

CHAPTER ONE

FOR the fourth time in ten minutes my cell phone rang as I added the final touches to my black eyeliner. It didn't take being psychic to know Finnius Macleod was on the other end this time just as he'd been the previous three times. Normally he wasn't as obsessive, but with me going to the opening of Sebastian Arroyo's play tonight, he would call me until I answered. Knowing this I decided not to answer until I was ready to walk out the door; so once again the phone stopped on the fifth, depriving the voicemail from claiming the call.

For any other man this would have been warning signs that something was slightly, if not majorly, off. But Finn's not like most guys, he's a werewolf; and werewolves tend to handle stressful situations differently than human males. If an alpha wolf, Finn, thinks his mate, me, though in werewolf cultures we weren't officially mated, is being belligerently disobedient, a stressful situation has just been created. The only thing that had him calling instead of driving to my house was being on duty as a helicopter rescue pilot for the San Francisco, Monterey Bay area.

It wasn't that I was going to a play without him; it was that I was attending a play written and directed by Sebastian. One thing I've learned; never let a vampire know what gets under you skin.

Glamorization completed, I stood in front of the antique full-length mirror to view the final product. I hadn't bought it with the bedroom set but the dark oak wood matched the rest of the furniture in my bedroom as if they'd all be purchased together. My sophisticated look of a white

2 Fannie Price

button-up dress blouse, and black wide-leg dress slacks, was complicated by a dash of rebellious youth in the form a strapless black satin corset worn over the shirt, and a pair of satin covered Mary Jane heels.

The top few buttons of the shirt were left undone allowing the Chakra pendant I wore on a sliver chain to direct the eye to the glimpse of cleavage the corset afforded. Straight black hair was down and kept from coming over my shoulders by the sides being pinned back with rhinestone bobby pins. My makeup, somewhere between tasteful and daring, pulled everything together. The weatherman said there would be a chill in the spring air, so I slipped my leather jacket on, grabbed my purse, both sets of keys and headed out the front door to the black Mazda RX8 parked in front of my house.

The fifth call came as I started up the car and was accompanied by a curse from my lips when I realized I'd left my Bluetooth in my everyday purse. Driving while talking on a cell phone is cumbersome enough; driving a stick shift adds another level of difficulty. I could have just ignored it, but he'd already be pissed. I didn't feel like pressing my luck.

"Slow night?" I questioned after I engaged the talk button.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to reach you for the past hour."

Born and bred on the sunny beaches of Miami, Florida, Finn had no discernable accent, at least nothing I could detect with the exception of when he was truly upset. On those occasions I could almost hear a southern twang to his words. Sexy as hell but makes it hard to focus on arguing with him. Dangerous too since sometimes I piss him off just to hear that southern twang.

"Hello Finn, I'm fine, thank you for asking. Work was a bit long cataloging all the different new items that have come in for the ancient Egypt exhibit, but the reward of having everything on display will be well worth it."

“You’re not nearly as funny as you think you are.” Yep there was that twang to his voice.

“That’s all a matter of opinion, and why are you burning up my phone line anyway?

Shouldn’t you be saving lives or something?”

“Is that why you didn’t answer the first couple times I called?”

“Couple?” I scoffed and flicked on my turn signal as I changed lanes and negotiated my car onto the expressway.

“I wanted to check and make sure you were alright.”

“In the event something happened on the way home from work?”

“Of course.”

“Then why’d you wait two hours after I’ve been home from work to call and make sure I made it home from work?” There was a pause while he tried to come up with something. “The jig is up, Finn. We both know the only reason you called is because I’m going to Sebastian’s play tonight.”

There was another longer pause before he spoke. “You know he picked tonight so I wouldn’t be able to go.”

“Finn,” I stopped myself before chuckling. “Even if Sebastian were that devious, the opening night of the play was set eight weeks ago. That’s well before even you knew you’d be working.”

He huffed silently on the other end.

“Besides you hate plays, only reason you’d go if you were off is to spite Sebastian.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

I smirked, but only because I knew he couldn't see it. Although I did it more often than I care to admit, antagonizing a werewolf isn't smart. "What are you really worried about? That he has some hotel room ready to whisk me away to?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," it was my turn to sigh. "I know you insist he doesn't have feelings for you that extend beyond a deep and meaningful friendship, but I know better. I've seen the way he looks at you, Danika."

"The way he looks at me? And how exactly is it that he looks at me?"

"Like any man looks at a beautiful woman," Finn replied sharply.

The way he bit back his words, I could tell there was more he wanted to say but for reasons known only to him held back. For my part I decided against pushing him. Finn was even more stubborn than I was. Asking was pretty much pointless, if he wanted to he'd tell me, otherwise I'd never know.

"Let's say for argument sake you're right and he fancies me. What exactly has he been waiting for all these years? I mean don't you think he would have spilled the beans by now?"

"He's waiting for the right time."

That got me to laugh out loud. "Right, because in the seven years that I've known him it hasn't been the right time."

"He's the walking dead," he whispered into the receiver, "He's got all the time in the world."

"But I don't. I'm a sorcerer not a warlock; I don't know how to prolong my life any more than the next person."

"Well, maybe he's waiting for the right time to invite you onto his team."

"Sebastian isn't going to turn me."

"Know this for a fact do you?"

“I’d be willing to stake my life on it.”

“I hope it never comes to that.”

Another soft sigh left my lips. “Finn, stop being so dramatic. I’ll concede Sebastian is devious by the sheer nature of what he is, but he’s not like that with me. He doesn’t have some secret sinister plot to turn me into a vampire, and you know well and good the only reason you don’t like him is because he’s a vampire.”

“No, I don’t like him because I don’t trust him, and I don’t trust his Murder. You don’t know vampires like I do.”

“And you don’t know Sebastian like I do.”

“So you keep telling me.”

“And yet you continue not to listen.”

“Maybe I’d believe it a little more if you didn’t try to convince me all the time.”

“Or maybe,” I paused, “You know what, Finn; I’ve been friends with Sebastian for a long time, longer than I’ve known you.”

“So?”

“So,” I paused. “You might know vampire nature, but I know Sebastian’s nature. He flirts with me to get a rise out of you, which he accomplishes... every single time. If you didn’t let him he’d probably stop trying, but so long as he can continue to successfully bait you, he’s never going to stop pushing your buttons.”

“So you admit he’s an asshole?”

“To you, yeah... but you give as good as you get so it evens itself out in the end,” I made sure he could hear the smile in my voice. He growled soft and low in the back of his throat like I

knew he would. “He knew I was a witch and he still trusted me enough to tell me he was a vampire, in my book that counts for something.”

“I trusted you enough to tell you I was a werewolf.”

“Technically you didn’t tell me, you just chose not to deny it when I confronted you. And last time I checked witches can’t affect werewolves like they can vampires.”

Finn must have put his hand over the mouthpiece, because I heard some muffled voice in the background before his voice came back over the phone. “I’ve got to go; I’ll call you when I get off duty.”

“Fine,” I replied and snapped the phone shut.

It hadn’t been a question, but a statement; one he knew would piss me off. He knew if I was angry I wouldn’t enjoy the play and would leave immediately after instead of staying for the wine and cheese they always served in the after party of opening night. It looked like he wasn’t the only one that continued to respond to being baited.

Pulling into the parking garage for the playhouse, I pushed the button to get my ticket and continued up the circular ramp seven levels until I found a spot to slip my car into. Once parked, I turned everything off, closed my eyes and breathed. Several deep calming breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. Try as he might I was not about to let Finn ruin my night.

There are different names for different types of witches. For example, though mainstream has labeled the male term of a witch, a warlock, it is really one that has learned the secrets of time. They’re generally able to move through time; the stronger ones can move back or forward by the decade, though they often refrain to keep from creating cataclysmic paradoxes. They’re also considered immortals.

It's not that they can't die. A gunshot to the head will kill them just as sure as it would anyone else, and their body still suffer the ravages of any disease, but they're so versed in the art of healing the only true way to kill them is to sever the head from the body and burn both, otherwise, it has been documented that another warlock can restore their life.

There aren't that many warlocks; they only share their secrets with their apprentices and becoming a warlock's apprentice is a herculean feat. A witch has to prove they are worthy of immortality, and worthy of immortality means different things to different warlocks. They can arrest the aging process for as long as they can find the ingredients for the potion being employed. However, they can only reverse the aging process back five years. No one outside of warlocks knows why and they damn sure aren't telling.

Wizard isn't the term for a male witch either, but for a witch apt in controlling and manipulating the natural elements. For most, younger wizards, it was the latter. They could take a light drizzle and milk a monsoon from the clouds, or pull down hurricane winds from a gentle breeze. The master wizards' control of the elements was truly scary.

They can create a storm on the sunniest days, and some can even control the very climate and temperature around them for prolonged periods of time. A good number of Native Americans are born into this form of witchcraft; it's where the rain-dancers come from. They can make just about anything grow in any terrain or condition. It's the wizards us witches go to when we need to find those rare herbs some potions demanded, always of course with a price. It's rumored in Africa there is a wizard so powerful she possesses the ability to raze the planet to the ground.

Sorcerers, meaning both male and female, are versed in mental prowess. Telekinesis, telepathy, thought transference, even mind controlling and imprinting thoughts if the witch is powerful enough. What people believe to be psychic powers is nothing more than a witch with a

8 Fannie Price

disposition to being a sorcerer who is unaware the ability resides in them. It's not all it's cracked up to be at times, the mind reading for example is a constant, it's not something that can be turned off, the best a sorcerer can hope for is to learn to filter it out and deaden the voices until it's like white noise in the background. It's not something that's easy to live with. A good number of schizophrenics are nothing more than sorcerers that don't realize the voices in their head are triggered by external forces. It's no wonder a good many sorcerers choose to become hermits.

No one knows why but preternatural creatures seem to be exempt, I can still read their minds, but it becomes an active concentration instead of the thoughts just flowing to me, it also makes it harder, but not impossible to control their minds and imprint thoughts.

Then there are the necromancers. Many people, even some naïve witches, believe necromancers are the harbingers of death simply because they are versed in the art of dealing with spirits, ghosts, zombies and all manner of dead things. Most can only communicate with spirits and ghosts, but there are those that have amassed enough power to control the dead. Like Warlocks they have the ability to stave the hands of aging and their own death but the price is high.

Due to the stigma that's associated with their practice some necromancers remain silent about what they are. It's believed by some witches that vampires are the byproduct of necromantic magic worked on the dead or dying centuries ago. Vampires deny this of course.

Necromancers and sorcerers bare a distinction the other two orders don't possess; one has to be born with the ability. It's unclear why; some elders say it's because the mark of sorcery and necromancy has to be imprinted on the soul at birth.

With my mind clear and my breathing and heart rate back to normal I undid my seatbelt and stepped from my car. The garage wasn't attached to the theater, but it was only a block away.

Thirty minutes to show time and the lobby was packed when I pulled the doors open. If I looked hard enough I was sure I'd be able to spot some famous faces in the crowd. Sebastian's plays were almost legendary. I stopped at will call where Sebastian had placed a complimentary ticket for me, and produced the necessary ID to acquire it.

They were box seats, but then he always got me box seats to his plays. Sometimes he'd join me, but most of the time he was either backstage with his actors before they went on, in the booth with the stage manager, or playing nice with some pretty young woman that had no idea she was in for more than a night of hot sex.

Though I knew first hand how devastatingly charming and incredibly sexy Sebastian could be; it still amazed me, in this age of pseudo enlightenment and HIV, the number of women that were willing to sleep with a virtual stranger. As a reanimated corpse, Sebastian couldn't contract, nor could he be a carrier for anything beyond anemia. The women he slept with, however, were no more aware of his vampiric condition than they were of his clinically clean status. I've never asked how much of the sex he got was protected or not, some questions are best left unasked and unanswered.

Ordering a mojito, I made my way to my box seating, set everything down and fished through my purse until I found one of the bags of peanuts that had gravitated towards the bottom. The playhouse offered snacks in the form of caviar on water crackers, or pâté, or hummus, or other such treats that were meant to stimulate and entice the palate. I'd always found caviar to be way too salty, and even if it hadn't, it would have been impossible to overlook eating raw fish eggs.

I read over the bios of the actors in the program, then the synopsis of the play itself. Sebastian Arroyo had managed to become a very famous playwright and director, an achievement that never ceased to amaze me. As a vampire I would have thought it would be his nature to shun

the limelight. Eventually people are going to realize he's not aging; however, vampires don't get to be as old as Sebastian if they don't know what they're doing. He's never told me his age, and I've always thought it impolite to ask, but judging from some of the stories he's told me over the years I've estimated him to at least be a hundred and fifty though honestly I was banking much older.

I knew he's originally from Spain but re-birtheed in America during a war. I knew guns had been invented, but that still left a lot of historical possibilities. America might still be a child compared to other countries but it's had more than it's share of warring.

The house lights flashed three times, a polite way of signaling all those still milling about in the halls, restrooms, and foyers they had five minutes to return to their seats before show time. Used to be the ushers wouldn't let people in after the play started. It was believed it disrupted the actors. Instead those people would be escorted to a room with a glass patrician towards the back allowing them to see the play. I guess enough people complained so the ushers now escorted latecomers to their seats. Apparently being in the right seat to watch the play was more important than potentially disrupting the actors.

With the price for theater tickets I could understand the reasoning behind it; however, with the price of theater tickets it looked like people would want to be on time.

The play was a two hour-long masterpiece divided into three acts with two intermissions. The actors took their bows to standing ovations before parting on either side to make room for the infamous Sebastian Arroyo. He took several bows, accepted the flowers given to him by the leading lady, blew several kisses, and tossed eleven of the dozen red roses to women in the audience, before taking a final bow and heading off stage.

I continued to occupy my little box as the others filed out, some going to their cars, or the taxis and limos outside, while others filtered down to the after party held in the theater. According

to my watch it was already ten thirty. I figured I'd stay long enough to tell Sebastian how brilliant I thought his play was before heading home. My desire to call it a relatively early night was based solely on the knowledge I'd have to get up comparatively early in the morning for work.

When the theater was almost completely empty I finally made my way from the boxed seating towards the after party room. Located on the same level I quite possibly could have beat the crowd and been one of the first ones in, but that just would have meant a longer period of time spent avoiding pointless conversation. The room was fairly packed when I entered. Young men and women in modern tuxedos were pimping hor'dourves and champagne on silver trays.

I took a glass so my hands wouldn't be empty and continued to circle the room to avoid small talk while waiting for the cast. It wasn't that I felt out of place among the elbows being rubbing in the room; as an archeologist in the Museum of Natural History section of the California Academy of Science I had sufficient experience mingling with the influential people of San Francisco. But, it wasn't something I really enjoyed when my job dictated the need, and changing the venue hadn't enhanced my opinion.

“Quite the little gathering, isn't it?”

I was glancing out the window to the street traffic below, but shifted my attention to my right where the owner of the intruding voice stood. She was beautiful in the traditional since of the word; though her alabaster skin was made even paler by the platinum blonde tresses that curled around her face.

The blinding red lipstick would have gone better with her hair if her complexion were darker, or better with her complexion if she were a brunette. Instead it just shocked the senses and drew attention to her thin lips. It did, however, match her gown, a long red chiffon and satin number that reminded me of rose petals. The straps crossed each other in the back and front,

making me realize they were the only piece of material covering her breasts while it left her stomach mostly bare. Her heels added at least three inches to her stature, but still put the top of her head, barely at my chin. I was already tall for a woman and my heels only added to my extra height.

The dress was interesting and she had enough curves to her body to show it off but again I couldn't help but think with her complexion she should have gone for another color. Her icy blue eyes bore into me when I met her gaze head on; waiting for the answer to her question as if her very life depended on it. I almost felt like I should have been replying in code with *the sick dog only yelps at the new moon*, or something equally secret agency. I decided to keep it simple.

“Yes it is, but then it is a Sebastian Arroyo play so...”

I let my words trail off with a shrug, and turned my eyes back to the room; my free arm crossed over my stomach. Despite her contrary features for some reason I still felt like the ugly little sister next to her, never mind my chocolate complexion wouldn't allow me to be confused as any of her relatives. I had to mentally remind myself to stand straight as my shoulders started rounding forward.

“You know Sebastian Arroyo?” that seemed to impress her, but I wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

“Yes, we're old acquaintances,” I finally stated.

This woman was giving me the creeps and I wasn't quite sure why. Fortunately the actors and Sebastian entering gave me the diversion I needed to slip away as her attention was drawn to the opening doors. My new position put me closer to Sebastian, which played along with my plan to congratulate him and beat a path back to my car.

“Was it really that much of a bore?”

Trust Sebastian to catch me mid yawn with my hand covering my mouth.

“Some of us have to work for a living,” I replied smiling once my mouth returned to its normal shape.

“Wasn’t it you that said if you’re doing what you love, it’s not really work?”

“Don’t start.”

He grinned at that and opened his arms for an embrace I gladly accepted. His body was warm; I could feel the heat radiating from it through his suit. It was a trick some vampires did to make themselves appear more human, along with breathing, and blinking, and a heart beat, and remembering to fidgets slightly, and a few other things humans did without realizing they were doing them, but would miss the presence of on a conscious or more often subconscious level.

Sebastian wasn’t really what would be considered the poster boy for bloodsuckers. He claimed to be from Spain, but migrated to America when with his parents when he was young. His time in the states has sense robbed him of any trace of an accent he once had. His hair was somewhere between brown and bronze, the kind of hair that probably would have been predisposed to lightening in the sun if it weren’t for his severe sun allergy. His eyes were a crisp blue, and there was a dimple deep enough to be a cleft in his chin. He was a pretty boy, a little too pretty for my tastes but the women fancied him. I’d never seen him naked, but his clothes always gave the illusion of a toned body. It wouldn’t have mattered; he could have been rail thin and still bench pressed a H3.

Upon my release from his hug, he traded my champagne glass for a single rose, the last of the dozen he received on the stage. I dutifully took the flower and brought it to my nose for a smell before accepting the offered arm.

“Finn couldn’t make it?” he questioned looking around casually. I didn’t bother answering, Sebastian knew as well as I if Finn were there he’d be Gorilla Glued to my side. “Tell me what you thought of the play.”

“I loved it,” I grinned, squeezing his arm. “But then you know I have a weakness for mysteries.”

“Yes, that did enter my mind as I wrote the play. Not that I wrote it for you of course,” he added with a grin.

“Of course not,” I chuckled softly. “How presumptuous that would be on my part.”

That made him smile but there was something in his eyes as he scanned the room.

It made me look around again even though I didn’t have the slightest idea what I was looking for.

“Everything alright?”

“Yes, and no,” he paused then looked to me with a slight frown. “Are you free tomorrow evening?”

I gave a dramatic sigh, “Sebastian you know I’m never free, though I’m sure someone with your resources will have no trouble meeting my going rate.” When that only barely got a smile from him I found myself getting worried. “Alright I’ll bite, what’s the what?”

“It’s a private matter, not something that should be discussed here.”

“Okay,” that wasn’t good. “I get off work at five; want me to meet you somewhere?”

He shook his head. “You’re home is fine, but let me ask you this... have there been any newcomers into your *community*?”

“I don’t know, possibly. It’s not like we really keep tabs on the who’s who. The elders meet quarterly and there’s the festival that happens in the fall but it’s not like we keep track of the comings and goings of each other. Why?”

He was thoughtfully quiet for so long had it been anyone else I would have assumed they either didn’t hear me or had fallen asleep standing up with their eyes open.

When he finally spoke he leaned into me, to the causal observer it would have looked very deceptive indeed. “Two have gone missing from the Murder; it is believed a necromancer is involved.”

My head snapped back meeting his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I’m not, but there are those among us that are already building the pyre.”

“Sebastian, there hasn’t been a necromancer in the area for decades, not since...” I paused censoring myself, and covering it with quiet pondering. “Not since at least the late seventies.”

That brought a soft smirk to his lips. “You know as well as I just because none have claimed the title doesn’t mean none are around.”

I remained silent, partially because I didn’t have a comeback readily on hand, and partially because I knew he was right. Witchcraft had its bases in alchemy for good reason, a great deal of what we did was potions for the body, for the mind, transmutations and the like, but there was more to being a witch than being able to cook up a love potion. With practice and the right spells from a Grimoire that each witch inherited and/or stole we could conjure things, some good, some evil, most indifferent.

I sighed softly, meeting Sebastian’s eyes again for a moment. It was never a good idea to hold a vampire’s gaze no matter how friendly they were; along with the sun allergy it was one of the things the books had gotten right.

“Give me as much information as you can tomorrow on the disappearance, and I’ll pass it along to the elders.”

“Thanks, I’d appreciate that,” that slight smile ghosted his lips then retreated as his eyes scanned the room again like he was looking for something.

“Would you stop doing that? You’re starting to freak me out.” Again I found myself looking around as well, and again I had no idea what I should have been looking for.

“Sorry, I just…” he paused, shaking his head a bit. “We’re supposed to be celebrating, why don’t I introduce you to the leading man? He is quite charming and almost as handsome as me.”

“Some other time, right now I have a date with a queen size sleigh bed.”

“Then let me walk you to your car.”

“I’m parked in the garage around the corner, I’ll be fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive,” I leaned in and planted a kiss on the corner of his lips. “I’ll see you tomorrow around six thirty?”

“I’ll be there with bells on,” he replied flashing that playboy smile that probably melted a few panties in the room.

“Good,” I retorted, “I’ve been saying for years you should start wearing bells.”

I tossed him a kiss from across the room before; I retrieved my leather and headed out.