



# POSSESSED

DEMON MARKED  
BOOK 1

ANTARA MANN

# Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Sign-up for my newsletter](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Thanks for Reading](#)

[Book 2 in the Demon Marked series](#)

[Sign-up for my newsletter](#)

[Also By Antara Mann](#)

[About The Author](#)

# **Possessed (Demon Marked Book 1)**

by Antara Mann

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# Chapter 1

Ashadha

When Evalyn McDonald came to my office on the fateful day of September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2045, I thought it was just the usual case of a worried housewife concerned for her hard-working husband. I detected her magical signature—a shifter—a few seconds before the door creaked open. The bells hanging from the ceiling, a present from a client, rattled and announced the entrance of a new client. A petite blonde woman with attractive features stood at the doorway, her body language suggested that she wasn't sure what she was doing here. Just a wrong word on my part or even if my voice didn't sound convincing could make her wind up and leave my small, one-person detective agency. The fact that my office was situated in Johnsonville, the worst of Aran's suburbs, wasn't helping her nerves, either.

“Hello, ma'am. How can I help you?” I greeted the newcomer. My tone made her visibly relax and she took a tentative step closer to my wooden desk.

“Hi, is this Four Paws and a Broom? And you must be Ashadha Matthews?” She asked and gripped the handbag in her right hand more tightly.

A warm wave of satisfaction coursed in my belly when she said the name of my small paranormal detective agency, but I focused on keeping the woman's interest in my psychic abilities. “Yes, ma'am. I'm Ashadha and this is my detective agency, Four Paws and a Broom. I've helped humans and supernaturals alike in missing person cases—”

“Oh, I know about your abilities; that's why I came to you instead of the ABI,” she cut me off, her body finally relaxed. Without even awaiting my prompt, she slid into the vacant chair before my desk.

I swallowed a lump in the back of my throat when I heard her mention the dreaded acronym of ABI. It stood for Angelica Bureau of Investigations, the investigating body of the Angelica Order. They now ruled the world and what was left of the United States after the war and cataclysms that had raged the earth until just a few years ago. I tried to push away my fear of ABI and everything they stood for, and set my mind on the woman in front of me.

“You’ve heard about me? Did someone recommend my agency to you?” It was always good to have satisfied clients and word of mouth remained the best advertising.

A slight smile flickered on the blonde woman’s pale, elongated face. Now that she had been here for a few minutes, I could decipher her distinctive magical scent: it smelled of pine trees, flavored with the richness of musk, mixed with spices. She was definitely a werewolf, no doubt about that. A bubble of curiosity coursed through me as I had never dealt with shifters; up until now, mostly humans and a few fae had hired my clairvoyant services.

“Conner gave me your address. He praised your special gift,” the woman said.

I furrowed my brows. “Conner, the bartender at the Shamrock?” Even in my wildest imagination, I couldn’t have pictured the fae bartender at the Irish pub in downtown Aran putting in a good word for my detective agency.

The woman nodded, clearly not caring about my surprise. “He said you could see into the past or future simply by touching a person. Is that true?” Even though she maintained a steady, nonchalant voice, a slight trail at the end of her question betrayed her anxiousness.

I reclined in my chair, already anticipating that she would hire me. “Yes, ma’am, he was right. I can indeed see the past, present, and even the future of a person by touching either them or an important object belonging to them. I need the object to have imbibed their energy.” I cracked a smile as I explained to her how my special gift worked. I’d had this ability ever since I was a child and it had always been part of



me, yet I was still human. At least that was what the world believed. I couldn't let anyone, least of all ABI and the Angelica Order, learn that I was a half-demon. This would mean my end and sign my death sentence. In the best-case scenario, the Angelica Order would imprison me so that they could study my demoniacal magic, given they were curious about it. I bet they'd love to experiment on me.

"Very well, then, you're the person I'm looking for," the woman said energetically as she placed her handbag onto her knees, revealing her black leggings below a summer shirt. "My name's Evalyn McDonald and I'd like to hire you to investigate my husband, Charlie. He is not missing, thank goodness, though I have other concerns." She opened her leather handbag and took out a small purse. She pulled out the picture of a young man with dark hair and a light in his eyes. "That's my husband and fated mate, Charlie McDonald. I'm not sure if you saw this about me, but I'm a wolf shifter. Well, he and I both are." She carefully placed the picture of her husband on my desk and continued with her story. "We've been together since we were fifteen. We both figured out we were fated mates early on." She stopped to gather her thoughts, the feeling that something bad was going on with Charlie simmered inside my chest as a tight knot started to form at the pit of my stomach. "Everything between us has been perfect. We still love each other strongly after all these years, yet..." her voice trailed off, her delicate fingers furiously fumbled with the handle of her handbag.

I patiently waited for her follow-up: she was clearly upset about something and a prompt could make her feel uncomfortable and distract her. I was almost sure that she suspected him of adultery.

"He's been behaving really strangely, lately."

I furrowed my brows. "What do you mean?"

She fidgeted in her seat. "He's distracted, more angered than ever, and he's always been the heart of the pack, our pack. He doesn't seem to care what's going on these days, not only in our home but even in the pack." She paused and gathered her thoughts. "I'm afraid he's gotten involved in



something dangerous. Something really bad. Please, Miss Matthews, help me figure out what's wrong with Charlie. I want my husband back." She gripped her purse as tears welled up in her eyes. I could feel her restraint as she tried not to burst into tears and taste her pain—the fear that had gripped her core and kept her awake in the middle of the night. Though I was surprised by this revelation and how wrong I was in my initial expectation of her concerns, I mentally swore to help her find peace of mind. With my psychic abilities, this case would be a piece of cake.

"Is there a concrete reason, ma'am why you're worried about your husband? As a police officer, he is bound to keep many secrets and behaving out of sorts doesn't necessarily warrant you being so suspicious of his well-being," I stated calmly, maintaining eye contact with her. "Maybe it's work-related and he just can't discuss the case?"

Evalyn blinked rapidly a few times and forced a smile, which didn't reach her eyes.

"I am aware you must think I'm overreacting, but a shifter's intuition is a mighty force, and even mightier for us werewolves. Charlie being my fated mate binds me with an invisible link to his soul. My inner wolf screams at me that he is in danger, though on the surface everything appears to be fine. That's why I've come to you now when there's still time to act and change things before it's too late." Her voice trailed off as a set of strong emotions overwhelmed her delicate body.

I cleared my throat, uncomfortable with the shift of her energy. "I'll see what I can do, ma'am. Did you bring an item of his that I can use?"

She cracked an apologetic smile. "I am so sorry. I don't have an item of his with me. Conner didn't mention that you needed anything. He only said you could see into people's future or past, so I brought this picture of him." She pointed at the photo on top of my desk. I studied the photo more carefully: the man was in his late twenties with dark curly hair and green eyes that made you think they glowed. Something within me stirred and without giving it a second thought, I reached for the picture. My skin barely touched the

photograph's surface, when a sudden jolt of electricity prickled my hand, passing over my upper arm like a tiny lightning bolt. Sparks erupted, hissing and sizzling over my hand and arm, but they dissipated quickly—as fast as they started. I glanced at Evalyn, wondering if she saw it, too, but the nonchalant look in her eyes and the way she hadn't even flinched gave me the clue: she hadn't noticed this mini show of magic. She was oblivious and thank goodness. I didn't want unnecessary questions as to how my touch provoked tiny sparks on her fated mate's photo. Even though she was a supernatural, too, I could sense deep within my soul that only my demoniacal powers enabled me to see this showcase of magic. Maybe this privilege was reserved for demons only. The perks of being a half-demon...lucky me!

I again cleared my throat and left the picture on my desk, careful not to let my hand linger on it unnecessarily, and I turned to my new client. "A picture is always welcome and a bonus, but I can't start gathering information about your husband without an item of his. Can you bring one to me?"

"Sure, I can. Will a piece of clothing work?"

I nodded. "As long as he's worn it, so that his energy has imprinted on it, it will suffice."

"Does it matter if it's small clothing or something bigger? I can bring you his boxers or socks, do you have a preference?"

I crunched my nose as I pictured his pair of dirty boxers or socks. Well, I hoped she'd bring them clean but still, she could fetch something not as intimate as his underwear to my office. Evalyn must have picked up on my emotions—werewolves were infamous for how good they were at reading other's emotions—because she hurriedly added, a flush dancing on her otherwise pale face, "I better give you a t-shirt of his, right?"

I nodded enthusiastically. "When can you bring it here? I am about to go have lunch, but after two pm, I'll be here the rest of the day." I omitted the fact that her case was my only one for the day; I had light work to do at an Irish pub, near the

Shamrock she'd mentioned, but that wouldn't take more than half an hour.

“Will it be too late for you if I drop by tomorrow at the same time? Around eleven am?”

“That's perfect, I'll be ready.” I stood from my chair and said goodbye to her, shaking her hand. Even though Evalyn looked delicate and soft, her grip was hard and steady. I reminded myself, she was a werewolf and had enhanced physical powers. I saw her to the door and once her steps receded, muted in the distance as she hit the street below, I directed my gaze and attention to her husband's picture. I carefully took the photo with a glove and placed it in the upper drawer of my desk. On the surface, this case looked simple and easy, yet the sparks and jolt of electricity that struck me didn't bode well. I hoped I could get the work done fast and seamlessly. I needed the money and I loved helping people. If this Charlie guy was cheating, as was my initial guess, I had to tell his wife about it; she had the right to know the truth. For the first time in my career, I hoped he was cheating. I prayed this case wouldn't involve dark magic. But the sparks and strange connection I felt to the photograph told me that there was more to this case than met the eye. Dark magic, maybe? Or, god forbid, demons? No, it couldn't be demons! Fate wouldn't be that cruel to me. Even if I, myself, was a monster.

## Chapter 2

Ashadha

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. I went to the Shamrock to thank my secret helper, the bartender Conner. If it hadn't been for him, I would have sat idly in my office talking to my familiar, a tiny dragon by the name of White Paw. Work had always been slow for my agency, but the summer months had proven to be horrendous. I simply didn't know how long I could support myself with my detective agency gig. If things didn't improve, I might have to search for additional work. Which turned out to be extremely difficult if you had demoniacal magic like I did. In a world ruled by the Angelica Order, demons were considered abominations and hunted down and killed. I couldn't blame the Angelica Order though. In the years before the war several pandemics ravaged the world, unleashed by the Demonica, then the calamities began: first a worldwide famine starved to death millions of people. Then, massive floods tanked all island nations and coastlines, obliterating them from the face of earth along with every single low elevation area. Finally, the earthquakes shattered all that was left of the old world. The Demonica Order had gained a lot of energy and influence over the naive and unsuspecting humans, which eventually led to the seven-year-long war between the Angelica and the Demonica Orders. Billions of people, both humans and supernaturals died in this war, while many others had already passed away due to the various diseases or the natural disasters in the years before the war. In the end, the Angelica Order won and established the current world order with angels and archangels at the top of the food chain. The demons and vampires, a lower subclass of demons, were killed; that was at least what we were officially told. The Angelica Order knew they hadn't pulled off killing all the Demonica, hence why they cracked down on anyone who had even the slightest heritage of demoniacal magic. I could only imagine the gusto they'd slay me with if they learned about my real nature.

“Oh, Ash! What’s up?” Conner greeted me in his typical manner: half-teasing, half-mocking as he saw me enter the bar’s main hall. The Shamrock was a typical Irish pub with its high ceiling beams, old pine furniture, interconnecting rooms, and a pool table, yet the plastic tables with white tablecloths in the main hall contradicted the Irish pub vibe and instead made it feel like a bistro.

Conner knew about my disdain for endearments, especially the way he pronounced them, but today even his attitude couldn’t dampen my joy from the fact I had a new case and a client.

“I’m back in the game, thanks to you. I owe you,” I said as I perched on the chair before the counter while Conner wiped the dust off a few highball glasses. He was my age, twenty-eight, a few inches taller than my five-eight height, slim and fit. He always wore a suit with a bow tie, the only sign of color in the outfit, which he changed to suit his mood. Conner grinned, his eyes sparkling green and blue—a peculiarity of the fae—and nodded approvingly.

“You’re great, girl You can do so much better. I just can’t understand why you don’t wanna work for the ABI—”

“No, I’m fine.” I cut him off. I’d been coming to the Shamrock regularly for a few months now and about a week ago I’d helped a patron of the bar find her missing handbag by simply touching the woman. She was a regular human and had no magical skills. It was then when Conner realized about my special gift and had taken it upon himself to encourage me to find a better job.

He arched his brow at my laconic decline to join the ABI but set out to haul ice for his station. It was early afternoon and the bar was empty except for me and the occasional customer who would order coffee and a snack. I knew I could make a killing if I worked for or even partnered with the ABI. Clairvoyant abilities paid a lot, especially since the Angelica Order could use them to uncover demoniacal activity or, god forbid, secret operations of the Demonica. But I also risked being exposed by letting my guard down. One lovely day, a high-ranking archangel could figure out who I was. And this

would be the end of my clairvoyant abilities...and my life. Better to be poor and struggling than dead or imprisoned. Priorities.

“I don’t get you.” Connor shook his head and dumped a load of ice into the stationary bucket, then grabbed a few bottles and put them inside the bucket, too. “Working or even consulting for the ABI would solve all your financial problems, but the choice is yours,” he said as he finally finished preparing his station. “Would you like to order something or did you simply come to enjoy my charms?” he asked, his eyes gleaming with mischief. He’d been hitting on me ever since I first came here, but I wasn’t interested in him. Or in any man to be precise.

“Give me a ginger ale. What’s on the menu for today?” I asked, abruptly changing the subject. Even though most people visited the Shamrock for the drinks, its kitchen was excellent, too. Unfortunately, the pub was situated downtown near the headquarters of the Angelica Order/ABI and the competition here was fierce. There were at least a dozen other pubs, bars, and restaurants that filled the nearby streets.

“Not much of a variety. Darren made pork chops and French fries. Wanna order?”

I looked around to see if the price was listed anywhere but decided it wouldn’t break the bank if I ordered a meal at the bar.

“Sure, is it freshly cooked?” I asked him teasingly.

A warm smile spread on his lips. “Just special for you.”

I chuckled. “Then count me in.” I instinctively licked my lips as a deep rumble notified me that my stomach needed some fuel to sustain the rest of the day.

He grabbed a ginger ale from the shelf mounted on the wall behind him, opened it, and served it with his best wishes. Then he added a speck of glowing fairy dust into the glass. A thin stream of greenish-yellow magic fluttered in the air, raining down into the glass. The ginger ale inside glowed brighter for a second, then the substance solidified. I took the glass and

eagerly sipped the drink. The typical ginger ale taste tickled my tongue, but the extra juice of Conner's fairy dust made it super delicious. It burned my throat, setting my mind on fire and painted all my senses with various colors. It felt amazing. And this is why I kept coming here instead of going to the other bars.

The fae had already waltzed through the swinging door, into the kitchen to order my meal. When he came back to the main hall, he resumed his position behind the counter and observed my sipping the ginger ale.

Finally, he disturbed the silence that had fallen between us by muttering, "You know, one of our patrons, a sexy angel from the Library of Magic keeps asking about you. It seems you've made quite an impression on him," he casually remarked as if he was just sharing his favorite book with me. "What should I tell him when he comes this evening and asks about you again?"

"To fuck off," I said laconically. The last thing I needed was a persistent admirer and to make things worse, he was an angel. Hell, double hell. I was supposed to admire and love our "saviors," the archangels and angels, but it proved difficult when you were the very thing they wanted to destroy.

"Tut-tut. So beautiful, yet so rude. What did men ever do to you that you've sworn us off?"

"I simply don't do dating, that's all. Not even one-night stands, so don't get any ideas," I hurriedly added before he could ask me about some men's favorite thing. "Stop poking your nose around and focus on your job," I remarked as I saw a customer at a table behind me raise his hand. Conner frowned at me but went to tend to the man in question.

He began again with his attempts to set me up as soon as he returned behind the counter. "You know, if men are not your cup of tea but women are, just tell me and I can hook you up with a good friend of mine. She'd love—"

"Jeez, you don't give up, do you? No, thanks. I said I don't date. Anyone. Is that so hard to understand?"



He shook his head disapprovingly, his eyes changing color faster than a teenage girl's mood. Fae were the most emotional supernatural species and their mood affected their physical appearance. Conner would only change his eye color, but other fae would frequently alter their hair color, too.

"I'll learn your secret one day and then hook you up with someone. Like it or not."

"If you keep pestering me, I might ditch your pub," I said and gulped the last drop of the ale.

"And miss out on my company?" He made an innocent face. "Besides, who'd put out word about your psychic gifts?"

His remark reminded me to ask him about my new client. To be fair, I didn't drop by the Shamrock only to thank Connor; I wanted to inquire about Evalyn, too.

"Do you know the woman? A wolf shifter by the name of Evalyn McDonald?" I asked casually as my fingers slid over the rim of the high glass I'd drunk the ale with.

He raised his brows. "Her husband is a regular, she keeps him company when she comes, too. That is, from time to time. Yesterday he was here and she asked me if I knew any psychics and I recommended you. What does she need your services for?" he asked with a slight tone of suspicion in his voice.

"Ah, it's nothing. The usual case of a wife worried her husband might be having an affair," I lied on a purpose. In all honesty, it wasn't out of the scope of possibilities; and second, I didn't want to make him worried that this case could be more problematic and complicated.

A deep scowl furrowed his forehead as he listened to me. "That's odd. He's never shown any interest in anyone here. He doesn't strike me as the playboy type of werewolf at least," he remarked then rushed off to the kitchen because the bell rang, notifying him that my meal was ready.

I ate the pork chop and French fries in a comforting silence as Conner got a phone call from the manager. From the sporadic words I overheard, he had to prepare the pub for a big

party next week. When I finished my meal, I left a few silver coins to cover my expenses and left. Ever since the Angelica Order won and came to earth to govern and rule us, unruly humans and supernaturals, angels abolished the digital currency, which the Demonica had established in the last years before the war, and we switched to the gold and silver standard from the days of yore.

I crossed the busy streets of downtown Aran, which was now one of the major cities of the US, and weaved my way through Johnsonville. Who could have guessed that this once-small town in the Rocky Mountains would become the future capital of the USA?

In the early afternoon, I arrived at my small office on the first floor of an old building, paint peeling and a small hole poking through its roof. I switched the hanging sign over the door to “open,” my eyes flickering to my agency’s name—Four Paws and a Broom. I had derived the name from my familiar’s four paws, and the broom was a reference for witches. Even though I wasn’t myself a witch, I always liked the association of witches riding broomsticks and boiling up pumpkin potions. Come to think of it, maybe I should have named my agency Four Paws and a Pumpkin. If another thirty days passed and work didn’t pick up, I might officially rename my agency. I knew of an old Chinese lady down the street who cleared spaces from evil spirits and cleansed one’s karma. If things didn’t look up, I’d hire her to help me get rid of my bad karma. Most of all, I’d sell my soul if anyone could make me fully human and remove the demon inside me. A girl could dream.

Inside my tiny office, I went straight to my desk and perched on my chair. I set out to tidy up my working space and began putting things in the drawers to clear the room. My fingers brushed against something, my skin coming into contact with a soft paper. The picture of Evalyn’s husband flashed in my inner eye and something deep within me yearned for me to touch the picture, to get answers. After a short internal battle, I gave up and took out the picture, my hand holding the old photograph tightly.

It all happened too fast. The world seemed to spin around, then it held still in suspension. Thick darkness shrouded me and the new space I found myself in. A silver light glowed in the distance and I noticed a drawn knife, its blade dispelling the pitch blackness around. Tightness gripped my chest, making my heart skip a beat. I saw Charlie, my client's husband, a few feet away from me. He was surrounded by a group of hooded men. The silver shining reappeared as this time the tallest of the hooded men twirled the knife and stabbed poor Charlie in his heart. A lump formed in my throat as I witnessed the horrific scene, my mind screaming at me to intervene and help Charlie; to fucking do something before it'd be too late. But before I could do anything, the whole vision vanished into thin air; not even a scream came out of the victim. The same unsettling darkness engulfed the space all around. Then, bright sizzling flames erupted, their heat burning my cheeks and clothes. I jolted away, finding myself back in my tiny office, the fire danced on the picture I still held in my hand. The bright red flames grew across the picture, their heat made me drop the photo on the desk. The flames swirled onto the wood but before a fire could emerge, I grabbed a bottle of water, which I always had below my desk and poured it into the hot, burning mess. The flames sizzled as water and fire collided, but I kept pouring water. The flames fizzled out with low hissing sounds, then eventually died. I let out a sigh of relief. I was so close to setting my office on fire, and for what? I glanced back at the picture: a few spots at its edges and middle were charcoaled, but the rest was good. Perhaps Evalyn wouldn't notice the small damage? Forget about the damn photo, what the hell was *that*?

*You know what it is, sunshine.*

The nagging voice! It had been with me ever since I'd come to Aran City and after that fateful, and near fatal, first time with my ex-boyfriend. I'd always wondered what the deal was with this voice; where did it come from and how had it come into existence, but no answers came. All I could do was suppress this little distractor and try my best to ignore it: if you ignored unpleasant things, they simply ceased to exist, right?

Heavy tightness settled over my chest, and the distant urge to vomit climbed up my throat as bile rose within my stomach. This was too much to deal with. Then and there I knew this case would be unlike anything I'd ever dealt with before. Did I accidentally peek into Charlie's imminent future? Or maybe it was from his distant past? Was he going to be slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb? But he was still safe and sound as far as I knew. Otherwise, Evalyn would have notified me. Were these hooded men demons? The bile inside my throat mounted as I considered the possibility of the Demonica's involvement. Was it too late to drop the case? I could always tell Evalyn something had popped up. Yet, I needed the gold she would pay me. Plus, if her hubby was in danger, it was my duty to help him. The real reason why I founded this agency was the drive to help humans and supernaturals. It made me feel normal and like a good person, not the half-demoniacal monster I was.

Maybe it was a trick my demon nature had pulled against me?

*No, it wasn't.*

It had done so at the very beginning of my paranormal detective agency career, so it could have happened again. I rubbed my temples with slow massaging movements as I tried to calm my overactive mind and bring my pulse to a normal rate. It must have been a trick of my mind, I decided as I left my office, climbing up the outside stairs that led to my apartment, just above my office.

All was good and no demoniacal activity had shown up. I kept telling myself this over and over again until I kinda believed it.

## Chapter 3

Ashadha

When I arrived home that evening, I headed to my bedroom and summoned my dragon familiar. Her fiery-golden head and neck materialized, followed by her flaming wings and talons—a mini version of a real dragon. She fluttered in the air for a few seconds then landed on my soft bed, her golden tail swishing on the silky comforter. Her name was White Paw because of the white spot on her front paw, starkly contrasting with her other paws. In the dark days following my mother's death nearly five years ago, White Paw appeared. Sitting with her soothed my soul and brought me comfort and joy—which made me wonder if my mother's spirit hadn't sent her to me. My mother was a mere witch, which meant she had no inherent magic, unlike sorcerers. Yet she had known spells and incantations so it wasn't out of the realm of possibilities for her to have summoned this familiar as a beacon of light for me. The mini dragon had breathed fresh powers and courage into my soul and mind, which was how I'd found the strength to come to the metropolis of Aran right after my mother, Susan, died. White Paw was also the reason I retained my sanity after that fateful event that changed everything in my life: the first time my ex and I were intimate and I nearly killed him. I vowed to myself never to date anyone else, as I now knew that the danger of killing them existed. A tight knot gripped my chest as the memory rushed to my mind and I placed my hand on my heart. Now wasn't the time to go over my first and only time with my childhood sweetheart. I didn't have the energy nor the strength for this

Even though this case hadn't officially started, it already exhausted me. Hell, I hadn't even gathered basic information from Evalyn. If she showed up tomorrow as she'd promised with her husband's belongings, I could try working on the case.

White Paw's amber eyes locked on mine and she nudged my arm with her fluffy head. Circles of fiery flames danced in

her aura, making her look a little like a phoenix.

“I know, dear, I know. I’ll rest and take care of myself, don’t worry,” I replied to her as I stroked her neck and wings. My mood directly influenced White Paw and the more joyful and happier I was, the stronger she appeared. In contrast, the more down in the dumps I was, the weaker she became.

I hit the hay early as the clock approached nine pm but my sleep wasn’t deep and relaxing. I tossed and turned, sweat dampening my neck and pajamas. When I woke up early in the morning, I felt more exhausted than the day before.

Evalyn came to my office at the same time as the previous day, equipped with her husband’s old t-shirt. Thankful for the t-shirt so my ability would work, I asked her to leave it on my desk. I was careful not to touch the clothing in front of her. I didn’t want to risk another showcase of my peculiar magic, maybe combined with her husband’s magic, too. Now that I had the necessary piece of clothing, I asked Evalyn the standard questions I asked every client of mine.

“What does your husband do for work?” I took out a small pad and a pen, my hand gripping the pen tighter as I readied myself to scribble down her answers.

“He’s a police officer and works for the Aran Police,” she said.

Relief washed through me. Thank goodness he wasn’t working for the ABI or the Angelica Order at least not directly; the Angelica governed the Aran Police, yet mostly humans and the occasional shifter, worked for the regular city police.

“How long has he been working for the police?”

She furrowed her brows, straining her memory. I felt like I could almost hear her internal thoughts as she calculated his work experience. “I think he started work there when he turned eighteen, now he is nearly forty. Well, in March next year, he’ll turn forty. That means he’s been working for the Aran Police for nearly twenty-two years.”

I nodded. “Does he have any other interests besides his job or spending time in the Shamrock?”

A faint smile danced on her lips as she realized I knew about her husband’s visits to the Irish pub, but she said, “He values his work, pack, and family the most. He has childhood friends he used to hang out with, but he seldom meets them nowadays. The last time they met was last summer.” “Why did they lose touch?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “No particular reason. Just life, I guess. Everyone has a family now and jobs, so life is busier than in the good old days. We don’t have any children, so we don’t always fit in with everyone else.”

I quickly scribbled down her answers, not paying attention to my messy handwriting. As long as I could read the information, it was fair game.

“Can you think of an enemy or someone who’s been hostile to your husband?” I carefully asked her, looking her straight in the eye. The memory of last evening’s vision, how the hooded men killed Charlie, stabbing him in the heart, shone vividly in my mind.

She took a second longer to think about it, then shook her head. “You see, Charlie is the life of the party—the heart of our pack. He is the kindest, most generous, and most compassionate person I’ve ever met. And I am not telling you this just because he is my husband; you can ask the Aran alpha. I can’t see anyone harboring hatred toward Charlie. No, it’s impossible.”

I suppressed the urge to comment that I’d seen things and people in my career that defied logic; instead, I asked for her cell phone number and address. Once I finished writing down all the information, I wrapped up my meeting with her.

“Thank you for all the info. I’ll get to work on this immediately and let you know what I find out about your husband. If I need further assistance, I’ll call you. Now, about the payment. I prefer an advance now, and one at the end of the—”



“Oh, please, Miss Matthews, no need to explain it to me. I completely understand. I’m ready to pay what it takes to know if Charlie is in danger.” She took out a small leather pouch from her handbag and dropped a few large golden coins into her palm. “Will this be enough to cover your expenses?” She asked as she handed me four big golden coins. I gawked at her, but regained my composure: her payment was way above what I’d earned for the entire month. With this much gold, I could not only make ends meet for a few weeks but even repair my oven, which recently began to smoke and was unfit for cooking.

I hastily took the coins and tucked them into my own purse. “It’s more than sufficient. Thank you, Evalyn. I’ll call you as soon as I know more about Charlie.”

In normal cases, it took no more than several minutes for my clairvoyance to kick in. I’d see either the missing person, item, or situation quickly and clearly. But in this case, I didn’t know what to expect. Fear that the Demonica might be involved brewed deep within my soul, making my mind restless. Hell, I even lost my beauty sleep last night.

I saw her to the door, then returned to my desk. I suspiciously eyed the t-shirt she’d left in a plastic bag on my desk and called White Paw from the magical abyss where she often rested until I called her—I needed her extra soothing magic to deal with this. I tapped into the invisible thread I could feel deep in my core and the dragon’s fiery golden body materialized, shimmering brightly in my office. She must have sensed my unease because she fluttered her wings and swiftly landed on my desk. She nudged the plastic bag with Charlie’s t-shirt inside. I got the cue that she wanted me to deal with this ASAP. It was always best to face your fears. The problem was, no one said your survival could depend on it. It may have just looked like a simple t-shirt, but if the Demonica were connected and the Angelica order found out, I could be in real trouble. My hand trembled as I reached for the plastic bag, my shaking fingers hastily and clumsily unwrapping it. Nothing. I took the piece of clothing in both my hands, my eyes studying the cotton’s bland color. Still nothing. I half expected another scary vision, probably involving demons or death, but the lack

of visions took me by surprise. I slid into my chair and this time let my psychic gift work. I relaxed and, inhaling a deep breath of air, traced down the t-shirt's owner and his magical energy. Just like Evalyn's energy, Charlie's magic smelled of pine trees, but this time the scent was richer and stronger. The aftertaste of musk peppered with spices finished Charlie's magical signature. Now that I took hold of it, I could browse through his past. I tapped into all the memories that stayed locked within his magical signature and a multitude of visions struck my senses. Through magical clouds, I saw several snippets from his life: him as a baby, then as a kid; as a teenager meeting Evalyn for the first time. The last thing I saw was him being hired by the Aran Police. So far, good. Yet, fate would have been too good and kind to me if everything went normal. Suddenly, the visions dimmed. The rest of Charlie's life was covered by a thick, smoky fog. This had happened to me only once before and it meant that someone had blocked me from seeing any further into his past or future.

Damn it! What was with this case and the werewolf? Was this his pack's doing? Some packs feared and despised witches and sorcerers, well, the few that remained, and they had protective spells and counter-tracking charms activated for their pack members. Was it just this or did some darker and more nefarious force meddle and get in my way?

The Angelica Order had killed off the Demonica long ago—their servants, vampires, evil shifters, witches, sorcerers. I knew this. Besides, the Demonica wouldn't have had any reason to block Charlie, would they? I wanted to trust this line of logic, but my instinct said otherwise. Very well. If I couldn't gather information about my client the supernatural way, I'd have to go the traditional, old-fashioned route and keep a tail on him to see if I can find anything out of the ordinary.

I stalked Charlie McDonald for the next five days and nothing of concern showed up. He kept his routine steady and the same: at about eight o'clock am he left his house in the shifter district of the city and drove to the police building in downtown Aran. He would have lunch at about one pm and finish work at five pm. On the weekends and Fridays, he

would go to the Shamrock with his colleagues or any of the other nearby bars. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't hold on to something in his case. Finally, I dialed Evalyn's number and when she picked up her phone, I told her the good news about her hubby. I thought she'd be surprised, but she informed me that all was well.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Matthews, I forgot to tell you. My husband is perfectly safe, and everything's fine. He just confessed the other day that he'd behaving strangely lately because of a top-secret project he's been working on with the ABI. Now it's over and we're good. I don't need your services anymore."

*You could have told me earlier and saved me from spying on your dear hubby, plus paying for a cab to follow him, I thought, but asked her when it'd be convenient for her to pay me the rest of my fee. She promised to drop by tomorrow morning. Even though a part of me protested when I learned I'd kept a tail at Charlie for no reason, a bigger part of my mind and soul beamed with relief: the scary vision I had of Charlie being slaughtered like a lamb turned out to be a glitch and didn't come true. Life was good and fate did love me after all. Even if I lived in a world governed by angels, who hated the very thought of my existence. This explained the earlier vision I had: perhaps his work with the ABI led to Charlie being involved with some dark supernaturals... Who knew? The important thing was, the case was over.*

*You're deluded, girl, The nefarious voice inside my mind said. Wait and see.*

## Chapter 4

Ashadha

Evalyn came by to make her final payment in a hurry the next morning and left so quickly that I forgot to give her Charlie's t-shirt and his old photo. That seemed off to me, but I attributed it to her feeling awkward about engaging my services when her worries proved to be unjustified. Plus, I could feel that she wanted to forget about my investigation. The rest of the day passed quickly as I worked to find my neighbor's missing dog. From the leash he'd provided me with, I saw the poor pet stuck in a ditch a few intersections down the street. We rescued the animal by calling the police. I returned home in the late afternoon, my stomach churning and rumbling to remind me that I had skipped lunch. Overall, exhaustion filled my body, but a sense of satisfaction swelled in my soul: my fears that this case could include demons proved wrong and I could relax. My wish to help others and feel normal was precisely why I founded my agency and why I loved my job; this way I felt like a valuable member of society. I knew that if they found out about my demon half, the Angelica Order would argue that I was not valuable, and declare that people like me with demoniacal magic were the reason why over half the population on earth had died in the past decade and a half. But regardless, I wasn't evil. I knew I was a half-demon, but as long as I kept this nature of mine in check as I had since that night with Ron, things would be fine. Hell, ever since I gave up on men and dating, my second nature would remain hidden. Life had been good, right? Well, if we didn't count the lonely nights, but again, better to be lonely than a raging monster. Priorities.

As soon as I came back home to my tiny apartment, I wolfed down the food I had in my fridge. The sun had already set when I finished my improvised dinner of leftovers with a side of more leftovers. I had made a note to call Evalyn to come back to the office and collect her husband's items, but it was too late for that. Tomorrow was another day. I'd call her early in the morning. I went to bed, sleep coming immediately.

A sudden and violent vision jerked me away from my sound sleep; a cold grip twisted my mind and soul into a deadly embrace. The blood froze in my veins, my heart sinking as I witnessed a dark, dank basement. Inside, I saw Charlie, slaughtered. A tiny stream of blood dripped from his mouth, his eyes once glowing with light now staring at the ceiling above, a look of horror locked in them. I nearly threw up when I saw his lifeless corpse, my gut churning. No, this couldn't happen, the case was finished! I applied all excuses and logic to convince myself, but I couldn't be fooled this time: Charlie was dead and I knew it in my heart of hearts. His magical signature hung thick in my mind and I knew that if I followed the signature, I could find his dead body. The question was, did I want to? Most likely, demons had been involved in his murder and I had to steer clear of them or risk being exposed. But I had been paid to investigate Charlie's strange behavior and I couldn't ignore that this psychic call led me to believe he wasn't okay. Thoughts of Evalyn rushed to my mind, overwhelming my conscience: how delicate and worried she had been when she'd first set foot in my office; how much she loved her fated mate, her husband; and how she was willing to pay anything to keep him safe. I just couldn't betray her like that. After all, he was already dead, the demons had already vanished. I had to simply check by tracking his signature and, if my vision was confirmed, call the ABI.

A new pang pierced my gut, twisting my stomach in two. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on breathing and calming my nerves. Would I do the easiest thing or the right thing? I looked at my bed: a simple movement and I'd be under the sheets and fall asleep in no time. I had no responsibility for this case anymore. Even Evalyn herself had said so. She didn't need my services any longer. My heart filled with hope, but a new realization shattered my momentary peace: even if I stayed home, I couldn't sleep after having had that vision. I'd be forever plagued by that sight if I chose to stay idle and do nothing about it. Cursing to myself, I got up and hastily put on clothes. I grabbed my leather pants from the wardrobe: if I confirmed the worst and I had to fight, leather worked way better than jeans. I put on a tank top and my black jacket to finish my kickass attire. I had to at least feel badass. I needed a

weapon, too, so I opened the last drawer of my nightstand and took out the gun my ex-boyfriend had given me long ago. It looked like a normal one, but it was loaded with silver bullets—they could kill or at least injure Demonica beings, depending on how powerful they were. I checked the safety was on and tucked the gun into my back pocket.

Last but not least, I reached for one of my mother's legacies—a copper coin that filled the wearer with whatever positive emotion they lacked. You didn't even have to summon that emotion, visualize it, or even chant some arcane mantra—the pendant knew what you needed all on its own, as if it was a sentient being. I loved this pendant more than anything. The coin's cold surface cooled my chest as it brushed against my bare skin above the tank top. I zipped my jacket, hoping to make my two super weapons invisible.

Before I could go, I summoned my familiar: I needed her comforting presence for a little while. Her fiery golden feathers fluttered in the air before she landed on the carpet. The sense of overflowing peace breathed courage and strength into my body. I stroked her neck and head, silently thanking White Paw. I was ready.

I went out into the pitch-black darkness—not even the moon shone above in the sky. The outlines of the mountains outside the city were barely visible in the darkness, yet stood tall, as if protecting us from the Demonica. Was it a new moon or the last phase of a waning moon? Whatever the case, I had my cell phone's flashlight. My wristwatch showed past four thirty in the morning. Who would be awake at this ungodly time except yogis, who considered waking up at four to be sacred, and the occasional insomniac? The streets stood empty, residents deep in slumber, which made it even easier to track down and follow Charlie's magical signature. The unmistakable scent of rich and powerful pine trees mixed with musk and strong spices led me all the way up to the downtown district of Aran City. I passed by the ABI's headquarters. A modern four-story marble house towered among the smaller buildings nearby. The ABI's splendid garden with exotic flowers and trees welcomed visitors with its radiance. I used to admire the ABI building when I was younger, until I learned I

was a demon myself—at least part of me was. After that, I didn't look at it in the same way.

The werewolf's scent pinged my magical senses, bringing me back to the seriousness of the situation. Charlie's signature felt stronger here and I shuddered as the idea crossed my mind that the Demonica could have killed poor Charlie right under the angels' noses. Fate had a wicked sense of irony. I turned right after I walked past the ABI's headquarters and found myself at the beginning of a small alley. Charlie's invisible signature vibrated the strongest here. I could almost feel his presence, well, his dead body's presence. I grappled with this conviction of his death. Intellectually, I knew I needed proof; I hadn't even seen his corpse. But instinctively, I knew he was gone. The horrific smell of dried blood resonated in my mind, giving me a bad taste at the back of my mouth. I kept walking, following his signature.

Suddenly, the scent vanished into a small two-story upper-class apartment building at the end of the alley. I grabbed the door handle and yanked it open. A low crack echoed, disturbing the total silence. I hesitated, listening carefully, but no other noises came. I went inside and found myself in a cold corridor, a steep staircase winding up to the upper floor. My flashlight ran along the damp wall and I saw another door below. A short staircase consisting of a few steps led to that door. This had to be the way to the basement below. Charlie's magical scent rolled from underneath my feet and I pushed the basement door, but this one didn't budge. Great; it was locked. The distant bark of a dog pierced the calm of the night, disturbing the silence yet again. I stopped in my tracks and listened for any possible noises from inside the building. My hand slid behind my jacket, my fingers gripping the gun's handle. Just in case, I took out the gun. Someone must have passed by or a cat had run because the dog kept barking, but it came from inside another building. Inside this one, everything was still and the people who lived here slept soundly.

I took out a small magical picklock designed to unlock all doors and, with a swift movement, the lock buzzed and I cracked open the metal door. Its paint had once been blue, but now it was dirty and diluted. The scent of Charlie's signature



blew right into my face, making me almost gag at its strength. I went down another staircase and found myself in an old parking garage. It was all pitch dark but my phone's flashlight saved the day again. Or more correctly—the night. The werewolf's signature came at me in waves, but a new magical signature intertwined. A vicious scent hung over the space like a raven, darkening everything in its wake. My heart skipped a beat, bile slowly but steadily crawling up my throat. I knew what this signature was—I had it deep down in my core, too. But I applied all willpower to mask that it was demoniacal. My feet found the way on their own, my mind blank. I glimpsed the splayed corpse in the middle of the parking lot then noticed the inverted pentagram that encircled the body. It looked like the inverted pentagram was drawn with blood. My heart beat wildly in my chest, threatening to burst out of my ribcage. I steadied my pulse, commanding my mind to obey me. I looked at the corpse and gasped, the blood draining from my face. It was Charlie. He lay on his back, unmoving; a tiny streak of blood dried on his mouth, his lips still with their natural color. He was irreversibly dead. There was no need for me to check his pulse. My magical sense screamed at me that he'd been very recently killed. What caught my breath in my throat was the sight of the shiny white knife protruding from his chest.

Damn it! He'd been stabbed in the heart, just like I had seen in my vision.

## Chapter 5

Kevan

I lit my candle and ignited the incense stick releasing the aroma of rose petals into the air. Preparation for meditation took some time and was just as important as the actual meditative practice. Once I had all the outward requirements in place, I sat on my carpet, my legs in a lotus posture, and gently closed my eyes. Before I could even summon my inner symbol—the sacred om—and my guru, my cell phone rang shrilly, making the candle’s flames change their direction for a few seconds. I whispered a curse and went to my nightstand to see who would be calling me at this early hour.

Ever since I joined the Angelica Order, the order required me to do this early morning meditation in order to keep my connection to the Divine. I was grateful for that. If I hadn’t woken up on my own, the shrill sound would have rattled my skull like a cat being dragged on a tin roof and that would have ruined my mood for the whole day. The intuition deep in my soul whispered to me that this call had to be important. A quick look at the screen showed my boss, Johnathan Delainey, calling. My muscles immediately tensed: he’d never called me that early, so it had to be important. I picked up the phone, his baritone voice greeting me.

“Kevan, I’m in a basement near headquarters. A police officer was murdered, just behind ABI.”

“What?” I asked and gritted my teeth.

“Yeah, it reeks of Demonica involvement,” Delainey added.

“Shit,” I mumbled under my breath. Why would the Demonica surface now? Maybe the culprits had committed this sin to draw our attention. Well, mission accomplished if that’s what they were after. I’d hunt them down until I

extinguished every single one of their kind. After everything I'd seen, I had a motto about the Demonica: no mercy.

On the other end of the line, Delainey scoffed, agreeing with me. "Hold your breath, Kevan that is not the worst part. Not only was the victim one of our police officers, but he was a werewolf, too. Charlie McDonald."

I cursed, this time aloud, and the candle's flame sparked brighter as the light picked up on my agitated energy. So much for my morning meditation ritual. I would have to find time for it later in the day.

"What on earth was he doing in this part of downtown Aran in the middle of the night? What was the time of death?" I fired my questions one after the other. The downtown area mostly accommodated shops, upscale businesses, and the like. Very few could afford to live there. Not to mention, he was a werewolf and would have lived in the alpha neighborhood of Aran, which stretched north of here, on the northwestern foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

"We'll wait for the forensics to determine his time of death, but it looks like he died recently. His body is still warm. He was on duty."

As I listened to Delainey, something gnawed at me, the dawn of realization brewing in my mind.

"Was there magic involved in his murder? Is that why you called me?" I asked him, my hand instinctively gripping my cell phone tighter.

He cleared his throat, and a charged silence electrified the space between us, only mounting my anxiety.

"Yes," he replied simply. That was one of the things I liked about Delainey: he cut to the chase and never beat around the bush. "Most likely, demons killed officer McDonald. I'm entrusting you with the investigation of his murder. I have faith in your abilities, Kevan, so don't disappoint me. This will be your first individual case, but if you need assistance you can always come to my office at the ABI. Now, I have a very important meeting with archangels and have to go. Chief

Hammond is here and he'll fill you in on all the details. The crime scene is at 18 Market Street. The Aran Police are here, expecting you," my supervisor said hastily as his patience waned, and he hung up the phone, the line going dead.

At the mention of demons, the blood froze in my veins. If this murder had woken up Senior Angel Delainey and the Chief of Police in the middle of the night, then indeed demons were likely responsible for this officer's death. This would be my first solo murder case, and a nod of trust from Delainey. I ran my fingers through my short hair—after all these years, I'd never dealt with murder by demons. Sure, recently my superiors, the archangels, reported breaking up and destroying a large Demonica operation at the Canadian border. Even in my wildest dreams, though, I wouldn't dare to guess that demons would kill a werewolf, let alone a police officer right behind ABI headquarters.

I was about to get dressed when my cell phone rang yet again, my body tensing as the shrill sound startled me for the second time this morning. I resolved to mute the phone next time I meditated and scooped up the gadget. I saw Chief Hammond's name and sighed with relief. I had known this guy for several years; we'd worked together on a few cases in the past when they detected some supernatural fraud and we had concerns about Demonica activity.

"Hi Chief Hammond," I greeted him warmly, yet in a business-like manner. Over the years of my work for the ABI, I'd grown closer to him.

"Hey, what's up?" His voice rang warmer and friendlier than Delainey's, the difference between a human and a senior angel in stark contrast. He didn't wait for my response, "Your boss was here and just left. I hear you're in charge of this one. Are you on the way?"

"Yup, I'm on my way, Hammond. Did you already notify the victim's family?" I hated to be the bearer of bad news in the few cases I'd had to deliver the news to people.

"Not yet. I sent officers to notify McDonald's wife, but their house appeared to be empty. His wife's phone is switched off

or out of range, but we'll keep trying to connect with her. We will keep trying to reach her.”

I massaged my temples, which had begun to slightly throb with an inner fire. “And who discovered the body?”

“A human by the name of Ashadha Matthews. She was hired by the victim's wife. Apparently, Miss Matthews has a clairvoyant gift and had a vision this morning of Charlie's murder, so she came to check on him.”

An independent psychic who stumbled upon the corpse of her client's husband because she had a vision? That was suspicious. I had to question this woman immediately. “Is she still at the crime scene?” I asked.

“Yes, though if you want to catch her, you better hurry. She claims she has a lot of work and needs to go. I'll try to keep her but can't promise anything. She's not a suspect.”

“Okay, got it. I'm coming. Try to engage this woman, I need to check her out first,” I said and hung up the phone.

I reached for my folded jeans on the chair near my nightstand then scooped up a t-shirt from my wardrobe. I dressed in my usual style: a fitted dark t-shirt and khaki pants. Lastly, I put on my cotton blazer. Before I could leave my studio apartment and drive to the crime scene, I wanted to check out both the victim and that mysterious woman, the psychic, on the Eye—an intricate data system that the Angelica Order had designed. The Eye was a virtual energy bubble that stored all the data and information about everyone in the whole country. The important thing to remember was that the Eye only showed us information about people that the collective knew; the high archangels didn't want us mere angels to peek into people's dirty secrets and unravel skeletons in the closets. I briefly wondered if the few archangels and gods sitting at the High Court—the highest magical institution in the world—would change their minds about access, considering this officer's murder. Everyone at the ABI and the Academy knew that Archangel Michael firmly believed in people's privacy and the right for them to keep secrets. As such, we had to uphold and respect people's privacy. In normal

circumstances, I'd wholeheartedly agree, but not when the safety and lives of others was threatened. Then, there shouldn't be the luxury of keeping your dirty little secrets. The Demonica had been biding their time ever since we defeated them. The painful memories of the war had scarred my soul, infusing me with the constant and deep drive to destroy the Demonica's wicked ways. No more murdered humans; no more broken families. We deserved peace and happiness. And I was ready to defend this right and our freedom by crushing the demons' twisted agenda.

My hand brushed against the t-shirt fabric, my fingers groping the surface of the metallic pendant I wore. It was one of the three most precious items I possessed: a gift the Angelica Order had given me once I passed my initiation at the Academy and was accepted into their ranks. A pentagram adorned the pendant's front while the eight-star sigil of Inana was engraved on its back side. Most importantly, many of my current angelic gifts became activated through this pendant. I called the image of the Eye and the space charged around me with a sparkling blue color. The pendant's mass solidified as a light blue mist settled in front of me, materializing into a tangible beam. I intuitively ordered the Eye to show me all the known information about Charlie McDonald. The mist swirled, a deep circle forming in its center. The blue waves electrified as the well began gathering all the information. Finally, the storm inside the blue circle stilled and the image of a middle-aged man appeared. His hair was dark and short and a light glowed in his eyes, giving him almost the vibe of an angel. He was nearly five-foot-ten, had an average body with a calm and good-natured face. The Eye showed me his wife, the cheerful and joyful home he'd had. Next, I saw him working at the Aran Police and how dedicated and honest he was in his job. The blue misty circle violently swirled around, the images becoming lost and muddy. I knew what this meant: the Eye had detected some secret information, which the archangels deemed too personal to be revealed. I couldn't help but wish Archangel Michael would see this dead werewolf and tell me with a straight face that he still respected everyone's right to keep secrets, especially when crimes like this occurred. There was a way around this privacy in cases that involved murder

and dark magic, but I had to report it to my superior, Archangel Musa. Then, he'd bring me just that specific piece of information, but it was too much hassle for something we had the right—and need—to access immediately. Hopefully, once I was promoted to the rank of an Archangel, I wouldn't lose time on such petty things. The blocking magic shimmered for a few long seconds, then I saw this werewolf lying dead in what looked like a parking garage. A long knife with sinister energy encircling its handle poked from his chest; dried blood painted the floor and the victim's clothes. This was all I could gather from the Eye about the murdered werewolf.

Next, I needed to see what I could learn about that psychic, Ashadha Matthews. Her surname was easy and common, but her given name indicated she might not be English, Anglo-Saxon, or even European. I thought it was Sanskrit.

The Eye swirled again and soon a new image emerged: a tall, slim woman with dark, curly hair and dark brown eyes appeared in the mist. I'd seen all types of women in my life but my breath ceased for a second as Ashadha's beauty stunned me. Her features were sensual and soft, and the curl of her full lips made my heart pound faster. I could feel it in my bones that this woman was fierce; a bright flame burned in her soul. There was something in her eyes that pulled me to her, making me want to lose myself in the gleam of her dark eyes. I shook my head: *what the hell was wrong with me?* Now wasn't the time for romance let alone with a mere human.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't despise humans. I was a human until I graduated from the Academy, passing my initiation trials. It was extremely tough and challenging, but I did it to protect innocent humans. But now that I'd become a second-born angel, I couldn't let a pretty face knock me off course. It didn't matter how hot and seductive she looked. Period.

The first thing I asked the Eye about her was to find out what her peculiar name meant. As I guessed, it was Sanskrit and meant invincible. Ashadha was the name of the month starting from the first new moon in June until the last full moon in July. Interestingly enough, Ashadha referred to one of

the names of Lord Shiva, too. From things I'd heard around work and the Academy, I knew one of the sitting gods at the highly secretive High Court was Lord Shiva himself. This could explain the badass and tireless nature I had picked up on. I liked my women tough and strong and she definitely was my type. *Fates, what was wrong with me?* I hadn't even met this woman and she'd already bewitched me.

I inhaled deeply and focused on gathering all available information about this woman. The Eye denoted she was half Indian, half American, raised by a single white mother who had passed away about five years ago. The Eye only indicated she'd been born in Varanasi and that her father was a pundit there. Next, I saw younger Ashadha move to the bustling streets of Aran with her boyfriend. My face grew hot as I saw her with this pale-faced boy. I felt like she deserved so much better than this weakling. Suddenly, the misty circle twirled hectically, forming waves within the circle. All the images vanished, destroyed. More secretive information I couldn't learn about. I cursed. Next, I saw her alone, with no trace of her dreaded boyfriend and I exhaled in relief. Good, she got rid of him. The Eye showed me she was working alone in what looked like her own detective agency in Johnsonville. It took me a few seconds to read her office's name—Four Paws and a Broom. I chuckled; she was witty. Next, a tiny dragon lightened the space, its golden wings and tail flapped as the creature flew around her apartment. A bunch of scenes that involved her clairvoyant abilities passed, one after another, and I could see she had talent. Like, Angelica Order level talented. Then why on earth did she work for peanuts, barely making ends meet at that detective agency of hers? If she worked for us, she could be well-off and ditch that pathetic and grimy district.

I ended up with more questions than answers as I left my studio. I scrambled into my Jeep Cherokee and gunned the engine, the tires squealing on the asphalt.

I needed to see Ashadha and figure out her secret.



## Chapter 6

Ashadha

“So, what color was the dog you found in the ditch yesterday?” the plump human police officer asked me as if this information was actually important.

I had spent nearly half an hour answering the Aran Police’s questions, and the coldness that permeated the basement had started to infuse my bones. My rumbling stomach protested against staying here for a minute longer. I couldn’t believe the police needed to know the damn color of the neighbor’s dog. It felt like they wanted to keep me at the crime scene for a bit longer.

“It was a yellow lab. Could I please go now? I need to have breakfast and tend to my own business: a detective agency. I’ll give you my number if you have more questions,” I said hastily, not even trying to hide the annoyance in my voice. The police chief, a short middle-aged guy with curly hair came over to me, discharging his plump colleague, and asked to take my number. I spelled it out for him, ready to take off but he stopped me, his hand gripping my arm.

“I’d really prefer if you could spare us another five minutes, Miss Matthews.”

“Look, Chief Hammond,” I said as I read the name on his badge. “I’ve been here for more than an hour and I need to eat something.”

“I totally understand, ma’am, but unfortunately Aran Police won’t be investigating this murder. The ABI’s in charge of such cases. We’ll pass the case over to them once their representative arrives. The angel assigned to investigate this murder is on his way, so I’m asking you to wait a few more minutes for him. He’ll need to write down your testimony, too.”

At the mention of the ABI, my heart panged in my chest, the blood freezing in my veins. Slight nausea climbed up my throat. Thank god this police chief was a human and couldn't detect my fear as a strong supernatural would. My initial horror swiftly turned to anger. *Better to be pissed off than terrified*, I thought to myself.

“For heaven’s sake, how many times should I give you testimony on the same thing?” I flared up.

“I’m really sorry, ma’am, but these are the rules. It’s not for us to decide the protocol for a murder,” he said the way a schoolboy would recite a poem at an oral test. I was about to argue that rules were meant to be broken, especially when they made no sense, but a tall man, about six-foot-six came over to us, appearing out of the blue and cut in our argument.

“Hi, Chief Hammond. Thank you for keeping the lady here. When will the forensics know the victim’s time of death?” He looked around at the forensic team who had already packed the corpse in a body bag and now collected evidence from the basement floor.

“You ask the same thing every time and I’ll give you the same answer every time, Kevan.” The chief chuckled. “I’ll give them a window of twelve hours, but they could finish earlier. I’ll call you as soon as we know.”

The new officer, Kevan, turned to the short officer standing beside the chief. “Please send me a report on everything we know about the victim ASAP.”

“Understood, detective,” the short man agreed. “I’ll help you with everything I can. We’re colleagues in a broader way.” He winked at Kevan and his body visibly relaxed.

“Thanks, man. This is my first solo demon case, so I don’t want to screw things up.”

“Unfortunately, it’s the first demon case in Aran City for three years, too. Take care, man,” Chief Hammond said, patting Kevan on the back before heading over to ask questions of the forensics team.

The presence of the new guy had infused soothing vibes into my bones, my fear and distress melting away. While the two men exchanged words, I took my time taking in the new guy, and oh my! He looked as if he were a god chiseled out of marble by the best sculptor. I think even Michelangelo or DaVinci would have been impressed if they could see him. A t-shirt and unzipped blazer fit his tall, slim body perfectly, accentuating his muscles. His khaki pants gave him a carefree vibe as if he'd gone out shopping, not to investigate a murder. His short, dark hair was meticulously combed and a sexy stubble ran along his chin. What took away my breath, though, was the look in his ocean-blue eyes: I detected an unadulterated interest behind his stern gaze, a bubbling curiosity emitting from his aura. My magical sense suggested that this guy, as human as he appeared to be, was actually an angel. His magical signature crashed wildly into my core, smelling of blueberries and raspberries mixed with lilac wine—a delicious combination. I believed that he'd cast an illusion spell that hid his wings. A bell rang loudly in my mind to warn me that I had to be extra careful around this man no matter how hot he was.

A slight smile warmed this hunk's features and softened his hotness into something more adorable and enticing. It took a great deal of effort to remind myself that this angel posed a deadly threat to me: he hated my kind and wouldn't even blink upon killing me. He was my enemy, not a man to desire.

“You must be Ashadha Matthews, right? I'm Detective Kevan Tyler from the ABI,” he said with a sly grin, his baritone voice cutting the awkward silence that had stretched between us. With horror, I realized he must have caught the side glances I gave him. The way my eyes lingered on his burly chest and tiny ass was more than a simple curiosity. Hell, he knew that I checked him out. I bet he was used to women's reactions like this all the time. He only smiled at me, clearly flattered by the fact I found him attractive. I ignored his reaction and answered his question.

“Yup, that's me,” I nodded, eyeing him suspiciously. My magical sense had guessed right. He was indeed an angel,

therefore super dangerous. And the fact that he was working for the ABI made him triple dangerous.

“Thank you for calling the Aran Police. Chief Hammond told me the victim’s wife hired your clairvoyant services for you to look into her husband.”

“Yes, that’s true. Evalyn McDonald, his wife, had some concerns about her husband. And seeing him dead here, it turns out she had a good reason to be worried about him.”

“Thank you for being so upfront. I’d like you to accompany me to ABI headquarters where I can gather your testimony. It’d be more convenient than here. Please,” he added, his brown eyes widening slightly, his cuteness level intensifying.

I hated this man and his tricks. No, I wasn’t some hormone-crazed teenager or a horny woman, I was my own woman. I didn’t need a man now, nor would I ever.

“As much as I’d love to, I’m really in a hurry, Detective Tyler.”

“Please, call me Kevan,” he corrected me.

I brushed his request aside; I didn’t aim to form a friendship with someone who intended to slaughter me.

“I’d rather answer your questions here as I need to go back to my apartment. I have things to do today, plus I’m wolf hungry.”

“At ABI headquarters, we have a cafeteria. The food is good. You won’t have complaints, guaranteed,” he said and raised his eyebrows suggestively. “It’s on me, if you accompany me. We can talk and I’ll get your breakfast after. I’d really prefer for us to talk alone, in my office. You know, away from the noise and all the police officers in here” he hurriedly added, a faint flush warming his cheeks.

A multitude of emotions swelled in my heart: the temptation to try the ABI’s cafeteria clashed with the repulsion to eat at my enemy’s headquarters; the idea that the angel might be hitting on me; but most of all the dread of him finding out my secret. It hung over me like a cloak, twisting

and wrenching my heart and giving me a panic attack. I couldn't let him figure out my secret. In any case.

“Is this a standard practice? Or you just want to spend more time with me, detective?” I finally mustered a reply, trying hard to apply all my charms. My attempt at flirtation must have come across somewhat wooden, given I hadn't really flirted with anyone for ages. The angel stood in front of me, his left eyebrow raised at me as if asking me, “Is that your best shot?”

But suddenly, his carefree face darkened, the smile evaporating from his features. “Yes, it is if we deem it necessary. But the important thing is that you're hiding something,” he remarked, disapproval and judgment ringing in his voice.

“Wait, what?” I exclaimed, taken aback. I didn't do or say anything to indicate that I hid anything. Well, I did, but my point was that he had no way to know this unless... The realization that he might have used his enchanted angelic superpowers crept into my mind, making me feel a little woozy. His defiant stare only cemented my belief. Damn it, this guy was more dangerous than I had initially assessed.

*No, it won't be your way, Mr. Hot Angelic Wings.* The voice in my head felt angry and I struggled to suppress it.

“No, I am not hiding anything,” I lied hurriedly.

“Then come with me to the ABI, it's just around the corner,” he motioned with his hand, pointing in the direction of his agency.

Damn it, he wanted to fool me into his lair, the angels' lair. I kept my head upright as I wanted to prove to him that I was exactly what I looked like: a mere human with a psychic gift.

“I simply have something to do at home, but if it'll ease your mind, I'll come to your office. Hope the food in that cafeteria of yours is good.” I winked, hoping to lighten his mood a little. Despite my fear of the ABI, I decided a meal wouldn't change my beliefs or how I felt about them. I just needed to eat.

“You have no idea. The best you’ll ever taste,” he remarked with a gleam of excitement in his blue eyes as he weaved his way through the crowd of police officers and forensics team in here to the door; he looked back at me to make sure I kept following him.

I reluctantly complied. My heart sank to my heels as I pictured a whole building of smug, cocky assholes like him; they ran our city and actually the whole country. And I had to remain invisible among the multitude of angels, keeping my true identity a secret. The illusion had to be protected at all costs. Or else, I’d be dead.

## Chapter 7

Kevan

I liked her in person even more than seeing her on the Eye: her gorgeous black hair fell in waves down her shoulders, her voluptuous figure, the fire, and drive that emitted from every cell of her being set my heart on fire. But most of all, I was captivated by her dark brown eyes. Her eyes mesmerized me, my soul craved to claim her, to make her mine.

I had to remind myself that she hid something dark and dangerous. The Eye wouldn't let me into show me her secret. I might convince my superior archangel to reveal Charlie's secret, but hers? Nah, it was out of the scope of the current investigation unless we had strong proof she had been involved in the murder, which my magical sense hadn't detected. What the fates was she hiding? And more importantly—why? My angelic intuition whispered to me that her secret was bad: really bad. A tight knot of dark energy had settled over the pit of my stomach, climbing up to my throat after I barely exchanged a few words with her. It didn't bother me; it simply made me anxious about what was at the heart of her secret. I wasn't sure I bought that she was an ordinary psychic, yet I couldn't really detect any magic in her. It was all too strange and the more I thought about it, the more confused I grew, which only irritated me more.

After some effort, I managed to convince her to accompany me to ABI headquarters. She was right; it wasn't a common practice for us to question people at our headquarters, but I needed to spend some time alone with her, away from the demoniacal energy that hung on tightly over that shitty basement. I wanted to question her away from all the police officers, the forensic team and the like who freely roamed the area, collecting and searching for evidence and leaving their own marks in the room. The second I'd set foot on the crime scene, the repulsive magical signature of demons assaulted my senses. It blew up in my face like a fist, aiming to punch me. I

wouldn't allow the Demonica to hurt me again. Not when I'd sworn to destroy them and protect innocent humans and supernaturals from their wicked ways.

“Wow, you have a really nice workplace,” she commented as we entered the ABI building. Thank the fates, the crime had happened just around the corner from our headquarters. It kinda felt like another blow, an in-your-face insult at how they could murder a police officer so close to us, but I preferred to focus on the positive side: it was easier to convince this beautiful woman to come back to the office with me.

Ashadha Matthews couldn't mask her astonishment at how splendid our building looked. To be fair, the Angelica Order had spared no expense, decorating everything with the most luxurious materials. Silver and gold adorned the building's dome; golden archways led to each floor; the floor below our feet was marble; the doors—Cherrywood. The walls greeted us in warm, colorful tones of orange or light blue. I'd grown used to the luxury and comfort in here—another perk for joining the Angelica Order—but for an outsider like her, it must have been quite the sight.

“Yes, we do have,” I agreed. The reason why my order had given it all into this building wasn't just to impress others and make us feel like the chosen ones. After the great cataclysms, all the coastlines of the US had been greatly destroyed and only the mountainous areas and higher elevated regions survived. The Angelica chose this small town in middle-of-nowhere Wyoming for the present capital of the US, renaming the town “Aran.” During my training at the Academy, my training officer explained to me that the name was Celtic for “high place.” It fit into our agenda of being closer to the divine and the creator.

“This way, please,” I said as I motioned at her to come to the elevator. I pressed the button to call the elevator and its doors beeped open. We went into it, her eyes still wide, gawking at the new technology.

“It's so smooth and fast,” she mumbled as it took the elevator exactly two seconds to move us to the fourth floor, where my office was situated. I hated to admit that my office



was nearly at the end of the corridor with all the less important offices, but I consoled myself with the fact I had recently joined the Order and the ABI—about five years ago. The majority of my colleagues had been working for the Angelica for at least a decade or more.

I nodded absentmindedly, part of my mind finding it hard to concentrate and think about work when Ashadha was near me. I could feel her breath with every pore of my being; her seductive scent intoxicated me, making me lightheaded. It smelled of wild fruits, mixed with a hint of old wine. That was strange: she was a human and in my gut I knew that she was, indeed, human. Maybe she'd descended from witches, but still human. So why did she have a magical signature? There were so many secrets I didn't understand about her and though I knew she'd never give me any answers, I suspected more trouble would come. I bit my lip as I finally reached my office door, the sexy woman close at my heels. I pushed the door open and gave room for her to enter my office first. She went straight to the chairs in the middle of my spacious office and perched on one of the chair's edges.

"I thought we would have had breakfast first," she faintly complained.

"I don't have the time for a leisurely breakfast, Miss Matthews. I'm investigating a murder with demoniacal activity. But once I take your account of the events, you can take your time downstairs in the cafeteria. I'll show you the way. I'll still buy your breakfast," I said, joining her behind the desk. As I passed her, my eyes fell on the framed picture of my sister that stood at the left front corner of my desk. My sister's beautiful face stared back at me, the look of adoration and deep calmness in her eyes infused my bones with strength, breathing a fresh desire into my heart to do my job at my best: to defend the world from the horrors of the Demonica Order. Many years ago, during the war, my sister and I hid in the woods when a bunch of crazed demons ambushed and attacked us. The assholes killed her on the spot, but I managed to survive. If it hadn't been for these wicked bastards, she would have still been alive, more radiant than ever. She was only seventeen when the beasts killed her.

A violent pang tore through my heart and I took my gaze off my sister's photograph. I directed my attention and mind at the young woman in front of me. Thank the fates, she wasn't an archangel so she couldn't read my mind. I poured myself a glass of water and offered her some, too. Luckily, she accepted the glass so I could sprinkle a little of our angelic dust into her water. Just as fae had their magical fairy dust, we had angelic dust. It made one relaxed, joyful, and more at ease. Now was the best time to use it if I wanted her to let loose and tell me more than she normally would.

I asked her to explain her involvement with the victim and his wife, then to describe to me in detail today's early morning events, especially how she'd come to discover Charlie's corpse. She kept her story short and to the point. My angelic intuition confirmed that she told the truth. Yet, the same gnawing suspicion that she hid something important and sinister persisted, hanging over me like a dark cloud about to pour rain on me. I surely couldn't force her to be completely forthcoming: she wasn't a suspect; her profile on our database was stellar. On the surface, all looked clean and good, yet that feeling... Add to it how the Eye had detected something hidden in her past, right after she'd come to Aran. I wasn't sure if her secret played a role in her separation from her childhood boyfriend, but it was a possibility.

I shook off the dark thoughts that swirled in my mind and vowed to keep track of her: she could deny and lie to me all she wanted, but she could only do it for so long. Eventually, she'd slip and I'd catch her in her tracks. And then I'd uncover her secret, whatever it might be.

## Chapter 8

Ashadha

Right from the start Kevan Tyler inquired about my relationship with the deceased werewolf and his wife as we found ourselves in the angel's office in the ABI's headquarters. I described to him why Evalyn hired me. Of course, I omitted the two incidents prior to starting to tail Charlie McDonald: the electricity jolt that hit me when I touched his pic, and my first vision of him being killed. I had to tell Kevan about my second vision of Charlie's murder—I had to justify roaming the city at the ungodly hour of four thirty in the morning and how I found Charlie's corpse.

He listened to me carefully and finally mused, "It turns out Evalyn's feeling was right." The sexy angel's light blue eyes darkened as something crossed his mind. "The victim was, indeed, involved in something dangerous."

I nodded. "And it seems demons took part in it, too."

A shadow passed over the angel's face and he moved forward, his eyes locked on me. "Probably, but we're not sure. We'll know better in a few days."

I hoped they would. It boggled my mind why the Demonica would kill Charlie, and right under the ABI's nose.

"Why did you come to Aran City?" Kevan suddenly asked me, his stern blue eyes laser focused on me. His intense stares made me uncomfortable and a tiny sweat broke out, dampening my neck. I certainly wasn't expecting him to pry into my past, so his question annoyed me.

"Ashadha?" The angel prompted me a few moments later, as I hadn't answered his question.

I cleared my throat. "Why did I come here? Very simple, detective. I needed a fresh start after my mother passed away in Sedona, Arizona. Aran City obviously has become the new Big Apple, so it made the most sense to me."

*After the old one, NYC, had sunk into the ocean, I thought but kept it to myself.*

“Do you like it here?”

I arched my brows: was this his personal curiosity or did he somehow think it could be related to the case? In any event, I didn't intend to answer this question.

He must have read my energy because he didn't wait long for my reply. “Aran is an expensive city. In fact, it is one of the most expensive here in the States. I'm surprised you manage to make ends meet through your paranormal detective agency,” he noted.

So, this was what it was all about? But how weird: my finances were none of this jerk's business. How I managed to survive was my concern only. To be fair, up until recently, my workload was bigger and I managed to earn quite a few silver coins, but ever since the summer, the work had dried up.

I gifted him a fake smile, my heart beating slightly faster than usual. “It's a price I'm willing to pay to stay independent.”

He didn't say anything to that, but his light blue eyes kept staring at me. Something pierced my heart as if by a tiny needle, making me nearly jump in my seat. I didn't like the way this angel looked at me. Danger, and the promise of trouble, brewed in his eyes; his fiery determination to unravel my secret pounded in my veins, overwhelming my mind and senses. Hell, how did I know this?

*It's not you, it's me.*

Damn; this voice again. It would pop up in the middle of nowhere, voicing its opinion here and there, but for the most part, it remained dormant.

“Why don't you come work for us? You know, humans are welcome to work for ABI as independent contractors,” the angel remarked, the dark shadow that had descended on his features seemed to dissipate, paving the way to amusement that flickered on his handsome face. “You'll earn a lot at the ABI.”

“Oh, I can see that.” I’d honestly never laid eyes on a more splendid and luxurious building in my life. The Angelica Order had put a lot of effort into showing off and instilling awe at their wealth. I realized that we mortal humans, and even the supernaturals, had to be grateful for the Angelica’s involvement in our world and the fact that they won the war. But at the back of my mind, there was always this voice that rebelled against them and their ways. After all, I was a pariah in this world run by the Angelica.

“Think about it, Ashadha. I have the feeling we’ll be seeing each other a lot,” the angel said, a slight smile warming his otherwise hardened features.

*I certainly hope not*, I thought as panic swelled in my blood at the idea of seeing this cocky bastard again. I couldn’t tell if I liked him or not, but my body said one thing while my brain told me to run.

“Time will tell. Are we finished?”

“Sure. I have no more questions for now, but if you think of something, please call me right away,” he reached for his wallet, took out a card, and handed it to me. I saw his name and cell phone number written below. The same symbols I’d seen here, at ABI’s parlor, and on the building’s door handles adorned the center of the white card: a golden pentagram and the eight-pointed star of Ishtar. A slight movement swirled in my chest as my fingers brushed against the symbols.

The angel had already stood up and with a few brisk paces, he reached the door. He held it open for me to go out first. As I joined him, passing through the door, my eyes fell on the pentagram and eight-pointed star, though they were smaller. Something within me whirred, and my head felt lighter. Once outside, we hopped on the elevator again, this time he pressed the button for one floor down. In seconds, we’d descended and the elevator delivered us to the third floor, its doors buzzed and opened. The scent of freshly baked muffins and hot bacon permeated the air, teasing my appetite. A deep rumble tore through my stomach and made me even hungrier. I licked my lips, my stamina evaporating faster than raindrops on a hot summer day.

The angel marched confidently forward and I trotted right behind him. He rounded up the marble corridor and reached a shiny cafeteria at the far end. Here, the savory scent of food hung in the air thicker than before; a golden inscription sparkled, perched on the wall, reading “Heaven’s Kitchen.” Kevan hurried into the cafeteria, holding its front door open for me. Going inside, I noticed the same symbols even on this door handle. *The Angelica had marked their territory*, I thought, amused. Something deep within me whispered that this was way more than just a mark or a symbol—maybe a protective spell or sigil—but the painful rumbles in my stomach made me forget about the thought. Who cared when you were wolf hungry?

He dropped a few golden coins in my hand, their metallic rattle a welcome sound for my empty pockets.

“Thanks a bunch for this,” I said to him as I made an effort to go to the counter and order something, but somehow I faltered. His hand abruptly grabbed mine, his skin pressing hard against my own. A jolt of electricity lit up my body and I hyperventilated. Seeing my stupor, or perhaps he’d had a similar reaction, he withdrew his hand from mine as fast as he’d grabbed it.

“Sorry to startle you. I wanted to remind you; please don’t leave the city. At least while we’re investigating the murder.”

I nodded; the shock of how my body reacted to his touch still had me numb. As I took a step away from him, ready to go to the counter, he added,

“And Ashadha...” He hesitated, his voice faltering. I turned around to look at him, all my attention directed at the sexy angel. “Please be careful.”

## Chapter 9

Kevan

I didn't mean to frighten her; I just wanted her to be more careful. When I grabbed her hand, a vision exploded in my third eye. I saw Ashadha surrounded by two demons, their bodies still human, but their signatures unmistakable. The rotten scent of dirty socks and fermented eggs surrounded me, making me want to throw up. They charged at her and the vision abruptly ended. I gathered this information simply by touching her hand. I never intended to see into her future, but such clairvoyant gifts had occurred now and then in my life, and I believed the more I served the Angelica Order, the more frequent and steady these visions would manifest.

“And Ashadha... Please be careful.” I felt my voice quiver as I said this and she stared at me in surprise before scurrying away and into Heaven's Kitchen. My eyes lingered on her slim figure, the leather pants and black leather jacket she wore hung tight on her body and accentuated her curves, especially as she moved. I stood there, mesmerized by this strange woman until I had to turn around and go back to my office. A growing desire burned my insides with an unmatched intensity, making me want to stop in my tracks and run to her; every inch and fiber in my body screamed at me to go get her and take her in my arms and never let her go. I sighed and shook my head: this was bad, very bad. I had to keep an eye on her, not fall for her.

I barely entered my office when the sudden ringing of my cell phone took me from my agony. A quick look at the display showed it was Chief Hammond. He told me they had connected to the victim's wife, Evalyn, and he gave me her address.

“How did she react?” I asked as I scribbled down her address on my napkin.

“She seemed surprisingly okay, as if detached from the whole tragedy,” Hammond conceded. “She didn’t even cry. At least not while I talked to her.”

That was interesting. Shock, maybe? I had to visit Mrs. McDonald and see if she knew more than she let on. Which reminded me of something to ask my colleague.

“Hey, Hammond, can you do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“Could you please keep a tab on Ashadha Matthews? I’d like to know more about what she is doing.”

“Do you suspect her? She didn’t strike me as a Demonica, but then I’m just a human.”

“No, it’s not that. I worry for her safety,” I said, plain and simple.

The chief paused for a second. “Ah, okay. I’ll send Rodriguez and Donovan to watch her; I took down her address.”

I thanked him and reminded him to call me again when they knew the approximate time of Charlie’s death, then ended the call. Now that I had entrusted him with watching over Ashadha, my mind could proceed and focus on the primary objective: the murder. I prepared myself for my upcoming call to my superior, Archangel Musa.

The calling of an archangel was a whole ritual on its own. The angelic pendant the order had given me functioned as the ritual’s foundation. I had to meditate while visualizing the pentagram image on the front side of the pendant then envision my superior and summon him. The sixty-four archangels had been divided into four sanctions, each one governing one of the four elements—and my superior was an air archangel specializing in mind control, telekinesis, telepathy, levitation, and the like. We, the angels working at the ABI, liked to call the archangels the “big guys.” Even though the archangels had superpowers beyond all comprehension, they limited their usage, at least when it came to communicating with us. That’s why psychics like Ashadha



came in handy. But she didn't want to cooperate, and I had concerns regarding her secret. To successfully summon Musa, I had to free my mind from all mundane and stressful stuff. That was going to be hard to do with this murder on my mind, but when I thought about Ashadha's usefulness, I also pictured her beautiful eyes. I was going to have to clear her from my mind and quickly.

I locked the door so that I didn't risk someone disturbing my meditation. I temporarily switched off my cell phone, too. Even though Musa was my direct supervisor, several other higher-ranking angels here loved to give me various tasks. I slid into my leather chair behind the desk and took the pendant from my neck. I placed it on my palm, the pentagram staring right at me. My eyes tracked down all the small angelic figures within the symbol, focusing on the one that represented Musa, and my core lit up with something I liked to call "the god energy." I let this light sensation spread from my toes to the top of my head. Once this energy infused my whole body, making me feel high, I visualized Musa's slim, average body, his curly blond hair, and youthful face. Archangels were granted immortality so they couldn't ever age. Musa would always appear to me dressed as a human, though his angel wings would often protrude from his clothes. Once, at the annual celebration of Saint George, I'd seen him in shiny armor, clutching a spear in his hand. I visualized him in the latter attire as this memory burned brighter in my mind than his casual clothes.

The figure of Musa manifested in my inner eye and I requested he appear to me. The air swirled in my office, and a gust of wind tossed the scattered papers on my desk. The room shimmered, a runic symbol sparkled in the air—Musa's symbol—and with a sizzling crack, he popped up in my office. He was clad in jeans and a shirt, his wings missing. Today, he'd chosen a fully human appearance. Good. I hid my own wings most of the time and would use them only when threatened.

"Hey, kid, how is it going?" He greeted me cheerfully, walking around the small office.

“I’ve been better,” I said, my dull and even voice sharply contrasting with his carefree vibe.

He pouted his lips, and the hint of a chuckle arose on his face. “What’s bothering you, Kevan? You must have a good reason for summoning me, right?”

I briefed him on my current murder case, starting with the near-certain involvement of demons. Once I mentioned demons, Musa’s joy evaporated, his features turned serious, and the glow in his eyes darkened. I told him what I’d seen in the Eye about Charlie. I asked about the missing information I desperately needed access to.

“Bad news, very bad,” Musa shook his head disapprovingly. “When Lord Shiva learns about the Demonica’s involvement in this murder, he will hit the ceiling. We haven’t had demons in Aran ever since we won the war. It’s upsetting,” he mused aloud.

I sighed heavily, not knowing how to reply to that. I was just as concerned as the big guys were, if not more. It figured that exactly when I earned the right to investigate a murder alone, fate would hand me the most difficult case possible. A glance at my sister’s photo reminded me of the vow I’d given to destroy the Demonica. And now they seemed to have risen from the ashes, murdering a police officer right under our noses.

“Your request to look into Charlie McDonald’s secrets is just and I grant you control over the memory,” Musa said and waved his right hand. The familiar light blue mist descended into my office, the air cooling. The mist swirled wildly as Musa’s hand manipulated it, his hand moving in strange ways. It felt as if he sent a coded signal to the Eye. Eventually, the mist stilled as Charlie’s face manifested inside the glowing circle. This time, the setting was dark, shrouded in shadows. I could sense the Demonica’s twisted and sharp magical signature. It poisoned my mind, activating my senses with its stench. The dark shadows stirred, moving and advancing toward Charlie. Hoods were draped over their robes, hiding their faces.

*Always the cowards*, I thought and pressed my lips together, trying not to lash out at the image.

The demons' leader turned to the victim and spoke. "We've reviewed your request to join our order and our Master has accepted you. You're required to obey me and your initiation will proceed. Remember, once you say yes, there's no going back. Understood?"

Charlie trembled, but he composed himself and confirmed with a loud, "yes."

"Very well. You need to come to the Aran Graveyard on September second at midnight. If you refuse, you'll forfeit your membership in the Brotherhood of the Serpent. And we punish those who play us for fools, understood?"

Charlie hastily nodded, the blood draining from his face. My heart seemed to freeze inside my chest: this werewolf had intended to join the demoniacal brotherhood of monsters? What was wrong with him? I hated to admit it, but a part of me rejoiced that they had killed him. Better have his cold corpse than him as an adversary.

The visions inside the mist dissipated, the circle swirling with a renewed force. The mist sizzled, then the Eye stilled, a new scene manifesting. This time, it showed Charlie alone. He paced to and fro in his room, his eyes golden—his inner wolf surging forward. I could taste his sour, sticky fear, the way it had gripped his soul. His inner wolf fought him hard, intuition telling him the initiation was a trap and they would unleash an ethereal entity to possess him. My angelic powers must have enabled me to overhear Charlie's dialogue with his inner wolf. The man inside Charlie protested, but as was the case with all shifters, his inner beast won over his logical mind. Charlie dialed some number and told the person on the other end that he wanted out of their weird brotherhood.

So, these psychopaths murdered him because he wanted out? To add insult to injury, he hadn't even passed their silly initiation. Monsters—straight and simple. The next vision showed him scared and pacing around his room, but then he got a call from one of the hooded men, who calmed and

reassured him that everything was fine. Charlie must have thought that it was over with the Demonica, but as I already knew, he was ambushed while patrolling downtown. The next vision confirmed my theory: the same hooded figures lured him into that alley by one of them pretending to be a hurt lady and letting out a fake scream. From there, they hit him from behind, knocking him unconscious. The final vision showed me his murder. The wicked assholes stood within their inverted pentagram circle and stabbed Charlie's heart with a blade.

A bitter taste burned inside my mouth, sticking like glue to my throat. I cleared my throat and turned to Musa, who looked as shaken as I felt.

“This was helpful. Now we know the Demonica's motive for killing Charlie McDonald, but why on earth did he want to join their brotherhood?” He seemed like a decent werewolf and Chief Hammond had praised his job as a police officer. Why would he want to play with the devil? Charlie had a wife, and a duty to the Aran Police; did the Demonica brainwash him? Or put a spell on him? I needed to know. When I'd go to question Charlie's wife, I wanted to know what to tell the poor woman.

“You have a point. Let's see what the Eye will show us,” Musa said and at the wave of his hand, he gave the Eye a new command. The misty circle shimmered, larger waves tearing through its mass. A slight crack shook its surface, then the mist held still. Inside the circle, a vision played out: Charlie sat beside the bed of a sick child, trying to cheer him up. The pale boy's body seemed nearly lifeless. Charlie brought him gifts and talked to his mother about their roles in the pack. He even tried a few potions on the kid, but they barely made a difference: the boy couldn't leave the bed. Charlie vowed to the mother, a werewolf shifter and, from what I felt, member of his pack, to find a way to heal her child.

Musa discharged the Eye as he lowered his hand. The misty circle sizzled, shrinking, then finally vanishing into thin air.

“I think this answers your question, Kev,” the archangel said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper.

My mind raced wildly, confusion swelling my chest. “But that child wasn’t even his!” I argued. Hammond had briefly mentioned how devoted this guy was to his pack, but still: to sell your soul to heal someone else’s kid went over the top.

“The heart knows no logic or reason, Kev. I think you can relate to that,” Musa said.

I stood numb, the accuracy of my superior’s words ringing true. Did he know about my crush on that psychic girl? I certainly hoped not. It was nothing; I’d get her out of my system quickly, and let my cold-hearted reason take control. I had to, or I risked getting involved with someone who had dangerous secrets that could threaten our collective safety. If the Demonica would do that to Charlie, I didn’t even want to imagine what they’d do to humans like Ashadha. If they figured out she’d had a psychic vision of his murder... I shook the thought away, not willing to consider the consequences.

“Any other questions, Kevan?” the archangel asked, impatience in his voice.

I scratched my head, contemplating what else I needed to know. There had to be a way for Charlie McDonald to have come in contact with the Demonica Order; it couldn’t have happened spontaneously.

“How did Charlie learn about this Brotherhood of the Serpent? There must have been someone to invite him to their secret society. These things don’t happen organically.”

The corners of Musa’s lips twitched into a smile, barely perceptible, yet I noticed his reaction. “You’re right. It’s an interesting question. We need to know how the enemy operates and recruits their members.” He raised his hand again and the misty circle reappeared in the room. It shimmered brightly for a few long seconds. The temperature dropped below zero degrees, frost covered my desk and the floor under my feet. I wrapped my arms around myself, my arms, covered only by a t-shirt, felt the stark shift in the temperature. Suddenly, the mist darkened, a bloody wave rising in its center. The world seemed to stop as a fiery circle with sharpened spears formed in the mist and my breath caught in my lungs, suffocating me.

The dark vision mounted, the heavy energy growing to a gigantic cloud of shadows until the mist exploded, swiping through our interactive technology. I'd never seen anything like this before. So much darkness, but nothing actually revealed.

“Holy cow! What was that?” I asked my superior, subconsciously lowering my voice.

Musa cleared his throat and turned to me; dark flames gleamed in his eyes. “Someone has detected us and blocked us from using the Eye to gather information about the murdered police officer. I'm afraid we won't be able to use the Eye for peeking into the victim's secrets anymore. I'm sorry, Kevan. You'll have to solve this murder the old-fashioned way.” And with this statement, a silver vortex swirled around, taking the archangel back to the place where archangels and gods lived—the Higher Realm.

# Chapter 10

Ashadha

I walked the way to my office in a trance-like state. Even my mother's special, magically infused pendant couldn't quite distract me from the feeling of impending doom that ravaged my mind. The angel's warning made my stomach churn and my pulse rush. Did he see something when his hand lingered over mine? The effect his touch had on me was another thing that shook me to the core, but the more pressing issue was my safety. I already regretted taking this case. True, Evalyn had paid me more than well, but it quickly morphed from a simple case to a demon-involved murder. And now the ABI had taken on the investigation. I sighed. So much for my efforts to stay in the shadows and avoid the Angelica Order.

Upon reaching the front door of Four Paws and a Broom, I noticed the short, plump man who had been walking behind me keeping a moderate distance. It crossed my mind that this guy might have followed me here from the ABI's headquarters. The thought made me uncomfortable, and cold sweat dampened my neck. I went inside my office, double checking that I locked the door. Inside my perceived fortress, I took a better look at the guy. Even though he didn't look intimidating—on the contrary, actually—he didn't put any effort to hide the fact that he was tailing me.

Of course, I'd had my share of obsessed men who couldn't take no for an answer, it was part of why I didn't date, but this was different. I had half a mind to call Kevan Tyler and ask for his help, but my instincts stopped me. I was my own woman and I didn't need a cocky angel to save me. Hell, I wasn't even in danger. Yet.

I set out to tidy my desk. I needed to see White Paw and she had the knack of landing on my desk just when I needed her. I'd barely closed the door behind me when the door handle moved. Someone wanted to enter. I nearly jumped as the

thought of the stranger waiting for me outside surged in my mind. My brain ran various scary scenarios through my head. The lock clicked, preventing anyone from coming inside. The bell suddenly buzzed, its quiet melody ringing in the air.

I checked with my magical sense and heaved a sigh of relief when I detected no demoniacal signature. But the scent from behind the door felt familiar. Evalyn. The smell of pine trees, musk, and flavored spices tingled my nostrils, fueling my mind with clarity and strength, having the same effect as if walking higher in the mountains. It was one of the gifts that wolf shifters often had. I spun and, with a few strides, reached the door, unlocked it, and greeted her.

“Hi, Evalyn. I’m so sorry for your loss. My condolences.”

She nodded curtly, her face visibly paler than usual. Dried tears glistened on her cheeks like crystals, her hair tousled. She was a mess.

“Can I talk to you?” she asked and walked inside my office before I could respond. She slid into the chair before my desk, her fingers digging into the handkerchief she held in her hands.

“I thought things were improving. I thought he really looked like the old Charlie I fell in love with and... and now he is dead,” she finished, her voice trailing off. A surge of tears poured down her cheeks. “I was trying to hold it together and just can’t anymore.” She sniffed and wiped her tears with the handkerchief. “I apologize for being a blubbering mess.”

“It’s okay,” I said quietly and waited for her outburst of pain to subside, praying for the angels and archangels to give comfort to the poor woman.

In a few minutes, her tears halted, her face flushed and reddish. Sniffling, she said, her voice shaky, “The police told me you’d found his body and called them. The police chief said you had a vision of his murder.”

I looked Evalyn straight in the eye. I nodded solemnly, my back hunching forward as I crossed my fingers and placed my hands to rest on the desk.



“Thank you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She hesitated before she asked me, “Did you, um, have a vision of him prior to his death?”

The air seemed to evaporate from my lungs and I tried hard to keep my cool. I didn’t want to lie to her so I went with a half-truth.

“The visions I had were inconclusive and I couldn’t help but feel that someone or something prevented me from peeking into his past, present, and future.” I paused, waiting for her reaction. Fumbling with the handkerchief, she curled it into a ball between her fingers.

I went on. “I have no idea how or why I had the vision of his death, it just happened.”

She composed herself, straightening her spine, and turned to me, a new gleam of strength and willpower shining in her eyes. “You’re really gifted. I’m so sorry you couldn’t help Charlie, but I guess it was his fate.” She paused and fumbling with her handkerchief, she suppressed a cry. “You know, I blame myself for his death. My inner wolf rang the alarm about Charlie and that’s why I hired you, but then when he told me that everything was fine, I blindly trusted him and ignored my shifter intuition.” She sniffled and added with a renewed energy, “Thank you for trying, though, and for everything you’ve done for us...for me. Promise me something, Miss Matthews,” she began and a tight ball curled inside my stomach, my senses alerted. “Promise me, you’ll find my husband’s killer and destroy them.”

# Chapter 11

Kevan

Not long after Archangel Musa left me with the truth behind Charlie's murder, Chief Hammond called. The forensic team had determined Charlie's time of death—between three thirty and four this morning. He also told me they'd discovered that the bloody inverted pentagram was made of Charlie's blood. I gritted my teeth, seething with anger. How dare they draw that abominable symbol using the victim's blood? Well, I guess he deserved his fate as he'd bargained with them. A tiny voice at the back of my mind argued that he'd been desperate and wanted to cure a kid from his pack, but I couldn't justify this. Working with demons was always unacceptable.

“The rules are rules,” my mentor at the academy always said. I'd tasted the crushing whirlwind of pain and depression—when my sister was killed, I seethed with fury. But instead of wallowing in self-pity, I vowed to destroy the Demonica in her honor. I'd been pouring everything inside me: my energy, mind, ambition, and skills to defeat those sick bastards.

Now that I had the missing puzzle of Charlie's past, I felt confident to question the victim's wife, Evalyn McDonald. I could only imagine her horror and shock when I would tell her that her husband had agreed to sell his soul to the Demonica by trying to become one of them. But then, his inner wolf had prevented him from participating in the initiation ritual, so the bastards killed him instead. It was a tough situation, but she deserved to know the truth.

I called her and asked to drop by her house in the Alpha District at four pm. Thirty minutes before my scheduled meeting with Evalyn, I hopped into my Jeep Cherokee, gunned the engine and drove from ABI headquarters. The vehicle zoomed into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains where the shifters had settled. I'd been in a shifter neighborhood only once before—the bears—but never to the werewolf district.

Shifters, just like us angels, had a hierarchy. The different classes had their divisions and rules, though as a whole, the shifter class worked unified.

The weather was still hot, the sun blazing high in the clear sky. The sun's rays penetrated every area, bathing the streets and houses with warmth and light. I liked summer. It was my favorite season—an eternal testament to how the light and positive forces always won over the darkness and negativity.

Soon, my car reached the werewolves' neighborhood: the Alpha District. The houses here towered higher than downtown, with large yards encircling each house. The shifters prided themselves as great farmers and I could see it, judging by the multitude of vegetables and fruit trees that they grew in their gardens. Fresh mountain air, and a sense of tranquility and serenity permeated the air. I liked it here. For a split second, I wished to move here from my modern studio downtown. The Angelica Order paid my rent so I could live close to work, as I had to be available to them at any time. I pulled my car to a stop in front of a well-kept, white and pink three-story house. The pine forest towered above the house, the trees casting a shadow onto the back yard. A chain-link fence encircled the property. I scrambled out of the car, closing its door and walked over to the house. An intercom was mounted on the right end of the gate and I pressed the intercom button. The thing cracked, buzzing and probably connecting me with the owner.

Soon, a melodious voice spoke, "Yes?"

I immediately recognized Evalyn's voice.

"It's Detective Kevan Tyler from the ABI. I'm coming to talk to you about your husband's death."

No answer followed, but the intercom clicked. The gate buzzed and opened slightly. I pushed it open and went inside the property. I walked down the stone pathway, my eyes immediately catching the wonder of the wolf shifter's home. I could feel the love these people must have felt when they built this house. Every small detail from the flowerpots on the windowsills to the carefully placed garden statues of dwarves

and deer spoke to how much the owners cared about their property.

Before I could reach the threshold, a woman opened the mahogany door, her face flustered. She stood around five-foot-two, with medium-length straight, blonde hair. Her light eyes quickly locked onto me.

“Hello, detective. Please follow me,” she gestured for me to follow her and I obeyed. She closed the door once I set foot in the entrance, and, walking past me, she opened the first door to the left. The new room was a spacious living room; a modern fireplace stood at the far wall, and a sofa and a few chairs surrounded a small decorative table in the center. Paintings of landscapes hung on the walls. Evalyn slid onto the sofa and invited me to sit down, too. I made myself comfortable on one of the chairs facing opposite her. I didn’t want to bother or make her uncomfortable by joining her on the sofa; plus, I wanted to maintain full visual contact with her. Judging by her sharp, anxious hand and leg movements, the news of her husband’s death had taken a toll on her. Small wonder: I was a mess for a whole month when the monsters killed my sister. My mind shook with the residual pain from that experience and I turned to the widow.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet me, Mrs. McDonald. And my heartfelt condolences for your husband’s untimely death. Rest assured; we’ll catch the perpetrators. I’m hoping our conversation today can shed some light on the investigation,” I said, keeping my tone both professional and friendly.

She nodded, her eyes staring at me sharply and watchfully. I first began with general questions as to where her husband had recently spent his time; about friends of his, and any potential enemies. She didn’t tell me more than I’d already seen in the Eye, though. Finally, I informed her about my discovery: what the Eye had revealed about her husband’s dealings with the Demonica and the consequences he faced leading to his death. She sat on the sofa, her eyes widening further as the story continued. I briefly described the Eye technology. Even though her husband had worked for the Aran Police, this technology was reserved for angels and as such, was secret,

but given Evalyn's husband was a police officer and the Demonica had killed him, she had the right to know the truth.

"Oh my. Poor Charlie," she muttered when I finished speaking. She stood up and went to the window at the far end of the room overlooking the front door and the road on which I'd parked my car. "My poor husband; he always strove to help those who were needy and unfortunate. He was so kind, so caring, yet so naive at the same time. To even think the Demonica would help him..." She tersely directed her stare at the outside world, her eyes filling with tears. She fought hard for a few seconds not to burst into tears, her voice shaking as she gulped down the pain. She fidgeted, her hands fumbling with a piece of her long skirt. "I never would have imagined he'd decide to join the Demonica. And for what? A promise to heal a *child*?" She sneered derisively, her shrill laugh came off agitated and cut the air as if with a blade.

I sat still in my seat—on the simple wooden chair—waiting for her to finish, to express all the emotions that raged in her heart. When emotional, people tended to share more than they realized.

She hastily wiped the tears in her eyes with the back of her hand, then sat on the chair closest to me. I'd sensed her magical signature ever since I saw her at the door, but now her rich pine scent hit me squarely in the face. As I inhaled deeply, her strong shifter magic interfered with my own magic, making me forget the things I had made a note to ask her. I shifted my body sideways and turned my head from her so that her scent wouldn't reach my face directly.

"But if you have access to this technology, detective, then surely you can use it to see who killed my Charlie, right?" she said, a new hope filling her voice.

I smiled, a sadness swelling in my chest. If only it were that simple...

"Unfortunately, ma'am, the Demonica disabled us from using this technology to spy on them long ago. It's a complicated issue. In Charlie's case, I was able to witness the things I told you because the Demonica hadn't yet detected us.

Now that they know we're after them, we won't be able to use the Eye to see anything else related to your husband's involvement with them, I'm afraid."

Evalyn's fragility took hold and she collapsed there and then, bursting into tears and covering her face with her hands.

For a moment, I didn't know what I should do. An impulse prompted me to reach for her hand and console her; another part of me wanted me to promise her that we'd catch the culprits and bring them to justice. If the Demonica thought they could get away with slaughtering an innocent werewolf, moreover a police officer, they were wrong. I always preferred actions over words: when I had reached my lowest after my sister's brutal murder, the drive and fire to avenge the Demonica had kept me sane and motivated.

I cleared my throat and turned to her. "Fear not, ma'am. With or without this technology, we'll catch your husband's killers and hold them accountable for their crime. The Angelica Order is far more powerful than the Demonica."

Her tears caught in her throat and, gulping, she said, "I want to believe you, detective. I really want to. Please promise me you'll find these demons and punish them. No more innocent lives should be lost at their hands."

I understood where she was coming from. Oh boy, how well did I know this internal fire ravaging her heart, seething in her blood, and wanting a horrible death for her enemy; but rules were rules. I couldn't play a judge, jury, and executioner and take matters into my own hands; it was the job of the High Court. Once we caught any Demonica, our protocol demanded that we hand the monsters to the governing body, a separate division of the Angelica Order. The High Court stood higher in the hierarchy than even the ABI.

"I'll catch these demons and bring them to the Angelica. But my superiors will punish them, not me. It's out of my reach. Now, could you think of a way your husband might have reached out to so he could join the Demonica Order? We need to find out how he came in contact with them. Please

think carefully, as this is crucial to the investigation,” I said, speaking calmly and staring at her intently.

She took out a tissue and blew her nose in it. Staring at me, her eyes blank and blurry, she finally said, “I have no idea, Detective Tyler. Besides looking out for our shifter district and his job, he didn’t have any interests or hobbies.”

“And what about bars? Did he frequent Fairy’s Kiss?” I asked her carefully. The forensic team had found a matchbook with the Fairy’s Kiss logo, one of my favorite go-to places in Aran after work. I began to wonder if the victim didn’t share some of my habits.

Evalyn furrowed her brows as she thought hard on my question. “Fairy’s Kiss? Isn’t that a bar in the fae district?” Seeing my nod in confirmation, she added, “I don’t recall him mentioning that bar. Why, detective?”

“Well, we found a matchbook with the bar’s logo in Officer McDonald’s pockets so I thought he might have contacted the Demonica over there. It’s a wild guess, but at this point I can’t dismiss any possibilities,” I said.

She pondered for a few seconds and added, “I find it hard to believe that the Demonica and that particular brotherhood you mentioned was willing to initiate him into their ranks.” She shook her head in disbelief, her fingers fumbling with the small tissue she still held in her delicate hands. “What you described to me sounds so unlike my Charlie. It’s so surreal, it’s frightening.”

## Chapter 12

Ashadha

After Evalyn's visit, I was a mess. She wanted me to find her husband's murderers and punish them... ha! If she only knew that I, myself, was a demon, a half-demon... I lied to her and promised her I'd find the killers. What else could I have said? I wanted to soothe her and get her out of my office. Once I was alone, I nearly had a panic attack; the complexity of the case hit me like a sledgehammer. First, was the blow of learning about the demons' involvement. Next, the sexy detective angel who kept asking if I was hiding something—what the hell did he want from me? How could he even know I had a secret?

*You know what he wants. You can't be that dumb, Ash.*

I ignored my rude inner voice and focused on the outside world, peeking through the drawn blinds. That stranger was still across the street watching my office. Triple Hell. Things were getting worse with each passing hour. First Charlie's murder. Then, the Demonica involvement, followed by the sexy but dangerous angel. Now, to top it all off, this man who was following me.

I had the impulse to flee, to run, to hide in the mountains if I had to, but to leave this damn city. My intuition and survival instincts screamed at me to get out of here without delay. Every second spent in Aran increased the chances someone would discover my secret. And even the possibility of the Demonica learning about my existence. The sudden realization of the threat they posed to me made me numb. I'd been afraid of the Angelica Order and what they'd do to me, but now that the Demonica was in the picture, too, I didn't think they'd let me live my life in peace as I had been—they'd want to control me. After all, I was a half-demon.

I was about to start packing my stuff to flee from Aran when I made a realization. *If I run away now, the detective*



*angel would think I'm somehow involved in Charlie's murder,* I thought.

Damn it. Then I'd have to leave the city as soon as possible. I had to get out of Aran. This place was too dangerous for me to keep my cover with all those high-ranking supernaturals on both sides of the spectrum. Ironically, I couldn't trust either of the two orders; I was too divergent to be left to live in peace. It sucked being so different, but what could I do?

The last thing that had my panties in a bunch was the angel's warning. Had he seen a premonition of something happening to me? That chubby man outside who kept a tail on me did bother me, but I believed he was harmless. Moreover, he was a human. Perhaps the Aran Police had deployed him to keep an eye on me. After all, I was the one who discovered their dead colleague. My hand cupped my mother's gift, the pendant's magical vibrations partly toning down my spiked anxiety. My paranoia had shot up like a Boeing, soaring high in the sky, but for my sanity, I needed to calm down. With my hands still gripping the pendant, I summoned my familiar.

White Paw's fiery-gold body fluttered as she materialized in my office and landed on the desk. I talked to her, telling her all my troubles and fears about the case Evalyn had hired me for, then Charlie's death and the demons who'd murdered him. I voiced my anxiety about the angel's warning and the stranger outside who kept an eye on me, too. White Paw listened carefully to me, and once I finished complaining to her about all my troubles, she sniffed my hands and lay next to me. Her amber eyes stared at me and I thought I discerned compassion and pity in them.

Caressing my familiar's tiny neck, I asked myself how I'd gotten in so deep. It all started with taking that case, but who could have guessed it'd be more complicated than it appeared? I suddenly remembered the small jolt of electricity that hit me right when Evalyn first visited me; then the first vision of Charlie being slaughtered exactly the way it had happened this morning. I shook my head. I already regretted taking the case. She'd paid me generously, but now what could I do? How would I get through this? I had to keep as low profile as

possible to avoid the Angelica and Demonica. Easy-peasy, right?

At the end of the long, emotionally draining day, I decided to hit the hay early. A peaceful rest and sleep didn't follow, though. I kept jerking from my sleep, running away from something. At one point, I must have fallen into a deeper state of sleep because I suddenly found myself in a crowded room. A hooded man in a scarlet robe stood in front of a large bowl of water while I was somewhere beside him. He reached over and grabbed me. Somehow my body must have shrunk because he held me above the bowl. A sharp wind blew through the room and I heard other people gasping. I let out a cry, trying to wriggle myself from the creepy dude's firm grip. He wouldn't let me go, though. His hold tightened, and a set of pointy teeth protruded from his mouth. His crimson eyes flickered and my hair stood on an end. A stronger gust of wind came, whirling around us, and a dark mass solidified, surrounding the creepy dude and me. Now I could hear him chanting something. My skin began to throb with pain, and the sensation of heaviness prickled every nerve and pore. I tried getting myself out of the man's grip, but his arms and body seemed to have frozen. I yelled in pain and frustration, my heart beating wildly in my ribcage. This couldn't happen to me! I told myself that surely, the gods didn't hate me so much as to let me be killed this way. The dark shadowy mass materialized, and a seven-foot-tall, greenish, cyclops stared at me. The cloaked man's humming grew louder, and now I could hear the other people in the room chanting along with him. The greenish monster grinned at me, then with an abrupt push, it went inside me.

I sat up in my bed, screaming; my neck and pajamas drenched in sweat. My breathing rapid, my heart beating like a drum, I swallowed the lump growing in my throat. I hadn't had that nightmare since I was twelve. I'd told my mother about it at the time and she had calmed me, reassuring me that it was just a nightmare. Now, I wasn't so sure. I looked at the pendant around my neck—I hadn't taken it off when I went to sleep. Clearly, it hadn't managed to keep my body and mind calm, free of worries. I silently cursed and summoned White

Paw. If there was anyone, or anything, that could get me back in check, it'd be her. My familiar's fiery body glowed in the darkness that engulfed my room, her warmth sending a tiny bolt of fire down my spine that was frozen from fear. I inhaled deeply and hugged the tiny dragon, her snout rubbing against my pajamas. She lay next to me and I fell asleep again.

My rest didn't last for long, though. White Paw let out terse and shrill scream that shook my whole body, rattling through my sleep-ridden skull. I sat up abruptly in my bed, White Paw flying wildly around my room.

"Hey, what is it?" I asked her, trying to comprehend the situation. She locked her big amber eyes on mine—a silent exchange of information between us. Someone was outside my apartment, trying to break in. Good thing I'd put up magical spells and wards to guard my apartment when I first moved in here.

The sudden click of a door echoed through the silence of the night, and goosebumps covered my flesh. White Paw looked at me again, this time silent. I knew what she was thinking: the noise came from someone opening my front door. The intruder was inside my apartment. I reached for my nightstand and took out my special gun with silver bullets and listened carefully for any sounds. Only the distant, rhythmic ticking of my wall clock from the living room disturbed the stillness of the night. My wristwatch showed past one am. I tiptoed to my bedroom door, my familiar fluttering beside me. The low, barely audible sounds of footsteps reached my ears. Whoever had broken in stood in the corridor, probably trying to move as soundlessly as possible, yet thinking I was asleep. Well, they were dead wrong. I pulled the door handle down, careful not to make a sound, and creaked the door open, stepping aside so I could see through the slight gap. I activated my magical sense, trying to decipher if the intruder had a magical scent or a human one. I detected the scent of rotten eggs, though the stench wasn't as bad as that at Charlie's crime scene. Great. The intruder was probably a lower level demon. I gripped my gun tighter, vowing to shoot the bastard as soon as I laid eyes on him. I knew it was a male demon: the aroma of rich, masculine musk reached my nostrils. The small,

calculated steps drew closer, the scent of rotten eggs growing stronger. I pressed my back against the wall, just inches from the door's opening. When he entered my room, I'd be there, waiting for him. With the view to the hallway from my hiding place, I'd blast his brains.

The steps became bolder, as if the asshole worried less and less if I could hear him. He must not have heard White Paw shriek and decided that if I hadn't reacted by now, I must be either sound asleep or out of the apartment. How mistaken was he!

A few long seconds passed by, making my heart race wilder in my chest. I almost stopped breathing, keeping my breaths as shallow and muted as possible. At last, a darker shadow appeared in the room, a tiny moonbeam throwing light through my window onto the corridor, which was how I noticed him. He was around five-foot-ten, dressed in jeans and a blazer, while a bandana covered his face. Only two slits of dark eyes poked through his mask as he stopped right before my door that stood ajar. He hesitated for a second, then set his foot forward, carefully passing through the doorway. I stood inches from him; my face and breath frozen. As soon as he came into the room, I pushed away from the wall and, facing the asshole, fired my gun at him. A series of consecutive shots tore through the silence of the night, the bullets hitting his chest and left leg. He cursed, a muffled scream leaving his covered mouth. Hobbling, he ran toward the front door. I kept shooting at him. My brain had become ferocious. It wasn't enough for me that I wounded him; oh, no, I wanted his blood. Once he slammed the door behind his back, his feet hitting the staircase, his steps uneven and heavy, I stopped shooting and lowered the gun. My lungs screamed for oxygen, lots of it, so I inhaled deeply through my mouth, greedy for air.

Before long, someone else's steps drew closer and my front door opened again.

## Chapter 13

Ashadha

I gripped my gun, raising it in front of my chest. He clearly couldn't have come back, this guy here wasn't hurt. No magical signature came to me, so it had to be human.

The newcomer flicked the light switch on, and called out, "Ashadha Matthews? Are you alright? It's Officer Zack Randall from the Aran Police. Where are you?"

Still holding the gun, I moved closer to the voice, keeping my steps small and stealthy. I still couldn't trust this guy; I needed to see him. When I reached the living room and faced the front door, I gasped. I saw the short, plump guy who had been following me and waiting outside my apartment. I lowered my gun and came over to him.

"Too late. He ran away," I said.

The chubby guy cursed aloud and ran his fingers through his curly ginger hair. "I only took my eyes off your apartment for a minute for the bathroom and when I came back, I saw a tall man with a bandana running away from the building. I heard gunshots. I lost him in the darkness and came to check on you. Please don't tell Chief Hammond I stepped away from my post, okay?"

I chuckled, heaving a sigh of relief. So, this guy worked for the police and the chief had sent him to guard me. Thank goodness I wasn't the damsel in distress the chief thought I was otherwise, who knows what the creep who broke into my apartment could have done to me.

"It's fine, I managed on my own. I shot the intruder several times. He was hobbling as he ran away."

The short officer took out his cell phone and dialed a number, probably Chief Hammond who held me at the crime scene yesterday before the angel arrived. The police officer's conversation with his superior was short.

“He’s coming here,” Officer Randall announced as he hung up the phone, putting it back into his back pocket.

“The chief?”

The officer shook his head and, scratching his chin, he said, “No, Detective Tyler.”

The blood froze in my veins. The last thing I needed was that sexy guy stepping into my apartment and poking his nose into my private space. I had to think of a reason to avoid his coming. I began to feebly protest, but the officer held his hand in front of me and cut through my protests.

“My chief said Detective Tyler was coming and advised me not to listen to your excuses. Sorry, ma’am. Tonight’s not your lucky night.”

## Chapter 14

Kevan

I slept soundly, dreaming of running after someone, the images vague and hazy, when my cell phone rang shrilly. That damn ringtone made me nearly jump, the stupid melody hammered in my head. Still sleepy, I reached, searching for my phone. Where did I put the damn thing? My fingers bumped into a heavy mass, then something crashed down on my floor. I cursed, the phone's energetic melody still filling my head as if to spite me. I flipped on the light and saw a broken glass lying on the floor; the cell phone kept ringing on my nightstand, untouched. Cursing, I grabbed the phone and took the call. It was Chief Hammond.

“Yes?” I said more grumpily than usual, the harshness in my voice perceptible.

“Hey, Tyler sorry for waking you up. I'm calling because someone tried to break into Ashadha Matthew's apartment. You requested I put one of my men to guard her place, and to call if anything happened.”

At the mention of her name, my residual laziness evaporated like water droplets on a hot summer day. Holy magic, the Demonica acted faster than I thought they would. But most of all, the dread of wondering if she was harmed or not burned my mind with ferocity. The idea that she could be hurt or in pain made my blood boil in anger and frustration.

“Is she alright? Did your man catch the offender?” I fired my questions one after the other.

“Yes, she's fine. Don't worry. Unfortunately, my officer missed the intruder and saw him only when he fled from her apartment.”

“Damn it, he should have been more careful! Did he leave his post?”

“No, he hasn't.”

“Is your man still with her? What’s his name?” I asked scrambling to put my clothes on. I needed to see her, console her, and most of all, inquire about what had happened at her place.

“Yes, he’s with her. Don’t worry. His name is Zack Randall. Do you need anything else from me? If you wish, I can place more of my officers to guard this woman.”

“Not for now, thank you. I’m going to talk to her. Will call you if I need your help. Please let Officer Randall know that I’ll take over surveillance for the night.”

I hung up the phone at last, happy to be free from the tedious conversation and move freely.

I hopped into my Jeep and pressed the gas down hard. The car took off, much faster than the speed limit. In my defense, it was the middle of the night—my watch showed one forty am—and I had a case; the most important one I had ever had since the start of my career at the ABI.

I reached Ashadha’s apartment in Johnsonville at two am sharp. God, she lived in a truly horrible neighborhood: the stench of decayed food and the smell of cooked rice, chili and other spices filled my nostrils. To make matters worse, her apartment and office were situated near a Chinese restaurant, just across the street. I parked and went into her building. I climbed the stairs to the second floor where she lived, a pungent smell hung in the stale air. I knew this scent: even though it was milder than the one at the murder scene, I could recognize a demon’s signature from miles away. Damn it. A demon had attempted to break into Ashadha’s apartment! Fate knows what he wanted from her and what he could have done to her. I wondered how she’d been able to beat the demon, my curiosity making me equally uneasy and proud. Despite my confused emotions, I had to be strong and maintain a detached distance from her.

I burst into her apartment, startling her and the short, plump police officer.

“Ashadha? How are you? Are you hurt or scared?” I walked straight to her, not even greeting the officer who sat on the



sofa in her living room. Ashadha walked into the room carrying two cups of tea..

She didn't show the slightest interest in seeing me, her face inscrutable when her eyes fell on me. Something fluttered down my chest, a pang reverberated in my soul. She didn't care about me—the realization hit me like a sledgehammer. Bitterness swelled inside my heart and I kicked myself for yearning for someone who kept more secrets than a sleek salesman. Of course, she wouldn't be interested in someone like me. It would be my job to uncover her secrets and she didn't seem interested in sharing that with me.

“Hi, Detective Tyler.” She greeted me coldly as she put the two cups of tea on the table before the sofa and slid onto the fluffy furniture beside Officer Randall. “I'm managing fine, thank you for your concern.”

She answered politely and even though her tone was normal, I couldn't shake the feeling that she mocked me.

“Hello, Detective Tyler. Chief Hammond told me you were coming. I was here when the intruder tried—” the man stood as he was speaking, but I was uninterested in what he had to say.

“Thank you, Officer Randall. You're free to go for tonight. I'll take it from here.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room and the officer went speechless. Ashadha came to her senses faster than him.

“Wait, you can't send him away now, when I made him a cup of hot tea, Detective,” she argued, crossing her arms in front of her chest defensively, her emphasis on “detective” sarcastic and biting.

“It's okay, I need to talk to her. Go home to your wife,” I said to Randall, his confused face meeting my firm stare.

He hesitated for a second but seeing the determined look in my eyes, he reluctantly gave up and left, leaving me alone with her.

“Did you have to send him away?” she exclaimed once Randall slammed the front door shut. “Now you have me on

your own...satisfied?"

Her words were like daggers, indignation burning in her eyes. I couldn't help but admire her passion and how hot she looked when angered. A steady voice at the back of my mind reminded me to get her out of my system and start working. I cleared my throat.

"You and I both know a demon has just attacked you. It's best for Officer Randall to go home and leave this to us. My question, though, is: what exactly are *you*?"

Her anger gave way as the defiant posture of her neck and body vanished and she slumped into her seat, fear flickering across her face. Yes, I could almost taste her tremor.

"What do you mean? I am just a human psychic, that's all," she retorted, avoiding my stare. Instead, she sipped at one of the cups of tea.

"I'm not so sure," I said slowly, my eyes locked on hers, so focused that I could almost burn a hole in her if I wanted to. Some of the higher angels could do it.

She laughed derisively and met my stare defiantly, the fire in her eyes burning brighter than ever. I had to apply restraint not to grab her in my arms and kiss her here and now. *If she allowed me*, I had to remind myself, given the dirty looks she threw my way.

"Then what am I? A demon? A ghoul? A vampire?"

Her question caught me by surprise. I thought for a moment, then said, simply, "No." I slid onto the sofa, next to her. She immediately moved further away from me, almost bumping into the recliner lever at the opposite end. I chuckled to myself when I saw her panic. It was dangerous for her to sit so close to me. She probably thought that I could put a spell on her.

"You're not a demon. I can't detect any magic inside you," I conceded and leaned into the soft cushions of the sofa. The fear for her safety, the mad car driving, and now this fight had taken a toll on my nerves; the stress had my energy crashing and I felt more exhausted than ever. Closing my eyes, my

fingers massaging my temples, I turned to her. “But demons keep appearing wherever you go.”

A long silence stretched; only the ticking of the wall clock disturbed the pause that charged the space between us. I was ashamed to admit that I liked to sit next to her and listen to her breathe. It was both soothing and intoxicating.

“No,” she finally replied, breaking the stillness of the moment. I opened my eyes and regarded her. She was so close to me, yet so far away. Pity and hurt swirled inside my chest and distinct anger rose in the pit of my stomach.

“I didn’t go anywhere this time. I was sleeping when that asshole tried to get to me. It’s the first time this has happened to me.” She shook her head.

“But you were the one who found Charlie’s corpse. And demons had been there too. They slaughtered him,” I remarked. I couldn’t help but feel like there was some kind of link or a connection between her and the Demonica as if she attracted the motherfuckers. Or maybe they attracted her, I don’t know; but the pattern was there shining brightly at my face like a flashlight. I would have had to be blind not to see it.

“So, what? I had a vision of his death; sue me,” she said sarcastically. I was starting to get tired of her stubbornness, the way she had closed herself to the outside world and, in particular, to me.

“Whatever. I can’t really think straight right now. I need a drink. There’s a great bar in the fae district. Wanna come? I’ll drive,” I said, abruptly standing from her sofa.

Confusion and mistrust brewed in her dark eyes. I thought we both needed a distraction from the intrusion and since I’d been meaning to check out Fairy Kiss anyway, since finding their matchbook in Charlie’s pocket, I figured a drink wouldn’t hurt.

“And why on earth should I come with you?” She asked, her voice filled with exhaustion and trepidation. “Unless you’re asking me out on a date. Is that what this is all about, Detective Tyler?”

For a fleeting second the desire to say goodbye to her and get out of her crappy apartment crossed my mind, but a tiny voice told me that I couldn't let her win the argument. If I stayed calm at her snark and patiently explained her why she'd benefit coming with me, maybe I could get to know her better at the fae bar. She wasn't completely wrong, but ultimately, a date wasn't the goal. Yet.

"No, Miss Matthews, it's not a date. A walk in the fresh air might do wonders for both of us. Plus, I'd like to show you something there. Needless to say, you'd be safer with me than on your own. I fear that more demons may come after you."

"What do you want to show me?" she asked cautiously, suspicion lacing her words.

I threw a glance at her and my eyes lingered on the remaining cup of tea, the liquid must have cooled down. "I have a feeling that the victim might have gotten in contact with the Demonica at that bar. It won't hurt to follow this trace. Also, the bar owner is a long-time friend of mine and makes the best cocktails in the city. You coming?" I strode to the front door corridor ready to go out. "It's on me, again. You can't turn down such an offer," I teased her.

She hesitated as considered the offer, silently moving her mouth in the process. I couldn't help but notice her pouted lips looked hella sexy and inviting...

"Okay, to hell with my sleep. But I'm only coming because I'm intrigued and need a drink, too. So don't get any ideas about us, uh... you know what I mean," she said, a slight flush adorning her cheeks. With a few brisk steps she joined me in the corridor. I suppressed a laugh and only nodded my head in confirmation.

*That's my girl,* I thought but didn't dare to voice it.

## Chapter 15

Kevan

I'd never before felt such difficulty driving as I did with Ashadha beside me. Her dark black curls danced in the night breeze as I rolled down the window for some fresh air. Trying to keep my focus on the road, I found myself staring at her beautiful eyes, her full, sexy lips, her entire body capturing my attention. The pressure built in my chest, tightening around my heart, as I tried to keep my mind, and eyes, off her.

*You have to get her out of your system; she is dangerous and keeps too many secrets. You never liked anyone with secrets, let alone secrets related to demons,* I kept reminding myself, yet my stupid heart and hormones didn't listen. I yearned for her; to be in her presence, to see and touch her... I shook my head. I didn't know how this would end, but a tiny voice at the back of my mind predicted a bad outcome.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter and pressed the accelerator: I wanted to reach the Fae District faster. This neighborhood sat to the right of the Rocky Mountains, bordering the Alpha District. Fae had bizarre and eccentric bars but Fairy Kiss was, in my opinion, the best bar in Aran City. We had many bars downtown around ABI headquarters and I'd visited them all, but none of these establishments could measure up to Fairy Kiss. I tried to make casual conversation with Ashadha and asked her if she'd ever been there before. She glanced at me, then shook her head.

"No. I've never even heard of it," she admitted and directed her gaze at the landscape around us. We'd long ago left the busy part of Aran, venturing now into the agricultural and rural area, shrouded in darkness.

"You'll love it. It's truly magical. Plus, the owner is a friend of mine. Well, kinda," I said, recalling how I'd come to meet Steven Maddock. My mentor at the academy had trained with Steven when they were younger, more than a decade ago.

Even though Steven Maddock couldn't pass the initiation tests at the academy and had to drop out of the order, he and my angel mentor remained friends. On the day of my initiation test, after I was accepted into the Angelica Order and received the superpowers of an angel, my angel mentor, Dan, brought me to Fairy Kiss and I met Steven for the first time.

"Have you visited the Shamrock?" Ashadha asked out of nowhere, changing my train of thought.

"The Irish pub downtown? It's not far from ABI. Of course, I've been there," I said. I'd tried all the bars in a perimeter of ten miles from our headquarters.

"What do you think of Conner's magical cocktails? He's fae and sprinkles some fairy dust in all the drinks.

I grinned. "Ah, Conner. Yeah, he isn't bad for downtown, but wait 'til you see Fairy Kiss." I raised my brows suggestively. Ashadha only rolled her eyes and sighed. She couldn't understand yet, but she would once we entered the bar.

"Comparing the Shamrock to Fairy Kiss is like comparing an angel to an archangel," I said, thinking this comparison would help her comprehend better. But the vacant look in her eyes made me realize she had no idea of how our order worked; to be fair most humans didn't. I silently cursed, reminding myself that our order's secrets had to remain secrets. And that required me to keep my mouth shut. For some reason, I kept babbling to this strange woman, speaking a lot more than usual. I couldn't help it when I was around her.

"We're here," I said as I pulled my Jeep to a stop at the curb in front of Fairy Kiss. The dark building didn't show any signs of life, but I knew this place well enough to know that its façade was designed to deceive. Steven intentionally didn't use any lights on the outside to make sure only regulars knew how to enter the bar. Fairy Kiss had become so successful that he didn't care about attracting newcomers. I scrambled out of my seat and ran to her door to hold it open while she climbed out. This time, she mumbled a short "thank you." My chest fluttered; the same damn butterflies making me lightheaded. I

scolded myself for showing weakness again and strode to the dark metallic door.

As soon as we entered the long, neon-lit corridor, Andrea, the banshee came to greet us. She was a five-foot-six-inch tall fae, with amber hair and hazel eyes. She wore a long red dress, and a funny cap with fruits adorned her head. Steven had hired her to work as a “psychic bouncer,” as he liked to phrase it. Not long ago, there had been a brawl here, which resulted in a death. Steven wanted to guarantee no more patrons would die at Fairy Kiss. Andrea regarded both Ashadha and me with her trademark expression of boredom. Then, once she decided neither of us was dying tonight, returned to her lyre playing as she let us through.

Ashadha, a step ahead of me, turned to me with a quizzical expression. I placed my hand on her shoulder, urging her to keep walking, when the same electrifying jolt of energy hit me, passing through us. I dropped my hand from her body, involuntarily jumping away from her. She must have felt it, too, because she jumped away also. Fates, what was it with me touching her? It had provoked a mini firework show for the second time.

Distant music came from the bar’s entrance at the end of the corridor, making it harder to hear each other. It was Wednesday night, and the bar would be relatively full. If we’d come Friday instead, the banshee would have refused to allow us to enter the bar, as Friday was so busy it required reservations. I suddenly realized that since it was nearly three thirty in the morning, the majority of the patrons would have gone by now. The Angelica Order had lifted the human ban on serving alcohol after two am, plus the fae liked to party ‘til early dawn.

“This way,” I said to her and motioned at her to follow me, this time careful not to touch her. She nodded and I thought her body still trembled from the wave of electricity that hit us. I hurried to the dark door in the corridor, this one bearing three water waves above a dot—the unmistakable logo of Fairy Kiss. The music grew louder the further we went down the hall. I

pushed the door open, making way for Ashadha to walk in first, then I followed suit.

Inside, the scent of greenery, plants, and various herbs filled the air, the music a bit louder than was comfortable. A few earth fae sat on the wooden chairs at the bar, engaged in heated conversations, and they didn't notice us. That explained the smell. Upon closer look, I saw that one was a dryad, her body a tree log, her head a tree's crown; another was a rose fae, her body tender, her face in the form of a rose. The third was a familiar face. Smith—the Dullahan, a dark fae in the form of a headless horseman—tended the bar, his black robe covering his skinny corpse, his severed head resting on the far end of the bar.

Ashadha nearly screamed when she saw the Dullahan, but I tried to pacify her, sending a tiny wave of angelic magic her way. This time, I knew better than to touch her. I made my way to a secluded table at the far end of the main hall near the jukebox. As I had guessed, the bar was nearly empty.

“And you like this place?” she asked with suspicion as she pulled up a chair and slid into it.

“Why? Don't you like it here? You haven't even tasted the drinks,” I remarked.

She shrugged. “It looks cheap, that's all.”

I couldn't help but grin. “First impressions can be deceiving. As the old saying goes, ‘don't judge a book by its cover.’”

She forced a smile and took the menu the waitress set on our table as she waltzed over to us.

“Good evening, Mr. Tyler. What would you like to order?” Kelly, one of the long-time waitresses, greeted me.

“One gin and tonic with a slice of lemon, please,” I said without hesitation. It was my usual order here.

“And for you, ma'am?” She prompted Ashadha, who frowned as she leafed through the menu. Growing impatient, Kelly was about to dash back to the bar, when Ashadha ordered.



“A ginger ale for me, that’s all.”

Kelly arched her eyebrows in surprise, then nodded her head. She glanced my way, as if asking me where I’d found this woman. Here, everyone drank alcohol and the heavier, the better so I understood Kelly’s surprise at Ashadha’s order. I pretended I hadn’t seen Kelly’s look and, instead, asked, “Hey, is Steve here?”

“Yup, he was doing the books in the office. Want me to get him?”

I smiled. “That’d be great. Thank you, Kelly.”

She beamed and went to the bar, passing through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen and back office.

I felt Ashadha’s stare and sensed her discomfort as the idea crossed my mind that she might have not appreciated the atmosphere at Fairy Kiss. I cleared my throat and decided to change the subject and get some much-needed answers from this stubborn and infuriatingly sexy woman.

“You never told me how you managed to push the intruder from your home,” I noted, not taking my eyes off her.

She waved her hand dismissively in the air. “I have a gun. I fired it at him. I think I wounded him several times. But he’s a demon; he’ll heal fast.”

I arched my brows, considering that she must have been a decent shot to hit him more than once.

“Did you manage to see his face?”

Ashadha pouted her lips, mischievous flames twinkled in her gorgeous eyes. I had a hard time concentrating while she faced me across the table. “Why are we really here, Detective? You claimed you wanted to follow a possible trace, but all I can see is a shabby bar and a rude waitress.”

I tried my best to keep a straight face. “I wanted you to relax some while we talked, that’s all. I didn’t mean any harm. And I think it’s important to find out why Charlie had a matchbook from Fairy Kiss. I’ve asked to speak with Steven to see if he has any answers. I’m sure you can help with that.”

“I think you can do fine on your own. I’m exhausted and really would just like to go home, after all.” She abruptly pulled her chair back and was about to stand up, but I hastily reached for her hand, stopping her. The same electricity bolt flared up and I withdrew my hand from hers right away.

“Ashadha, please. I need answers. I’m trying my best to uncover the murderer but there are so many missing pieces. And you seem to be important here, too.”

Her eyes darkened but she remained in her seat. After a few tension-filled seconds, she said, “You overestimate me, Detective Tyler.”

I smiled brightly. “Please, call me Kevan.”

She didn’t show any reaction to my request. Instead, she asked me, “Do you have a suspect?”

I stared at the edge of the wooden table, my mind running wild. I had this sinking suspicion that whoever had connected Charlie to the Demonica Order was also responsible for his murder. The police officer had to have contacted someone for them to have known he was susceptible to their invitation, but I didn’t know how that would have happened. Heck, I didn’t even think they had people functioning this far into the USA. We’d received reports about some activity near the Mexican border, but here in the capital? So close to ABI headquarters? This was too bold even for the Demonica given we’d defeated them. Ever since the end of the war, I had only heard of one case of an actual demon captured in Aran City. The rest consisted of lower Demonica supernaturals, such as witches and shifters who had made a pact with the dark side, and even a couple of vampires.

I was lost in the fog of my thoughts when someone’s heavy hand patted my shoulder, a familiar voice greeting me.

“Kev? Nice to see you, buddy!” Steven’s five-foot-seven-inch tall body came into view as he placed our orders on the table with gusto: my gin and tonic, and her ginger ale. “Long time since I’ve seen you, friend. What brings you here?” He pulled a chair from the vacant table nearby and pulled up next to Ashadha and me.

“A murder,” Ashadha said casually, as if she was telling him about her favorite drink. She spoke before I could reply to him.

An awkward silence fell between us. Steven regarded her for a second, then me, and burst out laughing. “I hope the murder didn’t happen in my bar.” He winked at me and gave my back a strong pat. “In any case, I haven’t heard of anyone being killed. At least not in here.”

## Chapter 16

Ashadha

“No one said the murder happened in your bar,” I said, eyeing the black-haired man that had stealthily arrived at our table. He appeared to be in his late forties, with the physique of a fitness instructor. He was clad in a dark green shirt with a beige cardigan that highlighted his muscles and biceps; tweed pants finished his attire. Since he had rolled up his sleeves, I had a full view of his many tattoos. I had the feeling he had inked his whole body, though I could be wrong. At least he hadn’t tattooed his head and neck. Something about this man didn’t sit well with me. I couldn’t help but register the tight ball that had lumped in my stomach when he joined the angel and me at our table.

The bar owner took a deeper look at me, which gave me goosebumps, and then he turned to the angel.

“She is feisty. I like her.” He directed his attention back to me and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Steven Maddock, the owner of Fairy Kiss.” He stretched out his wide, rough hand to me. I hesitated before shaking it. I half expected a nasty vision or at least a premonition to assault my mind, but surprisingly, nothing like that happened. On the contrary, a sense of deep peace engulfed my senses, and the tightness and mistrust from earlier evaporated from my body. This guy wasn’t bad. I realized I’d misjudged him as he gave me a bright smile, his beard seemingly glowing in the dim light from the flickering bulbs above.

“Ashadha Matthews. Nice to meet you,” I said finally, his hand still gripping mine. He chuckled and let go of my small hand, which looked like a baby’s compared to his paw.

“This your first time here?” he asked.

“Yes, I brought her here,” the angel answered before I could reply.

I gave him a dirty look and turned to the burly bar owner. “Your friend, Kevan, said Fairy Kiss was the best bar in town, so he was adamant we come in.”

Steven beamed with delight and, glancing at the angel, he admitted, “I’m happy I’ve built such a reputation. I’m trying my best to stay on top of the game. Please, taste your drink, darling, and tell me if you like it. When Kelly told me you were here, I put extra effort into both your drinks.” He winked at the angel and, with a nod of his head, prompted me to taste my ginger ale. I wondered if he put fae dust in his drinks like Conner sometimes did at Shamrock. I wasn’t thirsty yet but decided to satisfy his wish. My fingers cupped the highball glass and I took a small sip. The familiar taste of ginger ale burst across my tongue and mouth, but then a new sensation hit me like a train: light bubbles swelled inside my throat and chest, overflowing in droves, exploding in my bloodstream. Finally, I could tell that I was grinning from ear to ear like an idiot. Holy Hell, this ginger ale magic worked stronger than Conner’s.

Steven laughed out loud as he saw my reaction. “I take it you enjoyed my extra fae magic?”

I nodded in confirmation, the silly smile still spread across my lips like a clown’s. Not that I didn’t enjoy the magical effect it had on me, but I wouldn’t normally be that chill; especially in the company of someone who would probably kill me if I let my guard down and he learned the truth about me. The fear still permeated my core, but the fluttering wave of happiness and joy managed to push aside some of my paralyzing anxiety. My mind started to care a lot less about the possibility that this sexy angel could kill me the second he learned I was half demon.

Kevan took a big gulp from his glass, his vibe and attitude changing almost immediately as well. The sharp look in his eyes softened as the alertness of his muscles and his serious expression gave way to a relaxed, smiling version of Kevan Tyler. This wasn’t the intimidating six-foot-six angel; the guy who sat across from me at the table seemed more like a giant teddy bear. I pinched myself: what the hell was wrong with

me? Even if the danger was far away, it still existed and the only reason I let myself think of him that way was because of that magical drink Steven had drugged me with, right? Curiously enough, Steven's signature felt pretty human: I couldn't detect a shred of magical existence inside him.

*I invert and suppress your demoniacal magic, too,* the voice inside me chimed in. I brushed it aside as I always did. Now was the least appropriate time of all for it to speak up.

"Now, you look much more comfortable," the bar owner said, nodding his head approvingly as he regarded both of us. "When I came to the table, you two were at odds with each other."

"No, that's not true," the angel lightly protested, laughing through his smile. "Ashadha and I are consulting on an important matter. It's strictly work-related."

"Aha, the murder?" Steven asked as small, impish flames flickered in his eyes.

Kevan reached in his wallet and, taking out a picture of Charlie, he turned to Steven.

"This is the victim. An officer with the Aran Police. Have you seen him hanging out in your bar recently?"

Steven pondered the question for a long minute as he took the photograph in his hands. Finally, he shook his head. "I can't remember seeing this man here, but then hundreds of people visit Fairy's Kiss daily. Why are you asking?" He dropped the picture on the table and the angel took it back, tucking the photo back into his wallet.

"We found a matchbook from Fairy's Kiss in the victim's pocket. My guess is that the officer might have met with someone here," Kevan said calmly.

"I can't remember, man. Wish I could help you, but this face doesn't ring a bell. I'm sorry. If I recall something, I'll call you, though. Now if you two will excuse me, I'm overwhelmed with work tonight. Have to do the books. See you later, buddy." He patted Kevan's shoulder again and went to the creepy headless bartender. As he moved away from us, I

noticed that he limped slightly on his right foot. Steven said something unintelligible and patted the Dullahan on his back as the two talked. The headless creature had taken his severed head in his arms, his lips moving as he communicated with his boss. Cold shivers ran down my limbs, and the feeling of repulsion filled my chest. I'd seen a Dullahan once before, in the Shamrock during a Halloween party. But tonight was my first time to witness a Dullahan this closely. I nearly shrieked when I'd first laid eyes on the headless body pouring and mixing cocktails behind the bar. The sudden realization that he could have put in the fae magic hit me.

“Hey, is this funny magic that makes us behave like stoned teenagers coming from the Dullahan?” I asked Kevan, pointing at the headless barkeeper. The angel chuckled, his eyes losing focus as he regarded me for longer than I'd have liked. There was something about his lingering stares that sent tiny, warm bubbles down my belly. Perhaps he thought I hadn't noticed the way he looked at me, but I knew his look far too well to mistake it: he had the hots for me. Before he drank his magical drink, his stern and serious face had me wondering if I hadn't misread his feelings, but now that his mask was off, I could clearly see he was into me. My heart fluttered inside my chest, my pulse rushing. I immediately scolded myself for allowing this weakness to creep in. I didn't want to like him. I couldn't like him. Stupid, stupid heart!

“No, the Dullahan doesn't have that type of fae magic. Steven has many jars with different fae flavors they've given him. They owe him big time,” he finally said, the smile still plastered across his lips. I couldn't help but look closer at his full lips. My eyes skimmed his face, staring at the sexy stubble that highlighted his cheekbones... I shook my head, trying to look at him in a casual way. Two gorgeous blue eyes looked back at me, warmth radiating from them. For God's sake! No, I wasn't into him. This was strictly business-related, as he'd claimed earlier.

“I don't understand something, Ash—can I call you Ash?” He said, bending forward as he inched closer to me.

I nodded: this was what my mother and my ex-boyfriend had called me. Ron's memory brought back a bitter wave of emotions, the light headiness of the ginger ale wearing off.

“You and I can work well together. If you join the ABI, or even work as a consultant for us, everyone will benefit. You'll get out of that shithole, Johnsonville, and I'll get a psychic partner. Why not give it a chance?” A note of frustration laced his last words and I nearly choked as I pictured myself working for the ABI. If I wanted to kill myself, I'd do it fast and on purpose, not working for the very people who'd butcher me. I understood why they hated my kind but I always thought of myself as different. I *was* different, I reminded myself as I stared at the sexy angel across from me.

“Hasn't anyone ever told you not to poke your nose where it doesn't belong?” I said, trying to sound harsh, but instead, my voice came out playful. Damn it, that drink had messed with my mind big time. And my senses.

He grinned, showing me his snow-white teeth. “Many times. Maybe that's why I work for the ABI,” he winked at me. His carefree expression shifted, changing to semi-serious as his smile dropped and his eyes lost some brightness.

“Ash, you gotta tell me. Did you see something else? Did you have another psychic vision when you discovered Charlie's body? Or tonight when that demon tried to get to you? This is important, so please try to remember.” His blue eyes locked with mine and a primal desire surged through my body, making my blood hotter than ever. It was a bad idea to come with him to this bar. I should have known better than be swayed by his angelic charms.

I frowned at him, not trying to hide my disappointment. “I already told you and the police everything I know about the murder. You don't believe me? Am I a suspect, Mr. Tyler?”

He remained silent, the alertness in his body coming back. I had the feeling like the effect of the magical drinks had already worn off.

“No, you're not a suspect. I just want to know what you're hiding.”



*You'll never understand*, I thought but instead pulled my chair back, ready to stand when he grabbed my hand in his. Again. If I wasn't wrong, it was the third time for tonight.

"Please, Ash, tell me everything you know. I can't solve this case without your help."

Suddenly, the world spun around me, another vision raging in my inner eye. Kevan and I found ourselves seated in here, his mouth pressed firm against mine. I pulled him closer to me, his hard chest pressing into my breasts. His lips parted as he kissed me again. I responded to him, wrapping my arms around his waist, wanting—demanding—more of him.

The crash of something heavy dropping on the floor took me out of the vision. I stood and, with horror, noticed the ginger ale bottle lying at my feet, broken.

"Ash?" Kevan asked me in confusion, standing as if to protect or follow me.

No, this could never happen, him and me. I'd sworn never to date anyone again. Once, a decade ago, I had nearly killed the man I loved—my first boyfriend and childhood sweetheart. It was our first time when my demoniacal magic initially manifested. I couldn't do such a thing to anyone else, ever again. Least of all to a detective angel from the ABI.

Hot tears stung my eyes, my vision getting blurry as I ran away from him, my feet seemingly moving on their own.

I weaved my way through the bar, the angel's hurried steps close behind me. I sped up as I didn't want to see or even talk to him. I pushed the bar's door open, my lungs breathing in the night's cold air.

"Ash, wait! Come back," he shouted after me, but I didn't care. I needed to leave this place. And him. I couldn't allow him to see me in this state or I risked telling him everything, including the truth about my magical nature. And that would mean my end, literally.

I ran a few feet down the alley behind the bar, when suddenly all the air inside my lungs disappeared and I pressed my back hard against the brick wall. I hoped he would go

straight and search for me elsewhere. I tried to calm my fast-beating heart and keep my breath slow and quiet. A few long seconds stretched out, the angel's steps echoing as he moved away from me, the darkness shrouding him. I took a few long, loud breaths, wiping the sweat off my neck when something rustled ahead of me.

I realized with dread that someone was moving toward me. And it wasn't Kevan. The stranger's magical signature rolled through the air, strong and defiant—a demon coming for me. I stepped backward, my back hitting the wall I'd been hiding behind. Damn it. I needed space, lots of it.

A soulless chuckle disturbed the eerie silence followed by a grumpy, deep voice that said, "Ashadha Matthews. I'm happy to finally meet you. The Brotherhood has been waiting for you for a long time."

A set of crimson eyes flickered, dispelling the darkness around us and a man about five-foot-ten with a bandana on his face and horns protruding from his head hurled a wave of crimson magma my way.

# Chapter 17

Ashadha

It all came too fast for me to realize how it happened. The creep blasted me, but my own demoniacal magic stopped the red magma wave that exploded in my face, just inches from my skin. I could smell the rotten and repulsive smell of his magic, even see the small horns that matched the gleam of the red magma. A dark shadow curled its claws into my heart, making me breathless. Something primal and bestial rose inside my soul, and I took a strong hold on this new sensation. The palpitating fear thumping in my veins shifted into a rage as the sickening desire to roast this asshole mounted in my heart. I hurled all my pent-up emotions, all the magic I'd suppressed for more than a decade, at him. A thick flow of emerald green waves burst from my outstretched hand and hit the demon's chest. n

His body absorbed my magic, yet the blow threw him a few steps back. My fingers brushed against my jacket, desperately trying to find and hold on to my gun. I hoped I had taken it with me. If not, I'd be in big trouble.

“Not bad for a newbie,” the demon spat, his eyes glowing brighter than before. It seemed like he enjoyed this showcase of my magic. “Tell me, sunshine, is this your first time summoning your magic?”

His laid-back, relaxed attitude, the calmness with which he spoke to me, and his total absence of fear boiled my blood, filling me with rage. I wasn't a pushover! I had to prove it to him and his brotherhood, whoever they were. My hand gripped the hard handle of my gun, and I heaved a sigh of relief. Finally! I felt safer with my gun, loaded with magical silver bullets. This demon, like the one who had broken into my apartment, was too powerful to be killed by the silver bullets, but silver would exhaust him and, ideally, make him flee.

The demon took a tentative step toward me, the wicked gleam in his red eyes signaling that he liked this game of cat and mouse. Well, I wasn't going to play the mouse part. I took out my gun with a sharp movement and fired several shots at the guy. Even though he was unmistakably a demon, his signature differentiated from the creep who broke into my apartment earlier tonight. This guy's scent felt heavier and rougher than the intruder's but at the same time I could tell this demon was less powerful than the first. I had no doubt they worked together. I only wished I knew how they had found me. Had the intruder from earlier planted a tracking device? Was there a mole who had betrayed me? But who could it be? I'd spent the last hour or so with Kevan. The possibility that he could have betrayed me crossed my mind but I immediately dismissed it. Kevan truly believed in the Angelica Order and he'd rather die than join the Demonica.

*Are you so sure?* I wondered how well I really knew Kevan, but pushed aside the thought meant to distract me. The shots I'd fired at the demon had burned his jacket, and three steaming holes adorned his chest. At first, his smile spread into a vicious sneer, but when his wounds began to smoke, the sneer vanished from his masked face.

“What have you done, you stupid bitch?” he asked, panic surging hot in his voice. His feet started to stumble, not able to support the weight of his body. He swayed unsteadily and, when he couldn't stand upright anymore, he collapsed on the cold street. His head hit a brick stone with a thud. The crimson color in his eyes dulled, then finally fizzled out as he lost consciousness.

I was barely able to take a deep breath, my lungs screaming for oxygen when a new noise disturbed my momentary comfort. A sinister clap echoed from down the street, probably not more than twenty feet away from me, reverberating in the stone walls that closed around.

“I'm happy to meet you again, tonight. The first time, you surprised me, but I'm willing to even the score, Miss Matthews,” a new male voice said. This time the guy's signature rang familiar—it belonged to the intruder from

before. Holy Hell. He'd healed faster than I hoped for. The bullets must not have wounded him heavily. My heartbeat skidded to a stop when I heard another set of steps pounding on the asphalt, accompanying the first asshole. Double Hell. It was an ambush. I spun toward the source of the commotion and unloaded my gun into the dark space. The silver bullets flew one after the other, throwing a silver-blue glow in the dark night air. I saw two men, the first from earlier bandaged yet healed, and another short and burly one. They faced the flying bullets I unloaded at them. The short person had horns and two wings fluttering from his back, a spiky tail whipping the cold ground as he moved. That creature, who resembled a crossbreed between a demon and a gargoyle, stared at the bullets with his crimson eyes. They froze in the air just before hitting him. Another wave of their mind-controlling demon magic and the bullets fell, collapsing near the body of the first creep I took down.

*Uh-oh. This is bad, really bad,* I thought as I saw what this creature did to my magical silver bullets. I gripped the gun's handle tighter, wondering how many more rounds I had left in the magazine. In the best-case scenario, a few. The bad news was that even if I had a bucket of magazines, my bullets didn't stand a chance against this monster, whatever he was.

"Come now, Ashadha. Why welcome your relatives in such a rude way? Didn't anyone teach you some manners? We're family; we mean no harm. Our master only wants to talk to you, nothing more. We're coming in peace." The intruder from earlier spoke calmly to me, almost patronizingly, as if he tried to talk some sense into a spoiled child. Yet, he and the other winged monster remained a safe distance from me. His crimson eyes shone brighter than the guy I'd taken down. The creature's oblong and flaky face resembled a dragon, yet it was too short and small to be one.

"Really? You come in peace?" I laughed out loud, my voice hysterical. "And that's why you broke into my apartment tonight? And your friend just tried to roast me with his magma as a greeting?" I might look naive, but I wasn't dumb.

The guy made a few tut-tut sounds, then turned to me. “Look, Ashadha. I didn’t want to disturb you earlier. I wanted to check out something, but it turned out you were awake and thought I’d come for you. This wasn’t the case. As for my brother Harry’s behavior...” he pointed at the still unconscious body of the first demon, “he’s always been hot-tempered and impulsive. I apologize for his attitude. But even he didn’t intend to harm you, just scare you.”

Oh, was this supposed to be an apology? Attempt failed. “Well, he did,” I said, wondering if these two creeps would back off or attack me once they figured out I wasn’t going to their “master.”

A shadow flickered in the intruder’s eyes, his relaxed pose evaporating. Two beastly eyes stared back at me, small reddish hues twinkling. Ugh, I had the clear feeling this guy had read my mind. *I should have known better*, I chastised myself, but it was too late.

“Very well, if you don’t accompany us willingly, we’ll force you to come with us. Reikik, take control of her,” the guy ordered the beastly creature next to him. The monster flapped his wings and took off, his crimson eyes focused on mine, glowing like burning fire in the darkness. It was long before dawn and nobody was around to help me. I’d run off from Kevan and there was no way he was going to be here to help. I yearned for his gorgeous blue eyes, his tall frame, his confident smile, and his energetic gait. I shouldn’t have blown it with him. I frantically yelled his name, part of me hoping he’d hear my call. Silly me! He was most likely far away from here.

The monster flew straight toward me, a howling screech escaping his lungs. The sound froze the blood in my veins. His deep red eyes locked on me, he snapped his pointy teeth, and a greenish smoke puffed out of his open mouth right onto me.

## Chapter 18

Kevan

For heaven's sake, where did she go? And how on earth was it even possible? Did she conceal her human scent? No, for that she had to have magic inside her, which I'd checked for and she didn't. Then someone else must have muted her signature because it had simply vanished into thin air. Normally, I could distinguish her scent from miles away: even though she was human, her smell resembled that of a baby, innocent and fresh. I had no idea what happened at the bar but clearly, it had affected her a lot. I saw the discomfort on her face; the look in her eyes of pain layered over sheer determination. What happened to this woman that caused her to hurt so much? She was clearly hurting inside, but she was too proud to ask for help or even share it with someone else. If only she'd confide in me.

I kept running in circles around the block but she had gone. A small red light switched on inside my mind, reminding me I had an investigation. Instead of roaming the empty night streets of the fae district, I had to find who killed Charlie McDonald. Hammond and his people sought justice more than I craved the company of this strange woman. Not to mention that my supervisor, Angel Delainey, had faith in me and trusted me to find the culprits. If I did, my promotion to an archangel would be certain, though it'd take them a few years before they'd initiate me.

And yet, despite her unwillingness to cooperate, Ash held the key to the dead werewolf's murder. I kept asking myself whether she realized this or not. All paths led to Ashadha Matthews, but she was too stubborn to admit it. She was the one who'd discovered Charlie's murder—she had the vision of his killing, and now the Demonica had marked her. My angelic intuition whispered to me that I had to partner with her and figure out her secret before it was too late... Unfortunately, I had no other clues or evidence to go by. The forensics couldn't

give me anything else other than the approximate time of death and the way Charlie had been killed. The nasty creatures were too smart to leave any clues or, heaven forbid, fingerprints.

As I ran past the forest behind the bar, continuing my search for Ash, an abrupt pang tore through my whole being, my chest and muscles contracting and snapping, the pain excruciating. For a moment I worried the strike could rip apart my heart. I stopped and kneeled sideways on the road, hoping no car would pass by. I breathed in slowly and concentrated, sending healing waves to my heart. Warm bubbles filled my chest, and the heaviness slowly began to lift. I could partially heal myself, one of my angelic perks. My eyes slid to my wristwatch, which showed nearly four thirty. Good, this meant in about an hour the sun would rise, so at least the darkness wouldn't impede my search for Ash. But what the hell was this pang about? The night was getting stranger and stranger with each passing second and a sticky fear clamped my stomach, making me fear for Ash and her safety. The pain gradually subsided and I had just barely started walking again when a new pang shook me, my head spinning around. Ashadha's scent ravaged my senses, striking me like a thunderbolt. She was scared and in danger. I could feel the sticky touch of her fear: how it had curled around her chest, digging its invisible claws into her heart. She called to me, needing my help. She called for me to save her. How on earth could I read her telepathic call? My mind jumped from one idea to another but nothing made sense. All the scenarios proved impossible except one. Dread settled over my core, slight nausea climbing up my throat as the realization hit me. No matter how hard I tried to suppress it, she was my fated mate. This was why I couldn't get her out of my head. There was no other explanation.

A new pang tore through my frozen body and I spun around, running back to the bar. I could feel her pain, the mental link between us glowing clearly like the sun in my inner eye. It filled me with excitement, pumping my blood high on adrenaline. But terror had anchored its mark in my soul, too: could I reach her in time? We learned about fated



mates from literature and the angels' mythological lore. The Angelica Order claimed that this special bond between humans and angels had saved humanity during the war. I never subscribed to this myth, viewing it as sheer fiction, but the palpating tremor inside my chest propelled my legs to move with impossible speed, even for an angel. My golden wings remained dormant, hidden behind my human appearance spell, but I could only fly with them for a short distance. One command and I could turn into my true angelic form within seconds. My full angel equipment included a golden sword and a multitude of sigils that shimmered across my wings in silver and golden hues. I'd barely activated this form of mine; all my investigations up to this one had been small and, most importantly, they didn't involve demons.

I returned to the bar, panting with exhaustion, but the link that bonded me to Ash made me turn right and plunge into the back alley. I'd just entered it when the air exploded a few feet from me. A thick greenish smoke burst into the air, filling it with its heavy scent of decayed food and worms. A screech echoed from above my head, and someone screamed, calling my name—a female voice. Hers! I rushed toward the commotion and stumbled as I saw Ash pressed against the brick wall, frantically trying to shoot her gun at an ugly, creature hovering over her. The monster resembled a short dragon, but much smaller, with glowing crimson eyes. It whipped its tail as it breathed out another giant cloud of that nasty-smelling emerald smoke.

Charcoal and soot scattered around, and I transformed into my higher form. I silently said my magical incantation, a mantra given to me by my mentor, and the familiar electrifying touch swirled right through me, pouring golden threads of energy and power into my body. My stature rose to nearly nine-feet tall, and a golden sword materialized in my right hand. Golden wings sprouted from my shoulders and a thick metal shield adorned my chest. My legs had armor, too, though this one was lighter and fit for running. I flew through the air, swirling my sword toward the nasty dragon-like creature. The motherfucker was too engaged with Ash to notice my presence. Yet when I thrust the golden sword into

the creature's skin, it spun around, roaring in rage and pain. Dark specks of blood gushed from the spot where my sword pierced its flesh. The monster gawked at me, as if wondering where I'd appeared from, and how I dared to wound it. I slashed my sword at the monster, tapping into my extra agility and speed. One more strike, this one harder, and I'd kill it. The metallic blade swished close to the demon, but the blow slipped away as the demon stepped aside, and I didn't manage to wound him. The creature howled in pain and snapped open its snout. The small dragon bombarded me with a raging tornado of green smoke. The thick substance blew right at my face, sticking to my armor like glue. The scent of corpses assaulted my senses, my chest aching, but I braced myself and sprang up, flying nearer to the demon. I found an opening on his left side and thrust my blade into his repulsive body. The creature convulsed as the blade plunged deeper. Thick dark blood gushed out of its body like a waterfall.

Below, someone yelled, and the sounds of fighting reached my ears. I landed on the ground to see Ash trying to catch up to a man running from her. She howled in desperation as she hurled her gun at him, but she missed the target and the gun clanked on the sidewalk. I assumed the gun was empty. I scooped up the gun, then sped up to her and placed my hand on her arm.

"Leave it to me, I'll deal with him." I concentrated and flew toward the running man, my sword aimed to strike him from above, when the air around me shimmered in gray hues, a whirlwind raging through the atmosphere. The first rays of the sun dotted the horizon in pink and orange hues, the mountain range standing cold witnesses to our fight. I hurled my sword at the stranger, who'd stopped in the middle of the dark whirlwind. The metallic blade struck hollow as it bounced back, ricocheting off the shimmering vortex. The storm accelerated, mounting in speed and it took away the attacker.

Damn it. We'd missed him. Only the dying groan of the monster I'd mortally wounded disturbed the silence. I drew closer to him and tried telepathically to connect to Archangel Musa. I'd never seen that many demons in my whole life. Oddly, the telepathic attempt struck no luck. Just like I

couldn't detect Ash's scent before my bond to her became activated. What was going on here? I took out my cell phone and dialed my colleagues from ABI the non-magical way. I reported what had happened behind Fairy Kiss and waited for a team to come to us.

In the meantime, I stared at the repulsive monster writhing in agony in front of me. Its red eyes blinked several times then held still as its head thumped on the cold ground, expelling his final breath. I silently repeated my mantra and instantly transformed into my human form. My wings, sword, shield, and armor all disappeared. Instead, I was back in my khaki pants, my blue blazer, and gray runners, and back to my human height.

Ash ran to me and pressed her body tight against mine as she hugged me. Her warmth and scent of wild fruits was a pleasant change from the rotten stench of whatever creature I'd just killed. I wrapped my arms around her frame, hugging her ferociously. A part of me feared that I could lose her at any second; another part of me wanted to devour her smell, to get lost in her curves... Now wasn't the time for sentiments, yet the longing for her had taken a strong hold on me. It overwhelmed my mind and senses and left me desperate for more.

"Thank you for helping me fight these monsters," she said, head buried in my shoulder. Her chin movement against my chest sent a trickle down my spine.

I stroked her hair and had half a mind to kiss her. I cupped her face in my palm and stared at her mesmerizing dark brown eyes. I carefully drew my mouth closer to hers and inhaled her aroma—it smelled of tropical fruits, probably her shampoo—when she suddenly jerked away from me with a shriek.

"What, now?" I asked, startled. She pointed at an empty spot on the ground.

"The demon is gone! Where the hell did he go?" She frantically circled the empty spot, wildly waving her hands. "How did it happen, Kevan?"

“Ash, calm down. What are you talking about? What body? There’s only the corpse of that bizarre monster. The other guy ran away through what looked like a magical portal.”

“No, no. I’m not talking about the two creeps you saw. Before they came, another one attacked me just after I left the bar.” A rush of warmth flushed her face as she mentioned her strange retreat. Honestly, I’d forgotten about that episode, the fight was so intense. It seemed as if we’d come to Fairy Kiss an eternity ago, so much had just happened. I stared at the empty space where she claimed a body had been.

“I haven’t seen him. You sure about the body?”

“Yes, I knocked him down when he attacked me,” she said hurriedly, a tremor shaking her body.

“You knocked him down?” I asked surprised and stepped back to look at her better. “Impressive. Maybe you could have handled these baddies on your own, darling.” I winked at her.

A new rush of heat further warmed her face as she tried to brush aside my compliment. “Listen. When these creeps first showed up, I had a quick burst of a vision. I saw these guys take part in Charlie’s murder. They killed him.”

Her statement took out the air from my lungs and I stared at her sheepishly, my mouth trembling. “And now they just tried to kill you.”

## Chapter 19

Ashadha

Realizing that Kevan was right, I felt like knives pricked the center of my chest. I knew from a Reiki master, a neighbor in Johnsonville, that the chest was the point of stress in the human body. Now that the angel put it that way, I began to see the pattern. The demons' statements during the fight echoed in my mind: how the Brotherhood had been waiting for me for a long time, whatever that thing that attacked me was. The intruder from my apartment who just ran away, passing through a magical portal, claimed we were a family and was hell-bent to force me go with him and the winged monster, the one that Kevan killed. What was wrong with these people?

*They have detected your true magic. There's no going back now,* the voice said matter of fact. Damn it, it was right. What would I do now? They wouldn't back off or leave me in peace. The impulse to run away, far from Aran and the surrounding area, thumped in my temples, giving me a mild headache.

*You need to disclose who you are, you can't hide your true nature forever,* the voice added as if to add insult to injury. To tell the angel I was a half-demon and have him kill me on the spot? Though I knew I needed to, I wasn't ready. With a violent pang, I realized that if I didn't give answers to Kevan, the ABI team he'd called would ask me more questions and they'd be more persistent than the angel. My intuition told me, though, that Kevan would also want to look out for me. After all, he was attracted to me and I couldn't shake the feeling that we were somehow connected.

“What are you thinking about?” The angel's voice cut through the fog of my thoughts, making me nearly jump. I had sunk so deeply into my own fears and worries.

I cleared my throat and mumbled a feeble excuse, but Kevan drew closer to me.

His strong arms held mine firmly as he said to me, “Ash, cut the crap. It’s getting serious. A police officer was killed by these demons, and now they’re targeting you. You wanna fall prey to them, too?” His blue eyes had lost their warm and happy glow; instead, two cold eyes locked onto mine.

“No, of course, I don’t want this. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then you gotta tell me what is going on, Ash. I know you’re hiding something. When will you tell me the truth?”

Never. I’d rather be prosecuted by the ABI for obstructing their investigation, have them lock me up, beat me—whatever—than reveal my true nature.

The angel must have picked up on my stubbornness because he ran his fingers through his hair, sighing with exasperation.

“I don’t understand you.” He shook his head, and a deep crease furrowed his brow. A note of hope fluttered in his voice as he said, “Are you hiding someone? Protecting them? You can tell me everything, Ash. It’s me, Kevan. I saved your life, remember? I’ll protect and guard you no matter what. You can trust me.” He carefully handed me my gun with the handle pointing toward me. I took the empty gun and tucked it into my jacket pocket, noting to reload it with more silver bullets once I went home. I’d certainly need ammo and protection in every way possible.

I knew he meant well, but he was an angel. It had been beaten into him to hate the Demonica, and if he discovered that I was part of their “family,” as that creep put it, Kevan Tyler would change his tune in no time. It was the law of the times we lived in. I just knew it; I could practically feel his horror if I told him I had demoniacal magic inside me. I was exceptionally good at suppressing and hiding my magic, but it still lay dormant inside me; it was part of my nature. I swallowed the lump that had formed at the back of my throat and turned to him.

“I’m not hiding anyone, Kevan. It’s super late, the sun is coming up. I’m tired. Can I rest, then I can talk to you?” I was just trying to buy some time. Of course I wouldn’t tell him the truth, but I didn’t intend to make up things to throw him off

the scent either. For now, I told him the truth: I was exhausted. The events of the past twenty-four hours had pushed me beyond my limits. My head throbbed, my legs barely supporting the weight of my body.

The hard look in Kevan's eyes softened, replaced by another emotion I saw for the first time in him—care, compassion? I wasn't sure, but he showed sympathy for me.

“You're right. I am sorry for pressuring you. Once my colleagues arrive and take that corpse, you're coming home with me. No excuses.”

I wanted to object: I couldn't possibly go and sleep at his house, no matter that he had just saved my life or how tempting he was. It was too risky to stay so close to him. But he placed his forefinger on my lips and half-whispered to me, “You need safety. That asshole already broke into your apartment. The police guarding your home wouldn't matter since it didn't make a difference last night. With me, you'll be safe. Trust me.” He wrapped his arms around my body, giving me a strong, yet tender hug. His rich scent of musk and aftershave tickled my nostrils, sending a passionate desire into my soul to bury my hands into his hair and never let go of him. That wasn't even considering his intoxicating magical signature of wild mountain fruits and what it did to the thread in my center.

I felt so broken and tired that I had no energy to argue with him. Plus, he'd made a point. I could definitely tell my apartment wasn't safe, my only guards were my gun and my familiar, who wasn't powerful enough to help me outside of my home. White Paw lived in the magical abyss but could provide comfort to me at home. But compared to demons, they both stood no chance. Unless... The thought crystallized as clearly as the first rays of the sun, peeking from the clouds scattered around. Unless I claimed my own demoniacal magic and tapped into my hidden powers. The memory of my blast at the first demon, how I had knocked him down rushed to my mind, making me want to hit something. The key to my freedom lay in my fated doom. Life couldn't be a bigger bitch.

## Chapter 20

Kevan

We were still locked in a tight embrace when the ABI team arrived at the fight scene. The sun had already risen on the horizon, its rays filling the air with warmth and energy, dispelling the darkness. My heart hurt to think that winter would come in a few short weeks. For now, I enjoyed what little was left of the summer.

“Kevan,” a familiar grumpy voice called from behind me. I reluctantly let go of Ash, my body immediately registering her absence. I turned to face my supervisor at the Hexes and Homicide division at the ABI.

“What happened here?” Delainey pointed at the shriveled corpse of the winged monster that lay a few feet from us. The ABI forensic team had encircled the strange corpse and was gathering samples from it; hopefully, they could find some evidence. Our ABI Hexes and Homicide team rarely used these forensic specialists. We used the police’s forensics team in most cases, but given none of us had seen such a creature, ever, they were needed.

I told Delainey the events of the past hour in detail and he listened to me, his face stone cold. He didn’t show any emotion nor did he interrupt me.

When I finished, he asked me, “This case seems to be more complicated than I first thought. You sure you can handle it on your own?”

I glanced at Ash. She had perched on a pile of rubble, her arms crossed in front of her chest. She had the look of a lost child with her grumpy face, her lips pouted as if she’d cry any moment. Sadness and loneliness emitted in waves from her aura. My heart skipped a beat, yearning to protect her from the monsters outside, to take care of her and shield her against the evil that brewed in our world. Against the Demonica. After all, she was my fated mate and I was responsible for her.



“Yes, I can handle it alone,” I stated solemnly.

Delainey narrowed his eyes as he regarded me from head to toe, dark flames gleaming in his otherwise brown eyes.

“Yesterday morning I asked you if you needed assistance on this case, yet you brushed my offer off, and look what happened.” He absentmindedly pointed at the winged monster’s corpse. It was true. After Ash and I met, my boss had called me to inquire how the investigation was going.

He went on. “It’s your first Demonica case, Kevan, and I can’t shake the feeling that we’ve stumbled upon a whole new order of demons. And you wanna convince me, you’re fine and need no help?” He shook his head. “Who’s the girl?” He abruptly changed the topic of the conversation as he eyed her with mistrust.

I cleared my throat. “She’s the psychic who had the vision of Charlie’s murder. Now it seems that the Demonica has marked her, too. I’m not sure what they want from her. With Charlie, the Eye revealed to us his backstory, but her...?” I shook my head. “I’ll find her secret and get to the bottom of this case.” I clenched my hand into a fist, my resolve firm. I’d do whatever it took, but I’d find the criminals responsible for all this mess.

Delainey stood staring at me for a few long seconds, probably weighing his options before he’d make a decision. I’d told him about Ashadha’s latest vision, how tonight’s intruders had killed Charlie, to prove to him that the two cases were indeed linked. Finally, the superior angel broke the silence that had fallen in. “You have until the end of the week to solve this mystery. Today is Wednesday. If you don’t make good progress on the investigation, I’ll assign another angel to work with you. You can always consult with Detective Schuster; he’ll gladly assist you if you need his expertise. Oh, and I’m placing two angels to guard that girl. We can’t risk losing her, too. Never mind that Charlie attempted to betray us and join the Demonica; his shifter soul proved to be in the right place.”

“And that’s why the monsters killed him,” I said quietly.

My boss nodded and gave me a firm pat on my back, wishing me luck in the rest of the investigation. I'd surely need a good dose of luck. All in all, Delainey could have made a worse decision. At least I had some time left to prove my abilities and intelligence.

I stood in place for a second longer, my boss having joined the special forensic team. Then, I went to Ash, determined that I'd rather not tell her how my superior decided to put two angels to tail her. She was already exhausted so why bother her further? The news about the two angels stalking her would only cause more distress.

"Well, how did it go? Everything fine?" she asked me, tentatively, as I approached her.

I shrugged. "I have until Sunday to figure out who the killers are."

"Oh," she gasped, her eyes growing wide. "And if you don't?" Her question trailed off into a semi-whisper.

I smiled. "They'll assign another angel to work with me."

A wave of relief passed over and she visibly relaxed. "Hmm, that's not so bad. I thought they'd remove you from the case or worse..."

"Nah, it's just that in the worst-case scenario, I'll have to share points with another angel," I said and strode forward onto the street, motioning toward her to follow me. I'd parked my Jeep on the sidewalk in front of Fairy Kiss. I could barely keep my eyes open, the exhaustion from the past night giving me a headache. I needed to hit the hay and make sure she was with me, or else, things could get ugly. I didn't trust the angels Delainey would put in place to guard her, at least not for now. I wanted to watch her with my own eyes and feel her presence next to me. A shrill voice inside my mind sneered and asked if I was sure that I only wanted to keep a watch on her.

"Wait, what was that thing about sharing points with other angels?" She shouted as she caught up to me, lightly running to keep pace. I opened the passenger door for her to get in.

I stopped to stare her down. “Wait, Miss Matthews. Let me get this straight. You want me to explain everything yet you won’t tell me something as glaring as why demons are after you?” I rested my arm on the car’s open door. She gawked at me, her mouth slightly open.

“I... I don’t know why they’re hunting me. I wish I knew, Kevan, but I don’t,” she said simply.

I didn’t buy her weak excuse and gestured for her to get inside the vehicle. Once she’d scrambled onto the passenger’s seat, I closed the door. I walked around, sliding into the driver’s seat. I turned the engine, the machine rumbling low as it soared down the road to my studio apartment.

I couldn’t help but grin internally at the thought of her sleeping at my place. Small bubbles burst out inside my chest and flew into my body, pouring their happy vibes into my bloodstream. It felt good to be alive.

## Chapter 21

Ashadha

“Have you rested?” Kevan asked me once I’d awakened from my sound sleep. For the first time in a while, I hadn’t had any nightmares. He’d given me the large mattress in his bedroom, while he’d gone to the living room and slept on an overstuffed sofa.

I raised my arms above my head, stretching my waist from side to side, then stood from his comfy bed. I shook my legs, my flesh and muscles ready for the rest of the day. I’d slept with my clothes on and, judging by Kevan’s crumpled clothes, he did too.

“Yeah, I’m good. The headache is gone, though my stomach is rumbling, I’m so hungry. Jeez, what time is it?” I asked him as my eyes fell on my empty wrist; I must have taken my watch off before I fell asleep.

He chuckled. “It’s past three thirty in the afternoon. I’ll go and get us something to eat. I’m starving, too.” He went to the living room adjacent to the kitchenette. Something clicked, opening, as he began to prepare food, a multitude of noises coming from the kitchenette. I tidied my hair and searched for my wristwatch. I found it on the desk opposite the bed. I scooped it up when my eyes fell on a framed photograph in the center of the desk. It depicted Kevan embracing a girl. Both smiled, happiness radiating off their carefree faces. I wondered who that woman was; he’d never mentioned her. The sudden idea that he could have a girlfriend hit me like a train and made me want to throw up. No, it’d be impossible for him to be dating someone and have me sleep at his place.

I went to the living room, joining him. It was a spacious room, painted light green. Peaceful paintings of landscapes hung on the walls, a table with chairs stood in the right corner, while in the far left corner was the sofa he’d slept on this morning. His studio was situated in the most expensive part of

Aran, close to downtown, yet just up the road that led toward the Rockies. The building he lived in was super fancy, too: a private complex with its own garden and a mini pool, though the pool was more of a decorative one. I sat on a fluffy chair opposite the sofa.

“You are just in time. Here you are, mistress,” he said with a grin, winking at me then serving me tray holding a large plate with pancakes. Steam rolled off the pancakes, two small bowls each with milk and jam placed on the tray’s ends. The delicious aroma of dough, milk, and eggs wafted in the air, my belly rumbling in anticipation, eager to devour this treat. I gorged on the food, midway realizing he was just sitting across from me on his sofa, watching me eat in silence. Mild discomfort swelled inside my belly and I stopped eating, gulping down my mouthful.

“What?” I asked him abruptly. I realized with horror that I’d sounded rude. “Do you wanna eat, too?”

He chuckled. A smile danced on his lips, warming his features. I hated to admit how young, yet sophisticated he looked. Joy and relaxation glowed in his blue eyes, his stubble giving him more of a boyish vibe. Suddenly, I felt a lot hungrier than before. Too bad food couldn’t satisfy this appetite of mine.

“Nothing. I love watching you so happy. And thank you, I grabbed some protein bars while I made the pancakes, so I’m good. Besides, I’m trained to last for weeks without food.”

“Oh, really? Where did you learn to fast for such a long time?” I asked as I resumed my eating, my teeth biting into a slice of my third pancake.

“At the academy. The place where the Angelica Order trains humans who want to join the order.”

I slowed down my chewing, my eyes growing larger as I took in this information. So, he wasn’t a natural-born angel? I assumed he was.

“You’re surprised?” he asked, noticing my reaction.

“No, I just thought... Anyway, that Academy training sounds like a hell of a challenge.”

He smiled. “You have no idea. Many people, some of whom are stronger and fitter than me, couldn’t pull it off and dropped out. But my stubborn ass propelled me to succeed and I pushed through all my limits. And here I am today.” He winked at me, his hands gesturing around his spacious studio with pride.

I finished my mouthful and noted, “Then you must feel like a chosen one. What happened to those that dropped out of the academy?”

He ran his hand through his hair, sighing. “I don’t know. I don’t keep in touch with any of them except for Steven.”

His words took me aback. “The bar owner at Fairy Kiss? You trained at the academy together?” I shook my head. I would have never guessed it. Steven looked at least ten years older than Kevan.

Kevan chuckled. “No, I wasn’t with him when I trained there, but my mentor had enrolled at the academy with Steven. They are still close friends and that’s how I met Steven.”

That made more sense. I ate the remaining pancakes in silence. Only my chewing disturbed the stillness that had settled over the room.

Kevan eventually broke the silence as he turned to me. “I’ve missed it: the calm.”

I recalled his photo with that woman and decided to probe the waters. Not that I was interested in him or anything of the sort... No, of course not. “You live alone?”

He nodded absentmindedly so I continued, “And who is that woman in the photograph with you?”

Alertness took hold of his body, his muscles tensing as he focused his eyes on me. “That’s my sister.”

Embarrassment swirled in my chest as I scolded myself for my short-lived jealousy. I felt relieved as I realized I’d been

hoping he didn't have a girlfriend. So, he lived on his own and was single, just like me. Good.

Hell, I shouldn't think like that! I'd vowed to remain single for the rest of my days and not put anyone in danger. I had myself and my tiny dragon familiar. A small lump formed in my chest as I recalled how much I missed White Paw. Though I'd never tried summoning her outside my apartment or office. I liked to think she was bound to my home. All of a sudden, I realized how lonely I'd been. Heck, this was the first time since I'd moved to Aran that I had spent the night out of my tiny apartment.

*You live a fabulous and oh, so exciting life for a twenty-eight-year-old*, I thought, realizing that I was okay with that. I may be boring but I was still alive; the Angelica Order didn't know about my existence. That's what mattered at the end of the day.

"Hey, you alright?" the angel asked with concern.

"Yeah, I'm perfectly fine. Just thinking," I lied and stood to put the plate with the remaining pancakes on the counter.

Kevan cleared his throat, the action sending a warning signal down my spine.

He was a detective angel and had to cater to the ABI. He had a freaking demoniacal murder to solve. He couldn't have made me pancakes out of goodwill or because of my cute looks only; he had an ulterior motive. Hell, what was I doing? Sitting here in his home, I'd allowed myself to get distracted. I'd gotten weaker and let my defenses down. I wanted to pinch myself but it'd make him more suspicious than he already was.

"So, can you tell me, Ash? What happened when the demons attacked you? Did they say something? Please, try to remember everything."

There was no point in avoiding his questions; I'd promised him at the fight scene. I told him everything: about the intruder's persistent wish to go with them to their "master;" about the other guy's claim of how they had been waiting for

me and all this shit. Of course, I omitted the small detail that I, myself, was a demon. Well, a half-demon.

“I don’t understand,” he shook his head, having stood from the sofa, and paced around the living room. “Why did they want to take you to their master? What could you possibly have that they deem so valuable?” He pondered aloud.

*Demoniacal magic*, I thought but kept my mouth shut. I still valued my life.

“You’re not a supernatural, just a plain human who... Oh, fates, that’s it!” He exclaimed with excitement and clapped his hands. His action nearly made me jump from surprise. “You’re a psychic and have the gift to see into the past, present, and future. This must be what they’re after and why they tried to abduct you: for you to serve their master.” With a few strides, he came to me, his face beaming with happiness. “At least now we know they didn’t try to kill you.”

Yeah, this was a consoling thought. A small part of me wondered, though, if I hadn’t brought my gun and fought back, would they have killed me, given I refused to go with them?

“Great, we’re making progress. Now that we know they want a psychic like you, we have a clue. Why would they need someone like you, with your gift?” He contemplated, continuing to wander around the small apartment. “They wanted a police officer, too. They needed someone to see into the future and work for the police, which means...” He abruptly stopped his pacing, his face frozen as a realization dawned on his handsome face. “Oh, fates, I hope they’re not planning a terrorist attack. Could that be what this is all about?”

Huh? That was quite the conclusion to draw. I cleared my throat and turned to him.

“A terrorist attack?” I had no doubt they plotted something big and nasty and, unfortunately, it involved me. The sudden twist in my gut proved to me I was on the right track. Yet, I wasn’t sure I subscribed to Kevan’s idea that it had to be a terrorist attack. It just didn’t ring true for me.



Kevan waved his hand dismissively. “Either an attack or a strike, it doesn’t matter. But look at who they targeted—Charlie, the good, unassuming police officer, and you, a human girl. I wondered why Charlie got invited to the Demonica Order, and now I think I know.” He stood, deep in thought and silent for several moments.

“Why?” I prompted him to answer.

A devilish smile danced on the angel’s full lips. “They have a mole, a double agent, and he’s working for the police. That’s how Charlie got his invitation. Then the same mole reported your address to them and they sent one of their morons to your apartment.”

Now that he put it that way, I had to admit that it made some sense.

He stared at me, a triumphant look glowing in his eyes. “And we need to find that motherfucker ASAP and stop the Demonica’s plans.”

“We?” I asked, taken aback. I never even suggested that I’d assist him in his investigation.

He came over to me and knelt beside me, his hand almost reaching toward my knee, yet hesitating shakily. The impulse to touch his hand flickered inside me, yet I checked myself, remembering how our skin contact usually ended, and having no interest in any more electric shocks.

“Ash, I hoped you’d help me in a small way. Please remember, they’re after you, too. They want your psychic power for fate-knows-what twisted plans. Listen, I’ll only need you to use your gift to read into a person to see if they’re involved. I’ll talk to Chief Hammond. He knows the oddballs in his station who seem fishy and could betray our order. And then you’ll use your psychic eye to confirm the suspect. Easy, right?”

It sounded too good to be true. A sudden thought crossed my mind. “Wait, what if the chief doesn’t know of any oddballs among his officers? What if the mole behaves

normally and hides his true intentions? How are you gonna find them?"

The angel furrowed his brows, a deep crease forming on his forehead. He scratched his chin, his eyes darkening as he reflected on my words. "There are ways. I have other means to use. What I need from you is your psychic gift and willingness to help me. Can I count on you, Ash?" His voice filled with hope as his eyes focused on me; small glitters of hope gleaming in his irises.

*I shouldn't get involved with the ABI*, my gut practically screamed at me. But was I going to listen to it? No. The idiot I am, I gave in to the angel's pleas, his blue eyes swaying me into accepting his action plan. I'd be making a mistake if I agreed to his request, I realized this. But the trouble was, I'd stepped too deep into this mess to be able to back away gracefully. And he was right: the Demonica hunted me. It was either me or them. And I wasn't going down without a good fight.

## Chapter 22

Kevan

My charms did the trick! Or maybe because I'd rescued her from the monsters last night, she gave in and agreed to assist me. A small but highly important progress. But the game changer was how I cracked the code, uncovering why the Demonica had marked her. I should have guessed it earlier, but my heart and conscience didn't want to admit that there could be a mole working at the police, scheming against us. It wasn't just a mere guess or an idea, oh, no! My angelic intuition confirmed it. If only the assholes hadn't disabled our ability to use the Eye, this case and their petty brotherhood would have already been blown out. Thank the fates, I could trust Chief Hammond. He'd been working for the Aran Police ever since the Angelica established our new world order; he was one of the elders who was employed during the wars. I made it my top priority to personally find the asshole who reported our progress to the enemy and punish him with my bare hands.

"Jeez, it's getting late," Ash exclaimed when she glanced at her watch. "It's five in the evening." She abruptly rose from the couch, ready to leave, when I reached my hand out to stop her. I needed to talk to her. My heart beat wilder as I wondered if another showcase of electricity would occur at the touch of our hands, but surprisingly everything went fine.

"Ash, wait. I need to call Chief Hammond. Then I'll drive you home. You can't walk the distance from here to Johnsonville."

Even though she was in a hurry, she nodded in silent agreement with me. There was no public transport from here to her place, the only option remained to call a taxi, which would cost a fortune. When I dialed Hammond's number, it went straight to voicemail. I mentally cursed and grabbed my car keys from the table and headed out of my studio. She came in tow, surprisingly fast, her feet moving swiftly and elegantly

on the marble tiles. The front door automatically shut behind her. My security system was all the rage. The ABI paid for this furnished studio, plus they paid me in gold at the beginning of each month. They took really good care of their employees. But the salary wasn't what made me wake up in the morning: I wanted justice and longed to see the day when we'd defeat the Demonica once and for all. Plus, as a second-born angel, I was expected to do my job selflessly, serving the whole of humanity. Of course, this was on paper; unfortunately, many of my colleagues at the ABI did their job not with this lofty sense of duty, but for obtaining supernatural powers, gold and fame.

With one click of the key fob, I deactivated the car alarm and opened the passenger door. I couldn't believe just over a day had passed since the murder, but the events of the past thirty-six hours had been so intense that I could have sworn it had been a week.

Ash scrambled into her seat, and I ran around the car to slide into the driver's seat. I cranked the engine, the car rumbling in a melodious tone, which I'd grown used to. The tires squealed on the pavement as my foot hit the accelerator pedal. The car left the premises and flowed into the main road that led to downtown Aran. As my car swiftly gained speed, passing slower vehicles, I spotted a light gray sedan keeping a decent distance from us in the rearview mirror. My heart raced faster, and my neck began to sweat. We had a tail! Judging from Ash's carefree expression and mindless staring through the window, she hadn't figured out we were being stalked. My hands gripped the steering wheel tighter, my knuckles cracking. Ash glanced at me briefly, but resumed staring outside. Several scenarios ran through my head, my blood pumping higher as I tried to keep the situation in control. The guys in that car would be either demons or the two angels who Delainey had assigned to watch over Ash. I looked closer at the car's license plate, relief passing over me as I realized the number belonged to the ABI. Good. One less worry.

About thirty minutes later, I pulled my Jeep to a stop at the sidewalk next to her building. The sharp stench of rotten food met my nostrils as she opened the door. Dear Lord, I hated this

neighborhood! How she stood to live here was beyond me. The light gray sedan parked a few intersections from her place. Mixed feelings brewed inside my chest: on one hand, I could calm down and not worry about her safety; on the other hand, the idea that someone was spying on her made me uncomfortable: I'd much rather preferred to keep an eye on her myself, with no assistance.

"Here you are, Ash." I turned to her and added, "Once I get information from Hammond, I'll call you. Be ready to come to the police station and use your psychic gift."

She nodded absentmindedly and slammed the door shut, her black boots hitting the ground. She wanted out of this case; of the mess she'd gotten herself in. I couldn't blame her: everyone hated the Demonica, but when shit hit the fan, you had to pull yourself together, step up, and face the challenge. Maybe she was scared of demons? A twist of my gut and pain swelling in my chest signaled that she was leaving out something really important about this case. At least she'd agreed to help me in the investigation. One step at a time.

I watched her climb the metal staircase that led to her paranormal agency, the letters above reading the funny name "Four Paws and a Broom." I'd almost forgotten about her agency. Once she closed the door behind her, my body relaxed and I took a long breath of air. A small part of my mind wondered what the four paws thing meant, but then my cell phone rang. The damn thing vibrated, rattling in my blazer, and made me jump. My head slightly bumped into the car's roof, pain prickling my skull. I hated these gadgets. I took the call as Hammond's name filled the whole screen.

"Hey, you called me earlier?" he greeted me cheerfully on the other side.

"Yeah, I did. Look, I need to talk to you about the demon case. I need your feedback. I think I have an idea who is behind Charlie's murder and is targeting Ashadha."

"Damn it, Kev, I just finished work and left the station on time for once. Can you drop by Long John? We can discuss the case there. I'll get us a table in back," he offered. Long

John was one of the many pubs downtown, not far from ABI and the police station.

I had no choice but to agree to his offer. I needed his input about the police officers and any information or ideas he could think of as to who could be working for the Demonica. Long John wasn't my favorite pub in Aran, but drinks were drinks, plus I had to talk to Hammond. If there was anyone at the police station who knew everything that happened behind the scenes, it had to be the chief.

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I reached Long John in no time, the Jeep crawling along the narrow streets that stretched out, so characteristic of downtown Aran as the city was expanded after the war. When I entered the bar, it was still empty; the beautiful warm weather outside prompted people to spend more hours outdoors. Long John, located at the base of the mountains, was as low budget as it comes. From the plastic tables and chairs scattered in the main hall to the over-worn bar counter, its wood paint peeling at places, the bar hadn't been updated probably ever. The wooden boards on the floor were older than me and as I walked to a secluded table at the back of the room, some of the boards squeaked. I ordered a glass of gin and tonic when the waiter came to my table. While I waited for Hammond, hoping he'd arrive soon, I opened my email to see that he'd sent me all the relevant information about the victim, Charlie McDonald. It was basic stuff such as how long he'd worked for the Aran Police, his qualifications, events he'd participated in as an officer, marital status, professional achievements, and the like. Not a single word about his friends or enemies at the station.

My watch showed past six thirty when Hammond's short, plump body weaved its way through the main hall of the bar, his feet thumping on the old floor. He joined my table, his massive body sliding into the vacant chair across from me.

"Sorry for being late. Got a bit distracted. Anyway, what's up? You said on the phone you had a theory about who the suspect is. I'm all ears."

I told him how I believed that there was a mole working at the police department and they had been keeping the Demonica in the loop about the investigation. “Think about it. It all makes perfect sense. How Charlie was invited to join the Demonica Order or how they knew about Ashadha. Little things like that.”

Hammond let out a heavy sigh, his brows furrowing with many wrinkles around his eyes. “You wanna tell me one of my people is a double agent? And betrayed me and the order?” He shook his head, his left hand tapping on the table anxiously.

I pursed my lips: as bad as it sounded, this was what I suspected to be going on.

“I know it’s hard to swallow, but I’m afraid this is most likely the case. Now, I need your insight as to who that double agent might be. Any ideas? Anything you can think of about your officers could help me.”

Hammond grimaced as he considered the options but he finally threw his hands in the air. “I’m sorry, Kev, my people are all great. It’s impossible to point out a suspect. I’m not entirely sure I buy your idea,” he conceded and raised his hand, signaling to the waiter to come over to our table. He still hadn’t ordered a drink.

“Okay, let’s put it this way. Did Charlie McDonald have enemies at the station? Someone he fought with recently or just a person he didn’t get along well with?” It wouldn’t necessarily mean that person was the double agent but it would be a start.

The waiter approached our table and took Hammond’s order: a bottle of nonalcoholic beer with a raspberry flavor. “I’m on a diet, man,” Hammond said to me as he patted his stomach. “Alcohol contains a lot of sugar.”

I arched my brows: of all the people I knew, he was the last person I’d picture would be on a diet—he loved food more than anything else.

“My weight hampers my job. I have trouble running and keeping up to speed with my colleagues. The others have

coined a nickname for me—Fat Brian. Can you imagine? I am their chief for heaven’s sake! I need to gain back their respect.”

I chuckled, suppressing a laugh. I tried picturing Hammond running after a suspect or getting into a tiny space, but his protruding belly always got in the way, even in my imagination. “Okay, good luck with that. But can you think of someone that didn’t like Charlie or vice versa?”

Hammond scratched his chin and said, “There’s this guy at the station who Charlie never liked. The two fought frequently. But I don’t think he’s interested in the dark arts or Demonica. His mother was killed by demons during the war, just like your sister.”

The mention of my sister stung, but I pushed it away. I couldn’t afford to get sentimental about her death. I couldn’t risk the memory of it messing with my mind. No emotions while on duty was the motto I lived by.

“Okay, that guy probably isn’t involved with the Demonica, though nothing can be excluded. Maybe they could have tricked him?” I shot a guess, but Hammond shook his head vehemently.

“No, it just isn’t likely,” he said.

The waiter arrived at our table and set the nonalcoholic beer on the table. Hammond thanked the boy and sipped at the bottle. Very well, if Hammond didn’t have any ideas, I had one more. I cleared my throat and turned to him. “If you can’t think of anyone that would betray our order, then please send all the officer’s profiles to my office. I need to leaf through the pages of something tangible—on paper.”

Hammond took a huge swill of his drink and, putting the bottle aside, he whistled. “That’s a lot of red tape work, Tyler.”

“I know, but I need to go through all your officers’ profiles, including the supervisors.” Since Hammond couldn’t provide any valuable information, I had to study all the people that worked at the station and consult with the Eye. Even if they



had deceived Hammond and the others about their true intentions, they couldn't lie to our psychic system.

“You're crazy, man. Over a hundred people work at our station and that is without counting the cleaning personnel. There's no point in giving you all these people's profiles. At most, you'll need the police officers in Charlie's division, and the people he regularly came in contact with at work.”

Something within my soul protested, a nerve wrenching my chest. Yet, I had to concede his statement. If I searched for a mole among all the officers who worked at the police station, that would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

“You're right. Okay, let's start with Charlie's division, homicide. But if I strike no luck with it, you'll send every single person's profile to my desk, including the cleaners.”

I had only four days left to find the perpetrators or my chances of earning maximum points for this case would crash and burn. And if I failed, I'd get saddled with another angel to work with. I had to hurry up and show I was worthy of my angelic wings and the golden sigils.

Across from me, Hammond grimaced and muttered, “You're bonkers, man. Totally off your rocker.”

I chuckled. “No, I'm just married to my job and really want to catch the killers. Hey, don't tell me you're not shaken that demons are running amok in our city?”

Hammond drew closer to me, his voice barely above a whisper, “I'm shocked and disgusted, man. But your claim that we have a mole working at the station shocks me even more. I hope you're wrong. I don't want to wake up and discover I have partnered with a scumbag.” He narrowed his eyes and sighed.

I gave him a sad smile. I'd never told him about my angelic superpowers, but they included telepathy, enhanced intuitive abilities, summoning all the elements, blasting things and people, and, to a degree, healing. And the center of my chest had been pinging like crazy ever since the mole idea dawned on me. I knew I was on the right track. I only had to figure out

who the asshole was and from there, I'd take care of him and his "friends." This moment was what I'd been waiting more than a decade for, dedicating my life to the Angelica Order and the ABI. Once I got my hands on the damn demons, I'd revel in the joy of murdering them.

## Chapter 23

Ashadha

I came back to my office and collapsed on my desk chair. Finally, I was in my own space! With horror, I realized only a day had passed since I was last at home. I'd been missing my familiar, her soothing magic and calm presence, so I called her immediately. I desperately needed her warmth and her fiery nature to fuel some power into my tired bones. The room glowed and White Paw flew into the room, her small body landing on my desk. I caressed her neck several times before I rested my hand on her head.

“I am back, love. The demons tried to take me, but I got away,” I cooed as I resumed stroking my familiar's patchy skin. Softness and peace poured from her small body, radiating and engulfing my own. Lightness fluttered in my chest, my mood perking up.

“What to do, love? The angel wants me to assist him in his investigation. You know why I avoid the ABI.” I told her about my current state of affairs. She was with me in my bedroom last night and she'd warned me of the intruder's break-in. White Paw purred as I told her my concerns. She looked at me with her amber eyes, locking her gaze on me as if she delivered some information by mesmerizing me. Then, she rubbed her head in my palm. Her patchy skin tickled mine and I giggled. She opened her mouth and a shrill, low scream came out, piercing the air.

“What are you saying, dear? I can't understand you. Do you want me to help the angel or not?” I asked her.

She opened her mouth and let out the same sound again: a single scream. Something inside my head clicked and deep in my chest, I knew she was team angel. Great. Even my familiar wanted to keep us connected.

“Are you sure you want me to help Kevan?” I asked her, even though I was positive about her message. She bumped

her head against my hand and flapped her wings, taking off. Yeah, her opinion was loud and clear. I ran my fingers through my hair, wondering how much longer I could keep my secret. Even if the angel didn't figure out what I was, the Demonica knew damn well my true identity. The noose tightened around my neck, and I didn't know what to do. Night would fall in a few hours and the risk of more demons attacking me loomed.

A sudden thought crossed my mind: Kevan wasn't afraid to let me be on my own. I knew him well enough already to realize he had a good reason to be calm about my safety. Of course, the police would keep guarding my building, not that it made a difference last night, but still... Something deep within me whispered to me that another reason existed for the angel's calmness, yet I couldn't figure it out. Maybe the Angelica had put a watch on me instead of the police? The thought made my skin prickle with horror, a tight ball of fear, rage, and anxiety rose inside me. Great. Now I felt even worse than before. I hoped I was wrong, though. For some bizarre reason, I preferred the danger of the Demonica over being slaughtered by the ABI or the sexy angel who claimed he would protect me.

*Are you sure, he'll kill you if he learns who you are?* the inner voice chimed in. I wanted to ignore it as I normally would, but I wondered whether he really would kill me if he knew the truth, and something within my heart yearned to tell him. A new feeling prickled senses. Hope fluttered in my chest, making me nearly forget the danger Kevan Tyler posed to me. Stupid, stupid heart. Now I realized why they said that when you fell in love, you lost your mind. But I couldn't have fallen in love with him, that was... Absurd.

I shook my head in a petty attempt to banish these troublesome thoughts. Regardless, my biggest problem remained my imminent future. Even if I survived the next few days, I couldn't live long in this city. I had to leave and make a smaller place my new home. It was a pity, as I had grown used to Aran with its fresh and clean mountain air, its opulence, and the opportunities it provided as the new capital of the USA. But my life and safety were more important. First, I needed to survive the Demonica and Angelica Orders. Then I would run

away—this was the action plan that formed in my mind as I contemplated my situation.

*You're totally deluded, girl*, the voice inside me chimed in again, rudely. *You can't outrun your destiny. Try as much as you will, but you'll fail. You belong to us.*

The voice sneered maliciously inside my mind, and a tight ball of nerves formed. I'd never felt worse than now. I literally wished I would die, but it'd give the monster inside me great joy. No, I had to buckle up and survive this challenge as Kevan had said. I owed it to myself and my family; to my mother.

I scooped White Paw from the chair where she perched and left my office, climbing to my apartment upstairs. In my living room, I went to the wall where a picture of the holiest city in India, Varanasi, hung—a legacy from my mother. The picture depicted the ancient buildings that towered above the many ghats, or stairs, below that led to the holy river of the Ganges. Or, as my mother would call it, Ma Ganga. A long time had passed since I last gazed at this painting, my heart throbbing with grief as I recalled my mother. She loved that painting. It reminded her of India, which she considered to be her native land despite being American by birth. I had been born in India, in Varanasi, but at the age of three, my mother had taken me with her back to the United States, to her home. I had vague memories from India—the lingering sensation of extreme heat, a multitude of species, and people bursting in the overcrowded streets. Unlike my mother, I didn't miss India. I only missed my mother.

White Paw screeched shrilly and took off from my shoulder, spreading her wings as she flew. She circled the painting, her snout almost touching the paint.

“What is it, dear? You like this painting, too?”

*Just like my mother*, I thought, but said nothing. My familiar screeched again, the harsh sound unnerving me a little. White Paw directed her head at the picture, then she focused her amber eyes on me and lightly landed on my left shoulder. Very well, my familiar wanted me to touch this old

painting. I placed my palm on the center of the picture, my skin hovering above the image of the boats coasting on the Ganges. Strange bubbles swelled inside my chest, the heaviness from before evaporating. A new, unusual sensation prickled my flesh, and a tornado of strength and willpower rose within my soul.

I'd defeat the Demonica and run away from the Angelica. I felt it then and there. I had no idea how, but I knew that even though I don't remember him, my father's Varanasi ancestral spirits, and my mother's spirit, would take care of my survival. No matter how impossible it seemed right now.

## Chapter 24

Kevan

“I hope you’re satisfied,” Chief Hammond said as he dumped a load of files on my desk the next morning. As we’d agreed the previous evening, he’d been searching in homicide for someone who could be the Demonica mole.

I eyed the pile he’d brought in. Then, joining my hands behind my head, I reclined in the chair. I could see the picture of my sister and me from the corner of my desk, reminding me why I worked my ass off.

“Thanks. I’ll go through them.” I was about to open the first file when Hammond turned to me, his face serious.

“I remembered something, Detective. You asked me if I knew of someone who could have betrayed us and Charlie.”

The police chief’s tone grabbed my attention and my ears pricked up.

He fidgeted as he stood before my desk. He began tentatively, “You see, I’m not sure if it’s related to Charlie’s murder or even if it has anything to do with the Demonica and their... ugh, monsters, but for the past six months, Charlie had a beef with Senior Detective Spencer.”

Hammond paused strategically, probably expecting a reaction from me, but the name barely rang a bell. I motioned at him to continue. He cleared his throat.

“Charlie did fight with Detective Spencer a lot in the past, but nothing really serious. I’m afraid there are witnesses who can confirm that Spencer had sworn to take revenge on Charlie for his pranks and stubborn behavior.”

That was interesting. “What do you think about this? Is Senior Detective Spencer our guy?”

Hammond’s discomfort mounted as sweat broke out on his forehead. He pursed his lips. Finally, he said, “Kyle Spencer

has been working for the Aran Police for over thirteen years and I can't picture him betraying our department, or his colleagues. Yet..."

"Yet, what, Brian?" I said not trying to hide my annoyance. I grew impatient with my colleague's discomfort. I was aware of the fact that it was hard for him to speak badly of his colleagues, but we had a freaking murder case of one of his officers. And to top it all, it involved demons.

Hammond gulped and, voice faltering, said, "One day when we were out together at a local bar, something slipped from Spencer's wallet and fell on the ground. I saw it was a picture of a pentagram. It could have been inverted, but it was hard to tell. He claimed he'd found it in a suspect's belongings and took it to search for evidence. He said he couldn't find any and forgot to dispose of the photo."

Could this be the evidence that this detective could have joined the dark side and teamed with the enemy? It was hard to tell, though this accident did raise a red flag in my mind. It was against policy to hold evidence ourselves.

Hammond hurriedly added, "He didn't seem nervous when this happened so please take it with a grain of salt. I actually completely forgot about it until our conversation yesterday. I hope Kyle Spencer is not involved."

I nodded, my mind processing all the information. I thanked Hammond one last time as he stood to leave, then directed my attention at the pile of folders he'd left for me. I leafed through the documents. They consisted of fifteen separate files, each one for a member of the Aran Homicide division team. The station had a mortician, a criminologist, two detectives-one of whom was Spencer-and a few police officers. I went straight to Spencer's file. His thick file listed everything we knew about him: the date and place of his birth, his education, medical history, training, job, and family status. This guy was two years my senior, happily married for about eight years, and had lost a sibling, just like me. Though in his case it was due to an accident that happened after the war. I stared at the profile picture on the first page of his file: his cold, dark eyes emitted decisiveness and strong willpower. This wasn't



someone you'd like to cross. Shivers ran down my spine as I concentrated on his image. Could this be our guy? What could have made him switch teams and abandon the values the Angelica Order embodied? What could have made anyone do it, never mind a detective?

My head throbbed with pain so I tossed his file aside and rubbed my temples. The slow, rhythmic movements of my fingers relaxed my nerves and I closed my eyes. My head instantly grew lighter and I concentrated for a few long minutes on my breathing. It was a yogic exercise and it worked like a charm every single time I used it. Once I felt better, I tried what I usually did when I had doubts—I consulted with my angelic intuition. The void in my third eye remained empty: no images, no flashes, not even lights... nothing. This could mean only two things: either Detective Spencer was totally irrelevant, or someone or something blocked my intuitive powers. The Demonica and Angelica Orders had magic that could not only meddle with one's intuition but with other supernatural powers such as telepathy, teleportation, and even healing.

I stood from my chair and started pacing nervously in my office. What could I do to determine if this guy was our mole? I locked the door and called the Eye. The shimmering blue mist appeared and showed me snippets of Spencer's life but nothing seemed blocked; he was an open book. Until the very last image grew fuzzy and the darkness jolted me away from viewing his life.

*Isn't this a little strange?* I thought. Or maybe Spencer didn't have anything to do with Charlie's murder after all. I released a long breath of air: should I ask Ash to use her powers to look into him? I could ask her to touch some of his possessions. Maybe Hammond would give me access to his office, but was it worth it? I tapped my fingers on the wooden desk, weighing my options. I was still waiting for the forensics expertise about the demon's corpse from the back alley behind Fairy Kiss, the one I'd slain with my golden sword. The autopsy hadn't come back yet to determine what type of Demonica class he belonged to.

The ringing of my cell phone startled me yet again. I grabbed the damned gadget and froze in my place as I saw Dean Walker's name: the head of the forensics team at the ABI.

"Hi Dean, are the results ready from the autopsy?" I greeted him as I picked up the phone.

He took a deep breath, his voice somber as he said, "Yes, the results are ready. Though I'm not sure it's what you're hoping for."

"It can't be that bad."

"You better come downstairs so I can give you the autopsy results and show you some things. But for starters, the corpse belongs to a demon who's officially an extinct species. According to our database, the Angelica killed the last of his kind in the year 2034, eleven years ago."

"Jesus," I whistled as I strode to the door. Unlocking it, I went to the corridor. I headed toward the elevator to the morgue, situated in the basement at ABI headquarters. Dean had it right: I'd better go see it for myself.

"Buckle up, Kevan, that is not the worst news," my mortician colleague said as I stepped into the morgue.

*What could be worse than this?* I wondered. Charlie's murder case had exposed a deep web of deceit, hidden Demonica activity, and now an extinct demon species. I started to wonder if I was qualified enough to handle the job. Delainey's stern face appeared in my mind and sweat broke out behind my neck. I balled my hand into a fist, vowing to solve this intricate case without another angel detective, no matter what.

"That demon had possessed a human; the corpse was fundamentally human. The demon's DNA altered it slightly, though. It's how we know it was possession," Walker said after a long pause.

My heart dropped. An extinct demon had possessed a human? How was that even possible? My loathing and repulsion at the Demonica grew bigger and bigger with each

passing day. And just when I thought I couldn't despise demons any stronger than I already did, I learned something new. It just showed me how little I knew about their wickedness. Things definitely were getting stranger.

## Chapter 25

Ashadha

It was early evening when Kevan called me.

Unfortunately, no clients had come in today. If I survived the coming days, it would be necessary to move to the countryside, which meant that I'd forever say goodbye to Aran and to my agency here. I doubted running such an enterprise in the countryside, in a small town, would bring me any income, though. It'd be best to blend in and not attract any unnecessary attention. Since I'd been homeschooled by my mother, I didn't have any valuable qualifications, but I could always work as a waitress or a cleaner.

I answered the phone quickly. "Hello?"

"Hey, what's up?" I hated how rich and full of vigor his voice sounded, and the happy butterflies its vibration sent down my belly.

"I'm fine. No attackers last night. It was pretty boring," I said, trying hard to come across as nonchalant.

He chuckled and asked me, "You free right now? I have a suspect for a mole and I'd be grateful if you could tag along and see if your psychic gift can shed any light."

A lump formed at the back of my throat and, swallowing hard, I agreed. There was no point in coming up with excuses; he'd see through my lies and his suspicion would only increase. At least he didn't suspect the truth about why I hid something, but thought I was protecting someone else. *Yeah, the demon inside me*, I chuckled, amused by my own thought.

"Great. Thanks, Ash. I'll be there soon." Without saying anything else, he hung up the phone.

He arrived in my neighborhood and parked his car at the curb outside my window. My phone vibrated and, without

even glancing at the display, I knew it was him. Grabbing the phone and my leather jacket, I left my office.

“You look amazing,” the angel said, his voice sincere, as I scrambled into the front seat. Heat warmed my cheeks; my face must have flushed, judging by how hot I felt. I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. His compliment hung in the small space between us. For the first time in ages, I had put on a skirt, a tight blouse, and my leather jacket. Nothing fancy, but it was the first time he had seen me in a skirt. To be fair, I looked more like a regular woman about to go shopping than one on a mission to use her psychic abilities to solve a crime. The bastard must have seen my nervousness because he smirked as he maneuvered behind the steering wheel. Far behind us, a light gray sedan followed. I tried to look at the people inside the car, but the vehicle drove too far behind us for me to be able to see inside the car. Either way, the angel was calm, so these guys couldn’t be demons. Kevan made his way down the busy street, his Jeep speeding through the traffic. I realized with horror that we were headed downtown to ABI headquarters. *Oh no, not again*, I thought and pressed my hands together, my knuckles cracking.

“Hey, you alright?” He turned his gaze toward me for a fleeting second, concern lacing his voice.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and cut to the chase. “Where are we going, Kevan?”

He again glanced my way, surprise written on his handsome face. “To the police station. Our suspect is a detective who works there. Why, is there a problem?”

I kinda wanted to punch myself. I should have known we’d go to the police station. We were looking for a mole there, after all. I shook my head in negation to answer his question. There would be no point for him to bring me back to his office or hell forbid, get another of his lovely colleagues to question me. Yesterday at his apartment, he’d mentioned how he suspected an oddball officer to have betrayed his order by being a mole. I had the feeling he kept some things to himself and his theory built on more than just a hunch; maybe his angelic superpowers had given him this idea or, hell knows, I

didn't care. I only wanted to save my own neck. True, I'd always wanted to help other people, but the moment the Demonica marked me, all my noble intentions went out the window. First: survival, next: serving others.

"No, no problem at all, Kevan." I forced a smile and added, "And how come you suspected this detective? Any clues?" I asked him casually, though a simmering curiosity burned in my chest: if someone from the police would do such an abominable thing as to betray his own people, I would expect them to have been more careful and not leave evidence.

Kevan furrowed his brows and, glancing my way, said, "He's hiding something. Chief Hammond told me about some inconsistencies. Spencer had a photograph that was part of evidence and could have been an inverted pentagram. And he wasn't at the police station when he said he was, during the murder, which leaves him no alibi. Plus, he and Officer McDonald had a feud."

We spent the rest of the drive in silence. At one time, it seemed to me that he wanted to tell me something, but he stopped himself. Something in me thought it had to be related to the investigation. Was it something about Charlie, the victim? Or something about the demon attack from the other night? My chest panged with pain, heaviness descended on my shoulders, and I gave up thinking about it. As they said, ignorance was bliss.

We arrived at the Aran Police Station, the ABI headquarters just a few intersections down the street. There was no trace of the gray sedan, at least as far as I could tell. Yet, my soul stirred deep within my core and told me we were being watched. As we climbed out of the car, I noticed a multitude of police officers, including the administration, coming out of the station's entrance. The Aran Police Station paled in comparison to the ABI building. Kevan and I stood aside and waited for the crowd of officers to empty the building. It was shift change, so we hadn't picked the best time. Or perhaps the angel intentionally chose this time when many people would be out of their offices? He said he wanted me to check the suspect's office, so it made sense to pick a time after work.

Inside the gray building, Kevan strode up the stairs to the second floor, me coming in tow. He knocked on a door just inside the corridor. A familiar voice called “come in” and as we entered the room, the plump face of Chief Hammond came into view.

“Did he leave?” Kevan asked the police chief. The latter nodded and, standing up from his thin chair, he handed Kevan a bundle of keys. He held up two keys before dropping them into Kevan’s hand.

“The first key unlocks his office at the end of the hallway, the shorter one—his locker in the changing room.” The plump, short man glanced my way and greeted me quickly.

I responded to his greeting with a short nod, then followed Kevan as he strode confidently down the long corridor. The building was long rather than tall. Finally, the angel stopped in front of a door, the second to last at the end of the hallway, set the key inside the lock, and turned the key. The door gave a funny click as he pushed the handle down and the door creaked open. Kevan went inside first and motioned for me to follow him.

The room we’d entered was shrouded in semi-darkness, the blinds nearly drawn, only a small gap between the windowsill and the blinds. The office consisted of a standard-size desk with several chairs, potted plants, and a blackboard was mounted on the wall closest to the desk.

“This is Detective Kyle Spencer’s office. Don’t touch anything without first informing me,” the angel said and drew aside, waiting for me to work my magic. I didn’t know where to start so I set my eyes on the desk. The suspect must have spent the majority of his time at the desk, so his energy and consciousness would linger the heaviest here. In the ideal case, I needed clothes, but we could see if I could gather information here. If not, we’d go to his private locker. I signaled to Kevan that I’d check the suspect’s desk and he nodded. My fingers caressed the wooden desk, my hand reaching for the pens that lay nearby. My hand curled around a pen and I waited for some images to come to mind. A glimmer of sparks fluttered around, but they fizzled out as quickly as

they had appeared. No, I needed an item he'd used for longer than these pens. I needed his clothes—a piece of clothing—that was it.

“I can't, Kevan. I need clothes he's worn. Furniture or the less personal items here won't do it.”

He silently nodded and strode to the door. Once we were back in the corridor, he locked the office and headed toward the last door. This time, the room wasn't locked because he yanked the handle open and went inside. I followed him. A second door greeted us with the sign “Men's Locker Room” at its center. Inside, he strode to the suspect's locker and turned the key. Kevan reached inside the locker, taking out a long-sleeved shirt and jeans. He handed me the shirt in silence, anticipation palpable in the air around us. His eyes narrowed, and a deep scowl creased his forehead. The anticipation was killing me, too. Now was the moment of truth. My fingers took the soft piece of fabric, my hand sliding down the dark blue uniform. A multitude of visions rushed to my mind, one after the other. I saw the suspect on his first day at the station and how happy he was, his face beaming with joy. Next, I saw him at home, eating dinner with a woman and laughing; finally, I saw his promotion to detective, the joy that beat in his heart unmatched. This guy loved his job and wife. I involuntarily smiled: I liked this guy. He was a regular human and didn't pose any threat to me, unlike the hunk who'd brought me in here.

“Well?” The angel asked me impatiently as he saw my reaction. I cleared my throat and handed him back the shirt.

“This guy is clean; he's not the mole you're after.”

Disappointment spread across the angel's face as he frowned at me for a flickering second, then he resumed his inscrutable attitude. He tossed the shirt back into the locker and locked it. When he turned back to face me, he conceded,

“Yeah, I had this feeling too, though I hoped I was wrong. So, we're back at ground zero.” He perched on the long bench in the middle of the locker room. His face sulked as he thought about his options. A part of me longed to comfort him, to give



him a hug, but another part of me screamed to get the hell away from him and his order.

*You just love trouble, don't you?* The voice inside my mind sneered with malice and I couldn't help but feel repulse at its vibration.

The angel must have noticed my shivering or sensed something because he abruptly stood from the bench, his voice alerted as he asked, "You okay? You seem distracted."

"Agh, I'm okay," I said. I was sick of this persistent voice and wished I knew why it was here, but this was not the time or place to focus on that. Of all the people who could learn about this peculiarity of mine, the angel was the last one I wished to know about it.

*I'm glad we're on the same page,* the malicious voice spat inside my mind, giving me a headache.

## Chapter 26

Kevan

I could tell she lied to me when I asked her what was wrong. But this time I witnessed the change in her look, the way she seemed not only somewhere else but *someone* else: as if an invisible switch had been pressed. Ugh, what was she hiding? And come to think, I had almost shared the autopsy results of the monster who'd tried to kill her. Worst of all, though, was that this woman was my fated mate. No, destiny must have made a mistake. I couldn't picture being with someone so full of secrets and lies. What drove me to insanity was the pull and attraction I felt to her no matter what.

Maybe I had to bang her to get her out of my system? A light swirl throbbed inside my head and I instantly gave up on this idea, plus I doubted she'd agree to it. She didn't strike me as the type of a girl to enjoy one-night stands, and I wouldn't even bring it up to her. I liked her more than just a sexy piece of meat.

"Very well. This Spencer guy isn't the mole. We're back at square one," I said as I balanced my foot on the bench in the middle of the room. I knew in my gut that there was a mole, the trouble was how to find him. Over two hundred officers worked in the Aran police department, including the clerks.

"Don't worry, Kevan. We'll solve this mystery and catch the murderers," she consoled me as she drew closer to me, her rich scent of wild fruits blowing straight to my face. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't hide from her peculiar human scent. I really didn't know how she could have a magical signature, but my only explanation was maybe she had some distant magical ancestry.

She didn't seem to notice my stupor and the weird looks I gave her because she clapped her hands enthusiastically and loudly exclaimed, "I have an idea! I should have done it earlier."

“What is it?” I asked, forcing my mind to forget about the dangerous closeness between this woman’s sexy curves and me. Her skirt alone made my mind go wild with thoughts and desires...

“I have to go, but I will tell you later.” She was about to dash off, but I reached and grabbed her by the arm, stopping her in her tracks before she could do something stupid like that night at Fairy Kiss.

“No, ma’am. You can’t just go after you drop a bomb like that. What’s your idea?” My hand had gripped her arm tightly and I didn’t intend to let her go easily. The touch of her arm through her leather jacket made my heart beat faster, the blood in my veins raging with desire. At least this time there were no weird reactions from either one of us.

“Okay, I’ll tell you. Just let me go. This is my favorite jacket and I don’t want you to ruin it,” she said slowly, her breath hot on my face. My senses picked up on everything about her. This woman infuriated me and turned me on at the same time. I reluctantly released my hand from her arm and she brushed the spot off as if cleaning it from my touch. I rolled my eyes but watched her intently: she owed me an explanation.

“So?” I prompted her.

“I remembered that I could check the victim’s house and his belongings to see if I have a better vision. It wouldn’t hurt to try, at least.” She shrugged.

That was it! Why hadn’t I thought of it? I wanted to kick myself.

“Great idea, Ash. I’m coming with you.”

“Oh, no. No need to. I think Evalyn would feel more at ease without your presence. No offense.”

I furrowed my brows: it pained me to admit that she had a point. A lot of people weren’t comfortable with the police, let alone angel police. But what could I do? It wasn’t smart to let her go to the victim’s house and do her own mini investigation without backup. Darkness would fall soon, and I couldn’t risk

letting her roam the city on her own. I knew two trained angels kept a tail on her, but still... To be honest, I'd totally forgotten about her tail. I hadn't even noticed anyone following us as I drove to the police station. The guys were good. Yet my mind would be restless if I didn't have any news from her tonight. An idea crossed my mind and I turned to her.

"You can go alone to talk to Evalyn, but I want you to meet me after at Fairy Kiss, okay?"

She wanted to protest, but I raised my hand to silence her objections. "Demons have marked you and I need to make sure you're safe and sound."

"I thought your men were making sure I was all good," she said and I nearly choked. How did she know the angels were watching her? She must have seen them somehow.

"Don't worry, they're very discreet and almost invisible," she added as she saw my stunned face.

"Yeah, so discreet and invisible that you've noticed them," I remarked sarcastically and she chuckled.

A load of the burden fell from my shoulders as I relaxed and I rubbed my temples, trying to gather my thoughts. She was smarter and paid more attention to small details than I'd given her credit for.

"But how do you know they are my men?" My question came out feebly, heavy like a wet, dripping cloth about to fall on the ground.

She twisted her face and said, "I'm not an idiot, Kevan. I knew you had your watch over me when you left me home alone yesterday. Did you think I'd believe you'd leave me unprotected after the demon attack the other night? Please." She waved her hand in the air dismissively.

"Okay, Sherlock. I have my men keeping a watch over you but still, I'd like to meet you tonight after your visit to the victim's house." Plus, I kinda wanted to tell her about the coroner's discovery, but I wasn't sure how to deliver the news: that a bunch of crazed Demonica lured humans and supernaturals into their wicked Brotherhood and performed

intricate rituals to possess them by extremely powerful extinct demons? How did that sound? If Dave hadn't told me himself, I wouldn't believe it.

“Is this a date?” She teased me.

My pulse rushed, yet I remained nonchalant, at least I pretended to be. “No, it's a business meeting. I need your help.”

She eyed me suspiciously, obviously not buying my claim. “Why does it have to be at Fairy Kiss again? Don't you think it's a little strange that the demons attacked me behind your favorite bar?”

My instinct was to dismiss her question, but I stopped myself before I could even respond to her. She had a point. Steven Maddock had made a lot of friends among the ABI and the Angelica, and perhaps the mole liked to hang out there as much as I did. Maybe even the police visited that place, hence how Charlie McDonald must have met the mole and all this nightmare had started. I should have figured it out earlier.

“You're right, Ash. You know, you have a natural detective talent. No wonder you opened your own detective agency. But I still believe you'd be better off, at least financially, if you freelanced for the ABI.”

She wasn't impressed by my compliment, yet out of politeness she thanked me, her voice dry and lacking emotion. She was about to leave when I stopped her.

“What now? I thought I was free to go to Evalyn,” she snapped at me, annoyed.

“On your own? Public transport will slow you down. I have no other work at the moment and can drive you,” I said and stood from the bench. I headed to the exit, and Ash followed, reluctantly. I had to give Hammond the keys back and we could hop into my Jeep and reach the McDonald house in no time. “You sure she is home and is willing to talk to you?”

“Time to find out,” she said with a grin and took out her phone from the jacket. We were already going down the stairs, Hammond's office in view. While she talked to the widow, I

handed Hammond the keys. He asked me if we'd found anything, but I shook my head.

He sighed with relief and exclaimed, "I was sure Spencer had nothing to do with any of this. He is a man of integrity and great intellect."

I said goodbye to the chief and joined Ash outside in the corridor. She finished her call with the widow and turned to me.

"Evalyn's home and said I can come by. Let's go."

As we left downtown, headed down the freeway to the shifter district of Aran in the foothills of the Rockies, I rolled the window down to allow the wind to blow over my face. The warmth of the sun blazed right into the windshield. I pursed my lips, the tires speeding up and bringing us closer to the victim's house.

"Good luck," I said, to Ashadha when I pulled up in front of Charlie McDonald's three-story house. "You gave me an idea about Fairy Kiss, so I'm going to question Steve and his staff over there. Meet me at Fairy Kiss once you finish here." But I remembered that she had no car. I took out a few silver coins and hurriedly added, as she scrambled out of the seat, "Call a cab. It's on me." I handed her the coins.

She gave me a smile that didn't reach her eyes as she awkwardly accepted the coins and shut the door after herself. I took a long breath of air, contemplating who I'd better approach at Fairy Kiss: Steven or some of his employees. I was running out of time to get the answers before these motherfuckers hurt someone else, and I'd vowed to never let that happen again. I gunned the engine, the car rumbling as I left Ash behind.

## Chapter 27

Ashadha

“Welcome, Miss Matthews. I’m glad you came. I’ve been waiting for news from you,” Evalyn said as she opened the front door and made room for me to pass through. Closing the door behind me, she said, “The ABI doesn’t seem to know how to solve my husband’s murder. I’m hoping that you can help.” I stopped myself from making a comment about Kevan Tyler and his investigating skills or the ABI.

“I’m flattered, Mrs. McDonald, but I’m afraid I haven’t done more than Detective Tyler at the ABI. Actually, I wanted to pay you a visit because I hope my psychic gift can give me a vision of something that can move the investigation forward. May I walk around the house?” I stood in the middle of a spacious, well-decorated living room; its walls painted a beautiful and calming peach-orange color. The fireplace at the far wall drew my attention immediately, followed by the many paintings on the walls. The forest landscapes they depicted relaxed my eyes, breathing fresh powers and vigor into my body. Ever since I’d taken this case, disaster upon disaster followed; each one bigger than the one before. This case certainly felt like a curse.

“Of course, Miss Matthews. Please follow me. We have our bedroom and Charlie had an office where he could work on something or write on his laptop, whatever he needed to do. He preferred solitude.” She explained to me. I followed her down the hallway to a new room.

“This was Charlie’s man cave,” she said, gesturing toward the modest desk, the nearly empty bookshelf, and a pile of empty boxes. “He liked to spend time here alone when he had the chance. I’m afraid I’ve packed up the books on the shelves and moved them to the bedroom. If you wish to see them, I can—”

“No, no need to. I’ll spend some time here, thank you.” I nodded at her, implying with my tone that I’d prefer to be alone.

“Oh, I’ll leave you to do your thing. I have just started some soup, so I’ll be in the kitchen. If you need me, call,” she said and left the room. She carefully closed the door after her.

Once alone, I looked around the medium-sized room. The energy felt lighter and friendlier than in the living room, the minimalism and simplicity here uplifted my spirit. I understood why Charlie liked to spend his free time in this room, on his own. I drew closer to the desk and slid my fingers across the wood’s surface. Nothing rushed to my mind; no images, visions, or the like.

I knew that my gift worked best by touching clothes or items that a person used so that their energy could imbibe and infuse into the material. Maybe it was foolish of me to believe I could see more than I’d already seen. But then, the vision of Charlie’s murder had woken me in the small hours only a few days ago, without me touching anything of his. Go figure. This case didn’t make much sense; it deviated from the usual affairs. Maybe due to the Demonica’s involvement?

I sat on the chair before the desk and pulled open the top drawer. A framed picture of Charlie and Evalyn lay inside, and my fingers brushed against it. Lightness infused my being, my chest filling with love and gratitude. A bright glow blinded my vision and I saw young Charlie and Evalyn walking hand in hand in a forest. Then the scenery changed as their home emerged in front of my eyes. They had matured, growing older and wiser. He worked late at the police station, and she, too, in a bakery. They had been happy together, though they didn’t have children. Maybe that was the reason why Charlie had taken to heart helping that sick child? Something whispered to me that it was more than that, but I lacked the knowledge and information. I wished someone could wipe my memory and make me forget about the past couple of days. From a timid, Angelica-fearing private detective, I’d turned into a monster-hunting badass who partnered with the hottest guy I’d ever laid my eyes on. But he was forbidden territory: he’d kill me if



he knew who I was. No, some things needed to remain secret while others had to be exposed. I took a last look at the framed photo and pushed back the drawer. I searched the other drawers but the most significant item I found was an old dust cloth. The rest consisted of blank sheets of paper and scattered pens. The only item worth my time was the laptop on top of the desk. I had half a mind about whether to turn it on or not. I ran my fingers across the surface of the computer, my mind registering all the sensations. No vision or images popped up and I collapsed back in the chair. It was official: I'd wasted my evening here. I hoped the angel had better luck at Fairy Kiss. Something stirred within my chest, heaviness rising in tides. I couldn't put my finger on it, but my instincts told me that Fairy Kiss brewed trouble, making me alert and anxious. There was something shady going on there and I hoped we could figure it out in time.

## Chapter 28

Kevan

“Hi, buddy! I’m glad you’re here. You didn’t bring the hot chick this time...” Steve slapped my back playfully as he joined me at the table. I was looking forward to gaining his invaluable feedback on this complex case. If anyone knew angels’ and police officers’ true selves, it was Steven.

“Hi, Steve. I came to relax and have a drink or three. Gosh, it’s nearly the end of the week and I’m exhausted.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Are you and that hot girl coming to the solar eclipse party tomorrow?” He grinned, showing me his teeth. I didn’t understand my reaction, but his expression made my blood boil. It was as though he was waiting for his opportunity to approach Ash himself. I knew she was hot. Hell, I’d been struggling with it for days now. But the idea that Steven wanted her, too, made me sickly jealous. I wasn’t sure why I felt so overprotective of Ash against Steven’s comments but maybe that’s how fated mates worked. Steven must have sensed my discomfort because his happy, carefree expression evaporated, his look alert and confused.

“Woah, don’t worry. I’m not after your girl. I just want you to come to the party,” he said, his eyes gleaming with excitement as he held his hands up in surrender.

“Sounds great, but the trouble is, I’m swamped with work. I’m investigating the murder of a police officer, Charlie McDonald, and I’m at a dead end.” I looked sadly at my half-full glass of gin and tonic. I had only one workday remaining to solve this case .

“Aha, the murder your gal mentioned? We had no time to discuss it the last time we met. Is it that bad?”

I glanced around us—the tables next to ours stood empty, though customers occupied the room at a modest distance

from us. To be on the safe side, I lowered my voice as I turned to Steve.

“Demons are involved and I suspect there’s a mole in our ranks.”

Steven whistled, the look on his face turning serious and somber. “Oh, that is bad. Any suspects?”

I shook my head, my fingers clutching the glass. I slid my finger around the rim of the glass. “No, we have nothing yet. Have you noticed any of the police hanging out here?” I knew I was grasping at straws, but Ash was right: it was too convenient that she had been ambushed here the other night.

Steve laughed out loud, which made some of the customers turn our way, surprise on their faces. “Well, you and other angels from the ABI come here regularly, but the police... Let me think about it.” He scratched his chin as he pondered my question. Finally, he clapped his hands and exclaimed happily, “Chief Hammond used to come here often, though I’m not sure when the last time was.”

Chief Hammond—the words echoed in my mind. No, it couldn’t be him. Anyone else but him. My heart panged with pain and Steven must have noticed the grimace on my face because leaned in toward me.

“Hey, you alright? You seem off,” his voice laced with concern.

I waved my hand dismissively. “It’s nothing, I just remembered I forgot to do something at work. It’s fine.”

Steven stood to leave. “I’m glad we caught up, mate. I have to get back to work but I’ll check in with you again before you leave.” He patted my back and strode toward the bar, walking through the swinging doors to the office.

I swirled the ice in my glass, feverishly processing Steven’s claim. Even if Hammond came in here, that wouldn’t mean anything. What motive would he have to join the Demonica? My pulse rushed, slight nausea setting over the pit of my stomach. No, that would be absurd. Hammond had worked for the Aran Police for many years; he’d started right after the war

ended, when the Angelica won over the forces of darkness. I sipped at my glass, trying to focus on the gin's strong juniper taste.

My mind wrapped in deep thoughts, I hadn't noticed Ash coming in and approaching my table. Only when her figure slid into my peripheral vision, did I raise my head to see her sexy curves before me. Her skirt fluttered as she moved swiftly and my heart filled with joy, beating faster. Heat rushed to my cheeks and I realized with horror that I must have shown my interest in her very noticeably.

"Long time, no see, Detective," she greeted me playfully as she joined me. With amazement, I recalled how only a few days ago she wouldn't for the world be this friendly to me. She'd been an ice queen in our interactions, with what I'd thought was an occasional attempt at flirting. But that had come across clunky and unbelievable. A lot has changed in the course of three days. After I had saved her life that night, the ice between us started to melt.

"How did it go at Evalyn's?" I asked as I pushed the glass aside, my depressed mood slightly improved at the sight of her.

"Not well... Hey, is everything okay? You look... off," she concluded as she stared at me. Her watchful eyes and the way she looked at me sped my heart up even faster. I hated the effect this woman had on my body and soul. And the fact that she was my fated mate... I shouldn't ever tell her that. It'd be my secret. Honestly, I didn't know how I'd live without her, but I had to: she hid a huge secret and I knew that if she was going to stay so closed off, we could never work.

"It's fine. I'm afraid we haven't made much progress, and I'm feeling the stress of that," I said and gulped down all the gin and tonic that remained in my glass.

She stared at me in silence, watching my sullen face. Finally, she turned to me and said, "I have had this terrible feeling since the beginning, right after Evalyn hired me. I don't think I mentioned this to you, but the first time she visited my office, she brought a picture of her husband. Later,

when I touched it, a fire burst from the photo and could have ruined it. I managed to extinguish the fire before it could do damage.”

Damn it. Clearly, the Demonica had put their mark on the whole case from the very beginning. Not only were they responsible for Charlie’s death and attacking Ash, but they were actively working to prevent us from advancing even an inch. What were they up to?

“Kevan, umm, are you alright?” She asked me and cut through the fog of my thoughts.

I mumbled under my breath, but she didn’t hear me.

“I can’t shake the feeling that you’re not telling me something important about the investigation.” She looked at me with concern.

*Look who’s talking*, I thought and stared at her, thinking of my options. In the past, whenever I’d felt down and at a dead end, I’d visit my mentor Ryan at the Academy. Being here at Fairy Kiss and seeing Steven reminded me of those times I’d relied on Ryan to get me through and I realized that it was time to seek out his counsel. I cleared my throat and turned to her.

“There’s someone I think we should go see. It’s my mentor from the Angelica Academy. He’s one of the most knowledgeable people I’ve ever met, and incredibly compassionate, too.”

“So he’s nothing like you, huh?” She said, small mischievous flames burning in her dark brown eyes. I smiled, this time sincerely.

“Something like that. Well, what do you think? We can visit him tomorrow. I’ll need to call him and arrange the details, but I bet he’d love to meet you.”

She opened her mouth to speak when a dark shadow passed over her whole aura. I swear, she instantly changed; her relaxed body posture shifted to that of an animal under attack. She stiffened and shook her head. “I’d love to join you, but I can’t. I forgot that I have a new client. I’ll be busy working.”

Lies. Damned lies and more lies. I knew in my soul she didn't have a new client. I knew she wanted to come meet Ryan, I just couldn't wrap my mind around her sudden change. I decided to use one of my superpowers I saved as a last resort when all else failed me. I connected to the thread inside my center, where my magic was stored, and unleashed a tiny stream to her, letting the invisible blue web of twinkling stars reach her body and skin. I gave the mental command to my magic to invoke suggestion and compliance. I only used this mind manipulation technique when I deemed it appropriate and safe. In her case, I could feel it in my heart that she wanted to meet my mentor, but she was scared of something. I didn't know what held her back, but I wanted to help her. And, selfishly, I wanted her to go with me.

Her body posture changed: a wave of relaxation flowed in a steady circle from her center, moving up toward her head and down from her waist to her legs. Her stiffness and the strained look in her eyes slowly gave way to a chill and laid-back, gorgeous woman smiling at me. I'd gotten her. Now she couldn't refuse me and it wouldn't hurt her to relax a little.

"So? What do you say about paying a visit to my mentor tomorrow, Ash?" I prompted her, my eyes locked on her face. Eye contact was essential to using suggestive powers on others.

She chuckled and said, "Sounds good, just call me when you're headed to pick me up."

I nodded slowly as I enjoyed this new calmer and freer version of Ashadha Matthews. If only she could let her guard down and reveal her secrets to me... An idea crossed my mind: what if I applied my suggestive powers and untangled her tongue as to what she hid from me so feverishly? A sharp pain pierced my chest and I knew I'd gone too far. I had to respect her privacy, the way archangels and gods respected humans and supernaturals' privacy.

"Well, well, well, look who's here? Welcome back," Steven's thick, loud voice boomed as he approached our table. "I'm happy to see you again. Oh, you haven't ordered

anything, did Lisa take your order?" He glanced at our table, my empty glass the only thing there.

"No need to, thank you. I'm not thirsty," she said, but he had already snapped his fingers and the waitress, a new girl, popped up as if by magic.

"Lisa, why didn't you take this lady's order?" He scolded her. The girl was visibly shaking when she asked Ash what she'd like to order.

"I'm really not thirsty, thank you," Ash began but Steven cut her off.

"Nonsense! Lisa, bring her a glass of Johnny Walker, Blue Label. Actually, make it two of them. And one regular whiskey for me."

My eyes opened wide: this top-shelf liquor would cost me a whole golden coin. I wasn't sure if the second glass was for me, but I had finished my gin and tonic, and whiskey wasn't really my taste. I began to protest, but Steve stopped me midway. "It's on the house. Rumor has it, someone attacked you in the alley behind Fairy Kiss. Is that true?" He inched closer to us, sitting in the extra chair at our table.

Ash glanced at me in surprise. She turned to me. "I thought you came to talk to him about that."

Steven furrowed his brows, a deep crease forming on his forehead. "No, Kev hasn't told me anything. What happened?"

I gave her a reproachful look—I had wanted to see if Steven knew any more about Charlie's murder, but hadn't gotten to anything else yet. "A small inconvenience," I said. "We dealt with the attackers."

Steven stared for a second, which seemed to stretch out into a minute. "Be honest, man. Was this related to the murder you're investigating?"

I nodded my head and the bar owner whistled. "Now I understand your frustration. This case is complicated."

"Precisely," Ash chimed in. "Don't you think it's a little strange that we were attacked right behind your bar?"

He regarded her in silence, then burst out laughing. “Yeah, it’s suspicious, I admit. You think some of the customers at the bar that night attacked you?”

I glared at Ash, a silent signal to keep her mouth shut. I didn’t want to reveal all my cards to Steven. He was a long-time friend, but I had started to question everyone and everything. The waitress returned to deliver our drinks, then she scurried away as if running from the devil. I couldn’t tell if she was just nervous because she was new or if she was afraid of something.

I eyed the drinks and sipped at my Johnny Walker. I forced an apologetic smile at Steven and replied, “We haven’t yet determined how the two are connected.”

He stared at me intently and reached over to pat my shoulder. “You’re working too much, man. Come clear your mind at the party tomorrow night. Who knows, you may even solve the murder if you give yourself a little break.” He winked at me.

“Wait, a party?” Ash asked, her features contorting in confusion.

“Yes, we’re hosting an eclipse party tomorrow, it will be an all-day celebration. I already invited Kev and told him to bring you, too.” He turned to me and added, “Now you have no excuse not to come with her.”

“An eclipse party?” Ash asked, her brows raising as though deep in thought.

“Yes, we’ll celebrate the solar eclipse. It will be visible here for about ten minutes. Haven’t you heard about it?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m afraid I’m not keen on astronomy or astrology. I haven’t paid any attention.”

I kept silent about the matter. I knew astrology played an important role in occult and esoteric sciences and I even had angel colleagues who knew a great deal about it, but I wasn’t big on astrology. When he mentioned the solar eclipse, something rang a bell, but I couldn’t quite recall what it was.



I'd heard various things on astrology from my archangel mentor, but I couldn't recall them.

“So, are you two coming?” Steven's lips stretched into a smile as he glanced at me.

Ash looked like she was about to decline the offer when I intervened and accepted his invitation with a smile. “That sounds great. We'll be there, won't we Ash?”

“Sounds super cool. We'll come,” Ash chimed in. My suggestive magic still worked high on her; the effect usually wore off in about two hours.

Steven beamed with delight and he turned to both of us. “Then it's settled. We have a hell of a party planned.” He lifted his whiskey and added, “Cheers! For the party tomorrow. May it bring us closer to our dreams and make us happy.” Ash and I raised our glasses to the toast as well, the sound of our glasses colliding sharp and cutting.

## Chapter 29

Ashadha

“You ready to go meet with Ryan?” Kevan asked me when he called early the next morning. We’d stayed at Fairy Kiss until well after midnight: the angel and the bar owner reminiscing about the academy. Steven blabbered excitedly about the upcoming eclipse party, his enthusiasm infectious.

When the angel mentioned his mentor on the phone, something clicked in my head, my memory stirring. Holy hell. Somehow, Kevan had convinced me last night to meet his mentor! I remembered clearly how I initially declined his offer, but then something strange happened and I agreed to visit his acclaimed mentor. No, I would have never said “yes” to a meeting with a high-ranking angel. It’d be too dangerous. I couldn’t prove it, but I was positive that Kevan Tyler had bewitched me last night.

“Hey, you said you’d meet Ryan,” the angel chimed in from the other side of the line, sensing my unwillingness in my hesitation to answer.

I thought for a moment. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, after all. Plus, then I could spend more time around Kevan. I hated that I felt this way, but I couldn’t get enough of him.

“Ah, yeah, I forgot,” I said, and it was partly true. “Let me double-check my schedule.” I said, hoping to buy some time. Unfortunately, my detective agency had turned into a tomb: no cases, no new customers, nothing. A small part of me wondered if the Demonica hadn’t hexed my business long ago. “Okay. I can after one pm,” I said, stating that exact time because it’d give me time to cook a proper lunch upstairs and tidy up my office and apartment.

“At one o’clock I’ll come to pick you up. Be ready,” he said and hung up the phone before I could say anything else. I kinda wondered if his mentor had his whole day available for us, but the angel must have talked to him before calling me. It

all happened too fast for my liking. I sighed and hoped the meeting with Kevan's mentor would justify the hassle. I'd never met an angel mentor. Kevan Tyler was the first angel I'd knowingly come into contact with.

At one o'clock, my cell phone beeped. One glance at the screen and I knew it was him. I grabbed my jacket and phone and a tight ball curled at my belly. I opened the drawer where I kept my weapon. My hand brushed against the gun's metallic handle as I picked it up, tucking the gun in my jacket pocket, the safety on so that I wouldn't fire at myself accidentally.

I bounded down the building staircase and rushed to the exit. I yanked the handle to the Jeep open and climbed into the passenger seat.

"You're dressed casually today," he noted as his eyes lingered on my jeans. To be fair, the jeans were loose and flexible but less flirty than my skirt the day before. I was still angry that he'd bewitched me and didn't think being sexy for him was an appropriate reward.

"Yes, is that a problem?" I shot back, having a hard time concealing my annoyance. I suspected he wanted to feast his eyes on my bare legs, but I couldn't care less. Discomfort and anxiety brewed in my chest. Something primal had woken up inside and made me alert today. My intuition told me to bring my gun and wear something I could move easily in.

"Easy there, Ash. I just noticed, that's all," he said, a smile dancing on his lips.

*Asshole*, I thought and directed my stare at the windshield. He gunned the engine, the Jeep rumbling down the street. Traffic was light, so we could drive quickly, the air playing with my hair with the windows rolled down. The sun blazed above my head, the weather still hot, probably the last days of summer before winter would knock on our door. Since Aran was situated in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, we had fewer summer days than in lower elevations. Well, those that had survived the cataclysms. Sweat dampened my neck and tank top, but I kept my leather jacket on, as the gun was hidden in my jacket pocket. Kevan wore a fitted gray shirt that

accentuated his chiseled chest and biceps and I had a hard time keeping my mouth closed as I noticed the fitted khaki pants, too. We spent the drive in silence. Apparently, my snarky question had temporarily silenced him.

The Jeep left Johnsonville quickly and he drove downtown where his mentor lived. I couldn't wait for this meeting to end and, hopefully, finally solve this murder. Once I saved my own neck, I would be out of here. It wasn't easy being a half-demon and twice as difficult in the current political climate where the Angelica occupied the top of the food chain.

Lost in the fog of my thoughts, I hadn't noticed when the angel pulled to a stop in front of a white two-story house on a quiet street in downtown Aran. Beautiful cherrywood decorated its terraces and the rooftop. The whole house glowed on its own, never mind the sunbathing it. Kevan climbed out of the car and walked inside the gate, waving for me to follow him. I had barely set my right foot on stone pathway, when a large dog leapt toward us, his bark loud and enraged. He bared his white fangs at us, his eyes glowing with dark flames, his gray fur shiny and smooth as silk.

*Oh, crap*, I thought, terror coursing through me. The canine must have smelled my fear—dogs were notoriously famous for picking up emotions in people—because he shifted his body toward me, his rumblings and snarls growing louder and more pissed off with each second. Kevan must have pulled another one of his magic tricks because calmness and serenity pierced my chest, my short and rapid breaths becoming deeper and more relaxed. The aroma of roses permeated the air and the scary dog from seconds ago sat calmly in front of us, wagging his tail happily.

“Ares! Come here and don't bother the guests. I've told you many times,” a deep male voice called from inside the house, steps pounding in the distance. The dog howled lowly and skittered to the back of the garden. A few seconds later the front door creaked open, and an average sized man appeared on the porch steps. His body was fit and slightly chubby, though on the sporty side, his hair whitened, his face cleanly shaved. He sported comfy jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

He waved at the angel, shouting, “Kev, welcome, man. Come here! I haven’t seen you in ages.”

The angel dashed to his mentor, his feet taking two stone steps at a time. He reached the older man and the two gave each other a tight hug; a few joints cracking upon their strong embrace.

“How are you, man? Delainey still treating you right? The old fool is such a perfectionist.”

Kevan laughed and stepped back, directing his attention to me. I’d already crossed half the stone pathway but stopped to witness the angel and his mentor. I couldn’t help but feel that Kevan thought of this guy like a father figure.

“Umm, Ryan, I’d like you to meet Ashadha Matthews. She runs her own detective agency in Aran City and is helping me with the investigation I told you about.”

“Ah, yes. I consulted the Eye about the case. I’m up to date with the information, no need to brief me,” the mentor said. I wondered what the Eye was.

“Ash, this is my mentor and academy trainer, Senior Angel Ryan Montgomery,” he presented me to the older guy. I instantly liked Ryan—safety and calmness radiated from his aura, which made sense for the house giving off the same vibe of brightness. I walked over to him and shook his outstretched hand enthusiastically; somehow, my mind blocked the red alarm that always beeped upon encountering angels or anyone from the Angelica Order.

“Nice to meet you, sir. Kevan praises you highly,” I said to the mentor. He nodded, exchanging pleasantries with me, too. Glancing at Kevan, he urged us to go inside his house. The dog howled with sadness from the backyard, but his master didn’t even spare a glance at his pet. Ryan closed the door behind us, with no option for Ares to go inside.

“Please, come this way,” the mentor led us straight to a door at the end of a long corridor and pushed it open, making way for us to go first. He closed the door and held his hand toward the furniture, indicating for us to take a seat. We sat on a sofa

in the corner, while Ryan sat across from us, his eyes studying me intently.

“It’s a complicated case, I agree,” he began as he turned to Kevan. “And it involves a specific brotherhood of the Demonica that had consolidated their influence and power in recent years, operating in the shadows. The majority of the population isn’t even aware of the great threat that hangs in the air. And yet, here’s the silver lining: this brotherhood within the Demonica Order is in a hurry. They’re rushing things and I believe they will reveal themselves to you quite soon. Just be patient and stay on your guard. My advice is not to trust a soul: the Demonica has spread its tendrils everywhere, corrupting everything in its wake.”

Kevan nodded slowly at his mentor and rubbed his chin with his fingers. “And what do you think about my theory that there’s a mole in the police? I think if we can figure out who was recruiting Charlie McDonald to the brotherhood, we’ll solve his murder.”

Ryan smiled radiantly at his former student and, standing from his chair, he said, “I agree with you, it’s most likely that someone is a double agent. But I don’t think this murder case will be a mystery for long. Just be careful and you should be fine,” Ryan said calmly. He turned to me and added, “A piece of advice to you, Ashadha: trust your intuition, it’s your hidden asset.” He regarded me in silence for a few seconds then he clapped his hands energetically.

“It’s the end of the week; what are your plans for the investigation? Any new leads or evidence?”

Kevan shook his head mournfully. “Not much, but I suspect the mole might join a party we’ve been invited to tonight.”

“A party?” The mentor repeated, surprised.

“Yes, at Fairy Kiss. We’ll celebrate the solar eclipse today,” I explained to him.

His face lit up, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Old Steve thought of another opportunity to make money, huh?”

Kevan chuckled. “He promised us that it’ll be huge. Claimed there will be games and surprises.”

His mentor chuckled, too. “How is the old fool? Everything okay with him?”

Kevan shrugged. “His business is doing okay, it seems, and I assume his health is good, too.”

Ryan’s eyes took on a dreamy expression, staring at an invisible point ahead of him. “I’m happy you have something fun to look forward to but keep your eyes open. I have a feeling the mole might attack you at the bar. Maybe he will even set up a trap for you there.”

The blood in my veins froze. So, my gut feeling was right. Thank the fates, I’d taken my magically loaded gun. I’d chicken out if my pockets were empty. I had no magic inside if we didn’t count the demoniacal one and I’d never use it again much less when Kevan Tyler was near.

The angel straightened his back, his eyes gleaming with pride. “I’m aware of that danger; that’s why I agreed to go to the party. I invited Brian Hammond from the Aran Police to join me, too.”

Ryan nodded his head. “Just be careful, kid. I trust Steve, but the party will be full of all types of people and supernaturals. Plus, mythology has it that solar eclipses unleash very powerful dark energies. Today’s solar eclipse will be the perfect opportunity for the Demonica to attack you. Just in case, make sure you don’t drink or eat anything there.”

“Come on, Ryan, you can’t be serious,” Kevan protested but his mentor raised his hand to quell his arguments.

“I mean it, Kev. With that many people, anyone could slip something into your food or drinks. The enemy can drug or, magic forbid, poison your drinks and meals. Think about it.”

I hated to admit that he was right. And seeing how Kevan had pursed his lips, he knew damn well that this posed a very real threat. Tonight, we had to tread carefully.

## Chapter 30

Kevan

I hated the thought that I couldn't drink anything at the eclipse party but my mentor had been right to worry: it'd be too dangerous with that many supernaturals in Fairy Kiss. I'd informed Chief Hammond about the party this evening and he said he'd think about attending. I very much doubted Hammond could be the mole, but as Ryan had pointed out, we couldn't trust a soul.

We left my mentor's house and I gunned the engine as we drove toward the fae district. By the time we arrived at Fairy Kiss, the party had already started, judging by the many vehicles parked near the bar. Bouncers guarded the front entrance, checking the customers that lined up before the dark mahogany door.

When our turn came, the bouncer merely glanced at us and nodded his head, "Please go ahead. Steven waits for you in the main hall," he said and grinned. His many tattoos gleamed in the dim light, giving him a surreal, almost monstrous, aura. Goosebumps lined my arms and a feeling of foreboding set at the pit of my stomach. I couldn't shake the feeling that we made a mistake coming here. But what other choice did we have? I'd spent the whole day going through the forensics reports and all the possible scenarios, but had no idea as to who the mole was or how I could get access to the Brotherhood of the Serpent. I needed to find the missing piece of the puzzle and figure out who the damn mole was. Without this information, the case remained a mystery.

I marched through the long, neon-lit corridor, half expecting to see Andrea, the banshee, but there was no trace of her. I strode forward and pushed open the second black door at the end of the corridor. I held the door for Ash as she went in, then followed, keeping a close eye on her. The second I set foot in the main hall, all sorts of smells, noises, lights, and colors



struck my senses. The place had come alive, every spot in Fairy Kiss pulsating with raw, magical energy. Balloons hung from the ceiling above the bar, and the bartender and the waitresses wore some funny caps that resembled a sun, though theirs were black—probably an allusion to the solar eclipse that was about to happen. The bar and the tables were crammed to the max: I hadn't ever recalled seeing this place so overcrowded before. Steve hadn't exaggerated yesterday when he told us it'd be busy. I doubted there would be a free spot for a pin to land if someone dropped it.

“Hello, Kelly,” I greeted the long-time waitress as she moved past us, trying to weave through the crowd of witches and fae that had gathered around the bar. Many supernaturals stood at the bar and a handful occupied the stools, which I couldn't even see through the big crowd.

“Hello, Mr. Tyler. Steven reserved table number six for you. please follow me, I'll seat you and Steven will join you soon.”

I nodded and was about to follow Kelly when something made me stop in my tracks and turn around. Ash had stopped in the middle of the packed bar, her eyes locked on the fae playing the harp. Sad, mournful sounds came from his mouth. The song was beautiful, yet it prickled my skin, making me alert. The same foreboding sensation overwhelmed me, and the urge to leave the bar coursed through my veins. *No*, I told myself, drawing on my willpower, *we've come here to investigate Charlie's murder. I need answers.*

I pulled Ash's arm, tugging at her, and she snapped out of the stupor she'd found herself in.

“The song's beautiful, but let's find our table, and then we can listen to it, okay?” I said, guiding her toward me. The loud chatter, yelling, and commotion, combined with the music made it so I could barely hear myself speak, let alone hear anyone else. My lips almost brushed against her earlobe as I leaned to talk to her. A jolt of electricity passed through my middle, coursing in waves through my chest and head. Sweet, tempting intoxication swelled inside me, leaving me breathless. The desire to kiss her and claim her here and now

took hold of me and nearly made me lose my sense of time and space.

“Mr. Tyler,” the waitress shouted and I came to my senses. I followed her, my fingers wrapped around Ash’s wrist. Ash must have sensed what I just experienced, judging by the blush on her cheeks. The waitress passed a few fully seated tables and stopped at a secluded table with two chairs—ours. Kelly removed the sign that said “reserved” and placed it in her pocket as she set the two bottles of ginger ale she carried on the table.

“It’s a compliment from the house.” With this, she dashed to another table where a large group of leprechauns sat, engaged in a heated conversation.

I pulled out the chair for Ash to sit and a quiet “thank you” left her lips. A light flush warmed her face; she was too cute for me not to smile. I slid into the other chair and regarded the bottles of ginger ale. Well, it wasn’t what I was used to drinking, but this certainly seemed to be her favorite.

“I see Steve paid attention to your tastes,” I remarked, pointing at the ginger ale. She chuckled and opened the bottle.

“Do you think that’s smart? Remember what Ryan said?” I hurriedly said to her, trying to speak over the noise around us.

She chuckled, her fingers curling around the glass. “Of course, I do. Don’t be stupid. I figured I’d pretend to drink it. Among this many people, it’s super easy to blend in.” She winked at me and pretended to sip at the drink. “See, nothing complicated about it,” she said.

I regarded her carefully. “And your point in doing this is...?” I wasn’t sure what she aimed at. I couldn’t see anyone from the Aran Police or the ABI.

“Whoever has marked us, will get the wrong impression when they see us sipping at our drinks,” she said conspiratorially. I could feel it in my gut that she wanted this case to be over as soon as possible. I did, too. I was still curious what she was hiding from me, but more than anything

now, I just wanted to get to know her better. I hoped to do that when we solved the case.

“Kev, buddy, how are you? You came!” A familiar voice boomed behind me and a strong hand slapped my shoulder. I knew the voice too well to need to turn and the slap was unmistakable. Sometimes I wished he wouldn’t do that.

“Hey, Steve. Fantastic party,” I greeted him. He towered above us in a cardigan and tweed pants, his shirt rolled up, revealing his many tattoos.

He clapped his hands and said, “I’m delighted you came. I promised you some special games and surprises. I say we begin with the first one.” He stood silent for a moment, unusual dark flames gleaming in his eyes. A smirk twisted across his lips and he added, “I’ve called this game Demonica versus Angelica. Let the game begin.”

A sharp pain pierced my belly, the world spinning around. No, this couldn’t be true! Steven would never betray our order, his order. This had to be a nightmare; it simply couldn’t be happening. The crowd of supernaturals vanished, along with the party decorations, the bar, and the tables and chairs. A strong glow shimmered around us, then Ash and I fell through the floor into the basement, a wooden board creaking when my ass hit it. Iron chains and cuffs closed at our ankles and wrists, binding us to a pipe bulging from the wall behind us. The dimly lit hall darkened; only a single bulb flickered above our heads. I tried to pull away, but the chain sunk into my skin and pain seared through my body.

“Tut-tut, Kev. This is not the ABI. This is my home. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Hell’s Kiss,” his voice boomed and he cackled. A set of crimson eyes stared back at us and, with horror, I realized they belonged to Steven.

My mind raced wildly, trying to come up with a solution. I had to buy us time and distract the motherfucker. This way I could transform into my angelic form. I turned to Steven, trying to keep my voice calm, ignoring the bubbling rage that threatened to sweep me away, carried by the desire to strangle

this asshole. My mentor and I had trusted him, and he'd betrayed us and everything we stood for.

"I don't understand. Why, Steven? I thought you supported the Angelica." I connected with the thread inside my center and mentally chanted my mantra, yet nothing came out. No electrifying touch, not even a shimmer or a glow inside me. Utter void.

"Do you think I'd be that stupid to let you activate your angelic form, Kevan? You forget I trained at the academy, too," he snapped and drew closer to me. "But I won't waste my time with a loser like you any longer. The real VIP guest we have tonight is his Excellency, the demon inside Miss Ashadha Matthews. Welcome home, Master. Our brotherhood has long awaited you. I'll have the honor to deliver you from the bondage of human flesh." He showed his teeth and smirked as he leaned toward Ash.

My whole world crumbled and I was in the eye of the storm, falling into the abyss. My fated mate—she was...one of them? Did this lunatic mean that Ash was a demon? No, this was impossible! Preposterous.

"What are you talking about, asshole?" I yelled at him, balling my fists. The iron cuffs seared through my skin but I didn't care; I had to know if she was a demon or not.

He laughed out loud and I glanced at Ashadha: the color had drained from her face, her skin pale white. She had retreated, her back pressed against the cold wall. Her body shivered even though it wasn't cold. No, this couldn't be true. I refused to believe it. I didn't care what that deranged maniac claimed, my fated mate couldn't be a demon. The very same species who slaughtered my sister and who attempted to end human civilization. She'd been helping me to solve this murder. She'd been attacked. No, he played mind games with me, just like he'd created that illusion of his eclipse party.

Steven went quiet, his laughter dying. He looked at Ashadha and said with surprising softness, "I think you ought to tell him yourself, dear."

Hot tears stung my eyes and I vehemently shook my head. No, no, this couldn't be true, I wouldn't buy any of this. That maniac must have drugged her or put a spell over her.

“Don't say anything, Ash,” I shouted at her, my voice pleading with her. No confession, no crime.

Her eyes watered and she regarded me with deep sadness. She gulped down a tear and muttered, her words barely above a whisper, “It's true, Kevan. I'm...” her voice quivered, “a half-demon.”

## Chapter 31

Ashadha

Finally. No more secrets. He wanted to know my secret, now he had it. But by the look on his face, his shaking, his eyes hollow and empty, he didn't like it. There was no point in denying my real nature; the asshole Steven had already spilled the beans to Kevan.

Steven's rough and displeased voice cut the electrifying silence that had stretched between the angel and me,

"No, you're not a half-demon," he said with indignation as if the very thought alone offended him. "You're possessed. Your parents performed the rare and extremely dangerous initiation of invoking a demoniacal entity inside your body. I believe they did this when you were barely three years old. In India, am I right? Don't you remember?" He laughed out loud, the sound of it crawling along my skin making me want to either puke or punch him in his ugly face.

*Yes, it's true*, the inner voice chimed in. Oh, my goodness. I realized with horror that the voice, that nagging in my mind, was not my conscience, but a demon! My head spun and I collapsed on the cold ground, my lungs desperately screaming for oxygen. The stale air in this basement felt horrible, with no windows on the bare, old walls that closed all around us. I had the urge to touch my mother's magical pendant so that I could calm the raging fear in my heart. The pendant was tucked beneath my tank, but the handcuffs wouldn't let me reach.

*But my mother brought me here to the US*, I protested. Besides, I had no memory of a father, and my mom always refused to talk about him, so I assumed that she was ashamed.

The voice chuckled inside my mind, giving me a headache. *Why do you believe Susan was your real mother?*

"No, it can't be true!" I screamed aloud and Kevan gasped, the horror mounting on his face as he drew closer to me, as far

as the chain allowed him.

“Ash, are you okay?” He tried to reach out to me, but the iron chain clanked and sunk deeper into his wrist. He cursed out loud. Steven laughed, clearly amused by our predicament.

“Oh, now that’s funny.” He chuckled derisively as he regarded me with a mixture of disgust, superiority, and repulsion. “You thought you were part demon, but you’ve been possessed almost your whole life.”

“Shut up, traitor,” Kevan yelled at his former friend, his voice thundering.

“Uh-uh, Kevan, you don’t get to boss me around here. I’m the one that calls the shots,” the bar owner said not even bothering to spare a glance at the angel. His eyes had locked on me, their intensity making me feel filthy and unholy.

“How do you know that about my family?” I asked Steven. I genuinely wanted answers, had been needing the truth for a long time. Could it be true that I wasn’t a half-demon as I believed? I’d concluded I was a demon when I blasted my boyfriend the first time we were intimate. I had no inherent magic and I nearly killed him; the stench of rotten magic hung thick in the air for days.

Steven gave me a pitiful look as if I were a baby. “Oh, dear. You really don’t know anything, do you?” He shook his head and added, “I was told that you had an ancient and most powerful demon locked inside you. You ought to be more careful how you use your psychic gift, by the way. We first caught wind of you when you tried to seek out visions about Charlie. When you came to his murder scene, our brotherhood leader tracked you down. He had a vision that a special demoniacal entity resided inside you. To be honest, I was skeptical—how could a boring human girl like you host such a powerful demon—but I sent one of my servants to check on you. When you came in here a few nights ago, my doubts vanished. Then, I was certain you had that demon inside you.” He stared at me for a long second and added, “I wouldn’t normally bother telling you all this, but my master insisted that I tell you. We’ll slaughter you soon, anyway, so who cares.”

He scratched his chin and, straightening his back, he went on, "Our master told me that your parents belonged to a Shiva cult, located in India that summoned such entities. The cult leader apparently chose you as one of his experiments and your parents went along with it. They saw it as an honor. However, your mother's sister didn't belong to that cult and she took you from them. She brought you here right before the great cataclysms and the war began. The damned Angelica extinguished that cult, like many others, by killing all its members, including your brave parents. Actually, I believe Lord Shiva himself destroyed that cult, as he was outraged by its existence," Steven said, angry flames sparkling in his crimson eyes. A few of his many arm tattoos gleamed with bloody light as his emotions surged, then fizzled out with a sizzling snap. The longer I stared at him, my eyes lingering on his facial features and burly body, the more horrified I became. He looked like a demon, just without the horns.

I stared at Steven for a few long seconds that seemed to stretch into eternity. I gasped, a streak of hope fluttering inside my chest and flowing into my veins. So, I wasn't the monster I believed I was? Well, kinda. I was still possessed, so little difference at the end of the day.

*It makes a big difference, you silly woman,* the voice snapped at me with hatred. I could feel the palpitating vengeance in his voice, the way he regarded me as a fool. Turned out, I'd been one. I'd sacrificed my happiness and given up on love and life because I thought I was unworthy. How stupid and naive had I been! I wish I'd had someone to explain things to me, but the woman I believed was my mother died just before I had the incident with my boyfriend.

"I've lost precious time enlightening you, stupid woman. I'm afraid I don't have more time to spare and the ritual must start," Steven said and clapped his hands as if a signal. At his command, a few men dressed in black clothes from head to toe burst into the room from a small door behind him. As they drew closer to us, the dim bulb cast light on their faces and I gasped. Their eyes glowed in crimson while black bandanas covered their faces. A set of small horns protruded from their heads. What made my heartbeat slow down, fear curling deep



within my core, was their magical signature. It felt eerily familiar, the scent of rotten bodies and worms mashed together. I'd already met these creeps: one was my midnight attacker from a few nights ago; the other was the first guy that charged at me behind Fairy Kiss the same night. Kevan and I had been such idiots! We should have figured out that it had been Steven all along, but the angel trusted this guy too much to consider that possibility. Double hell. His mentor trusted Steven, too.

“Lovely to see you bound, bitch,” the taller guy spat at me, malice vibrating in his voice. Yup, definitely the same guy.

“What’s going on? Who are these guys?” Kevan asked, slight panic in his words, though his anger rang stronger in his voice.

“They’re members of the brotherhood and will help me prepare the ritual. You don’t think we’d leave the poor demon inside your stupid girlfriend?” Steven chuckled and nodded to his minions. The men began to draw some geometrical figures in the middle of the floor with white chalk. In the process, the men closed around us, my head throbbing with anxiety as I watched. This was bad, really bad.

Heaviness descended upon my head and shoulders; my heart seemed to beat so wildly in my ribcage that I thought it’d burst out. The creeps intended to butcher me to free the demon inside me? How lovely and generous of them. The motherfucker inside me must be glad.

*No, I’m not,* the voice retorted. *It’s true you’ve suppressed me surprisingly well these years since the transfer, yet I’ll get to decide whether to leave you, not a bunch of fools,* he snapped.

A flicker of hope that I could survive this sinister ritual rose within my heart, despite my intuitive feeling that he’d never wish to leave my body and soul on his own. My mind didn’t dare to make big plans, but I asked him, *Will you help me out? If we stay idle, they’ll butcher us.*

I wasn’t sure about Kevan, but most likely they’d get rid of him, too. The creeps had already drawn two inverted

pentagrams and now set up a fire pit in the intersection between the two symbols. Things just looked better and better with each passing second. The gun I had in my jacket pocket was useless if I couldn't reach it; my hands were too tightly bound by the damned handcuffs.

Silence filled my mind and fear dug its claws deep into my soul, making me think that the demon inside me had changed his mind.

*Okay, I'll invert their magic and direct it back at them, but I need time,* he said, breaking the stillness inside me. Steven had gone quiet, too, watching his minions with devoted attention. The angel sat on the floor and observed the demons with loathing I'd never seen on a person's face. If looks could kill, Kevan certainly would have murdered the assholes around us by now.

*Distract the leader, the guy with the cardigan and the tweed pants,* the demon instructed me and went quiet.

I cleared my throat and turned to Steven. "You never told us why. Why did you betray the Angelica?"

Steven turned toward me; his forehead creased as he drew his brows together. "Why do you care? Don't tell me you cheer for the Angelica after all they have done to you," he remarked.

"You deluded fool!" Kevan yelled at Steven, trying to wriggle out of the iron cuffs and the chain, even though the metal sunk deeper into his flesh. Steven gifted him a radiant smile, probably satisfied with the angel's outburst and how the situation had rendered Kevan helpless. I had to keep Steven engaged as the demon had advised. I couldn't believe I followed the instructions of a demon, but we shared a common enemy at the moment. If we made it out of this mess alive, I'd have to figure out how to get rid of that demon, too.

"You owe us an explanation," I said to Steven and a sudden idea dawned on me. He could refuse me, but he wouldn't refuse him. "My demon wants to know why you switched sides. He said he won't cooperate with you if you don't answer this question."

*Well done, Ash. It may be that you're not an utter idiot after all,* the demon's voice echoed inside me. I was unsure if it was an attempt at a compliment or a mockery.

An evil smile danced on Steven's repulsive lips. He drew closer to me, so close that I could feel his breath on my skin.

"He wants to know why I despise the Angelica?" He cackled and added, "Very well, then, I'll indulge his wish. The Angelica is weak and made humanity and the whole world weak, too. I spent four of my best years at the academy and what for?" He rolled up the left leg of his pants, a nasty scar winding from his ankle up his calf. "You see that scar? I was severely injured during my training and I still can't properly walk with this leg. To add insult to injury, the Angelica discharged me after my fourth year. They claimed I didn't have it in me to be an angel." His face reddened, and his veins bulged, matching his crimson eyes. "The good guys rejected me and I became an outcast. A nobody with no special abilities or powers, and, on top of that, injured, too. But the universe knows her business and my master found me. He accepted me and initiated me into the dark arts. Now, unlike when I strove for the Angelica's approval, I can mind control others, summon fire and air, and can injure or kill someone using just the power of my mind. Not to mention the various spells I can cast like illusions or disabling one's magic. You really fell for that party, didn't you, Kev?" Steven asked the angel, mockery dripping in his voice.

Kevan had frozen, his chest barely moving as his breathing had slowed. "You dirty scumbag," he said through clenched teeth, his eyes locked on Steven. The men clad in black had lit the fire pit, small flames flickered, sizzling nearby. The flames' heat warmed my face and bones.

"You betrayed us for cheap little powers," Kevan said venomously.

"Look who is talking. The guy who acquired angel status and has various superpowers. Parlor tricks, really. You think only you and the other pompous fools at the ABI deserve these powers?" Steven snapped back at the angel.

“So this is what it’s all about?” Kevan muttered slowly, more to himself than to his friend.

“Master, we’re ready. The ritual can begin,” the tallest of the men said.

“The talk is over, kids. Now I must focus on the ritual. This ritual is difficult and requires my deepest concentration. I can’t indulge any more of your idle curiosity,” Steven said, pretending to be polite but behind his smile, a raw predator hid. The crimson glow in his eyes eerie evidence of his demoniacal affiliation and nature.

Panic rose within me, and my mind raced wildly, wondering if the demon inside me had enough time and was ready to blast the deluded asshole and his equally deluded minions.

*No, I am not ready. This megalomaniac has some pretty intricate spells in place. They’ve disabled the angel’s magic and these fools feed on Kevan’s powers. Get me five more minutes. That is all I need,* the demon explained to me. His voice rang calm and assured in my mind, but I could feel the nervousness and strain in it.

*Easier said than done,* I thought to myself. How could I distract Steven any longer? He’d moved to the fire pit, his arms outstretched, his eyes closed. He hummed something to himself, his face in deep concentration.

*Ask him about Ahi-Amurru,* the demon said then went quiet.

*Who?* I asked him in confusion, but he’d gone silent. I cleared my throat and prayed to all the gods and angels that I could reiterate the name the demon had mentioned correctly.

Steven’s humming had grown louder, and tiny beads of sweat had broken out on his neck. The hair on my back stood on end at the sound and vibration of this lunatic’s melody. His minions had retreated to the back and watched him with awe and horror on their faces.

“How is Ahi-Amurru?” I asked Steven, trying my best to come across as nonchalant. The humming stopped and Steven turned to me. The crimson in his irises had grown darker and my heart skipped a beat as I saw the insanity and rage fill his

face. He glanced at the burning fire in front of him, then back at me. Kevan had locked his gaze on me, too, the look on his face asking me if I knew what I was doing. Not exactly, but I prayed the demon inside me knew. He had to. Steven venerated my demon and it seemed like he'd do anything to please him. Too bad for Steven, the demon didn't want to cooperate. Well, it was truly fucked up for me, but for now, it worked to my benefit. At last, something good from this possession. A blessing in disguise.

“How do you know about Ahi-Amurru?” Steven snapped at me, clearly annoyed. Suddenly, the angry flames in his eyes melted, his seething rage giving way to a realization. “Is that the Master, asking about Ahi-Amurru?” Awe and adoration rang in his deep voice and I vigorously nodded my head. Kevan gave me an unbelievable look, his mouth gaping wide open at me. Yeah, I didn't know how any of this worked or was possible, but here we were.

“Master,” Steven began, clearly addressing the demoniacal entity inside me, “Our beloved Ahi-Amurru didn't make it. We lost his luminous soul in an untimely battle with lesser people, precisely the same people I intend to sacrifice to free you.”

Something clicked within my mind: was this demon the one who Kevan had killed that night in the back alley behind Fairy Kiss? The winged monster? I realized the angel hadn't said anything else about that demon.

“Does that satisfy you, Master? Any other questions you'd like to know about our brotherhood?” He cooed, twisting his fingers like a lizard. Repulsion rose in my chest and I forced myself to keep quiet and listen to his ramblings. A few more minutes and the demon inside me ought to have disabled all the spells in here.

“You must be aware how our Brotherhood of the Serpent has been invoking and merging demoniacal entities with humans. This is how we were able to rise from the ashes and build our army.” Zealous flames burned bright and clear in his pupils and the urge to throw up gripped my middle, yet I got hold of myself.

He went on, “The Angelica has always played the safe, ethical game. Hell, they even respect people’s privacy! Can you imagine this level of stupidity?” He laughed derisively.

Kevan balled his fists, rage gleaming in his eyes.

“Unfortunately, Ashadha Matthews and this fool, Kevan Tyler, killed Ahi-Amurru when we sent him and another of our people to capture this girl. Of course, demons are extremely difficult to kill but since Ahi-Amurru shared a body with a human, he wasn’t as powerful. Just another reason for us to free you, Master,” Steven argued. Clearly, he’d gotten carried away and forgotten about the ritual. The flames had subsided, and slow hissing and sizzling popped from the small fire.

The demon chuckled inside me, pure malice ran up and down my spine. He despised Steven—at least something we agreed on—and whispered into my mind, *Now! I’m ready. I’ll count from three. On one, you’ll blast these idiots; just trust me.*

I nodded. I had no other choice but to trust the demon. If he helped me, he had his own best interest in mind. Not sure why staying inside me was so important to him, but if I could survive today, I could think about the possession tomorrow. Priorities.

*Three. Two. One. Now,* he shouted inside my mind, urgency ringing in his command.

A raging fire burned inside my chest and I tapped on that sensation. With a scream, I snapped open the iron cuffs and chain, my legs and wrists free as the metal clanked to the cold floor. Steven started, the minions jumped in shock, but my movements were faster. I let the seething rage inside me mount, not sure how much of it belonged to the demon inside me, and how much it was my own frustration; it all mixed together. When every cell of mine pulsated with this raw, primal force, I hurled a gigantic emerald wave at Steven and the minions behind him. The ground thundered as the magic blasted them, their screams piercing the air. Steven’s body caught fire, the twisted and merciless green flames rapidly

consuming his flesh. The others burned, too, the same emerald flames swallowing their dark clothes.

Something brushed against me and I spun around to see that Kevan had transformed into his angelic form. His tall body towered above me, almost bumping into the ceiling. His golden sword glowed in the semi-darkness, a stark contrast to the greenish flames that seemed as if summoned from Hell. He fluttered his wings in the air and glanced at Steven and his gang: the emerald fire had reached their hearts; the unbearable smell of roasting flesh filling the room. The screams were beyond anything human.

*A small lesson for attempting to get me out of Ashadha against my will*, the demon inside me snapped with satisfaction and goosebumps crawled up and down my limbs. If he helped me out to save my neck, he had to have a truly wicked reason to do so. Demons were anything but compassionate and charitable. This was bad; very bad, indeed. How I would get rid of him remained to be seen. Kevan scooped me into his arms, his strong embrace holding me still. He raised his golden sword toward an invisible point in the ceiling, gave a little push with his legs, then flew into the air. The screams and greenish flames below increased, the air thick with dark, poisonous magic, the smell of burning flesh filled the whole room. I pulled my shirt over my nose, praying we'd get out of this basement before I would suffocate. Kevan thrust his sword into the brick ceiling, paint and cement raining on us. His wings flapped wildly as he flew right through the hole that his sword had forged, with me in his arms. With one last push, we passed through the end of the hole and landed on the dusty floor in Fairy Kiss.

The customers around us screamed and ran as we scrambled from the ground. Kevan held his sword firmly, his body taking up almost the whole height in the bar. "It's Angel Detective Tyler from the ABI. We're conducting a secret operation here, please remain in your seats and keep quiet."

## Chapter 32

Kevan

We made it alive out of that hellish pit. Ashadha saved us. Well, she and the demon inside her. I had a hard time believing I hadn't figured out that she was possessed. I had always wondered about that lingering feeling about her, how she hid something huge and dark, but even in my wildest dreams I wouldn't have guessed that it involved a demon. Heck, I never even suspected she was more than a human. My gut wrenched whenever I thought about how a demon lived inside her and shared her body, energy, and mind. This was... utter hell. Yet, she wasn't to blame for this: she'd been a victim of her cruel, insane parents. How deranged could a person be to inflict such a thing on their own child?

But now she had me, I'd take care of her, unlike her evil parents. For the first time since I'd met her, I understood why she guarded her secret so ferociously and wouldn't let me in; her fear of the ABI and the Angelica now made perfect sense. If they had caught wind of her existence, they would have locked her up and monitored her, maybe even executed her. Hell, if I hadn't heard Steve's ramblings, I would have believed Ashadha's misunderstanding that she was a half-demon. Thank the fates, I learned the truth. I still had a hard time believing that Steven had betrayed us, turning his back on everything holy and good, just to gain some superpowers. What a fool!

When Ash and I broke the ceiling and landed on the floor at Fairy Kiss, commotion broke out in the bar. My cell phone went crazy, too, beeping several times. I instructed the customers to keep quiet and remain in their seats. I wasn't sure if Steve had more of his accomplices here, but we couldn't let anyone leave the bar. A short guy tried to leave, but I directed my eyes at him and gave the silent command to freeze him in his tracks. The thread inside me stirred as I said the incantation



mentally. The guy walked quickly, then his foot froze, unable to move. He screamed; his voice panicked.

“No one can leave the bar until further notice,” I ordered loudly. The customers looked at me; some eyes gleaming with fear, others with anger. Yet, I discerned boredom in some looks. Gasps and stifled groans spread across the main hall. Kelly, the waitress, watched me intently a few tables away from where I stood. I sat Ash at the nearest table and spoke to the room.

“We detected Demonica activity here, so please bear with us and let us finish the investigation. It shouldn’t take us more than a few hours at the most.” The groans grew wilder, but no one dared to move and test my patience or angelic powers. The bartender, the Dullahan, watched me intently, too; the headless body holding his head in his arms like a baby.

Now that I dealt with the customers, I could read my text messages. I had four altogether, all from Chief Hammond. He’d apparently come in here but couldn’t find me. His texts indicated that there was no party and to call him right away. It wasn’t too late yet, so I called him back. He picked up his phone after the third ring.

“Kevan, where the hell were you? I—” he began, irritation coating his voice, but I cut him off.

“Steven is the mole, he attempted to murder Ash and me. He and his minions have been eliminated. Come down to Fairy Kiss and I’ll fill you in.” I hung up the phone and dialed my ABI supervisor, Delainey.

“Charlie McDonald’s murder case is solved. The perpetrators have been extinguished.” Then, I proceeded to tell him about the evening, but I kept Ash’s secret from him. The ABI couldn’t learn about her. I wasn’t sure they knew how to deal with such cases. Demoniactal possessions were extremely rare and I hoped they would stay that way. That’s why it was crucial to destroy this Brotherhood of the Serpent, as they specialized in this abomination.

“Are you and the girl safe?” My supervisor asked me. “The two angels I assigned to guard the girl haven’t reported

anything to me. They must be outside watching the bar.”  
Damn it, I’d forgotten about the two angels who tailed Ash. Too bad they hadn’t understood what the bar owner had tried to do to us. On second thought, it was better that they hadn’t been there to hear Steven say all the things about Ash and what she had inside her. The cloaking spell Steven had placed on the bar must have blocked the magic happening inside as well.

“We’re good. Can’t vouch for the bastards down under. You better send a team to get the bar in order.” I gave him the address to Fairy Kiss and ended the call. Delainey told me that a special ABI team would arrive soon. Ash reclined in the chair, her eyes closing. She was justifiably exhausted. That emerald explosion she summoned was hella big. I had never before witnessed anything so intense and strong. I reached for her hand, her skin soft and alluring. If we didn’t have so big of an audience with all the customers, patrons, and personnel in here, I’d give her a tight hug and maybe even kiss her. Just a peck on the lips, but my mind raced wildly at the idea; my stupid eyes couldn’t turn away from her full red lips, her mouth tempting me. Her scent rolled toward me, fresh of wild fruits and my belly rumbled from hunger. She sat just inches from me. I sighed, resolving to wait a bit longer until we could be alone.

In almost no time at all, the two angels who had tracked Ash came in, followed by the ABI team. The paramedics took care of our wounds, which consisted of a few cuts and swollen places on our wrists and ankles due to the chain and cuffs. The detective my supervisor sent turned out to be the same Schuster guy who Delainey offered to have help me in the investigation a few days ago. He and the two angels had found a back staircase that led to the basement where we’d been locked and they rushed in there to check on Steven and his accomplices, the paramedics close on their heels. I was sure the assholes were dead, but a tiny part of me needed a confirmation that they hadn’t managed somehow to miraculously save themselves. A few other angels questioned the barkeeper, waitress, and patrons to determine if they were involved with the Demonica, too. My angelic intuition told me

that none of the people in here had anything to do with the secret brotherhood. The angels reached the same conclusion and released all the people in the bar. The mysterious master of this brotherhood had to be found and punished for his crimes, but I believed his secret society operated far away from here and the fae district.

Fairy Kiss emptied and I took my chance, cupping Ashadha's face in my palm. Her dark brown eyes glowed with life and something I hadn't noticed before.

"You won't tell them about me, right?" She leaned toward me to whisper, and I thought I heard fear in her voice.

"No, I won't." I chuckled gently and brushed her cheek, the movement sending electricity down my spine. Desire raged through my body and I had to restrain myself before I would do something stupid. I inhaled her intoxicating scent and steadied myself to release my arms from her shoulders when she surprised me. She pressed her lips against mine, softly and gently. I responded and opened my mouth, wanting and demanding more from her. She took the invitation, her tongue slipping past mine. Desire mounted, passion filling every cell. Lightness and the sensation of being high in the sky prickled my senses. I wanted more and everything from her. We were locked in a tight embrace, our kiss deepening. My hands reached for her back, sliding up and down her shoulders, her warmth buzzed lightly against my own chest when someone cleared their throat and I abruptly pulled away from her.

Brian Hammond stood at the entrance, watching us wide-eyed, his mouth gaping.

"I see you two are fine," he mumbled with difficulty. He cleared his throat and turned to me. "What happened? How did you guess it was Steven?"

"Ah, he dropped his cover. He intended to butcher us," I said.

"But what for?" Hammond ran his hand through his hair, his face creased in confusion.

“To feed his demoniacal deity. He claimed the angel and me, innocent souls, would please his Lord,” Ash spoke before I could answer, her mind working faster than mine. I shot her a look of adoration and she must have caught it because she flushed. The warmth that spread on her cheeks was so cute that I again had to use my willpower and not make out with her in front of the chief. It’d be incredibly awkward if he witnessed us kissing again.

Hammond shook his head and said, “Truly wicked. Thank goodness you two escaped.” He paused as a thought crossed his mind and he asked us slowly, “But how did you get away?”

Anxiety curled deep into my gut and I glanced at her. Her bottom lip quivered as she thought of something. Finally, she said, “Steven messed up the ritual and his own magic turned against him.”

Hammond arched his brows and scratched his beard. “Hmm, I suppose it’s dangerous to dabble in the dark arts. Thank the Lord, I’m just a human and would never be tempted to mess with those higher powers.”

Before either she or I could say anything more, Schuster and the two angels returned to the main hall. The paramedics followed. “Dead. They’re all dead,” the detective announced, his long face sullen.

The heaviness lifted off my shoulders and I sighed a breath of relief. It was good that none of the assholes survived: there wouldn’t be anyone left to tattle to the ABI about Ash’s situation.

“The room below stinks of demoniacal magic, and highly potent, too,” one of the angels said. He was a tall, slim man in his forties with reddish stubble.

“When could you two come to the ABI to give testimony?” Schuster asked us abruptly, looking at me. “Would you like to rest now and come in tomorrow?”

I nodded. It was late and after all the emotions and rampant magic, a good night’s sleep would do wonders for my nervous system and regeneration. Ash had to feel worse, given she’d

blasted the assholes. Well, technically it was her demon, but all the magic had passed through her, too.

“I still find it difficult to understand the demoniacal magic down there. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen in my whole career,” the same angel shook his head and frowned.

“Well, Detective Tyler and Miss Matthews will explain it to us in detail tomorrow,” Schuster said with a smile.

“Yes, we will,” I said, squeezing Ash’s hand, eager to go home.

## Chapter 33

Ashadha

I woke the next morning relatively late for me. My phone beeped and I glanced at the display—Kevan had called me. He'd driven me home last night and we'd decided we needed to talk today about what we'd testify to at the ABI. He was on point and concise: said he'd come at noon and we'd go to ABI headquarters. I was beyond relieved that he hadn't told his superiors that I was possessed. I still had a hard time believing how my world had turned around in just a few days. Ever since Steven told me I wasn't a half-demon but had a demoniacal entity possessing me, my willpower and lust for life had returned with full force. The remorse I'd harbored about my nature went away; the hope for happiness beat within my chest. I had even killed the assholes that tried to butcher us and, though a slight sorrow lingered inside me for taking their lives, for the most part I rejoiced for delivering the world from such evil. Everything would be perfect if it wasn't for that nasty creature inside me.

How could my parents do this to me? Now I could explain to myself that recurring nightmare I had ever since that fateful first time with my ex: how I was a baby and was initiated into a ceremony. Then a greenish monster came forth in and infected me. This had to be the demon inside me. Thank goodness, my aunt had saved me from my parents and came here, to the USA.

Kevan arrived at twelve sharp in front of my building and I went outside to join him. As he saw me, his face beamed with happiness.

“How are you, Ash? How did you sleep?” he asked me as I hopped onto the passenger seat. He inched closer to me, his thumb caressing my cheek. He carefully tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, drew his mouth closer, and pressed his lips onto mine, desire rising inside my core. I barely opened my mouth when the demon sneered in my mind,

*Ugh, girl. No action with the angel. You belong to me.* The voice cackled with malice and I abruptly withdrew from Kevan.

“What’s the matter? Did I do something wrong?” He asked me concerned, small wrinkles creasing his gorgeous face.

I took a deep breath, wondering how I could explain it to him. I decided it was best if I told him the truth.

“I’m sorry, Kevan but the demon inside me doesn’t want me to be close to you. I think he doesn’t like you,” I added quietly.

“The demon inside you doesn’t like me? We can’t be together because of that motherfucker?” He asked me incredulously, the pitch of his voice rising. His eyes darkened, angry flames gleaming in them.

I nodded and gulped down my own fear. Disappointment and frustration dug their invisible claws into my soul. After the last twelve hours, I didn’t want to think what that demon inside me was capable of. He’d claimed I’d successfully suppressed him for a while, but hell, I didn’t even know it was a foreign entity I was up against. I thought it was me.

In his frustration, Kevan hit the steering wheel.

“I am sorry Kevan. I didn’t want to get you involved in any of this, but I guess fate did,” I said apologetically and bit my lips.

He sighed and turned to me, his anger evaporating. “I know, Ash, I know. We’ll be together once this nightmare is over.” He took my hand in his and gently kissed my right hand, the action sending hot waves down my spine.

*I said no action, sunshine, remember?* The demon chimed in more to annoy me than to scare me, but I still pulled my hand from the angel’s face.

“You believe we can pull it off?” I asked him slowly. I didn’t know what to think of any of this. I just needed some rest and to spend time far away from this city, away from all my worries.

“Why, of course! Demoniactal possession is not a death sentence. We’ll find a way.”

It might not be a death sentence but it sure felt like a curse. A deadly curse and I couldn’t see or think of a way to undo this black magic.

“Have you freed someone else from possession?”

He thought hard and had to concede. “No, I haven’t. But I know some powerful people; I have connections. I’ll ask Ryan, he’s seen everything and knows a lot of esoteric, occult stuff. There’s got to be a way. I just know it inside my heart.” He turned to face me, his intense look making me think he’d burn a hole right through me. “Do you trust me? I need you to believe it yourself, otherwise, we’ll never succeed.”

“Yes, I believe it,” I said, looking him in the eye. The closeness to him reminded me of last night when we first kissed. It had been the best kiss in my entire life. True, I’d kissed only one guy prior to him, but the angel was pretty gifted in this department. Suddenly, I recalled the fear that bubbled inside me last night when I thought he’d tell the ABI about me and my inner demon.

“You never told me why you changed your mind about me. At first, you were horrified when you heard I was a half-demon,” I remarked.

He rolled his eyes. “But you’re not a demon, Ash. You’ve been a victim of your cruel parents your whole life. Listen, you’re good inside. It isn’t your fault your parents made this choice. Just like the circumstances that led to my sister’s death were outside of my control.” Tears filled his eyes, though he restrained himself from crying. “It’s the Demonica’s fault. I’ll never hurt or betray you. I want you to understand that. And I’ll never tell the ABI about you or we risk them locking you up or even worse...”

“Wait, you think the ABI will still want to punish me even now after we know I am not a half-demon?” I asked in surprise.



Kevan shook his head. “According to our protocol, you’re dangerous and pose threat to others. The Angelica would at the very least lock you up, but in that case how can we find a cure for you? No, I need you free and next to me.”

His comment made me pensive and I couldn’t help but realize that the government still viewed me as a threat. Hell, the fact that I had killed several guys yesterday proved this point, even if they were demons. The familiar feeling of being the misfit overwhelmed me, twisting my gut.

Kevan sensed my discomfort because he turned to me, his voice soft and encouraging. “Hey, Ash, it’s not you, it’s them. I have to admit that even though the Angelica has our best interests at heart, they can be a little too extreme at times.”

I watched him intently. “Just like you’ve been.”

He wrinkled his face at me. “Okay, you got me, Ash. It’s true that I might have somewhat seen things as either black or white, but in this case, you’ve changed me. I am now seeing things in a different way,” he said honestly and gave me a sincere smile.

The desire to kiss him, to hug him overwhelmed me, but the tiny voice at the back of my mind gritted its teeth and reminded me not to touch the angel. I had half a mind to tell the demon to go fuck himself but my instincts made me stop before I’d regret it.

“Now, are we ready to visit the ABI?” He asked me as he gunned the engine, not waiting for my answer, “We’ll stick to the story that Steven summoned a powerful entity out of Hell and attempted to butcher us using that monster, but the initiation went wrong and the demon killed all the goons. We escaped by me transforming into my angelic form.”

I massaged my forehead. “And why didn’t you transform into your angelic form earlier to save us from the monster?” I asked. I was sure that detective Schuster would ask him the same question.

Kevan shrugged. “Steven had spells in the room that prevented me from shifting. But once Steven messed up the

ritual, the spells that blocked my shifting disappeared.”

It made some sense, I conceded. “I hope they’ll buy it.”

He chuckled; his eyes focused on the road ahead of us.

“They will, don’t worry, Ash,” he said and glanced at me. The calmness in his eyes, combined with the sun shining above our heads made me relax and forget all my troubles if only for a fleeting moment.

I smiled but knew I couldn’t let my guard down for long. Eventually, I would find myself locked in a battle to the death. It’d be either me or that demoniacal entity inside me. And I had no intention of losing.

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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.

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## **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.

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## **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?

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**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...

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## **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 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>

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