

Light My Fire

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## Chapter One

“Just leave everything to me.”

“Famous last words, Ash. Your record hasn’t been too good so far, has it?”

The burly black shape in front of me that tossed the words over its furry shoulder didn’t stop, but I did, frowning. Jim, my demon in Newfoundland dog form, might not be Little Mary Sunshine, but it didn’t normally say things that it knew were deliberately cruel.

Around us in Green Park, people were flaked out in the rented park chairs or lying on the ground sunbathing, everyone happily enjoying the English September sunshine...everyone but my crabby demon.

“I have, if you haven’t noticed, been rather busy these last three weeks getting moved from Oregon to London. But I said I’d find someone to dremel your toenails, and I meant it. There has to be dog groomers in England who grind away nails with a dremel rather than clip them.”

“That last woman you took me to was nothing more than a butcher,” Jim snapped, marching forward with enough force to get me moving again. “I’m lucky I have all my toes. Minus the two you enchanted away, that is.”

“I said I’m sorry fifteen times already—I’ll say it for a sixteenth if it gets you out of this grouchy mood. I’m sorry she nicked your quick and made your toenails bleed. And that other toenail issue is *so* two months ago.”

“Too little, too late,” was the grumpy answer.

“Right.” I stopped near a tree that was relatively private. “That’s it. I’ve put up with your snarky comments the last couple of weeks because I know that transitions like the one we’re making aren’t easy for anyone. Lord knows I’ve heard nothing but horror stories from my family about Americans living abroad, but I expected better from you, Jim. You *like* Nora! You were looking forward to coming here. Why are you being so unpleasant about everything now?”

Jim turned to face me. I hadn’t thought it possible for a Newfie’s face to look sour, but Jim had pulled it off. “My heart is broken, in case you’ve forgotten! You shouldn’t have, since you’re the one who stomped all over it.”

“Oh, that.” I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck, stiff with tension.

“Yes, that.”

“Well, I know it’s no substitute for a corgi, but you’ve got a dog for companionship. You’ve got Paco now.”

“Paco isn’t a dog. Paco is a snack.”

Secretly, I agreed with Jim. Nora’s Chihuahua was nice enough, but was a little light in the character department. Then again, Jim could have ruined me for all normal dogs. “I

told you I'd take you to Paris to see Amelie and Cecile just as soon as I know..." The words trailed off to an awkward stop.

"As soon as you're sure that Drake is gone, yes, I know. But since he lives there, that's not likely to be for a long time, now is it? And Cecile isn't getting any younger. I'd like to see her before she's dead, my lord."

I sighed again, leaving the slight shade of the tree to brave the crowds filling the park. During the four days I'd been in London, I'd learned to avoid the edge that borders Buckingham Palace. It was always packed with tourists, and the last thing I needed was for one of them to notice that the dog who marched so determinedly in front of me was speaking. "I hate it when you call me that, but we both know you know that, so I won't humor your bad mood by arguing about you trying to get in a few 'you're a demon lord now, Ash' digs. And since you've apparently forgotten, I'll remind you that Drake also has homes in Hungary and the Cayman Islands, and probably a couple other places that never came up during our short time together."

"Short because you walked out on him. *Again.*"

My teeth ground. The park was too public a place to have it out with Jim. Nonetheless, I lowered my voice and whispered with as much threat as was possible, "I am not going to discuss my relationship with Drake."

"Ha! Relationship. Is that what you're calling it now? You two get together, you break it off. You get together again, you agree to be his mate, you take an oath of fealty to the sept, you get pissy, you leave him. Doesn't sound like much relationship is going on there."

Now that stung. Jim knew full well the circumstances of my breakup with Drake. It had even agreed with me at the time that Drake had pulled a nasty on me, and that I was fully justified in walking away from him.

"Demon, I command thee to zip thy lips until you get over your case of the grumps," I said instead of the gazillions of snappy comebacks that I knew would occur to me hours later. "I'm not going to defend myself or my actions. We're here, we're going to stay here, and I'll get you to Paris just as soon as I know the coast is clear. I'm sorry if that's broken your heart, not that demons have a heart to break, but it's the best I can do. Now, if you're done watering everything, let's get back to the apartment. Our stuff should be arriving today, and I want to get everything put away before Nora comes back from Liverpool."

Jim glared at me over its shoulder for a moment, but one of the fringe benefits of being a demon lord was that a demon in my control couldn't disobey a direct command, so we had a silent trip as we headed back to the three-room apartment that Nora had inherited from an elderly relative. Located above a chic combination bakery and bookstore, the apartment was a rare find in a city of overpriced, under-sized housing.

"After I get the stuff unpacked, I'll call Amelie and let you talk to Cecile if you like," I said as we skirted a group of tourists gawking in an expensive shop's window. We took advantage of a break in traffic to hurry across a zebra (pedestrian) crossing. "Not that you deserve it. Honestly, Jim, you're just about the most aggravating demon I've ever had the pleasure to—bloody hell!"

I jerked Jim back as a black taxi ignored the laws regarding pedestrians at zebra crossings, screeching to a halt just millimeters away from my demon.

"That sounded very English. You are adapting well, yes?"

The oaths that I was about to crack over the idiot driver's head dried up on my lips as I peered in through the window at the man behind the wheel. His voice was smooth, thick with a French accent...and very familiar.

"What...who...*Rene*?"

"Mais, oui. C'est moi. Good morning, Jim. You look well. Did you have any trouble getting through customs?"

I stared at the pleasant-looking fifty-something man in the taxi, not sure I was really seeing him, my brain grinding to a halt at the sight. It couldn't be Rene. It just couldn't. Could it?

Jim glared at me in answer to the question asked of it.

"Ah," Rene said, tipping his head to the side as he blithely ignored the honking of horns from the cars stopped behind him. "She has ordered you to silence, eh?"

"Rene, what in the he...Abaddon, are you doing here?" I asked, finally able to kickstart my brain into functioning.

He smiled and reached behind him to open the door. "I will take you to where you are going."

"Nuh uh." I could ignore the backed up traffic just as easily as he could. "Not until you tell me what you're doing here, in London, in a taxi. And it had better be good, because you showing up in Budapest a few weeks ago was really pushing the coincidence line."

"Get in, and I shall tell you all."

I gave him a long look to warn him he had better mean it, and opened the door to the taxi, herding Jim in before I followed.

"Now, spill," I said as the taxi started to move. "Oh, I'm going to 15 Warlock Close. That's located—"

"I know where it is. North of Bury Street, yes?"

"Yes. How do you know where it is? How do you know London that well? And what in god's name are you doing here? Why aren't you home in Paris?"

Rene's brown eyes twinkled at me in the mirror. I stiffened my immunity to his charm, sure something was going on for him to show up in yet another country driving yet another taxi. "You remember my cousin in Budapest, the one I was helping out during the week you were there?"

"Yes," I said suspiciously. "What about him? You're not going to tell me that he also drives a taxi here, in London?"

"No," Rene said, cutting across two lanes of traffic to turn left onto the short dead end street where Nora's apartment was located. "His brother, my cousin Pavel does, but that is not why I am here."

"Your cousin Pavel drives an English taxi?" I asked, refusing to budge when Rene pulled up with a flourish in front of our building.

"Oui. He is most good at it, as are all the men in my family." Rene didn't even bother trying to look modest, he just grinned at me in the mirror as he backed the taxi into a tiny loading area so it was no longer blocking the road.

"I'm not buying that, you know. Why are you following me? Are you some sort of really nice, helpful French stalker? You're not in love with me or obsessed with me or anything, are you?"

Jim snorted and rolled its eyes.

“You can speak if you have anything helpful to say,” I told it.

“The sun will never rise on a day when I say something that’s not worth its weight in platinum,” my demon answered. “Hi Rene. How they hangin’?”

“Free and easy, my friend,” Rene answered, turning in his seat so he could reach to ruffle the top of Jim’s furry black head. “It is good to see you both. You look well.”

“No,” I said, holding up a warning finger at Jim. “No long, maudlin tales of how your heart was broken because I didn’t take you to Paris to see Cecile the minute we landed. Rene is telling us just why he’s here. In a taxi. When he lives and works in another country altogether.”

Rene laughed. “Mon ami, put your mind at the rest. I am not in love with you—I have a wife and seven small ones, recall you. And I am not a stalker, or obsessed with you, although I am very happy to see you both. I have missed you these last few weeks.”

Now I felt like a great big heel. “I’m very happy to see you too,” I answered, leaning forward to hug him. “We were planning on seeing you when we go to Paris. How are you? How is your family? And what are you doing here?”

“I am fine. My family, they are fine as well, although my wife she has the allergies of flowers and her nose does not march along happily because of it. And I am here because she stayed home so she could not come on our honeymoon.”

“Your *honeymoon*?” Jim didn’t look surprised, but I sure did.

Rene shrugged his familiar expressive Gallic shrug. “When we were married twenty years ago, we did not have the honeymoon. We put it off until we had the time and money, but by then the little ones were coming along. So it waited until now. We were to have a whole month touring England seeing the grand homes and gardens, but my wife, she does not want to see any more pollen, and the tickets are not exchangeable, so...here I am.”

I wasn’t buying it. It was too pat, too slick, too...*coincidental*. And he had used up all his coincidence tickets when he showed up to help me in Budapest. “OK. But why are you in a taxi?”

“My cousin Pavel.” He reached behind him out through the window and pulled the door open. “He is taking his wife to stay in the Shakespeare town, using my reservation while I stay at his flat. He didn’t ask me to take over his job, too, but hien. It is what I do best. Me, I am the taxi driver extraordinaire.”

“You’re something, all right. And I’m going to find out just what it is.” I rubbed the back of my neck, glancing at Jim. My demon did not normally stay silent for more than a second or two unless specifically ordered, but here it was letting an entire conversation pass by without any sort of comment. I couldn’t help but wonder if Jim knew who Rene really was.

“So suspicious,” Rene answered, shaking his head as I got out of the car. Jim followed. “What makes you disbelieve me?”

“One,” I said, ticking the items off on my fingers, “you show up when I need help in Paris. Two, you do the same thing in Budapest. Three, you weren’t affected at all by the Venus amulet I had there, which hit every other mortal man over the head like a lusty sledgehammer. Why is that, Rene?”

He just smiled at me.

“Uh huh. I knew it. You’re not just a taxi driver who happened to stumble into the Otherworld like I did, are you? You’re...you’re something else, right? Something not mortal?”

Rene smiled again.

“Ash.”

“Sec, Jim. Come on, Rene. Out with it. It’s no coincidence that you’ve shown up whenever I’ve needed you, is it?” My eyes narrowed as I thought about that. “Only I don’t need you right now. Everything is hunky dory in my life. I washed that dragon right out of my hair, I managed to smuggle Jim into the country by means of demonic limbo, and Nora is going to train me to be a proper Guardian, not one who falls into stuff without knowing what to do. So...why are you here?”

“Ash, there’s someone at the door.” Jim nudged my hand with its cold nose.

I turned to look at the man facing the outer door to the hall that led to the three apartments that graced the top floor of the building.

“I am not done with you,” I warned Rene as I hurried over to the man, hoping it was the delivery of all my belongings cleared at last through customs.

“I will be around,” he called after me. “You have my mobile number, yes?”

“Yes,” I called back as he put the car into gear and merged into the busy London traffic. “Sorry. Are you the man with my boxes?”

“Boxes? No.” He turned to face us.

“Oh. Rats. Well, I’m afraid there’s no one in the apartments now. One of the tenants is off on his summer vacation, and the other one is in Liverpool for the day.”

The man held a business card in one hand, a pen in the other, evidently having been in the process of writing a note. A sharp grey-eyed gaze swept over me. “A Guardian.” He moved on to Jim, a slight frown pulling his dark brows together in a darker frown. “And a sixth-class demon.”

“Yes, I’m a Guardian,” I said, my hackles rising for some intangible reason. In the few months since I had found out there was a whole other paranormal side to the world I knew, including my own role as what amounted to a demon-wrangler, I’d learned that appearances were more than a little deceiving. The man in front of me might look like a perfectly normal Englishman—high forehead, long face, prominent nose, brown eyes and hair—but power crackled off him, leaving the air starchy around us. I’d also learned, however, that sugar would get me a lot farther than vinegar, so I slapped a pleasant smile on my face, and prepared to make myself friendly. “Well, to be truthful, I’m a Guardian in training, but hopefully it won’t be too long before I’m a full fledged active member of the Guardian’s Guild.”

The man cast a glance at Jim again, his gaze sharpening. “You are Aisling Grey.”

“Yes, but Aisling is actually pronounced ‘ash-ling’. It’s a Celtic name. Er...how did you know who I am?”

“All the Otherworld has heard of the infamous Aisling Grey, the woman who has the dubious honor of being a demon lord, Guardian, and wyvern’s mate all at the same time,” he answered, handing me his card. I gave it a quick look. On the front was his name—Mark Sullivan. Below it, in small discreet print, was one word: investigations.

“Yeah, dubious honor just about sums it up. You’re a private eye? A detective?”

“No. I am the chief investigator for the *l’au-delà* committee. I have been asked to look into possible inconsistencies with Nora Charles, Guardian.”

“Inconsistencies? What inconsistencies?”

Mark Sullivan gave me a long look that spoke volumes—of nothing.

“Nora is my mentor,” I explained, my hands automatically drawing a ward of understand on him. Maybe that would help. “She’s training me to be a Guardian.”

“Not any more she isn’t,” Mark said, pulling a piece of paper out of his breast pocket. “This is an order prohibiting Nora Charles from acting as a mentor. Please see that she receives it as soon as she returns. From this moment on, she is forbidden to teach anyone anything—including her current apprentice. Good luck to you, Aisling Grey. I fear you are going to need it.”