

STONE BRAIDE CHRONICLES Δ 2



LIGHTNING

A N O V E L

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Bonnie S. Calhoun, *Lightning*
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There is nothing new under the sun,
and the more things change,
the more they stay the same.
Hindsight is twenty-twenty.



Day 1

A clipped sound echoed along the cavernous street as Selah Rishon raised her foot onto a stone bench. She jerked her head up to glance around the abandoned streetscape.

A groan bounced from the building facades.

Eyeing the landscape cautiously, she secured her dark mop of unruly curls that sorely needed a visit from Mother's shears and finished tightening her exercise shoe. She stretched her calf muscle. Time to get this done before the sunrise and hot temperatures took over.

She switched feet, tightened her other shoe, and stretched again as she squinted into the soft rays of the morning sun trying to climb over the horizon. Dramatic shadows sliced across the ancient brick buildings, creating elongated, one-dimensional fright-men. She shuddered and pushed off on a

slow jog down the broken, weed-congested street. A shadow slid to the edge of the surrounding darkness in a doorway two building cavities away on her side of the street.

Selah stopped. Her chest constricted as her heart rate ticked up, pushing starbursts into her vision. She squinted at the different shades of black, attempting to distinguish a face among the sprinkled flashes. She deciphered the outline of a short club protruding from an overly thick hand, probably gloved. Her mouth went dry. She sniffed at the air. She could almost distinguish his smell. Sweat and vegetation mixed with musk and dirt. A male.

The black-clad figure separated from the darkness and lunged onto the uneven sidewalk. She inhaled to draw in calm and studied the shape and posture of the figure. A little taller than her five foot six. Broad at the shoulders, rectangular stance between legs and hips. Yes, it had to be a man.

Her heart pounded a staccato rhythm against her rib cage, drowning out her thoughts. *Control your breathing.*

She turned to run the other way. Adrenaline surged, prickling up the back of her neck and across her scalp. A movement whispered in front of her.

A second figure emerged from one of the numerous doorways, blocking her retreat.

How did she miss him? Not paying attention could get her hurt.

She pivoted and her back faced the street. No! Bad move. Another attack angle unprotected. She spun, positioning her back against the building. One assailant stood to her left, the other approached from the right. If she let them get close at

the same time, she'd be done. Her legs trembled. She steeled herself for an attack.

A squeak. An audible click. The man to her left flicked open an auto-blade. He brandished the knife and lunged. Selah jerked her wrist up to block the attack but overswung. Her hand accidentally connected with her own chin and she bit her lip. The taste of copper heightened her senses. Selah balled her hands tight to her chest and thrust out her left leg, planting her foot in his stomach.

He doubled over as air expelled from his lungs with a grunt. The knife flew from his hand and skittered across the broken street surface. He scrambled for the weapon. Selah bounced to a defensive stance. Pivoting her hip, she kicked out to the side with her right leg, connecting with his chest. He collapsed to the road, gasping.

Emboldened that she hadn't suffered a blow, she bolted in the other man's direction. He raised his club and she assumed a fighting posture. He swung. She blocked the downward motion of his left wrist with an upward thrust of her right forearm. It rocked her core, stinging her arm. An adrenaline rush absorbed the pain.

His right fist jabbed at her head. She pulled to the right side. Her left leg shot out in a low kick and connected with the outside of his knee, knocking him off balance. As he started to fold, she maneuvered a hefty jab and shoved her fist into his nose.

Spittle flew from his mouth.

The man grabbed his face. "My nose! Why, you—" He cursed and released the club. It clattered to the ground.

She sprinted down the street, crossing to the other side. Her core buzzed with the electricity of rapid-fire movements and precision strokes. Her speed felt fluid and natural.

Pay attention. Focus. Focus, she recited until her breathing leveled off.

Stinging. She shook her hand, blew on her fingers, and examined them. Tiny smears of blood dotted the back of her hand. She had skinned two knuckles.

White AirStream at three o'clock. Someone in the pilot's seat.

This time she wasn't taking chances. She dodged behind a tree and used the street-side refuse container to hide her advance. She sprang from the hiding place, ran to the AirStream, and crept along its length to the front. With her back against the sleek side, she reached across her chest with her left arm and snatched the occupant out by his tunic. As his torso exited the cockpit, she jammed her right hand into the space between his left arm socket and shoulder blade. She felt his shoulder separate and he howled in pain.

Lowering his center of gravity to throw him off balance, she drove his face into the narrow grassy strip at the edge of the sidewalk and planted her knee on the back of his neck.

"All right, all right! I'm down!" With his plea muffled by the grass, the man fell limp.

"Okay, Selah," boomed the speaker mounted high on the side of a nearby building. "Your session is done, and by the looks of it, so are my men." Taraji, the head of TicCity security, chuckled over the intercom.

Selah looked up at the tiny visi-unit mounted on the street

illuminator and smiled. “Okay, Taraji. I think I may have broken Arann’s nose. He zigged when he should have zagged. And Hex needs to lubricate his auto-blade. His prop has a serious squeak.” She looked down the street and assessed her friendly victims.

Arann, still holding his nose, raised his hand in a thumbs-up. Selah waved and jogged back to the training zone entrance.

A black-clad form dropped in front of her. Selah recoiled as the hooded figure crouched like a jumping spider and charged. She blocked the charge and spun to the right, executing a roundhouse sweep. The figure jumped her leg and came in with fists flying. The two of them parried back and forth, blow for blow, slice for slice. Selah’s comfort level with the defensive moves increased with her added speed and confidence.

A smile pulled at the corners of her lips. She felt exhilarated.

The spider figure lunged, rolled, and swept Selah’s feet out from under her with one fell swoop. Selah landed on her back with a grunt as the air rushed from her lungs. The figure scrambled over her and pressed a glove-covered fist to Selah’s throat.

Selah raised open palms. “Augh! I surrender.”

The black-clad spider figure ripped off its hood. Taraji grinned at Selah. “Never let an opponent see your level of confidence because they will use it against you every time.”

“I really thought I had you.” Selah shook her head.

Taraji held out a hand and yanked Selah to her feet. “You would have, if you hadn’t stopped to grin at me. It made for a perfect break in your concentration. But your increased

speed is phenomenal. You're ready to move to the next level of training."

"I need to thank you for suggesting Krav Maga. It's the perfect form of exercise and self-defense." Selah wiped at her brow with the back of her arm.

"Sometimes ancient techniques are much more practical than the new." Taraji smiled and offered a wink.

Taraji could have been a twin to Mojica, the head of Mountain security, from their singular names to both of them being six feet tall and having muscular builds, long dark hair, and large smoky eyes covered with heavy lashes. The only difference was Taraji's complexion was dark like the honey Selah loved for dipping her morning bread.

The resemblance had interested her for a couple of months. No matter how silly, she had to say something. "You remind me very much of a woman I met in the Mountain."

"Who in my clan did you meet?"

"Seriously? Mojica is related to you? How come she's in there and you're out here?"

"We each have duties to complete, and for some of us that breaks our familial contacts, but it is all for the ultimate good. How is she doing these days? I haven't seen her in many years."

"She's head of security in the Mountain, and it was her mobilized force that got us and the prisoners out safely."

Taraji nodded. "That's my Moji. I'm glad she's doing well. I covet the day we'll be able to reunite as a family."

"Couldn't she just choose to leave the Mountain? I've often wondered why she went back inside."

“That is her job. She cannot leave until the Mountain does.”

Selah pulled back. “What does that mean?”

Taraji reddened in the cheeks, obviously flustered at her own utterance. “It would be better if you forget that. I’ll see you in tactical first thing in the morning.”

“What did you mean to say then?”

“I *should* have said Mojica takes her job seriously and will gain release at the appropriate time.”

Selah decided to take Taraji’s change in demeanor seriously. That same look had always backed her away from pressing an issue with her stepfather. She watched the woman vault the stairs leading to the catwalk connected to her office. Gone before she could thoughtfully react. She shook her head. This whole adventure reminded her of the puzzles she used to work with Mother. All the parts were spread out on the table at the beginning, in organized chaos, with no two pieces fitting together.

Still sweaty, Selah entered the staging area on the backside of the security team training center. Her olive complexion protected her from the burning rays of the sun, but she hated being all sticky from profuse sweating. She had to remind herself that no matter how much she disliked exercise, there was a dual purpose—to rebuild the leg strength she’d found waning over the past months of lounging here seaside, and to alleviate her current predicament. She had been informed early on that walking around TicCity with knives hidden in her pants legs was completely uncivilized, so this regimen of training seemed like a great alternative to carrying kapos.

In reality, she had an ulterior motive for staying toned and lean—like love . . . regaining what had been lost.

Mindful that she didn't have to hide it here, she peeled off the vibrant blue top of her workout suit, exposing the mark hovering below her collarbone. Her narrow-strapped cotton shirt offered welcome relief from the heat. The suit top trailed behind her on the trudge across the equipment area to the ultrasonic showers as she thought about the strange conversation. It was the first time Taraji had displayed that level of firmness. If Mother had met her, she'd have said the woman was smooth as cream but tough as tree bark.

Selah smiled. She would love nothing better than for Mother to meet her new trainer.

If only she could find her mother to introduce them.