

Chapter 1: Ties That Bind

Manhattan, New York, June 2014.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Aisling jerked him around by one arm, eyes shooting daggers through his face.

Whatever. Blah. Blah. Blah. Sean peeled her claws off and stepped away. “I’m not in the mood for you right now. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m trying to work.” His position was totally blown, but that wasn’t the point.

Not ready to let it drop, she followed him down the sidewalk, voice dropping to a hiss that only he could hear loud and clear. “I’m not done talking to you. Don’t walk away from me!”

She was damn lucky he was surrounded by humans. He was seriously thinking of dematerializing and leaving her to bitch at the sound waves he left behind. They’d been arguing about this for months. It was getting old. Parting a sea of people like good ol’ Moses, he rounded the corner onto 44th Street and yanked her into a doorway. Stumbling, she huffed with indignation and glared up at him. (*Up* being a relative word—she was nearly as tall as he was to begin with, and the four-inch fuck-me shoes she wore brought them eye to eye.)

He jammed his nose to hers, and ground out with the very last remains of patience, “Woman, I am sick to fucking death of fighting with you over this. Why can’t you just let it go? I’m his *father*. I have every right to spend time with him as much as you do. Raphael and Gabriel both agree. Our custody agreement spells it out. You’re just being a bitch, and I’m sick of it.”

Her cobalt eyes burst into low flame as her anger threatened to push her to the edge. It was nice to see she trusted him enough to let all her supernatural power jump right out. Too bad she really wanted to light him on fire with it. Clutching his bicep, she sneered, “You’re right. I’m being a bitch. It’s what I do best, isn’t it?”

Rolling his eyes, he practically bit his tongue off trying not to snap even uglier things. How the hell had things gotten so bad? They’d never been close, but this past year they’d gone from tentative parenting allies to hostile enemies. Her mood swings made his head spin. He couldn’t keep up. A few months ago, she’d shared a bottle of wine with him when he brought Sean Michael home on Sunday. They were both mellowed out for a change, and the night ended with a kiss that left them both hungry. The next day? She’d shut down completely. Told him to fuck off and started doing everything she could to piss him off. Mica was sure it was a defense tactic. He snorted at the memory of that convo. Yeah. *Not*. His baby mama was a pain in the ass bitch. Pure and simple.

“For the last time, Sean Michael needs training. I’m his father. I’m training him whether you like it or not. I have to go. I have an appointment with a douchebag demon who owes me a favor. I’m picking my son up at 4:00 tomorrow for my six weeks. I *strongly* suggest you stop interfering and have him packed and ready to go.” He met her angry eyes with fury of his own. She didn’t blink.

Aisling Andersson refused to back down. She couldn’t afford to. Sean O’Cahan was under her skin. *In* her skin. Everything about him made her want to unravel—the intensity in his eyes, the faint Irish lilt he tried to hide, even the way he moved. God, how he moved! Like sex in motion, all smooth rolling muscles and coiled power. If she let her guard down for one minute, she’d remember the feel of his hands caressing her skin, his mouth on her neck. It might have

been seven years ago, but the haunting memory of the fire between them unfolded in her mind every time she saw him, which unfortunately, was every other weekend since they shared custody of their only child.

She tried to avoid looking at him. It was safer that way. He wasn't perfect, but he was the kind of man who turned heads. She'd love to say she was immune but that would be a flat out lie. No one was immune when he switched on the charm. Not that he was trying to be charming . . . he'd stopped trying to be nice years ago. With spiky black hair, finely-carved cheekbones, and vivid blue eyes that saw into a person's soul, he was fine. More than fine—he was wicked sexy.

Which was exactly why she was such a bitch.

Long story . . .

Those stunning eyes narrowed into slits as he stared her down. Sean was supposedly one of the good guys. He was one hell of a Primani and had sacrificed more than any of them for the greater good. Kudos for his bravery. They had a past though, and that was a problem for her present. Seven years ago, the universe had literally dumped him on her doorstep. Looking back, hindsight and all that, it was clear they'd been tossed together by someone higher up on the food chain. He'd been scattered—obliterated physically and spiritually—and she'd been ready to help him get himself back together. He'd lost his entire life; his lover, his world, and his Primani powers; all he had was her. Despite her need to keep him at a distance, his heartbreaking struggle had clawed at her soul, defrosting the ice, letting her feel again, *forcing* her to feel for the first time in more than ninety years. After spending nearly a year tiptoeing around one another, they had one night together before he vanished into thin air. One night of achingly beautiful sex that had left her raw, exposed, aching with the pain of loss—and *pregnant*.

Now she was back among the living and things between them were . . . complicated. Yep. *Complicated*. She couldn't lie to herself. She was attracted to him. He had more good qualities than bad. The angels knew he was a loving father in spite of his unreasonable expectations for the small boy they called son. Aside from that, he was a brilliant strategist, and one of the most successful Primani of recent history. Between him and Killian, they had vanquished thousands of demons. He was temperamental and brooding. He was goddamn sexy as hell. Exactly how she liked her men—or it would be if she was allowed to have one.

Another long story.

And with that thought, a chill brushed the back of her neck. Damn him! Not now! A shadow shifted across the street. Blinking hard, she searched the scaffolding that hid most of the storefront. Empty.

En slavita a Irku. Ad infinitum.

The words whispered through her mind, drifting away before she could fully understand them. Familiar but . . . not. *Deja vu?*

“Aisling!”

Pissed off and ready to choke her, Sean was so tightly coiled a tic jumped in his jaw. Closer to demon than angel half the time, he called to something broken inside, making her want more despite the danger. Unconsciously taking a step forward, she froze when an odd play of light caught her eye. Not again! Whipping around, she held up both hands to protect herself. An unexpected gust of wind bounced her into him. Catching her arms, he steadied her with a glimmer of concern in his eyes.

“You okay?”

Wrenching her arm away, she snapped, “Don't touch me! I'm fine.”

The flash of concern evaporated. His face darkened with anger, and he held up both hands in surrender. "Touching you is the last thing I want to do. I'm out of here."

She had nothing to say to that. Instead of tossing out another snarky comment, she watched him stalk down the street until he was swallowed up by the sea of people. He was gone. *Again*. Closing her eyes, she shoved the familiar hurt into its battered cardboard box. She knew better than to think such things.

The elegant Gramercy Park penthouse was a disaster area. Worse, it reeked of sick dog. Possibly *several* sick dogs. Someone had scattered newspaper across the black and white marble foyer. Much of it was now unreadable. Several piles of puke and poop dotted it like noxious landmines. The new leather couch was shredded.

"Holy shit!"

"Enter at your own risk." Sporting yellow rubber gloves, a gas mask, and a backwards baseball cap, Dec glanced up from gingerly stuffing the disgusting newspapers into a trash bag. Heartbroken sobs drifted from the back bedroom.

Aisling frowned. "Casualty?"

"Yeah. The runtiest little dude was just too sick. He couldn't recover." Gesturing with his chin, he said, "Thor and Loki are with Rori in the spare room. She's got them holding down food now. The vet thinks they'll be all right. Parvo is nasty shit. We're lucky we saved the two." One of his famous dimples made an appearance as he asked, "You in the market for a puppy?"

That explained the newspapers, but not the couch. It looked like a pack of wolves used it for a chew toy. She fluttered a hand in its general direction. "Doubt it."

"Yeah, the couch is a loss. Rambo freaked out so we ended up doping him. He's a little, um, skittish."

"Skittish? More like homicidal." The dog in question peered around the corner, shiny black ears laid flat, eyes narrowed with suspicion as he sniffed the air. She offered her hand, which sent him backpedalling so fast his rear paws hit his ears. The slick tile didn't help his escape. He fell on his doggy butt with a pitiful yowl before vanishing in a clatter of nails.

"You named him Rambo? Are you kidding me?"

Dec finished cleaning the rest of the trash, closed off the bag, and set it in the hallway. Stripping off the gloves and mask, he grinned at her expression of total disbelief. "Seriously, dudette. This is the first demon dog I've ever seen that was terrified of its own shadow. It's going to take some work to get him trained." Crouching nearly horizontally, he whistled for the Dalmatian.

Rambo slinked around the corner, stared reproachfully at her, then oh-so-cautiously tiptoed sideways to Dec who ruffled his ears. "There's a good boy."

"He's been like this since we pulled him out of that basement. Some asshole used his head as an ashtray. Poor baby. I've never seen such an abused dog." Rori's normally sunny smile was nowhere to be seen.

Moving slowly to keep from panicking the pooch, she followed Rori into the kitchen. After snagging a glass of water, Aisling perched on a stool, and waited for Rori to finish washing her hands. She wanted some girl time, but wasn't good at asking for it.

Rori lifted herself to the counter and crisscrossed her legs. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, *chica*, but it's not like you to drop in. You hate the city."

“You have no idea how right you are. Too many demons, too little peace. I hate this place, but I was stuck running down a lead for Alex so I met Sean for coffee to talk about summer vacation.” She scowled into her water and sighed. “We had a fight.”

“That’s a shock. What happened?”

“Same ol’, same ol’. I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s change the subject.”

Rori tossed her a knowing look, but changed the subject as requested. “You colored your hair, didn’t you? I like it. Why the change?”

Re-living history? Finding herself? Longing for her humanity? There were many reasons for the change, but none she was willing to share. Those wounds were scabbed over nicely. Sharing her secrets, speaking the words, would just add pain to the aches she already lived with.

So instead of baring her soul, she explained (more or less frankly), “This is actually my natural color. I’ve been a brunette for more years than I can count. Alexandyr suggested it a long time ago. He thought I blended a lot better as a brunette. Since I’m not undercover anymore, I don’t need to worry about blending.” Letting her lips relax into a smile, she ran her fingers through the curling mass of strawberry blond and shook it so it bounced over her shoulder blades. “I finally found a stylist who could match my natural shade.”

Dec strode in a few minutes later with a scowl between his eyes and his cell phone to his ear. Sean’s voice bellowed through the tiny speaker. Great. Here it comes. After hanging up, Dec considered her for endless seconds before finally sighing hard. As Sean’s wingman, best friend, and Primani brother, he kept getting dragged into their drama; kicking and screaming, but dragged nonetheless.

Steeling for another lecture, she calculated the distance between her ass and the nearest exit.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you? You have no idea how hard he’s trying to be civil, but you tear down every bridge he tries to build. Why can’t you meet him halfway?”

It was her turn to sigh. “He’s not perfect, Dec. Your partner can be a real dick. He doesn’t even have to try too hard. Surely you know that by now? How many years have you been fighting together? More than fifteen-hundred?”

“He’s bent over backwards for you! How can you be so cold to him?”

“Oh, please! He doesn’t give a shit about me. If I wasn’t Sean Michael’s mother, he wouldn’t even talk to me.”

“That’s because you’re such a bitch!”

Launching herself to her feet, she cried, “I’m so sick of being called a bitch!”

“Then stop acting like one!”

Rori squeezed Aisling’s arm and gave her boyfriend a pointed glare when he opened his mouth. “Stop! Both of you! Dec, out—go do something for a while.” She squeezed Aisling’s arm again. “And *you* settle.”

After much grumbling, Dec snapped a leash on Rambo and stalked out the front door, dragging the poor dog behind him. Taking a deep breath, Rori said, “I know you don’t know me very well, but I like to think we’re sort of friends now. We’ve both been sucked into the Primani life. I think I get where you’ve been. Maybe you’ve got your secrets—maybe you’re just really private—either way, I’m a good listener, and they say confession is good for the soul. If I’m crossing some invisible line, just tell me to shut the hell up, but what’s going on with you and Sean? He’s brilliant. He’s fine. He’s Sean Michael’s father. Wouldn’t it be nice to be a family? Why don’t you give him a chance? I’ve seen you two together. There’s chemistry.”

“Chemistry’s overrated.”

Sure, they had chemistry.

The explosive kind that would get them both killed. The kind she'd only felt one time before.

She'd exploded then too.

