

Chapter 1

I forced a smile as I approached table six. The man sitting there, a regular, was notorious for his rudeness. Today he seemed even crankier than usual.

“It’s about time you got around to taking my order,” he barked when I arrived.

“Sorry for the wait, Mr. Clark.” I tried to keep my voice calm, summoning every ounce of patience I could muster. “We’ve been a little busy today. What can I get for you?”

He snorted and glared at me as if I’d just insulted his toupée. “Busy, huh? I saw you chatting with the cook. Looks like you’ve got plenty of time for that.”

I clenched my jaw. *Yeah, asshole, that’s how waitressing works—you take orders and give them to the cook. Which, believe it or not, involves communicating with them.*

Keeping my thoughts to myself, I repeated, “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have the usual. And tell the cook to get it right this time. Yesterday, my eggs were overcooked, and the toast was practically burnt.”

“I’ll make sure it’s done right,” I promised, even though Mr. Clark’s usual order had always been prepared perfectly.

My smile dropped as I turned and headed for the kitchen. I pushed through the swinging doors and, with a frustrated sigh, handed the order to Jake, the cook.

Sympathy softened his features. “Mr. Clark giving you a hard time again?”

I slumped against the counter. “I swear to God, that man wouldn’t know kindness if it smacked him in the face.”

Jake started to prepare the order. “You’re a saint for putting up with him. I’d have broken a plate over his head by now.”

I chuckled, picturing the scene with relish. “Trust me, the thought has crossed my mind more than once, but I need this job too much to risk it. Can’t have the boss mad at me for scaring away the customers.”

Jack grinned, and I returned to the dining area to check on my other tables. Asher, another regular in his mid-twenties, signaled for the check.

When I got to his table, I set it down. “Here you go.”

He reached for his jeans pocket, but hesitated before looking up at me with a shy smile.

“Hey, uh, I hope I’m not overstepping any boundaries, but I was wondering if you’d like to join me and some friends for a hike this weekend. We’re planning on going to upstate New York and exploring some trails. Should be fun.”

I tensed. His words triggered a buried memory—the fateful hike with Laurel, my college roommate. The man who had attacked us on a mountain trail had taken Laurel’s life and turned mine into a nightmare, shattering my once sane, normal world. He locked me in a tiny room, where I woke up with the number 777 on my left palm, a countdown tattoo. The black ink was dark magic—so powerful that it’d given me cancer.

A shiver ran through my body as I remembered how scared I’d been of dying in that cell, all alone. Luckily for me, the king of the fae himself, Oberon, freed me without any explanation. He then vanished, and I had nowhere to go. My kidnapper had men watching my family around the clock. They’d kill my parents and sister if I ever tried to contact them. Fortunately, luck had been on my side again because I’d crossed paths with a vampire named Gideon. We made a deal: my blood in exchange for him curing my cancer. After he’d done it, I’d written him a goodbye note and flown to New York with a new ID.

Now the desire for revenge burned in me. More than anything, I wanted to track down the man who had ruined my life, make him remove the tattoo from my hand, and kill him. Only then would I be able to reunite with my family without worrying about their safety and get my life back. Problem was, I had no idea where he might be. But that wasn't going to stop me. *I will find him.*

“Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.” Asher's voice brought me back to the here and now. I gave him an apologetic smile. He seemed like a nice guy, but my life was too chaotic for dating. After politely turning him down, I dove back into the growing crowd.

When my shift finally ended, my feet were throbbing, and I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was get to my hotel room, kick off my shoes, take a hot shower, and collapse into bed. But instead, I had to meet Sarah, a potential roommate, at a nearby coffee shop. With my coat shielding me from the biting night cold, I walked out of the diner.

When I arrived, I stepped into the cozy interior and took a deep breath, praying that this meeting would go well. I scanned the room until I recognized Sarah from the picture she'd posted on a roommate-search site. She was sitting at a table in the corner with her laptop open. I

approached her, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods wafting through the air.

Noticing me, she grinned. “Hi, you must be Donna.”

I smiled back and nodded at my fake name, the one printed on my new ID. We shook hands, and after I sat across from her, we ordered two cups of tea. The conversation flowed easily as we chatted about work, hobbies, and our preferences for cleanliness and organization. Sarah seemed friendly, and things were going well. Just as I was beginning to feel hopeful, Sarah’s expression changed to one of apology.

“Oh, I just realized I forgot to ask you something important during our phone call. Do you have any references from previous roommates or landlords?”

I hesitated, feeling a knot form in my stomach. “No, I don’t. I just moved out of my parents’ house, and I’m staying with a friend until I find a place,” I lied. Crashing on a friend’s couch sounded like a more realistic temporary living situation for a waitress than a five-star luxury hotel in the city.

“I’m so sorry, Donna. I should’ve asked you before we met. Things have been incredibly hectic for me at work, and it completely slipped my mind. Look, I feel very positive about you, but after some bad experiences in the

past, I've become more cautious, which is why references are important to me. I hope you understand."

My shoulders sagged as I nodded.

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time. I hope you find someone soon," she said.

"Thanks, good luck with your search, too."

I let out a heavy breath after leaving the coffee shop. Apartment hunting was hell. I'd spent the last week searching nonstop for affordable places outside the city and in low-income neighborhoods, only to see them snatched up before I could even schedule a viewing. The few apartments I'd managed to apply for were taken by others with more financial stability. After failing to find anything outside the city, I'd decided to look for a roommate to share the cost of renting a place in the city. However, that, too, had proven challenging. Sarah was the third potential roommate to reject me. The first had been worried that my occasional late-night returns from work would be too disruptive, and the second had been concerned about having a roommate who relied solely on a waitress's income. I was getting worried; if I didn't find a place to rent soon, I'd end up without a roof over my head.

Concerned thoughts about the future swirled in my mind as I headed to the subway. On my way, I passed by some sketchy alleys. Before my abduction, I hadn't believed in the supernatural, unlike my sister. Now, I knew there were far more dangerous creatures than human street criminals lurking in the shadows. Despite the creature's supernatural powers, I wasn't defenseless. After Oberon had freed me, I discovered I was physically stronger and had martial arts skills I'd never trained in. These new abilities, I assumed, came from the rare dark magic on my hand.

As I continued walking, I kept my senses sharp. My foul mood made me hope that some vampire would attack me, just to release the pent-up anger and frustration that was simmering inside of me. However, the silver dagger in the inside pocket of my coat remained undisturbed all the way to my hotel.

Fatigue clung to my body as I stopped at the elevator bank in the lobby. A skinny guy, looking about two years younger than me, and a woman in her late forties stood in front of the polished brass doors. She held herself with an air of regal command, her gaze sweeping over me, a hint of disdain flickering across her face as she took in my

waitress uniform beneath my open coat. To her, I was an unwelcome intrusion in her world of elite refinement.

As the elevator slid open, the three of us stepped inside. The woman's perfume enveloped the space with rich, floral notes of jasmine and rose. When the elevator doors closed, I could feel her eyes on me, probing and judging. It'd been a long, exhausting day with difficult customers, and my feet were killing me. I was in no mood for her disapproving and condescending gaze.

I turned to her. "Is there something I can help you with?" Her chin lifted in response, and her lips compressed. She said nothing, as if she didn't think I was worthy of acknowledgment.

The guy, however, looked amused. "My mother is just a curious person. She's probably wondering how someone like you can afford such an expensive hotel. Would you indulge her curiosity? Who's picking up the tab for your room? Got a sugar daddy? Maybe someone famous?"

The woman's head whipped toward her son. "Evan!"

I met his gaze. Instead of telling him it was none of his damn business, I decided to make him and his mother think twice before coming near me in the future by telling him the truth.

“Yes, he’s very famous, but not in this world. He lives in the realm of faerie. His name is Oberon, and he’s the king of the fae.” Evan’s amusement turned to unease as I continued in a serious tone. “I made a deal with him while trapped in a supernatural prison in another dimension. He promised to bring my dead sister back to life, but only if I stayed away from Gideon, a vampire who had cured my cancer.”

The woman took a step back, clutching her expensive purse and nudging her son away from me. The expression on her face made it clear she considered me not only unhinged, but also potentially dangerous.

I looked at her son. He seemed uncertain whether I was being serious or joking. To ensure he shared his mother’s opinion of me, I continued, maintaining a straight face. “When I returned to our world from the supernatural prison, Oberon sent a common fae on his behalf. She arranged for me to receive an envelope with a plane ticket to New York, cash, and a new ID, so I could start over after leaving my vampire friend. I also got to see my dead sister alive again from a distance. Then, the nice common fae had a cab driver take me to this fancy hotel, where I had a room booked for three weeks. And that’s how I ended up here. Oh, and if you’re curious about—”

The elevator doors opened, and they both bolted like their asses were on fire. I leaned against the wall and smiled with satisfaction. Something told me they wouldn't bother me or ask such rude, personal questions again.

When I got to my opulent room, I took a long, hot shower. The water cascaded over me, its warmth soothing my tired muscles and easing the tension of the day. After I finished, I stepped out of the bathroom. A cloud of steam followed me, the scent of rose soap filling the air. I slipped into my pajamas and plopped down on the edge of the bed. I started to massage my aching feet, savoring the relief.

Then I looked at the black ink on my palm. The number 684 stared back at me. During the time I'd been in New York, the tattoo kept decreasing by one every twenty-four hours. Fourteen days had passed since the cab driver dropped me off at this hotel, took my cell phone, and gave me a new one with a different number.

Since that day, life at the hotel had settled into a steady routine. Aside from a few bizarre dreams about a vial containing dragon blood that jolted me awake with a hammering headache, things felt almost normal.

Knowing that the money in the envelope I'd received from the cab driver wouldn't last forever, I'd started

looking for a job, which turned out to be a struggle. I'd hoped to land a waitressing position, but since I lacked experience in the service industry, no one was willing to hire me. Then, in a twist of fate, I found Marvin's diner. He was in a bind—two of his servers had just quit. Desperately needing a new waitress, he couldn't afford to be picky. After I got the job, I went apartment hunting, which didn't go very well. The pressure to find a place was mounting as I only had a week left at the hotel.

The next day, I tried not to dwell on my troubling circumstances as I got ready for work. When my shift was over, Veronica, one of the waitresses I work with, caught me at the front door of the diner, and I wondered if it was to thank me again for helping her boyfriend, Nick.

Just the other day, he'd come by the diner to pick her up at the end of her shift. He'd waited outside while she put on her coat. As I was serving food, I spotted him through the diner window. Leaning against his Lamborghini, he seemed to get a call. He pulled his phone out of his jacket and answered it. Then, he popped a piece of gum into his mouth and started choking on it.

Luckily for him, my mom had taught me the Heimlich maneuver. I ran outside to help. With my new strength, I was extra careful not to break his ribs as I locked my arms

from behind him and jerked my fist inward and upward hard. After the gum had flown out of his mouth, he'd thanked me over and over again for saving his life. So had his girlfriend.

I liked Veronica. Under other circumstances, we might have been good friends, but my new reality didn't allow for new friendships or socializing. Nothing about my life was normal now. Gloves had become my constant companions, hiding the countdown tattoo on my left hand.

Those who saw me every day thought I had a skin condition, unaware that the gloves served as a shield against a far more terrifying truth. I also had to lie about myself. I went by the name Donna, and my official story was that I'd just moved to the city after taking some time off from college to rethink my life choices. In the meantime, I was crashing at a friend's place and desperately needed an affordable apartment to rent.

"Last night, Nick asked how he could repay you for saving his life," Veronica said as we stood at the entrance to the diner. "I told him about your apartment-hunting frustration because his mother owns a rental unit in the city. It became available a week ago, so he hit her up on her cell this morning to vouch for you. After hearing how

you had saved her only son's life, she was so grateful that she agreed to give you a long-term lease if you like the place.”

My eyes bugged out, and I drew in a breath. “No way, Veronica, this is amazing! I can't believe it! Oh my God, thank you!”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Don't mention it. Nick owes you big time. And don't forget, you covered my last three shifts so I could go on that vacation to the Bahamas with him. Helping you out is the least we can do.”

“Where's the apartment?” I asked. When she named the neighborhood, my eyebrows went up and my excitement popped like a balloon. “I'm pretty sure that's way out of my price range.”

“Yeah, it's a pricey area. That's why I didn't mention the apartment to you when it became available. But Nick told his mom you were going through a rough patch and asked if she'd lower the rent for you. She agreed right away.”

“What's the new rent?” I asked and blinked in surprise at the number she said. It was a significant reduction for that neighborhood and within the income range of a waitress.

“And there’s more good news.” A broad grin spread across her lips. “She’s giving you the first two months’ rent free.”

“Two months’ rent free?” My voice reached a higher octave, but the enthusiasm in me quickly faded. It seemed too good to be true, and I grew suspicious. I’d always assumed Veronica was a regular human, but what if she was a Daywalker? Vampires were born with the same anatomy and characteristics as humans. During this phase, they were known as Daywalkers. The sun didn’t harm them, and they ate, slept, breathed, and looked like humans. However, this state was temporary. Eventually, a Daywalker would undergo the Change, a process that stripped them of human-like traits, biological functions, and appearance. They’d then become a full-blown vampire, passing through three distinct stages of existence: Newborn, Adult, and Ancient.

If Veronica was a Daywalker, her intentions might not be innocent, and I could end up as the main course for her bloodthirsty vampire family. There was another unsettling possibility that she was a demon, a soul-sucking evil monster that looked human. In that case, whatever her intentions toward me were, they had to be bad. Then again, Veronica could indeed be a human—just not an

innocent one. Maybe she knew about the existence of the Hidden World. This whole thing could be a trap to get me alone and vulnerable, then drain my blood to sell it to a vampire or offer me as a meal for a demon.

At that moment, I wished I had my sister's ability. She could sense what kind of creature someone was. I regretted dismissing all the books Zoey had read about supernatural creatures as nonsense and a waste of time. Her obsession with them, which I'd once considered ridiculous, now felt like a missed opportunity for practical knowledge.

"Would you look at that? Yummy..." Veronica said, shifting her gaze to a guy who had just entered the diner with his phone to his ear.

He chose a table in the middle of the room and gestured for us to take his order. Veronica held up a finger to indicate that she'd be with him shortly then jotted down a phone number on her notepad, tore off the page, and handed it to me.

"Here's Nick's mom's digits. She's expecting your call," she said before heading over to the customer. I stared at the number for a moment and sighed. Maybe I was being overly paranoid. I tucked the paper in my pocket and left the diner.

The cold night clawed at my bones as I walked outside, the streets glistening from a recent rain. Halfway to the subway, an unsettling feeling of being followed crept over me. I paused and glanced over my shoulder, confirming my suspicion. A woman stood in the middle of the sidewalk, not far away, staring right at me. Holding a closed umbrella, she appeared to be in her mid-forties with natural, fair skin. Her long, brown hair was tied in a ponytail, and a white coat enveloped her body.

Who was she?

Confused, I stepped toward her, and a pack of rowdy guys passed by me, blocking my view of her. As they crossed the street, my line of sight cleared, but the spot where she'd been standing was now empty. I scanned the area, looking for her, but she was nowhere in sight. Where the hell had she gone? A raindrop splattered on my face, and the biting wind prompted me to resume my walk toward the subway. I pushed the strange incident out of my mind and shifted my focus to getting to my hotel room before I turned into a Popsicle.

When I arrived, despite my suspicions, I contacted Nick's mother and made an appointment to see the apartment. In my current situation, I couldn't afford to pass up what might be a legit offer.

The next day, after my shift was over, I changed out of my uniform and armed myself, preparing for the possibility that Veronica wasn't an innocent human and had set up an ambush for me.

Before I left the hotel, I also took a BFB pill from a bottle I'd taken the day I left Gideon's house. BFB was the only thing that could protect your soul from a hungry demon. They were expensive, had side effects like sensitivity to sunlight, and contained dried vampire blood, which demons found repulsive. As long as you had BFB coursing through your veins, your soul was safe from them.

When I reached the apartment, I was greeted by a harmless-looking woman who introduced herself as an employee of Nick's mother. As she showed me around, my suspicions began to wane. The woman's demeanor remained professional, and at no point did she make any move to harm me. It seemed Veronica hadn't set me up after all. At the end of the tour, I felt relieved and happy. The apartment was everything I could have hoped for, with a washer and dryer, a spacious bedroom, windows in both the kitchen and living room, and an impressive view. Best of all, it came fully furnished.

After signing the lease, I gathered my belongings from the hotel room and made my way back to my new apartment. I unpacked and put everything in place. Then I sat on the couch and basked in the sweet feeling of having my own place. I wished that Zoey and my parents could be here. They would have loved this place. Anger erupted in me as I thought about the person responsible for keeping me away from them.

With a job and a place to live, I could now focus on finding my kidnapper. I knew two things about him: what he looked like and that he was a powerful witch. Only someone truly skilled could have cast the spell that created the tattoo on my hand. I planned to use this information to track him down, hopefully before the tattoo reached zero. It wasn't much to go on, but it was a starting point.

I was set on getting revenge for what he'd done to me. When I finally found that bastard, I was going to pay a strong witch to help me lock him up in a cell as small as the one he'd put me in. I'd let him rot in there, enjoying every moment of his suffering before I ended his life. Picturing him getting what he deserved brought a smile to my face, and a spark of hope replaced my anger. I

lingered on the thought until my mind drifted to Gideon in the silence of the room.

What was he doing right now? How had he reacted to the note I left him? Was he upset that I had gone? Did he even care? My hand moved up to where his teeth had sunk and drawn my blood the night I'd left his house. I closed my eyes as heat spread through my body. My nipple hardened, and I snapped my eyes open, angry at myself. I had to stop thinking about him. He was just a part of my past now, and that was it.

Hunger started to take over, and a quick trip to the kitchen reminded me that I had an empty fridge. I slipped into my coat and went out to pick up some groceries. A few minutes later, I entered the bright interior of a grocery store and made my way to the bread and frozen meals at the end of the room.

I was moving down the aisle of crackers and cookies when, suddenly, a fog descended over my mind, making it difficult to think. A sense of detachment from my surroundings filled me as an inexplicable urge to abandon my shopping and leave the store consumed me. My own will ceased to exist. The feeling was familiar, and I realized what it was. Compulsion.

Two supernatural beings possessed the ability to mess with human minds. One was an Ancient vampire, a vampire over a thousand years old, and the other was an illusionist, a witch skilled in creating magical illusions and reading minds. Gideon and Audrey, an illusionist and his friend, had taught me how to protect my mind and soul from compulsion and mind tricks.

Despite my new ability, I was unable to resist the power that was controlling me. From the way my mind was being manipulated, I suspected that whoever was behind this must be an Ancient vampire. My current actions were not of my own volition. While illusion magic had the power to influence a person's decisions and actions, it couldn't impose the illusionist's will on them. Ancient vampires, on the other hand, had the ability to override free will with compulsion.

I glanced around the room. What puzzled me was that there was no one in front of me or in the store who looked suspicious. Eye contact was necessary for an Ancient vampire to compel a human. The only possible explanation I could think of was that the vampire controlling me had ordered my mind not to perceive their presence. Who the hell was doing this? What did they want? Alarmed, I found myself leaving the store. I

hopped on the next train to an address in the city and arrived at an apartment on the fifth floor of an old building.

The front door was cracked open. Crap. The whole thing screamed trouble.