

KNIGHTFALL

Chapter 1

Alaska, Present Day

Kerra double-checked the cargo to make sure everything was secure. Then she mentally walked through the pre-flight checklist. *Check the fuel. Check the oil. Check the—*

She wiped grease across an unbuttoned flannel sleeve. “The hell with it,” she muttered. She had a supply run to make and was tired of standing around on the ground. “Come on boy.”

Beacon jumped to attention, hopping along at her side and nearly getting tangled in her ankles. The only thing the little dog liked better than playing with his tattered tennis ball was going for an airplane ride.

Strapping the excited dog into his custom harness was near impossible. He was too busy wiggling in a dance of pure joy on the front seat, his nub of a tail wagging like a drunken hummingbird. Once the dog settled down enough for her to slide the harness over his head, Kerra buckled herself into the seat next to the hyper fur ball.

The engine revved to life on the first try, and she rubbed the dash. *That’s my girl.*

Sometimes she still couldn’t believe how lucky she was. Becoming a bush pilot—a *female* bush pilot no less—before the age of thirty. Then again, she also knew most of that luck came from working her butt off to be twice as good as any of her male competitors.

She taxied the plane onto the runway and ran a quick warm-up. With the instruments in the green, she pushed the throttle full in and the over-powered Maule popped off the ground before they were halfway down the gravel strip. Climbing through the air at over five hundred feet per minute, Kerra made her way toward the mountain pass.

After dropping off supplies, she weaved around mountains and chased herds of elk until the fuel light came on. Then she reluctantly headed back, flying long after Beacon’s tiny snores echoed in the cabin. The glow of his aura encircled him like melted butter. She took comfort in the honest color. Unlike her dog, people’s intentions were rarely as pure.

As long as she could remember, she could see the energy of living things. A shimmery glow bathed them, like someone held a dim candle from behind. Seeing auras was like having a built-in lie detector on steroids. And what she saw was that people lied. A lot. And so she moved out to Alaska to get away from it all. Away from people. Away from dead-end jobs.

Alaska was good, but in the air was where she found real peace. Freedom.

She could almost feel the tundra tires tickle the gravel as the Maule touched down on the runway. After taxiing over to the fuel farm and shutting down the engine, she hopped out and topped off the tank. Forty-seven gallons. There went a big chunk of last week's paycheck. She swiped her credit card before she could dwell too much on the fact that she'd be eating Ramen noodles for another week.

She'd finished chocking the plane in the old tin hangar and stretched, inhaling the cool Alaska air that brought refreshing scents of pine and ocean mixed with hints of one-hundred low lead aviation fuel. Stress evaporated. This was the good life.

When she heard steps on gravel, she scowled. That was the problem of being the only woman on an airfield. On occasion you picked up visitors—of the male, single persuasion. A shape appeared around the corner, and then sure enough, a guy made a bee-line straight to her hangar.

As he came closer, she froze when she saw *it*.

The guy's aura betrayed him. Whatever he was up to was bad. Like tearing wings off butterflies bad. And he was walking directly toward her.

Her heart lurched against her ribcage. "Yeah, Beacon. I got him," she said to the terrier pawing at her leg.

With a whimper, he sat and nervously glanced from her and back to the man walking toward them.

Kerra reached in the Maule's open cockpit door, pulling out her log book and the Glock strapped under the pilot seat. She pretended to read the logbook in one hand while she held the gun behind her back, never letting the guy out of her sight. Everything about his energy screamed foul. Worse, Big Ball of Ugly focused on Kerra was now only twenty feet away and closing the distance.

She clenched her teeth. What the freaking hell did this guy want? Her brain kicked into gear. Two months ago, a plane was jacked out of an open hangar. They found the plane a week later,

out of fuel and a busted wing from a botched landing. They never found the culprit. What if this guy . . .

“Can I help you?” she called out, waving the logbook in the air with forced nonchalance. She sucked in a deep breath, tried to keep from hyperventilating. If this guy thought she would lie down and let him steal her plane, he would discover that she was the best student her sensei ever taught.

No response. Instead, he walked right at her, unfazed.

Beacon whimpered at her side. The guy was nearly to her hangar. She dropped the logbook. Gripped the gun with both hands. It took twenty kinds of stupid to try to steal a plane with its pilot standing right next to it.

Unless . . .

Oh shit.

Unless Big Ball of Ugly also needed a pilot for whatever screwy scheme he had planned.

She swallowed hard. Worst-case scenario, the creep was here to hijack a plane and skip the country. But in her experience, that’s how things usually worked around her. Worst case. Nothing else of value was stored at the small municipal airfield. The place was practically deserted today—just like every day. The perfect place for a no-gooder to get busy being up to no good.

The man froze mid-step when something near the runway yanked his attention away from her. The colors of his aura trembled like raindrops breaking a puddle. Which meant whatever he saw had him scared shitless. She would have followed his gaze except her eyes were stuck on his energy.

He spun on his heels and jogged back the way he came.

“Fuck you!” she yelled, and he paused long enough to throw a snarling glare her way.

Her breath came out in a rush, tension melting from her joints. *Jesus. What an asshole.* Beacon threw out a big dog growl for good measure.

Kerra never took her eyes off the man. Not until after he walked across the airfield and not until after he climbed into a small rental car and drove away.

After convincing herself he wasn’t coming back to go *Shining* on her ass, she leaned against the Maule and let out the breath she’d been holding. She’d never been that close to a plane-jacking, or robbery, or whatever the hell the guy had been up to.

She couldn't file a report with the police. What could she say? Put an ATB out because he *looked* like a bad guy? Yeah, that would go far. But she could sure as hell tell Hap about him first thing Monday morning. As manager of the airfield, Hap would post a "shady character" bulletin by the coffee maker in the pilots' lounge.

She bent down, her fingers shaking so badly she struggled to grab the logbook. Tossing the black leather book onto the seat, she rubbed the back of her neck. Her muscles were tight, bringing on an instant tension headache.

She glanced down at the gun in her hand and then gave the side of the barrel a kiss. She bought the Glock several months earlier in case she ever needed to scare off a cow moose. Never, *ever* had she thought she'd need a gun against a man.

Once she found her nerve again, she gingerly stepped out of the hangar and scanned the airfield. Nothing in sight. *What the heck had scared away that creep?*

After a quick perimeter check, she returned to her hangar. Her hand still shaky from adrenaline, it took her a couple attempts to slide the gun back into the holster.

Rubbing her sweaty palms up and down the front of her jeans, she stepped back and nearly tripped over the small dog sprawled out on the ground. Fully recovered from the near-whatever-it-was, Beacon stretched, taking in as much sun as he could. He radiated a sweet lemon aura while gnawing a tattered tennis ball and happily wiggling his stumpy tail side to side.

She couldn't help but smile at the relentlessly happy fur ball. The smile didn't last long though, and a sigh carried away any last hints of peacefulness.

She should have stayed in bed.

Today was *supposed* to have been her day off. She had worked every day for the past two weeks straight, flying supplies under contract for Hap. That was the downside of being your own boss. There was no such thing as PTO. So, when he'd called and woken her up this morning for a quick supply run, "ticked off" didn't come close to describing her mood. But, like always, she wussed out and caved in to the old bugger. At least this morning she'd added in a few colorful words pilots pick up after getting weathered in at Bumblefuck Egypt. Immature? Maybe, but anything helped to make her feel a tiny bit better for losing her Saturday to her job. Again.

A shiver climbed her spine. If she'd known that the creep whose aura bled vile ink was going to show up today, she would've turned Hap down.

Kerra shook off the feeling and tinkered around the plane until she stumbled over a familiar tennis ball at her feet. Anxious puppy eyes looked up at her. She ruffled his fur, picked up the ball, and gave the toy a hefty throw, watching Beacon take off after the ball like a greyhound chasing a rabbit down the grass taxiway. That little dog had a bursting ball of energy squeezed somewhere inside that Buddha belly of his.

Beacon galloped back toward Kerra with the conquered ball. And kept running past her toward the airfield's gravel parking lot.

"Where you going Beacon?" She watched the fur ball skid around a mud-splattered black Land Rover where she lost sight of him. Then, as if the tennis ball had a life of its own, the toy flew through the air, followed by a speeding dog.

What the hell?

Everyone who hung around the airfield knew and liked the spunky terrier, but Beacon was very possessive. Nothing short of a T-bone would bring the dog to offer his precious ball to anyone except her or Hap. Kerra knew the creep from earlier was long gone, but she wasn't about to take the risk. She grabbed the Glock and tucked the gun into the back of her jeans.

Wary, but with firepower-boosted confidence, she headed over to the SUV to see who'd enticed Beacon to surrender his toy. Expecting to see Hap when she turned the corner, she did a double take.

She couldn't fault her dog's taste when she saw *him*. He was kneeling by an SUV with an open hand, waiting for the dog to return the tennis ball.

Kerra sucked in an appreciative breath. Solid muscles, chiseled cheekbones and tousled brown hair—this guy looked far tastier than any steak she'd ever seen. A package of power and strength. A man's man. She was admiring the way his faded t-shirt hugged a nicely muscled chest when she felt eyes on her.

Shit. Busted. Heat flooded her cheeks.

He tensed like a sprinter in the blocks but then came to his full height and turned a mesmerizing gaze onto her. The man crossed his arms over his chest as he watched her in a stance of defiance.

If anything, he looked annoyed, which corrupted those sexy masculine features, although still mouth-watering features. He scowled, and she bristled. Hey, it wasn't like this was his personal parking lot.

With hands on her hips and every intention to put him in his place, Kerra snapped her mouth shut when his energy hit her harder than a bad landing. The color was a complete contrast to his hard expression. The gold of his aura made her heart melt on the spot. No other aura compared to the warm beauty of this man's energy. He shimmered as if he'd been touched by the gods themselves. *Oh, God.*

Avoiding eye contact, she noticed how his faded jeans molded perfectly to toned thighs. His faded navy t-shirt matched his sapphire eyes. Somehow, his disheveled hair—which looked like it had been cut with a chainsaw—and his five o'clock shadow added to raw sex appeal. He didn't look like the type who tried to look good. He just did. This was one hundred percent bona fide I-am-male-hear-me-roar.

She took a step closer and held out her hand. "I'm Kerra Cain." She gestured toward the little attention-getting culprit. "I see you've already met Beacon."

He nodded slightly but ignored her outreached hand.

After waiting a moment, she slowly dropped her hand. He wanted to play tough? Fine. Two could play at that game. "And who might you be?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Instead of responding, his crystalline eyes examined every inch of her athletic frame, dragging across her harnessed mop of blond hair down to her scuffed hiking boots and everything in between, pausing momentarily when he met her eyes.

She'd bet her Maule they'd never met before, even though there was something way too familiar about him. He also acted like he knew her. And wasn't the least bit happy to see her. As if sharing the same space as her was the last thing he wanted to do. Not that she blamed him. He was a delicious god stranded in mortal form, and she was a plain Jane blond tomboy in dirty clothes and a pony tail.

After a pause much longer than it should have been, he frowned and ran a hand through his hair. "Gareth."

Her heart jumped. He spoke only one word, but the two gravelly syllables with the slightest hint of accent sent a shock of heat straight to her core. She wanted to play hard ball, except never before had a simple word made her toes curl. Heck, to be honest, never before had *anything* made her toes curl.

The guy oozed hotness.

But she wasn't about to get all sappy. She stood firm. "That wasn't so hard now, was it, Gareth?"

His mouth threatened a smile. He continued to watch her as he bent down and gave Beacon a scratch behind the ears, causing a white hind leg to mimic with a quick wind-up motion.

"He likes you. Usually he's a little standoffish to anyone new. I've never seen him warm up to a stranger like this before."

"Yeah?" He never bothered to look up.

This guy set her off-balance more than anyone she'd met before, but not in a bad way. More in a take-me-now-or-lose-me-forever sort of way. There was something about him. Something she couldn't quite place. Whatever that sensation was made her want to jump his bones right then and there. Which happened to be completely against how Kerra behaved. She should've taken that as her cue to get out there, but the truth was, she simply *couldn't*.

"I haven't seen you around these parts before. What brings you to Lake Hood?"

"Hunting."

"Well, you've come to the right place. I came across a couple dozen elk on my flight today. About ten miles northeast of here."

"Thanks." The word came out more like a grunt.

Kerra scuffed at the ground with the toe of her hiking boot. "You been here long?"

He shrugged, a careless lift of his shoulders. "Most of the day. Been waiting for someone."

His golden energy remained calm, pure. Her heart was in no way trusting by nature. Despite his standoffish behavior, she knew this was the kind of guy you could count on in a daddy-would-be-proud sort of way. She could spend days staring at his aura. She wondered how his energy would ebb and flow with his breathing as he slept. She wondered how the warm glow would envelope his naked skin. Her body nearly swayed at the thought.

She jerked straight. This wasn't her, and it sure as hell wasn't the weather. But yet she couldn't bring herself to take that first step. She didn't understand the sudden attack of lust, but the little devil on her shoulder was itching to stick around. Kerra twirled the keys in her hands. She figured that after the near run-in with the creep earlier, she could use the company. Yeah, it was weak logic, but it was a rationalization she could deal with. "Umm, do you need a lift anywhere? My Jeep's right over there." She nodded toward the 4x4.

“No thanks. I’ve got a rental,” he replied as he tapped the black SUV. The Land Rover had been around the airfield before. In fact, she remembered seeing the SUV quite a bit over the past couple weeks. Being a rental, the Rover was used by tourists and big game hunters who flew out of Lake Hood for their hunting trips. From the dried mud splattered across the hood and sides, Gareth had been putting the SUV to good use.

As a rule, Kerra avoided people. This was the first time she remembered that she actually *wanted* to converse with someone. And that someone happened to be the man who looked like he stepped right out of her dreams. Literally.

She had never seen the face of the man in her recurring dream, but she’d recognize that melt-in-your-mouth golden aura anywhere. The honest-to-God same golden aura of the man who, in her dreams, stood with his back to her every night. What was even more uncanny was how Gareth had the same stance as the man in her dreams, even dressed like the man in her dreams. As if the dreamy stranger had stepped right out of her fantasy and onto the airfield.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you around.”

“Maybe.”

As if on cue, Beacon returned with his tennis ball and dropped his toy between their feet. Gareth, looking relieved at the interruption, went to pick up the ball. Without thinking, Kerra bent down at the same time. Her fingers lightly brushed against his strong, calloused hand.

She sucked in a breath. Electricity rippled throughout her body, vibrating her very core. The intensity of their shared touch burned through her. And from Gareth’s startled face, the same heat coursed through him.

Kerra’s fingers stayed on his hand as she brought her gaze up to meet his sapphire eyes, which had softened to a vibrant deep blue ocean with simmering ferocity, daring her to come closer.

His aura grew bolder and jumped out at her. Her knees grew weak. She had been too busy staring at *him* to notice the change in his energy. She hadn’t believed his energy could become even more vibrant, but it now burned a brilliant, blazing gold. It was as if the sun was held captive within him, fighting for release. God. It was beautiful and pure and seductive, and his energy reached out for her, yearning for her.

The Alaskan autumn air had become a rainforest, pouring desire onto her, through her. The world outside melted away, and she could no longer see anything except the man standing in front of her. How could someone affect her this way?

She moved her fingers from his hand up his arm, the hair thick and dark over his hard forearms. Her fingertips tingled as they danced over his skin. She imagined those powerful arms taking control of her.

Which they did.

Gareth's grasp was rough and gentle at the same time. She tightened her grip, aching to be embraced. Instead of pulling her closer, he held her there, his feral sexuality caged behind a hungry gaze that was nearly enough to put her over the edge. She vaguely noticed a warm violet glow surround them and the scent of peaches filling the air. But she was too focused on the flesh pulsing with power beneath her palms to care.

Gareth stood frozen, as if he was fighting to keep his passion leashed, failing miserably as his golden aura grew brighter. Every muscle of his body rippled like a wild beast on the prowl.

And she was his prey.

His muscles were hard as iron as he restrained her from coming closer—or maybe he was restraining himself. His eyes had grown darker than should be possible. She was swimming in midnight blue, and she wanted more.

Something grabbed her leg, yanking her back to reality. Dazed, Kerra blinked at the small dog tugging on her blue jeans, impatient to chase his tennis ball. Gareth stepped back and stared down at his hands as if her touch had burned him. They stayed like that, separate, frozen, for what seemed like an eternity.

Gareth broke the silence first. "I shouldn't—Ah, fuck. Hell. I've got to go," he said in a hoarse, tight voice. He grabbed his leather jacket off the SUV's hood, opened the door, and climbed inside in a blur of speed.

"Wait . . ." she trailed, not knowing what else to say. She didn't recognize the pleading voice coming from her. She was strong, always in control. She had never sounded so *needy* before. She had no idea what the hell just happened, but—

His eyes met hers and he reached out to her, only to yank his hand back right before contact. With a tortured look on his face and a ripple in his aura, he turned his head from her and stared through the windshield. A storm of cussing flew from under his breath, but she couldn't make

out the words. An instant later his face became devoid of all emotion and she was looking at a stranger again.

Kerra fought a sudden craving to slap him across his stoic face. Why the bad-ass act? His aura had flashed a different story, a story that said he'd been as affected by their heated touch. She was set on confronting him, but he revved the SUV, cranked the wheel drove away before she found the words. She stared for several minutes at the now empty space where Gareth had held onto her moments earlier, playing the magical too-short scene over and over in her head.

It didn't take an empath like herself to see he couldn't get away from her fast enough. Not that she cared, she tried to convince herself. Besides, she wouldn't know what to do with him anyway, even if he was interested. She was a wrecking ball and relationships were paper-mâché.

"His loss," she said to the dog at her feet. Pissed off at him—and herself—for winning the speed record for getting dissed, she flipped her favorite finger at the Land Rover. Her hand fell to her side and her shoulders slumped. She was being a hypocrite. She knew her frustration lay with herself, not the man disappearing into the distance.

"C'mon Beacon, let's get the hell out of here. I think we've had enough excitement for one day."

"Fuck!"

The steering wheel threatened to crack under Gareth's grip. Holy shit. He'd gone and done it. He was supposed to watch the assignment twenty-four/seven without her knowledge. Easier said than done. The female hung out in the middle of nowhere, all by herself, begging for trouble. And that damn mutt of hers made the job more of a bitch.

That damned dog—*Beacon*—had followed him like a lost puppy. He didn't want to kill the dog, so he'd been forced to play with the mutt to keep the thing from yapping and drawing the female's attention to the worst place imaginable. Face-to-face with him.

Things hadn't gone as planned.

He'd been forced to interact. To get close. Close enough to know her tight body would wrap perfectly around his. Close enough to want to take his hands and free her blond hair from that

blasted pony tail, to grab that hair and pull her to him. Close enough to see the desire in her eyes. Hell, with one bat of her eyelashes, she'd nearly broken his resolve.

He tried to forget how perfectly the female's skin had felt on him, how his desire for her had consumed him, and how, in the fleeting moments they touched, he nearly betrayed his mission for a kiss, to make her his. Gareth's body still buzzed with energy from her touch, sending a razor-sharp hunger through him. Such cravings were dangerous. Especially to him. He was a Guardian, a protector of the Seven Seals. He couldn't risk losing control over a woman. Over a fucking assignment.

He glanced at the rear-view mirror. The woman still stood in the middle of the parking lot, right where he left her. Only now she was giving him the one-finger salute.

He chuckled. The female had spunk, he'd give her that. Bet she'd be a wildcat in the sack. And she smelled light, fruity. Like peaches. He readjusted himself. Damn cock was harder than a sledgehammer.

His lips curled down into a frown. A woman hadn't controlled his thoughts in well over a thousand years. Hell would freeze over before he would tie himself to a woman again. Sure, the feisty female tested his resolve back at the airfield. He'd admit that. But he'd never let anything get in the way of him doing his job before, and he wasn't going to start now.

His hand balled into a fist and he hit the dashboard. He needed to get his fucking head back into the game. She never should have seen him. He was supposed to shadow her, not talk to her. And holy-fucking-shit not *touch her*.

Cellach showing up at the airfield meant the Doms were already here in Alaska, gunning for her. He had a job to do. It was simple. Figure out what the Dominion wanted with Kerra Cain. Eliminate her if she posed a threat to the Seven.

Gareth grimaced.

He hoped things wouldn't come down to that, but he wasn't going to let a female—no matter how good in the sack she looked like she'd be—get in the way of him doing his job.

There was too much at stake.