

SPIRIT

Book Three of The Elemental Series

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CHAPTER ONE

Hunter Garrity awoke to the click of a gun.

His grandparents kept a night-light in the utility room, but either it wasn't working or someone had killed it—his basement bedroom was pitch-black. His breathing was a shallow whisper in the darkness. For an instant, he wondered if he'd dreamed the sound.

Then steel touched his jaw.

He stopped breathing.

A voice: soft, female, vaguely mocking. "I think you dropped this."

He recognized her voice, and it wasn't a relief. His arms were partially trapped by the sheet and the comforter; he couldn't even consider disarming her from this angle.

"Calla," he murmured, keeping his voice low so as not to spook her. He had no idea how much experience she had with guns, and this didn't seem like the right time for trial and error.

"Hunter." The barrel pressed harder into the soft flesh under his chin.

He needed her to move, to shift her weight. Right now, she was just a voice and a weapon in the darkness.

He let out a long breath. "How did you get in here?"

"I drugged your dog and picked the lock."

It took great effort to keep still. He had a knife under his pillow, but going for it would take about three hours in comparison to the amount of time it would take her to pull the trigger. "You *drugged* my *dog*?"

“Benadryl in a New York strip.” Her voice turned disdainful. “You don’t even walk your dog on a leash.”

He never walked Casper on a leash. His grandparents lived on an old farm. Like he should have considered that psycho teenage girls might be leaving tainted steaks for his dog to find. “If you hurt him, I’ll kill you.”

“You know,” she said, ignoring him, “I thought about just burning this place down. Kerosene, match, whoosh.”

“What stopped you?” He slid his hand beneath the blanket, just a few inches to see if she would notice.

She didn’t. “Nothing. There’s still time.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “If you wanted to start a fire, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

“We want you to get a message to the other Guides.”

“I don’t *know* any other Guides,” he hissed.

Well, he knew one, but Becca’s father was just as far off the grid as Hunter was.

His hand slid another few inches, clearing the blanket.

“Come on, Hunter,” she said sweetly. “Aren’t you your father’s son?”

Her voice had grown closer. She was leaning in. The gun moved a fraction of an inch.

All he needed was a fraction.

He swung for her wrist, going for deflection, ducking under the movement. His other hand was free, flinging the blankets at her while he slid to the ground. He threw a

punch where her knee should be, but she was gone already, somewhere back in the darkness.

He tried to slow his breathing, his heart, trying to convince his body that he needed to *hear*.

“Nice try,” she said.

He focused on the air in the room, asking the element to reveal her location more precisely, but it was never something he could force. He had to wait.

And the air wasn't talking.

At least the darkness was working to his advantage. If he couldn't see her, she sure couldn't see him.

He slid a hand under his pillow, and the knife found his fingers, the hilt a reassuring feel in his palm. He'd never cut anyone with it, but he knew how to throw.

Then he heard her breath—or maybe he felt it. Close, too close. He lifted a hand to throw.

Something hard cracked him across the side of the head—a board, a book, *something*. He went sprawling, and for a painful moment, he didn't even know if he was lying face up. Now the room was full of light: stars danced in his field of vision.

She kicked him, rolling him onto his back. “Idiot,” she said. “You think I'd come alone?”

Rolling sent the back of his head into the carpet. It hurt. A lot.

His knife was gone.

“I should shoot you right now,” she said. “But we *need* you.”

“Go to hell.” He could taste blood when he talked. He slid his hand against the carpet, looking for his knife, but a booted foot stomped down on his fingers.

God, how could they *see* him?

The gun went against his forehead. “A message,” said Calla. “Are you listening?”

“Yeah,” he ground out. He still had a free hand, but he had no idea whether her ‘helper’ had an extra weapon.

“We’re going to keep burning houses,” she said. “Until the Guides come.”

She was nuts. “They’ll destroy you,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Tell them to come and see.”

“You’ll kill ordinary people—”

“No. Until they come, that’s on *you*.” She shifted the gun. “You like piercings, right?” The hard steel pressed into his bare shoulder. “How about a little bullet hole to convince you?”

Hunter whipped his free hand out to deflect again, this time rolling into the motion and trying to break her wrist.

She shrieked and dropped the gun.

He didn’t let it distract him—he kept moving and drove his fist into the leg of whoever pinned his other hand.

This time, he connected. He heard a male grunt of pain. His other hand was free. Movement filled the darkness around him, and he knew they were getting ready to retaliate.

And then Hunter found the gun.

He didn’t wait.

He pointed at motion, then pulled the trigger.

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Kate Sullivan awoke to the click of a gun.

Irritated, she rolled over. She should have closed the door before going to bed.

Silver was checking his weapons again. He did this several times a day.

She'd known him for seventy-two hours, and it was already making her nuts.

She glanced at the clock and called out. "You know it's not even five in the morning."

"I have the capacity to tell time, my dear."

She slid out of bed and went to the doorway. He had a British accent completely at odds with his olive complexion, slightly slanted blue eyes, and sun-streaked blond hair. She'd asked him about his heritage, and he'd told her he was poured straight from the melting pot.

Apparently that pot poured into one hell of a mold, because Silver was hotter than the day was long.

The name almost didn't fit him. His skin and hair were sun-kissed, as if he spent an insane amount of time outside. He'd be right at home on a beach, with a surfboard staked in the sand beside him. His hair was short, but just this side of too long to be called military style. She'd been tempted to call him Iceman, after the bad-boy hottie in *Top Gun*—eighties' movies were kind of her thing. But then she'd gotten a good look in his eyes, which were a cold blue that made her shiver.

She glanced through the opposite doorway, which led to the bedroom he'd claimed—though *claimed* might have been an overstatement. They'd walked into the furnished apartment yesterday, and he'd said, "Sleep wherever." Just now, his blankets were flat and perfect, almost military style. Either he hadn't slept or he'd made the bed like he was in boot camp.

"You should be sleeping," she said.

He clicked the magazine into a semi-automatic handgun and slid it into a holster. "But we must play the proverbial early bird today."

She leaned her forehead against the doorjamb. "I don't want to go to high school."

"You are, in fact, a teenager. Isn't this some kind of rite of passage? Couldn't you find some time to *rah* with the cheer girls while killing rogue Elementals?"

"I think you've been watching too many shows on the CW."

He didn't answer, and she peeked through the spill of blond hair that fell across her cheek. He'd moved on to other weapons, knives this time. He slid each out of its sheath and checked the edge of the blade.

Kate sighed. He practically had an arsenal in the truck, more deadly toys than she would know what to do with. More guns, of course. Knives of varying length. An honest-to-god bow with a quiver of arrows.

She'd mocked him about those. "Oh, good! Are those for when we fight the elves?"

An arrow had just *appeared* in his hand, the point pressed into her throat hard enough to draw blood. "No, they're for when my trainee gets mouthy."

The accent, the danger, the weapon in his hand—it all combined to make him immeasurably sexy and terrifying at the same time. Kate had no idea how old he was, but he couldn't be *much* older. His features were smooth and unlined, his body lithe and muscled. She wouldn't put him past the age of an average college student, but he probably couldn't pass for high school.

That's why *she* was here. To infiltrate the local high school, to determine who the true Elementals were, and whether they were as powerful as rumor said.

Silver was here to kill them.

Kate hadn't expected an assignment at her age—she'd only been in training to be a Guide for about six months before the call came.

It was an honor to be picked, even if her ancillary role had been emphasized to the point of irritation. Silver was in charge of this mission. She was the apprentice. The student.

Her mother would be so proud.

Kate dropped into a chair at the table with him. A gun sat there, a Glock 9mm, and she ran a finger across the barrel.

He watched her but didn't say anything.

“Have you ever killed any of them?” she asked.

Silver nodded. “Of course.” He didn't have to ask whom she meant. There was only one *them*. The pure Elementals. The ones with enough power to level cities.

Everyone on earth had some connection to an element—but only a select few were *pure* Elementals. Kate imagined it like a circle with a five-pointed star inside. Four points of the star represented each of the classical elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water.

If everyone alive was put inside the circle, some would fall between branches and some would fall on a point.

The closer you fell to a point, the greater your affinity to that element.

If you fell directly on a point, you could harness that element's power and bend it to your will.

Kate was a pure Elemental, too, but she fell on the fifth point, which represented the Spirit. Once she fully grew into her abilities as a Fifth, she'd be able to control all four elements. Beyond that, her connection to the human spirit meant she had a greater connection to the people around her.

Years ago, the pure Elementals used to wreak havoc: mass destruction spanning centuries. The great Chicago fire. Earthquakes. Tsunamis. The Fifths, connected to human suffering by their very abilities, banded together to destroy pure Elementals and stop the destruction.

Now Fifths were selected to become Guides, and trained to kill pure Elementals before they could come into their full power.

Kate's connection to her element should have made it hard for her to kill anyone.

But when it came right down to pulling a trigger, it wasn't hard at all.

Her mother always used to say it was *for the greater good*. Kate wondered what she'd say about that now, after everything that had happened.

She watched Silver's fidgeting for another moment. "Do you expect them to be hard to kill?"

His eyes left the gun to flick up and meet hers. "Nervous?"

She matched his tone. "Of course not."

He smiled, but there wasn't anything amiable about it. "You have some familiarity with weapons, yes?"

Kate picked up the Glock and took it apart in four seconds. The bullets plinked out of the magazine onto the table. "A little."

"A bullet to the head is one of the few sure ways to kill them."

"I have some familiarity with killing, too."

"So I've heard." He ignored her attitude and started putting the stripped gun back together. "I've seen an Air Elemental take four shots to the chest and still come up fighting."

"An adult, right? I thought we were killing teenagers."

"We are." He paused. "And how does that make you feel, Kathryn?"

She looked up in surprise. "Fine. Why?"

"Honestly, when they told me you were my 'trainee,' I was surprised."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I don't know what you're doing here."

It shouldn't have hurt—but it did, like getting a pinch in the arm from a vicious child. She'd earned her spot here. "I was assigned to help you."

"You seem eager."

"I've proven myself. I'm ready to *do* something." She needed to succeed here. If she couldn't, it meant her mother's death was for nothing.

His hands stilled on the firearm, and he looked over. "You must have done something already, to be assigned with *me*."

"Why, you think you're such a badass?"

“I don’t need to think that, Kathryn.”

“Stop calling me that. Only my mother called me Kathryn.”

He looked back at the gun, checking the sight this time. “I heard a rumor about your mother.”

“She was very good at what she did.” Kate kept any thread of emotion out of her voice. “I’m better.”

“I should hope so. Obviously your mother wasn’t good *enough*.”

Kate wanted to punch him, but it probably wouldn’t end well. “I took care of it.”

“I heard a rumor about that, too.”

“What did you hear?”

“That your mother was assigned to destroy a Water Elemental but failed.” He paused. “That you went after the Water Elemental yourself and succeeded.”

“My mother made a mistake.”

“A mistake the size of the Gulf of Mexico, I heard. Stupid, to go after one of them in the middle of the water.”

Silver was baiting her. Kate knew it.

It was almost working.

“My mother knew what she was doing. She used to say, no matter how good you are, there’s always someone better.”

“And clearly she learned that lesson the hard way.”

“I think it’s time to stop talking about my mother.”

He smiled. “Can you get close to these Merrick boys?”

“Yes.”

“Without them knowing what you are?”

“*Yes.*”

“And if they display the traits of a full Elemental, what will you do?”

She licked her lips. “Kill them.”

His hands went still. “Wrong answer.”

She flung herself back in her chair and rolled her eyes. “Report back to you.”

“Good girl.” He snapped the magazine into the gun and slid it across the table to her. “Now get dressed. We have work to do.”

