

Chapter 1

Brookline; a charming Boston suburb. More upscale than most, this was the home of business VPs and other upper-middle-class professionals. The spacious houses with immaculate lawns and two-car garages. The Mercedes, Audis, and Cadillacs in each driveway. Just cruising down a street like this made people feel inadequate.

But not me.

I pulled my Ferrari to the curb behind Detective Ross' unmarked Impala and turned off the engine. The officers in the yard stared at my shiny new 458 Italia, a top-of-the-line sports car. In red, of course. When I do something, I do it right.

The house before me stood out from the others. As big and beautiful as any in the neighborhood, the two police cruisers parked in the street before it drew attention. All the neighbors stared at the place with undisguised contempt. Rich people. Always ready to

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turn on their neighbor at the slightest indiscretion.

A fine mist of rain greeted me as I walked up the driveway. Despite the weather, I left my jacket unzipped to provide access to my gun, just in case.

“If it isn’t our friend, Simon Kane.” The asinine words came from Officer Pope. He had been with the Brookline PD for twenty years and was still a street cop. With a wit like that, I was surprised he hadn’t made captain.

I continued my stroll up the driveway. It would bring me past Pope, but I wasn’t getting my shoes wet on the rain-soaked lawn.

“Hey,” Pope’s expression promised another insightful witticism. “You think the suspect’s a vampire? No, wait! A werewolf! You believe in them, right?”

Yup. Pure genius.

“Failed the detective test again, I see.” Grabbing his wrist, I shoved a hundred-dollar bill into his sweaty palm. “Go buy yourself some Cliff Notes.” Without a second glance, I continued past him to the door. Guffaws from the other cops followed, and his eyes burned on my back, but I didn’t care. He would be a good boy and leave me alone. The cop at the door said nothing as I passed him and entered the house.

The place was clean and comfortable with classy décor. They had some taste for middle-class. The sound of Ross’ voice led me through a doorway off to the left, and I found myself in an equally well-decorated

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living room. A large, flat screen TV dominated one wall, with the couch and other chairs positioned toward it. Photographs and nick-nacks lined the mantelpiece above the fireplace. The room felt warm and homey. A playpen sat by the bay window, and a baby held itself up on tiptoes, gripping the railing for support. A woman stood in front of the sofa near the center of the room. She crossed her arms nervously over her chest, her face a wreck from crying. Detective Joseph Ross hovered between her and the crib. He wore a beleaguered expression as he watched the woman. My entrance got his attention, and he showed relief when he saw me—a rare thing.

My brow wrinkled in consternation as I scanned the room. There were no bodies. No stench of death. And no occult symbols or artifacts anywhere. Only Ross, a few cops, and a distraught housewife.

“Simon,” the detective said, taking a professional tone and waving me over.

In three long strides, I stood beside him. “Why am I here? I don’t do domestic disputes.”

Ross ignored my greeting and turned to the woman. “Mrs. Mann, this is Simon Kane. He’s a private investigator but is well suited to help sort this out.”

Mrs. Mann stared past me at the baby with undisguised hatred. Odd. Wasn’t she the child’s mother?

“Simon,” he said, undaunted. “I’d like you to give this woman your professional opinion about her son—”

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“He’s *not* my son!” the woman shrieked, tearing her gaze from the child to scowl at the detective.

“Ross, I’m not an expert on babies, you know that.” Domestic disputes were number one on my list of reasons not to be a cop.

“You *are* an expert on the supernatural, aren’t you?” He said that loudly, as much for the woman’s benefit as for mine.

“Yes, that’s why I consult for you. What does that have to do with the baby?”

“Mrs. Mann believes little Jacob over there is not hers.”

“It *isn’t* Jacob!” the woman sobbed. That explained the look she gave the child.

“But you think it is?” I said to Ross.

The detective nodded. “A photo comparison matches.”

For the first time, I turned to face Mrs. Mann. She gazed at me with teary eyes as I examined her. She was pretty for a woman in her mid-thirties. Though she had that soccer mom look that turns me off. She held a wild, hysterical expression that made her appear desperate, but she wasn’t a nut-job who wouldn’t recognize her own child. Okay, I was curious.

I affected my best professional tone as I addressed Mrs. Mann. “Why do you think the baby isn’t yours?”

She gazed at me for a moment. “You have to be a mother to understand. That—that *thing* is not my son!”

“Hmm.” Not really an answer, but there was one

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thing going for it: sincerity. The woman believed what she said. The time had come to interview the kid.

Crossing over to the crib I knelt and examined the thing that stood inside, holding onto the railing. I say *thing* because it was no kid—I could tell that much. Oh, the creature looked like a baby to everyone else. To me—well, let's just say I have a nose for the supernatural—or an eye, in this case.

It's one of my unique talents. You see, I'm not entirely human. Somehow, my DNA got mixed with something paranormal. I have no idea what I am or how I got to be this way. Whatever the case, I've found I have certain abilities, one of which is seeing supernatural beings for what they are. This is why I'm a PI. To learn more about these beings, and exactly where I fit in.

Identifying a supernatural being—or *supey*, as I like to call them—is hard to do. This is, in part, because I was raised like a human, and had to figure it all out myself. Some supies look different to me than they do to ordinary people. Those are easier to identify. But some are tricky. This one had the body of an infant, but something was off about Little Baby Jacob. The expression with which the baby's face considered me was too adult to be real.

“What are you?” I whispered. The fake Jacob stuck its tongue out at me. Nice.

“Fuck you,” the baby said, so quietly only I heard. But instead of the surprise and revulsion the faux infant

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expected, I smiled. Yeah, I knew what it was.

As casually as I could manage, I turned and walked a few steps away. The timing was important. I didn't want to tip my hand, or things could get nasty. In one fluid motion, I drew as I turned, flicking off the safety as I aimed. My handgun was always cocked, so the thing only managed to gape at me, its blue eyes bulging in surprise as I squeezed the trigger.

I always forget how loud a gun is. The report filled the enclosed space of the room in a deafening roar, leaving my ears ringing. Cops ran into the room from outside, their guns trained on me within seconds.

"What the hell!" Ross was beside me in an instant and pulled the gun from my hand. I let him take it.

Ignoring Brookline's finest—and their weapons, I turned to the grieving mother. "You were absolutely right, Mrs. Mann. That was not your son."

"Sir!" Officer Pope said to the detective. "Look!"

All eyes turned to the crib. Where the bloody body of a baby should have been, instead lay the bloodless empty skin of a child. There were no bones, no meat, no organs. It was a baby suit, like the skin of a snake after it molted.

Ross whirled on me, his face twisted in disgust and confusion. "What the hell was that thing?"

I shrugged. "A changeling, of course."

Chapter 2

Ross bobble-headed from the playpen to me, gaping stupidly. He took the revelation better than most people would. At least half of the cops turned away, and one of them vomited. Mrs. Mann screamed. Perhaps she *did* think it was her son, after all.

My gaze switched to the detective. “May I have my gun back?” The request was reasonable. The thing in the playpen wasn’t human, so no murder was involved. In fact, I might have even saved their lives. After all, fairies could be extremely dangerous when pissed off.

“The Hell I will!” Ross exclaimed ungratefully. “You shot a baby!”

I rolled my eyes. Sometimes, I just couldn’t help it. The detective had always been more sensitive to the supernatural than most people, which he stubbornly refused to accept. “Didn’t you hear me?” My tone was calm, matter-of-fact. “The creature was a changeling,

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not a baby.”

“That was a baby in the crib, Kane. We *all* thought so. Even you did when you first came in.”

“But when I took a close look the thing in the crib, I became certain.”

“Christ, Kane. I looked at the baby, and all I saw was little Jacob Mann.”

“I’m not like you, Detective Ross...”

“That’s for damn sure,” he cut in gruffly. I chose to ignore his bad manners.

“You know I can see supernatural entities, even when they’re in disguise. When I went to the crib, a changeling looked back at me. I knew exactly what I was doing when I pulled the trigger.”

“So, you’re saying you expected Baby Jacob to turn into *that*?” His frown betrayed his disbelief.

“Well, I expected the important part. The changeling would be sent home, and its disguise would be lifted.”

“Mr. Kane,” Mrs. Mann said in a shaky voice. She had gotten over her screaming fit, and now only sniffled. “You said *that*—” she pointed at the crib “—is not my son.”

“That’s right.”

She clenched her jaw, taking control of her emotions for the first time. “Then where is he? Where is my Jacob?”

The two waited expectantly for my answer. “Let’s go to the kitchen, and I’ll explain changelings to you.”

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Ross stepped away to tell his men what to do with the mess in the playpen before ushering the woman into the kitchen. We sat at the table, and they both stared at me—her expression full of desperate hope, his grim understanding. He thought the kid was gone for good. He might be right.

“A changeling is a type of fairy that loves to cause suffering in humans. It disguises itself as a human child or an elderly person and behaves in ways that drive the victim’s loved ones crazy. The thing made you hysterical today, but trust me, that was only the beginning.”

The two of them stared at me. Both of their expressions changed. Mrs. Mann’s became one of confusion and Ross’ one of disbelief with maybe a touch of impatience.

“Cut the crap, Kane,” he growled.

My eyes rolled again. “Detective Ross, you know I wouldn’t lie about something like this.”

“But a fairy?”

“Fairies exist. I’ve seen them. You need to get over your mundane beliefs.” He should have trusted me more than that. I was a professional.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

“Are you saying,” said Mrs. Mann timidly, as though she felt crazy just thinking of it, “that my son is a fairy?”

“Of course not. I’m saying your son was exchanged with a changeling.”

“By whom?”

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“By other fairies.”

“Why?”

“Because, Mrs. Mann, you made them mad.”

“What?” she said, surprised. “That’s absurd! How could that happen? I don’t even believe in them.”

“Well, somehow they got angry with you or your family, and so they switched your kid with the changeling. They’re punishing you.”

Mrs. Mann opened her mouth to speak, but Ross spoke first. “How can you make a fairy mad?”

Now he came around. “How do you make anyone mad? Maybe you stepped on its favorite flower, or you cut down a tree it liked to play in.”

“You mean a fairy would do something this extreme for stepping on a flower? Come on, Kane. That doesn’t make sense.”

“You’re assuming fairies think like humans. The truth is they have more respect for flowers, trees, and other parts of nature than they do for us. Did you ever torture bugs when you were a kid, Detective? That’s what we are to them. And they can act like kids. They’re fickle and easy to anger.”

“But you’re right,” I said. “It probably took something bigger to make the fairies this mad.”

“How can you fight them?” Ross asked.

“You don’t fight them,” I said with a chuckle. “You say you’re sorry. You do things to appease them, to make them happy. Then, hopefully, they’ll leave you alone.”

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“I just want my son back,” Mrs. Mann said.

“Then find out how you made them mad and make reparations. And not just to get your kid back. They haven’t finished messing with you. They’ll do something else. And no matter how many times we stop them, they’ll keep attacking your family. You need to make them happy. And you need to do it soon.”

“But I couldn’t have done anything to upset them,” she said. She was about to lose it again.

“Maybe your husband did, or someone else in your family. Find out what happened and put an end to it. Then, do things to appease them.”

“Like what?” Ross asked.

“In the olden days, people used to set food out on their doorstep. But you’ll think of something better once you’ve found what made them mad.”

“I’ll talk to Richard. Maybe he can think of something. Can I call you when I find out?” Mrs. Mann looked at me all teary-eyed.

The truth was, I had hardly ever seen a fairy, and I wanted to. I had questions for them. I was curious about this case. Reaching into my jacket pocket, I pulled out a business card and set it on the table.

“I’m a professional, ma’am. I charge for my services.” She took the card.

“You’re a private investigator?” she asked.

“And occult expert,” I added. “The supernatural is my specialty—it’s all I do.”

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“That can’t earn you a living.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “I don’t do it for a living.”

Ross handed her a tissue, and she blew her nose. She did it daintily.

“Thank you, Mr. Kane.” She sounded grateful. That was surprisingly accepting, given the circumstances.

“Is that all?” I said to the detective.

He nodded.

“Good. Then I’d like my gun back.”

Ross just stared at me. He didn’t want to. The muscles in his jaw tightened at the prospect. “Okay. But next time I keep it.”

“Whatever you say.” He would never be able to keep my gun. My father had connections. He was one of the most influential men in Boston, which gave me certain liberties with the police.

Ross pulled my gun from his belt and handed it to me. “I’ll walk you out,” he said.

After cocking the weapon and making sure the safety was on, I holstered it. We went to the door.

“Are you serious about this fairy crap?” he said once we were out of earshot of Mrs. Mann.

“Yes, I am serious about this crap.”

“Look,” he said, his tone still hushed, “I’m okay with ghosts and some of the other paranormal stuff. But fairies—that’s going a bit far.”

“It took me a while to believe in them, too. My eyes are tuned differently. You and I see a very different world

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out there. But they're real. You saw one today. How else can you explain what happened?"

He shrugged. "But it didn't look like a fairy."

"How do fairies look? And please don't tell me they're like Tinkerbell. You're too smart for that."

Ross glared at me. "Fine." He did expect Tinkerbell. "So, do you think they'll give the kid back?"

At the door, I turned to face him, looking him squarely in the eyes.

"Honestly, I have no idea. Fairies sometimes give them back. But not always. It's said they occasionally kill the child. Other times, they raise it as their own. I think you should be prepared for the possibility the baby is gone for good."

"Is there a way to rescue him? You know. Do your supernatural thing and bring him back?"

"Who do you think I am? Gandalf the Gray?" The chuckle that followed was more for the absurdity of this conversation than at my joke. "Being rich doesn't help. Fairies don't care about money. And I may have 'special abilities,' but there's a limit to what I can do. To my knowledge, no one can force them to do something they don't want to do."

The expression on Ross' face was grim. He cared. He cared for the kid, and for Mrs. Mann. He was setting himself up for a fall, but I bet he understood that. "The woman's best chance is to try to appease them. If they can make up for what they did—whatever that may

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be—then they might give the baby back. It's a long shot, but it's all they've got."

Ross frowned. "I'm reporting this as a missing child. After all, I can't go to my superiors and say, 'the child was taken by fairies.' We'll send the skin to the Medical Examiner for analysis and hope they find something useful.

"In the meantime, I'll talk to the husband. He might think of something that could have pissed off the fairies. Although, I might use the term 'ecological extremists.'"

"Fair enough," I said with a laugh. "Call me if you find anything." And with that, I walked out into the chilly spring air.

A changeling.

The drive back to my office was spent thinking about them. Fairy lore was a subject I put extra effort into because I suspected there might be some Fae blood in me. My knowledge of them was pretty impressive. In fact, I would say I knew more about them than just about any human being. When it came to the supernatural, there were two lines of research. One was to study the folklore, mythology, and experiences people had. The other was to investigate using supernatural means. Normal humans couldn't follow that second line of study. I could.

In history, many of the worst diseases and illnesses were blamed on changelings. But not all of them acted

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sick. Some were abusive or even violent. Whatever it took to punish the real victims—the loved ones.

Why did the changeling target the Mann family? In this day and age of non-belief, what could someone do to upset fairies that much? People destroyed acres of forestland every day, and they're never targeted. It just didn't seem possible that an average family could accidentally anger them to the point where they would use a changeling. There had to be more to it.

Well, whether or not Ross wanted it, he managed to get my attention. I decided to do a little research on the Manns. Maybe one of them was doing something out of the ordinary, something I could work with.