

## Excerpt from *Death & Desire*

I never expected *Touched by an Angel* to stray into bad touch territory.

“Tall, white robes, white wings. Was there a celestial light? Did anyone see a halo?” The questions I asked in pursuit of the truth.

“It’s an Angel of Death. It kills people.” Husani Tannous, a late-twenty-something Egyptian, adjusted his baseball cap to hide his receding hairline. “It doesn’t get a halo.”

Ironclad logic from a man who’d paired his masculinity issues with the semi-automatic at his feet. Like fine wine with cheese. Or gasoline with a match.

This living room was as much a battlefield as any muddy trench. There was even a dead body upstairs, and if the animosity down here got out of hand, more casualties to come. The fluttering in my stomach did double duty as nerves and a coiled excitement.

“I’m not trying to be facetious,” I said, steepling my fingers and leaning back in a fancily embroidered chair. “But I do need the facts.”

“The facts are that it murdered my brother!” He shook his fist. “And I will avenge him!”

His cousin, Chione, slowly stroked a finger over the handgun in her lap, all the while sucking butter off her toast.

I leaned in, fascinated by her particular brand of multitasking.

“Big talker, Husani. How will you find this angel? Are you going to fly up into the sky?” Chione said in Arabic-accented English.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Flying magic doesn’t exist.” Rachel Dershowitz, early fifties and mother of the bride-to-be Shannon, was as bitter as the gin and tonic she gulped down. The gaudy rock on her finger had fewer facets than the sneer she shot Chione.

Chione’s hand twitched on her gun and I stepped between the two women. “Did Omar have any enemies? Any reason why anyone would come after him?”

“Omar is a good boy. No enemies. This is a hate crime. Those sons of dogs killed our firstborns before and they’re doing it again!” Thank you, Masika Tannous, the grandmother and matriarch of the clan visiting from Cairo. While the little old lady was knitting a sweater like many a sweet grandma, she wielded her needles with a savage ferocity that scared me more than the Uzi of questionable origin propped against her side.

Between Masika, Husani, and Chione, this mercenary family packed more firepower than the Canadian Armed Forces, but like I'd always said, Mundanes didn't require magic to be dangerous.

The physical weapons from the Tannouses were countered by serpents made of light magic that writhed above the table, ready to pounce on their victim and squeeze the life out of them.

I wanted to smack sense into all of them, but it was hard enough doing my job, never mind exuding enough badass vibes to keep these two families in line.

"You brought death into my home. Jews shouldn't mix with Egyptians," said Ivan Dershowitz. The fleshy home-owner on my left sat next to his wife and daughter on a high-backed chair with spindly legs that strained under his weight. His light magic bobbed like a cobra.

The two families hurled racist epithets back and forth, this season's bridal registry must-have.

The delicate-featured Shannon let out a hysterical wail that probably used up her caloric intake for the week. However, she was the only one acting appropriately in my opinion, given her groom-to-be had been murdered. The heavens agreed with my assessment as a shaft of sunlight cut through the clouds on this March morning to confer a kind of benediction upon her.

What can I say? When I was right, I was right.

I whistled sharply. "Assuming we take the story of Passover literally, Malach, that Angel of Death, killed *all* the firstborn sons to free the Jews from an oppressive slavery. While it is Passover this week, we have only the one death, though I'm monitoring that." I turned to Masika. "I'm deeply sorry about the loss of your grandson Omar, but one murder isn't exactly mass smiting, not to mention, the Jews are sitting right here in their own home." Low class, but hardly enslaved. "We need to keep an open mind. Perhaps it's an Angel of Death and perhaps someone is using a good story, preying on centuries of superstition and hatred to hide what's really at play."

You point out one hard truth and suddenly the place was all twitchy gun fingers, snaky beams of light, and a knitting needle jabbed at you like a curse.

My command to shut it down was ignored. Fantastic.

The person standing in the center of the room cleared his throat, and everyone immediately fell back into their corners, muttering angrily.

In his forties, he had white hair and a white suit that veered sharply towards the 1970s. Between his wardrobe choices and the fact that he was the right hand man of the Queen of Hearts, my moniker of White Rabbit Man was hardly a stretch.

One day, I'd call him that out loud.

Given his overall vibe, he shouldn't have commanded any respect, but the motherfucker of a sword in his hand helped.

Big deal. I could decapitate a few dozen people and get that response, too.

"If someone could show me upstairs so I could examine the scene?" Collecting the shreds of my patience, I met the cold beady eyes of the showpiece of this ostentatious living room: a massive crystal chandelier in the shape of a bird with its wings outstretched, soaring overhead.

Even the decor wanted out.

"Mr. Dershowitz," I said.

"Rebbe," he corrected.

Yeah, right. Ivan had earned that nickname not for his religious leanings but because, during his high-profile incarceration for assault and battery, he'd beaten a fellow inmate into a coma with a copy of Genesis. Can I get a hallelujah?

I gritted my teeth. "Rebbe—"

Ignoring me, he sent his serpent slithering to the ground where it circled the room. The urge to pull my feet up was strong. "This marriage was a mistake," he said.

No, the real mistake was coming to this shitshow. Although it wasn't as though I'd had a choice to refuse this "request."

"We can stand here and argue the existence of angels," White Rabbit Man said, "or you can allow Ashira, the private investigator vouched for by the Queen, access to Omar's room so she can determine precisely what happened."

After another couple minutes of mutually insulting each other's matriarchal lineage coupled with some anatomical suggestions that I never intended to Google, Rachel called for a maid. Husani and the help escorted White Rabbit Man and me through the mansion down a long hallway filled with bookshelves that contained zero books but an extensive and disturbing collection of china bird figurines.

Birds! They're just like us. They nest, they whistle, they rub their genitals against tufts of grass in a lusty manner.

“Was beheading too fast a way to torture me?” I muttered at White Rabbit Man.

The tiny quirk of his lips was the only thing on his impassive face that betrayed his amusement.

“We can take it from here,” I said to the people following us, when we reached the stairs to the second floor.

My escorts didn’t move.

“The Queen thanks you for your service. I’ll be sure to mention to her how you allowed me to do the job that she so kindly recommended me for.”

Still nothing.

“We’ll call should we require your assistance,” White Rabbit Man said.

Sure, that got them going.

I stomped up the stairs, stopping in the doorway of the guest bedroom to gather my first impressions.