

## Chapter 1

Night shifts were always the worst.

Mira's been working at Biscuits & Books since she was sixteen and every single night shift is practically empty.

The only reason it stays open is for the late-night studies and insomniacs who need books and coffee to get through the night.

But with spring break just starting, all her night shifts are empty.

She fidgets with the sleeve of her uniform. Her mothers usually pretty lax with the uniforms in general, especially with closing shifts, so the blue bottom down is the only thing not from Mira's own closet. She had swapped the black pants for some comfortable jeans, and the ugly black shoes for her usual boots. She didn't understand why anyone working at the cafe part even tried all that much, since half their clothes were covered by the aprons.

Speaking of, Mira tilts her head to the center of the store, where Kaylin is slumped across the counter. She lifts her head as they lock eyes, and Mira dropped the books she was shelving back onto the cart and made her way over.

"What?" Kaylin asked, brushing her apron absentmindedly.

"Make me coffee."

She sent Mira a deadpanned look. "Really?" She asked. "It's almost midnight."

Mira shrugged. "And? Make me coffee."

Kaylin stared at Mira a bit more, but finally turned with a sigh.

"So how's Steph?"

Mira groaned. "She is all over this comp-sci guy. His name's like, Kyle or something. Derek? Chad? It's a frat boy name."

"Comp-sci frat guy?"

"I know. It's crazy." Mira said. "But he is all she posts about now."

"Well, you guys did break up. Three months ago."

Mira groaned. "It's not like I want to date her again. It's just like, him? Really?"

"Again, you broke up with her."

"And that comp-sci guy isn't even cute!"

Kaylin gave him a look.

Mira sighed. "Okay, he's kind of cute."

"He's cute. I've seen the posts."

"Don't let Aaron hear you say that."

Kaylin smiled. "Aaron also thinks he's cute. He just likes me more."

"This is also a sixteen-year-old talking about a twenty-year-old."

"I thought you were supposed to be on my side."

She shrugged. "I like to label myself as a neutral party."

Mira rolled her eyes. “Why are you even here anyway? You have school tomorrow.”

“Canceled cuz of the weather. Mom asked if I could take the late shift with you.”

“I can handle myself.”

“You’re banned from ever using the espresso machine.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Here.” Kaylin set a steaming cup on the counter alongside a blueberry muffin.

Mira grabbed the cup eagerly, letting the warm, bitter taste slip down her throat. “You are the best sister ever.”

“I’m your only sister.”

Mira set the cup down. “You never know. Mom could’ve had another kid.”

Kaylin only scoffed. “She’s told the story a thousand times, and it’s the exact same, word for word. I’m the only kid she’s had.” Kaylin paused. “I mean, like,” She gestured to her stomach. “Biologically, you know?”

Mira sighed. “I know.”

“Dad could’ve had another kid,” Kaylin said sharply, eyes glinting with mischief.

Mira rolled her eyes. "I've heard the story too. Mom was the only other person he's been with other than whoever mine was."

"Well, he's not here to say any different." Kaylin shot back with a smile.

Mira shrugged. "Fair."

There was silence for a moment. Kaylin poured her own cup of coffee.

"Is Teresa home this week?"

Mira nodded. "She got here yesterday night. We're going out tomorrow, actually. She found this weird antique store she wants me to check out."

"Sounds fun. Trying to find some cursed jewelry?"

"Maybe. Why, wanna come?"

"Nah. Mom'll probably want me to help with shipping orders. But bring me back something haunted?"

"Obviously. How else am I gonna mess with you?"

"What?"

"By getting some ghost attached to you."

Kaylin gave an unimpressed look. "Who would ever want to haunt me?"

"I don't know. Someone crazy"

"If I get haunted I'll simply get them to kill you."

“You wouldn’t”

Kaylin shrugged. “Try me.”

Mira huffed, slumping against the counter. “I hate you.”

Kaylin stuck out her tongue. “No, you don’t.”

Mira crossed her arms, letting out a heavy sigh. “No, I don’t.”

There were several minutes of silence, both working on their own separate drinks, and Mira found her eyes turning to the large windows facing the street.

The rain was still coming down in sheets. It only just started raining a few hours ago, but it had already turned into a pouring mess, streaking the window and making the chill air colder than normal.

Kaylin always chided her for never wearing a coat in the winter.

Mira was surprised it wasn’t snowing. It was the beginning of March, sure, but if Kaylin had gotten off of school, the snow must be starting soon. It already felt cold enough for the rain to change slowly into thick white flakes.

But it was raining. Hard.

“Hey, do you think Mom would let us-” Mira turned, expecting to see Kaylin behind the counter.

But no one was there.

Mira turned, scanning the store for any sign of her sister.

“Kaylin?”

There was no one. The store was entirely empty.

She slipped off of the stool, letting her weight drop the extra foot.

“Hello?”

There was no sound other than the rain.

“You know this isn’t funny, right?” She said loudly. “You’re not funny!”

“She’s not important to us now, Miss.”

Mira screamed. She cut it off quickly, but the sound still echoed around the room.

Standing in front of her was a man. He looked around college age- maybe grad school?- dressed entirely in blue. The top was sleeveless, with a neckline reaching his throat, and the bottoms were cargo pants colored darker. He was smiling softly, but his eyes were steeled.

Mira laughed lightly, nervousness creeping in at the edges, placing a hand over her thumping heart. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry about that.” The man said, expression shifting slightly. His smile tilted up, and his eyes softened into something more human. His accent was odd. It sounded almost British, but not quite. There was something else in the undertone giving it a distinct sound Mira had never heard before.

“Can I help you with something?” Mira continued, heart still pounding with excess anxiety. “We’re just about to close, so if it’s not important-”

“Oh, no. That won’t be a problem.” He said casually. “I don’t need anything in this store. At least,” He’s made his way to the cafe section, skimming his finger along the rim of Mira’s cup. “Nothing for sale.”

Mira tilted her head. “I’m sorry. Do you need to be here?” She laughed suddenly, nervousness spilling out of her. “Because I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Right.” The man turned. “I was getting to that.” He starts moving toward her, each step making Mira’s gut drop lower and lower. “You have been chosen for something special, Miss. Baker.” His hands flex against his sides, and Mira feels her back press against the cool glass. The rain is loud, pushed into focus suddenly. The man stops directly in front of her, maybe an inch between them. Mira can’t speak. She can’t breathe.

“You have a meeting with Hemlock.”

He stamped his foot down with such force that Mira flinched backward. At some point, the lights had been shut off, so Mira could clearly see the glowing symbols swirling around the both of them. A loud buzzing noise filled her ears, like a million bees entered her

eardrums. The man grabbed her wrist and started dragging her toward the center of the shop, where the symbols followed.

She tugged her wrist with all her strength, digging her boots into the hardwood, but he pulled her steadily toward the center of the shop.

“You know,” The man said it casually- like he wasn’t attempting a kidnapping. “This would be a lot easier if you didn’t struggle.”

“Really?” Mira yelled back breathlessly. “I never thought of that.”

He laughed harshly, suddenly pulling her close. His eyes were a blazing green. His teeth shined like black light. “Don’t run.”

All at once, he dropped his grip, and Mira slammed into the hardwood. But as soon as she dropped, she was scrambling up again, dodging his grasp and rushing toward the street. It was then that she realized that the doors were on the complete other side of the wall, meaning she was heading straight toward the thick glass.

Thunder boomed, and before she thought any better of it, she ran through the window, surprised at how easily it broke. But due to the extra momentum, she stumbled into the open air and onto the street.

She hit the pavement hard, swearing as her hands scraped against the rough asphalt. She stood quickly, breaking into a run before she was even fully upright.

The street lamps flickered, quickly blinking out as she passed each one of them. The rain was coming down hard, making the cuts that



no doubt littered her skin scream in pain. She could hardly feel her legs, but she kept racing onward. Surely someone had spotted her by now. Surely someone was getting help.

But it was at this point that she realized why everything looked so off to her: there was no one here. The entire street looked completely abandoned.

This street was usually the busiest in the city. Even though it was just passed midnight, the stores lining the street were still open. There was a twenty-four-hour pharmacy here. The tarot shop around the corner didn't close until two. And on top of that, there were always people walking up and down, coming from bars looking for food and places to spend some money. It was never quiet here.

But now it was.

A hand gripped her shoulder, and Mira screamed, trying to pry it off as the man started dragging her toward the center of the street. Mira spotted a flash of metal as his hand thrust forward, digging something sharp and hot into her side.

For a moment, everything was quiet. She couldn't hear the rain, or her heart, or anything other than the ringing in her ears. Her vision was spotted, fizzling in and out as her side screamed nonsensically.

“Did you not hear what I said?” He shouted. The noise was back, suddenly, like someone turned the world off the mute. The sound of rain

had returned tenfold, and the buzzing was back, filling her head with pain.

He growled, turned her toward him, and grabbed her wrist, lifting her up and off the ground. His eyes were twin flames of color, angry and green.

Mira darted her free hand forward, dragging her blunt nails across his face. He yelled, and although she didn't feel his skin break, blood slowly began to pool across his face.

“You better be what he's looking for.” The man spits out. “And you better stay put. Hemlock isn't nice when he's angry.”

She looked down. The symbols surrounding her hissed against the rain, glowing brighter by the second. The ground in the circle suddenly dropped out, leaving her feet against open air.

“Enjoy your stay, Miss. Baker.” The man said coolly, seemingly having gained back his composure. “Let's hope you survive for both our sake.”

With that, the man released his grip, and Mira was sent falling into nothingness.

Mira squeezed her eyes shut, hearing the man's laughter echoing around her.

Then there was silence. It was like all the sound was pulled out of her eardrums. There was no laughter, or rain, or anything. Just her shallow breathing shaking in her ears.

She opened her eyes.

It was white. Stark, and blindingly white.

It was empty too. Mira didn't really know what to expect, but white and empty definitely wasn't on the list.

If she thought hard enough, she could smell the hospital, the sterile scent filling her nose with memories of her childhood. The beeps of machines filling her ears with the claustrophobic understanding that her father was dead.

She was eleven, when it happened. She was clinging to Kaylin, her sister only just grasping why they were here.

Her mother was in the room with him. Mira had only just been told about her real mother- the one who left her with Dad when she was born- and even though she had been calling Trina mom for as long as she could remember, she still held some understanding that both of her parents were dead.

It was an odd feeling, back then.

It's an odd feeling now.

But just as that feeling began to re-enter in her gut, the sound of wind began slowly filling her ears. Mira looked around before spotting

bright blue a few yards away from her feet. It was getting close fast, the clouds streaking white against the brightness of the sky.

She was shot from the tunnel, screaming as she hurdled upward, before gravity suddenly grabbed her firmly and pulled her down to the grass below. The force was startling, pain ricocheting through her like a ping-pong ball.

Mira groaned, turning her body up toward the sky. Trees peaked at the edge of her blurring vision, and just before she drifted into unconsciousness, she had the silent realization that she was very far from home.