

# DARKANGEL

BOOK 1 OF THE WITCHES OF  
CLEOPATRA HILL



CHRISTINE POPE



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*To Erik, for going on this crazy journey with me*



**DARKANGEL**



## CHAPTER ONE

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### Number Forty-Four

MY AUNT RACHEL PAUSED AT THE DOORWAY TO MY ROOM. “He’s here,” she announced—unnecessarily, since I’d heard the doorbell just a few minutes earlier.

“Okay,” I replied, and didn’t bother to keep the reluctance out of my voice. Neither did I bother to turn away from the table where I sat, which functioned as both a computer desk and dressing table. At the moment my laptop was closed. I should have been primping in front of the mirror, but really, what was the point?

Up until that moment my aunt had worn her usual cheery expression. But I saw her mouth compress slightly, even as she gave my jeans, black T-shirt, and black cowboy boots a sideways glance. “Angela, it might help if you at least looked as if you were making an effort.”

I lifted my shoulders. “What difference does it make? If we’re fated to be together, then he really shouldn’t care what I look like, should he?”

“That’s not the point—” She broke off, really looking at me this time, instead of my outfit. Voice gentler, she said, “He’s nice-looking, this one.”

Their looks generally weren’t the problem. My aunt knew I hated this ritual, knew how much I hated not being free to make my own choice, and so I got the impression that she quietly filtered out the candidates who were awkward or plain or had acne or whatever. Even so, a depressing number of hopeful young men had passed through our door in the months since I’d turned twenty-one.

Forty-three, actually. The one waiting for me downstairs would make forty-four. That was a hell of a lot of blind dates.

“I’ll be down in a minute,” I told her.

Another one of those pauses, and then she nodded. But, since she was my Aunt Rachel, she couldn’t seem to keep herself from adding, “Just a little lip gloss, dear,” before she turned and went back down the stairs, silver bangles jingling, skirt swishing. Unlike me, my aunt dressed in a jumble of multi-colored broomstick skirts and ethnic jewelry, alternating from tanks and tees in hot weather to long-sleeved T-shirts and sweaters in the winter. Her attire wasn’t really that unusual for this part of the world,



which had more than its fair share of New Age practitioners of various persuasions.

The difference between all those New Age types and my aunt—and everyone in my family, actually—was that we really *were* witches.

Scowling, I opened the little carved box from India that I used to store my meager supply of cosmetics. A tube of soft peach-colored lip gloss stared up at me, but I ignored it and instead took out a tube of Burt's Bees lip balm and applied some of that instead. After all, what was the point of putting on gloss when it was just going to get kissed off in a few minutes anyway?

Rubbing my lips together, I went down to meet the latest candidate.

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His back was to me when I entered the living room. All I saw was someone tall, with dark hair, and for a second my heart leapt. *Maybe it's finally him....*

But then he turned toward me. Dark eyes met mine, and my heart fell, just as it had every other time the candidate was someone tall and dark-haired, but also definitely not the man who had been haunting my dreams for the past five years.

My aunt smiled at the stranger, then at me. Deep down, I had to admire her for being able to summon a real-looking smile after all these disappointments. "Angela, this is Alex Trujillo."

“Hi,” I said, and managed a smile of my own. I had a feeling it wasn’t quite as believable as my aunt’s.

“Hi,” he said.

I could tell he was looking at me but trying not to *seem* as if he was looking at me. By that point I was more or less used to it, even though I didn’t like it very much. These encounters never lasted long enough for me to ask what the young men were looking for, precisely, although I had a feeling most of the time they’d been expecting more from the McAllister clan’s *prima*-in-waiting. My friend Sydney had tried to tell me more than once that I could be beautiful if I just worked at it a little, which made no sense to me. Either you were beautiful, or you weren’t.

Judging by the studiously neutral expression on this Alex Trujillo’s face, I guessed he thought I fell in the second category.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” my aunt said, and disappeared down the hall that led to the kitchen. Some truly amazing smells were drifting through the hallway and into the living room.

Poor Aunt Rachel. Every time we went through this whole song and dance, she had a big meal going, just in case *this* candidate would turn out to be the one and so would need to stay for dinner. Good thing her “friend” Tobias came by regularly to eat with us,

or there would've been a heck of a lot of roasts and chili and tamales piling up in the freezer.

You'd think after doing this forty-three times, I'd be a little better at it. I cleared my throat and said, "So, um, Alex...where are you from?"

The first five or six times I'd tried poking around on Facebook and using Google to dig up as much background information about the candidate as possible, wanting to be forearmed. Then I realized if I already knew everything about the guy, we wouldn't have anything to talk about. So these days I just went in blind and hoped for the best.

Alex shifted his weight from one foot to the other. With the exception of my cowboy boots—he was wearing black Chucks—we were dressed a lot alike, both in jeans and black T-shirts. His skin was warm olive, and Aunt Rachel was right...he was good-looking. If it weren't all so awkward and strange, I wouldn't have minded kissing him, even if he wasn't the man of my dreams.

Literally.

"Tucson," he said at last.

Which meant, despite his last name, that he was part of the de la Paz clan. Maya de la Paz was the *prima* of that clan, which counted both Tucson and Phoenix as part of their territory. Compared to that, we McAllisters, with our little corner of northern Arizona, were pretty small potatoes. This was the

first time a de la Paz had been offered as a candidate, and I wondered why they'd bothered at this point. Alex had to be a more fringe relation...or maybe not. The McAllister clan was not as powerful as the de la Pazes, but then again, I wasn't just any witch.

I was the next *prima*.

"So you're one of the de la Pazes?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer. "And Maya de la Paz is your...?"

"Grandmother," he supplied at once.

A direct relation, then. Interesting. Probably I should have known that, but trying to keep track of all the twigs and branches in my own family tree was work enough without delving into those of the other clans. Aunt Rachel reveled in that sort of thing, and kept detailed lists and charts. Handy, I supposed, when so many in a clan were related to one another in some way.

Not that witches and warlocks couldn't marry outside their clans, of course. It was good to bring in fresh blood—or else I wouldn't have Alex Trujillo standing in front of me right now—but there were still a lot of third and fourth cousins married to one another even so. And now that I thought about it, I seemed to recall a McAllister marrying into the de la Paz clan a few generations back, so Alex and I still might be related, if only tangentially.

But I knew I was letting my thoughts wander so I wouldn't have to think about the task at hand. This would be a lot easier if we could both share a drink or two first and get a little tipsy, let our guards down a bit. Custom dictated, however, that we go into this clear-headed and wide-eyed. Otherwise, our reactions could be clouded by the alcohol, and that wouldn't do at all.

"So she's okay with this?" I asked. Probably not all that tactful, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

A lift of the shoulders. Nice, broad shoulders. Although our conversation was limping along, I couldn't help wishing this encounter might have a different conclusion. He really was awfully good-looking....

"Of course," he said immediately. "It's a big deal, to be the consort of the *prima*. Even from a clan—" He broke off then, as if he'd just realized he was about to stick one of those size-twelve Converse high-tops right in his mouth.

"Even from a piddly little clan like the McAllisters that lives in the middle of nowhere, right?"

"I didn't mean that."

I was pretty sure he did. I let it go, though. Kissing a next-to-perfect stranger was hard enough without getting into an argument beforehand. "It's okay," I

said. "I know we're not much compared to the de la Pazes. But we like it that way."

Alex nodded. "It is pretty cool up here. I've never been to Jerome before." His dark eyes fastened on mine, and he moved a few steps closer. A new warmth in his expression made an excited little shiver go down my spine, even though I knew this wasn't going to end the way he wanted it to. "I think I could get used to it here."

Another step, and another, and then he was standing right in front of me. He smelled good, too, of some citrusy aftershave or cologne, something fresh and clean.

"You could?" I managed.

"Yes," he replied, then reached up and took my face in his hands, fingers warm and strong against my cheeks. He pressed his lips against mine, and...

...and nothing.

I'd known that was what would happen, but even so a sharp wave of disappointment washed over me. It didn't matter that he was gorgeous and smelled good and seemed more or less friendly. Whatever it was—whatever that spark was that should flare into a raging fire once a *prima* kissed her intended consort—well, it just wasn't there. He wasn't the one.

For a second or two he continued to kiss me, as if he thought I was on a delayed-reaction fuse or

something. But he could kiss me for the next ten years, and it wouldn't make a speck of difference.

Gently as I could, I pulled away. I didn't say anything at first. Then, "I'm sorry, Alex."

His dark brows pulled down as he frowned, but then he gave a philosophical lift of the shoulders and stepped back a little. "My *abuela* warned me that this wasn't a sure thing."

I forced a chuckle. "Oh, she did?"

"Angela, you're sort of legendary. Forty-three candidates—forty-four now, I guess—and not one suited you?"

"It's not as if I have a choice—"

"Oh, I know." To my surprise, he bent down and kissed me again, only this time on the cheek. "It's sort of like buying a lottery ticket for us candidates, I guess. We all know the odds aren't very good, but we all hope that we might be *the* one." He grinned, a flash of white teeth, and said, "*Hasta luego*, Angela." Then he went out the door that led to the hall, and from there to the front door.

Well, technically, it was the back door, as our house was a two-story apartment above my aunt's store, and so the private entrance was off the alley and not the main street, but still. Either way, he was gone. *Adios*, number forty-four.

I had no idea who number forty-five was going to be, but I had a feeling he couldn't possibly be as cute as Alex Trujillo.

Aunt Rachel appeared a minute or so later, wooden spoon dangling from her hand. "No?" she asked, in weary but unsurprised tones.

"Nope," I replied. It bothered me that it still hurt so much. By this point, shouldn't I have gotten numb to the whole process?

But I hadn't. Each time the hope would surge, even though my mind always told me the new candidate couldn't be the one, because he wasn't *him*.

Since she was my Aunt Rachel, she didn't sigh. Maybe she allowed herself the smallest twitch of her mouth, or lowering of her eyebrows, but that was all. She gave tilted her head to one side, appearing to consider my expression. "There's still time, Angela. No need to worry."

"Who's worried?" Before she could reply, I added, "I'm going upstairs. Unless you need me to help with dinner?" That was the last thing I felt like doing at the moment. Even so, I didn't hesitate to ask, since that was what I was expected to do.

I'd gotten really good at doing that, what was expected of me.



My aunt shook her head. “No, sweetie, I’m fine. You take some time for yourself.”

I murmured a thank-you and fled upstairs. Most days my room felt like a refuge, a place I could go to escape the weight of all those expectations. Today, though, it felt more like a cage, even with the breathtaking view that looked out over my hillside town, perched on Cleopatra Hill, and down into the Verde Valley, past the red rocks of Sedona, and all the way to....

It was a clear, cool day in mid-October, with visibility of fifty miles and more. Much more, actually, as I could see Humphreys Peak in Flagstaff, nearly a hundred miles away. On days like this, it seemed as if I could almost reach out and touch it...if I were crazy enough to do such a thing. Flagstaff was forbidden territory.

Flagstaff was where the Wilcox clan held sway.

I didn’t have any time to think about the Wilcoxes, though, or their myriad sins, because right then my cell phone rang. For a second or two I considered ignoring it, even as I wished we were back in the summer’s monsoon season, when my cell phone tended to crap out any time we had a decent thunderstorm. At least when that happened I didn’t have to make a conscious decision to avoid looking at the caller ID so I could let it roll over into voicemail without feeling guilty.

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