



SHATTERED

DEMON MARKED
BOOK 2

ANTARA MANN

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Shattered (Demon Marked Book 2)

by Antara Mann

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Chapter 1

Ashadha

“Hey, you alright?” Kevan asked as he leaned on the doorframe of his room while I delayed getting dressed. He’d treated me to some delicious Thai food and I slept at his apartment last night. Today we planned to meet his mentor, Ryan, who Kevan had assured me could help me deal with my possession and, hopefully, get rid of the demon inside me for good.

I turned my eyes to Kevan as I fumbled my way into a pair of jeans. I forced a smile and hastily said, “Yeah, totally. Just wondering what shirt would match these jeans.”

He obviously didn’t buy my lie because he stepped closer to me and cupped my hands in his. Compared to his hands, mine looked super tiny.

“You’re very bad at lying, Ash. Plus, I’ve known you long enough to sense when something’s bothering you.” He gently lifted my chin with his forefinger and the contact with his skin sent a warm, tingling sensation down my spine. My whole body trembled with yearning for him, to feel his caress on my skin, for his warmth and care. These thoughts had barely crossed my mind when a nausea, cold and sticky, climbed up my throat and I knew it was the motherfucking demon inside me, protesting against Kevan’s touch.

I clamped down on the simmering anger in my chest and said, “Ever since that fight in Fairy’s Kiss when I slaughtered your pal, Steven, and his cronies, I’ve been wondering why the demon inside me decided to save our lives. I’m starting to think that what he’s after is much worse than what those lunatics had planned for us.” I paused and looked into the

angel's eyes, searching for some emotion in him: understanding, agreement, surprise, anything.

Kevan's blue eyes stared back at me, his head just inches from my face as he'd wrapped his arms around my frame, his strong perfume infusing into my senses. His expression remained intent but inscrutable, not even a hint of an emotion discernible on his handsome face.

"Kevan, I'm afraid the demon inside me has cooked up something truly wicked and nasty for us—for me," I said, barely above a whisper, a tear streaming down my cheek. I didn't want to think about what we would have to go through in order for me to get rid of him, but I could feel in my gut that it would be horrible.

"Hey, hey, Ash. Don't sulk. Look at me. We'll find a way. Have faith in us, in Ryan. There's got to be a way to free you from that piece of shit and that's what we'll do no matter what." His brows furrowed as he thought about the nasty creature inside me.

"Speaking of Ryan...can I count on him that he won't tattle to the ABI about my existence?" I asked Kevan for probably the hundredth time since he'd offered to ask for advice from his mentor. He'd assured me it was safe and we could trust him, but the fact that Ryan was a retired trainee at the Angelica Academy, combined with his tight connections at the ABI made me anxious and uneasy.

"Ash, I already told you he gave me his discretion. Plus, I already confided in him that you're demon-possessed. He is fine; he really wants to help you. That's why he asked to meet and talk with you." He squeezed his arms around my back, his potent masculine energy washing over me. I reluctantly rested my chin on his shoulder and hoped everything would be fine as Kevan assured me it would be. He was right; I had to have faith and trust him. I hoped we were on the right track to beat the demon inside me.

We reached Ryan's house in downtown Aran in about half an hour, the traffic nonexistent this early Saturday afternoon.

Kevan rested on the weekends, off work at the ABI, and my work pretty much had become obsolete at my detective agency, Four Paws and a Broom. I had to get my own gig going but given the demon possession thing, I had my plate full. I needed to free myself first, and then I could focus on reviving my detective agency. Priorities.

Kevan took the stones on the pathway three at a time to his mentor's porch and rang the doorbell. I came in tow, looking out for Ryan's fierce dog that had scared me the last time we visited, but there was no trace of the canine, thank goodness. Distant steps echoed on the floor, growing louder. Soon enough, the front door opened and Ryan's cleanly shaved face appeared, greeting us with a sincere smile.

"Kev, Ashadha, welcome again to my modest home. I'm so happy you came."

Once we entered the hallway, he closed the door behind us and ushered us to his spacious living room.

"I'm eager to help you with everything I can, Ashadha, and I'm truly sorry for what you're going through. Please tell me all that you know about the demon inside you, right from the beginning," Ryan urged me once we sat on the sofa.

I informed him about my situation, starting with the recurring nightmare I had always had of me being a small child and participating in a bizarre ritual with many people watching, including my own parents; someone hung me above a bowl while a dark, greenish entity infused into me. I would always wake up with a scream once the transfer of the demon into me started. Next, I told Ryan about my ex-boyfriend and our first time: how I nearly killed him because of the monster inside me. I told him how until I met Kevan, I'd sworn never to date anyone, since I believed I was a half-demon. Kevan gaped at me, his eyes wide-open as he heard about the first and only time I'd ever had sex. I didn't want him to hear my backstory this way, but I had no choice; his mentor had to know all the important events in my life. I concluded my long story with our captive state at Fairy's Kiss: how Steven wanted to butcher us and even free the demon inside me. But the

demon didn't like to be bossed around, so he killed Steven and his partners, combusting them in the air.

Ryan sat motionless in his chair, his fingers twirling a peculiar green ball with a yin and yang symbol on it in his palm. I suspected this item helped him concentrate and filter my story better, but I could be wrong. From my seat I didn't register any magical energy emitting from this small ball.

Finally, he opened his chestnut eyes, staring at me, and asked, "Your parents willingly put you through the initiation ritual that infected you with a demon, right? Did this happen in the United States before the war and the cataclysms?"

"Oh, no, this was way before all the turmoil that ravaged the world. Actually, we were in India at that time. My father was a pundit at a local temple, my mother was American. I was born in Varanasi. And that's pretty much all I remember about my parents." Emptiness hung over my middle and gave me a sour taste in my mouth. I'd thought the hurt about my parent's absence would have diminished over time, but it never truly disappeared.

Ryan scratched his chin, glanced at Kevan, and said, "I'm sorry to ask you this question but how did you end up in the States, Ashadha?"

I shrugged. "It's okay. A woman named Susan brought me here. I used to believe she was my mother, but she wasn't. She didn't like talking about my father or the past so I always assumed he must have died in an accident."

Ryan furrowed his brows, a deep crease forming on his forehead, his look pensive as he took in the information. "I won't lie to you, kid. I think that this woman, Susan, knew about the demon possession, or at least suspected something, and that's why she took you away from India and fled with you to the States. Maybe she was your mother's sister or a close relative." He fidgeted in his seat and fired a new question, "I'm sorry to ask you this, too, but does anyone from your family or the ones you are aware of have magic inside them?"

I slowly shook my head. “None that I am aware of. Susan was human, just like I thought I was. She never mentioned my father being anything other than a priest and that’s all I know.” I paused as I recalled my familiar, White Paw. Soon after Susan died, White Paw appeared out of the blue, making me think that Susan was somehow connected to her; maybe she had taken on this form to guard me and assist me? I might never learn.

“Well, right after Susan’s death, a familiar came to me in the form of a tiny fiery golden dragon, but besides the demon inside me and my clairvoyance gift, I’m human. And I have no idea where my gift comes from. I’ve had it as long as I can remember,” I hastily added before he could question me about my special gift.

He nodded and exchanged a long silent look with Kevan. Finally, Ryan turned to me. “I’ll be upfront with you, Ashadha. I’ve read in my mythology and academy books, plus I consulted with some friends of mine—do not worry I haven’t told them your secret—possession boils down to the fact that the demoniacal entity always wants to take over the host body. Demons’ end goal is the host’s soul. In your case, your demon wants to eat your soul. You might call it a theft or a takeover, it’s linguistic variations. I have no experience with exorcism, myself, but I have a good friend from Varanasi, a pundit like your father. He ought to know more about how you can get rid of the demon before it’s too late. The trouble is, he only communicates in a state of deep meditation. We met at a training at the academy many years ago and he owes me a favor, so I’m positive he’ll tell me everything he knows. I’ll connect with him right away and call Kevan once I have information. Til then, my advice to you, darling, is to observe that inner voice and try to detach and distance yourself from it. You won’t deny its existence but try not to react to it. This is what I am sure a Yogi would advise you. And that good friend of mine from Varanasi is exactly that, a Yogi.”

Chapter 2

Kevan

“You sure about this priest of yours, Ryan?” I asked, turning to my mentor: I didn’t want us to lose precious time for nothing. Every second mattered, the clock ticking relentlessly, and I’d rather spend some time alone with Ash than chase a mirage in India.

Before Ryan could reply, Ash intervened, “I think he’s onto something. When he mentioned Varanasi, I felt something in my solar plexus. The only thing I have at home from India is a painting of Varanasi’s riverside, the banks at the Ganges.”

“Really? That’s curious,” Ryan said. “I’d like to see that painting if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.”

In the middle of their conversation, my cell phone beeped, vibrating in my pocket. I casually pulled it out, not hurrying, since it was my day off. A glance at the display and the appearance of Delainey’s name sent a ripple of anxiety down my spine, an inner alarm ringing in my ears. This had to be urgent, otherwise he wouldn’t call me. I picked up the call and, jumping from the sofa, I went to the corridor where I could talk with my boss freely, not disturbing Ryan and Ash.

“Kevan, come to the ABI ASAP, we’re having an emergency meeting in about half an hour.”

An emergency meeting? This didn’t bode well. The pit of my stomach tightened as I mentally braced myself for the worst. “I’m on my way. What happened that called for this urgent meeting?”

Delainey paused on the other side of the line and I started to wonder if the connection hadn't broken when his baritone voice cut through the silence, my racing heart the only thing I could hear in that moment. "Kennedy called for this meeting; that's all I know. Be on time." And with that the line went dead.

"Hey, is everything alright?" Ash asked me, patting my back with her delicate fingers, which sent warm butterflies down my belly and cleared the dark clouds that had converged in my head. I hadn't even heard when she'd left the living room and had come over to me. I turned around to face her, a smile dancing on my face despite the ominous call from my boss. I didn't like this emergency meeting one bit. I wrapped my arm around her waist, pulling her closer to me. Her breasts brushed against my chest in a way that made my head go wild with fantasies and desire, yet I checked myself.

"I don't know. I hope so. The ABI chief has called for an emergency meeting."

She furrowed her brows; her lips pouting increased my desire to kiss her here and now. Yet a demon lived inside her, and I didn't want to unnecessarily anger him. Besides, I had to hurry to headquarters. Now wasn't the time for making out.

"Your chief's name is Delainey, right?" She asked.

"No, Kennedy—the chief of the whole ABI, not my direct superior," I corrected her. "He called this meeting, not the head of my division. Otherwise, you got the name right. Anyway, I have to go, Ash. It's urgent. Here, take these silver coins to pay for a cab to drive you back to Johnsonville. I'll call you later." I planted a kiss on her forehead, ready to burst out of the house when Ryan trotted down the corridor, asking me what was going on.

I shouted back that I had no time now and that I'd call him later to arrange a visit to Ash's apartment for him to see that painting of Varanasi. Then I pushed open the front door, entered the garden and ran to my parked car outside his house. My inner being ticked with anticipation, my heart and soul

praying nothing catastrophic had happened in the world. I wasn't sure I could live through another war.

I arrived in front of ABI's quarters just in time and took the elevator to the last floor to the special room where we always had these types of meetings. Not that we had them often, but the few times we did, it was always in the big blue room with peculiar pictures on the walls. Even the rookie agents here knew which was the emergency meeting room. The elevator's doors beeped as I reached the last floor, and I strode to the end of the long corridor. As I drew closer, I noticed that the door stood ajar, held open by a few agents. I recognized Schuster and another detective I hadn't seen before. They cordially greeted me and I gave them a curt nod. The pit of my stomach pulsated with anticipation and excitement, not sure what turn this meeting would take, but I was positive it would change our lives at ABI forever.

The room itself was spacious, the size of a university auditorium, painted in different variations of blue. My first boss at ABI had told me that blue was the color of Lord Shiva. The multitude of paintings hanging on the walls portrayed strange geometrical figures or forms; they shone positively in bright colors, mostly red, yellow, and other variations. Someone had told me that the purpose of these paintings served to induce positivity and stimulate our problem-solving abilities. That was the reason why, as soon as I entered the blue room, I turned my attention to the painting closest to me, depicting a yellow well and a purple thing on its edges. With all the uncertainty about Ash's situation and now the tension about the meeting, I needed some fresh, positive vibes.

"Kevan, hi." Delainey's familiar voice rang behind my back just as I perched on a vacant chair in front of a large mahogany table. I turned around to see him standing next to the wall, checking something on his phone. "Kennedy is discussing something with the mayor. He should be here soon." He forced a smile, which didn't reach his eyes.

He barely finished his sentence when Schuster and the other detective rushed into the room and slid into two empty chairs

beside the table. I recognized the familiar faces of the detectives at the ABI. Kennedy's brisk steps echoed as he entered the room and a rush of anxiety rang up my middle, reaching my temples, which had begun to pulsate.

"Hello, detective angels. I truly apologize for being late, but my conversation with the mayor lasted more than I thought it would take," the grand chief of our organization said hastily. He was six-foot-two, chubby yet strong, and sported neat stubble on his face. He always wore tweed pants and a fitted polo. "Now, you must be wondering why I urgently summoned all of you here for an emergency meeting. As most of you have guessed, the reason isn't benign. Yesterday, it was brought to my attention by none other than Lord Shiva himself that the Demonica prepares for a revolt against us and our established order. The High Court specifically warned me to find and destroy the Brotherhood of the Serpent, as it stays in the heart of the Demonica's sick ambitions to take us over. I'm sure all of you know that last week detective Tyler from Hexes and Homicide barely escaped the brotherhood's clutches. They tried to transfer demoniacal entities into him and a human woman. The High Court demands we take immediate action before it's too late.

"The gods and archangels couldn't give me much information, but what they were able to see is that this brotherhood gathers in various bars that are mostly underground. We already checked Fairy's Kiss, where detective Tyler was attacked and held captive, but we detected no further activity there. The bar has since officially closed its doors to customers so we ruled it out as a meeting point. Fairy Kiss's owner was one of the prominent members of the Brotherhood of the Serpent and was killed in the scuffle. But the existence of this brotherhood goes beyond a simple bar in the fae district. This is why I'm asking you to search all the bars and restaurants of Aran and detect any unusual magical activity. You will work in pairs. I have talked with the mayor and you will have full access to all the premises." Then he proceeded to assign the pairs and handed us single paper sheets with the bars each pair had to check. Schuster and I were assigned to work together. For some reason, unease

twisted my gut at the thought of working with this guy. I had nothing against him, but I didn't appreciate his cocky attitude. Though the meeting wasn't as bad as I expected, it seemed the hard part was just ahead.

"Do you have questions?" Kennedy turned to the crowd, and from his body posture and the way he glanced at the door, I could tell he was ready to end the meeting.

One of the senior detectives I'd seen talk with Delainey before raised his hand and the chief nodded toward him.

"Since the High Court is so powerful, can't the gods and archangels see more about this mysterious brotherhood? They only gave us crumbs."

Several heads nodded in agreement and Kennedy raised his voice to quell the murmurs that had spread in the hall like a growing avalanche.

"The High Court's members are doing what they can, but this is what they were able to detect in the universe's database for now. They are working to uncover this brotherhood more than anyone, but in the meantime, we can help by searching all the bars here in Aran. Now if we cleared this up, are there any other questions?"

Silence fell over the room and the chief declared the emergency meeting to be over.

"Hello, Kevan, or should I call you 'partner'," Schuster approached me in the corridor. Schuster was visibly shorter than me at around five-foot-eleven, and was tall, thin, and lean, with dark blond hair and a beard. If I didn't know he worked for the ABI, I would have assumed he was a car mechanic or a laborer.

"How are you doing?" I greeted him, trying my best to be polite. I glanced at our sheet with the bars we had to visit. Altogether, seven.

"Same as usual, but how are you? Have you fully recovered from last week's battle at Fairy's Kiss?" He asked me, concern in his voice. He'd been one of the agents the ABI sent to assist after Ash and I escaped from the basement. He'd seen us right

after that cutthroat battle in Steven's basement, so he personally knew how haggard Ash and I looked.

"Not complaining. I've recovered and so has Ashadha."

A shine gleamed in his otherwise dark chestnut eyes and, trying to suppress a chuckle, he remarked, "You're really fond of that girl, aren't you?" He pressed the elevator's call button as most of the other detectives had dispersed, the floor now standing empty.

"Is that a problem?" I cut in, my tone sharp and unyielding. Instead of an answer from Schuster, the elevator beeped as it arrived on our floor, its door sliding open for us to get in. As we hopped onto the elevator, he turned to me.

"Not a problem at all, man. But never forget you're an angel and she's just a human. A pretty human, but still a normie. You may hate me for saying it, mate, but those relationships always end badly. Always. Keep that in mind, Kevan."

Chapter 3

Kevan

Schuster and I started with the bars closest to headquarters and weaved our way to the furthest one in the outskirts of Aran, in between the fae and the shifter districts. The first few bars, which happened to be in downtown Aran, presented no interest to our investigation: they were the typical fancy bars in the downtown area, where the Angelica mostly hung out. I couldn't even picture a secret demoniacal brotherhood operating there in the shadows. The next few bars were rundown and poor compared to their elite competitors. The last bar proved to be the juiciest one in terms of supernatural activity. I recalled I'd received reports about suspected vampire activity there, though in the few times when angels went to check, the alleged vampires had gone. The bar's name alone was a testament to the vampire rumors: The Bite.

We went into the dark two-story building bearing the sparkling red inscription. My clock showed it was nearly seven pm and we had the luck that the bar stood empty. The bouncer wanted to check us but when Schuster flashed him his ABI badge, the ogre stopped mid-sentence, his face sulking and he ushered us inside. The bar's main hall reeked of alcohol and greasy food. The chairs scattered at the bar looked shabby, their paint peeling. The wooden chairs in the dining area looked even shabbier, and I wondered who in their right mind would visit this place. Apparently, it served as a good hiding spot for the remaining vampires, which my order hadn't yet managed to terminate. I took comfort in the thought that these vampires were low-level and didn't pose a real threat to the Angelica Order. The creepy Brotherhood of the Serpent, on the other hand, was extremely dangerous because they dabbled in demoniacal possessions like Ash experienced, though hers was

a different kind of game not connected with that brotherhood. I couldn't help but think what could be different if only we knew more about who and how that entity possessed her. The dream Ash remembered was too little for me or anyone else to work with. I hoped Ryan and his Varanasi friend would help us more.

I activated my magical pendant to inspect The Bite for demoniacal activity, my fingers brushing across the metallic surface. A blue mist fluttered in front of my chest, though it remained unnoticeable to the plain human eye. Unfortunately, my pendant registered no forbidden magical activity here. A quick glance at Schuster informed me he'd had the same result on his own. Having nothing else to do here, Schuster and I slid into two of the chairs at the bar. I ordered a juice, having decided to take the opportunity to question the bartender. We did the same in the previous bars, too, if our magical items didn't show demoniacal activity. I doubted any of these bartenders would confide in us even if they knew something, but it was our duty to pull all the punches.

"Long night ahead, huh?" I remarked as the bartender, a tall guy in what appeared to be his mid-thirties, set my drink on the counter and handed Schuster his beer.

"I've never seen you two here. Are you new in town?" the bartender asked, his tone polite but curt. He didn't trust us and he had the right. If I let on that we were ABI agents, he might never tell us anything but the bill.

I considered that carefully, ran my hand through my hair, and said, "Yes, my brother and I just arrived from the west. The capital is so different than the wilderness all around." One of the first things the Angelica changed when they took control of was the environment and care for Mother Nature: the urban cities, which were destroyed during the cataclysms anyway, were turned into huge forests, the freeways replaced by all types of plants and animals. Aran was the only populous and urban city in the whole US. Compared to the world before the purge, Aran was far greener than the former megalopolises like New York and Los Angeles.

“I bet you must feel like you’re in the jungle.” The bartender chuckled. Leaning on the counter toward me, he said, “Don’t worry, bro. You’ll get used to it. I still remember my first day here. I wanted to run back to the south where I grew up. But the pain was totally worth it: here’s the highlight of the country, plus the pay is excellent.” He winked at me and walked away to take the order of a new customer who had just arrived.

Schuster turned his head to me and whispered, “Brother? Couldn’t you have come up with something more believable?”

“Like what? A colleague?” I snapped at him, keeping my voice a whisper.

He shook his head and I directed my attention back at the bartender, who had finished with the new customer. Now was the time to take a shot at this and try my luck. I cleared my throat, which drew the bartender’s attention and asked him, my words calculated and concise, “Hey, man, we’re looking for something and we heard you could help us. Have you heard anything about a group called Brotherhood of the Serpent?”

The bartender’s carefree expression evaporated at the name and he turned his back to us, pretending to wipe the counter.

After a few moments, he faced us again and murmured under his breath, “I’ve never heard about that brotherhood. Can’t help you guys.” Before he could go through the swinging door at the end of the bar, I inched closer to him.

Careful that my tone came out clear and audible, I said, “We’re ready to pay you generously for any information you can give us.”

The words “pay” and “generously” did the trick and the bartender came back to the bar, small greedy flames gleaming in his watery eyes.

I took out a few large golden coins to prove my point and a dirty smile spread on the bartender’s lips as he saw the gold.

“Because of this brotherhood, we came all the way to Aran. We need all the information you have about them,” Schuster

added, speaking for the first time since we arrived. The bartender barely shot him a glance and directed his attention back to me, his mind probably calculating what he could do with all this gold. I didn't intend to give it to him unless he shared something of use with us.

“Come back tomorrow, guys, at the same time as tonight and I'll have gathered everything I can about this brotherhood. But...” he reached out with his hand to us, his palm open, “you pay half as a deposit now, the rest tomorrow evening. Take it or leave it.”

I exchanged a look with Schuster—after all, I claimed we were brothers—then nodded in agreement. I dropped a few coins into the bartender's palm, hoping I hadn't wasted them.

The guy's lips curled into a semi-vicious smile and he said, “Nice meeting you guys. See you tomorrow.”

The bartender disappeared through the swinging door into another room and Schuster heaved a long-held sigh of relief. He arched his brows and said, “Nice act, brother.” He chuckled and before I could reply, my phone beeped under my blazer.

I pulled it out and saw Ryan's name fill the display. My heart fluttered with hope and anxiety: had he managed to connect to his Indian friend and get answers as to how we could free Ash from the monster inside her?

“Hi, Ryan. Any news from your friend?” I greeted him.

His tone was brisk and concise as usual, “Yes, I got information from Ganeshwar. When can we meet?”

I flashed a glance at my wristwatch: the clock approached seven thirty, so I could meet him and Ash in my apartment in about an hour. Schuster and I had checked all the assigned bars, plus today was still my day off. I told Ryan to drop by my place in an hour, then called Ash to inform her I was on my way to pick her up. Schuster observed me the whole time, his face inscrutable.

“You really like this girl, right?” He remarked calmly, staring intensely at me.

For some reason, I couldn't let his comment go and I lashed out at him. "Who I like and date is none of your business. Got it, *brother?*"

He suppressed a chuckle and said, "Easy there, macho. I am not after your girl."

And you better not be or else I'll smack your fucking head onto the counter, I thought to myself. Jesus Christ, this guy was seriously unnerving me! How was I supposed to stand working with him in the coming days?

Chapter 4

Ashadha

After the meeting with Ryan, I went back to my office, waiting for potential customers but, alas, nothing. In the days right after I discovered the truth about myself, my work totally dried up. I wondered if the demon inside me wasn't responsible for that as a way to avenge me for figuring out his existence. Either way, I had to banish him. Thank goodness Kevan helped me with money and, even though I protested and insisted I'd give it back to him, he said he'd do anything for me, to help me. These days I often wondered about my relationship with him, too. We hadn't even been intimate, yet he treated me as if I were his wife. I had the feeling every now and then that he hadn't told me something important about us, about our relationship.

I sat in my chair in front of the desk and read an old tome of Susan's when my cell phone rang. Kevan called to let me know he was on his way to pick me up. Ryan had a response from his Varanasi friend and wanted to tell us the news. As soon as I heard the words escape Kavan's lips, my heart fluttered inside my chest, beating wildly with excitement and anxiety; fear curled up deep within my core and my middle began to throb.

You won't get away from me so easily, Ash, the familiar malicious demon voice chimed in, scolding me for trying to get rid of his presence. *You belong to me, Sunshine; you're mine only.* And with that he laughed out loud, his laughter shrill and rattling, cutting an invisible hole into my soul. I hadn't heard him ever since that battle with Steven and his cronies; it was a relief to be left alone. But I guess the peace had to come to an end since I hadn't yet defeated the demon.

Kevan was relaxed and in a better mood than he'd been in the morning. When I asked him how the emergency meeting went, he explained that they had to check all the bars in Aran for demoniacal activity.

“Tomorrow evening I'll know more if I am onto something. For now, the bait has been put in place,” he said cryptically and I felt no further desire to drill him about his work.

Kevan pulled out a chocolate cake and some fruits to eat while we waited for Ryan to arrive. The clock approached nine pm when the doorbell rang. Kevan reached the door with a few brisk steps, and I heard Ryan's familiar deep voice greet us.

“Sorry for being late but Ares, my dog, got into the trash and I had to clean it up. Anyway, nice to see you again today.” He came into the living room and gifted me a radiant smile. He sat on the nearest chair and went on, “You're lucky, young lady. My friend Ganeshwar responded immediately to my call, which is rare for him. You must be special. He agreed to meet you. He thinks he knows a person who has knowledge as to how to dissolve dark magic, ugh, demon possession. He gave me his address. It's Hanuman Road fifteen, near the riverbanks of the Ganges. He also asked that when you two visit him, you'll inform him in advance. He needs to know.”

My heart swelled with happiness and joy, yet my logical mind told my senses not to get my hopes high so early; we still knew nothing about this Ganeshwar guy or even if he or his pals could actually help me. I glanced at Kevan for confirmation about the issue with our transportation to Varanasi. Kevan had the power to teleport and other abilities, which came along with his angel status.

Kevan scratched his chin, probably picking up on my buzzing thoughts and he said more to himself than to any of us, “My teleportation magic can only work in short distance. I'm afraid I have no power to transport us to Varanasi on the other side of the globe. If I ask my superior archangel Musa, he'll get suspicious and would ask why I need to go to Varanasi, which we must avoid at all costs in order to protect your secret, Ash. And we have no time to go the human route

like taking a plane. It'll take us a few days to travel, and I have no extra time to lose, especially now with the talks of a threat from the Demonica." He shook his head and conceded, "The only option left is to buy a teleportation charm from the black market."

Ryan stirred in his seat. "Are you serious? It's risky, Kevan. The Angelica keeps a tab on such illegal activities and they can track you down if they catch wind of your purchase."

"It's okay, don't worry. I need to visit a bar that sells these kinds of things tomorrow anyway. It's safe and discreet. Given one has enough gold to spare."

"Still...be careful, my friend," Ryan said as he furrowed his brows. "I don't want you getting into unnecessary trouble."

Kevan straightened his back and, caressing my thigh with his hand, he said, "For Ash, I'm willing to go to Hell if I have to."

Pride swelled inside my chest and I looked adoringly at Kevan. True, I hadn't scored the lottery with my parents, but at least I'd found a man worth his salt. If only the other Angelica supernaturals would be as tolerant and understanding as him...

Chapter 5

Kevan

The next day, Schuster and I worked our asses off finishing our canvas of the suspicious areas of Aran we hadn't gotten to the day before. Since yesterday, we covered all the bars from the list Kennedy had given us, then we went on to visit more places and from all districts. The other angel detectives did the same. None of my colleagues had found anything solid, though—we all danced on thin ice, trying our best and hoping for a revelation. The Demonica Order and their offshoot, this wicked brotherhood, needed to be stopped at any cost before they could create chaos and wreak havoc again in our world. The memory of my little sister being slaughtered by these monsters had plagued me since her death, and it took a lot of time and effort on my part to mute the pain and hurt. Now the risk of another catastrophe loomed on the horizon, even though this time I was an angel and had superpowers. I had Ash but she needed my help to get the demon out of her. I would do anything for her—she was my fated mate, the one destiny had chosen for me. She was the love of my life and I had to protect her no matter what. Even if that meant my own peril.

In the evening, Schuster and I went back to The Bite to get the information I'd paid for so steeply. I hoped the bartender had something of interest for me and the ABI. Schuster was highly skeptical and didn't stop making fun of the fact I had told the bartender that he and I were brothers. Schuster was getting on my nerves. I couldn't figure out how this dickhead had passed all the tests and trials at the academy to become an angel. I sincerely hoped Kennedy would never ever assign me to work with this ass again. The mantra I kept repeating to myself while he was near me was simple: this, too, shall pass.

Yet I didn't know how long this passing would take. And if I could stand him for that long.

"Hey, guys, welcome back," the bartender greeted us. He was wiping dry a few high glasses, the bar nearly empty. A funny woman with a wide hat, as if taken from the book *The Wizard of Oz*, sipped a martini at a nearby table, clearly waiting for someone. A few dudes with bodies that looked as if they were made of steel hung out at the end of the hall, talking loudly and making rude jokes about women. Relief passed over me that Ash hadn't come in here to hear their obscenities.

"Have you got the information?" I asked the bartender without beating around the bush. Schuster and I perched on the chairs closest to where the bartender stood.

"Did you learn anything about that brotherhood we asked you about?" Schuster asked.

The bartender's lips stretched into a greasy smile and the desire to wipe out his smugness hit my middle, taking all my willpower not to punch this guy right here, right now.

"Easy there, guys. I'll tell you the tea." He inched closer to us, leaning on the counter and he continued with a hushed voice, careful not to draw the other customers' attention to us. "So, I asked here and there and heard that this brotherhood is preparing to overthrow the established order. Yes, gentlemen, they want to defeat the Angelica and have their own world order," he added as he saw Schuster make a face at the information.

"But where can we find them? Do they gather somewhere?" I asked, trying to extract more from this dude than what we already knew from Kennedy.

"You owe me more golden coins, bro, and then I'll tell you." His lips stretched into another smile, more vicious than the previous one. I suppressed the urge to curse him and, taking out my pouch, I removed a few golden coins and dropped them on the counter. He took them with the speed of a vulture, his watery eyes gleaming with satisfaction. Once he'd taken his prize, he turned to us.

“The brotherhood gathers at various bars and restaurants, underground in basements. They always change places because a week ago, the ABI detected them and killed a few of them in a bar in the fae district. As soon as I learn about their next gathering, I’ll tell you guys.”

This information was still pretty vague, but if this guy could tell me in advance where the Brotherhood of the Serpent would meet next, he’d be worth the few golden coins I’d parted with.

“How do you know this information is true? Who’s your source?” Schuster asked him. This dickhead spoiled everything.

The bartender narrowed his eyes, suspicion growing on his face. “Hey, you two don’t work for the ABI or the Angelica, right? Because here, we don’t like angels.”

I shot Schuster a dirty glance, happy our concealing charms hid our angelic auras and powers and turned to the worried bartender.

“Of course not. Relax, dude. My brother simply wanted to make sure we could trust you. Here, take this as an advance for tipping us off about when they meet again.” I handed him one more golden coin to calm his nerves. At the sight of it, he forgot my partner’s earlier line.

“Sure, I will. Nice working with you guys,” he said and went to the shelves with bottles mounted on the wall behind the bar, taking a few bottles.

“Umm, one more thing, buddy,” I said and realized I didn’t even know this guy’s name.

“It’s Simon,” he said turning to face us again. Whoa, did he just somehow read my mind? I was sure he hadn’t heard my other thoughts, otherwise we wouldn’t be speaking this casually if he did.

“Do you have transportation charms? I need to buy a few,” I said nonchalantly as if I was buying bread. I hoped Schuster wouldn’t mind or question my motives for needing those charms.

Simon's lips pulled into a new greasy smile. "Absolutely. Wait here while I fetch some from the office," he said and darted to the inner side of the bar, waltzing through the swinging door.

"What the hell, man?" Schuster asked me as soon as Simon disappeared.

I shrugged. "I have something in mind. Trust me, *brother*."

Chapter 6

Ashadha

Early the next morning, Kevan came to my place; thank goodness I had already woken up and dressed. My familiar, White Paw, woke me up, jolting me from my sound sleep around six every morning. Kevan texted me last night that he'd obtained the so-needed transportation charm and now he wanted both of us to teleport to Varanasi ASAP, to talk to his mentor's friend.

"Right now?" I asked and rubbed my eyes. I hadn't yet had any tea or coffee and my mind simply refused to function. My brain cells screamed at me, demanding that I give them fuel to operate.

"Yes, immediately. Varanasi is about ten and a half hours ahead of our local time, so it's afternoon there. If we go later, it'll be night. The sun sets early in India." He paused to study my eyes, searching for something in them: a clue, agreement... whatever it was, I wasn't sure I was on board with his idea to teleport to my birth city right away.

"What is it? You're reluctant to go and claim your right to a normal life, with that demon out of you?" Kevan muttered as he lifted my chin in his hand, his fingers brushing against my skin. The touch of his hand sent a wave of heat down my spine, making my head dizzy and warm bubbles formed in my belly. I couldn't help but grin despite my rumbling stomach.

"Of course, I'd give my soul to get rid of the demon inside me, but I'd like to have some breakfast or at least have a cup of coffee before we teleport to Varanasi," I said meekly.

He chuckled and gave my cheek a peck, his lips barely touching my skin, yet the heat mounted between my legs. The

demon protested, warning me to stay away from Kevan.

Don't even think about him in that way or I'll punish you. His malicious voice reverberated in my mind, poisoning my cheerful mood. Huh, way to have a boyfriend with that demon inside me, I thought but still stepped away, Kevan's hand dropping from my shoulders in the process. His brows furrowed, creases forming on his otherwise handsome face.

"Don't tell me that ass threatened you again because of the small kiss I just gave you," Kevan said angrily, his voice booming with indignation and fury.

My silence was the confirmation he needed and he added ever so angrily, "Come on, let's go. This can't continue on like this any longer. Let's just eat in Varanasi. Don't worry, I'll take care of you." And with these words he threw a small, round, black item on the floor. The air shimmered for a few seconds, then a silver cloud swirled around, emerging from the little item. Before I could protest or say anything, Kevan wrapped his muscular arms around my body, tugging at my flannel. Our hips bumped together as the cloud intensified and took us away from my apartment into the void, coldness permeating over my skin and bones.

I don't know how much time the journey took but it felt like I'd been reborn again. The blackness vanished in the blink of an eye, and the bright sun scorched my clothes, which surprisingly felt too thick and heavy. In Aran at this time of the year, the second half of September, the weather started to cool and prepare us for a long, cold winter, but here in India it felt as if the summer season was still in full swing. The silver cloud that had encircled us dispersed, the shimmering particles vanished, and we found ourselves in the middle of a street bustling with life. All kinds of aromas and spices assaulted my nostrils. The loud mewing of a cow behind me nearly made me jump. Kevan took a step back and managed to pull me away before a small cow passed by, her angry noises indicating she didn't appreciate us blocking her free movement. Someone else's angry shouts reached my ears and the sight of a middle-aged couple arguing and fighting came into view. The woman attacked the man pretty aggressively,

the guy slowly retreating backwards. I stood there mesmerized, observing present-day Varanasi, truly seeing it for the first time. With the exception of the heat, I didn't remember much about it or my time in India.

“Come. We can take our time seeing Varanasi later. Now, we have to find Ganeshwar's little temple. Ryan told me we need to reach the banks of the Ganges. There, we need to look for a large painting of Lord Shiva on a wall. We can ask someone how to find the Ganges.” Kevan talked more to himself than to me as he marched forward, motioning at me to follow him. I braced myself for all types of shenanigans here and ran over to him. He'd already stopped at the closest street shop, a peculiar blending of a shop and a place to order food. The seller cooked what looked like oily rice with vegetables and broken eggshells lined the street near the shop.

“Namaste. Do you speak English?” Kevan asked him politely, but the man, a middle-aged Indian with a dark complexion and black eyes shook his head, muttering something in Hindi. Oops, the language barrier wasn't in our plan. I was about to go to the next street shop when I noticed that Kevan didn't budge from where he stood, his hand resting on his chest. Was he touching his pendant? His eyes glowed with a strange light and a tremor passed through my middle as fear dug its claws into my abdomen, curling up in my core. What was going on with him?

Suddenly, Kevan surprised me by asking his question in Hindi. The shop seller perked up and, excitedly, replied something in Hindi. I stood there like a baby, oblivious to what they discussed. It was a shame, as I was Indian and Hindi was my birth language. And yet I couldn't even understand the most basic stuff in Hindi. Thank heavens, Kevan didn't talk long with the street seller and turned to me once the convo was over.

“Come. He told me the way to that spot on the Ganges we're looking for. Hurry up. It's nearly six pm.” He grabbed my hand in his, surprisingly tenderly, and guided me through the street. Then he turned left and crossed a smaller street, marching confidently as if he'd lived here all his life. We

walked for several long minutes, during which some of the passersby tried to either sell us something or to initiate a conversation with us, but Kevan was relentless. He ignored them all with cold detachment. Finally, we reached the riverside, the smell of polluted water permeated the air and battered my senses. A group of monkeys roamed this area, too; their small bodies jumping from one bank onto the next. A couple of boats waited on the banks, tied to the bay.

“Care to explain that to me? I thought you didn’t speak Hindi,” I said to him as we weaved our way through the banks, his steps brisk and steady, his eyes set on a point in the distance. I ran after Kevan, trying my best to catch up with him, but it wasn’t that easy. I hoped Ganeshwar’s small temple lay nearby and we didn’t have to cross all the riverside to reach him.

“Of course I don’t speak Hindi, but that’s why I have my angelic pendant.” He stopped and turned to face me.

I finally managed to catch up to him and, panting, asked, “So, with this marvelous thing on your chest you can speak in any language you’d like, huh?” I teased him. He didn’t reply, instead he wrapped his hands around my waist and pulled me to himself, my breasts bumping into his chest. Heat swept over me and before I could react, he pressed his lips hard on mine. His kiss sent an explosion of desire, setting my mind and senses on fire. I wanted him, at least a proper kiss. But the demon inside me sneered with malice.

No, it won't be your way, stupid girl.

Before I could comprehend his words, dark magic burst out from me and hit Kevan square in his chest. Dark gray smoke engulfed him and he reeled backwards, falling onto the steps. My heart froze and horror struck me as I watched him collapse on the hard stones. I ran to him, praying he hadn’t smashed his head on the stone steps. I couldn’t forgive myself if the demon inside me hurt him or, god forbid, killed him.

“Kevan, are you alright? Please tell me you’re fine,” I asked frantically as I searched for his pulse. His eyes were closed,

his breathing slow and I could barely feel his pulse. What did I do? What did *he* do to him?

Chapter 7

Kevan

I was kissing her passionately, her intoxicating scent filling my every fiber with desire when something happened. Before I could even blink, a dark cloud of highly negative energy hit me right in the chest, making my head spin. My breath ceased, heaviness weighing on my flesh and bones. I tried to keep my balance and fight back but the blast took me by surprise, too late for me to summon my angelic superpowers. The dark magic reeled me backwards as if I were a feather and my body hit the stone stairs. Dull pain pierced my middle and the world turned black. I have no idea how long I'd lost consciousness, but the next thing I knew, someone's fingers massaged my abdomen and I reluctantly opened my eyes, stirring my feet.

“Thank goodness, you're alive. I was scared I might have killed you.” Ash stood above me; her face contorted in worry. As she saw me come back to life, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“Nah, you won't get away from me so easily. I'm way tougher than you think.” I said and stood upright. I took a good look at my body, especially my legs and arms, then checked my head to see if I had any injuries. So far, I was unharmed; only the scare from the surprise attack lingered in my mind. I turned to Ash.

“What was that about? Was your demon angry that I kissed you?”

Ash turned her eyes away from mine and wriggled her fingers nervously. That was all I needed to know that the motherfucker inside her was indeed responsible for this blast. I stood up and shook the dust off my clothes. Heavens, these steps were full of rubbish.

“I’ve had enough with your demon. We need to banish him faster.”

Ash nodded vehemently and mumbled a stifled agreement. Good that we were on the same page about her demon. Now if only he would leave her in peace... One could only dream.

I looked around, searching for that small temple with a large painting of Lord Shiva on the wall: it had to be somewhere here. My eyes fell on the horizon; the sun had started to go down. A noise from the Ganges reached my ears and I noticed several men swimming in the holy river. Prior to the cataclysms the Ganges was known as one of the dirtiest rivers, but after the purge, the filth had reduced and now the river looked surprisingly clean. Though to be fair, an unpleasant smell from it still hung around. The blue of the water relaxed my eyes and serenity filled my soul. With renewed energy and powers, I again searched for Ganeshwar’s temple. We had to hurry. I wanted to find him before darkness shrouded the land. Another shade of blue caught my eye near the river, about twenty feet from us, up the north side of the banks. The face of Lord Shiva greeted me from a wall of a modest hut and as I took my time to study this construction, I realized the small cottage could actually serve as a temple. That was it!

“Look! I think we found Ganeshwar’s temple,” I said to Ash and motioned at her to follow me. I set out to reach the small cottage, going down the multitude of steps. Finally, we reached the back of the cottage, the large face of Lord Shiva welcoming us. Shiva looked exactly like in our textbooks at the academy: long hair and braids, snakes curling around his neck and the Ganges flowing from his hair. He’d raised his left hand, giving us a blessing with a moderate smile on his lips. Undoubtedly, he’d long ago blessed the whole city of Varanasi, given it stayed almost intact after all the great cataclysms. Usually, those cities on the riverside or coastlines were either destroyed or severely damaged, but Varanasi served as a great example of what the High Court could do if one of their chief members had a winter residence there.

I slowed down, waiting for Ash to come over to me. The aroma of fresh and rich incense and fruits danced in the air,

tingling my nostrils. I took a few steps further toward the front of the cottage, which overlooked the Ganges. Ash joined me as I entered the doorway. A thin man sat on the floor in a lotus posture in the back of the small cottage, eyes closed.

Without even bothering to open his eyes, he muttered slowly, his words concise and clear, “Namaste Kevan and Ashadha. I have waited for you.”

Chapter 8

Ashadha

The stranger sitting in front of us looked like how I'd always pictured a Yogi: lean, modest and with the aura of austerity over him like a halo. He was bare-chested, wearing a white cloth from his waist to his feet. As he stood up, opening his eyes to greet us, I noticed the smeared ash on his chest and arms. I couldn't comprehend why he'd done that, but I could feel it had to have a spiritual meaning for him. He drew closer to us and joined his palms together, saluting us.

“Hari Om, friends. My name is Ganeshwar. Your mentor, Sri Ryan, informed me about your misfortune and I'm glad to assist you in whatever small way I can to help you reverse the demon possession you've been marked with.”

“Great. Ryan told us you have a friend here who can—” I began but this peculiar man cut me off, brushing aside my inquiry.

“Young lady, hold your horses. Before we could visit my dear friend, Sri Shankarananda, I'd like you to perform a small puja here, in my modest mandir.” Seeing our stunned and confused faces, he added, “In my temple. Come, I'll show you what you need to do. Today is Wednesday, which means we ought to worship Lord Ganesha. He is the remover of all obstacles. Here. Come here, Ashadha. You need his blessings the most.”

He motioned at me to come over to the back of his small temple where now I noticed a bronze figure of a deity the size of a medium TV placed centrally on the floor. I recognized the well-familiar elephant god, Ganesha. My aunt had a similar yet much smaller figurine back in our home before she passed away. Ganesha's fat belly filled most of the statue, his elephant

head in stark contrast with his human body. The Yogi picked up a tea pot shaped candle and began to move his hand, holding the lamp in a circular movement around the statue, humming some mantras under his breath. Once he finished, he passed me the lamp and motioned at me to repeat his movements. I took the candle and tried my best to repeat his actions. I couldn't help but feel stupid. Kevan stood behind me, silently observing everything with the utmost attention. In the meantime, Ganeshwar took a few incense sticks, lit them up, and made a few more circular movements around the Ganesha statue. He then took the candle from me and passed the incense sticks to me. I repeated his movements, holding the incense tightly.

In the meantime, he sorted out the candle and the incense sticks by placing them in front of the elephant statue. Finally, he passed me a mango and a banana and urged me to place each piece of fruit before the statue. Did he think he'd feed and please the elephant god this way? I couldn't help but admire how he treated this bronze statue as if it were a real person. As I took the delicious looking fruits in my hands, my empty stomach rumbled, reminding me I hadn't eaten anything for breakfast. My belly could wait. I had a more pressing issue than hunger.

“Now repeat after me ‘Om Gam Ganapataye namaha.’ Say it eleven times. Both of you,” he urged us as he saw Kevan standing idle. We complied and as we said this mantra, Ganeshwar placed his thumb into a small bowl on the floor to the right of the statue and took a small liquid from it. Then he placed his thumb on my forehead and marked something on my skin, my mind registered a cold and sticky sensation. He repeated the same on Kevan. Now, with the ritual over, I glanced at Kevan and could see what Ganeshwar had drawn on our foreheads: three long lines in a yellow color.

“This is for protection and good luck,” he added as he saw my puzzled expression.

“Thank you, sir. Now could we please visit your friend who has knowledge of possessions?” Kevan asked, trying his best to hide the impatience that permeated his whole body.

Ganeshwar smiled. “Of course. Please follow me.” And with these words he went out of the small cottage temple onto the darkening landscape outside. A few more minutes and the sun would disappear from the horizon, the night embracing this old city with its ancient traditions and rituals.

And yet I couldn't help but smile inside. The atmosphere here, the vibe, even the people and surrounding areas felt like a long-forgotten home, their ancient song calling at me, tugging me closer to them, and the beat in my heart increased with each second I spent here.

Chapter 9

Kevan

Ganeshwar led us through the banks of the Ganges back to the busy, bustling streets of Varanasi. Since the sun had set, I thought the street activity would have reduced. Contrary to my assumption, the streets here were just as active as when we arrived, if not even more. Ganeshwar chose smaller, less populated streets, the aroma of cooked rice, spices, and curry swirling through the air straight into my nostrils. A fleeting thought passed through my mind: Ash had told me she was hungry but we hadn't eaten anything yet.

After half an hour walking and weaving our way through the small and winding inner streets of Varanasi, we came to a broad street that looked more like a boulevard if we applied Western standards. A few rickshaws had stopped nearby and the drivers waved their hands at us, inviting us to hire their services. Ganeshwar shouted something at them angrily and the drivers went silent, turning their heads away from us. We crossed the busy street, a multitude of people, rickshaws, and even cars passing us by. Ganeshwar turned down a smaller street, full of merchant shops. As we entered the street, I noticed the two policemen sitting on chairs at the front, observing the busy street. Their uniforms stood out from the surrounding people. Even though night had fallen, I was sweating in my long jeans and t-shirt. Ash strolled ahead of me, climbing the street that rose in elevation and I assumed she must be sweating, too. She was clad in leather pants and a tank top; she'd already taken off the flannel she had over her tank and wrapped it around her waist. The humidity here was unbelievable. Even in the midst of summer, the temperature in Wyoming was no match for the boiling heat here. No wonder

the locals looked all weary and hollow: the scorching sun must have consumed most of their life-force.

We climbed the busy street with shops on both sides, the crowd growing thicker the more we moved ahead. Ganeshwar led the way, Ash and I following behind. He would wait for us from time to time, turning his head to check if we needed more time to reach him. We trudged our way, weaving through the bigger and bigger crowds, a sense of suffocation swelling inside my stomach. Hopefully, we'd reach his friend soon and get away from this insane crowd.

Finally, Ganeshwar turned down a smaller, empty street and I sighed in relief. It felt good to have sufficient oxygen and not constantly bump into people all around me. Ganeshwar walked several feet down this street and knocked on the door of a police cabin at the end of a long-winding wall. A chubby policeman came out and, giving us a scrutinizing look, shouted something angrily at Ganeshwar. The latter didn't back down and barked something in response. I didn't care much what they said to each other. If I had the need, I could speak Hindi when I touched my angelic pendant, but I had no desire to comprehend what they argued about.

Finally, the policeman snapped something short, then grunted and gestured at us to go straight toward a large green door. The officer went to unlock the door and indicated for us to go into what looked like a backyard. Where the hell did Ganeshwar bring us? I thought we were going to meet a friend of his; did this friend live here? But then why did the police guard his property? I had so many questions, yet I doubted Ganeshwar would answer even if I asked.

Ganeshwar stopped in the middle of this new space, turned to us, and said with pride, "Ashadha, Kevan, welcome to the golden temple of Lord Shiva. This is Kasi Vishwanath mandir."

Ash slowed down her pace and turned to me, flashing me a surprised glance. "Sir, is this your dear friend, the one who knows about possessions?"

Ganeshwar smiled and said, “That’s right, young lady. Sri Shankarananda is the chief priest of Kasi Vishwananth, which isn’t just an ordinary temple but one of the twelve jyotirlingas. This temple has one of the original shivalingas, or special statues in the form of an oval dark stone of Lord Shiva. As you, Kevan, might know, Lord Shiva is the master of all demons.” He shot me a glance, expecting my confirmation. I rubbed my temples, trying to remember this fact, but strangely enough my memory felt blank as if I were in another dimension. Maybe it was due to the energy permeating this place?

Ganeshwar must have sensed my peculiar state because he went on, “I can assure you, if there’s someone in India who knows about possessions, it must be Sri Shankarananda. Come. The evening service is over, so he has likely retreated to his room.” He strolled forward toward a towering temple. This one, unlike his river cottage, was huge—over forty feet tall. It had the form of a cone, its roof golden. A dark orange flag fluttered from the top of the cone, clearly a symbol of Hinduism or maybe of Lord Shiva. A crowd of people had gathered in front of the temple and I recognized policemen among the crowd, too. Ganeshwar passed all these people and kept walking straight until he stopped at a smaller temple building and knocked on its door. No one answered.

My muscles tensed, the hair on my neck standing on end as a potent wave of magic reached my senses, making my stomach ache with pain. I convulsed as the thought hit my brain: it was the magical signature of demons. No, this couldn’t be true. Our arch enemy couldn’t have found this priest before us. Fate would be too cruel if this were true.

I tapped Ganeshwar and motioned at him to leave me to deal with this. I was a trained angel at the ABI, he was just a Shiva devotee. I knew well from our books that Lord Shiva could bestow various superpowers to his devotees, yet I preferred to deal with the demoniacal motherfuckers myself than let this Yogi suffer at their hands. I gathered my strength and blasted the door. The force of my magic took the door by its hinges and it blew away, revealing the inner side of a small temple complex. Broken items, chandeliers, and statues lay

scattered on the floor. A bunch of masked demons had gathered at the far end of the room, threatening a panicked priest with their nasty magic. When they saw us at the doorway, the noise of me blasting the door too loud to ignore, they charged at us in unison.

Chapter 10

Ashadha

The stench of rotten eggs hit my senses with such velocity that I thought I'd puke, my temples throbbing with dizziness. The demons here definitely were low-level, though. As uncomfortable and repulsive as their magical scents may come across, they lacked the power and wickedness of Steven and his cronies.

The demons charged at us, their crimson eyes gleaming, and hurled a series of shadow blasts our way. I ducked while Kevan transformed into his angelic form. He rose in height, towering over everything in the room, his head bumping into the ceiling. His armored chest took several hits of the dark magic, but it couldn't hurt him: his angelic protection keeping him invincible. I wrapped my arm around Ganeshwar, trying to protect him. He kept shouting something at his priest friend, held captive by a single demon.

I tried to hide behind a big cupboard-sized statue depicting Lord Shiva, but the assholes hurled a new series of attacks, this time at Ganeshwar and me. Seeing they couldn't harm Kevan, they must have decided I was an easy target. The space around me darkened, ominous circles danced, rippling the air with swirling waves. The shadow blast tore through the flesh of my arm, perfusing the fabric of my jacket with its rotten smell. Immediately, pain hit my arm, wrapping its claws around my body and mind. I gripped the statue with my fingers. Shaking, I managed to take out my gun loaded with magical bullets. Kevan struck several demons with his enchanted golden sword. His wings fluttered in the air, his enormous body moving swiftly and seamlessly in the space above our heads. I showed myself from my hiding place behind the statue and unloaded my gun into the two demons

closest to the priest and me. The blue magic hit the demons' bodies and they tried to block the blue trace that began to encircle their torsos, spreading onto their feet and heads. As the shimmering blue light reached their tiny horns, fire erupted on their clothes and flames burst, swallowing their flesh. I stared in awe at my gun. I'd never set demons on fire with it, but I guess there was a first time for everything.

"Nice shot, Ash," Kevan said approvingly from near the ceiling. He'd just slain the remaining two demons as they tried to retreat to their last pal, the one who held the priest. Kevan's golden sword sliced through their bodies in a swift motion as he plunged his weapon deep into the demons' flesh. The demons shrieked, their eyes losing their crimson glow. Finally, they collapsed on the floor, the life force going out of them.

Before Kevan or I could stop him, Ganeshwar ran to his friend, saying something to him in Hindi. The demon tightened his grip on the priest's neck, his fingers digging into the man's bare skin as he gritted his teeth. Ganeshwar took a tentative step backwards.

"One more step and Shankarananda will die. You can't allow this to happen, right?" The demon laughed out loud, his cackle sending a wave of chills down my spine, revulsion mounting in my belly.

Ganeshwar shrieked, panicked, and tried to get to his friend, but Kevan, who had landed next to him, stopped him, blocking his way. The demon's eyes flickered with a rekindled glow of crimson, his lips contorting into an evil grin. If it hadn't been for the seriousness of our situation, I would have chuckled at how conventionally villainous he looked—as if taken from a superhero movie.

"Don't do anything stupid, man. Just release the priest and we can negotiate," Kevan said, his voice echoing in the room. He'd decided to engage in a conversation with the demon, his right hand firmly placed on Ganeshwar's back as he made sure he wouldn't do something stupid in trying to save his friend.

The demon laughed again, the sound eerie and soulless. Before I could even blink, the air around him and his hostage

shimmered in dark hues; a black vortex manifested as it rippled the air across their bodies. The whirlwind took them out of the room into, quite possibly, another dimension. Kevan ran toward the vortex and stuck his sword into the rippling and swirling magic, but it was too late. The demon and priest had already teleported, vanishing from the temple complex.

“No!” Ganeshwar cried, sincere pain lacing his voice, and he collapsed on the ground. Tears welled up in his eyes and he hastily wiped them dry. “They took Shankarananda! Even worse, they took The Scroll of Destiny.”

The Scroll of Destiny? What the hell was he blabbering about?

“What is the Scroll of Destiny?” I turned to him, trying to calm the adrenaline still running high in my body now that the tension and stress of the fight were wearing off.

Ganeshwar shook his head, his face still glistening with hot tears. Barely audible, he muttered, “It’s the scroll that describes the exact ritual as to how possessed people can be freed from demoniacal entities. That’s why I brought you here to him.” He gulped down a tear and added, “It’s an ancient scroll and the only one I am aware of. The legend says Lord Shiva himself wrote this scroll as a way to help us fend off demons and their nasty ways. And now it’s gone, together with Shankarananda.” Ganeshwar cried and this time he broke down, his body convulsing as he let his tears pour down his cheeks.

“Wait. Even if the Demonica took this scroll, wouldn’t your friend still remember the ritual?” Kevan asked hastily. “If he has performed exorcism with this scroll, he ought to remember the ritual.”

Ganeshwar shook his head, wiped his tears, and said, “You don’t understand. The ritual itself wouldn’t free anyone from a possession, but the energy of the scroll—it carries a fraction of Lord Shiva’s power and soul. If demons are afraid of anyone, it’s Shiva. Even if we get back to Shankarananda and he performs that ritual on you, without this scroll, the magic of liberation won’t happen. That’s why the Demonica stole the

scroll, those bastards,” he hissed angrily, his desperation morphing into anger.

No, this couldn't be the end; there had to be another way. We couldn't let the Demonica defeat us that easily. I gave up arguing with Ganeshwar—he clearly wasn't in his right mind. Instead, I went over to Kevan, who stood silently at the spot where the demon and the priest had vanished. Kevan pressed his lips tightly together, his mind feverishly working. I knew him well enough to recognize his patterns: he thought hard about something, his brain planned something, his intent onto something.

I touched his hand, my fingers brushing against his. The hardened look on his face softened as his eyes fell on me, yet it lasted only for a fleeting second. The hard look returned to his features as he grew more determined than ever. Ferociousness gleamed in his eyes like a beast before the kill. He wanted revenge; he was after their blood. Before I could say something to him, he turned to me.

“They knew about us. The fucking brotherhood was aware of our plan.” He paused and said quietly, “This means only one thing, Ash. There's a mole among us. Someone betrayed our plan to come here and get to Shankarananda. What just happened was no accident, make no mistake.”

Chapter 11

Kevan

I couldn't believe I missed the demon and let him take the priest away! How stupid of me. If only we'd come earlier... But the fact remained that someone close to me must have known about my plan to visit Varanasi and what Ash and I wanted to achieve here. It couldn't have been anyone close to Ash because, except for me and her familiar, she didn't have any friends. The image of Schuster came to my mind, my insides twisting with revulsion: could this dickhead be a double agent, secretly working for the Demonica? Besides my downright dislike for this guy, he hadn't done anything suspicious. Besides, I never told him I intended to come here in India, let alone about Varanasi. Yet he knew I bought transportation charms from the greedy bartender at The Bite. But how could he have figured out I would come here, of all places? Schuster didn't sit well with me and I had to keep an eye on him and his shenanigans. If he was the mole, I'd make him pay for it.

"It could be a ritual, too," Ganeshwar said unexpectedly, his thick Indian accent cutting through the fog of my thoughts.

"Pardon?" I said, turning my head to him.

He cleared his throat and added, "You said demons must have learned about your trip here and your plan to get information from me and Shankarananda. You suspect a mole among your circle, but may I suggest another possibility? It is quite possible for the demons to have performed a dark ritual and obtained insight into your plans that way. Never underestimate the power of the occult."

As plausible as this thought sounded, my gut feeling and angelic intuition whispered something else. I was positive

someone must have betrayed us. The question remained, though, who? I balled my fist and mentally vowed to find the culprit and make him wish he had never been born. Ash was my fated mate and I'd do anything to save her from the clutches of the monster inside her.

“And now what can we do? Your friend was abducted by a demon; god knows where he teleported him to,” Ash said in exasperation.

Even though her question was directed at Ganeshwar, I drew closer to her and took her hand in mine, whispering to her, “We'll find a way, don't worry.” I wished I believed it, myself.

Ganeshwar scratched his chin and paced around the ransacked temple, careful not to step on the broken glass and debris on the floor. “I'll try to connect with Shankarananda. We have a link, just like Ryan and I, though ours is stronger. I'll also try to find out if Lord Shiva made a copy of the Scroll of Destiny, though to be fair, I doubt it.” Realizing what he'd just delivered wasn't exactly “good news,” he hurriedly added, “I'll try everything possible and keep in contact with Ryan. I'm afraid I can't offer you anything else here at this time.”

No work here meant we had to return to Aran. So much time lost to find a transportation charm, and then we hit bottom rock here. At least I could join Schuster and the others in the search for traces of the Brotherhood of the Serpent.

Ash, Ganeshwar, and I went outside, and the night greeted us: an array of stars twinkled above our heads in the sky. The humidity from earlier had disappeared and finally cooler air blew by, clearing my head. Ash must be starving, though I suspected due to our failure, food probably stood at the end of her to-do list.

“Thank you, Ganeshwar. I take it you'll report to the local Angelica services about the demon attack and the kidnapping of your friend?”

He gave me a curt nod, the full moon that had risen high in the sky shined on his face, giving him a sad and melancholic vibe. I couldn't blame him, though.

“I hope the next time we meet, we have greater luck and get to that scroll the demons took,” I added and then I recalled something and asked him, “By the way, do you know of a restaurant nearby? I’d like to treat Ash to some delicious food. If you still want to take my offer.” I winked at her and she forced a smile. I knew her spirits were down, so I intended to distract her by visiting a traditional Indian restaurant.

“Yes, sure, I can recommend a lovely and cozy family restaurant. It’d be difficult for me to tell you where it is, so I’ll take you to it. We’ll walk together.” He gave us a signal to follow him as he quickened his pace and we weaved our way through the backyard of the temple complex. The policemen, one of whom was the guy who argued with Ganeshwar, threw us stern looks and stared at us as we left the premises. We strolled down the street, which now seemed much cleaner and bearable as the crowds had left.

And then, in the quiet of the evening, Ash walking beside me, her magical scent tempting my senses and tickling my inner fire, I got a telepathic call from my boss, Delainey. He was short and to the point: someone had killed the chief of the ABI, Kennedy, and wanted me to come to the headquarters ASAP.

“The situation is bad, Tyler. The High Court is sending archangels to investigate the chief’s murder. We’re all worried his death is connected to that Brotherhood of the Serpent we’ve been after. This doesn’t bode well.”

I stopped in my tracks. Ash and Ganeshwar sensed something was going on with me because they stopped, too, and stared at me intently and with concern.

“If we don’t find Kennedy’s assassin fast, I’m afraid the High Court will declare war on the Demonica. And this is the last thing we need now.”

Chapter 12

Ashadha

Kevan stood in the middle of the empty street, the night sky casting shadows on his pretty face. From his expression, I assumed that he received a telepathic call from his boss at the ABI. This would mean he wouldn't treat me to dinner at a local restaurant. My stomach growled in protest, but we had more important and pressing things to accomplish than having a pleasant meal. In all honestly, after the fight with the demons, and the priest's abduction, I doubted a meal would taste as good as it normally would. Ganeshwar glanced at me, wondering how I'd react to Kevan's changed behavior, but I simply waited for him to gather his thoughts and speak to us first. I'd grown used to how angels communicated with each other and came to respect his inner space. As I suspected, Kevan turned to me once he gathered his thoughts, and the telepathic call had ended.

“Bad news, guys. Our chief at the ABI was assassinated. I must return to Aran as an investigation has started. I'm afraid our dinner has to wait. I need to teleport immediately.”

A lump formed at the back of my throat and heaviness rose in my chest, giving me the impression that my insides weighed more than usual. I didn't like that someone killed his chief. Was this murder connected to the Demonica attack we just fended off? And what about this mysterious Scroll of Destiny? Were these events just coincidences or there was a hidden hand shaping all these occurrences? My gut feeling whispered to me that it was the latter option. It would be too convenient for all of this to be just random.

“Of course, Kevan. We have finished here for now. Ganeshwar will let Ryan know as soon as he learns something,

right?” I asked Ganeshwar and he nodded slowly, his thoughts engaged with something else, far away from us.

He turned to Kevan. “Stay on your guard, Kevan. Evil has raised its head and I fear for the near future.” He cast a glance at me and added, “I’ll see what I can do about finding a copy of that scroll but I can’t promise anything. Be careful, both of you. May all the gods and especially Lord Shiva protect and guide you.” He raised his hand as a sign of blessing and I couldn’t help but be reminded of Shiva’s painting on his hut.

Kevan was just taking out his transportation charm, another small and round black item. He threw it on the street in front of us. Ganeshwar took a few steps backwards so that he wouldn’t teleport, too. The space shimmered for a second, then another silver vortex tore the air as if it were a lightning bolt and took us across the ether back to Aran City. Kevan teleported us back to where our trip started: my apartment.

“I’m going to ABI headquarters and will call you when I know more about the chief’s murder,” Kevan said and kissed me gently on my forehead. His lips brushed across my skin but he made sure not to linger on my flesh too much as to not to irritate the demon inside me. Ugh, I hoped this nightmare would finish soon and I’d function as a normal human being. Hope died last, they said, and I began to understand the truth and power this proverb carried.

I saw Kevan to the front door and locked it behind him; his brisk steps pounding on the staircase as he descended. I stood in my empty apartment for a long minute, contemplating the chain of events over the past couple of hours, my heart beating faster than usual in my ribcage. We missed meeting the priest—the Demonica acted faster than us—yet something inside me whispered we could get better. I could free myself from the clutches of that monster inside me with or without that stupid scroll.

You wish, the unmistakable and grumpy voice inside me sneered with malice. I shook my head in a vain attempt to banish the asshole out of my mind and soul. My stomach came to my aid, signaling me the time was past eleven in the

morning and I still hadn't put a morsel in my mouth. I rushed to my kitchen and prepared myself a sandwich.

I barely swallowed a few bites when the ringing of my doorbell downstairs signaled I had a customer. I'd connected the bells of both apartments to make sure I wouldn't miss a call if I came to my apartment to have a break. The tones were different so I was sure which bell I heard. Grumpily, I paused my meal, finished my bite, and went outside, locking my apartment behind me. I loped downstairs and once I unlocked my office, I headed to the front door. Just inches from the door, I paused in my tracks as the strong scent of pine trees blew right into my face. It was clear as day that a shifter stood outside the door. The idea that it could be Evalyn, the widow of the deceased werewolf policeman, crossed my mind, but I didn't think it was likely. As I stood there, listing the options as to who that shifter could be, my doorbell rang twice. *What an idiot I am*, I scolded myself. Instead of being fearful of potential shifter clients, I had to be happy I'd have a new case. I unlocked the door and yanked the handle open. Outside, a woman in what appeared to be her early forties stood a foot away from me; her rapid movements betrayed her impatience. A weak sense of guilt passed over my chest as I wondered if she had been waiting for me a bit too long.

"Hello, ma'am. I'm sorry if I made you wait for me. What can I help you with?"

The woman cast me a quick glance and asked routinely, "Are you Ashadha Matthews? Mrs. McDonald recommended your services; said you were truly gifted."

At the mention of Charlie's widow, a pang tore through my lower abdomen and bile rose in my throat. It had all started with Evalyn McDonald hiring me. That part of the case was over, though we now had to catch the mysterious Brotherhood of the Serpent. I hoped the woman in front of me would have nothing to do with the creepy brotherhood the ABI were after. A girl could hope. I nodded eagerly to the lady in front of me in confirmation—indeed, I was Ashadha Matthews, for good or bad.

“Please come inside, ma’am. I’m sure I can help you with whatever you’re looking for.” I made space for the unfamiliar woman to come inside, then closed the door once she’d entered my office. She stood in the middle of the room, not daring to sit on the chair in front of my desk. She was medium tall, with dark brunette hair that came down in her shoulders in waves, and bright brown eyes. Her body was slim and fit: one could tell she either kept a diet or practiced some sport. She also exuded an aura of seriousness and hard work, so I was sure she hadn’t come all the way to my office in Johnsonville for nothing.

“Please take a seat, ma’am. I promise I don’t bite.” I forced a smile which she did not return. I wondered what she was worried about.

I hurriedly added, “Besides, if you sit, ma’am, you’d feel more comfortable.” I went to my own chair behind the desk and slid into it. I forced another smile, hoping my friendly attitude would make her relax. She grudgingly perched at the end of the chair and gripped her purse tighter in her hands.

I cleared my throat and prompted her, “Now, what can I help you with, ma’am? I’m sure you haven’t come all the way from the shifter district just to see my face, right?”

This time her lips stretched into something resembling a chuckle and she said, “I apologize for my stiff attitude, I just have never met a psychic before.” She coughed and added, “My name is Irene Harvey and my teenage son, Oscar, has been missing for the past two days. My husband and his younger sibling and I are all quite worried about him. Please, Miss Matthews, help me find my son,” she pleaded with me, her eyes filling with tears as she locked her gaze onto what I assumed was her son’s picture, which she’d taken out of her purse. I could almost taste her bitter sorrow and the distress she was going through. That would explain her hesitant behavior from earlier.

“Please tell me more about your missing son, Mrs. Harvey.”

She fidgeted in the chair, fingers fumbling with the handle of her handbag. “Oscar is a lovely young man, seventeen years

old. Actually, in less than three months he'll turn eighteen. Here is a picture of him." She placed the photograph on my desk. I picked up the photo and took a good look at it. It showed a young man with short hair and blue eyes; he stared back at the camera confidently, his features resembling that of the woman before me. One could clearly tell they were mother and son.

A shadow passed over the mother's worried face, but she quickly regained her strength as she continued, "Oscar is a hard-working boy, and he's been preparing for his exams to enter college next year. He's a good boy and has never had trouble with anyone. He's the captain of his rugby team at school, plus he has a girlfriend, too. I can't think of anyone who would want to hurt him." A well of tears formed in her eyes, and poured down her cheeks as she swallowed her grief. I had taken out my notebook and a pen and had scribbled all the information she had shared with me so far. I offered her a tissue, but she rejected it, taking a Kleenex from her own handbag.

"Please tell me about the day your son disappeared, Mrs. Harvey," I asked her, careful that my tone sounded polite, yet compelling.

She wiped her tears and concentrated on my question. After a brief thought, she said, "Oscar went to school at seven ten in the morning, as usual, but he never made it home from school. First, we called all his school friends and his girlfriend, a lovely wolf shifter named Brianna, but all said they never saw him at school." She paused for a moment, then added, "We called his teachers and they confirmed what his friends told us: Oscar was never present on that day, which means he disappeared in the morning, on the way to his school."

I scratched my chin and asked her my number one question, "I take it Mrs. McDonald has informed you how my clairvoyance works? I need an item that belongs to your son and which he frequently wears, like his jacket, or a t-shirt. Did you bring a piece of his clothing with you?"

Instead of answering, she opened her handbag and took out a small plastic bag. Opening it, she handed me a carefully

folded t-shirt. I took it, my fingers brushing across the soft cotton material. The t-shirt was of very good quality, its color dark green. I instantly liked this clothing and had half a mind to ask my new client where she had bought that t-shirt from.

“This was his favorite t-shirt; he wore it the day before he disappeared. I hope you can see something about my son by touching it.” She looked at me eagerly, probably hoping that I’d activate my gift in front of her and immediately tell her son’s whereabouts. I usually took great care not to activate my gift before clients. If something bad happened, I wanted to make sure no one would see it or get hurt. It was a precautionary measure, but better be safe than sorry.

“Thank you, Mrs. Harvey. I’ll check to see if I can obtain any information about your son and will call you if I have news. I’ll need your cell phone number to keep in touch, and I require a downpayment of five silver coins to begin.”

I barely finished the sentence when her hand reached for her handbag again and she took out several golden coins and a small piece of paper with a printed number; she dropped the coins and the paper on my desk. My eyes grew wide at the glow of the gold. I hated that Kevan had loaned me money and this was enticing. Well, I called it “borrowing,” but I was sure Kevan had no intention of letting me pay him back.

“Just do what you can and find my son. I’ll pay you double this if you find my boy. Please, Miss Matthews,” she said, desperation coating her voice. She abruptly stood up and walked to the front door. Without even waiting for my response, she went outside, leaving me stunned in my chair.

This was the easy part, I thought to myself as I directed my attention back to the t-shirt now that my client had left my office. I had to find her son and hoped the Demonica had nothing to do with his disappearance.

My hand hovered over the t-shirt and I gently placed my hand on top of the fabric, its soft cotton welcoming my skin. At first nothing happened, just a warm, fuzzy sensation climbed over my hand, sliding to my palm and fingers. Then the heat mounted, making it unbearable and I saw Oscar’s

face. He was as alive as one could get, his lips stretched into a smile. The corners of his lips twisted and something eerie flashed in his eyes, giving me goosebumps. His smile twisted into an evil grin and the heat on my hand exploded. Scorching flames erupted, my skin burning as fire engulfed my hand, sizzling on my flesh. With a shriek, I pulled my hand away from the t-shirt and grabbed a glass of water from the desk, throwing it at the raging flames. With searing hiss, the flames fizzled out and eventually died. A large hole stood in the middle of the t-shirt. Charcoal and debris had stained my desk, the smell of burned wood filling the room. My skin burned, blistered and red. Damn it, what just happened?

Chapter 13

Kevan

I arrived in the ABI at noon, my colleagues rushing to and from the building, everyone frantic and worried. It was huge for the Demonica to kill the chief of ABI, and it meant that no one of us lesser angels were safe while the murderer was on the loose. We had to find the culprit right away and punish them or else I didn't want to think what the High Court could do. They had probably gathered and decided to give us some time to solve the murder; if we failed, I was afraid the High Court would take matters into their own hands. And in this case, everyone would suffer, including the Demonica. The High Court only acted in extreme cases and mostly when we at the ABI couldn't handle the situation.

I took the staircases since the elevator was busy. I opened my office door and collapsed in my chair behind my desk. I immediately called my boss, Delaine, his brisk voice answered on the other side of the line.

"Tyler, are you in the office?" he asked instead of greeting me, his tone formal and somewhat cold. I had grown used to his cold-hearted behavior with less emotions and more logic and work. This strategy had always produced good results so I didn't complain.

"Yes, boss. I'm in my office and all ears."

"Good, I'm sending Schuster your way. He'll fill you in on Kennedy's murder, and you two will work together. Continue your search into the Brotherhood of the Serpent, but with the knowledge of the chief's murder. I'm outside ABI, on a special meeting with other senior angels. I can't talk more but will find you later." And with that, the connection ended, the quiet of my office welcomed me back.

This wouldn't last long, though: Schuster would join me and breathe down my neck. I couldn't hide that I didn't like the prospect of working with that ass again. I was aware my dislike of him had formed purely subjectively, yet I couldn't stand his smug attitude and the stupid grin on his greasy face. I had half a mind to use the Eye to gather the details of Kennedy's murder, but Schuster burst into my office before I could even try. I think his office was either on the same floor as mine, or a floor below. At any rate, his office was situated very close to mine.

"Welcome back, Kevan. How was your short vacation to India?" he asked me casually. He perched on the vacant chair in front of the desk. "Varanasi is a legendary city; so glad the gods spared it from the cataclysms. Bringing your girlfriend there must have been nice," he mused aloud as if he and I were best buddies.

I gaped at him, my mouth wide open: how did this weasel figure out I was in India, and more precisely in Varanasi? I hadn't told anyone; I only informed my boss that I'd need the morning off and would be to work by noon. But I never even told Delainey where I would go, let alone Schuster.

"How the hell do you know where I've been, man?" I snapped at Schuster, my tone sharp and laced with hostility. I realized how rude I must have come across and added with a softer voice, "I never disclosed this to anyone, not even to Delainey.

Schuster chuckled as he showed me his white teeth. Bile began to form at the pit of my stomach: the more time I spent with this dude, the more I grew to dislike him.

"Oh, Kevin, I asked the Eye about you. This morning when we got the news about Kennedy's murder, I thought we'd work together, but Delainey said you were coming in late. Naturally, I was curious and decided to use the Eye. Nice trip and glad you two met a Yogi there. This guy looks exactly the way they portray ascetics from India in our academy books." He chuckled.

My heart twisted in my ribcage. So, he'd seen Ganeshwar, too? Fear twisted my gut at the idea that he might have seen the other Indian guy, the priest, and the subsequent demonic attack we had to fend off.

“Was this all you saw about our trip to Varanasi? No demons, no murders?” I asked half-teasing, half-serious. Schuster, though, took it as a joke and brushed away my remark with a chuckle.

“No, man. Only saw your lovely trip with your girl. I can totally understand why you like her. Now, we have work to do to solve Kennedy's murder. Most likely, demons killed him. Here, loverboy, you can read the details of the murder for yourself.”

He tossed a paper file onto my desk. Images of Kennedy's dead body greeted me on the first page, his chest naked and a nasty wound in his heart, blood smeared on his skin. I grimaced: this wasn't the way I'd like to remember our chief.

I cleared my throat and turned to my partner. “Could you spare us the time and please fill me in on the details?” I put the file on my desk then directed all my attention at Schuster. He grinned yet again, which only made my blood boil with annoyance.

He said, “The chief died in his home in downtown Aran between ten and midnight yesterday, stabbed in the heart. His wife found him lying in their bed. Our detectives haven't detected magic to have been used, but we suspect a high-profile demon, or even multiple demons, killed him. The wife attended a salsa dancing party that evening and came back home around midnight and found her husband murdered. She claims she hadn't heard or seen anyone or anything suspicious.”

“Was there anyone else in the house? Servants, children, pets?” I asked as I scratched my chin. The more I learned about the chief's murder, the more my gut wrenched. This murder had demons written all over it.

“They have two small children who didn't witness anything. The Kennedys have a nanny, but she was asleep in the

children's room when the wife found her husband dead. She claims she dozed off after she read a fairy tale to the two kids, but she hadn't heard or seen anyone in the house. Our forensic team didn't find any fingerprints or evidence. I'm afraid we don't have much to go on. The Eye couldn't give us information, either. Whoever killed Kennedy covered their tracks in a way only the Demonica can."

"Did the High Court grant us permission to see more about the chief's murder?"

Schuster nodded at me slowly. "Yes, they gave us access right away, but every time a senior angel tries to see the chief's murder, a violent explosion occurs. Three senior angels were nearly severely hurt. They were healed by our healers, but the assistant chief of ABI doesn't want more casualties."

As he mentioned the assistant chief, I narrowed my eyes, trying to recall the name of that senior angel.

Schuster must have picked up on my thoughts because he added, "Caroline Simmons has been working here since the establishment of the Angelica Order and our ABI organization."

Impressive, but I doubted if she could solve Kennedy's murder on her own, I thought to myself but didn't voice my thoughts. She would probably team with other senior angels. This could explain Delainey's absence and that meeting he mentioned.

"Delainey thinks the Brotherhood of the Serpent is responsible for Kennedy's murder. What do you think?" I asked him as I tapped my fingers on the desk.

Schuster narrowed his eyes at me. After a long stare, he replied, "Everyone thinks they did it. I mean, a few days after he assigned us to find out more about this brotherhood, he's dead. Plus, the chief had put so many protective and magical spells in his home, it's impossible for a mere human to have killed him. Or low-level supernaturals. Professionals assassinated him."

"What do we know about Kennedy's movements that day?"

“Same as usual: he left the ABI at close to nine in the evening and drove to downtown Aran where he entered his house.”

“Did someone see him while he was at work here, in the ABI? How did he seem? Worried, anxious?”

Schuster gave me a dry smile. “I must have been the last person to see him leave the building. Yesterday, I stayed late in the office, burning the midnight oil. I was smoking outside when he left and wished me good night. He looked normal, nothing extraordinary. You know what Kennedy was like: super energetic, brisk, and to the point. I sensed no nerves in him that night or during the day.”

Hmm, that was interesting: my partner saw the chief an hour or so before Kennedy’s death. The suspicion that someone I worked with had tattled about my trip to India gnawed at me. This dude knew about Ash and me going to Varanasi; now he admitted he was the last one to see Kennedy alive. I could easily verify if this guy had indeed spent the evening and early night in the ABI through the security cameras. I was aware I had no evidence against him, but the more I talked to him, the more I convinced myself he was somehow involved in the chief’s murder and had told the Demonica about our trip to Varanasi. Maybe it was my angelic intuition? Who knows, but I had to prove my theory or it’d remain just that: a theory based on my dislike for him.

I vowed to myself to keep a close watch on Schuster and report to Delainey if I had real evidence about his possible involvement with the Demonica.

Chapter 14

Kevan

Shortly after our talk, Schuster left my office to tend to some paperwork he needed to finish by the end of the day. This gave me some time to go through the file from Kennedy's murder and then we had to return to The Bite again to follow up. We had to question the greedy bartender and the patrons about Kennedy's assassination. In the meantime, I checked with the security officers from the building about the footage from last night. A plump, middle-aged, obviously tired human policeman replied that the senior agents had already asked about it, but unfortunately all the cameras yesterday malfunctioned.

"There was a problem with the recording and I called a technician. He came and fixed the issue, but we have no footage from yesterday," he said and scratched his balding head.

How convenient, I thought but kept it to myself. Schuster could have been somewhere else at the time of Kennedy's murder and not in his office as he claimed. Alas, this applied to every agent at the ABI. And it was highly suspicious that all our cameras went down yesterday at the time the chief was murdered. But why here? He was killed in his home, or at least that's how it appeared. We were waiting for the autopsy report but it would take the mortician at least twelve hours to examine the corpse fully.

I idly sifted through Kennedy's file, my mind trying to figure out why the Demonica would murder him when my cell phone beeped, vibrating in my jeans pocket. I reached for my pocket and took out the damn gadget, cursing my lack of ideas

about the murder. Ash's name filled the whole display and I smiled.

"Hey, how are you?" I greeted her.

"I've been better," she said laconically and asked me, "How is it going on your end? Much progress?"

I ran my hand through my hair. "Yeah, same for me. I've been better, but no complaints. Hey, did you call me to say you're missing me?" I asked half-serious, half-teasing.

She chuckled on the other side of the line and said, "No, actually something happened a few minutes ago. I have a client, which would normally be a good thing, but it seems like we have another case like Charlie's. I just hope the poor boy doesn't end up slaughtered by demons, too..."

Ash spoke too quickly and I couldn't quite follow, so I cut her off, "Wait, what happened? Start from the beginning, please, and be concise."

She proceeded to tell me how a wolf shifter from the same pack as Charlie and his wife had come to her office. The woman, Irene Harvey, hired Ash to find her missing teenage son. The troublesome part was that when Ash touched the boy's t-shirt, a violent explosion threw her off, much like in Charlie's case; this time the explosion was even stronger than before.

"I don't know what to think, Kevan. I can feel it in my gut that this shifter's disappearance and the demon attack in Varanasi are connected. Probably even your chief's murder is linked, too," she said. I had to agree with her. I was telling her to relax and that I'd join her at her apartment at the end of my shift, when Schuster burst into my office and indicated we had to leave for The Bite.

"I need to go. Will call you later, bye," I said to Ash and hung up the phone.

"You ready to visit The Bite?" Schuster asked from the doorway, resting his back on the doorframe.

"More than ready. Let's go see what Simon has to say," I said with a chuckle and stood from my chair, joining Schuster

with a few strides. My partner closed the door after me and we went straight to the elevator.

Half an hour later we arrived at The Bite. The bar was open, though it stood empty. And small wonder: the majority of its patrons would come in the evening.

“Hello, is there anyone here?” I called out, raising my voice as the empty establishment welcomed Schuster and me. Even the bar area stood empty, no trace of the greedy bartender. My colleague gave me a long look as if he asked me what I expected to see in a night bar at lunch time.

“And yet the bar’s open,” I remarked to Schuster and perched on the stool at the bar nearest to me. He grudgingly followed my example and slid onto the next stool to mine.

“Maybe they’re unloading the truck or doing inventory,” he suggested as he tapped on the bar counter, his eyes locked on the various spirits on the shelf. The bottles glared at our faces on the shelves at the wall behind the bar. An uncomfortable silence stretched out between Schuster and me. If we were friendlier to each other, it probably wouldn’t have felt that awkward when a dull thumping on the floor finally broke the silence. Someone was hauling something heavy. The noise grew louder and soon enough the swinging door opened as a burly man came into the room and dropped a heavy bucket with ice behind the bar.

“It’s done, boss. When will the demons stop by tonight?” He barely uttered the words when he spotted us, and his face nearly froze, his lips contorted in a fearful trembling. He came to his senses, though as he laughed and added, “I didn’t see you there, gentlemen. I meant, the guys who would dress as demons for our carnival party. We have them each Thursday night.”

“We’re from the ABI,” Schuster began as he flashed him his badge. The burly guy didn’t look surprised and his reply confirmed it.

“I know. I saw you question our bartender a few days ago. My name is Andy, I am the manager of The Bite. What can I help you guys with? I doubt you came here to just say hello to

us.” The mockery in his voice was unmistakable, lacing every word.

“The chief of ABI was killed last night, and we suspect the Demonica is responsible for the murder. Do you know anything about it? Have you heard rumors about who was involved and why they did it?” I took control as I asked Andy.

The news clearly took him aback as he took a step backwards and covered his mouth with his hand.

“The chief of ABI was killed? Really? Oh my!” He exclaimed and slid into his chair behind the bar. I narrowed my eyes: his surprise at the news seemed genuine, though I didn’t buy the lie about the carnival party for even a second. We had always known The Bite hosted parties and dealt with lower demoniacal supernaturals, but the question was if these demons who Andy mentioned were related to the Brotherhood of the Serpent or not? I had only one option: check with my enhanced angelic powers.

“So, am I to take it, you don’t know anything about Kennedy’s murder?” Schuster asked Andy as I stood from my stool and asked about the toilet. I’d use it to check with the Eye and tap into my pendant’s power. Schuster could question the manager; I doubted he’d tell us more than we already knew. As I weaved my way through the main hall, crossing the empty tables, I heard my colleague ask Andy about his whereabouts last night. Andy’s muffled voice reached my ears, the fear that he was a suspect evident in his voice. A few more steps, and I lost earshot of their conversation. The bathroom was situated near the entrance, on the opposite side of the bar. I entered it and locked the door behind me to make sure no one else would interrupt my investigation. When my fingers brushed against the pendant’s metallic surface, the thing sizzled and with a hissing sound welcomed me. I cupped the pendant with my palm and concentrated, calling the Eye to materialize in front of me. The air around me charged with electricity and the familiar blue mist spread around, settling in the space. I ordered the Eye to show me all the data about The Bite and its demons and demoniacal activity lately. The mist shimmered for a few seconds, absorbing my command, then

its center glistened as waves rippled across the blue mass before me. The waves increased, their velocity mounting as the system gathered all the collective information. The ripples suddenly stilled as a multitude of images assaulted my vision, taking form in the blue mist.

First, I saw a few vampires hang out at the bar, stealing some money through a poker game and selling a few drugs. The images changed, a new wave swirling in the mist's center. Andy and Simon were talking to another bunch of demons, though those were hardly a threat: my magical senses told me these were half-demons as their magic felt very weak, their scent of dirty socks bearable. In comparison, Steve and his cronies' magical signature felt and tasted like poison, the stink like horse shit. The mist showed me a few more episodes of demons doing some small, illegal stuff here, but none of these scenes featured the dreaded Brotherhood of the Serpent. I would have sighed in relief and called it a day except that in the next vision, Schuster appeared. The Eye showed him converse with one of the demons, exchanging a few golden coins, and taking a medium-sized package. The images in the mist overflowed and got blurry until the visions disappeared. With a searing sound, the blue mist snapped shut and my hand tapped on the pendant again, as a sign of my gratitude for the information.

I took out my cell phone and dialed my boss, Delainey. Now I had something more concrete than a gut feeling about Schuster's involvement with the Demonica. The question remained, though, was he the mole? A double agent who rattled our secrets to that secretive Brotherhood of the Serpent? Was he somehow involved in Kennedy's murder?

Delainey picked up his phone on the second ring and listened carefully to my suspicions about my colleague. I presented my case, pointing out all the recent findings, emphasizing the last revelation from the Eye.

"Hmm, this could mean something or it could be not related to us at all," Delainey said after a short pause and then he ordered me, "Kevan, I want you to follow Schuster from now on. Keep a tab on who he meets, where he goes and the places

he visits. We need to know his movements. This is how we'll figure out if he's a double agent or not." He paused a second, then added, his thick, baritone voice booming in the speaker, "God help him if he's turned his back on the order. If he has betrayed us, we'll punish him."

Chapter 15

Ashadha

After the explosion erupting from the missing shifter's t-shirt, I couldn't sit calmly. This case felt like déjà vu. A shifter from the same pack as Charlie McDonald, an explosion when I hovered my hand over a piece of his clothing, both missing and then... No, I couldn't let the nightmare from a few weeks ago repeat itself. Did the Demonica abduct the poor boy? But what for? I stood hastily from my chair and paced in my office. My heart raced wildly in my chest, beating so fast that I was scared it might burst out. Sweat dampened my forehead and a dull pain throbbed in my temples. I didn't like the direction this case was headed. The question that burned in my mind was whether the secretive Brotherhood of the Serpent was somehow involved in this poor shifter's disappearance. I thought of his poor mother's face, her worried look, the traces of tears and sleepless nights evident on her remarkably young face. I wanted to help her, but what if this was a trap? What if the Demonica had devised this as a plot and abducted the boy simply to get my attention? If true, they'd lure me into their lair and kill me the way that asshole Steven wanted to.

Shivers ran up and down my spine as I recalled that the creep intended to infuse another demon inside me. Too bad for him I already had one. Deep inside I knew and suspected that sooner or later I'd face the Demonica and their cult brotherhood, but my goal had been to do it once I got that asshole out of me. A tight ball of nerves formed in my belly and bile climbed up my throat. I needed to vent and take off this energy of frustration, fear, dread, and hopelessness. I increased my pacing in my office and considered going for a walk when the space before me shimmered, golden sparks flashing in the air like fireflies. The fiery golden body of my

familiar appeared and she flapped her wings as she landed on my desk. Her tail swished and thumped on the wooden surface. I came over to her and caressed her neck. Her talons fluttered as she purred against my skin, burrowing her small head in my hands. I loved White Paw with all my heart. Her warm body infused calmness into my flesh and bones, a sense of tranquility washing over me as I took several long, deep breaths. She locked her blue eyes on mine and screeched shrilly then took off and flew in the air. I followed her as she crossed the office and bumped into the door to the staircase. I opened it and White Paw flew down the hall toward the next floor, where my apartment was. I obediently went after her. Something inside my chest tugged at me, stirring as the thought crystallized that my familiar wanted to tell me something through this showcase.

As I guessed, she arrived in front of my apartment's door and patiently waited for me to reach her. Once she saw me on the landing, she let out a hollow screech and nudged my shoulders with her soft forehead, urging me to open the door faster. I obeyed her wish. She barely waited for me to creak the door open and flew inside with gusto. She took to my living room and stopped at the wall in front of the framed picture of Varanasi. I smiled, though internally I wanted to cry—our attempt to get to the priest and his scroll that could provide a solution against my possession had failed miserably. The bitter taste of disappointment filled my mouth as I swallowed the lump of regret that had formed at the back of my throat.

“I know, dear, I know. We tried to get answers from Varanasi and the specialist there, but the Demonica got ahead of us,” I said as I caressed my familiar's golden neck. She purred happily and peacefully against my touch.

“The question is, what can we do now?” I mused as I took a closer look at the painting of the ancient city. No doubt it was painted before the great cataclysms. Comparing this painting with present-day Varanasi, I found no significant difference except for the reduced population there, plus the improved cleanliness. Unfortunately, most cities didn't turn out to be as lucky as Varanasi. An idea formed in my mind and it warmed

my heart: if only Lord Shiva himself could help me get rid of that demon inside me!

Not gonna happen, sunshine. You are stuck with me for all eternity; there's no escape, the familiar, malicious voice sneered in my head as a new wave of bile climbed my throat. I had to find a way to get rid of that asshole. This hellish state of coexistence made me restless and drove me nuts. I clenched my fist: there had to be a way to vanquish that demon inside me, just as there had been a way for my parents and that cult to put him there in the first place. I just knew it deep down.

Keep dreaming, Ash. Dreams are free, he said and cackled inside my head, my temples burning with pain and heaviness.

If I couldn't get Lord Shiva's help, at least I would have an angel at my side, and he not only knew of my secret, he eagerly wanted to help me out of love. Or so I told myself. True, we'd known each other for less than a month and it was early to call it love, but I could tell our attraction and relationship meant more for Kevan than just a temporary fling or an infatuation. He didn't simply want to claim me and go to bed with me; there was this bond between us that I had felt time and again. I wasn't even sure what it was, except that it was special. I waited till the evening when I knew he would have finished work and dialed his phone number. He picked up right away, his voice low, his words concise.

"Hi, Ash. Sorry I can't talk right now, I'm following a suspect," he said.

"Oh, okay."

"Sorry, Ash, I got to go. I really can't talk now, will call you later," he cut me off and muttered more to himself than to me, "Damn it, what is he doing here, again? Bye, Ash, love you," he said and hung up the phone.

My heart fluttered in a somersault: did he just say he loved me? He was distracted by following a suspect, but still he said the magical words. Maybe he really meant it and he loved me? A warm, fuzzy feeling spread down my spine, onto my limbs

and I slid into the sofa in my living room; if someone like Kevan loved me, we'd found a way to free me from the monster inside me. As the saying went: love conquered all. I only had to believe in it.

Chapter 16

Kevan

After our visit to The Bite, Schuster and I hung out in the outskirts of Aran, dropping by various small bars and clubs and questioning their owners if they had heard anything about Kennedy's murder. As expected, no one told us anything: even if they knew, I doubted they'd tell it to two ABI angels.

We spent most of the afternoon completing some boring, administrative tasks. At seven o'clock sharp, Schuster said goodbye to me and went home. This is what I'd been waiting for since I received the command from my boss to tail him. I gave him several minutes' advance, then I left my office, too. I activated my pendant and could see that Schuster had already reached the parking lot and gunned the car's engine. I was lucky that my suspect was an angel and belonged to the Angelica Order; that's why my magic could work on him and I could spy on him. Unfortunately, my angelic powers didn't function that easily on other supernaturals, especially on the Demonica. There was one caveat for my magic to kick in: to see with my inner eye what Schuster was up to, I had to be in close proximity to him. If I lay on my bed in my studio and he roamed Aran City, I wouldn't be able to see what he was up to.

Soon enough, I hopped into my Jeep Cherokee. Schuster had already left the parking lot, driving on the nearby street. I gained speed and caught up to him, making sure to keep a safe distance so that he wouldn't notice me. The dude drove fast, probably breaking a few traffic rules, but that wasn't the reason why I kept a tail on him.

His first stop was his house in the outer part of Aran. I parked down the block and turned off my lights. I waited patiently for Schuster for the first ten minutes, but the minutes

stretched into an hour and I decided to tap on my inner angelic eye and saw he was taking a shower. Good Lord, how much time did he take to get himself clean?! Some people took forever so I hoped he'd hurry up and show me more interesting stuff.

When I checked in on him again a little bit later, I saw Schuster fully dressed and gathering a pouch full of coins. This drew my interest, making my pulse beat faster than normal. Where was he going that he'd need so many coins? Would he go back to buy contraband at The Bite, from a demon? Why, for heaven's sake, was he buying from our enemy? A sourness formed at the pit of my stomach, and relief washed over me as Schuster finally left the house and hopped back into his car. Now I would finally get some answers.

Schuster peeled away from the curb quickly and I waited for a few moments before following. I didn't want him to notice me tailing him. With my inner eye I could see that he headed toward The Bite. What a weasel!

The sun hovered on the horizon lazily, the last rays coloring the sky in different shades of red, orange, and even pink. In about an hour the darkness would shroud our city, the night welcoming us into her quiet, yet mysterious origins. I accelerated the engine, driving with full speed. I didn't like nighttime; I preferred the comfort and brightness of day. There was nothing more reassuring than the sun illuminating the darkest of earth's corners and giving light and warmth to each and every creature, regardless of their virtues or vices. I kept reminding myself to try and be as positive and inspiring as the mighty sun.

Of course, I had a lot to improve on, mostly my hot temper and tendency to see things as either black or white, but my aspiration remained. This was one of the reasons why I wanted so much to get to the rank of a senior angel—with the enhanced superpowers senior angels possessed, I could advance in my own evolution and better improve myself. For now, though, I'd settle for delivering Ash from the monster inside her and finding and punishing the asshole responsible for Kennedy's murder. No one could kill the chief of ABI and

get away with it. Even if one of the culprits was an angel and worked for us.

My suspicion proved right as Schuster indeed arrived at The Bite and quickly got out of the car. The sky grew darker, twilight kicking in faster than a bloodthirsty vampire would bite their victim. With brisk steps, Schuster reached the two burly bouncers that stood at the entrance and exchanged something with them. I caught a brown package slip from Schuster's hands into the grip of one of the bouncers, then the same bouncer handed Schuster another brown package. What the hell was that? Clearly, Schuster paid for something, but what did he receive? Drugs, illegal magic, or something worse like demoniacal artifacts?

Demoniacal artifacts were rare and hard to get unless one had friends in higher places and deep pockets but judging by the hardened faces and inked bodies of the bouncers, it wouldn't surprise me if that was what my colleague paid for. The thread in my center pushed and pulled at me, indicating the tattoos of these bouncers had magic locked in them. I liked this business of Schuster's less and less: his actions made me question his loyalty to the order and which team he played for—the Angelica or the Demonica. Yet, I didn't possess the gifts of senior angels so I did what any other angel would do if they were in my shoes: I called my boss.

I briefly told him how my partner had returned to the suspicious bar, The Bite and exchanged something with one of the bouncers. Schuster had exchanged a few words with the bouncers, then he went into the bar, the thick metallic black door closing after him. I sat in my car, parked sideways in the shade of nearby trees, which hid me from clear view and gave me the benefit of observing everything without being noticed. Suddenly, the air outside of my car charged with electricity as golden ripples swirled in the space, a vortex forming in the middle of it. A second later, Delainey appeared, materializing as the vortex stilled, the golden ripples eventually fizzling out. He so seldomly teleported that I knew he must be just as worried as I was, if not more.

I scrambled out of my Jeep and came over to him.

“Tyler,” Delainey said, “Where is he?”

I pointed at the low building that was The Bite. “He went inside a few minutes ago. He hasn’t left the bar.”

Delainey turned around and walked to the bar’s entrance and indicated to me to follow him.

“I don’t like the angels I am in-charge of to keep things from me and visit funny places like this secretly. Let’s see what Agent Schuster is hiding.” He reached the front door with a few strides, the two bouncers barked at us that the party inside was with invitations only. Delainey tiredly took out his ABI badge and flashed it at them—this piece of paper opened all the doors for us whenever we wanted. All humans and supernaturals were required by law to obey the orders of the Angelica and that included granting us access to all premises. Delainey grinned at the confused and somewhat anxious looks that the bouncers exchanged but didn’t stop. I followed, wondering how Schuster would react and what explanation he’d provide to Delainey. It was clear he wouldn’t be impressed with my presence, but that of our boss would take him out of his comfort zone, wiping out the smile on his smug face.

Don’t be too judgmental against Schuster; he hasn’t done anything bad, yet a tiny voice of reason, probably my conscience, whispered at me, but I shoved the thought to the back of my mind—now was the time of truth and revelation. If Schuster was playing dirty, he’d have to face the music for his wrongdoings. We crossed the long, neon-lit corridor and arrived in the main hall of the bar, where the party was just beginning. What a difference it made this late in the evening: the place was crowded with people, the majority of which were humans. Busy talks, laughter, and shouts rang in the room, the commotion and excitement palpable. We found Schuster at a secluded table near the pool table, conversing with a scary dude nearly six and a half feet tall. The guy sported a long beard, his body covered in tattoos. When Schuster noticed us, surprise flashed in his eyes, yet he smiled and pretended it was a regular meeting.

“Kevan, Boss, what a surprise. I didn’t know you hung out in places like this.”

“We didn’t know you did either,” Delainey remarked, his tone cold as ice, his eyes narrowed and watching Schuster intently like a predator stalking his prey.

“Hey, it’s not against the law of the Angelica to chill out here,” Schuster said defensively, yet his pal hurriedly moved to the other side of the room, out of our view.

“No, it isn’t,” Delainey agreed but added, “but going to bars like this on your own is suspicious. Even worse—buying drugs from demons is an offense. Please take out the brown package from your jacket,” he ordered. Schuster’s carefree expression evaporated and he hurriedly added, his voice anxious, “I can explain, boss. It’s not what it looks like.”

“Please show me the insides of your jacket pockets,” Delainey repeated, raising his voice. The people at the tables near us went quiet, a palpable storm brewing in the air.

Schuster grunted yet took out the brown package from his jacket and handed it to Delainey. My boss sniffed at it and declared, “High quality Vicodin. As I thought. But what I’d like to check the most is all your pockets. Come closer, agent Schuster and turn around,” he ordered and Schuster had no other option but obey silently. The bar had already gone totally quiet, all eyes and heads turned at us, watching us intently. The silence hung in the air so perceptible that if someone dropped a pin, we could all clearly hear it drop on the floor.

Delainey went through Schuster’s pockets, searching his jeans and checking his jacket and belt. His hand gripped something and he slowly took out a small carved knife. The blade glistened in the dim light but I could see the small, silver-looking runes that shimmered on its edge and the few stained blood droplets near the handle. I was seeing this weapon for the first time, but two things were certain about it: it was a magical knife, and someone had been stabbed with it.

Delainey cleared his throat and asked the stunned Schuster, “Care to explain how this knife got into your pocket, Agent Schuster?”

Schuster threw his hands desperately in the air, stammering as he mumbled, “I d-don’t know where this came from. I’m seeing this knife for the first time, boss. You have to believe me. Someone must have put it in my pockets.”

Sure, we believe you.

“Tyler, take him to the car. We’re going to the ABI,” Delainey ordered me and I guided my colleague to my parked car outside. This didn’t look good for Schuster. Did we just find a magical murder weapon? Schuster persisted that he was innocent yet he had the murder weapon, was hanging out in The Bite, and had bought drugs. Even if Schuster wasn’t guilty of murder, possession of the weapon made him an accomplice.

Time for payback.

Chapter 17

Ashadha

I tried one more time to get visions of Oscar. His mother was relying on my gift and I had to give my best and find something about her missing son. Yet, this time when my fingers brushed past the t-shirt's fabric nothing happened: no visions, no clues, not even an explosion erupted. This was bad: it indicated someone was using magic, likely black magic, to block my clairvoyance. While I had no doubt Oscar's disappearance was related to Charlie's murder, I had to get answers. It would be a good start to go to the shifter district and question the inhabitants there, but I preferred to do it with Kevan. Him being an ABI angel carried more weight than a struggling human private investigator. It was late, so I went back to my apartment to work more comfortably. I used the internet to gather what I could about Oscar's family, but they were pretty average. The only useful information I found was that his father fought for the Angelica Order during the war and after the victory of the Angelica, they repaid him with a special golden medal for his contribution to their victory.

My wristwatch showed past ten in the evening when my cell phone vibrated, the familiar melody ringing in the quiet of my apartment. Kevan's name filled the display picked up right away.

"Hello."

"Hey, sweetheart, are you still awake?" Kevan's voice greeted me on the other side and I almost cringed at the ridiculousness of his question: if I were asleep, I wouldn't be able to speak to him, right?

"You're lucky I haven't yet hit the hay. I still need to talk to you; I have a new case and I'm afraid it might be somehow

related to Charlie McDonald. When can you come over?" I said.

"Yes, I remember, Ash. That's why I called you. I apologize for my late call, but I just finished for the day. We had a lot of work at the ABI, plus we arrested my colleague on suspicion of criminal activity. I better tell you about it when we meet. Can I come by now?"

"Sure. I'd like to discuss my new case with you," I said after a brief pause; I'd have a much more peaceful sleep if I consulted with him about Oscar's disappearance.

"Okay, I'm on my way," he said and ended the conversation.

Nearly twenty minutes later, he arrived.

"Hey, how are you?" He greeted me as he came into my living room and gave me a tight hug. The demon inside me hissed with venom when our bodies collided, heat buzzing down my skin, but I ignored the demon. I had more pressing things to consider than his dislike of Kevan. Yet, I pulled myself from Kevan's tight hug, leaving us hungry for more. I didn't want to provoke the beast inside me by going overboard.

"Please take a seat, Kevan. Would you like something to drink or eat?"

He shook his head, declining my offer and slid onto the sofa. He cut to the chase. "Please tell me about your new case, Ash."

I proceeded to describe Mrs. Harvey and her missing son, Oscar, and what I experienced when I first touched one of Oscar's t-shirts. I mentioned to him that it was Evalyn McDonald who'd recommended my services to Mrs. Harvey.

Kevan scratched his chin, his brows furrowed in deep thought. "So, you believe these two cases—Charlie's murder, and the teenager's disappearance—are somehow connected. Why? Except for both of them being werewolves, I don't see any other similarities."

“Call it female intuition, but I can feel in my gut that Oscar’s disappearance is somehow linked with the Demonica. His mother is worried sick about him—and who wouldn’t be—but I’m afraid I might not be able to find her son.”

Kevan smiled sadly and stood up, coming over to me. I stood in the middle of my living room, too agitated to be able to sit down. He wrapped his strong arms around my frame and whispered into my ear, the action sending a tickling and hot sensation down my spine onto my middle.

“Sweetheart, you’re overthinking it. This case is nothing like Charlie’s murder. I’m sure even if the Demonica is somehow involved, the poor boy is still alive. I’ll go to the shifter district tomorrow and will ask about his disappearance, though. If there’s something fishy going on, they’ll tell me. I promise I’ll get to the bottom of this. Don’t worry, Ash.” He traced an invisible pattern on my cheek with his thumb and desire exploded inside me. I gave him a sincere smile and deeply inhaled his intoxicating scent of blueberries and raspberries mixed with lilac wine. My insides burned with passion, and I wanted more than anything to press my lips hard onto his and bury my hands on his chiseled chest.

Yet the warning of the demon inside me cooled my passion as he sneered inside my head, *Easy there, girl. You don’t wish to do something that might upset me, do you?*

Fuck you, monster, I replied instantly in my mind without giving it a second thought. I barely said the cursing word and my middle panged, a scream escaping my lips as sharp and hot pain tore through my middle into my chest.

“Ash, are you alright?” Kevan asked with concern, his arms pressed onto my back, supporting me from collapsing to the ground as the pain spread through my limbs. He helped me to sit down on the sofa, his soothing angelic magic pouring onto my body, chasing away the sharp and ice-cold energy of the demon inside me.

Once I felt sufficiently good to speak, I said, “I’m better, thanks. It’s the damn demon who is doing this to me, it’s some sort of punishment. He hates you with a burning passion.”

Kevan shook his head in disbelief, angry flames gleaming in his blue eyes. “We’ll get rid of that asshole soon, Ash. Have faith and patience and all good things will come our way.”

Chapter 18

Kevan

I had barely arrived in my office the next morning, when Delainey burst in, his face beaming with happiness, something I would rarely register in his emotionless attitude.

He said to me, “Good job, Tyler. The knife we found on Schuster matched the weapon that killed our chief, Kennedy. Schuster has no alibi for the time of death, plus we established that he had been buying Vicodin from the Demonica for several years now. I think we’ve found Kennedy’s murderer.”

I only managed to blink at Delainey, the information too much for me to grasp it at once. I needed some time to comprehend all these facts.

“What, aren’t you happy? Your investigative skills have helped us catch the right man. Be proud, Agent Tyler.” Delainey gave me a solid pat on my back, which would have normally made me proud of myself, but something started to gnaw at me. It was too easy: Schuster might have turned out to be in the wrong place with the wrong people. The fact that we found the knife stained with blood wasn’t helping him, but I couldn’t help but wonder what type of an idiot would keep a murder weapon in his jeans, moreover when visiting a suspicious place like The Bite. Something wasn’t adding up.

“Anyway. Cheer up, Kevan, and prepare for Schuster’s trial. We’ll need your testimony. He still denies everything but buying drugs from that low-level demon. It’ll be tough to prove his guilt, but I think he will crack under the pressure and confess everything. You can be very proud of your work—without your sharp mind, we would still be beating our brains about Kennedy’s murder.” He made his way back to the door, but I stopped him midway.

“I don’t understand something, boss. Let’s assume Schuster killed or at least was involved in Kennedy’s murder; why would he keep the murder weapon in his jeans? He might not be the brightest egg in the basket, but he isn’t that stupid.”

A sly smile flickered in Delainey’s dark chestnut eyes and disappeared as quickly as it showed up. He returned to my desk and perched on the end of the vacant chair before me.

“You make a good point, Tyler. Here’s what we believe happened. Schuster has been working for the Demonica for quite some time, feeding them important intel about the ABI. We suspect Agent Schuster didn’t directly stab Kennedy but was involved and maybe even present at his murder. Somehow, the Demonica couldn’t take the knife, which is a magical one, enchanted with dark spells. Schuster ended up with the knife. He tried to clean it but missed a few blood spots. He went to The Bite yesterday to deliver the knife to another demon, one that belongs to that brotherhood, but we prevented the meeting.”

I massaged my temples: this explanation made some sense, though the pit at my stomach still throbbed with anxiety, the tight nerves in my stomach a clear indicator that something felt wrong about accusing Schuster of Kennedy’s murder.

“Well, I dropped by to tell you this. If you have questions on the case, I’ll be happy to assist you. Once again, excellent work, Tyler,” Delainey said and abruptly stood up from the chair. He went to the door, but right before he could yank the handle open and leave my office, he stopped and turned to me. “I think now will be the right moment to nominate you for senior angel at ABI. You’ve worked hard for this promotion, plus you’ve been wanting to be a senior angel for quite some time. I believe your prompt investigative skills are what we need the most.” With these last words, he left my office and I was all alone again.

I had to be happy and on cloud nine by all logic—I’d been wanting to get to the status of a senior angel ever since I enrolled into the Angelica Academy, yet I felt nothing but an emptiness that was eating my insides with doubt and worry. The more I thought about Schuster, the less likely it appeared

to me that he was involved in Kennedy's murder. I inhaled deeply and my hand brushed against my metallic pendant.

My hand hovered on the pendant, its runes and sigils sending a light wave of magical electricity down my spine, infusing their powers and insight into my skin and mind. I had to consult with the Eye: if Schuster was indeed involved in the chief's murder, it had to show up in our database. Yet, the chances of the Demonica wiping clean any evidence in our magical database were extremely high. The fact that a few angels here tried to access the Eye right after Kennedy's murder and were injured was a clear signal that the Demonica had tampered with our magical system. I took a quick lunch break as I contemplated this, but when I returned to my office, a middle-aged petite and pretty woman waited for me in my office, sitting on the vacant chair before my desk.

"Do I know you, ma'am?" I asked her. "What can I help you with?"

She turned her attention toward me, her head following me as I passed her chair and slid into the comfort of my own chair.

She spoke quietly, her voice keeping a steady tone, yet I could detect the effort she was putting not to burst into tears. "You're agent Tyler, Kevan Tyler, right?"

I nodded in confirmation.

She went on, "I know you arrested my husband Dan Schuster for the murder of ABI Chief Kennedy, but you have to understand he's innocent," she began agitatedly, her speech faster than before and I had a little trouble following her trail of thoughts.

I made a gesture with my hand for her to stop speaking. "Please, ma'am, I understand that you're worried for your husband, but this is our job and we can guarantee you that he'll face a just and fair trial—"

"No, you understand nothing, Agent Tyler. My husband didn't do anything wrong; he's only been buying illegal Vicodin but it's because of me. My mother is terminally ill, but the Angelica didn't allow euthanasia for her, so Dan started to

buy her drugs for her to cope with the severe pain she has. But he didn't kill anyone, let alone your chief. This is all a misunderstanding. I don't know who has framed him, but you have to understand this: my husband is innocent. I swear it. Please, I beg you as an angel myself, please clear his name and catch the real culprit. Dan isn't it."

The sincerity in her voice made me pause and look at her in a new light. To be fair, I'd started to question his involvement, even before his wife came, but now that she was here and swore to the innocence of her husband, my own doubts mounted. The worry that I might be responsible for arresting an innocent person grew tenfold, gnawing at my conscience. I couldn't allow the wrong person, moreover an agent of the ABI, to take the guilt for this murder.

"I'll try my best, ma'am. If your husband is involved in Kennedy's murder, he'll get justice, but if he isn't, I guarantee you that we'll release him. There's no reason for you to worry, ma'am. We've sworn to serve the Higher Order of the Angelica and you can be sure in our pure hearts and minds," I said to calm the worried wife in front of me.

She only shook her head as if trying to banish an unpleasant thought. "I hope you'll realize that Dan is indeed innocent and help him. Always remember that he didn't kill anyone. He never worked for the Demonica." She then stood from the chair and left my office. Once she shut the door after her, I let out a long-held breath as I adjusted to the quietness in the room. This visit didn't bode well with my own doubt and suspicion that Schuster wasn't a mole. There was only one way to prove if what she'd just said was true, and that required using the Eye. Of course, our magical database would only show me what the collective already knew about Kennedy's murder and about Agent Schuster. If someone else had been involved, I'd see the blocked information and ask my other superior, archangel Musa for permission. I wanted first to see what the Eye had in store for me. Though Musa served as my boss, too, Delainey was my direct supervisor. I was allowed to summon Musa only in matters related to the Eye; otherwise, I had to report to Delainey.

My fingers groped the metallic pendant, the sigil of Inana engraved on its back. I called the image of the Eye and the blue mist shimmered in my office as the mass solidified. I gave the command for the magical system to show me all the information known about Agent Schuster. I nearly asked about Chief Kennedy's murder, but the memory of the hurt angels who had already tried it hung in my mind like a ghost so I decided to play safe and not poke the beast. The image of Schuster appeared in the blue mass in front of me, his carefree face contorted in worry as he pondered something. The images distorted and disappeared as the lines blurred, then a new image formed: it showed Schuster buying drugs from the same demon we caught him with in *The Bite*; the images swirled, then disappeared as a few more scenes played out, all connected to Schuster buying drugs from the same demon. Yet, no hint of anything serious, let alone something connected to a murder or the involvement of the *Demonica*. My heart skipped a beat, then began to race wildly in my chest, threatening to burst out of my ribcage. The lack of any information connecting Schuster to Kennedy's murder troubled my mind. Maybe we did arrest the wrong guy. I thought of Schuster's wife. Her adamant claim that her husband was innocent rang in my head as clearly as if she stood before me speaking the words. Dark clouds congested, forming in my heart, and I knew I had to do something. I had no other option but call Delaney and tell him about my suspicion that we got the wrong guy.

I barely dialed his number when he picked up the phone.

"Agent Tyler. Schuster just made a full confession," my boss said instead of greeting me.

"What?" I couldn't hide my surprise. "I think we mistook the case and that Schuster is innocent," I said trying to keep my tone cool and levelheaded.

Delaney chuckled. "No such case. Schuster made a full confession about his involvement with the *Demonica* about Kennedy's murder. As I suspected, Schuster aided the assassins and gave them access to the chief's house that night."

“But the Eye showed no—” I tried to object but Delainey cut me off mid-sentence.

“The Eye has been tampered with; we can no longer trust it. The Demonica poisoned the whole magical database. We need an IT team of angels to come and fix the Eye, but for now we have more urgent issues. We need to defeat the Demonica before they initiate a new war with us. I need you to do some work, Tyler. Can I count on you?”

I nodded and urged him to go on: as an angel at the ABI, he was my superior and I had to obey his orders.

Delainey went on, his tone cold and distant, “I want you to go to The Bite. Take another agent with you, I think Jefferson is available, and tail the demon from which Schuster bought the Vicodin. I need to know where that demon goes, who he sees, etcetera. Find out everything you can about that motherfucker. We need to get to the bottom of his Demonica involvement. And then hopefully we can crack the Demonica once we know who ordered Kennedy’s murder.”

Chapter 19

Kevan

I obeyed Delainey's order and took Agent Jefferson with me. As I suspected, our tailing the demon didn't reveal anything, yet Delainey insisted we keep an eye on him for the next week at least. I managed to ask Jefferson about his observations on the situation at the ABI: about Kennedy's murder; about our arrest of agent Schuster, yet Jefferson had no inner qualms. He simply obeyed orders and never questioned them or authority. A small part of me envied him, yet my growing discomfort and inner voice gnawed at me. Something didn't feel right. I could feel it with my whole being, but in particular my chest panged with doubts and worries. I remembered the sad eyes of Schuster's wife, and the sincerity in her voice as she swore her husband was innocent. And the worst was that my magic pulsed with vengeance, screaming at me that we had arrested and accused the wrong person—Schuster was indeed innocent. That was what my magic had to say on the case.

After our work ended for the day, the tailing of the demon drug dealer unsuccessful, I took the initiative and visited the shifter district. I wanted to ask my shifter friends if they had heard about anything strange going on lately. A shifter lady had hired Ash because her son had disappeared, but I needed to know if there was more to it. I invited Jefferson to come with me, but he had no desire, plus he said he had some other work to tend to.

Once in the shifter district, I questioned my friends. They said there had been several disappearances of shifters in the last month, all strong, young boys.

"It's very strange, Kevan," an old wolf who used to be the pack's alpha said to me. He had retired from being in charge of

the pack and now lived his remaining days as a mere observer of the pack he used to rule. “These shifter boys were good boys; they’d never get involved with something wicked or bad. I fear the Demonica might have abducted them.”

“What for?” I asked. I didn’t doubt the Demonica’s wicked ways, but I just couldn’t picture what the dark side would do with that many young souls. “What would they do with these shifter boys?”

“I thought you were the detective. It’s the Angelica Bureau of Investigations, right? It’s your duty to figure out why we’re losing young shifters,” a bear lady chimed in, coming from the street. My shifter friends had perched at the edges of a few benches scattered in a small public garden, right in the heart of the shifter district. Shifters loved nature, and in particular trees and the woods, maybe this was the reason why the Rocky Mountains bordered the shifter district?

“Kelly has a point, Kevan. It’s your duty. You ought to figure out what is going on with our missing boys. Whatever it is that is happening, I have a bad feeling about it,” the retired alpha said to me. He shook his head, then scratched his stubble. “You need to act fast and bring us back our missing boys.”

I nodded in agreement. My whole core and magic agreed with the shifters; I only feared I’d discovered these strange events too late. Now I had no alternative but to investigate on my own. I didn’t intend to inform the ABI about my plans to help the shifters and find the missing boys. I had no time to lose getting wrapped up in red tape. I had to rely on my intuition and magic and do it my own way. The angels’ way.

Chapter 20

Ashadha

The next day I tried my best to find out more about Mrs. Harvey's son, Oscar, yet the void in my inner eye and the emptiness in the center of my thread worried me. I even requested another pair of clothes from Mrs. Harvey, and she brought a few more t-shirts to my office. Despite her efforts, it didn't change my lack of visions. I spent the whole day trying to awaken my gift, but so far, I was failing miserably. By the end of the day, I had no alternative but to call Kevan and consult with him. I believed I still had the gift of clairvoyance, yet I feared that the Demonica had found a way to neutralize and block my ability to see what had happened to Oscar.

I caressed White Paw, her fiery skin infusing warmth and tranquility into my flesh, when I called Kevan. He picked up his phone immediately.

"Hi Ash," he greeted me, his voice crisp and clear. "What a coincidence. I was about to call you."

"Oh, really? What for?" I asked.

"Look, I need your help. Please come to the shifter district. I need you to help me look into a few missing shifters. I'm with the pack's alpha right now. I fear something really wicked is brewing in the Demonica. I'm worried they've taken these young shifters, though I don't know why. Can you come?"

Kevan's dead-serious tone, plus the fear I could feel in my heart when he mentioned the missing shifter boys brought home the urgency of the situation and I agreed.

"I'll come, Kevan, but I'm worried I've lost my gift or at least the Demonica has blocked it. I'm not sure how much help I can be."

“Nonsense, Ash. I’m sure it’s fine. I’ll text you the address.” With that, he hung up.

I called a cab and arrived in the shifter district half an hour later. The driver dropped me in front of the alpha’s house—a white two-story building with several pine trees in the backyard. I barely managed to scramble out of the car and approach the chain link fence when the front door opened and Kevan burst out of it, marching toward me.

“Thanks for coming so quickly, Ash. I have a very bad feeling about all these missing shifters.” He came over to me and embraced me, giving me a tight hug. His magic pulsed against my skin like bubbling wine, ready to explode any second. I inhaled deeply and rested my head on his chest, a sense of deep tranquility washing over me. Even the demon inside me couldn’t bring me out of this blissful meditative state I found myself in.

“I’ll do anything to help you, Kevan. Plus, I feel guilty ever since Charlie McDonald died, so anything I can do for the shifters will ease my pain and guilt,” I said, my cheek and face still buried in Kevan’s chiseled chest. His warm chest felt so comforting, so reassuring, so...blissful.

He nodded, absent-mindedly. “Are you ready to go inside? We have a few of the missing shifters’ clothes. The alpha, Michael, is inside.”

Deep exhaustion washed through me and spread its tendrils toward my limbs, too. Grudgingly, I raised my head to look into Kevan’s eyes and found him watching me intently. I stepped backwards and steadied myself.

“We can try. I’m not sure I’ll see anything, though. I’m still trying to awaken my clairvoyance for Oscar,” I said.

“It’s okay, Ash. I have faith and confidence in your gift. Don’t worry; it’ll come back to you. Demonica could be suppressing it or maybe you’re burnt out.” He took my hand in his, our fingers intertwining. He gave me a peck on the lips and we went to the house. He opened the front door for me to go inside first and then closed it behind him. Inside the house, I found myself in a long marble corridor. I had barely set foot

inside when a tall, burly man, his head nearly bumping into the ceiling, hurried toward me. He stretched out his hand to shake mine. The scent of pine trees and musk rolled in the air in droves, his eyes turning honey gold. This guy was not just any werewolf, but the alpha of his pack. I could only imagine the monstrous wolf he'd shift into when his inner wolf came out. He wasn't the type of guy you'd want to cross ways with.

“Miss Matthews, I'm so happy to meet you. Kevan has praised your clairvoyant gift so much, and I wanted to personally thank you for helping us rescue our missing boys. It's such a tragedy for the whole pack, but especially for the families of the missing boys. They're suffering so much right now.”

Mrs. Harvey's flooded my inner eye and I suppressed the guilt that gripped my heart like a deadly ivy, trying to infuse its poison into my every cell. I tried everything I could think of to get a vision of her son, yet with the exception of the explosion when I first touched Oscar's t-shirt, nothing else happened. I hoped that being in the shifter district, in the Michael's house, my gift would return.

I cleared my throat. “I'll try to do whatever I can. Do you have clothes that belonged to these missing shifters?”

“Sure. Please come with me to the living room. I've gathered the clothes so you can start right away.” He went straight into another room, its door standing ajar. Kevan and I followed him. The new room was spacious, with sofas pressed into the edges while the center stood empty and I couldn't help but picture shifters having regular meetings here. The alpha picked up a few packed bags from the nearest chair and passed them to me. I motioned at him to keep the bags in front of me: I wanted to take my time and pick the bags and clothes using my own sort of magic or clairvoyant gift.

This is bullshit about you using your magic. We both know you're using only my inherent magic. You're a normie, Ash and have no magical abilities, the demon sneered inside my mind. My temples throbbed with pain as tiredness hit my head like a train. I ignored the demoniacal entity inside me and focused on the present room and the bags of clothes.

My hand slid to the surfaces of the bags as I wondered which clothes to pick up first. My fingers itched with fire, the pit of my stomach pulsating with a new sensation: desire, eagerness, curiosity? Whatever the emotion was, it pumped up my blood with excitement. My fingers groped one of the bags and took the first package out of the bag. The sensation of fire lit, exploding in my mind. The taste of gasoline filled my nostrils and assaulted my mouth. The pit of my stomach ached with strain and the desire to set everything on fire, to destroy it all. The hotness on my skin increased and when I thought I'd explode, the room swirled under my feet. Next, I saw a young man. My mind screamed at me that these were Oscar's clothes I just touched. The young man sat unconscious, tied behind a chair in a dark room; only a tiny bulb flickered above from the ceiling. Next, I saw another man lying unconscious on the bare floor and it made my breath catch in my throat: it was the face of Shankarananda, his face still as smooth as when I saw him in Varanasi. My mind focused on him and All of a sudden, Shankarananda's eyes flickered and came to life. Awakening, he linked his mind with mine.

"Come rescue us," his deep voice echoed in my head, his voice intertwining with my own thoughts, which was scary. I faltered, taking a step backwards. *"Hurry up! We don't have much time left—they'll slaughter us."*

And with these words, the world spun around me. My legs swayed under the weight of my body and before I could scream or do anything, darkness engulfed me and I went into oblivion.

Chapter 21

Kevan

Thank the fates Ash responded to my call, immediately coming to Michael's house. I knew she was talented; the gods had given her the power of clairvoyance, which even the sick bastard residing inside her couldn't stop or mute. Yet, she was vocal about something stopping her gift; she'd tried to use it to find one of the missing shifters but this time she couldn't. I didn't take her warning seriously, though.

When the alpha werewolf invited us into his living room and she touched a pair of pants, something happened: she swayed on her feet, her eyes losing their focus. Shortly after, she collapsed on the floor. I ran to her and took her near-lifeless body in my hands before she could hit her head on the floor. I put her on one of the sofas in the corner of the room and applied my magical healing powers. I placed my right hand on her chest and with a low, buzzing sound, my palm began to warm her skin. The sensation of coldness and pain pierced my hand and I knew she'd experienced them, too. My hand warmed her up, soft and steady bluish light gleaming below my skin and lighting up her body and skin. After several minutes, she took a noisy breath of air, her body convulsing as she started to cough. I gripped at my magic tighter and applied even more healing power onto her, the bluish light growing bigger and stronger. Ash's dark eyes blinked then she stared at me, her mouth trembling.

"What happened?" she asked me quietly.

Before I could say anything, the alpha wolf went to her and said, "You lost consciousness and fell. I suspect you must have had a strong vision of the missing werewolf, am I right?"

Ash looked at the alpha, then directed her stare back at me, as though asking me how much she should share. It was clear as day that she had a vision, but I wondered if I could believe in its truth. Based on her reaction, I worried that the Demonica might have invaded her thoughts and I wasn't sure how much we could trust her clairvoyance. The trouble was, we had no other alternative as I didn't possess her gift. If the Angelica promoted me to the rank of a senior angel it would give me limited clairvoyance; archangels had unlimited clairvoyance but it was easier to conquer Everest than reach the ranks of archangel. Still, I had to hear what Ash had seen, so I nodded in confirmation, indicating to her to disclose her vision. I fully trusted the alpha, he had been our ally ever since the war, though at that time he was merely a teenager. During this troublesome period, he'd been a brave and highly intelligent werewolf and I was unsurprised that he rose to be the pack's alpha.

Ash cleared her throat and, trembling, she confessed, "I saw that shifter boy, Kevan. He was tied down on a chair, in a dark basement. It reminded me of where we were held captive. Then, I saw the Indian priest, Shankarananda, too, locked in with him. Somehow, Shankarananda managed to link his mind to mine. He told me to hurry up and save them. He claimed they didn't have much longer before the demons would kill them."

My breath caught as she uttered the message from Shankarananda. My hand formed a fist before I could check myself: these assholes would bitterly regret they had messed with the wrong angel.

The alpha exclaimed, "You saw Peter? Is he alright? Are the other shifters alright?"

Ash shook her head. "The shifter whose clothes I touched was unconscious, but I think otherwise he was okay. I didn't see other shifters... no. I'm sorry."

Rage coursed through my body, making my blood seethe with fire. "Now we know the two things are connected: Shankarananda's abduction by the demons, and the shifter disappearances. I can't believe the Demonica are this stupid

and reckless,” I said. Shifters were pack supernaturals and quite vengeful when the pack’s safety was threatened. And now the Demonica had turned them as their enemy. I briefly wondered why the Demonica would need these young shifters, but we didn’t have time for the why. I gave up thinking about the demons’ secret agenda. We needed to free the shifters and get Shankarananda back from the bastards.

Ash nodded her head in agreement and stirred her limbs. She slowly stood from the sofa and I supported her. My thumb caressed the inside of her hand as I helped her stand up.

“What are we going to do, Kevan?” She asked me quietly as she glanced at the alpha, who had picked up his phone.

“We need to develop a plan. I fear Shankarananda is right and we need to hurry up if we want to save them.” I cleared my throat and turned to the alpha. “Michael, I need to question the parents of that missing shifter, the one Ash saw in her vision. Can you arrange a meeting with them ASAP?”

Michael gave me a surprised look as he directed his attention from the conversation he engaged in, onto me. He gave me a curt nod and exchanged a few more questions before he ended the call.

“You’re in luck. Peter’s parents agreed to meet you. Come, follow me. I’ll drive you to their cottage. They live near the end of our district in the last neighborhood before the mountain border.” Michael marched to the front door and I gave a signal to Ash to join us. We left the alpha’s house without him even bothering to lock the front door, though he locked the gate at the fence. He scrambled into a parked Toyota and prompted us to get in, too. I climbed into the backseat so Ash could sit up front. Once we got inside the car, Michael gunned the engine, the tires squealing on the hard and uneven road as the car catapulted into the darkness that lay ahead of us. The cold mountains towered above us in the distance, the tiny crescent moon glowing high in the sky, and reminded me that the moon still waned. Tomorrow would be the new moon.

In about half an hour, we arrived in front of a three-story house with a small garden outside. What little remained from the moon glowed right above us, bathing the building and the yard in tiny moonlight. Goosebumps prickled my skin, crawling up and down my chest. The distant sensation of nausea rose in my throat. I had a bad feeling about all of this, about the investigation and now about the missing shifter boys. Worst of all was that Ash and I hadn't moved even an inch in our mission to free her from the demon inside her. I hated to think that I was failing her.

Michael quickly got out of the Toyota and dialed a number on his cell phone. Soon enough, steps echoed in the quiet of the night and a tall woman walked on the garden pathway, her steps hurried and nervous. She came over to us as we waited patiently at the front door. The lock buzzed as she opened the door from the inside and greeted the alpha.

“Hi, Michael. Are these the people you said wanted to talk to us about Peter?” She threw us a quizzing stare, suspicion gleaming in her almond-like eyes as she regarded Ash and me. We didn't look like a pair of investigators and I hated to admit it but unless I summoned my inner angel, I seemed pretty ordinary. No doubt she could detect my magical scent, yet Ashadha must have come across as human despite the fact I had picked up on her peculiar scent of citrus fruits even the first time we met. The shifter lady herself smelled of pine trees, combined with musk and fresh mountain air, much like Michael's, though his scent was stronger and more potent.

“Yes, Cecily, these are the people. Let me introduce you to the angel Kevan Tyler from ABI and his assistant, the psychic Ashadha Matthews. They have taken to heart the disappearances of our werewolf boys,” the alpha said as he ushered us inside the garden. The shifter woman's eyes narrowed as she studied our faces.

“I already told the agent the ABI sent everything and now I have to repeat it all!? Are you sure it's worth the effort?” She asked her alpha.

A wave of shock passed over my middle and shook my core: the ABI had sent an agent? And they questioned the

missing shifters' parents? Clearly whoever had come and met this lady didn't do much on this investigation. Shame and guilt fluttered inside my chest and spread through my body. I had no idea why the Angelica had neglected this case, since I believed based on Ash's vision alone that the Demonica and their wicked Brotherhood of the Serpent were responsible for the whole mess. And their end goal troubled me even more. Before the alpha could muster a reply to the Cecily's question, Ash intervened.

"I understand your frustration and dissatisfaction, ma'am, but I'd like to assure you I just had a vision of your son. He is tied down and unconscious in a dark basement. He is still alive, but I fear we're running out of time so we need to act fast. My partner and I would like to ask you a few questions. I'm sure you could tell us something that could shed a new light on this case, and we could find your son and the other boys sooner."

I smiled internally: that was my girl! She wouldn't give up no matter what. When I first met her, until I realized she was my fated mate, I would get angry, annoyed by the secrets she kept. It bothered me that she refused to share them with me no matter how dangerous it was. Once I found out her secret, every strange behavior of hers had an explanation. If I hadn't seen that she was possessed, I might have thought she was a demon and could have killed her. Thank the fates I had learned the truth.

Cecily stopped in the doorway.

"You saw my son? Is he alright? Where is he kept? Where's that basement? Please, come in and tell me." The change in her tone and vibe was stark. She marched inside the house, Ash and the alpha following her, and I came last. I shut the door after me and joined the others who had crossed the long corridor and entered what looked like a fancy living room.

"For now, your son is fine, but we need to act fast. We need something to stick to: a trace, a pattern, anything that could direct us," Ash said. I decided it was time for me to take control of the investigation.

“Ma’am, can you think of a place where your son spent a lot of time, maybe alone? Five young and promising shifter boys have been abducted; there has to be a pattern, a scheme for how the Demonica abducted these boys.”

She gave me a glance, a mixture of surprise and agreement, then nodded.

“Sir, we had faith we could figure out how our kids were abducted, but nothing made sense. I told Michael that Peter only went to school, played football with the other boys, and then came home. Ah, there was that restaurant where he and his friends would hang out. They even celebrated the birthday of a boy from Peter’s class but that’s all. Michael and the ABI agent went to that restaurant to check it out, but you said everything was okay.”

Michael nodded and added, “Yes, we checked Blues in the Mist and didn’t find anything out of the ordinary.”

I couldn’t help but wonder who the hell that agent was—he was both secretive and incompetent at the same time. Also, that bar had to be checked by an agent when a few days ago all of us, grouped in pairs checked all the bars in Aran. Judging by the fact that not one of the senior angels mentioned the restaurant, I suspected no demoniacal activity had been registered there. But what troubled me the most was how no one, not even Delainey, informed me about the shifter disappearances. These shifters played a significant role in whatever the Demonica was up to and I believed even more so after Ash’s vision.

“Do you remember the name of this ABI agent?” I asked the alpha, hoping to figure out the mysterious identity of my colleague.

“Yes, it was a young man. An angel who went by the name of Jefferson. We questioned the manager on shift and neither he nor I detected a lie. Plus, the place looked clean. The werewolf boys discovered this restaurant in the last year and it became their lair, so to speak.”

“Did all the missing werewolves hang out there?” I asked as I suppressed a mounting rage that seethed in my chest. Of

course, the indifferent and docile Jefferson would get such a case and couldn't do anything else but butcher it. I instinctively balled my right hand into a fist, but quickly released the tension and shook off my hand. I couldn't and shouldn't show my emotions during work, especially my negative ones.

Michael furrowed his eyebrows and as he pondered, and Cecily said, "I think they all hung out there, as far as I know. Right, Michael?" She turned to her alpha and he nodded in agreement.

I scratched my chin, wondering if this restaurant with a funny name could serve as a trace or simply was one of the many restaurants around; shifters remained one of the biggest food lovers among the supernatural species. "Is this restaurant here, in the shifter district?" I asked them.

Michael nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, it's here, though on the border with the Magica district."

The Magica district included witches and wizards. Before the war with the Demonica, a class of sorcerers existed, but since sorcerers were primarily evil magical wielders with inherent supernatural powers, the Angelica's first job was to kill all of them during the war. The remaining few sorcerers who turned out not to be evil quickly found employment with the Angelica at the highest level. They served in the High Court, where the gods and archangels would meet and discuss the worldly and otherworldly affairs and the constant threat that the Demonica posed to all of us. The memory of the danger they put the whole planet in was still strong in my mind. I sighed. If fate hadn't intervened and my sister hadn't died from the crazed demons, I think my life would have taken a very different direction. I doubt I would have joined the academy and be working for ABI. It was scary when you stopped to think what trauma did to people, humans, or supernaturals.

"When did the missing shifters visit that restaurant for the last time before they began to disappear?" I asked the alpha.

He scratched his chin as he pondered on my question. “I think all the missing boys gathered there for Nathaniel’s birthday, which falls in the second half of September. After his birthday party at Blues in the Mist, the boys began to vanish, one by one over the next two weeks.”

“It’s very strange, I admit it,” I said and felt Ash’s burning stare on my back. I turned to face her and intuitively drew closer to her. I whispered into her ear, “We’re definitely going to that restaurant to check it out.”

She gave me a curt nod and I directed my attention back to the pack’s alpha. “How many shifter boys are missing?”

Cecily answered before Michael could even open his mouth, let alone speak. “Seven in total. One of whom is my son, Peter.”

“And all of these shifters are werewolves?” I asked casually.

“Of course. We don’t socialize with shifters outside of our species. The bear shifters have their neighborhood here, then the fox shifters, the lions, tigers, etcetera. It’s true that the other shifter classes are much smaller in numbers compared to us, werewolves, but each to their own,” the alpha said, matter of fact.

“I don’t care about other shifters, but if one of them claims they can help find my son... I’d sell my soul to get my boy,” Cecily said passionately, her dark eyes gleaming with flames.

“Careful there, lady. You wouldn’t want to bargain with the Demonica, never mind selling your soul. We’ll find not only your boy, but the others, too. Just give us a little time.”

She arched her brows, her expression filled with doubt. “Yeah, the other ABI agent said the same, yet here we are and the boys are still missing.”

She had a point. I pursed my lips, trying not to want to shout at Jefferson for his incompetence. Even worse, now Jefferson was my partner. I literally wanted to smash something, but anger was never a reliable solution. Instead, I bit my lower lip and forced myself to say to the worried

mother, “This time it’s different, ma’am. I give you my word that we’ll find your son and the others, no matter what.”

Chapter 22

Ashadha

As soon as we finished talking with Cecily, Kevan, Michael, and I weaved our way through the corridor back to the front door and onto the small yard. As we walked down the stone pathway, Kevan caressed my right hand. His rich scent and potent angelic magic sent a whole load of energy into my body and lit up my senses. I had the feeling that I could run a marathon in a few minutes, climb the Rockies, or work tirelessly for hours. Wow, I'd never thought angels' magic was so powerful. Along with my energy boost, my hormones soared, too. Desire, hot and sizzling, gripped my middle and I had to restrain myself from pressing my lips hard onto his. I wanted more than anything to bury myself in his strong arms and forget everything... Yet the demon remained unmoved by my raging libido, ready to attack me if I dared to be more intimate with Kevan.

"You ready to visit that restaurant now? If you need a rest, just let me know," Kevan whispered into my ear.

I shook my head. "No, I'm good. Thanks, Kevan. We better hurry, though. I still can hear Shankarananda's words echoing inside me. They're embedded into my mind."

He caressed my cheek and let me leave the gate first. Kevan turned to Michael.

"Can you lead us to Blues in the Mist right now? This place screams like trouble and we have no more time to lose. I fear for the missing boys' safety."

Michael furrowed his brows and I wasn't sure what disturbed his mind: the dire picture Kevan drew of the situation or the fact that Kevan wanted him to escort us there.

After a short pause, Michael agreed. As the car sped away, something deep inside me screamed to get away from here, to run and hide. But where? All my life I'd been hiding, not only from the Angelica Order, but from the Demonica, too. I had sacrificed my personal life and happiness so that I could stay alive and survive—another day, another month, another year. But I was always repressed, always fearful that someone might figure out my secret that someone might tattle about me to the ABI: that would have been my end, literally. Was this life worth living? Did I do anything to improve my destiny and change for the better? The truth stared at me cold and unyielding: I had to face danger if I wanted to live a better life and finally be myself, the demon out of me. And for that I had to become fearless and stare death right in the face. It was all or nothing and I couldn't afford to lose my nerves now. A deep nausea formed at the pit of my stomach, protesting all my good wishes and self-talk. It wouldn't be easy, but I'd be damned if I didn't try.

We arrived in front of a neon glowing restaurant that could have easily been a techno club shortly before ten pm. I looked around as I scrambled from the car. We were in a mostly residential neighborhood, which consisted of relatively new buildings with condos. The restaurant, though, stood alone in a small, secluded area overgrown with shrubs, bushes, trees, and grass, the closest building several hundred feet away from the restaurant. The restaurant itself looked as if came from a sci-fi novel. It had the form of a flying saucer, its form oval and black. A multitude of neon lights flickered on the building's peculiar roof, which further cemented the illusion of a flying saucer. The restaurant's name glowed right in the middle of the building and as we drew closer to it, I realized it sat above the front door.

“So, this is Blues in the Mist. Enjoy and let's hope you find a trace or something. The other ABI agent and I didn't find anything suspicious here,” Michael said and turned around to get back into his car when he recalled something and turned back to us.

“If you need me, don’t hesitate to call me. I’m going back home now. My oldest child has a birthday today and I promised him to attend his party. Good luck, guys,” he called one more time, as he went into his car and gunned the engine. The motor rumbled in the quiet of the night, as the tires took off and accelerated on the asphalt. Now we were on our own. Once we finished work here, I’d take us back home either using my angelic wings or calling Michael.

I drew closer to the front door of Blues in the Mist and realized no sound or music came from inside. I wondered if it was even open. I glanced at Kevan and he pushed open the front door. The door creaked open, revealing a long corridor lit with neon lights, mounted on the walls. Kevan strode forward, his brows furrowed, deep in his thoughts and lost in his own world. I gaped at the energy and vibe of this place—the restaurant smelled of alcohol and fast food, my nostrils flaring as I took a few rapid breaths of air. The scent of French fries blew right into my face, making my stomach rumble loudly. My mouth watered as I realized I hadn’t had dinner. I had been busy trying to help Mrs. Harvey find her son when Kevan called me to come and meet him in the shifter district. Now, the rich aroma of food tickled my senses, the scent increasing as we drew closer and closer to the main hall. I could hear muted sounds. With each step we took, they grew louder and clearer. The corridor wound through the building like a snake and it took us several long and tedious minutes before we arrived in front of another door, this one metallic with a crimson logo on the center of the new door—two spheres, one up, the other one down and a line connecting them. Goosebumps prickled my skin as my eyes locked on this symbol. Kevan glanced my way, oblivious to my inner reaction and opened the door. A brighter lit hall greeted us. On the left side stood the bar, while wooden tables and a pool table occupied the rest of the room. High beams stared at us from the ceiling, which gave the place a typical Irish pub vibe. The waitress, a plump woman in her forties moved swiftly through the dining room as she took orders from the restaurant’s few customers. Kevan walked into the room with the confidence and gait of a king, leisurely strolling in. He chose a table near the bar. I perched on the vacant chair

opposite his and took a look around. This place looked harmless. The customers consisted mainly of shifters, but I spotted a few witches, too. One of them had spread tarot cards on the table and did a reading for what looked like another witch. Both women had pink and blue hair coming down their backs in waves, topped with peculiar hats. I chuckled: these witches looked exactly the way humans imagined them, as if the pair was taken out of a Halloween catalog.

“Yes, I can see why they didn’t find anything here. This place seems clean,” I said as I turned my gaze back to Kevan.

He regarded me for a second longer and, his expression inscrutable, said, “I wouldn’t write off this place yet. Something doesn’t feel right here. I can’t point out what exactly, but I felt it.”

A shudder fluttered inside me and reminded me of the peculiar sensation I experienced when my eyes locked on the symbol painted on the second entryway. Yeah, maybe I did hurry to declare this place to be of no interest to our investigation. And yet, I couldn’t imagine how this restaurant could fit into our ultimate mission to get to Shankarananda and get the demon outside of me. Someone chuckled inside my mind, which gave me a headache and I knew it was that damn demon. Ever since we discovered his existence, he had mostly stopped talking to me; only when Kevan hugged or kissed me would he pop up, intervening and warning me not to get too physical with the cute angel. Damn vicious creature! I wouldn’t get peace of mind until I banished that monster out of me.

“Okay, Mr. Detective, are we looking for something in particular or you simply wish to observe?” I asked him after a pause. I wasn’t sure what we were supposed to do here. If I were on my own and not in the midst of an investigation, I would have relaxed here and maybe if I had more coins, I would have ordered a tarot reading from the witch sitting near us.

Kevan arched his brow and said, “You’re very impatient, Ash. We’re waiting and observing. I’ll question the personnel here about the missing shifter boys, too, but first let us relax

and get into the mood of the place. Maybe get something to eat?” He winked at me and I was about to ask if he had noticed something out of the ordinary already when the waitress appeared out of nowhere and tossed us two worn-out, greasy menus.

“Welcome to Blues in the Mist. Here are the menus. Would you like to order something already or you need more time?” She delivered the lines like a well learned verse but she lacked emotion. Now that she had drawn closer to me, I could feel her magical signature: it smelled of raw meat, flavored with strong whiskey. This lady was definitely a shifter, a lion.

“I’ll take my time to study your menu, thank you. In the meantime, could I please talk to a manager?” Kevan flashed her his ABI badge and the waitress sighed heavily; concern written on her face.

She cursed under her breath and hurriedly added, her voice agitated and strained, “The owner is out of town, and the manager is not here tonight, either. I can call them. Why do you want to meet them? Is it connected with a crime or with an investigation, detective?”

He gave her a bright smile and said calmly, as if he pacified a frenzied teenager, “It’s both. I’d really appreciate it if you called your manager and told him to come here ASAP. I’d like to ask him a few questions. It wouldn’t take him more than ten-fifteen minutes of his busy schedule. Would you tell him that? I’d be forever grateful to you if you do this for me.” He gave her another radiant smile, this one even bigger than the previous.

Just watching and sitting near him made my head lightheaded and the world spun around even though I was sitting. What the hell? Did he use magic to convince the waitress to obey his orders? He’d never done it around me before and it was something new. The waitress giggled and nodded coyly in confirmation. She waltzed back to the bar before she disappeared through the swinging door that separated the dining room from the kitchen.

“Did you just magically drug her? Or brainwash her?” I asked him as soon as the waitress disappeared.

Kevan shrugged. “She lied to me. She claimed neither her boss nor the manager was here, but that’s not true. With each second I’m here, my whole being screams at me this place is trouble, big trouble.” He inched closer to me and half-whispered to me, “Do you see that guy over there?”

I traced his stare, which pointed toward a burly man sitting at the right corner of the hall, a few tables from us. He conversed with another man, younger than him, and sipped from his rock glass.

“What about him?” I asked and arched my brows.

“It’s the bouncer from The Bite. The evening when Delainey and I found drugs and the bloodstained knife on Schuster, this guy was on duty there. Now we see him here where all the missing werewolves liked to gather. Curious, huh?”

I shook my head. “This doesn’t prove anything, it’s not even a clue. That guy is simply chilling here and talking to the other man, probably a friend of his. You know no ABI agent or a police officer would take this seriously, right?”

Amusement flickered in his eyes, then the gleam vanished as quickly as it appeared. “Maybe this is just a coincidence, it’s nothing. But as I said, something doesn’t sit right with me about this place. So, I’m searching for crazy little stuff like that bouncer being here. Maybe I’m too paranoid and this guy just likes to hang out here, but I need to consider all scenarios no matter how crazy. That’s how to do a proper investigation.”

My lips stretched into a broad smile, though I didn’t want to show him I agreed with his bizarre investigating tactics. I was aware Kevan was an angel and had a heightened intuition, but it was hard to understand him when he provided such vague explanations such as “something doesn’t feel right here”. But it was Kevan Tyler, so somehow, I let his odd behavior run its course. I couldn’t agree with him, yet I had to concede this place had a peculiar energy and vibe, but that was all. It didn’t necessarily mean anyone here was responsible for all those

young werewolves' disappearances. After all, the boys only met here, they didn't participate in some criminal activity here. I contemplated the thought when a tall, middle-aged man with white hair came over to our table, his steps hurried and nervous. Something about the way he stood, his shoulders tense, his face wearing a polite mask, reminded me of a dark cloud about to pour rain. He hadn't come to us just to say hello or something, oh, no. Curiously enough, I couldn't detect a magical scent in him. Maybe he was good at hiding it, or simply was a human. Either way, I decided I didn't like this guy. His eyes felt dark and cold and I couldn't shake the feeling of boredom and annoyance rolling off him.

"My waitress told me an agent from ABI wanted to talk with the owner about a possible crime. I'm all ears, sir. What do you need me for?"

Kevan explained to him how several young werewolves had gone missing and the one thing that united all these different werewolves was this restaurant.

"I'm sorry to inform you, Mr. Tyler, but I don't know anything about missing werewolves," the owner said, his tone polite, yet cold as ice. He went on, "I am focused on keeping my small business afloat, so I'm sorry but I haven't noticed anything of interest to you."

Kevan stared at the man, then asked, "You don't know the boys I'm talking about?"

The manager hesitated, then spoke quickly. "Yes, I remember there was a group of teenage werewolves hanging out here, but it has been nearly two weeks since I last saw them. And I don't recall anything unusual about these boys, just your typical werewolf teenagers who wanted to have fun and get outside of their homes for a while. I can tell you, though, they were all very polite and we have never had trouble with them. I'm saddened they have gone missing; I wish you good luck in finding them. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to finish doing the books. Sandra took me out in the middle of last month's report; she claimed it was very important."

Once the owner had left our empty table, Kevan turned his attention to me. He arched his brows and, trying to keep his voice calm and low, said, “See, this is what I’m talking about, Ash. This guy lied to us. I don’t know what he knows, but my magic made it clear he kept important stuff to himself. He’s hiding something or someone and it’s just another red flag about this place.”

I wanted to counter his claim when the waitress popped up from nowhere with her waltzing gait and asked us merrily, “I see you talked to James. Hopefully he answered all your questions. Have you chosen something from our menu?”

All of a sudden Kevan stood from his chair, pulling it aside. The chair creaked on the floor and drew the attention of the nearby customers.

Unfazed Kevan said, “No, we’re done. I sincerely hope you can find a new job. Who knows, maybe this restaurant won’t be open much longer.” He glanced my way, prompting me to follow him and stormed out into the corridor. I glanced at the waitress, mumbled a hushed “excuse us,” and followed him. I found him outside, walking in a circle around his car.

“What the hell was that, Kevan?” I said and threw my hands in the air exhaustedly. His weird behavior was starting to get on my nerves. I stared at him, the way he seemed not to be present, his brows furrowed as if he listened to something else. “What are you doing?” I raised my voice, partly scared he might ignore me or stay like this with no interest in me or the outer world for ages. Was this angels’ stuff? Regardless, I needed answers and to have proper communication with him.

“Sorry, Ash. I’m trying to connect to Delainey to update him on the case, but he doesn’t answer my telepathic calls. I tried calling his phone first but no one answered it, either. I’m starting to worry about him.”

He barely uttered the last words when the air around us shimmered in dark crimson hues, then a few large bodies landed on the ground as if taken straight out of Hell. Bandanas covered their faces, small horns protruding from behind their

ears. As if by an unheard command, the demons charged at us in unison, throwing a large magical blast right at us.

Chapter 23

Kevan

Damn it, why isn't he picking up my telepathic call? I internally cursed. I needed to report my findings and the ABI had to do something to find those missing shifters. I could feel it in my gut that these missing werewolves played an important role in the Demonica's twisted plans to overthrow us, the Angelica, and the established order. My angelic intuition pinged like crazy, prompting me to take these disappearances very seriously. This wasn't some silly low-level case. I could feel the Demonica were doing something, tampering with those poor werewolf boys.

The fact that Ash saw one of these boys bound together with Shankarananda, who we had to find, drove me crazy. I had to do something to get to the Demonica's lair and rescue all those innocent souls. Then if I had spare time, I'd punish the Demonica for their wickedness. I shuddered to remember how the monsters had attacked and abducted Shankarananda, then locked him together with the shifters god knows where. Without him, our chances to get our hands into the Scroll of Destiny equaled to zero. And without that scroll, Ash could never get rid of the demon inside her. It was a hexed circle, but we had to start from somewhere, breaking the spell.

I'd spent a few seconds on my own outside of the bar when Ash ran toward me and demanded an answer about my behavior toward the waitress. I apologized and was just telling her how Delainey wasn't picking up my calls when the air around us cracked, shimmering in an eerie crimson, making my hair stand on an end. My heart raced wildly, but before I could do something, a few enormous demons landed on the ground near us with a thud. Dark bandanas covered their ugly faces, their dark horns glistening under the light flickering

from the streetlamps nearby. I couldn't believe these morons would attack us in a neutral territory such as the shifter district, plus we stood in front of a restaurant. What if someone from inside heard something and came out? My fingers brushed under my blazer, further under my t-shirt to reach my magical pendant that rested against my bare skin. I barely managed to activate it, the familiar warm sensation flowing into my veins, pumping my blood with hard and rough power as I transformed into an angel. The demons didn't waste time, either, as they threw a glowing dark magical ball our way. The tallest of these monsters took the lead as he was the closest to us. Ash shrieked as the magical blast exploded in the air and dark rain of repulsive magic showered us. The air smelled unbearably of dirty socks and rotten food. My legs and arms stretched as I grew. My wings fluttered and I took off in the air, trying to shield Ash from the onslaught of this demon attack. The largest demon hissed, his nostrils flared as he saw me saving Ash and myself from their blast. The same demon's thick lips curled into a vicious smile, moving as he uttered something under his breath. I flew ahead, holding Ash tightly in my arms, my golden sword steadied in my sheath around my waist. One more minute and I'd fly the hell away from these assholes, but I bumped into an invisible wall. The air thundered around me as my wings hit into the magic's tough and unyielding surface, my body losing momentum. Great, we were cut off from the outside world. Judging by the lack of shifters and supernaturals coming to see the fight, I assumed the demons had activated a sound muting spell alongside an invisibility spell. I took my sword out and raised it to strike the demon nearest to me, when the leader of these monsters threw a small and round, black object on the ground. Oh, no, this was a teleportation charm... shit! Before I could even try to destroy the charm with my own magic, the object hit the ground with a thud. Immediately, a wild whirlwind raged through the place, its huge waves shimmering in dark hues. My head throbbed with pain, my wings suddenly weighing more than a second ago. I fluttered helplessly in the air, trying to maintain balance, but my body had shrunk, my wings shriveling rapidly. I collapsed on the ground, still holding Ash tightly in my arms. I expected to crash and burn,

my bones cracking and breaking, but strangely enough, no pain came. What the hell was this teleportation charm? The dark hues kept growing, encircling our full bodies. Ash was pulled out of my arms, her face contorted in worry. The demons surrounded us, drawing closer, their crimson eyes glowing triumphantly. The dark vortex took us into the void, the space in front of my eyes dimming as the magic ushered us into oblivion.

Sharp pain pierced my skull, followed by something tight searing my wrists. I tried to open my eyes, but the pain mounted in my head, which felt like it would explode any second. I decided to wait a little bit. I perked my ears and listened to hear any sounds or noises in the room: besides a low and rhythmic snoring from behind me, it was all quiet. The temperature here felt like a heated oven. Hot sweat dampened my neck, my clothes soaked. I swallowed, the taste inside my mouth sticky and dry. My lower lip ached and I realized the demons must have wounded it—bastards! They'd pay for all their crimes, including murdering my younger sister. And now they wanted to take away my fated mate.

I stirred my limbs and finally managed to open my eyes. Darkness shrouded the room and the shapes of other people's bodies began to take form as my eyes grew used to the lack of light. I tried to move and stand up, but the same tightness seared my wrists as the metal handcuffs went deeper into my flesh. I cursed in a low voice and looked around for Ash: for heaven's sake, where was she? Did the assholes who abducted us take her to another room? I balled my fist as much as the heavy handcuffs would allow me without roasting my flesh. I didn't know what to do. I called Ash's name several times before I heard a deep groan nearby. Her scent of wild fruits came to me and tingled my senses. Thank the fates she was alive and next to me! Yet her signature felt weaker than usual, maybe due to hurt and exhaustion? Once we were out of here, I'd heal her.

“Ash? Are you okay? I'm here,” I said half-whispering. I tried to turn my head in her direction, but the stupid handcuffs

got in my way and a new dose of pain cut my wrists. Damn it. If this kept going, I risked this shit leaving scars on my skin. True, I could heal myself relatively fast with my angelic superpowers, but for that I needed to be free and not bound like I was now. I could feel that these cuffs were enchanted and blocked angelic powers, including my shifting. Great! If I couldn't use my magic, how was I supposed to make it out of this hellish pit alive?

A new grunt came from Ash and she asked, her voice coarse and still sleepy, "Where am I?" She paused then she asked with a stronger voice, "Kevan is that you?"

My chest fluttered and I said, "Yes, it's me, Ash. Are you hurt?"

She sighed. "Let me check, though I don't think so. Kevan, where the hell are we?"

Before I could answer, a new voice behind me spoke. His rich and full voice, combined with his obvious accent nearly made me jump as I sat on the floor, the metallic handcuffs again searing my skin.

"Namaste, friends. You must be Ashadha and Kevan, right? Ganeshwarji informed me about your arrival shortly before the monsters kidnapped me. I'm happy we finally met each other, though I was hoping the circumstances would have been better. Anyway, I'd like to answer your question. My third eye says we must be below a building, in a basement or something; maybe even a wine cellar. I'm not familiar with your house construction in the United States."

"Hey, wait a second, are you that guy Ganeshwar wanted us to meet in the Shiva temple? The one who possesses the Scroll of Destiny?" I interjected. Damn it, he was right: the circumstances were horrible, and all I wanted was to see this guy in broad light and maybe even shake his hand.

"Yes, it's me. I used to possess this scroll but not anymore, I'm afraid. The demons who abducted me from the temple stole the Scroll of Destiny, too, and this saddens me a great deal. I don't know how, but we must stop them or they will inflict great destruction."

“It won’t be their first time ruining everything,” I muttered.

“You’re the Indian priest, Shankarananda?” Ash said excitedly. “Did you psychically connect with me? I used my clairvoyant gift to track one of the missing werewolf shifters and I saw you. You gave me a warning.”

He chuckled and said calmly, “Yes, that’s right, Ashadha. I sensed you peeking into our misfortune and called for help. I’m afraid our predicament hasn’t improved. The shifter boys are all here, though they’re drained and unconscious. The demons are using their energy, but for what purposes I have no idea. I doubt it’s for good.”

“Wait, do you—” I couldn’t finish my question because Shankarananda cut me off.

“Hush, they’re coming. Keep quiet and pretend you’re asleep.” And with that he went silent. Ash gasped instead of replying. Heaviness formed in the middle of my throat, making me suffocate. *They?* Did he mean the demons who abducted us? I perked my ears and heard distant steps echoing on the ground, growing closer. I distinguished that two people walked toward our room engaged in conversation. Their voices first came muffled, but with each new step, they got louder and clearer. They were just inches from our room and I heard them talk.

“They arrived, master. Everything goes according to plan.” The guy chuckled and I couldn’t help but wish he would choke with his ill sense of humor.

“Great, Gareth, thank you,” the second man said before Gareth cranked the door of our room open. I couldn’t care less what they’d do with us once they came inside as shock paralyzed my whole body—I recognized the second man’s voice. Holy hell, it was Delainey.

Chapter 24

Kevan

“Hello, Kevan, how do you like our special guest chamber? Do you have everything you need?” Delainey came over to me as I squinted, trying to adjust to the light coming from a weak, flickering bulb that hung on the ceiling. I glanced around me and held my breath: besides Ash, me, and Shankarananda being held in handcuffs on the floor, I spotted five young boys tied to old, metallic chairs a few feet away from us, in the other corner of what looked like a cellar. They sat slumped and unconscious in the chairs, their seemingly lifeless bodies scarred and bleeding with multiple wounds and marks. Seeing the room we were held in and locked up against our will, I had a flashback to our captivity only a few weeks ago. The only difference was that last time we were alone in the basement, whereas now we had company with the wounded boys and the Indian guy. Evil grew stronger and more sinister with each passing day.

“How could you?! You betrayed the Order, ABI, and the archangels and gods you’ve sworn to serve, respect, and protect. Traitor!” I spat my words with venom and balled my hands into fists, rage seething inside my chest. The handcuffs plunged deeper into my skin and hot pain seared my wrists. My skull throbbed as I tried to keep balance, but the task felt harder without my magic. Shit. The desire to tear Delainey apart overwhelmed my mind and I fought the urge to jump ahead and try to hit this loser somehow. I could kick or bite him, any way I could cause him pain. I gave up on that urge: it would be too difficult for me. I could see Delainey had come to talk to me. If I tried to attack him, I’d lose because of the handcuffs, but even worse, I’d miss out on whatever information he was about to share with me.

“Tut-tut, I see you haven’t learned anything, Kevan.” He came so close to me that I could feel his breath on my face. He knelt beside me, lifted my chin, and said, “I can’t shake the fact that you remind me of my younger brother. And you know what? He was just as stubborn and fiery as you.”

What the hell was he blabbering on about? Ash stirred in that moment and, blinking, gaped at the sight of Delainey and me. My boss barely spared her a glance, but directed his attention back to me, his follower came over to Ash and inspected her before he took a few steps back and positioned himself behind Delainey.

I didn’t say anything in response to Delainey. Instead, I let him talk and see what he had in his delusional mind.

He continued, “You and I are more alike than you think. Just like you, I lost my family during the war. But in my case, it wasn’t only my little sister. Everyone died except me. I was angry at the Demonica and wanted revenge, I wanted magical powers and the ability to avenge my parents and siblings, so I enrolled in the academy to become an angel. Sound familiar, Agent Tyler?” His eyes gleamed with a strange light, small dark flames burning in his irises. I felt a chill in my bones as I watched him—he was insane. How the hell hadn’t I figured out he was working behind the scenes for the Demonica? I’d been so blind that I ignored his prejudices against Schuster, even though the whole case against him felt weak. The sudden thought that Delainey might have killed Kennedy gripped my mind and nausea climbed up my throat.

“You, psycho! Was it you who killed Kennedy? How could you? The man who had faith in you, who built you and employed you!” Blind rage simmered in my chest, making me feel like I might suffocate if I didn’t vent the anger off.

An evil grin twisted across Delainey’s lips and he gloated, “Someone had to do it. The old fool had started to suspect me, so I had to remove him. He’d also figured out that we gather in bars. You and your bitch already took away Fairy Kiss from us—the place doesn’t function anymore and I doubt it would ever open again. We couldn’t lose another top-quality hiding spot so we had to get Kennedy out of the way.”

I furrowed my brows—“top-quality hiding spot”—what did the lunatic mean by that? Did he refer to The Bite or Blues in the Mist? I doubted he’d tell me, but I tried my luck anyway.

“Which place do you mean? Where are we now?”

He laughed. “Oh, no, I can’t tell you. You have to figure it out yourself or else it won’t be fun.”

I switched course and asked, “So, it wasn’t enough for you just to kill the ABI chief, you had to frame agent Schuster?”

He grinned, showing me his teeth, and I couldn’t help but register in that moment that Delainey exuded the vibe of a wild animal let out of their cage.

“You see, I wasn’t planning to frame Dan Schuster, but your dislike of him and your suspicion came at the right place and time for me not to take advantage of it. The rest was easy—I just slipped the murder weapon into his pocket. I’d intentionally left a few blood stains on the knife’s razor just in case. I knew I had to invent suspects; he was too big of a fish to not close the case.”

“But how did you make Schuster confess to a crime he didn’t commit?” I asked. I remembered how Schuster had admitted to aiding the Demonica in Kennedy’s assassination. Even back then it hadn’t made sense to me. The whole case was forced and weak.

Delainey chuckled. “Now that’s one of the superpowers I recently acquired, which I’ve always dreamed of possessing. I have unlimited power, Kevan, and I can make people do or say stuff they wouldn’t otherwise do.”

So, he’d bamboozled him. Nothing special. I could influence people’s minds, too, though I made sure to use this power only when absolutely necessary and never abuse it. I guess that was the difference between him and me—morality.

I decided to keep my mouth shut and not shatter his delusions of being special.

Delainey went on, his mind in what looked like a loop, “I was initiated into the ranks of angels and worked my ass off for it just like you. Eventually, they promoted me to senior

angel, but my ambition has always been to become an archangel. Ever since I witnessed all my family members die in the war, I put it as a priority to achieve immortality, one way or another. I kept working hard and hoping I'd be recognized and initiated into an archangel. But one day, I overheard something: two senior angels talked about how the ranks of archangels were forbidden for human-born like us. Can you imagine that, Tyler? All this work, effort, sleepless nights, and injuries we had to endure in order to become angels had been for nothing. Absolute bullshit! The Angelica are making fun of us; they've taken us for fools. And you're still a fool, Tyler. But here I am today. I've seen the light, the opportunities the Demonica offers me, to all of us, and I'm short on becoming immortal. Can you achieve that with the ABI? I'll tell you right now—no way! They'll exploit you; they'll ruin you for running the show for them, yet you'll remain a mere mortal. But time is ticking and we aren't getting younger.”

“How long have you been working for the Demonica?” I asked him in an attempt to win some more time, plus I genuinely didn't understand why Delainey didn't join Steven when the bar owner tried to kill us. “You kept your double play cover a few weeks ago,” I added.

Delainey's eyes glowed with pride and satisfaction, his lips stretching into a broad grin. “Yes, that's right. You're very observant, Kevan. Isn't it marvelous? To keep quiet and stay in the shadows while Steven took the spotlight. I learned so much.” He nodded enthusiastically. Jesus Christ, this guy was off his rocker. If he hadn't betrayed us and the Angelica Order, I might have felt pity for him and his state of mind.

Delainey went on, not picking up on my thoughts, “Of course, this was our Grand Master's idea. He ordered me not to act and keep my guard. Normally I'd have come to Steven's aid. I can't believe we lost such a loyal follower because of you and that abominable girlfriend of yours.” He pointed at Ash, not even bothering to hide his loathing, his face contorting in repulsion. “You killed so many of our brotherhood, Kevan. I should be mad at you. I should kill you and your girl.” He sighed and added, “but as I said, I have a

soft spot for you; you resemble my brother. Listen, I'll make you an offer." He paused, staring at me.

The asshole probably thought I'd be speechless and in awe of his generosity but all I wanted was to get the freaking handcuffs off me. Then I could blast Delainey's delusional ass and put an end to this insanity. His insanity.

Seeing that I wouldn't emotionally react to his "offer" he continued, "Join our Brotherhood of the Serpent and get immortality and all the powers of archangels. You just need to pledge allegiance to the Grand Master and the switch will happen. We'll spare your life and gift you with many superpowers, ones you've dreamed of possessing for a long time. Choose us and you'll live. And what a glorious life it'll be!" As he spoke, dark flames gleamed in his otherwise calm chestnut eyes, the sight making my pulse beat quicker and harder. Delainey regarded me for a few long seconds, quiet and deep in thought. Electrifying silence fell over the room, the only sound I could hear came from my own racing heart.

"Well, I'm afraid you must give me your answer now, Kevan. Are you with us or against us?" His voice cut through the air like a whip and my muscles twitched with exhaustion. Though my mind and heart were on fire, I wanted more than anything to blast this guy and end his sick ambitions to rule the world. Still, I knew I'd better answer him or he'd go nuts with rage. I had to win me some time, so I decided to play the fool card.

"And what about Ash? Is she allowed to join your brotherhood, too?"

Mischievous flames flickered in Delainey's eyes, his lips stretching into a semi smile. He shook his head and said, "You can't be that stupid. You know why we need to kill this girl. Nothing personal, but she has something we need. We'll take good care of her demon."

Seeing the horror on my face when he mentioned Ash's secret, Delainey gave me a sleazy smile and said, "Yes, I know her secret. Everyone at the Demonica does. Do you think we can be fooled like the Angelica? Get this into your head,

Kevan: we know and see everything; we're the best. No one can save you now, not even your girlfriend's demon. Say your prayers, Kevan." He cackled with delight, the sound of it giving me a headache.

Ash twitched her feet on the floor and glanced my way. I shot her a glance to keep calm and let me do the talking. The last thing I needed was this lunatic coming after Ash because of her demon.

"So, what's your choice, Kevan? I don't have much time to lose so I need your answer now." His voice got rougher and harder, his tone ice-cold.

I grinned like a schoolboy caught cheating at an exam. "You know I love her. I can't leave her to die."

Delainey shook his head disapprovingly, the gleam in his eyes vanishing. "You disappoint me, Kevan. As you wish, though, the choice is yours. Fated mates are overrated."

As he mentioned fated mates, my stomach contracted, fear twisting my gut. How the hell did he know that Ash was my fated mate? His Grand Master told him? I hadn't told a soul about it.

"Yes, Kevan, as I told you. I have many superpowers now and if you had chosen to join me, you would have had them, too. Sadly, you prefer this bitch of yours over becoming immortal and almighty. What a waste." Delainey gave a curt nod at his minion, who left the room and the door open behind him.

Delainey gave me a smirk, which only set my mind on fire, my blood boiling with the desire to clock him and smash his arrogance.

"You made the wrong choice, pal. You and your bitch are going to die tonight. Let's finish what Steven and the gang started a few weeks ago," Delainey said, his laughter reverberating in the basement walls, rattling in my own skull like a curse.

Chapter 25

Ashadha

At first, I didn't recognize the burly and imposing man, but as I took my time to study his face, a hint of a memory sparkled in my inner eye, and I remembered: this was Kevan's supervisor at the Hexes and Homicide division at the ABI, senior angel Delainey. I'd seen him right after Kevan saved me the first time demons attacked me. I couldn't believe yet another friend had betrayed Kevan. This was getting ridiculous and out of hand. This time, though, we weren't alone. Shankarananda sat across the room from us, his hands bound by handcuffs, while on the other side of the room several young men sat unconscious in chairs. Blood smeared their faces and clothes; wounds and cuts adorned their flesh. Seeing the boys' perilous state made me want to throw up, bile boiling at the pit of my stomach and climbing up my throat. The missing werewolves! They had to be. I couldn't allow these boys to be butchered by Delainey and his wicked minions of the brotherhood.

I didn't forget that Oscar's mother hired me to find her son. Well, I did find him with the little exception that now I needed help. But these were small details. The important thing remained: I'd found the missing shifters. And now I learned this creep, Delainey, knew about my secret. He claimed my demon couldn't save us; my demon, though, wasn't impressed or scared, so I hoped that meant the situation wasn't hopeless. At least this was what I kept telling myself.

And your thought doesn't help you the slightest, sunshine, the familiar voice chimed in and I cursed in exasperation. It felt nice that this monster hadn't spoken to me for quite some time. Now, of all times, he chose to poison my mind with his toxic thoughts and opinions.

Hate me as much as you wish, darling, but the truth remains that you can't do anything on your own to free yourself and get out of this mess. The demon's voice chuckled inside my mind and added amused, *Admit it, Ashadha. You need me to save your ass once again. And I'll indulge your desire. I'm here to help you even though you don't appreciate me.*

I snapped shut the psychic link I shared with this asshole and which enabled our communication. I'd rather drink a scorpion's poison than seek the demon's help. He thought that he was irreplaceable and without his intervention last time, Kevan and I would have died. Maybe, but the thought that I owed my life to the same entity that had made my life living hell and continued to screw me up felt like too much to bear. And now he wanted to help me again. Why?

You can't be that thick, Ashadha, he snapped at me and laughed maliciously inside my mind, which only made my nausea worse. The fact that I had to watch Delainey intimidate and talk to Kevan disrespectfully didn't help, either. Yet, I got the demon's point: he needed me so that he could continue living parasitically inside me. The moment I freed myself from him, he'd die. I had the upper hand in a sense. Ultimately, it was hard to view myself as having any power in this relationship since I'd always suffered. I even thought for a long time that I was a demon, a half-demon, and I'd lived my life clutching to the margins of life, trying to hide my real nature when it had been him all along.

Careful, sunshine. You don't want to challenge me to show you who the boss is. If I wish to destroy you, I'll do it in the blink of an eye.

I gritted my teeth and cursed my fate and bad luck. Speaking of fate, what the hell did Delainey say about fated mates? Did he mean Kevan and I were fated mates? I thought this type of relationship existed only in shifters, and I wasn't even a supernatural. If we didn't count the demon inside me...

Sweet dreams. You know I'll always be there inside you, and besides, you need me. Without me, you're nothing. Just like right now. If it weren't for my magic and powers, how else could you defeat this maniac and his minions?

Who's the Grand Master he mentioned? You must know, I thought, deflecting the conversation from the demon's manipulations. I'd be in a much better place without him and his rants and everyone with half a brain could see it.

The demon laughed derisively, which sent a new wave of nausea straight through my core. I had the feeling my head might explode if the conversation with the demon inside me lasted any longer.

Why do you think I'll tell you? You and that smug ABI angel are trying to get rid of me and you believe I'll go along with your plan?" He laughed again and added, You'll learn to respect me, Ashadha. Without me and my magic, all the supernaturals present in the room, including you, are dead. You'll survive only because of me.

My attention shifted from the mental conversation with my demon back to the outside world. The second man, who I presumed Delainey's minion, had returned, but he wasn't alone. A dozen other men dressed just like him, all in black with bandanas covering their faces and wearing black boots marched confidently into the basement. I couldn't detect a magical signature from these sinister-looking men, yet they still posed a threat. Though Delainey remained the biggest challenge. I could feel his wicked signature from across the room. It tasted of a soup filled with whole shreds of glass, mixed with gasoline, and reeked of rotten human flesh. Eww! The Demonica must have put extra effort to get this interesting result of magic. If I could, I'd somehow block his signature even if I had only minutes left to live.

"What is going on? Why are your goons here?" Kevan asked, nonchalance in his voice, yet I could tell he was worried. To be honest, the sight of these men sent a nervous twitch down my spine, too.

"Are you strong enough to face your imminent death?" Delainey asked, his eyes glowing with pride and satisfaction. The more I looked at him, the sicker I felt. From my memory last time I saw him, his energy felt decent, nothing like tonight's version. How did the Demonica manage to brainwash him? From his rants, he claimed he'd switched teams because

the Angelica hadn't promoted him to the ranks of archangels and he believed this rank was closed to humans.

Kevan brushed aside the threat that hung in the words and tone of his boss and persisted. "Why are these men here, Delainey? Are they all going to kill us? And what about the Indian priest and the werewolf shifters? Will you kill them, too?"

Delainey grinned from ear to ear and clapped his hands while the rest of his entourage positioned themselves in a circle, holding their hands in special gestures. Each of the Demonica followers stood in the center of the basement surrounding us inside the circle they'd formed. My heart skipped a beat and heaviness swelled inside my chest, spreading into my abdomen. I didn't like the formation of this circle one bit. The poor shifters remained outside the circle, though.

"Too many questions, Kevan. I can't indulge your curiosity. After all, you're supposed to be a detective," the creep said and smirked. I had the distinct urge to punch this guy right in his ugly face.

Nuh-huh. It's bad Ashadha, really bad, the demon inside me chimed in. For once, his voice didn't sound sarcastic or mocking. They want to transfer demoniacal entities into your bodies. Into yours, Kevan's, and the Indian guru's.

He was a priest, but I didn't intend to correct him.

And what about you? How can they transfer a new demon inside me when you're already there? I snapped back, annoyed by these lunatics' greed and viciousness. A slight fear curled in my belly and I wondered if more than one entity could possess someone at the same time.

The demon inside me chuckled, probably amused by my ignorance. *Not to disappoint you, sunshine, but it's possible. However, you're lucky to have me because I won't tolerate anyone else inside you. You're safe with me. This fool, Delainey is a total jerk,* he said, anger lacing every word of his. I had to agree about Delainey. But oh, the irony! I was

safe with the old monster, with the demon. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The men clad in black drew closer to us, the circle getting smaller and tighter. They closed their eyes and hummed something quietly under their breaths. Charged silence had fallen in the room and Kevan and I locked our eyes on the bizarre ritual. In the next moment, a loud chant erupted, breaking the silence. I turned my head to the source of it and nearly gaped when I realized it was Delainey. The ABI must have been blind to have hired this guy. But maybe in the beginning he wasn't as bad as he claimed. Though in his mind, he believed he was a fool at the time when he joined the Angelica.

"I don't like the vibe of it at all," Shankarananda said, speaking for the first time since Delainey had come into the basement.

He had barely uttered the words when a tight energy of hopelessness hung in the air, cloaking us like a piece of clothing. My heart ached, sharp pain piercing it. If I weren't bound with those stupid handcuffs, I would have liked to touch my chest. I was too young to die from a heart attack, but dark magic was a whole different kind of beast and the fact psychos like Delainey could unleash that type of magic made our situation even more fucked up. Small, emerald green smoke puffed out of Delainey's outstretched hands, then it shimmered unsteadily as the smoke swirled around. Eventually, it grew and formed a circle, transforming in front of our eyes from a thin circle into a thick and ominous gleaming beast of dark energy, swirling wildly around us. It moved as if it were a living entity. The circle stretched from encompassing Delainey onto us, tendrils erupting from the circle's glowing emerald surface. With a pang and new push of dark magic, the circle split into three smaller circles and they hung, clutching at us: one at Kevan, the other circle at Shankarananda, and the final one at me. A tight lump formed in my throat and I swallowed it with difficulty. So, this was how he intended to summon and unleash the nasty creatures from Hell and then infect us with them? Lovely.

He laid the foundation of demon summoning, next he'll manifest them, and lastly, he'll transfer them into your lot, the demon inside me said, his words faster than usual. Listen to what I'm telling you, Ashadha, if you want to survive. We don't have much time left so focus on my instructions, alright?"

The glowing circle that had closed around me gradually modified and contorted into an emerald beast, tiny legs and arms emerging in the wildly spinning mass of smoke. But the circle around me remained, shining like an ominous thread, ready to cut through my flesh if I tried to run away. Gradually, a large mouth formed, pointy fangs emerged inside it, and the monster bared its fangs at me. The beast tightened its hold on me, and the greenish mass snapped at me, smoke puffing in the air. I managed to move a few steps backwards, the handcuffs searing my flesh, but I couldn't care less. I'd do anything not to allow this beastly greenish mass to bite or eat me alive. I stepped back quickly into the edge of this circle. The air charged and a bolt of electricity passed through me in waves, shaking me to the core. At least I was alive, minus the ruffled hair, but I could live with that. The monster failed to eat me alive. One-zero for me. To give it credit, it missed my flesh just by inches. Sweat broke out on my neck and dampened my jacket. Kevan stifled a scream, ready to run to me and save me. Now that he saw I was alive, he visibly relaxed. His arms slumped, his back lost its tense position, and his eyes returned to their normal color—ocean blue.

"If you hurt her, I'll skin you alive," Kevan said through gritted teeth, warning Delainey. The latter laughed, brushing aside Kevan's threat. Delainey turned to the greenish monster of tight mass swirling around me.

"Easy there, girl. We don't want to frighten our special guest. Miss Ashadha Matthews, I'd like to present you Tyrienne, a demon that will live inside you." He grinned, revealing his teeth and I couldn't shake the feeling how this guy resembled an animal; a dangerous and insane animal that had to be killed to preserve the peace of the pack.

Next, the glowing circles around Kevan and Shankarananda that kept them both locked in place turned into beastly

greenish masses of whatever monster Delainey intended to transfer inside them, too.

I don't like this at all. What are we going to do? I asked the demon inside me as I observed with horror the thick rope-like circles, how they hissed and snapped as they modified around the other two hostages in the room.

We sit and wait. I'll attack the demon intended to eat your soul, but I can't do it before she fully manifests, the demon said laconically. Something sizzled close to me and I directed my attention at my own trapped state and gasped: the greenish monster had increased in size, nearly reaching the ceiling, while I sat on the bare floor, hands still cuffed. The monster had encircled me with her rope-like thread, emerald magic sizzling on its surface as the monster kept growing. Another second and this demon would bump her head into the ceiling. She directed her head at me, her features hardened and rough but smaller and somehow more gentle than male demons. A pair of dark magma-glowing eyes stared back at me, malice palpable in her irises: if she could, she would have killed me by her stare only. The air around twirled, hissed, and snapped as talons appeared on her greenish body. Next, her fangs grew, her head doubling, and two small horns adorned her head like antennas. The air in my lungs ceased as I witnessed this transformation. I hoped this beast of a demon wouldn't get any bigger, stronger, or nastier. Finally, the transformation had completed, the beast fully awake, greenish lava-like magic electrified on the demon's massive body. One word from Delainey and she would tear me apart. Seeing how enormous she was, I felt smaller than an ant.

Delainey nodded, his eyes gleaming with a mixture of malice and rapture and the towering demon screeched, her shriek deafening the charged atmosphere. Kevan shouted and tried to wriggle out of his own greenish circle, but his demon whipped his tail at him and Kevan screamed in pain.

Now! The demon yelled inside my head, taking advantage of the momentary distraction that arose.

Lock your eyes into hers, stare at her, and I'll do the rest, he said and went quiet. A strange sensation of excitement and

loathing swelled inside my chest. What the hell?! was my demon crazy? How would me staring the monster in the face thwart my imminent death? Still, I obeyed the demon and tried my best to stare at the greenish monster that filled the whole room up to the ceiling. She snapped her mouth, showing me her huge fangs, saliva dripping from them. She was about to breathe fire or, god knows what nasty magic, into my face, but the strange sensation in my chest burst out, erupting like a volcano. Without even realizing how, what, or why, I witnessed a gigantic red magma pour out of my throat as if I was a dragon. The magma flooded the basement, splitting it into three parts. It burned and destroyed the emerald circles that held Kevan and Shankarananda captive. Several hollow screeches filled the quiet of the night, the echo of the demons tore through the basement like thunder. The last magma scored straight into the towering demon above me. I couldn't believe how this fiery-red magma jumped and flew into the heart of the demon Delainey wanted to infest me with. The demon tried to put up a fight, but in vain. Before she could release her own magic, the magma had already covered large parts of the demon's body. The creature let out a painful screech. She tossed and turned her massive body in a wild frenzy, dying in pain. Gradually, her size diminished and shrank, her body burning from the inside out, shriveling and morphing.

Delainey screamed and shouted at his summoned demons, but as he saw the strange substance that poured out of me, he directed his commands at the gang of masked men in black. Several of these guys took out knives with engraved runes on their blades and charged at us, but Kevan had already freed himself from his handcuffs and waited for them. The magma melted Kevan's handcuffs as it did mine; what little of the nasty metal remained fell on the ground. Kevan touched his pendant, which always preceded him turning into an angel. In seconds, he doubled in size, his head almost touching the ceiling. His wings fluttered and he raised his golden sword as he stabbed the closest masked man. The golden sword went right into the guy's chest, blood gushing out of his wound. The blood splattered on Kevan's hands, but he swiftly took out his sword and went onto the next enemy. In the meantime, I ran

over to Shankarananda, checking to see if he was injured or needed help.

“Sir, are you alright? Are you hurt?” I shouted at him as blasts of magic flew in the air, painting the basement in different shades of white, gold, and black.

“I am fine. Go and free the shifter boys. They need help more than I.”

I cursed as I recalled the werewolves. How could I have forgotten about them? True they lay unconscious in the other corner of the basement, but Oscar’s mother had paid me to find her son. Preferably alive. I ducked to avoid several magical balls that exploded in the air close to me, their dark mass signaling that they belonged to the masked minions. I managed to cross the basement and approached the unconscious werewolves when Delainey popped up from nowhere, his face smeared with blood. Aa nasty wound adorned his torn t-shirt and revealed his hairy chest.

“You almost got away, Ashadha. Almost,” he spat venomously, a maniacal gleam in his eyes which locked onto mine. Fear curled deep into my heart as I realized this guy was clinically insane, either by birth or by joining the Demonica. I had no time to ponder which his case was.

“You almost achieved your wicked plan. Almost,” I snapped back at him. If he had any sanity left at all, he should flee and never turn back.

“How did you make it? How the hell did your demon disable the metallic handcuffs I bound you with? I don’t understand.” He shook his head and took a step closer to me. “The magic I had in place was good enough for Kevan, he couldn’t connect to his angelic magic, but you and your demon... I need to understand what kind of anomaly this is. I need to figure out your secret,” he kept blabbering, the zealous gleam in his dark eyes mounting.

I was about to argue or at least ask my demon what the hell the deal was with this creep when something sudden and big happened without even the shred of warning. The demon inside me was silent one second, then the next, he let out a

loud scream that tore out of my own lips. My mind felt separated from my body and I had a hard time believing such a primal, bestial scream could leave my lungs and mouth.

A gigantic wave of dark purple magic burst out of me, the sensation of a hot and sizzling magma overwhelmed my whole being. This magic hit Delainey right in his heart, making a huge hole into his chest. He let out an inhuman scream full of pain and suffering, which froze the blood in my veins. The demoniacal magic swept him off the floor as if he were a feather and he reeled a few feet until he bumped into his last remaining minion. Delainey's torn body slumped into the masked man and the two collapsed on the floor with a bang.

Kevan locked his eyes onto mine and screamed, "We did it, Ash. We beat the assholes."

I nodded, the motion making my head feel heavier than ever. My feet faltered on the ground as I swayed unsteadily. Why did my body and head feel so heavy All of a sudden? Stars twinkled in front of my eyes and before I could say or do anything, my vision blurred. I spun around and collapsed, the world turning black.

A muffled scream left Kevan's lips as he rushed to me, but before he could take me into his arms, I heard the familiar voice of the demon, angry and hard as steel.

No one can figure out my secret. Neither you, nor your angel boyfriend or, least of all, Delainey. I am almighty and follow my rules only. Respect me and I'll reward you; try to fool, cheat, or beat me, and I'll punish you. Got it, Ash?

Chapter 26

Kevan

Just when I thought we'd lost all hope of making it out of this basement alive, Ash took me by surprise. She, or rather the demon inside her, somehow managed to unleash a dark magma magic, hurling it straight at the new demon, who was about to roast her like meat on a stick. I tried to frighten Delainey, but he was no fool: he knew that without my angelic magic and bound with his "special" handcuffs, I didn't pose any threat to him or his insane brotherhood. I'd give my arms and legs to learn who the "Grand Master" of this abominable brotherhood was.

Last month, Steven had mentioned a master, too, though he had addressed the demon inside Ash. As much as I'd come to realize that when it came to the Demonica, anything was possible no matter how crazy it seemed, I doubted Ash's demon had anything to do with the brotherhood's Grand Master. In the academy, we learned that before the cataclysms and subsequent war, the Demonica had operated in the shadows, influencing powerful people, mostly humans like politicians, CEOs of corporations, famous sportsmen, celebrities, and the like. The Demonica had spread its tendrils and managed to taint the hearts of greedy people by establishing secret societies, gathering a great many important people. But thank heavens, we defeated them and restored the divine order on earth. I'd always thought that all those demoniacal cults and secret societies had vanished, but maybe I was wrong. This brotherhood about which Steven and Delainey boasted reminded me of those once existing secret societies. Humans knew them best in the past as Masonic lodges, though from my knowledge, Masonic lodges were

harmless; I believed the Demonica threw the scent off themselves by blaming the masons.

After Ash unleashed her dark magma magic and destroyed the demon, the same magma of sizzling dark hellfire came to Shankarananda's and my rescue. This dark mass of hot lava didn't leave any of the bad guys alive, sweeping past demons, masked men, and even Delainey. Interestingly enough, the magma didn't even cause a scratch on Shankarananda or me: the dark magma melted our handcuffs in half and I threw the metallic remains on the ground. I immediately activated my angelic powers, rising to lift my glowing golden sword. I ran after the bunch of masked men and charged at them. I applied all my frustration, rage, and pent-up emotions from earlier. Thanks to Ash's demon, we survived. My heart throbbed with conflicting emotions about her demon. On one hand, he oppressed her, making her life and now even mine to an extent a living hell, but on the other hand, he did save us. This only fueled my worries that for this motherfucker to have saved our asses, again, he had to have a much more sinister agenda on his own. Otherwise, why would he do it?

I'd killed most of Delainey's minions quickly, despite them hurling and blasting dark magical blasts at me. Their magic felt weak and self-absorbing; they just couldn't create or unleash magic with the ability to kill. Whereas all I needed was to raise my sword and with a quick swish, I stabbed these demons in their dark hearts, killing them. Only one masked man remained and I flew toward him, my wings flapping wildly. I lowered myself so I could stab him in his heart, when a piercing, bone-chilling scream resounded in the room and made me stop midair, afraid of the worst.

Ashadha! Was she hurt? Did that motherfucker injure her? If he did, I swore in the name of Lord Shiva and all the High Court members, I was going to kill him with my bare hands. I scanned the room and saw Ash and Delainey near the unconscious werewolf boys. My mouth dropped as I saw Delainey—a nasty hole the size of a basketball tore his chest, smoke and magma magic sizzling and roasting his flesh. His face contorted for a last time, then the magic ravaging his flesh and chest knocked him backwards, his body lighter than a

flake. His body flew in my direction with full force as if an invisible hand pulled and twisted him. I jumped sideways, ducking as Delainey's body hit the last of his minions, the collision causing them both to crash to the ground, bones breaking and snapping. I cheered at Ash for our victory, but she swayed on the floor, her legs buckling. I ran to catch her but was too late. She collapsed right in front of my eyes.

Panic surged inside my chest and I rushed to her unconscious body. Hot sweat dampened my neck as I realized I had to heal her and do it fast. The fear of losing her curled deep into my soul, digging a hole right into my heart. I couldn't allow myself to lose her now that I'd finally found her: my fated mate. She didn't understand what this type of a connection meant, but I'd studied enough to know that once you found your fated mate, if you lost her, your whole life afterwards would be miserable and unhappy. And I would never be allowed to fall in love again.

"She's fine. She got exhausted by the high voltage of the demon's magic, the one inside her," Shankarananda chimed in as he came over to inspect her state. I half closed my eyes and laid my hand on her chest, her weak but steady pulse palpable against my skin. Deep relief swelled inside me and I concentrated on summoning all my healing magic. My fingers buzzed as blue magic sizzled across my palm and warmth spread up my arm. I directed this magic onto her, the blue light fluttered across her clothes, spreading and filling her whole body. My magic soaked into her flesh and a weak shine formed in the air above her. Once all my healing magic went inside her, I sighed in relief and directed my mind onto getting outside of this dark and dank basement. I had to call someone, a superior, to get us out of this pit ASAP. One glance at the shifters signaled to me they didn't have much time left to hibernate in this half-alive state. I would have gladly healed them, too, but as per the shifter codex, only shifters could heal themselves and healers assigned by the Angelica Order in times of a crisis. The current situation was indeed a crisis, but I was a mere detective angel from the ABI, not a healer. I could use healing magic, but it wasn't my main duty.

I thought hard about who I could call from the ABI for help. Normally, Delainey would have been my go-to person, but now that he was gone, I had no other contact. The current ABI chief was outside of my reach, and I could only call other agents. I wasn't sure if Schuster was still in confinement or if his trial had ended; unlikely, given Delainey was the one pushing for it, and now I knew why. I had only one option and it scared me, but I knew I had to do it. I gripped my metallic pendant and called my archangel supervisor, Musa. This case had become too complicated for mere angels. It was high time for the big boys and girls to come and sort out this mess.

It all happened too fast: Musa answered my telepathic call immediately by appearing in the basement. I expected him to be either flabbergasted, shocked, or speechless upon seeing our current condition, but he remained cool as a cucumber, no surprise betrayed on his face or even in his eyes. The fleeting thought that he already knew what had happened came to me but I disregarded it as not important at the moment. Musa called the current director of the ABI and informed some of the gods and archangels at the High Court. I knew because he conversed with them in front of us. I wasn't sure where the hell the basement we were locked in was, but Musa knew. He gave directions to the ABI's chief to send agents to the underground premises of Blues in the Mist and take care of the bodies of Delainey and his only remaining follower. I had suspected this restaurant could have been at the center of the werewolves' disappearances, and it made sense for Delainey and his minions to keep us hostage in the restaurant's basement, but I couldn't be sure.

Archangels had one of the most powerful types of magic—the full activation of the third eye. No wonder Delainey had gone insane in his obsession to reach this status. Musa teleported all of us, his teleportation magic in stark contrast to the charms I had to buy if I wanted to teleport somewhere. But before that, he put protective spells to keep Delainey and the low-level demon's bodies in the basement. A shimmering purple circle swept through us, encompassing Ash's sleeping body, Shankarananda, the unconscious werewolves, and me. A

warm sensation spread onto my skin and the world spun around. Before I could ask Musa where we were going, my feet landed on a clean, marble floor in a spacious hall I had never seen before. Yet, the center in my middle pinged like crazy and I recognized the familiar sensation of belonging, of family. This hall was in the ABI, no doubt about it. It wasn't the hall for meetings or emergencies; no, this one felt totally different. The furniture here was minimal. A simple wooden table stood in the center of the hall with chairs placed around it. Several people sat at the table and the breath caught in my throat as I looked at them. The first person sitting at the far side of the table was the new ABI chief, none other than senior angel Caroline Simmons. I'd seen her occasionally in the hallways here or she'd be present in some meetings. She was tall, with straight dark hair and blue eyes, slim and elegant. She always wore black business suits in with a white shirt below. Her signature felt soft and tender like a light summer fruit but had the strong and heavy aftertaste of old whiskey. It was the way her magic would warn others not to mess with her. The next person was a tall, burly man, snakes curled around his neck like garland and blended with his long, thick brown hair. But the most astonishing thing about him was his skin color: blue as the ocean. I blinked several times as my mind had a hard time processing his presence—it was Lord Shiva, himself!

I'd seen him only in pictures and videos when I studied at the academy but never had the honor of meeting him face-to-face. Most of my colleagues and supernaturals would never meet him. What I experienced today was a privilege. Warm, fuzzy sensation fluttered inside my chest and spread onto my limbs and head, making me feel lightheaded as if I'd smoked weed or had drunk alcohol. The last two people in the room were tall, fit men, their golden wings protruding from behind their shoulders. The lower part of the feathers rested on their knees. Impressive and intricate armor adorned both men's chests and legs. Even a common human could tell they were archangels. I recognized the first one easily—his fiery armor and blond hair gave away it was archangel Michel, while the other archangel was, I believed, Uriel. His armor color was greenish brown, his hair dark chestnut, his eyes hazel.

As soon as we landed in this secret hall in the ABI, the new chief, Caroline Simmons, gasped at the sight of our wretched state. My clothes were torn, several wounds with smeared blood crossed my chest, though nothing serious. In my hurry to heal Ash as much as I could for the time being, I had neglected myself. Shankaranada's state was the best out of our group, though his prolonged and exhausted face indicated he hadn't eaten a proper meal for quite some time. The worst were the shifters: they still lay unconscious on the floor. At least the magic here felt divine, the horrors of Delainey's wicked cult gone.

"Oh my. It's worse than you told us, Musa! What happened to the poor werewolves? I'm calling the best healing angel and will task them to get everyone alive and kicking. Is the girl alright, Agent Tyler?" Caroline Simmons asked, indicating Ash.

I cleared my throat and said, "I healed her on a basic level, but she needs rest. I think she'll be fine with sufficient sleep and tranquility. She can stay at my place."

"You volunteer to take care of her? She's not one of us, right? She doesn't belong to the Angelica," Simmons mused aloud.

"Ashadha Matthews is one of the bravest, kindest, and brightest human beings I've ever encountered," I said, my voice hard and unyielding. I wouldn't let them discriminate against my fated mate only because she was human and not an angel.

"Very well, Agent Tyler, in that case, archangel Musa will teleport this girl to your apartment. You're tasked with taking care of her and monitoring her healing," Simmons ordered. The air around Ash's sleeping body fluttered; a small whirlwind of the same purple magic swept encompassed her. I was about to argue and tell them I couldn't just let them shift her to my place; I had to be next to her, but Lord Shiva must have read my mind because he held his hand up to forestall me.

“We’d like to discuss a few things with you and then you’re free to join her. Archangel Musa will teleport you to your place, too, so that you won’t lose time in transportation.”

I sighed in relief, the panic swelling inside me subsided. The air vibrated for a long second, shimmering around Ash and next, she’d gone with archangel Musa.

Simmons exchanged a silent stare with Lord Shiva, mutual understanding palpable in the air. He eventually gave her a curt nod. This is what she had been waiting for because she turned to us.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, I’m taking care of these lovelies,” she barely said the words and the air around the shifters swirled and twirled, a light greenish glow sweeping through them. With a sudden burst of light, the magic took the werewolves and Simmons into the ether. Someone from the remaining archangels cleared his throat and I directed my stare back at the table with the sitting High Court members.

Lord Shiva spoke, his tone calm and serene, yet the hint of a greater power beyond this world pulsed in his voice, hard and strong as a thunderstorm. “Dear Sri Shankaranada, I am sorry you’ve had a very bad experience in the United States so far. I can teleport you at once to your home in Varanasi if that’s your wish.”

I hurriedly spoke, inviting myself into the conversation—fear curled its claws deep into my soul as I panicked that the priest could vanish again and Ash and I wouldn’t learn how to get to the Scroll of Destiny and liberate her.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to invite Shankarananda to my mentor’s house to spend a few days there, gather strength, and exchange information with us. Then I’ll personally send him to his home in Varanasi.” I didn’t mention that I’d need transportation charms, but the ABI would provide them, given the task.

Shankarananda’s lips stretched into a warm, radiant smile, which highlighted his light-brown eyes, contrasting on his darker skin complexion. “My dear friend, Sri Ganeshwar has spoken very highly of your mentor, Mr. Tyler. I’ve heard a lot

of good things about him and it'll be my pleasure to meet him.”

Lord Shiva arched his brows in surprise but accepted my desire to keep Shankarananda with us for a few more days. I hoped by the time Ash returned to consciousness, Shankarananda would still be in Aran, at Ryan's house and I could arrange a meeting with him.

“Very well, then. You can stay at Ryan Sommerset's house, Sri Shankarananda.”

I was about to ask how he would transport there when the air again shimmered in the familiar purple colors, a bright light exploded, and archangel Musa manifested.

Lord Shiva asked politely for Shankarananda to follow Musa and the two teleported to Ryan's house.

Lord Shiva turned to me. “Agent Tyler, I'm glad we can finally talk to you in private. First of all, from the name of all the High Court members I'd like to thank you for impeding and destroying senior angel Delainey's attempt to wreak havoc on our order. We appreciate your dedication, detective skills, and your integrity. However, what we'd like to discuss with you is of another matter.” He paused, one of his many snakes twirled on his naked chest and snapped its teeth in my direction. I wasn't bothered because Lord Shiva controlled them, yet alertness hung tightly on my mind.

Lord Shiva went on, “We know your secret, Agent Tyler. Or rather, should I say, Miss Matthews',” he said the words slowly and carefully, making sure I processed the meaning of his message. “We know that a demon lives inside Miss Matthews and that entity is responsible for defeating first Steven Maddock, and now senior angel Casper Delainey.”

Panic hit me like a train, my mind buzzing with fear: would they imprison Ash or kill her? And what about me? No, I had to stand my ground, there was no point in denying the truth. These people belonged to the highlight of the supernatural community, and more specifically to the Angelica, and they knew everything. Whatever they decided for Ash and me, I'd face it bravely.

“I can explain, Lord Shiva. Even though Ashadha is possessed, her case is different. She’s the kindest person—” I began to argue, laying out my case, but Shiva cut me off, unfazed.

“Save your breath, Agent Tyler. There’s no need to convince us who Ashadha is. We saw it all.” He sighed deeply and added after a short pause, “We know she is a victim and we won’t punish her. But it’s clear as day, you two need help. You can’t banish the nasty demon on your own. Sri Shankarananda is a lovely pundit, but I’m afraid his treasure, the Scroll of Destiny is forever lost to us. The Demonica got their hands on it.” He paused again and looked me up and down and I felt the burning stares of not only Shiva, but of the two archangels, too. So, the High Court wasn’t against us? They supported us? Huge relief fluttered inside my chest, the tight knot that had formed in my middle a few seconds ago began to dissipate. How lucky we were to have these archangels and gods as the highest governing body! If it had been the ABI agents who learned Ash’s secret, I doubted they would have been so sympathetic to her plight.

Shiva went on, “Something’s got to change, and it’s better for you two to be able to fight against the ancient demon that lives rent-free in Ashadha. Therefore we, the members of the High Court, decided to initiate you to the status of a senior angel. You’ll have a plethora more superpowers and magic than now, plus your salary will improve, too.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. From feeling just moments ago that I’d be banished from the Angelica Order at the very least, to the High Court’s intention to promote me to a higher rank! Who would have thought?

“We know this has been your long dream and ambition, Agent Tyler and we’d like to assure you we appreciate your hard work.”

I wanted to jump with joy and shout from the top of my lungs how I made it. I’d yearned to reach the rank of a senior angel since the day I began work at the ABI. Dreams did come true after all. I sincerely thanked them all for this once-in-a-lifetime chance.

“Your initiation is planned for next week. Now, rest from the exhausting fight and take care of Miss Matthews. You have to promise us one thing,” Lord Shiva paused, locking his dark brown eyes on me, a snake hissed and snapped in the air. “Next time when you face the Demonica, make sure you get to their Grand Master. And please kill him or at the very least capture him. Promise?”

Many thoughts swirled in my mind—from Lord Shiva’s words, he made it clear that we would be facing the Brotherhood of the Serpent soon. Again. Maybe that’s why the High Court decided to promote me to a senior angel—to have better chances at winning against this cult and their mysterious Grand Master.

Anticipation and a rush of adrenaline swelled inside my middle, pumping my heart like an engine. I nodded vehemently and gave him my sincere promise that I’d give my best. Musa had returned, too, and waited to teleport me home so that I could join Ash in the quiet of my studio. It all seemed that my meeting with the High Court was winding up to its end when a troublesome thought crossed my mind, gnawing at my peace of mind.

Lord Shiva furrowed his brow as he picked up on my change immediately. “What is it, Agent Tyler? Something’s bothering you, I can see.”

It was now or never. I gathered my strength and said, “Thank you once again for your trust and the honor to continue my service to the Angelica as a senior angel. One thing, though, doesn’t give me peace of mind. As you may know, Ashadha is my fated mate and I have a special bond to her, so I worry that we still don’t know how to free her from the nasty demon inside her.”

Lord Shiva’s dark eyes gleamed with a strange flicker of flame inside them, a mixture of amusement, interest, and mischief.

“Concentrate your efforts to break down and destroy the Brotherhood of the Serpent and the leader at their heart and I’ll

take care of the rest. Kill the Grand Master and I'll generously reward you. Both of you."z

Chapter 27

Ashadha

A ray of light took me out of a deep sleep and I rubbed my eyes, wondering where I was and what time it was. The brightness of a new day welcomed me and I stretched my arms on the bed. I rose to a sitting position, took a good look at the room, and a smile danced on my lips. I was at Kevan's place.

The thought of Kevan barely crossed my mind when the whirlwind of the events from the past day overwhelmed me. I thought about Delainey keeping Kevan, Shankarananda, and me hostage in a creepy basement; his intention to infest us with demons summoned out of Hell. The images of our fight flooded my mind and I saw how I blasted a hole through his chest. The important thing remained that Kevan and I had made it out alive, again. The memory of the wounded, unconscious werewolves pinged my mind and worry coursed through my middle.

"I'm glad you've woken up. You've slept for three days without a break. Hello, princess, welcome back," Kevan had come into the room in the same moment, bringing a tray full of food. The smell of freshly cooked pancakes filled the air, whetting my appetite. My stomach rumbled in response, reminding me that I hadn't eaten for quite some time.

"How did you figure out I was awake?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously. He grinned and placed the tray on the nightstand next to the bed. "I've prepared you some food. Fresh pancakes with wild fruits syrup and apples. Bon Appetit!" He made way to leave the bedroom, but I stopped him.

"Wait, Mr. Angel, you can't leave me like that."

“Why? Don’t you like the meal I cooked? It’s delicious. Have some of it, Ash. The fight has exhausted you. You need energy,” he argued.

“Yes, sure. And thank you for the pancakes, they do look delicious, but what happened? I mean, with Delainey and his brotherhood?” I rubbed my eyes as tiredness passed through me, tightening its grip on me.

A smile flickered on his lips and, drawing closer to me, he perched at the end of the bed. “After you lost consciousness, I called my superior, archangel Musa, and a team of angels came to the basement in Blues in the Mist. They took away the bodies of Delainey and the last of his demon minions. Last night, Schuster texted me that Delainey died and the demon minion is in a critical state, still fighting for his life. He is kept in a hospital but since he belongs to the Demonica, our healers are barred from healing or assisting him, so it’s natural selection.” He chuckled.

I sighed and rested my head on the pillow, my mind insisting I direct my attention back to the food. Yet, I needed these answers and the pancakes were there anyway; no one would steal them from me.

“You said Schuster texted you; is he alright? Your ex-boss had framed him. I take it Schuster has been cleared now?”

Kevan heaved a sigh. “Yes, Schuster is back at the ABI working and all the mess Delainey created has been sorted out. I can’t believe we could have sentenced an innocent agent. On the plus side, he and I have grown closer. I apologized to him for suspecting him of such vicious crimes. Thank goodness everything is fine now at the ABI.”

“And what about the werewolves? Are they okay?” I asked with concern. I wouldn’t forgive myself if Oscar hadn’t made it out alive—his mother didn’t deserve the punishment of burying her child.

“Don’t worry, Ash. They’re all fine and healthy now. Our healers took care of them and now the boys are back to their families as if nothing happened.”

All appeared to be fine, yet something weighed on my shoulders and dug a hole into my soul. A familiar sneer echoed in my mind and I brushed him aside—the demon wouldn't poison my day. Not today. I cleared my throat and asked, “And what about Shankarananda? Will he be able to find the Scroll of—”

I couldn't finish my question because Kevan cut me off impatiently, “Forget about that scroll and the priest; we don't need them. Shankarananda spent a few days at Ryan's house and I had dinner with him, too. But now he's back to Varanasi. A thoroughly enjoyable and decent guy.”

Fear gripped my heart and for a fleeting second, I thought I might have a seizure. “What do you mean we don't need them?! And who's going to liberate me from the monster inside me? Kevan, I can't stand it anymore: his sneers, his constant meddling in my life, not to mention I can't even kiss you without him threatening me.” Tears welled up in my eyes and I had to apply a great dose of self-restraint not to burst out crying like a baby.

Kevan took my hand in his and sweetly said, “Easy there, Ash, you will get free, trust me. I wanted to say that we don't need Shankarananda or the scroll because now we have a much mightier ally on our side; the one who allegedly created that Scroll of Destiny.” He arched his brows meaningfully and I gaped at him, my mind refusing to believe my ears.

“You mean... Lord Shiva will help me?”

Kevan slowly nodded at me. “Yes, that's what he told me, Ash. But first we need to earn it, you have to earn your freedom. And we'll do it by destroying this wicked brotherhood and getting their Grand Master once and for all.”

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Also By Antara Mann

Have you read them all?

Hunted (Blessed by the Moon Book 1)

Demons are hunting me.

You know the old adage: wrong place, wrong time? That's my problem.

When a freeloader dines and dashes at the bar where I wait tables, I run after him, demanding he pay his bill. Trouble is, I'm not the only one chasing him. By the time I catch up — in a dark, secluded alley — the freeloader is dead. Murdered by creatures that exist only in the grimmest fairy tales.

Bad news: monsters are real and now they want me dead.

Good news: Sexy-as-sin alpha werewolf, Aidan McSmith, takes me under his protection while he investigates the fellow werewolf's death.

As we learn more about the murder, dodging demons, enemy werewolves, and a dark sorcerer, we unravel a bigger conspiracy that threatens to tear apart Aidan's pack. And take my life.

Time to master my magic and fight back the monsters!

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Chosen

(Blessed by the Moon Book 2)

Last month I was just a waitress. Now I'm hunting down an evil sorcerer.

Turned out, I was more than meets the eye. A hybrid between a sorceress and an alchemist, the sexy alpha wolf of Brookside and I managed to thwart an evil sorcerer's plan. Bad news: he got away. Double trouble: now the sorcerer has a bigger plan.

When I have the chance to prove myself at the Mythic Contest, things go even worse than I could have imagined. Suddenly, the stakes are even higher than some magical title and a little bit of prize money.

The evil sorcerer's grasp on our community runs deep, and his power reaches far beyond what any of us knew possible. When he takes out the werewolves and almost kills their alpha, Aiden, I know it's time to up my game.

I only hope I can live up to the task.

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Destined

(Blessed by the Moon Book 3)

It's either me or the dark sorcerer. And I won't let him win.

After months of fighting the forces of evil alongside Aidan and his pack, I am ready for a good, long break from evil sorcerers and a chance at a normal relationship. But when Jamahl heads our direction to wake a sleeping dragon and steal his strength, all that will have to wait. With the help of a new friend, we travel the world searching for a way to finish Jamahl once and for all.

It won't be easy. Nothing ever is.

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Sins of the Nephilim: Fallen Conspiracy (The Nephilim Legacy Book 1)

**The Magic Council declared my kind an abomination.
Now I'm their only hope.**

I'm a Nephilim, one of the unlucky few fathered by a fallen angel. If the supernatural elite finds out what I am, they'll destroy me.

“Hide your magic and lay low,” that's my mantra. Until a handsome guy up-to-the brim with magic appears at work and starts asking me questions.

Curse the fates, this guy can't be fooled. Turns out he's a high-profile angel and member of the Council of Nine — an

ancient secret organization that fights a cult of dark Nephilim. What's more bizarre is that the Council claims I'm the only one who can thwart the Nephilim's evil masterplan for a magical apocalypse. "Only a Nephilim can kill another Nephilim," they said. To accomplish this mission, I have to procure the Scroll of Lies and hand it to the Council.

So what's a poor girl to do? Accept the job with a pay raise, of course, and pray to the fates I'll survive. Small relief, I won't be alone in this suicidal mission: four gorgeous archangels and gods will accompany me.

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Shadow Walker

(The Nephilim Legacy Book 2)

Cheating Death is not easy, but I'm damned if I fail!

A few months ago I thwarted Drogo's sinister plan for world domination. Lucky me! I am finally out of the closet and not afraid of my magic. The Council is about to offer me a high-paying job as a mercenary, and a sexy archangel has the hots for me.

Then two senior shifters disappear. What's worse, someone is after Leia, my magical skull. I have to protect her at all costs or the supernatural peace we enjoy is at stake. Thank magic, my favorite archangels and gods can help me with that.

But keeping Leia safe is only one of my worries. An old enemy is stalking me from the shadows, planning his next move. Evil knows no boundaries and gets more wicked by the second.

Remind me, how did I end up fighting for my life?

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

The Gates of Hades (The Nephilim Legacy Book 3)

It's all or nothing

A few weeks have passed since I thwarted another attempt at a magical revolution. That was a close call. Thank the fates, my unique magic and stubbornness have saved my ass once again.

However, the temporary peace we enjoy is shattered by a new revelation. And it's coming from none other than the leader of the Black Court: the big, bad, Dark Lord — Lucifer himself.

He claims Drogo and Hades will perform the darkest ritual to unleash a new magical plague. And this time it'd affect supernaturals, too. Raphael and I, aided by Ares and an Egyptian soldier teleport to Drogo's castle to stop this insanity.

As we dodge sorcery spells and shadow magic, someone in the Black Court has been playing a double game, inflicting the Dark Lord's fury. And there's nothing he hates more than losers and traitors.

But you know what they say: keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

In this deadly game of cat and mouse, you either kill or fall prey. There's no middle ground.

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Bound by Sorcery

(The Half-Goddess Chronicles Book 1)

A supernatural apocalypse is coming. To prevent it, I'll have to stop hiding in the shadows.

I may be an elemental mage, but I prefer the quiet life. My occult bookshop barely pays the bills, but it keeps me out of the limelight.

Unfortunately, things in the supernatural community aren't so quiet. When a New York banker is found murdered — with an ancient symbol carved into his chest — the Magic Council wants me to investigate. But I won't be solving the murder alone. Tensions between gods and demons are heating up, so the Council gives me a partner: a powerful and frustratingly sexy fae.

And as if that weren't enough of a distraction, now someone's trying to kill me...

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Infernal Curse (The Half-Goddess Chronicles Book 2)

**All hell is about to break loose and only goddess magic
can stop it.**

Alexandra Shaw is days from coming into her full goddess
powers but things are not

going to plan. There's a surge of demonic and vampire
attacks in all major cities of the

U.S. What's worse, powerful mages are disappearing, and
the Courts of Heaven and Hell

struggle to keep it all hushed up. As a Magic Council
Investigator, Alex's caseload is piling up fast. With the
powerful fae

Kagan Griffith at her side, she's got a chance of tracking
down the missing mages. But

saving them is only one of her worries. An old enemy is
stalking Alex from the shadows, ready to attack. A month ago
he wanted her beating heart. Now he wants her magic. But as
Alex quickly learns, there are far more terrifying things than
death itself... With an ancient curse threatening to wipe out
her life and those of all her loved ones, will Alex be able to
cheat her destiny again?

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Cursed Magic (The Half-Goddess Chronicles Book 3)

Step up your game or die

Goddess Alexandra Shaw thinks her troubles are over when she comes into her powers, but a moment later she is hit by a terrible curse. Her mentor's quick intervention staves off the spread of the dark magic, but this is only a temporary fix, and there's no knowing when she will succumb to its toxic poison. Only a truly gifted shaman from Yorubaland can fully lift the curse. But in order for Alex to succeed, she'd have to team up with chief demon Kai, and learn to manipulate and control his dark, demonic energy. While Alex and her boyfriend Kagan search for a cure, a new and deadly type of evil returns to Earth with devastating consequences. Will Alex be able to fight off the attacks of mystical shamans, ancient monsters, and the Yoruba gods, and once again stop her archenemy, the inferni, from launching a magical revolution?

Cursed Magic is a fast-paced urban fantasy adventure featuring a kick-ass heroine, a fae hero, and lots of magic.

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Genesis Magic

(The Half-Goddess Chronicles Book 4)

Goddess Alexandra Shaw managed to break the curse that her archenemy, the inferni

Angus put on her. But now she faces an even more difficult task: fulfill the prophecy and kill Angus for good. Angus knows there can be only one winner from the supernatural war he waged: either him or his creator and brother, Kai Hellster. Consumed with a thirst for power and the obsession for world dominance, Angus sets his eyes on the most powerful and mythical demoniacal object: the Skull Chalice. Kai created it millennia ago and if either a supernatural or human performs a human sacrifice and pours the victim's blood inside the chalice, their wish will be granted. A fierce race against time begins as inferni, gods and dark fae all try to get hold of the Skull Chalice. But only one faction can possess it. Will Alex succeed and kill the abominable inferni and save the world from a fate worse than death? Or will she lose everyone in the battle, including herself?

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Alice in Sinland: A Story of Murder, Greed... Violence, Adultery and Treasure

Alice has a wish...

Alice Roseburg is an expatriate New Yorker, now a young attorney living in

London. Her career is on the fast-track until she begins
having lucid and haunting
dreams after representing the wealthy buyer of a castle in
Scotland, a property with a
dark and demonic history. A mysterious man has begun
shadowing her, demanding, “What do you want?” Some
wishes need to be spoken aloud. “I want to be a star.” Alice
quits her career, cashes out her savings, and moves to New
York City to
follow her dreams on Broadway. But she soon discovers
that finding her place in the
limelight is far trickier than she ever imagined.
“What do you want?” the dark one asks. Her rapid rise to
stardom attracts the attention of Aaron Chasin, a pop-music
producer, wrapped in questionable promises and sinister
ambition.
“What do you want?” the Devil demands.
“More,” Alice says, “more.”
But when the limelight fades, the debt remains...

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Aaron in Sinland

Aaron Chasin is a 30-something failed British indie
musician. He wants to be a
respected and successful A&R rep — to discover and
promote new musical talents and
turn them into superstars. Only his personal demons stand
in his way: alcoholism, anger, and a long-forgotten childhood
trauma. Aaron must face his fears or his

happiness, health, and well-being are at stake. Things change drastically for him when he meets the enigmatic tantric guru Shankar Govinda, who initiates Aaron into a new and exciting world of occult spirituality. But is it the answer to his prayers or a whole new nightmare?

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

The Witch's Kiss Bundle (Episodes 1&2)

He's a Genie, trapped in a magic lamp. She is an ugly old witch. They will fight the dark forces... together.

A terrible curse hangs over the mighty Ezemalda. Her faithful servant, the Genie Majestic is bound by a contract with the evil sorcerer – the Dark Prince. With a cunning plan they manage to free themselves and open a workshop for good magic only. When a beautiful desperate mortal asks for their help, they know they must do all they can to free her from her predicament. After selling her soul to the Dark Prince, Countess Sybil van Dyk seeks to reverse her enchantment at the magic workshop of the Genie and the witch. As they work to set the countess free, the Genie and Ezemalda embark on a new adventure in their battle with the Dark Side, not suspecting what

signing a contract with the Dark Prince on new moon
portends.

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

The Witch's Kiss Episode 3

NEVER BEFORE HAS PASSION BEEN MORE
DANGEROUS.

Furious that once again the Genie and the witch Ezemalda
escaped his clutches, the
Dark Prince enlists the help of Lilith, the dark queen of
sexual magic in his quest for
revenge. Tricking them with a drink, Lilith bewitches
Ezemalda and the Genie with
obsessive sexual dreams. The Dark Queen's plan backfires
when Ezemalda comes up
with an antidote, but she will not be stopped and implants a
dangerous idea in all the
kingdom's subjects. With everyone around them now
convinced that the Genie commits
terrible acts against women, even rapes them, he and
Ezemalda have to find a new way
terrible acts against women, even rapes them, he and
Ezemalda have to find a new way
to stand against the dark forces and clear their names.

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

The Wishing Coin

What would you do if you possessed a magical coin that could fulfill all your darkest wishes?

This heartwarming and witty modern fairy tale follows an ambitious young woman who

finds an easy way to fulfill all her selfish desires. TV reporter Julia Preston is having a bad day. First, a promised promotion is given

instead to ambitious newcomer Bailey – then Julia finds out Bailey is also dating her ex. Walking home, seething with anger, Julia encounters a street vendor selling wishing coins. Skeptical, she's not interested until he offers an old tarnished coin with some

geometrical figures that intrigue her. It soon becomes clear that she has come into

possession of a miraculous weapon to use against those who have wronged her. When

Julia's wishes begin to come true she believes her life has taken a turn for the amazing. But a dark secret behind her TV success is revealed and Julia's conscience is put on a trial. Would you be happy if all your wishes come true?

Would you be still you?

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

Back To The Viper - A Time Travel Experiment

If you could redo the worst mistake of your life, would you? At what cost?

Botching the biggest performance of her career ten years ago has left lead singer Ashley

Greendale as an unfulfilled barista at a local coffee shop. Just as she was beginning to

believe that superstardom was far from her grasp, her eccentric scientist friend, Harry, offers her a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that she wouldn't dare pass up - to travel

back in time and redo her career-ending performance. Taking her band with her known as The Jackal, Ashley and her music group rocks on to

repair their missteps from the past. But fame and fortune come with a price - now they

must decide if they're willing to pay. Are they willing to live out their dreams and lose

everything they've ever known?

Buy it: [Amazon](#)

About The Author



Antara Mann started writing at the age of seven. Nowadays, when she's not

reading and writing, you can find her practicing yoga, as she has developed a keen

interest in self-improvement, spirituality, and becoming a better human being. She

enjoys writing fantasy and paranormal suspense stories and believes in unity in

diversity. In her opinion, the best books and stories are crossovers between genres.

Say Hello!

Antara talks about writing, literature and her yogic journey on her blog

<http://www.antaraman.com>

Subscribe to her newsletter to be the first to hear about new releases, giveaways and pre-release specials here:

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