habit to arrive late for parties.

Seph smiled and nodded to the bouncer at the door. The man was there to intercept the underage, but he just smiled back at Seph and waved him on. Access was never a problem.

Music throbbed from high-tech speakers wired to the struts of the warehouse ceiling. Sweat dripped onto the scarred wooden planks as the crowd thrashed across the dance floor. The blacklights painted the faces of the dancers while leaving the perimeter of the room unviolated. An illegal bar was doing a brisk business in one corner, and the usual customers were already trashed.

He was stopped six times on his way across the room by people wanting to make plans for later.

Seph and his friends always held court to the right of the stage. Carson and Maia, Drew and Harper and Cecile were there; Seph guessed from experience they'd been there all evening. When they spotted him, they surrounded him, fizzing with excitement and the kind of euphoria that comes with hours of sensory overload. They were all older than him, but the party never really started until he arrived.

They all started talking at once--something about a girl.

"Whoa," he said, raising his hands, grinning. "Say again?"

Harper glared around the circle until everyone else shut up. "Her name is Alicia. She just moved to Toronto, and she's totally cool."

"She reminds me of you," Cecile added. "I mean she...well...there's just something about her," she trailed off. "We told her about you, and she said she might come back later—you know—to meet you."

Prickly Maia was the only one who seemed unimpressed. "I don't think she's like you at *all*."

Maia was Asian, a part of the stew of races that was Toronto. She had an Anime quality with her spiky hair and quirky quilted cotton clothes. Plus she could swear in three Chinese dialects.

Seph spoke into Maia's ear so he could be heard over the music. "So you don't like her?"

"I don't know. It's like, I don't trust her." Maia looked up at him, studying his face as if looking for clues, then plunged her hand into the beaded pouch she wore over her shoulder. She came up with a tissue-wrapped package. "I made you something." She thrust it toward him.

He weighed it on his palm. People were always giving him things. "What's this for? You didn't have to...."

"It's for your birthday. Open it."

“My birthday was two months ago.” He smiled at her and tore the tissue away. It was a gold Celtic cross on a chain, centered with a flat-petaled heirloom rose, cast in Maia’s distinctive, delicate style.

He shook his head. “You can’t give me this. It must’ve taken hours.”

“It was just an art project for school.” She took it from him, stretched up onto her toes, and fastened it around his neck, taking longer than was absolutely necessary. “I thought you’d like it.”

“I do like it, it’s beautiful. But...” He searched for the right words. He didn’t want to start something that would ruin what they had. “I mean, you are such a cool friend, and I don’t want to...”

“Just take it, okay? As...as a friend. No strings.”

And so he couldn’t refuse. “Well, thank you. It’s brilliant.” He embraced her carefully. All arms and no body, elbows down to keep a little distance. But she burrowed into him, winding her fingers into his curls, pressing her face against his shirt as if to breathe him in. Seph patted her back, soothing her with his touch. Spilling a whisper of power, but not too much.

“Here she comes!” Carson said, all excited, at his elbow. “That’s Alicia.”

Seph looked up to see a girl making her way across the crowded floor, dancers parting to let her through. She was small, but somehow lush, like an exotic tropical flower. She wore tight black jeans and a lace blouse that slid off her shoulders. Her blue-black curls were streaked with purple and loosely bound with a flowered scarf. She carried a Gypsy bag over her shoulder. Her eyes were cat-yellow.

“You must be the famous Seph McCauley.” She looked him up and down like she was used to being disappointed, then extended her ringed fingers. “I’m Alicia.”

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, letting go of Maia and gripping her hand.

It was like sticking his hand into an electrical outlet. For a long moment they stood frozen, the current flowing between them. Then they both dropped their hands, took a step back, and stood staring at one another. All his life, people had reacted to *his* touch. And now he knew what it was like.

She recovered first. “Well, well,” she said, studying him with new interest, running her tongue over red-stained lips. “You *are* the powerful one, aren’t you?”

“I get by,” Seph said, massaging his tingling fingers, fighting down a rush of hope. Power. She had power, too. “You...you’re...Where’d you say you’re from again?”

“Here and there. I was just in the States, but I had to leave.”

He rose to the bait. “Why did you...?”

“I was totally bored.” She squinted at him. “How old are you, anyway?”

“Eighteen,” he said, automatically adding two years to his age. “Listen, can I...can I buy you a drink?” Lame. That was lame. “Maybe we could go somewhere and talk?”

“Well.” Alicia surveyed Seph’s friends, who were pressed around them in a tight circle. Maia scowled, swiping back her ragged fringe of hair, biting her lip, looking from Seph to Alicia.

“You.” Alicia pointed at Carson. “Be a sweetheart and get us something to drink. Absolut and lime for me.” She looked inquiringly at Seph.

“I don’t...” he began, raising his hands.

“And a soda for Seph, who doesn’t,” she said, shaking her head.

Seph rolled his eyes at Carson, but he was already gone, hurrying to comply.

“Listen, I’ll catch you all later.” Seph gripped Alicia’s elbow, half expecting another spasm of power, and guided her toward a table along the wall, leaving Maia and the others by the stage. “Who do you think you are, ordering my friends around?”

“And you don’t?” She laughed softly. “You *should*. Who do you think *you* are?”

He never had a very good answer to that question.

Seph chose a table in the corner between the speakers, where the din retreated enough that they could actually hold a conversation. Carson brought their drinks and departed, giving Seph a wink.

“So why are you hanging out with them?” Alicia asked, reaching across and running her finger along the rim of his glass.

“Who?”

“Your friends. The Anaweir. It must get boring, I mean, aside from being lead dog, and all.”

He risked a question. “Anaweir? I’m not sure I…”

“The ungifted. The powerless. Even less relevant to a wizard than the servant guilds.”

Seph bit back a response. Who was she to say they weren’t gifted? Drew’s music would melt anyone’s resistance. Cecile’s poetry captured the secret language of the soul. Maia’s jewelry sold for high prices in the fancy shops in Yorkville. Seph had found friends at TechnoCamp, at UT, and at the warehouse parties of the waning Toronto summer. But none of them were like him.

None of them were wizards. Nor even members of the other magical Weirguilds: the Sorcerers, the Seers, or the rare Enchanters or Warriors.

Wizards were different from the other magical guilds, because they required *charms*, words to shape the magic. His foster mother, Genevieve, had told him that much.

“I’ve been trying to make contact,” he said to Alicia. “It’s hard to find other people...like us.” There, he’d said it. “I mean, I’d like to learn more, to get some more...training.” Implying that he’d already had some.

Alicia lifted an eyebrow. “Training comes through the Houses. What’s your affiliation?”

“Affiliation?”

“Your Wizard House.”

He just blinked at her, then focused on rolling up his sleeves, carefully creasing the rough-woven cotton fabric. It seemed to be getting hotter.

Alicia leaned forward, lowering her voice. “Look, I realize you can’t be too careful these days. No one knows what the rules are any more.” She shook back her mane of curls. “I was at Raven’s Ghyll, you know.”

“Where?”

“Raven’s Ghyll. At the tournament where the Rules were changed. I mean, I used to go out with Jack Swift. I can’t help thinking that if I hadn’t broken up with him, none of this would have happened.”

She looked to him for a reaction, but he just stared at her, groping for a response that wouldn’t give away his ignorance. He felt stupid, something he wasn’t used to, and which he did not like.

He reached for his glass. The soda ran down his throat and exploded somewhere beneath his breastbone, leaving him breathless and dizzy. What was the matter with him? He had to keep his head.

He smiled. Looked her in the eyes, a technique that had always been successful in the past. “I was hoping we could work together. You know. Collaborate.” Usually all he had to do was ask.

Alicia studied his face as if it were a book in a foreign language. She reached out and ran her thumb along his jawline, as if fascinated by his bone structure, then tilted his face into the light, brushing back his curls. Her touch was like tiny explosions against his skin.

“Do you know your eyes change color? Green and brown and blue.”

“So I’ve been told.” Seph shifted uneasily under her scrutiny.

She seemed to reach a decision. “Fine. I’ll tell you what House I’m in. I wouldn’t bother except it’s so hard to meet interesting people, and I think you’re...you know...interesting.” She untucked her blouse, exposing a tantalizing strip of skin, a pierced navel. There, above the waistline of her jeans, was a tattoo of a white rose. “All right,” she said, rearranging her clothes, as if that explained everything. “Now you.” She looked at him expectantly. “Red Rose or White?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Seph admitted, feeling like he was playing a rigged game of Truth or Dare. He slid his hand under his collar, pulling it away from his hot skin.

Alicia looked annoyed. “Trust me, I don’t care what House you’re in. I leave politics to the Wizard Council. I’m a Trader. I sell what people want to buy. I have to deal with everyone. I’m ecumenical that way.”

“Look, I can’t tell you what I don’t know.” He drained his glass and slammed it down on the table. “I know I’m a wizard. I know I have power, but I don’t know how to use it. I know there are others like me, but the ones I’ve been able to find don’t know any more than I do.”

He grabbed her hand and pinned it to the table. “Like I said. I need training. I have questions.” He knew he was giving too much away, that it was a bad idea to let a powerful stranger know how desperate he was.

Alicia tried unsuccessfully to withdraw her hand, seeming embarrassed by his neediness. “What about your family? What about your Weirbook? That should give you a start, at least.”

Seph swallowed hard. He felt like his head was going to explode. “I don’t have any family. That I know of. I don’t have a Weirbook, whatever that is. My foster mother told me a little, but now she’s dead. And things...they’re out of control. If you’re a Trader, then find me a teacher. Find me a Weirbook, if that’s what it takes. I have plenty of money. I’ll pay whatever you ask.”

Alicia looked across the table at him and began to laugh. “I can’t believe it. You’re sort of a magical virgin. You should see your expression. So serious.” She brushed his cheekbone with the back of her knuckles. “You’re gorgeous, you know. You have a face like a god. An angry god. And so...powerful,” she whispered.

Seph’s skin prickled and burned. Something like a heat rash spread upward from his collarbone. His lips were numb and his tongue felt thick in his mouth. He could not speak. Something sinister rippled under his skin, seeking an outlet. He felt too big for his

body, like he might split along his backbone and spill onto the floor like a snake shedding its skin.

“What...what’s going on?” he muttered. The music clamored in his ears and the lights intruded into their dim corner. He threw up an arm to shade his face.

She gave his hand a pat. “Believe me, it’s great stuff. It’s like nothing you’ve ever had.”

He gripped her hand tighter, helplessly spilling power. “What did you do to me? Is it some kind of a spell, or...or....”

Alicia fished in her Gypsy bag and retrieved an iridescent glass bottle, stoppered with crystal. “Will you relax? It’s called wizard flame. The street name is mind burner. Sorcerers make it for the trade. Let’s call this my special introductory offer.”

Panic fluttered at the edge of his consciousness. “You drugged me?”

“It’s an accelerator for the gifted. It strips away all the barriers and lets the power flow. You’ll love it. After this, everyday life will seem like black and white.”

He swallowed hard. “No. You don’t understand. I can’t control it when I’m *sober*. Things happen.”

She smiled at his distress. “Don’t worry, it’ll wear off in an hour or so. Here, let me show you something else.” She leaned across and kissed him on the mouth. Then flinched back, fingering her seared lips. “Hey!”

His lips were no longer numb. They were burning. His skin was burning. The music assaulted him. The stench of the crowd was making him sick. He couldn’t think.

Alicia struggled to withdraw her hand. “You’re burning me! Let go, will you?” He released his hold on her and she stood and staggered backward, disappearing from his field of view. Yet he could see every person in the hall, hear a hundred conversations all at once, as if all his senses had been sandpapered.

He had to get out. He headed for the door, sliding through the crowd, twisting and turning to avoid touching anyone, leaving charred and smoking footprints in his wake. He brushed a table and it burst into flame. Incendiary sparks flew from his fingertips, igniting the curtains around the stage, the sound-deadening mats that draped the walls. All around the room, burnables ignited, vaporized, shriveled into ash. Flames licked at the walls, and molten metal dripped from the ceiling. The music still played and the blacklights danced, but now a smoke alarm was clamoring like it was the end of the world.

“Get out!” he shouted. His voice, strangely amplified, reverberated in the hall. Faces turned toward him, pale spots in the ruddy dark as he stood, fountaining flame like a Roman candle. His cotton clothing smoldered and smoked. People stared at him, horrified, then ran for the exit, screaming, shoving each other aside in an effort to get away from him.

A crowd collected at the front door, like a panicked beast trying to force itself into a narrow burrow, while embers rained down from overhead. Too many people were jammed into the opening, and no one was getting through. Those who weren’t crushed stood to burn to death.

Seph charged toward the warehouse wall, arms extended, driven by nothing more than raw power and a determination not to preside at another disaster. Flame roared from his fingertips, blasting through the battered wood leaving a charred and smoldering

opening that smelled like the woodfires of winter and looked like a gateway out of hell. He stared at it, stunned, for a moment, then shouted, “Through here! Go!”

The crowd split and poured through the new doorway. He was overtaken by the mob and carried along with the press of bodies.

Finally, he was out on the street. The storms that had threatened all day let loose, and he stood steaming in the pouring rain. Within seconds, he was soaked to the skin. Refugees who hadn’t fled the scene huddled under an overhang across the street, watching him warily. Somewhere close a siren sounded.

Where were Carson and Maia and the others? Blinking water from his eyelashes, he scanned the crowd but could not find his friends. Nor Alicia, the girl who had set this calamity in motion.

He struggled back toward the entrance, against a tidal wave of humanity.

“Maia!” Maia was small, and likely to be trampled. He finally forced himself back through the opening, only to be met by a wall of flame and smoke. “Drew!”

He circled the exterior of the warehouse, desperately seeking a way in, and finding none. How could it burn like that in a deluge? Sparks gouted skyward as the roof caved in. The fire burned so hot that he had to retreat across the street again.

Pressing his back against a building, he slid to the ground, wrapping his arms around his knees. Gripping Maia’s cross, feeling the gold soften under his hot fingers, he turned his face up to the downpour, letting it cool his fevered skin, wishing it could wash away the memory of what he had done.

* * *

The meeting was held in Sloane, Houghton, and Smythe’s Toronto offices. When Seph arrived, they showed him to an opulent little suite lined with walnut bookcases, the carpet so thick it swallowed sound. Denis Houghton, Seph’s legal guardian, had traveled all the way from London for this event. He probably wanted to make sure that Seph came nowhere near the home office.

Seph had only seen his guardian two or three times. The solicitor was a tall man with graying hair and a taste for expensive watches and elaborate pinky rings. His custom-tailored suits couldn’t hide the beginnings of a paunch.

Seph couldn’t help wondering how many suits and pinky rings his guardianship had paid for. His foster mother, Genevieve LeClerc, had died three years ago. It was only then that he’d learned that he had a legal guardian, a very large trust fund, and a crowd of lawyers to look after his interests.

She’d kept so many secrets. While Genevieve had taught him how to make an omelet and hang wallpaper and choose bottles of wine from the cellar for their guests at the bed and breakfast, his feeble knowledge of magic was acquired in fits and starts, grudgingly released, pried from her like oysters from their stubborn shells.

She had a sorcerer’s mistrust of wizards and their ruthless ways, born of long service to a wizard in her native France. Her wrists were braceleted with layered scars, evidence of the shackles she’d worn. She loved Seph with a fierce devotion, but seemed to hope that his wizardliness would go away if unacknowledged. Instead it sent out long runners, climbing fences, and sprouting unexpectedly between the cobblestones.

Seph’s fingers tickle, his nursery school classmates said. His teachers had loved him in those days, surrendering to the boy with the dark curls, changeable eyes, and sweet smile. The classroom guinea pig denned up under his desk, and wouldn’t allow any

but Seph to handle him. The pond at the park froze in the middle of July when Seph wanted to go skating. He liked recess best of all. Sometimes recess lasted all day. All he had to do was ask nicely. Until Genevieve found out and intervened.

But, as he grew older, the magic grew stronger, more dangerous, more difficult to control. It was worse since Genevieve's death. He was the ugly cowbird in the sparrow's nest, impossible to ignore.

Houghton came out from behind his huge walnut desk and motioned him to a table by the window. It was to be a toe-to-toe, compassionate sort of meeting, then.

Seph settled into a leather armchair and Houghton sat in the chair opposite. The lawyer regarded Seph sorrowfully for a moment, removed his glasses, polished them to a sheen, and replaced them. Then heaved a great sigh.

"So. All right now, then, are we?"

"I'm all right," Seph said, looking the lawyer in the eye, daring him to ask another question. Seph didn't want to talk about the warehouse. He was afraid he would lose it.

Houghton soldiered on relentlessly. "A bad business," the lawyer said. "A bad business indeed. But, then, with those after hours parties, one never knows. Totally unsupervised. Often attract the wrong sort."

"Yes." One-word answers were safest.

"One hears there are often drugs, drinking, and so on." Houghton paused and raised an eyebrow in inquiry, but Seph looked out the window, forcing himself to take deep, slow breaths.

"Right," Houghton said, looking disappointed. "Well, at any rate, we've managed to make those preposterous charges go away."

"Good."

"I mean, really. Flinging flame from your fingertips like a character from a graphic novel. Rubbish. But people become hysterical, you know."

"Yes."

"Of course, the university has some liability in this. All summer camp students are required to be in the dormitories by ten o'clock, so it said in the brochure. And, yet, there you were, sixteen years old, running the streets of Toronto at four in the morning."

Seph was finally goaded into speech. "I wasn't running the streets. I was at a party. I've gone to lots of parties, and nothing ever..."

"Well, then, there you are. They're doubly liable. They knew, or should have known, that..."

Seph leaned forward. "You know I go to clubs. You've been paying the bills."

Houghton cleared his throat loudly. Seph half expected him to stick his fingers in his ears. "Well, then. There you are. I think we can agree that your idea of spending the summer at university in Toronto has been... a disaster."

"Toronto's not the problem," Seph said. "Toronto's great. I..."

"No." Houghton toyed nervously with a paperweight. His forehead gleamed with sweat. "Not this time. The Metropolitan Police have required my assurance that you will leave town as soon as possible."

Seph felt a great weight descending. "I thought you said the charges were dismissed."

"There were a number of witnesses who tied you to the fire."

Seph gripped the arms of the chair. "Really? And what do you think?"

Houghton mopped his brow with a snowy handkerchief. “What should I think? You seem to have a penchant for combustibles. There was that incident in Switzerland, the fires and explosions on the chapel roof, the...ah...demolition of the bell tower.”

“I went up there with a...a friend. I did not go up there to blow a hole in the bell tower.” Marie wanted to see the stars, Seph thought. It was after they kissed that the fireworks began.

“And that boy at St. Andrews. That Henri Armand. Attacked by a flock of ravens, wasn’t he?”

Seph shrugged. He couldn’t conjure any regret about Henri. Armand was an older boarding student from Marseilles, rumored to be the illegitimate son of the head of a French crime family. He was also a skilled street fighter, a talent unusual among private school students.

Armand considered Marie his personal property, like his gaudy gold jewelry and Italian sports car. When he’d heard about the incident on the chapel roof, he’d ambushed Seph in a remote corner of the campus, pounding away at his midsection so the bruises wouldn’t show.

Then the ravens came.

“Those birds tore the boy’s clothing to shreds,” Houghton persisted.

Armand had been so frightened he’d wet himself. Afterwards, several of the huge black birds had settled gently onto Seph’s arms and shoulders, watching naked Armand with their shiny black eyes. Never mind that Seph was just as frightened of the birds as Armand.

Well, maybe not quite as frightened.

Seph looked at Houghton and raised an eyebrow. An appeal to logic was usually effective. “So. You’re saying you think I sent a flock of ravens after Henri?”

Houghton smiled, a tight little smile. “I’m saying that you’ve been expelled from four schools in the past three years. We are running out of options.”

“But I’m going to UTS. It’s all set.”

“That is no longer possible.”

“What about St. Michael’s, then?”

“No.”

Seph saw where this was going. He needed to stay in Toronto. He needed to find that girl Alicia and get some answers. She was the only lead he had.

He was reduced to begging. “Please. Let me stay here for school. There has to be someplace that’ll let me in. I swear, I won’t get into trouble.” He extended his hand toward Houghton. If he could just make contact....

Houghton put up his hands and leaned away, as if to fend Seph off. “Don’t...It won’t work. Not this time. Our hands are tied. The police have made their position quite clear.”

“Let me talk to the police.”

“You’d better leave well enough alone. Thank God they’ve lost interest in you. It’s time you learned that you cannot talk yourself out of every situation.”

“I already know that.”

“Besides, it’s all arranged.”

“What is?”

“Your new school.”

“Where?”

“Maine.”

“*Maine*?”

“Seems a lovely place from the photographs. It’s right on the ocean.” Houghton thrust a brochure in Seph’s face. “Luckily for us, this came in the mail right after the warehouse story broke.”

Seph took it reluctantly. “I hate the ocean.”

“Perhaps you’ll grow to love it.”

The front cover featured a sailboat. He scanned the text and shook his head. “A *boys’ school*?”

Houghton shrugged. “Beggars cannot be choosers. And perhaps the absence of young ladies will help you...focus.”

“You never asked me what *I* wanted.” Seph scraped the toe of his sneaker over the hand-knotted rug.

“As I said. We didn’t have a lot of options, this late in the day.”

“Is there even a city in Maine?”

“Yes, I think so. Portland, I believe it’s called.” He frowned, rubbing his chin. “Or is that in New Hampshire? Well, no matter,” he said briskly. “You’ll need to leave immediately. The term’s already begun.”

Seph shrugged and slid the brochure into his pocket. Ordinarily, he would have continued to argue the matter. But, just then, he felt like he might deserve to go to Maine. Or any other place with a scarcity of people.

Houghton looked at his watch, seeming relieved that Seph hadn’t put up more of a fight. “So. Well. Do you have any questions?”

“Yes. Who were my parents?”

Houghton sighed. “Not that again. You’ve seen the documents. The photographs. I don’t know what else you...”

“I know they’re fake. I’ve checked it out. I’ve been online. It’s made up.”

Houghton stood and fussed with his cuffs, straightened the crease in his trousers, put a little more distance between himself and his client. “I know these past three years have been trying. It is difficult to lose one’s parents at a young age. And it is likely that your foster mother’s death has renewed your feelings of abandonment...”

Seph came to his feet, and Houghton took a hasty step back. “You’re a lawyer. No one’s asking you to be a bloody psychiatrist. Power prickled in his hands and arms and he struggled to damp down his anger. It doesn’t matter, he told himself. It’s not worth it.

“...and now this...event at the warehouse. So tragic. That young girl. What was her name again?”

“Maia.”

“You knew her?”

“Yes.” He was back to one-word answers.

“Well, best not to noise that about. It could complicate matters just as things are settling.” Houghton hesitated, then cautiously draped an arm around Seph’s shoulders. He smelt of expensive tobacco and wool and aftershave. Seph resisted the urge to flinch away.

“It may be that this is just what you need, Joseph. Go to Maine. Focus on your studies. Get away from all this for awhile.” The lawyer’s voice was not unkind. “You’ve

managed to come away without a police record. Your grades are good. See if you can manage to finish strong at the Havens. Then we can begin to talk about University. Perhaps you can even come back to Toronto for school.”

Two more years, Seph was thinking. Two more years, and I claim the trust fund and dismiss Sloane, Houghton and Smythe. Two more years, and I’ll have the time and money to find out who I really am.

Two years sounded like an eternity.