

## **Lineage chapter one**

### Chapter One

*Looking for bright, responsible, career-oriented, self-motivated individuals who have excellent people skills and are able to take high volumes of calls while maintaining a positive attitude. Ability to work with others is a must.*

I glanced down at the advertisement in my hand. I had none of those qualifications according to my last employer—and pretty much all my other previous ones as well. I was, however, a “foul-mouthed, bad-tempered, under-performing”—still didn’t understand that one—“sarcastic, waste of space.” Although, to be fair, only one of the previous employers actually called me a waste of space, and that was because I had stopped sleeping with him.

This unfortunate lack of options was the reason I stood in the parking lot of Tribec Insurance, smoking the last of my apple-flavored cigars—a habit I learned from my father—wearing a cream-colored dress suit and a pair of matching pumps. I couldn’t afford either of them, and I really hated pumps. But I needed the job, so I dressed the part of the career-oriented, self-motivated candidate the ad was searching for.

Most of the jobs in the area required a college degree, or at least several years of experience. I had no college degree, and the longest I’d ever been employed at one job was six months. Thankfully, Tribec Insurance was always hiring and had no such requirements—a rarity in the uptight community of Alice where Tribec was located.

Through a ring of cigar smoke, I took in the phallic structure that was Tribec Insurance. My eyes landed on the small, stone, pyramid-like shape at the top of the building. It reminded me of an Egyptian Obelisk—a symbol to the god Ra. The Egyptian word for it, “Tejen,” meant “protection” or “defense.”

Why would the occupants of Tribec Insurance erect a symbol of protection or defense on top of the building?

A slight breeze blew over my bare arms, carrying the salty scent of the ocean and stirring the beads of sweat that had formed on them. My new blouse had molded to my back, and my feet had started to sweat. I was generally used to Tulare Island’s oppressive heat, but the anxious jitters in my stomach had caused my skin to flush.

I tried to dispel the nervousness in my stomach. Despite the obvious, I didn’t want to show that I was desperate. My best friend Kara spent most of last night trying to prep me for the interview. She advised me to not ask annoying questions, make sarcastic comments, or let my disgruntled attitude show.

Essentially, she advised me to not be myself. There was a message in there somewhere, but I was choosing to ignore it.

Out of our original group in high school, Kara was the only one who was still in my life. The only one who actually gave a damn about me. Marta and I hadn’t spoken in years, and as for Steve... Well, it was a long time ago.

I glanced at my watch. Damn. I guess I had procrastinated long enough. I put out my cigar, grabbed my blazer from the front seat of my car, shoved the advertisement back in my overly large purse, and headed for the building. As I walked, I attempted to wrap my head around the fact that I was essentially *asking* Tribec Insurance to let me spend my days chained to a desk, listening to complaints from strangers.

Maybe I should look into prostitution. At least I'd enjoy the job. Kara also told me to smile a lot, so I pasted one on, pulled open the glass door, and stepped inside. Only to stop dead in my tracks at the entrance.

The walls—painted a burnt gold color that reminded me of the sunset—were lined with Egyptian art. Four glass displays, filled with half-head replicas of deities and artifacts, sat in each corner of the room. Green foliage hung from black ceramic pots near the entrance and the elevator. Something was off about the elevator. It wasn't stainless-steel. No, more like marble. Black marble with gold striations that, at first glance, appeared to be moving. Odd.

And everything, including the guard station—which sat sunken into the foundation in the middle of the floor—was set up in a spherical configuration. Directly behind the guard station was a set of mahogany double doors, with gold Egyptian hieroglyphs carved around the frame. They were also etched around the guard station.

Most people on Tulare Island either practiced one of the four principles of magick or knew someone who did. There was, however, a small group of people who, despite the evidence, still refused to believe in magick. They usually carried picket signs outside of herbal and occult shops, telling people they were going to burn in hell, not realizing they were actually practicing faith magick every time they went to church.

Judging from the set-up of the room, and even the obelisk on the top of the building outside, I could hazard a guess—more like an assumption—that the occupants of Tribec Insurance practiced magick.

Despite my assumption, I couldn't figure out which of the four principles—earth, elemental, mind, or faith—the people at Tribec used. There was, however, a fifth principle—blood—that to my knowledge, no one practiced anymore. And sadly, I didn't know enough about it to recognize any symbols associated with its practice. Yet, symbols from the other four were etched all over the walls. Odd. Especially since people only had the ability to practice one. Not all four.

If it was a job requirement for me to use magick, I was running the hell out of here. I would live in a cardboard box before I got involved with magick. And if I didn't get a job soon, that was exactly where I'd be living. Especially since I refused to move back in with my parents. I had to grow the hell up sometime.

I moved farther into the lobby; the scent of desert sand wafted around me. It had that baked-on smell that emanated off the ground when the sun was at its peak. It was unusual, but the décor could explain the smell. Especially if they added sand to some of the displays for authenticity. The odor that was definitely out of place was the one directly underneath it.

*Blood.* It was faint. I could almost chalk it up to imagination. Almost. If it wasn't so

overpowering.

I moved forward cautiously, my heels clicking on the white-tiled floor, as I tried to pinpoint where the scent was coming from. But the farther away from the door I got, the less I smelled it. I turned and started back toward where I'd first detected the smell. A chair creaked, stopping me in my tracks. The space between my shoulder blades started to itch. I turned.

The guard behind the desk was watching me.

I stood there, debating whether or not I should just leave. Yes, I was desperate, but the smell of blood? Was I imagining it? I pulled in a deep breath, trying to find the scent again. Nothing.

*Get it together, Nicole.*

After a short pause, I shook myself mentally, and continued toward the guard station with the guard's black eyes boring into me. Sizing me up.

"Can I help you, miss?" He rose to his feet and crossed his arms across his chest.

I placed him in his late twenties. He had a solid frame, close-cropped black hair, deep set black eyes, and no facial hair. The dark brown suit he wore looked as if it had been poured onto him. Had to be ex-military.

The gold tag on his shirt read "Oliver Strong." It suited him.

"Yes, my name is Nicole Fontane, and I'm here for an interview with..." I set my purse on the counter, ignoring his pointed glare, and pulled out my tattered notebook. "...a Francine Delaporte at eleven."

"Have a seat. I will call someone down to escort you." He inclined his head in the direction of the red leather couch on the right.

"Okay, thanks," I said as I mentally extended my middle finger. Everything about him rubbed me the wrong damn way.

I sat and placed my purse beside me on the couch—the damn thing weighed a ton—and picked up one of the brochures for Tribec Insurance. While I sat there leafing through it, another security guard walked up and blocked my view of the sun. Well, he would have if there had been one inside the building. This burly bastard had tree trunks for arms and a head that resembled a boulder. Did they chisel him from a mountain?

"Ms. Fontane?" the guard grumbled. It sounded as if his voice came from a gut full of rocks.

I stood, which put me at eye level to his massive chest and the name tag pinned to his shirt that read "Duncan Glass."

Maybe when they hired their guards, they assigned them names as well.

"Yes." I tried to push myself up a few inches more. I was already wearing three-inch heels, bringing my total height to five nine, yet this massive behemoth still towered over me.

"Follow me." He spun around abruptly and led the way to the elevator.

I was tempted to salute him, or give him the finger—the damn bossy bastard.

*Calm down, Nicole. You need this job.*

Duncan pulled a card from his pocket and inserted it into a slot located on the right side. I

guess that answered my question about the oddity of the elevator. Besides the strange composition, they didn't have a call button. They sure did have a high level of security for an insurance company. Maybe they denied more claims than they approved. Greedy bastards.

When the doors slid open, Duncan extended his arm out. "Ms. Fontane."

I stepped inside.

Once the doors were closed, he inserted his card into another slot, and a display lit up with a list of floors.

The number thirteen was among them.

I had once read somewhere that all older buildings either omitted the thirteenth floor or renamed it. It all stemmed from a superstition that the thirteenth floor was unlucky. I wasn't superstitious, but I did find it interesting they chose to include it.

"They have a thirteenth floor," I said.

"It comes after twelve."

While I was no stranger to snide comments I really didn't like others using them on me. Bastard.

A few moments later, the elevator doors opened and, thankfully, deposited us on the seventeenth floor. I followed Duncan to a set of offices in the center of the floor. He stopped at the first door in a row of three that faced the elevators. The silver name plate affixed to it read: Francine Delaporte. After he rapped on it three times, he planted his feet a few inches apart and placed his hands behind his back.

Maybe Duncan thought he was still in the military.

I took in the room while I waited. Cameras inside small black orbs dotted the ceiling. A hazy gray tint covered the windows, allowing minimal light to filter into the room. Industrial gray walls sported a few framed "inspirational" quotes that referred to "teamwork" and "having a positive attitude." They even had the stupid "Hang in There" poster with a cat hanging off a wire.

Even the partitions that divided the employees' desks were gray. The only break up in the ashen color were the fake wood desks.

It reminded me of a mental asylum.

The majority of the people in the office were women, with a few men thrown in here and there. Did they believe women were more suited to talking on the phone? Either way, everyone in the room was pasty, their eyes sunken in, wearing expressions that suggested they had given up on life. I wouldn't have been surprised if they were all former tenants of the asylum, dressed up in over-sized clothes and forced into the role of "employee."

The fact that no one looked up when Duncan and I got off the elevator supported my theory. They just sat there in their little black chairs, talking into their headsets, all repeating what sounded like the same practiced spiel in monotonous tones, a few minutes behind one another. Like a rolling set of waves crashing against the most boring shore imaginable.

I turned back to Duncan. He still stood at ease in front of Francine Delaporte's door. What the hell was taking this woman so long? My feet were killing me. Like an idiot, instead of

breaking the shoes in after Kara left last night, I had curled up on the couch with a bottle of Samuel Adams, contemplating my limited options. My little pity party of one ended at midnight when I realized my only option was one I wasn't willing to entertain.

As I switched my purse from my right shoulder to my left, I caught sight of a faint circular line drawn around the cubicles. I stared at the ground, unsure if I was seeing things, or if there really was a line drawn on the floor. I straightened and moved to the left, trying to follow it. As I stood there transfixed, someone brushed their frigid hand across my exposed neck.

Coldness raced down my spine, and the scent of sand filled my nostrils.

I whipped around.

Duncan was gone.

In his place stood a woman wearing a red paint suit. Given that she was at least five feet away from me with her hands down at her sides... Who the hell had touched my neck?

Francine extended her hand and smiled. "Hello. Ms. Fontane?"

I stepped forward, my legs suddenly weak, and took her hand. "Hi." I cleared my throat. "Yes, I'm Nicole Fontane."

"I'm Francine Delaporte. Let's get started." She let go of my hand and walked into her office.

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to warm the sudden chill that had settled there. I glanced around the room. The employees remained at their desks, staring rapt at their computer screens.

A cool breeze circled the room, pulling my gaze toward the ceiling. An air vent sat directly above me.

Before I entered Francine's office, I glanced down at the floor. The markings were gone. Maybe I had imagined them. And maybe the air-conditioning explained the feeling of someone brushing their fingers across my neck.

Yes—for sanity's sake, I was going to go with that.

Just my overactive imagination.