

Chapter One

The Stranger

He smelled like pine.

Not that synthetic chemical garbage that comes in household cleaners or scented candles. This scent was tangible; like the forest right outside the café windows, heady and thick like the earth. It was the first thing I noticed right before my Supernatural senses kicked into high gear and I could *feel* him. His presence caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end, and a shiver descended the length of my spine. That's how it always started, radiating outward in a slow caress until it felt like someone was pulling the strings on an invisible corset that choked the air from my lungs. That's how I knew he was different—like me.

I reached up, cupping the back of my head that was still tingling. The sensation should have worn off by now—I'd made a connection with the guy, so what was the hold up? It was like I was hyperaware of whatever he was, which made his presence impossible to ignore. I gazed at the back of his head from my position in line, wondering if he could sense me. It was different for all magical beings. Witches in particular could sense one another, but that wasn't always the case with the rest of the Supernatural kind.

Aside from my mother and me, Silver Mountain was void of other Supernatural beings. The town itself was just a small black dot on the map en route to bigger cities on the Eastern Seaboard. Population: twenty-five hundred and declining. Our town wasn't exactly the kind of

place that people chose to visit on purpose; in fact, most people rolled right through town before realizing they had. Not that it was a bad place to live or anything, because it wasn't. It was just a very rustic, very secluded place that didn't have a lot of modern draw. Silver Mountain contained two kinds of people; the ones who were native born, and the ones that moved away but missed the ambiance so much they ended up coming back. Kind of like that song—Hotel California—you could check out if you wanted, but you could never really leave. Silver Mountain had a way of grabbing hold and getting in your bloodstream. It made me wonder what could have drawn this guy in, or what it was about his presence that was wreaking havoc on my Supernatural alert-system.

The mysterious newcomer paid for his order and then moved out of line. He chose a lone corner table (my favorite) in the back of the café, sitting next to a big window beneath a replica painting of *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gough.

“What can I get you, Quinny?” Torrance grinned from behind the counter. The overhead lights glinted off the studded jewelry that pierced her nose and lip and when she smiled, her lateral incisor jutted out slightly over her front tooth.

“Better make it a double this morning,” I said, drumming my plum fingernails across the counter as I studied the menu above. “I’ll take a caramel macchiato, and a vanilla cappuccino, please.”

“I take it Annabelle is running late again?” Torrance giggled, tapping a few buttons on the register in front of her.

“Have you ever known her to be on time?” I asked.

“It’s her quirk,” Torrance said. “Everyone has something.” She tossed her long, wavy blonde hair over one of her shoulders with a shrug.

I lifted an eyebrow, waiting for her to tell me what my “quirk” was but she just laughed and spouted off the price of my coffee. I suspected Torrance had her own opinions about me, but didn’t want to voice them. I reached into my faded, multi-colored messenger bag to retrieve some money. Annabelle referred to it as my “hippie bag” because it was made from different fabrics that had been put together in patchwork-type patterns. At its center, a silhouette of a wolf sat howling up at a yellow moon. It was the last gift my mother had given me before she died.

I collected our drinks from the end of the counter and picked my way through the maze of tables, settling for a small table wedged between a support beam and a window that had a lovely view of the front parking lot. I sighed, sinking down into the chair. At least I could still see Silver Mountain Forest from across the street, and the silver-blue of the mountain peak poking over the backdrop of giant evergreens. I shot the new guy a look; knowing my expression portrayed a serious case of table-envy. It didn’t matter though. He had his back to me and he was bent over the table; head slightly tilted over some kind of paperwork. I watched the pen moving in his hand in a slow rhythm, almost as if he were distracted. Judging by the set of his shoulders and the way he was seated in the chair, it was like he was both relaxed and ready to bolt at the same time if he had to.

Stop staring, Quinn, you have homework to do, I mentally reprimanded myself. I concentrated on building a mental block against the Supe, and pulled my history book from my “hippie bag.” Just then, the little brass bell above the door jingled. I looked up, spotting Annabelle’s small frame as she picked her way through the congested space of towering bodies. She was easy to miss if you weren’t looking down. “Excuse me,” she muttered in annoyance. She pushed outward with her hands; a gesture like Moses parting the Red Sea before she managed to break through. “Must be Saturday,” she said with a bitter tone. “I hate that this is the only coffee joint

in town.” She pulled a chair out from the table; the wooden legs scraping against the linoleum tile.

“I ordered for you already.” I pushed her cappuccino across the table.

“Thanks,” she said, picking it up, “double shot of espresso?”

“You actually think I’d forget?”

“You’re the best,” she told me. “Sorry I was late. Caitlyn was monopolizing the bathroom for a job interview. Unfortunately for me, that falls under category one section A of our bathroom treaty and gives her the rite of dominion over the mirror for ungodly lengths of time. Like seriously, how is it possible that one human being can be in there for hours at a time—what are you even doing?”

“Yet another reason why I’m happy to be an only child.” I cracked a half smile.

“You don’t know how lucky you are,” Annabelle said. She scanned the room until her gaze fell upon the new guy who had taken up our usual table. “Who’s the table thief?” She tipped her chin in his direction and lowered her voice so he wouldn’t overhear. Not that he would anyway; the coffee shop was buzzing with sounds of mingled voices and bluegrass that was spilling from the overhead speakers.

I glanced up, taking in his dark hair and matching leather jacket. It was well worn, but fit him nicely across his broad shoulders and narrowed with his waist. He was of slender build, but I sensed he had a bit more muscle definition hidden beneath his autumn attire. Most Supernaturals tended to run on the fit side.

“Uh, I don’t know,” I replied with a frown. I wasn’t sure why I didn’t just tell her he was different. Annabelle was the only human aside from my immediate family that knew the truth about what I was. I could trust her with my life. But there hadn’t been another Supernatural in

Silver Mountain in eons, and I suspected this one wasn't staying long. Besides, we Supernaturals had an unspoken code of concealment. Being a witch meant that I had an unfair advantage in knowing he was different, and considering I didn't actually know what he was, I thought it best to just keep my mouth shut—even if he was frying my mental wires.

“Maybe he's a transfer?” Annabelle wondered aloud.

“From where,” I countered, “and *why*?”

“How should I know?” Annabelle retorted. “I'm not the one with the abilities. Can't you do a little witchy-woo and figure it out?”

I shot her a look, and she held up her hands in mock defense. Witch or not, I didn't tamper with magic unless it was a necessity. All magic was given at a price. There were rules, and if broken, the consequences could be severe. You couldn't just go around casting spells to make acne disappear or add a cup size to your breasts because you felt like it. You couldn't cast any spells for the sake of vanity for that matter, nor could you tap into a person's brain and get the four-one-one on them—unless of course you were me. I possessed a natural power that allowed me to see into people's minds, and get a glimpse of someone's past or future. It was fairly complex to tap into, and not at all as simple as tuning in and just “listening” to a person's mind, either. As if the “gift” wasn't already awkward enough, I could only do it if I made contact with blood.

It didn't have to be a monumental amount, really just a pinprick would do. If I touched it, a flash of images shimmered through my brain; at first appearing like the inkblot smears of a Rorschach test. The images shifted until they took shape, and I was thrown smack into the middle of the scene. Seeing a glimpse of someone's past was like being transported through another place in time. It scrambled my center, making me feel as though gravity were a relative

concept that no longer applied to me. I didn't physically go anywhere when it happened, but the spinning sensation always left me reeling as though I had.

Seeing someone's future was like watching a movie. I stood apart from it, observing from a distance, but this was by far the most painful experience. When it happened, I felt like I was being swallowed by the ocean, dragged beneath the waves and the crushing weight of it squeezed the air from my lungs. When you tapped into that sort of magic, you were watching something that hadn't yet come to pass, and in doing so meant you had the knowledge and capability to change an event before it could happen. Tampering with something like that could alter everything; disrupting the natural course of events, and maybe for worse. Regardless of what I did with that knowledge, I still had to pay a price for tapping into the ability. The divine elements would punish me by leaving me weakened. Nose bleeds accompanied by teeth-gritting pain would circulate through my entire body immediately after a vision. I guess it was nature's way of finding balance—damage control, if you will. And it wasn't pretty.

"Earth to Quinn," Annabelle said, snapping her fingers in my face. "Zone out much?" She rolled her eyes.

"Sorry," I said. My senses were overstimulated. The Supe in the corner might as well have been wearing a flashing neon sign bright enough to induce a migraine.

"What's with you this morning?" she asked.

"I'm just having trouble staying focused," I said, rolling my neck from side to side in hopes of easing the building tension. "I probably just need to recharge."

Annabelle's dark eyes widened, her doll-like face shifting into an expression of understanding. "We can take a hike if you want? We have the whole week to finish this report. I could use some fresh air."

“Yeah?”

“Of course,” she answered. “Let me just use the facilities, and then I’ll meet you outside.”

I nodded gratefully and began stuffing my books inside my bag with haste. I wound through the obstacle course of people and scattered chairs, and deposited our empty coffee mugs on the counter.

“Thanks Q, see ya’ Monday,” Torrance said.

“Thanks for the caffeine fix.” I tapped my goodbye on the counter and turned away. My shoulder bounced off a solid object, and I found myself looking up into the face of the Supe. For a moment, time seemed to stop all together. He had midsummer night eyes, I thought, voltaic; reminiscent of slow-rolling heat lightning on long, lazy summer nights. I blinked a couple of times, working my way out of the trance.

“Sorry,” he said in a low tone that sounded more like a rumble, “I didn’t see you there.” He started to smile, and I noticed a smirk seemed to take its place naturally, accentuating the small dimples on either side of his lips.

I meant to speak. I felt my lips parting, but for some odd sort of reason, the words just wouldn’t form. Instead of fading, the pulsing of my awareness only heightened in his immediate presence.

He strolled past me then, stirring the air with scents of earth and pine as he headed for the door. He moved with a vigilant awareness of his surroundings; every motion calculated. He’d bumped into me on purpose, I decided. And as I watched him climb behind the wheel of an old, black Pontiac Firebird, I wondered just what sort of game he was playing.

~*~

“Homecoming is next weekend,” Annabelle said behind me. She’d tried for a nonchalant approach to the subject but I couldn’t help hearing an influx of interest in her tone.

“So it is,” I replied. My calves were filled with the delicious ache from climbing through the forest. There were plenty of hiking trails mapped out through the park, but I knew the forest by heart, and preferred the adventure of hacking through uncharted land. I couldn’t say the same for Annabelle, though she tolerated my escapades without complaint.

“So,” she continued, “I was thinking that since we’re seniors this year maybe we should go—you know, for the sake of high school tradition.”

I wrinkled up my nose. “Since when do you care about high school traditions?”

“I don’t really. It’s just that years from now I want to be able to look back on my life and know that I didn’t miss out on anything. I don’t want to have any regrets.”

I stopped abruptly and felt her smack into my spine. I spun on my heel to face her. “Okay, who are you and what did you do with my best friend? Do I need to perform an exorcism spell, because the Annabelle I know doesn’t give a flying rats ass about ‘high school traditions’—in fact, I’m pretty sure she’d tell me they’re overrated.”

Annabelle rolled her dark eyes skyward, reaching back and looping her long black hair into a ponytail. “You’re not funny, Quinn.”

“I can’t be both comedian and witch—it’s against the rules of the universe.” I continued to tease her. She sighed deeply and moved in front of me, stomping off through the wilderness.

“Anna, wait,” I said, catching up to her. “I’m just playing with you. I honestly didn’t mean any offense—but I do know you, and I know you wouldn’t want to go to this dance unless you had a very specific reason.”

She wheeled on me and blurted, “Shawn asked me to go with him.”

“Shawn *Fletcher*?” My eyes widened owlshly. “When?”

“Last week.” She shrugged, studying my expression. “He asked me after AP chem. I didn’t tell you because I was sure you’d try to talk me out of it.”

“I wouldn’t do that!” I said defensively.

Annabelle lifted a perfectly manicured eyebrow and just glared at me.

“Well what about Huck’s anti-homecoming party? We already agreed to go.” (As had most of our cross-country team.) Huck was the boys’ team captain, and his parents were conveniently going to be out of town for their anniversary that weekend.

“I guess you’ll just have to go without me.”

“But you love Huck’s parties.”

“I don’t like the party aspect of it so much as I just like hanging out with all our friends,” she told me. “It’s just this one time.”

“Do you even like Shawn?”

Annabelle laughed, the sound of disbelief carrying high into the treetops. “Shall I hand you a shovel now, it’s looking pretty deep in there.”

“All right, I’m sorry,” I told her. “You’ve just never mentioned him before.” Book-smart and driven to succeed, Annabelle rarely mentioned boys or crushes. I could count the number of dates she’d been on with one of my hands and still have a few fingers to spare. It wasn’t that she didn’t get asked out, because she did. It was just that she was always so practical—wise beyond her years. Most of the boys at our school were leagues beneath what she called an “acceptable maturity level.”

“Shawn’s nice,” Annabelle said. We’d reached one of my favorite hideaways in the serene forest. Ducking beneath the low branches of the surrounding pines, we found ourselves in what I’d christened, The Hollow.

The opened area was nearly a perfect circle surrounded by towering rows of ancient pines, where the dense greenery and rubble of the earth rose up to meet the sun. Thousands of russet colored needles coated the forest floor, and several moss-covered boulders jutted forth from the earth; some taller than six feet, and just as wide. Annabelle slung her pack from her shoulders, letting it drop at the base of a boulder and climbed up so that her feet were dangling above the ground.

“He is nice,” I agreed. Shawn had a mop of brown shaggy hair that curled over his shirt collar. His glasses were too big for his face—he was always pushing them up the bridge of his nose whenever he looked down. He was clumsy too, tripping over shoelaces and dropping school books down the stairwell on a semi regular basis. He was, however, undoubtedly wicked smart. He was valedictorian, sitting at the top of our graduating class with a perfect GPA.

“And if you don’t mind his scruffy hair and baggy clothes, he’s kind of cute,” she added, bouncing her heels off the boulder.

“Hey if you like him, that’s all that matters.” I sat down at the base of her boulder, resting my back against the moss-padded surface. The sun filtered down through the branches, casting rays of slanted golden light through the Hollow. The Earth’s power was strong here. I pressed my fingertips through the orange needles and into the top layer of dirt below. I inhaled deeply, practically tasting pine. The image of the Supe’s amber eyes flashed across my inner vision; the scent sparking a memory. The back of my neck tingled, so I pressed my fingertips deeper into the ground and concentrated on letting the Earth element rejuvenate my senses.

“You could come with us—to the dance I mean,” Annabelle suggested a moment later, and I snorted.

“Tempting, but I think I’ll pass on the third-wheel portion of the program.”

“What about Jamie? I see the way he looks at you at practice. I’ll bet he’d be more than happy to escort you to the dance.”

Jamie was cute, and on very rare occasions he could be charming. Mostly he was an arrogant goofball. I’d had a huge crush on him my sophomore year, but neither of us had been brave enough to take a step past flirting. “I’m going to Huck’s party,” I said. “It’ll be fun.”

“Yeah, but we always do everything together,” Annabelle added. “I just don’t want you to be upset with me for going to the dance.”

“I’m not upset,” I told her, forcing what I hoped was a tone of enthusiasm into my voice. “I hope you have a lot of fun at the dance, honestly. And if for some reason you guys want to duck out early, you know where to find me.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “Are you feeling any better?”

“A little.” A witches’ magic source is derived from the earth itself. Since our abilities are closely linked with the elements, being outside in nature actually makes us stronger. It was like nature provided a charge and I could use it to replenish my rundown battery. It was harder to do from inside a building, or in places like a city. From what I understood, I could only draw energy from things that were alive.

“You always seem a little off in the magical department this time of year.” She’d said it innocently enough, but I knew she was thinking of the real reason behind my magic-blockage.

Autumn had always been the season I looked most forward to. In the mountains, nature put on a spectacular display of fall foliage as leaves and shrubbery erupted in brilliant hues of rich

color. The air was crisp and sweetly scented, and the town put on the annual Autumn Apple Festival to celebrate the change. But for magical beings, particularly witches, autumn meant something more powerful. It brought on the harvest moon, and the autumnal equinox. It was a time for light and dark to find balance, as day and night stood equal in time. The equinox brought on regeneration and restoration; a time for giving thanks.

My mother and I used to celebrate the autumnal equinox—or Mabon—together. We would climb deep into the Hollow and cast a protective circle, lighting candles that represented each of the five elements to start our ritual. We'd arrange an alter honoring the Earth Mother and reflect on the past year and talk about what we were grateful for—not so different from the Christian celebration of Thanksgiving. It was a time where my mother and I celebrated what we were, and in doing so, I'd never felt more free, or more alive.

That was before she got sick, and cancer took her from us.

I hadn't celebrated the equinox since.

There were still so many unanswered questions about who I was and what I could do—still so much I needed her for.

The wind picked up, carrying the scents of the forest in a blustery breeze. Sometimes, I could still smell her perfume; a vanilla musk that was out of place among the trees.