

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRACKED FLUORESCENT PANEL on the ceiling buzzed, flickering to darkness for a brief second before flaring back to life with a loud crack. Standing outside the dingy office, a newspaper advertisement clutched in her hand, Gwen Conway wondered what she was doing. Here she was answering some vague classified with the desperate hope it would lead to a job. *A glorified secretarial job. I wonder if I'll get to fetch coffee too. Oh lucky day.*

The hallway itself did little to settle her nerves. The stained linoleum flooring and the bad lighting brought to mind too many horror movies to count. Standing there was creepy enough. Working there? *Imagine how charming it would be at night.* She read the lettering on the glass-paned door. *Alistair Fletcher, Legal Files Specialist and ... something.* The rest was too faded to make out. Although she was curious about the full title, she was content with the use of the word 'legal.' Not her dream job by any stretch of the imagination, but it was good enough.

Running a hand over her chestnut hair, she hoped it wasn't a frizzy mess from the rain. It was hard to act the functioning adult when her hair was snarled as if she'd been dragged backwards through a hedge. With a sigh, she practiced a smile. No one was going to hire her if she walked around like a kid who dropped her ice cream cone. *Great, now I'm depressed and craving ice cream.*

She knocked. *Here we go.*

The office was bigger than it looked from the outside; and after the dingy light of the hallway, it was brighter too. Her attention was focused on the solitary figure standing in front of a large desk. At her approach, the man offered his hand for her to shake.

"Miss Conway, I presume?" His voice carried a distant hint of rolling green hills and waves on a rocky shore.

Alistair Fletcher wasn't what she imagined at all. She was expecting an academic eccentric: a smart, but odd man; thinning white hair, stooped shoulders, and owlish eyes hidden behind thick-framed glasses—a grandfatherly type. Who else would be banished to this forgotten basement corridor?

Instead, Mr. Fletcher was tall, and, while somewhere on the far side of middle aged, he hadn't let himself diminish with time. His thick, silver hair was combed back from a high forehead, and his jaw was covered with a neat beard. She didn't realize she was staring until his eyebrow arched over his steel gray eye.

"That's me." Gwen blushed. "Mr. Fletcher?" Her voice cracked, disbelief coloring her words. Her cheeks burned hotter.

"Yes." The one word contained the hint of a smile. "I hope you didn't have any trouble finding the office?"

"Not at all." Her gaze bounced around the room trying to find a safe place to land. Biting her lip, in a gesture carried over from childhood, she dragged her gaze back to the man's face. Gwen wanted to blame her nerves on the rudeness of the courthouse secretary. As Gwen had asked for directions, the woman's daggered fingernails tapped out an irritated beat. She had made Gwen feel as welcome as a cockroach in a five-star hotel. "The secretary upstairs, um, told me where to go. I didn't know we were supposed to use the back entrance to the courthouse. After that, an elevator ride and a couple flights of stairs, nothing too difficult." She tried not to wince. *You're blathering, Conway. He knows you can go down stairs. How impressive.*

This time his amusement was obvious. Motioning for her to sit, he folded himself back into the chair. "I must say, Miss Conway, I was surprised to receive your resume. With your accomplishments, I would think you'd be more interested in furthering your education."

He made a valid point. On paper, she was a college graduate and the recipient of the highest LSAT scores in the state. However, her resume wouldn't describe how her law school applications sat in the back of her closet collecting dust. Or how she was drowning and she needed something to keep her afloat. "Mr. Fletcher, I need the job."

He didn't appear offended by her bluntness, so she continued. "My test results were ... adequate, but the timing isn't right for law school. It's a difficult job market out there. And I believe this job offers a chance to—" Here she struggled for a polite way to say 'pad her resume with a job containing legal in the title.' "—a chance to increase my skill set. If I decide to go to law school, this may be the edge I need to succeed."

He rubbed his chin. "Fair enough. However, as advertised, this is little more than a filing job. I can't promise that you would gain any real legal experience."

Gwen tried to hide her surprise. Interviews were all about smoke and mirrors, creating an image of perfection. The picture-perfect employee was smart, not arrogant; self-possessed, not cocky; complimentary, not sycophantic. A smart interviewee would never question the validity of the offered job. The idea the potential employer would do so himself? *Welcome to the Twilight Zone.*

Mr. Fletcher continued speaking. "There are a few things to work out, Miss Conway." He waved his hand. "The usual: hours, pay, benefits. But minus any disagreements, the job is yours. It appears, Miss Conway, you are tailor-made for a job here at the Archives."

"Thank you, Mr. Fletcher." Gwen smiled despite herself. The interview wasn't going at all like she imagined. And she hadn't asked any of the questions she drafted up the night before. *Still, some good news. For once. But am I really going to accept a job after such a short interview?* "I would love to accept." *Apparently I am.*

He rested his chin on his folded hands, studying her face. "I would also ask you to consider your future here at the Archives. Certain occasions are known to arise when an Archivist is given a chance to perform outside their normal responsibilities."

He must have seen her confusion. "Employment in the Archives may not be as dull as you expect. You are never sure what mysteries you might uncover."

Gwen somehow doubted filing legal documents would unearth any great mysteries. Still, she smiled politely. At a brisk pace, the preliminary questions and required paperwork were dispatched, and with a flourish, she signed the final page.

Mr. Fletcher took the last sheet and stacked it with the others. "Well, *alea iacta est.*" With something resembling a sigh, he rose.

She might have considered the strange pronouncement, but she noticed a heavy oak door behind Mr. Fletcher's shoulder.

Mr. Fletcher followed her gaze. "Welcome to the Archives, Miss Conway."

"Thank you, Mr. Fletcher."

"Please, call me Alistair."

"Of course." However, she had a feeling calling her boss by his first name might be a little tricky, particularly when he was as formal as Mr. Fletcher, *Alistair*, seemed to be. "I look forward to starting."

Some hidden emotion darkened his gray eyes. But when he smiled, Gwen was convinced she must have imagined it. “Until then, Miss Conway.”

“It’s Gwen.” She smiled.

He made a soft sound that could have been a laugh and repeated her earlier words. “Of course.”

A few moments later, she stood outside the office staring at the faded lettering for a second time. With a soft laugh, Gwen walked towards the old service elevator the receptionist demanded she use. This time the clicking of her heels didn’t register. *A job. An honest to goodness*—something slammed into her shoulder, and the force sent her spinning. Blinking, she steadied herself against the wall. She scanned the empty hallway in confusion. *Didn’t someone just ...?* Rubbing the back of her neck, she shook her head. Thanks to the creepy hallway, she was already imagining things.

A job. An honest to goodness job. She couldn’t prevent the slight skip in her step. When she noticed she wasn’t alone in the hallway, however, she slowed her walk, biting her cheek to prevent an embarrassed laugh from escaping.

The old man nodded a greeting at her as he brushed a mop back and forth across the floor. “Any luck, miss? Heard they were hiring some kind of secretary down here.”

Gwen couldn’t help but smile. Turns out she wasn’t too far off with her imagining; she just had been picturing the janitor instead of her future boss. “Actually, I was lucky. They won’t be looking for someone any longer.”

The man peered at her from behind his thick glasses, his eyes faded but sweet. “Well, it wouldn’t hurt to get a fresh face down here, if you don’t mind me saying.” He turned his attention back to his mopping. “Nice meeting you.”

He moved down the hallway, his mop leaving a wet trail behind him. Gwen almost could hear his joints pop and creak with the movement.

Her good mood stayed with her as she waited for the elevator to descend to her level. *Goodbye unemployment; hello steady income.*

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In a room hidden within a twisting labyrinth, an ancient presence stirred. Something drew him from his rest. Too aware to sleep, he instead spent the endless years dwelling on past events. *And*

planning. Always planning. The ages dripped by at a maddeningly slow pace. Yet he could do nothing, imprisoned behind the glimmering surface of a black framed mirror.

The mirror hung alone in the dusty room. It was crafted with extraordinary skill, each carved figure waiting to come to life at the softest breath. On closer examination, the mirror's beauty turned grotesque. Hercules, driven mad by Hera, slaughtered his entire family. Prometheus, chained and bound, screamed in agony while a skeletal eagle tore at his liver. Sisyphus, tired and bloodied, struggled to press a boulder up a jagged hill. Set, smile as wicked and sharp as his knife, carved his brother Osiris into tiny pieces and hid them along the banks of the Nile. Each image was more disturbing than the last. Out of the corner of the eye, they writhed in pain.

With a soft crack, a thin fissure appeared on the face of the mirror. A dark smoke slithered out from the flaw and disappeared into the shadows clinging to the corners of the room. A wavering light illuminated the glittering mirror before the room was once again plunged into darkness.

He had waited for eons and conserved his strength. Whatever weakened his prison, it was sufficient. Complete freedom could wait. For now, the power to change would be enough. The Guardians had forced the time streams to remain static for too long. Change would be good.

In fact, change would be excellent. Through change, he would find revenge.

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Alistair sat at his desk, chin still resting on his folded fingers. His gaze shifted to the neat signature on the bottom of the paperwork. *Miss Gwen Conway*. She reminded him of days better left forgotten. He wished he could throw away the paperwork and call to explain why the job was no longer hers. Or if he was asking for the unattainable, he wished he had never written the advertisement in the first place. But he had very little control over what would come next. It didn't matter if he only wanted to keep Gwen safe from a world she knew nothing about.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, willing the tension to ease from his temples. His wife would have reminded him that only Gwen could control her future. Keeping her from the Archives might spare her pain, but it would also prevent her from following her fated path, regardless of where the path would lead her.

The darkness was soothing, so he allowed himself to sit, alone and aching. Then he stacked up the papers and locked them in a desk drawer. His hands were steady, yet he fought the need to run. *To hide.* Alistair stood and walked down the hallway at a deliberate pace.

It may be the coward's way, but nothing prevented him from avoiding the girl. It would give him time to think. *To plan.* He walked the familiar path through the Archives to his living quarters. Entering his front room, a small dark form wrapped itself around Alistair's legs. Its angry mews admonished him for being late. He paid it no mind, too focused on his destination.

On his bedroom dresser, with a vase of pale pink tea roses, was a photograph of a young woman, her eyes shining in a laughing face. With gentle fingers, he shifted it so it was centered and parallel to the vase.

"I'll do my best." His words broke the still silence and were every bit as empty as the dark room. *The die has been cast, indeed.*