

Chapter One

Boredom tightened the aching muscles in my neck. The opposing counsel droned on as I examined my nails. They were infinitely more fascinating than the pompous jerk in front of me. I frowned at a small chip in the polish and jotted down a reminder to schedule a manicure.

This was my fourth meeting today. Each one was more boring and useless than the last. I'd started grinding my teeth over an hour ago, at this rate I'd wear the enamel to the nerve.

The opposing counsel strutted around the boardroom like a garish peacock. He tossed over-inflated numbers around in a useless attempt to lure me in.

Lies spewed from his lips.

It wasn't his body language or tone that gave him away, anyone can learn to mask tells like that. I knew he was lying because I could see it. Each lie appeared on his skin, iridescent symbols that danced and twisted on his face. The jagged runes were tanner than his skin, a clouded shadow that barely sparkled in the low light of the boardroom. They drifted down his neck and disappeared into the stiff collar of his shirt.

No one noticed but me.

I was the only one who could see them, the only person I'd ever met with the talent—the curse as I thought of it sometimes.

I'd never truly mastered the language, although after decades of seeing things that no one else could, I'd figured out a lot. The color, intensity, movement, and symbols themselves all had a meaning. Each said something specific about the wearer and the lies they told. The darker the tattoo, the more frequent the lie was told.

The ease of its appearance, the thickness of the symbol, proved that it was a common thing for him. A pastime no more challenging or thought-provoking than breathing. My powers may be minuscule compared to others, but they were oh-so-useful.

Frustration boiled inside me; I'd had enough. I gathered my papers and threw the heavy file in my briefcase. The click of the latch echoed in the suddenly silent conference room. Five men seated at the table watched me with varying expressions of annoyance.

"Is there a problem, Ms. Anthony?" The opposing counsel looked especially irate, not surprising since I'd interrupted his carefully planned lecture.

"I refuse to waste any more of my time with this." I pivoted on my crystal beaded Louboutins and stalked to the door.

"Excuse me?" the peacock warbled. His eyes narrowed in contempt as I paused and cocked my hip.

We'd had several run-ins in the years I'd worked for Alejandro. I wasn't sure if his animosity was due to my gender or my boss. Could be both. Alejandro Guerrero was a ruthless businessman, among other things. He gathered enemies like bananas attracted fruit flies. "Ms. Anthony, we are offering Mr. Guerrero a good deal. It would be criminal of you to pass this up." The shimmer of another lie formed on his cheek, spread across his right eye and disappeared into his receding hairline.

My heels clicked on the marble floor as I returned to the table, catching the triumphant smile shared between two of the men. Their celebration was premature. I didn't miss the calculated gleam in the opposing counsel's eyes as I returned my Gucci briefcase onto the conference table. I ran my fingers along the smooth leather, the habitual movement soothing to my aggravated nerves.

My unflinching eyes stared into his, boring into his shrewd gaze. He dropped his eyes, running a finger along his collar.

"I don't think so, *gentlemen*." They tensed at my sharp words. "You have offered Mr. Guerrero a shit deal and you know it. My client will not settle for less than eighty-five percent ownership."

"Wait a minute, young lady—" the elder partner sputtered. A flush spread up his face, turning his face an alarming shade of red.

"If you continue to stall and twist the figures for your own benefit, we will move on. And I assure you," I narrowed my eyes, "we do not bluff. Call my assistant with your answer by the close of business today." I left them floundering, red-faced and mouths agape, as I strode from the room.

Alejandro would be pissed if I had fucked this deal, but my patience was long gone. A sliver of unease gathered between my already stiff shoulder blades as I walked into the gaping mouth of the elevator.

Battling out deals and contracts with pompous assholes used to make my blood sing. I loved the power, the one-upmanship, loved that a poor nobody from the wrong side of the tracks was pulling the rug out from under these wealthy Ivy-Leaguers.

I deflated and sank against the cool metal of the elevator.

With my bank balance and lifestyle, I was now more like them than my humble beginnings.

As each year passed, I found the legal face of the House more dissatisfying. While meetings with our not-so-human clientele were often nightmare inducing and had the constant potential for disaster, I was finding them preferable to the never-ending line of misogynistic simpletons in the legal system. Simpletons who enjoyed trying to pull a fast one on the young head attorney only four years out of law school. I didn't get this position working for one of the most powerful men in Florida just because I had a pretty face. Better to be underestimated by a bunch of blood-thirsty monsters because I was a *mere human*, rather than by my own species because I didn't have a dick.

I slid into the leather embrace of my Jag, unable to keep the smile from my face. The car was my baby, a childhood dream. I received the first as a Christmas gift seven months after officially joining Alejandro's company. Every year since a new one showed up light clockwork. Last year's was black.

Spoiled? Me? No question. And I soaked up every gift.

My life was a far cry from the borderline poverty I was raised in, the second oldest in a family with nine kids. I'd been fortunate to pull myself out of the desperation and endless cycle

of need, and I never lost sight of that. Everything I'd accomplished could be ripped from me faster than I could blink.

I gunned the engine and tore out of the parking garage. The tires screamed as I rounded the turn. The honking and yelling motorists I left stewing in my wake didn't faze me as I weaved between cars like I was skiing through downtown Tampa. Alejandro's building towered in the distance, flashing in the light of the setting sun, a diamond in the dullness of the city.

A valet materialized under the canopy as I whirled into the main entrance, nonplussed by my abrupt stop and the accompanying squeal of tires. After four years my driving no longer had valets diving for cover – except the new ones. I derived perverse satisfaction from breaking them in.

I tossed my keys to the handsome valet and slid from my home away from home, flashing more than a bit of thigh as my gray Gucci pencil skirt rode up. I caught the valet dragging his eyes away and I winked. "Better watch that wandering eye, Christoph."

His careful smile hid sharp fangs that could rip through my skin between heartbeats. The sun—which could cause a blistering sunburn in most young vampires—barely bothered the year-old vampire. Alejandro was testing his endurance by having the valet work days. His pale skin showed no ill-effects.

Before I could comment, the vibration of my phone drew my attention. I grinned at the display.

"Yes, Margaret?" I answered.

"They took the deal." My personal assistant got straight to the point. I despised idle chit-chat and social niceties.

"Excellent. Have the final paperwork waiting on my desk for me to sign in the morning." I ended the call, gripping my purse to hide my trembling hand. I exhaled a relieved breath although no one would suspect I ever doubted my decisions. I refused to show it, hid my anxieties behind my sharp tongue and fast wit. This business was tough; I couldn't show an ounce of weakness. If the piranha-like attorneys didn't eat me alive, the vampires or shifters would.

Alejandro was now the majority owner in yet another extremely lucrative venture. I'd laugh at the absurdity if there weren't already a multitude of ironic businesses my employer kept in his pocket: beach resorts, glass manufacturers, and now pool construction and maintenance. Who would guess that a vampire had controlling interest in so many industries that revolved around the sun?

The glass doors glided shut behind me, abruptly cutting off the noise from the street, cocooning me in a muffled silence. I needed a drink. A big one. The sooner the better. I glanced at my diamond encrusted watch, last year's anniversary gift from Alejandro. Tanya should have our table ready at The Harmony, the more upscale of the two restaurants in the building.

The Harmony was lavish, catering to the affluent residents. Unlike most fine dining establishments, it was open all night. Not unusual considering it was owned by a vampire, but that secret was kept tightly under wraps.

Tanya was already finishing her glass of white wine.

I sat in the booth across from her. “Rough day?”

“That’s an understatement.” The tall brunette flagged our server. “Patrick, I’ll need another. Hell,” Tanya scrunched her nose, “just leave the bottle.”

Patrick turned, his hollow gaze landing on me. “Ms. Anthony, what may I get for you this evening?”

“I’ll just have a glass of Alejandro’s reserve Chardonnay. Thank you, Patrick.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Patrick’s long stride ate up the ground. He was probably rushing off to report my arrival.

“Must be nice.” Tanya sighed, fingering the stem of her empty wineglass.

“It is.” I didn’t feign ignorance. My position—both as Alejandro’s personal attorney and his lover—was highly desired. Even though Tanya was one of my closest friends, I knew better than to let my guard down. Only humans in the closest circles of the House knew he wasn’t human.

“He must be hot in bed.”

Laughter burst from my lips at the unexpected comment. “Unforgettable.” I couldn’t tell her *how* unforgettable, though. Vampires had incredible stamina, and even a dud gained some amazing skills after a hundred years of experience. Alejandro was on the other side of the planet from duds-ville.

“Plans for anything further?” Tanya had something up her sleeve.

“What? Like marriage?” I snorted in surprise and rolled my eyes. “Not on my radar. Nor his. Don’t even go there,” I cautioned. I was saved from elaborating by Patrick’s abrupt appearance with our drinks. He left as unobtrusively as he’d arrived, a master at work. Our booth was plush and semi-secluded near the rear of the restaurant, situated for privacy. Most of the other tables were about being seen. The Harmony was a status symbol with an evening wait-list that was weeks long.

“What’s with the bottle?” I gestured to her obvious intention to get shit-faced this evening.

“Ari, have you ever felt like you were compromising too much of yourself, your morals, for this job?”

I swallowed, my throat tight, as I struggled with how to answer her unexpected question. “I think any high-profile attorney worth anything feels like that occasionally. Why?”

Tanya downed a healthy swallow of her wine. “I’m thinking of leaving the company.” She swirled the drink in her glass, tilting the stem one way and then the other. The golden liquid shifted with her movements.

Her wide blue eyes jerked to mine. Fear danced in their depths. “Don’t tell anybody.”

“Of course not.” I gently laid my hand over hers. The warmth that seeped through my skin was almost foreign; I’d gotten too used to Alejandro’s cooler temperature. “It’s not like I’m your boss or anything.”

“Yeah, I’m just a lowly minion.” Fake dejection colored her voice.

I laughed and sipped the smooth vintage, its fruit overtones bursting on my tongue. “What brought this on?”

“Nothing in particular.” The lie blossomed on her skin, a faint translucent slash under her jacket sleeve. I couldn’t see the details since it was mostly hidden, but the faint glow was unmistakable. As it faded, so did my good mood.

I could never turn it off.

A lie was a lie. My powers never waned, never faded. If someone was lying in my vicinity, I saw it. I had never lived in a blissful state of ignorance. I was never spared the cruelty of truth.

My childhood wasn’t filled with wonder and fantasy, only harsh reality and disappointment. Because everyone lied.

Everyone.

“I just think it might be time to make a change,” my friend continued, thankfully unaware of the turn my thoughts had taken. “I’ve been with Alejandro for a couple years now, straight out of law school like you.” She shrugged but didn’t point out the fact that I had rapidly risen through the hierarchy while she languished in a stagnant pool. “I didn’t intend to stay in corporate law. I wanted to work with nonprofits and charities.”

“What’s stopping you?” I knew why.

“The money.” She snorted, quirking her lips. “I’m used to living at a certain income level.” She gestured around us. “One that few nonprofits could afford. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t feel it if you left Alejandro? Not that I’m implying you couldn’t get another high-powered, well-paid position elsewhere. But really, girl, the watch he gave you on your anniversary must have cost about five grand, right?”

I shrugged, not wanting to point out it was actually closer to seven. That would only make her point more obvious.

I did love the money. I loved being in the position I was in, not only as Alejandro’s lover, but my job—ennui and all. I earned a six-figure salary, but my expenses were virtually nil since my condo, utilities, car, food, drinks, and clothes were all covered. In fact, practically all my income went into savings. If I bothered to check, I was sure my bank balance was comfortably resting past a million. But I didn’t check, did I?

I didn’t want to.

“What are you going to do, Tanya?” Uncomfortable with the shift in the conversation, I turned the focus back where it belonged. I didn’t want to delve any deeper into my own life.

“I don’t know. Things just aren’t right here. Know what I mean?”

I took another drink of my expensive wine. This conversation was unraveling. I racked my brain to find another, safer topic.

“I don’t mean anything specific,” she backtracked. Another lie I had to ignore glowed under her sleeve. Her cheeks flamed. “I just mean ... I don’t know what I mean.” Her head *thumped* as it hit the tabletop. “Now you see why I’m making friends with the bottle this evening.”

“At least this isn’t over a guy.”

“Don’t even get me started on men.” Her head shot off the table. “I’m fasting.” She poured herself another glass, this one a breath away from overflowing.

Back into safer territory, Tanya poured out her man-woes along with the rest of the bottle. Once it was empty, Patrick and I helped her to a waiting cab.

I'd only had four glasses but I swayed in my four-inch heels. I walked carefully to the elevator, thankful for the cool metal walls that held me upright.

My phone vibrated in my purse.

"Arabella, I'd like to see you this evening," Alejandro's cultured voice held a toe-curling remnant of his South American roots.

"I'm heading up in the elevator as we speak." I pressed the number for his floor, passing my own, which was immediately below his. Alejandro's penthouse spanned the top two floors, the first housed offices, the second his residence. I was one of the privileged few allowed on both.

The elevator doors swooshed open once my thumbprint was recognized by the system. Vampires tended to go a little overboard on security, but Alejandro was the head of a preternatural crime family that ran over a third of Florida. Security was something that couldn't be taken lightly.

"My dear, it's nice to see you." Alejandro didn't merely sit on the couch, he draped. He was displayed. The vampire was a work of art. One arm stretched along the back of the couch, the muscles evident through his soft shirt. My finger itched to follow the lines. His was a calculated beauty carved to maximum effect.

Power and strength radiated from him. It made me feel protected, cherished. At just over six feet, he was taller than most of the older vampires, a feature that he used to his advantage.

His sun-kissed skin and black hair hinted at his Hispanic heritage, complemented by his dark suit and the deep purple dress shirt. The jeweled tone brought out the brown in his piercing eyes, eyes that stripped me bare and peered into my soul.

I was nothing more than an instrument for him to play.

"I apologize," I breathed, caught up in my perusal. I cleared my throat and forced my focus to our conversation. "I was talking to Tanya a little longer than planned."

"Patrick mentioned that you'd had to assist her into a cab. Again." His lips pulled down, eyes speaking the censure he didn't voice. I wasn't surprised at his disapproval or the fact that Patrick reported my whereabouts to him. Everyone did. My every movement was scrutinized.

"You could have called if you'd wanted me here sooner." I pouted like I knew he wanted.

"I didn't want to make you feel rushed. It's nice to spend time with friends."

"And lots of wine."

His deep chuckle rolled over me. My skin broke into goosebumps as if he'd touched me.

"And lots of wine," he echoed, patting the space on the couch next to him. I curled into his body, resting my head under his chin. I breathed in the spiciness of his cologne. The scent warmed me more than his lukewarm body. He pulled me closer, wrapping his arm around me as I sank into his embrace, two pieces of a puzzle clicking into their place. "How was your day?"

The banality of his question struck me as absurd, but I stifled my laugh.

"I despise dealing with those bureaucratic assholes. They think they are superior because they have a penis. No offense."

He laughed again, the movement jiggled my head where it rested against his chest. It was a rare sound outside our private moments together.

“You are superior to them. It is not your sex that makes you such, it is your inherent abilities.” He picked up a wine glass from the side table. It appeared to be nothing more than a glass of Merlot, but I knew otherwise.

The fine crystal held the one thing I couldn’t give him: blood. I was too useful to him as I was.

“Don’t you find it enjoyable, thrilling even, to turn the tables? To play them at their own game?”

“Yes, of course. I love wiping that condescending grin off their faces.” My sigh came from deep within. Being a male, he just didn’t get it. “It isn’t that. I guess it’s just getting old. I’d love it if people took me seriously from the start sometimes. Just because I’m young, good looking, and female doesn’t mean I’m stupid or a pushover.” My voice had risen, colored with impotence born of years of frustration.

“But that is a power you can *use*. Use their preconceived perceptions to your advantage. It is much better to be underestimated, my dear. You can wipe the floor with people much easier if they are not expecting you to win.”

Stretching my legs onto the ottoman, I toed off my heels. “I know you’re right.” I flexed my toes, biting back a moan. I loved my Louboutins, but after wearing them all day I was happy to shed them. “I still hate it, though. I’m glad *you* don’t underestimate me.”

His cool lips brushed my forehead in a gentle caress. Moments like these—when we were just a man and a woman, just *us*—made me forget that he wasn’t human. I could wear blinders to the reality that he was a ruthless monster. One that was more than capable of killing and who had slaughtered countless lives in his years walking the earth. Sometimes I preferred to push it aside, to pretend he was everything that he appeared to be. I gave into the fantasy.

“Enough about me.” I turned the conversation. “How was *your* day?”

“If you think you’re tired of dealing with the same *bullshit*,” he stumbled over the unaccustomed word, “every day, try being as old as I am.” He shifted me so that my feet lay in his lap. I couldn’t hold back the moan as he rubbed along the arches, kneading out the kinks. “But it’s better now that you are here.”

His simple words wrapped around me, cocooning me in warmth. Our relationship was unusual but we fit—in an odd kind of way.

He continued to divulge details of his day, a constant parade of bullshit and backstabbing. I struggled to stay focused, despite his hands causing me to melt onto the couch. His was such a long, stressful existence. I couldn’t imagine the endless tiresome days that stretched out before him. Being immortal wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

“Alejandro, do you really need more money?” I rose on my elbows from where I’d sank onto the couch. “Why not say *fuck it* and have some fun? Leave running the companies to managers and people who do that sort of thing.”

“It isn’t that simple.” He turned to face me. I almost groaned at the loss of his powerful fingers. “It isn’t about money. As you like to point out, I have more money than God. I could

never spend it all in ten human lifetimes. I don't need any more. It's about staying in power, Arabella. I run South and Central Florida. I am responsible for millions of lives, both human and otherwise. If I just said *fuck it* and turned it over to someone else, I wouldn't be able to return. My position, my power, would be stolen by a rival in a heartbeat." He chuckled at his turn of phrase.

"Not only that, but with the loss of power, of territory, my ability to defend my Family would decrease." His voice dropped. I leaned forward to catch each word. "I would no longer be able to protect you. Some creature would snap you up." His thumb traced my bottom lip. My blood heated. "Whether anyone would recognize your power or not, you run the risk of being killed just for your proximity to me." He rested his hands on my ankles. "That is why I keep such close tabs on you, my dear. The rules and demands I place upon you are not for show or simply because I can. They're for your safety."

"Vampire politics."

"Not just vampire, my dear, but preternatural politics. You should try dealing with a room full of shifters."

"No, thank you." I wrinkled my nose.

"I hold a tough position, one I don't take lightly. I don't want more territory, nor do I envy those above me. The Old Ones in Europe hold entire countries. Power and change shift much slower there. While I've held South Central Florida for a century, it is a mere blink in time to them."

There were creatures in this world that would consider him young? A chill raced along my spine. I really didn't want to know that.

"Loyalty is paramount. I have to work hard to keep all of us safe. That is why I dread situations like what your friend Daniel has put me in."

Alarmed, I shot up. "Daniel?"

"He allowed himself to be marked by someone outside the House."

"Is that all?" I sank back into his side.

Alejandro's frown deepened. "That is a serious offense. That brings his allegiance into question. It is only because he's demonstrated unwavering loyalty all these years that he is being given a second chance."

"Wait, what?" My heart pounded as the blood rushed through my veins.

"Breaking allegiance is punishable by death, Arabella. He might have received permission if he would have asked but he didn't. When a non-House preternatural marks one of mine, it brings my ability as leader into question. I cannot have that." His irises darkened from topaz to a burnt umber. "He knew the rules and yet, he broke them."

Alejandro lifted my chin with his finger and stared into my eyes. My breath rushed out, worry quickening my pulse. Unable to miss my heightened anxiety, he continued. "I know he is a close friend of yours. I am giving him a chance to explain." He trailed the soft pad of his finger along my jaw. "We have a meeting tomorrow. He will bring along the creature that marked him. Hopefully, we can correct this mistake and determine where his true fidelity lay."

Daniel was as close as a brother. I didn't want to catch him in a lie. My shoulders sagged with the weight of that responsibility.

What had he gotten himself into?

"Alejandro, thank you for allowing him this chance. I'm sure it was all just a misunderstanding. Everything will be sorted out tomorrow."

But I felt the shift. A change was in the air.

I had a strong feeling that our lives would never be the same afterward.