

Chapter 1

~ Love is the enemy of reason and the death of discipline. All that does not serve is swept aside in its heedless path. For good cause do the elders curse it. Oh, how we need it! ~

Henriette de Bernardis, 18th c. wizard

By eight on Friday night, my weekend was already dying an ugly death. My favorite moping place, the back booth at Dante's, gave me a great view of the dance floor and the stage. It was perfect for those nights when I showed up to Dante's without Shade. For the fourth week in a row. Suicidal Jester seemed to hover over the crowd as they played one of their own songs, "Maddened Heart," and Mike Destine was moaning the lyrics into the microphone:

*Where are you now? In the middle of the dark,
In my mind's fevered eye, I see you laid down,
In grace pale and stark. My maddened heart watches over you,
And you can't know, you don't know to care, but I don't care!*

His voice rose to a scream on the last word, and the lead guitar matched him as it launched into a solo. In the crowd, I could see a familiar mane of flame red hair as I found Shade. She had her arms up in the air as her hips writhed like snakes, dancing with her eyes closed to a rhythm it seemed like only she could hear. Shiny black boots flowed up over her knees and clung to her thighs, leaving a few inches of pale white skin showing before a painted-on black leather miniskirt wrapped itself tight around her hips. The top of her skirt disappeared under a black satin corset that was laced up the back; the only color in the outfit came from criss-crossing lines of blood red ribbon cinching her into it. Even though she was dancing by herself, I knew she hadn't come alone, and that twisted the knife in my weekend a little more.

"Dude!" Lucas yelled from across the table. I could barely hear him over the music. "Maybe she brought him here for some kind of Pack business or something!"

He'd taken off his denim trenchcoat, showing off his black t-shirt that read, "I have epiphanies." Strands of black hair brushed his eyebrows and the tops of his new glasses, narrowed with half rims. He'd gotten titanium frames and high impact lenses after his old pair had been broken for the second time around Yule.

Beside him, Wanda was in a red top with black hearts all over it, wearing a red choker trimmed in black lace and red lace fingerless gloves that hugged her elbows. Her new pentacle, a silver star flanked by crescent moons, rode over her shirt. Her mom had given it to her when she'd started her year-and-a-day training as a Wiccan dedicant, and it never came off, no matter how much crap she caught about it at school. Below the table, she had on a red and black plaid skirt and red lace stockings that matched the gloves. One of her heavy wedge-heeled boots was on the seat beside me, black with red flames coming up off the soles.

"What kind of *business* is she doing in a *mini-skirt*?" I yelled back.

"But Chance, she's so into you!" Wanda said.

She tried to give me a reassuring smile as she brushed a few bright red strands of hair away from her cheek. The red framed her faltering smile and the rest of her hair, a black line that ran

just below her ears, swung as she nodded. Always the optimist, Wanda never thought Shade would date anyone else.

But my thoughts always went back to the last kiss Shade and I had shared at Imbolc last month. One of the problems with trying to date a werewolf is the danger of having your face eaten while you're making out, and that had come damn close to happening when we'd tried to move past kissing. But the memory of just kissing Shade made my lips tingle, and reminded me of what I couldn't have. She'd told me after that she needed an alpha. Something I wasn't, and short of a werewolf bite, I never would be.

"She's here with another guy, and she's dressed to thrill. I'm pretty damn sure she's not here on business, and it looks like she really not that into me. So stop trying to cheer me up, okay? Besides, it's better this way." I said the last quietly.

I tried to want her to be happy, but it hurt like all the Nine Hells just to see her. I wanted her to be happy with *me*, but that didn't seem like it could happen. So, I figured the best thing to do was avoid her. Made it easier to keep my hands to myself that way. And, it made it easier for her to find what she needed.

"Yeah," I lied to myself a little more. "It's better this way." It was Friday . . . yay. I tried to let the music wash over me and forget everything else for a little while.

"Are you the guy who does magick?" a girl asked as I was losing myself in the music. She'd almost had to yell to make herself heard over the pulsing beat of the band.

I tried not to grimace and looked down from the stage show to look her over. She was kinda pretty, I guessed, but I could only see the right side of her face. The left side was covered with a curtain of brown hair streaked with black. Half of an oval face peered at me, the one visible brown eye giving me the same once over I was giving her. I figured she was fifteen, the same age as me, maybe sixteen, probably a sophomore. A faded peace symbol was stretched across the front of her dark blue t-shirt, tight enough that I could see she had at least one piercing her parents weren't supposed to know about. Her dark gray hoodie hid most of the other side, so I couldn't tell if she had a matched set or not. A pair of tight black jeans rode low on her hips. All this girl lacked to make her a complete Emo chick was the dark eye make up. Her black-tipped fingernails tapped against the tab of her hoodie's zipper as she waited for me to answer.

"What?" I yelled back.

I gave Lucas and Wanda a quick glance across the table in our booth, and caught a nod from Lucas. He seemed to know the girl.

"You're Chance Fortunato, right?" she leaned forward. "You're the guy who does magick!"

The song ended just as she yelled it out, and people around us turned and stared at her while the rest of the crowd cheered. I gave her a glare as Dante's filled with sound. The girl pulled an empty chair up to the end of the table and sat down.

"Do I have a sign over my head that says 'I do magic tricks!' or something?" I asked as the band picked up with cover of Linkin Park's *Shadow of the Day*.

Nobody covered Linkin Park like Jester, and it was one of my favorite songs, which just pissed me off even more. More than the fact that she was right. I did know magick. Lots of it was black sorcery, but I was learning some new stuff. Her being right didn't piss me off as much as

the fact that she was yelling it out in public. I wasn't exactly on the Conclave's good side these days. They didn't care why I'd worked for a demon, just that I had. My demon master had called me his apprentice; I called me his slave. Guess who the guys in white robes believed? Go figure.

“My friend Robbie told me you broke a love spell some psycho bitch cast on him a couple of months ago. You gotta help me out.”

Her story fit, the name was right, and the time was pretty close. I leaned back in the seat and crossed my arms so I could favor her with a glare that should have peeled a couple of layers of skin off her face. As she matched my look, I remembered Dr. Corwyn telling me after the fact that I shouldn't have told the guy I'd broken the spell. It sucked when he was right, especially since that was most of the damned time. My weekend wasn't going to end well.

“And?”

“I need your help. I think . . . someone put a spell on my girlfriend.”

I closed my eyes in exasperation. I was actively trying to *avoid* being noticed. I should have told her no. I should have lied and told her anything but the truth, and part of me *really* wanted to.

Instead, I asked her, “What's your name?”

“Danielle.” The word fell off her tongue like she was spitting it out, just a little too familiar but a little too formal, too. Like it was a name she only used sometimes.

“What's *your* name?” I asked again. “The one your friends call you.”

She took a quick little breath and her mouth closed up tight for a second before she answered. It told me a lot about her. Most kids my age believed in a lot of urban myths. Only not all of them were myths. Danielle probably believed that giving me her name gave me power over her. That one was partly true. Giving me her personal name, the one that she used in her own head, was very potent, and she seemed to know that. Little alarm bells started going off in the back of my head.

“Dani,” she said softly.

“Dani,” I repeated as she hunched across the table from me.

The way she said it had a masculine ring to it. And she had mentioned 'her' girlfriend like a guy might, a little possessive. Yeah, this was who she was.

“Okay, what's up?”

“Crystal, that's my girlfriend, didn't come to school today. We were pretty serious and all until last weekend. After the Love In Chains concert, she got all moody and weird. Said I was going to leave her. She didn't talk to me at all on Wednesday, and by yesterday, she'd ditched the rest of our friends, too.” She stopped and put her hands on the table for a minute, looking at them like they were someone else's. “She wouldn't let me touch her.”

“And all of this adds up to 'someone put a spell on my girlfriend' how?”

“I felt it.”

“You . . . felt it.”

“Sometimes, I just know things. Crystal just . . . *felt* wrong. Like it wasn't really *her* anymore. I think that asshole Julian cast some kind of spell on her.”

“And you want me to break it for you,” I told her.

Her face brightened a little, even though I hadn't said yes, and she dug into her pocket as she started to talk again. “I've got some money. I can pay you fifty bucks, maybe a little more, but that's all I got.”

Old reflexes kicked in at her offer, but I stepped on them hard. I wasn't pimping souls for a demon any more, and I wasn't going to turn a quick buck on another kid's problems. I put my first two fingers up in a gesture I copied from Dr. C. She clammed up and went still.

“I can't take your money. I can't really do anything unless I can actually see your girlfriend face to face. And I'm not a detective. If you don't know where she is, I can't help you.” Everything I had said was true, but I still felt like an ass when I said it.

“Please, you *have* to help me!” Dani said as she leaned forward. “I know how to find Julian! Could you break the spell if you could see *him*?”

Her hand snaked forward and gripped my forearm. There was a flash of contact, even through the sleeve of my sweatshirt, and suddenly I was pretty damn *sure* I'd find Crystal where I found Julian. Other images piled on top of each other, too fast to make out all at once, but the sight of Crystal's face was the one that seared itself across my memory.

We recoiled at the same time and stared at each other. I was pretty sure I had felt what she was feeling, but there was also a part of that flash that wasn't her at all. She blinked a few times, and her face went a little green. My aura wasn't very wholesome, and if she'd seen as much of me as I'd seen of her, she'd definitely gotten the worse end of things.

I closed my eyes and took a breath, then let it out slowly. There is a moment after you open your eyes before they refocus. I could hold that moment and let my Third Eye see the world. I hated doing it in a crowd, but I had to know what it was that had attached itself to Dani. Her aura was bright pink with innocence at its core, but there were stains on it, dark places from her past that were still screwing her up. I could see the energies of the crowd coloring her aura at the edges, a sure sign of a naturally empathic person. It didn't go deep, though, mostly playing along the surface and sliding off like water on oil. I figured she'd learned to shield herself somehow. It was that or go nuts, for most empaths. But as strong as her defenses seemed, something had stuck to her aura.

A pale, powdery green smear ran across her chest, right over her heart. It explained a lot. I let my senses refocus on the physical world again and shook my head. All of that had only taken a few seconds, but like most of the times I used my mystic senses, it felt like I'd been at it a lot longer.

“Chance, are you okay?” Wanda asked me from across the table.

Lucas was sliding out of the booth toward Dani, who was swaying in her seat. My boot caught his leg before he cleared the edge of the seat.

“I'm okay, and don't. Touching her'll only make it worse.” I slid to the edge of the booth and waited for her to steady herself.

“Holy crap. You're really screwed up,” she said after a moment.

“Yeah, I get that a lot. It's hard for your friends to lie to you, isn't it?”

“How did you . . .”

The thing about having a reputation for doing magick is that people assume you have this whole list of powers you really don't. I could see her mind working through the usual assumptions, thinking I could read her mind, or that I just *knew* stuff. Totally bogus, but it saved time.

“You're an empath. I'm . . . something else. Look, where can I find this guy Julian?”

“He's usually on the Square. Are you gonna break the spell?”

“I'll do what I can, Dani, but no promises. Can you come with us and point him out?”

“Yeah,” she said with a cold smile.

“All right. Meet us outside.”

She got to her feet and leaned forward for a moment like she wanted to hug me or something, then she turned and headed off into the crowd.

“Dude, why did you do that?” Lucas asked. “She probably screwed around on her girlfriend or something and she wants you to make her fall in love with her again.”

“No, there's something there, guys.”

“There is?” Wanda asked. “She felt weird, but not, like, wrong. Like she was sick or something.”

“Yeah, she had something on her aura, a trace she picked up from a spell on someone she loves.”

“Then you *really* need to back off, man! Dr. C told you not to do any magick outside the sanctum, remember? Take it to him or something.”

“I'm just going to go take a look, Lucas, I promise. I don't want the Conclave's wizard cops on my ass, either. If it's something, then we tell Dr. C, deal?”

“You better, man, or your ass is walking all the way home,” he said as he slid out of his seat. For all his grousing, he still had his car keys out.

We were halfway to the door when I stopped in my tracks and felt my heart just sort of go hollow.

Shade was dancing with a guy. Not just dancing out on the floor. Jester's female lead, Sindy Sinn, was moaning the lyrics to an old Madonna song, *Crazy For You*, and Shade had her arms around about six feet of tall, dark, and, I figured, handsome. Her body pressed against his the way I wanted her pressed up to mine. The whole night turned to crap in front of me as she looked up at me and smiled. I wanted that smile to be for me. Not at seeing my heart breaking. I turned away before she could see me die any more inside and headed for the door. I really, *really* wanted Julian to be as bad as Dani made him sound. I needed to hurt someone tonight.