

# Chapter 1

The hammer of a gun clicked as it was cocked.

That small, distinct sound sent a shiver through me despite the summer heat shimmering off the sidewalk. My heart skipped. I froze with my right foot on the bottom step leading up to the tattoo parlor—so close to sanctuary, and yet I didn't have a chance. The front door was locked. I was trapped, hanging helpless in that second waiting for the gunman behind me to finally speak or send a bullet screaming through the back of my head.

“You fucking lied to me, Gage!” snarled my assailant. The voice sounded familiar, but it wasn't until I slowly turned around that I realized why my life was hanging by a thread. I had tattooed the man just a couple of weeks ago and apparently he wasn't pleased with the result.

Russell Dalton was a large, beefy man full of muscles and a layer of fat around his waist from too many Big Macs and not enough core exercises. He was loud, obnoxious, and cheap. In my opinion, he had gotten what he paid for, but then it looked like he wanted to take his anger and frustration out on my hide, as he remained in the shadows of the alley beside the parlor.

“I never lied to you,” I replied calmly, holding my hands open and out to my sides to show that I didn't have any weapons. In this world, you couldn't be too careful. I resisted the urge to look up at the sky, knowing that it was not long after noon—hours away from when the hulking Bronx would be able to get to the tattoo parlor. Damn trolls and their weakness for sunlight. I was on my own for now, but then it was better that way. Just the two of us and no one watching.

“You promised me good luck,” Russell accused. “Since I got this damn tattoo, I was fired from my job, my car was stolen, and my wife wants a divorce. That ain't good luck.”

“You paid me fifty bucks for a shamrock tattoo the size of a quarter on the bottom of your foot.” Balling my hands into fists, I let my foot fall from the step and turned around to fully face my attacker. “That was barely enough to cover the cost of the ink and my time and expertise, not to mention the leprechaun hair that I threw into the mix. Do you know how hard it is to get that shit?”

In all honesty, I had a contact at a popular beauty parlor across town and for a price she was kind enough to grab samples of hair for me. It wasn't that hard to get my hands on leprechaun hair. The only problem was that it so easily turned bad if you weren't careful. Obviously, my stockpile had taken an unexpected turn. I made a mental note that if I used it again I needed to cut the spell with

water from a spring snowmelt or fuzz from a white rabbit to counter the negative energy from the leprechaun hair.

Unfortunately, this cheap-ass dirtbag hadn't paid enough for me to take those kinds of precautions. Hell, he shouldn't have gotten the leprechaun hair at that price, but I had been in a generous mood. Sometimes I can be a real dumbass when it comes to my clients, but then, my motto was you get what you pay for.

"You have to fix it!" Russell snarled, ignoring my question. "You have to make everything right again!"

"And let me guess, you want this work done for free?" I sneered.

"Damn right for free! You've ruined my life!"

I took a step forward, and to my surprise, Russell slid half a step backward into the alley. That worked for me. I didn't want this on the street should someone walk by. "If you want good luck, it comes with a price, and the kind of luck you're looking for is extremely expensive. You blew through my front door demanding lottery-winning luck while waving fifty bucks in my face. You got what you paid for. Buyer beware, buddy."

"You fucking asshole! You're not the only tattoo artist in Low Town! I don't need you!" he shouted, shaking the gun at me.

I took another step toward Russell, backing him farther into the alley. "Yeah, but I'm the best and that's why you came to me instead of some broken-down backroom operation with dirty needles and shady ingredients."

"You're obviously not any better!"

I had had enough of this shit. Keeping my eyes locked on his, I let the gym bag on my right shoulder slide off and hit the ground with a heavy thud. As I expected, he jerked the gun toward the bag. Taking advantage of his distraction, I edged forward and slammed both of my hands into the hand gripping the gun, knocking the weapon to the ground. Still holding his right hand, I twisted it at an awkward angle while dropping to my knee, putting Russell on his back in the dirty cobblestone alley. Before he could get his wits about him, I slammed my elbow into his face, feeling his nose fracture beneath my forearm while the back of his head hammered into the brick-covered ground.

"Asshole," I muttered. Standing, I dusted off my jeans and stepped back. "Don't show your face around here again or I'll tell the cops what kind of tattoo you really came in my shop for."

Sucking in a deep, cleansing breath, I summoned up a smattering of the energy that swirled around me, begging for my touch. I raised my left hand toward him and clenched my fist, as if I was grabbing his shirt, before throwing out my arm. Russell slid violently down the alley until his head clanged into the side of a Dumpster.

My breath froze in my chest and I watched the sky for the telltale flash of lightning that would streak across seconds before the appearance of a guardian. I wasn't supposed to be using magic, no matter how minute. And the guardians were itching for an excuse to put my ass in a sling. I didn't need

to push my luck, but Dalton had gotten under my skin. I was an excellent tattoo artist and I didn't need his kind of bad karma mucking up my business. After a couple of seconds and no lightning bolt, I relaxed. For now, I remained under the radar and intended to stay there.

A large hand appeared from out of nowhere and wrapped around my throat, picking me up and slamming me against the alley wall of the tattoo parlor. A sharp-featured face leaned so close that I could easily make out the silver eyes with a hint of green. Black hair flowed around his face, putting his features in dark shadow despite the bright sunlight.

"Gideon," I choked out as I held on to his hand, trying to loosen his grip before I suffocated. "It's been a long time."

"Not long enough," he said in a menacing voice as he raised his wand and dug it into my cheek.

My heart pounded in my chest far harder than when I was facing the barrel of Dalton's gun. I'd always known I could stop a bullet, but I wasn't prepared to stop any spell that this warlock was itching to throw in my direction. Apparently, someone *had* been watching. Fuck.

Gideon's sneer turned into an evil grin. "You've been warned more than once that you have been forbidden to perform any of the magical arts. As I recall, you were the one who turned your back on us, saying that you didn't need us or magic."

Gritting my teeth, I pressed my hands into the wall behind me and kicked Gideon in the chest with both feet, shoving him violently away from me. I immediately erected a protective barrier as I slammed into the ground. A wicked flash of energy that shot from Gideon's wand was deflected by the shield, briefly lighting up the alley.

"Before I left, the council agreed that I could use magic in acts of self-defense," I shouted before Gideon could come up with another spell that would crash through my meager defensive shield. I had always been good at magic, but there was more to it than just being naturally attuned to the energies in the air. Being a powerful warlock took decades of study and I had stopped more than a few years ago. I didn't stand much of a chance in a magic fight against a warlock like Gideon.

He picked himself up off the ground and dusted off his black pants and shirt. Gideon even took the time to shake out his cloak before turning to me. In this day and age, the cloak looked a little ridiculous, but I was no fool. That thing was woven with enough protective spells that the warlock wouldn't be caught dead without it.

"I saw the fight," Gideon said calmly. "The man was already down."

"But not unconscious. I had to be sure that he wouldn't follow me into my shop where I would still be alone and defenseless."

"We all know you're never defenseless."

I shrugged, fighting back a smirk. "Relatively speaking."

"You used magic, when you were not permitted, in dealing with this human. You broke your agreement. You're coming with me."

"Not today." I shook my head as I dropped my protective shield and leaned against the wall so my

shaking knees wouldn't have to fully support my weight. "Bring me before the council and they will see that it was self-defense. An unarmed man against one with a gun. The council would be forced to find in my favor. Think about it, Gideon. I know you and everyone else in the Ivory Towers is eager to see me dead, but do you really want to waste the council's time? They won't look kindly on it."

My only warning was a low, frustrated growl before he rushed across the alley and slammed my head against the wall. "I will let you go this time, renegade, but we are watching you. We will catch you eventually."

"Try all you like."

Gideon gave a little snort as he stepped away from me. "Why you've chosen to live among these useless flesh bags is beyond me."

"That's why," I said in clipped tones. I refused to view humans as little more than chattel.

Gideon frowned at me one last time before he disappeared completely, heading back to the Towers, I was sure. Each continent was dotted with gleaming towers made of white marble and granite that stretched above the clouds. These were the elusive Ivory Towers, their exact locations known only to the witches and warlocks who lived in them. And me. I knew where they were and had managed to escape with that knowledge, not that it was doing much good now.

Sliding down the grimy wall, I took a deep breath as I tried to slow my racing heart and my trembling hands. I had come too close this time. That self-defense argument was starting to run a little thin and I had a dark suspicion that Mr. Dalton might have been given a little shove in my direction in hopes of pushing my buttons into using magic. It had worked. I didn't like being threatened and I didn't like it when my abilities were questioned. Sometimes I had too much ego and not enough common sense.

If Gideon had had his way, I would have been whisked away to the council in the Ivory Towers, found guilty, and executed, all within an hour.

Pushing back to my feet, I paused for a second as I gazed down the alley and saw Dalton's chest rise once with a heavy breath. Then I picked up the gun in one hand and my gym bag in the other. This neighborhood was getting more dangerous by the day.