

Chapter 1

“It’s been seven hours and fifteen—” I began to croon in my best, which so totally isn’t anything like Sinéad’s voice before I was backline chorused by two groans of annoyance. “—days,” I finished just for spite because I’ll admit it, I’m in a mood. An I’m-flipping-bored-so-when-is-this-flaming-asshat-going-to-make-his-move kind of mood. Or it’s PMS. I double-checked, ticking off days on my fingers. Yeah nope, it was the waiting on Lucifer to drop the apocalypse bomb thing. Mostly. There was also a self-imposed slow your roll on the Oreos thing going on too that had me a little itchy, but otherwise I was pretty sure it was the A-bomb thing.

“Every hour for the last fifteen days was all leading up to that little moment, wasn’t it?” Ashlyn asked.

“Duh. I’m really surprised you didn’t click on that one sooner.” I tsked in mock disappointment. “I thought you knew me? I thought we were in sync? Not the boy band, but partners in soul and mind—”

Ashlyn responded by chucking a couch pillow at said mind. I blocked it, of course, ’cause I have mad skills like that, as you’d expect since I’ve got this whole demon hunter gig going on. And just a quick P.S. Ashlyn and I clicked on so many levels, specifically a hundred and nine ... nope, just thought of a new one ... a hundred and ten naked ones. I was just bored, and when I’m bored, I get annoying. I know this about myself.

Head down, eyes on his keyboard, where they’d been the last (see earlier song inspired time reference), Danny offered up a “Thank you” to Ashlyn. I rewarded his blind backing by Frisbeeing the pillow in his direction. He also blocked it because he’s got some fairly mad skills himself. I mean, I’m sorta next level, but to be fair, he was flying solo, where I’m super-juiced with his great-times-three grandpa’s magical—and there is no way to end that sentence that doesn’t sound super icky. Let me digress since apparently, we have all the time in the world before the ultimate evil diva shows up to start this party. We’ll get to that part too, but I’ll start at the beginning and hit the highlight reel.

Oklahoma, circa a dozen years or so ago, when the grandparents took my sister and me on a summer vacay, which was

their normal summer MO. However, this particular trip had a little side bonus of getting me out of town after the “unfortunate incident” or UI for short, not to be confused with an actual medical UI that happened outside Winnipeg on which I won’t expand beyond that it involved too much Fireball Whisky, a shady swing set, and a stripper named Cynibuns. This, no need for meds UI, involved my then on-again-off-again, later determined to be demon-infused high school girlfriend, who’d “leapt” from a bridge into a river. I hadn’t been able to save her. Spoiler alert: I may or may not (totally do) have a smidge of emotional baggage from said experience.

Back to said summer vacation on a Native American reservation. I will short-script this part: I snuck out, made friends, drank corn alcohol, ran across Danny, a.k.a. Dyani Whitefang, sitting center stage of a drum circle ready to undergo a sacred ritual, which would pass the ancient hunter spirit from his grandfather to him. Insert me again, fueled by my insatiable curiosity and seven too many chugs from the jug. I stumbled literally and figuratively—absolutely not on purpose —smack dab into the middle of the right-of-passage ceremony. And just like that, wham-o, blam-o, I was super-infused with a shot of demon hunter or as I now lovingly like to refer to him, “Norm.”

I spent the next several years trying to right my wrongs, trying to evict Norm from my human apartment complex and into Danny’s, but fate and some ancient prophecies had other plans. Some of which I had just recently learned during my little trip to the ultimate land down under, and I’m not talking about Australia, because that would’ve been awesome. Kangaroos. Koalas. But no, we’re talking the real deal, h-e double hockey sticks, hell. Which, if you would like to know, comes complete with demons, fire, and a big, uber-creepy, dark castley thing, which I kind of destroyed. Sorry. Not sorry. Oh, and I killed the Queen of Hell, who kidnapped a little dude named Apoc, short for Apocalypse, but we’ll get to that fun name game in a bit. Sure, Apoc was her kid, but there were extenuating circumstances. One being she was a total bitch. In that form anyway. There’s kind of a Disney malevolent good-turned-villain backstory thing going on, but whatevs. Timing.

Apoc was his given name, well given to him by me, because of his own sucky fate as the love child of an angel and a demon. Also prophesied or prophe-sighed; it all depends on whether you are a “glass

half full” or a “fuck the glass, give me the bottle” kind of person. Anyway, Apoc was specifically created to have his own starring role in the destruction of Lucifer. Insert me again. I went to get him in hell, a lot of demony stuff happened, yadda yadda, I got Apoc back, killed the queen, then no-goed Lucifer’s little offer to fill in for the recent queen vacancy by shooting him in his dangly pant peppers. Oh, and I stole his dog. I know, I know, it should totally be a country song.

Anyway ... yeah, that’s pretty much the down-low on this shit show and how I came to be here twiddling my thumbs with Danny, Robin to my demon-fighting Batman, and my main love squeeze and righteous badass in her own right, Ashlyn. Now we’re just tres amigos sitting here in Grand’s, Danny’s fo’ realz and my adopted G-pa, double-wide, waiting for the big bad to *bring it*. *Errrk! *Record scratch** Oh sorry, rewind. I should also mention Michael, who’s also chilling ground-level at the moment. Michael, fallen angel and baby daddy to Apoc, who we all thought was dead after Round 1 with his ex, the queen, until I found him in hell meat-hooked from a ceiling and totally ... umm, rhymes with “plucked.” Let’s see, what else ... I feel like I’m forgetting something important. Yeah, I don’t know. I’m sure there’s something else, but whatever. The important thing to know at the moment is that I’m bored, there’s an upcoming apocalypse, and tomorrow is the all-you-can-eat chicken-fried steak night at the diner down the road. So yeah, whichever comes first, we’ll deal with it.

“I’m going for a run,” I stated, partly because I thought it prudent to be in primo shape for the upcoming battle royale and, well, again CHICKEN. FRIED. STEAK. NIGHT. I mean, girl, pleeease.

“I’ll go with you,” Ashlyn said as she stood and headed for the back bedroom.

I smiled at her eagerness. In the short time since she had joined our band of merry men, Ashlyn had been pushing herself hard both in physical strength and endurance training. Add in weapons and hand-to-hand with Danny and me and yeah, meooooow. I watched her and her toned backside start down the hall.

Yeah, I should probably go help her pick out an outfit. I’m thinking something naked since naked accentuates her eyes. I started down the hall, but pulled up short when Ashlyn turned and faced me, her finger up and twirling. “Put it in reverse, Sinead. I don’t need your *help*.” The way she emphasized the word “help” made me think she didn’t find me helpful at all. I scoffed. I thought I’d been rather helpful

in the shower this morning. Twice helpful to be exact. “I know what you’re thinking and no. Run now, then whatever that smirk ...”—another swirl of a finger, but this time at my face—“... is about, we can do that later.”

“I was just going to help you pick out an outfit,” I offered, with all innocence, rainbows, and kittens in my voice.

“Nice try, McFly,” she said, stepping into me and slipping her arms around my neck. “How about this?” She nipped at my jetted-out lower lip, which sent zippy do da messages to my naughty bits. “I’ll pick out my own outfit, we’ll run, and if you behave and aren’t too exhausted from me beating you, then I might let you take off my outfit.”

“My skill set does lean more to the taking off versus the picking out,” I offered as she nipped at my ear.

“Agree,” Ashlyn said, leaning back as she tugged on one of the strings of my worn-out SPD hoodie, which had seen better days since my time at the Seattle police academy almost a decade ago. “See you outside,” Ashlyn said, spinning me away and pushing me back down the hall.

“Denied,” Danny teased, never looking up from the screen of his laptop.

“Delayed, not denied,” I clarified, flicking his computer as I passed. “You want to join or are you going to stick here doing the geek stuff?”

“Geek stuff,” Danny answered. “I have some leads I’m trying to run down.” Translation: Danny was convinced there’s some secret *Raiders of the Lost Ark* something out there that’d give us a leg up on downtowning Lucifer again. That is, if he ever decided to show his pretty face. “Plus, Michael and I are supposed to go a few rounds later.” Danny finally brought his eyes up to meet mine after I went incommunicado for a few beats. I smirked. He glared. “Fighting,” he clarified.

“Is that what the boys are calling it these days?”

Danny’s eyes went roller coaster loop de loop, ending their ride back at his computer.

Five minutes later, Ashlyn and I stood at the edge of Grand’s small reservation and our current Motel 6. “Mile head start?” Ashlyn

asked as she caught her ankle behind her to stretch one thigh, then switched to stretch the other.

“To the highway and back?” I asked.

“Works for me,” she said as she bent down to touch her toes.

I took in the sight. “That works better for me.”

Ashlyn straightened and slapped playfully at my shoulder. “Meet ya in the shower?”

“Yes, please.”

She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and took off. “First one back gets the loofah,” she yelled over her shoulder.

I growled low in my throat. Damn her. She knows my devotion to skin care ... hers, of course. Mine was more of a “cool it’s still attached” kind of a relationship. I looked around while I waited for Ashlyn to hit the mile mark, which would only take about five and a little change. I took in the summer sky, its brilliant blue a perfect backdrop to the fluffy white clouds that slowly drifted by as if they didn’t have a care in the world. It must be nice. I closed my eyes, letting the sun’s warm rays heat my skin. I tried to soak in the serenity vibe, as my vibe of late was pre-tuned to the chaos and fear channel, the side effect of knowing about an impending apocalypse.

A sharp bark brought me back from my dark thoughts and I turned to see Six, my on-the-lam hellhound, jogging toward me. He was in his mini-me version, which was still intimidating. He’d been enjoying the river again as his underbelly was a mass of mud-slicked hair. He’d adjusted well to this above-ground life, especially the food, refusing all forms of dog food and electing instead to belly up to the breakfast, lunch, and dinner table with the rest of the crew. “Hey, not-so slim shady.” I greeted him with a head rub. “Want to take a run?”

He lowered himself to the ground, covering his eyes with a paw.

“Ashhhlllyyn is already out there ...” I crooned, using the crush he had developed on my girl to sway him. His paw came off his face, and both ears went full sonar at the mention of her name. He sat up, looking in the direction I pointed. “First one to catch her gets her—” And he was gone. I saw a blur of fur and tail. “Cheater!” I yelled after him. His return bark came from about a hundred and fifty yards away.

Six tail-checked me when I tried to pass him a minute later, pushing me back a good twenty yards, which gave him the space he needed to go full-scale. Supersized, he proceeded to play a mad game

of New York cabbie, blocking my path anytime I tried to dart around him. That lasted for a good portion of our run until I decided to drop back a few steps and leapfrog his ass. It was a good plan all the way up until he backdoor stink-bombed me. Fun fact: Last night's din-din was pot roast and cabbage, just in case you were curious.

When my vision and lungs cleared, Six had shrinky dinked it back to normal-ish dog size and was jogging companionably alongside Ashlyn, her fingertips rubbing at his ears, while she praised him. "Good dog. Gooood dog."

I passed them both on an eye roll. I went another five miles while Ashlyn and Six did three. I found them again on the trail back. Ashlyn was taking a cooldown walk near the river, and Six was, not surprisingly, in the river.

"Better?" she asked as I approached.

"Better," I said. I'd pushed it hard the last two miles, so I took up the cooldown routine alongside her. "I should probably let you know that I might have lost you in a bet of egos. I'm pretty sure Six owns you now."

She glanced at me, then at the dog playing doormat in the river. "I bet I can buy my freedom with a bucket of chicken."

"Throw in a family-size mashed potato and gravy, and I think you'll have a good chance."

"It's good to know one's worth," she said, sliding a hand into mine as we walked.

We fell into silence as we walked along the river, each in our own thoughts. Mine now consisted of chicken and mashed potatoes with a side of pending apocalypse.

Speaking of ... a shift in the air had Norm flipping the demon hunter lights on, and Six's zero to Defcon 1 stance had me pulling Ashlyn closer as I searched the area for threats.

Ashlyn's body stiffened against me, her eyes doing their own recon. "What is it?"

"I don't—" know was the genius end to that little statement as another ... we'll go with crackle, rippled through the air. I checked the sky; still clear and brilliant blue except for the perfect donut hole punched through an otherwise undisturbed cloud. "Six, you're with Ashlyn," I ordered, as I pulled my Glock, a.k.a. Barbra Streisand, from my waistband, her safety already off and ready to falsetto the shit out of whatever just Superman'ed itself through the clouds.

I was already running as I tried to lock in on Apoc and Michael's current location. I leaped the short wood fence, which separated the field and woods from the people part of the place. I cleared a picnic table and skirted around a row of clothes flapping in the summer breeze, running wide to do a drive-by of Grand's house. I knuckled the windows as I passed. "Danny! Rambo it up, we've got company!" Ten steps later, I heard the front door bang open, the rack of a shotgun, and booted feet hitting the dirt path behind me. I smiled. Aw, Danny. I seriously dug how he could go from super geek to super badass in 2.2.

Grand merged into my side view. I glanced at him, and he gave me an "I'm right behind you" nod. Grand was pushing seventy, and even though he'd given up the hunter's spirit over a decade ago, he was no poser. Plus, he had that whole "think before you act" thing going for him, something that has served him quite well. I'm tracking about 30/70, or 20/80 if you consider the breadstick basket at Olive Garden. I mean seriously, are those things not freakishly good? I have a theory BTW ... garlic butter-flavored crack. I'm just sayin'.

I adjusted my grip on Barbra, bringing her up to eye level a la SWAT-style, as I rounded the corner to the sandbox and mini-playground area the elders built for the kids. And Apoc's new favorite go-to since our little return trip from the land down under. Again we're talking hell, not Australia.

I skidded to a stop, needing a second to take in the total WTF before me. Michael was kneeling in front of the hottest dude in the history of ever. And that's saying something with the Rock, Jason Momoa, and the current down-in-the-dirt hottie with a banging body, Michael, in the running. Sooo yeah ... this dude was a next-level fella with his brilliant white wings, blond hair, ivory skin, and drown-in-the-crystal-blue of his eyes. None of which, of course, would deter me from feeding him his own earlobes if he took one more step toward Apoc. Who, FYI, was completely undisturbed and unimpressed by the scene unfolding around him, as he was otherwise engaged in the act of building a sand castle. In his superhero-themed Fruit of the Looms.

Danny pulled up curbside, doing his own what the heck and maybe a sexual orientation double-check before starting to lower a knee. "Are you," I jerked him up by his bra strap, shoulder, whatever, "freaking kidding me?"

“But that’s an ... he’s an ...” Danny’s head nodded in pretty boy’s direction as if I need a reminder of who we’re talking about, “an archangel,” Danny whispered with instant-awe in his voice. Which if I’m being honest, really didn’t do much for my present attitude.

“I don’t care if he’s the pope’s dressmaker,” I growled. “You’re just gonna go wheels down for ... for ...”

“An. arch. an-gel,” Danny supplied, breaking the title up so he could emphasize each annoying syllable.

“Los-er,” I countered, with a knuckle chuck to his shoulder before turning my irritable bits toward the other dude that was teeing me off. “Michael, buddy, what’s the deal-i-o with the low-go?”

Michael’s back stiffened, and the black wings that conveyed the “fallen” part of his title, came in tight to his back. I started to go wide, trying to get a side view of the situation and saw Ashlyn moving in cautiously from the opposite direction. Her outstretched gun lowered slightly at the sight of our visitor, but quickly raised again when she found Apoc in the mix. Have I said how much I heart her lately?

Six, back in his doggie version of the Incredible Hulk, moved to position himself where with a simple leap right he could protect Apoc or with a lunge left he could be in front of Ashlyn. I super heart him too, BTW.

“Michael?” I tried again. “I need a little direction here.” Nothing. “Butt wiggle once for friend, twice for foe.”

Mr. Big Bright Stranger Danger’s grin went full ray of sunshine on my soul as he turned toward me. My knees went a little wobbly, and I don’t even kind of swing in that direction. “Addison Jo Mattox, it is an honor to meet you. You are quite the topic of conversation these days.” I would finish off that statement with a “he said,” but the deep-silky tone was more deserving of a “decreed,” “proclaimed,” or “enlightened my soul.”

I checked myself. “It’s AJ, pretty boy. And since you didn’t pick up a ‘Hello, my name is’ sticker on your way in, do you mind telling me who you are and why my buddy Magic Mike is going all kiss-the-king’s-ring on you?”

And just when I thought the dude couldn’t get any more bomb-a-licious, he laughed. Well, fuck me. I recognized that panty-dropper smile anywhere as its co-owner was currently head down and ignoring my WTFs. So, this was Michael Sr. Like fo’ real deal super angel, Archangel Michael. That explained why Danny was still fangirling it

side-stage. "Daddy Michael, I assume?" I asked, as my emotional reaction swung from slightly enamored to "so you're the flaming dickhole that rejected your son." "Ya here to pick up your 'Father of the Year' mug? I mean, surely kicking your son out of the cloud house for falling in love would qualify you for one."

Daddy Michael's smile dimmed a little, fogged over by an emotion I would categorize as guilt, but I was a trifle leery and a lot pissed, so I double-downed because that's kind of my thing. "Sure, his lady love turned out to be a demon. Mega demon and the wife of Lucifer. Lucifer, the kingpin of hell, and ..." dot, dot, "your broth—" (dot, dot, dot and connect). "Oh Mikey, Mikey, Mikey, I didn't even think about ... Damn Shazam ... Auntie, Queen of Hell. Dude, I'm sorry, but that's kind of Arkansas 1825, but I guess that's kind of your all's deal."

Eyes back on Daddy Michael. "Speaking of banging DNA matches, I've always wanted to confirm the whole Adam and Eve thing. Like there eventually had to be some brother-sister love going on there, right? I mean, two plus two equals four minus one with the Cain thing, then skip to my lou my darling and there was suddenly a family pack of Duggars and then, poof, we've populated Asia. Right? Or did I miss something in Diddle-ronomy 1:69?"

"Sweetheart, I don't think you're helping this situation," Ashlyn stage whispered across our little scene.

I looked at her then back to Daddy Michael. His clenched jaw probably meant Ashlyn was on to something. "Sorry. Fine," I waved a dismissive hand, "no need to answer, I can have Danny just Ancestry.com that single tree branch later."

"We are not brothers of the flesh," Daddy Michael growled. "Only in the spirit of God."

"Wham bam shazammed his spirit aunt then." I noodled that around for a sec. "Eh, I guess that shaves off a little WTF." Daddy Michael stepped toward me. I did an "eh-eh-eh" with my gun. He flicked a finger with no more effort than if he'd been playing kicker in a table game of paper football. I watched Barbra field goal herself into the river. That's a good hundred yards away if you're Google-mapping this scene. I looked at my now empty hands. "Super inconvenient. And to be honest," I looked up at Daddy Michael, "I'm kind of regretting my recent life choices," I said, as Norm began to tapeworm himself under my skin to come front and center for this little standoff.

“I am not here to cause harm to anyone. Quite the opposite. I am simply here to talk to my son and offer what guidance I’m allowed in reference to the upcoming events,” he said as he reached out to place a hand on his son’s shoulder.

Magic Mike rose as if Michael had activated a hidden release button. “Father, how can I serve you?”

I snorted. I didn’t mean to; it was a by-product of my WTF reflux condition. Hey, it’s a thing. Feel free to look it up on www.whatthefuckever.com.

“You can tell your friends that there is nothing to fear from me.”

Another snort, and I had three sets of eyes on me. Probably had more, but I’d moved and couldn’t see Danny or Grand.

Magic Mike crossed his waist with an arm, then bowed slightly in his father’s direction. I caught the subtle double tap of fingers he did at his hip before going upright and turning his attention to me. “AJ, if not given reason my father will not cause harm to us.”

One would think the little statement was a warning for me to “not give reason.” Kind of a subtle “behave, and my father won’t smite you” deal. But nope, I’m an aficionado of the “don’t you dare” looks, as my mom had exercised and mastered a few dozen variations all before I hit the age of five. Magic Mike’s little finger tap was a “be ready with David,” my small but deadly bowie knife that I keep at my hip. Or that’s the translation I was going with anyway as it played better with my current mood. P.S. I know it’s kind of distracting with the whole archangel on Earth thing, but you totally got the knife reference, right? David. Bowie knife. David. Bowie. Got it? Okay, cool.

“You most likely know by now that certain ...” Daddy Michael paused to find the correct word. “Events,” he decided, “were set forth long ago, and it appears the time is quickly coming to pass.”

I held up a hand in a classroom “pick me” fashion.

“AJ,” Ashlyn quietly warned.

I turned to her. “What? I just want to make sure we’re all on the same page. Come to pass,” I repeated with air quotes as my hands were apparently free now. “Danny ate two burritos last night, and if this is all over something a vat of Gas-X can solve, then well ...” Danny groaned. Grand let out a stifled chuckle. Yeah, he’s awesome like that. Ashlyn’s eyes went—well, in the way of Daddy Michael’s home, and yeah. “I’m just sayin’, these dudes,” I pointed at the front and center

dude, “are responsible for the Bible, and that’s got all kinds of jacked up mixed messages, so I’d think we all could appreciate taking a little extra time to make sure we are all on the same page.”

Daddy Michael cleared his throat. “It is true, our messages can sometimes appear cryptic, but it is not for deception purposes. And I should point out that it was actually men that wrote the Bible, and they are not always the best listeners.”

I waited an extra beat or seven. “Oh, sorry. Come again? I flaked for a second. You were saying something about a Philly cheesesteak?”

Daddy Michael gritted his Crest Whitening Strip ad teeth and continued. “Our Creator has given humankind the gift of free will. Therefore, the ultimate or a single fate cannot be determined precisely. Any one person’s actions can change a great many things and outcomes.”

“Right, that whole butterfly flutters its wings in Japan and it blows up a stripper’s skirt in Branson and all that,” I said.

Daddy Michael pondered a moment. “More of a butterfly chooses to land and not fly; the stripper chooses to wear pants scenario.”

“Are they red patent leather pants?” I asked, for again absolutely no good reason, besides that I got a sick joy from attempting to making this living, breathing, holier-than-thou think about strippers in leather pants. I and my innocent self, however, chose to think about Rocky Road ice cream in the prolonged beat of silence. I mean, seriously, chocolate and marshmallows, yum.

“It would be of the wearer’s choosing as, again, free will,” he finally answered.

“With or without matching tassles—” I was already swirling my upper half when Ashlyn and Danny’s double “AJ!” objection cut me off. “What? I’m just trying to get a clear picture.”

Danny finally manned up or sucked up; sometimes I get those two actions confused. I blame politics. “Archangel Michael, sir,” he started, his head lowered as he stepped forward. “I apologize for ... she’s ... well, she’s ...” Danny gave me a sidelong look.

“Awesome? I think awesome is the word you’re looking for,” I interjected.

“AJ means no disrespect,” he said instead.

I snorted. “Um, unless I totally do,” I muttered.

“She is fiercely protective and sometimes her—”

“Again, awesomeness,” I inserted.

“... her protectiveness,” Danny continued, “well, sometimes comes out in creative ways. I hope you can understand.”

Daddy Michael glanced at his son. “I do. Sometimes, our intentions or actions are not clear to others.” Magic Mike dropped his eyes as his father placed a hand on his brain cap, giving it a loving stroke. “And sometimes the things we do, the choices we make to protect them, are very difficult.”

My shoulders relaxed a little. Okay, maybe Daddy Michael is not as big a flaming maxipad with wings as I thought.

He straightened. “I’m sorry, but my time here is short and we have much to discuss. As you know, my brother, Lucifer, has waged war against our Creator. Since his fall, he has vowed vengeance against humankind, destroying our God’s greatest creation. It is believed that time is nearing with the birth of this child—”

“Your grandson,” I inserted, as a friendly reminder.

Daddy Michael nodded sharply, but didn’t commit to the title change. “The existence of such a power ...” We all instinctively turned to ‘the power’ who was at present licking the sand from his fingers as if he’d just dipped them in a jar of Nutella.

“And destroyer of sandboxes everywhere,” I inserted.

Magic Mike moved quickly to pick up his sand-laden son, holding him up, giving him a couple of up and downs, so the sand in his shorts could salt and pepper itself out through his leg holes. Giving up, he held his son to his chest. “I will not let my son be used in his war. He has no part in the fight.”

“There is one way to ensure that,” Daddy Michael stated.

Magic Mike stepped back. I stepped forward and do-si-do we were about to go because no one here thought Daddy Michael was talking about a witness protection plan for half-angels, half-demons. “And we’re done. Last call for alcohol. The bar is closing. Uber is waiting at the curb.” I threw a thumb over my shoulder.

“Son, you must consider—”

“Nope. Nopedy. Nope. No. And you can tell Mister Geppetto, or whoever is pulling your skirt strings, that they’re going to have a fight on their hands if they don’t put that little idea in their back pocket and sit on it.”

“—the greater good,” Daddy Michael finished. Paused. Then started again. “There is little time. My brother is amassing his army as we speak. We feel the pull on the balance. There will be great loss and devastation to the human world.”

“Ain’t. Happening,” I growl-peated.

Daddy Michael looked at his son and his grandson, nodded once, then began to retreat, pausing to look at me as he passed. We did the soul gaze thing for a beat, but where I thought I’d find a warrior’s fierce coldness, all I found was a father’s deep regret. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “There may be alternatives, and I pray you can find them. There is little time.”

“Little time? What is little time exactly? I mean you guys are working on Central Standard Eternity Time, right? So, what are we talking— like ‘don’t start a movie because you won’t finish it’ kind of little time? Or ‘don’t get out the assless chaps and the pogo stick six Tuesdays from now ’cause it will be awkward to dismount in the middle of an apocalypse’ kind of little time?”

And that’s when I think I might have broken the pretty angel. He blinked. Blinked again. Then did a back and forth with his head as if to reset it. “We believe only days. A week at most, but likely less as the pull is strong and getting stronger.” He turned for a last look at Michael and Apoc. “We won’t be able to stop this without ...” He didn’t finish the statement, his jaw flexing as if chewing on the words left unsaid. He nodded once, and then with a flash and pop he was gone. The only evidence of his presence was the residual snark left in my throat and the “protect them” left whispered in my ear.

So days to protect Apoc from whom exactly was TBD. I spun back to the audience that had gathered. “Alrighty then, so a little birdie just told us we’re on slay-cation for a few days. Disneyland? Who’s in?”

Ashlyn dropped her weapon, coming to stand next to me. “I ... you ... are, I can’t even,” she let her words die as she simply curled into me.

I pulled her closer. “I know, I know. I should go see someone about my irritable bowel mouth. Maybe after the whole world ending thing works itself out.”

Ashlyn chuckled into my shoulder. “In the meantime, can we just try not to piss off the good guys?”

“Are we sure they are the good guys? Their solution is ...” We both glanced at the solution held protectively in his father’s arms. “I won’t let them.”

Ashlyn leaned into me. “Neither will I.”

“We,” Grand corrected, as he waved a hand around at Danny and the rest of the tribe that had come silently to encircle the father and son.

Michael did a slow Lazy Susan, and when his eyes came around to mine again, they were glistening with tears. “But you are the very people that will suffer the wrath if—”

“If we don’t figure something else out,” I said, end-gaming his sentence. “Which we will.”

“Thank you, my friends. All of you,” he choked out.

Apoc looked up at the strange sounds coming from his father’s throat. He then laid a hand on his father’s cheek where a tear had slipped. His chubby finger swiped at it, then pulled away, and the single tear pooled at the apex of Apoc’s fingertip. He studied it there for a long beat; then, slowly it began to grow into a brilliant sphere of light. It lifted from Apoc’s hand and began to spin overhead like a psychedelic disco ball. Apoc began to clap at his father’s cheeks, a wide smile on his face as he sang, “Happy daddy. Happy daddy.”

If any of us needed any more incentive to protect this special child, we were total goners now. And before long, despite the small fact that an archangel had just visited us with a total rock and a hard place message, everyone began to laugh, sing, and dance in the swirling rainbow of lights.