

Chapter 1

“Shit is hitting the fan!” I yelled as I rounded the corner into the living room where Ashlyn and Danny were trying to take some quick head-on-pillow time. They both jumped, automatically grabbing their cache of weapons that we’ve had at our fingertips for the last several weeks.

Danny was first to land on my side of the couch, but he’d been training his whole life to be a demon hunter. Ashlyn, an on-leave park ranger and my current girlfriend (totally not relevant, but it’s been awhile and I just like saying it), was only two steps behind him. *Swoon.*

“Where?” Danny asked.

Ashlyn, overlapping Danny, “How many?”

Both valid questions since we had to switch from offense to defense in this demon hunting game about three weeks ago after we bitch-slapped the Reyna, aka the Queen of Hell. I have other titles for her, but we’ll get into those later. See, the dirty little mud flap (it’s later) had come up with a clever plan to overtake the throne of her hubby, the King of Hell, otherwise known as Satan, Lucifer, El Diablo, Beelzebub, big giant flaming asshole, or whatever floats your evil boat. Her plan was to birth a child strong enough to take on the bringer of doom and gloom—a child of a fallen angel and her pure evil ass. Then she’d do the manipulative mother thing and bippity boppity boo: using her son as a weapon she would try to oust the ultimate dictator of bad. End game being, the Reyna would, by proxy, be the biggest, baddest, mama jama around. There was only one itsy bitsy problem with her plan ...

Enter me: AJ Mattox, demon hunter *extraordinaire*. I added the last part because to be honest my attitude has kind of been in the crapper lately and I

thought the slight embellishment would be a morale booster. I should also intro my band of merry men. Well, one “men,” Danny, the rightful heir to the hunter’s spirit, Norm, who’s currently hitching a ride in my skin suit instead. Long story. Let’s CliffsNote it: asshole teenage me, grain alcohol, stumble, stumble, land in ancient Native American ritual, and wham bam *No* thank you ma’am, I’m now a demon hunter. And Danny is the lucky sidekick trying to keep my ass alive until the next Hunter’s Moon, so we can reverse my little screwup.

And then there’s Ashlyn, my current slobber swapper (she wasn’t too hip on that title, but I had to get it out of my system). She added herself to this traveling troupe of shitstorms after learning about the true supernatural cause of her father’s death and the current threat to humanity, oh, and she might almost kind of like me. So, yeah, she’s kind of bad with the life decision stuff, but she’s really, really heart-thumpity good at everything else.

In answer to Danny and Ashlyn’s “where and how many” questions, I simply retreated to the back room from which I’d started this little get-up-and-go. I flung open the door, and like good little troops Danny and Ashlyn rushed in. I shut the door behind them. Them in and me outie.

I smiled at Danny’s defeated sigh. “You suck,” he yelled.

I gasped loud enough that the two that don’t have supersonic hearing could hear it through the cheap wood door. “Ashlyn! I thought we agreed what happens in the bedroom stays in the bedroom!” I could hear Danny’s groan and Ashlyn’s eyes scraping the top of her eye sockets. Insert evil grin here. “If you use the chair in the corner, you can reach the fan. Oh, and FYI, I think we should probably lay off the peas and sweet potato combo for a bit.” I walked away at the sound of Danny’s gag going into full-on retch.

I was sitting on the floor, my back against one of the living room chairs, a chair designed back in the days when chairs had skirts and obnoxious flower patterns. If that wasn't enough to tell me the décor was circa-old, it smelled like several generations of butts had taken up residence there over the years. Not saying the cabin wasn't clean; it was, with a good layer of Lysol over it all. It was just that my super sniffer was cranked to ten, and huffing leftover butt bouquets was one of the downsides to my not-so-superhero fringe benefits. On the flip side, I can also smell fresh donuts within a five-mile radius, so it was a pretty fair trade-off.

I was sharpening the second of my two long blades, Hall, as I'd already tended to Oates, when Danny, Ashlyn, and Baby Apocalypse—Apoc for short, as it was way easier to spell and it also sounded more rapper and less bringer of doom, which I thought might go over better in play groups emerged from the back room. Danny, still a little green around the edges, sat the destroyer of the world and several thousand Huggies in the center of the living room rug. It took Apoc a couple of seconds to get his four pudgy appendages on the same page, but he was getting better at it, only diaper checking the floor twice before he was up and going, beelining it over my outstretched legs to barrel down on Hall.

The kid really had an unhealthy fascination with shiny objects and, even more disturbing, a fascination with me. There were several things about the kid that completely wiggled me out. One, he's a kid. Two, he's the supposed doomsday-er for the underworld and in turn this world. Three, he's a freakishly fast grower. It'd only been three weeks since we took in Little Orphan A-bomb and he was already crawling and eating baby food. Four, his hands are always sticky. Yes, I'm aware the hand situation could be way worse since his mom is the Queen of Hell and has talons, but seriously, this kid is a crying, peeing, pooping glue stick. And fifth, and most

unnerving, is that he has his father's incredibly kind and brilliant blue eyes. Michael, a fallen angel, all because he'd opened his heart and fallen in love with the wrong woman. Granted, it was the really, really, really, wrong woman, The Queen of Hell aka the Reyna. But still, he was a good man. A good man that had left his world to find and then ultimately sacrifice his life to protect his son, with the awesome side benefit of protecting the world by forcing the Reyna back into the fiery hellhole that she'd crawled out of.

I shook off the memory of Michael's last moments before his fiery demise as I caught Apoc's hand going for Hall. "No. What did we say about sharp things? Not until your sixteenth birthday." I set both Hall and Oates out of reach and let the little clinger crawl into my lap. "Which, my little magical bean, could be like a month from now."

Ashlyn dropped onto the chair behind me, a leg on either side of my shoulders. I leaned my head sweetly against her knee, wanting in this small gesture to convey my thanks and love. Her knee turned pinball flipper and knocked my head back upright.

"Not after that little stunt you just pulled."

"What? I didn't lie. Shit was literally on the fan. I can't help that you got all froggy and jumped to conclusions. I think I did you," I flipped a look at Danny, "both of you a favor—a valuable life lesson."

Ashlyn snorted her disagreement. It wasn't one of her better sounds. "Here's a valuable life lesson." She leaned forward to point over my shoulder toward the back room, "That kind of stunt equals you sleeping on the couch and diaper duty for three days."

Danny, who was currently occupying said couch, lifted an arm. "I second that."

"What?" I got silence as a reply. "Fine. I don't care. It was a consequence I was willing to risk," I admitted.

“With the intent of swindling your way out of it later,” Ashlyn added.

“D to the uh,” I answered.

“Figured.” Ashlyn sat back, leaving a hand on my shoulder. I glanced at it and leaned away. “You washed that thing, right? Like A-B-C all the way through, complete with the rhyme at the end?” If she hadn’t, the side of my head where she just whacked it was now infected with kid butt cooties.

Danny chuckled.

I looked around Apoc, who was currently using my face as a Bop It! toy, and lifted an eyebrow. Apoc immediately lowered it for me. He’s so helpful.

“I guess we should get up and moving again soon,” Danny muttered, not really a question, but more of a pep rally for his exhausted body, which didn’t so much as flinch. Maybe he should try pom-poms next time.

“You find us a new location?” I asked.

Danny lifted a hand toward the nearby coffee table and blindly patted it, searching for his tablet. “Yea, a place in ...” his voice trailed off as his hand pooh-poohed out during its half-hearted hunt.

Ashlyn leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “Let’s give him a few hours of downtime.” If her breath didn’t stop tickling my ear, we’d be enjoying our own version of downtime. “The little playground at the top of the hill, you think we can risk it? Maybe wear the little guy out so he’ll take a nap in the truck later?”

We were on the seventh location in the last three weeks. The first place we’d shacked up was Ashlyn’s hometown. We’d had to throw down some serious shade since the Reverend-Mayor aka Head Evil Cheese had biffed it, during our fight with the Reyna. Fortunately, the chief law enforcement officer in the area was the Reverend-Mayor’s daughter, nemesis turned Double D sporting comrade, Sheriff Loretta Linn. Been there, done the jokes, despite the alternate spelling. She had come to realize the true level of bad her father had been aiming for

and not only assisted in his takedown, but helped clean up the aftermath. Lucky for us, unlucky for her asshole of a brother, who had been playing minor league ball with major league drug dealers, which allowed us the perfect backdrop to our little fib, which went something like, “It was big city drug dealers. The end.” The story was shaky at best, but slightly better than the truth, “Queen she-demon spawned a child with an angel to take over the underworld from her current ball-and-chain; you might know him as Satan, Lucifer, King of Hell, Diablo. Feel free to pick one. She then conned a particularly self-righteous asshole into believing he was “the chosen one” to raise the child on earth, keeping the kid off her hubby’s radar. We came in and fucked up her plan. The end.” Honestly, I think we could have gone with the real story or a close simulation, as the town had played victim to the Reverend-Mayor and been bullied by Junior and his tribe of lettermen jacket-wearing morons so long they were awful quick with the “sounds good to me”s. They were all too eager to get the bad behind them, put their town back together, and simply move on with their lives.

It was decided that once we fended off the first wave of demon attacks that the Reyna had sent after us in effort to retrieve her child, that we needed to pull up stakes and hit the road. After a very healthy debate, some which may or may not have been clothing optional, Ashlyn came out on top (feel free to interpret that however you like), but ultimately, despite my objections, she took leave from her job as a park ranger and we all set off into the sunset to protect Apoc from Mommy Dearest.

The attacks were separated by four or five days at first, but as of late we were checking our backside every two or three. We’d only been at this particular location since yesterday morning, so we might have a few more hours before we need to bounce. I stood in answer to Ashlyn’s question, Apoc’s diapered butt riding on one hip while I reached out to help Ashlyn out of the chair. “We should be good for a little while longer,” I offered as I

pulled her to her feet. “I’ll grab the big bag-of-things-that-I-never-wanted-to-have-to-grab-ever.”

Ashlyn looked at Hall, then Oates. “Tad bit suspicious for a playground.”

“Yeah, we’ll leave them for Sleeping Beauty.” I chucked my chin at the Glock on the coffee table. “We’ll take Barbara Streisand,” I looked around, “and I guess the Professor and Mary Ann.” When Ashlyn shot me her telling, and very overused if you asked me, ‘What the hell are you talking about’ look, I clarified, “My short blades.”

She shook her head. “And to think, I thought the demon hunting aspect would be the weirdest part of this relationship.”

“How about that thing I do with my tong-”

Ashlyn pushed me away. “Go!”

Not for the first time or the fiftieth—but who’s counting; wait, I was; it was sixty-four—I checked my watch, the tree line, and Apoc’s ever-growing pile of sand that he was pouring down the front of his shirt and his cotton poop saddle. I groaned. I saw where that kid could hide Cheerios, so I had a valid reason to be more than a tad bit itchy. Add in the Reyna’s legions of demons she was sending after him. Super itchy. All this itch talk had me scratching my arm. “Can adults contract diaper rash?” I asked, scanning the trees again.

Ashlyn laid a hand on my knee, which was currently impersonating a cocaine-addicted telegraph. Beep, da, beep, beep beep. Stop. Beep. Beep. Beep. “Babe, you need to try and relax a little. I feel like I’m sitting on a pay-by-the hour bench.”

“Is there such a thing? ‘Cause I could totally see that being a thing. Bench-a-matic.” I shook my head. “Dil-a-ben-”

“No.” Was all Ashlyn said.

I was going to argue, knowing given a minute I could do better in the naming a vibrating bench game, but

Norm, my in-resident demon-detection system, sent a zing up my spine. “Get him,” I ordered, already on my feet and moving across the playground.

There were only a few other early bird park visitors—a dad, grandma, a couple of mothers, future customers of the *Vibra-ench*, nailed it. On the positive side of this scenario was that all the bystanders reacted appropriately and as natural-born protectors should to a woman going from sitting to running across the park yelling, “Chickenpox! Pee-wee Herman! Barney Marathon!” They quickly and effectively gathered their little humans with their accompanying accessories, including the one rogue shoe and the cute-only-to-moms duck-themed headgear, and skedaddled.

With Norm V-8ing my engines, I was on the other side of the swings and wood fort when two dark figures emerged from the trees. I glanced over my shoulder to see that Ashlyn had already scooped up Apoc and was heading back to Danny and the short-lived residence. I had the Professor and Mary Ann in my grasp when I turned back.

The first demon was fast, a long-armed, long-legged wiry thing that looked as if he shared DNA with a wolf spider and an angry posthole digger. Not a person that dig holes for a living, but an actual posthole digger, you know, two long handles with collapsing claws at the end. The second was large, somewhere between 350 pounds and “Dude, you seriously need to lay off the Big Macs.”

The first demon came at me fast, claws snapping at my face. He went down with two quick slices to his torso, and one more deep in and out through his back before he fell.

The second was a bit more challenging. He had dark lava turned magma-like skin that when I attempted to dive Mary Ann into it, she ricocheted off like she was trying to slice a stone. I made a few more attempts at the more vulnerable parts of his body—sides, neck, and

armpit—and got only more no-go for all my efforts. “Fuck. Eyeballs it is then,” I muttered, reluctantly. I would like to say something tough and all badass, like I didn’t normally go for the eyeballs because I wanted my enemy to see who brought the end to their tormented life as the last of the fight left their eyes, but I’d be lying. Nope, my ‘no poking the peepers’ policy comes from the simple fact that eyeballs are icky. They do this little sucking-pop sound when they get punctured and frankly they just give me the full-body gag me’s. But compared to my own demise ... eyeballs it is. Sigh. And double sigh. The bastard was a really good blinker. So, I picked Plan E and went in through an earhole.