

Chapter I

Kaiden couldn't remember ever being lost down by the loch before. Even at night walking the short distance home by the light of the stars was easy. This evening, however, was different. A thick, cloying fog rose from the stagnant water obscuring the path. The heavy vapor wrapped around him and overpowered his nose with a vile smell like burning hair. He tried avoiding the sulfur-like stench by holding his breath, but after a while his body convulsed and bile rose in his throat, choking him. Wheezing, he flailed his arms in desperation searching for anything familiar to pinpoint where he was. His fingertips brushed against the coarse wool from a blanket he used to keep himself warm during the cool spring nights. Snatching the blanket it dawned on Kaiden it wasn't the fog choking him, but the smoke from the flaming coverlet of his bed. He woke up screaming in confusion.

He threw off the burning blanket. As he did his long ponytail, partly overhanging the bedside, fell against his back. Not quite aflame it singed his skin through the nightshirt. Crying out, he

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whipped his head from side to side attempting to escape the burning pain. Kaiden now realized it was his own hair which caused the nauseating smell in his dream.

His bedroom was exploding into flames. Smoke quickly blinded Kaiden forcing him to squeeze his eyes shut to protect them. His mind raced to find some way to escape the burning room. Working in and around the crystal making furnaces with his father, he learned the coolest, least smoky place in the room would be at its lowest point. He rolled off his bed expecting it to be safer on the floor. Kaiden's bed was perched on a wooden pallet lifting it higher, nearer the window in the warm Scottish spring, providing better access to the cool breezes wafting in as he slept. He crashed onto the pallet, breaking it into pieces, splinters piercing his hands and feet like needles through cloth before his momentum carried him to the hardwood floor. The pain from his injured hands was debilitating, forcing him to use precious seconds pulling out the miniature wooden stakes. Sometimes Kaiden used his teeth to remove them because his hands were so injured. Finished, he began crawling across the floor supporting his weight with his forearms. He bumped into pieces of furniture and fallen roof shingles as he made his way towards the door.

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The Brady home was a beautiful house located on the outskirts of Edinburgh. The father was a master craftsman who fashioned intricate pieces of crystal, some of which some were given as gifts to the royalty of Europe by the Queen. Generously compensated for his skills by local financiers he was able to raise his family well above their social stature, sending his daughter Lorna and son Kaiden to the best schools and taking wonderful holidays each summer.

His father insisted it important to have an education as well as learn the calling which would provide for Kaiden's own family one day. Turning twelve, Kaiden's father brought him back from school a year early, beginning the arduous task of apprenticing to learn the details of their trade. He started by polishing the almost finished crystal pieces employing a series of cloths, each one ever finer, to bring each piece to a sparkling radiance. Mastering this task over time he moved on to the crux of the crystal industry, preparing the kilns for firing the raw material into each work of art. Without proper preparation the kilns would either be too drafty or too hot creating subtle flaws in each piece due to uneven heating and airflow. Kaiden's father showed him just the basics. It was a job his father preferred doing himself as he didn't just yet trust his now thirteen year old son with this critical task. Kaiden didn't

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mind, he was eager to work on the crystal itself maneuvering the different styled pipes to mold and shape each piece. Soon his father allowed him to work on the larger pieces used for glass and tableware. It was difficult for him at first due to the sheer weight of the crystal compared to normal glass or the delicate china shipped in from the Orient. Crystal was up to three times heavier than glass due to its high lead content and countless times heavier than the Kaolinite clay used to make the most delicate china.

With practice, Kaiden's flair and artistic talent became apparent. By the time he was sixteen he was carving delicate nuances into each large plate and goblet. This unique approach was unheard of, but welcomed by his father and especially the financial backers of their little industry. He still wasn't ready to create the finer pieces his father was famous for, but it would only be a matter of time before he could make more delicate pieces, small as a sparrow's egg. Everyone could see how much he and his father meant to Edinburgh as a community. The 'cursed money-men' (as his father called them) bought larger and larger accommodations for them to work and live in. Not long ago they settled in their current home and workshop having had to move due to the unexpected but welcome return of his sister Lorna from Edinburgh Academy six months earlier than expected.

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All sense of time was lost on him. He opened his eyes searching for the door. It was fortunate the floor didn't catch fire as easily as the furniture due to its increased denseness, but the smoke was still too thick for him to see even down so low. He had to get outside fast, but not before he found his parents and older sister. He stifled a scream when a roof tile dropped to the floor beside him narrowly missing his injured hands. Taking a risk, he rose up onto his knees to go faster, but he became dizzy immediately and his eyes rolled towards the back of his head from the immediate lack of oxygen. Instinctively he knew if he passed out he'd burn to death. Without hesitating, he belly-flopped back down taking a brief second to quiet his fluttering heart. Kaiden knew the door must be near. He couldn't remember if it was open or not and he dreaded the possibility of what would happen if it were closed. Fighting through his fear he flattened himself harder against the floor hoping to get underneath the scorching air and deadly smoke. It was hard to believe the heat could get any more extreme, but his already seared skin started blistering from the intensity.

The few times he could remember heat like this was when he got too close to the glazing oven doors. His father taught him to ignore the heat and concentrate as he learned to make some of

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the more delicate shapes. He often thought he would faint from remaining so still. Kaiden hoped the cause of the fire did not have anything to do with the kilns located in the sheds outside. His father taught him to rake out the coals to a nice even level and close the dampers to just the slightest crack dimming the fire down to almost nothing. Kaiden remembered his father that evening had dimmed the kilns which wasn't too unusual. It relieved him of worrying about getting severely punished for starting the fire. If it wasn't done just right he'd get a cuff to the back of his head, he couldn't imagine what the consequences would be now.

A tiny current of cool air moved across his body shaking him from his reverie. It had to be coming from the hallway, meaning his bedroom door was open. With his eyes still closed, the draught acted like a guide for him. Kaiden sightlessly made his way to the door reaching out to find the frame. His hand knocked against the wash basin he had left beside the door earlier that night. He had been too tired to throw out the water before bed and now it sloshed over his outstretched hand. It felt magical. Kaiden paused to dip his hands into the bowl easing their pain. It surprised him to find his hands still worked a little even though they hurt so much. He took a moment and with his wet hands grabbed his ponytail tossing it into the basin. His once

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long hair (always something his father warned him about because of their profession) disintegrated into ashes floating on top of the water. One problem solved, he rolled onto his blackened back pouring the remaining ash-filled water over his face. The cool water energized him as it moistened his burnt cheeks and eyelids. He used the sleeve of his nightgown to rub against his eyes and surprisingly he could open them and see a little ways into the room around him.

His brief respite over, he rolled back onto his stomach grateful to not have the burning ponytail resting against his scorched back. Creeping out the door, he looked to the right and saw the hallway leading towards his parents and sister's room was ablaze: floor, walls, and roof all indistinguishable from one another. His first instinct was to shout for his mother and father, but he knew the raging inferno would drown out his cries. Knowing he'd never make it to them, he rolled onto his back screaming in frustration. This simple act saved his life. Looking up, he ducked back into his room and covered his head as one of the roof's support beams collapsed, taking down a large portion of the wall to the room across from his, embers and splinters flying everywhere barely missing him. The now open roof provided an avenue for all the super-heated air trapped in the first floor to escape. The unrestrained smoke howled through

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the hallway rushing out into the night frightening him in its sound and intensity. Kaiden cried and prayed his parents and sister were able to escape the burning house on their own. The heat from the burning hallway was so ferocious his tears evaporated before they even had a chance to roll down his cheeks.

When the rushing smoke quieted, Kaiden crawled through the door and towards the staircase. His thoughts went back to his hands worrying whether they would ever be useful again. He hoped his father wouldn't be too angry at him for hurting them so badly. At the top of the landing smoke still greedily worked its way up from the ground floor preventing him from seeing if the front door was open. The amount of smoke disturbed him that the ground floor might be in worse condition than the first floor.

The stairs leading down were just one flight, but with his injured feet and hands he couldn't decide the best way to try and descend. He used valuable seconds first putting his foot over the edge and touching the stairs to see if they could support his weight, but that was too painful. He couldn't remember ever crawling down head first before, but he knew the front door to their home was merely a few feet away from the stairs and Kaiden risked it. He hoped by going down this way it would be faster to open the door and escape.

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Once he reached the bottom the cooler air along the floor caused Kaiden to resume coughing, choking him. He couldn't stop. Each cough was a dagger to his ribs, every breath sharper and more painful. He curled in a ball hoping to ease the pain in his sides and give him time to recover his wits. Kaiden was thankful the air he now inhaled was less toxic than upstairs. His head clearing, he sat up searching for the front door. He saw it a scant five or six feet away leaning crookedly, its' top ablaze. The burning door provided a beacon to follow to safety.

Once he was outside of the house the fresh air revived him allowing him to move faster, away from the burning building. Kaiden made his way towards the small well the family used to fetch water. He hoped his parents were waiting there and his sister Lorna too so she could operate the well and pour water over his burns. When he was little he'd always go to his sister first to take care of his bumps and bruises. His mother was always too busy cooking and cleaning so Lorna became his caretaker watching over him like a hawk until she went off to her schooling.

Reaching the corner of the house he looked to his left and was shocked to see the sheds protecting the kilns were intact and untouched by flame. It confused him that the cause of the fire had nothing to do with the ovens. That didn't matter though when

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he looked from the sheds towards the well. A figure stood there leaning heavily onto one of the rakes they used in the kilns. The light of the flames profiled her revealing a round chin and smooth nose framed by unmanageable red hair. Lorna. Transfixed, she stared at the burning house. In utter exhaustion Kaiden rose up and waved his arms to get her attention, but Lorna never moved. With his last bit of strength Kaiden cried; "Lorna"! Hearing her name wakened her from her daze. She looked around to see where it came from and saw him. She threw the rake aside and painfully ran towards him screaming. Kaiden couldn't understand a word she was saying, but he didn't care, he was saved. He fell limply into her arms when she reached his side, slipping into welcome unconsciousness.