

# CHAPTER 1

**T**HE FIRST MISTAKE I MADE was leaving my friend, Jane Gardner, by herself at the table where we were having lunch together.

And the second was like it: Sensing a magical presence in the restaurant, but not bothering to investigate it or even just flat out grabbing Jane's hand and pulling her out of there by force. I could have made up an excuse if Jane asked questions, because I had gotten pretty good at making up excuses for having to leave places since I became a half-vampire about three months ago.

But even though Dad had taught me how to be aware of the presence of a sorcerer in my general vicinity, I had been in such a hurry to use the bathroom that I didn't pay as much attention to it as I should have. Magical auras felt kind of like the wind, ranging in strength from light, gentle breezes to raging tornadoes depending on the sorcerer in question. Most sorcerers didn't have an aura strong enough to sense, or if they did, it was weak. It helped that most sorcerers knew how to conceal their auras, because it was a basic skill that most sorcerers learned at a young age even before they started on their journey on the Six Steps.

But because I'd grown up totally ignorant about my sorcerer heritage, I learned it much later than most. As a result, my own aura-sensing abilities were fairly underdeveloped for a woman my age. I still had to put a lot of conscious thought into not merely locating the owner of the aura, but also sensing it at all. Dad told me that aura-sensing was an important skill for me to develop and that I should practice it always, which was easy to do because normal humans like my friend Jane didn't know when I was aura-sensing and when I wasn't. According to Dad, I would eventually become so good at it that the skill would become second nature and would eventually be on at all times even when I was asleep or unconscious.

That seemed like so far away, though, and because of my inexperience in aura-sensing, I wasn't always as aware of my surroundings as I could be. Especially whenever I was doing anything fun or relaxing, like going to lunch with my best friend for the first time in forever.

I hadn't meant to leave Jane by herself. I'd just needed to use the bathroom and told her I would be back in a minute. Jane had been in the middle of eating her avocado salad, so she hadn't been able to speak, but she nodded to show that she understood, so I crossed the crowded restaurant full of families and people eating lunch and went into the girl's room, where I did my business quickly. I didn't even spend much time looking into the mirror. While I still had a reflection (unlike full-blooded vampires), I hated looking at myself in the mirror and so generally tried not to do it.

Now I stood at the table where Jane and I had been eating together, doing my best not to panic. Her avocado salad sat half-eaten at her seat, while my taco plate was empty due to the fact that I'd finished eating first. Our drinks also stood untouched, so I still scanned the restaurant itself for any sign of Jane.

The restaurant in question—a Mexican food restaurant known as Ricardo's Place, which was one of my favorite places to eat—was packed, which made sense, because today was Sunday and church had

just ended for the day. The Mexicans from the nearby Catholic church all sat around eating and talking loudly in Spanish, while the people from my church—Greensboro First Baptist Church—were behaving much the same way, except their conversation was in English rather than Spanish. Combined with the delicious scent of homemade Mexican food and it created a very unique atmosphere, one I always loved visiting whenever I got the chance.

But I wasn't paying much attention to the atmosphere at the moment, because I was busily searching the crowded restaurant for Jane. I didn't see her among the Baptists, nor was she among the Catholics, either. I knew she wasn't in the bathroom, because I had just been in there less than a minute ago and hadn't seen her. I suppose it was possible that she might have entered just after I left, but I would have seen her if she had. And she definitely hadn't gone back to the front counter to order more food, nor was she trying to catch the attention of that handsome Mexican waiter who had served us our food today.

I pulled out my phone and was just about to call Jane on it when I noticed her phone was still sitting next to her avocado salad. Uh oh. Jane never went *anywhere* without her phone, but how could she have just disappeared into thin air like that? And in the middle of all of these people?

"Miss?" said a Mexican accented voice behind me. "May I help you with something?"

I whirled around to see one of the restaurant's waiters standing behind me. He was the same handsome one Jane had been eying ever since we entered the restaurant, who, although short, was pretty ripped and had great hair. I half-wondered what his blood tasted like before telling myself not to get distracted by that.

"Oh, yes," I said, nodding. I gestured at the table. "Do you know where my friend is? I was just in the bathroom, but when I got out, she was gone."

"You mean the blonde one who looked at me strangely?" said the waiter. He frowned, as if thinking about my question. "Ah, yes. I remember. I saw a man walk up to your table, talk to her briefly, and then take her hand and lead her out of the restaurant. I think he was her boyfriend."

My heart froze. Jane didn't *have* a boyfriend, though not for lack of trying. "What did this guy look like?"

The waiter frowned even deeper, as if I had just asked him a hard question. "About medium-sized, black, and wearing a really cool silver necklace around his neck with a pentagram on it. He also wore some weird coat that looked kind of like robes, though I was too busy taking someone else's order to pay too much attention to him."

That sounded like a sorcerer, but that made no sense to me. What would a sorcerer want with Jane? "Where did they go?"

The waiter gestured toward the exit. "Just out the exit. They didn't make a fuss about it or anything."

"Did they get into a car?" I said, trying not to show any fear or panic.

"Again, I don't know," said the waiter. "I was not paying very much attention, but it's possible, I suppose."

I hated how casually this waiter was taking what might have been a kidnapping in progress, but aloud I said, "Thanks. I think, uh, you're right about it being her boyfriend. Must have come to pick her up early. I'd better leave, because we're going to see a movie together and I don't want to be late."

"I understand, miss, but could you pay your bill first?" said the waiter, holding up a bill toward me. "That was what I was coming to show you, since it looked like you and your friend were done eating."

Damn it. Even spending just a few seconds paying this bill might make it impossible for me to find Jane, but I also knew that there was no way this waiter would let me leave if I didn't pay, so I quickly dug some cash out of my purse and shoved it into his hand. "Take this. And keep the change. Think of it as a tip."

Before the waiter could stop me, I walked straight out of the restaurant, weaving my way in and out of the families that were busily enjoying Mexican food. As soon as I stepped out of Ricardo's Place and closed the door behind me, the sounds in the restaurant died down, allowing me to focus on the parking lot.

Looking around the restaurant's parking lot, I noticed that my car—a small blue sedan that I had bought with money saved up over the summer during my senior year in high school—was still here, thank God, but I didn't see any other cars which might belong to the sorcerer. Of course, the waiter had said that he didn't see them leave in a car, which made sense, because as far as I knew sorcerers didn't drive cars. There was a very good chance that the sorcerer in question had teleported away, though given how teleportation always created a bright blue light and the waiter hadn't seen anything like that, I suspected that the sorcerer—and, by extension, Jane—were still somewhere in the area.

I focused on my aura-sensing, doing my best to locate the sorcerer's aura. I picked it up fairly quickly. It came from behind Ricardo's Place, away from the parking lot, where you couldn't see anyone unless you actually walked around back. A part of me feared that the sorcerer might be abusing Jane, but I pushed that thought out of my mind and made my way around the side of the building. As I walked, I prepared a fireball in my hand, ready to throw it in case the sorcerer tried to attack me.

Walking around the side of the building, I saw two people. One was a tall black man in sorcerer robes, with a pentagram necklace hanging off his neck, while the other was Jane, who stood next to him. The sorcerer was pouring blue teleportation dust out of a bag, forming a wide circle around him and Jane. As for Jane, she had a fairly glassy-eyed look, as if she was unconscious, though she didn't seem to be in danger of falling over.

"Hey!" I shouted, stepping out from around the corner and pointing a finger at the sorcerer. "Get away from my friend, you creep!"

I threw a fireball at the sorcerer, but the sorcerer waved his hand and formed a protective barrier around himself. The fireball struck the barrier dead on, but dissipated upon contact, leaving the sorcerer unharmed.

I readied another fireball, but before I could throw it, the sorcerer pulled Jane closer to him. His hands were huge, with fingers long enough to wrap completely around Jane's upper arm.

Despite being grabbed roughly, Jane just giggled and said, "Blake, what are you doing? Are we at your place yet?"

Uh oh. It sounded like Jane was enchanted by the sorcerer. Dad had told me about enchantments and how they could be used to alter a person's mind, often without them even knowing, but this was the first time I'd seen an enchantment in action in the field.

"Not yet, my dear," said the sorcerer, his voice husky and deep, looking at me with annoyance. "I have one last thing to take care of before we leave. But don't worry, it won't take long."

Jane giggled again before looking at me, her eyes as glassy as ever. "Hey, that's my friend, Tara. Can she come with us, too?"

"No," said the sorcerer, apparently named Blake. His grip on Jane tightened noticeably. "It is just going to be you and me, and soon, the Fire as well."

“Okay,” said Jane, who sounded genuinely disappointed at Blake’s response. She looked at me again and smiled in a very airy fairy way. “Don’t worry about me, Tara. Blake is the love of my life and we’re going to get married and have ten children together. We’ll name two of them after you, since you’re my best friend.”

Blake must have had Jane under some *heavy* enchantments to have her talk about having ten children, given how the Jane I knew wasn’t very fond of children in general. “That’s nice, Jane, but I think you should dump him. He’s really not your type.”

“Maybe you should let her decide who her ‘type’ is,” said Blake. He smiled. “Though I imagine her taste in men must be better than yours, given how you are an abomination who shouldn’t exist on this Earth.”

“Abomination?” Jane repeated in a dazed manner. “Blake, that’s not very nice. I mean, I’m not a fan of Tara’s hairstyle, and I think she applies too much eyeliner, but—”

“Silence, Jane,” said Blake in a harsh voice. “Go to sleep. When you next awaken, we’ll be in our love paradise.”

Suddenly, Jane’s head fell forward onto her chest and she would have fallen onto the ground if Blake hadn’t been holding her. Blake then threw Jane over his shoulder like she weighed nothing (which was pretty close to the truth, given how small she was) and then looked at me and smiled again. “It was nice meeting you, Tara Lee, daughter of Richard Lee. Next time we meet, perhaps I will find out if you really are as good as your lineage suggests.”

Before I could respond to that, Blake snapped his fingers and the blue teleportation dust exploded around him, creating a bright flash of light. Even with my sunglasses on, the blue light nearly blinded me and it hurt my skin, forcing me to look away to avoid being blinded.

As soon as the light faded, I looked back and saw that Blake and Jane were gone. The only hint that they had even been here was the circle of blue dust where they had been standing, but that, too, disappeared in the wind before my startled eyes.

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