

“Are you all right, Mr. Chastain?” Sierra asked.

North Chastain was clearly startled by the question. It immediately became obvious he was also seriously pissed off.

“I’m fine,” he said.

He was lying. She could see enough of his reflected aura in the mirror on the wall behind him to tell her that the man from the Foundation was sleep deprived. She was sure North Chastain was drawing energy from his paranormal senses not simply to stay awake but to ward off the disorienting effects that resulted from a severe lack of sleep.

It wasn’t just lack of sleep that was disturbing his senses, she concluded. There was something else going on with his aura, something more complicated. The dark reflections in the mirror were difficult to interpret. She might be able to get a better read on him if she could get a look at his eyes—she was pretty good at reading eyes—but that was impossible at the moment because North was wearing wraparound mirrored sunglasses. Indoors. In the shadows of the dimly illuminated basement of the Vault nightclub.

He did not appear to be the kind of man who adopted dramatic affectations like sunglasses in a nightclub. The glasses were part of the mystery that enveloped him.

With his hard, sharp profile, he had a predatory edge that gave him an intriguing but decidedly ominous vibe. He was not a man you would want to cross. Like her, he was wearing a lot of leather—jacket and boots but no gloves. She assumed he wore it for the same reasons she did. Cleaners kicked down a lot of dangerous doors and had to be prepared to come in contact with some hot artifacts. They chased the bad guys, after all.

Beneath the jacket North wore a gray crew-neck pullover and black cargo trousers festooned with a lot of pockets. He had dropped a pack onto the floor when he sat down in the booth.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet with me,” North said. He sounded cool and professional now, having evidently managed to control his short rush of irritation.

She gave him her most polished smile. “Anything for the Foundation.”

North winced. “In other words you figured that if you didn’t agree to see me, you might be looking at trouble from Las Vegas.”

“Exactly. Also, I need the money and Mr. Jones assures me the Foundation always pays its tab. Okay, I’m here. You’re here. Tell me about the case.”

North drank some coffee and lowered the big mug. She was drinking coffee, too, a frothy cappuccino. North had ordered a triple-shot grande.

“Are you aware of Swan Antiques in Pioneer Square?” North asked.

“Of course,” Sierra said. “Gwendolyn Swan is a player in the hot artifacts market. I’ve done a few jobs for her. Why?”

“Yesterday afternoon Chandler Chastain bought an artifact from her.”

“I’m assuming the Chastain name is not a coincidence?”

“No,” North said. “Chandler is my father. At some point after he purchased the artifact he was attacked. He’s awake but he’s almost entirely unresponsive, although he does seem to be able to communicate a little through Mom when they have physical contact.”

Shocked, Sierra set her cup down. “I’m so sorry. Was he shot?”

“No. There is no evidence of physical trauma, which makes me think he was attacked with something that affected his paranormal senses. He may have been drugged. That’s the theory the doctors are going on at the moment. But there is another possibility.”

Sierra eyed him warily. “What?”

North hesitated. “The attacker might have used a hot artifact, one infused with a lot of dangerous, unknown radiation that destabilized Dad’s aura.”

Sierra went still. “Are you talking about a paranormal weapon? That’s the unholy grail of the underground collectors’ market. If such a thing existed the Foundation would be breathing fire down the neck of any dealer or go-between or collector who tried to buy or sell it.”

Too late she realized she should have kept her mouth shut.