



“SPELLBOUND”

Chapter One from the Novel by
LANCE WOODS

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CHAPTER ONE

“Do you have the Bible, sir?”

Eric Chen squared his shoulders and nodded, then turned to the pale, beautiful woman standing between him and the Chief Justice. Elizabeth Chen, an elegant redhead in her late 30s, smiled at her husband.

The 40-ish President-elect then turned to their ten-year-old son, Brian. Wearing a dark blue suit similar to the one his father selected for today, the stocky boy calmly stepped up to his mother and held up the Chen family Bible with both hands. He did so smoothly, without regarding or entirely understanding the circus taking place around him. It was as if he, Mom and Dad were the only people standing on the West Front of the Capitol. Just them — no Chief Justice, no politicians, no dignitaries, no honored guests, no entertainers, and no one-million-plus

spectators assembled on the National Mall in front of them to watch the inauguration of the first Asian-American President of the United States.

Brian knew his part cold. He presented the family Bible to his mother.

Elizabeth Chen didn't take the book. She smiled at her husband.

Chen, mystified and frustrated, fought to smile back. "Liz," he whispered, glancing at the Bible.

As if awakening from a trance, Elizabeth blinked. As Eric, Brian, the Chief Justice, and the world watched her, she slowly reached out and took the Bible in her right hand, then supported it with her left to hold it up between Chen and the Chief Justice. Both men tried to conceal their obvious relief.

The Chief Justice nodded. It was time to resume making history.

Chen relaxed and placed his hand on the Bible. As his palm touched the cover, he hesitated.

The Bible was trembling.

No ... Elizabeth's hands were trembling.

Chen looked at her again.

Her long hair began to flutter, as if blown by a light breeze.

But the frigid January air was still. The thin ridge of white that crested Chen's own dark hair didn't move.

Elizabeth was still smiling at him, but it wasn't the proud smile he saw, or thought he'd seen, before. This smile was tighter, almost like it was being pulled taut by invisible wires, straining, as if she were hiding or withholding something within her.

Something that wanted to get out.

“Liz!” Confused and worried, Chen looked into his wife's green eyes as they turned solid red, and she hissed at him.

One scream led the thousands that followed: “Mom!”

Brian tried to grab his mother's arm. Chen pulled him away from her as an armada of Secret Service agents clustered around them, weapons drawn and trained on the next First Lady, who maintained her fierce gaze upon her terrified husband.

She never saw the two female Secret Service agents race up on either side of her. One was tall with curly, blond hair pulled back; the other was shorter, with short brown hair. Both wore dark suits and sunglasses that helped them blend in with the other agents, until they reached Elizabeth Chen.

The shorter agent grabbed the woman by her chin with one hand, turning Elizabeth's face to look squarely at hers. Then, the agent whipped off her dark glasses to reveal not a pair of normal, colored eyes, but two perfect, spherical mirrors with the outlines of an iris and a pupil lightly etched in each. Both eyes reflected the searing red of Elizabeth Chen's eyes. “It's in her!”

Elizabeth lunged at the shorter agent, who calmly held out a hand that stopped her within inches of striking distance, then called to her blonde cohort, “Now, Nix, now!”

The blonde agent, Nix, made a slight gesture with her hand, and a bright, white rectangular doorway of light appeared on the terrace behind Elizabeth. Both agents seized the woman by the shoulders and shoved her into the rectangle, then followed her.

And disappeared.

The inertia of the two agents forced the confused Elizabeth Chen through the portal and slammed her onto her back when she hit the smooth marble floor. The women in the suits released her and rolled about a foot away from her in opposite directions. Each rose to a crouch, their empty hands raised in her direction.

Elizabeth, or what was hiding within her, turned to the shorter agent who stopped her before, snarled, and lunged. Then she stopped.

The agent with the mirrored eyes calmly stared at her, then glanced down at the floor.

Elizabeth looked down.

She was in the middle of a circle edged with a Chinese inscription, drawn on the marble floor of an enormous cathedral. The Bible she'd been holding lay on the floor beside her.

She whirled toward the blonde and gnashed her teeth.

The blonde yawned.

A firm female voice sharply whispered a short phrase in Chinese.

The red-eyed woman in the circle stood up and screeched at both the words and their source. A petite woman in a fashionable green business suit stood just beyond the edge of the circle, unafraid. She hid her sixty years beautifully, naturally, without make-up. Despite the casual, tousled styling of her short silver hair, the look in her grey eyes was determined, her tone was even, her conduct professional.

When Elizabeth roared and lunged at her, the woman didn't blink. She merely held up her palm. The gesture, combined with the inscription on the floor, contained Elizabeth, who roared again, thrashing madly, only to be pushed back into the center of the circle by the calm, petite lady.

“Cover us, girls,” the woman said in a distinct Romanian accent before turning to a man in his late 50s dressed in full Episcopal vestments. “You're on, Canon.”

She stepped to one side. The Reverend Canon of Washington's National Cathedral quickly moved forward and assumed the grey-eyed woman's position. Holding a crucifix between him and the trapped Elizabeth Chen, he recited the Rite of Exorcism from memory in a rich, deep voice that filled the cathedral: "Exorcizo te, immundissime spíritus ..."

Beside him, the grey-eyed woman repeated the words in Chinese.

Elizabeth hissed again and raised her hands, as if taking an attack stance. The other lady's upraised hand trembled slightly.

“... omnis incúrsio adversárii, omne phantasma, omnis légio,” the canon intoned, “in nómine Dómini nostri Jesu Christi eradicáre, et effugáre ab hoc plásmate Dei.”

The older woman translated it into Chinese.

Elizabeth leaned forward in the circle, struggling to break through the invisible barrier that surrounded her. It did not stop the canon from bravely moving closer to her as she thrust her snarling face forward. Then she froze.

The upraised hand of the lady in the green suit was now a tight fist. Her eyes stayed fixed upon the immobilized Elizabeth.

“Now, please,” the Romanian woman asked the canon.

Tracing the sign of the Cross on Elizabeth’s brow, the canon continued, “Recède ergo in nómine Patris, et Fílii, et Spíritus Sancti.”

Elizabeth stopped hissing.

She froze for a moment, then relaxed completely, stumbling backward.

The two younger women rushed into the circle and held her upright.

“Amen,” the canon said with a soft sigh of relief.

“That’s it?” the blonde asked. “That’s the exorcism? No offense, Canon, but I thought a badass Chinese demon would put up more of a fight. Or at least cause some pea soup puking.”

“It wasn’t Satan, Nix,” the dark-haired faux agent with the mirrored eyes said.

“Remember? It was an *émó*. Strictly minor league as demons —”

A brief, hot, blinding flash of multicolored light interrupted her. When they could see again, the three women and the canon watched as a tight, iridescent funnel spun up and out of Elizabeth Chen’s body, then coalesced into a creature that appeared to be made of living stained glass. At first glance, it looked like a dragon from Chinese art and mythology, but when it turned and looked at the older woman, its face contorted into barely human features, angry, with a huge, fanged mouth.

Interposing herself between the creature and the canon, the older woman said, “It’s still contained.”

Knowing that, the demon released a long, loud roar that caused everything in the cathedral to vibrate, including the thick, stone floor.

“It can’t hurt us,” the older woman said.

The canon bit his lip as he watched isolated trails of dust stream from the ceiling. “Not directly, anyway,” he said.

The older woman raised her palms to the monster and began to speak in Chinese again, with more urgency than she had when translating the canon’s prayers.

The demon twisted its serpentine form and plunged down as far as the enchantment would allow, until it was at eye level with the white-haired woman. It roared again. This time, a searing blast of bright white coursed out of its mouth and struck the woman’s hand.

The younger women watched her, startled; the blonde held her nose.

The canon placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder, as if ready to pull her out of harm’s way.

The woman didn’t budge. Her eyes squinted a little from the intensity of the light, but she remained focused on the mosaic eyes of the creature, determined to defeat it.

“Hey!”

The demon stopped its assault on the older woman and turned to face the distraction.

It was the petite, dark-haired agent, now standing at the edge of the circle in a martial arts combat stance. Before the demon could unleash a roar in her direction, she cut loose with a powerful series of rapid punches and kicks, none of which made physical contact with the beast. However, with each gesture, part of the demon’s stained glass exterior shattered as if struck by a bullet.

And each blow nicked the dark-haired woman’s knuckles. She ignored the small cuts, and the blood.

The other two women and the canon shielded themselves as the pieces flew past them and throughout the cathedral.

The demon roared again, but appeared to be more annoyed than pained by the blows. Indeed, each time a piece of his hide was shattered, a new piece began to form over the opening in its “skin”.

Punching with greater speed, the dark-haired woman called out, “Nix! Make a hole!”

“Where?” the blonde woman called, dodging glass.

The dark-haired woman sweated as she applied multiple punches to an area in the center of the demon’s body, refusing to allow it to heal. It looked hollow within. “There!”

Nix saw the opening and gestured, creating one of her bright portals inside the beast. Its angry roar instantly turned into an anguished cry. It twisted and spun, as if resisting a terrible force.

The white-haired woman raised her hands and made a slow, shoving motion, never breaking eye contact with the demon while continuing to speak her Chinese incantation.

The demon met her gaze and released a final, defiant roar as it collapsed, sucked into itself and into another dimension through the door created by Nix.

As the echoes of the beast’s roar faded, the canon stood up. “Good Lord ... are you all right?”

As they caught their collective breath, the older lady nodded and said, “As Violeta was saying, Canon, the *è mó* is a minor demon. But not one to be underestimated.”

The canon turned to Nix. “Where did it go?”

“Someplace where it won’t possess or bother anyone again, Canon,” Nix said.

Nataliya eyed her with disapproval. “Nicoleta, when we planned our attack, you said nothing about opening —”

“Did you want me to send it back to Hell instead?” Nix said. “We needed serious transdimensional decompression to suck that bastard out of here, and *nothing* gets out of that dimension.”

“Which dimension?” the canon asked.

“The dead zone,” Violeta said. “You know, the other side. Nix breached it by accident a couple of years ago and spent some time running messages between the dead and their surviving —”

Nataliya’s glance turned to Vi. “Enough!”

“I don’t do it anymore, though,” Nix humble told the canon.

That was of little comfort to him, who desperately tried to absorb information that mortal men were never supposed to know. Nataliya fought the impulse to reopen that doorway and toss her children through it.

Vi placed a hand on the canon’s shoulder. “Look at it this way, Canon: it doesn’t prove or disprove the existence of a Christian Heaven. It just proves that, you know, people die, and we’ve known that for —”

With a groan that commanded their attention — and, to Nataliya’s relief, ended a potential theological discussion — Elizabeth Chen stood erect and rubbed her eyes as if awakening from a deep sleep. The lilting Texas drawl that America had come to know during the campaign didn’t have its usual confidence as she asked, “Where am I?”

“You are in the National Cathedral, Mrs. Chen,” the older lady said, extending her hands to her and leading her out of the circle. “You are still in Washington, and you are safe.”

Elizabeth looked at the woman and gasped. “You’re Nataliya Tzone.”

The lady nodded, then turned to the younger women still crouching outside the circle, but considerably more relaxed. “My daughters,” Nataliya said. “Nicoleta and Violeta.”

The blonde, then the brunette, nodded as they were introduced.

“Nicoleta,” Nataliya said, “please go to the safe room under the Capitol. Let the President-elect know what has happened and tell him that we will reunite the family shortly.”

“On it, Mama.” Nicoleta made a small gesture with her hand. “Anything to get away from that thing’s gas-leak smell.” Another rectangle of light the size of a doorway appeared. She darted through the portal; it vanished behind her.

“I believe you and your husband know the Reverend Canon Gear,” Nataliya said to Elizabeth.

“We met at last year’s Senate prayer breakfast,” he gently reminded. “The Dean of the Cathedral would have performed the rite himself, but he was attending your husband’s inauguration —”

“My God ...” Elizabeth’s memory began to return. “Eric. Brian!”

“They are safe, too,” Nataliya said. “The Secret Service was prepared for this and took the necessary additional precautions.”

“Prepared for what?” Elizabeth asked. “What happened?”

“After your husband won the election,” Nataliya said, “a colleague of mine in China alerted me that a demon might attempt to disrupt the inauguration.”

“Why?”

“As you know, many people in Asia are proud of your husband. But there are some less enlightened forces that think he is betraying his Chinese heritage by becoming a western leader. None of them pose any real danger, but we were told that a demon, the *émó*, might be summoned to possess your body, your son’s, or even the President-elect’s. We shared our concerns with the Secret Service,” Nataliya continued, “and made arrangements to have my daughters assigned to their detail in case the demon made an appearance. I instructed the agents to let Violeta and Nicoleta bring you here, where I waited with Canon Gear. It was tenacious, but it failed, and we couldn’t have defeated it without your help.”

Violeta nodded. Elizabeth frowned, puzzled.

“When I looked into your eyes at the ceremony, Mrs. Chen, I could see that your soul was intact and strong,” Violeta said. “That’s why your hands shook when you held your family Bible. You had a hell of a fight going on inside you.” Realizing what she’d just said, she whispered to Gear, “Oh, excuse me, Canon; excuse me, God.”

Elizabeth glanced back at the circle.

“A traditional containment device for demons,” Nataliya said. “I didn’t wish to profane the cathedral with a pentagram, so we opted for a few choice psalms.”

“It did the trick nicely,” Gear said. “It held you — well, you and the demon inside of you — at arm’s length long enough for me to perform an abbreviated Rite of Exorcism. And for Violeta to beat the crap out of the thing.”

“Mama always said a girl should know how to defend herself,” Violeta said. “Now I’m glad you made me take those classes, Mama. Tae kwon do combined with a little physiokinetic force does wonders.”

Nataliya nodded at her daughter’s still-bloodied hands with concern.

Violeta finally took a handkerchief out of her Secret Service disguise to start wiping the blood away. “Mama, why were you speaking in Chinese during the exorcism?”

“Canon Gear reached Mrs. Chen’s Christian soul with the Latin rite,” Nataliya replied. “My colleague translated it into Chinese for me so that the demon would know what it was up against.”

“I hope we impressed it enough,” Gear said, surveying the plaster dust and broken glass sprinkled around the floor.

“We did,” Nataliya said. “Thank God.”

Gear smiled. “It’ll be my pleasure.” He sniffed and winced. “After I air the place out. Your daughter wasn’t kidding about that gas smell.”

The portal appeared again behind them. This time, Nix stepped out of the light with Chen and Brian, followed by a Secret Service detail so large that the portal might have been confused with a car of serious, well-dressed clowns. They barely registered that they'd just passed through an interdimensional doorway as they spread out around the cathedral in a tight, protective formation. Chen, Brian, and Elizabeth raced into each others' arms.

“They insisted, Mama,” Nicoleta said, gesturing to the Chen males. She gestured to the agents. “Then *they* insisted. I tried to tell them all you wouldn't be long.”

“And we shouldn't,” Nataliya said. “Do you feel well enough to travel, Mrs. Chen? It's only a few steps to get back to the ceremony.”

Elizabeth nodded and stood close to her husband.

Nataliya knelt down, picked up the Chen family Bible, and passed it to Elizabeth, who held it without a tremor. “Nicoleta, please take the Chens and these fine agents back where they belong before someone declares a Constitutional crisis.”

Nicoleta made a gesture toward the open portal, then waved to the Secret Service agents. Before she could say, “Okay, guys, hut, hut, hut, hut, hut!”, the agents were already charging into the portal, ready to scour the way ahead for the new Chief Executive.

Chen kissed his wife several times, then turned to Nataliya and stepped up to her. “Ms. Tzone, I cannot thank you enough for your assistance.”

“Please, sir, thank the canon,” she said. “It was he and your wife who did the ‘heavy lifting’. All we did was bring our pagan witch ways into a house of God. ”

“Ms. Tzone,” Gear said, “God knows how hard you’ve fought for justice throughout your career. I doubt that even He could refuse an opportunity to join that fight alongside the world’s most powerful sorceress.”

Those last five words always had the same effect on Nataliya. This time, she tried to ignore them by focusing on the family her powers and daughters had just helped. She tried focusing on the millions of cheers she heard from the other side of the portal when the Chens finally stepped through to complete the inauguration.

She tried, but ultimately failed, to ignore the kind words, when she saw her daughters smile at her with pride.

Once again, after someone called Nataliya Tzone “the world’s most powerful sorceress,” the world’s most powerful sorceress blushed.

