

DEMON CURSED

BOOK 1 OF THE DEMON CURSED SERIES

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CHAPTER ONE

ADDIE

MY FACE PRESSED AGAINST A ROUGH SURFACE. I SHIFTED, TRYING TO GET comfortable. The same rough surface scratched against my hands.

Water lapped over the edge of my fingertips. My eyes flew open. I jolted back. “Wh-”

Ahead of me, waves crashed down and then ran up the shore toward me. I scrambled back to avoid getting soaked. I stared my mouth hanging open. It had to be the ocean I was looking at. It was too large to be a lake. And lakes didn’t have waves, did they?

But I didn’t recognize the beach. Where was I?

Disbelief rolled over me. What was going on?

Mind whirling, my head shifted from side to side, looking for something, anything I recognized. But there was precious little light. And even that was scattered and far in the distance. The moon was full, though, allowing me to make out the outline of bleak buildings about thirty yards back. The beach itself was long, maybe fifty yards, and bracketed by a wall of rocks on either side.

There wasn’t a soul in sight.

I slowly got to my feet, wiping the sand from my hands on the side of my jeans. My hand brushed against leather. I glanced down. My knife. It was still there, secured in its sheath. I grasped the handle, comforted by the familiar presence.

Right now, that was the only thing that was familiar. Water rushed toward me again, and I backed up even more. It lapped against the edge of my worn boots. Where was I? Why didn't I recognize any of this?

I scrambled, trying to remember something, anything, that would clue me in. I didn't recognize the beach, my clothes, or even know my name. I tried to scrounge up a picture of what I looked like. But there was nothing. Just a complete and total blank where my memories should be.

Panic crawled up my throat, but I shoved it away. I might not remember exactly where I was or even who I was, but panicking definitely wasn't going to help.

My boots sank into the sand as I started toward the buildings slowly, keeping one hand on the hilt of my knife as I scanned the area for movement. Still nothing. It was deathly quiet, except for a small light wind.

Come on, remember something. Despite my attempts to stay calm, my heart pounded faster. I identified the beach, the ocean, the abandoned boardwalks. They weren't familiar to me, but I knew *what* they were. It was just me I couldn't identify.

Name: nothing.

Age: nothing.

Family: nothing.

The lid I'd placed on my panic teetered. No, I couldn't give in to it. Nothing good would come of it.

The thought brought me up short. I was sure it was right.

I didn't know if it was life experience that had taught me it, but it was something I *knew*. I held on to it with both hands.

The sand led to broken pavement in front of an old boardwalk lined with abandoned storefronts. It had obviously been out of use

for years. Some buildings even had scorch marks along the walls and roofs. Empty panes with only a few shards of glass made up of most of the frames.

I walked past a desolate arcade, the insides draped in shadows.

Hair rose on the back of my neck. I didn't like this. Too many shadows, too much darkness, even with the moon shining brightly.

Light, I needed to head to the light. There were some small lights up on a large hill in the distance. Lights meant civilization, people. And right now, that's exactly what I needed.

A break in the buildings appeared after about four hundred feet. The location gave me a side view of the hill. As I rounded the last building, there were some small lights in the distance. I stopped still at the sight of the now blinding lights up on the hill. They blazed with amazing intensity.

From this distance, I could now make out multiple well-lit homes, although homes seemed like too small a word for these buildings. Mansions or mini castles were more accurate. But they had to be miles down the road. I followed the line of lights down the mountain and spotted a bridge outlined by bright lights as well.

On the other side of the bridge were more buildings, although they were nothing like the homes higher on the hills. Smaller and irregularly shaped, I had the feeling they had been thrown together rather than carefully constructed.

I picked up my pace, careful on the swollen wood. The boardwalk had seen better days. I caught sight of my reflection as I passed an old storefront that still had its glass intact. Long dark hair, a slim but muscular build. Black tank top, sturdy jeans, and combat boots.

Nothing about the reflection was familiar. Not my eyes, my face, my clothes, nothing. I stepped closer to the glass, hoping maybe it would spark some recognition. But I could have been looking at anyone. I didn't recognize the woman who stared back at me.

But how I could I not remember?

A wind blew, stirring my hair as I stared in shock at my reflec-

tion. The girl in the glass was me, and as far as I could tell, I had never seen her before.

I took a step back, my hand going to my mouth. The strange girl in the glass did the same. Why wasn't my reflection familiar? Why couldn't I remember who I was?

The panic that I'd chased down when I'd first awoken came surging back. I didn't know where I was or who I was.

Oh God. Oh God.

The creak of a door cut through my panic. My heart raced in response. My eyes narrowed as my head jerked up. The sound came again. It was close. Two buildings down, maybe. It was the first sound I'd heard. The first sign of life. I didn't need my memory to tell me that whatever was creeping out in this darkness was probably not something good.

I pulled my knife from its sheath. Goosebumps broke out along my skin as I moved closer to the buildings. The first was a brick building, its signage long gone. The second had been a café. Its sign with a coffee cup on the end was still visible. I slipped past it, careful to avoid the cracked wood in the boardwalk and paused at the edge of the building, my nerves stretched thin as I listened.

All was silent again.

Maybe it had been the wind blowing on the door, although that seemed to have died down. Or maybe it was just a cat. I looked around with disgust, or more likely a rat.

For a moment, I debated whether to even stay. Then the scrape came again. Part of me screamed that I should run the other way. And yet I found my feet headed toward the sound, almost of their own free will.

I slipped around the side of the café. A former T-shirt shop was on my other side. The alley between them was ten feet wide and surprisingly free of any obstructions.

At the end of the alley was a warehouse with three immense garage doors. A faded sign read Bob's Yacht Service. A few large boats lay on their sides in the parking lot next to it. But the sound

hadn't come from the parking lot—it had come from inside the building.

I wanted to know what had made that noise, but I wasn't willing to step inside that dark garage to find out.

I walked along the front of the building, careful to check for movement at each window before slipping by. By the time I'd covered the front, I had no more answers than when I'd begun.

The town down the road beckoned. Answers seemed more likely there. Whatever was inside this place was probably not something that I wanted to—

"You need to be quiet."

"I *am* being quiet," a small voice replied.

I flattened myself against the wall as the voices drifted out through the broken windows.

"I can't see anything."

"Come on."

The voices were too low to make out gender, although they sounded young—really, really young. And definitely not a threat. For a moment, I considered walking away. But only for a moment.

Something about those two small voices called to me.

I'd make sure they were safe, and then I'd see what I could find out.

It was easy to track the kids' movement. As stealthy as they were trying to be, their steps echoed. I walked along the outside of the building, parallel to their movement.

I rounded the corner. A chain-link fence blocked my way. There was a rip along the bottom that I could squeeze through. Was it even worth the effort? I hadn't heard anything but the kids. I could probably just walk around the other side and –

A heavy footfall sounded from somewhere down the alley. I craned my neck, trying to see. Maybe it was one of the parents of the kids. The kids probably had someone looking out for them. They sounded too young to be out here alone.

But the hair on the back of my neck suggested otherwise.

“Matthew!” A girl’s scream filled with fear pierced through the night. “Micah run!”

Without a conscious thought, I dove for the fence. The hole at the bottom wasn’t as large as I’d first thought. I pulled at the bottom of it and squirmed through. Wire slashed at my shoulders, but I didn’t care.

I’d only gotten halfway through when another scream sounded. My head jerked up. Two shapes sprinted past the end of the alley. With the dim light, all I could make out was that they were small and moving fast.

Squirming, I turned on my back to wiggle my hips through. But then I went still as the person following the two kids came into view.

Or should I say, the thing.

My eyes went wide and even my breathing seemed to cut off. The creature had to be close to seven feet tall, with muscles that bulged unnaturally from its shoulders and back. But that wasn’t the most disturbing part.

No, the most disturbing part were the curled horns that extended from the top of its head.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SIGHT OF THE HORNED CREATURE MOMENTARILY PARALYZED ME. IT HAD pale green, marble-streaked skin. Then images of other creatures just like that one swarmed through my mind.

“Noel!”

The boy’s scream cut through my paralysis. And suddenly I couldn’t move fast enough. I yanked my legs the rest of the way through the hole, ripping my jeans at the thighs on the ragged fencing. Scrambling to my feet, I sprinted to the end of the alley just in time to see the creature disappear around an enormous, crumbling brick building. I sprinted after it, my knife gripped in my hand.

A scream came from somewhere behind the building. I put on a burst of speed while simultaneously wondering what the heck I would do once I caught up with the creature.

Despite my fear, my steps didn’t slow. I careened around the corner and sprinted down the alley. The alley dead-ended in a small parking lot surrounded by wooden fencing. The two children stood facing the creature, backing away slowly.

The girl stood in front of the boy. She had long blonde hair with eyes sunken into her face. Her jeans were threadbare, and her

sneakers had more holes than her shirt. She was too thin, and the top of her head only reached about halfway up the creature's chest.

Yet she stood defiantly in front of the creature, a rusty knife clutched in her right hand. Her legs braced, she tried to protect the small boy peeking out from behind her. Black skin and dark eyes, he was barely four feet tall. He couldn't be any older than eight, ten at the most.

"Get back," the girl ordered with a shaky voice as she waved the knife back and forth.

The creature laughed, deep and full throated. "What are you going to do, little girl?" he taunted in a deep, gravelly voice.

The boy, his eyes growing even larger as he took in the demon, tugged on the back of the girl's shirt. "Noel ..."

Noel gripped her knife tighter, not taking her eyes from the nightmare in front of her. "Run, Micah."

She tried to step forward, but Micah wouldn't let her go. "Not without you," he said.

But there was no time for Noel to reply before the demon darted forward, reaching for her. Noel pushed Micah to the ground as she rolled out of the way. Micah darted behind her again, but they were now in the lot's corner.

The demon laughed again. "Children, you can't escape. But this game is fun." He reached for them again. The girl lashed out with her small knife. As it came in contact with the creature's skin, the tip broke off.

The girl let out a small gasp, her mouth falling open as she stumbled back.

I bolted across the parking lot. With a leap, I plunged my knife into the demon's back, shocked when it sank into the thick skin. I yanked the blade out just as the creature howled. It whirled around, its fist, which seemed to be the size of my head, struck out.

Wind blew past my head as I ducked out of the way, moving to the creature's side.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

Grunting, it turned to face me as I backed up. The girl had called the creature a demon, and nothing about him suggested that she was exaggerating. His hands ended in sharp, dark claws. His frame was so muscled that the lower half of his pants had shredded, exposing calf muscles the size of my thighs.

“You’re not my size,” it growled in that deep voice of his.

With a stranglehold on my terror, I spoke without tripping over my words. “Nope. But I’m a lot closer than those two.”

The demon smiled, showing off its mouth full of sharp teeth. “So nice of you to offer to take their place. At least for now. I’ll save them for dessert.”

An image of a human leg disappearing into this thing’s maw tripped across my mind. A shiver ran up my spine even as I sized him up. I catalogued his body, looking for weaknesses. Ears, maybe, definitely the eyes.

I smiled, throwing as much cockiness into my voice as I could manage. “Then come and get me, big boy.”

The demon darted forward.

It was incredibly fast for something that big. But I managed to sidestep, swiping out with my knife and catching it in the ribs. I tensed for a moment, expecting my knife to break just as the girl’s had.

But instead of breaking, my knife sliced cleanly into skin.

The demon let out a howl of outrage. “Not possible. No human can hurt me.”

“That wound in your side would beg to differ.”

A massive claw darted toward me. I managed to slip out of the way, feeling the wind of it as its claws just missed my face. I shot a glance at the kids. They were still in the same spot. The creature and I were blocking any exit for them.

I needed to move this thing away from them. I reached out and slashed at its forearm. The demon roared again and struck out incredibly fast, catching me on the cheek with a back fist.

Pain exploded across my face. I flew off my feet, landing in a heap against an abandoned car.

Stars danced across my vision. Laughing, the demon walked toward me, apparently not even a little bothered by the blood dripping from its back, arms, and side. "Not so strong now, are you?"

Curling my right leg under me, I leaned back and faking fear.

Which was not that hard.

It leaned down toward me. I dove in between its legs, slashing up as I did so. It cried out, this time a high-pitched squeal.

Wasting no time, I slashed at the back of its knees. Blood poured from the wounds. The ground shook as it crashed to its knees.

On automatic pilot, I leaped to my feet, grabbing it by the back of the head. I plunged my knife over its shoulder and right into its heart.

Then I twisted the knife.

The demon's eyes jolted wide, complete shock blanketing its face. Its mouth gaped and its chest went still before it fell forward.

I released my hold on its head to keep from getting yanked forward. My breaths came out fast as I waited, staring at the creature, hoping it was dead. Carefully, I moved forward and rolled it over, surprised it didn't take much effort. The creature's mouth was slack, showing off a row of pointed teeth.

Staring at the creature, I waited for it to move. It had fallen with my knife still embedded in its chest. Only about an inch of the handle was now visible.

I thought about leaving the knife there. But as far as I knew, that knife and my clothes were all that belonged to me. I grabbed the end of it. By the time I wiggled it free, my knife and hands covered in blood.

"Is it dead?" A small voice called.

Heart racing, I whirled around. The girl let out a little gasp before taking a step back. The boy once again ducked behind her.

Heart pounding, I lowered my knife. "I think so. Are you two okay?"

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The boy peeked out from around the girl again. "You killed it?"

"It looks like." It was once again silent all around us. It didn't seem like anyone had heard the fight. Which begged the question, "Do you guys live around here?"

Micah opened his mouth as if to answer and then quickly shut it at a shake of Noel's head. "Why do you want to know?" she asked, her eyes narrowed and her whole body tensed.

Man, even saving a kid from a demon didn't win any points with this kid. I respected that. "Just want to make sure you get home safe."

Micah stepped out from behind the well. "We don't live anywhere."

I glanced around, still not recognizing a thing. "I don't think I do either."

CHAPTER THREE

TWO YEARS LATER

HUSHED VOICES IN THE KITCHEN WOKE ME. I STARED AT THE WATER SPOT ON the ceiling above my bed. It was getting bigger. I'd have to do something about that one of these days.

"Should we wake her?" Micah asked in his attempt at a whisper. It wasn't even close, but he was trying.

"Give her a few more minutes. She had a tough night at work," Noel answered.

"She'll be late if she doesn't get up soon," Micah said.

I smiled as I listened to the two of them. Noel, Micah, and I had lived together since that night we met down on the beachfront. The first few days, we'd stayed down by the boardwalk in an empty former liquor store. After that, we moved from spot to spot while I looked for a job. The town of Blue Forks didn't have a lot to offer then. It still didn't.

Blue Forks, of course, wasn't the town's official name, but no one remembered what that was anymore. Its name came from an old rundown factory on the edge of town. On the roof was a giant bill-

board with a huge smiling blue fork. It was the first thing people saw when they came into town.

Over the last two years, I managed to pick up some cleaning jobs and a few catering jobs, even some yard work. I wasn't picky or proud. I'd take anything. After a while, I'd squirrelled away enough to get the three of us a small apartment. It wasn't much, but it was an actual apartment left over from the old days, with two bedrooms, a decent-sized living room, one tiny bathroom that worked minus the hot water, and a kitchen that was slightly larger than the tiny bathroom. I gave Noel and Micah the bedrooms, and I just cornered off a portion of the living room with some blankets to make a third bedroom for myself.

They offered to share a room, but I figured they'd had precious little to call their own throughout their lives. They at least deserved their own rooms.

"We need to wake her," Micah whispered.

Pushing the blankets aside, I swung my feet over the side of the bed. "I'm up," I called out.

"Breakfast is ready," Noel called back.

I smiled at her word choice. Breakfast was a rather strong term for our usual morning meal.

My overlong hair fell in my face and I shoved it back impatiently. I needed to cut it soon, but more critically I needed to wash it. But there was no time for either this morning. I grabbed my brush from the crate I used as a side table and ran it through my hair before quickly and efficiently pulling it into a ponytail.

As I stood, I put my robe on over my tank top and underwear. I pulled back the blanket door and smiled at Noel and Micah. Noel was fourteen, and Micah was twelve. Noel was tall for her age and was often mistaken for a full-fledged adult. Micah, in contrast, was short for his age and often mistaken for someone much younger.

After that night on the beach, Micah had accepted me immediately. Noel's trust had been a little harder to earn. But once I'd earned it, I knew there was nothing she wouldn't do for me, and vice

versa. She was tough, smart, and way too jaded for someone her age. But she hadn't exactly had the easiest of upbringings. Orphaned at the age of nine, she'd ended up in a group home. And from the little she said about it, I knew it was a place of horrors. Micah still had nightmares about it. She'd left with Micah three years ago. They'd been on their own for a year until I came across them.

I stepped out of the bedroom and smiled at the two of them. "So what amazing creation will we be having for breakfast this morning?"

Noel smiled, holding up the plate. "Fresh apple slices with peanut butter."

"My favorite," I said as I took a seat at the table. I flicked a quick glance at the fire escape, but it was empty.

Micah sat across from me. I ran a hand over his head. "Sorry I was late last night, guys. It couldn't be helped."

"What was the party like?" Noel asked as she placed the plate in the middle of the table. From the look of it, she had sliced the apples to make sure she got every last piece of edible fruit. Thinly spread across them was peanut butter.

My stomach growled at the sight. But I only ate two slices, and small ones at that. I'd managed to eat a little at the party last night, and I knew that Noel and Micah had had little to eat. Food was a luxury these days, and we had very little money for luxuries.

I sat back, sipping a glass of water. "Oh, you should've seen it. Francesca Remiel was there, and I swear she must've been wearing her weight in diamonds. She had trouble holding her neck up, they were so heavy."

The kids' eyes shone as I told them story after story of how the rich lived. My stories from my time over the bridge were one of the few sources of entertainment we had in this world. I'd gotten pretty good at taking a boring event and making it into something fabulous.

"What about the food?" Micah asked.

“They had a chocolate fountain. Chocolate bubbled up and cascaded over the sides. People would dip cups in or little cookies.”

“Wow.” Micah leaned forward, his mouth hanging ajar.

In great detail, I described the feast, which, for a party in Sterling Peak, was just a normal night. There’d been roast rack of lamb, ham, and salmon as the main courses. And then at least twenty side dishes, plus appetizers and two ten-foot tables full of desserts. While food might be an issue in this household, and most of the households in Blue Forks, it was definitely not a problem over in Sterling Peak.

Micah sighed after I mentioned that I’d left before the Sterling Peak Seraph Force had arrived. “One day, one of them is going to look at you and realize what you can do. Then you’ll become a ranger and we’ll move over the bridge.”

I smiled back at him. “Let’s not get your hopes up.”

“You’ll see,” he said.

Noel and I shared a look over the table. Rangers were the soldiers of the Seraph Force, the security force that protected people from demon attacks. They did occasionally take on a Demon Cursed as a ranger, but it was rare.

And no one was going to invite a maid to join their ranks.

But neither Noel nor I said anything to Micah. He lived in a small fantasy world that I wasn’t sure what to do about. I didn’t want to take away the solace of a world that was much kinder and more hopeful than our actual reality provided him. At the same time, I knew that he needed to have his feet firmly planted on the ground. After all, life was not going to get any easier for either of them.

“How was school yesterday?” I asked, wanting to get that dreamy look off of Micah’s face.

Mission accomplished. He frowned.

He and Noel exchanged a glance. “We had to duck out early. A social worker came by,” Noel said.

My heart rate picked up. I struggled to keep the tremble from my hands. Even though they sat there within arm’s reach, the fear of

losing them jolted me. Social workers went to the schools to check and see if there were any children without homes. At least, without official homes.

We were undeniably an unofficial home. Foster homes had to pay taxes on their kids. If we became official, I would have to choose between paying rent or paying for the kids. It was a stupid system. But the group homes got money from the government for each kid. So if you wanted to take a kid from them, you had to pay them. It was corrupt. It was wrong. And it was how it was.

But if it came down to it, there would be no choice. I would have to pay. I was just really hoping we could avoid it for the next six years or so. "Did she see you?"

Micah took a bite of his apple slice, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "No. Noel noticed the car before we even got into school. So we ducked down the alley by the old toy store and came back home."

"I think you should stay home today."

Noel shook her head. "The social workers never come two days in a row. It'll be okay."

I waged a silent war inside my mind about whether or not to let them go. I knew they needed to go to school. Not necessarily for the education. They were both smart kids and had the basics down. And to be honest, it wasn't like lawyers and doctors were really a thing anymore, at least not for people like us. But they needed to be around kids their own age. They needed to have a normal life, or at least as normal a life as we could manage.

"Okay, but if anything feels off—"

"Trust your instincts," they said in unison.

Feigning ignorance, I raised an eyebrow. "Have I said that before?"

Noel rolled her eyes, popping another apple slice into her mouth. "Only every day."

"Well, then, my job here is done. Speaking of which ..." I glanced at the clock. "I need to get moving, or I'll lose my other job."

I hustled into the bathroom and took a super-fast ice-cold

shower. Then I dashed back into my room, pulling the blanket closed. My uniform hung on a hanger on an exposed pipe, but I ignored it. Normally I left it at work, but I'd been so late yesterday that I'd worn it home. I'd had to wash it in the sink last night. It was still a little damp.

Slipping on my jeans and tank top, I then sat on the edge of the bed to pull on my socks and boots. I shoved my work shoes into my backpack and then my clean uniform over my arm. I'd get changed when I got to work. If I wore it there, I would just get it sweaty and wrinkled.

And Mrs. Uriel hated when we showed up sweaty and wrinkled.

Trying to work up some enthusiasm for the day ahead, I stepped out of the room and yelled down the hall, "Okay, I'm going."

I waited for a beat. Both doors opened. Noel and Micah hurried out. "Hugs."

As I opened up my arms, the two of them rushed me. This was our morning ritual. Everyone got hugs before they left, no matter what. The world was decidedly unstable. And I never wanted to leave the house without saying goodbye, just in case. I kissed Micah on the forehead and did the same to Noel. "I love you. And I love you."

They held me tight. They mumbled their I-love-yous into my side.

And for just a moment, everything in the world was right. The small apartment, the lousy job, the unbearable weight of just existing these days, none of it mattered right at that moment. I had them, and they had me. And that was all that mattered.

Too soon, Noel and Micah stepped away. I glanced back at the clock. I was really going to have to hustle to get there in time.

"Love you," I called out one last time as I flung open the door and raced down the stairs.

CHAPTER FOUR

I HUSTLED OUT ONTO THE STREET, DUCKING AROUND IMMANUEL SANCHEZ AS he pushed his shopping cart filled with metal scraps from the alley that ran along our apartment building. “Morning, Manny.”

The Sanchezes lived on the first floor of our apartment building. It was Manny and his wife, Lisa, and their four kids, three of whom were younger than ten. Lisa worked up in Sterling Peak at one of the other houses. Sometimes she and I walked to work together. After the birth of their baby boy, Miles, though, she’d taken on an extra cleaning job and now left hours before I did.

“Morning, Addie,” he called as I ran by. Addie was short for Addison. I still didn’t know what my actual name was. But the day after I met Noel and Micah, we all agreed that they needed to call me something. We passed by a store that had an old sign on the window for Addison Shoes. Next to it was a former bakery. So Addison Baker was born, a non-angelic surname. Only the Angel Blessed had angelic names.

With money, a person could buy a lower level angel name, But there was no point in getting one. There was no benefit. So most waited until they had enough for one of the higher angel names.

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Noel and Micah had angel last names simply because all orphans were given the same one: Rikiel. It was a label they then had to wear until they could afford a new one. Of course, the label also helped insure they never did. It was like being stamped with the term Demon Cursed.

Although I recognized a few more people heading along the street in the same direction, I didn't stop to say hello. They were more the people you saw all the time but never got to know, which was the case for most of the people in Blue Forks. They were kind, hardworking people. But we were all trying to make ends meet—during daylight hours. Because when the darkness hit, no one stepped outside unless they had to. The nights belonged to the demons now.

The Celestial Bridge, which connected Blue Forks to Sterling Peak, came into view. I smiled at the sight of it. I loved this old bridge. It was a hundred and fifty years old, made of rock and steel. I don't know why, but I thought it was absolutely beautiful.

My eyes immediately went to the highest point of the bridge. Stone-carved versions of the archangels Michael and Gabriel clad in armor with spears clutched in their right hands stood with their backs perfectly straight. Their narrowed gazes focused on a point in the distance, their backs to Sterling Peak. Each time I saw them a tingle of warmth spread through me. Times were tough yes, but the angels looked out for us. And if the demon attacks got really got bad, I and everyone else knew they would return to protect us, just like they had before.

Which was good, because we couldn't count on the people of Sterling Peak coming to our rescue. Twenty years ago, renovations on the bridge had been completed that allowed the first twenty feet of the bridge to retract in case of a demon attack, thus protecting all of Sterling Peak while leaving the people of Blue Forks on their own.

I tried not to focus on that whenever I saw the bridge.

"Morning, Addie," a familiar voice said.

Scanning around quickly to make sure no one was too close, I dropped my chin. "Morning, Torr."

Torr was only five feet tall. He had green mottled skin, pointy ears, and two small nubs for horns. Today he wore red shorts and a dark gray Mickey Mouse T-shirt, along with his standard black Converse sneakers.

I met him three months after I met Noel and Matt. One of the other demons was attacking him late one night. I intervened before I got a good look at him. And afterwards, well, it didn't seem right to kill him. He had a large gash in his ribs, and tears had welled up in his bright blue eyes. I'd never met a demon like him. He wasn't vicious. He wasn't cruel. In fact, he seemed younger than the others.

And he could be invisible.

The first time I realized that Torr could cloak himself, I'd been terrified. It opened up a whole new avenue of fear when it came to the demons. Slowly, I realized that the ability was unique to Torr. He made himself invisible, but as far as he or I knew, no other demon could.

"I smelled demon blood on your blade last night. How many did you take down?"

Talking out of the side of my mouth as I kept my head forward, I said, "Only two. One caught up with me on the way back from the Hills last night, and the other was stalking Lisa Sanchez."

Torr shook his head. "She shouldn't stay out after dark like that."

We were getting closer to the line for the bridge, so I took out my water bottle and pretended to drink. "No choice, just like me. The Uriels had a party. It was stay or lose my job. Lisa had the same choice at her job."

Torr swore softly. "So they just sent you guys home with no protection?"

I shrugged. "You know how it is."

He didn't say anything because he knew the deal.

Sterling Peak used to be a ritzy part of Los Angeles. They didn't worry about demon attacks at night there. They had enough security

to make sure that if any demon attempted to attack its citizens, it paid for that violation.

The first Seraph Force Academy had been started in Sterling Peak nearly a hundred years ago. It stood on the far side of the mountain, away from the wealthy estates, and trained the country's top defenders against the demons. There were a hundred students at any given time, give or take, plus the thirty-six full-time soldiers of the Seraph Force stationed in Sterling Peak. It was fair to say that Sterling Peak was one of the safest locations on the planet.

Downhill, though, there was nothing for the rest of us regular folks. The demons had realized pretty quickly which side of the bridge to focus their attentions on.

Not that demon attacks were new. The demons had been attacking for over two hundred years. But for the last hundred years, the attacks happened occasionally, once every three weeks or so, although back then the attacks came maybe once a year. Now, it was more like once a night. Something had changed in the last few years, ramping up the attacks. Back then, when it had gotten really bad, a legion of angels descended from on high and fought back the demon hordes.

Half of the world had been destroyed as the battle raged on for fifty years. But eventually, the angels were victorious. When it ended, life for humans was very different. Resources were much scarcer. Electricity had become an extreme luxury. And society had been quickly split into the haves and the have-nots.

But the haves decided they deserved a better name: the Angel Blessed. They claimed to be descendants of the archangels who had appeared to fight back the demons and then disappeared. There had been offspring of the archangels who had some of their abilities. But from all reports, the abilities were only seen in the first generation of children, not in any subsequent generations. That didn't stop the wealthy from claiming to be Angel Blessed, even decades later.

It probably helped them justify in their own minds their hoarding while other people starved and died. The name they gave

the rest of us made it easier too: Demon Cursed. There was no proof that humans and demons had procreated, but that didn't stop the name from catching on. Now the Angel Blessed gathered all of their resources to themselves and gave them out only when they needed something from the Demon Cursed.

I worked for the Uriels, another one of the higher Angel Blessed families. The Angel Blessed, when they had enough resources and money, took on the names of the archangels. The richest families had the names of the archangels, while the less well-to-do had names of lower angels.

The Uriels had an enormous mansion: ten thousand square feet, with ten bedrooms for a four-person family. Noel, Micah, and I could have hidden away in one wing of the house, and they probably wouldn't even realize we were there for a week. But of course, the Uriels weren't the sharing kind.

And the truth was, I was just happy to have a job, a roof over my head, and at least a little food. Plus, the cook at the Uriels often snuck me and the kids some extra food.

In my gut, I knew it was unfair. We shouldn't have to struggle so hard when those with so much didn't struggle at all. But when you were just trying to get food on the table, there wasn't a lot of extra time to fight the system.

Besides, as far as the power balance went, it was all on the side of Sterling Peak. It would be like throwing pebbles at a demon. It might feel good for a moment that you were fighting back, but it wouldn't change the outcome of the fight.

"How were the kids' last night?"

Torr smiled. "Good. They came in, did their homework, and tidied up a little bit. Then they played Parcheesi until it got too dark to see. Noel read by candlelight for a short time before going to sleep."

When I worked late, Torr would sit out on the fire escape and keep an eye on Noel and Matt. He never revealed himself to them. We'd argued about it more than a few times. I thought Noel and

Micah would accept Torr, especially once I explained that he'd actually been a part of our lives for almost two years now. He even slept on the couch sometimes, unbeknownst to either of them.

But Torr didn't want to risk it. And I understood that. He worried that the kids would make me choose between them and him. And although I would never let myself choose, I could see why he wouldn't want to risk that. We were his family, Noel, Micah, and I, even if two members of that family didn't even know he existed.

I gave him a smile. "Well, I appreciate it. Did you get some breakfast?"

"I did. I had some apples. Did you guys get the ones I left for you?"

"We did. Thanks."

"Do you think you'll be late today?"

The bridge was only ten feet away now. I stopped to lean down and tie my boot, dropping my voice to barely above a whisper now. "Shouldn't be. Last night, Mrs. Uriel drank a lot. She'll be hung over for most of the day. To be honest, I'd be surprised if she gets out of bed before noon, and that'll only be for a quick bite to eat before she returns to bed."

"Good. I'll walk the kids home from school and wait for you."

Torr didn't wait for a response, as a group was coming up behind us. He simply walked back the way we came, skirting around the people hurrying toward the bridge. A wave of pity fell over me. I hated that he had to stay hidden. In the time I'd known him, I'd seen no evidence of aggression or violence. Other than how he looked, I'm not sure how he could even be classified as a demon. Every time I tried to talk to him about where he came from and why he was so different from the other demons, though, he made himself invisible to me as well. It didn't take long for me to realize that that was one topic that was off-limits.

Standing up, I adjusted my bag and rearranged my uniform to remove any wrinkles before I stepped into the line. There were only ten people ahead of me. Two guards in the gray uniforms of Sterling

Peak security stood at the front of the line at the bridge entrance. I groaned silently when I saw that Claude was on-duty. The guy made my skin crawl.

I didn't recognize the other guy. He must be new.

A job with Sterling Peak security was *the* dream job for anyone living down in Blue Forks: three square meals a day and an actual livable wage. Those who got tapped for the job were usually some distant cousin of a Sterling Peak's resident. Most of the guards were allowed to move into the lower levels of Sterling Peak after a year, and they wasted no time doing exactly that.

And most liked to lord that status over those who still had to commute.

Counted the people ahead, I tried to figure out who I would end up with and let out a sigh of relief that it looked like I'd speak with the new guy. Anyone had to be better than Claude.

Then a guy three people up couldn't find his identification card. It took so long that instead of getting the new guy, I found myself face-to-face with Claude.

Claude was a little shorter than me, standing at maybe 5'6". He had a nearly perfectly round head and a rotund body that had only gotten larger in the last few months. Apparently, he was putting all of his money into food. He smiled as I stepped in front of him. His gaze shifted from my face, down my entire body, and then back again. Anger rolled over me as quickly as his eyes did. "Identification."

Pulling my ID out of my back pocket, I handed it over. Claude made a big show of looking at my face, back at the ID, and then back at my face again. "So how are you doing this morning, Addison?"

"Fine."

He leaned forward. I struggled not to lean back from the stench of his breath.

"You know, my offer still stands. I have a sweet little pad not far from here on the good side of the bridge. I'd be more than willing to

make some room for you in exchange for some favors.” His eyes drifted over me again.

“Can I have my ID back?”

Grinning, he held it even farther away. “I don’t know. I’m not sure this is legit. I might need to take you in for extra searching.”

“Claude!”

Claude winced, his shoulders practically touching his ears. He turned slowly as a woman marched across the bridge toward him. Sheila Castiel was in charge of Sterling Peak security. And by some absolute miracle, she was not a jerk like most of her staff.

The tall, muscular woman stopped next to Claude, glaring down at him, her hands on her hips, her dark hair pulled back into a no-nonsense ponytail. “Why are you holding up Miss Baker?”

The guard fumbled with my ID and quickly handed it back. “I’m not. I’m not. I was just making conversation.”

She glared at him. “Do we pay you to make conversation?”

“Uh, no,” he mumbled.

“That’s right. We pay you to keep Sterling Peak secure and to keep the lines moving quickly. Now which is more important: making conversation or doing your job?”

“Um, the second one?” He asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, the second one. Now go down and join the river patrol. They’re missing a guy and need some extra help. Perhaps it will help remind you of how lucky you are to have this position.”

“Yes, ma’am. Right away, ma’am.” He hurried off, shooting me a glare before disappearing down the path along the side of the bridge.

It would be one seriously smelly day for Claude. River patrol involved searching the riverbanks for any demon attack victims, and being it was the end of the month, cleaning out the nets that were used to catch the debris that floated down from Blue Forks.

Sheila rolled her eyes. “I really don’t know why we have to keep that one around.” She rolled her shoulders as if shaking off the encounter. Then she smiled at me. “How’s it going today, Addie?”

“Good. How’s Marjorie?” I asked.

Sheila’s face lit up at the mention of her younger sister. Marjorie had some learning deficits, and she struggled sometimes with understanding the rules. One night when I had been coming home late, I caught sight of her walking off the bridge into Blue Forks. I didn’t know she was Sheila’s sister. I just knew that she shouldn’t be out by herself. There was something so childlike about Marjorie, even though we were probably about the same age.

I followed her to where a man was meeting up with her. And that was when the demons attacked. Sheila had been out looking for Marjorie and arrived as I was standing between Marjorie and the last one. I’d already taken down the other one. The man had run off. Sheila jumped into the fight without hesitation, and together the two of us dispatched the remaining one. She called the security patrol to escort me home that night. I’d ridden in a car, which, as far as I knew, was the first time I’d been in one.

She’d never forgotten that I’d helped her out. Occasionally she’d be waiting for me after work with some fresh baked bread or some clothes for the kids. And somewhere along the way, we’d become friends.

A genuine smile crossed her face. “She’s great. She started painting. She’s actually really good.”

“That’s wonderful. I’d love to see her painting some time.”

Titling her head, Sheila studied me. “Tell you what, why don’t you bring Noel and Micah over this weekend for dinner? You can stay over. There’s going to be fireworks. I’m sure the kids would love it.”

“Thanks. Actually, that sounds great.”

Smiling, she stepped out of the way so I could pass. “See you Saturday.”

“See you then.”

Picking up my pace, I took off across the bridge. The bridge itself was something out of a fairy tale with its stone arches and the sun shining on the water below. I loved walking across it. It felt freeing.

But today I couldn’t take the time to appreciate the bridge. I was

running late. I broke into a jog, hurried across the bridge, and then up the hill. The Uriels were one of the wealthier families, and as a result, their home was third from the top. Walking to work was a workout every morning. Running to work was an extreme exercise. But today there was no choice.

I sprinted up the hill, bypassing some other workers. I pulled into the Uriels' driveway just five minutes before nine.

Their drive was cobblestoned, so I had to slow down or risk twisting an ankle. The home was four stories high, with giant columns all along the front, which were reminiscent of a Greek temple. The gold cherubim fountain in front of the house, though, was more like something from old Las Vegas, at least according to the pictures I'd seen.

I quickly made my way to the side door. Before I could knock, George, who with his shaggy gray hair, eyebrows, and mustache bore an uncanny resemblance to an English sheepdog, had the door open. "You better hurry."

"I know, I know," I said as I squeezed past him.

Ducking into the first bathroom, I quickly stripped off my jeans and tank top. I splashed cold water on my skin and toweled off. Then I threw on my uniform. I grabbed the ridiculous ballet flats out of my bag and slipped them on my feet. Mrs. Uriel didn't like to hear anybody walking around her house. She insisted we all wear these ridiculous shoes that gave zero support while standing on them all day.

But like many other things that involved the welfare of her servants, that was not Mrs. Uriel's concern.

As I grabbed my brush, I looked in the mirror as I pulled my hair tightly back, making sure there wasn't a single hair out of place. The uniform was the exact same blue as my eyes. I pulled out one of the fresh aprons that hung in the closet and wrapped it around my waist and then placed a small little cap on my head.

Made with a really delicate material that was also durable, the

uniform was surprisingly comfortable. Sad to say, it was by far the highest quality outfit in my entire wardrobe.

After I stashed my backpack in the closet, I hurried into the kitchen with a quick glance at the clock. 8:58.

“Cutting it close,” Beth Myers, the Uriels’ cook, said as she pushed the already-made-up tray toward me. I was supposed to put the tray together. But Beth no doubt knew I’d been here late and would run in at the last minute.

Beth had been with the Uriels since she was a teenager, and she’d been in the kitchen now for close to fifty years. She knew where all the Uriels’ dirty secrets were buried, so unlike the rest of the staff, they were very courteous to her. Beth, in turn, used her sway to help make life a little easier for everyone else.

“Thanks, Beth. You’re a lifesaver.” I grabbed the tray and hustled down the hall. Carefully balancing the tray and trying not to slosh any of the tea, I climbed to the second floor. At the landing, I stopped for a moment to readjust the plate that had slid a little toward me. Luckily, none of the tea had spilled. I knocked on the double master doors at nine o’clock on the dot.

“Come in,” came the muffled reply from the other side of the door.

Once again, carefully balancing the tray with one hand, I turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open with my foot. Mrs. Uriel was still in bed.

Silently, I walked over to the side table and placed the tray silently upon it. Mrs. Uriel groaned from her position face down in bed. She shoved her thin pale-brown hair back. Large black circles of mascara rimmed them. A quick glance at the white pillowcase showed where the lipstick, blush, and eye makeup had rubbed off during the night. “What time is it?”

“Nine o’clock.”

“It’s too early.” She shoved herself up. The straps of her white silk negligee slipped down her shoulders.

I averted my eyes. I wasn’t exactly a prude with the human body,

but Mrs. Uriel thought nothing of parading around with little to nothing on. She wasn't showing off. She just really didn't think of her staff as people.

She shoved her straps back up and sat against the pillows. "My tea. Quickly."

I uncovered the tray and poured some into her cup. The scent of ginger and lemon wafted up. It was Beth's hangover remedy. With Mrs. Uriel, she'd had enough practice to fine-tune the recipe.

I handed her the cup. Without a word, she took it and drank down its contents practically in one gulp. She shoved the cup back at me. "Come back at twelve."

Flopping back down, she rolled over, giving me her back. I placed the cup back on the tray. As silently as I could manage, I picked it up and walked back out the door. Once again, balancing the tray with one hand, I closed the door behind me and then leaned against it, taking a breath. Okay. My work day had officially begun.

CHAPTER FIVE

I SPENT THE NEXT FEW HOURS TIDYING UP AFTER THE PARTY LAST NIGHT. According to Nigel—who was the head butler, Beth’s brother, and the house’s most notorious gossip—the party broke up around six a.m. Mrs. Uriel had gone to bed a few hours earlier, but her children had kept the partying going. A few guests had taken up residence in the rooms on the fourth floor.

After I helped Nigel and Ingrid, the other maid, with the second and third floor, Ingrid disappeared down the stairs to help Beth in the kitchen. Nigel turned to me, watching me down his hawk-like nose. “I’m afraid you’re on your own for the fourth floor. A group of Hunter’s friends stayed over last night, so try to be quiet and ignore any rooms where the door’s closed.” He paused. “Or open and occupied.”

Looking up the stairs with a sigh, I said. “How long’s Hunter staying?”

Across from me, Nigel glanced around, lowering his voice. “Hopefully only a few days. He scared off another kitchen worker yesterday.”

“Who?”

“Hilda’s girl.”

My mouth gaped. “She’s only fifteen!”

Anger slashed across Nigel’s face. “I know.”

My own anger simmered just below the surface. I wasn’t a fan of Estelle Uriel, but I’d take her any day over her entitled, arrogant, lecherous son. He’d assaulted me one night when he was too far into his cups, and I broke his arm. Luckily, he thought he’d fallen down the stairs while he was drunk.

Noel had wanted me to report him, but there was no point. No one would do anything about the creep. There was, however, an excellent chance I’d get in trouble for breaking his arm.

Although, I have to say, he’d made certain to keep his distance from me since then. Maybe he remembered part of it. Hunter liked to give the impression he was a tough guy. Being beaten up by the house staff wouldn’t exactly help that reputation.

Nigel leaned toward me, dropping his voice after glancing around to make sure no one could overhear him. “The Seven met here last night.”

The Seven were the leaders of the Seraph Force. And although they were called the Seven, they currently only numbered six. Major General Rolf Remiel had left two weeks ago to help set up another academy on the east coast.

I raised my eyebrows. “Really?”

The Seraph Force was the security force in Sterling Peak. They were viewed with a hallowed air. And I had to admit, they looked intimidating. All strong, tall, muscular, male and female alike. They were all descendants of the archangels and looked it. Sheila ran basic security, but the Seraph Force trained to fend off demons. And I knew that Hunter wanted more than anything to be one of them.

Nigel nodded. “The meeting was supposed to happen at Donovan Gabriel’s, but Katie came down with a stomach bug.” Katie was the Gabriel’s chef. “The doctor said it might be contagious, and so it was moved at the last minute. Being we were already set up for a party here, it seemed as good a place as any.”

It took me a moment to understand why. "Oh, it was a Council meeting last night."

Nigel nodded. "Yup."

The Council of Light was the ruling body of Sterling Peak. Six members were all from prestigious families, and the seventh member was the leader of the Seraph Force, who was also from a distinguished family.

The Uriels were very wealthy, but as descendants of Uriel, they couldn't compete with the Rafael, Gabriel, or Michael families. But they were always trying to get their foot in the door. I grunted. "I wouldn't be surprised if the Uriel's drugged Katie to get the meeting moved here."

He narrowed his eyes. "Me either. Well, time to get lunch ready. God forbid even in their hungover states they miss out on a meal." Nigel patted me on the shoulder and headed down the stairs.

Watching him go, I once again noticed him moving a lot slower than he used. These last few weeks, it had become a lot more pronounced. I didn't want to think of how the Uriels would treat him when they noticed. I'd need to try to see if I could cover some of his duties to lighten his load a little.

I grabbed the basket that Ingrid had emptied before heading up the stairs, my mind cataloguing Nigel's duties, trying to see where I could help. A splash of bright blue caught my eye. I grabbed the piece of silk from the top of the banister. It was a lovely bra, trimmed in lace. Rolling my eyes, I tossed it in the basket. Hunter's parties got pretty wild. Like Mrs. Uriel, Hunter's guests didn't seem to mind public displays of nudity.

And it looked like this party had devolved, just like all his other ones. So far, I had found six pairs of underwear, four bras, a handful of shirts, and two pairs of pants. Apparently, people just left here naked last night. There weren't enough rooms to accommodate that many.

Or they were all in one room, sleeping off the giant orgy. With Hunter, it could go either way.

The study at the top of the stairs was unoccupied, but the remnants of the party had spilled in here as well. I grabbed the empty glasses and dirty plates, noting the fresh wine stains on the rug. I'd need to bring up the cleaning supplies later.

Most of the other doors were closed. I didn't try them to see if there were people inside. Tomorrow I'd do a massive cleaning. Today I just needed to get the obvious stuff. I reached the end of the hall. Someone had left a glass tilted on its side. The contents had dribbled onto the rug. Great. I placed the basket on the table by the wall. Leaning a hand against the guest room door, I swung my arm down to grab it, balancing on one leg.

The door swung open.

With a cry, I fell to my side. Two powerful arms caught me before I could hit the ground.

Oh crap.

Mrs. Uriel hated when we interacted with guests, even if the interaction was unintentional. She wanted us to be seen and not heard. She worried our actions would be construed as us throwing ourselves at the feet of one of them.

Of course, in the current situation, I had pretty much done exactly that.

Double crap.

I wrenched myself from the man's arms, not even turning to look at him. "I'm so sorry."

A deep chuckle emitted from his chest. "No, not at all. My fault for opening the door."

I prepared myself to see disdain in the man's face, or maybe some arrogance. Instead, I met warmth from a pair of dark-brown, nearly black eyes. Eyes I recognized. Everyone in Sterling Peak did.

At six foot five with the build of a Viking, Graham Michael, the Commander of the Seraph Force, smiled down at me. His mother was from China, his father from Sweden. The combination made for a widely attractive son. I'd only seen him from afar, but I'd heard more than one citizen of Sterling Peak comment on the fact that

they'd like to do more than just look at the devastatingly handsome Seraph Force leader.

But that was not a world that I involved myself in, not even in my imagination. I liked to keep my daydreams within the realm of possibility. The baker for the Camiels? Possible. Manny Sanchez's cousin who visited last summer? Possible and better in my imagination than reality.

The Commander of the Seraph Force? I might as well daydream about living in one of these houses as well.

The Seraph Force was the national security force charged with leading the fight against the demons. As Commander, Graham Michael was also the head of the Council of Light, the ruling body for all the nation. They made the laws that influenced every aspect of life. While he wasn't a king, he presided over the meetings and determined the schedule. Each member of the Council had an equal vote and was from the seven ruling families: Michael, Gabriel, Rafael, Raguel, Remiel, Uriel, and Sasquael. Each family claimed a direct line to the archangels. Which made Graham Michael the most powerful and therefore the most sought after man on the continent.

I ducked my head back down. "Commander Graham, I'm so sorry, really. Is there anything I could get you? Breakfast, perhaps?" Due to the fact that the same families always ran the Seraph Force, all members were addressed by their title and their first name.

"No, no, I'm fine. I grabbed breakfast back at my place. I just came to check on Donovan." He waved his hand back in the door.

Lying on the bed, shirtless and with a white sheet covering him from the waist down, was Lieutenant Commander Donovan Gabriel. He and Graham had an almost identical build and height. But whereas Graham's face was a merging of Chinese and Caucasian features, Donovan's face only held pure Persian ancestry.

Together, the two often made conversations come to an abrupt halt when they stepped into a room. Words seemed to dry up in most women's and a few men's mouths at the sight of them. Add in that Donovan was Graham's second in command of the nation's most

lethal security force, and well, the two of them were the stars of more than a few individuals' fantasy lives.

"I'm sorry we made so much work for you." Graham kept his focus on me as he talked. Most Angel Blessed barely acknowledged our existence. And receiving that kind of attention from Graham, well, my words seemed to dry up a little bit too.

"Um, that's fine just fine. It's no problem."

Hanging onto the banister, his breath labored, Nigel appeared at the top of the stairs.. "Commander Graham ... I just learned ... you were here. What can I get you, sir?"

Graham gave Nigel an amiable smile. "Nothing, Nigel. I'm fine. Your excellent staff has already offered me breakfast, but I'm afraid I have to hurry off."

"Let me escort you down, then. Addison, if you're done, Ingrid could use your help with the buffet."

"Yes, of course." I grabbed the basket and hurried down the stairs ahead of them, listening as Nigel made small talk with Graham. I glanced over my shoulder, noting that Graham moved at Nigel's pace, even though the older man was going much slower than Graham could take the stairs.

I shifted my gaze to Graham's face and saw he was watching me as well. Heat flared in my cheeks. I turned around, picking up my pace, but an infinitesimal part of me felt warm and not just from the sight of him. He'd taken his time walking with Nigel. It was a kind thing to do.

Huh, maybe some of these guys weren't as bad as I thought. But almost as soon as I had the thought, I banished it from my mind. Nope, I was not going down that road. Even though I could only remember the last two years of my life, I'd heard of way too many girls who'd thought one of the Angel Blessed were kinder than they'd been taught, only to learn that that kindness only lasted as long as a woman's willpower to say no.

Hurrying down the stairs, I winced as I realized how unhappy Mrs. Uriel would be if she saw me going through the front foyer with

a basket full of dirty dishes and clothes. Luckily, no one was around, and she was still in bed. I had another thirty minutes before I needed to wake her up. I darted down the hall, glancing into the dining room as I passed. Inside were three guests, and fourteen-year-old Nathan, the houseboy. Nathan was George's nephew and the reason George stayed on at the estate, even though as a former member of the Seraph Force he had a retirement savings that would see him through.

I dropped the basket in the workroom and then hurried into the kitchen.

At the kitchen island, Beth blew at a piece of hair that had slipped out of her bun while she rolled dough. "The natives are getting restless. Poor Ingrid is being run off her feet going up and down the stairs delivering food and drinks."

"What do you want me to do?"

She nodded to the prep room. Through the open doorway I could see serving trays lined up on the counter inside. "Take the chafing dishes out, fill whatever needs to be filled, and then you can help out Ingrid."

With a nod, I hustled over to the trays. I could easily stack them all and carry them out, but I also knew that would not go over well. Instead, I stacked two and carried them out, backing out the door into the dining room.

"Oh, let me help you with that," a voice said.

A glance up showed that it belonged to D'Angelo Rafael. D'Angelo was another member of the Seven and had the looks that seemed to confirm his angelic heritage. Wavy blond hair and piercing blue eyes above sharp cheekbones looked down at me with a smile. Before I could say anything, D'Angelo had taken the top tray from me and walked toward the buffet.

I narrowed my eyes, wondering at his game. Because while D'Angelo might look like an angel, he was anything but.

A scan of the room showed that Amon Michael was there. Amon was a college friend of Hunter and from a Michael family in the

Chicago area. Like the Michael family here in Sterling Peak, the Chicago Michaels were incredibly wealthy, with their hands in many pies. And they had a daughter who, according to the staff scuttlebutt, D'Angelo was very interested in marrying.

Not because he was in love with her. As far as anyone knew, he'd never even met her. He wanted an arranged marriage that would solidify his status as the wealthiest member of the Seraph Force. He would take the Michael last name when they married. The connection with the Michael family might be enough to solidify him as the next leader of the Seraph Force should anything happen to Commander Graham.

Amon watched D'Angelo walk over to the table and place the tray upon it. I couldn't read his expression to see if D'Angelo's chivalrous act impressed him or if he saw through the façade.

Keeping my eyes down, I walked toward the table. "Thank you, Major D'Angelo."

D'Angelo laughed. "I've told you, just call me D'Angelo."

It was an effort not to gape at the blatant lie. D'Angelo had spoken to me half a dozen times. And each time he'd looked right through me. He preferred girls younger and blonder. I was pretty sure he did not remember me at all. And he'd definitely never told me to call him by his first name.

Giving him a stiff nod, I turned my attention to the trays of food. D'Angelo grabbed a biscuit and a glass of orange juice and said something to Amon before heading for the door. He left the glass on the edge of the table.

As he left the room, I watched him go with narrowed eyes. D'Angelo Rafael was everything that was wrong with the Angel Blessed. He was wealthy, attractive, and had way too much power for someone without compassion.

A pair of warm, dark brown eyes floated through my mind, and an unfamiliar stirring erupted in my stomach. Nope, Graham Michael was just like all the others. And even *if* he was kinder, he was still completely, totally, and irrevocably off-limits.

CHAPTER SIX

GRAHAM

THE URIELS' BUTLER WAS GETTING ON IN YEARS. GRAHAM COULD TELL THAT he was having trouble managing the stairs now. He knew for a fact that the Uriels would fire him as soon as he no longer proved up to the tasks of his job.

Major Tess Uriel, a member of the Seven—and as she put it, an unfortunate relative of these Uriels—was considering buying a cottage overlooking the river. She would rarely be there and would need some help maintaining it. Perhaps he could suggest Nigel to her.

He shook the man's hand at the door. He'd known Nigel for years. He was close friends with Mary and Franklin, who ran his house. "Thank you, Nigel. I appreciate you taking care of all of us."

Nigel beamed as he held open the door. "Oh, it's a pleasure, Commander Graham. A pleasure."

Graham stepped outside, but he couldn't resist taking a quick look back into the foyer.

The maid with those incredible blue eyes had disappeared. She

always did. He'd seen her on more than one occasion, usually from afar. Something about her drew his attention every time. He thought it was the confidence. Most servants walked around with their shoulders slumped, trying not to garner any attention. She did the same, but he got the impression it was an act. There was a strain of confidence that ran through her when she met your gaze. She knew what the rules were and how to follow them, but she didn't believe in them. And something about that was incredibly arresting. Of course, her looks were plenty arresting as well.

Graham shook his head as he made his way down the Uriels' steps, pushing the woman from his mind. He didn't interact with anyone else's staff. He'd had a few relationships, and they had been just that, relationships. He would not be one of those ones living down to the reputation of Angel Blessed taking whatever they wanted.

He rolled his shoulders, thinking about Donovan still asleep upstairs. Graham had left after the meeting last night, but Donovan had stayed on. Graham knew he should have stayed with him, but he couldn't handle one of Hunter's parties. The guy had the morals of a snake. And Donovan was a big boy. Plus, he'd been in a mood. It was best to just let him drink it off. But Donovan would have one hell of a headache for the rest of the day.

Graham supposed he shouldn't be surprised by Donovan's unusual bout of drinking. Donovan had mentioned that his brother and father were home. The three of them did not get along.

Or, more accurately, his father and brother did not get along with Donovan.

Donovan was the firstborn, which in most Angel Blessed homes made them the honored child. But not in the Gabriel home. Donovan was the only child of Sasha Gabriel's first marriage, an arranged marriage. Donovan had inherited the dark good looks of his mother. She had died during childbirth, and Sasha had wasted no time remarrying. His younger brother was born just a year after her death.

Jayden, the younger Gabriel, was the spitting image of his father, with his blond hair, pale-brown eyes, and weak chin.

But the resemblance didn't end at their looks. The two of them strongly believed that the Angel Blessed were indeed blessed by God. And with that blessing came the entitlement to all the spoils the world offered. The Demon Cursed, in their mind, had been put on this earth to serve them, to pay for the indignity of their birth.

Graham had even heard ramblings that in his younger days, Sasha had advocated for slavery for any Demon Cursed that broke the law.

Luckily, Donovan hadn't really been raised by the senior Gabriel. Sasha had taken his youngest son on tours of the world, wanting to show him everything that he felt he was owed one day. Donovan had never been invited along. Instead, he spent his time at Graham's home.

Not that Graham had a pleasant relationship with his own parents. But unlike Donovan, Graham was the second son, therefore the less important one. His older brother Brock got all the attention focused on him. He was the heir to the Seraph Force throne, a direct descendant of the archangel Michael. So it wasn't unusual for Brock to go off with his father on trips all over the world, sometimes accompanied by Sasha and Jayden Gabriel, as well as D'Angelo Rafael and his father. As a result, the three spoiled boys had become incredibly close.

And incredibly dangerous.

Before his death, Brock had been the Seraph Force leader. Graham's father had been peacock proud. Their father had been unable to take on the role due to a club foot. A distant cousin, therefore, had taken on the position, but he'd since grown too old to continue. He'd moved east to head up one of the smaller Seraph Force Academies.

Brock had only led the Seraph Force, and by extension the Council of Light, for three years before he was killed in a demon attack. During that time, Brock had made his mark.

Graham had watched in growing horror as his brother encouraged the Seraph Force to punish any indiscretions by the Demon Cursed. He increased the penalties for even the most minor of infractions, while at the same time cutting wages and reducing food allotments sold in the markets down in Forks and across the nation.

His brother hadn't been a man of compassion. He hadn't been a man of integrity. And God help him, Graham believed the world was better off with him gone.

Graham hadn't been in Sterling Peak when Brock was killed. After two years, he could no longer stand his brother's machinations. If he'd stayed, he probably wouldn't have survived much longer. His brother had made it a point to give him the most dangerous and least respectable assignments.

And every time he came back victorious, Brock stewed a little longer in his anger. Brock held his people's allegiance by fear. Graham held the allegiance of his brothers- and sisters-in-arms through mutual respect. Brock had been determined to destroy that.

Graham had known it was only a matter of time before Brock's vindictiveness got someone killed. So, rather than letting it come to that, he took an assignment to accompany an occult professor named Marcus Jeffries on his research trip for the year. They'd traipsed the globe looking for patterns in the demon attacks, trying to find any information that would help turn the tide against the attacks, which only seemed to be increasing in frequency.

It had been Graham's decision to go, but he'd been under no illusions that he would enjoy himself. So he'd been shocked to find himself fascinated with the professor's research and fascinated by the professor himself. He'd planned on extending his assignment another year when word reached him about his brother's death. He was immediately named the head of the Seraph Force.

For a moment, he'd thought about turning down the title. People had done it before. But he knew the importance of his position. As the leader of the Seraph Force and the Council of Light, he set the

rules for how demons would be engaged, how society would operate.

The last time he'd gotten drunk, it was with Marcus as they discussed the pros and cons of taking the position. Marcus had pressed upon him the good that he could accomplish as leader. If he had turned it down, Graham had no doubt that D'Angelo would have petitioned for Donovan to be set aside and for D'Angelo to be named the leader of the Seraph Force.

If only a sliver of the policies his brother and his friends had contemplated came into play, life wouldn't just get more difficult for the Demon Cursed—it might cause an all-out revolution. Graham couldn't sit back and let that happen.

The next morning, he awoke with a pounding headache and with the realization that as much as he enjoyed the freedom of traveling with Marcus, he knew that he would need to return home.

Next in line for the position was D'Angelo, his brother's best friend. And if anything, D'Angelo was worse than Brock. He couldn't sit back and let that happen. If only a sliver of the policies his brother and his friends had contemplated came into play, life wouldn't just get more difficult for the Demon Cursed—it might cause an all-out revolution.

So Graham returned home with the expectation that in a few short years he would step away, having hand-picked a successor to take over. He didn't want the power that came with the position, even though Marcus thought that was exactly why he should have it.

The door opened again behind Gabriel. A familiar head of blonde hair emerged. For a second, Graham wondered if he broke into a run if he'd be able to avoid him.

"Graham."

He tensed, gritting his teeth as he turned to face D'Angelo. He focused on keeping his expression neutral, bordering on polite. "D'Angelo. Good morning. Late night for you as well?"

D'Angelo chuckled as he walked along the path. The sun played off his blond hair, almost making it look like he had a halo

surrounding him. “The Uriels throw an excellent party. And there was a new serving girl who started. *She* is lovely.”

It was difficult for Graham to hold back his anger. He clasped his hands behind his back so he didn’t reach out and grab D’Angelo by the throat. Hunter also thought nothing of hitting on the young women or even girls of Forks. And neither of them, if the rumors were true, believed the word “no” was an acceptable response from any of their targets.

Yet D’Angelo was well-liked within Sterling Peak. He had that smooth veneer that never seemed to get ruffled. His good looks no doubt helped sway public opinion. So Graham knew he had to bite his tongue and bide his time. D’Angelo was well-connected with a lot of support.

With a nod for D’Angelo, Graham headed toward the fence. “If you’ll excuse me, I have some work to do. It’s going to be a busy day.”

“Oh, yes, your professor friend is coming to town, isn’t he?”

Eying D’Angelo, Graham once again marveled at the man’s network of spies. Marcus’s arrival was a closely held secret. Yet again, though, D’Angelo demonstrated an ability to see through the security Graham had put into place. He was a formidable opponent. He might not be able to take Graham on the battlefield, but in the world of politics, he could run circles around Graham, and Graham well knew it.

“Yes, he is. You should come by the house and meet him. He’s a fascinating fellow.”

D’Angelo grimaced. “I would love to. Although sitting down with a stodgy professor is not exactly my idea of a good time. But you never know when you’re going to need a resource, right?” He slapped Graham on the back a little harder than necessary.

Enjoying D’Angelo’s discomfort when the slap didn’t move him so much as an inch, Graham smiled. “Well, let me get to it. I’m sure you have an impressive deal to accomplish today as well with the fresh recruits coming in tomorrow. Is everything ready for them?”

Annoyance crossed D’Angelo’s face before he covered it. “Of

course, I have my people working on it diligently. I will review everything later today. Do not fear. All will be completed and ready for our new batch.”

“I never worry when you are in charge, D’Angelo. Have a good day.”

“You too, brother, you too.”

D’Angelo turned for his home as Graham turned for his. Graham glanced back over his shoulder at him. A young woman was walking up the hill. When she caught sight of D’Angelo, she quickly crossed to the other side.

Graham rolled his hands into fists. One day D’Angelo would get his. Graham would make sure of it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ADDIE

I HAD BEEN WRONG ABOUT MRS. URIEL NOT KEEPING ME LATE THAT NIGHT. She kept me for two hours after the end of my shift. Her daughter Tiffany arrived home unexpectedly from school. An impromptu formal dinner had been arranged to celebrate her return.

Of course, Nigel took me aside to share that the reason for her return was that she had flunked out of school.

But Mrs. Uriel announced that Tiffany had returned to spend more time with her family, who she couldn't bear to be away from during these trying times.

I'd had to stay to help set up and prepare before the evening staff came in. Beth gave me a look as she darted a glance at the darkening skies. "I don't like you walking home in this. Do you want to stay at my place tonight?"

"No, I'm good."

"But there were four demon attacks last night. One of them, they went into a family's home."

I stopped still. "What?"

All the demon attacks I'd heard about had one thing in common: They occurred after dark and outside. I had never heard of a demon entering a home. For some stupid reason, I thought they couldn't.

Beth nodded. "A young family. They killed the mother and took the husband. The child was left behind."

"Are you sure they went into the home?" I asked.

Beth shrugged. "You know how it is. That's what the rumors are saying. But that's never happened before, has it?"

"No, it hasn't." But even though I wanted to chalk it up to the rumor mill getting the details wrong, dread ran through me. If they could go into homes . . .

I quickly wiped down the counter. "I need to go. I can't let the kids stay alone at night."

Beth bit her lip. I knew she wanted to argue more. But there was no way to argue that Noel and Micah should be home alone. So instead, after darting another look out the window, she went back to the kitchen table and grabbed some rolls, ham, and cheese. She rolled all of it into a large napkin and handed them to me. "I'll finish up. You tell those kids I said hello. And I'll have some tarts for them tomorrow."

"Thanks, Beth." I hurried out of the kitchen, stopping at the bathroom to change.

Pulling my backpack from the closet, I tucked the food bundle inside. The kids would be thrilled. I hung my uniform up in the closet, knowing that it would be washed tonight and waiting for me tomorrow. After quickly donning my own clothes, I hurried outside.

With dread, I realized it was later than I thought. Dammit. I hated getting home this late. Lights were already on in the houses in Sterling Peak. Down the hill in Blue Forks, it was dark. No one was going to waste electricity or candles until they absolutely had to.

I hurried toward the bridge at a brisk jog. Going down the hill was much easier than my sprint up it this morning. The line at the bridge was shorter than this morning, too. There were only two

people ahead of me. Both of them cast increasingly nervous looks at the darkening sky.

Once past the guards, I hurried over the bridge and then ran when I hit the edge. Four demon attacks. I didn't like the sound of that. And with them going into people's homes, well, that just wasn't good at all. I hoped the rumor mill was wrong.

And I prayed that Torr would keep watch.

By the time I reached the outskirts of my neighborhood, darkness had completely fallen. I slowed as I reached the buildings, placing my hand on the knife at my waist. I didn't run in the dark unless I knew exactly where I was going, and that there were no demons nearby. I dashed down the street, casting my gaze from side to side and checking behind me. Everything seemed all right.

A muffled shout reached me from an alley only two blocks from the apartment. I paused, trying to figure out if it had come from inside a house or out of it. Then it came again, followed by the clang of a trashcan.

I slid my knife from out from its sheath as I ducked down the alley. A man walked with his back toward me, his hands up. "No. No, please."

The demon laughed as he approached. "Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Please, just let me go."

The demon reached forward and snatched the man by the front of his shirt, holding him up in the air. "Where is it, Professor?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have the book."

The demon smiled. "Then you are of no use to me."

Its hand rose in the air, its claws extended. I darted forward and grabbed on to its arm, shoving it back. The demon stumbled, flinging the professor away. The man hit the wall and slid down, disappearing behind some boxes.

Shock splashed across the demon's face. "How did you do that?"

I smiled. "I've been working out."

Truth was, I didn't know where my strength came from. It was something that Noel, Micah, and I had discovered together after that

first fight with the demon. I could fight them hand-to-hand. My strength matched theirs, even though my size most definitely did not.

The demon pulled a sword from behind its back. Lightning flashed along the blade. I swallowed. Well, that was new. I'd never encountered a demon with a weapon before, although I'd heard about them.

Unfortunately, I did not mask my surprise and fear well. "Not so cocky now, are you little human?" It asked with a growl.

Stamping down my fear, I pictured Noel and Micah. I didn't have the luxury of fear. I needed to get home. I shook my head. "It's not fear. It's excitement. Looks like I'm going to get myself a new toy."

Knife still clutched in my hand, I darted forward and then shifted to the side, cutting the demon at the waist but barely breaking the skin.

He swung at me. I ducked under his arm, slashing out at his stomach. He let out a scream as my knife sank into his skin deeper this time, leaving a jagged six-inch cut. The demon swung wide, it hit a reaction to the pain rather than a focused move.

I darted behind him, kicked out his leg, and then plunged my knife into the side of his neck. Blood coated my hand.

He jolted forward, moving so quickly that I lost my grip on my knife, unable to yank it out before he stood up. I jumped back as he swung at me again. I backed away, my hands in front of me.

Blood dribbled from the edge of the demon's mouth. My knife still impaled in its neck, it smiled. "Looks like I have all the weapons now."

He lunged forward, his sword leading the way.

Shifting to the side, I latched on to his wrist, yanking him forward just enough to get him off balance. I wrenched his wrist to ninety degrees, facing his palm toward him before turning his hand to the ground. He let out a scream as he hit the ground, and his sword, still gripped in his hand, pointed at his own neck.

Putting all my weight and strength behind it, I shoved the tip

into the edge of his neck and then through. The head was barely attached by the time it was done. His tongue rolled out the side of his mouth. He hissed out a breath before going silent.

I rolled my shoulders, taking a breath as the flames dimmed around the sword and then went dark. Carefully, I pulled the sword from his neck, and then ripped it from his hand.

A demon sword. A chill ran through me.

Leaning down, I used the edge of the demon's trousers and wiped the sword clean. It was a beautiful weapon. The blade was straight and unblemished. The hilt was curled with an ivory-wrapped pommel.

But I didn't have time to scrutinize it now.

I stuffed it into the side of my belt. It was a little awkward, but the best I could do at the moment. I stood up and made my way to the discarded boxes.

The man was slowly getting to his feet, his eyes unfocused. I didn't recognize him. He was older, probably in his late fifties, with light-brown skin and light-brown eyes. His dark hair was scattered with gray.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

The man touched the back of his head with a wince. "I hit my head. I think blacked out for a moment."

Good, that meant he hadn't seen anything. Normally I had a black veil that covered the lower half of my face, but I forgot it in my rush this morning.

"How did you do that?" The professor stood up from behind me, his eyes shifting between the demon and me.

I spoke quickly. "I didn't. I was coming home and heard something. When I arrived, the demon was already down. Are you all right?"

A confused look on his face, He ran his hands down his body. "I think so."

From the corner of my eye, I saw the demon dissolve into ashes. All the bodies did. Some it happened instantaneously, some took a

few minutes. But all of them were reduced to ash in death. I kept my attention on the man. "You shouldn't be out here this late."

"Yes, I know. But it couldn't be helped." The man stepped away from the wall and then swayed.

I darted forward and grabbed him. "Give yourself a second. You've had a scare. Where do you live?"

"Not too far." He gestured vaguely toward the bridge.

Surprise ran through me. He did not look like one of the residents of Sterling Peak. His clothes had a distinctive lived-in look to them, and his pack was practically ancient.

"The bridge will be shut down by now. They won't let anyone through without special permission. Do you have that?"

The man shook his head, his eyelids dropping again.

I couldn't leave him here. And I certainly couldn't let him go wait by the bridge. They wouldn't let him cross. Already a light rain had started. He'd be huddled there in the wet until morning. That was if he even made it. In his current shape, that seemed like a long shot. At best, he'd get pneumonia.

"Okay. Why don't you come home with me? You can stay the night. It's nothing fancy, but at least it will keep you dry."

"Thank you. I would really appreciate that," he said, right before he pitched forward in a faint.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PROFESSOR WAS DEAD WEIGHT. I CHECKED FOR INJURIES AND FOUND nothing. Maybe he'd just passed out. Regardless of the cause, I had to get him home somehow.

I grabbed him by the arm and hauled him up, flinging his arm over my shoulder. He was surprisingly light. The jacket made him appear bulkier than he was. In fact, it felt like the guy could use a good meal. Maybe even a dozen.

Not that that made him different from anyone else around here.

Of course, that did call into question whether or not he really belonged over in Sterling Peak.

I carried him along the back streets, staying in the shadows. It was blessedly quiet. I turned right at the alley that ran alongside my apartment building.

Torr sat up on the fire escape and spied us from down the street. He quickly climbed down, stopping in front of me, his hands on his hips as he studied the professor. "What happened?"

"Demon went after this guy. He passed out or something. I couldn't just leave him there."

He looped the professor's other arm over his shoulder. The

weight on me immediately lifted. Torr might be short, but he was incredibly strong. He grunted. “You *could* have. You just chose not to.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “How are the kids?”

“I walked them home from school. One of the kids was giving Micah a hard time. That Thompson kid?”

I nodded as I pictured the boy that had been picking on Micah for the last few months. But Micah, being such a sympathetic soul, he didn’t have it in him to return any of the insults from the much larger Raymond Thompson.

“Yeah. Unfortunately for the kid, he took a tumble down the steps of the school as he was coming out the door.”

“Torr...”

Torr glared at me from the side of his eyes. “What did you expect me to do? That kid’s a bully, and Micah’s too nice to defend himself.”

“Was the kid hurt?”

“Just his pride. I’ll stick close to Micah and make sure the Thompson kid becomes awfully clumsy in his presence if he keeps it up.”

I wanted to tell Torr that what he was doing wasn’t right. Raymond Thompson had lost his brother to a demon attack just six months earlier. That had to be messing with his head. But I couldn’t let him mess with Micah’s head. “Thanks.”

Between the two of us, we awkwardly carried the professor up the stairs. At the door, I dropped my voice to a whisper. “You need to stay in the apartment tonight. The rain’s getting bad out there.”

Torr started to shake his head. “No, I’m fine. I’ll—”

“This is not a debate, Torr. I won’t have you sitting out on the fire escape getting soaked. I’ll make a bed in the corner of my room. Besides, what if this professor goes all crazy on me? I’ll need the backup.”

He snorted. “Yeah, the day you need back up against a human is the day we’re all in trouble.”

"You're staying inside," I said, my tone leaving no room for argument.

Torr opened his mouth and then shut it, giving me a nod. "Thanks," he said gruffly.

Shifting so I took all the professor's weight, I kicked lightly at the door.

"Who is it?" Noel called, her voice meaner and deeper than was natural.

"It's me," I said, gripping the professor a little more tightly around the waist.

There was a clacking of locks as she undid all of them. Then the door swung wide. A look of relief crossed Noel's face, and I cursed Mrs. Uriel for keeping me late yet again.

The relief quickly shifted to alarm as Noel's gaze fell on the professor. "What happened?"

"He passed out as I was walking home. I couldn't just leave him in the street."

Noel met my gaze for a moment and then nodded, stepping back to give me room to maneuver the professor in.

She and Micah knew about my extracurricular night activities. They knew that I took down more than my fair share of demons. And we never talked about it. I figured they knew what I did, and that was enough. No need to worry them.

But one of the first things I'd done when we first met was to teach the both of them how to defend themselves. For the last two years, I'd spent hours on the weekends training them in self-defense. Over that time, the two of them had gotten pretty skilled. They didn't have my strength, but barring that, they were a match for any human, at the very least. They might even be able to tag-team a demon.

A small one.

Although if I had anything to say about it, they would never have to.

As Micah came out of his bedroom, Noel slipped underneath the professor's other arm.

"What's going on?" Micah asked, his eyes going wide.

Behind us, Torr slipped in quickly without touching either Micah or the door just before Micah closed it.

I quickly explained about finding the professor, briefly mentioning the demon as I maneuvered him onto the couch. The professor stirred, his face arranging into a frown. His eyelids fluttered and then flickered open before closing again. A second later, they flew open, and he tried to sit up. He reared back, catching sight of us.

"Hey, hey. It's okay. You're safe," I said, putting up my hands.

His gaze darted around the room before it returned to Noel and Micah, who stood behind me. "What happened?"

"What do you remember?" I asked.

He stared at me and then sank back against the pillows. "You're the one from the alley."

"Yes. You passed out, so I brought you here. I didn't want to leave you there just in case anybody else came by later."

The professor nodded his head wearily, starting to sit up. "Thank you. But I'll get out of your hair now."

"Not tonight," I said.

"But I need to get to Sterling Peak," he said even as he sang back against the cushions.

"Like I said before, without special permission, you're not getting across the bridge at night. They don't let anybody over there after nightfall. And it's not safe for you to just wait outside. Especially in the storm."

Still looking pale, he struggled to sit up. "I don't want to put you out. I'll just go find some other place—"

"There is no other place. So I'm afraid you're stuck with us till morning." I turned and handed my backpack to Micah. "Beth sent a few things to eat."

Beth's name earned a smile. "Awesome." He grabbed the bag and headed to the kitchen.

"Can you get the professor a glass of water?" I asked Noel.

She nodded, following Micah. I glanced over at where Torr perched in the corner, studying the professor with a look on his face I couldn't decipher.

Turning back to the professor, I said, "You'll stay with us for the night. You can sleep here on the couch. It's not much, but it's better than being outside."

He met my gaze for the first time. "You're very kind. Oh and I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm Professor Marcus Fischer."

"Addie, that's Noel and Micah," I replied. "What are you a professor of?"

"Demonology. I was . . . " His words drifted off as he frowned.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" I scanned him, wondering if I had overlooked something. It was dark when I'd first checked him.

"No, no. I'm not hurt, but... you... you fought off that demon, didn't you?" He asked with a frown.

Heart racing, I made sure to keep my voice even. "Like I told you, I found you afterwards."

"It was probably the Masked Avenger," Noel yelled from the kitchen.

Marcus frowned. "The who?"

Noel walked back in and handed him a glass of water. "The Masked Avenger, Blue Forks' only security force. He or she has saved dozens of Blue Forks citizens from demons over the last few years. But no one knows who they are."

"I didn't think anyone could fight a demon except the Seraph Force," Marcus said.

Noel shrugged before turning back to the kitchen. "Maybe the Masked Avenger is a member of the Seraph Force. It *is* one theory."

She provided the explanation without a hint she was lying. She was really getting too good at this.

Lowering my voice, I cast a glance toward the kitchen. It wasn't

very far away, but the sandwiches from Beth had caught the kids' attention. "I'd rather not talk about the demon attack in front of the kids. They know about them, of course, but I just don't want to worry them any more than I have to. You're fine, I'm fine, and that's really all that matters."

"Of course, of course. But could you tell me how you found me?"

I was saved from answering when Micah reappeared with sandwiches on a tray. "Ham and cheese. My favorite!"

Noel and I exchanged a grin. Micah said that about absolutely everything Beth sent home. The professor smiled at his exuberance, but his gaze drifted back to me. And I had the feeling that while Noel's lying had improved dramatically, mine had not. My appearance in the alley had the professor wondering. I could practically see the questions circling around in his mind.

The smile on Micah's face pulled my attention to him. He handed out the sandwiches, carefully cut into fourths so they'd be easier to split up. A little extra food and his happiness increased. While I was happy to see it, no kid should be this happy about a few sandwiches.

With a nod of thanks, the professor took one small quarter. His eyes were kind. I wasn't worried about him as a physical threat.

But that wasn't the only threat he could provide. Hopefully, after a good night's sleep, all his suspicions would disappear.

Yet I couldn't help but wonder what kind of trouble he could make for me if they didn't.

CHAPTER NINE

THE NEXT MORNING, TORR SLIPPED OUT BEFORE ANY OF US AWOKE AND CAME back with some rolls. The kids gave me a strange look when they magically appeared in the kitchen, but I just said that they must have missed them in the bag. They were used to food just appearing in our kitchen overnight.

The professor and I left for the bridge a little earlier than my usual the next morning. I wanted to give us extra time to get there given his weakened state from the night before. I was hoping it had only been because of hunger and dehydration.

As we made our way to the bridge, though, I couldn't help but think he seemed to be in much better shape this morning. There was more color to his cheeks, and he kept to my pace without seeming to struggle.

He also talked the entire way. He once again thanked me profusely for helping him. And for our hospitality the night before. He spoke more about his work. He'd traveled all over the world researching demons, their attack methods, and victims, looking for patterns.

“Have you found one?” I asked when he paused for breath. “A pattern?”

“Not exactly. The demon attacks started increasing about two years ago. I’m not sure what was special about that time. But something happened that seemed to almost release a steam valve or something.”

My heart rate ticked up a notch. “When exactly two years ago did the attacks begin to increase?”

“In March, as far as I can tell.”

The blood in my veins seemed to freeze. March. The same month I’d washed up on the beach.

I forced myself to breathe normally. It was just a coincidence. Whatever was going on with the demons and the professor’s research had nothing to do with me.

Even as I felt a little light-headed, I tried to lock it all down. It was a coincidence, that was all.

Despite knowing nothing about my past, I was almost certain demons had nothing to do with it. It was crazy to even think about. But I couldn’t help but recall that when I’d first seen that demon attacking Noel and Micah, an image of demons had flashed through my mind. In the last two years, it was the only trace of a memory I’d ever had.

In all likelihood I had been the victim of a demon attack, which was how I lost my memory. That first attack had just stirred it up. That was the only connection.

It would be nice, though, to actually know about my past. Besides that one flash, I hadn’t remembered a single thing about my life before I washed up on that beach. It was almost as if I just didn’t exist before that moment.

Which was insane, because I had to have existed. There must have been people who cared about me, who missed me, right? Or at the very least who knew me. Yet not once had anyone recognized me. Not a single soul in Blue Forks did a double take at my appearance. So wherever I was from, it wasn’t around here.

The bridge appeared up ahead. I realized that the professor and I would go our separate ways soon. I felt a sense of loss at the idea. There was something incredibly friendly about the man. He was nice to be around, comforting in a weird sort of way.

“Do you know where you’re going once you get over the bridge?”

The professor scanned the neighborhood above the bridge. “I’m looking for Graham Michael. Do you know which house he lives in?”

I pictured Graham from yesterday. Powerful arms, kind eyes. Warmth filtered through my stomach. Still not for me, I reminded myself. “Um, yeah. They’re the second house from the top. His is the white one with the columns. Do you see it?”

The professor’s gaze drifted up the hill until it fell on Graham’s home. “Oh my goodness.”

I grinned. “It’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

He nodded, his mouth hanging open. “I mean, he mentioned his family had money, but ...”

I knew what he meant. The Michaels’ home was truly immense. There were four balconies, two on either side of the house on the second and third floors. Columns held up the front porch. It had a domed roof, and huge fountains dominated the yard. All the grass was lush and green.

“I didn’t realize *how* rich they were.” Marcus shook his head, almost as if he were disappointed by the news.

I could understand how the man could make the mistake. Even in my brief interaction with him yesterday, Graham really didn’t give off that serious, rich vibe.

“I mean, I knew he was rich, but certainly not *that* kind of rich. He has the confidence of the well-to-do man, but none of the arrogance you’d expect from someone with ...” He waved his hand toward the hill.

That had also been my impression. It was nice to know it wasn’t entirely my hormones directing the idea. “Well, I’m afraid I don’t know him. But that is definitely where he lives.”

We got in line at the bridge, and luckily Claude wasn’t there, so

we quickly crossed. Sheila, however, was there. She caught sight of us when we were halfway across. Her gaze locked on to the professor as soon as he came into view. She reached us just as we passed the archangels, their shadow cast over us. "Are you Professor Jeffries?"

His voice hesitant as he took in the serious look on Sheila's face, he nodded. Then she smiled, her shoulders dropping in relief. "Thank goodness. Commander Graham has been worried about you. He expected you last night."

"I ran into some trouble, but luckily I also ran into this young woman, who helped me out."

Sheila raised an eyebrow at me. "Saving people again?"

"All I need is a cape," I said lightly.

Turning back to the professor, Sheila said, "Commander Graham will be very happy to hear you're safe. Let me give you a ride up to his home."

The professor smiled, his relief at not having to face the mountain of the hill obvious. "That would be lovely, thank you. But I have to insist that Ms. Baker join us. After all, she's the reason I'm here and in one piece."

Sheila nodded. "I have no problem with that."

A few minutes later, I got my second ever ride in a car. I had to admit it was nice not having to face that hill today, although watching everyone else walk by made me feel more than a little self-conscious.

When Sheila pulled into the Uriels' driveway, I quickly got out of the car, noticing George peering at us from the side door, curiosity written all over his face.

"Thanks, Sheila. Good luck with your research, Professor."

The professor clambered out of the car and offered me his hand. "Thank you, Addie. You are quite literally a lifesaver."

With a smile at the professor, I headed into the house, feeling a little lighter. The day was definitely off to a good start.

CHAPTER TEN

GRAHAM

THIS DAY WAS NOT OFF TO A GOOD START. GRAHAM SLAMMED THE DOOR closed as he walked into the kitchen. Mary Elise and her husband, Franklin, looked up from their spots at the kitchen table.

“Any luck?” Franklin asked as he got up to grab Graham a plate.

Graham waved him back down. “No. What about the other search parties?”

Franklin poured coffee into a mug from the pot on the table and walked over to Graham, handing it to him. “Donovan and Mitch checked in when they stopped to get a bite to eat, and then they went back out. I haven’t heard from the other two.”

“Dammit,” Graham growled, taking a sip of coffee. The jolt of caffeine was welcome. Marcus should have arrived last night at the latest. Graham had been waiting all day for him. As darkness fell, he’d sent out search parties, first through Sterling Peak and then down into Blue Forks. But there’d been no sign of him.

Graham himself had been out since the bridge had closed.

“Any signs of more demon attacks?” Franklin asked.

Picturing the scene from last night, Graham nodded as his stomach tightened. “I found scorch marks in Blue Forks. Someone tussled with a demon.”

“And won?” Franklin asked with raised eyebrows.

Meeting Franklin’s gaze, Graham shrugged. “Maybe.”

After each attack, scorch marks stained the ground or walls where a demon died. Their bodies went up in flames and all trace of them disappeared within seconds, only the burn marks being left behind.

“Our Masked Avenger?” Mary asked with more than a little interest.

Graham inclined his head. “So it appears.”

In Sterling Peak, Graham had been coordinating with Sheila since he’d been made Commander. They had succeeded in at least interrupting several attacks, but it had done nothing to stem the tide.

But someone had been doing the same on the other side of the bridge. Over the last two years, he and his fellow fighters had seen more and more evidence that someone was not only fighting the demons but winning. The victims they had come across had been nothing but effusive. Yet they hadn’t been able to describe their heroine.

And what little description they could give didn’t make much sense: a small, thin female. The individual’s face had been covered with a veil that went up to her eyes so that the victims could describe no more of her than her size and the color of her eyes—a bright blue. Every victim since had been adamant that the individual who had defended them from the demon, the individual who had *defeated* the demon, had been most decidedly female.

Graham wasn’t sure what to do with that information. He had investigated every blue-eyed woman in Sterling Peak. The only blue-eyed women here were either too young, too fat, or too old to

possibly be the one they were talking about. So who exactly was the one-woman vigilante team?

He didn't think he'd find her in Sterling Peak, though, because that was not the area that she was trying to protect. No, she was on duty in Blue Forks. And she had proven to be much more efficient than Graham's own security detail. It required two or three Rangers to take down a demon. It was galling.

So last night he was unsurprised to find evidence of yet another demon being taken down. This time, though, he'd been unable to find a victim. It had been too late to knock on doors when he found the scene, but he'd asked around this morning. No one reported seeing or hearing anything. But hopefully, by the end of the day, he would learn who the victim was.

Of course, that wasn't getting him any closer to finding the professor.

When he'd met him, Marcus had also been a man searching for answers. His wife had been killed in a demon attack ten years earlier. Together, Marcus and his wife had been researching demons for decades.

After Helen died, Marcus had redoubled his efforts. He'd given up his home and his teaching position to search the world for answers. He and Graham had stayed in touch, and Marcus had contacted him just a month ago to say that he'd uncovered something that he thought could change everything.

So Graham had invited him to Sterling Peak. Through his travels, and as the leader of the Seraph Force, Graham had amassed a collection of occult and supernatural tomes and weapons that would surpass any universities. Whatever Marcus had found, it would be best if they staged the next move from here, where Graham had resources at his fingertips.

Marcus, however, had never shown up. Graham had gotten word that the ship Marcus had sailed on had arrived, and Marcus had disembarked yesterday. Marcus had elected to walk, which was not

surprising. It would have taken him most of the day to get to Sterling Peak. He should've arrived by nightfall at the latest.

But there'd been no sign of him after the docks. And there was still was no sign of him. That had Graham beyond worried. He had no idea what the organization of the demons was like. But there was a good chance they knew that Marcus was looking for a way to stop them.

And if Marcus was right, and he was getting close, it wasn't exactly a stretch to imagine the demons might target him. Marcus himself had mentioned that he'd barely escaped two previous demon attacks.

And now Graham was afraid that his friend's luck had run out.

An urgency rolled through Graham. He needed to find him. He downed coffee and placed the mug on the counter. "Okay. I'll do another sweep of Blue Forks, maybe take the road down to the old dock. It's entirely possible that—"

The doorbell chimed. Graham's head jerked up, his eyes narrowing before he hastened to the front door. Anyone in the search party would have just come around the side and let themselves in.

But Marcus wouldn't be comfortable doing that. He'd never been here before. It seemed unlikely, however, that he'd be the one standing at the front door. Nevertheless, Graham's hopes raised.

He hustled down the long hallway, cursing his family and their extravagant ways. His home was a fifteen-bedroom monstrosity. There were an additional twenty bathrooms and two full kitchens. Plus a pool, tennis court, and even a bowling alley. His father had built it fifty years ago. While people were fighting and dying, his father had made sure that his family lived in the lap of luxury.

Graham curled his lip at the thought of dear old dad. They'd never seen eye to eye. Graham was the second son, the less important one. His father had given all his attention to Brock. But Graham supposed that was a blessing. Mary Elise and Franklin had basically raised him. They'd been his de facto parents. And whereas his own parents had turned Brock into a cruel, arrogant man, Mary Elise and

Franklin had emphasized compassion and integrity. In many ways, he'd been the lucky one.

When Brock died, his parents had taken it hard. But perhaps even harder for his father was the idea that one day his beloved legacy would end up in the hands of the son who hated him.

His father had taken off for a tour of Europe with his mother shortly thereafter. They returned every once in a while for a week, sometimes three, before taking off for another travel. Graham liked to think it was his presence that was driving his father away, but he knew it was the ghost of Brock.

It took Graham a full two minutes to reach the front of the house, by which time the doorbell had rung an additional two times. Obviously, whoever was behind the door was unfamiliar with how long it took to reach it.

Graham pulled the door open.

Marcus whirled around, his face lighting up. "Graham! It is the right house. I was beginning to worry that—"

Relief pouring through him, Graham pulled him close and hugged him tight. "Marcus."

His friend patted him awkwardly on the back. "Good to see you too, son."

As Graham released Marcus, emotion made his voice harsher than he intended. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you—"

For the first time, he noticed Sheila standing at the edge of the landing. "Sheila. Thank you for bringing the professor to me."

Sheila inclined her head. "I can't really take responsibility for this one. I met him at the gate of the bridge. Addison Baker is responsible for the safe return of your friend here."

Frowning, Graham didn't recognize the name. Was it a new member of the Seraph Force? Normally, he was pretty good at getting to know all of them. That was a question for a later time. "Yes, well, thanks to her, then. I'll be sure to reach out to her."

"Have a good day, Graham. Nice to meet you, Professor."

She turned and headed back down the drive.

Graham turned to the professor and raised an eyebrow. "What happened?"

The professor grinned in response. "Do I have a story to tell you."



ALTHOUGH GRAHAM WANTED to demand answers from Marcus immediately, manners had been instilled in him from birth, so he showed Marcus to a guest room and gave him time to get situated. After Marcus took a shower and filled his belly, he sat at the table with Graham, Mary, Franklin, and Donovan, who'd arrived to find out what had happened.

As Marcus told his story for the second time, Graham wanted to know exactly how hard Marcus had hit his head.

"So you're saying some tiny slip of a girl took on a demon all by herself?" Donovan leaned back in his chair. He raised the dark sculpted eyebrows that drove the ladies more than a little bonkers in Sterling Peak and anywhere else he went.

Marcus nodded eagerly. "I couldn't believe it myself. She did it. The demon had his arm out. He was about to run me through, and she got in between us and stopped him."

"You said she denied it was her," Graham said.

"Yes, yes. I was confused at first after the attack. But I know what I saw. She was the one who saved me."

Graham leaned forward. "So how exactly did she stop him? A sword? A club?"

Marcus shook his head. "No. She grabbed his arm. She blocked his arm with her own."

Donovan sat back, shaking his head. "That's impossible. A grown man can't do that. *I* can't do that. And you're telling me some little tiny girl held off a demon on her own with what, a tiny little knife?"

"I know it sounds crazy. I have never seen anything like it before. But she did. She held him off. She fought him off. And she won."

Everyone was silent. Graham didn't know what to think. He was glad to see that Marcus was home and safe, although he was beginning to doubt exactly how healthy he was. Maybe all of this focus since Helen's death had put a strain on his mind. He wouldn't be the first one to go a little nuts when demon hunting. There was one guy he'd come across in Germany who had raved about invisible demons talking to him. Before that, he'd been one of the top hunters in the nation.

"I promise I'm not crazy. She really did protect me. And then, somehow, she even got me back to her apartment." Marcus said.

Donovan wiggled his eyebrows. "Now you're getting somewhere."

Marcus gave him a look of reproach. "Where she lives with the two wards that she's taken on."

Donovan looked properly chastened.

Marcus continued. "Although she didn't specifically say so, I could tell that going out and taking on demons wasn't exactly news to her two wards. Although it looked as if it made them uncomfortable, so she tried not to mention it."

Mary piped up. "Perhaps she's your Masked Avenger."

Graham's gaze darted toward her. He hadn't even thought of that. Despite the eyewitnesses, he'd been looking for someone like either him or Donovan—over six feet tall, lots of muscles, trained in warfare. Although whoever it was had been protecting Blue Forks, a female from Blue Forks hadn't even entered his mind except for Bertha down at the café. She looked like she could take on a legion of demons. Although her fighting skills left a great deal to be desired.

Not that he didn't know any tough female warriors. It's just that they trained for years to have that skill. And no one down in Blue Forks would have the time for that. They were too busy working to survive.

"All the victims and witnesses said that the Avenger was a small female," Franklin reminded him.

His mind struggling to accept that fact, Graham nodded slowly.

He honestly thought that the witnesses had been mistaken. It had always been night when the attacks had occurred. He knew from experience that demon attacks happened so fast that it was hard to see what was going on. He thought perhaps the demons were just very large, making the Avenger look smaller in comparison. But if Marcus was right ... “Her eyes. What color are Addison Baker’s eyes?”

“Blue,” said Marcus. “The most brilliant shade of blue.”