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# THE GUARDIANS

ELISE MARION

The Guardians Series  
Part One: The Guardians  
Smashwords Edition  
Elise Marion

The Guardians

Elise Marion

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## Micah's Ragin' Cajun Slang Dictionary

*Podna* – friend, or partner

*Neg* – term of endearment for another person (male).

*Cher/cherie* – “darling”, “sweetie”, or “honey”

*My foot!* or *My eye!* – no way!

*Crapeau* – a booger

*Mamere* – grandmother

*Papere* - grandfather

*Mais* – Well ... usually used to start a sentence.

*Peekon* - thorn

## Chapter 1: Dark Nights

The pavement thrummed under his feet, the vibrations echoing from the soles and up his legs, travelling the length of his body. This place teemed with life, pounding, resounding ... brimming with temptation. Half-naked women struck a variety of provocative poses in the display windows of clubs, hoping to entice the men walking down the street to come inside.

Jack Bennett avoided their unfocused gazes; the glazed eyes of drugged-up strippers didn't appeal to him, and neither did the breasts pressed against the glass in tawdry exhibition. He moved on with purpose, weaving through the sea of bodies clogging the street. Ahead, in a large circle left open by spectators, a group of B-boys performed their best tricks for tips. Jack cut through the middle, ignoring the jeers and hisses of the gathered crowd and the largest of the three dancers who held his arms out in challenge and bellowed, "Hey, what's your problem, asshole?"

He kept moving, jerking the hood of his sweatshirt over his close-shaven head. He didn't have time for anyone's bullshit tonight; the cold metal of the gun pressing against the small of his back reminded him of the urgency of his mission.

Shouldering his way through the crowd, he continued on. Here and there, people dressed as 'living statues' entertained for money. He saw them everywhere—pulling out all the stops to make a buck on a Saturday night. Musicians sang, a group of gypsies danced, and one guy dressed as Uncle Sam would even pose with you—along with his cigar-smoking stuffed dog—for a mere donation of a few dollars. From the open doors of clubs and bars, music pounded out, a mingling of hip-hop, jazz, blues, and country that spilled into the street and mingled with the smell of crawfish being boiled outside a restaurant nearby.

Bourbon Street ... a place unlike any other; where all the best and worst parts of New Orleans converged into one debauched playground—one that served to mask the demonic activity going on here on a regular basis. A hotbed of depravity, the perfect stomping ground for a minion of the underworld. Eleven years as a Guardian had honed his senses and now, he could see them as if they'd shed their human disguises and stood exposed to the entire world. A man in a tacky linen suit and fire-engine red, alligator-skin shoes walked past him, a matching fedora sitting at an angle on his bald head. His skin appeared dark and oiled, gleaming in the moonlight, his eyes black as night.

*Demon pimp.* With a mental eye-roll at the two half-dressed girls flanking the man, Jack pursed his lips. *Demon hookers.*

One of them met his gaze, her smile wide as she let her human mask slip, flashing her red, glowing irises and a peek at a face even a mother couldn't love.

Jack curled his upper lip in disgust. His trigger finger itched to draw the pistol from his waistband and dispatch the ugly bitch back to Hell. Unfortunately, he couldn't, so he moved on. Those demons weren't breaking any of the rules, which made them off-limits to him. If he had his way, he would round them all up and drop them through the nearest portal. But there were rules involved, and he couldn't break them or risk the wrath of Reniel ... and worse, Michael. Those angels of war proved something to see when they got angry, and he would be damned if he had to be on the receiving end of that.

Nearing his destination, he snatched his cell phone from the pocket of his jeans to check the time.

*Eleven forty-five. Right on time.*

Coming to a stop in front of two buildings, he slid into the narrow alleyway between them, remembering to snatch the zipper of his hoodie all the way up to his neck. The last thing he needed was for someone to notice the glow emanating from the symbol branded into his chest and come running down the alley to ‘check things out.’ He hated having to erase people’s memories, but this represented yet another necessity of his job.

There didn’t appear to be anyone or anything in the alley. If he didn’t know better, the narrow space would seem to be no more than a dark slit stretching between two bars. But Jack did know better.

Inching down the darkened space, he braced his hands on either side of the wall, forced to feel his way to what he searched for. As usual, his partner, Micah, could be found nowhere and Jack had to go at it alone. Micah always carried a flashlight; his absence left Jack in the actual dark.

He smirked in satisfaction as his fingers found the right brick, which sunk in at the slightest pressure, causing a large panel of wall to slide away and reveal a secret passage. Without hesitation, he stepped into the now-open doorway. Swallowed up by darkness, he descended a narrow, curving staircase. His fingertips caressed rough brick as he felt his way along, drawn toward the orange light becoming brighter as he stepped downward on steady feet. The throbbing techno music coming from the club above him faded, suffocated by layers of stone and earth. As he went deeper underground, the hum of voices reached out to him. At first, their words proved indiscernible, but as he came to a rough wooden door, the chanting became clear.

*“Baal Adramelech. Baal Adramelech. Baal Adramelech.”*

His source had led him to the right place—he wouldn’t have to go back to the sorcerer, Prema, and smash his face in, after all.

Impossible to tell how many voices he heard, and he was running out of time. He pushed the door open and peered around it to see inside.

Hundreds of candles, which sat dripping wax in sconces and candlesticks on several surfaces, lit the dark room. Figures in hooded, brown wool robes knelt before a makeshift altar, on top of which a man in a black robe strode back and forth, his face shadowed by a hood, as well. Those kneeling rocked along, their covered heads bobbing in a synchronized rhythm as they chanted, *“Baal Adramelech”*, their voices rising and falling like a song. Beyond the altar and the pacing man, a bronze structure loomed over them all. It had the upper body of a man, complete with a wide, rippling torso, and bulging arms. Its head and hindquarters would be better suited to a mule. Behind it, gleaming peacock feathers fanned out in a glorious display.

A likeness of the demon Adramelech.

The being pacing on top of the altar like a caged lion had to be the demon himself in human form.

Jack slipped into the room, careful to close the door without making a sound. So far, no one had even noticed his entry, so wrapped up in their worship of the demon known as the ‘king of fire.’ Keeping his gaze fixated on the black, hooded figure, he leaned against the wood panel and waited for the right moment to make his move. The chanting began to swell even more, growing louder and louder until the repetition of *‘Baal Adramelech’* became enough to make him want to run screaming from the room. He gritted his teeth and waited, watching.

All of a sudden, the noise ceased, each voice breaking off at the same time to let an eerie silence settle over the room. Another door on the opposite wall swung open, and four more,

brown-robed figures came into the room carrying tiny, writhing bundles. Despite the burlap concealing them, Jack knew what the hooded figures carried. Their tiny sacrifices.

Human babies.

One of them began to cry, its sharp wails muffled by the coarse fabric covering its face.

In the past, he might have reacted viscerally to the sound, hurdling into trouble and doing something reckless. He'd grown too seasoned for that now, and knew better. Being emotional about this wouldn't help anyone, least of all that crying baby. Taking a deep, slow breath, he willed himself to stand still and wait.

The figure in black held up his hands, yet, those kneeling had not moved or spoken since the baby-carriers came into the rooms. Stepping down from the altar, he strode toward the effigy, reaching out with gloved hands to open a hatch built into its belly. An orange glow emanated from it, the crackling of flames filling the room.

Heat spread through the space, causing sweat to break out along Jack's brow, trickling down his face and into the collar of his hoodie and T-shirt.

The people who'd arrived carrying the babies knelt before the altar and raised their offerings high. A roar rippled through those gathered and the chant of '*Baal Adramelech*' continued, drowning out the cries of the infants bold enough to call out their displeasure. Jack put one hand behind his back, taking comfort in the solid weight of the Desert Eagle handgun pressed against his tailbone.

Adramelech's human form came forward, accepting a squirming sack from one of the kneeling worshippers. He held the child high, exulting in the praise of those chanting his name.

Jack went for the gun, keeping it behind his back, determined to make a move at the right time.

Adramelech moved toward the bronze-statue-turned-makeshift-furnace, clutching the infant.

A sinking feeling warned him of what came next. The demon wasn't called the king of fire for nothing ... burning children being the way his followers had paid him tribute in the days of old. It seemed the ancient demon had forgotten about the rules, one of which said a demon could not impart physical harm upon its prey. Mental and spiritual influence were fair game, but kidnapping and sacrificing human children amounted to a big no-no.

He couldn't wait another second. The gold barrel of his gun gleamed in the light of the fire coming from the statue's belly as he lifted it and took aim. One quick trigger squeeze proved enough. A white beam of light arced from the gun, before striking the demon in the back. It disappeared in a puff of black smoke and a blinding flash of bright light. The baby landed on the pile the robes made as its wearer disintegrated in a swirl of ash. The child rolled from its burlap sack and onto the dirt floor with a wail. A girl, he could see. Naked and afraid, but unharmed.

Jack shouldered his way through the gathered group; they had stopped chanting and now stood, pulling back their hoods to stare at him in bewilderment. After kneeling to pick up the baby, he wrapped her in the burlap with care and faced the several pairs of eyes boring into him.

"Listen up, everybody." His voice, deep and booming, rang in the little room. "You have gathered here under the compulsion of the demon Adramelech. While you have the free will to choose who to worship, you do *not* have the right to kidnap and sacrifice innocent children. Lay the babies down, and leave this place now and no one will be hurt."

Now that Adramelech had been dispatched back to Hell, the gathered people should have been freed from any sort of mind control the demon had exercised. Jack didn't have very much

faith left in humanity, but he had a hard time believing these people had all been willing to sell their souls to a demon who demanded sacrifices be made of human babies.

Dozens of blank stares bore into him, almost unseeing, as if no one was home behind the irises.

“What the hell, Jack!”

One of the hooded worshippers came forward, still clutching a burlap-wrapped baby. Revealing his face, he stabbed Jack with a narrow, green stare.

Jack’s jaw dropped. “Micah! What are you doing here?”

The hulking Cajun he’d been paired with came closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I told you I had a plan, *podna*.”

Jack scowled. Micah always ‘had a plan,’ almost always contrary to Jack’s ideas about what they should do. Glancing at the other hooded figures holding babies, he identified four other Guardians in the room. They’d gone along with Micah’s plan of infiltrating the cult by pretending to join.

Micah had gone behind Jack’s back and done things his way.

Again.

“Well, thanks, but I got it handled.” He gave his gun a twirl before sticking it back into his waistband. “As you can see, your boy Adramelech is done for.”

Micah winced. “Yeah, um ... about that.”

A low growl sounded behind them, causing the surrounding space to rumble.

A cold stone settled in his gut, and a fist-sized lump formed in his throat.

With a noisy swallow, he whispered, “Micah ...”

“That was Eli, one of Adramelech’s sorcerers. Since he was possessed by the demon, your little gun just got him to his final destination a little faster.”

Jack scowled, already annoyed with Micah for going behind his back, and now this on top of everything? “So if that wasn’t Adramelech ...?”

Micah pointed behind Jack with his eyebrows raised and cleared his throat. “Behind you, *podna*.”

Jack swallowed past the lump in his throat; someone breathed down the back of his neck; he could actually feel each hot huff. Every muscle in his body grew tense as he turned to face the real Adramelech.

He sucked in a sharp breath as he came face to face with the bronze statue. Its hatch lay closed now, but the heat emanating from the fire still burning in its belly reached out to him in scorching waves. The bronze thing had come to life, inhabited by the spirit of Adramelech. The face moved as it scowled—as much as a mule could scowl—and snorted in Jack’s face.

“Babies. Out. Now.” Jack didn’t dare move a muscle, but Micah got the message. He took Jack’s baby before handing that one and his own off to the other Guardians.

“You heard him. Shit’s ’bout to get real in here.”

Jack reached for his gun as Micah pulled the wool robe over his head.

“Can’t that wait?” he hissed, never taking his eyes from the demon. It would strike at any moment. Smoke curled from its nostrils, its human hands reaching behind it for something. Jack got a hold on the butt of this pistol and held his breath, waiting.

“I ain’t fightin’ in no dress,” Micah retorted as he tossed the robe aside. He wore his customary tank top and jeans underneath, his dirty blond curls mussed from the hood. But his eyes glittered with a feral sort of excitement as he drew a pair of large and curved golden knives from his belt.

He'd once asked why Micah preferred knives, wondering why someone would want to have to get up close and personal with a demon in order to kill it. Micah had grinned and slapped him on the shoulder, telling him that's why he'd chosen it.

"So, you wanna do your thing and clear the room?" Micah added, shooting a glance his way.

He sighed. "You always get to do the fun stuff."

"Are you kiddin'? You have a beautiful voice, *podna!*"

Adramelech roared, sending a fan of flames screaming over their heads.

Jack and Micah exchanged glances and shrugged, before turning back to back. Jack took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders as the familiar warmth gathered in his throat. The first time it had happened, the vibrations of his vocal chords had scared him, and the heat had been intense. Now, he knew the high temperature represented the perfect gauge for measuring the force of his power.

At the same time that Micah lunged forward, locking in a grappling move with the demon, Jack let loose with a bellow that sent all of Adramelech's worshippers sprawling to the ground and across the room, clearing a perfect path for them.

Micah's arms tensed, the blue veins beneath his skin bulging as he dropped to one knee, buckling under the weight of the massive thing bearing down on him. Even so, his superhuman strength saved him—any other man would have been ground into dust by now.

With a swift motion, Jack retrieved his gun and took aim, letting loose with a rapid, white-hot blast.

Quick as lightning, Adramelech threw something toward Jack like a harpoon. It deflected the light and staked into the dirt where Jack had just been standing. If he hadn't dived to get out of the way, it would have impaled him.

He leaped to his feet, eyes widening as he identified the weapon as one of the demon's peacock feathers. The tip of it looked razor-sharp and would have hooked him like a fish if the demon had had his way.

Adramelech laughed, more sulfuric-smelling smoke and a few flames licking from his mouth and nostrils. The sound grated like nails on a chalkboard mixed with the screeching of faulty brakes. Flinging Micah aside, the beast then ambled toward Jack, now left with no choice but to run.

He dashed for the door, careful to keep a tight grip on his gun. Another one of the peacock barbs shot over his head, embedding in the wall in front of him. He kept moving, rounding the first curve in the staircase as the thing kept coming toward him.

He whirled and tossed another beam of voice waves over his shoulder, pumping his fist in the air as the bellow's vibration knocked the thing's feet—or hooves?—from under him. Micah dove on it in an instant, jumping onto its shoulders as it struggled to stand. Roaring, the demon flailed and swatted, trying to dislodge Micah, who held his knives high, ready to strike.

Jack took the opportunity to aim at the demon's exposed torso, but just when he'd squeezed off a shot, the demon dislodged Micah and sent him falling to the stairs below, sprawling at Jack's feet. Adramelech deflected the beam of light with another well-thrown bronze barb.

"This guy's really startin' to piss me off," Micah growled as Jack helped him to his feet. Shrugging off Jack's hold, he charged the creature again, snarling in response to the demon's roar. The creature lunged, as well, and his body weight won out, sending him and Micah both

tumbling down the stairs, just missing Jack—who pressed his body against the wall to avoid going down with them.

Jack ran down the curving staircase behind them as the two continued rolling, trading blows all the way. Micah grunted as he took a fist to the jaw—his superhuman strength also meant he could take a punch better than anyone Jack knew. The demon screeched when Micah returned the blow, driving an elbow into the side of its face.

They neared the opening now, which would lead them out into the alley. The behemoth would never fit through the narrow gap. They could trap it and get rid of the thing once and for all.

Sure enough, a well-timed kick from Micah sent the demon into the alley, where it soon became lodged between the narrow walls of the two buildings. The cacophony of music and laughter coming from Bourbon Street buried the noise as Adramelech struggled, clawing at the walls and screaming his anger and frustration with a huff of fire and smoke.

Before Jack could draw his gun, Micah came barreling through the door, driving his shoulder into Adramelech in a move worthy of a linebacker. Pressing him against the wall, Micah drew one of his knives.

“You came, you saw ... but you ain’t conquerin’ anything, you demon piece of shit!”

He drove his knife between Adramelech’s ribs, causing a burst of light to flash at the contact point, before the demon disappeared ... but not before he’d made a mess. His bronze form shattered, sending bits of metal whizzing in every direction as his spirit evacuated the vessel, blowing a humongous hole into the wall of the building across from the one they’d just run from.

Jack fell to his knees to avoid flying debris, but wasn’t so fortunate. He yelped in pain as a piece of shrapnel from the statue embedded in his shoulder, and kept his head down until the last of the metal and brick fragments fell. Lifting his head, he found that Micah had been thrown through the wall of the building next door.

He stood, stepping over the wreckage Adramelech had left in its wake, and dashed through the opening in the brick. The blast had thrown Micah through another wall and straight into the front room of Saints and Sinners.

He breathed a sigh of relief upon finding him safe—on his ass in a red vinyl chair, of all places. The chair sat just within the main entrance of Saints and Sinners, which meant everyone dining or sitting at the bar downstairs had had a front row seat for Micah’s little entrance.

Giving all the shocked onlookers a reassuring smile, Jack quickly tucked the gun back into its place at his back. “Sorry about that folks,” he said, injecting his voice with a sense of calm. “Filming a scene for a movie in the building next door and things got a little ... out of hand.”

The predictable Bourbon Street response ensued. Instead of brushing him off, being afraid, or running off to investigate the source of just what had sent Micah propelling through two walls, the patrons let out a cheer and threw their hands up in the air. A blonde woman, wearing skimpy shorts and a too-tight tank top that read ‘Saints and Sinners’ across her massive implants, pulled a lever to tilt Micah’s chair back. Tipping a bottle of fireball whiskey over him, she poured a liberal amount into his open mouth, causing even more of those crowding around the bar to give a raucous cheer.

Swallowing, Micah bounded to his feet, standing in the chair. With a few streams of the whiskey dribbling down his chin and wetting the front of his tank top, he whooped and pulled the blonde up into the chair with him, before kissing her full on the mouth.

“Yeah!” he boomed, still holding his shot girl by the waist as he pumped one fist in the air. “I just kicked some demon ass, and now I’m gonna get shit-faced!”

More cheers greeted him, and Micah came off the chair and headed to the bar, the blonde in tow.

Shaking his head, Jack ignored the crowd gathering around his charismatic partner and reached into his pocket for his cell phone, glad it had survived the scuffle, unlike his last two phones which had been shattered during demon fights. Dialing one of the only five contacts he kept in his log, he inched toward the entrance, pressing one finger to his opposite ear to drown out the noise.

“Jack,” said the deep, smooth voice of Reniel from the other end. “Is it done?”

“It’s done. But, uh, you might want to get down here.”

“Micah exposed you with a public display again, didn’t he?”

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Does a bear shit in the woods?”

“I’ll be there in five.”

The line went dead and he slid the phone back into his pocket. Five minutes would be long enough for a beer—he took a seat at the bar and signaled one of the half-dressed female bartenders.

Bourbon Street ... even a demon attack couldn’t kill its deep-seated weirdness. Jack took a deep pull on his beer and waited.

## Chapter 2: Myth or Legend?

“Fifty-two.”

Reniel, angel of war, paced back and forth in the cramped apartment Jack shared with Micah. In his human form, he stood around six-foot-five and carried two-hundred-fifty-pounds of intimidating muscle. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, he was one of the prettiest men Jack had ever seen.

Just now, though, his chiseled features had fixed into a mask of annoyance.

“That’s how many memories I had to erase tonight after your little fiasco on Bourbon Street. That included the bartenders and wait staff at Saints and Sinners, as well as the people dining there. Two brick walls, which I had to rebuild, and—”

“Yeah, that was epic!” Micah quipped from his place in the corner. Seated sideways in a recliner with his legs dangling over one of the arms, he wore an old cowboy hat low over his eyes and gulped from a mason jar with relish.

Jack wasn’t fooled by the clear liquid; it came from Micah’s moonshine stash. His partner’s uncle distilled the potent stuff himself.

“These missions are to be taken serious!” Reniel retorted, his voice low as he turned to spear Micah with a narrow glare. “It isn’t supposed to be fun or ‘epic’.”

Micah stood, his long, sturdy frame unfolding from the chair, almost a match for Reniel’s. The Louisiana native had a country boy’s bulky frame with the Cajun accent to match. One of his meaty fists curled, but he kept a tight grip on the mason jar with the other hand.

“Back off. We been at this for seven years now ... havin’ a little fun is the one thing makin’ any of it bearable anymore.”

“You’re a Guardian,” Reniel insisted, reaching out to snatch the jar from Micah’s hand. “The only thing you’re entitled to is a legacy, which you are obligated to live up to.”

Micah grew serious—had he been exaggerating his drunkenness before now?

“Oh, I think I more than lived up to my end. You want the job done your way, you go ask someone else.”

It didn’t work that way, and Micah knew it as well as Jack did. The call of a Guardian was one of ancestry and tradition. Though, like all humans, they still possessed their free will. Once you decided to take up the mantle, however, there could be no taking it off without serious consequences.

Reniel softened at Micah’s reminder that he’d sacrificed more than most for the cause of Heaven; he backed down, but still kept a tight grip on Micah’s moonshine.

“There’s another assignment.” He changed the subject. “This one ... well, it’s probably going to be the most important task you’ll ever carry out as a Guardian.”

Jack perked up at that. “Eligos?”

Just speaking the name of the Great Duke of Hell sent a shiver down his spine. Eligos—the reason Micah and Jack spent most of their days cleaning demon scum off the streets. That scumbag and his sorcerers had found a way to open unauthorized portals between Hell and Earth using black magic, and now, all the big baddies were coming through and causing all sorts of trouble. Adramelech hadn’t been a minor demon, but he still didn’t come close to the big ten, the ones who, in the end, had to be hunted down and destroyed, so that the ten portals they’d opened could be demolished along with them.

It had all sounded so simple at first, and Jack could remember being a bit flippant about the mission in the beginning. Michael—the Archangel, himself—had sent Reniel to Earth to gather an elite group of Guardians. The best of the best, with the longest and strongest lineages. As a cocky eighteen-year old, Jack had been looking forward to fighting demons like the hero he'd always thought his father to be. Yet, the more time passed, the less true that became for him.

“Sorry, *podna*,” Micah slurred as he stumbled back toward his recliner. “Still workin’ on the last mission you gave us. You know ... ten demons, ten scrolls ... close the portals ... all that.”

“Think of this as a mission within a mission. And no, it isn’t Eligos,” Reniel added, turning to Jack. “Not one of you is ready to face him.”

His jaw clenching in annoyance, Jack squared his shoulders. “Another seven years, then?” he spat.

Like Micah, he’d grown sick of the runaround, tired of trying to understand why this mission seemed to be one ongoing cluster fuck. Hunt demons, dispatch demons to Hell; rinse, repeat.

Reniel sighed, running a hand through his golden locks. “Listen, I know it has been a rough time for you all, but you’ve performed well. Despite a few hiccups—” he shot Micah a pointed glance, “—you have more than lived up to Father’s expectations. Long is the road, Jack.”

Jack sank onto the worn loveseat facing the ancient television set that had come with the little storefront apartment. “It would be nice to know what the endgame is here,” he sighed.

He caught his reflection in the T.V. as he ran a hand over his close-shaved head. A haggard face that looked much older than its twenty-five years. Dark, ebony skin; his father’s slate gray eyes; a prominent brow hooding the depths; lines of fatigue lining his mouth and eyes.

“Father has a plan,” Reniel insisted. “Even I do not know what it is, but I trust Him. I thought you did, too.”

“I do,” Jack said, only half lying. Over time, he’d become a bit cynical, despite being a servant of God and all. Hard to trust someone who didn’t seem inclined to share their secret plans with you—plans that ruled your life every minute of every day. “Okay, let’s have it. What’s this mission?”

“The mission isn’t a just a ‘what.’” Reniel joined him on the couch. “It is also a ‘who.’”

This caught Micah’s attention. Removing his hat, he sat up in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees.

“What do you know about the Seal of Solomon?” the angel asked, his gaze flitting from Jack to Micah and back again.

Jack frowned, trying to remember his religious legends. He’d learned a lot from his stepmother, who knew things about the spiritual world that no one else on Earth ever could. Before she’d been given the privilege of life on Earth as a human, Sarah had been a messenger angel. Falling in love with his father had been enough to make her want to trade in her wings, which Jack never could quite understand. Still, he’d been fortunate to have Sarah there to step in and help raise him when his own mother lost her battle to cancer when he was just seven years old.

“King Solomon possessed a ring that was said to give its wearer power over demons,” he recited as the memories of Sarah’s stories came rushing back to him. “Sarah used to tell me there are opposing views on the ring. Some believe it was real, and others think it’s only a pagan myth.

She told me it did exist, and God did impart the power of dominion over demons onto it, as a gift to Solomon along with the gift of wisdom. When Solomon pissed God off by getting tangled up with the pagan gods of his wives, the power was taken from him.”

Reniel nodded. “It is true, the ring existed ... still exists. Part of your assignment is retrieving the ring. It holds the power that the Guardians need to destroy the ten demons, their scrolls, and the portals.”

“Convenient,” Micah drawled, rolling his eyes. “Wanna clue us in on why Michael didn’t tell us about this magic ring before now?”

“Because, it wasn’t—”

“Part of the plan,” Jack finished for Reniel. “We get it. Why now? Why me and Micah? He’s a drunk who goes rogue on almost every mission, and I ...”

Reniel considered him as he trailed off. “You’re what, Jackson?”

*Tired. Angry. Bitter. Alone.*

He didn’t give voice to any of his true feelings, but he knew Reniel could feel them all. Angels, programmed to be sympathetic, could perceive the emotions of the humans around them. It took a well-disciplined angel to contain all of that and channel it without letting it get the best of him. Reniel had proved one of the strongest, and Jack had met a lot of celestial beings over the years.

“I am willing to do what has to be done,” he finished, clearing his throat. “If Father chose us to find and bear the ring, then we’ll do it. Won’t we, Micah?”

“Oh, yeah, *podna*. But you mentioned somethin’ ’bout a ‘who’, Ren,” he said, turning to the angel. “Who are we talkin’ about here?”

“You two are not exactly responsible for wielding the ring.”

Jack frowned. “So the person you’re talking about is the wearer. We have to find the ring and get it to them.”

Reniel nodded. “Yes. Although, it might be best if you find her first, then take her to the ring. The members of the Order of the Seal of Solomon are going to want to speak with her and they’ll want proof that she’s the one.”

“I’m no *couyon*, Ren,” Micah declared. “I know what you’re gettin’ at here. It’s not a ‘who’ we’re after, but a ‘what’. A Naphil, I’m thinkin’.”

It made sense. Those with the mixed blood of human and either angel or demon possessed special gifts.

“Yes, Father has commanded that the ring must be borne by a Naphil,” Reniel confirmed. “However, it cannot be just any Naphil. There is one, a young woman. Father has chosen her above all others.”

“All right, fine,” Jack said with a shrug. “Point us in the right direction. Who’s this girl and where do we find her?”

“Her name is Addison Monroe, and she lives right here in New Orleans. Finding her won’t be a problem. Convincing her you’re not insane will be.”

Micah frowned. “Girl don’ know she a Naphil?”

Reniel shook his head. “No, she is unaware of the battle that rages on between Heaven and Hell, or her place in it.”

Jack shook his head, downright flabbergasted. This was unprecedented. The Nephilim were some of the key players in this war that took place on the battleground of Earth. Both sides always wanted the Nephilim for their own, but they always had a choice to make. God didn’t mess with free will; Lucifer not allowed to, either. Even Nephilim with the blood of demons

could choose to fight for the side of Heaven—after all, even the devil himself had once been an angel. The reverse proved true for Naphils born of angels. Because of so much competition for the allegiance of the Nephilim, the Guardians had been tasked with protecting them, guarding them, and keeping them away from the influence of either side until they made their choice.

“That’s impossible,” Jack said. “Isn’t it?”

Reniel sighed. “It’s kind of a long story, and it’s complicated. The first thing you need to know is that she’s the daughter of Eligos ...”

## Chapter 3: Deadly Dancer

Addison sashayed down the catwalk, her platforms clicking over the stage as she reached for the gleaming pole at the end. The rowdy cheers greeting her passed through one ear and out the other. With a mechanical precision born of experience, she gripped the pole with both hands and wrapped one leg around it. Swinging to gain momentum, she joined the first leg with the other, using her thighs to grip it tight before bending backwards. Reaching behind her head with both hands, she held on as she executed a perfect upside-down split, earning her even more cheers, whistles, and a shower of dollar bills across the stage.

Sliding down and flipping right side up, she dropped back to her platforms and worked the crowd, though her mind wasn't focused on the task. She'd danced to "Cherry Pie" so many times, she could do it in her sleep. After two years of working at Temptations on Bourbon Street, she had mastered the art of stripping for tips while her mind wandered elsewhere. Just then, it was on her final semester of college classes, and the English degree waiting for her at the end. It was the sole thing that made her crappy job bearable ... hell, the only thing that made her entire existence bearable.

Someday, she'd pack her stuff and move far, far away from New Orleans and make something of herself. Maybe she could teach, or even pursue her dream of publishing a novel. Anything would be preferable to this. The men—and a few women—in the crowded club didn't know her. They didn't see anything other than the size of her breasts and that she knew how to shake her ass. To them, she was nobody ... just a piece of flesh to throw dollar bills at. While she had never been ashamed of her job—she made more money in a week than most people with regular nine-to-fives—she had always wanted more. Ever since she'd been a little girl growing up in a dilapidated trailer, Addison had wanted to be someone.

She would be. Addison Monroe was nothing if not determined.

She crouched near one corner of the stage, swinging her vibrant red hair as she dropped to her knees in front of a group of young guys crowding that edge. She collected the bills scattered near that side of the platform and tucked them into her g-string without missing a beat. She then reached down to pull a near-non-existent fishnet top over her head, revealing the red leather halter underneath.

Flashing a friendly smile to the blond jock-looking guy who slid a fiver into the string against her hip, she arched her back in a feline fashion and rolled her hips.

"What's your name, gorgeous?" he bellowed to be heard over the music, leaning against the stage.

Rolling onto her back, Addison struck another provocative pose, parting her legs a bit for the benefit of the people sitting on the other side of the stage. She was going to milk this drunk guy for every dollar he had.

"Red," she replied, giving him her stage name. The other dancers had christened her 'Red' for obvious reasons. She might be a natural redhead, but the fiery color she sported now came nowhere near what she'd been born with.

The guy reached toward her and she danced away.

"Sorry, honey," she said in a syrupy sweet tone. "Touching's not allowed. You can look all you want, though."

With a wink, she pulled at the strings of the halter at her back, revealing two heart-shaped pasties and round, perky breasts underneath. The drunk blond slid her a ten this time.

They always made it so easy, like taking candy from a baby. She had the attention of his friends now; they crowded the stage as she went up on her knees, shimmying in a way that made the tassels on her pasties twirl. Another shower of bills, and Addison reminded herself she was working for one more course, one more book, one more month of rent.

“Screw that, baby. It’s my bachelor night. How much for a private dance?”

“Forty bucks,” she told him, “for just you. If your friends want to come along, it’s going to cost extra.”

“That’s not the kind of dance I meant.” He curled his upper lip as he leaned even closer. She could smell the beer on his breath and it caused her nose to curl.

“I’m not a hooker,” she growled between clenched teeth. She stood—this guy’s money wasn’t worth putting up with that kind of talk.

Lightning-quick, his hand shot out and curled around her wrist in a bruising grip. Addison fell to her knees, the impact rattling her teeth. Fury shot through her so fast, her blood raced hot in her veins before she knew what had happened. The edges of her vision went hazy and her breath sawed in and out of her lungs in rapid drags. Instead of trying to pull away, she leaned closer.

Her free hand shot up to his throat, her fingers digging into his flesh with savage intent. The black rage causing her head to pound also darkened her vision until she grew almost blind from it. She could feel the blood running through his carotid artery. She could smell his fear, mingling with the odor of sweat running down his temples. It would be so easy to dig in with her fingernails, not stopping until the hot spray of his blood showered over her. The anger consumed her, the feeling not unlike that of being high on drugs. The man’s grip on her wrist loosened as he gurgled and gasped, struggling for air.

“I said, no touching,” she snarled, giving him a rough shake before throwing him back into his chair. The force of her shove sent him head over heels, overturning the chair and dumping him on the sticky floor.

Andrew, the bouncer, interceded a little too late, appearing only after the scene she’d caused. Addison shook her head as her vision returned. Now that she’d calmed down, the severity of her actions hit her like a club to the back of the head. Forgetting the rest of the bills strewn across the stage, she gathered up her meager clothing, then turned and fled the stage.

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“Girl, you okay?”

Addison glanced in the mirror and her eyes met the reflection of Marie, friend and fellow dancer. Her inky black hair had been slicked back and covered by a wig cap, her face made up like a drag queen’s. Her golden skin gleamed from oil and body glitter, and her stage getup left little to the imagination. Unlike Addison, Marie was petite and slender, with an almost boyish frame.

Around them, the other dancers changed and refreshed their makeup. Where the dressing area behind the stage usually hummed with conversation and laughter, you could have heard a pin drop just then. Addison knew why ... they were all staring at her out of the corners of their eyes and wondering what the hell kind of freak she must be.

“I’m fine,” she answered, avoiding Marie’s gaze and leaning forward on her stool to slide her platforms off.

“Why don’t you bitches mind your business?” Marie snapped, her scathing glare landing on several of the other girls. A few of them turned away, intimidated. Others rolled their eyes in annoyance, though they eventually looked away, as well.

Popping onto the bench beside Addison, she faced the mirror and reached for the blonde wig she wore on stage. She slid it on and began arranging the bangs to her liking.

“That jerk-off deserved what he got,” she said, pursing her lips at her reflection before touching up her fire-engine red lipstick. “Don’t feel bad about it.”

“I don’t,” Addison insisted. Retrieving a cleansing cloth from the pouch she carried in her bag, she began the process of removing her makeup. “I just ...” she trailed off with a sigh, frowning at the girl staring back at her in the mirror. Smokey eye shadow rimmed her hazel eyes, and a few light freckles made an appearance as she swiped the cloth across her cheekbones and nose. Grabbing another wipe, she tossed the first and used the second to scrub her eyelids. “I don’t know what happens, Marie. When I get angry ...”

She couldn’t explain it, and even if she could, Marie would think her crazy. Sometimes, Addison thought she must be. It would be just the sort of icing on the cake representing her life. Deadbeat dad, drug-addicted mom, boozed-up stepdad, abusive boyfriends, and far too many bad decisions to count ... yeah, if she were to be declared insane, it would fit.

But then, there had to be something more to it than just anger or rage. The intensity of those moments couldn’t be described. Just then, when her hand had been wrapped around that man’s throat, her mind had filled with gruesome images of tearing his head from his shoulders and being doused in his blood and gore. The idea had given her a feeling of euphoria, a high unlike anything a drug or drink could give her.

She’d endured this her entire life. Since childhood, she’d been tempted with thoughts of violence. She had been horrified by the fantasies of choking her brand-new puppy to death that had filled her mind at the age of five. She’d cried so hard, and for so long, her mother had just taken the puppy away. Addison had been relieved, because even then, the urges proved strong. However, she’d always controlled them. Through the years, she’d always been able to remind herself that the thoughts were wrong and acting on them would be out of character. She was *not* that person. Wherever the anger came from, she remained determined not to let it rule her life.

Only once had she lost control ... but never again. Just thinking about that day seven years ago made her sick to her stomach. She lowered her head to the table and took a deep breath as the memories assaulted her. The stench of stale cigarettes ... the rasp of calloused fingers up her spine ...

*You’re stupid ... worthless ... trash ...*

She fought against the emotions that converged on her all at once, shaking her head to dislodge the voice echoing in her head.

*I am not stupid. Someday, I’m going to be something more. I’ll show him. I’ll show them all.*

Marie’s hand was gentle on her shoulder. “Honey, I’m worried about you.” Her voice came out low and sweet. “So is Andrew.”

The club’s bouncer acted like a big brother to all the dancers at Temptations. She’d known before she’d even left the stage that he’d get his beefy hands on that jerk who tried to manhandle her and toss him out into the alley.

“I appreciate that you guys care about me,” Addison said as she lifted her head, wiping away a few tears as well as makeup when she confronted the mirror once more. Squaring her shoulders, she forced herself to push the feelings away. No sense in dwelling on them. The moment of rage had passed, her shift over. “I’m fine, I swear. I’m just going to go home, drink a few glasses of wine, and soak in a bubble bath. Tomorrow, I’ll be good as new.”

Marie wrapped her arms around Addison, giving her a tight squeeze. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. I promise, I’ll be fine. Just a rough night.”

“Just a few more months and you can quit this place,” her friend added with cheer. “When that happens, I’m throwing you the biggest, best graduation party a stripper could have.”

“Thanks, Marie. You’re the best.”

“I know,” Marie teased before disappearing through the curtain separating them from the stage.

Addison took her time getting dressed, trading her skimpy dance gear for her comfortable shorts, tank top, and sneakers. After pulling her hair up into a ponytail and then slinging her messenger-style bag over one shoulder, she left feeling much more like herself. Everything that happened on stage got left there. The woman she portrayed on that platform existed as a separate being, a persona she put on to make tips and nothing more.

“Until tomorrow night, Red,” she mumbled, stepping out through the side door of the club. The narrow, short alleyway led her right toward Bourbon Street. The flashing lights of other clubs and bars greeted her. People milled about on either side, and in the middle of, the boulevard. Across the street, the bouncer of a competing club gestured toward the two half-naked girls at his side, hoping to steal some business. He called out to passing men like an auctioneer, his wild gestures ushering them toward the club’s double doors.

Before she broke free of the alley, footsteps sounded behind her.

“Hey, Red.”

She turned, but before she could react, a fist had crashed into her jaw. Pain exploded across her face and one of her eyes stung as she went reeling against the brick wall of the club next door.

The blond from the club and two of his friends came into view, their smiles menacing. Instead of the fear she should have felt, she experienced a rush of exhilaration. The punch had given her a surge of adrenaline, one that had her ready to tear each of them limb from limb. Part of her knew the feat would be impossible—she stood at only five-foot-six and one-hundred-thirty-five pounds. Still, something deep down inside of her whispered a different story. It told her she could dismember each and every one of them with very little effort if she wanted.

Balling her hands into fists, she dropped her bag to the pavement.

One of the guys came up behind her, his arm wrapping around her waist in a tight grasp.

Addison didn’t even fight him, using the disgust his touch triggered to fuel her anger. The blond approached next, his fingers gripping her chin in a crushing grip.

“Not so tough now, are you?” he whispered, spittle flying from his mouth and landing on her cheek.

Addison panted with anger, her chest heaving and bursting with fury. “I thought I told you,” she murmured as her vision went dark and hazy again, “no touching.”

The heat creeping along her skin reached an unbearable limit, leaving just one way to get relief.

Closing her eyes, she released the feeling, sighing with relief as the wave of fury left her body in a rush. It reached out with invisible hands and slammed all three of them to the ground.

When she opened her eyes, not one of them appeared to be conscious, and thin tendrils of black smoke started curling around her. In case they hadn't gotten the point, she added a kick in the blond guy's ribs for good measure.

Stepping over him, she reached for her bag and slung it over her shoulder once again, then moved with a confident stride out onto Bourbon Street. Maybe, just maybe, a little anger wasn't so bad. If she could control it, perhaps it could do her some good. It had certainly come in handy teaching those guys a lesson.

"I suppose you think that was a pretty neat little trick you just pulled."

She startled, one hand coming up over her pounding heart as she turned to face the voice that had reached out to her from the darkness.

A tall, willowy woman with smooth, ebony skin and dark, glittering eyes came toward her. She wore plain clothing—a black t-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops. Her hair hung in neat dreadlocks pulled back from her face. She seemed unimposing, but still, something in Addison reacted to this woman. She knew at once this was not a chance encounter. This woman understood what she'd just seen Addison do, and she wasn't pleased.

"Yeah, well, they asked for it."

The other woman smiled. It was one of the most radiant sights Addison had ever seen.

"You're right about that," she replied. "Still, you could have lost control and killed them. You're strong, Addison, stronger than most of the others. That's why He chose you."

Addison frowned, taking a step closer to the woman. Despite the noise around them, she could hear her voice loud and clear, almost as if it echoed inside her mind. But that sounded ridiculous ... the woman's mouth had actually moved. Hadn't it?

"What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"My name is Elle, and I've been sent to give you a message, Addison. As to who He is ... well, I suspect you already know the answer to that question. After all, He's the one you talk to when you're angry or sad, the one you blame for the circumstances of your life."

"God?"

Elle nodded. "*Him.*"

She shook her head, backing away from Elle. "Listen, I don't know how you know my name, or any of that other personal stuff about me talking to God but ... I'm gonna go now, okay? Please don't follow me. I don't want to do to you what I did to them. You seem nice."

She turned to walk away, but Elle fell in step beside her. Her legs were long, making it easy for her to keep up.

"You cannot escape the truth anymore," Elle insisted. "That's why He sent me. There are things you need to know, and we don't have a lot of time."

Addison couldn't help it. Curiosity got the best of her and she paused, turning to face Elle once again. "Wait a minute. Are you saying *He* sent you?" she asked, pointing skyward. "*He, Him?*"

Elle smiled at her as if patronizing a child. "Of course." She didn't bat an eyelash when hitting Addison with her next statement. "I'm a messenger of God, Addison. An angel."

## Chapter 4: The Bitter Pill

“Before the dawning of the Earth, there was war in Heaven.”

Addison leaned forward, elbows braced on the tiny, round table in her box of a kitchen. She ignored the steaming mug of tea between her hands, unable to take her eyes off Elle for even a second. She wanted to laugh in the woman’s face, tell her how ridiculous she sounded walking around telling people she was an angel.

Sure, she believed in God. She even believed in Heaven and Hell. Beyond that, she was skeptical. She’d have thought an angel would be more to look at, and Elle looked like half the folks walking around New Orleans. In a city full of people who practiced voodoo and believed in even the most ridiculous of superstitions, it was possible that Elle was just some nut job.

Yet, somehow deep down, she had always known that the truth about her ... condition ... lay out there somewhere. If it weren’t for the abnormal things she could do when stressed or angry, she’d have chalked it up to some kind of mental disorder. But there had to be more to this, so she’d decided to humor Elle. It couldn’t hurt to at least listen.

After her stunning declaration, she’d invited the alleged back to her place. She’d done the polite thing and offered her guest the tea, but had been itching to get down to business the entire time. Now, they were getting somewhere.

“Lucifer was the most beautiful of the angels, and had a gift for music,” Elle continued, pausing to take a sip of her own tea. “His name means the Morning Star, and it fit him. He shone brighter than even the sun. His place was one of honor at Father’s side. Over time, he became proud and vain, desiring the power and omniscience possessed by Father alone. He rebelled, taking a large portion of the other angels with him. He wanted a throne above that of God’s.”

“I think I can guess where this is going, seeing as how Lucifer is also the name of the devil,” Addison interjected.

Elle nodded. “Father sent Michael, the Archangel, and his warriors to defeat Lucifer and his horde. One-third of Heaven’s angels aligned themselves with him. Their betrayal brought so much pain, as many of those angels were our friends, our brothers and sisters.” She paused, lowering her eyes. Her lips pressed into a thin line and sighed as if reliving the memory. Unshed tears glimmered in her eyes when she raised them. Yet, she remained composed. “Still, Father did what had to be done, and when Michael imprisoned Lucifer and his followers, bringing them to his throne room for judgment, it marked the beginning of a never-ending battle between Good and Evil. Lucifer and all who joined his rebellion were cast out of Heaven, never to return. Lucifer became the Evil One, Satan, The Deceiver. His followers were stripped of their wings and their beauty, cursed and banished to Hell for all eternity.”

“But that sounds like the end to me,” Addison said. This story grew more fascinating by the second. “I mean, Lucifer rebels, God kicks him out into Hell. Good wins; the end.”

Elle sighed and shook her head. “Unfortunately, that is not the case. When the Earth and mankind were created, the battle raged on. Lucifer began it with his temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. We have battled the demons for the souls of mankind since the dawn of time as you know it.”

Addison frowned, shaking her head. “It doesn’t make any sense. If I were God, I would just make all of mankind love me and then Satan wouldn’t have anything to work with. Battle won.”

Elle smiled. “Then it isn’t actual love, or devotion, is it? Not without free will and the ability to choose. Father has given all men free will, and with that, you may choose to live a good life and love others, or choose a path of hatred and harm. That is why the battle persists, because before the end, only one will win.”

“So, how does it work? I mean, you’re telling me that angels and demons are fighting for territory here on Earth. Since you’re the first angel I’ve ever met, I’m assuming this is a war being waged where we can’t see it.”

“In a manner of speaking,” Elle answered. “The battle is happening right before your eyes. If you choose to see it, it becomes very obvious. Angels and demons walk the Earth in human disguise; they are everywhere. However, they are not the only ones involved in the war. The scales are balanced by other beings who also fight on either side.”

Addison’s pulse began to race at Elle’s words. She’d been expecting angels and demons; the thought of other things that went bump in the night was nerve-wracking. “What other beings?”

“There are many. On the side of Hell are witches, sorcerers, and the demon-possessed. These are people who have chosen to sell their souls for power. Lucifer has promised them places of power in Hell when the end of the world has passed.”

Addison snorted. “Yeah, right.”

Elle shrugged. “He isn’t called The Deceiver for nothing. He is good at making the distasteful look attractive. For the side of Heaven, there are Oracles, and the Guardians. They are a special race of humans created by Father to tip the scales and even things out a bit.”

“Do these humans know they’re involved in a war? I mean, you say the bad ones choose to serve Hell, and I get that. But it doesn’t sound like the Oracles or Guardians have a choice in the matter if God makes them. What’s special about them, anyway?”

“These people are a hybrid breed, given gifts to aid them in their service to Earth and Heaven. Oracles have the gift of foresight and wisdom. They can look into the past and future, and they are very knowledgeable about the spirit world. The Guardians have different gifts that vary from person to person—superhuman abilities that give them strength beyond that of ordinary humans. While these people are born the way they are, they have just as much right to choose as anyone else. When they are called upon, they decide if they wish to get involved or not. Everyone has a choice, Addison.”

“So ... I must be one of those Guardian people, right?” she guessed. “I mean ... I’ve always been different and I knew I couldn’t be the only one.”

Elle leaned back in her chair and studied Addison with a pensive look on her face. “Why don’t you tell me about it?”

Addison glanced down at the hands clutching her now-empty teacup and realized they were shaking. She trembled all over, her heart racing a mile a minute.

What would an angel think about her past? Above all the *incident* that had revealed the extent of what she could do. How would Elle react when Addison told her about the nauseating thoughts that ran through her mind when she became angry? Images of dismembered body parts and blood; thoughts of killing and destruction. There had to be something wrong with her. If she was one of these special people God had created, then she must be defective. Somewhere along the way, she’d been messed up.

“You don’t have to feel ashamed,” Elle said when Addison lowered her eyes without responding. “I am not here to judge you. I am here to help you.”

Her eyes widened as she glanced back up at Elle. How could Elle have known what she was feeling?

“I know how you’re feeling, the same way I knew that you blame God for your problems,” Elle said with a knowing smile.

“If you know so much, then why even ask me?” she snapped.

“Because I want to hear about it from you.” Elle’s voice remained calm despite Addison being anything but. “I want to know the truth as *you* ’ve experienced it.”

Addison ran a hand through her hair before blowing out a heavy breath. What could it hurt to talk about it with Elle? She had insight into Addison’s thoughts and feelings, and she saw firsthand what happened to those men. Maybe she’d found someone who could understand.

“All my life, I’ve thought something is wrong with me. I never tell people about it, because I’m afraid they’ll lock me away in some mental institution. I’m not even sure they wouldn’t be justified. I have thoughts that no person should be having. Dark, sadistic thoughts that I don’t want to have, but they come upon me anytime I get angry or stressed out. When someone pisses me off, all I can think about is ripping their head off. And when I’m angry, I get ... weird.”

“You possess the powers of telepathy and telekinesis. That is how you were able to drop all three of those men to the ground with just a thought,” Elle said with an even tone. “You also possess quick reflexes, strength beyond that of a mere mortal, which is exacerbated when you become angry. There is more inside of you that has yet to manifest. Your potential is beyond anything you could ever imagine. You are nothing as simple or basic as a Guardian or Oracle.”

A twisting sensation started in her gut and she couldn’t push it away. For a moment, she’d dared to hope that maybe God hadn’t abandoned or tossed her aside. If she was a Guardian, she was special, and that meant, maybe He gave a damn. But now ...

“What aren’t you telling me? I need to know the truth, Elle. What am I?”

“There is one more group of players in this game that I have yet to tell you about. Mankind isn’t the only one with free will. As I told you, Lucifer chose his fate, and so did the other angels who became demons for their crimes. Since the fall of Lucifer and his minions, other angels have fallen, as well. Free will sometimes leads them to do things that are against the rules governing my race. While on Earth in human form, sometimes angels and demons interact with people and attraction sparks. Out of those unions come special children with the blood of both celestials and humans in their veins. Those children are known as the Nephilim.”

Something resounded in her at Elle’s revelation. She’d never known her father, and her mother had always been very secretive about him. In fact, just the mention of him sent her mother into a tizzy, and she refused to tell Addison anything at all.

“He’s nobody you need to know ... ever,” she’d told Addison the last time she’d asked. “You’re better off not knowing, Addie.”

“I never knew my father,” she murmured.

Elle nodded. “I know. Your mother had her reasons for keeping his identity a secret. She just wanted to protect you.”

“I don’t understand why, though,” Addison replied. “I mean, would it be so bad for me to know that my dad’s an angel? It’s kind of cool, when you think about it.”

For a moment, Elle didn’t speak; she watched Addison with an expression of pity lining her face.

That’s when it all came together. Addison understood why her thoughts and feelings turned toward the macabre with such ease. Why her anger often grew strong enough to almost

choke her. Why sometimes she wondered if she wasn't the most evil, heartless person on the planet.

She had it in her blood.

"My dad's not an angel, is he?" she asked.

Elle shook her head. "No," she replied gently. "He is not."

## Chapter 5: Temptations

“Stop sulking. We’re doing this.”

Jack watched Micah from the corner of his eye. Side by side, they worked to set the dining room of Mama Jo’s Café to rights at the end of a long shift. Their apartment sat over a Cajun diner owned by Josephine Broussard, a squat Cajun woman with a mother’s personality—thus the nickname ‘Mama Jo.’ She allowed the guys to live there for next to nothing. The two also worked for her—Jack as a waiter and busboy, while Micah assisted in the kitchen.

Micah’s oversized biceps bulged and rippled as he wiped down tables with a white rag. “I ain’t sulkin’.”

Jack snorted, the sound heavy with sarcasm. “Like hell, you’re not.”

Micah paused and sighed, keeping his head lowered over the small, round table. His jaw appeared tense, his eyebrows furrowed. When he got like this, Jack knew his sister’s memory haunted him. Micah was almost never serious, but when he thought about the sister he had lost to the wrong side of the war between Heaven and Hell, he became angry and sullen. Rightfully so, but Jack couldn’t let Micah’s feelings interfere with their new mission. This might just be the most important assignment they’d ever been tasked with.

“She’s a demon, Jack. A *demon*.”

“Addison Monroe is *not* a demon. She’s a Naphil.”

“Born from demon scum,” Micah spat out, his eyes narrowed as he snapped his burning gaze toward Jack. “I don’t get it.”

“We don’t have to get it; we just have to do it. Think about it, Micah. This is our chance to end this thing, a chance at a normal life.”

Micah reached for a bin filled with dirty dishes and turned toward the kitchen. “I got news for you, *podna*,” he said as he brushed past Jack. “The moment we let them brand us with that damn Guardian symbol, normal went buh-bye.”

Jack watched Micah go, realizing the truth of that statement. He finished his cleaning duties before locking the front doors and turning off the dining room lights. He always offered to help Micah scrub pots and pans in the kitchen, but he needed a break from his partner’s surly mood. Micah was a powder keg of emotions ready to be set off at any time and he went from highs to lows with such ease, it could make your head spin. Nonetheless, Jack knew the reasons for that well enough. Micah carried a lot of guilt and anger that he tried to mask with a carefree personality and drown in moonshine. Every now and then, the mask slipped, and Jack remembered he wasn’t the only one who’d had to make sacrifices for the cause.

Alone in the apartment, he trudged to the tiny bathroom at the end of the hall between the two bedrooms. Turning the shower on, he moved toward the mirror while he waited for the water to heat. Pulling his yellow, Mama Jo’s t-shirt over his head, he stared at his reflection and the symbol of the Guardians branded into his chest; a cross with a dove carrying an olive branch in its mouth etched into his dark skin in smooth, black lines—a way for him to be identified by others of his kind.

Like Micah, he’d known his entire life about the order of the Guardians. His father and step-mother had taken custody after his mother’s death; from then on, the importance of his heritage had been drilled into him. All the Bennett men became Guardians, and they passed the gene on to their sons. As a kid, he’d always been captivated by the idea of being a hero like his

father, fighting a battle against evil demons, and being privy to a secret world others knew nothing about. When his ability first manifested, he'd been ecstatic. At long last, at the age of fourteen, he became good enough to stand beside the others and take his place as a Guardian.

Of course, over time, the allure had worn off, leaving him to wonder if it was all worth fighting for. It seemed pointless. The world had to end sometime, and when it did, everyone already knew who would win. For Lucifer, it wasn't about winning, but about taking as many souls with him as he could when the final battle saw him trapped in his own Hell for eternity.

*This isn't about winning or losing*, his stepmother, Sarah, had always reminded him. *It's about saving as many souls as we can before the end.*

He knew that, just as he knew destroying Eligos' ten and closing their portals proved key to that objective. In clear violation of the rules governing the war, they had to be dealt with. At the same time, he often wondered what would happen if the Guardians laid down their weapons and just gave up the fight. If demons wanted the world that bad, he didn't understand why Heaven just didn't let them have it. Politics, environmental destruction, murder and rage, war ... it seemed everyone headed in that direction, anyway.

With a sigh, he shed the rest of his clothing and stepped into the shower. He winced from the heat, but remained under the steaming spray, allowing himself to adjust and his tense muscles to loosen.

*It's worth it for one*, his father would have told him. *Out of billions, if you only save one, it would still have been worth it.*

Then why did he feel like such a failure? Years of fighting, with almost nothing to show for it. He didn't know if he was being tested, or if all the failure rested on his and Micah's shoulders. Just because he wasn't as vocal about it as his friend didn't mean Jack didn't agree with him.

*This could be the last mission*, he told himself as he washed. *This could bring an end to the fight against Eligos and his ten.*

It didn't matter what Micah said; life could be closer to normal for a Guardian. As a kid and young adult, he'd lived that normal life with his parents, whose sole assignment had been the protection of a Naphil kid named Elian. Life hadn't been uneventful, but it wasn't a constant onslaught of demon attacks, either. His hopes didn't have to be completely dashed just yet.

After finishing up in the bathroom, he wrapped a towel around his waist and trudged out into the hall. He could hear Micah in his room, picking at the strings of his guitar. He had just pulled a pair of boxers over his hips when the music stopped. A few seconds later, Micah appeared in his doorway.

"I reckon I'm done bein' a rascal. Now you know I'm all for demon slayin'. That bit about the Naphil just ..."

Jack waved a hand in dismissal. "I get it. I miss her, too."

Micah's jaw hardened and he avoided Jack's gaze. He didn't like to talk about his sister, and that always made moments like this difficult.

"I'm headed out to Bourbon," he continued, pulling on a clean shirt and choosing to change the subject. "Reniel said Addison Monroe works at Temptations."

Micah arched one blond eyebrow and smirked. "Are you tellin' me that our only hope of winnin' this fight is in the hands of a half-demon stripper?"

Jack snorted. "We don't know that she's a stripper. She could be a bartender or a waitress."

"Twenty bucks says she's a stripper," Micah challenged.

“Does that mean you’re coming? I wasn’t expecting you to want to tag along.”

He shrugged. “The way I see it, Eligos and his ten are gonna know we’re onto a way to beat ’em. That means before long, the demon attacks are gonna start. You think I’m leavin’ my *neg* to face that alone?”

Jack chuckled at that. The first time Micah had called him ‘my *neg*,’ he’d almost eaten Jack’s fist for lunch. He’d then explained that ‘*neg*’ was a Cajun term for ‘friend.’ Jack had grown used to it, and all of Micah’s other colorful phrases.

“You just want to come because there will be naked girls.”

“For true, *podna*,” Micah confirmed with a nod. “For true.”

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Half an hour later, they stood in the entryway of Temptations. Through the pounding of the music’s heavy bass, the low hum of voices filled the room. On the t-shaped stage jutting out from the back wall, four poles stood, occupied by dancers. All around the room, waitresses in barely-there shorts and tank tops served overpriced drinks, while more of the same worked behind the long, gleaming bar. Red velvet curtains separated the main room from those where private dances took place.

“Did Ren give you a description?” Micah bellowed in his ear as they made their way toward the bar.

“No!” Jack shouted back. “But he did say she’d be here tonight.”

Micah’s broad shoulders, paired with his stony features, were always good for clearing a path in a crowd, tonight being no exception. A gap opened up at the bar as they approached and Micah slid into it, glaring at the guy nearest him until he moved, making room for Jack. Sitting at one of the barstools, Jack waved down the nearest bartender.

The girl had cinnamon-hued skin and tacky, blonde extensions running down her back, her breasts spilling out of the tank top she’d shredded to reveal as much skin as possible.

“Hey, honey, what can I get you?”

“Rum and Coke,” he answered. “And you can point me in the direction of Addison Monroe?”

The bartender frowned. “Addison?”

One of the other bargirls came up behind her, toting a tray full of dirty mugs. “You know Addie. The one they call Red.”

The blonde bartender nodded. “Oh, yeah, Red. She’s backstage, but she’ll be performing soon, I’m sure. She’s one of our more popular dancers. You got a thing for redheads?”

Jack shrugged, dismissing her question, and the girl went about making his drink. Micah’s gaze burned into the back of his head, yet, he refused to turn around and acknowledge him. But the big Cajun wouldn’t let it go without rubbing it in. His heavy hand clapped down on Jack’s shoulder as he guffawed.

“Pay up, *podna*. I was right. Demon stripper.”

“Naphil stripper,” he grumbled, reaching into his wallet. He paid for his drink and handed a twenty to Micah, who used it to pay for a beer and a Jager bomb. “According to the bartender, she’s also a redhead.”

Micah shook his head. “I dated a redhead once. Gal had a temper like you wouldn’t believe. Best lovin’ I ever had, though, for true. Though I reckon you wouldn’t know it for

lookin' at me afterward. All them scratches 'cross my back, you'd think I'd laid with a cougar. Come to think of it, I also dated a stripper once, but that's another story."

"One I've heard a hundred times," Jack reminded him.

The music changed and a booming voice announced over the speaker system the names of the four new dancers taking the stage. Candy, Toya, Tigris, and Red.

"Heads up." He nodded toward the stage.

The four girls strutted out one at a time as the first notes of 'Lick' by Joi filled the club. Jack sipped on his drink, his eyebrows shooting up as the fourth girl took her place at one of the center-stage poles. She and a brunette that had to be Tigris—due to her black and orange striped costume—became the center of attention as the men closer to the stage clamored for their notice, bills floating down to the stage floor.

Even from this distance, he could make out her curvy yet muscled build. Her arms and legs appeared sinewy, straining with strength as she used her limbs to execute some pretty impressive pole tricks. Her hair was a vibrant shade of red that bordered on maroon. It shimmered like fire beneath the stage lights, fanning out around her face as she danced. Her makeup was heavy, so Jack couldn't decipher any features, her eyes ringed with smoky eye shadow and her lips shimmering a glossy pink.

"Not bad for a demon," Micah grunted, before downing his shot. He slammed the glass back down onto the bar, then reached for his beer.

Jack lowered his eyes and tried to focus his thoughts elsewhere. The typical guy response made it hard to look at Addison Monroe as just a part of their mission. He couldn't talk to her about God and fighting demons if all he could think about was what she looked like naked.

It was damn hard, but he managed to fix his vision on one of the many flat screens behind the bar playing one of several football games. By the time the song ended, his drink was gone and he'd grown restless from waiting.

"She's gone backstage," Micah told him, setting his empty beer bottle beside Jack's glass. "These places always have back entrances for employees. Gal gotta leave sometime."

Jack nodded and turned away from the bar. "We'll wait for her outside."

## Chapter 6: The Chosen One

Addison peered out through the crack in the back door of the club, holding her breath. After her long talk with Elle the night before, she hadn't slept a wink. As a result, she'd been unable to concentrate on anything all day. She'd burned her grits that morning, almost stepped into oncoming traffic, and had put on several articles of clothing inside out before having to try again. All because she couldn't stop thinking about her parents— her father, in particular; whoever he happened to be. She still had so many questions unanswered. Like, who was her father? Did her mother know what he was? It would explain why she'd kept so much from Addison. But then, if she had some important destiny like Elle had said, why wouldn't her mother have told her the truth? Maybe she had a reason for that. Maybe she'd only wanted to protect Addison.

It was all enough to give her a headache, and she just wanted a night of reprieve from it.

*You'll be visited by someone else soon, Elle had told her last night. They'll tell you everything you need to know about your destiny.*

Apparently, she'd been chosen for some sacred duty, though why any god would want her, she couldn't figure out. She was a white trash stripper with a demon for a father. What could God think she had to offer?

Whatever the case, she didn't think she was ready to hear it. She'd been watching her back all day, wondering if every person who looked at her for more than a second had come for her like Elle had predicted. Of course, this made stripping in front of a crowded room full of men a nerve-wracking experience.

Finding the alley clear, Addison opened the door wider and slipped out, her gaze sweeping the area for any sign of movement.

"Lookin' for someone, *cher*?"

She gasped as a man's voice—thick with the accent of a Cajun—came lilting from the darkness. She moved away from the sound, only to end up with her back against a wall. A large, hulking figure started toward her, blocking the way out. Her heart leapt into her throat as he came into view—the biggest man she'd ever seen. Wearing a white t-shirt that appeared to be stretched to its limits by his bulging biceps, he lumbered forward, his boots pounding a heavy tread on the pavement. A messy mop of dirty blond curls fell in disarray around a rugged, hard face, the jaw covered in days' worth of stubble. His piercing, cool green stare seemed a bit disdainful as he stared at her.

Addison scowled. "Look, I'm off the clock, and I'm not that kind of stripper. Some of the other girls are down for this kind of stuff, but I'm not, so get out of my way before I kick your ass."

To her surprise, he laughed, his chest trembling with amusement. "You, hurt me?"

"Leave her alone, Micah."

Addison started and turned to find that the wall she'd knocked into was actually a person. She backed away as he peeled himself away from the shadows.

"I apologize for my friend," he said.

He had a bit of an accent, but he wasn't Southern. New York, maybe?

"He doesn't have manners, which is why I never take him anywhere," he continued.

“My foot!” the one named Micah protested. “I got more manners in my thumb than a Yankee like you has in his whole body.”

Addison heaved a heavy sigh, relieved she didn’t need to kill these guys. They didn’t seem to be a threat, and if they’d wanted to hurt her, they would have already. She scowled and turned back to the Yankee. He was tall, but not as intimidating as his friend. His shoulders were broad, his waist narrow, and his skin a beautiful shade of dark chocolate brown, his features full-bodied. Grey, soulful eyes hooded by dark brows stared at her. Tension around his mouth hinted at more beneath the surface. This guy looked like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and it was killing him a little each day. She instantly empathized with him.

“You must be the ones Elle told me were coming,” she said. She supposed the reprieve she’d wanted wasn’t an option here. It seemed that once God decided something was going to happen, He worked fast. “Let me see your marks.”

The dark man with the glittering gunmetal eyes smirked at her. “You met Elle?”

She nodded. “Yeah, and she said I could trust you, but to ask for marks first because there are demons out there that might want me dead.”

Reaching up, he loosened the first three buttons of his deep red shirt and pulled it aside, revealing a wide swath of bare, smooth chest. Addison leaned close to better see the dark tattoo. She swallowed noisily as his spicy scent met her nostrils.

“You can touch it if you need to,” he murmured, gazing down at her. “To make sure it isn’t fake. It won’t rub off. It’s burned into my skin.”

Addison took several steps back—the last thing she needed was to touch him. “I believe you. I know a tattoo when I see one. How about you?”

She turned to the big Cajun and waited.

Pursing his lips in annoyance, he yanked at the collar of his t-shirt, revealing the matching black mark branded into his sun-tanned skin. A cross with a dove carrying an olive branch perched on one of its beams; Elle had told her about the symbol of the Guardians.

“I guess you guys want to talk,” she said. “We shouldn’t do it out in the open, though. If you want, we can go back to my place and I’ll hear you out. I didn’t catch your name, by the way.”

“Jackson Bennett, Jr., but everyone just calls me Jack,” he said, extending a hand to her. “This is my partner, Micah Boudreaux.”

Addison lifted one eyebrow. “Partner?”

Micah cleared his throat. “All Guardians work in pairs. We aren’t *those* kinds of partners.”

Jack seemed amused by that, but didn’t remark on it. “We’ll come with you. I’m sure Elle already dropped a lot of information on you, and I’m sorry but we’re going to have to add to that load. We need to know how much you’ve already been told so we can fill you in on the rest.”

“Works for me. Come on, it’s not far.”

They took the twenty minute walk in silence. Once the noise of Bourbon Street faded away behind them, the silence became stifling, but Addison didn’t know what to say. Should she ask questions? And then to ask what? It unnerved her, being near them. Micah was just plain intimidating, and she couldn’t ignore the way he’d stared at her before, as if she were some gross thing he wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole. While Jack seemed less intimidating than his partner, he set her even more on edge. He seemed too astute, his stare far too penetrating. As she led them, she could feel his eyes on the back of her head, as though he could see right through

her. It made her feel even more exposed than dancing half-naked on a stage in a crowded club ever could.

They reached her building and she led the guys up the wrought-iron stairs to the second floor. Shame heated her cheeks as she swung the door open to reveal her cramped, one-bedroom apartment. The building sat in a seedy area of town, far from being the nicest on the block. She used every spare penny she earned for her education, and didn't have the time or money to make the place appear homey. Her walls looked stark with peeling, grayish paint, the little furniture she owned old and worn. No, her place wasn't Buckingham Palace, but it was hers; she kept it clean, and unlike some of the other girls who lived in her building, she didn't earn the money to pay for it on her back.

The dull yellow bulb hanging over her tiny kitchen table flickered on as she hit the switch and ushered them inside.

"I don't keep a lot of food in the house, but I've got water, tea, and a couple of Cokes if you want something to drink," she offered as she dropped her purse onto the coffee table.

"We're fine, thanks," Jack insisted as he stood aside to let Micah in. The large man had to turn sideways to get his oversized shoulders through the doorway. His gaze wandered the room with curiosity as he took in his surroundings.

"Not what I expected," he murmured.

Addison narrowed her eyes at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Jack glared at Micah, as well. "Seriously, man, if you're going to be an ass, you can go. I got this."

"No, it's okay," she said. "I'm used to it. To answer your inevitable questions, Micah, I live this way because almost all of my tips go toward paying my college tuition. Sorry if you were expecting red walls, a stripper pole, and a stocked bar, but I don't bring my work home with me."

Micah didn't answer her. He plopped down onto the couch and crossed his arms over his chest.

Jack sighed. "Don't mind him. He's cranky tonight for reasons we don't need to get into."

Addison turned her back to the gigantic Cajun sitting on her couch and went to the refrigerator. Retrieving a bottle of water, she motioned for Jack to join her at the table—the same table where she and Elle had sat the night before while the angel turned her world upside down.

"Elle came to me last night, pretty much the same way you two dropped in on me," she began as she twisted the top off her water. After taking a swig, she continued. "The things she told me answered so many questions I had ... about myself, about my father. I wanted to believe she was some crazy nut job, but it all made sense once I heard her out. Too coincidental not to be true."

Jack nodded. "I know what you mean. When my parents first told me about all this, I believed them without a doubt. For the most part because so many of the things going on around me seemed to make so much more sense. I'm glad you gave her a chance to explain because it makes my job much easier."

She folded her hands on the table and watched him, chin on her palm and head tilted. "What is your job, Jack?"

Leaning back in his chair, he returned her stare without wavering. God, those eyes of his were downright magnetic. Slate grey and so deep-set in the shadows of his brow that a person

could stare into them forever and still never learn the truth behind them. It should have been threatening, but something about him put her at ease.

“Right now, protecting you,” he answered. “There’s more to that, but I have to tell you a story before you can understand it all. Are you ready to hear it?”

Addison nodded, her ponytail bobbing and brushing her neck. She couldn’t deny that curiosity had her on edge.

Jackson continued. “First, I need to know what Elle has told you. Do you know about all the different players in the war between Heaven and Hell?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Angels, demons, Guardians, Oracles, Naphils ... all of it.”

“Good.” He sighed with relief. “So I can go straight into it, then. Because the battle is for the souls of mankind, lesser demons are allowed to come and go, just as angels are. They either cloak their appearance as humans, or stay out of sight while they do what they do best. Temptation is their thing, with different demons specializing in different areas. Some inspire envy and hate; others exploit sexuality and turn it into something dark and degrading. Others operate through fear or anger. Whatever the case, as long as they work within the rules and don’t try to influence free will, it’s all allowed.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That sucks.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, well, the angels balance things out. Healing angels heal; messenger angels remind people that there is still hope and that they have a higher calling; warrior angels wrangle the demons who step out of line ... or, at least, they used to before one of the demons crossed the line.”

She leaned forward, her attention caught by his last words in particular. “What happened?”

“The demon known as the Great Duke of Hell decided that he’d had enough of the rules, so he got together with a sorcerer under his possession and created a spell opening ten extra portals between worlds, from Hell into Earth. Before, there existed only a handful. This allowed more demons in than usual, and we’re not just talking about any regular minions here. Demons operate in a hierarchy, just like angels do, and there are lesser creatures who work for greater ones. The spell was copied ten times onto ten scrolls and distributed to ten of the biggest, baddest demons that exist in this world and the next.”

“Couldn’t they have come through before?” she asked. “What made these portals different?”

“Some of these demons have been banned from coming to Earth for breaking rules in the past. They’re already in violation of their banishment to Hell, but to make matters worse, they’ve taken it one step further. Influencing free will is a huge no-no, and they’ve been crossing the line by enslaving the minds of people and using them in the most depraved of ways. Just to give you an example—the other night, Micah and I had to hunt down this demon named Adramelech who had started himself a little cult right here in the city. He’d brainwashed them to think it was a good idea to sacrifice human babies.”

Addison gasped, her heart aching at the thought of kidnapped children being slaughtered for some sick demon’s sadistic plans.

“Don’t worry,” Jack added in a rush. “We got there before the babies were harmed, but ... well, we’re not always so lucky.”

“I don’t understand.” Her brows furrowed while to wrap her mind around all he’d said. “If the demons are out of line, why don’t the angels just take them out? Why doesn’t God just put a stop to it all?”

Jack fell silent for a moment, almost as if he didn't know how to answer her question. The tension around his mouth became more pronounced, as if what he needed to say would be distasteful.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Addison." His voice sounded low and strained. "We don't always understand, either. This job isn't easy, and just because we know all that goes on behind the scenes doesn't mean we like it or understand it." He sighed. "The fact of the matter is, the angels are stretched thin and can only do so much. The Guardians are an order governed by the warrior angels, who fight alongside us. They work just as hard as we do to keep people safe. But, this is our fight ... humans, that is. We are the ones who have to decide in the end ... Good or Evil. From the beginning of time as we know it, since the fall of Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, two sides have fought for the allegiance of man. We are the ones who decide how much power the demons have in our lives. It's our world, and we have to protect it."

Addison mulled that over for a moment. It seemed a bit harsh, but it also made sense. She could remember being a little girl and walking with her mother to the tiny, dilapidated First Baptist Church just about a mile from their dusty trailer park. Sitting on a hard pew with ribbons in her hair, she'd let her mind wander during the long, droning sermons. Even though she hadn't paid much attention, sometimes pieces of them would come drifting back to her at the strangest times. Just now, she could remember the preacher railing about how the sins of man had destroyed the direct bond between them and God. That was why He didn't interfere in the way the Bible taught He'd been known to back in those times. Man had made it clear that His interference wasn't welcome, so He left them up to their devices and offered them a choice.

Of course, these memories were few and far between. Once drugs had taken a hold of her mother, they'd stopped going to church altogether. They'd stopped doing much of anything.

"How does any of this involve me?" she asked. "Elle didn't really get to that part. She only told me that as a Naphil, it's my choice if I want to get involved and which side I choose. She also told me that Guardians were tasked with protecting people like me because demons sometimes like to come after them."

Jack nodded. "That's all true. Naphils, no matter who their parents are, can choose any side. It's because demons were spawned of angels, so even a demon Naphil also has the potential to do good with their power. Their abilities make them targets for demons who want to use that power for their own gain. They try to temp the Nephilim, and influence their decision."

"That isn't all, though, is it?" she asked, unable to help the edge of exasperation in her voice. There was so much to take in, and she still didn't know how it all affected her. "Elle told me that I was special, that I'd been chosen for something."

"That's exactly it. Addison, you're the key to bringing down the ten demons that have opened the forbidden portals and restoring the balance."

She couldn't help but laugh at that. "You're kidding, right? Me?"

He shook his head, huffing in annoyance. "It's not a laughing matter. As the daughter of a very powerful demon, you're not just a prime target for other demons. You're a strong Naphil with the potential to do great things. You're also the only one who can wield the sole weapon we have to use against the kinds of demons we're up against."

"What's the weapon?" She kept her other questions to herself. *Why me? Do you have any idea what kind of person I am? Do you really think I can do this?*

"It's called the Seal of Solomon," he answered. "It's actually a ring, one worn by King Solomon."

"The one from the Bible? The really rich one?"

“The very one. A lot of people believe it’s a myth, but it’s been confirmed that the ring does exist. The mystical properties are more than just legend. The ring was given to Solomon because he possessed the wisdom to use it, but when he lost his way, it fell out of his hands and was assumed to be lost forever. We were just told where to find it and how to use it, but we need you.”

“To get a ring back?” Had she gone to sleep and woken up in an Indiana Jones flick? What the hell had she gotten herself into?

“We need you to *wear* the ring. You are one of the few Naphils with the power necessary to channel the might of the ring.”

“What does it do?” she asked, growing serious now. Her palms began to sweat at the implications of this. It all sounded dangerous and she had never wanted anything more than a stable and normal life. It seemed like normal would never happen for her now.

“The ring has the power to command demons, to destroy them ... you would have the power to pretty much bend them to your will.”

Thinking of the three men she’d injured the night before, she frowned. Those thoughts led her on a path to her past, and the monster that lived inside of her, just waiting to be unleashed. Her heart began to pound and her palms broke out in a sweat. Swallowing past a lump in her throat, she wiped her hands on her jeans and tried to take a deep breath.

“No,” she whispered.

Jack scowled. “I’m sorry, what?”

She shook her head. “You don’t want to give me that kind of power.”

“I’m not the one giving you anything,” he insisted. “You’re a Naphil, and that means there is already power inside of you. I didn’t choose you; God did, and He has His reasons. My job is to protect you, get you to the ring, and help you harness its power. I’m a glorified bodyguard; nothing more.”

Addison stood, and her chair scraped the linoleum as she pushed it back from the table. “You don’t understand, Jack. You don’t know what kind of person I am.”

“He does,” Jack insisted.

“Right, which is why I don’t understand why He’d choose me. You said we have free will, right? Well, I’m turning this down. I’m sure He can hear and see everything, but just so we’re clear, you should go back to whatever angel you answer to and tell them I can’t do this. There’s something inside me. It’s a kind of darkness. That’s the best way I can describe it. I have these thoughts and feelings ... well, I don’t think you need to hear all of that. Trust me, I am not the one you want carrying this ring or using its power. I’m sorry.”

Jack stood, as well, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Listen, I know this is overwhelming but—”

“Um, excuse me.” Micah had been silent through their entire conversation, but he spoke up now. Standing at the window overlooking the street, he parted the blinds and stared out into the night. “I don’t wanna interrupt, but we got company, and it ain’t the kind you invite in for tea.”

Jack was across the room in a few strides and at Micah’s side to peer out through the blinds. “Damn it,” he muttered.

He and Micah traded glances before looking back at her.

“What?” she asked, staring back at them in confusion. “I’m not expecting anybody.”

“You should be,” Micah said. “You’re the chosen one, which means you got a big ole target on your back.”

A shiver ran down her spine as an ominous sound filled the room. At first, she couldn't figure out what it was, but as the seconds passed, it became clear. Several whispering voices warbled together, mingled with what sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. Adrenaline surged through her and her hands began to shake. Jack's eyes glittered as he gave her a solemn stare and said the one word that struck fear into her core.

“Demons.”

## Chapter 7: Fight or Flight

“You’re going to have to come with us.”

Jack watched as Addison twisted her trembling hands together, her eyes darting around the small front room of her apartment.

“I ... I don’t understand,” she stammered.

“It’s real simple,” Micah said, clearly out of patience. “Demons are comin’ here to take you out. I don’t know about you, but I don’t plan to stand here and wait for ’em.”

She nodded, seeming to understand.

“I have to get something,” she said before turning with a swish of her long ponytail and dashing toward her bedroom.

“God a’mighty,” Micah huffed, pulling on his wild curls in agitation. “That girl’s gonna be the death of us, *podna*.”

“Cut her some slack!” Jack snapped as he glanced out through the blinds again. He knew why Micah had so little sympathy for the girl, but that didn’t mean he should be so rude to her. “Life as she knows it is over. Whatever she needs to make her feel better about the situation, we’ll let her have it and shut up about it.”

Micah’s response came through a clenched jaw and narrowed eyes. A few seconds later, Addison came barreling from the bedroom with a bag thrown over one shoulder.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

“Well, what a coincidence,” Micah snapped. “So are they!”

Addison stood between them and looked out between the blinds. A sharp gasp tore from her—she was seeing the same thing he’d seen. Small, black shadows crawled over the sides of the buildings lining the street, hanging from roofs and balconies. Their metallic voices whispered out, the sound scraping at his eardrums. It didn’t matter how many demons he’d dispatched; that sound never ceased to send a chill down his spine. Beside him, she trembled, as well, and he placed a firm hand at the small of her back to steady her. The touch seemed to help, and she turned to face him, her gaze filled with terror.

“It’s okay,” he reassured her. “We’re going to run. They know we’re in here, so there’s no need to be covert about it. These are minor demons, little minions. They’re nothing compared to some of the others I’ve fought before, so don’t be afraid. Micah’s going to open the door and go out first. I want you to get behind him, and stay as close to him as you can. I’ll be right behind you.”

She nodded. “Got it.”

Jack reached into his waistband and pulled his gun free. Beside him, Micah had already retrieved his knives. If Addison was surprised by their weapons, she didn’t let on. She stood back as Micah stomped toward the door, his heavy tread loud on the carpeted floor.

“Watch your hair,” Micah grunted at her, hand on the doorknob. “These little sons-a-bitches got claws and they like to pull.”

Before she could answer, he jerked the door open and barreled out onto the balcony. She followed close, and Jack fell in behind her. The jarring sound of the small demons’ wings flapping was a dissonance that, when mixed with their grating whispers, made Jack want to take a drill to his temple just to chase the sound away. He reminded himself that it was all

psychological. Demons reveled in emotions like fear; creating it in people gave them their strength, and they fed off of it.

They ran for the staircase, keeping their heads low. The demons took flight, swarming toward them in a black mass that would appear to be no more than a large flock of birds to the untrained eye. As they got closer, they'd appear in their true form—long, skinny claws, chimp-like bodies with swishing, barbed tails, and bat-like wings covered in the armor that caused the metallic sound.

One of them issued a high-pitched screech, causing a chorus of identical sounds to ring out through the swarming cloud. They barreled toward Micah in one large mass, long, pointed teeth bared and dripping saliva. Micah lifted his knives and twirled them with expertise before swinging both his arms out in a wide arc. The blades cut through at least ten of the little demons, causing them to disappear in a burst of white light and a shower of black blood. Micah appeared heedless of the inky goop staining the front of his t-shirt as he continued descending the steps, his oversized arms swinging the knives so fast, they were a golden blur.

Another swarm of them came from the right, but Jack turned and let loose with voice waves strong enough to drop them all mid-flight. He repeated the bellow as they neared the bottom of the steps; one burst from his burning throat large enough to take out a cluster of demons. Black blood splattered to the pavement before disintegrating into puffs of curling black smoke.

Once they reached the street, Micah took a left and squeezed down the narrow alley between her building and another. The demons followed, some still flying and several climbing alongside them, their nails grating against the bricks. Addison cried out and swatted at two of them as they swooped down on her, one landing on her shoulder and the other on her head. With a vicious yank of her ponytail, one of them threw her off balance while the other tried to sink its teeth into her neck. Micah turned and put his knife through its gut, while Jack swatted the other off her head before putting a beam of light between its eyes.

The alleyway opened up into a small courtyard, which housed an outdoor café. As luck would have it, it was closed for the night with no one there to watch as Jack shoved Addison beneath a table and joined Micah in fighting off the little beasts. It seemed like a never-ending swarm that multiplied almost as fast as Jack and Micah could kill them. Three of the little creatures landed on Jack's shoulders, their sharp talons digging into the fabric of his shirt. He shrugged them off before shooting, taking out all three in a single burst.

"Time to hit 'em with the light, *podna*," Micah called out, his shoulder brushing Jack's. They stood back to back, cornered on every side in what seemed like an impossible situation. They both knew better. Every Guardian possessed what could only be described as an inner light. It sapped a great deal of strength, so Jack always exercised caution about when he used the ability. A horde of demons surrounding him fit on his list of acceptable times to apply the power.

"Agreed." He fired another shot into the fray, taking down five of the tiny demons flying at him from the same direction. A sixth one avoided the shot and landed against his chest, digging its claws in. Despite the small size of the minions, their claws were sharp and barbed. They dug into Jack's skin, causing him to roar as a burning sensation exploded through his chest, almost paralyzing him. Forcing himself to breathe through the pain, he closed his eyes and pulled his inner light. He pictured it—white, bright, and glorious, reveling in the vibrations building inside until they hit a crescendo. The mark on his chest began to burn and he opened his eyes, his vision filled with the vibrant light emanating from it.

The demon shrieked and fell away. The light flickered and then a burst like a lightning flash emanated from first him, and then Micah, sweeping throughout the outdoor café and dropping the demons like flies. Their black blood rained down over them, splattering his face and clothing, and the putrid stench of sulfur invaded his nostrils. Still, the demons were gone and the café had gone quiet around them.

Jack swiped a hand over his eyes, flicking a handful of the black demon goop away with a huff of disgust.

“Ugh!” Micah grumbled, swiping one hand over his face and sending more of the globs splatting to the cobblestones. “This stuff is always a real *crapeau* to clean.”

“Guess I can kiss this shirt good-bye,” Jack muttered, staring down at his black-spotted top.

Micah laughed. “Don’t I always tell you not to wear your fancy clothes for demon huntin’?”

He rolled his eyes. “Micah, a clean t-shirt is fancy to you.” He turned away from his partner and searched the courtyard for Addison. “You can come out.”

At first, he couldn’t make her out in the darkness. Then, a dark shape shifted and appeared from beneath a table. She was clean, having avoided the shower of demon blood that had rained down on the two of them. Her questioning gaze darted between the two of them as she approached.

“What was that?”

Seeing the fear and confusion in her eyes, Jack stepped forward. “It’s okay,” he said, trying to reassure her. “We would never hurt you. Our mission is to protect you, remember?”

She nodded, seeming to relax a bit at that reminder. “Micah is freakishly strong, and that thing you did with your voice ...”

“All Guardians possess gifts,” he answered. “Mine is my voice; Micah’s is his strength.”

“That burst of light ... it was coming from your chest.”

He nodded. “All Guardians have an inner light, which we can use when we need a large burst of power in one sweep.” He sagged and sank down onto a nearby chair. “It’s exhausting, though, so we don’t do it often.”

Addison’s brow wrinkled in concern as she stepped closer, peering down into his eyes. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Nothing a few hours of sleep won’t help.”

“Speakin’ of which,” Micah cut through. “If you two don’t mind, I’d like to get home and wash the stink of demon guts off me.”

Jack stood, gripping the edge of the table as a wave of dizziness washed over him. Micah being stronger, it took more to sap his strength than one burst of inner light. Jack could curl up in a ball right there on the ground and sleep the rest of the night away.

“Sounds like a plan. It’s not a long walk from here,” he added, turning to Addison.

She nodded and fell in step with them, glancing back over her shoulder at the scene of their little fight in a bout of paranoia. She probably half expected another wave of demons to come crawling out of the shadows. The blood was disintegrating, vanishing in puffs of curling black smoke. Jack breathed a sigh of relief as the stench dissipated, though the dark stains remained in his clothes.

Silence dominated the walk home. He watched her from the corner of his eye. She was holding up well considering all she’d heard and seen during the last couple of days. He’d had other people cry, scream, and object in stubborn disbelief when faced with the truth of the world

that existed right under their noses. He wondered what had happened to this woman in her life that caused her to adapt to unforeseen circumstances with such ease.

When they arrived at their place, Micah preceded them up the back stairway and straight to the door leading through their kitchen and into the apartment. With Addison there, turning in circles to observe her surroundings, Jack became very aware of how messy the place was. Her sparse, yet clean, apartment seemed like a palace compared to their little nook above the diner.

His face heated as he took in the rows of empty mason jars on the kitchen counter, dirty clothes piled up around the washer and dryer in the corner of the kitchen, and the random junk strewn around the living room.

"I call first shower," Micah declared, making a beeline for the bathroom. A few seconds later, the sound of his off-key warbling drifted out to them, mingling with the cadence of water hitting the bottom of the tub.

Jack cleared his throat when he realized he and Addison had been standing in the living room, staring at each other for a full minute without speaking.

"I'll sleep on the couch tonight," he told her. "You can have my room."

Compared to the rest of the house, his room passed for somewhat clean. Clearing the bed of a few books, he stripped the sheets from the mattress. After replacing them with a set of clean ones he kept in his closet, he stepped aside and gestured toward the small, twin bed.

"It's not much, but the mattress is comfortable and with the hallway separating you, you won't even be able to hear Micah's snores."

Addison giggled at that, coming toward the bed and plopping down on it. Her bag slid from her shoulder and landed on the floor with a soft thud. "He doesn't like me, does he?"

Jack leaned against the dresser, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's nothing personal." Micah would kill him for revealing too much about his sister, and it wasn't his place to tell. Aside from that, he also had no desire to talk about Tracy. To anyone. Ever.

"Sure does feel personal," she scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Reaching up, she pulled the rubber band loose and allowed her curtain of fiery red locks to cascade around her shoulders. The dim light of the lamp caused the strands to catch fire and for a moment, he was hypnotized by the shades of amber highlights dancing in the glow.

"What, does he hate strippers or something?" She glanced up at him, her gaze locking with his.

Jack lowered his eyes, realizing she'd caught him staring. Embarrassment flooded him. "Micah loves strippers," he remarked with a dry snort. "Maybe one day, he'll tell you about the one he used to date."

"And what do *you* think about strippers, Jack?" She arched one titian eyebrow at him.

He shrugged. "I think people do what they have to do to make a living. I just saw a few seconds of your performance but, uh ..." he cleared his throat again and jerked at his collar. "You, um, seem like a ... talented dancer."

She laughed. A deep, throaty sound, almost like a purr. "I've gotten a lot of interesting feedback about my performances, Jack, but I have to do say most guys don't tell me what a good dancer I am."

"Well, I turned away before you started taking your clothes off, so there isn't much to go off of here."

She cocked her head at him, eyes narrowing on him in curiosity. "You looked away?"

"I didn't go to Temptations tonight to drool over you. I came to recruit you for an important cause. Didn't seem appropriate to watch."

Her gaze held his and she regarded him for a moment without speaking. You are a surprising person, Jack,” she said with a shake of her head, her voice low.

He didn’t know what to say. The truth was, now that he’d seen her wearing next to nothing, he found himself wondering why he hadn’t watched. She had a beautiful figure; all lithe curves and legs that went on for days. Reminding himself of the last time he’d mixed his duty with pleasure, he shook his head and broke her stare. As attractive as Addison was, he couldn’t let her distract him from what needed to be done. Most of all, he didn’t need the complications she presented. A normal life could never be possible as long as he had a Naphil hanging around. Better to finish the mission and part ways as soon as possible ... better for everyone involved.

The bathroom door opened, the sound of Micah’s heavy footsteps crossing the hall to his room before the door slammed.

“Bathroom’s free,” he said. “If you want, you can have it next.”

“No. You’re the one that got covered in demon blood. I’m happy to wait.”

Nodding, he turned and opened a drawer to retrieve pajama bottoms and a t-shirt. He turned to find Micah standing in the doorway, barrel-wide chest bare, a pair of sweatpants hanging low on his hips. Damp hair clung to his forehead and neck as he came into the room, extending a small bundle to Addison silently.

Standing, she gave him a wary glance as she reached out to accept it. “What’s this?”

“Figured you’d need ’em,” Micah answered in a gruff tone, “since we took you before you could gather clothes and all.”

She gave him a tentative smile as she unfolded the bundle to reveal a woman’s t-shirt and gym shorts. “Thank you, Micah. That’s very sweet.”

Micah responded with a low grunt as he turned his back on them and lumbered down the hall. In the kitchen, Jack could hear him go to the refrigerator—likely to retrieve one of his many mason jars.

“See, he does like you,” he teased as he gathered his own clothes and turned to leave.

*He just doesn’t want to.*

Neither did Jack, if he was being honest with himself. But then, it was far too late for that.

## Chapter 8: Beignets and Broken Dreams

Addison woke up the next morning to the sound of pots and pans banging together and the low hum of masculine voices. It was so jarringly different from waking up in her quiet apartment that it took her a moment to realize where she was.

As she lay in that groggy state of awareness between wakefulness and sleep, the events of last night came rushing back to her in a blur. In the midst of the haze, Jack and Micah stood out in clear relief. Partners, they'd called themselves, but two more opposite men couldn't exist in the world. Yet, she had watched them fight together like old battlefield buddies and interact like brothers. She'd never experienced that kind of camaraderie with anyone, and she envied that.

After a while, she recognized their voices as the ones filtering beneath the door. As she drifted to full wakefulness, she also registered the aroma of something delicious being cooked. Her stomach responded with a loud rumble—she hadn't eaten anything since before her shift the previous night. Hunger seemed to fade when your life was being turned upside down by two supernatural beings who risked their lives to help you escape from a horde of demons.

Remembering the attack left a sour taste in her mouth. While the two Guardians had fought to protect her, she'd cowered under a table. Though, maybe cowering wasn't the right word for it. During her time there, she had watched the scene before her with interest, her mind filling with images of a different outcome. All it had taken was a split second in which she'd let her guard down, and her thoughts became overwhelmed by dark imaginings. The thought of wreaking a little havoc of her own on the little demonlings had brought her a satisfaction she'd never known. Her fingers had itched with power held in check, just waiting to surge and take them all out in a tidal wave of mayhem. The thought of all that black blood drenching her hadn't been repugnant; it had been ... seductive ... irresistible.

She'd done what she always did when faced with dark thoughts—closed her eyes and fought them down until they retreated back into the dark abyss of her soul. Now that she knew the truth of where she came from, she understood it all so much more. She was half demon. It must be in her nature; there could be no other explanation for it.

She turned onto her back and stared up at the ceiling.

*Why me? Why would you want someone with the thoughts of some kind of deranged serial killer?*

As always, God remained silent. If it weren't for the fact that she'd met a real, live angel, she would have continued in her belief that He didn't exist. Now, she supposed He did exist, yet had no interest in communicating with her, or giving her any indication that He cared at all.

"He chose me," she whispered out loud.

*You will fail ... just as you've always failed. You're nothing ... no one.*

Ironically, the voice of doubt that clouded her thoughts was that of her stepfather. The cadence of his voice drumming against her skull brought back memories better left in the past. With a sharp gasp, Addison squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out images of calloused fingers reaching for her, the feel of them on her skin. The smell of cigarette smoke and liquor-laced breath in her face. Shaking her head, she forced herself to focus on the enticing scent floating into her room, the sound of the mingled voices bringing her back into reality and out of the past.

Leaping from the bed, she bolted for the door, glad for once she wasn't all alone. Something about last night's demon attack had awakened something in her. The memories she'd tried to block out were forcing themselves to the forefront of her mind, her dark desires never far from her thoughts.

Twisting the hem of the tank top Micah had lent her, she made her way through the apartment and toward the kitchen. The windows in the living room and kitchen had been thrown open, and the sounds of the Big Easy filled the small space. In the distance, the resonances of a French horn flitted on the air, the rousing melody of 'When the Saints Go Marching In' bringing a smile to her face. She now recognized the sweet smell that mingled with the strong aroma of coffee ... beignets. She neared the tiny kitchen just in time to see Micah dusting powdered sugar over the fresh-fried pastries.

"Good morning."

She jumped at the sound of Jack's voice, even though she'd known he must be in the kitchen. What about him made her feel so on edge? Her breath caught as she turned to find him standing on the other side of the room, pouring coffee into one of three chipped ceramic mugs.

"Good morning," she answered, hoping she didn't sound as shaken as she felt. As it was, her heart had just leapt up into her throat.

"Coffee?" he offered, sliding one of the mugs toward her. She accepted it with a smile. "Micah made beignets from scratch."

Addison lifted her mug and took a sip. Strong and black, just the way she preferred it. "Wow, I haven't had homemade beignets since before I left home."

"*Mais*, even a demon has to eat, I s'pose," Micah muttered as he slid the plate piled high with powdery beignets across the counter toward them.

"Micah," Jack hissed, his tone laced with a warning.

She ignored Micah and accepted a paper plate from Jack before taking three of the beignets. After a bite, she gave a happy sigh and licked the powdered sugar from her lips with an exaggerated motion. "Mmmm, not bad for a big, dumb redneck."

Micah glared at her and stormed from the kitchen, muttering under his breath in Cajun French. She didn't catch it all, but she did hear the familiar phrase '*bonne a rien*', which just got her hackles up more.

"How can I be good for nothing if I'm God's chosen one, Micah?" she spat, sneering at the back of his head. "I may not be fluent, by my Nana spoke French ... I get the gist of things."

Micah paused and turned, coffee cup in hand. "My *mamere* always said the Lord works in mysterious ways ... whatever His reasons are, I sure don't understand 'em."

Turning away again, he trampled back toward his room, causing the floorboards to quake with every step. Addison's smile faded as she turned to find Jack watching them with a scowl on his face.

"Sorry," she mumbled, lowering her eyes back to her coffee. "The beignets really are good, but he's starting to get on my nerves."

Leaning against the counter, she went back to the pastries. Just because Micah was a jackass didn't mean she couldn't enjoy them.

"Look, I know he's been hard on you, but Micah ... well, he's complicated."

She regarded him as she chewed, lost in thought. "I can tell you guys are close."

He nodded before sliding a few of the beignets onto his own plate. "We are. Like brothers. We've been fighting together for seven years.

"Yet, he's a Southern Cajun, and it's obvious you're a Yankee."

Jack laughed. "Is it that obvious?"

She nodded. "It is to anyone with ears. You're from New York."

He nodded, eyebrows raised. "You're right; I am. Brooklyn, to be precise. You have a good ear."

"How did that happen, then? You guys are so different."

"When Michael calls upon the best of the best, you answer no matter where you're from."

"Michael?" she asked, recalling the little she knew about the Bible. "As in ...?"

"The archangel," he confirmed. "The very one. He is at the head of our order, he and the other angels of war. When we had that first meeting at the Lady of Our Immaculate Heart church, Micah sat right next to me. Michael told us how hard this mission would be, and gave us all a chance to back out beforehand. Said he wouldn't hold it against us if we decided we couldn't do it. I was only eighteen—Micah a few months older—and we were both cocky as hell. Slaying demons was all we wanted to do, so it sounded like fun. Dangerous fun, but still."

"Do you regret it?"

He lowered his liquid gray eyes to his plate. She couldn't see them, but his avoidance said more than his words ever could. She could see it before, and it became even more prominent now in the stark light of day.

Jackson Bennett, Jr. had grown tired and jaded.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "Forget I asked."

"No," he insisted, running a hand over his hair. "It's okay. I just ... no one wants to admit that they're tired of doing the right thing. You know? That's like a doctor saying he's tired of saving lives. Who does that?"

"No doctor has to risk his life and sacrifice everything to operate on a patient," she pointed out. "You're no different than young men who risk their lives to go to war. They might go with dreams of glory and honor, but they don't always return that way. You're fighting in a war, too, Jack. A war that won't be over until Armageddon, if I'm understanding things correctly. Even if we get Solomon's seal, and close the ten portals, this fight doesn't stop there, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," he agreed with a snort and a shake of his head. "I will fight against demons for the souls of mankind until the day I die, if the end of the world doesn't happen first. If I ever have a son, he'll in all likelihood do the same. It's our calling, and it's also our curse."

"I don't know too many people who think of callings and curses in the same way."

"Give it time," he countered. "You can always see the curse in a calling."

She set her now empty coffee cup in the sink and trashed her paper plate. "Speaking of fathers, by the way ... do you happen to know anything about mine?"

Jack's lips tightened a bit at the corners and he watched her, seeming unsure of what to say next. "Are you sure you want to go down that road?"

"Color me curious." She gave a nonchalant shrug. "Look, not a lot gets to me, okay? I've had a crappy life so I've come to expect that crappy things will happen to me. Like, for example, finding out that my birth father is a demon. I doubt knowing which demon it is going to give me a case of the vapors."

He nodded. "I can tell you're a tough girl, but it's just that your father isn't any ordinary demon. He's one of the biggest, baddest demons around."

"Isn't that just typical," she snorted. "What's his name?"

“Eligos.” Jack shivered as the name fell from his mouth, and a tremor slid down her spine like an icy drop of water. “Also known as the Great Duke of Hell. He specializes in malice, malcontent, warmongering, and feeding on the darkness within a person. If there is any darkness to be found inside someone, he latches onto it and exploits it.”

Addison wrapped her arms around herself, despite the heat that had her sweating minutes before. “What does he look like?” she asked, her curiosity now in overdrive, despite the fact that the mere mention of his name had her shaking.

“Ugly as sin, no pun intended. Like a mummified human skeleton with strips of flesh still hanging around here and there. Empty eye sockets, flames burning in the depths. Kind of like Ghost rider, but way less cool.”

She scowled at that. “There’s no way,” she protested. “My mother might be a drug addict with poor taste in men, but even she wouldn’t sleep with a guy who looks like that. Maybe there’s been some kind of mistake.”

“No mistake. All demons and angels can take on a human form at will. It would have been easy for him to get to her. Demons are hideous in their true forms, but they know how to make themselves, and their vices, attractive. Your mother wouldn’t have stood a chance, especially if she didn’t know he was a demon.”

Remembering her mother’s strange behavior whenever the subject of her father was mentioned, she shook her head. “Maybe not,” she mused out loud. “But she knew something. I need to talk to her.”

“There’s no time. Reniel will be here soon to meet with us about the next part of our mission, which will be getting you to the ring. In the meantime, Eligos and the others are sure to know that you’ve been chosen to wield the seal. Which means last night was just a preview of all you’re in for. They’ll be coming for you, which is why I can’t let you out of my sight for a second.”

“I know you have a job to do, but I just found out my entire life is a lie. You may not think so, but I believe I’m entitled to the whole truth. You know a lot, but there are things I need to understand that only my mama can tell me.”

Jack breathed a heavy sigh, his jaw ticking in annoyance. “Of course I agree that you’re entitled to the truth, but there isn’t time. Can’t it wait until after?”

“After I’ve risked my life for the human race and maybe even died for a cause I knew nothing about a few days ago? Yeah, I don’t think so. I’m going, Jack, whether you come along or not.”

Without giving him a chance to answer, or to try and stop her, she turned on her heels and marched back toward his bedroom.

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Jack tried not to watch the sway of Addison’s hips as she walked, but it was damned hard. For one thing, her shorts were way too short. Not that it was her fault. After all, they didn’t exactly belong to her. The cutoffs with frayed edges had once belonged to Tracy. Micah hadn’t kept everything, but a few stray items still lay around here and there; the shorts and boots Addison wore among them. Tracy had been petite, and at least two sizes smaller than Addison. With her long legs and curvy hips calling attention to the uneven hemline, Jack found his eyes straying down to her swaying backside more than once as they marched up the narrow, dirt lane leading to Addison’s childhood home.

It wasn't just the shorts, but the way she walked, as if the entire world were a runway. She had presence and a strut that made her look at home on the dusty path wearing cutoff shorts and someone else's cowboy boots. Far too busty to wear the shirt Micah had given her, she'd borrowed one of Jackson's, knotting it at the bottom against her hip for a better fit. The smooth patch of skin showing between the knotted t-shirt and the waistband of her shorts taunted him, until all he could think about was grabbing her by the waist and pulling her up against him, allowing his thumb to trace that bare skin in slow circles.

It had been far too long since he'd gotten laid. It had to be the explanation for why he was so distracted when they had far more important things to worry about. Shaking his head, he forced himself to focus on their surroundings instead of Addison's curvaceous thighs.

The trailer's faded siding looked weathered and worn, the wooden steps leading up to its front door splintered and littered with cigarette ash. A cat lay in the shadows beneath the stairs, its yellow eyes glittering and its black tail twitching. A clay pot sat near the front door, the dead stems of a plant withering and hanging over its edges. More cigarette butts protruded from the ash-covered soil. Floral curtains covered the windows and could be seen through the broken slats of the mini-blinds behind them.

"Are you sure there's anyone here?" he asked, glancing back over his shoulder to where Micah stood leaning against his pick-up. There wasn't another car parked in the makeshift driveway—no more than a slab of concrete on the side of the house—and not a sound came from inside the trailer.

"Only one way to find out," she declared, balling her hand into a fist and pounding on the door.

It rattled in the frame as he tried to peer through the gaps in the blinds, hoping to determine if there was anyone at home. He understood her need for more information, but being out in the open like this made him edgy. Demons had no qualms about attacking in broad daylight, and Addison had now become their number one target.

When no one answered, she knocked again, this time rising up on tiptoe to peer through the small circular window built into the door. After another moment, she tried the doorknob and found it unlocked.

"Wait," he whispered, taking her elbow in a gentle but firm grasp. "Let me go in first."

The house felt too quiet, too still. Motioning for Micah to join them, he brushed past Addison and through the open door. The closed curtains left the living room and kitchen area of the trailer in shadowed darkness. He made out the shapes of furniture in the room and reached out for a lamp. The bulb flickered on, casting its meager light on a gut-churning scene. The place was in shambles, the furniture falling apart, the cushions burnt in several places by cigarettes. Speaking of which, the room reeked of stale Marlboros and cat urine. A few of the animals lounged about on surfaces; a third licked at a molding dinner plate left on the coffee table.

The living area and kitchen were a mess, littered with stray magazines, empty glasses, and dirty plates. Piles of clothing that he could only assume were dirty lay strewn on the floor, the kitchen counters piled high with even more filthy dishes. A trashcan in the corner of the room overflowed, and four ashtrays brimmed with ashes and butts. He wrinkled his nose, coming farther into the room, keeping alert for any sign of trouble.

"There's no way anyone lives here," Micah declared, following him into the room. "This place hasn't been cleaned in God knows how long."

“Oh, yes, there is,” Addison protested from the doorway. “This is how it’s always been. The litterbox is clean.” She pointed at the tray. “My mother might not take very good care of herself, but she always looks after the cats. She’s here.”

Jack held a hand up to keep her from advancing farther into the trailer. “Let us check the bedrooms first.”

She rolled her eyes but stayed put while he and Micah waded through the trashed living room toward the open door hanging open just off the kitchen. A low whimper met his ears before he reached the threshold, and he darted inside, his every nerve ending on high alert. The room appeared empty at first—just a cluttered mess, with old, dilapidated furniture and one very hideous, floral-printed bedspread.

“Did you hear that?” he asked as Micah came up behind him.

“Prob’ly just another cat,” his friend drawled. “Checked the room next door and the bathroom. All clear.”

He inclined his head and listened close. “No, it wasn’t a cat,” he insisted. “It sounded like a person.”

“You’re paranoid, *podna*. There ain’t nobody...”

Micah trailed off as the tacky bedspread moved and shifted, and a pile of even more clothes fell aside to reveal a writhing form on the bed.

Exchanging a glance with Micah, Jack crossed the room in three long strides and swept the comforter aside, revealing a woman that had to be Addison’s mother. She was rail thin, with leathery skin made buttery brown by the sun, and hair a more natural shade of red than her daughter’s, a disheveled bird’s nest around her head and face. Her hollowed cheeks caused her cheekbones to jut out beneath her eyes, too prominent and sharp. She wore a tatty bra and panties and not much else; while Jack knew he should look away, he couldn’t help but notice how her collarbones protruded through her skin, or how prominent her ribs were. Her eyes should have been the same warm hazel as Addison’s, but an unfocused glassiness had stolen their luster. Her mouth hung open, but he couldn’t hear her breath.

“Micah, I think she’s sick,” he said, pressing his fingers to where her throat met her jawline. Her pulse galloped against his fingertips. “We should call an ambulance.”

“She’s not sick,” Addison said from the bedroom doorway.

He straightened and whirled, trying to block the sight of the woman from her view. No one should have to see their mother this way.

But Addison just leaned against the doorframe, crossing her arms over her chest and giving the figure on the bed a narrowed glare. “She’s high.”

Frowning, he turned back to take a closer look at the woman on the bed. Sure enough, he recognized the evidence of drug use. The track marks running up and down her arms ... the scabs between her fingers and toes ... the needle still clutched in one hand.

“Shouldn’t we do something?” he asked, placing one knee on the bed to lean over her. He waved one hand in front of her face, but she remained unresponsive.

“You do whatever you want,” Addison replied flippantly. “I’m going into the living room to wait for her to snap out of it. I’m not leaving here without answers.”

Her footsteps vibrated across the thin floor as she left the room. Jack covered Addison’s mother’s body with the comforter once more.

When he returned to the living room, she just stood there in the midst of the filth, staring off into the distance. A toilet flush sounded down the hall, and Micah appeared once more, navigating the narrow doorway sideways to allow his broad shoulders room to get through.

“I gotta get out of here,” he mumbled to Jack, already headed for the door. “I’ll be back with food. Looks like we’ll be awhile waitin’.”

“All right, man,” he answered to Micah’s retreating back. Once his partner had left, he sidled up beside Addison. She refused to look at him as he stood beside her staring at her profile. They looked alike—Addison and her mother—though the woman in the other room had been reduced to a shadow of a person. Still, Addison hadn’t seemed surprised to find her in that state.

“He sure left in a hurry,” she said after a while.

Jack shoved his hands down into his pockets. “Micah doesn’t deal well with this kind of stuff ... other people’s problems.”

She snorted. “You sure are cryptic. Someday, you’re going to have to explain all that to me. I mean, I’m guessing there used to be three of you ... it’s the only way to explain the girl clothes at your place. Did he love her?”

He met her gaze and answered with honesty. “More than anyone else in the world. We don’t have to stay here, Addison. We can come back later when she’s ... better.”

“She’ll never be better,” she replied with a shake of her head. “It’s best to catch her right after she comes down off a high, or we’ll never find her sober. You don’t have to stay if you don’t want. I can take care of myself.”

She sauntered into the kitchen, approached the sink, and turned it on. Locating a bottle of dish soap—miraculously hidden behind a stack of plates—she started piling the dirty dishes on the counter and making room in the sink.

He stood there watching her for a moment, his insides churning at the forlorn picture she made. Seeing her, standing in the dilapidated trailer, told him more about her than she’d doubtless ever be willing to say to him out loud. Even in her borrowed clothes and messy ponytail, she was beauty in the midst of all the muck. An iris growing from a crack in the asphalt. Remarkable.

He joined her at the sink, taking a soapy plate from her and rinsing it. She turned toward him, her eyes sharp and questioning though she remained silent.

“Something tells me you’ve been taking care of yourself for a very long time,” he said. “You don’t have to do it alone this time, Addison. That’s why I’m here. Let me help you.”

She seemed to not know how to respond to that. Her gaze questioned and probed, also a bit awed, as if no one had ever offered to be there for her before.

He broke eye contact, going back to helping her rinse the clean dishes. Then, she returned to her washing. They worked that way together for the rest of the afternoon, the clinking of dishes and the sound of the broom over the floor the only breaks in the silence.

## Chapter 9: Who We Were

They'd scrubbed every inch of the trailer by the time Micah returned with pizzas.

His eyes widened as he faltered in the doorway. "Am I in the right place?"

His speech sounded slurred, and Addison could tell by the unfocused look in his eyes that he'd been drinking.

"We busted our asses cleaning while you were off getting drunk," she accused from where she sat on the couch. She and Jackson had just settled in the living room with *I Love Lucy* re-runs when Micah came stumbling in.

He gave a lazy shrug and set the three pizza boxes he'd been holding on the card table in the kitchen. Settling onto one of the folding chairs pushed up to the plastic table, he produced a six-pack of beer and popped one open.

"Doesn't look like I missed much."

She curled one hand into a fist and fought the urge to ram it down his throat. The more time she spent in Micah's presence, the harder the impulse became to resist. Jack's hand covered hers in a soothing gesture and when she turned to look at him, calm suffused her.

*How does he do that?*

"Hungry?" he asked.

Standing, he offered her a hand up. She accepted, letting him pull her to her feet. She trailed him to the table and sat across from Micah. With no other chairs, Jack chose to stand, leaning against the counter as he opened one of the pizza boxes and slid a slice onto one of the now clean plates.

She shooed Gabriel, an orange tabby, away as she tried to force herself to eat. Coming back here had stolen her appetite, but she hadn't eaten since that morning and the sun had started to set beyond the windows of the trailer. She'd just taken her first bite of extra cheese and pepperoni when her mother appeared from the bedroom.

Addison swallowed past the fist-sized lump in her throat, the slice slipping from her fingers and plopping down onto her plate. She took her time standing up, her eyes locking with a pair that had once been identical to hers. Over the years, Elizabeth Monroe's eyes had lost their luster ... as had everything else about her. She'd faded, blending into the background of her environment, as dusty and worn as the curtains.

"Addie," she said with a snuffle, pulling a robe closed over her half-dressed body and belting it tight. "When did you get here?"

"My guess is sometime right after you injected yourself with your favorite brand of poison."

Elizabeth lowered her eyes, having the grace to at least look ashamed. "If I had known you were coming, I would have cleaned up a bit ... went to town to get some food."

"The house is clean, Mama," she said, a biting edge to her voice.

Elizabeth glanced around the small space as if seeing it for the first time. "Huh," she mumbled as she came into the kitchenette. "So it is."

She stood on her tiptoes to retrieve a carton of cigarettes from on top of the refrigerator, and slid a new pack free. She eyed Micah and Jack as she opened it and pulled a slim, white cigarette loose. "Who're your friends? The black one's cute. Kind of intense and serious-looking, but still ..."

“Mama!” Addison shot Jack an apologetic look, but she could see he was fighting back a laugh. “That’s Jackson, and he’s a friend of mine. This is Micah and he’s ... well, he’s with Jack.”

“Of course, he is,” Elizabeth snapped, her gaze darting back and forth between her companions. Something about the way she looked at them made Addison uneasy. “They’re partners, right? Guardians always come in pairs.”

Jack wrinkled his eyebrows. “You know about Guardians?”

Elizabeth laughed as she used the gas range to light her cigarette. “Know about ‘em?” She reached up to the collar of her robe with one hand. Pulling it, and the strap of her bra aside, she took a long draw on her cigarette. “I used to be one.”

Smoke curled from her nostrils as she met their shocked stares with a knowing one of her own. Just above her left breast, etched against her leathery skin in a smooth, black scar, was the symbol of the Guardians.

The sound of her heart pounding filled her ears as her mind raced.

*I used to be one.*

Her mother’s declaration echoed in her head like a clanging bell, causing that familiar rush of emotion to overcome her. It was all too convoluted to sort, but she registered the distinct sting of betrayal in the midst of it all. Her mother had *known*. All this time, Addison had been going through life feeling like a freak, and Elizabeth had known about everything. She’d had answers and hid them, allowing Addison to go on thinking that something was very wrong with her.

“What do you mean, ‘used to be’?” Jack demanded, saving Addison from having to speak. As it was, she could do nothing except stare at her mother in disbelief.

Elizabeth righted her clothes and leaned against the refrigerator, arms crossed as she took another drag on her cigarette. “Aren’t you cute? You must be new, honey.”

“I took my mark at fourteen,” he answered, his tone defensive. “And I’ve been working with Micah for the last seven years. You still haven’t answered my question. Guardians are born, and then choose to wear the mantle. As far as I know, there is no getting out of it. You are a Guardian until the day you die.”

“Unless you create a Naphil child with a demon,” Micah added from where he still sat at the table, beer in hand. “Ain’t that right, Liz?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I can see you’re not the smart one on this team.” She flipped her tangled hair over one shoulder. “If that was all it took, I wouldn’t be the only Guardian stripped of their powers.”

“Wait.” Jack frowned. “You were stripped of your power?”

She nodded. “So fast it made my head spin, but not for the reason you might think.” Seeming to remember that her daughter was in the room, she turned to Addison. “Since you’re with these two, I assume you know.”

Addison finally found her voice. “You mean about my demon father? Yeah, I’ve heard. When I first found out, I felt sorry for you. I figured you’d been tricked by a demon in human form who’d turned your head. But coming here tonight and seeing that mark on your chest ... you’re a freaking *Guardian*, which means you knew about all this. Maybe you didn’t know what he was at first, but at some point, you had to have figured it out. You’ve known what I was all this time and you never told me!”

“Guess you don’t feel so sorry for me anymore,” her mother mumbled, putting her cigarette out in a nearby ashtray. “Can’t say I blame you, either. I thought I was doing what was best for you, but in the end, I just screwed you up more.”

Addison gestured toward the living room. “The truth, now,” she demanded, trying with everything inside of her not to lose it and start screaming and throwing things. Anger’s bitter bile rose up in the back of her throat, but she would not let the emotion overcome her. “No more lies.”

Elizabeth swept past her, heading toward the small living area and the worn recliner she always fell asleep in while watching T.V. Addison followed, plopping down onto the couch. Jack sat down beside her, his hand covering hers in gentle reassurance. She took a deep breath and squeezed his fingers, drawing on him for strength. It didn’t matter that she barely knew him; somehow, Jack’s quiet strength had struck a chord with her.

“I took my mark when I was eighteen,” Elizabeth began, fishing her cigarette pack from the pocket of her robe and firing up another with a lighter she found on the side table. Rocking back and forth in her recliner, she spoke through the bluish-gray haze of smoke surrounding her. “My mama was one, and her mama before her. The Monroe women have served as Guardians for as far back as anybody can trace. That’s how it works, the Guardian gene. It always goes from father to son, or mother to daughter. I tell you, I was proud—dang proud—to take that mark. My partner, Andre, and I were part of a group of Guardians responsible for keeping the witches and sorcerers in New Orleans in check. Sometimes, they get a little out of hand with their rituals and forget about the rules. That’s when we’d step in and remind them. If they didn’t submit, we’d dispatch their asses.”

Addison frowned. “Wait, I thought only demons could be dispatched to Hell.”

“Anyone who is possessed by a demon can also be dispatched,” Jack told her. “Witches and sorcerers sell their souls for their power, which places the mark of whichever demon they sell to on them. They can be dispatched by our weapons the same way a demon can. No one wants that, though ... being dispatched sends them to Hell way faster than they’d like. Doesn’t matter, though; that fate can’t be avoided forever.”

Elizabeth nodded in agreement. “You bet your ass it can’t. Anyway, I was living in the Easy then, in a little apartment off the French quarter. It was fun for us, you know? We never took it seriously, at least not at first. Anyway, I was out walking one day and almost got run down by one of those mule-drawn carriages the tourists take. This tall, dark Creole snatched me out of the way just in time and I was smitten like a schoolgirl. Oh, he was real slick. Smooth and charming as they come. For someone who was supposed to have an instinct about things in the spirit world, I completely missed the signs. He had me wrapped around his finger in no time.”

“Did he compel you against your will?” Jack asked, his dark brow creased.

Was that pity?

She snorted in response. “I’m sure it would ease your mind to think it did, but sorry to say that wasn’t the case. I gave it up easier than a drunk sorority girl, and I was more than willing. Fancied myself in love with him ... what an idiot. The morning after, I woke up to find Elle sitting on the edge of my bed. It wasn’t usual for an angel to concern themselves with my love life, so I knew I’d messed up.”

“They wouldn’t have punished you for making a mistake,” Jack reasoned, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees.

“No, and they didn’t. Elle told me the truth—that the man I thought I was head over heels for was a demon. Not just any demon, either, but the goddamn Great Duke of Hell. She told me I

would have a child, a Naphil, and protecting her would become my new guardianship. Elle said he would try to come for her someday and that I needed to be ready. Well, me being so young and dumb and all ... I decided that I couldn't do it. I couldn't raise a child I'd made with a demon, let alone protect it for the rest of my life. Other Guardians got the hard jobs, but that wasn't what I'd signed on for. I wanted to abort, but Elle told me that I couldn't. She told me you were important, that from the moment of your conception, a plan had been made for your life. Well, you can't exactly argue with an angel."

Addison toyed with the frayed edges of the borrowed shorts she wore. "I always knew you never wanted me," she whispered.

"It was hard to feel any maternal instinct, I'll admit that," Elizabeth replied. "You have to understand, your father just wouldn't let matters lie. He tormented me from the moment I discovered I was pregnant until the day you were born."

"Torment? How?" Jack asked.

"Visions, whisperings, temptation. You name it. Addison created a thread between us, if you want to think of it that way. He used it to torture me day in and day out. His voice was always in my mind, telling me how Addison would be his someday, and sit at his right hand in Hell. He told me that I was nothing ... just a vessel he'd used to create his own personal army of Naphils. I was just one of many. Well, a person can only take so much before they crack. I wanted nothing more than his voice out of my head. I wanted to drown the pain."

"Nana always told me that I wasn't even a full four pounds when I was born," Addison said, realization dawning. "You were pregnant when you started drugs."

Elizabeth shrugged matter-of-factly, as if they were talking about Algebra, instead of the lives of two people. "I'm not proud of it, but that's a fact. I won't lie; I kind of thought it might kill you ... a demon's child, an abomination. If you died, then there was nothing to worry about. He wouldn't have any hold on me anymore. But you were a fighter, even then. The doctors were baffled at how, but you flourished from birth and you beat the odds. Once you were well enough to leave the hospital, there was nothing left to do but bring you home. When I got there, Elle was waiting for me." Her voice hitched a bit, and emotion crept in at last. A lone tear glimmered in one eye, but she blinked it away. "She said I was being stripped of my power because I'd tried to kill you before you were born ... even though she'd told me explicitly that God had chosen you for some special purpose. I'd angered Him, she told me, and this was my punishment."

"Yet, they still left Addison in your care," Jack said, his voice laced with disbelief. "It doesn't make sense."

"Who are you telling?" Elizabeth quipped with a dry laugh. "While I lay on the floor screaming in agony as Elle snatched my power from me, I comforted myself with the knowledge that they couldn't mean to leave Addie with me now. I was powerless to protect her and strung out on drugs. Yet, when it was over, Elle just vanished. No word on what I was supposed to do with the baby. No further instructions. No promise to return. No one ever even sent a Guardian to protect Addie, which was odd. Naphil children are always protected by Guardians, even if it is from a distance. So far as I know, we were on our own from that day, and for the life of me, I was never able to figure out why."

Addison ran a hand over her face with a sigh. It was all a lot to take in at once, and her head reeled, leaving her dizzy, like she might collapse onto the floor, buried under the weight of it all.

“I’ve always known God didn’t give a damn about me,” she seethed. “And why should he? My father is a demon, and my mother is a junkie ex-Guardian who turned her back on everything she was supposed to stand for out of selfishness.”

Jack reached for her hand again, but she snatched it away and stood. He stood, as well, facing her.

“That’s not true. Didn’t you hear what she said? From the beginning, He chose you. He knew what was going to happen, and that you were going to be the one to bring a stop to it. You matter, Addie ... you have always mattered.”

She laughed, the sound sadistic and rough to her own ears. “Yeah, I was so important that he forgot to assign a set of guards to me. I spent my childhood getting yelled at by my strung-out mom and being abused by—” She clamped her lips closed before she said too much. She refused to put a cherry on top of the sundae that this epic day had become by breaking down in front of Jack over the past.

Jack frowned, but didn’t ask. Maybe he understood the look on her face and realized she wouldn’t have told him if he’d asked, anyway. Elizabeth stood from her chair, dropping her cigarette into the ashtray at her side.

“I was a terrible Guardian, and an even worse mother. I know that. You don’t owe me a damn thing, Addie, and you have every right to hate me. But whatever this calling is, whatever you’ve been asked to do, you can’t say no.”

“I’ve been told I have a choice,” she argued. “That free will was a gift even demon kids get. I don’t *have* to do anything.”

“You’re right; you don’t. But if you refuse, you’re only giving him what he needs to come after you. For real, this time.”

Addison edged closer to her, searching her mother’s face for some hint at what she didn’t say. “What do you mean, ‘for real’? When has he ever tried to come for me?”

“Not in the flesh,” Elizabeth answered. “That thread that existed between us was because of you, Addie, because you were his seed. When you were born, he stopped tormenting me, and it didn’t take me long to figure out why.”

Addison’s stomach twisted and she thought she was going to be violently sick. “Because he was too busy torturing *me*. I was the thread and once I was born, you were free.”

“Exactly,” her mother confirmed. “You were always such a serious and gloomy kid ... always staring off into space. When you turned two years old, you would throw these epic tantrums. I’m talking beyond anything I’ve ever seen. It wasn’t normal. In time, you evened out, so I figured he got bored. But, Addie, if you refuse this, he will see it as you turning your back on God and he’ll try to tempt you to his side. If you think it’ll be easy to resist, think again. He will latch on to the weakest parts of you and exploit them.”

Addison’s hands balled into fists at her sides as she advanced on Elizabeth. The tears were coming now, and she couldn’t stop them no matter how hard she tried. She thought the rage would choke her; it grew so thick. “You figured he got bored and just moved on? You really are clueless, aren’t you? I didn’t ‘even out,’ Mama; I learned how to control it. I have spent my entire life fighting to keep it hidden, to keep anyone from knowing about the thoughts I have when I’m angry.”

Jack stood beside her again, gripping her arm and pulling her away from Elizabeth. It was a good thing, too, because right now, she was ripping her mother to pieces in her mind, the thoughts far too enticing.

“Wait a minute,” he said, turning Addison to face him. “Are you telling me that Eligos speaks to you? You hear his voice?”

Addison shook her head. “It’s never any one voice. When I get sad or feel alone, I can hear voices telling me that I’m a worthless nothing. Anytime I get angry, the rage is unreal. I feel strong enough to tear a grown man in half, and my vision gets hazy. My mind fills with all kinds of deranged images of death and destruction. All this time, I’ve thought I was crazy, that maybe I suffered from some kind of mental disorder. I was afraid if I told anyone, they’d commit me to the nuthouse without a second thought. Are you telling me that he could be the one causing all of this? He’s the reason I fantasize about torturing and killing people? Or why I get so depressed sometimes I just want to slit my own throat?”

Jack nodded, but his gaze no longer focused on Addison. He stared over her shoulder at Elizabeth.

“You have failed your daughter,” he ground out through clenched teeth. “Whatever she decides concerning her calling is none of your business. You lost the right to advise her about anything a long time ago. Micah, we’re leaving!”

Micah had already jumped to his feet, one box of pizza and the rest of his six-pack in hand. He’d been silent through the entire conversation, but he’d watched the entire exchange with interest.

Addison let Jack lead her to the front door by the arm, too numb to protest or make a sound. They needed to leave; she knew that. Best that they left before she snapped and killed them all. As it was, she felt very aware of everything around her, almost as if she could reach out with some unseen force and crush the trailer until it reduced to the size of a tin can.

But murdering her mother was the last thing Addison wanted to do, if for no other reason than it would mean her father had won.

Micah lumbered down the front steps, his long legs propelling him toward his truck. Its headlights illuminated the dark night as Jack and Addison followed.

“Addie, wait!” Elizabeth cried, her robe fluttering around her thighs as she chased them down the short dirt path to Micah’s waiting truck. “Please.”

She spun to face her mother, and found identical tears coursing down her cheeks. “What do you want? Don’t you think you’ve done enough?”

“No, I haven’t. That’s why I need you to hear me out. Just one last thing and you can turn your back on me forever. I won’t try to contact you again, or be a part of your life. I need you to take this.”

She glanced down as Elizabeth extended a black velvet pouch to her. She hesitated, but then accepted the pouch, surprised by the weight of it. Reaching inside, she came out with a piece of jewelry and what looked like a solid gold brick the size of her forearm, heavy and solid. Her eyes widened as she turned it over in her hands and realized it was real. The jewelry was real, too—a golden medallion on a slim chain. The pendant made up the Guardian symbol—the cross, olive branch, and dove within a gleaming circle.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Those are the tools you need to complete your transition as a Guardian, should you decide to become on.”

“Whoa, wait, what?” Jack fumbled as he glanced from Elizabeth, to the gold, then Addison, and back again. “How is that even possible? Addison is a Naphil.”

Elizabeth lifted her chin a notch. “Not just any Naphil. Why do you think He chose her? She has the best of both worlds in her. Her human side is far from ordinary, and if she chooses to take the mark of the Guardian, she will be endowed with the same inner light you carry.”

“Why would anyone allow me to become a Guardian?” Addison questioned, confused as she studied the objects in her hand. “Didn’t you hear what I just said about my dark thoughts and my sadistic nature? I am not Guardian material.”

Elizabeth’s bony fingers found her face in a tight grasp. Her eyes grew wide as she leaned close, and for a moment, a woman Addison had never known came to the surface. A woman with purpose.

“You listen to me, Addison Monroe. You *are* a Guardian! I don’t give a damn who your father is; I am your mother, and we come from a long line of light bearers. If you take the mark and become a Guardian, it will bring balance. The light will chase Eligos away and you will have peace. Darkness cannot reside where there is light ... you need the light, Addison. It will save you.”

Addison was flabbergasted. “Is that all it took, all this time? Why didn’t you tell me all this before? I could have taken the mark years ago and saved myself so much pain. Why now?”

“You had to be willing,” Elizabeth insisted. “I always believed I could have avoided so much heartache if I’d waited until I was older to take the mark—when I would have been old enough to understand its importance and treat it with the respect it deserved. Maybe then, none of this would have happened. Now that you know the stakes, and the truth, you decide. You can embrace the light, Addison, and do what I never had the courage to do.”

Addison stared down at the medallion in her palm, her thumb tracing the smooth gold. Jack cleared his throat beside her.

“I will have to consult Reniel on this, but it sounds like the truth,” he said. “It makes sense when you think about it. It would be an advantage for you, Addison, whether you decide to help us find the Seal of Solomon or not. It could help you to combat the darkness enough to live a normal life.”

Dropping the items back into the velvet bag, Addison turned to her mother. “Thank you for telling me the truth.”

Elizabeth smiled, showcasing her tar-stained teeth. Addison could remember a time when her mother had been pretty. As a little girl, she’d thought Elizabeth the most beautiful woman in the world, even with the dark circles under her eyes and disheveled hair. Guilt and drugs had withered her away to nothing. Despite her hurt and anger, she found herself pitying the woman again.

“I’m glad you know. I don’t know about you, but I feel so much better now that it’s all out in the open.”

Addison shrugged. “It helps.” She turned to leave, but paused, swiveling back once more. “Mama?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“What was your power?” Curiosity was a strange thing. Even when Addison should have had nothing left to say to her mother, the question just wouldn’t leave her alone. She had to know. She wanted to believe a different woman had existed once ... a woman with a cause and a purpose. “When you were a Guardian, what was your ability?”

Another tear slipped from Elizabeth’s eye and clung to the edge of her chin. Her smile wobbled and her answer came out on a sob.

“I used to fly. Yeah ... that was my gift. I could fly.”

## Chapter 10: Things that Matter

Jack sat on the edge of the couch with his head between his hands. The apartment had gone quiet for the night, but his thoughts were anything but serene. His mind raced with all they'd learned tonight. There was still so much he didn't understand. If Elizabeth had told the truth, then Addison could become a Guardian, too. Who knew what kind of power that would unleash from the depths of her soul? For that matter, he still had no idea what the scope of her abilities encompassed. He had a feeling she didn't quite know herself. She'd been too busy holding her dark thoughts at bay to explore her gifts.

He'd put in a call to Reniel as soon as they'd arrived back home, and he expected the angel first thing in the morning. For now, they could do nothing except try to get a good night's sleep, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't force his mind to shut down. The scenes from Elizabeth's trailer kept replaying themselves over and over again—the look on Addison's face as the truth finally came out; the pain in her eyes as she realized that her mother had really never wanted her; the hope that flared when she encountered the option to become something greater, to become a Guardian.

While Micah had finished off his six-pack and then stumbled into his room where he closed the door and passed out, Jack had been sitting on the couch for hours, just staring off into space. In the beginning, this mission had been all about Eligos for him. Whatever it took to take down the Great Duke and his ten, he would do, without question.

Now, he found himself tangled up in this web of Addison's life. A place he didn't want to be. Since learning about the Guardians and taking up their cause as his own, nothing had been the same for him. With Tracy, he'd thought he'd found something—someone—to anchor him, to remind him beauty and laughter and love could be found in the world. It had given him hope that there could be life beyond this one mission that had consumed his entire adult life.

Now here came Addison, who required protection, but needed so much more. She was an angry, insecure mess, but no matter how much Jack tried to pretend it didn't strike a chord with him, it did. No matter how much he tried to pretend he didn't care about her beyond what she meant to their mission, deep down, he did.

That's why he stood and made his way down the hall to his bedroom. The door was closed, but he could see the glow of the light from the threshold. She must still be awake.

He paused with his hand poised to knock and asked himself what he could be thinking. Nothing mattered except convincing her to go along with the plan, which could have waited until the next morning with Reniel around for backup. That rationale did nothing to sway him from his determination to know that she was all right. He had to know how she was dealing with what had just happened. He'd told her earlier that she didn't have to do it all alone, and he'd meant it.

Snapping out of his wandering thoughts, he knocked.

"Come in," her muffled voice said through the door.

He turned the knob and stepped inside, finding her seated cross-legged on the floor with the bag she'd taken from her apartment upended beside her. Notebooks, pens, and pencils lay scattered around her, one of them open at her feet. She straightened, her hair a cascade of flames around her shoulders, a few strands falling into her eyes.

"Hey," he said, leaning against the doorframe. His voice sounded gruffer than he'd intended, but it matched his mood. "I just wanted to check on you. What happened back there at your mom's house ... well, I know it couldn't have been easy for you."

She unfolded her long legs and stood, causing his breath to catch in his throat. She wore another one of his t-shirts and it just covered her thighs. All that tanned, supple skin bared to his view should have been a sin ... hell, it had to be since all he could think about was finding out what she had on underneath. If anything. He swallowed, his throat gone dry.

"I'm fine." She shrugged, though she didn't quite meet his gaze.

He came into the room, though he kept his hands clasped behind his back to refrain from touching her, the temptation far too great. "I don't believe that."

She scowled at him, hands going to her hips—gesture that showcased her curvy shape beneath the oversized shirt. "What do you want me to do? Fall into a heap on the floor and cry? Scream and yell? Throw things?"

He shrugged. "If it helps. I told you, you don't have to do this alone."

"See, I can't lose control," she argued, beginning to pace, heedless to the notebooks she kicked aside as she moved. "When I lose control, things break, people get hurt ... I'm calm right now because I'm journaling, and that helps keep me grounded. I can pour all of that out onto the pages, and when I'm done, I feel better and think clearer."

"You think journaling will help you now?" His gaze flitted to the open notebook on the floor. On the pristine white pages, her rounded, feminine handwriting stood out in blue ink.

"It helps me think, and I need that right now. Mama gave me a lot to think about, on top of all I learned from you guys and Elle."

He nodded. "It helps you sort through your thoughts. I get that. Would you mind if I asked where your head is at? It's just that Reniel will be here in the morning and he's going to ask. I'd like to know what to tell him."

Her shoulders slumped and she sat down on the bed, her hands clasped tight in her lap. "You know what's funny about all this?" she mused, staring up at him. "I've spent so much time wishing that I mattered to someone, that I was important. I finally get my wish, and I don't know what to do with it. I mean, here I am, just a stripper from the trailer park, and the balance in the spiritual world is relying on me and my decisions. It's ..."

"Overwhelming," he supplied when she trailed off. "Right?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "On top of that, my mom drops this bombshell about me being able to becoming a Guardian. What am I supposed to do with that?"

He joined her on the bed, bracing his hands on the edge of the mattress. "Accept it if you want. Put it aside if you don't."

She shook her head, hiding her face from him as her hair fell forward to shield it. "That's just it. I know that I want it. This is my chance to do something good, to be something other than a stripper and the daughter of a junkie. But, in the back of my mind, I know I'd never be good enough. I mean, not for the Guardian part, anyway. I've already decided I'm going to help you guys find the Seal of Solomon. I'm going to wear it, and use it, and do whatever needs to be done to help send those demons back to Hell where they belong."

He should have been sighing with relief. Her agreement to wield the seal was all he should have cared about. All the same, he couldn't turn his thoughts away from the prospect of a Guardianship for Addison.

"Addison Monroe," he said, studying her profile—or rather, the little bit of it he could see with her hair shadowing her face, "what has life done to you that you're so hard on yourself? Who told you you weren't worthy of anything good?"

A lone tear trailed down to her jaw, hanging on the end before falling off and landing on the back of her hand. She didn't sob; she didn't wail; she didn't so much as hiccup, but the sight of that lone tear broke Jack's heart.

"Everyone," she whispered. She pulled her knees against her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

It was the perfect picture of what Addison's life had been—she comforted herself because she had no one else.

Jack was drawn to her then, sliding across the mattress toward her. It wasn't right, knowing someone had never been held when sad, or comforted when frustrated. He was almost afraid to touch her, not sure what her reaction would be. Yet, he couldn't have stopped himself if he'd tried. His hand reached, and his fingertips encountered her chin, tilting it until she looked at him. She held the rest of her tears back. They formed clear pools, causing her hazel eyes to glitter like brilliant gold.

"I don't believe that," he whispered with a smile, one thumb catching a stray tear as it escaped. "I don't believe that for one moment."

"You don't even know me," she replied, her voice low and raspy with emotion.

"I know enough," he countered, his thumb still stroking her cheek in a slow caress. Her skin felt unbelievably soft. "I know that you've been through a lot and never let it tear you down. I know that a weaker person would have folded under the kind of torment Eligos has put you through. Look at what it did to your mother. She turned to drugs to escape, and it broke her. But you fought and never stopped fighting. I know that you take your clothes off for money, not because you're a bad person ... but because you know it's a means to an end and that no one can objectify you unless you let them. I know that someday, you're going to have a diploma with your name on it to prove that it wasn't all for nothing. I know that you are the kind of person that I have always wanted to be but never felt like I ever measured up. So don't you ever let me hear you say that you are nothing, Addison. You are *someone*. You are important. You matter ... to me."

Her eyes grew wide, as if startled. As if she wanted to jump up and run because she didn't know how to handle what he'd just said. And why should she know how? Jack would be willing to bet that no one had ever told her they loved her. No one had ever made her feel like she was worth anything. That knowledge made him want to be the one to give that to her. So, he did the one thing he could think of to show her with actions what he'd been trying to say with words. He leaned forward, his hand still cupping her face, and kissed her.

It happened fast; a slight brush of his lips over hers, but it caused the surface of his skin to tingle. He paused at the corner of her mouth, his open eyes burning into hers. A silent exchange, and then ... a whisper of a moment in which Addison's breathy sigh skimmed his cheek. With a low whimper, she leaned into him, meeting his parted lips with her own.

Jack's fingers traced the path of her jawline back until he found her neck and gripped the nape. Strands of her hair tangled around his fingers and he clutched them, angling her for better access. Her arms came up around him and one of her hands stroked the back of his neck, her fingernails causing a tremor to roll down his spine.

The kiss felt languid and slow, gentle, with an urgency that boiled just beneath the surface. She tasted sweet to him, a bit minty, and oh so addicting. He deepened the kiss, moving even closer to her on the bed, his free hand finding her waist and pulling her body up against his. She came without hesitation, half on his lap and half on the bed as she melded her chest to his and drank from his mouth. She offered her tongue, and he accepted it, groaning deep in his chest

as the taste of her became so intense that his head began to spin. He held on to her tight, his fingers tangling in her hair and the fabric of her t-shirt. Her hold on his neck loosened and then her hands found his chest, warm and sure as they explored the width of him from shoulder to shoulder. Jack's muscles tensed in response, his blood humming in his veins and shooting straight down to his groin.

"Well, well," Micah drawled from the open doorway.

His voice resonated as loud as a crack of thunder in the quiet of the room, causing them both to flinch and back away from each other. Twin pink spots appeared on Addison's cheeks, Jack's own neck heating in embarrassment and annoyance as he turned to find Micah leaning against the door frame, watching them with amusement in his eyes.

"Am I gonna have to get you two a chaperone?"

Jack took a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. He was usually happy for Micah's company, but just then, he could have done without it. He could have also done without the pointed look his partner directed at him.

"No, but you can close the door and leave," Addison snapped. "We were talking."

Micah gave a lazy shrug and grinned. "Didn't your mama ever teach you not to talk with your mouth full?"

Jack leapt to his feet then, his fists curled as he advanced on Micah. "Okay, that's enough. You're drunk, man. Go back to bed."

Micah pressed one massive hand to Jack's chest and pushed him back with little effort, a subtle reminder of who was the strongest. When Micah got drunk, he turned into a brawler who popped off at the slightest provocation; which was never good for whoever got on his bad side.

"I was just headed to the bathroom," he said, giving Addison a little wink over Jack's shoulder. "Go easy on my *neg, cher*. He tries to play it cool, but he's the sensitive type."

"I'll keep that in mind," Addison said, seething with barely contained annoyance.

"And you," Micah clapped him on the shoulder with a boisterous laugh. "Safety first, *podna*. I don't even know what you'd call a Guardian and Naphil hybrid baby, and I doubt you wanna find out."

Turning, Micah reached out to steady himself against the door as he stumbled back out into the hall. Before long, the door to the bathroom slammed and the house grew quiet once more. Jack made sure to close the door before turning to face Addison. She had stood up, her fingers toying with the hem of her t-shirt as she studied him.

"Sorry about that," he said with a sheepish grin. "When Micah gets drunk—"

"Don't worry about it," she insisted. "Drunk, I understand. Drunk, I can handle. Nice, good-looking guys kissing me and telling me I matter to them ... not so much."

He nodded, running one hand over his hair. "I get it."

Addison stepped closer. "I don't think you do," she said with a slight smirk. "Thank you for that, Jack."

"I don't think a girl has ever thanked me for a kiss," he quipped with a dry laugh.

"I didn't mean for the kiss." She nudged his shoulder as she laughed aloud.

God, her laugh curled his toes.

"I meant, thank you for saying those things. I've never been a needy person, but I think everyone wants to know that they at least matter to one person. Now, I have you, and that feels so good. I've never had that before, so thank you."

He nodded, putting his hands in his pocket, not sure of what else to do with them. "Well, what can I say? I'm as sensitive as Micah claims. Anyway, I'm going to go now and let you get

some sleep. Reniel will be here in the morning, and then we can make arrangements to go after the Seal. Oh, and we should get you some clothes, huh? You can't keep running around in Tracy's things."

Addison frowned. "That would be cool, thanks. Do you think it'll be safe to go back to my apartment so I can grab what I need?"

"Sure. With Reniel around, we'll be much safer. Besides, the demons are sure to know where you are by now, anyway. It's just a matter of time before they show up here."

"Okay, that sounds good. Hey, Jack?"

He'd just turned to leave, but he stopped now and faced her. "Yeah?"

"Are you ever going to tell me about Tracy?"

He sighed, one hand braced on the doorknob. He should have kept his mouth shut. She didn't need to know; it wasn't important. However, if this girl was going to spend an extended amount of time with him and Micah, she would learn the truth, anyway.

"Micah's sister," he confessed. "A Guardian, too. We ... lost her."

Addison came toward him, one hand finding his bicep in a comforting touch. "I'm sorry for your loss."

He tried to shrug it off, but his voice betrayed him when he spoke.

"It's okay," he replied, because it's what you say when someone apologizes for a loss they had nothing to do with.

She shook her head. "I don't think it is. You called her 'Micah's sister,' but you also said 'we' lost her, not 'he'. I think I'm starting to understand this partnership. You cared about her, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Thanks for telling me. And, Jack?"

"Yes, Addison?"

She gave him a brilliant smile, and for a moment, he forgot about everything but her.

"You matter to me, too."

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Addison stumbled bleary-eyed into the kitchen, still trying to shake off the fog of fatigue. Despite getting a full seven hours of sleep, she was exhausted. It must have been the emotional trauma of the night before that had her feeling like she'd just gone ten rounds with Mohammed Ali. The smell of coffee had her mouth watering and was a big help in helping her perk up. Jack slept on the couch, she noticed as she padded past the living room, careful to keep silent. The blanket over him had fallen down to his waist, revealing his naked torso. She paused, coming to full wakefulness as she studied his sleeping form.

She did *not* need to know that he slept without a shirt on. She didn't need that image tormenting her with ideas of what it might feel like to sleep next to him with that naked chest pressed up against her back. She didn't need that at all—not after the kiss they'd shared the night before. Now, on top of having to relive that moment over and over again, she would be tortured with knowing every contour of his chest and abdomen.

Hope. It's what his kiss had given her. Jack didn't know it yet, but kissing her had been an epic mistake. What was he thinking, giving a girl like her hope that there could ever be someone out there who could love her? It was like dangling sweets in front of a kid not allowed to have candy. The more the kid saw it, the more they wanted it, their lips watering for that

elusive, honeyed taste. How long would it take before it got snatched away; before their mission ended, with Jack no longer responsible for her? She'd be alone again, and heartbroken. Not that she thought he'd ever hurt her on purpose; he didn't have it in him. However, while he'd been elusive when speaking of Tracy the night before, Addison could read between the lines. She saw the things he didn't say. He was about the job, and nothing else, because experience had taught him this would be the best way. He'd kissed her last night in a moment of weakness, but in the back of his mind, he would always remember how easy it must be to lose someone in this battle he fought every day. That meant nothing could happen between them past the solitary kiss they'd shared—for both their sakes.

Addison wasn't exactly stable, and she wouldn't deny that. When they defeated Eligos, and Jack was able to move on with semblance of a normal life, it should be with someone other than her. Someone whose life didn't represent a magnet for danger and mayhem. She held no delusions that completing this mission would free her from being targeted by her father and his minions. This was what her life would be, and Jack should have no part in it.

With that in mind, she tore her eyes away from Jack and continued on.

"Didn't you get enough last night?" Micah quipped as she entered the kitchen. He stood at the stove, the muscles in his massive shoulders bunching and rolling as he stirred something in a large pot. Something else sputtered and bubbled in a pan. Whatever he was cooking smelled like heaven.

Addison scowled at the back of his head as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "Nothing happened last night," she snapped. "Not that it's any of your business."

"My *neg*, my business," he shot over his shoulder as he side-stepped to a cabinet and opened it, retrieving four bowls. "Good to know you haven't sunk your claws in him yet."

"What is it that you don't like about me, Micah?" she asked. It was time to get everything out in the open. "Do you think I'm not good enough for your friend because of my job, or because of who my father is?"

Micah shrugged as he spooned steaming, cheesy grits into each bowl. "Nothing personal, *cher*, but you're a demon and I don't trust you."

"I'm not—"

"Yeah, I know," he interrupted, "you're a Naphil, which ain't the same as a demon. Sorry, but in my mind, there ain't no difference, not after what I been through."

"You mean, what your sister went through," she said softly. She didn't know why, but the fact that Micah seemed to hate her bothered her. If they were going to have to work together, she wanted them to at least reach some kind of understanding. "Jack told me she was a Guardian like you, and that she died. I'm sorry, Micah, for whatever happened to her, but I had nothing to do with it."

He paused with a skillet in one hand and ladle in the other. The enticing aroma of spicy Andouille sausage and shrimp sautéed with green peppers and onions filled Addison's nostrils. He speared her with a murderous gaze, his jaw flexing and his nostrils flaring as he took a deep, noisy breath. He lowered his gaze to the bowls and started ladling the sausage and shrimp mixture over the grits.

"I'm only gonna warn you one time, *cher*," he whispered, his voice gruff and low. "Don't ever bring her up again, you hear?"

It seemed she would never get through to Micah, and he'd made it clear she might as well stop trying. "Fine," she said. "I'm sorry, I just thought ... well, whatever's got you so worked up doesn't have anything to do with me. If you need someone to take it out on, then you go right

ahead, Micah. I've been a punching bag my entire life, so you wouldn't be the first. I can take it."

Plopping down at the table, she turned to stare out the window, sipping at her steaming coffee. A few seconds later, Micah's hulking form appeared at her elbow. She glanced up into his hard, green eyes, and guilt she didn't understand filled her. She didn't owe him anything just because some demon—or Naphil—had done something to his sister. It hadn't been her fault. She hadn't even known she was a Naphil until a few days ago. She hadn't done anything to him, yet she still felt sorry for the guy.

He slid one of the full, steaming bowls in front of her. "Eat up, *cher*," he said. "Reniel will be here soon, and somethin' tells me we'll be on the first thing smokin' to wherever the seal is."

"You don't know? He didn't tell you?" she asked as she stirred the contents of her bowl.

Micah shrugged as he dug into his own shrimp and grits. "I don't ask questions; I just do my job."

They ate together in silence for a few minutes before she spoke again. "This is so good," she said, indicating her bowl. "The beignets you made yesterday were good, too. Where'd you learn how to cook?"

"My *mamere*," he said between bites. "Me and ..." he cleared his throat and seemed to rethink his words. "I used to spend summers up the bayou at her house and she taught me everything she knows. That woman makes a mean gumbo."

"The only thing I know how to cook is ramen noodles," she quipped.

Micah cringed. "That stuff'll kill you," he mumbled.

She laughed. "And fried doughnuts and heavily sauced shrimp and grits won't?"

"My foot!" he protested. "My *papere* ate this stuff every day of his life and he lived to see a hundred and ten."

She shook her head. "I don't believe you."

He shrugged again, before cleaning the bottom of his bowl with his spoon and shoveling the last of his grits into his mouth. "He did, I tell you. And not only did he live that long, so did his manhood, if you get my drift."

Addison's stomach quivered with laughter. "Oh, my God!"

"I tell you true, *cher*," he insisted. "Matter fact, if I recall, *Papere* died in the middle of the act."

"He did not!"

"Did so. Folks 'round here still talk about it. He met his maker while lyin' underneath his third wife, a gal one-third his age. Of course, to keep up with her, he needed some of them little blue pills to keep him fresh."

Addison covered her mouth to stifle her guffaws so as not to wake Jack, but Micah had made it damn hard. Her eyes were watering now; she was laughing so hard.

"Well, wouldn't you know, he took too many of the dang things," Micah continued, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head. "So when he died, that part of him was still alive and kickin' ... standing straight up in the air like a flag pole."

"Okay," she managed between laughs. "Now I know you're lying."

He grinned. "Cross my heart and hope to die. It's the God's honest truth. Once that rigor mortis set in, there was no gettin' it to go down, either. When we buried him we had to—"

"Dig a hole nine feet deep instead of the usual six," Jack grumbled as he stumbled into the kitchen. "Isn't it kind of early for your tall tales this morning, Micah?"

Addison pressed her lips together as Jack moved past them, pulling a white t-shirt over his head as he made a beeline for the coffeepot.

“Runs in the Boudreaux family, *podna*,” Micah said, standing to collect his empty bowl. “Tall men, tall tales, tall—”

“And that’s enough out of you,” Jack said, cutting him off before he could add something inappropriate. He stirred milk into his coffee and retrieved the bowl Micah had filled for him before joining Addison at the table.

“Good morning,” he said as he slid into the chair beside her. His hand brushed hers as he set his coffee down, and her gaze flew up to his.

Even with the cloudiness of sleep still lingering, his eyes were mesmerizing, shining like liquid titanium in the light of the sun filtering through the window. For a moment, she forgot that she wasn’t supposed to let herself get attached to him. She forgot that her focus was supposed to be on their mission. She forgot everything except for the way it felt to have that smoldering stare set on her, or the fullness of the lips parting for a sip of coffee against hers.

“Hi,” she answered, lowering her eyes back to her bowl.

“Looks like you two are getting along better,” Jack said, nodding toward Micah, who had resumed his usual place in the ratty old armchair, guitar slung across his thighs.

She shrugged. “I don’t think he wants to like me,” she said, her voice low, “but I think I understand why.”

“Be patient with him,” he said. “He’ll come around.”

They finished their breakfast in tense silence, though she could feel Jack’s lingering stare on her. She avoided looking at him, because if she had to look at him, she’d start to hope again. When she finished eating, she left her bowl in the sink with Micah’s and trailed into the living room, plopping onto the sofa.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now we wait for Reniel,” Jack said from the kitchen, from where he washed their bowls and Micah’s cooking utensils.

“Where is that big fairy, anyhow?” Micah mumbled around the guitar pick clenched between his teeth.

“Fairy?”

Addison almost jumped a mile at the voice booming through the small apartment. The front door hung open, and a large beast of a man blocked the sunlight coming through the opening.

“Watch it, Micah,” he admonished as he came into the house and closed the door behind him, “I don’t care how strong you are; I’m always going to be the guy in the room stronger than you.”

Addison studied him as he came closer. He stood at least six feet, five inches tall, as wide in the shoulders as Micah. Her jaw dropped as she studied his features, her mind reeling from the possibility of anyone being as beautiful as him. With a face chiseled as if from stone, he looked like he’d stepped out of a magazine. From the t-shirt straining to confine the bulges of his arms, chest, and shoulders, she could see he had a body to match. Blue eyes sparkled like sapphires, and a headful of thick, blond locks swept the back of his neck. His expression of annoyance faded as he laid eyes on her, and a blinding, white smile appeared.

“You must be Addison,” he said as he extended one large hand to her. “How do you do? I am Reniel.”

She unfolded her legs and stood, her eyes wide and unblinking as she placed her hand in his. For someone supposedly stronger than Micah, he had a gentle touch. Suddenly, her insides seemed to turn to mush, and her fear dissipated, like someone had injected her with a solution of rainbows, happy juice, and chocolate.

“Hi,” she said, her voice a low, breathy whisper. “I’m Addison.”

“He’s doing the thing, *podna*,” Micah said to Jack, shaking his head as he watched the exchange.

“I only wish to put our new friend at ease,” Reniel shot over his shoulder.

She didn’t miss the way his brows furrowed when he addressed Micah; it would seem she wasn’t the only person he annoyed.

“What thing?” she asked, curious.

“Angels have the ability to flood a person’s soul with peace and calm,” Reniel answered. “I hope you don’t mind. You seemed tense.”

She smiled. “I kind of liked it?”

He released her hand. “You have been told what you must do?”

“Yeah, Jack and Micah told me everything.”

“And you are ready? There aren’t any doubts?”

“Oh, there are plenty of doubts,” she admitted. Something told her Reniel would know if she lied, anyway. “But I do know that I want to do this. If I’m the one who’s been chosen, it must be for a reason. Even if I don’t understand what that reason is.”

“We learned new information when we visited Addison’s mother last night,” Jack said as he entered the living room, folding his arms over his chest and leaning against the wall. “Some things we need explained.”

Reniel arched one eyebrow at Jack in response to his clipped tone. Even Addison could sense the tension coming from him, but didn’t understand it.

“What did you discover?” Reniel asked, the cadence and tone of his voice never changing.

Jack huffed in clear annoyance. “You know exactly what we discovered, Reniel. Why do you always do that?”

“Do what?”

“Ask questions you know the answer to.” Jack’s voice grew more agitated by the second. “Hold out on us with important information! Whatever lesson you’re trying to teach us, we must be too stupid to learn it, so in the future, if you could just give us all the info up-front, that would be great.”

Addison gazed back and forth between the angel and Jack, waiting for Reniel to strike Jack down for his misstep. All the Bible stories she remembered from her childhood depicted God as vengeful. She imagined angels must be no different, and wondered how Jack could ever be so bold and talk to one that way.

“Addison is not an ordinary Naphil,” Reniel said, ignoring Jack’s outburst. “You, my dear girl, have the potential to be so much more. Have you given any thought to taking the Guardian’s mark?”

She exchanged a glance with Jack as memories of their conversation the night before came rushing back. Lowering her eyes, she pushed aside thoughts of what had come after. “I haven’t been able to think of much else since last night,” she replied. “But ... I’m still not sure yet what I want to do. Do I have to decide now?”

Reniel shook his head. "Of course not. And for the record," he added, stabbing Jack with a narrowed glare, "I reveal to you what Father allows me to. Perhaps last night's revelations were a crucial part of yours, as well as Addison's, journey. I would not have thought you'd need reminding of that."

Jack turned his back on the angel and stared out at the bustling city street below them. New Orleans was coming alive for the day, and on a Saturday, there was even more activity than usual. "Yeah, well, if things had gone the way we planned, this would be over and I wouldn't need reminding. We did what you asked, Ren. We found Addison and told her of her purpose. She's agreed to go along with it. Now what?"

"Now, we fly to New York."

Jack perked up at that. "New York? The seal is there?"

Reniel shook his head. Stalking back into the kitchen, he retrieved an empty bowl from the cupboard and began filling it with Micah's grits. "The seal is in Ethiopia, in the care of the Order of the Seal of Solomon ... it is an old and ancient knighthood made up of the direct descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba." He glanced up at Addison as he ladled the sausage and shrimp mixture over the grits. "The queen spent a lot of time in King Solomon's company," he told her. "The son of David was both wealthy and wise, and the queen was enthralled by him."

"Didn't they sleep together?" Addison interjected. "At least, that's how it was in that movie, right?"

"They did," Reniel answered as he polished off one bowl of shrimp and grits and went back for more. Addison's jaw dropped as she realized how fast he'd consumed the first helping. "After her journey to Jerusalem, the queen returned to her own homeland, where she gave birth to a son, Menelik. Many years later, when Solomon angered God, the ring was taken from him. He lost not only the ring and its power, but Solomon's kingdom was also lost, as well."

"Wow." She shook her head. "That's a bit harsh, isn't it?"

"Solomon turned his back on his beliefs, and wealth, possessions, and lust became his gods. They destroyed him. It was a just punishment."

She could see that Reniel believed that, so she kept her mouth shut. Even if she didn't understand all that had happened, it had no bearing on the present. Things were the way they were, and the past in the past. "So how did the Ethiopians end up with the ring?"

"When Solomon was stripped of the privilege of bearing the ring, he left it in the queen's hands for safekeeping. He knew that even though he no longer had the power to wield it, that there were others who would do anything to unlock its power. He told no one what he had done, but we have always worked closer with the Order to keep it safe. As far as Ethiopia is concerned ... they are privileged to have been born of Menelik's bloodline. The Order is made up of those who are irrefutably descended from the king and queen."

"So it sounds like we need to hop a plane to Ethiopia," Micah chimed in from his place in his chair. "Not New York."

"You will journey to Ethiopia after a stop in Brooklyn," Reniel answered. "The order will want proof that Addison is the one. Only an Oracle can provide that proof."

Jack nodded. "You want my great-grandmother to tag along?"

"Vivian has already been told of her part in your mission. She is waiting for you. I have already secured air passage for the four of you from New York to Ethiopia in three days' time."

Micah stood. "Well, let's get this show on the road. Time waits for no man, right, Ren?"

“Wait,” Addison piped up, glancing down at Jackson’s t-shirt covering her body. “We were supposed to go to my apartment to get me some clothes. I’m tired of wearing borrowed stuff that doesn’t fit. Do we have time for that?”

Reniel nodded. “Your flight to New York will not be by conventional means. We leave when you are ready and not before.”

She frowned and turned to Jack. “Not by conventional means?”

Jack grinned. “What, you’ve never flown Angel Airlines?”

## Chapter 11: Fight Night

Addison seemed more confident dressed in her own clothes. With her messenger bag slung over her shoulder, she stood on the roof of Jack and Micah's apartment—and Mama Jo's, of course—watching Reniel with expectation lighting up her face. Seeing all of this through her eyes, Jack could remember how exciting it had all been in the beginning, when the concept of war with demons had been new to him, and angels were strange and foreign creatures. Funny how experiencing it every day had numbed him. Having Addison around, asking questions and exploring and discovering, reminded him of how intriguing it all was.

“Okay,” she said, one hand on her jean-clad hip. “I know you're an angel and all and I'm sure you're super strong, but can you fly all three of us to New York at once by yourself?”

Jack couldn't help but chuckle, despite the dirty look she gave him.

“I could,” Reniel replied with a smug grin and a shrug, “but I think it would be better for everyone involved if I bring in a little help.”

As he spoke, two more figures appeared on the roof, having just swooped down from the starlit sky. Addison gasped and backpedaled, one hand clapped over her mouth. Jack reached out to steady her as she banged up against his chest. Something else he'd forgotten, but was now reminded of in Addison's presence—how magnificent angels were in their true forms.

“It's okay,” he murmured, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “This is what angels really look like.”

Grabbing her shoulders, he turned her until she faced them again. When she gasped this time, it melted into a sigh of awe and wonder. Her muscles relaxed and she melted against him, staring up at the creatures stretching up ten feet tall. Reniel knelt between them and transformed, as well, his human form melting away and revealing his true self. His pristine white wings reached at least twenty feet wide, his skin like polished gold, and his broad, warrior's body covered in Roman-style armor from head to toe. Glowing white eyes peered out at them from the openings in his helmet. A golden sword dangled at his waist, with a matching bow and sheath of arrows strapped to his back.

The two others, Jack recognized as Elle and another angel named Daniel. Elle's skin glowed the shade of a moonstone, milky white and glittering with a beauty that rivaled the precious gemstone. Her black hair fell in perfect ringlets down her back, her Grecian style gown draping her body and pooling at her feet, her wings as white and wide as Reniel's. Daniel, an angel of healing, glimmered the color of an emerald, with gold flecks dancing on the surface, the white glow of his eyes picking up a bit of the green hue, causing them to appear almost aquamarine. He wore a long tunic and matching pants, weaponless, his wings no less impressive than the other two.

“Oh, my God,” Addison whispered, trembling against him. “Is this what they really look like?”

“Mm-hmm,” he mumbled. “I know it's jarring, but you get used to it after a while.”

She turned and gave him a smile that hit him full force in the gut. “I hope not. I'd hate to get to see something that beautiful all the time and become so blasé about it.”

He winced, feeling even worse now as he watched her walk toward Reniel, one hand outstretched in curiosity. The angel knelt and lowered his wings, letting her explore, touching and stroking the feathers, staring at her reflection in his golden skin. He could remember his own

awe when encountering Reniel's angelic form for the first time, but he saw the memory so distantly, it felt like a lifetime ago. Like someone else's life being played for him like a film, and he couldn't connect with the young boy named Jack who had grown up thinking Reniel must be the coolest thing on the planet.

"Don't be afraid, Addison. I've got you," Reniel said, his voice large and booming as he lifted her beneath her arms and propelled her into the air in one clean motion. Elle did the same with Jack, and Daniel followed suit with Micah. As the seconds passed, New Orleans grew smaller and smaller beneath them. The rushing of the wind swept over them, plastering Jack's shirt to his chest and muffling all the sounds of the world below. They went higher and higher, the lights of the city now no more than tiny pinpoints as they hurtled upward. He turned his head toward Micah, who had his eyes closed and seemed to be praying that Daniel wouldn't drop him. His partner never did care for travel this way ... he couldn't bear a plane ride, let alone hurtling through the air without a seat, or several shots of vodka to calm his nerves.

Glancing to his left, he was struck dumb at the sight of Addison. Her hair had come loose from its topknot and floated on the wind, surrounding her face in a haze of red strands. Through them, he could see her face, serene and peaceful, tilted up to the stars. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks flushed and her lips parted. Secure in Reniel's hold, with her back turned against his chest, she spread her arms wide and smiled, seeming to revel in the feeling. Now this ... this he had never forgotten. The wonder of flying never got stale, and he knew just what she felt in that moment.

Suddenly, they were swallowed up by wispy, white clouds and the wind stilled. They came out above them, where the night looked even clearer and the stars brighter—free from the distracting city lights. The three angels turned east and continued on their set trajectory, the rustle of their wings beating against the still night air the sole sound through the stillness.

"This is amazing," Addison called to him as Reniel swooped closer to Elle. "Do you get to do this often?"

Jack grinned, remembering his bizarre childhood. "When I was little, I did it all the time."

"All the time?" Reniel snorted, but kept his eyes focused straight ahead as he flew. "The kid thought I was a pack mule. 'Again, Renny, again, again!'"

Addison giggled at his imitation of young Jack's voice. "I think it's so weird that so much goes on in the world every day that impacts the lives of so many people, and they don't even notice it," she mused. "I mean, even I never noticed. Angels and demons really do live among us and we interact with them every day. We just took off from a roof in the middle of downtown New Orleans and no one even noticed."

"People are more distracted than they used to be," Jack explained. "They get so consumed with their lives that they forget to open their eyes and look around. If they wanted to know the truth about the world, all they'd have to do is look up."

"Just look up," she repeated his words, seeming to think them over. "I like that," she said after a while. "Words to live by."

Their gazes locked and held, and for a moment, nothing else existed for Jack. His breath caught and held as the moonlight danced in her hazel eyes, causing them to glow. Her lips parted and her eyes widened in fear, yet, she didn't look away. Her anxiety was mirrored in his own eyes. Whatever existed between them could never last, and they both knew it. That didn't stop him from wanting her with every inch of his soul.

Without warning, he caught the movement of a dark shadow flying at them from Reniel's left side. He opened his mouth to warn the angel, but it was too late. Addison seemed to register Jack's distress in the instant the dark form made contact, throwing Reniel off balance. Her scream split the air, and then faded away as she dropped through the clouds, arms and legs flailing as she hurtled downward.

"Addison!" Jack thrashed in Elle's hold, one arm extending even though he knew he could do nothing to save her.

"Hold on!" Elle said, her voice echoing on the night as she dove. Still holding him under one of her arms, she reached down with the other as they flew through the clouds. Behind them, he heard the sound of Reniel drawing his sword. Grunts and clashes of metal indicated that the warrior angel battled with whatever had attacked them.

Jack's heart hammered in his chest for the few seconds it took for them to come out the other side of the cloud. Confidence that Elle could catch Addison in time didn't stop the very real fear that stabbed through him at the sight of watching her plunge toward death. The white wisps of cloud cleared, and he panicked when Addison was nowhere to be found.

"Oh, my God," he whispered as his eyes darted back and forth, searching for the beacon of her red hair down below them. "She couldn't have fallen that far so fast."

Yet, she was gone. Not fallen ... simply vanished.

"Jack," Elle murmured, giving him a little shake. "Look up."

He obeyed, and found his breath stolen from him at what he found.

Addison wasn't below them because she'd risen, arms extended and hair fluttering as if whipped about by a current of wind. The whites and irises of her eyes had gone black, her skin pale as a ghost's. Levitating upward, she lifted her arms higher, her jaw clenching as she rose. Elle and Jack followed, breaking through the clouds again as she did. They hovered near Micah and Daniel as she neared Reniel and the dragon-like demon he wrestled with.

Jack watched in awe as the black beast with the body of a lizard, wings of a bat, and flicking tongue of a snake wrapped itself around Reniel, attempting to tear his throat out. Two others appeared on the horizon, shadows flying, silhouetted against the moon. As Reniel thrust his sword into the belly of the one attacking him, Addison swiveled on the air to face the other two. She wasn't afraid or unsure ... in fact, this had to be the most confident Jack had ever seen her. With her black, unblinking eyes, she glared at the approaching demons and thrust her hands toward them, palms out. They screeched and snarled as some unseen force stopped them in their tracks. Spreading her fingers, she trembled, her head lowered. Then, without warning, her head snapped back up again, her hands closing into tight fists. The second her fingers closed onto themselves, the demons screamed and burst into flames. Their wings caught first, and the fire spread in a rapid rush down toward their shoulders. Addison turned away from them as they fell from the sky, writhing and screaming in agony while the flames devoured them until nothing remained but ash and smoke.

Reniel floated nearby, watching Addison with the same expression of shock he and Micah wore. His partner had forgotten his fear of heights and flying for the moment.

"Incoming!" Daniel bellowed, one arm still holding Micah tight as he pointed toward the east.

Jack heard them before he saw them. The metallic sound of their wings beating and their low, hissing whispers preceded their appearance. But then, they were there, bearing down upon them, at least one hundred more of the draconic creatures. Reniel was silent and confident as he reached into the sheath at his back and withdrew ten of the massive arrows. Notching them to his

bow, he raised his arm and let them loose. All ten reached their intended targets, sending the demons back to hell in bursts of white light similar to a fireworks show. Reniel repeated the motion, taking out another ten as the swarming horde came closer.

“There’s more of ’em,” Micah pointed out.

Jack looked both left and right—they were surrounded.

Addison turned to the east, her arms already outstretched toward the demons flying at them from that direction. Her lips parted on a deep, guttural cry as the same invisible barrier seemed to halt the creatures. She screamed as if in pain as she opened her palms and then clenched them, using much more strength and power to set one hundred of the demons on fire than it had for just two. As balls of orange flame dropped out of the sky and disintegrated into ash, she dropped her arms. Her head lolled to the side and her eyes slid closed.

“Get me closer—she’s gonna fall!” Micah boomed over his shoulder to Daniel, who already flew them in her direction.

“Is she okay?” Jack asked as Addison fell into Micah’s arms. With her head turned inward toward Micah’s chest, Jack couldn’t even tell if she was conscious.

“She’s fine, *podna*,” Micah said. “Just tuckered out, is all.”

He nodded, turning his gaze on the other horde approaching from the west. “Good. Elle, have you ever played catch before?”

“I am sorry, the games of humans are not known to me, but I believe I understand the basics of throwing and catching,” the angel responded, glancing down at him with a confused frown. Beside them, Reniel fired another ten arrows into the swarm he’d managed to whittle down to twenty.

“Works for me,” he answered. “In this game, you have to throw *and* catch.”

“You don’t mean ...?”

“Throw me straight in the middle of that swarm,” he confirmed. “And I swear to God if you’re not on the other end to catch me when I come out, I’m going to be so pissed.”

“I think I can manage it,” Elle said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, before hefting him up onto one shoulder. After swinging him around three times, she released him, sending him rushing toward the black cloud of demons with all the force of a cannon.

Jack waited until the burning in his throat and chest had reached an almost unbearable limit. Closing his eyes, he braced himself as the swarm swallowed him up, surrounding him with writhing bodies, tails, and tongues. He winced as claws ripped at his clothes, tearing his skin, but forced himself not to let the pain distract him. Daniel could heal his body when it was over. He waited until he’d reached the center, when he thought his throat would catch fire from the power building there. Then, he unleashed a roar so powerful, he feared it might tear him in half. The force of it rippled out from his core, racing outward on visible waves that hit the demons like a sonic blast.

They dropped like flies, falling from the sky in a shower of black body parts and ash. He found himself back in Elle’s arms the moment the sky had cleared. The angel had come through, after all. He sagged in her arms as fatigue caused his muscles to turn to jelly. He didn’t think he’d ever used so much power at once before. This had surpassed even the use of his inner light, and had left him weaker than he’d felt since becoming a Guardian. Reniel had taken care of the rest of the demons, the skies now clear.

The knowledge they were safe stole what remained of Jack’s coherence. Just before he slipped away, he locked eyes with Micah’s. His partner still clutched Addison in a protective hold as they resumed their flight. He nodded and smiled at Jack.

“You did good, *podna*.”

## Chapter 12: Family Affair

Addison woke up in unfamiliar surroundings. As she opened her eyes and fought to regain her equilibrium, she recognized that her spectacular flight across the heavens had come to an end. Instead of the strong arms of Reniel cushioning her, she found a mattress. Despite its comfort—and that of the downy blanket covering her—her body ached all over, as if she'd just taken a beating, even though she couldn't recall engaging anyone in a fight. Groaning, she stretched to loosen the tension in her muscles, then tossed the covers aside. Feeling her way in the dark, she found a nightstand beside the bed and a lamp, which she switched on. The circle of yellow light illuminated a small but tidy room decorated in shades of red, black, and gray. Standing, she turned in a slow circle and surveyed the room.

A teenage boy's room, she realized as she took in the posters of Jay-Z, Biggie Smalls, and half-dressed girls plastered over the walls. New York Knicks and Yankees memorabilia lay scattered about; a desk littered with text books, comics, and a few novels; a rack holding a set of free weights in the corner.

Smiling, she lifted a photo from the nightstand. A much younger Jack stared back at her, next to a little girl who couldn't be any older than three. Jack looked so carefree, grinning as he clung to the girl. He didn't have any kids of his own, so the girl had to be a relative. She was adorable, with a head full of brown corkscrew curls and a light dusting of freckles over her caramel-toned cheeks. Large, round eyes peeped out from a cherub's face—the perfect hazel blend of brown and green.

So, they must have made it to New York. The last thing she remembered was being attacked by demons mid-flight before her instincts had taken over. She remembered very little beyond the blackness that always clouded her vision when she became angry. She realized now that it came along with the surge of power that tingled on the surface of her skin. Instead of trying to repress it like she always did, she had reveled in it, drawn on it, unleashed it. Her recollection of the event amounted to a blur of images, but one clear theme remained—death and destruction.

*It was for a good reason*, she reminded herself as she set the photo of Jack and the little girl aside. Reniel had needed help fighting the demons off, and she had interceded. These weren't people she'd hurt, but demons that delighted in causing pain and sadness. Remembering that made her wish she could go back and kick their asses again.

The door to the room flew open all of a sudden, jolting her out of her thoughts. She gave a timid smile as Jack appeared in the doorway ... at least, she'd thought him Jack. As the man stepped into the light of the lamp, she realized she stood face to face with Jackson Bennett, Sr. He looked so like Jack, it felt uncanny—the same smooth dark skin, gunmetal grey eyes, and long, lean figure with just the right amount of muscle. The longer she stared at him, though, the easier it became to see the differences.

Jackson, Sr. had a bit of grey going at his temples, with the face of a man who'd seen and done a lot. Remembering that Jack had mentioned his father's past military service, Addison knew she stood in the presence of a man experienced in the ways of war—in both the Earth realm and the spiritual.

“You must be Addison,” he said, his voice a deep, smooth baritone tinged with the same Yankee accent of his son. “I’m his dad, by the way. You can call me Jackson.”

Addison came forward and took his offered hand. His fingers clutched hers and he shook with a firm grip.

“I can tell.” She hoped he couldn’t hear how nervous she was. For that matter, she couldn’t figure out why meeting Jack’s dad would be so intimidating. Outside that door were even more of the people Jack knew and loved. It made her heart gallop a bit in her chest. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“I hope you don’t mind that Jack put you in here,” he said, placing his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “When you all arrived, you were still out cold and we weren’t sure when you’d wake up. He wanted you to be comfortable.”

“I appreciate it,” she murmured, peering through the cracked window blinds and out into the night. “How long has it been? A few hours?”

Jackson jerked at the collar of his shirt and cleared his throat. “Um ... more than a few. More like twenty-four.”

Her jaw dropped. “I slept for twenty-four hours?”

He nodded. “Reniel told me what happened. I can remember when Elian—uh, he’s the Naphil kid I guarded for my first assignment—exerted too much power for the first time. But he’d been using telepathy and telekinesis since the age of six, and from what I hear, you’re kind of new to it. If you don’t take it slow at first, it can take a lot out of you. Elian would sleep for hours, too, after manifesting a new ability. For you ... well, you did a lot in one encounter. Your body needed to recharge.”

She ran a hand through her disheveled hair and sighed. “Wow. This is all going to take some getting used to.”

Jackson smiled; it carried the same devastating potency as when his son did it. These men were certainly blessed with some good genes.

“I remember being new to it all. It’s overwhelming at first, but after a while, it just becomes a part of your life.”

“For now, it just feels like a weird dream,” she admitted. “But Jack has been a huge help to me. You raised quite a son.”

“Thank you,” he replied, beaming with pride. “Anyway, I was just peeking in to see if you were still asleep, but since you’re up, I’m sure you’re hungry.”

She nodded. “Starving.”

“Great. There’s a bathroom at the end of the hall if you need it. Everyone’s downstairs and the ladies are just finishing up dinner, so you woke up right on time.”

“That sounds good, thank you.”

Jackson left, closing the door behind him. Addison glanced down to find the bag she’d packed resting on the floor at the foot of the bed. Taking it up, she left the room and went in search of the bathroom. The low hum of voices and the tantalizing aroma of food drifted toward her from downstairs, but she refused to go down until she’d freshened up. A shower would be a must, and she wanted to at least run a comb through her hair.

Her sore muscles relaxed a bit beneath the hot spray, and she took her time bathing and washing her hair. Wrapped in a towel with her hair hanging down her back, she studied the contents of her bag, at a loss as to what to wear when meeting Jack’s family. She wanted to tell herself it didn’t matter what she looked like; that meeting them wasn’t a big deal. Yet, she couldn’t decide between the few things she’d packed and nothing seemed nice enough. Her

shorts were too short to wear when meeting someone's mother, so they were out. Her only clean pair of jeans were worn and faded, but comfortable, which was why she'd been saving them to wear on the plane along with her most comfortable sweatshirt. The clothes she'd just taken off had been splattered with demon blood and she'd slept in them for twenty-four hours.

Which left one other option. She had packed the yellow maxi dress on a whim, and hadn't given the selection much thought as the last thing she'd thrown in after pajamas, her shorts and jeans, a few tops, underwear, a bra, a pair of flip flops, her toothbrush, soap, shampoo, and a comb. She'd worn the simple dress once, but it flattered her coloring. She wondered for a moment if it would be too much, but then pushed the thought aside and slipped into the dress. It had been a while since she'd felt feminine and pretty; not just like a sexual object to be gawked at. That was why she'd purchased the dress in the first place—because it made her feel like a lady instead of a stripper.

After towel-drying her hair as best she could, she settled on leaving it in a braid hanging over one shoulder. It was the best she could do without a blow dryer. In the side pocket of her bag, she found an old tube of peach-tinted lip gloss she hadn't worn in ages. Finding it still good when she opened the tube, she dabbed some on her lips before shoving the rest of her stuff back into her bag and leaving the bathroom. She stashed the bag back in Jack's old bedroom, then made her way down the narrow staircase at a meandering pace.

The first floor of what must be a city townhouse was warm and cozy, clean and charming, decorated in shades of cool green, ivory, and dark brown. Photos were everywhere—on the walls, the mantle, table surfaces. At the foot of the stairs, the ground level opened up into a large living room which sprawled to her left, then a dining room and kitchen where everyone had gathered to her right. She passed a photo of Jack in a cap and gown, hanging on the wall next to his high school diploma, and another photo of him in a basketball jersey and shorts with a medal around his neck as she made her way toward the tangle of voices pulling her nearer to the kitchen.

She found so many people and voices that, at first, she found it hard to make sense of it all. Two middle-aged women stood in the kitchen, between a high, long counter, laying out various dishes and bowls full of steaming food. They laughed and whispered together like old friends, or even sisters. One seemed petite and downright mousy, with a short mahogany brown bob enhanced by amber highlights. The other looked like an Amazon of a woman—curvaceous and tall, with a thick mass of black hair pulled into a messy topknot. On the other side of the counter sprawled a dining room with a long table set for eight. Crowded around it were Jackson, Sr., Jack, Micah, Reniel, and an elderly black woman with a sleek, salt and pepper hairdo, the little girl from the photo upstairs—much older now—a teenage boy with dark features and a frizzy black afro, and a dark-skinned man almost as tall and broad as Reniel and Micah.

The little girl giggled and swatted at Jack, who kept poking the back of her neck with his fork every time she looked away. He chuckled as she took up her own fork and engaged him in a duel. Micah had a deck of cards in his hands, and from where Addison stood, seemed to be showing Jackson, Sr. and the dark man beside him a card trick. The teen with the afro appeared oblivious to everything around him as his thumbs tapped over the touchscreen of his cellphone. Reniel sat engaged in silent conversation with the older woman, who she guessed had to be Jack's great-grandmother. He clutched one of her slender hands in both of his large ones, his expression soft as they chatted.

"Oh, you're awake." The Amazon woman turned toward Addison with a wide smile, her voice thick with a Puerto Rican accent. "Don't just stand there, come sit down. Micah!" The

Cajun glanced up from what he was doing, raising his eyebrows as he found Addison standing in the kitchen. "I know you Southern boys don't mind giving up a seat for a lady. Move it or lose it."

Micah rolled his shoulders as he rose from his seat. Grabbing his beer bottle from the table, he swiped up the cards with his free hand. "That's no lady, Missus Rodriguez. That there is a dad-blamed *peekon* ... you often find them jabbing you in the sides and making all kinds of trouble."

Hand on hip, Addison pursed her lips at Micah and shook her head. "Nice to see you, too, Micah," she replied, rolling her eyes. She had come to realize his veiled insults were just his way when it came to her. It almost felt like the ribbing of a big brother.

Micah flashed a grin at her as he slid a barstool away from the counter and placed it in the corner of the dining room. He perched there, leaning against the wall and resting his bottle on one knee. "Glad to see you up and about, *cher*," he mumbled, taking a swig.

Jack had stood when he heard her voice, and now approached her from the dining room. "Hey," he said, his gaze sweeping over her as he entered the kitchen.

Addison's skin grew warm from his perusal. The look on his face made her glad she'd worn the dress.

"We were starting to get worried, but it looks like that long sleep did you some good."

She smiled, hit by a sudden wave of shyness. It was the way his eyes seemed to strip her bare. They were also surrounded by everyone he cared about in the world, and she found herself here, too. She experienced feeling of hope again, making her all too aware of the fact that she was falling for Jack.

"I feel great," she said, speaking the truth. After the hot shower, she felt less sore, and the long sleep had rejuvenated her. Once her belly got full, she would be more than content. "Sorry for scaring you."

"No need to apologize." One of his hands grasped her arm at the elbow in a light but firm grip. "That was amazing, what you did up there."

She shrugged. "I figured the time had come to start making myself useful around here."

"You've done more than enough for now," said the small brunette from Jack's side.

She barely came up to his chest, but Addison could see this woman should not be defined by her size. Despite her unassuming face and small stature, she had presence.

"There will be many occasions for you to do your part for the cause of Heaven. For tonight, we want you to relax, eat, and forget about all that." She smiled up at Addison and offered her a pristine white dinner plate. "I'm Jack's stepmother, Sarah. And since you're our guest, you get to hit the buffet line first."

Addison couldn't help but return the woman's smile. So this was the angel who had helped raise Jack. Unlike Reniel, whose human form looked akin to a Greek god's, Sarah looked like any soccer mom in the grocery store, with nothing intimidating about her.

"Thank you," she answered. "Everything smells wonderful."

"Well, with so many guys around, we have to make a lot of food, and variety doesn't hurt," the woman Micah had called Mrs. Rodriguez said as she came forward with a fistful of serving spoons. She left one in each dish, then stepped aside. "You can call me Carmen, by the way. We're just glad to be able to add another *chica* to our little family, right, girls?"

"Oh, yeah," Sarah mumbled as Addison edged toward the long counter.

She gaped at the spread with wide eyes, unsure of where to begin. She'd never been to a big, family-style gathering like this. There had never been this much food at her house, either ... or this much laughter and warmth, for that matter.

"I don't mind," the little girl with the bouncy, golden brown curls said. "Micah, you should come sit by me."

"Cassandra," Jackson, Sr. added, a warning tone to his voice.

The girl ignored him and continued making moon eyes at Micah, obviously enamored with him. The little toddler in the picture had grown into a pretty girl of about eleven or twelve, her hair a thick mass of curls hanging down her back, her freckles now dotting defined cheekbones. She must be Jack's little sister.

Micah gave Cassandra a lazy, charming grin. "Now, you know we can't go making all the other couples jealous, *cherie*."

Cassandra giggled. "Right. I forgot."

Micah winked at her and crossed one leg over the other. "You're still my best girl, Cassie."

Addison couldn't help a giggle at the exchange. Micah could be sweet when he wanted to be; he'd proved that by capturing the heart of Cassandra.

Once Addison's plate had been filled with an assortment of foods, the others stood and took their places in line. Before long, they all sat around the table with full plates. Micah, Jackson, Sr., and Reniel had taken barstools against the wall to give up seats for Addison, Sarah, and Carmen. Addison sat sandwiched between Jack and the sullen, brooding teenager with the afro.

"This is Nathan, my husband," Carmen told her, indicated the large, dark-skinned man seated beside her. "And this is our son, Elian," she added indicating the boy.

Addison could see it now, the brown skin tone a perfect blend of both parents, the dark brown eyes the same hue as Nathan's.

"So, you're the Naphil I've heard so much about, then," Addison said to Elian as she dug her fork into the creamy macaroni and cheese on her plate.

Elian nodded, his mouth full of fried chicken. He swallowed and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Dad used to be an angel," he said in a voice that had already been deepened by puberty. Addison could see a bit of dark fuzz on his chin, too ... Elian stood on the verge of manhood. "Mom's an Oracle."

"So is my grandmother, Vivian," Jackson, Sr. said from his perch on the barstool. Balancing his plate on his lap, he indicated the woman seated at the head of the table.

Addison stared at her with curiosity. It seemed impossible to determine her age, though Addison knew she couldn't be younger than eighty. Though her deep mocha skin was lined with age, a clarity lingered in her vibrant, dark eyes that spoke of a young soul. She was reed slender, with sharp features and vibrant red lips that matched her polished nails.

"I am Vivian Bennett, dear," she said in a smooth, soulful voice that made Addison want to sit on the floor and lay her head in this woman's lap. Why couldn't she have had a grandmother like this? Her Nana had been a hard woman; not mean, but not affectionate or warm, either. "I look forward to getting to know you."

"You, too, ma'am," Addison said.

Vivian gave her an encouraging smile that immediately put her at ease. The group ate in silence for a little while, and Addison discovered she was surrounded by people who could cook. Vivian had fried the chicken and baked cornbread from scratch, while Sarah, Carmen, and Micah

had made everything else to accompany it. Everything tasted so good; she lost herself in filling her stomach for a while and soaking everything in. All the people here seemed so comfortable with each other. Addison didn't know how to process it. Jackson, Sr. talked to Jack and Micah about their last couple of Guardian missions, while Sarah and Carmen chatted about Cassandra's upcoming cello recital and Elian's impending senior year of high school. Nathan, who had seemed dark and brooding at first glance, lit up like a Christmas tree—laughing and smiling as he and Reniel swapped stories about their days as warrior angels. Vivian admonished the guys for being messy, praised Cassandra for her table manners, and complimented Sarah on her delicious green beans. A sense of genuine harmony seemed ingrained.

"You all seem so close," Addison said after a while, bringing the attention of the entire room back to her. She shifted, uncomfortable under their probing gazes, and shrugged. "I mean, my family isn't anything like this and ... well, only some of you are related. I just wonder ... how did you get so close?"

"Father," Sarah answered, a small smile edging her lips. From the barstool behind her, Jackson, Sr. reached over the back of her chair and clasped her shoulder in an affectionate motion. Throughout the entire meal, the two had been stealing glances at each other, touching every chance they got—like they couldn't stand to be separated even for a second. It appeared clear they were crazy about each other, even after close to two decades of marriage. Nathan and Carmen were just as bad.

"Everything happens for a reason, Addison," Sarah continued, placing one hand over Jackson's on her shoulder. "I was a messenger angel who had no concept of compassion for humans. I didn't understand their ways or their emotions, and I did not want to. It wasn't until I met Jackson that I understood what it was like to truly be human. To feel things, to love people, to lose them, to hurt and feel pain. When I opened my heart to him, it also exposed me to love."

"But Reniel led me to believe that love between humans and angels is forbidden," Addison replied. This had been bugging her all this time, but she'd never had a chance to ask about it.

"Every creature created by Father has the gift of free will," Reniel said from his place between Micah and Jackson, Sr. "Even angels. While Sarah did not choose to love Jackson—for no one can choose who captures their heart—she did choose to obey the laws governing angels. Romantic, physical relationships between angels and humans are forbidden, and because Sarah resisted temptation, Father chose to honor her by offering her a mortal life as a Guardian. He saw that an eternity without him would have been like a personal hell for Sarah, and He did not want her to suffer."

Addison smiled. "What a sweet story."

Sarah nodded and smiled, too. "I have no regrets, either. I've had a beautiful life for the last eighteen years, and I couldn't ask for more."

"Some of us took the harder path," Nathan said.

His whiskey-brown eyes were haunted as they met Addison's. The darkness about him came back, and she could see in him the same depth of experience with pain and heartache that she saw in Jackson Sr.

"I lost my wings because I wasn't as strong as Sarah."

"So you ... became a demon?"

"Not exactly," he answered. Carmen reached over and grasped his hand, giving it a tight, affectionate squeeze. Nathan held on to that hand as if it were an anchor. "I became one of the Fallen, which are angels who have been banished from Heaven. When that happens, you lose

your wings and the essence of everything good is stripped away from your soul. At that time, something is planted inside, like a seed. It's your own personal little demon, sent to torment you until you transition."

Addison frowned. "I don't understand. It's not an instant thing?"

"It would be easier if it were, trust me," Nathan replied. "But no, it's not instant. The demon becomes a part of you, in your head always tempting you. Every time you give in to rage, despair, lust, depravity of any kind ... he gets stronger and his hold over you grows. Before you know what's happened, the demon has taken over and you no longer exist. You become one of them."

Addison's mouth fell open and she forgot about eating. Her fork clattered to her plate. "That's awful. How did you beat it?"

"I fought it for seven years," he told her. "I refused to give in. If Lucifer wanted me, he was going to have to come for me himself. But then, he went too far and sent Eligos to kidnap my son ..." he trailed off, his jaw tightening as anger hardened his features.

Addison's heart plummeted into her stomach. "Eligos?" she whispered.

Carmen nodded. "He wanted Elian for his power. We had to fight to get him back. That is how Nathan earned his chance at a new start. He was willing to trade his soul for Elian, no questions asked. That act of selflessness redeemed him."

"That's ..." Addison lowered her eyes to her plate, her heart dropping even further in the pit of her gut as she remembered, yet again, that no one in the world cared for her that much. "That's beautiful," she managed.

"*Lo siento*," Carmen apologized, her wide eyes sympathetic as she watched her from across the table. "We did not mean to make you sad with our story."

"It's okay," she said, forcing a smile. "The stories are all wonderful. I think I get it. Sarah met Jackson when she got assigned to tell him about being a Guardian. They got together and their first mission as Guardians together was looking out for Elian, who was born after Nathan met you and lost his wings. Seven years later, here comes my ... Eligos, who kidnaps Elian. You guys fought to get him back and Nathan gets a mortal life with his family. Reniel used to be friends with both Sarah and Nathan when you were all angels, so you're all close. And because Micah is Jack's partner, you guys are all like one big family."

Vivian nodded. "Exactly," she answered. "But, you know, sweetheart, there's always room for one more."

"That's right," Sarah added. "We're all on the same side here, and we have to stick together. Jack has told us a lot about you. I know your life hasn't been easy, and there's so much you have to learn, but we want you to know that we're here for you."

Addison didn't know what to say. Trying not to show how much their stories had affected her was hard. Her heart pounded so loud she swore they could hear it. Her eyes stung, and her palms began to sweat. Blinking back tears, she put another smile on for their benefit.

Through the rest of the meal, she remained silent and observant once more. Vivian's words echoed in her mind, and again, hope flared in her chest. Only this time, it rooted itself, going deep and implanting where she could never pry it loose. Which meant, when her mission ended and she was forced to leave these people behind, she would end up heartbroken.

She made it through dinner with quiet politeness and easy smiles, but it proved hard with Jack sitting beside her, watching her from the corner of his eye. By the time dessert and coffee were served, she couldn't take it anymore. She excused herself and left the cozy little kitchen and dining room and raced up the stairs, seeking solitude. Once upstairs, she found another set of

steps she hadn't noticed before, leading up to a closed door. She remembered from shows she'd seen on television that most of these city apartments and houses had roof access. Hoping for some fresh air without alerting anyone that she'd left the house, she took a chance on the door and started up.

Sure enough, she found that the unlocked door lead out onto the roof. A wrought-iron rail circled the roof of the Bennett's townhouse, separating it from the others sandwiching it on either side. The row of homes went on down the block in both directions in an endless line. While New Orleans was a bustling city, Addison found it much different from New York, none of the Southern charm or French influence present here. New York seemed like another world—one of smog-blotted skies, bright lights, and straight, clean lines. Still, it was a pleasant, balmy night which struck her as vastly different from the stifling humidity of Louisiana.

Leaning against the rail, she stared at the lights stretching out as far as the eye could see. She wondered if she could conjure the power to fly again like she had while fighting those demons. With practice, it'd come like second nature to her.

One thing she would doubtless never learn to do was numb herself against the feeling of being so alone in the world. Clutching the iron bars in a relentless grip, she lowered her head and finally allowed herself to cry.

## Chapter 13: Hope

“Hey, what are you doing out here all by your—” Jack trailed off as Addison spun away from the rail to face him. She lowered her head, hiding her face from him—but not before he caught sight of her flushed and tear-stained cheeks. “Addison, what’s wrong?”

After she’d excused herself from the table and hadn’t come back, he’d grown concerned. He’d gone upstairs to check on her, and became even more worried to find the bedrooms and bathroom empty. Thinking she’d gone up to the roof for air, he had followed her. However, his relief at finding her here had proved short-lived. Seeing her doubled over, arms wrapped around herself as she fought to contain the sobs causing her body to tremble, became more than he could bear.

Closing the door, he crossed the roof in a few quick strides, reaching out for her on instinct. Touching her would be a bad idea ... but then, not touching her would also be unacceptable when she seemed to be in so much pain. She fell into him, her face buried in his chest as she sobbed as if her very soul had been injured.

Unsure of what to say, he just held her, his arms tight around her and one hand skimming her back. Allowing her to get it out, he became her rock, giving her someone to rest on for a change. The end of her braid caressed his fingertips, and a few stray strands at her crown teased his jaw. The smell of her shampoo invaded his senses, along with the feel of her against him and her own natural, feminine scent. She smelled earthy and sweet, like an open field. He didn’t fight the urge to bury his nose in her hair and inhale. His eyes slid closed and he clung to a moment of closeness with another human being—the likes of which he hadn’t experienced in so long. Since Tracy’s death, he hadn’t let himself.

Addison began to calm, her sobs dying away, her trembling shoulders stilling. Once she grew quiet, he grasped her shoulders and pushed her back just enough to get a glimpse of her face. The tears hadn’t let up, streaming down her cheeks and clinging to the line of her jaw before falling away. The sight broke his heart all over again.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

A sound like a half sob, half laugh escaped her lips. She shook her head. “Nothing. Everything. I just needed to be alone for a minute. Being around your family and friends was overwhelming.”

He winced. “Did someone say something that upset you? Look, Nathan doesn’t know Eligos is your father, but he wouldn’t care if he knew. No one here is going to judge you for who your parents are.”

She sobbed again, bringing on a fresh wave of tears. “That’s the thing, Jack,” she cried, swiping at her face with her fingertips. He helped her, using his thumbs to smear away the remnants pooling just beneath her lower eyelids. “Those people down there are amazing. They love you, they love each other ... everyone has a place and no one ever has to worry about being alone. I’ve never seen anything like that in my life, Jack. I’ve never had a family dinner before. I’ve never had someone welcome me to a table and treat me like my past didn’t matter.”

He nodded in understanding as revelation dawned. “I’ve been very fortunate,” he admitted. “But your life doesn’t have to continue to be like it was. You can have the same thing.”

“This isn’t my family to be a part of, Jack. I’m just here because someone decided I’m the one who needs to wear this ring. Once all that is over, there’s nothing tying me to them.

Everyone here has a history, a thread tying them together. Marriage, friendship, children ... and what am I? The outcast demon Naphil that everyone is nice to out of pity.”

“No, that’s not true,” he insisted. “None of that is true. You do have a connection to them. You do have a place here.”

She pulled away from him, turning back to the railing. Her shoulders squared up once again, her back ramrod straight. He’d seen the last of her tears for now. The moment of vulnerability had passed, with Addison erecting her walls once more.

“I don’t have a place anywhere,” she whispered, staring out over the city. “I never did. I know all these years of fighting have been hard on you, Jack. I know you have a hard time understanding where all of this is going, and maybe you resent your Guardianship just a little bit. But you’re so lucky, because at the end of the day, you get to come home to this. You have these people to remind you that you’re loved and a part of something. Don’t take it for granted, because there are people like me who don’t have it and we want it.”

He approached her at a slow pace, drawn forward by the yearning in her voice. It tugged on his heart, making him want to fill every void in her life in any way that he could. Ridiculous. They hadn’t known each other long, and what little he knew of her past wasn’t pleasant. Still, as much as he wanted to be the one to save her, he needed saving just as badly. He paused when his chest was a mere inch away from Addison’s back. His hands braced against the rail on either side of her, trapping her between his arms. She stiffened, sucking in a ragged breath, but she didn’t turn, the only movement that of the wind through her hair, causing a few loose, vibrant strands to caress her face and the back of her neck.

“If you want it, it’s yours,” he murmured, coming even closer.

Their bodies were touching now, the curve of hers fitting so seamless against him that it felt as if something had just fallen into place. Her rigid posture melted, and she leaned back, resting her head on his shoulder. He turned his head, allowing his lips to skim the side of her neck. “You were wrong when you said you had no ties to those people, or that you wouldn’t have a reason to stay when this was all over. So wrong, Addison.”

She sighed as his arms came around her, hands splayed on her stomach. Her flesh felt supple and warm through the thin fabric she wore, a beckoning temptation to his fingers.

“You don’t know what you’re saying. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

He slid his mouth up the column of her neck to her jaw. His lips lingered on the corner of hers, just a breath separating them. “I told you that you mattered to me, and I meant that. I don’t know what this is, Addison. I can’t pretend to know what tomorrow will bring, or even where we’ll be next week. But I can tell you that when this is all over, I’ll still be here. I’ll still care about you, still want you beyond all reasoning. If you need a reason to stay, there’s your reason, Addison. I’m the reason ... *I* ... I want you. No, it’s more than that. I think ... I need you. Stay for me. Stay *with* me.”

She turned in his embrace to face him, her eyes wide with shock. “What in the world could you ever need me for?” she whispered. “No one’s ever needed me for anything.”

He grinned. “Isn’t it obvious? This path, this calling ... it takes things from you. Sometimes, it takes so much that you don’t even know who you are anymore. Why do you think Micah is the way he is? He sure wasn’t born that way.”

“What did it take from you, Jack?”

He lowered his eyes and sighed. There could be no keeping it to himself anymore. If anyone had a right to know, it was Addison. “Tracy,” he said.

It surprised him how much it hurt to say her name. He'd thought the sharpness of the pain had faded away, but it proved surprisingly acute.

"Micah's sister?"

He nodded. "Yeah. She was a Guardian, too."

"I thought Mama said the Guardian gene is passed down by parents to a child of the same sex."

"Tracy was Micah's half-sister. Different dads. Micah was older by a few years, and both his parents were Guardians. After his dad left his mother, she remarried, and they had Tracy."

Addison nodded. "I get it now. So, they must have been close."

"Like you wouldn't believe. She followed Micah everywhere. Even though she wasn't one of the elite chosen to fight Eligos and his ten, Tracy refused to be left out. Everywhere Micah and I went, she went, looking for a piece of the action."

"What could she do?"

"Tracy was a chameleon. She could blend into her surroundings and pretty much disappear. She was also a prankster, which made her one of the most annoying roommates you'd ever want to have."

"Sounds like a fun girl."

He chuckled as memories he'd forced himself to bury along with Tracy assailed him. "She was. Real bouncy and cheerful, always laughing and joking. She and Micah were so close, which was why he stopped fighting it and let her tag along on some missions. I was against it at first, but Micah convinced me that we could protect her from anything that would hurt her. Besides, Tracy could take care of herself. She had quick reflexes and was smart enough to know when to fight and when to run. So, for a while, our duo was actually a trio."

"Didn't that ruffle Reniel's feathers?" she asked. "Ha!" she added. "Feathers ... that was funny."

Jack laughed at her and shook his head. "It did, but by then, he was used to Micah going against the grain. He never did know how to follow the damn rules."

"So, I take it you and Tracy were a thing. I mean ... you cared about her, right?"

"I loved her," he admitted. "I never saw it coming. The three of us were like best friends, you know? And then one day, it was just the two of us and something clicked. I felt so fortunate to have something within this world of angels, demons, and war that was just mine. Something normal, and simple. It didn't seem so bad then, the endless demon fights and that feeling of failure, not when I had her. I had this hope, that someday when it was all over, I would have her. In the meantime, she was my piece of normal ... an anchor of sorts."

"Losing her must have been so hard," Addison whispered, her voice edged in sympathy. Her eyebrows were furrowed as she eyed him with compassion.

"Not as hard as it was on Micah. Her death destroyed him. He hasn't been the same since."

"How did she die?"

"Murdered," he answered. A shudder raced down his spine at the memory of her lifeless body, splayed in the dark alley between Mama Jo's and the souvenir shop next door. If he concentrated hard enough, he could still smell the blood ... still see the gaping red smile carved into her neck.

Addison gasped, one hand coming up over her mouth. "What? By who?"

He shook his head. "We're not sure, but we know it was someone on the other side. Not a demon, but maybe someone possessed by one, or even a Naphil. In the weeks leading up to her

death, Tracy had been acting weird. Coming and going all hours of the night, and sneaking around. We had a huge fight about it a few days before it happened, because she wouldn't tell us anything. By then, we were pretty serious, and I was out of my mind thinking there was some other guy she was sneaking off to meet. When she wouldn't tell me the truth, I outright accused her of cheating to try to get a reaction out of her. She got upset with me, and told me to go to hell. After packing a few clothes, she stormed out of the apartment. She told me I was going to be sorry when I found out what she'd really been up to, and maybe she'd finally get credit for something, for once. She left to go stay at a friend's, but that was the last time I saw her. We found her in the alley on the side of Mama Jo's with her throat slit and a pentagram carved into her chest."

Addison shook her head, disbelief and sadness marring her face. "Oh, my God, Jack ..."

"After losing Tracy, I made a decision," he continued. "My life couldn't be about anything but being a Guardian. I let myself fall in love with her, and it ruined me when she was gone. I realized that the life I wanted so bad was never going to happen. I was never going to have what I thought was waiting for me at the end of all this, because there was no end."

"So you decided not to get close to anyone again," she finished for him. "It's easier to suffer alone, than to let someone into your life just to lose them and end up suffering even more."

He nodded. "I knew you'd understand."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Then what is this, Jack?" she asked, seeming confused. Hell, he wasn't thinking straight either. "I made the same decision in my own life after the last guy I dated ended our relationship by beating me to a pulp. I got so tired of being disrespected and hurt ... I've had enough of that in my life. I thought I was over that need to be with someone. But then I met you ... and all that seems to have gone out the window."

"I know," he said, coming toward her again and reaching out. Her arms fell away from her chest as he touched her shoulders, drawing her toward him. "I don't understand it, either. I just know that I can't stop wanting you. I can't stop thinking about you ... the way you smell, the way you taste. When we kissed, I didn't want to stop. I wanted ..."

Her hands came up to his chest, her palms burning his skin through the fabric of his shirt. "Yes?" she prodded, her voice hopeful.

"I wanted ..." he murmured, lowering his head toward hers. His lips tingled with anticipation. She stood but a breath away now, his for the taking. Lips parted, eyelids lowered, breasts heaving as her breath raced in and out of her lungs; she embodied his every desire, a temptation too great to resist. "I wanted everything I have no right to ask of you. I wanted everything I thought I'd stopped craving a long time ago."

A low whimper escaped her lips as they brushed over his, and her hands slid up from his chest to his shoulders. "Yes," she repeated, an affirmation this time. "Yes, Jack."

A tremor rocked him at her words of surrender. Still, he had to be certain. Lifting his gaze to hers, he found her chin with his fingertips and raised it. Her eyes met his, pools of tawny amber filled with uncertainty, desire, and need. "Are you sure?" he whispered.

She nodded, her hair brushing his forehead as she closed the remaining distance between them, pressing her body tight up against his.

"You're different," she said. "You aren't like the other guys I've been with. I know you'll respect me and treat me with more care than I probably deserve. And even though you wouldn't mean to, I know that if you ever did hurt me, you'd be sorry. You don't have to make promises, Jack, not if you don't mean them. I know what you can give me right now, and what you can't. I

just know that any time I could have with you, even if it's just for a while, would be better than anything I've ever known in my life, and I want that. I want you."

It was all Jack needed to hear. She was right; he couldn't promise her much. He wasn't even sure he could promise her tomorrow. With demons lurking at every corner, they had no guarantees. What he could do was give her what she wanted from him, and maybe in return, he would gain what he craved.

His lips found hers, capturing and possessing them. She responded with zeal, clinging to his shoulders and pressing her body so tight against his that he could feel every curve through her dress. His arms came around her, his fingertips digging into her bare back as he clung to her. For as long as she allowed it, Addison was his. Breaking the kiss reluctantly, he took her hand in his and pulled.

"Come with me," he whispered.

She followed, seeming perplexed about his actions. Instead of taking her to the door that led back into the house, he led her to one that opened into a small storage shed.

"There are too many people in that damn house," he grumbled as he released her hand to rifle through the shed. "I want you all to myself for as long as I can have you."

He'd spoken the truth. He didn't want walls surrounding them, or ears on the other side listening in. He just wanted Addison and the moonlight.

"What are you looking for?" she asked as he sifted through boxes of Christmas decorations, his dad's army gear, and old baby clothes.

"Hold on, I think I found it," he said as he touched the large, plastic tote box Sarah kept stashed there. Written across the lid in black permanent marker was the word EMERGENCY. Popping the container open, he struck gold. When he turned back toward Addison, he had two thick wool blankets over his arm, a plastic bag full of tea light candles, and a lighter in his pocket. "Now we're in business," he said, leading her to a shadowed corner of the roof, further away from the door. "You wait right here. Don't move."

While Addison looked on, he spread one of the blankets on the roof. Folding the other, he left it nearby. Then, he busied himself with laying out the candles, surrounding the blanket in a ring of them before taking the time to light each one. By the time he turned to face her again, she was smiling. He extended a hand to her from the center of the ring of tiny flames. "Come here."

She obeyed, lifting the hem of her dress as she stepped over the perimeter of candles and onto the blanket. The firelight had the intended affect as all the little flames created a soft, red-orange glow that set her on fire with an ethereal glow. He pulled her close to him, reaching up to stroke one cheek with affection.

"You're like a flame, Addison. I think that's what I like most about you. That fire in you draws me in."

"Careful," she joked, "I might burn you."

He ran his thumb lightly over the plump cushion of her lips. "I might like it," he replied, his voice growing husky with desire.

Addison's reply was the hot caress of her velvety tongue across the pad of his thumb. That simple action sent a jolt of heat speeding through his veins, intensifying his already raging need. The heat pooled low in his groin, filling his sex and engorging it to almost painful limits. It had been so long since he'd been this close to a woman—a little over a year since Tracy's death, and there had been no once since her.

He reached up to the thin straps of her dress, his hands shaking as he pulled them away from her shoulders. He left them hanging against her arms, and leaned down to plant a feather-light kiss on her collarbone. She shivered at the touch of his lips.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight in that dress?” he asked, skimming his lips along her collarbone, toward her neck and the delicious temptation of her pulse thrumming just at the base.

“Your eyes did,” she murmured, “when you looked at me. I love the way you look at me. With my job, I’m exposed to so many men, but not one of them has ever seen the real me. They look and they give empty compliments, but none of them sees me. Not one of them knows me.”

“I see you,” he said, his thumb coming up to trace her jawline as his lips found her pulse. His tongue circled the thrumming artery as his teeth scraped the taut tendons surrounding it. She gasped and gripped his shoulders tighter, holding on as he suckled, tasting her skin for the first time. “I see everything about you,” he added, punctuating his words by claiming her lips again. “Addison,” he mumbled against her mouth. “Addie ... Beautiful Addie. Sweet Addie. Strong Addie. *My Addie.*”

Reaching up to the straps hanging against her arms, she pulled, allowing the flowing yellow dress to fall down her body and pool at her feet. He sucked in a ragged breath. His heart drummed against his ribs and his mouth went dry at the sight of her half-nude body.

“Yes,” she answered, eyes locking with his. “Yours.”

He lifted her in his arms, holding her tight as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He sank to the blanket with her, laying her down and coming over her. Her back arched as his hands began a slow exploration, running down from her shoulders toward the peaks begging for his touch through the cups of a simple white bra. The lace returned his caress, tickling his fingertips as he palmed her breasts. A low sigh escaped his lips as he kneaded them, his head swimming from just the pleasure of touching her. Her body was everything he had observed when she’d been on stage at Temptations, yet even more up close. Sinewy muscle and supple, feminine curves combined to create the perfect fantasy. Only, she was all too real, and all his, quivering as his thumbs flicked over her nipples through the lace and gasping with a breathless sigh.

Her hands came up to clutch his head, urging him on as he lowered his head between the plush mounds begging for more of his touch. With one swift tug, he had the lingerie down to her waist, causing her breasts to bounce free.

His erection grew even more painful at the sight of her nipples, like round cherries topping scoops of smooth ice cream. He reached beneath her, his fingers working at the bra clasp, while taking one of the pink buds between his lips. Addison gasped, her hips bucking against his as he suckled, rolling the little hardened nub with his tongue and taking more of her flesh deep into his mouth. He freed the clasp and tossed the bra aside, still feasting on her ample offering. His hand came up to the opposite breast, his fingers rolling that nipple and teasing it into a stiff peak. Her clamped lips couldn’t contain the soft whimpers stirring in her throat, and he smiled as he unlatched from the first breast and switched to the other. He brushed the nipple with his lips, causing her to jerk, her hold on his head tightening.

“New York is noisy,” he told her with a chuckle. “No one will hear you.”

She mewled again, clenching her teeth when he ran his tongue from one breast to the other and back again, teasing her nipples with playful nips. He bit down on one gently, scraping it with his teeth until she released a high-pitched moan. The sound was almost enough to bring his climax then and there. He fought for self-control, reminding himself that *he* was in control here, not his body. Snatching down his zipper and driving into her then and there sounded

appealing as hell, but a slow seduction would be the plan he'd stick to. He didn't even have to ask to know that Addison had never experienced this before. That he would be the first to give that to her filled him with a deep sense of pride. He wouldn't let her down.

Coming up to his knees, he grabbed the hem of his shirt and whipped it off over his head. She sat up, reaching for his belt buckle with urgency, attempting to snatch it loose. He covered her hand with his, stilling her busy fingers.

"Hey," he whispered, drawing her gaze up to his. "Tonight's about you," he told her. "Let me make love to you."

Her lips parted and her eyes grew heavy-lidded as she nodded.

Smiling, Jack reached down and cupped the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her fast-unraveling braid. Tilting her head back, he lowered his head for another kiss, this one slow, methodic, languid. With his tongue, he traced the seam of her lips and she opened to him, offering hers in return. Her hands left his belt and traveled upward. His ab muscles jumped and flexed in response to her fingers skimming the planes and forging a steady path upward. His breath hitched as she traced slow circles over his skin, making her leisurely way toward his chest.

He allowed her to explore, his fingers finishing the task of unbraiding her hair and leaving it hanging down her back. When he was done, he took her hands and lowered her to the blanket. He lifted her arms over her head, securing them by the wrists, imprisoning her with a tender but secure hold. Addison didn't fight him. She surrendered to his mastery, allowing him to hold her in the vulnerable position as his lips mated with hers. He trailed his fingertips over her skin, down from the insides of her wrists and arms, over her chest, pausing to stroke her nipples before continuing on. She squirmed as his touch skimmed her stomach, his thumb tracing a slow circle around the charm dangling from her belly button.

He paused at her hips, where the waistband of her white cotton panties met her skin. Parting her legs a bit, he turned his head to kiss the inside of one sinuous thigh. He trailed a gradual path downward, toward the apex of her thighs, brushing a row of gentle kisses along her skin.

"Jack." Addison shivered beneath him, his name a whispered plea on her lips.

The scent of her arousal, heady and sweet, invaded his senses to combine with the sound and feel of her to drive him insane. He pressed his lips to her sex, his mouth watering as he encountered the moisture dampening the strip of cotton separating them. His fingers came up to replace his mouth, stroking her through the fabric.

She writhed in his hold, her fingers twisting the blanket and her back bowing up off the roof. "Oh, God ... Jack ..." she panted, her chest heaving as she fought for air. Her reaction to his touch was intoxicating. If she didn't stop, his ego might just be too big to fit back through the door when this was over. "Please ..."

He obeyed her silent plea for more and removed the final barrier separating them. His mouth went dry as he encountered the smooth, bare lips of her sex and the slick inner folds dewy with her desire for him.

"Ah, Addie," he murmured, his cock throbbing at the feel of her, like satin to his fingertips. He stroked in slow circles, finding the little nub buried in the seam and teasing it with his thumb. "You're so ..." he trailed off, his throat constricted as a flood of warmth and moisture rewarded his caresses.

*Wet. Hot. So damned good.*

The words never came, because he couldn't form a coherent thought by now, let alone a string of syllables to make words. His index finger found the tight opening to her passage and dipped just inside of it, tracing the rim before delving farther in. With his other hand, he worked to free himself from his jeans while still stroking her insides in a steady rhythm. Her sheath captured him, tightening around first one, then a second finger as he pumped them in and out of her. Addison's hips thrust to meet his hand, her moans wild and untamed now. Her cheeks had flushed, her lips parted and eyes squeezed shut. He watched her face closely, not wanting to miss a moment once he realized a climax would come any second.

"That's it, Addie," he whispered, lowering his mouth to her ear and capturing the shell between his lips. "Let go ... you're almost there."

She wrapped her arms around him, delirious with pleasure, her hips bucking in steady concert with his thrusting fingers. He captured her lips in a kiss the moment she screamed out in ecstasy. Then her inner muscles began pulsating around his fingers. He kept a slow but steady rhythm, drawing out every second of her glorious ending, making it last as long as he could. Addison trembled in his arms, a chorus of muffled groans echoing from her mouth into his. When she stilled and went limp, he withdrew his fingers, finding them soaked in her essence. He wanted more. He wanted to feel that same slick heat around his yearning cock.

As she recovered from her release, he finished unbuckling his belt and freeing himself from his jeans. His erection sprang free, thick and engorged. She reached for him. He braced himself over her on his elbows and allowed her to palm him. His lips parted on a hoarse cry as her smooth hand stroked him, the fingers gripping with the perfect amount of pressure. She kissed him, drinking from his mouth with fervor as she fondled him, exploring the length from the tip to the base and stroking back up again. His hips moved of their own accord, thrusting the hardened length further into her palm.

"I want ... inside you ... Addie," he growled, his muscles burning from the strain of holding back, when all he wanted to do was bury himself in her.

She guided him toward the weeping mouth of her core and raised her hips to him. "Yes, Jack," she sighed.

He sighed with relief as he slid into her inch by exquisite inch. His arms trembled from bearing his weight, and sweat broke out along his brow. Her shuddering thighs gripped him as he buried himself in her to the hilt. He could feel her rapid breathing against his shoulder, and every bare inch of her pressed up against him. Her lips grazed the side of his neck, and her fingers caused a tremor to roll down his spine.

Unable to hold back any longer, he withdrew and plunged, struck dumb by the smooth glide and ripples of her inner flesh around him. He gazed down at her as they found a steady rhythm, a concert of movement as synchronized as a dance. Her hips moved in time with his, her body undulating beneath him in a hypnotic dance. He drank in his fill of her, his gaze raking her from the top of her fiery head, to her passion-flushed face, and down, down her body to where it connected with his.

Her hands grazed his back, her lips pressed against his ear as she whispered her pleasure to him.

"Yes, Jack ... that feels ... oh, don't stop."

Her words set him on fire, emboldening him. Lifting her hips, he increased his rhythm, lowering his head to her breasts and catching one with his mouth as his thrusts became frenzied and wild. She clung to him, her legs wrapped around his waist as she held on for the ride. The

melody of her moans mingled with his hoarse cries over the staccato rhythm of their bodies joining and separating.

“Addie,” he groaned, that familiar tension coiling just below his sex telling him the end was near.

She was close, too. He gritted his teeth and fought for more time, but the way his climax nipped at his heels, he wasn’t going to make it. With a few more strokes, he spent, driving into her in one last forceful thrust. Addison splintered, muffling her cries against his shoulder as her insides clenched him with a powerful squeeze. Jack couldn’t make a sound, his breath robbed away by the intense pleasure unfurling inside of him and releasing, spilling into her in a hot, wet gush.

They lay together in silence for a while. His erection had waned, but he remained nestled inside of her, content to stay there. Their breaths rung out in noisy harmony as they lay listening to the myriad of sounds coming from the city below them. He pulled away from her, reluctant to separate, but not wanting to crush her with his weight. He rolled to his side and found the second blanket, opening it and covering them both. When he turned back to her, he found her staring at him, awe widening her eyes.

“What is it?” he asked, dread filling him in an instant. Had he been mistaken about how good their lovemaking had been? For him, it had been blissful but ... “I didn’t disappoint, did I?”

Her look of awe melted into one of shock. “What? No! Of course not! It’s just ... okay, this is embarrassing.”

She turned onto her back, avoiding his gaze. He propped his elbow, head on his palm, and turned to her. “Come on, you can tell me. After that, there isn’t much you can hide from me now.”

Addison sighed, closing her eyes. “I’ve never had an orgasm before, okay? So ... that was a new experience for me.”

His lips twitched as he fought back a laugh; he didn’t want her to think he was making fun of her. He schooled his face into a calm expression as she opened her eyes and glanced over at him. “Addie, you shouldn’t be embarrassed. Those guys you used to date should be. What kind of jackass doesn’t know how to make a girl’s toes curl?”

She grinned. “Oh, you curled more than my toes, mister.”

Reaching across the space between them, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Anyone who could be with you, and be so selfish not to give you pleasure, doesn’t know what he’s missing. I fully enjoyed exploring you ... and I can’t wait to go back for more.”

She laid her head against the blanket and curled up against him with a sigh. “Who knows when that’ll be? Tomorrow, it’s back to reality.”

He wrapped his arm around her and held her close, laying his head beside hers. “Yes, well, a harsh reality is always easier to face when you don’t have to do it alone.”

## Chapter 14: Transformation

When Jack returned to his bedroom, he found Addison sitting cross-legged on the bed, head bent over her journal. After coming back down from the roof, they'd taken turns in the shower. The house had gone quiet for the night, and they'd been lucky not to encounter anyone as they snuck back in. He didn't need the drama of the third degree that would ensue if they got caught coming from the roof with wrinkled clothes and, in Addison's case, messy hair. Sarah would want to know if it was serious, and if he was in love. Micah would make inappropriate jokes. His dad would lecture him about using protection—which he'd forgotten in a moment of stupidity. Reniel would have harangued him, too, but this time about not mixing his personal life with his job.

He'd let Addison go first, waiting in the bedroom and trying not to picture her standing beneath the spray with suds running over her curves. That line of thought could only lead to him joining her, lifting her up, and pressing her against the tiles. Not something he wanted to do in his parents' house. Filing that idea away for later, he'd waited his turn.

The moment he'd left, Addison had produced her journal and started writing. Her pen moved over the pages in a frenzy, her bare legs crossed in front of her. She wore an oversized t-shirt and shorts, her feet bare. The messy bun on top of her head slouched toward her forehead, and a riot of loose strands stroked her face and neck. She looked so adorable and sexy that he wanted to jump on the bed, toss that notebook aside, and curl her toes a few more times before the night ended. Instead, he closed the door and settled for easing onto the edge of the bed and waiting for her to finish.

He'd sat there for a few moments when he noticed the Guardian's medallion resting next to her on the bed. Beside it, the block of gold. His gaze snapped up to her in surprise.

"What's this?" he asked, seeming to break her trance.

She started, glancing up at him. "Oh, sorry, Jack. I didn't hear you come in."

"You really do retreat to another world when you're writing."

"I guess I do," she replied with a sheepish smile.

"What are you writing about?" A sly smile stretched across his face. "The different parts of your body that just got curled?"

She reached over and slapped his knee, laughing. "Not even. Take a look. See for yourself."

She pushed the book across the bed toward him, and he picked it up, curiosity gripping him as he glanced down at the pages. Her handwriting looked a bit messy and frenzied, but he could read it just fine.

*I've decided that I'm ready to be a Guardian. It's time for me to accept who and what I am. That includes embracing both sides of me, not just the Naphil part. My mother is a Guardian, which means the blood flows in my veins. Maybe my life doesn't have to just be about darkness and death. Maybe this is my chance to be something, to do something good ... something good beyond just being the one to wear the Seal of Solomon. So, I'm doing it tonight. I'm terrified out of my mind, but I know that I don't have to do this alone. I have Jack, and he's already taught me a lot about what it means to be there for someone. And even though he pretends to hate me, I know I have Micah. This is the first time in my life I've ever had more than*

*just myself to depend on. I didn't realize until tonight how bad I wanted it. Now that it's within my reach, I have more hope than ever that my past doesn't have to be my future. Hell, it doesn't even have to be my present.*

He glanced up at her to find her smiling at him. "Are you sure you're ready?" he asked. "Once you do this, there's no going back."

She scooted closer to him on the bed, reached out, and slid her fingers between his. "I'm surer of this than anything I've ever done," she answered. "I want to tell you something about myself, Jack. Something no one else knows about except my mom. Maybe then, you'll understand why I want this so much."

Leaning back against the headboard, he nodded. "Okay, I'm listening."

She took a deep breath, running her hands through her hair and closing her eyes. She fell silent for a few seconds, with him content to leave her be. Whatever this could be, it was hard for her to talk about, and the fact that she wanted to share it with him meant a lot. She opened her eyes and began.

"Of course, you know I never knew my father. My mother would never talk about him, and when I asked about him, she'd get so pissed. She'd yell at me and tell me I didn't need to know anything about him. But my mom didn't stay single. Before the drugs took their toll, she was pretty, but for some reason, she attracted the assholes. Drunks, druggies, womanizers, abusers ... you name it. Like she had a target on her back."

"Nothing can be worse than getting knocked up by a demon," he muttered with a shake of his head.

She shrugged. "Now that I know this, I think it's why she always aimed so low. She didn't think she was worth better. Anyway, most of the guys came and went like the door to our trailer was revolving. But there was this one guy named Buck ... well, he stuck around so long, they finally up and got married."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. He didn't know Addison had a stepfather. "Well, where is he now?"

She lowered her eyes. "Dead."

Something about her tone filled him with dread. Leaning toward her, he lowered his voice. "Dead, how?"

When she glanced back up at him, her eyes were turbulent, her jaw clenched.

"He would never just leave me alone," she said, her hands shaking and her voice hoarse. She clenched them in her lap, but that didn't stop the shaking. "He was always there, telling me I was nothing but trailer trash, my mom a whore. When he would slap her around and I'd try to stop him, he'd throw me across the room and tell me to mind my business unless I wanted some, too. At some point, I just stopped trying. If she wouldn't fight back or speak up for herself, I was damned if I'd keep doing it."

His brow furrowed in sympathy. "No kid should have to go through that."

"Oh, it gets worse," she retorted, shaking her head. "When I got older, he started noticing. By fifteen, I was filled out in all the right places and he wasn't shy about telling me he liked what he saw. He'd make fun of me when I wore shorts or a skirt and tell me I looked like a streetwalker, but anytime my back turned, I could feel him watching me." A violent shiver rocked her, as if the memory made her skin crawl. "I started spending more time away from home, because I was afraid of him. I was scared that one day, Mama wouldn't be around and he'd try something."

Jack felt like his teeth were going to shatter from how hard his jaw had clenched. He found himself glad this guy was dead. “What happened, Addie? What did he do to you?”

“Nothing really, at first. Just little stuff. Like, he would brush up against me on purpose as an excuse to feel me up. You know, that trailer’s not very big, and he took full advantage of that. Then he got bolder, trying to touch me when no one was looking. I’d always push him away, and that made him angry. When he was angry, he would drink. When he was drunk, he was mean. He’d call me a slut and throw beer cans at me ... full beer cans. Then he would tell me he knew I was giving it up to the boys at school, so he didn’t know why I acted like such a prude around him.”

“And your mom allowed this?”

“Mama was high all the time.”

Her voice had a biting edge to it now, and behind her hardened exterior, he could see the young girl who had only wanted someone to stand up for her.

“She never knew what was happening, and when she did, she didn’t care. ‘Don’t fight him, Addie’. That’s what she used to say. ‘It’s better if you don’t fight’.”

He lowered his head, sure that rage would make him do something stupid—like take a trip back to New Orleans and back to that trailer. Elizabeth Monroe didn’t want to see him coming. “Please tell me ... he didn’t ...”

She shook her head, blinking back tears. “He tried. One day, he came at me when he was drunk. I was in the kitchen washing dishes, and he came trying to get a handful. By then, I was seventeen, and I’d just had enough. I was counting the days until graduation and I was going to leave that trailer and not look back. I thought I could bide my time, keep avoiding him ... but that night, I just snapped. I reached into the sink and pulled out a butcher knife. I turned it on him and swiped for his throat. When I missed, he grabbed my wrist and twisted it, making me drop the knife. Then he punched me in the face, almost knocking me out.”

“Jesus.” He pressed a hand to his forehead, swallowing past the lump of raw anger threatening to choke him. He didn’t want to hear any more, but knew she had to get this out. She’d never told a soul, and it seemed clear the weight had become too much to bear.

“He dragged me to the living room and threw me on the couch. He said he was tired of waiting for me to come to my senses, and he was going to get what he wanted whether I liked it or not. I tried to fight him, but he overpowered me and started tearing at my clothes. Well, by then, I’d pretty much mastered keeping my anger under control. I didn’t want to let the dark thoughts take over, and I didn’t want to do anything bad. That day, though, I didn’t care anymore. I let every dark thought I’d ever had run loose in my mind and I directed it all at him. Years’ worth of anger and pain, and I just released it in one wave like it was nothing. By the time the haze cleared from my eyes, he was gone.”

“Gone? Not dead?”

Addison laughed. “Oh, he was dead all right. By gone, I mean there was literally no body. He just kind of ... exploded.”

His jaw dropped and he felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. “You mean ... as in ...” He couldn’t even form words; he was so flabbergasted.

She cringed. “Yeah, sorry if it’s kind of gory, but it’s what happened. It took me hours to collect the body parts that were left and mop up all the blood. It was everywhere, all over me. I didn’t think I’d ever come clean in the shower.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “Wow ... wow, Addison.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “You should have seen my mom’s face when she came home and found me in the middle of cleanup. I never understood why she could’ve been so calm about it all. She helped me clean it up and burn what remained of him. After that, we never talked about it again, and she never had another boyfriend. I realize now, it’s because she knew I was a Naphil. She knew what I was capable of.”

“Hey,” he said, reaching up to cup her face. “You are capable of good, too. What you did ... you couldn’t help it. You didn’t know it would happen. And to be honest, I don’t think anyone will miss that asshole. He had it coming, and he deserved what he got. But what happened doesn’t define you. It isn’t who you are.”

She smiled. “It has been for a long time,” she whispered. “I’ve let killing Buck define me for most of my adult life, but tonight, I want to change that. I don’t want to let it anymore. I want the inner light that you have, Jack. I want it because I know it’ll chase away the darkness in me. Maybe it’ll still be a little dark in there, but it won’t be able to rule me anymore. I can feel it.”

He nodded. “I understand. If you want, I’ll stay with you, help you.”

She lifted the medallion from the bed and held it up between them. “I’d like that. I need to know what to do with this.”

He took the medallion from her and studied it. The cross was a match for the one on his chest, with a dove carrying an olive branch in its mouth and perched on one of the beams. The symbol had begun to lose its meaning for him over the years. Watching Addison make her transformation would bring it all back for him.

“Take your shirt off,” he said.

She laughed. “Can’t that wait until later? Geez, you horn dog.”

He chuckled. “Not for that, woman. Just do it.”

She did as he asked, and he sighed with relief to find she wore a bra. If she hadn’t been, he’d have proven himself to be the horny animal she’d accused him of being.

“This is the hard part,” he said, dangling the medallion by its chain. “We call this taking the mark. This medallion is going to react with your DNA. When it touches your skin, it will recognize you as a Guardian and brand you. That’s how you’ll get the mark on your chest. It hurts, and not just because of the brand. Something inside of you will shift. Because you’re a Naphil, I have no way of knowing if it’ll be easier or not, but it’s necessary. The inner light has to take hold and fill you.”

She lowered her head. “I’m ready.”

He obliged her by looping the chain around her neck, allowing the pendant to rest just above her left breast. Then, he sat back and waited.

It didn’t take long for the power of the medallion to take hold. Addison’s lips parted on a silent cry of pain as the gold began to glow, sizzling against her skin. Jack caught her when she pitched forward, writhing in pain. The inner light was filling her. Turning her so that her back rested against his chest, he put his arms around her and held on tight.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, stroking her hair as she continued jerking and writhing against him, whimpering in pain. “It won’t be long. Just hang in there.”

Her limbs bent and then straightened in spasms, her head lolling against his shoulder. He gave her a pillow at just the right moment. She buried her face in it as a loud scream tore from her. It seemed like hours passed before she stilled, her breath coming in ragged gasps. He glanced down at her to find that the chain had disintegrated, leaving only the smooth, black tattoo of the Guardian’s symbol on her chest. Addison gave him a weak smile.

“That wasn’t so bad.”

He snorted. “You don’t have to play tough for me. I remember taking the mark like it was yesterday. That shit burns.”

She nodded. “Like fire in your veins. But it was worth it. I feel ... I don’t know, different.”

“That’s your light,” he answered. “The intensity you’re experiencing right now fades over time, but you’ll always be aware that it’s there. Eventually, I’ll teach you how to pull on it and use it. It’ll be interesting to see how it works with you being a Naphil.”

“I feel like a really cool experiment. No one seems to know what to do with me,” she said, taking her time sitting up before reaching for the gold brick. “Now, explain what this is all about?”

He smiled and took the block of gold from her. Turning it over in his hands, he caressed the markings running down the front with this thumb. “This is Hebrew for Phanuel. He’s an angel. Back before the war reached the boiling point, he was the angel whose job it was to dispatch demons back to hell. After a while, though, they multiplied, and of course, more and more of them started breaking the rules. It became a bit much for him to handle alone. So he went to God and asked for help. God gave him thousands of these gold bricks, which Phanuel blessed with his powers. It is what our weapons are made of, and allows us to send those bastards back to Hell where they belong.”

Frowning, she took the brick from him. “So, how do you turn it into a gun?”

He laughed. “Well, you can make it whatever you want. Micah made his into a set of knives. I chose a pistol because it’s what I saw my dad use growing up, and he was taking me to the range from the time I turned thirteen. Just hold it, close your eyes, and imagine the weapon of your choice. Careful, though. You get one shot and whatever weapon you choose, you’re stuck with it.”

She did what he instructed, and after a few seconds, the gold brick in her hands began to morph and shift. When Addison opened her eyes, she held a small, .22 caliber pistol.

“Nice,” he said, nodding his approval.

She twirled the gun and held it up with a grin. “I added my own touch.”

He laughed at what he found etched into the grip. Engraved in a swirling scrawl, he saw the shortened version of her name, ‘Addie’, surrounded by thorny vines and roses. “It’s perfect for you. Are you happy with it?”

Dropping the weapon onto the bed, she launched herself at him, laughing out loud. She threw her arms around him and kissed him with relish.

Jack fell back against the pillows, his arms coming up to embrace her. He welcomed her searching lips, opening to her and reveling in the moment of happiness. One of just a few times he’d ever seen her smile, and he liked it.

When she pulled away, they were both breathless, her lips pink from the pressure of their kiss, eyes shining brightly.

“Just now, I’m happy with everything,” she whispered.

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They arrived in Addis Ababa—the capital of Ethiopia—the following evening. After a long, fourteen-hour flight, Addison was exhausted, sore from sitting so long, and hungry. Everything had gone pretty well. They’d descended from Jack’s room that morning to find the kitchen already occupied by Micah and Sarah whipping up breakfast together. Addison had

ignored Micah's knowing look and volunteered to help Sarah make toast—the only food in the kitchen she could make without burning.

“Something's different about you,” Sarah had observed as they stood side by side in the kitchen. She'd glanced up from the bowl full of eggs she was scrambling and set her sharp, perceptive gaze on Addison.

With a smile, Addison had pulled down the neck of her t-shirt, showing Sarah her mark. “That's because I am.”

Sarah had grinned, going back to beating her eggs. “I knew there was something. I'm happy for you, Addison. You've made a powerful decision. Your life will be forever changed.”

“That's the goal,” she'd replied with cheer. Just the night before, everything had seemed so bleak. Then Jack came and changed her mind. Giving hope its day hadn't blown up in her face. It had gotten her what she wanted—a purpose, a way to combat the darkness inside her, a person to call her own ... maybe forever.

“Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle,” Micah mumbled, glancing at her over his shoulder. He stood at the gas range wearing an apron ridiculously too small for his wide chest, pouring pancake batter onto a griddle. “Guess you've got some sense after all, *cher*.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I've got more sense than a monkey's uncle, that's for sure.”

Micah had chuckled and gone back to flipping pancakes. Addison had then shared the good news with everyone around the breakfast table. Sitting in the cozy kitchen over pancakes and having people celebrate an accomplishment with her had felt surreal. She was almost loath to leave the little New York townhouse, but they couldn't avoid what would come next. She told herself that in the days to come, she would cling to the memories she'd made here with these people, with Jack. They would serve as a reminder when things got tough—and she had no delusions that they wouldn't.

Reniel came for them at nine a.m. sharp with all the travel documents necessary for the trip. Addison smiled as she glanced at her passport.

“It's good to have friends upstairs,” she murmured.

“There are some perks,” Jack agreed, slinging a duffle bag over his shoulder and taking the one she'd borrowed from Carmen under his arm. Because she and Carmen were of similar size and build, she'd offered to loan Addison more clothes. Addison had accepted with thanks. Taking her own bag as a carry-on, she'd settled in for a long day journaling and sleeping on the plane. Along for the trip came Vivian, who would be needed. The Order of the Seal of Solomon weren't just going to let the ring go without proof that Addison had been chosen to use the seal. An Oracle could provide them that confirmation.

“I see our escort has arrived,” Reniel remarked as they neared the baggage claim of Bole International Airport.

The angel approached a rail-thin man almost as tall as him. His skin shone a beautiful shade of copper and he possessed a head full of lush, ebony curls. He extended his arms to the big angel and embraced him, leaning in to kiss him three times on each cheek. The two spoke in hushed tones for a moment before Reniel led the man toward their group.

“Everyone,” he said, “this is *Ato* Hakim. He is of the Order, sent to greet us and act as our escort.”

“Greetings, and welcome to Africa,” Hakim said with a nod. He didn't smile, but she liked the kindness to his long face. He approached Vivian first. “You have the mark of an Oracle,” he observed.

Vivian flashed a polite smile and extended her right hand. Just between her thumb and forefinger sat a small, raised circle that looked like a burn or birthmark at first glance. Addison had noticed Carmen bore the same mark.

"I'm Vivian Bennett," she said. "And yes, I am an Oracle."

He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, bowed over it in reverence. "It is an honor, *Weizero* Vivian."

She leaned toward Reniel and whispered, "What did he call her?"

"It is a form of address for a married woman here," Reniel hissed back. "Men are *Ato*, unmarried women are *Weizerit*."

Addison fell silent as Hakim greeted the rest of their group. He shook hands with the men and greeted them, taking his time and asking them about their trip. He came to Addison last. He studied her with unmasked curiosity, his dark eyes assessing.

"And you must be *Weizerit* Addison," he said.

She extended her hand to him and he took it, shaking it with confidence she did not feel. "I am. Thank you for meeting us here. I know there are doubts about me, but—"

"No, no," Hakim chastised with a click of his tongue. "First, we will make you comfortable and see to your needs—rooms, food, and drink. Then, we will discuss the important matter. In the meantime, it is an honor to make your acquaintance."

"Oh, um ... you, too," she said, unsure of how to talk to this man.

"Ethiopian greetings are always very formal," Reniel told her as they waited for their bags to arrive on the carousel. "And the men and women of the Order are especially traditional. They may not seem warm, but Hakim is a kind man who is dedicated to the cause. You will grow used to their ways."

"I know all about hospitality," she quipped. "I'm from the South, after all."

It didn't take them long to retrieve their bags. The moment they left the airport, two identical black sedans rolled up to them. Addison had always pictured Africa much in a different way ... but then, she'd also known it must be more than what you saw on T.V. or in National Geographic. Addis Ababa was a huge city, one of the largest in the world, Hakim told them as they navigated the main thoroughfare, Churchill Avenue. The city resembled a jumble of architecture, with skyscrapers as tall as any in New York.

She gasped and pressed her face against the window as they pulled up to one of the most beautiful buildings she'd ever seen.

"Oh, my God, what is this place?" she asked.

"We have come to the Haile Selassie Church. It is also known as the Holy Trinity Cathedral, if that is simpler for you to remember," Hakim answered from the front seat.

Jack and Micah glanced out from beside her at the sprawling, grey stone church looming over them. Sculptures of crosses and angels stretched toward the sky from the parapets, and pillared archways led the way inside. A massive, dome-topped structure sat behind the square front of the church. The intricacy of the architecture took her breath away with its detailed carvings in hypnotic, curving lines and scrolls.

"It's so beautiful," she murmured as the car circled around behind the church.

"Haile Selassie has been the home of our order since the nineteen-fifties," Hakim told them as the driver parked. "The danger of what we have been tasked with has required us to relocate several times to keep the Seal out of the reach of those who seek to use it for evil. In the catacombs beneath this cathedral, we live peacefully—protecting always that which our order has been entrusted with." They left the car, following Hakim to a side entrance. "I must ask that

you remove your shoes before entering, for this ground is sacred,” Hakim added, slipping out of his own sandals as they paused at the entrance. Addison obeyed, pushing her sneakers into her bag.

Reniel and Vivian joined them, having followed in the second car, and the group entered the church as one. They all fell silent as they found themselves in the massive sanctuary, surrounded by more pillared archways, painted ceilings, and stunning, stained windows. Addison imagined the place must be even more beautiful when the sun shone through the multi-colored glass. Behind each archway lay a window, in which was fixed a stained-glass scene from the history of the Bible. She stared at them one by one—the temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden, Noah and the ark, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, the Last Supper, and the crucifixion of Christ. This place was a feast for the eyes, and everywhere she looked, she found something new to wonder over.

Hakim spoke in passing to them about the history of the church, and how it was built to commemorate Ethiopia’s liberation from the occupation of Italy. Beyond the church, he told them, was a burial ground where those who had fought for Ethiopian freedom were buried. The two large, stone crypts located near the front of the church held the remains of Emperor Haile Selassie and his wife. Hakim told them that Haile was responsible for opposing the occupation by Italy, as well as pushing widespread reform and modernization in Ethiopia.

“And now,” Hakim said as they reached another door situated behind the church’s altar, “we will proceed into the catacombs. This requires us to walk through the crypts, where more of the Imperial family are buried. The experience can be unnerving for those who have never been in such a place, but I promise you, we will not linger.”

He opened the door to reveal a dark, narrow staircase that curved at a steep downward incline.

Exchanging a glance with Jack, Addison slipped one hand in his and held on tight as they stepped into darkness and began to descend.

## Chapter 15: The Seal

Jack hadn't known what to expect when Hakim had told them that the Order of the Seal of Solomon had taken up residence in underground catacombs. Maybe a few dark, damp caves where the men and women of the order lived like monks. As they'd descended the staircase, it had seemed his assumptions were correct, at first.

But then, Hakim had led them through yet another stone door at the end that took them into a place as beautiful as the cathedral above.

Cloisters carved from gleaming wood yawned above them, and marble tiles shone below. Tapestries bearing the colors of Ethiopia, and many likenesses of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, lined the walls. The queen, Jack could see, represented a great source of pride for the Order. He remembered Reniel telling him that Ethiopians prided themselves on their lineage, as they were certain they descended from the Queen of Sheba's son by King Solomon, Menelik.

Men and women passed them on either side, wearing white robes embroidered in brilliant gold and that swept the floor. However, Hakim did not greet them, and they did not acknowledge him or his guests. They seemed busy at some sort of prayer, their voices ringing out in a hypnotic chant in a language he could not identify. The tones all mingled until they sounded like one, reverberating from the high ceilings and echoing down the long corridor.

Hakim wasted no time escorting them to a suite of rooms all connected to a single living area. The furniture was opulent and beautiful, made from carved mahogany wood and rich damask upholstery. Jack and Micah were given quarters to share, while Vivian and Addison took the room next door. Reniel took a third, smaller chamber to himself, though Jack doubted he would use it. Angels only ate or slept to pass time or because they enjoyed it—not because their body needed sustenance or rest.

"Now this is what I'm talkin' about, *podna*," Micah said with a wide grin as he and Jack explored their room. Two large, queen-sized beds with massive oak posters stretching up toward the ceiling took up two corners of the room, with several chairs, couches, and tables filling in the rest of the space. Their private bathroom had a shower stall with granite tiles and a large tub big enough for five, with water jets. "They couldn't 'a done better had they put us up at the Ritz."

Jack inspected the mantle over a large, stone fireplace, and the solid gold figurines lining it. "I shouldn't have been surprised. The Order descends from one of the wealthiest men in the history of the world, and the Queen of Sheba wasn't exactly hurting for money, either. These people have expensive taste."

Micah fell back onto his back with a sigh of ecstasy. "Ahhh, wake me when it's time to eat."

Micah's nap didn't last long. After a short time, someone knocked on the door and entered, arms brimming with traditional Ethiopian clothing and with a summons to dinner in one hour. The guys took turns in the bathroom showering and dressing, and by the time their escort returned, had dressed in the provided clothes. Jack was surprised they'd been able to find garments to fit Micah's oversized frame. He looked nothing like his usual, laid back self in the rich, all-white ensemble. He wore identical pieces, consisting of pants, a tunic that hugged his chest and waist before falling away to the knee, and a rich vest that was also white, but embroidered with scarlet thread. They encountered Addison and Vivian in the sprawling living area connecting their suites. The ladies had dressed in traditional, white Ethiopian garb, as well.

Both their gowns were white and trimmed in the same rich red. A white scarf fringed with red tassels covered both their heads and wound around their necks.

Someone led them back through the winding, ominous halls, and to a dining room just as opulent as the rest of the underground compound. A long table big enough for at least fifty was already occupied by twenty men and women in white robes. At the head of the table sat the woman Jack assumed must be the head of the Order. Of the entire table full of white-garbed people, she was the only one wearing all scarlet. From her headwear to her gown, she looked like a ruby queen presiding over her white court.

Their group sat down, and dinner was served—a far less formal affair once everyone had been introduced. He couldn't remember half the names of the people he met, but they were friendly. Laughter and conversation flowed without strain as they served themselves from large dishes shared by groups of four. They found no utensils, and all foods had to be eaten with the right hand, using flat bread to scoop up spicy meats, pastes, vegetables, and other things Jack couldn't name but which tasted like heaven. Sweet, honeyed wine was served, and afterwards, the best coffee he'd ever had. Café Du Monde had nothing on this.

With the meal over, they were escorted from the dining hall to an adjoining room with no furniture and only thick, patterned rugs and cushions, which they were told to sit on. The cushions had been arranged in a large circle, and in the center sat a small, square, golden altar no bigger than a footstool. Jack recognized the markings on either side as the Seal of Solomon—the symbol engraved into the ring endowed with the power they needed to defeat Eligos and his ten. The Seal was everywhere, he noticed—on the walls, the rugs, on tapestries hanging from the ceilings, as well as the red scarves each member of the order produced from beneath their cushions and hung around their necks as they knelt. He followed suit, and so did the rest of their party as they joined the Order. Reniel knelt beside him, silent and stoic as he observed the proceedings.

The red-garbed woman stepped into the center of the circle, turning to look them each in the eye as she spoke. A short, plump woman with deep, ebony skin and glittering dark eyes, her presence proved commanding.

“We have gathered here tonight to discuss a matter of utmost importance. For millennia, our Order has protected the ring bearing the Seal of Solomon. Yahweh was forced to strip the ring of its power when King Solomon went against his commands, but we were promised another bearer of the ring in time ... His appointed. And now, the time has come. Demons have overstepped their bounds and dared to go against the boundaries set for them at the dawning of this war. The Great Duke and his horde must be stopped. The angel Reniel has informed me that the chosen one is in our midst. I do not need to remind you all of how many imposters there have been over the years. It is our duty to protect the ring, while still abiding by the will of Yahweh. An Oracle has been brought into our midst, and she will offer us the proof we require that one, *Weizerit* Addison, is indeed the chosen one. Come forth, both Oracle and chosen ring bearer.”

Addison helped Vivian to her feet, and the two met the priestess in the center of the circle. She gestured toward the little golden altar.

“Kneel, and join your hands upon the altar.”

The red priestess backed away from the two kneeling women and folded her hands in front of her. Addison and Vivian clasped hands and rested them on the golden surface.

“*Weizero* Vivian, I know that as an Oracle, you are bound to tell us the truth of what you find in the heart of this young woman. It is for this reason that we trust you to tell us what you see when you peer into her soul.”

Jack caught the almost imperceptible tick of Addison's jaw and the widening of her eyes. She darted a glance at him, and he gave her a reassuring nod. *Relax*, he mouthed to her. Addison must be scared to death at what Vivian would find when she looked inside her. An Oracle had the position to strip away every layer of a person and discover the truth about them. All of her secrets would be laid bare. By the time it was over, his great-grandmother would know more about Addison than Jack did. However, he wasn't worried. He was still discovering all there was to know about Addison, but what he did know encouraged him. She was the one, just like Reniel had told them, and soon, the gathered members of the Order would know it, too.

Vivian tightened her grip on Addison's hand and dark, coffee-colored fingers intertwined with apricot. The gnarled, veiny hands of his great-grandmother were still strong as she gripped Addison's and held on tight. All at once, the irises of her eyes faded and a white glow emanated from them, illuminating the whites, as well. Addison started, but didn't move or let go as Vivian leaned forward, staring deep into her eyes.

For a while, no one spoke, and no one moved. Everyone on the outer edge of the circle sat in silence and watched as the two women gazed at each other. After a while, Vivian began to tremble. At first, it started as a small shiver, and increased into full-fledged tremors that wracked her slight body.

Jack clenched his fists in his lap, determined not to move a muscle. An Oracle's power often manifested in odd physical symptoms. The dutiful great-grandson in him wanted to make sure she was all right; the Guardian knew better. Vivian would tear him a new one if he interrupted one of her trances.

Addison had grown afraid. Her gaze darted around the circle as she seemed to silently ask what was happening. Jack hoped she found reassurance from his level stare.

When Vivian let go and fell back onto the rug in a heap, Jack stood. Rushing to her side, he knelt beside her and pressed a hand to her cheek. His great-grandmother stared up at him with unfocused, brown eyes.

"Daughter of the Great Duke ... yet, a bearer of light with the Guardians' seal ... a strong heart ... Addison Monroe is the one," she rasped, before closing her eyes and curling into Jack's chest. She'd lost consciousness, but at her age, it was normal for an Oracle to experience intense fatigue after focusing so much of their power in one trance.

As Jack took Vivian into his arms and stood, a chorus of gasps rang out through the circle. The murmurs turned to cries and many white-robed figures shot to their feet around them.

He glanced up and gasped, too, as he discovered the source of the commotion. Addison sat across from him, her lips parted as her breath came in rapid gasps.

"What?" she asked, glancing around at the members of the Order in confusion. "What's everyone staring at?"

The red priestess came toward them, offering Addison a hand mirror. She glanced into it, seeing what Jack and everyone else in the room had already seen. On her forehead, a white symbol had appeared, glowing white and burning bright ...

The Seal of Solomon.

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"How does this thing work, anyway?"

Jack's eyes glittered like polished silver as he looked from her, down to the ring hanging from a chain and resting safe against her sternum. The Order had handed it over without an

ounce of trouble—but quite a bit of ceremony. It neared one a.m. and they'd just left the catacombs and the safe haven of the Order for a bit of fresh air. Just a block away from the cathedral, they could still see its towering parapets and the looming figures of angels against the full, luminescent moon. The ring had been made for a man's hand—far too big for even her thumb, so Addison had been given a simple silver chain to hang the ring from around her neck.

"Reniel said you would know how to use it when the time came," he said, reaching out to lift the ring from against her chest. His fingers brushed her bare skin, sending a little thrill through her. She knew they were supposed to be thinking about their mission and all, but he made it easy to forget. Jack proved one very tempting distraction.

"It's hard to believe," he murmured, his thumb and forefinger caressing the ring, "that the weapon we will use to bring down Eligos is something so small."

"Hey, never underestimate the small things," she said with a smile. "Or, even the ugly things. This ring is hideous."

He chuckled. "It's not so bad."

It was a heavy object, made of half iron, half brass, carved with a hexagram and markings that Reniel told them translated into the Tetragrammaton, or the unspeakable name of God. It also held four gemstones, which represented the four elements—earth, water, air, fire. Addison supposed in its day, it might have been considered a beautiful piece of jewelry, but to her, it just looked gaudy. Jack let go of the ring and let it slip back to its place inside her tank top. He threaded his fingers through hers and they continued on their sedate walk.

"This place is beautiful," she remarked, "and we've only seen a little bit of it. I wish we could stay longer."

Reniel had informed them that they would depart first thing in the morning on a flight home. Better for the Order if Addison wasn't close enough to draw demons to their hiding place. The Order had been safe beneath the cathedral for decades, and she didn't want to ruin that.

Jack nudged her with his shoulder. "Maybe we can come back someday," he said, his voice low and full of meaning. "You know, just for fun instead of a dangerous, important, spiritual mission."

She paused and stared at him, her face growing hot. "I like it when you talk like that," she admitted. "Like you believe there could be more for us beyond this."

He leaned close, pressing his forehead against hers. "That's because I do," he whispered, before pressing his lips to hers for a sweet kiss.

She reached for him, pulling him flush against her and holding on tight. "Hmmm," she murmured against his lips, "say more things like that."

"Well ... mmm," he said between heated kisses. His hands grew possessive and tight at her back, holding her against him. "You never got a chance to see New York, so we'll need to fix that ... take you to see all the sites ... Statue of Liberty ... Empire State Building ... the MET ... Knicks games and hot dogs ..."

She giggled. "Yes, all of those things. Let's do all that stuff."

He nuzzled her nose with his affectionately. "Then we'll go to other places. We'll eat barbecue in Texas, and ride roller coasters at Disney World. We'll go to the beach in California, and to the space needle in Seattle."

She laughed, hanging on to his neck and throwing her head back with giddy joy. "Yes, yes!" she said with another laugh. "You sure know how to plan a future, Jackson Bennett, Jr."

"That's because I've been planning mine since I was a kid. Now, maybe I have someone to plan it with?"

Their eyes met and she fisted her hands in his shirt. Their lips hovered, inches apart, allowing the tingle of anticipation to grow and swell between them until they both trembled from want. “Maybe, Jack,” she whispered, lips curving in a coy smile. “Just maybe.”

All of a sudden, he jerked and cried out, clinging to her as his legs crumbled and his body sagged. Addison tightened her hold on him, thrown off balance and sent down to one knee from the forceful pull of his body weight. Her teeth clattered together, causing her head to rattle when her knee hit the pavement hard.

“Oh, my God, Jack!”

Panic gripped her as she glanced down and found a dark stain spreading fast across the front of his shirt. He grit his teeth, panting for breath as he reached behind him and yanked a large and curved, ornate knife from his left shoulder blade. With a grunt, he threw the bloodstained weapon onto the sidewalk.

She helped him to his feet. “Are you okay? What the hell was that?”

He reached for the chain hanging around her neck and yanked it free of her shirt. His jaw clenched as his eyes locked on the ring. She glanced down—the seal engraved into it had begun to glow.

“Demon,” he growled, his sharp gaze darting to find where the knife had come from.

Swallowing past the lump of fear in her throat, she eyed the glowing ring. “I’m guessing not your garden variety demon since this thing just lit up like a Christmas tree.”

He shook his head. “One of the ten,” he confirmed. His breath sounded fast and he seemed a bit gray.

Addison eyed the wound in his back and cringed. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Fine.” Before the word was even out of his mouth, another knife came hurtling out of the darkness. This time, Addison was ready. Throwing one hand up, she used her telekinesis to halt the flying weapon before it could embed between her eyebrows. Plucking it from the air, she held it by its hilt, squeezing it tight.

“Okay, whoever that is, just show your face already!” she bellowed into the darkness. Far more confidence echoed in her voice than she felt. “You know who I am and why I’m here, so let’s get this shit over with already.”

A few seconds later, the figure of a large man appeared from the shadows. His girth went beyond extreme and bordered on circus freak. His skin glowed, ghostlike in the moonlight, and several chins rested against the lapels of a crisp, white dress shirt. A gigantic paunch pressed against an elaborate, embroidered vest, and large, sausage-like arms stretched the sleeves of a black suit jacket. Black hair had been oiled and slicked to the back of his neck in a ponytail. Every one of his thick fingers boasted a large, gaudy gold ring set with a precious stone—rubies, diamonds, emeralds, moonstones. The chain of a gold pocket watch could be seen along his vest, with even his belt buckle made of gold.

“Are you kidding me with this guy?” she murmured as he sidled toward them down the street. His ruddy cheeks and smirking mouth did nothing to take the coldness from his dark, beady stare. He gave her the creeps.

“That would be Mammon,” Jack said, curling his upper lip in disgust. “He’s one of the seven princes of Hell. His vice is excess—greed, hoarding, and the love of money. Everything he does is excessive ... thus the gold, and the clothes, and the gut. The guy likes to eat and wear expensive things.”

“I see our Guardian friend here has made the introductions already, young lady,” Mammon said in a deep, bass-filled voice as he paused just in front of them. He looked her up

and down, then shrugged one shoulder in a nonchalant motion. “The way Eligos was carrying on over you, one would think you were more to look at.”

Her fist curled at her side and her vision grew dark and hazy with rage. She took a deep, calming breath. “The way my friends carried on about Eligos’ ten, one would think you’d be more fearsome. I have to say, I’m not impressed.”

Mammon smiled, parting his fat, worm-like lips with a deep chuckle that jiggled his belly. Reaching for the lapel of his jacket, he opened it, giving her a pointed stare as he revealed the row of gleaming, gold knives just waiting to be thrown. “Nothing would bring me more pleasure than to impress you. But first, my one and only offer. Name your price for the Seal.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

“No,” Mammon replied, circling them at a meandering pace.

Despite her earlier taunts, Addison was scared out of her wits. She knew demons were deceptive and could appear in any form they wished. She wasn’t itching to see this guy in his true form, or experience his power.

“I do know that you’ve spent your life on the bottom rungs of society,” he said. “You’ve lived poor, hungry, a Spartan existence that has always left you wanting more. I could change that for you, girl. I could give you wealth beyond your wildest dreams. No number is too high; all you need to do is claim what is already yours.”

Mammon waved one hand, and in an instant, the entire street filled up with hundred dollar bills. The piles appeared inches high, from curb to curb, an endless sea of money as far as the eye could see. Bills fluttered from the rooftops, a few brushing against her face as they drifted to the ground.

Addison’s eyes widened at the sight. She’d never seen so much money in her life. Yet, it still wasn’t enough to persuade her.

Glaring up at Mammon, she took a step closer to him, hands on her hips. “Fuck you,” she hissed, “and your money.”

Mammon sighed, causing the money to disappear as fast as it had materialized. “Very well, then. I’m afraid I cannot allow you to live.”

Quick as a blink, he had three of the knives freed from his jacket. The speed with which he threw them shocked her so much, she didn’t realize one of them had struck her until she felt the slow trickle of blood running between her breasts. She looked down to find a red line of blood welling in a shallow cut where the ring used to be against her chest. She dove for the ring, which lay on the ground, the chain still attached to it and wrapped around the blade of Mammon’s knife, embedded in the earth.

Everything happened so fast.

Mammon reached down with one of his massive arms to push her aside. The force of his strength sent her flying down the street several yards. Pulling on the power she was just coming to understand, she pulled up and levitated, just saving herself from being bashed against the gravel road. Allowing herself to pull on the slow burn of anger turning her blood to molten fire, she flew at Mammon, who was charging at Jack, two more knives unsheathed.

Before she could reach him, Jack opened his mouth and a barrage of sound waves rippled out toward the large demon, sending him crashing to the ground a few feet away. The impact of his bulky body left a small crater in the ground, but Mammon surprised her by finding his way back to his feet quickly. It would seem size didn’t matter when one was a demon—speed and agility must be programmed in.

Mammon let two more of the knives fly—one sent arcing toward each of them. Addison reached out to stop the one hurtling at Jack, but wasn't fast enough to halt the one coming at her. Another slash, this one across her cheek, was her reward. Jack had his pistol free from his waistband, charging at Mammon. She took the opportunity to retrieve the ring, still on the ground with the chain wrapped around Mammon's knife.

Slipping the ring back around her neck, she allowed her feet to leave the ground again, hoping to surprise Mammon with an aerial attack. She came at him from behind, her hands extended to yank him away from Jack, but the demon sensed her coming.

Mammon used one of his blades deflect a white beam from Jack's gun, and drove his elbow into Jack's chest, sending him sprawling to the ground again. Then, he turned on Addison just as she was about to wrap her hands around his meaty throat. His palm seemed to grow as it came toward her, becoming larger and larger until it grew big enough to wrap around her waist like an iron shackle. He squeezed her in a bruising grip, almost cutting off her air supply as the rest of him expanded and morphed along with his oversized hand. His hair came loose from its binding, the black tendrils writhing about his head like a nest of snakes. His beady black irises expanded until the whites got eaten up by the dark color. His ruddy complexion melted away, revealing skin the shade of an apple, with shining reptilian scales along the surface.

Addison writhed and struggled in his hold as he continued to shift and transform. His nose became pig-like, his teeth jagged and uneven. A set of curved horns sprouted from his head, splitting the skin and stretching up several feet. His clothing tore away and hung from him in shreds as the folds of his arms and stomach broke loose, leaving his upper body exposed, his torso covered in demonic markings and tribal style tattoos. More of the gold everywhere on him, piercing his nose, his lips, his ears, nipples, and even a large diamond the size of her fist nestled in his navel.

He opened his mouth to laugh, and billowing black smoke curled from his nostrils. The stench that emitted from the deep cavern of his mouth caused her to quiver with a forceful retch. The combination of sulfur, decaying flesh, and rotting garbage proved enough to almost steal her consciousness.

She struggled for focus, closing her eyes as she once again pulled on the instincts she had been keeping at bay her entire life. Reniel was supposed to be training her to fight, but they'd never gotten that far before being attacked. She was on her own here, and she would have to wing it.

The boiling feeling in her veins began again and she let it grow and swell to near-unbearable limits. She screamed when it ripped from her in a torrent of blackness and destruction, slamming into Mammon and sending him rolling into a nearby building. The stone of the building cracked and caved where his massive body struck it, the demon slow to get to his feet, dazed by the powerful blow. Addison refused to give him the chance to get back up. Advancing on him, she balled her hands into fists, trembling as her power seemed to form there, concentrating in the tips of her fingers.

When she reached for Mammon, the adrenaline that surged in her felt so heady, she almost got high from it. She didn't know where the strength came from, but deep down knew she'd always possessed it. She grasped Mammon by his horns and began to drag him across the pavement.

"You stabbed my boyfriend and interrupted one of the most romantic moments of my life, you pig," she muttered as he growled and grunted, attempting to fight against her hold.

"Addison!" Jack's voice rang out from somewhere behind her. "No!"

She only just registered his protests as she swung Mammon with all her might and sent him flying off into the distance. He soared up over the rooftops, tumbling head over heels, before righting himself, levitating with masterful skill, his arms outstretched. His laughter echoed over them, a coarse sound that grated across Addison's soul like fingernails over a chalkboard.

"Don't fight him, Addie," Jack said, staggering toward her with the pistol hanging from his good hand. His injured shoulder seemed hunched, his eyes clouded by pain. The wound had to be more serious than she'd thought. "He's too much for the two of us without backup. You have to use the ring to dispatch him so we can get away."

She nodded, glancing down at the glowing ring. Reniel had said she'd know what to do when the time came, but she was at a loss. *Don't fail me now*, she prayed, *not when I was just starting to believe you might care a little bit about me*.

Mammon hovered over them, his arms still spread as if in a welcoming gesture. "Is that all you've got, girl?"

Addison's fists clenched so tight, she could feel her fingernails biting into her palms, drawing blood. "Try me, piggy," she growled, hoping to entice him closer. Maybe if she made contact with him, instinct would take over and she could dispatch him with the ring.

"Challenge accepted," Mammon growled. "Let's see if you have what it takes to protect the people you love."

He lifted his massive arms, and in response, several more of the golden knives appeared from thin air. In puffs of smoke, they materialized one by one. There had to be at least a hundred of them by her count. Without warning, Mammon extended his hands, sending the daggers hurtling straight toward them. Addison leapt in front of Jack in a flash and threw her hands up to stop them, but there were too many. While most of them halted in midair, held aloft by her control, three slipped through, one of them embedding in her thigh.

"Addie!" Jack bellowed, reaching out to steady her as she staggered backward, her knee buckling from the agony. Red hot pain exploded in her thigh and traveled throughout her veins, burning as if someone had hooked her up to an I.V. full of acid.

She reached for the knife and yanked it out, biting back a scream of pain. A black substance oozed from the tip. "Poison?" she whispered. The pain didn't register as sharp now, but it lingered. Now she knew why Jack was in such bad shape. "The knives are poisoned."

He nodded. "Shit stings, doesn't it?"

"Not bad, Naphil," Mammon said. "But let's see how you do with this."

This time, twice as many came at them. So many that Addison knew she couldn't stop them all.

"Jack," she whispered, already backing away. "Run."

They turned as one and sprinted away from Mammon, who was amused to follow them, flinging the knives a few at a time. Two whizzed over Addison's shoulder, just missing her ear, and Jack grunted in pain as another one found his calf.

"Enough of this," she hissed, turning on her heels and charging back toward Mammon. Her feet left the ground as her power surrounded her in a swirling, black storm. She reached for the knives with her telepathy and turned them on Mammon. She couldn't help the smile that crossed her lips as several of them embedded in his flesh. "This ends right now," she said as she floated toward him, levitating higher until they were face to face.

Mammon was pulling the last of the knives from his flesh with a snort and a grunt, causing more of the black, sulfuric smoke to waft around him.

"I'm weary of these games," he said, his voice low. "You bore me, girl."

She wasn't prepared for the force that slammed into her as he lowered his horns and charged. She gripped the horns, holding on tight as he traveled with her, hurtling toward the ground. Pain exploded in her back and radiated through her body as he slammed her into the street's surface. Her head pounded and her vision swam as the demon loomed over her, his jowls jiggling as he laughed. His hand wrapped around her throat, squeezing tight. She fought against him, physically trying to break his hold, while drawing on her power for one last attack. But no matter what she did, Mammon's strength did not wane. In fact, it seemed to grow stronger.

"Addison!"

Jack ran toward her, his pistol ready as he leaped toward Mammon, ready to fire. With one hand still around her neck, Mammon produced another dagger with the other, throwing it to deflect the white beam of light once more. He swung his head to meet Jack's charge. Jack's feet scraped the pavement as he tried to slow his momentum, but it was too little too late. He was unable to stop the forward movement of his body as it propelled him straight into one of Mammon's sharp horns.

A scream burned in Addison's throat, but came out as choke gurgle as Mammon swung his head, flinging Jack's impaled body to the ground. The horn slid free, leaving a hole through Jack's middle.

"J-Jack..." she whimpered, her eyes filling with tears as she turned to gaze at his limp body.

His eyes were still open, but they appeared hazy and unfocused. His mouth had filled with blood, which trickled from the corners of his mouth, staining his beautiful, brown skin.

"Your power ..." Jack gurgled, turning his head to spit a stream of red onto the ground. "It feeds ... him. Darkness ... cannot ... overcome darkness. Light, Addie ... find the ... light."

He coughed as more blood came up, choking him. Addison squeezed her eyes shut against the sight, the hot splash of tears running down her cheeks. As Mammon took his time strangling the life from her, she tried to remember the one night of happiness Jack had given her. She remembered his kiss, his arms around her, his words wrapping her in a cocoon of hope and light.

*Light!*

Her eyes flew open as she realized what Jack had been trying to tell her. It all became so clear. Mammon was a demon, and her Naphil power was based in darkness, just like his. Darkness could not combat darkness. Only light could do that. And she now had the light inside of her ... the light of a Guardian.

Addison reached up to her chest, fumbling as she grasped the ring. Her vision was fading now—her death must be near. This would be her only chance.

Closing her eyes, she focused her thoughts inward and pulled on the good. There hadn't been much in her life, but she had what she needed from Jack. She smiled as she found it, a solitary pinpoint behind her closed eyelids. Her entire being seemed to vibrate as she focused on it and watched it grow. The pinpoint became a star, and that star a beacon. That beacon swelled until it burned with a white hot intensity, so large it filled her vision.

Mammon roared as the light expanded outward from her chest in a brilliant flash. Addison opened her eyes and watched in awe as it left her body like a starburst, shimmering on the air and surrounding Mammon like a cloud. His fingers left her throat and she rolled away from him, sucking in deep breaths of air with relish.

In another bright flash, Mammon was gone.

She struggled to her hands and knees, still drinking in much-needed air and trying to fight against the drowsiness pulling at her. Jack had been right; the inner light had taken a lot out of her. She felt even weaker than she had after the night she'd fought off those demons in the sky. It took everything in her to crawl over to Jack's unmoving form. The gravel bit into her palms and scraped her knees, but she didn't care. Tears streamed through the grime on her face as she neared him. At the sight of the blood soaking his shirt and streaming from his mouth, she began to sob, her hand fisting the front of his shirt.

"Jack," she sobbed, shaking him as she grew more hysterical by the second. "Jack, please. No ... no, no. Come on, don't do this to me."

She couldn't detect anything but the slightest movement of his chest. His breath became so shallow, she had to strain to hear it. His eyes stared above her at the sky, sightless.

She knelt beside him, leaning down to press her head against his chest. His heartbeat was almost nonexistent.

"You can't leave me, Jack. Not when I just found you. I need you ... please."

She stretched out beside him, not caring about the blood soaking her clothes and staining her hands. Wrapping herself around him, she held on tight, sobbing into his neck. The flutter of his pulse died away, and his chest stilled. She turned her face inward and muffled her loud sobs against his shirt, inhaling his heady scent for the last time.

She remained that way for what felt like hours, until the sound of wings overhead told her she was no longer alone.

With bleary, tear-filled eyes, she looked up to find Reniel, Elle, and Daniel swooping down from the sky in their angelic forms. Reniel held Micah, who he set on his feet once they'd landed. She sat up as they approached, the three angels shrinking and morphing into their human disguises. Micah ran toward her and Jack, skidding to a halt as he realized what had happened. His mouth fell open, and grief slashed across his face with such force that it sent Addison into another round of sobs.

"Reniel!" she said, swiping at her wet face and neck as the angels caught up to Micah. "Thank God you're here. You can help him, can't you? Daniel, you're a healer, right? Heal him!"

Daniel cast a silent glance at Reniel, his face inscrutable. Addison's heart dropped into her stomach as Reniel crouched in front of her, his face carved in sympathy.

"I'm sorry, Addison," he murmured, reaching out to touch her shoulder gently. "An angel of healing can only save those Father has chosen to save."

Her jaw dropped as shock and anger rippled through. "Only the ones he *chooses*?" She laughed, now hysterical as the sound melted into another sob. "Are you *kidding* me? Jack has spent his entire life in service to the Guardians. He's given up his life ... he's given up everything! And you're telling me *He* has decided Jack isn't worthy of being saved?"

A lone tear ran down Reniel's cheek and hung from the end of his square jaw. "It is not for me to question the will of Father. He alone decides when someone's time is up. It was Jack's time."

With that, he reached out. After brushing her aside with a gentle hand, he took Jack's body into his arms. Addison grabbed onto the angel's shirt and held fast.

"Please!" she pleaded. "This was my fault. All of it. This can't be the end. This can't be it. There has to be a way he can have another chance. Please, Reniel!"

The angel looked truly sorry as he pulled away from her grasp and turned to walk away, Jack's weight like no more than a doll's in his arms. Addison fell back to her knees on the ground, burying her face in her hands as what remained of her heart crumbled into dust.

It wasn't fair. Jack had given her everything, and in return, she'd gotten him killed with her foolishness and ineptitude. The walk had been her idea. If it hadn't been for them being exposed, Mammon could have never caught them unaware. She hadn't had what it took to fight the demon ... what made her think she could take on the other nine? She almost hadn't made it out of this fight alive, and had lost Jack in the process.

Grasping the ring hanging around her neck, she jerked forcefully at the chain. With a scream of anguish, she flung it away from her. It landed near Micah's feet with a clink. The big Cajun hadn't said a word since finding them. He'd just stood and watched it all in silence, that terrible expression of grief creasing his face and causing him to look older than his years. He bent and retrieved the ring, lifting it by the chain and slipping it into the pocket of his jeans without a word. His booted footsteps crunched over the gravel as he neared her, stopping when just in front of her.

Micah's face was solemn and hard as he stared down at her. One large, calloused hand reached out.

"Might as well get up, *cher*," he grunted. "He's gone."

## Epilogue: The Other Side

For a while, there was nothing but darkness. No ... not just darkness. Blackness. A smothering sort of blackness that robbed him of all his senses. He had sight, yet couldn't see. Not even the stirring of air to feel, or a sound to be heard. He was weightless, with no concept of time or space.

Was this death? Jack had always imagined it another way. Sarah always told him of an Angel of Death, and he came to those crossing over into either Heaven or Hell. He'd always expected the Angel of Death, maybe a white light, and then pearlescent gates.

At some point, the pitch black faded, and a brilliant light came rushing at him out of the dark. He squinted against it. The brightness became too much for him, causing pain to throb between his eyes and at his temples. It stung, forcing his eyes to remain closed as he tried to gather his bearings.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself in a room that seemed to have no ceiling or walls. Nothing but stark whiteness surrounded him, the only furniture a chaise longue he'd been lying on—also white.

He blinked against the brightness as he tried to stand. His mind struggled to remember what had happened. One moment, he'd been with Addison, and then the next ...

It all came rushing back to him in a series of images, flashing through his mind like a fast-moving film. His heart hammered in his chest as he glanced down at his body, searching for the evidence of what his memories told him. But he found nothing. No blood, no hole through his middle, not a single scratch. He didn't even wear the clothes he'd put on that evening after dinner. Standing out in stark contrast against his dark skin were simple white garments similar to hospital scrubs, the linen thin but comfortable, weightless on his body. He pressed a hand against his chest and closed his eyes, counting the beats of his heart.

*If my heart is beating, then I can't be ... I can't be dead.*

He paced in the never-ending white space, his mind racing as he tried to understand what was happening. Was the blackness he'd experienced a hole in his memory? Had the Angel of Death come for him, but he just didn't remember?

"No."

He fell to his knees on the white floor, breath coming in ragged gasps. He couldn't be dead. It was too soon. After years of feeling dead, he had just started to feel alive again. His father would be wrecked when he found out, and Sarah ... oh, God, his sister. Cassandra had always told him he was her hero. What would happen when she had to be told that her hero had died? What about Micah? Who was going to be there to keep his partner from going off the rails for good? And Addison ...

Jack staggered to his feet. "Addie," he murmured, closing his eyes against the pain that tore through him at the thought of her. She needed him most of all. "I can't be dead."

Walking back and forth in the room, he tried to find an entrance or an exit ... anything that would clue him in to where he was. He found nothing. Just the white walls he couldn't see, the white ceiling that seemed to go on forever above him, and the white chaise resting on the white floor.

Cupping his hands around his lips, he lifted his head and called out, "Hello? Is anyone there?"

No answer came. Grunting in frustration, he started pacing again like an animal trapped in a cage.

"I know I can't be alone here!" he yelled, looking up. "If there's someone there, please ... don't keep me waiting! What's happening to me?"

To his surprise, a response came this time. The air before him seemed to part, and through the opening came the last person he would have expected to see. He'd only encountered the Archangel Michael once, and hadn't thought he would ever again, despite the fact that Michael stood at the head of the Guardians' order. Reniel, his subordinate, carried out his commands, acting as a liaison of sorts between him and the Guardians. Yet, here he was, the Angel of War himself, standing right in front of him.

He was the largest of all the angels, standing fifteen feet tall with a chest and shoulders that were impossibly wide. His limbs resembled thick tree trunks, his fingers each about the size of Jack's body. He wore the same gleaming, golden armor that Reniel and the other Warrior Angels wore, though he didn't have his helmet today. Black, shining ringlets fell past his shoulders in a glorious display, his white wings stretched the width of what had seemed like a never-ending room until he appeared. Now, it got dwarfed by his presence. His eyes glowed white in the sockets, and though there were no irises, Jack could *feel* the angel's gaze on him.

"Michael," he said, staring up at him. "What is this? Where am I?"

"I should think it was obvious," the angel replied. His voice was as intimidating as the rest of him, striking Jack's insides like thunder and reverberating through the room with a powerful echo.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "I died."

Michael gave a silent nod.

"And you're here, so this must be Heaven," he reasoned aloud. "Right?"

Michael's face betrayed nothing, not an iota of emotion. "A part of Heaven."

"A part ...?" He scowled. "What is this? If I'm dead and this is Heaven, then where are the gates? Where are the other angels and my dead friends and relatives? Where is God? Where ... what is this, Michael."

"You *are* in Heaven, yet not within the inner realm inhabited by souls who will spend eternity here."

Jack's eyes widened and hope flared in his chest. "Does that mean ... is there a chance I can go back?"

Michael turned away from him, and the white space around him opened up again. Beyond the angel, he could see glimpses of Heaven ... the real Heaven complete with golden streets and green, rolling hills. Michael was leaving him already.

"Wait!" he cried, running after the retreating angel. "You can't leave me here with that! Please ... you have to send me back! I can't stay here, I have to go back!"

Michael turned within the mouth of the opening and stared back at him with those white, glowing eyes. "That, Jackson Bennett, is not up to me."

"What? What does that even mean?"

No answer came. As Jack stood watching, the Archangel walked through the portal and disappeared, closing it behind him.

Discover where it all began...



Read **Angels Among Us**, the 3 novella box set, for **FREE!**



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*Dear Reader,*

*A lot of you know that this book was a long time coming. There was almost two years between the final book of the Angels Among Us series—which introduced the characters of Amir, Shayla, Jackson, Sarah, Reniel, Nathan, and Carmen—and The Guardians. When I finished Redemption, book 3 in the Angels series, back in 2012, the plan was to jump right into writing this story.*

*Well, you know how life can be. Things happen and I got distracted. Then the inspiration just wasn't there. I knew who I wanted Jack to be, and that he was going to pair up with Micah to bring down the demon Eligos, but I got lost from there.*

*Fast forward to 2014 and a trip to New Orleans that would inspire me to the point of bursting with ideas for this series moving forward. I am so excited to finally be able to present this story, and can happily say the wait won't be long for book 2. I can't wait for you all to find out what's going to happen for our trio of Guardians.*

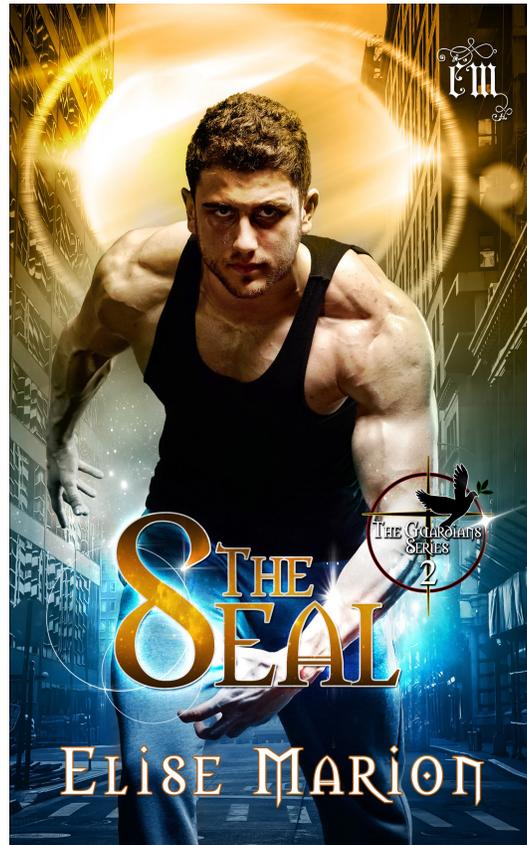
*I just wanted to take a moment to thank my readers for being patient with me. I've been answering messages and emails for the last two years telling everyone that this was 'coming soon', and I meant that. I hope the wait was worth it. Thanks for having faith in me, and for all your love and support. Your emails, messages, and reviews mean the world. Speaking of reviews, if you enjoyed The Guardians, don't forget to leave your thoughts in form of a review wherever you purchased it. I take all feedback to heart when moving forward with other projects.*

*Be on the lookout for book 2 in The Guardians trilogy, 'The Seal', coming early 2015. Be sure you're subscribed to my newsletter to be updated on a release date soon.*

*Much love, and happy reading,*

*Elise*

Book 2 in The Guardians series, *The Seal*, now available!



Addison Monroe took a chance on becoming a Guardian to fight alongside the forces of Heaven in the war against Hell. A girl with a dark past, she had nothing to lose ... until she fell in love with Jack Bennett. Now that she's lost him too, there's nothing left for her but a mission—a cause she's truly come to believe in. With one of Hell's most notorious demons—Lilith, mother of legions—after her, she can't afford to let her personal life become a distraction.

As the war with Hell continues, Jack Bennett fights to get himself back in the game. Little does he know that returning home will only complicate matters, as nothing can ever be the same between him and the two people he cares for most in the world: his best friend, and the love of his life.

Micah Boudreaux never thought he would get stuck babysitting 'the chosen one' all by himself, but without his partner, Jack, in the picture, he isn't left with much of a choice. The fact that she's a demon half-breed only reminds him of all he's lost to the side of Evil. Yet, hating her becomes difficult as he's forced to work alongside her on a mission he's spent seven years trying to complete. He never counted on Addison stoking feelings in him that have

lain dormant for so long.

It's wrong to want her. She's his best friend's girl, and has the blood of demons running through her veins. Yet, despite all of it, the demon-hunter with a complicated past will dare to hope for more. Even though life has never given him much, he will dare to hope for love ... even in the midst of a dark world and a conflict he sees as unwinnable.

## *About The Author*



Elise Marion is a lover books and has a special place in her heart for sweet and sensual romance. Writing about love across all walks of life is her passion, as is reaching people through the written word. The Army wife and stay-at-home mother of three spends most of her time taking care of her children. Her second job includes writing stories about characters that people can fall in love with. When the Texas native isn't caring for her family or writing, you can usually find her with her nose in a book, singing loudly, or cooking up something new in the kitchen.

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Bound (Chained Trilogy Book 2)

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The Arrangement (Altar-ed Destinies Book 3)

Cake: Can I Eat It 2? (Just Desserts Book 2)

The Real Housewives of Mayfair (Regency Era Romance Series)

Sons of Cardenas (A spin-off of the Kings of Cardenas Series)