

ARCHANGEL

THE BOOK OF MAMMON



BLACK MIKE



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*For those who will not forsake virtue
despite the vice that surrounds them.*

The Fall of Grace

Grace strained against the chains binding her wrists. The cold metal bit deep and even though it was only gold it was still too strong for her to break. The gag in her mouth was silk, but that didn't make it any more comfortable either.

She was in a small room, dark and cold. It was probably some kind of closet. She'd been blindfolded when they brought her here. *That* she'd managed to free herself from, a small stab of hope that was quickly withering in the face of the gold chains around her wrists and ankles.

Grace's eyes stung but did not tear. She wasn't going to cry! She hadn't done anything wrong! She shouldn't be here. She wouldn't be here. If she could just break these fucking chains.

If only the agent who had burst into her apartment had believed her! Had been able to see the monsters in the air all around them! But he hadn't. He hadn't believed her.

No one had believed her.

She'd just been doing her job! Her boss had asked her to show his boss's boss around the office, and she had. Creepy old fuck. But Grace had played nice. The man owned the whole fucking company; of course she'd done as she was asked. He gave her a thumb drive with some files on it he said needed to be incorporated into their database. She finished the tour, plugged it in, and transferred the things.

Had she opened one, out of curiosity? Sure. But there was nothing inside but a bunch of strange diagrams that made not a lick of sense to her.

She closed it out and didn't think anything more of it until she began seeing...things. First it was just flickers at the

edges of her vision, like the dancing spots you sometimes get from rubbing your eyes too hard or looking at the sun and then away. But then she started to catch sight of hazy forms drifting around certain people. Not just at the office but on the streets and in her building.

Eventually, they came into focus and that's when Grace's real problems began. They were horrific, the things she saw, and no one else seemed to see them! Her work became erratic, she stopped sleeping, and the whispers began.

She didn't know if people were actually whispering about her at the office or if it was the things she was seeing. It got so bad that she requested a leave of absence, using up all her banked holidays and sick leave.

Grace had been three days into her break, not that it had been doing much good. The strange forms she saw were all around. Even in her apartment! Golden eyes seemed to stare at her from everywhere. Mirrors were the worst, though at least the monsters she saw reflected in the glass were silver, not gold.

She wasn't sure why that was better, but for some reason it was. They were less menacing, less immediately dangerous.

Three days in and a one-man SWAT team of some kind had exploded into her apartment, shoving her to the floor and shouting about her being some kind of terrorist! She wasn't a terrorist! She'd tried to explain, to tell him what she had seen, that she was innocent, but he hadn't listened. She'd thought she saw a flicker of kindness in his eyes, but he hadn't listened.

And he still turned her over to his superior. A fat man smoking a disgusting cigar. Who gave the agent that had taken her down a bag that clinked heavily. She'd still hoped, then, that she was being arrested, had breathed and told herself that a lawyer would sort it all out, but when she was shoved into the back of an unmarked sedan, she wasn't taken to jail.

She was driven to a deserted stretch of road and the fat man with the cigar had hauled her out and passed her to these lunatics. The men who had wrapped her in golden chains and gagged her with silk.

The ones who were holding her prisoner.

The sound of a key in the lock broke through Grace's reverie. Though it was hopeless, she nevertheless persisted in trying to break her bonds. Golden light, bright and warm, spilled into the darkness blinding her. Strong hands grabbed her and hauled her out, carrying her kicking and screaming through her gag, only to dump her bodily onto a cold, slick expanse of raised marble.

An altar.

Robed figures stood all around her and Grace bucked and struggled as she was bound in place with yet more chains. These also gleamed like gold but there were scratches on the surface, strange imperfections that Grace's panicking mind seized upon. The chains weren't pure gold, merely gilded iron.

Not that that would do anything to help her.

Tears streamed from her eyes, turning the candle flames all around her into dancing globes of fuzzy golden light. Words were echoing off the vaulted stone above her, voices chanting, and the sound of...coins? Coins falling all around her.

One word stood out from all the others. A name.

Mammon.

Then a figure was standing over her. Grace tried to scream but again the gag kept her silent. The cowl of the robe was pushed back revealing a cold and smiling face.

A face she recognized!

She screamed through the gag, but it was no use. A knife glittered in the candlelight, rising and then falling with a swift finality. Grace choked on her own blood, her last thought just the words *But I'm innocent!* screaming through her fading mind.

There was no one left to protest when Grace's body was removed from the altar, no one left to see when two strong men hauled her body away, her lifeless eyes glimmering golden in the night.

No one saw them drive away. No one saw them digging a shallow grave several yards deep into a copse of woods off the interstate. No one saw Grace's body turned out of its shroud of a tarp and unceremoniously dumped into the hole.

A few shovelfuls of dirt and even if Grace had still been alive she would no longer have been able to see the starry sky through the skeletal branches of the trees all around her.

Then even the men were gone, leaving behind only a small mound of dirt strewn haphazardly with handfuls of leaves to mark their presence.

Golden fireflies rose from the freshly turned earth, blinking aureate in the blackness, though there were none there to see them dancing in the dark.

Wakeup Michael

“None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.”

— *Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe*

Michael ignored the trickle of sweat creeping down his back. The surveillance van was hot from the screens and various equipment running inside, hot from the sun beating down overhead, and hot from overcrowding, with five people cramped inside the small space. His eyes never left the screens, however. This was his op, and he was in charge of making sure the terrorist they were tracking didn't kill anyone else.

“What's that on five?” Michael directed the question to Tanner, one of the younger men on his team, a genius at the tech angle of things.

“Looks like maintenance personnel,” Tanner answered. There was a bit of a quaver in his voice. Tanner was better with tech than he was with people. Or high-stakes situations.

“Can we get another angle? The cap is blocking his face. Could be our guy.”

“On it,” Priestly said, her hands dashing across the keyboard. “Nothing, nothing, there! On three.”

Michael glanced at screen three. The angle wasn't great, but a partial face was visible. Though there was a goatee, it wasn't enough facial hair to stop the recognition tech they were running.

“Not even a partial, sir. I don't think this is our target.”