



One Hell of a Deal

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Description: Max never thought a hellish contract and a shower mishap with a demon-turned-human would lead him to the brink of love—or disaster. Now juggling a chaotic office life, relentless supernatural threats, and an unexpected romance with the spellbound Daphne, he must decide whether to risk it all for an unconventional happily ever after. With time running out and a bureaucratic demon ready to revoke his freedom, every heartbeat and stolen glance could mean the difference between a stolen future and one lost to the flames of fate.

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Chapter One: Max

I should be crying. After all, I was his best friend. The truth is, we were more like brothers. We were so young when we met that I don't even remember the day. But Garrett Banks has always been the only constant in my life, so it would only make sense for me to shed buckets of tears at his funeral. But I can't.

When I glance over at his Cassandra, his gorgeous new, and quite pregnant wife, I'm too preoccupied with the odd circumstances of his death to feel anything other than bewildered curiosity. Of course, I am angry too. But that's an emotion I am well-practiced at burying.

The church is packed, everyone in their suits and dark dresses, almost all of whom are Garrett's business associates. Other than Cassandra, I doubt anyone here knew him or loved him, like I did. His mother did, but she chose not to come to the service. It was all too much for her, and although I think I understand, her absence makes me sad. Just not sad enough to cry.

As the minister drones on and on about Garrett's accomplishments, I drift away. My mind replays the night before his wedding on a constant loop.

We were both a little drunk. The evening had been jam-packed with a formal rehearsal dinner where we all downed a lot of expensive wine, followed by a smaller group of us guys hopping around from bar to bar for several hours to celebrate his last night as a free agent.

We behaved ourselves, which I found a little disappointing. Maybe as the designated

best man, I should have ordered a stripper-gram to show up in his penthouse, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I've always thought the whole bachelor party thing was borderline disgusting.

He didn't seem to mind the fully clothed conclusion to the evening. At least he never complained. It was around two in the morning when the last guests stumbled out, leaving the two of us on the balcony, finishing our cigars.

My buzz was finally subsiding, and I stared out over the New York City skyline, in awe of how far we had both come. "Can you believe all of this?"

He snorts and puts out the cigar in his whisky glass and nods. "We're definitely a long way from the Sliver."

Our old trailer park, crammed between two state highways and smack in the middle of nowhere, Pennsylvania, was a hell I was glad to escape. "Thanks to you. I was military-bound when you offered me the job. I owe you everything."

"It's a shame it all comes with such a high price tag." He runs a hand through his dark mop of hair, and his brow is furrowed.

"What do you mean, man?" I say with a chuckle. "You are about to marry an absolute gem. She's a damn ten in every way, man. You live in one of the best penthouses in the city, and are president of a billion-dollar marketing firm, and you aren't even thirty years old. Your life seems damn good to me. What am I missing? Are you having cold feet?"

"She's pregnant, you know," he says in a low voice. I'm taken aback by his lack of joy in the announcement. He's always said that he wanted to have children. He wanted to give kids a stable family that he never had. "We found out a few weeks ago."

“That’s amazing, Garrett. Congratulations.”

He turns to face me, and his eyes are stretched wide, and he’s wringing his hands. I’ve never seen him so unraveled, and I find it confusing. “It’s not, though.”

“What?” I say, searching his face for any clue as to what he’s working through. “You are having a child with your new wife. You get to have your perfect family that you always wanted. How can you say that isn’t amazing?”

“Because I won’t live long enough to see him born.”

Without intention, a laugh erupts nervously from me. He’s going through something. I figure it must be the booze, but I’m not too concerned. He’s being crazy, but as his best friend, I’m determined to get to the bottom of this. “I think you are out of your mind, man. You look as healthy as a damn ox to me. Is there a hitman after you that I need to know about?”

He doesn’t answer, but starts to pace, wringing his hands maniacally. His silence is beginning to freak me out. “Garrett? Answer me. What aren’t you telling me?”

He stops pacing a couple of feet in front of me and stares into my eyes. I don’t remember him ever looking so serious. He opens and shuts his mouth several times before he starts speaking. “What I am about to tell you sounds unbelievable, but I promise it’s the one hundred percent truth, and you need to believe me.”

He has never lied to me before, which I am aware of, so I nod, intrigued by this madness. “Go on.”

He takes a deep breath, rambling as he exhales. “Almost ten years ago, on the graduation trip that you couldn’t go on because you had the flu, I made a deal with a crossroads demon. All of this,” he says, flailing his arms and spinning in a wobbly

circle, “was in exchange for my soul.”

I think he may need to see a doctor. “I think perhaps you’ve had a bit too much to drink tonight, buddy. We really should be getting you inside and...

“I’m not fucking lying Max!” His shouting startles me. He’s not one to yell. Ever. “Now listen to me. This is important.”

Unsure of what else to do, I deflate. “I’m listening.” I’m scared for his mental health, but at the very least, this should be entertaining. He waves me inside, and I follow him to the living room in silence, taking a seat across from him. He looks so tired. Worn.

“Now I get how ridiculous this all sounds. Really, I do. But I need you to know, and I’m going to need you to promise me something too.”

“Let’s hear the story first,” I say, fighting to remove any trace of condescension from my voice. I owe him that at least.

“We never should have stopped in Jackson,” he groans. “But we had been driving for so long and needed a break. We planned to hit the road early and be to New Orleans by noon. We pulled into the city around midnight, and Frank had the brilliant idea to try out our fake IDs before finding a room for the night. We drove around for a while, eventually settling on a little hole-in-the-wall called Marlow’s Place. It was dark and in the shadier part of the city, but for whatever reason, we all thought our greatest odds of success would be there.”

“Did they serve you?”

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He laughs. “We barely had our asses in the stools before the bar tender started shouting at us, telling us to get our kiddie asses out of there before he called the cops.” He pauses, smiling and staring off, lost in the memory.

But his joyful expression quickly fades. “We should have just gone straight to a room then, but you know how the guys were. They didn’t plan to give up so easily. On our walk back to the car, this tall, skinny, creepy guy approached us and said he knew a place about twenty minutes out of town, where they serve anyone and everyone. Caught our attention. Mikey pulled out the map, and the man pointed to the intersection and said we would recognize the place by the blue lights on the porch.”

I cringe, perplexed at their naivety. I don’t know where his story is going, but there isn’t a chance in hell that I would have trusted some weirdo sending us to the middle of nowhere.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says, nodding slowly. “How could we be so stupid, right?”

“Right.”

“We planned to drive out there and scope it out. We would only go in if it looked safe.”

“Still, sounds pretty dumb,” I say, shrugging. “But go on.”

“It turned out to be a cool place. They never even asked to see our IDs, the beer was cheap, and the atmosphere was super chill. Blues on the stage...pool table and

darts...people dancing...it was a great vibe. A couple of hours passed, and while chilling at the bar, we started talking to this fat dude with wonky eyes. He was funny and wanted to hear all about our life in Pennsylvania. We told him about the Sliver, how tough things were, and our lack of any hopeful plans for our futures. Looking back, it was a bit odd how curious he was, but none of us thought much of it at the time.”

He falls quiet again, and I wait patiently for him to find his next words.

“That’s when he started telling us all about a supposed ancestor of his, some famous jazz musician. Told us how he became a musical virtuoso by making a deal with the devil at the crossroads. Then he said we could do the same thing and have the best life we could ever dream of. I am paraphrasing, of course.”

“Of course,” I repeat.

“We asked him if it was a true story, then why didn’t he make a deal himself? He said it was because he would never mess with anything to do with the occult.”

“Sounds smart to me,” I say, shrugging.

“Once again,” he says, shaking his head, “hindsight is twenty-twenty. Mikey and Frank were smart enough to shrug the man off, but I was glued to his every word. You have to understand, I had no options. No money for college. No prospects for any kind of stable future. Shit, I couldn’t even get into the military because of my damn knee. Plus, I was slightly intoxicated, so there is that.”

“So, you actually tried to summon a demon?” The words coming out of my mouth are perplexing. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking it was worth a try. I hated what my future looked like, and if I had an

opportunity to make it better, I was gonna take it.”

I raise my voice, annoyed by his carelessness. “I can't believe you tried to summon...

“I did summon her,” he interrupts, and I snap my mouth shut, frozen. “And she made a deal with me. Sealed it with a kiss and poof, she was gone.”

“Not that I believe any of this, but what was the deal?”

“I asked to be wealthy and successful in every endeavor. Work, love, health, everything.”

“Way to shoot for the stars.” I collapse against my chair, trying to absorb his nonsensical story. “And what did you have to pay for this arrangement?”

“My soul. I'm allowed to enjoy my life for ten years, and then I am taken.”

“Taken?” I sit up. “Taken where?”

He looks at the floor, and his voice cracks. “To hell.”

My mind races. I've never heard such a wacko story in my whole life. Garrett's always been so logical. There's no way he believes that he actually made a legitimate deal with some kind of demon. Surely, his success has been from hard work or by being in the right place at the right time.

“Garrett, I'm sure your current success has more to do with hard work or luck than some drunken deal you think you've made. Maybe you believed in it so much, you made it all happen. You know, like a placebo effect.”

“I've grappled with that for years, Max.” He exhales a loud breath. “But the contract

was real. And I am running out of time.”

I scootch closer and lean in. “How do you know?”

“You mean besides the fact that I didn’t dream up the demon kiss?” He runs a shaky hand through his hair, “Weeks ago, I started to dream of hellhounds coming for me. It is so real. It’s like I can actually feel their claws scraping at my skin.”

“But those are only dreams,” I say, not sure if I’m more worried about his supposed demon deal or his mental sanity.

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“Yeah, well, the last few days, I can hear them while I am awake.” He stares me hard in the eyes, and his face is painted in terror. “They’re coming for me, Max. And there is nothing I can do about it.”

We sit quietly for several minutes. I don’t know what to believe. I’m beyond tired, and this whole thing has reached a new level of outrageous. My head spins, but I’m too perplexed to sort it out. I decide to sleep on it, hopeful for clarity after a good night’s rest. But then I remember something. “Say that I do believe you. Say you are going to be dragged to hell soon. What is the promise you need me to make?”

He looks at me warmly with a half-smile, but it doesn’t hide the worry in his eyes. “Just promise me that you will check in on my mom once in a while. I know she’s a mess, but you have been like a son to her, you know? Cassandra and my baby will be fine. She comes from a huge family. But my mom? It’s her that I worry about.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes, pulling in a deep breath. I don’t feel right catering to this nonsense, but in case this craziness is somehow real, I want him to find some peace about the whole thing. “I promise.”

A ringing bell snaps my attention back to the funeral service. I stare at the casket, and a rage-filled realization bubbles within me. I don’t know how it’s possible, but I think Garrett was telling me the truth. It’s the only thing that makes sense at all, despite the thought of it seeming too fantastical to wrap my head around.

He has never made up stories or lied to me. He’s never had a creative imagination, so I don’t think he could have conjured up such a tale if he wanted to. But the deciding factor for me to buy into his story is that I don’t believe for one second that he threw

himself off the balcony. Or the claw-like scratches all over his body happened on the way down.

I believe he made a deal with a demon and was dragged to hell. And I intend to make that demon pay.

I just need to figure out how I'm going to do that.

Chapter Two: Max

The weeks after the funeral were a total whirlwind. Garrett left some enormous shoes to fill at Tophat Marketing Services. They didn't waste a moment promoting me, the current Vice President of Sales, to jump in and fill his vacancy.

TMS was a bit heartless about the whole thing. They just sent me an email on the day of the funeral, saying that effective immediately, I was to step into the role. It was overwhelming, to say the least.

My days started at four am and were filled with budget meetings and client conference calls. As hectic as it all was, I was grateful for the distraction.

Most nights, I wouldn't get back to my apartment until after 8, where I would spend my evenings hunched over maps and scrolling the internet for anything I could find to help me on my new quest for vengeance.

Researching crossroads demon lore sent me down one rabbit hole after another, and any remaining skepticism melted away, story by story, night after night. I reached out to our old friends and Garrett's travel companions, Mikey and Frank, back home in Pennsylvania. I was trying to get as much out of them as I could about what transpired that night at the desolate bar.

Mikey wasn't any help at all. He says he was too drunk to remember much more than Garrett leaving the bar briefly. He didn't even ask me why I wanted to know. I wasn't surprised by his disinterest. In our little social group, I was the least close to him.

Frank was more helpful. After apologizing for missing the funeral, I filled him in on everything. Having always been very pragmatic, it didn't surprise me when he laughed at my belief in the demon story. Frank's a police detective, and I wouldn't expect any different reaction from a cop. He said that people are evil enough without pushing supernatural nonsense into the fray.

But at least, despite his disbelief, he was gracious enough to recall a few details of the night, like the crazy-eyed man at the bar, and the general direction they traveled from Jackson to get there. But that was pretty much it. He told me to call if I needed more help, wished me luck, and left it at that.

Most nights, I crawl into bed around one, but struggle to fall asleep. My thoughts spin in a constant argument with myself about whether I should just drop the whole thing and move on with life, or continue in my quest for Garrett's retribution.

According to my limited research, a demon can be killed, and the process sounds simple enough. But I worry if there is any truth to the internet theories, or if it came down to facing one, would I chicken out and run? And then what?

Do I really have what it takes to summon, much less kill, a demon?

After struggling with those questions, my thoughts drift over to Garrett. His smiling face flashes in my mind's eye, and sadness mixes in with my anger. He was just a stupid kid when he made that deal. A stupiddrunkkid. In one moment of complete ignorant lunacy, he made a grave mistake. And the demon took advantage of him, a transgression that can't be unpunished. So, each night I conclude the argument with a hard truth: It's up to me alone to make that creature pay.

Lying awake in the darkness, I miss my friend. I never pictured my world without him in it. He encouraged me in everything I've ever done, was my rock when my mom died, and always had time for me, no matter how important he became or how hectic his life was.

Friends like him only come once in a lifetime, and that was stolen from me. From both of us. My sadness is a weight almost too heavy to bear.

Tonight is no different. As they usually do, my shifting thoughts have led me deeper into my resolve to slay the demon that took him. And now I know it's time to put my plan into action.

I'll need to rent a car. I know how to drive, and thankfully, I've kept my license current for the occasional work trip. But living in the city, I have never required a car. The supplies needed for my supernatural hunt have been ordered and are due to arrive by Thursday. I will call out sick on Friday and make my way down to Jackson. If all goes to plan, on Saturday night, I get to kill myself a demon.

There will be hell to pay.

Chapter Three: Daphne

Even after seventy years, I'm still not used to the sudden jolt caused by a summoning. When I was first promoted to the crossroads, my unexpected calls to the overworld would happen with regularity. It was almost weekly. Then things started to change, and the calling became more sporadic. I could still expect at least one pull a month. But the last two decades or so have been slower than I could ever have imagined, bringing my body to earth only twice in the last five years.

The lack of new soul contracts has caused enough of a stir with the High Court; they've sent out lower-ranking demons to encourage transactions. They managed to

get a few people to summon me, but not a lot. At least it's not my fault. I can't make deals unless I am summoned. I just want to finish my hundred-year contract and take the next step up in the ranks. As it is, I'm barely recognized as a step above a standard demon. I don't dare dream about earning a rebirth.

As I'm painfully suctioned through the darkness of the portal, I wonder who will be waiting for me. A mother willing to send herself to hell to save her sick child? A money-hungry man, ready to sell his soul to own a fancy car? A seeker of celebrity status, or unnatural athletic ability? With my luck, it will be another egomaniac who wants to be president or king. Guessing what the call is for is the only fun I have with this so-called job.

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With a swoosh and a soft pop, I am standing at the familiar spot, facing the center of the intersection. As usual, there is a man cast in soft blue light from the nearby bar, staring at me with a face full of terror and disbelief. He's holding what looks like a crowbar and has something in his other hand, too, but it's too dark to make out what it is.

"You have summoned me," I say for what feels like the millionth time. "That means you're here to make a deal. What is it that your heart is longing for?"

He shifts slightly. "I am seeking justice for a friend of mine."

I laugh a deep cackle. "A virtuous man. Haven't had one of those in a while."

Stepping closer again, his brows dropped into a hard line. "You must not have a good memory, Demon. You had a virtuous young man here just over ten years ago. He was only a boy, and you stole his life from him."

It all makes sense, and I nod. "I remember a young man who made a deal, knowing full-well the consequences, to better his life, if that's who you mean. If memory serves me, we claimed his contract a few weeks ago."

"He was manipulated," he shouts, and annoyance builds within me.

I flood my eyes with black and shout back, wanting to make my power known. "He had a choice. He is the only one to blame. You humans are all the same. Greedy, lust-filled, conniving, lying, scandalous, worthless, slithering, egomaniacs. He was willing to spend eternity in the fires of hell, to stroke his ego and live without normal human

struggles. If you want to be pissed, be pissed at him. He was selfish.”

“You're wrong,” he snaps. “It was a mistake. A mistake that a drunk teenager made. He was innocent, and you took advantage of a moment of weakness.”

This guy doesn't understand the way things work. “You do realize that I am a demon, right? What would you expect me to have done? Sober him up with a coffee and told him to go home? I was only doing my job, you fool.”

“Well, it ends tonight,” he roars and runs at me, throwing a handful of salt in my face, which only stings a little. He is about to crash the crowbar down on my head, so I disappear and reappear with a pop, several feet behind him. I laugh as he spins and runs for me to attempt another blow. And again, I disappear and pop up right beside him.

Only now I'm really fucking angry. “I think you didn't do enough research.” I reach my hand into his chest and wrap my fingers around his heart, and he drops the crowbar. His eyes are fully open, and his mouth gapes wide in a silent, painful scream.

My mind searches for a plan. I could simply kill him, but I wonder if there is a way I can use this fool to my advantage. “What am I going to do with you?”

I throw him hard into the dirt and watch as he pants, clutching his chest. “I'm going to die now, right?”

“Maybe,” I say, smiling as a plan forms in my mind. “Unless...”

He sits up but keeps his eyes on my feet. “Unless, what?”

“Although you were stupid enough to think you could kill me with a little salt and

iron, I think I can allow you to live. But only under one condition.”

“And what is that?”

“You have to make a deal with me.”

He nods silently. “So, instead of killing me, you’ll let me live ten more years, but then I will be dragged to hell? No thanks. Just kill me. At least I will still have my soul.”

“What if I give you twenty years, and you go in your sleep? No hellhounds. Would you do it then?”

I observe him contemplate the offer and think I’ve got him.

He gets to his feet. “Thirty years, or no deal. What are the terms of the contract? It has to be more than just that I get to live. It has to be worth it.”

He is smarter than I realized. “It will be worth it. For me, anyway.”

“Oh man,” he deflates. “Explain.”

“It’s simple. You need to ask for my obligations as a crossroads demon to be completely fulfilled, and that I am to be released from hell onto the earth to live a full life as a human until I suffer a natural death.”

“Is that all?” He scoffs and runs a shaky hand through his hair. “I ask for that, and in return, you let me live thirty years and I die peacefully in my sleep?”

“That’s right,” I say, smiling as I remove the black from my eyes. “Do you agree to the terms?”

“Where do I sign?”

I grab his strong jaw and pull his face close to my own. “Oh, you know how we seal this deal.”

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He pulls in a deep breath and releases a long, hot sigh before bringing his lips to my own. A blast of wind circles around us, and my body vibrates and glows. He pulls away, and the sensations within me fade, and once again, all is quiet and painted in soft blue light. Everything is different. I am different. I can't believe it actually worked.

I nod, licking my lips before mumbling to him. "A deal has never tasted so good."

He is emotionless. "I guess I will be going now."

"Enjoy the next thirty years," I squeal, euphoric from the victory, and he turns away. "I've got a lot of living to do."

Chapter Four: Max

That didn't go to plan even a little bit. Watching the newly freed demon girl bounce away towards the old bar, I'm filled with dread. Not only did I fail to avenge my best friend's unfortunate death, but now I have sealed my own fate and released a demon into the world on top of it. I've mucked things up before, but never to this level.

Unsure of what else to do, I head over to the rental car and get inside. My brain swirls with the replay of what just happened. I'm too nauseous to drive, so I plop my head on the steering wheel and take several deep breaths to try to calm my nerves.

My emotions shift between scared and angry as I work through my thoughts. Shame mixes into the mess, and my eyes start to burn, threatening to explode with tears. Thrusting my head backwards onto the headrest, I blow out a sigh and press my

thumb and finger hard against my eyes to keep the tears away. I hate feeling so weak. I need to figure out how to fix this.

A sudden knock on my window startles me, and I yelp, swinging violently toward the intruder. “Oh for fuck’s sake,” I mumble as I turn the key to roll down the window. What could she possibly want from me now?

She’s grinning like a damn schoolgirl and slightly bouncing up and down. “Um, hey. I’m sorry to trouble you, but it seems as though I may require your assistance.”

I’m disgusted. How dare she ask me for anything? Is my soul not enough? Scowling at her, I decide not to answer, knowing I owe her nothing more.

“You see,” she continues despite my obvious indifference, “I wasn’t expecting to be freed tonight, and in my excitement, I forgot some important details.”

Oh God, what now? “Such as?”

“That’s the funny part,” she giggles, as fresh bile moves up my throat. “I don’t have any money. It’s more than that, really. I don’t have anything. You are the only human I know. Can you help me out, please?”

Now it's my turn to laugh. “Pardon the expression, but there isn’t a chance in hell I will help you with a damn thing. Why don’t you conjure up some demon magic or something? You are crazy to think I would ever help you.”

“That’s not how it works, though.” Panic flashes in her eyes. “I’m human now. All of my powers are gone now.”

“Oh, poor baby,” I snort. “Guess you’ll just have to starve to death then. Oh well.” I put the car in drive and start to pull away. But she screams, “Wait! I can help you,” so

I screech to a halt and glare at her.

“Help me? How?”

“If you take me with you, get me on my feet, teach me the ropes, so to speak, then I will help you out of the deal. I’m sure we could find a loophole somewhere. The ancient laws are full of them.”

I swallow hard. “Suppose you can’t find a loophole, then what?”

“If that's the case, I will take your place,” she said firmly. “I will make a deal to save you.”

I glance at her up and down. The thought of being forced to help her makes me furious, but if there’s a chance she can save me, it may be worth suffering through. “Do you really expect me to trust you?”

She cocks her head and smirks. “No. but I think it’s the best option you have. Please. I won't be any trouble, and I will make good on my word. Please take me with you.”

I can’t believe I am doing this. “Get in.”

She squeals, jumping up and down before running around the front of the car and getting in. A blast of cinnamon hits me, almost burning my nose. It’s pleasant, but strong.

“You expected me to smell like Sulphur, right?”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know what I expected, but cinnamon wasn’t it. Now just sit back and be quiet. I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

“Fine,” she says, swiping her hand across her lips like she’s closing a zipper. “I won’t say a thing.”

Chapter Five: Daphne

It’s been torture staying quiet for so long when I have so many questions I want to ask. But every time I look over at him and open my mouth to say something, he shoots me a look that says, “Don’t you dare,” and I snap my mouth shut and obey. I don’t want to risk him changing his mind and kicking me out of his car, especially in the middle of the night. I don’t know much about humans, but I do know enough to understand that most cannot be trusted.

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We have been driving for a few hours, and I have no idea how much longer the trip will take. He looks almost as tired as he does grumpy, but I guess that makes sense. Turning to the window, I notice the sky seems lighter, and excitement bubbles within me. I've never seen the sun before.

"What the hell are you so happy about?" The break in silence catches me off guard. I didn't realize I was smiling, but I'm relieved to be asked a question.

I point up ahead. "I've never seen anything other than a black sky. This is gonna be amazing."

He scoffs at me. "Don't demons prefer the dark?"

"We have only known the dark," I say, trying to ignore his condescending tone. "You act like I'd made the choice to be a demon."

His face crunches, and silence returns for several minutes. I watch his expressions shift from hard to soft, like he's deep in contemplation, and I wish I could read his mind. I wish he would say something.

Twenty minutes pass before he finally does. "I plan to drive until the early afternoon. We can get food and a room somewhere in Virginia to get some sleep for a few hours."

I nod and lean forward, noticing the sky, turning slowly from grey to a soft blue. A flash of orange draws my attention toward my window, and the scene unfolding makes me gasp. Vibrant reds and blues are trickling up into the sky from a bright

point on the horizon. It's like a fire is painting the world with light, and it's so beautiful that I forget to breathe.

"Look at that," I say out loud without meaning to.

He softly laughs through his nose. "The sunrise is beautiful. But seriously? You've never seen the sun? I just assumed you were a human before you became a demon. I guess there is a lot I don't understand."

I smile at him, slightly relieved that the tension in the car has slightly softened. "If I have seen the sun before, I have no memory of it. They told me that I was a human once, but I can't remember that either. I don't know what I did to end up in hell, but I think it must have been something pretty horrible. I wish I could remember." I laugh, and he shoots me a befuddled smirk. "At least if I knew what I did, I could be careful not to repeat it this time around. It would be nice to avoid going to hell again."

His face drops into a frown, and he grips the steering wheel so hard that I can hear the leather groan. I shouldn't have said that. His best friend was just dragged to hell, and he is bound to a future there soon enough.

"That was a dumb thing to say," I whisper. "I'm sorry."

His face and grip on the wheel soften, but he doesn't look at me. "Whatever. Let's go back to quiet time."

I blow out a sigh and drop my forehead on the window. "Right. I'll keep my mouth shut."

The truth is, at this moment, I don't mind the quiet. I'm content to gaze at the sky, brightening by the second. I want to stare directly at it, but when I try, it burns my eyes, so instead, I close them. My eyelids absorb the light, glowing within, and my

face starts to warm, draped in a blanket of light. I know this is only Earth, but right now, it feels like Heaven to me.

Chapter Six: Max

Daphne is an odd duck, but I guess that's to be expected. She didn't sleep at all but quietly flipped through the channel on the hotel room TV for five hours as I slept. She was mesmerized by the flickering boob tube having never seen one before. We ended up getting fast food to save time, and she groaned in delight with every greasy bite from her burger and sip from her cola. It was entertaining, but I was careful not to react in any sort of positive way. The last thing I need is for her to think we are friends.

I plan to get her settled and out of my life as quickly as possible. But I can't deny that I'd love to watch her consume something decent. If shit food makes her moan in delight, some high-quality cuisine may explode her. I wouldn't want to miss that.

She finally dozes off around midnight, and it's three in the morning by the time I exit the tunnel, into the city, and gently tap her shoulder.

She sits up and rubs her eyes. "Are we here?"

"Just a few minutes," I say. "Thought you might want to see the city while the streets are, for the most part, empty. It's packed with people and bumper-to-bumper traffic almost all of the time. So, this is a rare opportunity."

She leans forward and her mouth drops open. "There are so many lights. Do you see that? These buildings reach up into the clouds. How do they not fall over?"

My resolve to remain indifferent to her starts to melt away. She seems more like an innocent child than anything resembling her demon origins, and despite my inner

protestations, I am bemused.

She blabs a ton of observations and questions, without leaving me time to answer, as I drive slowly through the deserted streets.

“Is that a homeless person? That shop has the world's best coffee! Look at the size of that TV on the building. Do you work in one of these towers? What is the smoke coming up from the ground?”

A laugh escapes me, and she turns and smiles at me, her face still stretched in awe. “What? This place is crazy.”

“So, you really haven’t seen much of Earth, then?” I ask.

“All I’ve seen is hell’s fire chambers, and the boring ol’ crossroads. Other than seeing cars and the building with the blue light, my experiences have been, shall we say, limited.”

“This must be wild for you.”

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“You have no idea. I’ve never eaten food before today. Or slept.”

“That explains the moaning,” I say with a chuckle, surprised by my own candor. “I suspect you have a lot of firsts on their way.”

“Speaking of that,” she says, suddenly squirming as her face crunches. “I am having a strange sensation near my fornication shaft.”

If I had a drink in my mouth, it would have come flying out. “Your fornication shaft?”

“Yeah, you know,” she points between her legs. “Down there. It’s an odd feeling. Like pressure and burning. It is not pleasurable like penetration.”

I swallow hard. “I think you may have to go pee. Urinate. The building is right here, so let me find a parking spot and I’ll get you to my bathroom quickly.”

“Oh man, I’ve never done that before.” She sinks into her seat and blows out a deep sigh. “There’s so much I don’t know. This human thing is a lot more complicated than I anticipated.”

I laugh, but then stop myself when I catch her frightened expression. I luckily find a decent parking spot not too far from my building’s front door, and as I pull in, a sobering realization hits me: It’s going to be up to me to teach her all of it. Hopefully, bathroom stuff will be the worst of it.

“Let’s take this one step at a time,” I say, offering a soft smile.

She nods. “Why are you being nice to me now?”

Not really sure myself, I shrug. “I don’t know. But if we are stuck together for the next few days or until I can help get you sorted out, it might as well be as pleasant as possible.”

She smiles, satisfied with my answer, but she gasps as her face morphs into a look of terror.

“What is it?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

“Is that pee stuff hot and wet?”

I nod, pretty sure I know where this is going.

“I think it just escaped.”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s get you inside and cleaned up.”

I exit the car, and as she gets out, I make it a point not to look at her accident. I hope my doorman is as kind. But mostly, I just hope I will still get my deposit back on the rental car. I doubt her pee smells like cinnamon, too.

Chapter Seven: Daphne

There are so many emotions I have experienced during my short life as a human. I think it's fair to say that my least favorite of these has been humiliation. It’s bad enough that I urinated in his car. I wish my loss of pride ended there. But the conversation that followed my first trip to the toilet only made things worse.

I think it was pretty bad for Max, too. I didn’t know a face could flush as red as his

did, as he calmly sat me down and explained the many bodily functions I would soon experience. I'm not sure what is more upsetting: the human need to defecate food waste each day, or that I will bleed between my legs every month. Both seem terrifying.

There have been good emotions too, thank God. Laughing makes me feel warm, eating food generates a sense of physical and mental satisfaction, and I am intrigued and amazed by so many other things. It seems the good emotions outweigh the bad.

I wish we had more time to talk after my shower, which was also strangely enjoyable, but Max had to get ready and leave for work. He promised to answer any more questions I have when he gets home tonight.

The problem is now I don't know what to do with myself. He made me promise not to leave the apartment until he returns. I found that odd, seeing as his goal is getting rid of me as fast as he can. But I guess he wants to make sure I will help him out of his deal. He's most likely worried that I will take off and not make good on my word.

There are several reasons I wouldn't do that, though. One, I have no idea where I would go and what I would do. Two, I made a promise, and the one thing I have never done is break a promise. That's literally what I have done for the last several decades...made good on promises. But third, and perhaps the most unexpected reason, is that I'm starting to like Max.

I can tell he's irritated with me. But I can't fault him for that, given the circumstances of our relationship. But despite all of it, he's been kind to me. He easily could have mocked me when I peed on myself, or refused to answer any of my questions, and frankly, he could have chosen to ignore me completely, but he doesn't. He's helpful and patient.

His attitude towards me has only strengthened my resolve to undo his contract. I just

need to figure out how. I'm not sure if any copies of the Book of Arcainia are left on Earth. Locating the ancient book of laws is my only chance of finding a loophole in our deal. But if there is a copy somewhere, I will have to get my hands on it. Somehow.

For now, I will have to wait. I can't do anything without his help because I don't know how to navigate the human world. I spent the morning looking around the apartment, opening cabinets and doors, examining the art on the walls, the furniture and fixtures, and observing the enormity of the city around me through the floor-to-ceiling windows. But now I'm feeling worn down. Maybe I need to sleep.

Max looked exhausted when he left. He had thick, swollen lumps under his eyes, and the color seemed to have run out of his skin. I bring my fingertips to my eyes and don't find them puffy at all, but decide to lie on the couch for a while. Maybe a rest will make me feel better.

Turning on the TV, I press the arrows on the handheld device, changing from one moving image to the next when an old woman with a funny voice catches my attention. She's breaking eggs into a giant bowl and says she will somehow make it into a cake. This I have got to see.

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I thought food was just something that was available. It never occurred to me that it has to be put together and made hot. I am fascinated. I wonder if Max keeps stuff in the apartment to make food or if he has someone else make it for him. Maybe I could be the maker of our food.

Now the lady on TV is holding a headless and featherless bird she calls a chicken, but I thought chickens had heads, so I'm confused. She is showing me how to roast it, whatever that means, with herbs and butter, whatever that is.

Suddenly overwhelmed with all the things I do not know, I squeeze my eyes shut, releasing a deep sigh as I mutter into the empty room, "Maybe I am not fit to be human after all."

My stomach sinks as I listen to her continue the lesson. "Dropping a rounded teaspoon of..."

Her voice is getting farther away with each second that passes until I slip away into nothingness.

Chapter Eight: Max

The day is a cyclone of frustration. Between morning conferences and client calls, my head circles with weekend replays and dread about not only my immediate issue of sorting things out for Daphne, but also of my thirty-year countdown to hell.

My personal assistant, Belinda, keeps telling me how tired I look, and although I keep shrugging her off, I fear the endless coffee refills aren't going to sustain me much

longer. It wasn't until I spaced out on an early afternoon call with one of our top-tier clients that I relented.

There is no point in finishing the day if I'm not really here anyway. I need food, sleep, and a fresh mind in order to function at the level my demanding new position requires. At least my seniority means I have no clock to punch, and only a few corporate heads to ever answer to, so leaving a few hours early will go unnoticed. Especially because I tell Belinda, I'm meeting with a client on my tired shuffle to the elevators. I don't think she falls for it, though.

"See you tomorrow then?" She says with a smirk. "Hopefully, you can catch up on the sleep you obviously didn't get over the weekend."

"Of course," I say as she shoots me an overly animated wink. I hate that she is so perceptive, but I guess that skill is an asset for an assistant to have.

It's about a twenty-minute walk from the office to my apartment. It's usually a commute I spend observing the city chaos, while reflecting on the day's activities, but today is different. There is only one subject swirling around my noggin, consuming all of my focus.

What am I going to do with her? How can I get her out of my life and ready for independence of her own? Can she even help me out of my deal, or is she just manipulating me? I can't believe I was so stupid. How am I going to fix this? I just want things to go back to the way it was before, but I know that's never going to happen.

"You've really fucked things up big time, Max," I mumble under my breath without meaning to, shocked as the old doorman opens the door and with a confused glare says, "What's that, Sir?"

A fire creeps into my cheeks. “Oh, it’s nothing, Bill. I’m sorry. Thank you.”

“Well, good luck with whatever it is, sir,” he says as I walk away. “I’m sure you’ll sort it out.”

I nod in appreciation without looking back at him as I press the elevator button many more times than necessary, and mumble, “I’m not too sure about that,” as the door opens and I step in, relieved to find it empty. One last moment of peace.

The doors open into my hallway, and my chest tightens as a strange odor hits me. I can’t quite pin it down, but it’s unusual. It reminds me of burnt marshmallows mixed with flowers. But it also has hints of oregano...or is that thyme? At least there's no sign of a fire.

I take a deep breath before walking in. My nerves are shot; like all the coffee I’ve consumed today has turned my veins to glass. Stepping inside, unsure of what I will find, I am hit with something so unexpected that I instantly break out in a chuckle, a release that sends my tensions to the background of my mind for the first time today.

Daphne, wearing only one of my button-up dress shirts and a pair of my boxers, covered in what I can only assume is flour, is standing at the kitchen island. She is surrounded by a mess of pots and pans, eggshells, odd-looking batters, and charcoal lumps of failed baking attempts. I think she has used every ingredient she could find in the cupboards and fridge. I’m just glad she didn’t burn the place down.

“You’re early,” she says, her face dropping. “I wanted to surprise you with food.”

I walk closer and fight off my laughter. “That was surprisingly thoughtful of you.”

“To be honest, it's not going too well,” she says, pointing at some black lumps on a cookie sheet. “I tried chicken first. You had some thighs in the freezer. I don’t know

where I went wrong. But I know those aren't right."

"That's chicken?" I say, truly amazed. "I thought they were burned cookies."

She groans dramatically and throws her hands in the air. "It must have been the peanut butter."

"Peanut butter?" Now I'm really curious. "On baked chicken? I'm no chef, but that doesn't sound right."

"Well, the lady on the TV said to use a half cup of butter, and I already used the last of your regular butter in the cake. That's in the oven. I thought the peanut kind could work. It's butter, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, it's not the same," I say, but the disappointment on her face makes me feel bad, so I add, "but I think it's a really lovely thing that you tried to do here. Maybe the cake will be perfect."

"I doubt it," she says, shrugging.

"Oh, come on," I say. "What makes you say that?"

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“Because my nose works,” she mumbles, shaking her head. “Something doesn’t smell right at all.”

I can’t hold back my laugh, but thankfully, she joins in. “It does smell pretty bad.”

It’s a pleasant and light-hearted moment, but my stomach interrupts us, growling loudly, and snapping me back into the reality of our arrangement. “I’ll order us some Chinese. Then I will help you clean up this mess.”

“I’ll take care of it,” she says, shooing me toward the living room. “You go and rest. You must be tired. After we eat, we can talk about plans?”

I nod. “We can make a shopping list too. Clearly, we are going to need some more food.” I glance at her up and down. “And some clothes for you.”

She looks down at her outfit. “I hope you don’t mind. I got milk all over my clothes, and I couldn’t remember how that machine thing works. I thought it would be strange if you walked in and I was naked.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say, moving toward the couch. “We will have it all sorted soon.”

Only it’s not fine. Because I am supposed to be focused on ordering dinner, but all I can manage to think about is how thrilling it would have been to find her naked. The last thing I need is the inconvenience of being attracted to her. I shake my head and scroll through my phone, looking for the restaurant’s number, but my mind keeps flashing to the curve of her hips in my boxers. I start to picture sliding them off and...

Stop it, Max.

Find some damn perspective. She was a demon. She's not for you, and she needs to go.

Kung Pow Chicken...

Kung Pow Chicken...

Kung Pow Chicken.

Chapter Nine: Daphne

What a week it's been. On the positive side, I've gotten better at making some basic food, thanks to Max's quick evening lessons. So far, I've successfully cooked eggs, burgers, and pasta. Max also ordered some pre-made boxed meals that I cook in this funny box thing he calls a microwave. It's nice that they are ready to eat so quickly, but they don't taste too good, and tend to make my stomach churn a bit. Of course, I don't tell him that. I don't want to come across as ungrateful.

Another first that was not as scary as I thought it would be was that I have been successfully pushing out my food waste every day. The first time it happened, I announced my success proudly, and Max outright laughed at me and then asked if it smelled like flowers. This confused me because it actually had a very unappealing smell. When I told him, he only laughed at me more and told me it was normal for "shit to stink." Needless to say, I kept my daily evacuations to myself now.

He showed me how to use his computer box, and although I am getting the hang of it, I'm not quite there yet. I find it fascinating nonetheless. He navigated to the button called the internet, and on this one page, there was everything for sale you could want, and he ordered me a bunch of clothes. If that wasn't impressive enough, the

items actually arrived at the front door the next day. It was like magic. I never knew the human world was filled with so many wonders.

In the evenings, we spent countless hours on the internet pages, trying to find the ancient texts to search for demon contract loopholes. He ordered several books on demonology, but he says they will take several days to arrive. I don't think those books will help us much anyway.

The Book of Arcainia, is the only book I trust to be accurate, but so far, we have had no luck in our pursuit of finding a copy. The only thing we've found is a couple of articles that reference the book. So, I am trying to hold out hope.

I also still don't know what my future holds. I don't know how Max expects me to figure out my path in life as a human if I am stuck in the apartment all the time. I told him as much, but he shrugged it off, saying we will find a solution soon enough. He's always so worn out when he gets home, so I never push, but I'm starting to feel trapped.

I've been craving a real life for so long that finally having one, and not being able to explore my options, is frustrating.

At least it's finally Friday, and he should be here any minute now. I'm looking forward to his company. Loneliness is another emotion I am not fond of. He's promised to take me out tomorrow. I don't know what he's planning, but I'll take it.

I wish he would hurry and get here. I'm looking forward to the pizza he's promised to bring home. He brought me a slice a couple of nights ago, and I've never tasted anything so amazing. He said that this city is the only one that makes it so perfectly, but I imagine some other places do it well too. I want to try it all.

But maybe his stopping to pick up the pizza is why he isn't back yet. It's starting to

get dark, and he's been home every night before the sun is fully set.

I head into the kitchen and pour us both a glass of red wine, another new thing that I love. We each have a glass or two with our evening food, and it relaxes me and warms me up from the inside. After he has a drink or two, he tends to pay closer attention to me, too, which I crave. Last night, he even put a hand on my arm when he said goodnight, but his face quickly turned red, which I found endearing. But something about wine makes us, at least physically, more comfortable around each other.

I hear the door as I take a long pull from my glass and smile. He is home.

"Hey, sorry I'm so late, but I have wonderful news," he says, balancing a pizza box in one hand and holding a brown, fairly large paper bundle in the other.

"I didn't notice the time," I lie and take the pizza box, dramatically sniffing it before setting it on the counter. "I poured us some wine. What's in the package?"

He sets it, with a loud thump, on the island. "This is the wonderful news I mentioned. Do you remember I said I had a friend in the history department over at Blake University?"

My pulse quickens, and I stare at the bundle in awe. "Is that what I think it is?"

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“Not quite,” he says with a smirk. “But it’s close enough, I think. It’s not the actual book, but it’s six hundred scanned pages of the original text.”

Without thinking, I run over to him and wrap my arms around him. “I can’t believe you got this, Max. You really are quite amazing.”

His body is stiff, but I feel it soften slightly with my words. Realizing I am making him uncomfortable, I back away, but I am relieved to find he is smiling at me, looking a bit proud of himself.

“It’s going to take us a long time to sort through it all,” he says, and takes a sip of wine. “But I think we can get through a decent chunk of it on the ride tomorrow.”

I pep up even more at this news, and my entire body bounces in delight. “Oh, yes. How exciting. Where are we going?”

He laughs, but not in a mean way. I think that he thinks I am cute. I’m not sure, though. I’m still learning how to decipher his expressions. “I’m taking you to the Sliver. It’s the place where I grew up.”

“What will we do there?”

“Well,” he runs his hand through his hair and looks off to the side. “I promised Garrett that I would look in on his mother, and it’s been over a month since...since...”

Realization hits me. “Since I called in his contract. Right.”

The warmth in the room a moment ago is now gone. We stand in awkward silence and sip from our wine.

Finally, he clears his throat. "It's about a five-hour drive, so you can scour the pages on the way."

I nod, but a lump in my throat keeps me from saying anything.

"Don't worry, Daphne," he says, looking me in the eyes again. "She won't know what... em... I mean...who you are. She won't make a problem for you."

I nod again, but my chest is tight, and my eyes start to sting. I'm not worried about myself. I am scared. I've never had to face the human consequences of my crossroads duties, and I'm about to meet a mother who has lost her son because of me. I've never felt like such a monster before.

"You all right, Daph?" he asks, and I try to shake the sadness out of my expression.

"I just feel bad," I answer honestly. "I know I didn't have any choice in the matter, but I am the reason this woman is all alone."

He surprises me with another laugh. "Wait until you meet her. She prefers to be alone."

I don't really understand, but I appreciate his attempt to comfort me. I want to change the subject. "I'll be okay. Besides, we have pizza. Everything is better with pizza."

He smirks at me. "New York Pizza. You mean that everything's better with New York pizza."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, sure. New York pizza."

Chapter Ten: Max

With another hour of driving to go, I'm growing weary of the silence in the car. Other than a few frustrated groans and the shuffling of pages, Daphne hasn't made a peep. The old texts might not be as helpful as she thought they would be, and that worries me.

"Still no luck?" I ask, desperate for a break from my boredom.

She slaps her hands down on the pile of papers in her lap and grunts. "I thought this would be easier."

Nothing is ever easy. "Why don't you take a break from all of that for now. I can help you scour the pages later."

"If I could just find something," she says, thrusting her hands up in frustration, "I would take a break. But I haven't even found a single word about the crossroads yet. What if there's nothing in here? What if we can't find a way out of this?"

Her concern surprises me. It's a relief to know she does care and that her offer to help me wasn't just to get the help she needed. "There is no point wasting your energy on it anymore right now. You seem so frustrated, which in my experience means you are likely to miss a fine detail anyway."

I can feel her eyes burning into the side of my head. She neatens the stack of papers and reaches into the back, and places them on the seat.

"How the hell did you get so smart anyway?" she mumbles and blows out a long sigh.

"Don't let me fool you," I reply with a chuckle. "I've learned the hard way when to

keep going and when to walk away.”

“What do you mean?”

I squirm, unsure of how much to share with her. “Growing up in the Sliver was hard. And my parents made things harder than they had to be.”

“I still don’t get it,” she says, turning toward me. “What does having shitty parents have to do with learning when to walk away.”

Gripping the steering wheel tighter, a fire builds in my guts. This is something I don’t like to talk about. “My dad was a drunk. He was always coming in and out of our lives, at his convenience. Like if he needed money or a place to stay. And my mother always let him. Every single time. And being the stupid kid that I was, every time he showed back up, I thought I could convince him to stay. I thought if I showed him my good grades, did well in sports, helped mom around the house, whatever, it would be enough to make him want to hang around. Again and again, he disappointed me. I took it as my failure. I wasn’t a good enough son for him to want to stay.”

“I don’t know much about humans, but it seems like he was the problem, not you,” she says, placing her fingertips on my shoulder, which sends a wave of unexpected emotion through me. I ignore it as best as I can.

“Anyway,” I say, shrugging my shoulders in an attempt to appear nonchalant, “I eventually concluded that there was no point in trying anymore. I learned to walk away. I haven’t seen the sonofabitch since I was fourteen. He’s most likely dead. He wasn’t one to let a case of beer stop him from getting in a car.”

She nods and sits back. I’m grateful she doesn’t press.

Staring at the road ahead, the fire burns hotter in my stomach. It happens every time I return to the Sliver. I look forward to the day I don't have to go back.

"What about your mom?" Daphne's question snaps me out of my wandering mind. "What happened to her?"

"She died when I was seventeen," I say flatly, hopeful to end this conversation. "Cancer."

"Oh," Daphne whispers. "I'm sorry."

I don't reply; my capacity for past drama is at its limit. Thankfully, she picks up on this and stays quiet. But after twenty minutes or so of nothing but road noises, she drops another question.

"What can you tell me about Garrett's mother? I'm a little nervous going in there blind."

"She is quite the character, you will see. I promise there is absolutely nothing intimidating about her, though, so don't worry."

"But is she nice?"

"She's stoonice," I tease. "But you're just going to have to see for yourself."

"You are no help," she snaps, playfully slapping my arm. "The suspense is making me crazy."

Glancing over at her, I can't help but laugh at how frazzled she looks. She is clenching her jaw, and her eyes are wide. "Don't worry, Daph. It's not much longer until we are there, and you will see you are worried for no reason."

If anything, I know she will find the Sliver depressing and unexciting, like I always have. Garrett's mother, Lulu, however, will be the highlight of her experience there.

It's never dull at Lulu's.

Chapter Eleven: Daphne

The clouds rolled in the moment we turned off the highway, draping the already depressive landscape in drab shadows. We make a few turns, passing a worn-down gas station and a junk yard with dozens of rows of rusty, broken cars and farm equipment, before we arrive at the entrance to a fenced-in lot. The front gate is wide open, so we drive through, and I'm surprised there is no sign out front to let people know where they are.

"Welcome to the Sliver," Max groans as he takes the first right turn. "They call this kind of place a trailer park."

I take it all in. The houses all look the same for the most part. Long skinny rectangles, with a small porch, and a narrow patch of grass between each one. Some have collections of mechanical parts and tools, in piles surrounding their homes. And some yards are littered with kids' toys. Glancing over at Max, I am confused by his expression. His brow is furrowed and his jaw clenched. I wonder if coming home is harder than he lets on. It doesn't seem so bad to me.

"It must have been fun growing up so close to the neighbors," I say, in an effort to lift his mood.

He cocks his eyebrow and smirks at me. "This place is a dump. And it's okay if you think so too. You aren't going to hurt my feelings."

"Well, I don't think it's a dump," I retort. "From what I understand, and I know my

knowledge is limited, is that a lot of people struggle to get ahead, and many don't even have a place to live. This seems like a good option to me."

"You make me sound like a snob," he says as he visibly deflates. "There are many wonderful communities like this. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with living in a trailer park. But this one in particular is the absolute pits."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the people here are mostly drug addicts and alcoholics. And the kids who grow up here don't have a chance to get out of this cycle of shit they're born into. There is no room for dreams in this place. There is no way to get out."

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“But you did,” I whisper softly, as he turns into the parking spot in front of the last house on the right, a weather-worn, robin egg blue, older home, by the looks of it.

He turns off the engine and takes a deep breath. “I would never have made it out of here without Garrett. I’m no different than anyone else here. No better.”

“So, this was his house then?”

He nods, “Yup. And mine was the tan beast across the street.”

I don’t turn around to look at it. I have a feeling that he doesn’t want me to. “Shall we head in to see Garrett’s mom then?”

A slight smile plays at the corners of his mouth. “Let’s do this.”

His shift in mood makes me nervously intrigued about meeting this woman, and I keep a few paces behind him as we make our way up the few steps to the front door. It’s strange how I feel protected with him in front of me. But at the same time, I don’t understand why I need to feel protected from a little old lady. The conflicting emotions are tiring me out. I fight the urge to go back to the car as he knocks.

As the door creaks open a few inches, I lean over to sneak a peek around Max, but can only see darkness within the house.

A throaty, deep, and faceless voice calls out from inside. “Maxy? That you?”

“It sure is, Lulu,” he says. “Who else were you expecting?”

My heart jumps as the door flies open and a frail, wrinkled, and stringy gray-haired woman flies out and wraps her arms around him, shrieking in delight. She's quite a sight in bright purple threadbare pajamas and dirty pink bunny slippers. Definitely not what I was expecting.

She loosens her grip on him and, with a big grin, leans back to examine his face. "I was worried you were Big Tom, here for the lot rent. I won't have it until Wednesday, so I'm hiding out for a while. Glad as hell it's you instead. Get in here before someone sees you and tips off the jackass."

Max reaches a hand back and pulls me inside behind them, talking as we go. "I don't get it, Lulu. Didn't Garrett leave you a bunch of money?"

"Sure did, but it will be six months before I see any of it. Stuck in probate or some shit like that," she says, but her eyes suddenly widen as if she is noticing me for the first time. "Who the hell is this?"

Max steps to the side, providing a direct line between her and me. "Lulu, this is my friend, Daphne. She wanted to see the place I grew up."

She is staring at me up and down, and a chill runs through my whole body as I mumble a soft hello.

"You smell like sulfur," she says, cocking her head sideways at me and I'm unsure how I should react.

Max, thankfully, jumps in to rescue me. "You're nuts, Lulu. You are mistaking cinnamon for sulfur. I guess you don't bake those tasty snickerdoodles anymore."

Her eyes don't leave me. "Maybe. Why don't you two sit down, and I'll fetch us all some tea."

She scurries off, and Max leads me in through the dark room, and we sit down on a brown, flowery couch that smells of cats and stale cigarette smoke.

The air is heavy, and as I take in the space, my guts burn with anxiety. There's an old clock on the opposite wall, ticking in pace with the drumming in my chest. The shaggy green carpet is layered in dust and hair, and empty liquor bottles are strewn about the room. The walls are covered in dark paneling, and the windows are darkened with smoke-stained, bent, and crooked mini-blinds.

The only other furniture in the room is a table with a large box-shaped television and a chair with lumps and scratch marks running down the two front legs. There's a small table beside the chair with a framed photo of a young man in it, but it's too dark to make out any detail.

A tall glass of brown liquid is now inches from my nose, and I gasp, before taking the glass and mumbling my thanks.

“That picture there,” she says, handing Max his glass, “is my Garrett. But I imagine you knew that already.”

I nod and take a tiny sip from my glass. The beverage is so sour and sweet at the same time that I want to spit it out, but force myself to swallow it and hope my face doesn't give my disgust away.

She sits in the small chair and takes a slug from her glass before turning to Max. “So, I know you didn't come all this way to show your friend here, our cute little neighborhood. Why are you really here, Max?”

Max chuckles. “No foolin' you, Lulu. I wanted to check on you. Make sure you are doing all right after losing...”

“After my boy was stolen from me?” She is glaring at me now, and my veins feel like they might shatter. I feel like she knows something. But how could she?

Max shakes his head. “Lulu, He took his own life.”

“Bullshit,” she snaps, scowling at both of us. “You know damn well he would never do that.”

“But, Lulu...

“But nothing,” she interrupts and points at me, my heart now about to break out of my throat. “And I think I know exactly what happened to him. And you had something to do with it.”

Panicked, I jump to my feet. “Why would you think that?” I want to leave, but Max isn’t moving. I bent down and take his hand, but he doesn’t budge. He is just staring at her with his mouth wide open.

“I’ll tell you why, so sit your ass down.”

Without any other viable option, I obey and cautiously take my seat again.

“Every night for the past month, I’ve had the same dream. And you, my dear, have been in every single one of them.”

“What?” Max says, looking frantically between us. “That’s crazy, Lulu. You must be mistaken.”

“I suppose I could be,” she says, but her tone is sarcastic, so I don’t believe she thinks so. “There is something very different about you in the dreams.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, not really wanting the answer.

She lowers her face and speaks in a creepy deep growl. “Your eyes are black in my dreams, and I think I know what you are.”

“That’s enough, Lulu,” Max shouts. “I can’t believe you are being so rude to my...

“Demon?” Lulu shouts back, standing and pointing at me again, as the air plummets out of my lungs. None of this makes any sense at all.

I think I’m going to be sick.

Chapter Twelve: Max

I cannot control the shake in my voice as I shout back at Lulu. “You are out of line. Think about what you are saying.”

Inside my head I’m freaking out. How can she possibly know any of this? How can I convince her that she’s wrong when I know she is right?

Lulu’s face reddens. “Those dreams are not normal dreams. I know she’s a demon, and I don’t care what you think. I need to know what the hell is happening here, and why is that thing with you?”

“Just stop,” Daphne’s cry catches me off guard, and I spin to look at her, slightly shaking my head and pleading with her silently not to reveal our truth. “I’ll tell you everything.”

Lulu’s face relaxes, and she sits back and crosses her arms. “I’m listening.”

I slowly return to my seat beside Daphne as my heart threatens to pound out of my chest. I place my hand on her knee and notice a slight tremble. “Are you sure about this?”

“She needs to know,” she mumbles. “It’s only fair.”

I nod but think this could be a mistake. I guess I'm about to find out.

Daphne takes in a deep breath and meets Lulu's sharp eyes. "I am not a demon. But I used to be."

"I freakin' knew it," Lulu yells. "This better be good."

"Your son conjured me at the crossroads, ten years before the night he died. He made a deal, and there was nothing I could do about it. It was my job."

"So that explains how his life became so damn perfect all of a sudden then," she grumbles as she nibbles on her fingernails. "My boy sold his soul to the devil."

"I'm sorry," Daphne says, and her eyes pool with tears, which isn't something I expected. I give her knee a squeeze and pass her a soft smile.

Lulu stays quiet. Her eyes dart back and forth as she continues her nibbling. I'm not sure if I should say anything. And what could I say?

Lulu's next words surprise me. "Sounds like Garrett is the one to blame. I can't believe he did something so stupid."

I want to tell her that he was young, and that he was probably drunk, and that kids do stupid shit all the time and she shouldn't blame him. But the fire in the room is dying down, and I don't want to stir things up again.

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Lulu shifts forward and cocks her head at Daphne. “But how come you ain't a demon anymore? And why the hell are you with Max now? This shit doesn't make any sense.”

I turn to Daphne. “Let me handle this one.” She nods, and I am struck by the melancholy of her expression.

I clear my throat as I search my brain to find the right words. “I went and conjured her. I wanted vengeance for Garrett. Through several mistakes of my own, which I don't want to get into, I ended up freeing her from her contract. She is human now and staying with me until I can get her on her feet.”

“Looking at her, it makes sense you would free her. She's a sexy little prize, isn't she?”

I'm annoyed by her accusation. “It's not like that, Lulu. She is a decent human, and she's trying to help me out of the deal...” I snap my mouth shut. I didn't mean to say so much.

“Oh, I see,” Lulu says, nodding. “You made a deal, too. That explains why you've been in my dreams as well.”

“Seriously?” I ask, a tightness building in my throat.

“Yup,” she says, her face dropping into a frown. “It all makes sense now.”

Another hush falls over the room, and I want to leave. This was not the visit I

expected, and I know if I am feeling this uncomfortable, it must be ten times worse for Daphne.

I've never believed in psychic abilities and prophetic dreams, but then again, I never thought that demons were a real thing either. The existence of special abilities doesn't seem like such a big stretch anymore. But Lulu? She is the last person I would've imagined having this kind of gift. This is all too strange.

"Putting all of this unfortunate information aside," I say, doing my best to sound pragmatic, "is there anything I can help you with? We can't stay as I have an early morning meeting that I need to be home for."

I can feel Daphne's eyes burn into me. I quickly look at her, pleased by the look of relief on her face at our new plans to leave early.

"I suppose I could use a couple bucks," she says without looking at me. "Got nothing but tea and eggs to last me till my check comes in. But only if it's no trouble."

"No trouble at all," I say, as I stand and pull my wallet from my back pocket, adding, "This should hold you over," as I hand her two crisp hundred-dollar bills.

"Thank you, love," she says, somehow her old self again. "You always take such care of your old Lulu. Now give me a squeeze before you go."

I take a few steps closer and bend down to hug her, and out of the corner of my eye, I catch Daphne heading to the door. "Call me if you need anything."

"Thanks, Maxy," she says, smiling at me and completely ignoring Daphne as she opens the door and steps out. "Visit again soon."

I nod and don't look back as I head outside, not surprised by the deluge of rain falling

from the sky. Despite making a run for it, I'm soaked by the time I get in the car. I looked over at a drenched and grimacing Daphne. "You okay?"

"I will be," she says. "Thank you for getting us out of there."

My gut sinks. "I wanted to get out too."

She drags a sleeve across her face as I start the car, and I'm not sure if she is wiping away tears or the rain. I don't think it's just rain.

"Well, now that we have some extra time, how about we do something fun?" I ask, desperate to cheer her up after the ordeal.

"You don't need to do that," she says, turning to stare out the window. "We can just drive back."

"Nonsense," I say, trying to sound chipper. "You've been in the apartment too long. Let's get some food, and I'll bring you to a beautiful trail along the Susquehanna River. I think the rain should be lifted by the time we get there. Then we can get a room for the night. How does that sound?"

"That's fine," she says flatly. "We can go through the papers more, later in the room."

Her response is making me feel even worse, but I won't give up so easily. "I think you could use a piece of Buster's Pie. Buster's Diner has the best pie in Pennsylvania, and it's only an hour up the road."

She turns to me, and relief floods over me as she passes me a slightly pathetic smile. "As long as I never have to drink that tea ever again."

I allow myself a small laugh. “That, I promise you. No more of Lulu’s nasty tea or anything else. I made a mistake bringing you here, and I am sorry.”

She puts her hand on my shoulder, and it sends a rush through me. “Sounds like Buster’s pie will make things right.”

Chapter Thirteen: Daphne

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Buster's was crowded, and after our soup and sandwiches, the sampler pie platter we devoured explained why. I have never tasted anything so delicious, and it was impossible to choose a favorite. Max insisted the coconut crème was the best, but for me, the chocolate cherry mouse and the raspberry almond were both superior. The sweet contents in my stomach have left little room for air, making the promise of a long nature walk quite appealing.

The rain cleared out, as Max said it would, and the Susquehanna trail is even more picturesque than I could have imagined. The air is damp and cool, and the river is muddy and swollen from the rains, providing a roaring yet peaceful soundtrack as we walk side by side on the gravel path along the bank.

The heaviness in my stomach is finally starting to settle. I glance over at Max, who seems lost in thought as we march on, and I find myself suddenly more curious about who he is. I can't tell if he's in the mood to talk, so I start off with some light chatter.

"This is a really beautiful place," I say. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"What's that?" he says, jerking his head like he forgot I was here. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. I was somewhere else for a minute. It is nice, right?"

I nod. "Where were you? Anything on your mind you want to share?"

"Nothing too interesting, I'm afraid. I was thinking about how much Lulu has changed since I saw her last. She has lost a lot of weight. I hope she isn't using again."

“She was pretty skinny,” I say, unsure of how else to react. “She used to use drugs?”

He nods. “She’s been clean for a long time. I hope losing Garrett didn’t put her over the edge.”

I bite my lip. If she did relapse, it's just another thing to tag on to the list of damage I caused, and now my guts feel full again. But I am curious about one thing. “Did you know she has visions? Has she always been psychic?”

“Not a clue. And honestly, I’m still sorting through all of it in my head. But enough of that for now,” he says, pointing up the path. “The river bends up ahead, and there’s a large boulder we can climb up to see the most gorgeous views.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“We can hang out there for a bit before we head back. Find ourselves a room for the night.”

“Works for me,” I say as we continue in silence. A few minutes pass, and we arrive at the curve in the trail. The boulder is a couple of feet taller than I am, and a surge of anxiety runs through me. There’s no way I can crawl up there.

He laughs. My face must be giving away my feelings of terror.

“Around the front,” he says as he circles the side of the massive rock, and I follow, relieved to see that the side facing the river is tiered and navigable. “I need you too much to kill you off by making you scale a rock wall.”

It’s me laughing now. This I can handle. He helps me up to the top, following close behind, and we sit on the highest surface, facing the river, with our legs dangling over the side. The view is breathtaking, with a clear line of sight for miles in each

direction.

“I think I could sit here forever,” I say, smiling as I take it all in. “How did you find this place?”

“Garrett did. Believe it or not, we used to spend the summers camping illegally in the woods over there. It was awesome, but I never really appreciated it much back then. I guess that’s youth for you.”

“What about girls?” I ask, feeling heat run into my cheeks. “This spot seems romantic.”

He leans away and looks at me like I have said something absurd, and my face sears even hotter. “I suppose this rock has seen its share of foolin’ around.

I look down at my hands and pick at my nails. “I wonder, if I dare ask, but what about you? You are not a young teen anymore. Why aren’t you with a mate?”

“A mate?” he laughs, and now I feel stupid. “I’ve had my share of women, if you must know. Just none of my relationships stuck.”

“Why do you think that is?” I press, curious as to why a man with so much to offer is still alone.

He blows out a deep sigh. “I haven’t found the right one, I suppose. I have a very demanding job, and that takes up most of my time. Most women don’t understand that.”

I nod, pretending to understand. “Don’t you get lonely? I’ve been alone for just a few days, and I feel sad and empty most of the time.”

“Sometimes I do,” he says, looking me in the eyes as his face softens. “I guess I am too busy to pay much attention to it. But why the sudden interest in my love life?”

“Sorry,” I say with a shaky chuckle. “I guess I’m just trying to sort out all of this human emotion. I see an attractive, successful, and kind man, and from the collection of souls I have dealt with, you are superior to the average. A girl would be lucky to have you, is all.”

He cocks his head at me and smiles. “You really think so?”

“I do,” I say and touch his leg softly. I don’t think he knows how good he really is.

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He shrugs and looks back at the water. “That’s very nice of you to say, Daphne. And for the record, I’m sorry you’ve been lonely.”

He reaches down and puts his hand on top of mine and gently squeezes my fingers, as we sit enjoying the sights and sounds of this slice of paradise. Hesitantly, I drop my head onto his shoulder, and he stiffens for a moment, but then relaxes, allowing my affection.

“I’m not lonely, now,” I mumble.

“No,” he says softly. “Me neither.”

Chapter Fourteen: Max

Something has shifted between Daphne and me, and it’s confusing and complicated. I never thought I would think of her as more than a problem to solve, but our time at the river showed me a side of her that challenges me. I finally see her as a human.

We were quiet on the way to the hotel, and I spent most of the short ride lost in thoughts on how to stay focused on the mission, and away from thinking about her. Unfortunately, it was a difficult task, and now I’m exhausted by the thought of how much falling for her would complicate everything. I can’t fall for her.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, with the stack of papers in my lap, I fight to focus on finding any information that will help me out of my contract. But the sounds of Daphne humming away in the shower make their way to my ears through the thin hotel walls, making me too distracted to think clearly.

The problem is, I'm pretty sure that I could have her if I want to. And my body wants to. I mean, what man wouldn't want to be the first to welcome her to the Earth with an explosive orgasm? The thought alone makes me as hard as the boulder we sat on.

"Get a grip, Max," I groan into the empty room. I need to get my head right. I need to forget about the possibility of being with her. Things are already more messed up than I can deal with. I set the papers down next to me and rub my temples. "Shift your focus."

"What was that?" I look up to see her, standing in a skimpy towel, dripping wet and confused. I never noticed the shower stop. It takes everything in me to ignore how the towel is clung to her chest, a perfect challenge with her nipples hard in my peripheral view.

"Oh, nothing," I say, focusing my gaze on the floor. "I think I'm going to take a shower too."

"You do that," she says as she moves around me and toward her bag on the other bed. "The water is refreshing."

I stand when I'm sure she isn't looking. The last thing I need is for her to notice the rocket trying to launch in my pants. "I won't be too long."

The bathroom is steamy, and I am quick to undress. The hot water doesn't make my situation any better, so I start to take matters into my own hands. I picture Daphne on her knees in front of me as I stroke, completely lost in my fantasy.

The sudden sound of her voice makes me freeze. "That looks fun."

I spin away, toward the shower wall, embarrassed by her sudden intrusion at such a vulnerable moment.

Panicked, an unmanly squeal escapes my mouth. “What are you doing in here?”

The excitement in her voice drops. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend. I just thought we could, you know, have a bit of harmless fun.”

I look over my shoulder at her, and her eyes are hungry. She is biting on her lower lip, and I am at a total loss for words. I want to tell her to go away. I want to tell her that we shouldn’t complicate our situation with sex.

But my brain has seemed to travel to my dick and all I want is to plunge it inside any part of her she will allow. All I can manage is, “If you think it won’t complicate things too much.”

I slowly turn to face her, exposing my excitement, as her towel drops to the floor. Any blood remaining in my limbs shoots into my groin. My breathing is rapid, overwhelmed by her generous curves. She takes hold of my arm and steps in to join me, her eyes locked with mine.

She stands close and unmoving, and I am unsure what she wants me to do. I put my hands softly onto her hips and pull her closer, the steam now flavored with a gentle, sweet cinnamon.

“Kiss me, Max,” she whispers, and I gladly comply. Her thick breasts press into my chest, and our heartbeats play against each other. My mouth moves to her neck, as my hips smash against her, seeking the warmth of her skin. My hands caress her breasts, and as we move together, the world and all of its problems completely disappear.

She starts to bend down, and a rush of hope that my fantasy is about to unfold hits me, and I hold my breath. But instead of dropping to her knees, she reaches behind me and turns off the shower.

Confused, I exhale as I sputter, “Are you having a change of heart?” I do my best to appear and sound indifferent, but I am screaming on the inside.

She laughs and takes my hand as she steps out of the shower, pulling me behind her. “There is no chance of that. I just thought we could have more fun on the bed.”

Without taking a second to dry off, we move to my bed, and she drops down onto her back, directly in front of me. I wonder if I might have a heart attack, or if it’s possible to rupture my skin from the throbbing pressure. I’ve never wanted someone so bad.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” She says, spreading her legs in invitation.

Wordlessly, I crawl atop her squirming, perfect body, and I kiss her fiercely as I push into her. My excitement is nearing capacity, so I move slowly, trying to calm myself down. Otherwise, this slice of heaven pie won’t last much longer than a moment.

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And I want to make sure she gets her pie too.

Chapter Fifteen: Daphne

I was right. It was a lot of fun on the bed. But it was also something I didn't anticipate: Sweet and oddly romantic. Afterwards, as we lay in each other's arms, a panic started growing within me that everything would become awkward and uncomfortable between us. But I was pleasantly surprised when the next morning, the only change in our dynamic was that we somehow seemed closer.

We should be back home in a couple of hours. I'm not necessarily looking forward to being back in the apartment all week, but at least I have Max. I wonder if I am falling in love with him. That's not something I ever dreamed I would be capable of. I must be getting ahead of myself, though. I doubt anyone could fall in love so quickly.

Everything I know about the human male wouldn't point to him being in love with me either. The men I have met at the crossroads have been selfish, egomaniacs who care very much about sex and success, but not more than that. He doesn't seem like them, though. He seems like an elevated kind of man.

Glancing over at him, he looks so relaxed, and I smile. With everything he has done to help me, at least giving him my body looks like it took some of his stress away. The last thing he deserves is to be stressed out and lonely. He's too good for that. I wish there were a way that I could make his life better.

A wonderful idea runs through my brain, and before I take time to sort through it, I blurt it out.

“What if I just move in with you long term. I could take care of you.” I hold my breath as I wait for him to answer.

His brow furrows and he cocks his head at me. I scramble to explain. “Not that you need taking care of. It seems like it makes sense with you working so much, and me having no skills or money, I can keep the apartment clean and make dinner for you, and we could do stuff together on the weekends, you know?”

My heart pounds for several seconds as his eyes shift between the road and my face. He finally clears his throat. “Is that what last night was about? You thought that would be a way for me to let you stay?”

Ouch.

I can’t believe that’s what he thinks, but at the same time, I don’t blame him for being suspicious. It was foolish of me to think our evening together felt special to him, too.

My eyes are heavy and starting to pool, so I blink several times to try to dry them up before tears fall. I don’t want his pity.

I don’t know if I should be honest with him or let him think the way he does. I decide on a half-truth. “Not at all. I just thought it may be a practical arrangement for both of us. We get along well together, and I like cooking for you, too.”

He smiles, which confuses me. “Thankfully, your cooking has improved quickly.”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling hopeful again. “I was thinking I could take a course on it. Maybe get a job in a restaurant. I enjoy cooking. It makes me feel useful and creative at the same time. What more could a human need?”

He nods, but the mood in the car is strained. He’s biting his cheek and seems lost in

his thoughts. I wish I had never said anything. He probably wants me to leave as soon as possible now.

I stare out the window and watch the trees blur as we pass. I think it's best to keep my mouth shut for a while, but I wish he would say something. I never meant to disappoint him.

"I think I owe you an apology," he blurts, and I sit up and turn towards him, shaking my head.

"You don't owe me anything..."

"Yes, I really do," he interrupts, and I snap my mouth shut. "My reaction was a bit harsh. The thing is, last night was unexpected, and honestly, the whole thing threw me off a bit."

"I'm sorry," I say, as my stomach drops. "I thought it was..."

"It was amazing," he interrupts again, and now I am glued to his every word. "I just had this idea of what our arrangement looks like, and then, everything changed. It's a lot to process. Plus, I've never been good with feelings, if I'm being completely honest."

"What do you mean? Do you have feelings for me?"

His eyes shift between me and the road again, and his grip on the wheel is so tight I think his fingers might break. "I never meant to. But yes, I guess you could say that."

"Wow," I say softly. "I was worried it was all one-sided."

"It's not," he says flatly. "But let's not get carried away. Feelings come and go. And

our situation is less than typical. We can't forget that.”

“You’re right,” I say with a nod. “I should not have suggested something so drastic.”

“It’s not that drastic.”

A shiver of excitement courses through my chest, but I try to stay calm. “What are you saying?”

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“Maybe we give it a shot,” he says, shrugging. “There’s no harm in trying. If it doesn’t work out, then we just go back to the previous plan.”

His eyes are fixed on the road ahead, so he doesn’t see the cheesy grin spread across my face. “What made you change your mind?”

He blows out a raspberry. “It’s been nice having you around. We mesh well together. It would be a shame to go back to how things were before we met.”

“I think that’s more true for me,” I say, laughing at the absurdity of my past. “I think being a lonely workaholic is a reality that most would find more appealing than being an imprisoned crossroads demon.”

He chuckles. “I suppose you’re right. Guess we both needed each other. But the good news for you is that no matter what, you would only have to put up with me for thirty years at most.”

My heart swells with the fact that he imagines us together in the long term, but also shatters at the reason for his statement. “Don’t worry, Max. Just because I’ve roped you in with my shower moves doesn’t mean I’ve given up on finding a way out of your contract.”

He takes my hand and squeezes it. “Your shower moves are worth it. Last night was incredible.”

“Wait until you see what I have planned for when we get home.”

I'm thrown back against my seat as he presses the accelerator, zooming us faster ahead.

"Hey, slow down," I giggle. "Where's the fire?"

"In my pants," he says, laughing as he resumes a normal speed. "This is going to be the longest hour drive ever."

I smile at him as he squeezes my hand again. This must be what heaven feels like. I can't believe this is my life now.

Chapter 16: Max

If anyone told me a couple of weeks ago that I would be falling for a demon-turned-human girl who was responsible for my best friend's early demise, I would have either laughed myself to death or punched them in the face. But here we are.

Life with Daphne has been strangely comfortable. I spend my days slogging away at the office and coming home to her and her daily cuisine experiments, which have been, for the most part, culinary marvels. She definitely has a knack.

We spend the evenings sipping wine and talking over movies, blissfully procrastinating the research we need to do about my contract. Most nights, we go to bed around eleven but don't sleep for close to an hour. That's our fun time, and man, is it fun.

I'm exhausted, though, not the young buck I once was. She wants to go out tomorrow and see more of the city, so I'm trying to come up with a plan as we sip wine on the couch.

"You look stressed," Daphne says, setting her glass on the coffee table. "Is everything

alright?”

I run my hand through my hair. “Don’t mind me. I’m usually pretty burned out by Friday night. But I’m fine. I was just trying to figure out where to take you tomorrow.”

She claps her hands, bouncing like a schoolgirl. “I’d really love to see Central Park if that could happen. And maybe eat lunch at Brechon Fire? I’ve read that it’s one of the best restaurants in the city, and I’m dying to try their foie gras.”

She really cracks me up. “Foie gras at Brechon Fire?”

She nods excitedly, with a wide, cheesy grin on her face and her hands clasped together as if in prayer.

Reaching to snatch my cell off the table, I chuckle at her enthusiasm. “I’ll call them now and see if we can even get a table. Might be impossible, for a Saturday lunch on such short notice, but I will try.”

“Thanks, Max,” she almost shouts as she crosses her fingers, dramatically waving them in the air as I look up the number.

“Found it,” I say, but then my eye catches a sudden flickering orange glow on the floor in front of the television. “What the...”

Daphne and I pop to our feet and watch in horror as the glow spreads into a perfect circle of dancing flames. My mind fights to rationalize what I am seeing. It doesn’t seem possible for a perfect ring of fire to form on my floor. I don’t see or smell any smoke either, which is adding to my bewilderment. I shake my head, snapping myself into action. “I’ll get the extinguisher, and you call 9-1-1!”

“No,” Daphne says calmly, “we aren’t in any danger.”

“What the hell are you talking about? The damn building is on fire!”

“Just watch,” she says, nodding toward the flame circle, and I reluctantly obey. “We are about to get an out-of-this-world visitor. And it’s not a good thing.”

I move beside her and take her hand as we watch a spiral of the blackest smoke form in the center of the ring, turning and growing, until the circle is filled completely with solid darkness.

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My heart threatens to break out of my chest, and I feel like I should do something, but I don't know what. "What's going to happen, Daph?"

Just as my words escape, a vortex of red flame blasts straight up from the blackness, slightly scorching my face, as I raise my hand to shield my eyes from the extreme brightness and heat. But the tower of flame drops back down onto the circle, leaving something of nightmares behind as it descends.

Standing before us is a creature shaped like a tall, bony man. His skin is charred and filled with cracks of molten lava, like he's been made from hot coals. His eyes burn with fire, and his mouth is a gaping black hole. This thing can only be a demon from hell. The air feels like it's been sucked out of the room and I struggle to breath. My stomach churns and my legs wobble, like all of the strength has run out of me.

"Shax," Daphne says, squeezing my hand tighter. "I humbly request you present in human form."

The creature releases a deep vibrational groan, which only makes my head spin more.

"Please," Daphne pleads. "You will give him a damn heart attack."

With a dizzying swoosh, a human man is standing where the demon was just a moment before, and my body returns to a normal state of equilibrium, although my heart still pounds with anxiety about what may be coming.

The uninvited man is average-looking in every way. He's a touch shorter than I am, slightly pudgy, with thinning brown hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. His new

appearance is about as intimidating as your average insurance salesman, but I still feel very threatened by his presence.

“Sit down, the two of you,” he snaps in a surprising Brooklyn accent that only bewilders me further. “You’ve caused a heap of shit with the Legion, Daphne. I haven’t seen things so chaotic in the Council Hall since WWII.”

“I didn’t break any rules,” she says. “I just bargained my way out of...”

“You stupid fool,” he interrupts, spitting in anger. “Did you think Lucifer would take lightly to being outsmarted by a common scum? Asmodeus is in a rage, too. As Captain, he’s being held responsible for your stupid escapade.”

“So why are you here?” Daphne asks, surprising me with her brave demeanor. “If I didn’t break the rules, I don’t understand what you have come for.”

They glare at each other, and I am still too frazzled to speak, which is fine because I am beyond confused by this whole mess.

“That’s the thing about hell,” Shax says, an evil grin playing at the corners of his lips. “New laws and amendments can be made within the will of Lucifer and the great Council.”

“New rules wouldn’t apply to me,” Daphne says, sounding strong, but her eyes flicker with doubt.

“That is where you are wrong,” he says, bobbing his head like a patronizing jerk. “The council has agreed to make the new laws...oh what’s that word again...retroactive.”

“What!” Daphne yells and jumps to her feet as dread fills my guts while I helplessly

watch as everything comes undone for her. “You can’t make me go back!”

“Oh, but we can,” he teases, examining his fingernails as if he’s no longer interested in the situation. “And you will restart your hundred-year commitment as punishment.”

“No,” Daphne wines and crumbles to the floor. “Please, let me stay. Please help them reconsider.”

“Oh for fuck sake, stop groveling,” he snaps. “It won’t help you. You should be grateful they are being so lenient on you. If it were up to me, you’d be in the trenches for eternity. Lucky for you, they believe you did a decent job as the American crossroads demon, so they think it’s best if you resume your old post.”

She is sobbing now, clawing at his feet. “There has to be a way to change this.” Her pleading breaks my heart into tiny pieces, and I wish I knew how I could help instead of just sitting here. I am mortified as he kicks her hands away.

“I guess there is one bit of silver lining for you,” he says as she sits up and drags her sleeve across her face.

“What’s that?”

“Your little man here,” he says, pointing at me, “is out of his deal.”

“What?” I ask, shocked by his unexpected announcement.

“Yup, cupcake. Null and Void. Like it never happened. But don’t get any ideas of trying this shit again. There is only one way to free a crossroads demon. That, according to Lucifer, is of the oldest magic and will never change.”

“What is the one way?” I ask, slowly finding my courage.

He laughs in an obnoxious tune. “There’s not a cold chance in home, I would tell you that. Think I want to be demoted to the trenches. Took me three centuries to be as important as I am now. I’ve got thirty demons under my command. I won’t risk that by helping you. You’re nothing to me.”

I nod and glance over at Daphne. Her head is down, but the way her shoulders are shaking, I know she is crying. This is another crossroads I wasn’t expecting.

Shax clears his throat loudly. “The new retroactive law goes into effect in a fortnight, under the highest point of the next full moon. I suggest you are at the crossroads portal then. If we have to send someone for you, I suspect you will have home to pay. You understand?”

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Daphne raises her head and catches my eye before turning back to face him. “I understa...

In another sudden rush of hot flame, he is gone.

I move to Daphne and wrap my arms around her as she silently sobs. “We still have time. We can find a way.”

“I doubt it,” she stammers. “We barely have two weeks.”

I shift myself in front of her and put both hands on her shoulders and stare firmly into her pooling eyes. “We'd better start on the research right now, then. I'll get the papers. You put on some coffee.”

She takes a deep breath and nods. “Okay. But can you still try to get us a lunch reservation for tomorrow?”

She is something else. “Sure. I can try.”

“Good,” she says, pushing to her feet. “If I have to go back to hell, there are a few things I'd like to do before I go.”

“And eating foie gras is one of them?” I can't help but chuckle, despite my emotional exhaustion.

“At Brechon Fire? Yes.”

I guess this is very important to her. Hopefully, I can get us a table.

Chapter Seventeen: Daphne

Max couldn't get us the reservation until next weekend, but that's okay with me. I'm too depressed to enjoy anything right now anyway. I never realized that emotion can have such a strong physical effect on the human body. All the energy and excitement I had before Shax showed up last night is gone. I just want to lie in bed and cry all day.

Thankfully, Max isn't having it. He says if we are going to find a way out of this mess, we have to dig deep and get to work. Despite us both tossing and turning last night, he was up early, making us breakfast and coffee that we enjoyed together in bed. But now it's time to get to work.

Pages of the Book of Arcainia are strewn about the living room. Page by page, we double-check everything to ensure nothing has been missed. After three hours, I can't take much more.

"There is nothing in here," I growl. "I've read every page three times by now."

He releases a deep sigh as his body visibly deflates. "I guess we need to find another angle."

I shake my head, as my chest grows tight. "This is hopeless. We should give up now, and that way we can spend the little bit of time I have left, enjoying things together."

His brow furrows. "How can you give up so easily?"

"Easily?" I snap. Nothing about any of this is easy. It's not his humanity on the line. "Do you even realize how slim the possibility is that we can outsmart the devil

twice? Nothing is easy here.”

My body is trembling slightly, and my face burns, and to make matters worse, Max is staring at me with a bewildered expression.

“What?” I bark, louder than warranted.

“It’s just that...” his voice trails off.

“Just that what?”

He shifts uncomfortably and looks down at the floor. “Your...um...eyes...”

“What about ‘em?”

“Well,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. “They are black.”

Confused, it takes a moment to register what he’s said. Once I collect my thoughts, I focus my energy on calming down, closing my eyes until I feel the change back to human eyes take place. I don’t know why, but something is happening inside me. It’s like my humanity is starting to fade away.

“That’s better,” he says, chuckling nervously. “What was that about?”

I shrug, not wanting to tell him what I suspect is happening. “I think my emotions got the better of me. I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t scare you.”

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“Don’t worry about me,” he says with a comforting smile. “As long as you’re okay.”

I smile back and nod, grateful to have him by my side through this chaos.

He clears his throat. “So, like I was saying. We need to try to find another angle. You’re right about the Book of Arcainia. There’s nothing here.”

“I think it may take God himself to get me out of this shit,” I groan, pointing at a stack of the pages. “Too bad there is nothing in there about divine intervention.”

“That’s it!” he shouts.

“What?”

“Don’t you see?” He gets up and starts pacing behind the couch. “We’ve been looking in the wrong book. I think we need to go biblical on this.”

“I don’t get it.” Why does he think some holy book would contain any information that would help a demon out of a contract with the devil? “I think you are reaching here.”

“Maybe,” he says, shrugging. “But it’s worth a try. I have my grandfather’s old King James Bible in a box in my closet. We can start there.”

“If you say so, but...” My words trail off as I watch him sprint off to the bedroom to find the book.

This feels like a giant waste of time to me. I don't know what makes him think God would want to help me. After all, I was a demon for a reason...even if I can't remember what that reason was.

After six hours of scouring the old and new testaments for anything at all that may help us, I'm ready to jump off the building.

"There's nothing in there," I whine as I storm off toward the kitchen.

"Where are you going? There are still a few more books in the New Testament to check through."

"We need to eat," I say, rolling my eyes with my back to him. "I'm making us some dinner."

I hear him snap the book shut. "I'll give you a hand. I could use a break. Let's pick this back up tomorrow."

"Or let's not," I say, looking him fiercely in his eyes as he approaches me at the kitchen island. "I don't want to do this anymore. Can we just enjoy the little time I have left? There is nowhere left to look."

His face flushes. "I'm not just giving up. I really think we can find a way..."

"Enough!" I growl, my voice unnaturally deep and gravelly, and his eyes widen. I take a deep breath to calm myself, not wanting to morph into a full demon. "I don't want to look anymore."

His shoulders drop, and he slowly nods. "Fine," he says. "But I'm not giving up. You can't stop me from trying to help you."

“Do whatever you want,” I say, turning to get some pasta from the cupboard. “But I’m going out tomorrow. With or without you. I want to have some kind of a life before I go.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose and nods again. “Fine. I’ll take you to Central Park tomorrow.”

“Promise?” I ask, turning to smile at him.

“I promise.”

Chapter Eighteen: Max

It was a beautiful day in the park, and Daphne wanted to see it all. I swear she touched every flower, pointed out every bird, chipmunk, and squirrel, and said hello to every person we passed. I took her to lunch on Broadway, to a tourist hot spot where the servers break out in songs between serving the patrons. I’ve never seen someone smile so much.

By the late afternoon, as we were wrapping up a tour of the super crowded Times Square, I was falling asleep on my feet. Knowing we would be out in the city all day, I shouldn’t have stayed up so late, but at least I managed to email almost twenty demonologists and theology scholars about our predicament.

Of course, I told them I was researching crossroads demon lore for a documentary I was writing, instead of the truth. I doubt anyone would believe the truth anyway. I’ve been checking my emails off and on all day, anxious for a reply, but there’s been nothing yet.

Daphne is currently bent over a table, shoulder to shoulder with an out-of-towner, the table filled with knock-off watches and perfumes. She holds up a gaudy gold watch

and waves it at me, shouting, “Can you believe this is only five bucks?”

“That’s because it’s a fake,” I say, putting my hand on her elbow, guiding her away.

“That will turn your wrist green in a day.”

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She giggles as the vendor shouts obscenities at me, and her innocent excitement makes me smile. I really don't want her to go. "What do you say we head back home? It's been a long day."

Her face drops, but she nods. "You do have work tomorrow, don't you?"

"Unfortunately," I say as we walk off toward home.

"I might be wrong," she says, "but you don't seem to like your job very much. Why do you stay? Why not do something different?"

"It's not that," I say, touched by her thoughtfulness. "It's just that since I've taken on Garrett's old position, my workload has doubled. I suppose things will calm down once I settle into it."

"Hope so," she says, and we continue the rest of our walk home, silently observing the sounds and sights of the city.

Returning to the apartment, we decide that pizza and a movie would make the perfect ending to our day. She selects a murder mystery that I've never heard of, and I order us a large pepperoni. As we start the movie and wait for the food delivery, I take a second to check my emails again, and my heart skips a beat when I see two replies from last night's inquiries.

The first reply is from a demonologist who says the only way to free a crossroads demon is to receive a pardon from the devil himself. He lists rituals that have been performed to call upon the devil to request a pardon, but he also says there is no

record of it ever being successfully done. Hopefully, the next reply will offer more value.

The Second email is from Dr. Jerome McLantis, a theology professor at Ledgemont University. I read the body of the email out loud, and under my breath.

“Your project sounds very interesting, and I am happy to help in any way that I can. From what I have studied about demons, particularly, of the crossroads or soul-bargaining variety, my understanding is fairly limited. It is my opinion, developed by the ancient texts I have studied, that a demon of any status may only be freed by an act of the devil (Lucifer) or through direct divine intervention (God).

That being said, I believe in the complexities of defining the word “God.” According to Abrahamic belief, in the Bible, and all of its translations, there has been a consistent agreement among the scholars on one concept: God is Love. Many of us believe that the two are interchangeable words. Therefore, going back to the ancient demon texts, one may surmise that a demon could be freed by an act of ultimate unconditional love. Perhaps sacrificial love.

This is all of course, just a theory, but I hope it helps you in your creative venture. Feel free to reach out with any further questions.”

I sit back and glance at Daphne. I wonder if an act of absolute love could save her. But even if it could, it doesn't help our situation at all. I care very much about her. But do I love her? I don't know. And even if I do, I don't feel like I am willing to sacrifice my own life, and be forced to serve as a crossroads demon, to free her.

“Hey Daph?” I ask softly.

She pauses the movie and turns to me.

“I just got some information from a pretty reliable source that an act of absolute love can free a demon from its contracts. But the thing is, if that’s true, wouldn’t that have been enough when I freed you? I was there to avenge Garrett, who I loved unconditionally.”

“True,” she says and nibbles on the inside of her cheek. “But you’re forgetting that the deal you made was to save your own skin. The deal you made had nothing to do with your love for Garrett.”

That makes sense. “I wonder how that would work then? How could an act of love save you?”

She eyes me suspiciously. “Don’t you be getting any crazy ideas.”

“No, no,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m asking rhetorically.”

“I suppose someone would have to love me enough to take my place. I don’t know. Sounds like a bunch of human conjecture to me.”

“You’re probably right,” I say, as the buzzer sounds from the front door. “That must be the pizza.”

“Can’t wait. I’m starving.”

“Same,” I say as I go to collect the pie. But I wasn’t starving. I have lost my appetite. My mind is now consumed with what to do about this new information.

I pay the guy and set the food on the coffee table, barely sitting down before Daphne grabs a slice. I watch her dig in and moan with pleasure with each bite. She really is quite a find. She laughs at the murder scenes in the movie. She’s so beautiful and doesn’t even know it. She’s charming, inquisitive, and intelligent.

As I finally scoop up a slice for myself, a realization punches me in the face: I do love her. I love her completely. But do I have the courage to sacrifice my own life for hers?

My cell phone rings, startling me enough to drop my pizza, luckily onto my plate. I look at the phone, surprised to see it's Lulu. She must need something.

"I got to take this," I say, getting up as she points at the movie with her eyebrows raised and mouth full of pizza. "No need to pause it. I won't be long."

I answer as I step into the bedroom, closing the door behind me. "Hello, Lulu. Is everything okay?"

"You're the one that's gotta tell me that!" I have to pull the phone away from my ear, she is shouting so loudly.

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“Calm down. What are you talking about?”

“I just dozed off on the couch and had another one of those strange ass dreams again. Only this time, you turned into a damn demon. What the hell is going on?”

I would like to know that too. This shit is crazy but I force a laugh. “It must have just been a dream, Lulu. I can’t think of anything that would make sense of...”

“You better not be thinking of doing something stupid,” she interrupts. “I can’t lose another son.”

Her voice cracks, and I want to reassure her that I’m not planning anything rash. And it’s the truth. I’m not. “Honestly, Lulu, you’re just dreaming this time. Everything is fine over here.”

Silence.

“Well, I am on a new medication,” she finally mumbles. “Maybe that’s messing with me.”

“I’m sure that’s what it is. Is everything okay otherwise? Do you need help with the bills or anything?”

“No, nothing like that,” she says. “In fact, they released some of Garrett’s funds to me earlier than expected.”

“That’s good,” I say, suddenly sick in my stomach and desperate to end this freaky

call. "I'll call you in a couple of days. Why don't you go back to sleep now? You sound tired."

"Sounds good," she says. "Maybe you're right. I have been having a lot of odd dreams lately. I'll talk to you soon. Just one last thing."

"What's that?"

"I never said thank you for being such a good friend to my boy. And like another son to me, too. Love is a rare thing to find in this messed-up world. I thought you should know that I love you for it."

Now I'm starting to worry about her. "Geez, Lulu, you sound like you're dying or something. I know how you feel about me, and the feeling is mutual. Are you sure you are okay?"

"I'm fine as long as you're fine," she says.

"All right then, it's settled," I say. "Goodnight, Lulu."

"Night."

I sit down on the edge of the bed and try to process the odd call. Why is she having visions of me as a demon? And why the uncharacteristic show of devotion?

I shake the thoughts from my head and force them down. I must be overthinking all of this. I guess Daphne is right, and there is no chance we can get her out of any of this. All I can do for her now is make sure the rest of her time with me is as perfect as it can be.

I feel like, at the very least, I owe her that.

Chapter Nineteen: Daphne

We don't speak about what is coming. The Book of Arcainia scans and all other evidence of research have been put away. Max arranged a two-week sabbatical from work, having given the excuse of addressing a family emergency. Every day, he has taken me somewhere. We have made day trips to the mountains, seen underground caverns in Pennsylvania, and taken in a very loud, but fun, rock and roll concert at Madison Square Garden.

He has made sure that I have tried every cuisine possible. I've tasted everything from amazing coffee from a street vendor to an award-winning crème brulee at a five-star restaurant. I don't think there is much left that I want to do before I go, except spend as much time with him as I possibly can.

We make love every evening, sometimes it's slow and intimate, and sometimes wild and guttural. It's those nights I struggle to keep the demon inside from breaking through. Twice now, I've growled at him, and my eyes have blackened more than a handful of times. Thankfully, he's gotten pretty good at ignoring it when it happens.

I only have three days left, and as we arrive home from a romantic sunset carriage ride through Central Park, I sense a new tension between us. I suppose we need to talk about the plan to get me back to the crossroads portal. I'm not ready. I wish I could slow down time.

We ride the elevator in silence, and I catch him running his hand through his hair several times. He passes me a smile, but not with his eyes. As we enter the apartment, I know what's coming.

He pulls in a deep breath as we make our way to the couch, exhaling loudly as he plops down onto his favorite corner spot. "I think you know what we need to talk about."

I nod, taking his hand. “Yes, and it’s okay. You’ve made my time here better than I could have ever wished for. I feel like I have lived more in the last week alone than most do in an entire lifetime.”

He opens his mouth and closes it a few times, and his eyes are watery. “Daph, I’m so sorry.”

He covers his face with his hands, and his shoulders gently shake, ripping me apart. “You have nothing to be sorry about, Max. There is nothing you can do.”

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His voice is muffled through his hands. “I gave up too easily. I should have tried harder.”

“Stop this,” I say firmly, and he slides his hands down to reveal his puffy, bloodshot eyes. I move closer to him and throw my arms around him. “This is not how I want to spend my last hours. I just want to be happy and snuggle with the man I love.”

His body tightens under my embrace. “You love me? Like, really love me?”

I’m confused because I thought it was obvious. I thought he knew. “Of course I do. And I feel as though you love me too, and that’s enough for me.”

“I have fallen in love with you, Daph,” he says quietly. “That just makes this all so much worse. I don’t want you to go. You’ve brought me back to life, and I don’t want to be without you.”

“Everything will be fine,” I say. “I don’t want to leave, but I am lucky that I got to experience any of this at all.”

“Lucky?” he scoffs. “This doesn’t feel lucky to me.”

I place a hand on his cheek and he leans into it, turning me to butter. “Yes. Lucky. But enough of all of this.”

He nods and drags the back of his hand across his eyes. “Is there anything special you want to do tomorrow? We have to leave before sunrise the next day, if we are to make it to the portal on time.”

“How about we stay in and make love all day?” I snuggle into his shoulder.

“And order all of your favorite foods?” he asks, his voice strong again.

“Sounds like the perfect last day to me,” I say. “In fact, I think we should start now. Race you to the shower?”

I pop off the couch, and he grabs at my waist, almost securing me, but I slip through and sprint for the bathroom.

“Cheater!” he yells, running to catch up. “You will pay for that.”

Reaching the bathroom, a split second before him, my eyes blacken as I turn to him, panting a raspy growl. “I wouldn’t mind a good spanking.”

A hungry smile creeps onto his face. “Oh, one of these kinds of nights. I like this kind.”

My heart pounds in excitement as I allow my dark side to stay and play. I’m about to give him a night he will never forget.

Chapter Twenty: Max

I can’t believe I am doing this.

The hardest thing I have ever done was to kiss her goodbye. And I was careful not to wake her, because I knew she would try to stop me, as I quietly snuck out of the apartment, knowing I would never see her again.

I didn’t sleep at all. I spent the night fighting with myself about whether or not I could do this. But I could find no other option. I cannot let her return to suffer hell for

a hundred years. Love has given me the courage to do whatever I can to keep her safe.

And now, I am drained. Almost twenty hours in a car alone can make a man crazy. I don't regret my decision to try to take her place, but I've been worrying about all of the details. I've left a note with clear instructions for her on how to pull money from my bank account, and I've prepaid the apartment rent for two years. She will need to figure out how to create an identity and how to organize some phony documents, and I'm nervous she won't be able to figure that out.

I don't even know if this is going to work. I love her with my whole heart. I love her enough to sacrifice my own life so that she can live hers. It wouldn't be worth it to continue my journey without her beside me. But I am filled with dread about the possibility that the theologian was wrong. If an act of love won't save her, then she will be hunted down by the hellhounds for not being at the portal.

I try not to picture her waking up to realize that I am gone, and what I am doing. I know she will be furious with me. I keep glancing in my review mirror, subconsciously checking to see if she is in the car behind me, trying to catch up and stop me, even though I know the idea is ludicrous. She is smart, but I don't think she would know how to catch a bus or hire a driver, and even if she did figure it all out, it would take time.

Exhausted, I finally pull into a spot in front of the run-down, blue-lit bar and turn off the rental car. It's just after midnight, so I have a few hours before I can summon the temporary demon I am to replace. I reach inside the glovebox with shaky hands and retrieve the small tin of summoning items. I put it together in such a rush that I want to verify I have everything in there that needs to be there. I've only done this once before.

I chuckle. I never thought I would summon a demon once in my life, much less twice.

I finger through the tin contents, grateful I had leftovers from my first summoning. I don't think I would have been able to do this otherwise. I wouldn't know where to find a black cat's bone on such short notice. I didn't keep them for future plans either; I just hadn't gotten around to throwing them away yet. Thank God.

There was only a pinch of graveyard dirt left in the little baggie I had. I considered stopping along the way to get more, but I didn't want to risk being late. I hope it's enough. For my photo, I found an old driver's license and chucked that in there. I suppose I could have used my current one if I had to. God knows I won't need it anymore. The only thing missing is the yarrow flowers, which are conveniently growing all around the intersection. I doubt that is a coincidence.

I blow out a trembling breath. "Everything is set, Max. You can do this."

I close my eyes and picture Daphne again. She is smiling and walking through the park. She is happy. She won't waste this gift. Giving my life for hers is easy to justify. I've been floating through for years, going through the motions, making money, avoiding connections, or feeling any emotions. Life should be so much more than being on autopilot all the time. Daphne has such a zest for life. She deserves to experience it all. The world is a better place with her in it, which is something I could never say for myself.

This is my chance to add value to the world by making sure that she stays in it. I really hope this works. And if it does, I hope she can move through the pain of what I have done.

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My eyes are heavy, and I don't want to risk falling asleep, so I step out into the blue glow and, tin in hand, slowly make my way over to the crossroads. I reach down and pluck some white yarrow flowers, bringing them to my nose, inhaling the delicate, earthy-yet-sweet aroma before tucking them into the tin.

I sit down cross-legged in the grass and wait. A few cars pull into the old bar lot, and I watch as the various patrons stumble in and out, without taking notice of me at all. The air is crisp and cool, the large full moon illuminating everything around me. Time passes so much faster when you want it to move slowly. I can't slow it down, though. It's almost time now.

"No turning back now," I grumble as I push to my feet. "For Daphne."

As I had done before, I move to the middle of the intersection and squat down. I dig at the gravelly dirt road with my fingers until I have a small but deep enough hole and drop the tin in, before sliding the pile of dirt on top of it. "Now I wait."

Wiping my hands on my pants, my knees crack loudly as I stand. My heart is pounding and I'm dizzy. A slight breeze kicks up, and my stomach sinks. "Here we go."

The dirt swirls on the ground in front of me, and with a swooshing pop, I am thrown back in disbelief at the figure suddenly in front of me. This cannot be.

"Nooooooooo," I wail and crumble to the ground, unable to catch my breath. My eyes fill with emotion as I look up at Lulu, black eyed and grinning down at me. I sputter, "What have you done?"

“I did what needed to be done,” she says, reaching to pull me up off the ground. “I wasn’t about to let you clean up my Garrett’s mess.”

“But Lulu,” I sob, dragging my arm across my face, fighting to take control of my swirling thoughts. “This was my mess. How did you...why did you...”

“Listen,” she interrupts. “I knew you had feelings for the girl the moment I saw you. I’ve been like a mama to you since you could piss in the woods. I couldn’t let you do something stupid and let you give your life up.”

I am so confused. “But how did you know?”

“The dreams I have are pretty specific,” she says. “Two nights ago, I had a visit from an angel who told me what you were up to. I guess you could call it a divine intervention. It left me with an easy decision to make. So here I am.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” I argue. “I thought that taking over for Daphne requires an act of pure love. You don’t love Daphne. This is all wrong.”

“There’s my always-too-literal fellow,” she teases. “It’s not Daphne that I love. It’s you.”

A sob frees itself from within me, and I tremble. “But I can’t let you do this.”

“You don’t have a choice, Maxy. It’s done.”

“That’s not good enough. You can’t expect me to allow this.”

Her smile drops away, and the black drains from her eyes. She looks like the old Lulu, which only makes me cry harder. “I want to do this, Max. My entire life, I’ve been nothing but a mess. I’ve never contributed anything good to this world. This is

my chance to set things right, to do something...

“That’s not true,” I interrupt, now angry at her self-deprecation. “You were there for me when I had no one else. You treated me like a real son. You’re the reason I made it out of my youth alive.”

“And what would that be for, if I let you throw it all away now? This is my time to go, Max. My time to do the right thing.”

“But I don’t want you to be stuck here, like this,” I say, shaking my head. “This isn’t fair.”

“It’s more than fair. Besides,” she says, “the cancer was about to claim me anyway.”

Her words catch me off guard, and I wonder if she’s making this up to make her sacrifice easier to accept. “You never said anything about cancer.”

“Didn’t want to trouble you,” she says. “It happens when you spend your days living as hard as I did.”

“But still,” I say, shaking my head again. “That’s no reason to...

“It sure as hell is,” she snaps, but then smiles warmly at me. “This is done, and you won’t change my mind. Now give your old Lulu one last hug and go back to that girl of yours. You deserve to be happy, Max.”

I stare at her as she opens her arms for an embrace, but I can’t move. Twice now, I have been outsmarted at the crossroads. She is the last of my family, and I don’t want it to end like this.

“Come on now,” she says, flapping her hands. “You ain’t getting any younger.”

Hesitantly, I step into her arms and melt against her frail form. “I love you, Lulu.”

“I love you too, Maxy,” she whispers. “Now go and live the best life you can dream up.”

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“I will try,” I say as she vanishes into nothing, and I stumble forward into the emptiness of the intersection.

I guess this is over. I stumble back to the car, sobbing softly under my breath. I never expected that anyone would love me enough to sacrifice themselves for me. But as profound as my sadness is, my relief and hope are beside it. Somehow, I'm allowed to keep my Daphne. I get to live my life beside her.

And I know one thing for sure: I'm going to make it the best life I can make. Not only for Garrett and Lulu, and Daph, but for me too.

Lulu has made one hell of a deal. Her deal has given me the gift of a life full of love. I'll be damned if I'm going to waste it.

The End.

Epilogue

One Year Later – Daphne

Max is snoring lightly, tangled in the sheets, as I open the patio door as quietly as I can and step out onto the balcony overlooking the resort beach. Every time I think I can't possibly see something more beautiful than I already have, I am surprised by a new high. This morning is like that.

The sun is popping over the ocean's horizon, filling the sky with purples and reds, reflecting on the water's surface in a dreamy dance. I've spent so many years in hell,

it still seems like a dream to be in this heaven. Heaven is here on Earth.

Max has been the man I knew he was. During this last year, he has taken a sabbatical from work, and after some shady dealings to get me a fake identity, we have traveled the world and lived our lives to the fullest.

With the year coming to an end, we thought the best way to end it would be by getting married, so that's what we did. Neither of us has any other family, so a small justice of the peace wedding worked out perfectly. Now, the rising sun on the last day of our Hawaiian honeymoon brings with it a buzz of excitement.

Tomorrow, we head back to the city. Next week, I start classes at the Culinary Center. As much as I am looking forward to it, I will miss this pace.

The door groans behind me, and I turn to see Max holding out a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, wife," he says, handing me the cup as I smile at him. Hearing that will never get old.

"Good morning, my husband."

He looks out at the water. "Wow. Sucks we have to leave today. And as much as I don't want to go back to work, I'm hopeful that at least my new position will be a lot less demanding of me."

"I think it's brilliant you told them you'd only come back for a junior position."

He laughs. "They still probably can't believe it. I doubt many people negotiate a lower salary with less of a title and responsibility."

"True," I say, setting my cup down on a small table. "Come here, you."

He turns and steps into my arms, wrapping me in a warm embrace. Pressing my ear to his chest, I breathe with him, and the drumming of his heart is music to my soul. “I love you, Max.”

His fingers move up my neck, and he holds the back of my head, bending down to kiss my lips. His touch is gentle and sweet, filling me with hope and security.

He is my forever, and our lives together have only just begun. Our marriage is the kind of contract that I’m happy to be locked into...I only wish we had a hundred more years to live. Because together, there is nothing we cannot do.

Love is a powerful force, and I will always honor its ability to repair even the most damaged of souls. Humans...Demons...Love can save us all.