

Chapter 1

~ Free will above all, this you shall not violate. ~ The First Rule of Magic.

Friday afternoons are always the worst when you work for a demon. My boss did a booming business in desperation measures before everyone's date night, or the official start of their weekend, or whatever it means to whoever it is. I looked over at him as he drove the borrowed school district van, his eyes bright with anticipation of the payoff he'd be getting at the end of the day. Right now, he looked like a plump, middle-aged geek in a pale green polyester shirt and black slacks. Glasses and a receding hairline completed the harmless teacher look. At least until you looked at his eyes. There was a gleam there that wasn't human, wasn't healthy. He could sense the desperation in the air even better than I could. The difference between us was, he enjoyed it, and it showed in those eyes.

I called him my boss, but in truth, he was my Master, and I hated him for that. So, in my own head, at least, I didn't give him the title. It'd been three years since he'd had any access to my mind, but he hadn't figured that out. I'd been letting him catch a steady drone of despair to make him think I was still his broken, beaten slave with occasional rebellious thoughts, and he let me keep them. He let me wish I could be free, but he didn't think I had any possibility of it, and that's what he liked: the sheer hopelessness of the situation. Yeah, the bastard dug that. He would. The boss stopped the van and turned to me.

"You have four deals at Lincoln Heights High School. Be quick about it. We have another four in the business district before six o'clock," he shoved me toward the door.

"Yes, Master," I answered meekly, and got out of the van. I caught a quick glimpse of myself in the reflection of the window as I closed the door. A teenager with unruly, greasy curls of black hair that hung down to his shoulders, a mouth that almost never smiled and dark, hateful eyes stared back at me. The boss hit the gas as soon as the door slammed shut, and I watched the beige minivan pull away. He'd be hidden nearby, where he could keep tabs on me without scaring off any of my marks. With its school district plates, it was the perfect cover for what we were doing. Who was going to question what a school vehicle was doing near a school? I checked the various amulets, talismans, and charms that I'd whipped up over the past week. All of them were ready, each pumped with just a little bit more essence than they needed to work. I stuck my hands in the pockets of my leather jacket and took off for the first meet at the nearby park.

In the world I lived in, I was what was known as a warlock: a person who used dark magick. It's not very far from the safe and sane world most people know. Pretty much right underneath it, really. Right around the corner, and just at the edge of your vision. My world had rules, just like a normal person's, and I broke most of them at my Master's command. I lied, I cheated, and I stole from people every day. And I was good at it. Since I was a human working for him, I could also get close to places he couldn't, like most schools. If you look, you can find some kind of holy ground, usually a church, less than a mile from most schools. Demons tended to get pretty toasty, pretty quick when they got closer than three miles from holy ground. That meant job security for me.

I'd done business with the girl I was about to meet before, and I knew the boss almost had her where he wanted her. A few more deals like this, and he would have controlling interest. Lucinda was a vain little blonde who figured out really quickly what she wanted in life: love. Not to *be* in love, but to have

men fall in love with her. I had trolled her during one of my online crawls in a Wicca forum a couple of years ago when she'd asked for a love spell. The practicing Wiccans had nailed her from her opening line, when she'd asked if there were any "real" witches in the room, and when she asked for a love spell, they all turned her down. I offered her exactly what she wanted, and she didn't even think twice about saying yes.

Today made the fifth deal Lucinda had cut with me. I saw her sitting at the usual park bench, almost-wearing some sort of white plastic outfit that looked very expensive and seriously slutty, with matching knee-high boots perching on uncomfortably high, narrow-looking heels. Those boots weren't made for walkin'. I sat down beside her without asking.

"Hi, Chance," she purred.

"You have the money?"

"Yeah," she said, popping her gum and straightening.

I looked over at her and blinked in surprise when I got an eyeful of her profile. Lucinda had new boobs, probably courtesy of her latest mark, a wealthy friend of her dad's.

"Why's it so expensive now?" she whined. I had jacked the price up by a few hundred dollars on the sly, but the boss had been upping it, too. She had it to spare, so I didn't feel too bad about it.

"Takes more power to keep that many guys in love with you at the same time, even with the new tits," I lied. "If you can't afford it, I can always undo some of the other spells."

"I can handle the price!" she said with a sly smile. "Maybe we can work out a trade. I can make it worth your while." She pointed her breasts at me and gave me a sultry look.

I just gestured for the money. "I don't do casual sex," I growled as she slid a thick envelope across the space between us. I slipped it into my jacket pocket and pulled out her charm, a little gold locket she'd given me earlier in the week. I dropped it into her palm and wrapped her hand up in mine. She smiled and shivered a little at the contact, then looked at me with wide eyes, looking like an innocent little girl. I didn't buy it.

"*Amoricae insinadra voluptos*" I intoned in pseudo-Latin. I let the meaning I'd assigned the words in my head bring my mind into the right state to pour the energy into the charm. As the magick flowed, I also extracted the *real* price, a small portion of her soul, into the heavy black amulet I wore around my neck.

She jerked as she felt the small emptiness open up inside her. She could feel the wound I left on her spirit, but she didn't understand the loss. The more of her soul essence I took, the less joy she'd be able to feel, until she was completely drained of the spark of life that allowed her to feel *anything* good, including love. Even now, she wasn't truly happy with the fake love of four men; she wanted even more. A couple more deals, and she would belong to the boss.

While I was taking the piece of her soul, I felt the blackness creeping onto my own. What I was doing was wrong in so many ways, even if I didn't have much of a choice. I couldn't take a piece of someone's

soul without polluting my own in the process. Meanwhile, the boss was technically off the hook for everything I did in his name. As the spiritual fee filled the amulet, I siphoned off a tiny sliver into another charm I wore etched into my skin, a Lemurian blood tattoo that I'd carved one into the soft skin along inside of my right biceps. I was already in for a spiritual ass kicking, so a little extra bad karma wasn't a real problem for me. Besides, if everything went the way I planned tonight, my mystical embezzling would pay off in spades.

"There," I said, as the last trickles of essence flowed into the two charms. "It's ready to go. Same as always, say the guy's name while the charm is touching his skin, and he's yours."

"Great, thanks! This time, I'm going to make Daddy's bank president fall in love with me!" she gushed, full of her own plans. "I'm going to be rich! I think I'm going to let him marry me, when I get old enough!" And there it was, the thing that ate at me the worst; Lucy was only sixteen. The boss liked his victims young. I nodded and gestured for her to leave, and she walked away unsteadily on her skyscraper heels.

The boss was a demon Count, name of Dulka. He made his living on people's misery, trading them a little bit of power for the low, low cost of their souls. Soul essence was the going currency in the Underrealms, and a whole soul was like a self-regenerating supply of power, at least as far as I understood. It had been about five hundred years or so since demons were able to just pop up and offer deals to humans. Something to do with some guy named Faust during the Middle Ages or Renaissance who screwed everything up for them. It was a touchy subject for demons. The boss didn't talk about it much.

Even though demons couldn't just show up to do the deal directly for a person's soul any more, they could still be summoned, and people could still offer them their souls in return for stuff. But demons didn't like waiting around for someone to find the right grimoire or summoning ritual. Patience was a virtue, and demons avoided that like drinking holy water. So, instead of waiting around, they used people like me. Me, I'm Chance Fortunato. I'm a familiar, which is just a fancy word for a slave. I pimp souls for him and do his dirty work.

I hated my job. I hated my whole life. I leaned back on the bench, and mentally kicked my own ass for a minute or two before I got up and headed to the next meet across from Lincoln Heights High School. After years of practice, I'm very good at temptation and self-flagellation.

A few minutes later, I was watching the front of the high school from across the street, waiting for my next mark. Riker McKane was a new kid in town. He was already into us for several charms, some minor glamours that made girls hot for him, and some heavier augmentations that gave him extra speed and strength. He'd contacted us wanting to beef up the physical augments even more, and out of professional habit, I was curious about that. With the augmentations he had requested, he would be hitting the top end of human limits. These charms had some serious punch to them. What could make him need that much power? Knowing that might give me some leverage on him.

The last bell rang, and kids started pouring out the front doors, backpacks slung over their shoulders, talking, laughing, and planning what they were going to do for the weekend. I let my eyes un-focus and opened my third eye, the source of most of my mystic senses, just a fraction. Dulka had forced it open

when I was seven, so I could use magick for him. I didn't know exactly how it worked, but it let me feel magick, and use it. Most times, I kept it nailed shut to keep Dulka out of my head. But when I opened it up a little, I could also see peoples' auras: the energy fields around people. Moods, desires, big events, they all left their mark on the aura. I could tell a lot about a person from looking at one. My senses shifted a fraction, and I *Saw* them.

They were beautiful. Bright, shining, full of life, innocent in a way I would never be again. There were only tiny spots on some of their auras: little things like jealousy or minor greed. A lot of them were bright with lust, and that had a beauty all its own. I held my own hand up and looked at the red and black swirl of crap that oozed through my aura, the stain of eight years of doing Dulka's dirty work. I blinked and re-focused once I saw the dark blotch that covered McKane's aura. I recognized my own work when I saw it. Riker saw me and broke away from a gaggle of adoring girls to cut across the street. I faded back into the shadows and waited for him to come to me.

"You got my payment?" I asked as he stepped into the alleyway.

"Not till I see the goods," he countered with a sneer. "You lay it on me, and if it's up to par, then you get paid, punk. Do we have an understanding?"

I'd seen *this* before. The idiot was drunk on his own power, and he wasn't thinking. You'd figure people would learn. "No, we don't. Let me lay it down for you, McKane. You don't get buffed until I get paid, just like before."

"I'm changing the deal. I couldn't boot your ass into next week last time, and now I can. So you hand over the goods, and I'll decide what I pay you, if I pay you a damn thing!"

"Look, that wasn't the deal, man," I said, letting a little fake desperation creep into my voice. "I'm outta here!" I took a step back to make it look real.

Just like I'd hoped, he reached out and grabbed the collar of my leather jacket with both hands. He yanked me to him, and I let myself go with the pull so I could be in contact with him.

"It's the deal now, asshole. You fork over the damn charm right now, or I beat it out of you!" he hissed in my face.

"*Vox probrum, aufero quod transfero volo*" I whispered while he was threatening me. In a heartbeat, the counter-spell removed all of the charms I had already put on him, and transferred them to me. On impulse, I reached into my pocket and activated the charm I had ready for him today. Added together, all of those charms made me stronger and faster than the average steroidal ox. At least, for a while. They were designed to crap out eventually, so the client would have to fork over more of their soul for the next slice of brawn.

I reached up and grabbed his hands from my collar and bent his wrists backward until he cried out and fell to his knees in front of me. I gave him a wicked grin as I leaned over him. Now he was in the shoes of the people he'd probably been lording it over all week. I liked the irony.

"You are seriously stupid, McKane. I *laid* those charms on you. Did you think I couldn't turn the damn things off when I wanted to? You don't change the deal. You don't have any power except what

I give you, and I can take it back whenever the hell I want. I can also *change* the deal whenever I want to, so here's how it's gonna go: the price is tripled, and until you come up with the cash, I keep all of the charms I laid on you. Do we have an understanding?" I pushed a little harder against his hands as I finished.

"Ow, shit, yeah! Ow! Ow!" He yelped, and I let him go. He hurried toward the mouth of the alley, cradling his hands close to his chest.

I waited until he was gone to shudder in revulsion. While I had him on his knees, the activated amulet had been draining his soul essence, the real payment Dulka wanted. The boss would be happy to get something for nothing. I still ended up with another stain on my soul, Dulka got paid in essence, and McKane was out all of his charms and glamours. Only the hijacked charms and the tiny bit of essence that I'd drained into my own blood charm had made this deal work for me.

The other two deals were new people, one a protection charm for a wanna-be sorcerer, and the other, a persuasion charm for a girl to make the cheerleading squad. Both took only a few minutes each, and then I was on my way toward the pickup point.