

CHAPTER 1

An icy tingle of foreboding ran down the back of my neck even before I turned the corner and saw the NYPD's yellow barrier tape.

I shivered. Even though I was all wrapped up in my favourite long coat, I was freezing cold. October in New York was often pretty mild, but the temperature had really dropped the past few days. I didn't usually mind cold weather, but today I'd managed to miss the last bus. So I'd been walking the cold wet streets of New York for over an hour now. I'd been down some dark alleyways that most women of my age and slim build probably wouldn't have ventured down even with a loaded weapon. But although I'd been walking so fast that the muddy puddles had splashed right up to the ankles of my scuffed old boots, I was still running very late. And now, as I turned onto 3rd Avenue (just three blocks from my destination) and saw the yellow barrier tape, I knew I was never going to make it on time.

I slowed down almost instinctively. I could feel myself breathing faster, and somewhere in my chest my heart gave a horrible lurch. This was New York – it wasn't exactly the first time I'd seen a police cordon in this part of town. Accidents and fights were everyday occurrences, they happened all the time. Melrose might not be the worst neighbourhood in the city, but it was still the Bronx.

Something told me, however, that this was different. Perhaps it was the icy tingle I'd felt run down the back of my neck a few streets ago. It had moved lower now, gripping my heart like a cold fist.

I probably should have changed direction straight away. I could have taken a detour around the next block, I knew that. But for some reason my feet kept moving towards the cordoned-off street that I often used as a short-cut to get to Rhapsody. The blue lights of a police car parked behind the yellow tape cast weird shadows on the surrounding buildings. They looked like dark demons, and the tightness in my chest grew worse. More urgent. Something about this felt strange. Familiar but eerie, like a horror story you've heard a thousand times as a kid and yet it still sends shivers down your spine.

I wasn't the only rubbernecker, of course. Even though it was so late at night, there was still a little huddle of bystanders standing beside the yellow barrier tape, whispering to each other and shaking their heads with horrified expressions. *How awful*, I heard someone murmur, as I hugged my chest and moved a little closer. I tried to make out the details of the scene behind the cops and

the flashing lights on their cars. I was looking for some kind of clue to explain what had happened here. Why the whole damn street was cordoned off.

And then I saw him.

He stood out from the other cops even though he was wearing a similar uniform. Jet-black hair, shaved at the sides and just long enough on top to curl slightly – the only untidy thing about his whole appearance. A pair of piercing dark eyes that seemed to see right into my soul every time – and which I knew, when you saw them up close, were a deep forest green. And his detective's jacket with the symbol of the NYPD's 42nd precinct on the left breast pocket and high up on the sleeves, with a small, easy-to-miss addition that marked him out as someone special. A golden emblem in the shape of a shield.

Hayes.

My heart skipped a beat, and almost instinctively I moved behind two women who were standing close together right next to the barrier tape, whispering. I peered through the gap between their heads at the detective. He was standing a few yards away beside a police car.

Despite the cold, he'd rolled up the sleeves of his jacket and was listening to one of his colleagues make their report. He was frowning. This in itself wasn't unusual: Hayes always looked serious. But I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him look this tense. And even just the fact that he was here, that he'd been put on this case, was not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

I felt my stomach tighten. My body was reacting instinctively to the threat he posed. But along with my rising panic that he might spot me, I felt another emotion.

Curiosity. A kind of fearful curiosity that was like an icy sheen on my skin.

I stepped to one side to get a better view of the scene, but I kept the two women between me and Hayes. I'd completely forgotten about how late for work I was, and the lecture I was going to get from my brother Ellis. I studied the scene. But before I could make out any details, I became aware of a smell. It was faint at first, diluted by the scent of the recent rain and the stink of the streets. But I could still smell it. There was a smell of burning and also something else, something familiar which I couldn't place at first. As I leaned forward a little and ran my hand along the barrier tape, still wet from the rain, I saw something sticking out from under one of the police cars. A kind of sheet. It was black, almost the same colour as the dark street, but the moment I caught sight of the thick plastic I knew exactly what it was.

It was the type of sheet they use to cover a dead body.

At that moment I also realised where I knew that smell from. It was the smell of old library books, the smell of dusty pages, the smell of dark secrets that few people knew. It was the smell of a Narrative. A Mage.

I stepped backwards with a little gasp, and immediately the two women turned to look at me.

One of them seemed put out; she raised her eyebrows and stared at me. Perhaps it was because of my long coat, which my friend Veda had given me. It was a beautiful coat, made of thick navy blue fabric with a pattern of gold patches, but it stood out a mile. Especially in a neighbourhood like Melrose, where hardly anyone wore vintage designer clothes like this.

The other woman looked at me with a slightly less hostile expression, and in her watery blue eyes I saw something like compassion. “So awful,” she said. Her voice was hoarse, perhaps from a slight cold, and I recognised her as the woman who’d spoken a moment ago. “That poor creature.”

“It was murder,” said the other woman. She spat out the word like a curse, and that cold prickling at the back of my neck became a river of ice running down my spine. Murder. Here.

The fact that Hayes was here – and the unmistakable scent of magic in the air – made the whole thing even more ominous. Because it meant one of *us* was involved. But was it the murderer, or the victim?

I looked back at the piece of plastic sheeting sticking out from under the police car. It was as if I was looking through a dark tunnel and all I could see was this black plastic sheet. And beneath it lay a human being who had lost their life. So close to my home, so close to my everyday life.

Murder.

All of a sudden, two polished shoes stepped in front of the plastic sheeting and a voice pulled me out of the dark tunnel I’d been gazing into. “Nothing to see here. Move along please.”

I looked up into the face of a man whose voice seemed far too soft for his appearance. His eyes were dark, and the rest of his face was almost completely covered by a thick black beard. He had a torso like a wardrobe and his muscular arms, folded across his chest, looked like they were about to burst out of his police jacket.

The women standing in front of me protested, and the officer replied calmly that they were impeding a police investigation.

I looked again at his feet, which were blocking my view of the plastic sheet now, and pulled my coat more tightly around me.

Little by little, mundane thoughts returned: I remembered I was going to be super late. The thoughts tried to take the place of the scene I’d just witnessed, a scene I already knew would follow me into my nightmares. *I’ve got to go*, I thought. And then, again: *One of us. Murder.*

Just before I turned to leave I lifted my head one last time – and my eyes met those of Detective Hayes. He must have looked over at his colleague to see what was taking so long. Very briefly, his eyes widened in surprise as he recognised me. Then they narrowed to slits again, and his whole

face turned hard like a stone wall. There it was – the lightning bolt that ran through me every time he looked at me that way. With that strange mixture of annoyance, contempt and total mistrust. As if he was looking for something in my face and was angry that he couldn't find it. Suddenly the icy sheen returned, creeping down from my hairline over every inch of my skin.
Fear.

Yet he had no idea how right he was to mistrust me. If he'd known I was a member of one of the most dangerous gangs in New York, I'd have been staring at him from a jail cell long before now. With *the* Detective Hayes, legendary scourge of the New York underworld, sometimes a mere suspicion was enough to put someone behind bars. And the fact that we had a shared past and could almost have been something like friends was no use to me at all.

For a moment, as I stood there by the barrier tape as if frozen to the spot, I thought he was going to come over to me. Walking briskly, the way he did. Only soldiers walked like that. I thought he was going to ask me what the hell I was doing here, and tell me to get lost. His gaze seemed to go through me like a sharp knife through butter. Deadly. But after a second or two he looked away abruptly and turned back to his colleagues. In that moment it was as if I'd been freed from the grip of an icy fist and could finally move again. So I hurried away, my arms hugging my chest, striding quickly down the street until at last I could turn the corner by the Asian snack bar and I was out of sight.

It was stupid, but I still felt as though Hayes's eyes were burning into my back as I marched along the sidewalk, past the buildings with their fetid smell of greasy food. I could almost hear Veda's voice in my head warning me to stay as far away as possible from the cops – especially from Hayes. "You're a terrible liar," she'd always said. "They'll lock you up before you can count to three." Hayes had only looked at me for a second. He hadn't even come near me, and I felt myself getting slightly angry that his mere presence had made me so anxious. I wasn't usually so easily intimidated. The last few years, especially, had given me a skin as thick as granite. But there was something about that damn detective, a weird aura that seemed to penetrate right into my soul. And if there was one thing I hated, it was people trying to look inside my soul. Even *I* was too scared to do that. Scared that my inner self had become so dark, these past few years, that I wouldn't even recognise it anymore.

I tried to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. A glance at my phone, as I pulled it from the deep pocket of my coat, showed me I was already twenty minutes late for work. Ellis was going to kill me. Especially if he found out why I was late.

Crossing the street, I looked hurriedly left and right and then ran across on red to try and save a few seconds at least. The road – a patchwork quilt of asphalt and half-hearted repairs, typical of

this neighbourhood – was still wet from the rain, and I splashed through puddles as I ran. I'd been fired from all my previous jobs after a few weeks, but in my brother Ellis I'd found a pretty forgiving boss. Even he was going to lose patience with me soon, though, if I didn't get my shit together.

I nearly ran headlong into an old woman as I turned the corner. She yelled at me, and I muttered a hasty apology and turned into the next narrow alleyway. The shadows of the tall buildings swallowed me up, and I couldn't help picturing the plastic sheeting again. I thought about the person lying beneath it on the wet ground, never to see their family again, and I felt such a powerful, throbbing guilt that it almost took my breath away. Guilt? Yes, that must be what was weighing so heavily on me. Although I didn't think the dead body under the sheet could have been one of the people whose deaths I'd caused. Dorian Mars, the most infamous gangster boss in the underworld, was not a man who left any evidence behind.

As I emerged from the darkness of the alleyway into the light of the neon adverts and street signs, I was filled with relief. Relief that I'd left that eerie scene, the corpse, and Detective Hayes behind me. And as I walked swiftly along Melrose Avenue my heart rate gradually slowed. The dead body, the murder, they had nothing to do with me. I had to banish them from my mind and keep a clear head. I didn't have time for stuff like that. And I certainly didn't have the headspace to worry about problems that didn't affect me. I had enough problems of my own.

As the high walls of Rhapsody appeared before me, my pulse finally returned to normal. I glanced up at the black façade of the building, which still looked like a pub despite all the renovations Ellis had done. But the neon sign bearing the club's name, and the queue on the sidewalk, told a different story. I looked over at the front door where Carlos was checking people's IDs. He was a giant of a man, even bigger than the detective at the crime scene just now, and his fierce grin was enough to scare off any troublemakers before they could even think about starting anything. It didn't scare me, though. I knew that behind the menacing smile was a genuinely nice guy who would do anything for his daughter. I returned his smile before pushing past the long queue of people on the sidewalk.

Ellis had turned our grandad's old pub into a small nightclub six months ago, and ever since then it had been steadily growing in popularity. Everyone wanted to visit the exclusive venue, to see what it was like inside, to sample its legendary cocktails. Word on the street was that these cocktails did strange things to people's emotions. In a matter of months, Rhapsody had gone from a well-kept secret to a "Don't tell me you've never been there" kind of place, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. My grandad's pub had been a cosy little spot, a quiet watering hole where

people met for drinks after work. I'd found it hard to get used to its modern and fashionable new image.

To the left of the building was a narrow passageway, and as I squeezed through it I tried not to think about the dead body in the alley and the detective who might be after me. The staff entrance was at the top of a little staircase with only three steps. The door was open, and I could hear the music from out here. Sitting on the top step was our barman Michael. He had one leg stretched out in front of him and was holding a cigarette loosely in his left hand. He raised his eyebrows when he saw me come hurrying towards him, and I muttered immediately: "I know I'm late. And I don't have time for a lecture, sorry."

The corners of Michael's mouth twitched as he took a drag on his cigarette. He blew out the smoke very slowly, and I was already on the steps when he said with a shrug: "Ellis has been asking for you."

Shit. I stopped on the second step and looked up at him, my lips pressed tightly together. Michael always reminded me a little of a sailor with his full beard, stripey shirts and the little cap he always wore. But tonight there was something of the jackal about him, his eyes glittering as he stared at me. He could smell my nervousness in the air.

I'd been hoping my brother wouldn't notice my absence, given how busy the bar was tonight. Most of the time he wasn't even front-of-house when the doors opened – he'd still be in the storeroom barking orders at people, or checking on the security guards. But tonight of all nights he was here, of course he was – and he was looking for me. It was my own fault really. I just couldn't seem to manage to be on time.

"What did you tell him?" I asked breathlessly.

Michael took his sweet time. He took another drag on his cigarette and looked at me with amusement in his bright eyes. Then he said: "I told him I'd sent you to the storeroom to get some soda. No idea if he believed me or not. When you see him, maybe tell him you had to go to the bathroom as well."

I turned towards the graffiti-covered metal door with relief. "Thanks," I said.

He shrugged again and watched me as I hopped gracefully over his outstretched legs and stepped inside the club. The heat and the music hit me like a wave, but I still heard what Michael murmured as I walked away. "Did you go to see Gage alone again? Ellis won't like that."

Rage welled up in me. The way he said my grandad's name as if he knew the whole story, as if he knew how I felt, made me see red. All Michael really knew was that my grandad had been in an old people's home for the past six months and that my brother didn't want me visiting him on my own. But he had no idea how my grandad was doing. Or how I felt about this awful situation.

Or why my brother wanted to keep me away from the man who, for much of my life, had basically been a father to me.

I spun around to look at him, and to my satisfaction he flinched. Veda had told me more than once that I had a truly terrifying glare for such a delicate little person. Even my normal face was slightly hostile. She called it ‘resting bitch face’.

I could only imagine how my light-blue eyes were flashing as I put one hand on my hip and gritted my teeth. “That’s none of your goddamn business, Michael.”

“Of course,” he replied at once, and seemed to crumple even though he was already sitting down. “Sorry,” he added.

I sniffed and turned away, slipping back inside the club. Without another word I marched off down the dark, narrow corridor, which led not to the dancefloor but to the little staff changing room. My rage gradually began to subside, but it was still mixed with guilt and frustration – a dangerous combination.

The little staff changing room always reminded me of the rooms where we’d got changed for P.E. lessons at school. Wooden benches and dark red lockers along one side of the room. A little mirror above a sink. Neon lights, at least one of which was always flickering. And a lino floor that squeaked no matter what shoes you were wearing. I hurried over to my locker and carefully hung up my beloved coat inside it. I kept my black sports leggings on and just swapped my hoodie for a shirt featuring the Rhapsody logo: a cocktail glass with what looked like poisonous smoke rising from it.

I was just pulling my long blonde hair out of my shirt collar when my phone pinged. I felt a chill run down the back of my neck again – as if I hadn’t been through enough for one night. For a moment I thought about ignoring the ping. But I knew, of course, who the message was from and what would happen if I ignored it. There was only one number I hadn’t silenced my notifications for – because he’d made it clear I wasn’t allowed to.

I flung my rucksack carelessly into the locker, my eyes already on my phone screen. I had two new messages, one from my friend Veda about meeting for coffee, and the other one that had just arrived. DM, it said. Dorian Mars. My heart beat faster as I opened the message. It was a photo that looked a little like a police mugshot, with a name underneath it. Jack Lawson.

I focused on taking deep breaths. A few times I’d asked Dorian about the people he sent to me. What they’d done to deserve it. What their crimes had been. But on the few occasions Dorian had actually given me an answer, I’d immediately regretted asking. His reasons were never good enough. Not that any reason would have been good enough, but his were so cold-blooded that after a while I stopped asking him to justify himself, and just changed the subject.

I slammed the locker door shut a little too hard. As I walked to the door, I typed the name Dorian had sent me into a search engine. It only took me a few seconds to find the same photo online, on the website of the NYPD. What I read did help to calm my pounding heart a little. Armed robbery. Multiple aggravated assaults. Attempting to kill his own child. This Jack Lawson was one of the worst thugs in New York. Perhaps not as evil and ruthless as Dorian Mars, but there was enough to satisfy me for the moment. To soothe my conscience. To make me feel like what I was about to do was justified, and to suppress the thought of what someone like Detective Hayes might see in my black soul.

I slipped my phone into my pocket and went out into the corridor.

CHAPTER 2

Even from the wide staircase that linked the back corridor with the dancefloor, I could see blue and pink neon light on the walls. Ellis had installed ceiling-high mirrors on both sides of the stairs which reflected the light – every time I went up or down these stairs I felt like I was inside a kaleidoscope. The bass was so loud it made the air hum, and weirdly this slightly gloomy, slightly frenetic atmosphere made me think again of the scene in the alleyway. The plastic sheet. The look in Hayes’s eyes.

I rubbed my tingling neck as I climbed the stairs, and tried to block out the images. It worked, surprisingly quickly, but then I had been training myself to do it for years. *Keep going, no matter what’s happened. Forget, no matter what you’ve seen or done. Repress, even if the guilt is eating you alive.*

The main room of the club was already pretty full – there were lots of people on the dancefloor and at the bar. As I reached the top of the stairs and looked around the room, I realised that although I’d got used to the venue’s new look, I still hadn’t quite got my head around how busy it was these days. As a child I’d loved my grandad’s rustic pub – I’d felt like I was inside a weird little cave where there was an adventure around every corner. Luckily, when Ellis had done the renovations, he’d kept the things that had always made it such a magical place. The bare brick walls all the way up to the ceiling were what gave Rhapsody its charm, along with the neon lights, the old-fashioned bar tables, the modern bar, the well-worn couches, and the glittering dancefloor and stage. It was a unique combination of new and old. And although I didn’t like to admit it, one of the main things that drew people to the club was how good it looked on Instagram. The hype about Rhapsody had started a few months ago with an Instagram post and a mysterious caption about our cocktails.

Behind the bar I saw Marla, her red hair shining in the neon light, and Michael serving a customer. He was back from his fag break, then. I squeezed past a couple who were making out against a pillar, and headed for the bar. Marla saw me coming and opened the little side door for me.

“Where were you?” she asked. Her voice, as ever, was even and emotionless.

I shrugged. “Got held up.”

She raised one eyebrow as she filled two glasses with whiskey and coke. “Sure.” It was obvious from her tone that she didn’t believe me. I had used a lot of excuses on her lately. “Maybe in future you can try not to get held up on our busiest nights?”

I nodded and turned to the customers standing at the bar. Now I was here I should really try and make myself useful – better late than never. I took someone’s order and scanned the crowd before yelling to Marla over the sound of the music: “The street between Melrose and 3rd Avenue was cordoned off.” And to make it sound a little more dramatic, I added: “I think something unnatural happened there.”

Marla pretended she was too busy serving her next customer to listen to me. But from the way she tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear, I could tell she was paying close attention. And I was right. A few seconds later she piped up: “What happened?”

I slid the drink I’d just made across the bar before leaning closer to Marla and replying: “A murder, by the sounds of it. And a Mage was involved.”

Her head snapped around and she stared at me, eyes wide. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m serious. I could smell paper, and I saw the sheet covering the body.” I turned to my next customer, plastering on a smile. But my stomach was churning. Telling Marla about the crime scene had brought the mental images flooding back. That eerie feeling, that cold prickling sensation. The smell of old books and magic. As if what had happened in the alleyway did have something to do with me after all. As if it was important to me.

“Whoa!” Marla replied, and then we both went on working in silence, apart from when we exchanged a few words with the customers.

After a few minutes I was filled with the lovely sense of calm I always got standing behind this bar. It was my favourite thing about working at Rhapsody. My brain was so focused on mixing drinks and trying to hear the customers over the loud music that I had no time to think about other things. It was incredibly soothing. And since I’d been working here for a good six months now, I knew most of the cocktail recipes by heart and I could make them without even thinking about it. So I was free to study the customers’ faces. Watch their eyes sparkle with excitement the first time they ordered one of our specials. Watch them take their first expectant sips of our

glowing green Dancing Joy cocktail. Hear them wondering whether all the things people said about us were really true or just crazy rumours. And watch the drinks slowly take effect, getting into their bloodstream and their brains. Until the realisation was clearly visible on their faces: the feeling they'd been hoping for was now spreading inexplicably from their stomachs to the tips of their fingers. Every time, I saw them look back at me from the dancefloor as if trying to read my expression. They wanted to know if they were just imagining it or if it really was our drinks having this effect. But eventually they'd all just shrug their shoulders and dismiss the thought. It was too far-fetched, too unrealistic, to think such a thing could exist – magical drinks that could alter your emotions.

I vividly remembered all the visits we'd had from the police, both in the early days when Rhapsody had first opened and more recently. All those cops who'd sent our drinks away to labs, only the labs had never found anything wrong. Because there were no drugs in our drinks. There was no explanation for the effect they had on people. No logical explanation, at least. Since most people didn't believe in magic.

I couldn't help thinking of the second or third police raid, when I'd suddenly found myself face to face with Hayes. At that point it had been years since I'd last seen him. But I'd heard about his determination to put Dorian Mars behind bars, and that was why I'd carefully avoided him since his return to New York. Even though my whole being had been crying out to see him again, to catch even just a glimpse of him after all this time, to see the young man he'd become. And one look into his cold eyes that night at Rhapsody brought memories of the past flooding back. The brief but somehow meaningful moments we'd shared. As if they'd happened not years but hours ago. If the sight of me had any effect on him, however, he hid it well. His face was a mask of professionalism.

While I showed him and his colleagues around behind the bar and took them to the storeroom so they could carry out their checks, I followed his example and gave no outward sign of how flustered I was. But inside me, a storm was raging. I watched every tiny little movement he made, every twitch of his eyelids, every gesture of his slim fingers. Perhaps because I wanted to see, in this imposing man, some remnant of the boy who had touched my heart and then disappeared. But that boy was gone – at least I could see no sign of him. And when Hayes and his colleagues left the club, I was left with a strangely empty feeling. As if I'd lost that boy a second time.

I shook my head firmly now and focused on my work again, mixing drinks and watching the customers. After a while my gaze fell on a young woman who was clearly enjoying the euphoria she was feeling. It would last for a few hours, long enough for her to have a great night, before gradually fading.

The magic in our Dancing Joy cocktail – in all our cocktails – was completely different from the drugs people were taking everywhere else in New York. It didn't affect your ability to make rational decisions, you wouldn't end up being forced into anything because you were too out of it to say no, and you wouldn't wake up the next day with a splitting headache and no memory of what had happened the night before. All Dancing Joy did was make people happier. Just for a moment, just for a night. It allowed them to forget their problems without clouding their minds Without getting them addicted. That was why Rhapsody and our drinks were so popular.

The corners of my mouth twitched and (not for the first time) I wished it could have been that easy for me. That I could have just knocked back one of our drinks and felt happy and forgotten everything. But for a cocktail to work on me it would need a much stronger dose of magic than we used for our customers. And Ellis had asked me just a few months ago to reduce the dose – he was worried that eventually people would become convinced there were drugs in our drinks. And that the other Mages in New York would try and shut the club down.

Anyway, even at the right dose one of our cocktails would only have made my problems go away for a fleeting moment.

“Avery.” Marla elbowed me gently in the ribs, snapping me out of my almost trance-like state. I looked at her enquiringly, and she nodded towards the corner of the bar.

My heart sank a little as I followed her gaze. Ellis was standing at the end of the bar, his arms folded across his chest and a fierce look on his face. He was frowning hard, and I bit my lip. He looked angry. But not too angry – he didn't want to alarm the customers. So he was actually even angrier than he looked. This was not good. Not good at all. I glanced over my shoulder at Michael, trying to gauge the situation. Had he ratted me out after all, because I'd got in such a huff with him? But the barman was standing with his back to me, serving a customer, so I couldn't see his face. I had no way of knowing what he'd said.

“You'd better go speak to Ellis,” muttered Marla from beside me. “Before he comes and drags you out from behind the bar.”

This was going to be one awkward conversation. Inwardly I heaved a sigh and made my way along the bar to where Ellis was standing. As soon as he could see I was going to follow him, he turned and strolled off towards the staircase as if he was totally relaxed. Except that I could see how tense his shoulders were under his neat black shirt, and how stiffly he was moving. His blond hair – the same blond hair I'd also inherited from our mom – was combed back neatly at the sides. He'd probably tried to do the same on the top of his head, but our naturally wavy hair just would not lay flat. It didn't even have the decency to curl properly – instead it just stuck out in all directions, even when it was cut short.

As I came out from behind the bar and walked towards my brother, I thought for a moment that I should tell him to grow his hair the same length as mine, then the waves might flatten out a little. But when I met his eyes, and saw the grim look in them, I thought better of it and leaned back against the wall beside him without a word.

Ellis was standing on the step below me, but he was still a couple of inches taller. He used our difference in height to glare down at me from above. “Where have you been?”

“What do you mean?” With an innocent look, I smoothed a lock of hair back from my face and gave him a winning smile. Obviously it was no use.

Ellis waved his hand impatiently, as if trying to sweep away my words. “Avery, cut the crap. I know you weren’t here.”

Hmm. He hadn’t swallowed Michael’s lie, then. I wasn’t surprised, really – Ellis was too smart for excuses like that. “I got held up,” I ventured. “The police had cordoned off the short-cut I usually take, and I had to go a different way. I think someone was mur-”

“And how much time did this add to your journey? Twenty minutes? Half an hour?” Ellis interrupted, annoyed. . He nodded towards the bar, where there was now an even bigger crowd of people. “We’re busy tonight, the rest of the bar staff need you. You have to start being more reliable. If not I’m going to have to let you go.”

I knew he would never do that. We were still family, after all. In fact we were almost all that remained of our family here in New York, and there was no way he’d ever let me go. Not from the house where we lived together and not from this job either. Still, I put on a suitably apologetic expression. I knew he was just looking out for me. And although it irritated me when he tried to play the father figure, I was grateful to him that I could stay in New York. That he let me work in his bar.

“Sorry, Ellis,” I said.

He waved his hand again dismissively.

I held back a groan, because I knew he was about to give me a lecture. I quickly turned my face away so he wouldn’t see how irritated I was.

“I don’t want excuses, Ave. I want you to take responsibility. For yourself, for your co-workers and for the business I’ve built here. For your job. Are you even listening to me?”

“Of course.”

“So why don’t you look at me when I’m talking to you?”

I forced myself to lift my head and look at him, but it was extremely difficult. Not only because he was starting to sound like my mom, but because at that exact moment Jack Lawson walked into the club. His hair was slightly longer than in his mugshot, and he had a scruffy three-day-old

beard, but I recognised him straight away, This was the man Dorian Mars had sent to me. This was the man I had to take care of.

“I’m putting you down to work tomorrow. The Sunday shift,” Ellis was saying. He had his hands on his hips and the expression on his face made it clear there was no point arguing with him.

“Okay,” I muttered, looking back at the door. Lawson was pushing through the crowd towards the bar, so I had to be quick. I couldn’t let him order his drink from someone else.

“... expect from you, especially since the Kennedys are involved.”

My heart gave a jolt, and I looked quickly back at Ellis. “The Kennedys?”

My brother looked annoyed. “I’m glad to see you *are* actually listening,” he grumbled. “Yes, Isla Kennedy has hired out the club tomorrow for her bachelorette party. So you need to be here on time and do your job properly, understand?”

Isla Kennedy. I remembered reading something on Instagram about her being engaged and about to get married. But I’d had no idea she was having her bachelorette party right here at Rhapsody. Crazy! For a moment I even forgot about my job for Dorian Mars.

I was going to meet Isla Kennedy!

“Get your shit together,” said Ellis, but his tone was already much more forgiving than it had been a moment ago. I was willing to bet he’d put me down to work tomorrow not as a punishment but as a favour to me. He knew I followed Isla on all her social media. The high society girl, the magical superwoman that people either admired or hated (out of jealousy). But Ellis still had to look strict and play the big boss. He had an image to maintain.

So I pressed my lips together and nodded obediently.

“Good.” Ellis gestured towards the bar to send me away, and then headed down the stairs. For a moment I watched him go, wondering if the tension in his shoulders had anything to do with the fact that a member of the Kennedy family was coming here to Rhapsody. The Kennedys were an influential family, the darlings of New York high society – but that was nothing compared with how important they were to us. To our people. To us Mages.

My skin started to prickle just thinking about it, but I forced myself back down to earth: Jack Lawson had just reached the front of the queue at the bar. With a harried expression, he looked around for someone to serve him. His shoulders sagged dejectedly. Luckily Michael and Marla were busy serving other customers, so I slipped in hastily behind the bar and leaned over to him. “Hey, what can I get you?”

My nervousness had returned, in stomach-churning waves. I felt my voice tremble, but luckily it was masked by the booming bass. Lawson turned towards me and I was surprised by how

empty his eyes were. How devoid of hope. I felt certain he was aware of his fate, that he knew exactly what was in store for him. And again I wondered what he'd done to piss off Dorian Mars so badly. Not that I really wanted to know the answer.

There was a smell of alcohol coming off Lawson, along with something else – the scent of magic. But it wasn't the magic of old books and secrets radiated by Narratives. Or the magic of wine mixed with blood – sweet and dangerous and bewitching – that surrounded Poisoners. Like Ellis. Like me. Instead, it smelt as though Lawson had just finished a huge painting and come straight from his gallery to the club. The smell of fresh paint, oil and freedom emanated from him. He was unmistakably an Artist, although his scent was weak, which meant his magic was too.

As he leaned across the bar, I could feel the soft prickling that always filled the air when two Mages met. It was faint, like two weakly electrically charged atoms coming too close to each other. If Lawson noticed the sensation too, he didn't show it.

In a raspy voice, he ordered our most popular cocktail. "I'll have a Dancing Joy."

By the looks of him he was sorely in need of a little joy. His eyes flicked around the room again as if looking for something. He barely noticed me, so preoccupied was he with his own anxieties. One of Dorian's men had probably told him he would find some peace here. Some distraction from what was troubling him. Some relief.

Instead, he was walking towards his inevitable death.

"Coming right up," I said with a smile, although my heart was racing and my guilt threatened to overwhelm me again. I tried to focus my mind on the things I'd read about Lawson, as I reached under the bar for a dark-coloured bottle I'd put there for Dorian's jobs. It was hidden behind some other bottles in a little niche only I knew about, to make sure Michael and Marla didn't accidentally use it. I tried to think about Lawson's crimes as I mixed his cocktail, about the people he had hurt, even though I didn't know their faces. *You won't find any joy here today*, I thought, and my fingers trembled slightly.

The man didn't look at me as I slid the glass with its dark purple liquid across the bar to him. I wanted to turn away as he reached for it, as he lifted the drink to his lips and took the first few sips. But I couldn't. It was like witnessing an accident. One where you knew exactly what was about to happen and there was nothing you could do to stop it.

I forced myself to step away from him and serve the next customer. But I kept glancing back at him where he sat slumped at the bar sipping his drink. I watched his pale face, so despairing, so hopeless.

And so I happened to be watching him at the exact moment when the Dancing Joy, that wasn't actually a Dancing Joy, started to take effect. First there was a nervous twitching in the man's shoulders, then a restless tapping of his fingers. He looked towards the door. Towards the dancefloor. Back to his drink and then over his shoulder again. I knew what he was feeling, I knew what that ugly concoction I'd poured into his glass was doing to him. It began with anxiety, which gradually escalated until it became fear. Then blind panic, spreading to every one of his nerves. Taking over every fibre of his body.

And then came the guilt.

I knew that was what it was from the way his face seemed to almost collapse in on itself. What the guilt was that tormented him I didn't know. Guilt about his victims, perhaps. Or his family. Or whatever he'd done to make Dorian Mars so angry that he'd sent him to me. How anyone could risk antagonising the dangerous gangster boss was a mystery to me.

But the cause of Lawson's guilt didn't really matter. The important thing was the emotions that were multiplying inside him, crashing over him in waves, taking possession of him, until he was incapable of feeling anything else. Until he consisted of nothing but those emotions.

I knew I'd given him a strong dose. I always did when Dorian sent someone to me – I wanted to make sure the job was done properly. But the horror that came over Lawson's face now was even worse than I'd intended. For a moment I thought he was going to collapse right there at the bar. He was as white as a sheet, I could see that even under the neon lights, and he clutched at his chest.

I put out a hand, wanting to touch his shoulder and ask if he was okay. He wasn't, of course, and that was my fault. I knew that. The impulse was completely irrational, but I couldn't help it.

But before my fingers had reached his sleeve, Lawson suddenly leapt out of his seat. His face was deathly pale and his hands were trembling. He cast his eyes around the room with such a hunted look, it was as if he was having a psychotic episode. Then he barged through the crowd towards the exit, so roughly that he knocked a few people off balance. They glared at him angrily, but he didn't even seem to notice. In his blind panic, his overwhelming fear and his all-consuming guilt, he was completely oblivious to everything else. And that would be his downfall. The emotions I had triggered in him would drive him straight into the arms of Dorian Mars, and so to his death.

The moment he lurched out of the door and into the night, it was as if my whole being went limp. I felt something like relief that it had worked, but also the endless, agonising guilt. The despair that gnawed at me and reminded me I had no choice. The feeling was so intense that I reached for a bottle of whiskey and poured myself a shot.

Silver & Poison (Bd. 1): Das Elixier der Lügen

Silver & Poison (Bd. 1): Das Elixier der Lügen *(The Elixir of Lies)*

by Anne Lück

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The alcohol burned my throat and distracted me from what I'd just done. Even if only for a few seconds. It distracted me from my despair, from my fear, from my anguish about Dorian Mars and his terrible assignments.

And it distracted me from the fact that I was a goddamn murderer.