

Fire Demon

## CHAPTER ONE

Philadelphia, PA

I sat in my office chair with my feet on the desk and looked over the pictures I had taken that morning. Mr. Henderson's "business trip to Pittsburgh" had turned out to be a romantic weekend at the Ritz-Carlton with his twenty-three-year-old yoga instructor. The pictures were damning: drinks by the pool, holding hands, and a kiss by the elevator. This is classic.

I thought, "Another marriage bites the dust," as I put the pictures in a folder. \*At least the check will go through.

My office wasn't much—a storage room that had been turned into an office in a building that had seen better days, probably when disco was still cool. The radiator made a noise like it was sending out Morse code signals of distress, and the window looked out over a brick wall that had more personality than most of my clients. But it was mine, and the rent was not too high.

Almost.

"Rayne, you need to see this." Tanya burst into the office door that connected our

two offices, waving her phone. She lived next door and was a bail bondswoman with a sailor's mouth and a heart bigger than Philadelphia. We had become friends over late-night Chinese food and talked about how bad our landlord was.

"What now?" I asked without looking up from my laptop.

"Another strange death. The third one this month. She put her phone right in front of my face. The news story had a picture of the crime scene. It was very pixelated, but I could still see the yellow tape and the angry looks on the cops' faces. "Guy was found in his car, all burned up. But the car didn't even get burned. How does that happen?"

I saw the headline: "Police Clueless Over Mysterious Death—No Signs of Fire at Scene."

"Spontaneous combustion that happens on its own?" I said it half-jokingly.

"That's not a real thing."

"Your diet isn't working either, but you keep trying," I smirked when she hit my arm.

"Bitch." She smiled, but it didn't last long. "Seriously, it's really creepy. The bodies of all three victims were burned beyond recognition, but nothing else was damaged. The police don't know what to do.

I felt a chill run down my spine, but I shook it off. Weird news was just that: weird news. There was a lot of it in Philadelphia.

"Maybe it's a new drug thing," I said as I turned back to my computer. "Or a serial killer who loves flamethrowers."

"You're such a romantic." Tanya rolled her eyes. "By the way, when is Liam going to pick you up?"

"Seven." We're going to try that new Italian place on Walnut.

"Is that the one with the \$50 pasta?"

"He insists." Says I should be pampered. I couldn't stop smiling. Liam was the best thing that had happened to me in years. He was stable, kind, and had no idea how dangerous my life had been before I met him. My grandmother had taught me how to do something bad. Liam was everything normal that I had been wanting.

My phone rang. Talk about the devil.

"Hey, babe," I said.

"Hey yourself. Still going to happen tonight? His voice was warm and friendly.  
Safe.

"I wouldn't miss it. I might need to wear a disguise so they don't kick me out for not being dressed well enough."

He laughed. "You could wear sweats and still be the prettiest woman there."

"Flatterer."

"Guilty. I'll see you at seven. I love you."

"Love you too."

I hung up and felt that familiar warmth in my chest. Tanya was smirking at me like she knew something.

She said, "You two are so cute it's sickening."

"Are you jealous?"

"Very." She went back to her desk. "Don't forget that rent is due on Friday. Mr. Kowalski has already sent me a note.

"Damn it." Rent. I had been so focused on closing the Henderson case that I had completely forgotten about my own money problems. I was two weeks late, and my landlord wasn't known for being patient.

I looked at the pile of bills that were past due on my desk, then at the pictures of Mr. Henderson cheating. The retainer would only just cover the rent. I needed a real job that paid more than finding lost cats and cheating spouses.

"Please, universe," I thought, "send me a client with a lot of money and a problem I can really fix."

The door on the outside creaked open, and then the sharp sound of stiletto heels on linoleum followed.

"Be careful what you ask for."

When my new client walked in, the door opened and the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. She walked like she owned the city, with her shoulders back and heels as sharp as her gaze. Her dress was made of obsidian silk and was cut so well it draped and moved as if it were her own skin.

. Diamonds sparkled on her throat and ears, but in the gray light of the morning, they looked cold, almost blue, like icicles. Her crocodile bag hung from her arm, and the shine on it made my worn-out linoleum look even worse.

But it wasn't just her money or how fancy she was that bothered me. The air around her seemed to get tighter, and every speck of dust seemed to hang in the air, as if she had her own gravity. The space between us was filled with her perfume, which was hard to pin down but had a sharp, wintry smell with hints of smoke. As she got closer, I saw that her skin was almost too pale for a living person. It glowed in a way that made her look like she was made of moonlight. Her hair was black as a raven's wing and fell perfectly, framing a face that looked both ageless and cold. When she stopped to look around my office, the faintest glint of something old flickered in her eyes—smoky, unreadable, the kind that could swallow secrets whole.

She stopped in the middle of the room and looked at the peeling paint and the chair that was taped up with duct tape. I had seen disdain before, but it felt like a

physical force on her.

Rent past due and threats ringing in my head—this woman was my chance. I stood up straight and smiled at her, even though my arms were covered in goosebumps.

"Excuse me if this is a bad time."

"No, ma'am." Your timing is just right.

I made my shoulders relax and pointed to the only chair that didn't wobble. "You can sit down if you trust the furniture."

She didn't grin. She sat on the edge of the seat, moving slowly and carefully, as if she were trying to catch something in the air. She looked around the office, stopping on the pile of overdue bills and the patched linoleum before finally settling on me with an unsettling intensity.

I cleared my throat. "What brings you here, then? I'm guessing it's not my lovely decor."

She looked at me like a doctor would. "I need someone who can keep things to themselves." Someone who isn't connected."

Not connected and not obvious. That could mean a lot of things, and none of them are good. I pretended to write something down in my notebook to calm my hand. "I assure you, I maintain the highest level of discretion," I said. "But I want to know what I must not have a connection with."

She paused for a moment, a flash of doubt in her otherwise perfect mask. "You're not ready to know yet."

A chill ran down my back. I thought of the burned bodies Tanya had just shown me. They were burned so badly that they couldn't be recognized, but nothing around them touched.

I leaned back and crossed my arms. "Let's say I'm interested. Why me?"

She looked at me and I couldn't tell what she was thinking. "Because Ms. Parker, you have a gift. More than you say."

Cold sweat started at the back of my neck and my skin felt prickly. "She knows. How? I had told no one. Not even Liam."

I knew she was bad news, but I needed her. That didn't mean I would let my guard down. I moved in my chair and hid my hands, which had turned into fists on their own.

"Miss...?"

"Deveraux. Lucinda Deveraux.

"I have no idea what you mean. Now, why do you need a private investigator?"

She tilted her head, and for a split second, I could have sworn that her shadow moved on its own, a split second out of sync with her body. I blinked a lot. "Too much coffee. Too little sleep."

"Ms. Parker, you are very professional. I think that's great." There was something about her voice that I couldn't quite put my finger on. It was musical and almost hypnotic. "But we both know this isn't a normal case."

"I don't understand what you mean." My heart raced, but I kept my voice steady. The room had gotten colder again. I could see my breath now, and there was a thin mist in the air between us.

Lucinda's lips made a shape that wasn't quite a smile. "Don't you? When was the last time you talked to your grandmother?"

The question hit me like a punch in the gut. "That's not your business."

"Mila Becker. A strong woman. I bet she taught you a lot, but maybe not everything you needed to know." Lucinda leaned in a little, and I saw frost forming on the edge of my desk. The cheap wood veneer was covered in delicate crystalline patterns. "She would want you to take this case."

My mouth got dry. No one knew about Oma. No one. We hadn't talked in years, and I had done everything I could to forget that part of my life. "How do you know my grandmother's name?"

"Ms. Parker, I know a lot. For example, I know that the Henderson case only paid for your rent this month. I know you're still two weeks behind, and that small cheating-spouse cases won't keep you going for much longer. I know you had ramen noodles for dinner last night, the kind that cost 47 cents, but you lied to Liam when you said you went to that expensive dinner on 42nd."

My face got hot, and shame and anger mixed together to make something bad.

"Leave."

"I know you have exactly forty-seven dollars in your checking account," she said, not bothered. "And that your credit cards are maxed. I know you lie awake at night wondering if leaving the police academy was the right thing to do. Wondering if your mother would be sad about how you turned out."

"I told you to leave." I stood up, and the chair I was sitting on made a loud noise as it scraped against the floor. My hands were shaking, but I couldn't tell if it was from anger or fear.

Lucinda stayed completely still and calm. "Ms. Parker, I'm offering you \$50,000. Half now and half when the work is done."

The number hung between us like a rope. \$50,000. I could pay off my debts, pay my rent early, and maybe even fix the Mini Cooper's transmission. I could eat something besides ramen. I could breathe again.

A voice in my head said, "Don't do it. This woman is a threat."

But another voice, louder and more desperate, yelled, "You need this! You're going to drown."

Slowly, I sat back down, trying to keep some control. "That's a lot of money for just one investigation."

"This is not easy at all." Lucinda took a thick envelope out of her purse, which was a designer bag that probably cost more than my car. She put it on my desk, right over the frost that was spreading. "Twenty-five thousand. Money. You can count it if you want."

I looked at the envelope. I wanted to grab it, rip it open, and feel how heavy those bills were in my hands. Being free. Safety. A future without eviction notices and calls from debt collectors.

"What do you want me to look into?" My voice sounded empty and far away, as if it belonged to someone else.

"Find someone for me." Someone who doesn't want to be found. In the low light of my office, Lucinda's eyes looked like they were glowing. "Someone who has been hiding for a long time."

"Who?"

"A demon."

The word hit me like a stone in still water, sending ripples through my carefully built world. I laughed, and it sounded sharp and brittle. "A demon. Okay. I think you need a psychiatrist, Miss Deveraux, not a private investigator.

"Do you?" She pointed to the frost that was slowly moving across my desk and the mist of our breath that was hanging in the cold air. "Ms. Parker, please tell me what the temperature is in this room right now."

I looked at the thermostat again. It still said 76 degrees. But I was shaking, and my arms were covered in goosebumps. There was a thin layer of ice on the coffee in my cup.

"Bad thermostat," I said weakly.

"Of course." Lucinda's smile got bigger, and she showed too many teeth. "And the shadow that moves by itself? The frost that forms when I touch something? The way you can feel the truth of what I'm saying in your bones, even though your rational mind is screaming denial?"

I wanted to fight. I wanted to throw her out, envelope and all, and act like this conversation never happened. She was right, though. I could sense it. A deep,

instinctive feeling that everything she said was true. The same knowledge that had set me apart my whole life. That had put a rift between me and Oma. That made me run away from everything I was supposed to be.

"Why me?" I said quietly.

"Because you're a hunter, Rayne Parker. You have to accept it. It's in your blood, bones, and soul. Your grandma knew it. Your mom knew. And you know it too, deep down."

The envelope was between us, and inside were crisp bills that were a devil's bargain. I thought about all the times I lied to Liam about how much money I had. I didn't have anything to eat, so I went hungry instead. The collection notices kept piling up on my kitchen counter. I remembered Tanya's face when she showed me those pictures. She looked scared.

I thought about the other option. Eviction. Going bankrupt. The shame of telling Liam the truth. Would he ever be able to forgive me?

My hand moved toward the envelope almost by itself.

"Before you make a choice," Lucinda said softly, "you should know the truth."

This demon, Marchosias, has killed people before. A lot of times. The bodies your friend showed you? His job. And he won't stop until someone stops him."

"And you believe that person is me." It wasn't a question.

"I know it is. Ms. Parker, it's your destiny. You can run away from it, just like you've been doing your whole life. Or you can accept it and save a lot of lives in the process."

I touched the envelope with my fingers. The paper was so cold that it felt like it was going to burn.

"I'll need more information," I heard myself say. "All the information you have about this... person. Where people last saw him. People you know. The works."

"Of course." Lucinda stood up straight, and her shadow finally moved with her body. "I'll get in touch with more details. For now, think of this as a retainer. Proof that I am serious about seeing this through."

She walked toward the door but then stopped. "Ms. Parker, one more thing. Tell your grandmother that Lucinda sends her love when you talk to her, which you will have to do. She'll get what that means."

Then she was gone, leaving behind the smell of winter and the envelope on my desk.

For a long time, I just sat there looking at the money. \$25,000. Most likely blood money. For sure. Money that came with strings attached—strings that led straight into a world I'd been trying to get away from for years.

I took the envelope. It was heavy and big. For real.

\*What the hell am I doing?\*

But I already knew what the answer was. I was doing what I always do to stay alive. Even if it meant making a deal with the devil.

I opened the envelope and began to count.