

Tribute

Kevil failed to feed Jannette to a bear. He really tried, but since it was past nine pm, he no longer had time for the ritual. He leaned against his car, his mind racing as he observed his surroundings. Snow-draped oak trees lined the deserted avenue. A brisk breeze tousled his clothes as the wind howled, lifting leaves into the air. They soared to a raven across the way that feasted on another. As the wind intensified and branches swayed, snow descended on the raven, prompting a startled shriek and hasty flight.

Kevil shifted to the rear of his vehicle and unlocked the trunk. He rearranged the tool-set, first aid kit, and assorted boxes, to uncover a concealed vent. He retrieved his key and opened the vent, exposing a hidden compartment. Inside, Jannette lay beneath the trunk, her body bound and handcuffed with aluminum foil. Only her face was discernible, and she was both gagged and incapacitated. Her tear-soaked eyes widened as she saw his face. She quivered but refused to turn her gaze away from him.

Jannetta used to be an exemplary part of the church of the transcendence, a secret religious community. She partook in the rituals and ceremonies, as she should, as everybody should, and added value to the community. But upon investigation, she secretly built a case against the church, alleging them of indoctrination, fraud, and human rights violations. Kevil's inquiries indicated that she was possessed by a demon, and the only way to cleanse her was to feed her to a bear. Unfortunately, there were no bears nearby.

"I must say, I'm quite disappointed" Kevil said, gently stroking her cheek. Anxious, suppressed noises emanated from her, but Kevil paid little attention, instead, deciphering her lip movements—he was quite used to it. They conveyed something along the lines of *please don't*.

"It appears you fail to understand," he remarked. "I'm undertaking this for your benefit."

Her eyebrows arched, and her eyes widened as she let out an anxious grunt.

"The demon inside you is growing, and if we don't cleanse it, it will spread."

Her eyes darted from left to right as she strung together a senseless collection of grunts, each louder than the other. *Talking to her is pointless...* It was the demon that made her turn against the church, and if he didn't cleanse it, she'd multiply her suffering by spreading the curse. He simply carried out his divine duty, yet she acted as if he was unjust. *I mean, what am I, a toxic person?*

Kevil reached for the sedation cloth in the trunk, pressing it against her nose. Beneath his palm, he sensed the resistance, the futile struggle to break free, the overwhelming desperation. However, there was no alternative. The only path to salvation was through this ritual. She had settled into a tranquil state, and this serenity would last for at least twelve hours. He would have to find a bear later. After all, he had a meeting to attend.

