



# Unholy Night

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** From Nichole Chase, the bestselling author of *Suddenly Royal*, and Karpov Kinrade, the bestseller of *Vampire Girl*, comes a holiday romance sure to put the magic back in your year.

Lyla: No one tells you when you're young that you will outgrow magic. It just happens, so slowly you barely notice it until one day it's gone. That's the most tragic part of growing up, I've always thought. And now, as a broke, single mother, it's my job to create the magic. To preserve it and guard the light of it as I pass the torch to the next generation. And I'm failing right now. This has been one of the hardest years of my life. But it's Christmas Eve and I'm doing my best to make it special for my daughter. That's when I hear the voices. Two men downstairs arguing. One is a solid Santa cosplay winner, down to the glint of glee in his eyes. The other man... he is all darkness, hard sexy angles and eyes that suck in my very soul. And they are both about to change my life forever.

Lucifer: I will not lose this. One night a year I leave all the stench of fear and pain, and revel in the magic of the human plane while making a few kids happy. Even if it's a little unorthodox. Of course, I also enjoy the irony of it all. The letter was clearly addressed to me, not Santa. The old elf is at the wrong house. In years past, the overgrown elf and I would just squabble a little and move on. I never could have anticipated he would quit his job and leave me with the responsibility of saving Christmas. I'm Satan. I don't exactly have a barn full of reindeer. And if I did, they would most likely be food for my demons, not to use as transportation. Thus begins the strangest Christmas Eve of my very long life. With the help of a sinfully sexy woman who has no idea how magical she truly is, I'm going to make Christmas happen. And maybe show that red obsessed elf a thing or two.

This Christmas, in the most 2020 plot twist of all times, the magic of the season—and even true love itself—will be found in the most unlikely of places.

**Total Pages (Source):** 56

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:24 am*

## Prologue

### Lucifer

Swirling the amber liquid in my glass, I stare into the fireplace. I lift the glass and sniff, trying to rid myself of the lingering scent of fear and pain that fills my nostrils.

Fuchsia knocks on my office door and I snarl softly. I've just gotten back from doing my rounds through the levels of hell and I'm exhausted. Not physically--that's not possible--but mentally. Humans believe I delight in torturing souls, but it's just a job to me. I'm not torturing them for pleasure. It's my duty and their destiny. If they learn their lesson, another path will open to them.

But I am forever stuck on this one.

And after eons of dispensing punishment, I just feel hollow. The pain, the fear, the howling screams have eaten at me inside and out. At first, my own anger fueled me and my methods, but anger is an insubstantial companion and left me far sooner than I would have thought.

Now I spend my endless days measuring souls and serving them punishment. Yes, I have my demons, and I'm thankful for them. They help me do my job and some have become friends and confidants. Yet, I still feel as if something is missing. I need something more.

"Master, the letters have arrived." Fuchsia is used to my moods and ignores my growling as she enters.

After such a long trip through the different levels, I have nothing left to give. My soul feels foul and gritty, as if I, myself, have committed these awful sins. It feels as if they have rubbed off on me and I want nothing more than a quiet drink and a long shower, not to be bothered with more work.

“What letters?” I slam the glass on the table and it somehow manages to not shatter. Fuchsia most likely had something to do with that after cleaning up too many shards of glass to count. “Who dares write to me?”

The only time I’m contacted by other immortals is if they need something. Same with humans. They seek to bargain with the devil. They watch too much television.

“It’s that time of year again, Master.” Fuchsia sets a large basket full of letters at my feet. Several of the other demons that work in my home follow closely behind, leaving their own baskets heaped with envelopes.

I sit up and look at the red demoness in surprise. She smiles, her dainty fangs resting on her bottom lip. She knows what this means for me. I should be embarrassed, but instead I’m relieved to have someone understand. Not just an employee, but a friend who knows exactly what I need tonight. These letters must’ve been showing up for weeks.

“Christmas,” she says.

The other demons scurry out of my office except for Fuchsia, Dan, and Birch. They’ve become more than employees over the centuries. I’m not sure friends is a strong enough word for what they are to me now, but family--well, family isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be. In fact, I refuse to label them as family. The crimes committed in the name of family is a big reason the population here is growing.

“Christmas,” I whisper. As much as I loathe the fat, bearded elf, I look forward to this

holiday. Though I will never say that out loud. I might even cut out the tongue of someone who dares imply I do. But the letters, these letters are important. They are the only thing I look forward to every year. I glance at the baskets and feel the corners of my mouth turn up.

I inhale deeply and breathe in the happiness, the eagerness, the hope, and little traces of magic. It's like breathing fresh air for the first time in a year. I run my hands over the baskets, absorbing a bit of the clean energy clinging to the envelopes.

Unable to help myself, I reach into the nearest basket and rustle around, but something catches my attention. A scent I recognize all too well. I drop the letter I'm holding and plunge both hands into the basket, spilling envelopes onto the ground as I search for the one that calls to my soul. When I find it, my hands shake as I lift it up to study.

I bring it to my nose and inhale, closing my eyes so I can pick out all the different flavors. The cloying smell of a child's sadness matched by the fresh evergreen smell of a child's hope... but it's sadly fading. I breathe deeper and find the other smells that call to me. The heavy scent of loneliness and desperation, the salty smell of fear.

I open my eyes and trace a finger over the letters of my name written in green crayon. Carefully I slice open the envelope with a sharp fingernail. The smells intensify as I gently pull the folded piece of paper out and open it.

An insane amount of silver glitter falls into my lap and I frown. It looks like a disco ball exploded in my lap. I hear one of the demons in the room snicker, but when I cut my eyes in their direction, they all have blank expressions. Ignoring the glitter for now, I read the sweet letter and look at the very short list. This little girl isn't asking for the newest name brand shoes or fancy game console. She's not demanding the most expensive phone.

She is asking for a puppy, and in doing so, she is asking for unconditional love and to give love in return. Yet, I smell the desperation of someone else on the letter, fear of failure. The person taking care of this child can't also take care of an animal. This person is in complete despair.

I don't know how long I sit and contemplate this one letter. I memorize the swoops and straight lines of the child's handwriting. I memorize the smells that are particular to the two humans who spent so much time lingering over the paper.

Eventually I fold the letter, replace it in the envelope, and tuck it inside my suit jacket. I pour myself another finger of scotch and look back at the baskets. I will read each letter and prepare a gift for them.

But I will need to do something special for the little girl named Mandy.

She will be my last delivery on Christmas Eve.

1

Lyla

The smell of burnt cookies is nearly my undoing on a night meant for magic and cheer.

"Mommy, mommy, my sniffinator says the cookies are done," Mandy says, crinkling her button nose. I tweak it with my fingers gently and smile, swallowing the tears burning my eyes.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:24 am*

“I think you're right little bunny.” I grab the oven mitts and run over to save what I can of Santa’s unfortunate treat.

When I pull them out I’m relieved to discover at least a few are salvageable. I was lucky I could scrounge together enough sugar and flour to whip these up when my sweet eight-year-old daughter convinced me we had to leave a snack and a note for Santa.

Honestly, I thought we would be past the Santa lie by now. Had counted on it actually. There will be precious little in her stocking this year, and nothing in mine, though she still insisted I put it up. “Mom you can’t just give up believing. This year has sucked! We need all the magic we can get!”

“Don’t say sucked,” I chastise her.

This year Mandy seems determined to make this a Hallmark-worthy Christmas. She is on a mission, from cutting snowflakes from random bits of paper to trying to talk me into using our last bag of popcorn to string around the tree. But I know Santa isn’t coming.

2020 has been the year of the pandemic. The year of job loss and financial ruin. The year of homeschool—Jesus take the wheel—masks and social distancing. The year of out of stock toilet paper and too much isolation for even the most introverted of us. Certainly too much for children who crave socialization and friends. It’s the first holiday season I couldn’t join my parents for Thanksgiving and now I won’t see them for Christmas. They live too far away to visit during a pandemic and I can’t put them at risk anyway.

And so it's just me and Mandy, and burnt cookies and only a splash of milk. Only a splash because we are almost out and Mandy will need some for breakfast in the morning.

It's a chipped cup for the fictional man in red and recycled gifts wrapped in newspaper that I spent weeks drawing on to make it festive because I couldn't afford wrapping paper.

Not this year.

When you're suddenly jobless with barely enough money in the bank to pay the bills and eat, wrapping paper just isn't a necessity. Especially when no one is hiring office workers right now and I'm contemplating taking an overnight job at a gas station just to put food on the table.

Except I have no one to watch Mandy. And she can't go to school. And... ugh. Everything about this year feels impossible.

Thankfully, Mandy doesn't seem to mind the burnt cookies as she happily smears them with green and red frosting and sprinkles.

I force myself to stop calculating how much each ingredient costs and make myself just be present with my daughter. She is the light of my life, and I am doing my best to hold onto the magic for her even if I can no longer see—or feel it—myself.

No one tells you when you're young that you will outgrow magic. It just happens, so slowly you barely notice it until one day it's gone. And you've already convinced yourself it never existed at all.

That's the most tragic part of growing up, I've always thought.

And now, as a broke, scared, single mother, it's my job to create the magic. To preserve it and guard the light of it as I pass the torch to the next generation.

And I have to admit I feel like I'm failing right now.

"We have to feed the reindeers too," she says, once we've set the frosted cookies and chipped tea cup of milk on the table by our sad Charlie Brown Christmas tree.

"Feed the reindeers?" What fresh hell is this?

"Yes, it's the law. They eat oatmeal and glitter and they won't bring Santa if we don't feed them."

I stifle a groan and turn back to the kitchen, mentally calculating how much oatmeal to give up. I can skip a few breakfasts if it means the reindeer will survive Christmas Eve. Right?

We pull out the glitter and mix it into a handful of oatmeal, then take it out to the apartment balcony. We don't have a lawn or any grass nearby so this will have to do.

Mandy very solemnly tosses the mixture onto the ground and mumbles something under her breath.

"What was that honey?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Nothing. Just making my Christmas wish."

My stomach clenches. There's no way I can give her what she's wishing for, and I fear tomorrow morning what little magic I've managed to salvage will be destroyed by cold hard reality.



But I smile when she looks at me and guide her upstairs to brush her teeth and get into bed.

I tuck her in and kiss her forehead and as I'm about to leave she stops me. "You have to read the story," she says. "It's tradition."

Right. Of course.

I suppress an exhausted sigh and remind myself that this is usually my favorite time of the year. My favorite part of the holidays. These quiet moments reliving comforting traditions, getting lost in the magic of a story, absorbed by the wonder of it all. The glint of lights against snow, colorful baubles and ornaments decorating the world, reminding everyone that underneath it all, we do want peace and love and joy.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:24 am*

Even if we, humans, often seem to work counter to that base instinct in the choices we make, but once a year a fat man in a red suit somehow reminds us to be better people.

Except I can't find the wonder this year.

I'm spent. I have nothing left and I am pulling on reserves I didn't know I have to keep going. It's all for Mandy. I'm driving on fumes to keep her safe. Happy. Secure and loved.

I just don't know how much longer I can hold on.

I read her 'Twas the Night Before Christmas and she smiles and quotes the book by memory with me. We both know the words to this poem down to our marrow, but we read it nonetheless, the very same story my parents read to me as a child, the pages worn from use, some scribbled on with crayon, whether by her or me, it's impossible to say at this point.

This book has seen us through too many moves. Too many new beds during the holidays as I chase jobs that have any hope of paying enough to keep us fed and clothed and safe after a messy divorce that left me broke and alone.

The one silver lining of this year, as much as it's driven me crazy at times, is I have had more time with this little girl who I love more than life.

It's a nice change of pace after so many long days away, working late without overtime pay, for an amount that barely covers the cost of childcare and gas, only to

come home exhausted and to a baby already asleep. It feels good to finally be here for her, to slow down a bit. If only the money didn't also slow down.

I have hoarded one indulgence, one mommy treat, a gift from my job before they laid me off. "Sorry but we can't afford to keep a paid staff while we're shut down. But... here." Stewart awkwardly handed me a parting gift, and through the months of this pandemic I've kept it safe.

I creep out of Mandy's room, grateful I still have my own room for now. It's very likely we'll have to move to a studio if things don't improve... or more likely beg my parents to let us live in their camper trailer in their backyard... I dread the day it comes to that..

But today, for right now, I have this apartment, and electricity, and one burnt cookie frosted with love, and my pandemic downsizing gift.

I tiptoe through the house, knowing Mandy is fighting sleep to hear Santa's sleigh, and grab the bottle of red wine on the top shelf. Stewart even put a bow on it, which seemed an odd choice at the time but I had bigger things to worry about. Of course, now that I think about it, the wine had likely been a re-gift considering the festive bow on the bottle.

I lock up the downstairs, take my cookie and the wine and head up to my bedroom. I slip out of my pants, put on an old shirt and sink into my bed, then put my headphones on and reach for my phone to play my current audiobook when I realize I left it downstairs in the kitchen.

Shit.

I weigh the pros and cons of getting back up and walking all the way downstairs, and I just can't. Cannot. I'm done.

I reach for my laptop on the dresser next to my bed instead and play the audiobook that way. Mandy will wake me up in the morning and I won't need my phone until then anyways.

I pour a generous glass of wine and take a long drink, then a bite of my cookie.

And then I cry.

It's a sadness that rolls through me like a storm in the sky, upending my insides and drowning me. I can't stop. The sobs wrack my body, shaking me and crashing into me like the sea.

I don't know how long I stay like this. But my eyes are puffy and heavy when I finally stop. I pour more wine and wipe away stuff from under my nose that I don't want to think about. I take another bite of the cookie and close my eyes again. Losing myself to the murder mystery I'm listening to until everything around me fades away.

I don't even realize I fell asleep until something jolts me awake.

I sit up, my heart beating against my ribs like a trapped hummingbird.

I've still got my headphones on, the voice of the narrator a calm presence in my ear. I look at the wine bottle. Empty. And the glass. Also empty.

I have cookie crumbs on my T-shirt, an old oversized thing that is more gray than black after so many washings.

I look around, searching my room, and my eyes land on the dimly lit wall clock. One minute past midnight. What woke me?

I pause the audiobook and take off the headphones slowly. It's dark in my bedroom.

And cold. An icy wind blows through a window I didn't close all the way.

And then I hear it. Talking. Arguing, really. Two men.

And it's coming from my living room.

My pulse lurches, my head aching from the wine and this new danger.

I look around for my cell phone and curse myself. Right. I left it in the kitchen and was too lazy to retrieve it.

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Shit. Not good. Not good at all.

Letting my eyes adjust to the dark, I search my room for anything that can be used as a weapon.

After groping around the bottom of my closet, I finally settle on a high heel shoe, a decision I'm not proud of. But my home security safety has taken a back seat to just trying to keep me and my daughter alive. Some days, more than I want to admit right now, that's really all I can do. Thank God Mandy's room is farthest from the living room.

With shoe firmly in hand, I slowly open my bedroom door and begin to creep down the staircase. I realize then that I'm not wearing pants. Just the shirt and underwear. And I wonder at the fact that this bothers me more than possible intruders in my house in the middle of the night while I'm alone with a child.

I don't often wish for a husband these days. But nights like these I do. It's a special kind of loneliness to parent alone. To carry the full weight of responsibility for not just yourself but a young, innocent child who didn't choose this life. To not have anyone to share that profound responsibility with.

Some days it feels too heavy. Too much. Like right now. I can feel myself cracking in the deepest, most hidden places of my soul. I think I can keep the cracks from showing for a little while longer.

But then what?

What happens when I crumble??

I shake my head and push those morbid thoughts out of my mind. I have a more pressing issue. Definitely more pressing.

The voices are getting louder and I pause by the hallway to the living room and listen.

“You’re overstepping your authority,” a male voice says. It’s a full, rich voice that should be pleasing to the ear but... he sounds whiny to me and I take an instinct dislike to him.

“The letter isn’t addressed to you, old man. Go back to your elves. This one is mine.” This man sounds arrogant. Self-assured. His voice is a husky baritone. It sends a shiver down my spine... and not the scared type.

There’s a pause, then the first man makes a disgusted sound. “These cookies are garbage.”

His insult to my admittedly lackluster baking skills still makes the blood run hot in my veins and I feel my skin flush. How dare he break into my apartment, steal my cookies then complain about them! The nerve!

I’m about to barge in against all common sense and give him a piece of my mind when the second man speaks. “These cookies are delicious. If you weren’t such a piece of garbage, you would taste the joy and the tears that went into baking these.” He makes a satisfied sound as if he’s taking another bite. “This realm is so dense. Each visit it becomes more difficult to breathe. To cut through the human slime. Magic is almost dead. But I taste what was and what could still be in these cookies. Now get out. You don’t deserve this family.”

I’m about to make a dash for the kitchen to grab my phone and call the police when a

tiny voice nearly stops my heart.

“You don’t like my mommy’s cookies?” Mandy asks.

My feet move on their own and I’m suddenly standing in the living room, breathless and terrified, to find my little girl dressed in her reindeer onesie standing between two men, a look of utter, heartbreaking sadness on her face.

The man on her right is a big man with a large belly, long white beard, wearing a very familiar red suit and hat, with a red velvet bag at his feet.

If you believed in such things you might be tempted to call him Santa Claus.

The man to her left holding the last of the cookies is tall and lean, wearing a tailored black suit, a black silk tie, and a black Christmas hat trimmed with ebony fur. His hair is pitch as night; it is a wild, untamed dark halo around his pale face. His eyes are bottomless pits that I find myself falling into when he turns to look at me. He’s got a very posh, black briefcase with a silver clasp at his feet.

“Mandy, come here right now,” I say in my most stern mom voice as all eyes in the room turn to me. I clutch her to my chest before shoving her behind me and brandishing my shoe at each man in turn. “What the hell is going on here? Who the hell are you, creeps? And why aren’t you wearing masks during a freaking pandemic?”

2

Lucifer

Isnort before I see the anger flashing in her blue eyes, but really, I can’t help myself. Masks? She’s standing there in a t-shirt, brandishing a shoe, and demanding to know



why I'm not wearing a mask.

Cute.

Her eyes move back and forth between me and the old elf that has lived far past his expiration date. Surprisingly, the ancient git hasn't decided to just disappear. That's his trademark move. I cut my eyes at him and watch as his brows come together and he strokes his beard. What is that walking heart attack thinking?

I look back at the woman, taking in her long legs, light brown bed-tousled hair, and bright blue eyes. Honestly, if I didn't have plans for Christmas, this night might have taken a different turn. Especially if the fat bastard wasn't standing there smelling like soured milk.

"If you're Santa Claus, you should be nicer." A little voice pipes up and I look into the cherubic face of the reason I'm here.

"You heard her, elf. Straight from the babe's mouth." I can't help the grin that pulls at my cheeks as I wink at the little girl. She has the same straight hair as her mother but hers is blonde, and instead of blue she blinks back at me with bright green eyes.

## Page 5

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“Oh now, little one! I didn’t mean any harm. I think I’ve just had a bit too much sugar.” The jerk smiles and kneels down to meet her gaze.

“That’s not an apology,” I point out. The little girl nods her head in agreement.

“Excuse me? Yeah. I’m still standing here.” The woman reaches a hand back and clasps the girl’s shoulder as if to make sure she’s still there. “No one has answered my questions. Better yet, you both need to get out of here before the police arrive.”

Lie.

I can taste it on the air. Bitter and coppery. And that isn’t all I can taste. Fear is the strongest—the salty tang of it a too sweet candy I’ve grown tired of, but anger is quickly catching up, a spicy fiery flavor, followed by confusion, and something akin to... treachery? No, that isn’t the right word. Plotting? It tastes like bitter greens in butter. She’s trying to come up with a plan to evict us from her humble abode. Yes, if it was any other night, I might find myself delightfully enamored with her.

“My dear lady, we won’t stay but a moment longer. Please, take your sweet child back to bed and we will be out of your hair as soon as we settle something.” I smile and push a little compulsion into my words.

Her back straightens and I return my attention to the velvet atrocity next to me. He needs to leave. This house is clearly mine and I’m on a schedule.

“Do as the nice woman asked and get out of here.” I drop my smile and glare at the idiot. He is still smiling like the simpleton he is.

“Uh, no. I didn’t ask,” she says. “I told you both to get out.”

I turn back to see the woman standing stiffly, her mouth twisted in anger. That is justified, I suppose. I did just dismiss her as if she wasn’t important.

Santa cackles next to me. This isn’t his friendly Ho, Ho, Ho. No, it’s pure wicked delight. His smug emotions are almost thicker than the woman’s fear. Cancel that thought. Her anger is most definitely in the lead now.

“Looks like your little trick didn’t work, Lucie.”

I grind my teeth but don’t respond. I hate that name more than I hate Cupid. But he’s right. Apparently my compulsion doesn’t work on this woman. I look at her with more interest. I used more than enough compulsion to have any human scampering off to do my bidding. Why isn’t she?

“Lucie?” She wrinkles her nose and I hate that I find it adorable even though she repeats that awful nickname. “Look, I don’t give two shits who either of you are. Get. Out. Of. My. House!”

“Mommy,” the little girl whispers. “That’s Santa Claus.”

Mandy. Her name is Mandy and the reason I’m here at all. I received the letter she wrote with her mother a few weeks ago. I remember it clearly because compared to the others it smelled sad but hopeful, like a flower in full bloom nearing the end of its lifespan. There had also been a whiff of desperation that I’m now sure had been the mother’s. I’d marked it as a VIP on my list. This little girl is close to losing her belief in magic and I am going to make sure that doesn’t happen.

Even if she had sent the letter to the wrong place. After all, she’s only eight. She had all the letters right, just a little out of order.

“That’s right. I’m Santa Claus and I’m here to bring you a present.”

“No, you are not.” I whirl toward him. “I showed you the letter. She wrote tome.”

“On accident!” The elf rises to his feet entirely too quickly for someone his age. “She meant to write to me. That’s why I’m here. It’s Christmas. This is what I do. You have a job. Leave me to mine and go torture some kittens.”

A tiny gasp reminds me that we are not alone.

“I do not torture kittens!” I raise my hands as if to defend myself. See? No kittens.

“Is this a joke? Are you part of some sick prank?” The little girl's mother raises her shoe higher and gestures in our direction with the pointy heel. “It’s Christmas Eve! This is not funny! I swear if you don’t get out of here right now, I’m going to call the police!”

I cock my head at her and frown. Well, she blew her own lie and I’m not sure if I’m amused or disappointed. From the look in her eyes she must’ve realized her mistake too.

“Now, Lyla, we’re not here to hurt you or Mandy. Lucie is just a little confused about his job description.” The idiot smiles in their direction

“My name is Lucifer. Stop using that idiotic nickname, you self-righteous toddler. I’m older than the land your workshop is built on.” I owe Michael more payback than a solid punch or two. I’ve been hearing that stupid Lucie crap for eons. I look at the elf my father chose and anger washes through my body.

“Careful. You’re frightening the little one.” Jolly Old Fat Sack tips his head in the human’s direction.

I take a breath and squeeze my hands into fists, putting out the flames that are gathering in my palms. Fear is quickly filling the tiny living room so thickly I can barely breathe, and I fight to not choke on it. No matter the years I spend as Hell's Keeper, I never get used to that smell. It clings to everything in my domain, and this is supposed to be my chance to escape it for a night, but more and more the human plane smells of fear as much as hell itself.

I close my eyes and breathe through my mouth. I know it's a flimsy excuse, but I will not have it taken away from me. Besides, I actually enjoy the irony of it all. And I'm not going to let the red Michelin Man ruin it for me.

Slowly, I loosen my fingers and open my eyes. What had he called the mother? She's not on any lists I have so I had no way of finding out.

## Page 6

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“Lyla.” I say her name and meet her gaze. A hint of arousal floats toward me. It’s barely there, but it is there and it is much better than the fear. She likes me saying her name? I will happily indulge her. “Lyla. As you can see, we are not the usual thieves or hooligans. I’m going to reach into my pocket and get something that will make all this clear. Don’t do anything dangerous with your... shoe.”

Red seeps into her cheeks at my words, but she doesn’t lower the shoe. She also doesn’t tell me not to reach into my pocket. Instead she jerks her head yes, very much like her daughter had earlier.

Slowly I slip my fingers into my suit jacket and pull out a folded paper from the interior pocket. She doesn’t need to know it was actually on my desk just a moment before. She just needs to see the writing and understand the mix up. Then I can deliver my present and be done for the night. I have a date with a glass of scotch and a new book I don’t want to miss and this run-in with the blowhard is already messing with my timeline. Though, I might have to find a reason to visit again later. Lyla is an interesting woman. Fierce even when deathly afraid, a devoted mother, cunning, beautiful, a pair of legs that go on forever, and at least somewhat immune to my compulsion. Definitely interesting.

I unfold the envelope and hold it up for her to see, but it’s too dark. I snap the fingers of my free hand and the lights come to life.

“My letter!” Mandy steps around her mother and points at me.

“Mandy!” Lyla pulls the little girl back behind her.

“Mama, that’s my letter! Remember? You helped me write it. We put it in the mailbox on the corner next to the apartments.”

Lyla doesn’t say anything and her eyebrows knit together. She inches closer, probably without realizing.

“It does look like...” She shakes her head and glares at me and then at the fool next to me. “This has to be a joke.”

“It is not a joke. Like I said, I’m simply here to deliver a present.” I pull the letter out and some of the left over glitter falls to the carpet as I unfold it. “The glitter bomb was a nice touch.”

Mandy looks up at her mother. “See, I told you we needed the glitter.”

I laugh at that. “Ask any crafter, glitter is definitely my domain.”

Sadly, no one in the room gets the joke. Jerk Face snorts and goes to sit down on the couch. He wipes at the cushion first and lifts his gloved hands and inspects his fingers as if expecting to find something on them.

“Hey! Watch it!” Lyla pulls Mandy closer to her edging a little towards my direction, as if the elf is the biggest threat in the room.

Good instincts. Another point in her favor.

“Don’t mind me. I’m a very busy man. If I’m going to be here for a bit, I might as well rest my old feet while I can. You don’t mind, do you?” With a flourish of his glaringly red jacket, Saint Crap Head sits down and crosses his arms. “But I do have a schedule to keep. So if we could hurry this along, it would be for the best.”

“Shut it, Nicholas.” I snap at him, annoyed he is behaving so churlish in front of a child. A child I’m here to make happy, to shore up her belief in magic. And he’s being a red and white candy-cane shaped dick.

Lyla is looking between us, but I sense she is more annoyed with Milk Breath than moi.

“Go ahead. Show her the letter.” Nicholas waves his hand at me in a dismissive gesture and I have to remind myself I’m not allowed to roast the old elf with the flames of hell. Pity, that.

Turning to Lyla and Mandy, I carefully hold the letter and envelope out for her to take.

She looks at me for so long I start to wonder if she’s going to actually take it. After many seconds tick by, she lowers her shoe, which I now notice is black with a thin heel, and she takes the papers.

She looks at the letter, then the envelope.

I wait patiently as she glances back up at me with large eyes. Oddly the stench of fear does not overwhelm my senses again. She looks at the envelope once more, then her eyes dart to where Nicholas is sitting and then back to me.

“No.” She shakes her head as if that will change anything.

“Yes.” I hold my hand out for the letter, but she presses it to her chest.

“This is a joke.” She looks over to the other man.

“What is it going to take?” asks the Saint Asshat. “Snow in the living room? A ride in



the sleigh? Maybe the winning lottery numbers?" The old man narrows his eyes. "I. Am. Santa Claus. And he is exactly who you think he is."

"Why are you here?" Lyla looks back at me, her blue eyes wide, before suddenly narrowing. "You cannot take Mandy."

Loyalty, devotion, rising rage. The scent of a mother's love when her child is threatened. Milk and honey. A hint of cayenne pepper.

"What's wrong?" Mandy looks at me in worry. "Are you a lawyer? You don't look like Daddy's lawyer. The judge already said Daddy couldn't have me. Do you work for Santa?"

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“I most certainly do not.”

“Hell no.”

We speak at the same time and exchange glares over their heads.

“Then why are you here?” Lyla’s voice is barely more than a whisper.

“To deliver a present for Mandy.” I motion to the letter she is clutching. “She wrote to me, so here I am.”

“But you don’t work for Santa?” Mandy frowns at me. “I thought he brought the presents.”

“Well, he does bring presents to some children, but you didn’t write to Santa this year. You wrote to me. So here I am.” I motion to my briefcase.

“I don’t understand.” Mandy’s eyes fill with tears. “I was good this year.”

“Now you’ve done it.”

I ignore the old bag of bricks and kneel down. “Yes, you were very good. So I brought you a present.”

“But you’re not Santa.”

“No, I’m not. I’m much cooler than that old... I mean, I’m much cooler than Santa

Claus.”

“But I sent my letter to Santa.” She reaches out and grips her mother’s hand.

“No, you didn’t.” Lyla looks down at her daughter.

“I did! I wrote on the front of the envelope like you showed me!” Mandy’s eyes are dangerously close to overflowing.

“Not quite.” Lyla seems to shake herself out of whatever she’d been thinking and looks down at her daughter. “You misspelled his name and the letter went to this man.”

“Who is he?” Mandy looks from her mother to me and then back to her mother.

Lyla takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. When she opens them again I can see the resolve she has gathered.

“Satan.”

3

Lyla

“Can we move this along?” Nicholas--no, Santa Claus--stands up and brushes off his pants as if my house is dirty. “I have more than enough work without this idiot getting in my way.”

When he reaches for his bag, Lucifer lifts a hand and it fills with golden flames, so hot I can feel the heat from here.

Mandy's eyes nearly pop out of her skull at the casual display of magic, and I don't blame her one bit. I'm kinda freaking out myself.

"Stop right there, elf." His voice is stern and brooks no room for argument. This is a man who is used to being obeyed without question.

"See? See how he is?" Santa asks in a petulant tone. "I'm just doing my job and he is in the way." Santa throws his hands in the air before pointing at Satan, his voice filled with too much whining for my taste, especially from a grown-ass man. "You might be able to laze about, but time doesn't stop for me."

I'm not sure which surprises me more. The fact that Satan and Santa are actually real or the fact that Satan is currently threatening Santa because he wants to give Mandy a present. Am I dreaming? Had the wine been bad?

A high-pitched wailing shatters my thoughts and I look up at the ceiling before smacking Satan in the shoulder.

"Are you crazy? Put that out!" I drop the shoe I've been wielding as an entirely ineffective weapon--especially against a man who can conjure flames from his hands--and run over to our dining table to grab a chair and drag it across the room. I climb up and just barely manage to get my fingers on the smoke alarm. The stupid battery case won't slide open and in desperation I manage to hook my fingers between the plastic and the ceiling and yank it off, leaving little wires hanging in the air.

There goes my deposit.

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At least the wailing has stopped. I throw the thing in the corner and climb down from the chair.

That's when I realize what I have done. I left Mandy next to a stranger that broke into our home. Not just any stranger. But Lucifer, the Devil himself.

It's difficult to explain why I accept their identities so readily.

A part of me recoils from the idea that either of these beings are real, let alone standing in my apartment arguing. I'm not exactly religious and my belief in Santa is long gone.

The logical explanation is these two men are robbing me. Maybe they're partners who planned this together. Maybe these are their disguises to keep from being identified, though they're about as effective as Superman's glasses.

Maybe they're part of a local theater group doing a strange—and invasive, not to mention dangerous during a pandemic—kind of performance art.

All of these possibilities scramble through my mind, but they are all rejected just as quickly and all for the same reason.

In my deepest of hearts I can feel the truth of who these men—if you can call them men—are. I know this sounds ludicrous. Like a crazy lady grasping at fantasy. But I have no better way of explaining it.

For anyone who has fallen in love, it's similar in a way. The way you can go from

being a complete stranger to someone to loving them so completely... it's a strange kind of magic that binds your heart and soul to another. It's an inner knowing. A surety of something that is impossible to prove or quantify or study objectively.

This is like that. Not love of course, but that inner knowing and surety. When you are in the presence of something so full of magic, it's impossible to misidentify. To look at these men and think they are robbers or performers or crazy people would be to mistake a poorly drawn circle on a piece of paper for the moon itself. It's a ridiculous comparison. You know when you are in the presence of true love, or when you are witnessing the moon and not a drawing of a circle. Just as anyone would know that these men are who they say they are.

Not to mention one of them can summon fire in the palm of his hand. I'm sure there are ways to fake that, but it doesn't look fake to me.

Which puts me in a very tricky position.

Because right now Santa is pissing me off.

"Why don't you just leave the presents and go?" I put my hands on my hips, sadly aware that I no longer have my shoe handy. Not that it was really going to help against either of these two.

"That's not how it works," Santa sneers. "One kid, one wish, one present."

"Seriously?" It's my turn to throw my hands in the air. "It's Christmas. Look at all the time you're wasting. Just leave the present and get out of here."

"Fine then. Let's just prove who really knows what Mandy wants for Christmas." Santa plops back down on the sofa and quick as a snake grabs my daughter's wrist before I realize we're so close to him.

Just as my fingers close around her free arm another hand encircles her wrist.

“Back off.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

Lucifer and I speak at the same time and I can’t help but glance up at the man--or is he an angel--no, now isn’t the time for that train of thought. His jaw is clenched tight, his dark eyes flashing with some kind of power I don’t understand. The hairs on my arm stand up like they say happens just before being struck by lightning. And for the first time, I notice small black horns blending in with the curls of his wild hair.

Demon horns?

“I was going to have her sit in my lap and tell me her Christmas wish.” The older man--elf--whatever he is, doesn’t let go of Mandy, and my anger ignites into something louder, harsher, more violent.

“Let. My. Daughter. Go.” I keep my voice calm, so as not to further terrify my child, but I enunciate each word and lob them at Santa like weapons.

I feel Lucifers’ eyes on me, but he doesn’t say anything. Neither does he look back at the elf. It’s as if he suddenly finds me to be the most dangerous being in the room and the direct attention of his stare only heightens my rage.

A tug pulls Mandy closer to Santa and I growl like a predator before a kill. The sound surprises me, but I give it little thought as I lunge forward, wrap an arm around her waist and practically fly to the other side of the room with her tucked against me.

“Mommy?” She looks up at me with watery eyes and I brush the tears away before they can fall.

“It’s okay, bunny. Don’t leave my side.” She gives me a quick little nod, but I see the quiver in her lips and it ignites my rage all over again.

“Stay where you are,” Lucifer says to us, and I realize he’s positioned himself between us and Santa Claus. “I’ve always known there was something wrong with you--having children sit in your lap to tell you wishes--but you’ve really gone too far here. Grabbing a child? Yanking her away from her mother? Pulling her onto your lap by force?”

His voice is almost a hiss, but fills the tiny room like thunder. Blue and orange flames dance across the skin of his hands, but oddly I’m not afraid of him. Not even a little bit. Which really makes me question my survival instincts. Shouldn’t I be terrified of an angry Satan standing in my living room? But his fury isn’t directed at me. No, it’s directed at the man in the red suit.



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“Just what are you implying?” Santa stands up and I swear I can literally feel the tension in the room amp up. Where I have always thought Santa would be warm and cozy, like a fireplace during a winter storm, he is all hard ice and sharp edges. Instead, it’s the Devil himself filling our half of the room with warmth and a sense of security.

“Pedophilia. I have a place I’d love for you to visit.” Satan closes and opens his hands. “For eternity. I’ve worked very hard to make sure it’s a very special experience for people like you.”

“Pedophile? You’re accusing me of being a pedophile? If I didn’t think it would upset your father, I’d kill you right here.” A howling wind seems to spring to life around Santa, his bushy beard floating in the gusts. “Do you know how hard it is for children to trust nowadays? To get them to tell me their most heartfelt wishes without fear? You think it’s so easy to do my job? You think it’s simple to make billions of children happy when I only have one night?”

“If someone like you can do it, then I must say it would be supremely simple for someone like me.” The derision in Lucifer’s voice is so thick even Mandy seems to pick up on it, so I wrap my arms around her even tighter.

“Is that so?” Santa’s blue eyes are flickering with their own strange magic. Nothing like the twinkle Mandy and I read about in the stories. More like lightning about to strike.

“Without doubt.” A shadow appears behind Lucifer, stretching and closing, as if it’s a pair of wings. I raise a shaking hand to my mouth. Am I really seeing this?

“Fine.” All of the wind stops, leaving the room oddly still. “Then you do it.”

“I will--wait. What?” The fire disappears from Lucifer’s hands and the shadow behind him vanishes. “Do what?”

“My job. You want it so badly, you do it.” Santa leans over and picks up his bag before launching it at Lucifer, who catches it hard in the gut with an oomph. “I have no reason to stand here and argue with a petulant child.”

“Again, I’m far older than you are.” Lucifer’s menacing words hold a bit of confusion.

“Then act like it,” the heavy-set man snaps. “Go. Be Santa Claus. If it’s so easy, you’ll be done in no time.”

“I’m not doing your job.” Lucifer drops the bag and it lands with a heavy thump.

“Then there will be no Christmas.” The blue eyes narrow. “And tomorrow morning when there is even less magic filling the earthly plane, everyone will have you to thank for it.”

“Now see here!” Lucifer’s eyes are so wide it would have been comical if they weren’t having a showdown in my living room on Christmas Eve in front of my child.

With one last look in our direction, Santa gives us a brief nod before lying his finger beside his nose and disappearing completely.

If there was any doubt these two are who they say they are, this crushes them all. Fire, magic, and a disappearing Saint Nicholas.

Silence reigns in the room before Mandy's tiny voice pipes up. "How are we going to deliver all the presents? Do you have a sleigh?"

"A sleigh?" A bewildered look flits across Lucifer's face. "Whatever for?"

"To deliver the presents," she says, like it should be obvious "We can't let all the kids be disappointed just because Santa is having a cranky day." Mandy steps out of my arms and gestures at the sack. "If you don't have a sleigh, how are we going to get from house to house?"

Wait. Why is she including us in this? I run a hand over my face.

"Mandy. Bunny. We can't deliver Santa's presents. We're human. We don't have any magic." I place a hand on her shoulder.

"That's not exactly true," Lucifer says. "Magic was gifted to humans long ago, but eventually it was taken away because you abused it." He looks me over. "Well, it has been dying off over the generations. The idiotic witch hunts had a big hand in that. I suppose there could still be some lineages with a bit of magic left."

I stare at him. For all the world, he sounds exactly like one of my history professors from college when someone got an answer wrong and he gently corrected them.

"What are you saying?" I ask, holding Mandy close to me.

Now that Santa's gone, disappearing in a puff of smoke as it were, the tension has drained from the room, along with my adrenaline. I'm cold now, shivering, standing in just underwear and a shirt, and with the way Lucifer's eyes take me in, top to bottom, I'm keenly aware of an entirely different kind of chemistry filling the space between us.

I blink, pushing thoughts that could definitely land me on the naughty list into the back recesses of my mind. It's been awhile since a man has looked at me the way the King of Hell is currently looking at me. To be honest, I'm not sure anyone has ever so fully devoured me with their eyes, but this is neither the time nor the place to play out those fantasies. My priority is Mandy. There isn't time for anything else.

Lucifer grins with such a devilish knowing I wonder if he can read my mind. It's possible, I suppose. I have no idea what kind of powers Satan has.

"Only someone with magic in them would be able to see me or the pervy elf. Not even most kids can see us, which is how Santa gets away with his breaking and entering schtickevery year. And the few kids who can see us usually lose all their magic when they hit puberty." His voice is smooth as whiskey on a cold night, but his words jolt something awake inside of me.

"Are you saying...?" I can't finish the sentence. It seems too outlandish.

But he smiles and gives a small nod. "Kids used to channel more magic. But these days, they are too lost in their electronics to notice anything else. But you..."

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I shake my head. “As someone who went through two years of divorce court and contentious custody battles, I can assure you my belief in magic shriveled to dust long ago.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth I regret them. I never meant to speak so frankly in front of Mandy, and she looks up at me, her lips quivering. “You don’t believe in magic anymore, Mommy? Did Daddy take it all away?”

Shit. Double shit. I’m the worst mom ever. I kneel down to look at her. “Oh no honey, he didn’t. I just meant that I’m a grown up now and once you grow up you...” realize the magic was never there to begin with. But of course I can’t tell my daughter that on Christmas Eve after she’s just had a confrontation with Santa and his nemesis, Satan. “You realize that there’s less time for it all. For the magic and the play.”

She folds her arms across her chest. “I don’t ever want to grow up if I have to give up magicandplay,” she says stubbornly, and I smile and hug her to me.

I’m searching for words to soothe her, words that don’t feel like false promises or lies. But Lucifer beats me to it.

“You don’t have to give up magic to grow up,” he says. “Your mom is proof of that, even if she doesn’t realize it.” His dark eyes twinkle like I expected Santa’s to. “You both have magic in you. More than I’ve seen in humans in a very long time.”

Mandy pulls away from me to face the man before us. Her tears have dried on her soft little cheeks, and she smiles at Lucifer... a smile that nearly lights up the room. “Then that means wecanhelp!”

I stand and look at the man whose cocky grin falters when he remembers Santa just stormed out leaving a bag of presents--and all his responsibilities--behind. "Right. About that. I really am not set up to do that whole... thing."

Mandy puts her fists on her hips and gives him the look. I know this look because she learned it from me. I hide my laugh behind my hand, but Lucifer shoots me a glare that has probably killed lesser men.

"You will have to suck it up, buttercup, because we can't let down all those kids." She turns to me. "Right, Mommy? We'll help him, won't we?"

I place my fists on my hips in a very similar manner to my child and assess the man before me. "What do you say, Lucie... you gonna let the elf beat you?"

4

Lucifer

She looks like she wants to suck the words she said right back into her mouth. But also like she will fight me on this, just to keep her kid happy.

I just want to punch a hole in Nick the Dick's creepy face for getting me into this situation at all. Of all the houses to end up fighting, we choose the house with maybe the last two humans on the planet who still have enough magic in them to be useful.

I mean, they aren't really the very last two, but it sure seems like it. Magic is disappearing from this dense planet faster than our efforts to curtail it can keep up. I should know, as I was forced to present an entire lecture about it at the last annual Summit. Complete borefest, but since I come into contact with a disproportionately large number of humans--albeit after they have already made some questionable life choices--it was left to me to adequately explain the severity of the problem. I didn't

have a solution at the time. But maybe if I spend enough time with these two, I can figure out what makes them different.

The only problem is... I can't let them work for me without a contract. It's kinda my thing.

I clear my throat. "We will have to enter into a legally binding contract if we are to do this."

Lyla's face pales and I taste fear in the air. She's scared of contracts but not Satan himself? I'm starting to get excited about the prospect of spending the night with her--and her little girl of course.

"What kind of contract?" she asks, her voice hard and low.

"The usual kind," I say casually. "You bind yourself for a set period of time in exchange for something I give you in return. Usually these are more of the eternal soul variety, but in this case it would just be your assistance for the night. One unholy night, as it were, and in exchange, I would owe you."

She raises an eyebrow at that. "What would you owe me? And this contract, it would be strictly business, yes? We help deliver presents, that's it. Nothing... else."

I taste a whole lifetime of bedroom promises in that one tiny word...else. The potential of it hovers between us, scenting the air with a crashing desire I don't often feel anymore, especially for a human. The feeling ripples through me and I struggle for a moment to regain control of myself as I smirk at her. "Nothing...else," I say, emphasizing the word that holds so much enticement. "I don't have to negotiate contracts forthat, I assure you."

Blood rises to her face, staining her cheeks a bright red that contrasts beautifully with

her pale skin. I enjoy getting a rise out of her, even if it is far too easy.

Then again, it didn't take her much to convince me to do this harebrained idea, so who's the one falling far too easily I wonder?

"So, Lyla," I say, stepping toward her and taking her hands into mine. An electric current runs between our fingers and her eyes widen at that. I grin. Definitely magic in her blood. "What is it you most desire from me?" I put just enough compulsion into the question to make sure she gives me an honest answer. With skin to skin contact it should be more effective this time. This won't work if she lies or holds back. The contract must be true to be binding. "And it must be for you or Mandy. It can't be something like world peace or an end to the pandemic. Even I don't have that much power." It's sad how few people even bother to ask for something that could benefit all of humanity, but if anyone did, it would be this woman.

Her pupils dilate and I feel a wave of emotion crashing out of her and into me so hard that it rocks me back on my heels, but I don't break contact with her, gripping her hands tightly in mine.

Her voice is soft at first. "I want..." then it sharpens like a blade. "I want the truth."

A flicker of surprise widens my eyes. This... I was not expecting.

She notices the expression on my face and frowns. "What did you think I would ask for?"



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I shrug and deliberately continue holding her hands. I like the way they feel in mine, so small but so fierce. Just like her. “Money,” I tell her finally. “You’d be surprised how many people are willing to trade their souls for a pittance of cash. I guess I just expected... given everything...” I let my words trail off as I glance at the pile of overdue bills stacked neatly in the corner of her kitchen counter.

Her gaze follows mine and her cheeks are set aflame a second time, for less enticing reasons sadly. Shame. And anger. It tastes like vinegar and jalapeños.

I like the anger, the spice, and I want to flame it, to let its fiery scent fill the air, but she pulls her hands out of mine and our connection is severed.

“I probably should have asked for money,” she says with a small sigh that is nearly my undoing. “Lord knows we need it.”

In that split second I feel...uncomfortable at her pain. I don’t like it and I want it to stop, which honestly isn’t like me at all. Natural consequence of my work of course. Causing pain is in my job description after all. And the ones that appear for me? Well, they deserve it.

She... she doesn’t. That’s another occupational hazard; I can assess a person’s soul with a single thought.

She will never end up in my neck of the woods.

She glances at Mandy who’s staring up at both of us. “Honey,” she says, her voice going straight into Mom mode--kind and loving and patient. “Why don’t you go

upstairs and get dressed in your warmest clothes. It looks like we're going on a Christmas adventure!"

I don't point out that the contract isn't signed yet. But when the child squeals and runs upstairs so full of joy it smells like the sweet scent of fresh jasmine on a beautiful night, I know I will do whatever I must to make this night happen.

For Mandy.

It has nothing to do with the reaction my body, mind, and soul have when I'm this close to her enchanting mother. Nothing at all.

It's all for the kids.

Yep. The kids.

Mandy stops at the top of the stairs and turns back. "Don't you need to know what I want from you?" she asks.

I'm about to answer when Lyla speaks first. "Honey, you put it in your letter. A puppy. But remember, we can't have dogs here, and I can't really afford the care of one. Did you want to ask for something else?"

Mandy's face drops, and before I can tell Lyla that I will make sure she can raise an entire pack of puppies... Mandy rushes off to get ready.

Once the child is out of ear shot, Lyla turns back to me, her words instantly changing from a soft caress to a woman on the edge of a very steep cliff.

"I may regret not asking for money. Especially if we're evicted and end up homeless."

Her words send ice through my veins and I know instantly that I will punish whoever tries to hurt this family. She will not go homeless. Neither of them will. I feel it best not to tell her this outright, lest my words fail to have the intended effect. But she will know eventually. Lyla and Mandy will never want for anything as long as I am King of Hell.

Lyla continues, unaware of the dark path my thoughts have journeyed.

“You have no idea what it’s like to be a single parent without enough money to take care of your kid. At least, I don’t think you’ve ever been a single parent.”

I shake my head, fighting the urge to ask if Father of Lies counts as parenting. This isn’t the time for my humor.

She nods, continuing. “To not know how you’ll make the money last to the end of the month. To have to choose whether to pay the electric bill or buy groceries for a week because you can’t afford both. I have endured long lines and the feeling of being a complete failure just to make sure we have enough food to get us to another paycheck. And we have no safety net. If she gets a cavity, or I end up breaking my foot... we are screwed. I can’t afford our life even if everything goes according to plan. And now we’re living through a pandemic, and she hasn’t been able to play with her school friends in nine months. I haven’t had work, and I’ve lost what little social support I had. Do you have any idea how long nine months is? Probably not, you’re older than humanity. But to an eight-year-old? Nine months is a lifetime. And if one of us gets sick and ends up at the hospital, what will I do then?”

Tears are streaming down her cheeks, though I don’t think she realizes that yet. I cannot resist the temptation to use the pad of my thumb to wipe one away. I bring my thumb to my mouth and flick my tongue against the saltiness of her emotion.

Scent carries a lot. A bold flavor of feelings. But tears and blood, they carry the heart

and soul of a person. They carry the complex blend of deep, deep pain and love and fear and joy.

I close my eyes, savoring her.

But I am interrupted when she clears her throat. I open my eyes to see her glaring at me. “Would you and my freaking tear drop like to be alone?” Her voice is dripping with venom, her eyes like daggers ripping into me, and I am loving everything about this exciting, bewildering woman.

“Why didn’t you choose money then?” I ask. It flies in the face of self-preservation and caring for her child to give up a chance at wealth. And I know that little girl is the center of Lyla’s universe. I just wish I could have one night alone with Lyla to show her how it feels to be the center of someone else’s universe for a time. She certainly deserves it.

“Because I have to know the truth.”

“The truth about what?” I ask.

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“All of it!” She says in such charming exasperation I have to stop myself from doing something we both might regret.

“All of it is a big ask for someone who has existed for all of human history. Care to narrow it down?”

Her eyes widen cartoonishly and I want to suck my words back in. Of course, that information is going to unnerve a human. But... is she entirely human? That's a really good question.

And what I learned from her teardrop didn't answer that for me. As much as it did fill me with a bouquet of other answers.

“This. You.” She says. “I just gave up my chance at being independently wealthy. Or famous. Or whatever. So I want answers instead. If you and Santa are real, there must be other things I thought were stories that are real too, right?”

Her words are measured. Almost too much so. She's being very conscious of how she talks about this. About magic and the realm of the fantastical. But it's there in her eyes. The wonder of it all. The hope. Not the kind made in childhood in the newness of first life, but a raw, beaten, bruised and bloodied hope. One that has been tested by the cruelty of life over and over and over again. A kind of hope a person earns through pain and trauma and a tenacious grit. That is the kind of hope I see in her eyes right now. That is why she chose to know the truth over financial security. The truth is, in the hierarchy of needs, Maslow got one thing wrong. There is one need that comes before that pyramid base of basic physiological needs. Before even your base survival needs of food and shelter. And that is hope. Hope for the fantastical.

Hope for the brighter day. The lighter load. The magic of it all. Without that, humans would not have the will for the rest of it.

And humanity is losing its hope. It's already lost most of its magic, and hope and magic are intrinsically connected at the root.

I've been trying to stop it. To find someone, anyone, who still has a spark.

And here she is.

So with a flick of my wrist I produce a parchment flowing with magic. It is already filled in with the terms of our understanding.

I roll up my sleeve and produce a quill pen, then use the razor-sharp edge to slice my arm. Lyla gasps as blood trickles down my skin. I use the pen to soak up enough to sign my name.

Then I hand it to her.

I half expect her to refuse it, to say she will not sign herself away to Satan on Christmas Eve. That the whole thing is ludicrous. I don't know what I'll do if she says that. I clench my jaw and wait.

She licks her lips, an action done in such an innocent way that it does not aid at all in my attempt at composure.

Finally, she takes the pen and the contract from my hands and begins to read.

I hold my breath, which is uncomfortable for me in this form even though I don't strictly need to breathe.

“I only have tonight to ask my questions and find out the truth?” She asks, looking up.

I give one solemn bow of my head. “This is a limited time contract. Not the kind I am typically known for, but desperate times and all that. You can ask me anything tonight and I will do my best to answer.”

“And then we never see you again,” she says, flicking her lower lip with her tongue again. “At least I get to keep my soul.”

That last little bit is whispered under her breath, so I pretend to not hear it.

“That’s the idea,” I say. And why are those words so difficult to say?

She nods, then brings the pen to her arm. She pauses. “Um. I’m assuming you can’t pass on STDs or viruses? Given, you know, the pandemic and the... blood thing.”

“I assure you, my blood is the purest you will ever find.”

She nods again then doesn’t hesitate or flinch as she slices her arm.

The smell of her blood blooms in the air like a rare flower, nearly extinct. Exotic and fragrant and oh so delicious.

When she scrawls her name, I feel the magic of the contract bind us together.

My contracts aren’t usually so... intimate in a non-sexual way. I don’t typically sign up for spending time with others.

But this... this feels different. A sense of knowing settles on me and I shiver.

Tonight will change the course of both our lives.

One way or another.



5

Lyla

Mandy clambers down the stairs sounding like a small herd of buffalo despite being one tiny girl. My mouth twitches when I see what she's wearing.

She must've put on all the sweaters she could find before pulling on a snow suit that's two inches too short for her, leaving ankles and lower legs bare. She made up for that by layering on socks--which look suspiciously like mine--and is trying to wrangle her arms into the too small snow jacket.

"Mommy, I can't find my scarf." She finally manages to get her arm into the second sleeve and sticks her tongue out as she fiddles with the zipper.

Lucifer makes a choked sound and I look up to see his full lips fighting to stay still. I might be annoyed at him laughing at her if my daughter didn't look like a hobo version of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. It's rather ridiculous and I don't bother to keep my lips from curling into a smile.

"It's hanging up in the bathroom. Remember we had to let them dry after the snowball fight?" I watch as she gives up on the zipper and smiles. She's still missing one of her top teeth and I'm a sucker for her smile.

"Oh yeah!" And she's off again, another herd of buffalo racing up the stairs.

Lucifer clears his throat next to me. "Might I suggest you find some warm clothes of

your own?”

I look down at the old, baggy t-shirt I’m wearing and cringe. Not only is the shirt awful, it’s the only thing I’m wearing other than a pair of panties that have long since seen their hey-day.

And it’s quite obvious that I’ve been skimping on the heat for the apartment.

“Of course, if you’d prefer to travel like that, I’d be happy to keep you warm.” His dark eyes rove over my body and I fight a shiver that has nothing to do with the chill in the air.

Just as I snap myself out of it and try to come up with an appropriate response, he lifts one hand and it fills with those magical flames. “I’ve been told I run a little on the warm side and the fire won’t hurt you.”

My blush is instantaneous. He knows exactly what I thought he meant. I walked right into his trap. I also feel certain that those flames could and would hurt me if he so desired.

“No! I mean, no, thank you. I’ve got clothes.” I take a step back toward the stairs. “I mean warm clothes. I have more clothes than this. You know, it’s not like I just wear this all the time.” I take a few more steps backward. “I mean, I wear warmer clothes than this. When it’s cold. But I was asleep.”

His knowing smile grows with each nonsensical word I utter.

“I was asleep when you broke in! I’m sure you don’t sleep in that suit!” I gesture at him and take one more step toward the stairs.

If possible, his smile grows even wider. “Me? I prefer to sleep in the nude.”

Of course he does. And boy does my imagination have a field day with this information. Lust courses through my body like a tidal wave and I feel an unwanted ache build in my body. It has been so long since I've been touched. Caressed. Loved.

But this isn't the man or the night for such thoughts.

I turn to the stairs and take them two at a time, ignoring the chuckle that follows me. I can hear Mandy still in her room, so I shut my door and lean back against it. What the hell is wrong with me?

Lucifer, really? I slap my forehead as if I can knock sense into myself that way. I can't be attracted to Satan! Wait, can I? I mean, he is Satan, isn't temptation part of his MO?

And boy, is he tempting.

I dash to my closet and rummage around. What does one wear to deliver presents for Santa Claus? Deciding Mandy probably has the right idea, I go for layers. I shuck my shirt and dig around until I find a clean bra. It's nothing to write home about, but it will do the job. I layer tank top over tank top, before doing the same with t-shirts and add a thick wool sweater. I pull out a pair of thermal underpants and shimmy into them before sliding into a pair of jeans.

Socks. I look at the drawer and see it's open, socks hanging from its sides. Yep, Mandy is definitely wearing mine. I grab two pairs and shove my feet into them just as I hear Mandy scampering back down the stairs.

Rushing, I grab a pair of snow boots from my closet and chase after her.

As my feet hit the stairs, I hear high-pitched laughter from the first floor, followed by the amused rumble of a man's voice. My feet stop and I press a hand to my heart.

How long has it been since I've had a man in my home? A man who seems genuinely interested in Mandy? A man who isn't trying to escape as quickly as possible once he realizes I have a daughter?

It's nice.

Then my brain catches up with my heart and I remember it's Lucifer down there with Mandy. I take a deep breath and slowly descend the stairs. He hasn't done anything that should make me question his motives. In fact, he's been protective of Mandy. Even showing up to bring her a present in case Santa missed her because her letter went to the wrong place. Really. Who would have thought Lucifer could be so... sweet?

They are both sitting on the floor eating the remaining cookies and giggling like best friends at a sleepover when I approach.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:25 am*

Mandy looks up at me and grins, crumbs dotting her chin and a dollop of red frosting on the tip of her nose, making her look a bit like Rudolph.

But it's Lucifer's gaze that heats me up through the layers of clothing, making my skin tingle with the promises inherent in his look. Promises I will not lay claim to, no matter how tempting he is.

His grin is wicked as he takes in my outfit. "If at any point you need help peeling yourself out of those layers... let me know. I'm quite skilled at such things."

I snort. "I'm sure you are, but I'll be fine." I'm starting to sweat though, so I clap my hands and put on my mom voice. "Shall we be off then? I'm not sure how this works but I don't imagine we have a lot of time to make this happen?"

This is the first time I'm actually considering the logistics of this night. How will Mandy get any sleep? There's no way she'll have the stamina for an all-nighter. How are we going to get to every house on earth in one night? Or at least the ones that celebrate Christmas, which is still a shitton. And if Santa is truly real, why do so many kids go without during the holidays? I need answers, but these aren't questions I want to ask in front of my child.

Lucifer stands and helps Mandy up, who's a bit unbalanced with her multiple layers.

"Yes, about that," he says. "First, we'll need to stop by Hell to get ourselves organized. Then we can begin."

"Hell? As in... actual hell?" I ask, my throat going dry.

He nods. “Don’t worry, it’s quite pleasant for honored guests, of which you both are, of course. You needn’t fear the more nefarious parts of my domain.”

“Right. Sure. Okay. How do we get there?” I ask. I must be under some kind of madness spell for even considering taking my child to hell with Satan on Christmas Eve. If my ex finds out about this, he’ll have a field day in court. But of course, he already tried to accuse me of being Satan, and that didn’t fly. So no one would likely believe him about this even if he believed it, which he wouldn’t. That man doesn’t have a magical bone in his body.

And he has no claim on me or Mandy anymore. She’s all mine. I repeat that mantra to myself daily, when anxiety creeps up and fears start to take hold again. It’s done. The abuse. The court battles. It’s over.

Lucifer holds out his hands, and those same flames from earlier appear. At least this time my fire alarm won’t go off.

“The fastest way is through a portal,” he says. Then he chants something in what sounds like an ancient language made up of guttural sounds under his breath and flicks his wrist.

Before us, an arched doorway appears, made of the flames themselves.

“We’re supposed to walk through fire?” I ask.

But my fearless daughter is already approaching the door. I reach for her hand but she touches the flaming doorknob. “It doesn’t hurt, Mommy. See?”

Without hesitation she twists the knob swinging the door wide open. With a squeal she launches her way through the door and out of my sight.

“Mandy!” I run forward without thought, and as I move through the frame of the door I feel a shiver travel up my spine. My skin feels electrified, sizzling with a magical energy. I feel weightless for a moment, and then my feet slip on dew wet grass and I barely manage to stay upright. A solicitous hand slips under my elbow to steady me, but I shake it off. “Mandy, get right back here.”

It’s dark, but there is no missing the bright blue of her snow suit and jacket. She’s twirling in a slow circle, her mouth open in a wide ‘O’. “It’s like a fairytale!”

Taking in her amazement and wonder, I realize she’s in no immediate danger, so I look around too. I expect rocks and fire, dank smells, and scorching heat. Brimstone and torture. The usual hellscape.

I am incredibly wrong.

The air is cool, but not cool enough for the amount of clothing I’m wearing. A soft breeze tickles my skin and lifts my loose hair from around my shoulders. The air is so sweet I can almost taste it on my tongue. Crisp, clean, and devoid of any sort of pollution. It’s something I’ve never experienced. I doubt even the air at the very peak of Monte Picchu is so fresh. Untainted by pollution, untainted by humans, untainted by evil.

It is only in this moment of experiencing such purity that I realize how toxic my normal environment is. Like coming out of an abusive relationship where you think that’s the norm, and finding out it’s not. That there can be kindness and goodness in others. Like seeing the sun and the moon for the first time.

I turn in a slow circle to take it all in, and I see the fiery door I just came through disappear as Lucifer steps through.

The largest trees I’ve ever seen surround us, almost blocking out a clear, star-studded

sky. In the lichen, different shades of flowers are peppered at their base. Amongst the branches, soft orbs of light float here and there like fairies. I spin in my own slow circle and take an even better look. In the distance I can see the glimmer of lights that must be from a small town or more likely village. Is it populated by demons? It feels more likely we will run into a fairy or a unicorn rather than a famed creature of hell.

Modern religion is wildly off the mark in its understanding of hell, it seems.

But that's not what stops me in my tracks.

Behind us stands a castle straight from the bedtime stories I read Mandy every night.

Beige stone that shines softly in the moonlight, a drawbridge made from the smoothest wood I've ever seen, turrets that would make the buildings in Manhattan jealous, all surrounded by a moat of crystal clear, teal water. Vines creep along the stones, purple flowers blooming even in the dark. Glowing gems the size of my head light the path along the bridge. Crystals are arranged in a delicate swirling pattern above the arch of the castle entrance and along the visible windows.

My wildest imagination could not have conjured a place such as this.



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:25 am*

“I thought we were going to hell?” I say the words quietly.

“Not what you expected?” Lucifer whispers in my ear. His soft breath tickles the hair tucked behind my ears.

My heart speeds up and I bite my lip. My knees feel a little shaky at the warmth so close to me. Not trusting myself, I nod my head in reply to his question.

“Let me guess. You imagined lava, dark rocks, and the screams of tortured souls?”

I nod again before I realize that might be rude. I turn to look him in the eyes, intending to apologize, but instead I suck in a deep breath, my body responding viscerally to his nearness. His face is so close to mine, the dark pull of his eyes mesmerizing. The allure of his lips, parted slightly as if in anticipation, so hard to resist.

“I--I--um.” I take a step back and brush at my coat while trying to regain my composure. I feel bad at first but then decide if I only have one night with Satan himself, I’m not going to hold back. All cards on the table. “Yeah, you’re right. That’s exactly what I pictured. Maybe more blood and some demons running around too.”

He chuckles but quickly turns serious. “You’re right of course. There are levels of hell full of blood, levels full of demons, levels full of lava that glares against dark stone walls. And yes, levels filled with the screams of utter agony.”

I meet his gaze and shudder at the intensity. “I was beginning to think you might not

actually be the Devil.”

“Oh, I’m most certainly the Devil, Lyla. I might be a refined gentleman, but never forget it is my duty to punish those that deserve it.”

“How do you know they deserve it?” I don’t break eye contact. I don’t think I can. I feel a pull to him that’s intoxicating.

“Is this part of our deal?” He asks, his voice deep and resonating, a caress of sound. “Part of the truth you seek to understand?” His eyes narrow.

“Yes.” I lift my chin. “How do you know someone deserves to be punished? You keep talking about levels of hell. How do you know who deserves what punishment?”

His narrow eyes assess me quickly before glancing in Mandy’s direction. I look over to see her giggling as some of the glowing orbs dance around her.

“With a look.”

I jerk my gaze back to Lucifer. “A look?”

“With a look I can see all the sins committed in a person’s lifetime. It’s that simple, that quick. Then I sort the souls into the level they deserve.”

I wrap my arms around myself. All my sins lay bare before this man. What counts as a sin? Envy, greed, lust... oh, boy. I’m definitely full of lust, which means sin. There was also that one time I backed up into a car in a parking lot and didn’t leave my identification. There hadn’t been any marks on their car, so did that count? And what about the time I snuck into my best friend’s parents’ liquor cabinet?

“Don’t worry. That thirty-year-old bourbon you nicked from the Jackson’s house is

very low on the sin-o-meter. Though, I must say, you were far too young to truly appreciate what it was you were drinking.”

“Hey! Jessica drank it too!” I push his shoulder. “And don’t do that!”

“Do what exactly?” Amusement sparkles in his eyes.

“Read my mind... or my sins, or whatever.”

“Well, it was right there on the top of everything. Unless you’d rather discuss the lust.” His gaze turns hot, serious, penetrating. His lips part a fraction and, as if I’m inheriting his power, I swear I can taste his desire for me. It’s a disorienting moment and I sputter and turn away from him to look for my daughter. It has nothing to do with hiding the red I can feel flaming my cheeks. “Mandy! We should hurry. Time is ticking.”

Lucifer snorts beside me then picks up the red bag of Santa gifts and throws it over his shoulder.

“You’re right! We need to deliver these presents!” He says. Mandy runs over and grabs my hand. “Mr. Lucifer, can I come back here another time? I want to play with those lights some more.”

“Mandy!” I’m shocked at her audacity.

“I’d be honored.” Lucifer smiles down at her as he starts walking toward the drawbridge. “But those aren’t lights.”

“What are they?” Mandy reaches out and grabs his free hand with hers.

I open my mouth to say something, but the smile that lights Lucifer’s face is so pure

and full of delight, I remain silent.

“Souls,” Lucifer explains. “Those are the souls that have served their punishment and are awaiting reincarnation.”

Ice runs down my spine and I look back over my shoulder at the lights--no the souls--of people so evil they had been sent to hell. I let them play with my daughter simply because they were pretty and seemed harmless. Isn't that how it always is?

## Page 16

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“But those souls weren’t mean! They were nice and complimented my hat.” Mandy wiggles her head so the fluffy ball on top of her head wiggles.

“Well, that’s the point. Their souls came here after leading horrible lives. They needed to be punished for all the bad things they had done. Their punishments are designed to help them better understand themselves and the impact they had on others and the world. You could say... they’re dirty and need to be cleaned.” Lucifer’s face takes on a thoughtful expression and once again he sounds more like a professor. “Once they’ve worked off all the negativity they spread or created in the world, their soul is cleansed and sent back to Earth to learn more. Indeed, they are now the most innocent beings in hell. Well, except for you two.”

I watch as he winks at her.

My heart stutters again, leaving me feeling a little light headed.

Trying to regain some control I turn the conversation back to my original question. “So, you can see and weigh a person’s soul with one look. It is all up to your judgment.”

“That is my gift.” The words are light, but I feel an undercurrent of something I can’t quite put my finger on. Dread? Reluctance? Maybe even loneliness.

What must it be like to be able to see everything horrible a person has done in their lifetime? I shake my head. That’s not a gift. It’s a curse. To only ever see the bad in people... that’s depressing.

It also probably doesn't leave him with many friends. Who wants a buddy who knows every time you cheat a little at work, clock out early, or don't report all your tips?

We are nearly to the bridge when I feel his eyes on me. I look up and see a gentleness I never would have expected from the devil... but from Lucifer? Yes. When did I begin to see Satan and Lucifer as two different people? Maybe it's because being Satan is his job and Lucifer is the true identity behind the horns, lava, and demons. Of course, I haven't seen any demons since we arrived, but maybe they just don't live in this part of hell.

"What are those?" Mandy asks quietly. I feel her pull a little to the side as if hiding behind Lucifer.

"Aphrodite and Mars," Lucifer cheerfully replies. "Don't worry. Just let them get a good sniff of you so they will recognize you the next time you visit."

I almost make a joke about play-dates in hell, but then before I see the looming beasts leaning over my daughter.

"Mandy!" I start to yank her away, but Lucifer stops me.

"Don't." He looks at me quickly. "They won't hurt her and they need to know her scent."

I turn back to the monsters currently nuzzling my daughter's shoulders and stomach. She giggles before reaching up to scratch one large, upright ear. It makes a crooning noise and the other one butts Mandy so hard she falls to the ground.

My gasp is building to a full scream when Lucifer clamps a hand over my mouth. "They're just playing. They've never seen a human child before." I shake my head

but he doesn't let me go. "Lyla, I would never let anything happen to Mandy or you."

At his words I stop struggling and try to watch the scene from a different perspective. They may be beasts, but they aren't really monsters. No, they look like giant dobermans with glowing red eyes.

And a healthy amount of drool.

"Ew, you slobbered in my hair!" Mandy pushes them away and sits up while they take positions next to her, tails wagging. She stands and reaches to pat each one on the head. "Don't worry, sometimes I drool too. Especially if I'm asleep."

I reach up and pull Lucifer's hand away from my mouth. "What are they?"

"Hellhounds, of course." He steps away from me and motions in my direction. "Your turn. Get a good sniff, you two."

Suddenly the hounds are at my side pushing their snouts into my clothes. One even lifts up on their hind feet long enough to lick the side of my face, leaving some of my hair wet. But when the other pushes its snout between my legs I decide they've gotten my scent by now.

"No. That's off limits." I bop the hound's head.

He leans back and cocks his head as if daring me to smack him again. He moves his head in my direction again and I step back. He steps forward. Again I retreat. Again he steps forward. His tail is thumping the ground in a steady beat.

"I said no!"

Mandy giggles and points at the hound. "He's just making sure his sniffinator is

working.”

“That’s enough, Mars. We don’t have time to play chase.” Lucifer reaches over and pets the hound’s head. Where I can almost look Mars in the eyes, Lucifer is more than a good foot taller than me and his hand rests on the hound naturally. As if the Hellhounds were created especially for Lucifer and his dimensions. “Now, let’s get inside and figure out what we need to do.”

Aphrodite and Mars flounce back to their posts on some unseen signal and we cross the bridge.

I marvel at the architecture as we pass under the entry. It straddles the line of being entirely unique but also somehow familiar. The seams between the stone are smooth, the blocks themselves are some sort of stone I can’t identify. I reach out and trail my fingers along the surface. It’s smooth, warm and dry.

“You won’t find that stone anywhere on Earth.” Lucifer notes my interest. “It’s cultivated from one of the levels of hell.”



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I snatch my fingers away as if burned. The stone doesn't seem quite so pretty now that I know how it got here.

“You’re bothered that demons and sinners shaped these stones?” Lucifer stops and looks at me.

“It’s not my place to judge.”

He nods his head. “Do you know what I see when I look at this?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“I see effort and potential. I see remorse and hope. I see new beginnings.” He presses a hand to the wall. “I know these souls worked off their debts and started anew. I see second chances. These stones hold the warmth of souls wishing for a better future.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.” I feel a little embarrassed. “You make hell sound like a much nicer place than I’ve been taught to believe.”

“There is darkness and pain. There is unimaginable agony on some levels. But it all serves a purpose.”

“And it’s not endless,” I say.

“Well, that’s debatable, but perhaps we could save that discussion for later. We have a lot of catching up to do.” Lucifer shrugs.

He has been honest with all of my questions up until now, so I decide to let this one go. Instead I look around the courtyard. Crystals float about, their facets reflecting light from the moon and glowing gemstones. It's like walking inside a kaleidoscope.

I can hear the light sounds of water in the background and look around but don't see a fountain. Maybe it's in another room? There are doors and corridors leading off in different directions that have my curiosity spinning. What type of wonders might be hidden in Lucifer's palace?

I look back at the man currently pointing to different crystals floating in the air and explaining them to Mandy. My heart does that increasingly familiar flutter. Why does seeing him with Mandy make my brain turn to mush?

"So, do you think we'll find a list in this bag?" Lucifer asks.

Mandy looks up in horror. "Oh no! What if he keeps his list in his sleigh?"

"Let's go to my office and find out." Lucifer takes the lead, obviously at home. With his free hand he loosens his tie before running his fingers through his unruly hair. "Please forgive me, but we don't have an elevator."

His warning is just in time to keep me from tripping over the first step of an elegant staircase. When he glances in my direction with a flash of perfect white teeth, I'm certain he did it for my sake.

I follow him up the beautiful, grand staircase and through a hallway lined with paintings that belong in museums. In fact, I see a few that I'm certain are hanging in museums and zealously guarded on Earth. Are these the real things? Are the ones locked away the perfect replicas?

Lucifer stops at a large door before flicking his fingers at the doorknob. It twists and

flings open. He strides into the room and we follow quickly behind him.

What looks like Lucifer's personal office is large and warm, filled with the crackling sounds of fire in a fireplace, the flames dancing shadows off the walls. Mahogany bookshelves line the walls and are heavy with leather bound books, ancient parchment scrolls and tablets carved with the glyphs of dead languages. I inhale the scent of burning wood and old leather and smile.

"Have you read all of these?" I ask. I've always loved libraries and this one is filled with treasure.

Lucifer dumps Santa's bag on the ground and looks over at me with a mysterious smirk on his perfect lips. "Read them? Yes. In fact I've written many of them."

I'm honestly stunned and his smirk turns piercing. "Surprised the Devil is so scholarly? You shouldn't be. I am the first to tempt humanity with knowledge after all. If not for me you'd still be stuck in the Stone Age."

Huh. He's got a point there. I've never really understood why Eve was punished for wanting knowledge.

He turns his attention to Mandy and smiles. "Well, dive in kid!"

Mandy wastes no time. With a squeal of glee she unties the bag and pulls open the velvet fabric, gasping in shock when she sees what it contains.

6

Lucifer

Humanity has never collectively been more consistently wrong about anything as it

has about me and my role in the fall of Eve, if you can even call it that. Humans always have needed to demonize something...me. Women. Anyone who doesn't look like themselves. Anyone who comes from elsewhere. It's an inherent flaw I've seen poison every single civilization since the dawn of humankind. And I see no indication it will change anytime soon.

So it's always a rare delight when I have an opportunity to correct the narrative, even if only a little.

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:25 am*

I can see by the look on Lyla's face my words have rearranged her perceived understanding of my nature—and what's more, there's no resistance. It is so effortless for her to see me as I am and not as I have been portrayed in nearly every form of story and art since the beginning.

She doesn't look away as I study her. Nor does she look away as Mandy digs through Santa's bag.

She looks into me. Deeply. And I feel—I feel something I haven't ever felt before. I know it only from the taste of it on others.

I feel vulnerable.

To be seen is to be laid bare. Defenseless. At the mercy of another.

What does she think of what she sees?

If only I could read her mind as easily as I can read her soul.

Mandy's squeals steal both of our attention, and the moment dissipates like smoke. But I cling to what it felt like. What it could mean, and I feel Lyla's proximity to me like a magnet even as I look at what Mandy is showing us.

"It just keeps going and going," she says.

"Like Mary Poppins' bag," Lyla says with a smile.

Mandy frowns. “Who?”

Lyla laughs. “Never mind. I’m clearly dating myself.”

I snort at that. “I’ve been around since the dawn of time. If anyone is dated it’s me. A rare antique.”

She just shakes her head with a small smile that feels like a secret between us.

“I think I found the list!” Mandy says, relief heavy in her small voice.

“At least the cookie sniffing elf didn’t leave us totally up shit’s creek,” I say.

Lyla shoots me the evil eye, presumably for swearing in front of her daughter, but she’s also trying to hide her laugh so I don’t feel terribly bad over my language choices.

This is hell after all. If you can’t be at least a little naughty here, then what’s the point?

Mandy brings the list to her mother, and Lyla takes a seat in one of the chairs in front of the fireplace and studies it carefully. It’s one single sheet of cream parchment, a scroll bound by a red ribbon. Lyla unties the ribbon and spreads the paper flat as I sit in the chair next to her and Mandy props herself on the foot rest.

“What’s it say?” the child asks, full of excitement and wonder.

It’s been a long time since hell had so much hopeful energy. I feel the shift Mandy and her mother are causing and I breathe it in deeply, gratefully, knowing that when this night is over, I will revisit this moment, this feeling, time and again to try to capture what they’ve shared with me. The fact that they have given me this moment

without even knowing it, makes it all the more special.

“It’s magic,” Lyla says softly, her words breathless with each new discovery of this world she never could have imagined existed.

But even I, as jaded as I am, glance over to see what she means. I have a passing curiosity about the list, the elf, the toy shop, Santa’s whole job. It always seemed like an easy job for a lazy immortal. I guess I’m about to find out if that’s true.

The list glows with names written in gold, and as Lyla touches it, the letters rearrange themselves, forming new names with new notes about their deepest wishes.

“What language is this?” Mandy asks. “‘Cuz I can only read the names. That other stuff is all gibberish.”

Lyla hands me the list so I can study it more closely. “Elvish,” I say with a sigh.

“And I assume you can read Elvish?” Lyla asks. “Since you’re older than dirt.”

I cut a sharp glance at her but she just smirks. And oh that smirk, those lips, those sky blue eyes... I feel a jolt in my chest just looking at this woman. “My Elvish is rusty. The only place it’s still spoken is the North Pole. Not a place I frequent.”

Lyla exhales sharply. “Okay, then. How do we do this? Santa has a workshop and elves and reindeer and a sled and some kind of magic that makes it possible to visit all these houses in just one night. What do we have?”

I pause, considering. “I don’t have reindeer, but I do have a litter of Hellhounds that can fly when necessary.”

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“Hellhounds.” Lyla’s tone speaks volumes about her thoughts on that, but I just shrug.

“We must work with what we have, my dear. Unless you have a better idea?” I lean toward her curious to see what she might suggest.

She purses her lips then nods. “Okay, Hellhounds. What about elves?”

“I’m sure my demons would love a change of pace. They can help orchestrate this.”

She nods again. “Sled?”

I pretend to frown. “Will a coffin be sufficient? They’re quite comfortable.”

“Why do you have coffins here?” she asks, incredulous.

I chuckle. “You likely don’t want to know.”

“Right,” she says. “I don’t think we’ll fit in a coffin.”

I lean back again and smile. “We could go try, if you’d like.”

“In your dreams, Lucie.” This time a hint of a smile accompanies the tinge of red in her cheeks and I don’t cringe at the nickname.

“Shame. I would have enjoyed that.” I arch an eyebrow and lean forward again, encroaching on her personal space.



“Yes, you would have.” She reaches out a hand and just when I think she’s going to caress my cheek she uses the tip of her pointer finger to push my face away. “But it’s not going to happen.”

I let her push me away, enjoying just that simple touch. There’s something in her scent that lets me know while she is telling me no, there is also a hint of ‘not yet’ too. Plus I have the benefit of being on the receiving end of her sexy smirk, so I have no immediate complaints.

“Just as well. A coffin won’t have the magic we need to do this right. I’m afraid we have no other choice but to take drastic action.” I steeple my fingers and smile. I knew this was our only real option from the beginning. “We need to put together an extraction team.”

“Extraction team? What on Earth are you talking about?” She looks at me with an expression that clearly says she thinks I’m crazy.

“Ah. You forget. We’re not on Earth right now.” I stand up and stroll to a long golden chord hanging next to the wall. Gently I pull it and the sound of a deep bell peels through the corridors. “And we need an extraction team to steal a sleigh.”

“You want to steal Santa’s sleigh?” She shivers, obviously remembering the elf’s anger. “That seems...”

“Naughty?” I smile. “Well, he did tell us to do his job and a sleigh is a basic requirement, is it not? Besides, we’re not stealing. We’re... borrowing it for the night.”

“Riiight.” She stands up and crosses her arms. “And what if borrowing Santa’s sleigh lands Mandy on the Naughty List for the rest of her life?”

“Not possible. It’s my plan, my minions, and my pleasure. Nothing will taint your sweet daughter.” I look over at the small form in front of my fireplace, one of her hands clutching the velvet bag. “Trust me on this, Lyla. I know enough about that elf’s magic to be certain it will not taint Mandy in any way. And I haven’t been on the Good List... ever. So, no harm done.”

Instead of laughing like I expect, she gives me a long searching look. “That’s the real shame,” she says quietly.

For the first time in centuries I feel... flustered. Her scent isn’t the cloying smell of carnations that I associate with pity. In fact, I’m not sure how to label her scent. A hint of displeasure and... that same smell she emitted when guarding her daughter. Again I wish I had the power to read minds, not just souls. This woman is frustratingly complex; but in a very good way. She wasn’t worried about herself being on the Naughty List, but the thought of me being on it...

I clasp my hands behind my back and look toward Mandy’s tiny form. There is much to ponder when it comes to Lyla and not nearly enough time in which to do it.

Finally she speaks again. “So. We’re going to jack Santa’s sleigh.”

“Yes.” My voice sounds rough, so I clear my throat. “Our help should be here soon.”

“Well, if this is what we have to do, then it’ll have to work. But I have a lot of questions.”

“What a shock,” I deadpan, clutching my heart dramatically.

She narrows her eyes at me then glances over to Mandy, who has finally given in to her exhaustion and has fallen asleep on the thick rug in front of the fire. Lyla’s expression shifts from reprimanding to peaceful as she smiles, the love for her child

lighting up her face with such beauty it nearly steals my breath.

I reach for the throw blanket hanging on the back of my chair and gently place it over the small girl, though she hardly needs it with all the layers she's wearing.

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“What would you like to know?” I ask, reclaiming my seat and turning to face her.

“How does all this work?” she asks. “How do we get all the presents delivered? Why do some kids not get presents? Why is it so imbalanced and unfair if Santa is real? What about families who don’t celebrate, or honor other religions and traditions?”

I frown. These are good questions with no easy answer. At least none that she will appreciate. “You’ve heard me mention magic, and how it’s fading in your realm. This is affecting everything. Even Santa’s magic. Parents of course no longer believe in any of us anymore. So we have relied on the belief of children to survive... to have an impact on earth. But that too is fading. If a child doesn’t believe, doesn’t have at least a seed of magic within them, then they won’t be able to see the gifts left. The magic around them. The truth. As for other beliefs and religions, it is belief that gives us life, just as it gives life to the others. I am but one manifestation of belief, but I am not the only one. Nor is Santa. Every culture and tradition brings with it its own set of beings that share the immortal realm.”

I pause, frowning. “It’s an incomplete answer, I know. But it’s the best I can offer. The truth is, at our last Summit we talked about what’s been happening on Earth and none of us have any real solutions.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Summit? Who’s we? What else is real that I always thought was myth?”

I shrug. “All of it. All of it is real, or has been at one time or another. Where do you think the myths and stories come from? They were cobbled together from the scraps of truth that remained in the minds of the few who still remembered. But the further

into despair humanity falls, the less potent is our collective magic. A few of us have already disappeared entirely, never to be thought of again.”

The taste of her swirling emotions permeates the air around us, and I inhale deeply. There’s sadness, shock, confusion, but also... underneath it all, delight.

“It’s real.” She looks at me with shining eyes. “It’s really real.”

7

Lyla

It seems impossible to believe, and yet how can I not? I’m sitting next to Lucifer in Hell. There was a showdown with Santa Claus and now we’re about to steal his sleigh. Cleansed souls float along tree branches waiting to be reborn. A Hellhound tried to sniff my crotch.

And the Devil himself signed a contract in blood promising to tell me the truth.

The laugh bubbles out of my throat before I can stop it. I raise a hand to try and stifle it, but it feels as if something inside of me has been unlocked. My laughter feels lighter, brighter, and I barely notice the tears running down my cheeks until Lucifer offers a hanky embroidered with a large elaborate L.

“The Easter Bunny?” I wipe at my cheeks and look up at him.

“Pardon?” His eyebrows scrunch together forming delicate lines along his forehead.

“The Easter Bunny is real too?” I ask.

“Yes. He is certainly real. Very vocal on the council.” Lucifer looks relieved. Had I

worried him? “And don’t get him started about eggs. If I have to hear him complain that rabbits do not lay eggs one more time, I might feed him to my demons.”

I laugh. “What about the Tooth Fairy?”

“She’s very much real. Though she has a nasty habit of trailing glitter everywhere she goes. It gets into everything, you know.”

“What about... the Sandman? Is he real? Surely there isn’t a being that goes around sprinkling magical sand in people's eyes.” I lean forward.

“There is a Sandman, though sadly, he is one of the immortals not powerful enough to enter the Earthen realm any longer. I’m sure you’ve experienced insomnia yourself. It’s a common plague amongst humans now.” He’s watching me with open curiosity. As if my response is unexpected or maybe amusing.

“That makes sense. Too much sense.” I frown and try to think of something else. “What about Father Time? Is he real?”

“Hm. Father Time is a tricky one, but as real as the rest.”

“Why is he tricky?” I’m leaning toward him, hanging on his every word.

“Well, Father Time exists, but on so many planes and at many different times, we don’t really interact with him.” He leans forward, balancing his elbows on his knees. “Though I have him to thank for the time in Hell.”

“What does that mean?” I frown.

“How long do you think we’ve been here? In Hell,” he clarifies.

I think back and frown. “An hour? Maybe two? That’s not good. We’re going to run out of time to deliver the presents.”

“Ah, but that’s where Father Times’ gift is a true blessing. Time does not pass in Hell the way it passes on Earth.”

“What does that mean?” I inch a little closer and he matches my movement until our knees are nearly touching. I’m suddenly keenly aware of his nearness to me, his scent--smoky with a hint of leather. Everything about him is so intoxicating it’s hard to keep a clear head, but I am determined to remember everything I can about this night.

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“For you, for Mandy, no time has passed on Earth since you walked through my portal.” His eyes twinkle, but it’s from the flickering flames of the fireplace rather than magic this time. The fire seems to caress him, to move in tandem with him. “Here on this level, time stands still.”

“How is that possible?” I know my eyes are wide at this point. “No time has passed since we left Earth?”

“Not a second.” Lucifer flashes a conspiratorial smile. “And as to the how of it, you’d need to ask Father Time. It’s his gift, not mine.”

“That’s...” I search my mind for the right word and come up blank. I’m basically a dictionary on a normal day, but this is no normal day.

Lucifer’s smile grows and he shakes his head in amusement. “I can see the gears turning behind your eyes, but have no idea what you’re thinking.”

“I’m not sure I’m actually forming full thoughts at the moment. It’s all so much, so amazing... so wonderful.”

“I’ve lived it all my life, but watching you right now, I’m reminded too, of just how magical it all can be.” He reaches forward and gently cradles one of my hands in his, sending a jolt of electric energy through my arm. “This is what we need, Lyla. You, here, right now. This is what makes magic possible. Just these past few moments with you have revitalized the magic on this level.”

I squeeze his hand, inching even closer. “Then this is what you all need. You say that



magic is dying, that even children are losing their ability to believe. You need to show them again that you exist. Find other humans that still have a little magic and give them a glimpse of the impossible. Revive their magic and you'll revive the next generations' magic."

His mouth opens and closes, his eyes glued to mine, his hands trembling ever so slightly. "Give them a glimpse."

"Yes!" I cover the hands cradling mine with my free hand. "Show them you're real. That you're still here watching over them. And honestly, it doesn't have to be big. Just little things, like the glimpse of the Easter Bunny's ears as he leaves, or a jolly 'Ho, Ho, Ho' heard from the living room."

"We've spent so many years hidden... It would have to be small things like you say. Because it's the belief without proof that creates the magic." He doesn't move, but his eyes are no longer seeing me. They're running through a thousand possible scenarios. "The small things. Little traces that even leave the parents surprised."

"You know, that gives me another question. How do the parents not notice an extra present under the tree?"

He pulls one hand away and waves it in the air. "Oh, that's easy. Sometimes the kid takes it before the parents see it. Or they assume the other parent got it or that they forgot they'd gotten it."

"That makes entirely too much sense." I shake my head. Had I done that? Just given it no thought?

"Oh, humans are very good at explaining the unexplainable. Don't misunderstand. Science is sound and shouldn't be dismissed. But things like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, me... we don't exactly consist of quantitative data."

“The Greek gods? Zeus? Poseidon? Athena and Artemis?”

“Well, my Hounds are named Aphrodite and Mars.” He smiles and gives an easy shrug. “They’re around. Somewhere. Like the rest of us, their power is dependent on magic--on belief. Gods rise and fall all the time. But the Greek gods, the Roman gods, some of the Celtic gods, Egyptian gods, and Asian gods have hung around for a long time. Some of them are still worshipped. Some have seen a re-emergence with the New Age trends.”

I bite my lip and he seems to understand. It’s natural. How could I not ask after what he’d just explained.

“Go ahead.” He nods. “I’ve been waiting for you to get to this.”

I worry my lip with my teeth. Do I even really want to know? Do I already know? Is the answer to confirm my suspicion sitting right in front of me?

“God. Is God real?” My words are so quiet I’m not sure he’s able to hear me. My shoulders tense as if I’m going to be struck down any second.

“God is real.” His response is just as quiet. “Though as you can tell from meeting me, not everything is as you might expect.”

I nod. “What about other religions? Beliefs and gods? Does all of it co-exist?”

“We exist within the reality created for us by belief. It’s all part of the universal soup of existence.”

My mind feels too full, like my belly after a big Thanksgiving meal. I need time to digest everything, so this is all I’m going to ask on that subject. The magnitude of these revelations are immense. I let go of Lucifer’s hands--immediately missing their

soothing warmth--and sit back in my chair with a loud sigh that ruffles the list still in my lap.

I give my shoulders a little shake and pick up the paper. “Do you think I accidentally skipped kids when I touched this earlier?”

“I doubt it.” He holds his hand out and I pass him the scroll. “The elf’s magic is stronger than most.”

“Why is that?”

“Consumerism. Lucky bastard.”

I snort a very unladylike laugh and I think of Valentine's day. “Then Cupid must be going strong.”

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He lowers the list and gives me a serious look. “We do not speak that name in this house.”

I can’t help it. I burst out laughing, startling Mandy from her sleep.

“What’s so funny, Mommy?” She sits up and rubs at her eyes.

“Mr. Lucifer is scared of a cherub.” I cover my mouth with my hand but it does nothing to stop the sound of my giggles.

“I am not afraid of Cupid. I simply dislike the fellow.” He’s glaring at me, but I’m not worried in the least.

“What’s wrong with Cupid, Mr. Lucifer?” He looks at my daughter and his whole expression changes into something kinder, patient, and... almost adoring.

“Well, let’s just say we’ve had our differences in the past. Using his arrow on Helen of Troy was careless and most definitely not a good joke, no matter what he says. I was busy for a decade sorting all the dead into the appropriate levels.”

“Where did they wait? Purgatory?” I hold out an arm for Mandy and she bypasses it to crawl onto my lap instead. I pull her against my chest and tuck her head under my chin.

“I might be wrong, but I’ve been taught it is a place between heaven and hell where people wait to see where their souls will go,” I say.

“I have no need for Purgatory. I have a waiting room on level two that plays the Macarena continuously. I checked their souls as they came in. I’d already assessed them, so knew they belonged here, but the paperwork! I thought I’d never see an end.”

“Let me get this straight. You have a waiting room that plays the Macarena on repeat?”

“What other song would I use?” His bewildered eyes are my undoing.

I laugh and try to muffle the sound against Mandy’s winter hat.

“You think it was a bad idea?” He runs a hand through his hair, giving me another tantalizing glimpse of his horns.

My fingers are itching to touch them, trace their curves, and bury my fingers in those soft looking curls.

His eyes cut to me and he smirks. Damnit. He knows what I’m thinking. He might not be able to read minds--according to him-- but he can definitely read pheromones or something, and that’s bad enough.

A knock sounds against the large door leading into the office, before opening and revealing creatures that are both fantastical and horrifying at the same time.

Mandy makes a small peep of fear before hiding her face against my jacket.

“Fuchsia, Birch, Dan. These are my guests. The lovely Lady Lyla and her charming daughter, Mandy.” Lucifer looks at each group and smiles, but it’s the first time I’ve felt true fear ring down my spine since setting foot in Hell.

I've been wondering where they are, if they are even allowed on this level, but here they are staring at us in shock. Just as I mirror the same expression back at them.

"Nice to meet you?" I don't mean for it to come out as a question. I clear my throat and try again. "I mean, I'm pleased to meet you."

"Don't worry, my Lady. Most humans never see us, so it's a real treat to be addressed at all." A demon the size of a dining room table chair approaches, leaving a trail of something slime-like in his wake, and it takes all of my will power to keep from shrinking away from the small demon. He gestures to himself with hands that only have two fingers and a thumb, each ending in a sharp claw. "I'm Dan. Is that your spawn?"

Huh? Spawn? Mandy grips my waist even tighter. Oh. "Uh, yes, she is. Mandy, be polite and say hello to the nice demon."

She shakes her head no against me. This won't do. I lower my voice to her ear and whisper, "Remember when we talked about discrimination and how it's a terrible thing to do? Well, you're doing it right now."

She pulls away from me with a look of dismay. "But Mommy, he's covered in gross stuff and his hands look funny."

"And that, Bunny, is exactly how discrimination starts. You're afraid because Dan looks different. We don't have any demons where we live so I understand why you might be scared. But if you get to know him, he might be the nicest person... er, being you ever meet." I put my hand on her shoulders so she will meet my eyes. "You are too smart to be afraid of someone just because he doesn't look like you, aren't you?"

She nods her head yes before turning to look at the demon. "It's nice to meet you, Mr.

Demon.”

“Just call me Dan, little one.” Dan, the tiny, slimy demon turns to Lucifer. “What can we do for you Master?”

“We have a code Eighteen-A. Round up the appropriate staff for an extraction.”

“Yes sir!” Dan practically runs out of the room in his excitement, leaving a trail of gross, sticky-wet footprints in his wake.

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“How may I be of assistance, Master?” This next demon is larger. Human sized, with curling black horns poking out from her hair, one of which looks as if it’s busted on the tip. Her eyes are slit, with cat-like pupils, and her skin is a red that reminds me of cherries. She’s wearing cat-eyed glasses and what looks like a traditional maid’s black dress, complete with white collar. Unlike Dan she has five fingers, but like Dan they’re each tipped with long black claws.

“Take Lady Lyla and Mandy to their room. They need to be dressed for the cold. Something durable, please.” Lucifer walks over to his desk, searching for a pen and then scribbles something on a torn piece of paper. “Birch! I need you to help me organize.”

I really take a look at his desk this time and cringe. Sticky notes and papers are sprawled out in a haphazard way. It makes my OCD brain demand I straighten it up. Everything about Lucifer and this realm of Hell seems orderly. But his desk is a complete contrast of chaos.

“Of course, Master.” Birch is taller than Mandy, but not as tall as I am. However, that doesn’t matter. He is all bulging muscles and looks one flex away from ripping his shirt. His skin seems to be made of bark. Large, black horns curl back from his forehead, ending in vicious points. And from what I can make out, his teeth resemble those of a shark. “What are we preparing for?”

“A heist, old friend.” Lucifer slaps the demon on the back. “We’re going to steal Santa’s sleigh.”

Mandy sucks in a breath and looks up at me. “Stealing is bad.”



“He meant borrowing. We’re just borrowing it to deliver the presents, then we’re going to return it to Santa.” I shoot a warning look at Lucifer over her head. He smiles back and offers a little shrug.

“Lady Lyla, my name is Fuchsia. If you’ll follow me to your rooms, I’ll help you get dressed.” The red demon smiles and I try to not stare at her fangs. “It’s right this way.”

I pat Mandy on the back and she hops off my lap so I can stand up. “Lead the way, Ms. Fuchsia. I guess we’re changing clothes.”

“We need to change?” Mandy grabs my hand.

“Seems like it.” I squeeze her hand. “We’re going somewhere much colder.”

“Follow me.” Fuchsia opens the door and walks out into the hallway.

I look over to where Lucifer is busy planning with the muscle bound demon. His eyes are animated as he talks quickly and quietly. There is something bright and eager in his demeanor. He looks at me as we head for the door and his smile is so alight with happiness and full of mischief it steals my breath. Everything fades away and my world narrows to him, to this moment. The light glinting in his eyes, the crackling coming from the fireplace as the flames reach for him, the white of his smile.

“Mommy?” Mandy tugs on my hand and I suck in a deep breath.

Lucifer gives me a wink and turns back to plotting.

“Let’s go, Bunny.”

We walk out to the hallway and find Fuchsia waiting for us, her hands clasped gently

in front of her stomach, her expression serene.”Your rooms are this way, My Lady.”

“Please, just call me Lyla.” I follow the brisk pace the demon sets. “And we don’t really need a guest room, just a place to change.”

“Oh, My Lady, these aren’t guest rooms. They are your rooms. Only the people Master dislikes stay in guest rooms.” Fuchsia turns and smiles, revealing her fangs once more. “The moment you set foot in Hell he had rooms designed for both of you.”

“Why would he do that? Our contract is only for one night.” I look at the demon in confusion.

“It’s not my place to presume to know.” She looks at me and her smile grows, giving me the distinct impression she has her own ideas as to why. “I simply do what is asked of me.”

“And you prepared rooms for us in this short time?” We take a left down another hall and I find myself wondering where Lucifer’s room is located.

“I would have liked more time, but I think they will work for now.”

“We really only need one room and like I said, not even that. Just a place to change,” I explain.

“That just won’t do.” Fuchsia keeps up her brisk pace. “Master was specific. He even wanted you both in this hall.”

“What’s so special about this hall?” Mandy asks.

“Ah, this is where the VIP’s stay.” Fuchsia looks down at Mandy. “That means Very Important People. It’s been decades since we made rooms for someone.”

I'm not sure what to think of this information. We're VIPs? Why?

“Who was the last person to stay in the VIP wing?” Yes, this is a much better train of thought.

“Elvis Presley,” she says. “Quite the character.”

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“Wait,” I stop walking. “Elvis Presley. The King stayed here? Is he here now?”

“Oh no. Just long enough for our Master to sort him into the correct level.” Fuchsia stops and looks at me, her eyes twinkling. “I take it you’re a fan?”

“I spent my childhood listening to my father’s records. He still plays his vinyls.” I look around the hallway as if I might spot some sign of Elvis. “I know all the words to every song.”

“Oh, we will have to trade tales later. Things were very lively when he was here!”

“Why was he here, though? You said he was being sorted into Hell. Shouldn’t he have been on Level Two?” I frown. “Why was he in Hell anyway?”

“That is definitely not something to talk about in the presence of little ears. Let’s just say, he is the King of Rock n’ Roll.” She walks to a door and rests her hand on the doorknob. “Our Master felt Level Two was too cruel for someone with such a musical gift.”

“The Macarena wasn’t invented then, so what did he play?” I can’t help my curiosity.

“Oh, he’s been playing the Macarena for centuries. I believe Father Time helped him with that little trick.” She turns back to the door and pushes it open. “And here are your rooms. If there is anything you dislike, just let me know. Your clothes are on your beds.”

Mandy and I walk into the room and it’s not actually a room at all. It’s a giant sitting

room warmed by a large fireplace, with an overstuffed couch, several chairs, and thick carpet. Bookshelves line one wall and I can see treetops through one of the windows. Mandy wastes no time running through the room and opening all the doors.

“Oh my gosh!” She squeals and disappears.

I run after her just in time to see her launch herself onto the largest pink monstrosity of a bed I’ve ever seen.

“Mandy!”

“It’s so soft!” She swings her arms and legs back and forth like she’s making a snow angel.

“I’m very glad you like it.” Fuchsia smiles and pushes her glasses back up her nose with one delicate claw. “Now, let’s get you two dressed.”

8

Lucifer

By the time Lyla and Mandy return, I’ve worn a path in the hardwood floors with all my pacing. I am immortal. Eternal. A creature that has existed longer than humanity. And in many ways, my existence these long years has been static. Unchanging. Unmovable.

Until tonight. No--maybe since I held Mandy’s letter in my hand.

How... in such a short time, even when compared to the gnat-like lifespan of a human... how has this woman and child shaken my core reality so profoundly?

When she walks in wearing a black velvet bodysuit with blood red fur cuffs and black Santa hat, I feel momentarily tongue tied, which is not like me at all. I'm very good with my tongue in all situations.

But she's so stunning, so radiant, and so damn sexy in an outfit that hugs all her perfect curves just right that I know I look like a foolish hormonal mortal as I stare at her.

"Don't look at me like that. It was this or a mini skirt and that was not going to happen. Humans can get frostbite, you know." Her cheeks turn that charming shade of red, but she holds my gaze with her own, her chin tilted up in silent defiance of her nerves. Her lips painted the same red as the fur trim. Her eyes blazing. Damn this woman sets me on fire.

When my language skills return, I grin at her. "You look like the poster girl for Santa's Naughty List."

Mandy frowns, looking up at her mom. "Is that true, Mommy?" she asks, clutching Lyla's hand in hers. "Are you on the Naughty List?"

Mandy is dressed up like an elf, down to the white and red candy striped coat and floppy green hat. She's adorable, even in the old elf's colors.

Lyla narrows her eyes at me, then looks down at her child. "No, Lucifer was just making a joke. An inappropriate one," she says, glancing back at me with a stern expression that makes me laugh.

Mandy shakes her head. "Grown ups are so weird sometimes. Aren't jokes supposed to be funny?"

Lyla laughs. "Yes, they are." She looks at me. "You just got burned by an eight-year-

old,” she says with no small amount of glee in her eyes.

“So I did,” I say, giving Mandy a gallant bow. “A well-placed hit. I will have to work on my humor, Lady Mandy.”

The child giggles and it warms my cold, immortal heart.

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“Can I touch your horns, Mr. Lucifer?” Mandy asks. The request gives me pause. No one has ever asked me this.

“Mandy, that’s impolite,” Lyla rebukes her daughter.

She is always on as a mother. That must be so exhausting. And to do it alone. I make a mental note to look into this ex of hers. Will he be one of my less honored guests someday? I daresay I hope so.

A taste of my own malicious delight taints the air and I smile. We shall see what kind of man could hurt these two pure souls and I will make sure he pays for his sins.

I feel their underlying pain, raw and ugly, a deep wound for both of them, though it’s already fading for Mandy. The young are quite resilient when given love and support.

Lyla, though, isn’t there yet. She’s still healing. The taste of that wound induces a violent rage within me that I force down. This isn’t the time.

“Sorry Mr. Lucifer,” Mandy says, a bit of sulk in her voice.

“No need for sorrow,” I say, brandishing my most winning smile. “Better to ask than assume.”

I would have let her, but I don’t want to contradict her mother in front of her. I would never undermine Lyla’s authority as a parent.

“And you,” I say to Mandy, “look like a proper elf-girl. Are you ready for a trip to the



North Pole?” I ask.

Her face beams, all sulk gone as she nods her head. “Yes! I’m so excited I could scream!”

“You’re in Hell,” I tell her. “We encourage screaming here.”

Her eyes widen and I nod, giving her permission.

A glint of delight lights her eyes. She opens her mouth and screams as loud as she can. It’s an impressive sound for such a little thing.

I throw my head back in a full body laugh, then I join in, screaming into a roar of demonic glory.

Lyla looks at both of us like we are mad, and certainly we must appear so, but then she laughs softly and surprises us both by letting out her own furious primal scream. It starts soft but crescendos soon enough, channeling so much pent up pain and rage I feel almost drowned by it. The scents wafting from her are a mix of bitter pain and the sweetness of liberation.

But the release in the room is also palpable. We have each been holding onto something that only a good scream in Hell can properly exorcise.

Mandy flops to the ground, giving up first and collapsing into peels of slightly manic laughter.

Lyla lasts longer than I expect, and when her voice goes raw, she finally stops, breathless and red-cheeked, flush from the emotional outpouring.

“Wow. That was...” her voice is scratchy.

“Awesome!” Mandy finishes before looking at me. “That was awesome. You must scream in here all the time!”

I think about it a moment and shrug. “Not in a very long time, actually,” I say. The truth of that weighs heavy on me. I’ve become too numb to the pain and suffering around me. Too anesthetized to it all.

But tonight I can feel it again. The burn. The bittersweet pull between the dream and the nightmare. The raw urgency of my role in this domain. I may not always be pleased with my job, but this reminds me of how important it is for the world.

A knot forms in my stomach even as something in my soul loosens and breathes again.

I am simultaneously pulled under the weight of it and renewed by my own tie to humanity—a kind of tug of war I haven’t felt in far too long.

Needing something to do, I move to the corner of the room where I keep a full bar and I pour myself and Lyla each two fingers worth of scotch. For the little one I cheat a bit and use my own power to conjure a hot chocolate. She’ll need a little sugar to get through this night.

Mandy’s eyes widen when I call her over and hand it to her. Then I carry mine and Lyla’s drinks and join her on the loveseat. Our thighs touch as I sit and I know she’s as keenly aware of me as I am of her.

“A toast,” I say. “That our future be met with fortune and fortitude.”

She clinks glasses with me then takes a sip. “Oh this is good. Very good. Strong peaty flavor. Smokey and robust.”

“You know your scotch.”

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She nods. “Growing up my grandfather loved his scotch. He’d share sips with me when my mother wasn’t looking. At first it made me gag, but I eventually developed a taste for it.” I swirl the amber liquid in my glass, studying it. “This is the real deal. Scottish single malt scotch from Islay. The perk of a contract I made years ago.

We sip our drinks slowly, savoring the burn. Once we are all finished, I stand. “Shall we be off then?”

Lyla nods a bit nervously. “So we are really doing this?”

I hold up my hands, palms up. “If we want to save Christmas, we must.”

“I’ve got my people here ready for us when we return. But it’ll just be the three of us going. My demons would be too conspicuous.”

Lyla smirks. “And you’ll fit right in? Or me for that matter?” She glances down at her outrageously tight bodysuit that molds to her skin like a glove.

“You’ll be as stealth as night itself,” I say, admiring the outfit once more before I summon a door of fire to take us to the most insufferable place imaginable.

I’ve been to the North Pole exactly once. The year the Summit was hosted there. We all take turns and that year it was Santa’s. God awful place. Truly.

I’m not looking forward to going back, but I remember the place well enough to get us where we need to be.

This time I take the lead, holding Lyla and Mandy's hands as I guide them through the portal and transport them from Hell to somewhere far worse.

I can smell the peppermint the moment we step through, and it nearly gags me. My eyes water and I blink back the tears. I'm the Devil. Nothing makes me cry, but this blasted peppermint is evil. Everything in this cursed domain smells like peppermint. All the time. Every emotion. It is a nightmare.

I've actually reproduced this smell as a torture for some of my less fortunate guests. It works wonders.

Mandy takes a sniff and coughs. "Smells like someone threw up a lot of candy canes," she says, with the honest insight only a child has.

Lyla is about to scold her but I laugh. "You're absolutely right, my dear. It does."

We are standing in a field of snow surrounded by a grove of Noble Firs reaching hundred of feet into the sky, their silvery green branches lightly dusted with the perfect amount of snow and lit up by dozens of tiny white candles on each tree.

And there are hundreds of trees.

The effect is quite stunning, even I can admit as much.

"This is a fire danger," Mandy says solemnly. "We learned about it in school during our Stop, Drop, and Roll lessons."

"The magic of this place protects the forest," I say. But the worry of her words lingers.

We won't be here long enough to be concerned about fire hazards anyway. "The

village is through those trees,” I say pointing west. “We just need to get to the barn where the sleigh and reindeer are kept and we’ll be out of here.”

Lyla shivers, but it cannot be from the cold. Her outfit is insulated with Hell’s special brand of warming magic. As is Mandy’s. They will both stay perfectly regulated all night. Something else is bothering her, agitating the little bit of magic that inhabits her soul.

She instinctively knows something is off about this place, and she’s not wrong.

It feels different than when I was last here.

More... desperate.

We move quickly and quietly. Even Mandy manages to maintain some level of stealth, though I end up carrying her on my shoulders once we are within sight of the village. She’s getting tired and Lyla shouldn’t have to do all the work. Not while I’m around and able to help.

The little imp holds onto my horns as she rides on my shoulders, guiding me like her own personal pony.

I can only imagine what they would say about this back home.

The moment we pass through the trees, we are accosted by a scene unlike any other. It’s Christmas on crack. Glossy and shiny and noisy and blingy and so damn festive, but it all feels hollow this time. “This place feels like it should be fun,” Mandy says in a quiet voice, “but it’s just sad.”

They can both see it, feel it. We all can. There are life-size cottages made of gingerbread and frosting. Once upon a time they might have looked tantalizing, but

now they are fading. The frosting is yellowing, clumping, and crumbling. The gingerbread is cracking; it has definitely seen better days.

And the elves who should be busy at work are lounging on porches smoking and drinking. Arguing about something nonsensical.

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They are dressed like Santa's helpers, in the same getup as Mandy.

Red and white stripes, floppy green hat, long toed shoes, candle cane pendants. But these elves are dirty. Their clothing has holes. Their lives are in disrepair. It's sad to see even if I do hate the little buggers.

"Are they... are they smoking mistletoe?" Lyla asks in a whisper, pointing to two male elves near the woods standing behind one of the cottages.

"Yes," I say.

"Look, mommy. That one is smoking a candy cane. Why would he do that?" Mandy asks.

I rescue Lyla from that question before she can reply. "They aren't human. What's deadly for a human is fine for them. Don't do what they are doing. Mistletoe is poisonous to humans." I try to channel a little of Lyla's confident tone of authority that still has the backbone of love. "Just say no to mistletoe."

When she smiles at me, a smile that shows me her pretty teeth, I know I've gotten close enough.

We stay behind the cottages, avoiding the two elves smoking. The deeper into the village we go, the stronger the peppermint scent grows and the heavier the feeling of wrongness swamps our senses

"It's a really powerful aroma, isn't it?" Lyla says, covering her nose and mouth with



her sleeve.

“Something is wrong,” I say, the certainty growing in me.

An argument breaks out in the cottage we are sneaking past, and I pull Lyla and Mandy against me and position us behind a tree. The branches drop a little snow on our heads and shoulders from our movements.

A male and female are screaming at each other in elvish. Something about heat. Or flames of passion. I’m not sure.

Littering the perimeters of all the cottages are empty containers of eggnog. “The elves have been hitting it hard, it would seem,” I whisper as we continue to move toward the barn.

“Eggnog is hitting it hard?” Lyla asks with disbelief.

“Here it is. They get drunk on that reindeer piss.”

She snorts a laugh then covers her mouth at the startling loudness of the sound. “This place isn’t what I expected,” she whispers.

I purse my lips in a frown. “It’s gotten worse than I realized. Don’t get me wrong, it’s always been a nightmare. But this is...”

“Off.” she says, finishing my sentence.

“Exactly,” I say, something in my chest sputtering like a nervous bird. “You’ve read my mind.”

I can tell we are near the barn by the new smells wafting toward us. The smell of

peppermint scented reindeer shit. There's nothing else like it.

Mandy wrinkles her nose. "Ew. Gross. What is that?"

"That is someone not taking care of their animals," I say with a sharper tone than I intended. There's nothing I loathe more than those who neglect children and those who neglect animals.

I pick up my pace and reach the barn before the girls. I fling open the red and white striped door and gag.

Santa's reindeers are not living their best lives, as the humans these days would say.

Most of them are lying down in their stalls, the hay long past due for changing. A pile of filth has been shoveled into a corner, swarmed with flies. It's as if the elves have done the bare minimum to keep the reindeer alive.

"Oh my God," Lyla says, rushing in past me. "What's wrong with them? We have to help them."

"There is no helping them," a woman's voice says from the shadows.

Lyla yelps and steps back next to me, reaching for my hand. A thrill runs through me at the contact.

Mandy crowds next to her mom, hiding her face against Lyla's waist.

A tall, slender woman with snow white hair braided down her back with red ribbon steps out of the shadows. Her pale blue eyes are trained on us. Her ageless face is impossible to read. Even her scent is hard to trace, whether because of the overwhelming vileness floating in the air or because she has gained such mastery of

her emotions, I can't say. But it's disorienting.

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“Hello, Mrs. Claus,” I say.

She smiles. “Lucie, why so formal? Do you call all your siblings by their last name?”

“Of course not,” I say with a small bow. “Jessica. Lovely to see you.”

She pulls out a candy cane and lights it with a blaze she produces from her finger.

I sigh. “Not you too. What happened here?”

She blows out a puff of minty smoke and laughs, but it’s a hard sound full of lost dreams. “Why not? We are in the age of the fall of magic,” she says sadly. “Soon we will all turn to dust.” She holds up her candy cane, the tip burning a bright red like a ripe cherry.

“What happened to these animals?” Lyla demands, stepping forward boldly.

“The same thing that is happening to all of the North Pole. They are dying. Everything is dying. Even their hay fades within an hour. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. They can’t fly tonight. Maybe they’ll never fly again. This might be the end of Christmas.”

Lyla swears beside me and Mandy gasps under her breath but then falls silent again as the weight of our conversation settles on her.

“Is this why your old elf was in such a foul mood tonight?” I ask.

“Maybe.” She shrugs and looks away for a minute.

“We need to borrow the sleigh,” I say. “We can save Christmas and we will spark what little magic is left in those children. It’s not too late.”

Her eyes are bloodshot when she looks at me. Puffy and purple beneath. “How is it that the last optimist left would be Satan? You really are the best of us. I’ve always thought so.”

That... surprises me to hear. And makes me feel... something. Surprise, certainly, but something else, too.

“Are you going to try to stop us?” I ask.

She laughs. “Stop you? I’m here to help you. You’re our last chance, Lucie. You always were.”

I’m about to ask her what she means by that when what sounds like a herd of angry elves begin pounding on the barn door.

Jessica rushes forward, then turns to us. “The sleigh is over there,” she says, pointing to the opposite end of the barn. “Do your thing and get out of here. I’ll distract Santa’s little helpers.”

I nod my thanks. “How did you know we’d be here?” I ask as we move away from her.

“Oh Lucifer.” She just smiles and shrugs vaguely. “You know.”

And then she is gone.

Disappeared like her husband. But without the tell.

Her magic always was much stronger than Santa's.

A little-known secret outside the community.

Jessica is the real powerhouse behind the holidays. Women usually are the unseen heroes that make it all happen.

The sleigh is where she said, polished bright red like an apple. Not my color at all, but we can fix that when we get home.

"Climb in," I say, helping Mandy up.

I turn to Lyla. "You and Mandy get in. I'm going to push it through the door I create."

"You can't push it alone," Lyla says.

"Pft. Darling you have no idea what I'm capable of."

9

Lyla

I climb into the sleigh and pull Mandy against my side. I catch glimpses of switches and screens on the dash, but I don't have time to study them because Lucifer's portal flames to life in front of us.

"Are you sure you don't nee--" I slide back in my seat and clamp my mouth shut as the sleigh rushes forward. Of course Lucifer can move a sleigh by himself. His show of strength does make me wonder what his other powers are, and my cheeks flame red and hot when I imagine... things I shouldn't imagine under the circumstances.

Mandy clutches my hand as we pass through the portal, but once through I realize she's squeezing the blood out of my fingers due to excitement, not fear. Her face is full of wonder and delight. She stands up and lets go of my hand before turning to look over the backside of the sleigh.

We're in a small clearing, surrounded by giant trees, but not far away I can see something that looks like a stone structure, light pouring through what must be windows. In the opposite direction is the fairytale castle Lucifer calls home.

"You're really strong, Mr. Lucifer!" She waves at him. My heart clenches a little. She's getting attached to him awfully quickly and who knows if we will even remember all of this once we're done? And if we do remember, what are the chances we'll see Lucifer again in our lifetime? He'd been clear from the start this is a one night only contract, despite his confusing comments about visiting again. He was

undoubtedly just being polite.

“Thank you, Lady Mandy.” I look back in time to see him sweep into a courtly bow that would please any queen.

His gaze swings to me and questions fill his eyes. Did he pick up a change in my scent? I need to distract him.

“Indeed, Lord Lucifer seems to be the strongest of all the knights.” I tilt my head in ladylike acknowledgment.

He steps back as if he’s been struck and places a hand over his heart. “Oh, to be recognized by the stunning and brilliant, Lady Lyla. This humble knight is at your service.”

My heartbeat speeds up and I can’t keep the smile off my face.

He smiles back, leaning forward and resting his arms on the back of the sleigh. His dark eyes dance with mischief and something warmer. His hair is mussed from when Mandy rode his shoulders. It didn’t escape my notice that she used the ride as a chance to touch his horns despite me telling her not to. Thankfully he didn’t seem to mind.

I put my elbow on the back of the chair and rest my face in my hands. I’m well aware of the view I’m providing. This ridiculous jumpsuit shares more cleavage than I normally would show. But for some reason, I feel daring. We are in Hell, after all. Even moms should be allowed to flirt a little in Hell.

His eyes run from the top of my head, over my face, lingering on my lips, before continuing on to what I’m displaying. His expression is appreciative and instead of being embarrassed I feel a little wild. When his eyes finally return to mine, I know



the lust I feel for him is returned in equal measure. I also know that what I feel for him is turning into something more than just lust.

“Mr. Lucifer!” Mandy puts her hands on her hips next to me and I shake my head to clear it. I feel like I’m coming up for air after diving deep into the ocean. “I said your name three times! It’s not nice to ignore people.”

She called his name? I meet his eyes and see the same thought flit through his mind.

“My apologies, Mandy. What can I do for you?” He turns his complete attention to her and she seems mollified.

“I asked what do we do now? We have the sleigh, but we still haven’t delivered any presents!” Mandy leans forward, worry giving her words an extra edge. “We’re going to run out of time!”

Lucifer reaches his long arms up and Mandy reaches back, letting him lift her out of the sleigh. “Mandy, do you trust me?” He sets her feet on the ground and kneels before her.

If I had my cell phone with me--assuming it would even work in Hell--I’d take a picture of this moment. Satan kneeling before a little girl, so he can speak with her eye to eye.

“Yes, sir.” She nods solemnly and I try not to fist bump in victory that she remembered to say ‘sir’. I also try to ignore the clench of my heart and gut that she already trusts him so much.

“I am not going to let anyone miss Christmas. This sleigh? It’s magic, just like what we have here in Hell. Time does not work the same way it does on Earth.”

“It doesn’t?” Her eyes go wide and I remember she was asleep for that part of our conversation.

“No. Which means, we have all the time we need.” He stands back up.

“Then why does Santa try to deliver presents all in one night?” Her voice rises in confusion. “That doesn’t seem smart!”

Lucifer freezes, his mouth open as he searches for words. He closes his mouth and looks at me. I shrug. How am I supposed to dispute her logic? He’s the one who’s supposed to have all the answers.

He gives me a look that clearly says I’m no help before turning back to Mandy.

“Walk with me.” He holds out his hand and she readily grabs it. “Hm. I think the reason he does it all in one night has to do with magic.”

“But I thought magic was the reason he could do it whenever he wants.” She looks up at him and pushes her hat back out of her face.

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“Ah, the better way to explain would be to say he does it all in one night tomakemagic.” He leads her to where I’m still sitting in the sleigh and offers a hand to help me out. I let him help me down but before I can take my hand back, he laces his fingers with mine. He gives me a quick, questioning look, and I offer a small smile in return. I was feeling bold and sexy earlier, but now I feel like a girl holding hands for the first time.

“Santa makes the magic? All in one night?” Awe fills Mandy’s voice.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Lucifer grunts. “He makes magic, but not all of it. Of course, he does contribute a great deal.” His voice is grudging as he adds that last part.

“I’m sure a lot of magic is still alive because of you,” I say. Santa’s Village is one of the saddest things I’ve seen in a long time. But Hell? It’s full of magic.

“Thank you, but fear is a lot stronger than pure belief.” His voice shifts just enough that I can tell he dislikes that fact. “It’s the reason I was asked to speak at the Summit,” he says. “My realm is one of the few that still has power.”

“Your job is important.” I tighten my fingers in his and look at all the drifting lights around the trees--souls waiting to try again. “You are needed.”

He stops walking and looks at me. Slowly, so slowly I can stop him if I want to--but I don’t, he raises our joined hands and presses a kiss to my knuckles. His lips are warm and gentle. Heat roars to life, flooding my body, but it’s the gratitude in his eyes that makes my heart thump loudly.

“Thank you.” His husky voice makes me want to lean into him, for him to let go of my hand and wrap his arm around me instead. I don’t trust myself to speak, so I smile instead.

“Whoa,” Mandy whispers and takes a step closer to us.

I look up and immediately understand why Mandy is nervous. A... horde... of demons are advancing in our direction. As different as the three demons we met earlier, all of these differ in many ways. Some are huge, with horns the size of elephant trunks. Some walk on four feet or have three arms. They come in every variety of color you can imagine and have entirely unique body shapes and sizes.

“Don’t worry. These are my friends.” Lucifer releases my hands and wraps his arms around Mandy’s shoulders. “They will never hurt you.”

In fact, as they get closer, I realize they seem nervous. Some of the demons are whispering amongst themselves and pointing at Mandy. A few throw looks in my direction, curiosity evident, but it’s definitely Mandy who holds their attention.

“Why are they all looking at me?” Mandy asks, a slight tremor in her voice.

“They’ve never seen a child before,” Lucifer replies.

I look up at him in surprise. I shouldn’t be surprised. Of course there are no children in Hell. Not with someone like Lucifer in charge.

“Are they scared of me?” Mandy cocks her head back so she can see his face. “Some of them look scared.”

“Hm. Remember when you met Dan?” Mandy nods her head. “He was different, so you were scared.”

“But I’m not scary! I’m nice!” Mandy looks shocked.

“And so is Dan, but you didn’t know that at first.” He pats her head. “They just need to get to know you.”

A couple of demons edge a little closer, curious but cautious. Mandy contemplates them for a minute before putting on her brightest smile and waving.

“Hi! I’m Mandy!”

A few of them flinch at her loud voice and several more make sounds similar to chuckles. One of the demons walking on four legs lumbers closer and takes a sniff of Mandy’s outstretched hand.

“See? I’m nice!” She steps out of the circle of Lucifer’s arms and holds her other hand out to another demon. “We can be friends!”

My mom instincts are screaming that I should grab Mandy and run, but the fond look on Lucifer’s face weighs against those and I take a deep breath. Instead of grabbing my daughter, I step forward and offer my hands as well.

“Hi, I’m Lyla.” A small, green demon the size of a cantaloupe walks forward and looks at me with three big eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Gurch.” I’m not sure if he answered my question or burped, but I’m going to roll with it.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

Gurch scrambles closer, his little feet moving quickly, and takes a deep sniff. Before I know what’s happening, he’s scrambling up my side and sitting on my shoulder. The

smell of sulphur is stronger with him so close, but not overwhelmingly so. I'll take this over peppermint any day.

A deep growl reverberates from Lucifer and I look to see him glaring at the tiny demon.

"I'm going to stuff stockings." Gurch apparently isn't worried about Lucifer. "You smell interesting."

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“Thank you, I think?” I can’t really look at the little demon since he’s on my shoulder and others are starting to find their courage.

“It is good. It is a good change.” I feel his little hand clutch onto my ear and I turn my head. “They’re not used to it. The smell. It’s sweet.”

“Oh, I guess we still smell like peppermint.” I grimace.

“No, no. Not that. Happy. You smell happy.” Gurch leans close and whispers. “And so does Master.”

I look at Lucifer. He’s standing next to Mandy, making sure she’s not overwhelmed. His smile is so bright it’s almost blinding.

“Is he not usually happy?” I whisper back to Gurch as another demon grabs my hand and shakes it vigorously. “Nice to meet you, too.”

“No. Not for Gurch to say.” The little green demon moves so I can just barely see him out of the corner of my eye. “Stay. Stay and Master will be happy.”

I don’t respond to that. What can I say? I’m mortal? I have a daughter to raise? We have to go back to our depressing and increasingly more difficult life. And that’s a sad, sad thought. It’s not like we can stay even if we want to.

And Lucifer hasn’t said anything about us staying. Why would we? I shake my head as if that will clear it of thoughts. We just need to get through tonight.

“It’s okay.” Gurch pats my ear as another demon steps forward. “It will be well. Tonight, you help Gurch with the stockings. Fuchsia says we must make magic.”

“That’s right.” I shake a scaly hand with red claws.

“I have plan. You look it over.” Gurch jumps down from my shoulder and looks up at me. “Come. Come.” He beckons toward the palace.

“But...” I look at Mandy and Lucifer.

“Do you trust me, Lyla?” He steps closer and reaches for my hand. It’s the same thing he asked Mandy. Do I trust him? Trust is so much harder for me. I’ve been burned, badly. When I was younger, trust cost nothing, I gave it freely without thought, expecting everyone to treat me the way I would treat them. Boy did I learn my lessons the hard way.

But standing here, in Hell, holding Lucifer’s hand, surrounded by demons, I feel that dim light grow in my chest. Do I trust the way I did when I was younger? No. But I do trust this man. This angel. The Master of Hell.

“Yes.” I reach up with my free hand and place it over his heart. “I trust you, Lucifer.”

He covers my hand with his and leans down until our foreheads meet. “Thank you.”

The emotion in those words reach deep into my soul and heal some of the cracks. I close my eyes and inhale softly. He has a spicy scent and the faint smell of campfire smoke.

He pulls away, but dips his head and brushes his lips across my cheek bone. “If we didn’t have an audience, I’d be kissing you until you forgot where you began and I ended. I know what offering your trust means to you.”



I suck in a breath. I really, really, really want to kiss him. But he's right, now isn't the time. Lucifer steps back as if putting distance between us will help. I realize Mandy is watching us with wide eyes. Not sure what to expect, I'm surprised when she hides a giggle behind her hand and turns back to her newly made demon friends.

"Trust me and I will keep Mandy with me while you assist Gurch. He knows more English than most of the others." He lets go of my hand and takes another step back as if having trouble distancing himself from me. "We will make some much needed alterations to the sleigh while you get organized."

I swallow. "Okay."

He takes another step back with a small smile. "I think you should leave first. I'm not making much progress."

His words break the tension between us and I laugh. "I think you just want to watch me walk away in this suit."

"I hate for you to leave, but I do think I'll enjoy the view." He winks.

My laugh grows louder and some of the demons look at us curiously.

"Mandy," I wave her over. "I'm going to the castle with Gurch to work on the list. Mr. Lucifer wants your help here. Is that okay?"

Mandy nods. "Do I get to paint the sleigh?" She points to some demons carrying canisters and brushes.

"You listen to Mr. Lucifer and if you're not sure about something, you ask him, okay?"

“Yes, Mommy.” She grabs my waist in a quick hug and then disappears into the milling demons.

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“Then, I guess I’m gone.” I look back at Lucifer who is still watching. I give him a coy little wave before turning and walking to where Gurch is waiting for me. And if I put a little extra sway into my walk, who can blame me?

10

Lucifer

“We need elf outfits,” Mandy says, pulling my attention from the sway of Lyla’s hips, and all the naughty thoughts it brings like a blaze of fire in my core.

“Elf outfits?” I ask, forcing my attention away from that deliciously indecent bodysuit to the child before me. “Who needs them?”

She waves her hand to gesture to the demons around us. “Them. If you’re Satan Claus, then they have to be your demon elves.”

I chuckle. “Satan Claus? Did you come up with that?”

She grins. “Yup. It just makes sense. Santa. Satan. Anyway, can we get them outfits?”

“Um...” I struggle to find the words. I could magic some up, but that seems like a waste of time. “I don’t really keep a pile of elf costumes in my closet. I’m not sure--”

But before I can finish making my lame excuses, I’m cut off by Tzul, who is standing a respectful distance away from us holding a can of pitch black paint. “Master, we

already discussed the matter amongst ourselves while you were gone and, well... Marlix made everyone outfits, if you don't mind us wearing them?"

Mandy frowns and looks at me. "What language is he speaking? It sounds weird. Not like words at all."

"It's the language of demons," I say as I relay what he told me.

She grins. "That's wonderful! So he understands me but can't speak English?" she asks.

Clever girl. "Yes, some of them have better comprehension than others."

I can practically hear the wheels turning in her sharp mind, and she reminds me so much of Lyla, of her mother's curiosity and intelligence, her quick wit and kind heart. A rare combination in any realm.

Especially rare here.

"Won't Santa be mad we're painting his sled?" Mandy asks, in a mildly surprising non-sequitur.

I look to Tzul first and give a curt nod. "Tell everyone they can change into whatever Marlix made. But then hustle. Mandy will need to sleep eventually."

Mandy raises an eyebrow. "You underestimate a kid on Christmas Eve," she says, deadpan.

I burst out laughing, the sound coming from my gut in a full-bodied way that is far too infrequent in my existence.

“If you say so, short stuff,” I say, ruffling the hat on her head.

She giggles and picks up a paint brush Tzul left behind. “I like painting,” she declares.

“So do I,” I tell her as I pick up my own brush. “Let’s start with the doors.”

We each dip our brushes into the blackest ink in existence. “I had an artist from your Earth make this,” I tell her as we work. “He had the right spirit. Wanted to stick it to another artist who was hoarding the pigments he created. So my guy was determined to make the blackest black ever for everyone in the world except his rival. And I gave him just the secret ingredient he needed to create it.”

Mandy looks at me blankly then just shakes her head and returns to painting the sleigh. “Grown ups are so weird. Getting mad about whose black paint is the blackest? Just weird.”

I frown. “Well, when you put it like that.”

We work in silence for a time, before she turns to me. “You didn’t answer my question. Won’t Santa be mad you painted his sled the blackest black ever?”

“Doyouthink he will be?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I would be.”

“Then why are you doing it?” I ask.

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She purses her lips in a miniature version of the exact same expression Lyla makes when she's thinking.

"Santa quit his job on Christmas Eve. Mommy always says you should treat people not just how you want to be treated but how they want to be treated," she says thoughtfully. "Santa treated the whole world meanly. That's not nice. And he said you should do his job for him right?"

I nod. "That's right."

"Well," she frowns. "That means you need his stuff if you're gonna do his job. Right?"

I nod again. "One could argue that, yes." Mandy is truly a child after my own heart.

She shrugs. "So that's why I'm doing it. It's part of the deal. If you're going to do his job, then you should do it your own way."

I beam at her logic as we finish up the sled. "You could teach my demons a thing or two."

She grins. "Oh my gosh, how fun would that be?"

"The most fun," I agree.

The paint dries fast, courtesy of my special ingredient. Demonic sulphur. Does wonders for the depth in the black hole-like pigment, and dries nearly instantly. So

the sleigh is done by the time Tzul and their two assistants return.

And they are indeed dressed as elves. Or...some version of elves. With red and white stripes that look like blood splatter, and a garish hat that almost looks elvish but lands just left of it, in much darker territory. Though I hesitate, Mandy does not. She's exuberant.

"Oh my gosh! You all look so cute! I love it." She squeals and looks to me. "Any chance I can change into one of these? I like theirs better."

Tzul looks ready to explode with excitement. I hope he doesn't. It was such a mess to clean up last time.

"Oh yes, Master, may she? We have an extra. The perfect fit." Which obviously means they've been hoping for this exact reaction. They are already in love with the child.

Will they pine for her once she goes home? Or will they cherish this memory as I will? Though, I'm starting to think I'm going to do both. Which is not very good for my dignity.

"Fine. You two have worn me down. But only if you're sure your mother won't mind," I say, vaguely wondering if I should wait to ask Lyla, but then deciding this can't be that consequential, can it? It's just an outfit. Both costumes are ridiculous, anyway.

And Mandy and Tzul are too excited to change my mind now.

Tzul scrambles away then returns with said outfit. So fast I'm certain this was the plan all along, but he clutches his air of innocence as he hands Mandy the clothing. And really, it's an amazing thing to see a demon with such an innocent expression.

She looks around for a place to change and I direct her to the office near the barn. With full plumbing, I might add. After all, I am not the one here to be punished.

I cut Tzul a glare at his deception, but when he smiles sheepishly I can't maintain it.

"The pretty lady makes you smell nice, Master," the demon says suddenly.

"I..." I feel momentarily rattled, but this won't do at all. "Nonsense. I am the King of Hell. I am not meant to smell... nice."

I expect my tone to intimidate the defiant demon, but he just smirks knowingly. "Sure thing, Master. Whatever you say."

I growl and turn away from him just as Mandy returns. She's skipping back through the trees, surrounded by a different set of demons. Good grief, they're flocking to her now.

I smile when I see her and she gives a little spin, looking like a goth elf going through a dark phase. "You make it work," I tell her.

She giggles, then walks over to admire the sleigh with Tzul by her side. "I feel like if I touch this I'll fall through space," she says, and I know the artist will enjoy hearing those words, when next we speak.

"It's missing something, though," she says.

"What's that?"

She looks up at me, her big blue eyes red-rimmed, a sure sign of the encroaching sleepiness. "We still need reindeer."



“I don’t have any,” I say, “but I have something even better. Come, let me show you.”

Mandy shakes her head. “First, you need to get your costume on.” She’s very solemn and serious as she says this, and though I have no intention of dressing like that overgrown elf, I find I can’t say no as Tzul walks over and hands me a bag. “For you, Master.”

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He even bows.

How are these two plotting against me when they don't even speak the same language?

As if the child can read my mind, she grins. "I'm using Pictionary to communicate with Tzul," she says. "I talk and he draws pictures. I've already learned some Demon. Wanna hear?"

Before I have a chance to reply, she makes some sounds that do sound vaguely like Demon in a rusty accent. "You like cookies with butter?" I say with a smile.

She frowns. "Milk. How do you say milk?"

Tzul makes the appropriate sound and Mandy repeats him, then beams with her progress. "I'll be fluent in no time. I wonder if there's an app that teaches Demon?"

I chuckle. "I'll look into it."

I shake my head, staring at the bag of clothes in my hands, then with a flick of my wrist I summon a whirl of black smoke and when the smoke fades I'm standing in my demonized version of a Santa outfit. Black and silver and white, with the traditional hat to top it off. In black too of course. I'm not dressing in all red, not even for Mandy. I don't need to look like a giant bloodstain.

"Much better," she says, slipping her tiny hand into mine. "Now, about the reindeer?"

I guide her across the field and through the narrow stand of trees to a large barn, built of gray stone rather than wood. Wood isn't advisable when the occupying animals can occasionally shit flaming embers. One bad case of bowels and the whole thing would go up in a blaze.

It, in fact, has done just that. Which is why it's now built out of stone.

Mandy tugs my hand. "Where are we going?"

She stifles a yawn, and I can tell the night is taking its toll on her, no matter what superpowers kids on Christmas Eve get.

But when we walk through the heavy doors--that I push open after she tries and fails to open them herself, letting out an adorable grunt of frustration in the process--her jaw drops. "Puppies!" she screams, and all the Hellhounds turn to look at us, low growls in their throats.

In a move that proves the kid has zero self-preservation instincts, she runs into the pack of hounds like she's in a petting zoo for bunnies.

"Hello puppies!" she says in a baby voice as she kneels to hold her palm out to them. There are about two dozen of them, since three of my bitches just gave birth to new litters.

Others are working--guarding various levels of Hell, keeping an eye on the cells.

But some of the older pups are ready for real work, too.

And all of them are a good three times Mandy's size, even the youngest and smallest of the pups.

She looks like a chew toy in their presence, but they instinctively know to treat her gently. I know their moods like my own, so bonded are we.

Slobbery tongues the size of Mandy's head are licking her, and she's ewwwing and squealing with feigned disgust and clear delight.

When all the greetings and wagging tails have settled, the giant black canines form a protective circle around the girl, their ears perked and heads facing her, as if they've been called to a meeting.

I stare in shock. I've never seen them act like this before.

"Okay," she says, taking control of the room. "We need eight of you to fly Satan Claus's sleigh tonight. You have to be able to fly, and um..." she pauses, thinking. "And carry us and all the presents. But there's magic, so I think you'll be okay. Who wants to come?"

This isn't how I planned on going about this, but I watch in fascination as the hounds begin stepping forward one by one. As each does, she holds out a small hand like a royal sword for knighting, patting each one on the head. "I dub thee Dasher," she says to the first. "And you shall be Dancer." And so on, through to Blitzen. "That's eight," she says.

I feel Lyla approach, but keep my gaze locked on Mandy. I'm not worried the hounds will hurt her. I'm more entranced by her bewildering powers over them.

"She's always been like this," Lyla says with a smile. I can hear it in her voice. "She has a way with animals. We'd have a whole menagerie if my apartment complex allowed pets and I could afford it. She has strays following her home from our walks all the time, and I swear there's a bird that shows up at her window everyday with a small gift."

“She is channeling primal magic,” I say. “It’s the only kind animals respond to. Earth magic. Nature magic. Very elvish.” I almost hate to admit the relation to elf magic, but it’s true.

Lyla sucks in her breath and watches as the sound of a whine draws Mandy’s attention.

The hounds are circled around her, but she steps forward, and two larger hounds part to reveal a much smaller hound standing there, ears too big for his head, eyes wide and trusting--not like a proper Hellhound at all, half-tail wagging. This hound is much smaller than the others, small enough that Mandy can pick him up and hold him against her chest. “Oh look at you. You’re the sweetest aren’t you? A good boy.” She studies him carefully then nods. “And look at those bright red eyes. They practically glow. I dub you Rudolph. You will guide the sleigh for the others.”

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The pup yawns with a wide mouth and little puffs of fire spark around him. Lyla gasps and moves forward, but I hold her back. “Look.”

Mandy laughs and sets Rudolph on the floor. “The elf clothing protected her.”

Lyla exhales, her shoulders relaxing.

“Let’s go, deerhounds, it’s time to deliver presents!” Mandy says, marching out of the barn and back toward the sleigh.

And to the astonishment of every demon--and human--present, all nine of them follow her in an orderly fashion.

It does not take long for us to strap them to the sleigh, but Mandy pauses, frowning. “Hm...”

As if reading her mind, Tzul snaps his fingers and another demon arrives carrying a large bag. He hands the bag to the girl, who peers into it and smiles, then says “thanks” in Demon, shocking her mother.

“She’s already learning their language?” Lyla asks.

I nod. “She’s an extraordinary child.” I glance at the beautiful woman beside me and smile. “She must get it from her mother.”

Mandy drops the bag on the floor and the demons help her take out the contents and strap them to the Hellhounds, who stand patiently during the entire process.

The cheeky girl has given them each fake reindeer antlers. “This way, against the moon, they will look like Santa’s reindeer and people will believe. Just like in the story me and Mommy read each year.”

Lyla walks forward and pulls her child into a hug. “It’s perfect.”

There’s an excited energy in the air as we all climb in.

“Are you ready?” I ask her, holding the reins but knowing I won’t need them. My hounds know my will. That is all that is needed to guide them.

Still, the reins are a nice prop. Something to occupy my hands so I don’t give into temptation and touch Lyla in ways I know we both want.

I tighten my knuckles around the leather straps as Lyla smiles nervously. “As ready as I’ll ever be,” she says.

Mandy whoops from the back seat. “Let’s do this!”

I press the red button on the dash, and we fly.

11

Lyla

I clutch at the list as the sleigh lurches into the air. Mandy is in the second row, whooping like crazy. Her delight is palpable and I can’t deny the smile spreading across my own face. Deciding to not hold back, I let out my own whoop of exhilaration. There is no explaining the thrill of being pulled through a night sky in a sleigh.

Lucifer presses some buttons on the dash and then we're flying through one of his fiery portals. I close my eyes as we pass under the flames and then suck in a breath as true winter cold hits me. Wind whips at my face and hair and I reach up to grab my hat, but it's staying on as if it's glued in place.

Magic, I think to myself. For that matter, other than my nose and cheeks, I'm not cold in the least. Looking down, I run a gloved hand over my pantsuit. It feels like normal velvet, but I'm not uncomfortable. Gurch is sitting in my lap wearing one of those ridiculous Hell-elf costumes and doesn't look bothered at all.

"Where to first?" Lucifer raises his voice just a little and glances in my direction.

Right, this is where my part came in. I look over the edge of the sleigh to see if I can guess where we are. "Is this Chicago?"

"Yes," he says.

I run my finger over the list the way Gurch has shown me and pull up the list for Chicago. It's surprisingly small for such a large city. Maybe Santa already got a lot done in this area.

"The Denricks! They live in an apartment complex in Lincoln Park. Gurch says if we get close the sleigh should do the rest." I watch as Lucifer stands confidently, the reins loose in his hands.

"Then the Denricks it is."

The sleigh makes a sharp turn to the right and I clutch my seat tightly. "Mandy, you better be holding on!"



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“Don’t worry, Mommy! Mr. Lucifer put in a seat belt!” she hollers back.

I jerk my head back to look at her. She lifts the blanket from her lap and displays a tight black strap clasped across her lap. She smiles impishly up at me as if to say they thought of everything.

The flight to Lincoln Park doesn’t take long, which isn’t a surprise. Magic and all that. The list in my hand begins to vibrate and I gasp.

“That’s the signal!” Gurch wiggles in excitement and I wrap an arm around him to make sure he doesn’t wriggle right out of the sleigh.

“We’re close!” I tell Lucifer and carefully raise the list so he can see it. “The closer we get, the more it vibrates.”

“Hm.” Lucifer glances at me. “You’ll have to be my navigator. Whatever magic links the list to Santa does not apply to me.”

The list jerks in my hand. “To the right!”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Lucifer guides the sleigh to the right and levels out. When the list gives another jerk, I shout out a command.

Within seconds we’re floating above a tall apartment building, the architecture old and graceful. Street lights glow in the dark and light sprinkling of snow floats around us. Lucifer stands and grabs the sack from beside Mandy.

“Well, I suppose this is the place.” He hefts the sack over one shoulder and smiles.

Gurch leaves my lap and jumps to his master’s shoulder, patting his ear. “I do stockings.”

I look down to hide my smile. Are the devil's minions always so cute and presumptuous?

The bright glint of gold flashes on the list and catches my attention. “Wait!”

“What is it?”

“There’s a D next to their names!” I stand up in my excitement and the sleigh rocks a little. I can’t help my squeal. Lucifer reaches out and steadies me.

“Does this mean they’re almost failing at something?” His voice is amused in my ear.

I push away gently and clear my throat. “No. I think it’s the opposite. Gurch, Fuchsia, and I think it means they are Descendants. Families from magical lines that still carry a little in their blood. Why else would Santa bother making the notation?” I don’t bother telling him Fuchsia put in a call to a friend in the North Pole. It was just to confirm what we’d already guessed.

“And what does that mean for me?” His expression sours and I have a feeling he knows exactly what it means.

“You need to encourage their belief.” I reach out and grab his hand. “Do something they can’t just shrug off. Rejuvenate their magic. Who knows? If everyone does this and keeps at it, it might even encourage their magic to grow. I’m certain it will at least help the children keep it alive longer.”

“You want me to pretend to be the miserable old elf?” Lucifer purses his full lips as if he’s tasting something nasty. Maybe candy canes.

I know I will never eat another one as long as I live. I’m traumatized.

“You don’t have to be Santa Claus, Mr. Lucifer! Be Satan Claus!” Mandy undoes her seat belt and leans forward eagerly. “Just do a little something they will always remember.”

“I’m not sure I’m that creative, sweetheart.” He smiles down at my daughter.

Sweetheart? Did they become that close while working on the sleigh?

“Not creative? Your entire job is about creativity. How many levels of Hell have you created? How many ways have you devised to make souls pay off their debts?” I snort.

“Fine. Then let’s do this together.” He reaches out a hand and grasps Mandy’s.

“Wait! We can’t just go in there! We’re human! We need masks! And you too! What if we’re contaminated and you accidentally carry that into someone’s home?” I touch his arm.

He looks like he wants to argue, instead he sighs and black masks appear, covering all of our mouths and noses. Even on Gurch, though I’m not sure how it’s staying in place since the little demon doesn’t have ears. “I assure you, my magic precludes any kind of disease, as does the jolly sick bastard’s. But if it makes you feel better than I shall comply.”

“It does,” I say. “And if we get caught, I don’t want them worrying either. This year’s been hard enough.”

“Very well then.” He turns his head to Mandy. “Don’t be scared.”

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“Wha--” I’m cut off before I can finish my question as Lucifer, Gurch, and Mandy swirl into black smoke and I watch as my own hand, then arm disappear too.

I suck in air but am careful to not make a sound.

The next second we’re all standing in the living room of a very expensive apartment.

“What the hell was that?” I whisper yell up at the man next to me.

“Mommy, we have to be quiet.” Mandy raises a finger to her masked lips and I clamp my mouth shut.

“Were you scared?” Lucifer leans down and whispers in my ear. There’s a hint of teasing in his tone.

“Confused, not scared.” I turn to correct him and our noses bump. He doesn’t pull away. Instead he points up at the ceiling with one finger. I tilt my head up just enough to see the clump of sparkly mistletoe hanging in the archway above us.

I look back at him as my heart picks up pace and I lick my lips, getting the taste of medical-grade mask on my tongue.

“If we’re going to keep magic alive, we should keep up the traditions, don’t you agree?” He leans just a little closer. I look to the side and notice that Mandy is nowhere near us, instead she’s curiously inspecting the Christmas tree with Gurch. It’s a huge tree, nothing like the one at home. Gurch seems to be asking questions about the different ornaments.

“I think... you’re right.” My heart lurches in my chest and I feel a giddy dizziness as I lean forward a little more. That's all he needs for an answer.

I see the smile in his eyes before he pulls down his mask. He caresses my cheek, slipping my mask off with his finger as he does. He dips his head until our lips are a breath apart. I feel an electric current run between us, and when our lips finally meet that familiar zing rushes through my body. Whatever magic is left in my blood is definitely responding to his magic. His mouth is slow and tentative at first. Gentle presses and caresses of his lips on mine before the warm tip of his tongue traces the seam of my mouth. I open, letting him in, savoring his taste. With his free arm, he pulls me snug against him and I give in fully. My hands run through his hair, tangling in the curls, before gently tracing his horns with the tips of my fingers.

He gasps softly against my mouth, but he doesn’t stop. On the contrary. He leans into my touch and slides his hand to the small of my back so he can press closer. I can feel every line of his body through the ridiculous velvet bodysuit and it suddenly doesn’t feel so ridiculous. I’m glad I let Fuchsia bully me into the outfit. In fact, I have to fight to keep from rubbing myself against his hard, taught body. I love he is taller than me, love he doesn’t mind I’m not a size two, love how secure I feel with him and against him. I grip his horns, one in each hand and hold him so he can’t back away. He may have asked for this kiss, but I’m the one in control now. The hand on my lower back is slowly dipping further south and I am here for it. It’s been so long since I’ve been kissed, but I know it’s never been like this. As if our souls are communing on some deeper level. It feels as if I was made just for him. As if--

Only the sound of a giggle can break the special magic our kiss has entranced us with. My hands drop from his horns as if I’m burned by them and I try to step away, but Lucifer keeps his arm firmly around my waist. I bury my face against his chest in utter humiliation.

“I see Mommy kissing Satan Claus.” Mandy hums the tune with the words before her

giggles overtake her. When the giggles grow louder, she slaps hands over her mouth.

“Why you sing?” Gurch stops his work.

“There’s a song about that,” she whispers to Gurch. “That makes this funny.”

“Mandy,” I hiss. How embarrassing to get carried away in a stranger’s house in front of my daughter.

“Hmm. You teach later?” The little green demon in his goth elf suit is scrambling up the mantle and stuffing all sorts of things into the stockings. “Demons like songs.”

“Sure! I know lots of songs,” Mandy says.

“Not so sure you’ll like their singing though,” Lucifer whispers, his voice wry. I look up into his eyes and take a moment to appreciate just how handsome he is. My gaze drifts back to his lips and they curve in a sexy smile, full of promises. “As much as I’d like to continue this bit of magic, time resumes the moment we’re off the sleigh. So we need to hurry.”

“Oh!” I step back as we both slip our masks back on, and I watch as he puts the large red sack on the floor. “When you open the bag, the toys meant for this family should be the only ones you find,” I say.

Lucifer scoffs. “I always figured him for a cheat. This is too easy. Where’s the challenge?” The King of Hell shakes his head as he reaches into the bag and pulls out a bright red package trimmed with green ribbon. He looks at it and sighs. “All these years and he’s never changed his color scheme.”

“Maybe that’s part of the magic! So no one forgets.” Mandy dashes forward and grabs the present. “I’ll put it under the tree!”

“It is good branding,” I say.

The sound of tearing fabric catches my attention and I run over to Gurch who is trying to stuff a piece of chocolate the size of a basketball into a stocking.

“Gurch, that doesn’t fit!” I grab the chocolate before the little demon can do any more damage.

“It is appropriate stocking material. Candy about a game the child likes.” Gurch frowns at me. “Should go in stocking.”

“Ah. Okay, yes, a Basketball made of chocolate is a great idea, but it’s too big for the stocking. So why don’t we just put this one with the presents?” I take a step back and watch the three little eyes glaring at me mulishly.

“I make fit.”

“No, you’re tearing the stocking. Put something else in it. The child will still be very happy.” I hold the chocolate behind my back so Lucifer can take it from me and hopefully hide it from the determined little demon.



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“Fine.” Gurch turns to the stocking, moves his mask to open his mouth... and proceeds to vomit candy, toy cars, and what looks like a set of colored pencils... all into one very lucky boy’s stocking.

I swallow back the bile that rises in my throat. It takes a few tries before I can speak without wanting to throw up myself. Are those toys and candy dry, or covered in demon... Nope. I can’t think about it. Nope. Nope. Nope.

Lucifer is laughing quietly. “Santa Claus might have a bag like Mary Poppins but Satan Claus has a barfing demon.”

I look at him and know there is no way I’m keeping even a quarter of the disgust off my face. “I didn’t realize that’s how we were transporting the stocking stuffers. We just discussed what was appropriate.”

“Well, he got that part mostly right.” Lucifer hands the last present to Mandy before standing up and holding a hand out to me.

I take it and smile. One house down... who knows how many more to go?

“Don’t forget the milk and cookies!” Mandy lifts the glass and thrust it at Lucifer.

He takes the proffered beverage and sniffs delicately before sliding his mask to the side to take a minuscule sip.

“The cookies too!”

“I’m not really a cookie kind of person.” He frowns at the plate but picks up a very fancy chocolate chip cookie. If I had to guess, these are from one of the upscale bakeries in the neighborhood. A far cry from the burnt offering we left out.

“You liked the one at our house,” I remember.

“True. Yours were special.” He sniffs the cookie and sighs. “I also usually don’t have to eat as many. There’s a reason Santa wears pants with an adjustable waist.”

“I’d offer to help, but global pandemic, ya know?” I smile behind my mask and raise my shoulders, fully aware that he’ll be able to scent my amusement.

The sound of porcelain shattering causes us all to whip in the direction of the small table. Gurch holds the plate, now missing a large mouth shaped piece. His mask hangs from one side of his face as he continues to chew. When he notices us all looking he shrugs.

“I help.”

The sound of footsteps scrambling above us are quickly growing closer.

“Do something!” I hiss.

“What?” Lucifer swoops Gurch up to his shoulder.

“Laugh!” Mandy runs over and grabs my hand. “Hurry!”

“You can’t be serious.” He looks at my daughter, eyes wide.

“Do it!” I wrap an arm around his waist. “You need to build the magic anyway!”

“I am not using that man’s ridiculous trademark.” His tone is slightly pretentious.  
“Think of something else.”

Steps sound on the stairs and I hear the voice of a man warning a child to stay back.

“There’s no time! Be a good boy!” I press my body against his, undoubtedly--and okay, intentionally--inspiring more the naughty than the nice in the Ruler of Demons himself.

“Only if I’m allowed to be naughty later.” He whispers in my ear, reflecting my own thoughts back to me. This is exactly the reaction I was hoping for. Standing on my tiptoes I pull down my mask and press my lips to his in a quick kiss.

“I’m counting on it.” I smile and pull my mask back up.

He looks at me with an amused expression, obviously aware of what I am doing, and enjoying it anyway. But just as we swirl into smoke, he lets out a booming laugh.

“Ho, Ho, Ho!” His voice echoes and I smile.

Perfect. Even if it does sound slightly on the evil side.

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Lucifer

I can still taste her mouth on my lips as we fly through the sky, the bitingly cold night air warmed magically by the sleigh--and my own hellion powers. Mandy has been a chatterbox this whole night, alternating between singing every Christmas song she can recall--none of which feature me--to occasionally bursting into loud Ho Ho Hos, mimicking my sinister version of the elf's obnoxious cawing. As annoyed as listening to songs about my nemesis for hours on end makes me, I can't help but notice the smile that keeps creeping onto my face. The joy that I feel is...buoyant. Unparalleled.

And temporary.

We have been flying all night, though the magic of the sleigh warps time, turning hours into seconds, even within our bodies. Lyla and Mandy will not remember every single house we have gone to. Their minds will not be able to contain the paradox of their experience tonight. It would drive them mad. But they will--if they choose--remember the highlights. The rest will be like a dream they once had. They will hold onto the feelings. The warmth of good will and joy.

But their minds will never comprehend the magnitude of what they've done tonight.

Only mine does.

The immortality of my consciousness is expansiveness itself. My mind grows with the ages, creating tunnels and pathways and labyrinths of memories I can pull forth at any moment.

I will remember every detail of my time with Lyla and Mandy, and when this night is over and I lose them to the living, I will replay these memories over and over. Will that be my personal heaven? Or personal hell? I don't know.

Maybe both.

It is one of my gifts. Memory can be its own kind of torture.

I know I will never forget that kiss for as long as I exist and I'm not sure if it's a blessing or a curse.

I lose my smile, and my gaze cuts to Lyla, who is staring into the sky, watching the lights of the houses as they loom larger the closer we get.

Our contract is for one night.

She has a life. A child. A place in her world that I do not.

I dropped hints... their own rooms, the invitation for Mandy to come again, in order to gauge her reaction, to scent her needs. But she remained aloof, guarded.

And I realized...

There is no path forward that is good for her, if I lay claim to what I want more than anything.

Which means I cannot. I refuse to ask more of her.

When this night is over, when our mission is complete and our contract fulfilled, I will leave her with everything she needs to live any kind of life she wants without having to work another day in her life, and then I will walk away forever.

My chest burns with frustration.

This decision brings me no comfort.

It flies in the face of every self-instinct.

I am not used to being denied anything.

I am certainly not used to denying myself anything.

And yet.

I know I must.

I know I cannot ask Lyla to choose me, when she and Mandy have their whole lives ahead of them.

Human lives.

Mortal lives.

The thought of it makes my heart burn like a million suns.

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“Where are you?” Lyla says, curling into my arm as she pulls it around her shoulders. “You look far away.”

“I’m thinking we are nearly through our list,” I say, glancing back at Mandy, who’s sound asleep and curled up with Gurch. “This is the last house.”

My words serve as a reminder to her that the night we are having is just a fantasy, not the reality for either of us.

“That’s great,” she says, but her voice carries a heavy wave of sadness that I can taste in the air. It rivals my own.

“Yes,” I say. “Great. We showed that bloated elf what’s what.” I try for my old bluster, but it falls flat. And when Lyla turns her head to hide the tears I know are welling in her eyes, my heart breaks again.

I take her hand in mine, holding it tightly as I guide the Hellhounds with my free hand. We haven’t spoken about our kiss. Our growing intimacy. The feelings we’re developing for each other. We seem to have an unspoken agreement that we will not commit these things to words. That what we have must live outside the limitations of language.

To speak of it is to doom it prematurely.

The night isn’t over yet.

Not quite.

“I don’t understand how we did this,” she says, leaning her head against my shoulder. I inhale the strawberry scent of her shampoo, setting it--like everything else about her--to memory. “It feels... strange. Surreal. How did we physically do all these houses in one night? I mean, I’ve been here the whole time and I still don’t believe it.”

“It’s part of the magic,” I say, a bit lamely. But what other explanation can I offer?

She looks up at me, her blue eyes sparkling with wonder. “We will remember this, right? All of it?”

“You’ll remember what your mind can handle,” I say.

She frowns at that. “That better be all of it. I don’t want to forget...” she tightens her hand in mine. “Anything.”

“Do you have any more questions?” I ask, shifting the subject. “I want to make sure our contract is complete to your satisfaction.”

The mention of the contract sours the mood and I internally kick myself for ruining the moment.

“Do you think tonight helped? That we made a difference in inspiring more magic?” she asks.

I look at her, at the desperate longing in her eyes that reflects the intensity in my own heart. “You certainly brought magic back to my life,” I say, my voice huskier with more emotion than I intend.

Her eyes are bright with unshed tears but she swallows her feelings and clears her throat, pulling away from me a bit as she does. “I hope it helped. That we... helped.”



“What about you?” I ask her. “Has tonight brought the magic back to your life?”

She averts her gaze, staring into the distance instead. “You know it has.”

Her voice is soft as she speaks, as she deepens the open wound that hasn’t healed. “I didn’t think I would ever feel safe again,” she says. “I... I never thought I would be in a position to be hurt like he hurt me. And... I feel so stupid. Stupid for staying. Stupid for trusting.”

I temper my reaction, knowing that if I blow up--quite literally--the way that I want to, it will hurt her. She won’t feel safe anymore. I will have broken her trust. So I stay calm. And I listen.

When she realizes I’m not going to interrupt, she visibly relaxes, sinking into me as she continues baring her soul. “I was scared to leave. Scared I couldn’t make it as a mother on my own. Scared I wouldn’t be able to provide for Mandy. Scared he might come after us and...”

And get violent. I can taste her unspoken words on the air and I vow to pay a visit to this man who tried to break the woman I...

Shit.

“Tonight was a reminder that not all guys are like that,” she says, oblivious to the dangerous road my thoughts are traveling. “That... well, you’re not exactly a typical guy, but still. That I deserve to be treated well. You told me the truth. You were kind and considerate with me and my daughter. You helped heal my heart tonight, Lucifer. That is your special brand of magic. You are a healer.”

Her words slice through me like daggers, though I know that isn’t her intention. She believes her words a balm to cover my wounds, but she doesn’t understand how her

words make my heart ache for her even more.

Because she is saying the thing that I have always wished were true, but it's delusional thinking to imagine Satan could ever be anything but the antagonist in the narrative. There is no room for a version of Lucifer that heals. There is only Satan.

Still, even as her words strike their death blows, I crave more of it. I cup her face, trusting my hounds to guide the sleigh just fine on their own, and I lean toward her, desperate to taste that mouth again, to feel the fiery passion burning hot and fierce within her.

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I was gentle last time, but now... now I just want to ravage her, holding nothing back. Of course this is not the time or the place, so I will use just my lips to communicate my desires.

I claim her mouth deeply, with abandon, pulling her against my chest as I do. She sucks in her breath, and I still, waiting for any sign that she doesn't want this.

With her exhale, she scoots her body closer to mine. Winding her hand around my neck, her fingers digging into my hair, Lyla explores my mouth with her tongue. I lose myself in this kiss, in her, in this moment.

And then the elf be damned Nice List starts vibrating.

There's so much more I want to say, to do, to feel, but we have arrived at the final house on the list. Lyla and I peel ourselves away from each other, adjusting our clothing as we do, and I assess our location. It's a small cottage on the edge of a quaint town. It could have been charming once, but time and disrepair have given it a rundown, almost abandoned look.

Lyla looks back at Mandy. "Maybe I should stay here with her while you do this one alone. I don't want to wake her."

I can't argue with a mother's love, but Mandy spares me the need to even try when she jolts awake. "I'm up. I'm up!" she says a bit frantically, looking around and trying to pretend like she's been awake the whole time.

"Hey, bunny," Lyla says, leaning over the seat to be closer to her child. "You're

sleepy. Do you want to skip this one and rest?"

"No way!" she shouts, startling Gurch awake, who was slumbering on her shoulder. He's certainly worming his way into their hearts, I notice. Maybe he's following my example and making memories of his own to cherish.

Lyla laughs. "Alright then. Let's go. This is the last one!"

That's my cue. With a flick of my wrist, I produce the black smoke that will spirit us from the sleigh to the living room in a flash.

It feels much like walking through a gust of warm air and then poof, we are standing in the humble living room of one Chuck Bergstein and Mona Miller-Bergstein, parents to Sara Miller-Bergstein, age eight, precocious but kind, loves science sets--the more explosive the better.

Santa St. Dick's notes were thorough, I'll give him that.

The tree is in the north-west corner of the room, strewn with simple, hand-made decorations. No lights. There's one present under the tree. For Sara, no doubt. Nothing for her parents. The cottage smells of worry and regret. Too little food and too much stress.

Even Lyla and Mandy appear more somber, as if they too can sense what I do. And maybe they can. After all, they know what this feels like better than some.

I set the bag of gifts down, and Mandy opens it, revealing one elegant gift wrapped in shiny ribbon.

She looks under the tree and frowns. "The mommy and daddy need gifts too," she says softly as she places the gift gently by the other.

I frown. “I don’t think that’s how it works. The bag only gives one gift per child.”

Mandy sticks her lower lip out in a pout. “No wonder grown ups stop believing in magic. Magic stopped believing in them first!”

Lyla shrugs, her gaze locked on mine. “She has a point.”

I know she does. That's what's so irritating.

“It’s not my magic,” I say. “The Jolly Red Sausage is responsible for this. His magic, his rules. There are no more gifts.”

“What if I give up mine?” Mandy whispers. “For two years, I give up my right to a gift so this little girl’s mommy and daddy can have one too. Wouldn’t that make it fair?”

“Oh Mandy,” Lyla says, kneeling down to face her daughter. “That’s so kind and generous of you, bunny. You have such a big heart. I’m very proud of you. Even if we can’t change the magical rules, what you just did was brave and good.”

Mandy smiles sadly and hugs Lyla around the neck.

But of course, I can’t tell this little girl no, when she’s willing to give up her own gifts for others. Plus, she has a valid point. Why shouldn't the adults still have some magic in their lives? No wonder the magic of this world is dying. We’ve been stealing it from them all along.

The Council will be very interested to hear this.

I snap my finger and a contract appears in my hands. I hold out a pen to Mandy, but Lyla grabs my arm. “She is not using that pen!” Her voice is stern, alarmed.

“It is not the same pen. It has perfectly normal ink.”

“You cannot legally enforce a contract with a child,” she hisses, eyes wild.

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I chuckle. “Quite right, quite right.” Another snap and the contract disappears. “How about this?” I say. “I will cover the extra gifts, if you do me two favors?”

Mandy’s eyes widen. “What favors?”

“Clever girl,” I say with a smile and ruffle her hair. “Just like your mother. Always ask for the fine print.”

She giggles at the compliment.

“Favor one: be extra helpful with chores at home.”

She nods solemnly. “I promise. I’ll even clean my closet out.” She wrinkles her nose in disgust and Lyla laughs.

“Favor two: never stop believing in magic.”

I hear Lyla draw in her breath, and Mandy frowns, chewing on her lower lip. “I could never stop believing. Not now that I know.” Her voice is soft, but determined.

Lyla steps forward and wraps her arms around her daughter, but she looks over to me. “We will never stop believing. You’ve made sure of that.”

I don’t trust myself to speak, so as Gurch fills the stockings, I open a portal of fire and stick my arm through it, pulling out two more gifts, wrapped in black shiny paper with a silver bow.

My trademark colors. Let them wonder over this surprise.

I place them under the tree and then I pull Mandy and Lyla toward me and use my black smoke to transport us back to the sleigh.

The next stop... is home.

Their home.

I let myself take the scenic route, unwilling to rush our eventual goodbyes, but I can't avoid it forever.

We finally arrive at their apartment, and I magic us all into the living room.

Mandy is about to fall asleep on her feet, so I say goodbye to her first. I pick her up and she smiles sleepily at me. "I can't wait to see you again, Mr. Lucifer." She kisses my cheek, then promptly falls asleep on my chest, giving me no chance to tell her I won't be seeing her again.

It's for her own good.

Isn't it?

But she won't understand that. How can she when even I can't?

Lyla comes over and is about to take her from me, but I shake my head and carry the child to the couch, laying her down while Lyla grabs a thick blanket. Then I open a portal to the sleigh and reach in, bringing back with me Rudolph. He gets very excited when he sees Mandy, but I quiet him before laying him next to her.

With a little magic I alter his appearance. I take a step back and study my handiwork.



He still looks off--but Mandy will love it.

Lyla frowns, but I shrug. “You’ll thank me for this one day. And I promise you won’t have to worry about anything.”

We stand facing each other for an awkward moment. I’ve never been tongue-tied before and it’s not a pleasant experience.

“So, do you have any more questions?” I ask, stalling our final goodbyes.

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so. I mean, I’ll probably think of a million the minute you leave but... but I can’t think right now.”

I take a step toward her, breathing in the sadness and loss I can already smell on her. It mirrors my own emotions. I want to keep her, to keep them, so much I feel as if I’m ripping myself in two.

“Thank you,” I say. “For your help. For allowing me to meet your beautiful little girl. For bringing magic back to my life as well.”

Before she can respond, I lean in to taste her one more time, to claim her lips before I disappear forever.

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Lyla

I glance at the clock and can't even find the energy to frown. I'm exhausted on so many levels. Our magical night has come to an end. Lucifer swept into our lives and out... in less than a minute. I watch as the clock ticks and it turns over to two minutes past midnight. A minute past the moment I first heard two legendary creatures arguing in my living room. More magic.

I thought things were bad then.

And now... I don't know if I feel better or worse. Somehow better... but also lonelier.

I look at where Mandy is curled on the couch, her arm wrapped over the largest, quite possibly ugliest dog I've ever seen. Thanks to some demonic magic, the tiniest Hellhound now looks like the largest, derppest, pug in the world. His snores are the loudest sound in the apartment. Possibly the loudest sounds in the entire apartment building. It was stupid to agree so readily, but how could I say no, after all the bonds my child made with Satan, his demons and his Hellhounds?

So here I stand in a velvet leotard, the glow of Christmas lights from the tree filling the room, and an emptiness in my heart I hadn't known could be so vast.

That's when I see the snow globe sitting on my coffee table. It wasn't there before. I inch closer, taking it from the table to study it, my emotions catching in my throat when I see what's inside. The intricate detail is incredible. It's a moment caught in time. An exact replica of our kiss under the mistletoe, with Mandy and Gurch in the

background. Lucifer looks as lost in me as I do in him. I hold it to my heart and a tear trickles down my cheek. Yes, there is an emptiness in my heart, but I will try to fill it with the memories of our time spent together. Those moments where I felt as if I was the only thing that mattered to him, those moments when his eyes shone brighter when looking at Mandy. Of demons dressed in elf suits. Of Mandy commanding a team of Hellhounds and giggling like a fiend. Of the kiss...

A sob breaks free from my chest and I cover my mouth and sink to the floor, my back against the couch. Tears slip past my eyelashes, sliding down my cheeks.

I shouldn't be sad. It was an amazing night, full of the impossible. It was one night. Just one night. Or had it been? How long were we truly in Hell or at Santa's Village? What about the time spent in the sleigh? It feels so much longer than one night. And yet my clock says it was only one minute. One minute in which my entire life changed. How did the King of Hell steal my heart in under a minute? How will Mandy feel in the morning when she realizes we'll never see him again? A man she gave her trust to after all of the hurt and pain her father dealt her. A man who showed us magic is real? A man who lives in a fairytale castle while helping souls work off their sins. A man--an angel--the devil, who has one of the most important jobs ever.

Of course he had to get back to hell. Of course we mortals can't go with him. Of course we can't keep him. Of course I can't have him.

I cradle the snow globe closer to my chest and press my hand harder against my mouth to muffle my crying. I will not wake my daughter with my selfishness on such a special night.

I sit here for what feels like hours, staring at the tree through my tears. The presents have multiplied, wrapped haphazardly in acid green and blood red. It seems the demons made an appearance at our tiny apartment. For some odd reason, the image of demons scurrying around my apartment snaps me back to my senses and I fight a

giggle.

I'm tired, so tired. I crawl onto the couch, snuggling between the cushions and Mandy. Rudolph lifts his head to look at me, before running his slobbery tongue across my cheek and settling back into place. I wrap an arm around my daughter and bury my face against her shoulder. No matter what I face when I wake up, I have my daughter, and I can survive anything as long as I have her.

I wake to the sound of a giggle and the whine of a puppy.

"Shhh! Mommy is still sleeping!"

A loud thump, scramble, and squeal has me jerking into a sitting position and looking around the room wildly.

"Now you've done it," Mandy warns. She's glaring at the dog, but I know what that whine means. I scramble to my feet and run toward the door, almost tripping on a couch pillow and discarded throw blanket.

"Shoes!" I scramble for the ones I kicked off last night. "He needs to go out!"

"You were asleep! I told him he had to wait." Mandy stands up and pulls on snow boots. "I can't go outside alone!" She is running toward the door when I realize I'm still in what basically amounts to a velvet cat-suit, a la Naughty Christmas style.

"Wait! Go get a grocery bag!" I fumble around with the coat rack looking for something long enough to cover my butt.

"Grocery bag?" Mandy pauses.

"You have to clean up after Rudolph." I slide my feet into boots and zip up the parka

I pull on.

“Ewwww.” Mandy’s face twists into horror. “Mommy, does Rudolph make normal poops?”

“I guess we’re gonna find out.” She returns from the kitchen stuffing a plastic bag into her pocket. I look down at the dog. His tongue is hanging out the side of his mouth and his eyes look to be on the verge of panic. At least he waited this long, and didn’t just do his business on my carpet. “Hold on Rudolph, we’re going.”

We manage to make the trip outside and to the park next door without any issues. No one is out to notice Mandy’s emo elf outfit or the incredibly unnatural dog leading our way. In fact, it’s oddly quiet. That’s when it hits me. It’s Christmas morning.

Once back in the apartment, Mandy barely slows to kick off her boots before scrambling to the tree.

“Mommy! Can we open presents? Can we?” Rudolph sits next to her, stubby tail steadily thumping against the carpet. They are already attached at the hip. “There are ones with your name and Rudolph’s name too!”

Rudolph yip-growls in agreement and I shush him. The last thing I want to deal with is complaints from neighbors.

“Yes!” I sit down next to Mandy as she excitedly starts sorting gifts. To my surprise there are a few for me as well. Even Rudolph has a pile of his own. “Well, go for it!” I encourage her.

She starts with my gifts, oohing and awwing over the new jeans and sweater I’d managed to buy during a holiday special. She’s growing so fast. She really needs more than just the one pair, but this is what I can afford. The rest of the gifts are

smaller. A sketch pad, some new coloring pencils, a stuffed bear with dopey eyes similar to Rudolph's. She loves everything she opens, careful to make sure I know how much she appreciates each new treasure. I try to not cry at her show of gratitude. It hurts this is all I'm able to do for her. Mandy deserves everything this world has to offer.

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“Mom! You have presents too! Open mine first though!” She presses a package into my hands. I look down and it’s wrapped in birthday paper she must’ve found shoved in a closet somewhere.

Carefully I undo the paper and pull out the picture frame made of popsicle sticks and bits of crafts supplies. Where she found the picture to put inside, I have no idea. It’s of the day she was born, just me and her and I’m smiling larger than I can remember ever smiling. If I count, I can probably see every tooth in my mouth. Underneath the picture in glue and gold glitter, ‘Number 1 Mom’ is written.

“Do you like it? I used the rest of the gold glitter on this, that’s why we had to use silver for Satan Claus’ letter.”

My chin wobbles as I trace my fingers gently over the picture. “I love it.”

Setting it aside, I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my lap. She barely fits anymore, but I pepper her face with kisses just like I did when she was a toddler. She squirms and complains until I throw in some tickles too, which cause her to giggle. We’re interrupted when Rudolph tries to fit in my lap too, causing both of us to laugh when he seems bewildered why he doesn’t fit.

“Love you, Mommy.” Mandy throws her arms around my neck then quickly jumps out of my lap. “Now! Open the other presents!”

Without waiting she rips into the waiting gifts with glee, little squeals of excitement as she finds gifts I wouldn’t have been able to afford even if I still had my job. A game console with games. I pick one up and glance at the cover and am thankful

they're age appropriate.

"Mommy! Open some of yours too! I'll help Rudolph." Indeed, the hound has a pile of his own presents, one that is bone-shaped and already sporting signs of chewing and drool.

"Okay." I surreptitiously wipe the tears from my eyes and open the nearest gift, careful to keep Mandy's close. I try to not gasp when I see the luxurious bottles of skin care products I only dreamed about and the lotions that cost a small fortune.

"Are those nice?" Mandy pauses to look at me in curiosity. "They don't look like the ones you normally use."

"More than nice." I open one of the bottles and take a delicate sniff. "These are the kinds of things only really rich people use."

"Good! You're already so pretty, you'll probably look so amazing after using those Mr. Lucifer won't be able to look away!" With that she returns to her stack of presents.

I push away the pain her comment brings and instead focus on what I received. Even if I never see Lucifer again, I will remember our magical night every time I use these, and feel even more magnificent.

After that, the presents continue to grow in expense, clothes, shoes, things I've denied myself for years, all ending with a bracelet of rubies flashing with fire. They're even warm to the touch as I lift the bracelet from the box. I bring it close to my eyes in astonishment. Real rubies are often cloudy, not the crystal clear red stones people like to call rubies. Maybe they aren't rubies after all, maybe they're some sort of special stone you can only find in Hell.



“Ooooh.” Mandy leans over and studies the bracelet. “It looks like there is a little bit of fire in each one.”

“It really does.” I nod. Maybe there really is a little piece of fire in each stone, given who it’s from. Who knows? And the thought of having something that was made in hell makes me smile. Which would have sounded insane yesterday. But today I know how precious stones from Hell are, that they are created by souls wanting to be better.

I place the bracelet back in the box and carefully tuck it with the frame Mandy made. After I’m sure they’re safe I turn to Mandy and the giant pug. “Now, show me what you two got!”

Rudolph turns his head as if understanding and shows off a studded collar, obviously proud. He also has a matching leash and food bowls. And food. Someone in Hell is clearly a planner and I have a feeling I owe Fuchsia a thank you.

By the time every present has been unwrapped and carefully examined all three of our stomachs are rumbling. Laughing at Mandy’s attempt to drag the dog food to the kitchen, I follow behind her with Rudolph’s new bowls while the dog himself keeps pushing at Mandy’s legs as if to hurry her along. In the kitchen we put down a towel, because I’m certain Rudolph is not going to be a neat eater, and set up his bowls.

While Mandy feeds her new best friend I turn to the fridge and frown. There isn’t much for us to eat and there certainly won’t be any large Christmas breakfast. But there is cereal and just enough milk to feed Mandy, and I take that as a small sort of win. I grab a bowl before opening my pantry and come to an instantaneous halt. It is full. Every shelf is lined with food. Canned goods, different types of cereal, even a bag of potatoes meet my eyes. Real potatoes. Not the flaky kind that comes in a box. Bread, bagels, and rice fill just one shelf. Stacked neatly on the floor are paper goods and more dog food.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?” Mandy comes to stand next to me. “When did we get all of that? Oh my god! Look! It’s the chocolate loop cereal I’ve been asking for! Can I have that for breakfast? Please?”

I don’t answer her. Instead I close the door and walk to the refrigerator.

“Mommy?” Mandy trails behind me. “Can I have the cereal?”

“Just a minute, bunny.” I grab the handle and slowly open the door. I let out my breath and stare at the full shelves. Eggs, milk, butter, fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit. There’s even yogurt. How do they know the types of yogurt we like?

I lift my hand to my mouth and whirl to the counter where my stack of unpaid bills sat last night. They are gone. Tears fill my eyes. I know if I call the companies I will have zero balances.

“Mommy?” Mandy watches me with worry. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” I reach out and pull her to me. Her little arms wrap around my waist and she presses her face against my stomach. “I’m very much okay.”

“Did Mr. Lucifer give us all this food?”

“I think so, bunny.” I let go with one hand and wipe the tears from my face. When did he have time to plan this? When did it occur to him to do this for us? “Maybe with some help from his friends.”

“I really like Mr. Lucifer. He’s nice, isn’t he?”

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I laugh and give her a quick squeeze. What a funny thing to say. Yet, we both know it's true. "Yes, he is."

"Will we see him again?" She turns her head so her face is hidden from me.

My stomach clenches and I do my best to keep my voice even. "I don't know, Mandy."

"But you want to see him again?" She looks up at me with her big green eyes and I know it this moment Lucifer has stolen my daughter's heart too. We are both goners.

"I do." I really do. I wish he was here this morning to see just how happy he's made us. "But no matter what, bunny, we will always have last night and today to remember. We had an adventure that we will never forget. We know things are real that other people only dream about. You've been to the North Pole!"

"And Hell." She smiles up at me. "I really liked Hell."

I throw my head back and laugh. It's an honest to God belly laugh that I haven't enjoyed for... I can't remember the last time I laughed like this. Leave it to Mandy and Lucifer. She giggles and snuffles at the same time. I think we're both feeling the same thing in different ways.

Rudolph whines and does this weird little prancing before trying to push his head between us. I don't blame him. Human emotions are hard to understand. And while he seems to think the sun rises and sets with Mandy, he left his family behind. I will not forget that.

When we finally calm down, I put my hands on her shoulders and hold her so I can see her face. She wipes at her cheeks but is smiling, so I think we're okay.

"How does scrambled eggs with cheese, bacon, and French toast sound instead of cereal?"

"Can I have the chocolate cereal tomorrow?" Mandy wheedles.

"If you eat all your breakfast and dinner." I boop her nose and let go. If we have this food, I'm not going to let it go to waste. I think making good use of it is the best way to show our thanks, even if no one is watching.

Then again, if Santa Claus sees us when we're sleeping and knows when we're awake, maybe Satan Claus does too.

Cooking, eating, and taking care of Rudolph take up most of our day. It is a lovely, lazy Christmas spent talking to my family on the phone, hooking up the new game console, and filled with lots of cuddles. The night ends with all of us, and I do mean all of us, in my bed. Mandy is snug in the middle sound asleep while I try to ignore the sounds--and smells--Rudolph is making in his sleep. The sulfur scent is probably never going to wash out of my blankets.

I hold my snow globe up and give it a shake. My eyes trace the planes of Lucifer's face, but it's the look in his eyes that hold my attention. In that moment, I was the only thing Lucifer was focusing on. As if the world around us stopped and it was just the two of us and the intense connection that links us. This moment, perfectly preserved, will warm my heart on the hard days ahead.

The next week is an odd combination of comfort and lingering thoughts. If I have to give this feeling a name I would say... It's almost like a hangover. How do you follow up such an amazing adventure? Even Mandy seems to be lost in thoughts from

times to time. She decides two days after Christmas to send a thank you letter to Lucifer. I'm not sure if it will work like it did with Christmas, but I'm proud of her thoughtfulness, so don't discourage her. If nothing else, maybe Fuchsia will see it.

We drop off the letter while walking Rudolph. Despite my worry over having a dog, especially a Hellhound, most people either ignore him or love him. I find myself wondering if the people who seem to ignore Rudolph just don't have any magic left and the ones who notice him still have a hint in their blood like Mandy and I. Though I'm starting to suspect we might have more than most others or wouldn't more people see Santa on his deliveries? I also wonder if we will start to see things we didn't see before. Sadly, I hadn't thought to ask about those types of things.

And the fact we have magic is still mind boggling. It's abundantly obvious that Mandy has a way with animals. But what about me? I mean, I get along with animals and sometimes seem to know things before they happen, but don't most women have that sort of intuition? Is my magic why people open up to me so easily, willing to tell me their entire life story over a cup of coffee? Come to think of it, my dad has that effect on people. Everyone automatically trusts him, tells him things they would never share with anyone else. Do these gifts come from him, my mother, or maybe both? My mother has a way of whipping together things at the very last minute. Wedding dress ruined? You call Abigail Haliday. If she can't fix it, she will know who can, or someone who just happens to be selling an unused dress in the perfect size. Yeah, I'm thinking the magic is strong in those two.

Does Mandy's father have magic in his blood? I snort at that thought. I suppose being a con man, a magic touch would be helpful. Now there's a true devil, hellfire and brimstone. Leaving him and keeping Mandy was the best moment of my life until this week.

Lyla

I spend the following days perusing job ads online and playing video games with Mandy, interspersed with walks to the park with Rudolph. Our days are peaceful and normal... and missing something. Maybe our days aren't missing something, so much as someone. Mandy doesn't complain, not once, and I think part of that is because she has Rudolph to help fill the void Lucifer left in her heart. At night I fall asleep staring at my snow globe and wondering how Lucifer is doing. Is he busy? Does he think about us or has he gone back to his normal routine? His job is so incredibly important, it's not as if I can ask him to stay with me. To stay with us. Despite what so many believe, we need him..

The next morning is New Years Eve and I decide we're not going to let this gloom linger any longer. I need to at least pretend things are okay for Mandy.

"Why don't we stay up until midnight this year?" I ask Mandy.

"Really?" she asks around a mouthful of chocolate cereal. "You'll let me stay up this year?"

"Yep! Let's eat lots of junk food and watch the ball drop on the television." I smile at her.

"Yes!" She jumps up from her seat and does a little dance. "Rudolph! We get to stay up late!"

The dog dances around her, his goofy eyes shining at her happiness.

"What should we make?" I ask as I clean up our dishes.

"Popcorn, obviously," she says with giddy excitement. "This morning there were new

crackers in the pantry and that cheese that comes in the spray can. And ice cream with all the toppings.”

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I bite the inside of my cheek to check my annoyance. “How do they know about that spray cheese?” I put my hands on my hips. “Do they have canned spray cheese in Hell?

“Welllll... I may have made a request,” she admits sheepishly, glancing up with a sweet smile. “I haven't had any in a long time.” She touches her pointer fingers together.

"And how did you do that?"

“Yesterday I was really hungry and you fell asleep with the tablet on your face.”

I cover my eyes with my hand. "How did you make this request?"

“Well I just opened the pantry and said aloud what I wanted. It’s worked a couple of times now.” She shrugs.

“You’ve done this more than once?” I frown.

“Um, yeah. Just little things. Not for anything expensive.” She twists in place while I contemplate what I want to say. “Like snack cakes and beef jerky.”

“We’ve been okay. More than okay. And now I find out you’ve been making excuses and asking for even more! That won’t do.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy. You’re right. That was selfish. I have more than enough and should have asked you.”



“Okay, let's not do that again. Lesson learned.” I nod my head and turn back to the sink. They have given us so much, I can't stand the idea of asking for any more. I still have my pride.

“We don't have to have the cheese! We could cut up fruit and put that on a dish,” Mandy offers.

“That sounds like a good idea. There are blocks of cheese too, so I can cut some into cubes.” Honestly, I shouldn't be surprised. As soon as I use something to cook, or eat, there is a replacement the next time I open the fridge. If something doesn't get eaten, it magically disappears, replaced by a new option.

“Yum!” Mandy gives me a quick hug before running out. Probably to play one of her favorite video games. I really hope this doesn't become an issue when we start back up for school.

I am elbow deep in dish water when Mandy calls my name.

“What is it?” Is there something wrong with her game? That would be more like our luck this year.

“I think you need to see this, Mommy.” There's something off in her voice that has me quickly finishing the dish in my hand, before going out to meet her in the living room.

“Are you okay? Did Rudolph have an accident?”

“Nu-huh.” She points at the tree. “There are more presents under the tree.”

I frown and turn to look. There are in fact a couple of presents that weren't there this morning. Instead of the acid green and blood red wrapping paper from Christmas,

these are wrapped in black paper that has a silver sheen when you move the package, and black satin ribbons.

“Are they from Mr. Lucifer?” Mandy scrambles under the tree on her knees. “They are!”

“Get out of there before you knock the tree over, or Rudolph thinks you need help.” She giggles at my words, but carefully extracts herself from the branches. My heart speeds up. Lucifer sent us presents? Why? We fulfilled our contract, why would he send us any more than he already has?

“They’re for us,” she says. Her eyebrows pinch together as she thinks. “But it’s not Christmas or our birthdays.”

“Only one way to find out, kiddo. Grab a present and start unwrapping.” A week ago, I would’ve been scared and warned her away from surprise presents that came out of nowhere. Now, I’m anxious to see what they are.

“There’s a card here for you.” Mandy picks up the black envelope and I look at my name written in silver ink with delicate precision.

I take the envelope and sit down next to my daughter. Carefully, I open the letter so nothing will tear.

Dear Lady Lyla and Sweet Mandy,

I hope this letter finds you both in good health. If you do not have plans for this evening, I beg you join me for a New Year’s Eve party being held in Hell. You’ll be quite safe since immortals are immune to disease, nor are we carriers. I hope you do not mind, but I took the liberty of picking out holiday dresses for you both. If they’re not to your satisfaction, say Fuchsia’s name three times and she will come to help.

I am greatly looking forward to seeing the both of you. My days and nights have been empty since we parted and I'm not sure I can bear it much longer.

To accept, simply say yes and your answer will be relayed to me. If it is your desire to enjoy my company for the evening, I will pick you both up at eight tonight. If you do indeed have other plans, I will console myself with the thought of you wearing your new gifts.

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Yours for eternity,

Lucifer

My fingers trace the sweeping handwriting and stare. He hasn't forgotten us after all. He wants to see us. He wants to spend more time with us. And much more time might have passed for him than for us.

My heart tries its best to burst into a thousand tiny pieces, but I hold it together.

"What do you think, Mandy? Should we stay? Or should we accept Mr. Lucifer's invitation?" I watch her face morph into something entirely too close to the look of teenage disbelief.

"Mommy, of course we have to go. We can watch the ball next year." Mandy grabs a large box addressed to her. "It would be rude, considering all the work he put into this."

"That's true." I hum under my breath.

"Do you not want to go?" Oh, I want to go all right. I want to see Lucifer again, to hold his warm hand, to see his smile. I want to kiss him at midnight and--

My thoughts come to a screeching halt.

Nope, I won't go down that road. I have no idea what his intentions are by inviting us. I like to think it is because he's missed us as we have him, but I could be

completely wrong. Even now, it's hard for me to believe someone could want me.

I hold up the envelope and letter and whisper, "Yes."

"Best. Dress. Ever!" Mandy stands up and holds the fabric to her shoulders. The gown is black, with a black and white striped underskirt that peeks out from the bottom. It's beautiful, the craftsmanship superb. It has silky capped sleeves and an empire waist, with a sweet quality to it that fits her age, but also something a bit darker that suits the emo personality she seemed to have developed since Christmas eve. A happier Wednesday Addams vibe, for sure. She spins in a circle. "It's perfect."

"It is." She carefully drapes the dress over the back of a chair and opens the other boxes. The second box contains shoes, shiny black Doc Martens to be exact. She lifts them and holds them out for me to see. "It's like he read my mind! These are perfect."

In the next boxes are a necklace with a pendant that is so old, I'm almost afraid to touch it. And yet, he sent it to my child to wear to his party. It's a cameo necklace, the white profile on a black surface, surrounded by diamonds. There are also baubles for her hair.

"Open yours, Mommy!" Mandy slips the necklace over her head, admiring the pendant cupped in her hands.

I lift the largest box and carefully untie the bow. Inside is a dress made for an extravagant social event. The material is pitch black and has a scoop hem, leaving it longer in the back. This dress leaves me speechless. When I lift it from the box and hold it to my shoulders as Mandy had done, my eyes widen. The neckline plunges deep between my breasts, but has a black panel of sheer fabric in the center. It hugs my curves until just above my knees where it sweeps out in layers. Black lace has been applied in places that will draw the eye, embellished with black thread that

glints in the light.

“Whoa. Mommy, you’re going to look amazing!” Mandy smiled broadly, carefully tracing some of the intricate lace. “Like a gothic princess.”

“What do you know about gothic princesses?” I look at her with a smile.

“I know I want to be one someday. Wow!” She looks back at the tree. “What else did you get?”

One box holds a pair of heels that make my inner fashionista squeal. Black like the dress, they each have a little bit of lace that matches the dress and bright red bottoms. Simple and elegant. The last box holds a pair of earrings made from the same stones as my bracelet which I never take off. They are shaped like teardrops and placed in an antique setting.

Mandy whistles and I look up in shock. “When did you learn how to do that?”

“I dunno.” She shrugs her shoulders. “But it felt like this was the right time to do it.”

I laugh and clutch the gifts to my chest. “We get to see Mr. Lucifer tonight.”

“I’m so excited!” Then she pauses. “But what about Rudolph. Won’t he be sad if we go to his home without him?”

“We’re not. He’s used to his leash now and is very well-behaved. We should definitely bring him with us.” I stand back up and smile. “Well, bunny, I think we have a change of plans. Instead of pajamas and snacks, we’re going to Hell for a party.”

Her giggle is so full of delight, it’s contagious, and before I can stop, I’m giggling

myself too.

It's still early, but I am going to take my time getting ready for this party. A long hot shower using the products I received on Christmas, and an insane amount of time shaving and preening. I take my time on my hair and make up, opting for a deep red lipstick. It was a gift from a friend last year, when we were able to still see friends. At the time I thought I'd never have a reason to wear such a bold color. Yet, here I sit, carefully applying the red to my lips.

Mandy takes a shower as well, without any grumbling, and even asks me to curl her hair. I use the black and red baubles to secure some of the hair away from her face. When she turns to me I fawn over her, making her blush.

"Eh, stop it mom! It's just a dress!" She waves her hands in the air as if to fend off an attack.

"Mom? Mom! What happened to Mommy?" I look at her and place a hand to my chest. "Where is my baby and who are you?"

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“I’m still me, Mommy.” She smiles up at me, her eyes mischievous. “But who are you? You look like Maleficent. Just no horns.”

I laugh as she walks around me, eyeing me critically like an actual fashion designer. I place my hands on my hips and pose dramatically for her. She giggles and turns back into the little girl I know and love.

“You’re silly, Mommy.” She reaches out a hand and touches the red bracelet on my wrist. “But you look really pretty tonight.”

“Thank you.” I look at the clock on the wall in my room. “We better put on our shoes.”

Without a word, she runs out of my room with Rudolph on her heels.

I open the shoe box for my new heels and carefully take them out. It’s been a hot minute since I’ve had a reason to wear heels, especially ones that aren’t intended for working in an office. I slip them on and am relieved to find they fit perfectly. I have a funny feeling that my toes won’t be cramped and there will be no blisters on the sides of my feet at the end of the night.

I look at myself in the mirror and stare in wonder. I’ve never looked this... sexy. This dress is worth more than I made in a year at my old job. I look like someone else.

I pull all of my hair to one side of my head so it all splays across just the one shoulder. I only curled the ends and it looks perfect. I secure it all in place with a simple hair pin the same shade as my hair.



I'm studying my eyes, wondering if I should add another layer of mascara or not, when I hear a familiar sound I thought I would never hear again. The hiss and magical whisper of a fiery portal being opened in my living room.

I can hear Mandy talking animatedly while Rudolph lets loose with a string of happy growls and yips. Then I hear his voice in response and my whole body flushes. Even clinging to his memory didn't do him justice. His voice alone is enough to heat me from head to toe. I check myself in the mirror one last time, take a deep breath, and make my way down stairs.

Lucifer is standing at the bottom in an all black tux, except for the red tie pin and cufflinks. If I was worried about his reaction to me, I now know I didn't need to be. His dark eyes drink me in hungrily and his mouth is just slightly ajar.

"I told you she looks like a princess." Mandy crosses her arms, her expression smug.

"You're wrong." He says softly and steps forward, lifting my hand to his lips. "She is a queen, a goddess gracing us with her very presence."

I want to scoff at the cheesiness of his words, but I'm breathless from his hand holding mine and the warm press of his lips.

"Oooh. I like that!" Mandy looks at me, her eyes wide. "You do look like a queen. You just need a crown."

"Thank you," I tell Lucifer. "For the dresses, the party, the food, everything. I've wanted to thank you countless times over the last week."

"Had I known you were waiting for me, I would have come running sooner." He lowers my hand, but doesn't let it go. His eyes stare into mine, as if willing me to understand how much he had wanted to come running. "I did, however, receive a

very generous Thank You note from one little princess.”

He looks at Mandy and smiles. “Thank you, dear. Your words warmed my cold heart.”

Mandy’s cheeks turn pink, but she smiles broadly. “I’m glad you got it.”

“Your heart is not cold.” I smile up at him. “Look at all you’ve done for us, for the world. You might pretend to be cool and calculating, but there is a squishy warm heart under that exterior.”

“You’re too kind. I am most certainly cool and calculating.” He reaches up and brushes his thumb over my cheek. “However, you bring out the best in me.”

It’s my turn to blush and I lower my eyes. “I do have one complaint.”

“Whatever it is, I will do my best to remedy it.” His voice sounds worried. In fact, if I wasn’t listening to his words so intently I might have missed the nervousness. Has he missed me as much as I’ve missed him?

I look up at him coyly and give him a small smile. “You’re entirely too smooth with your lines.”

He blinks, then laughs, obviously not expecting that answer. He pulls me closer so that I have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. “My dear, I fear I must deny you this once, because I’m resolved to steal your heart. I’m incredibly selfish in the end.”

“And what will you do with it if you manage to capture it?” I tilt my head to the side and hope my smirk distracts from the pounding in my chest.

“What does any one do with their most coveted treasure?” He leans forward, his lips

teasing my ear. “Keep it. For eternity.”

I shiver and lean into him. “Human’s do not have eternity, but I’ve resolved to let you have it for as long as it lasts.”

“Dear, you underestimate me again.” He leans back a little and I look up at him, heat staining my cheeks because of my declaration. “I’m the Devil, Master of Hell. And you, My Lady, have magic singing in your blood.”

“Mandy?” I whisper softly.

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“The same. She’ll need to spend time on Earth to grow to adulthood, but that is nothing unmanageable.” He leans forward and presses his forehead to mine. “I’d be honored to be part of her life as long as you will let me. In fact, there is only one thing I want more.”

“What is that?” I frown.

“To be part of both your lives. To claim a space in your hearts no one else can have.” His hand cups my cheek. “Fill the hole in my heart, be the light of my soul.”

I stare into his eyes and wonder if he’s using magic to mesmerize me. My entire being feels entranced. “Is this magic?”

“Isn’t love always magic?” he asks.

“Is this love?” It’s been so long since I’ve been in love and this feels so fast, but also so much stronger, like what I felt in the past was a pathetic photocopy of the real thing.

“It is for me,” he replies. “Lyla, I can wait as long as you need to decide.”

“No, no, Lucifer. I want to try this.” I reach up and place my hand over his heart. “I want to try us. But I have to always take Mandy into consideration.”

“I don’t know why.” My daughter’s annoyed voice interrupts me and I turn to her, blinking. Her hands are on her hips as she stares at me. “You deserve to be happy, Mommy. Isn’t that what you tell me? Isn’t it what you tell your friends?”

Under my hand, I feel Lucifer's chest vibrate and I glare up at him. He's trying his best to not laugh, while I get lectured about my love life by my eight-year-old daughter.

"I know I'm little and don't know anything about all the mushy stuff. But I know when you're happy and Mr. Lucifer makes you very happy. I've seen you looking at the snow globe so many times, I'm surprised you haven't worn it out."

I widen my eyes and make a face at her. Why is she spilling my secrets? And doing so while looking so much like me is unfair.

"And if that isn't enough, maybe you should ask me what I want."

"She does have a point, dear heart." He strokes his thumb over the hand he is still holding.

I give him an unamused look. If I didn't know better, I would think they had set this up together.

I pull away from Lucifer, even though it feels so nice to be back in his arms.

"Okay. Mandy, what do you want?" I realize I'm unconsciously mirroring her pose. My pose. Whatever. So I let my hands fall to my sides and definitely hear soft laughter behind me.

"I like Hell, Mommy. I like the demons and the happy souls. I like the Hellhounds and my giant pink bed." She pauses and leans around me to look at Lucifer. "Think we could add some black to my room?"

"Done." The amusement in his voice is obvious.

She looks back at me and this time, there is a vulnerability in her gaze. “And I like Mr. Lucifer. I don’t want to never see him again.”

“We can’t spend all our time in Hell.” I cup her face in my hands. “Time stands still there. And we have to visit our family. You need to go to school. If school ever goes back to normal, that is. But if you are really okay with this, I think we’d both be very happy.”

“All three of us would be very happy,” Lucifer adds quietly in his baritone.

Mandy reaches up and covers my hands with hers. “Let’s be happy, Mommy.”

Tears fill my eyes and her face turns horrified. “Don’t cry, Mommy! Don’t cry! This is happy! Happy! You’ll ruin your makeup!”

I laugh and pull her to me. “Since when do you care about make-up?”

“You look so pretty. I didn’t mean to ruin it.”

I dab carefully under my eyes with one thumb and smile. “You haven’t ruined anything and I won’t cry.”

“Good! Then let’s go party!” Mandy steps back and claps her hands. “My first grown-up party!”

“Eh, these people might be older than dirt, but I wouldn’t call all of them grown-up.” Lucifer steps forward and offers both arms. “May I have the honor of escorting you ladies?”

I step forward and slip my hand in his arm and watch as Mandy mirrors my actions on the other side. Rudolph doesn’t bother to wait for us and leaps through the portal

the moment it opens.

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As we pass through the flames I feel the familiar whisper of Lucifer's magic and then we're standing in Hell. People--I should probably say beings-- part as we walk through a crowd. Demons are interspersed through the masses and Mandy waves happily at them all.

Lucifer stops and introduces us to one magical creature after another, keeping us close the entire time. I have a feeling this possessiveness is actually a compliment amongst the immortals we're meeting. As if he's saying we're privy to all his lifestyle entails. I try to not ogle at the Easter Bunny whose ears moved independently of each other. Even as a child, he'd been my favorite. Mandy finally loses her calm when we meet the Tooth Fairy. She's everything I would expect of the Tooth Fairy. An ethereal beauty, shimmering skin and wings, and the sweetest, calmest voice I've ever heard.

"Oh my God!" Mandy lets go of Lucifer and covers her mouth. "You're the Tooth Fairy! The real Tooth Fairy!"

"It's lovely to meet you, Mandy." The tooth fairy is barely taller than my daughter, but I can feel the weight of her years.

"You know my name!" Mandy squeals.

"Of course. I have several of your teeth."

I blink. She does? What the hell have I been saving in that little box all these years?

"We'll leave you to chat," Lucifer smiles. Mandy waves a hand at us as Lucifer steers



us away and I cringe when I hear my child asking questions about wings.

“It’s fine,” Lucifer whispers in my ear. “Aletta loves talking about her wings.”

“They’re very beautiful,” I reply.

“Not nearly as beautiful as you.” He takes my hand and spins me out to arm length.

“Let me look at you. I don’t feel I have seen nearly enough.”

I blush as his eyes travel from my head to my toes. I look around, but no one is paying us any attention. I look back at him and decide to let myself revel in the heat of his gaze and return his admiring stare. His tuxedo is well tailored, fitting his tall, lithe frame perfectly. I let my eyes linger on his broad shoulders, the sharp edges of his cheekbones and chiseled jaw, and stop on his eyes. I feel as if I’m falling into his soul, seeing all the dark and bright pieces at once. I want to explore them, ask him questions.

With the flick of his wrist he brings me twirling back into his arms and music begins. He spins me about the open area between trees and other couples join us. The music is beautiful, magical, and reminds me of wind chimes, but fuller. The field is lit by the soft glow of the souls floating above and I really do feel like a fairy princess. We move over the grass in smooth, easy steps. I’ve never learned any ballroom dancing, but Lucifer makes it easy.

“I will talk to Father Time about Mandy, if you would like.” His breath stirs the hair on the top of my head and goosebumps breakout on my arms. “He may be able to make it so she will still grow and mature at the correct rate while in Hell.”

“You think he would help?” I look up at him.

“I would ask tonight, but it’s his busiest business day.”

I laugh softly. “That makes sense.”

“Are you sure, Lyla?” His eyes stay on mine. It’s the first time he’s said my name tonight and my eyes flutter shut as heat fills my core. His voice is sinful.

“About what?” My voice is high and wispy.

“Us.” He spins me once and then brings me back to his arms. “About being in a relationship with Satan. I’m not exactly a well-loved immortal. And I’m being incredibly selfish for trying to keep you for myself. I tried to let you live a normal life, but I’m not strong enough.”

“Are you sure?” He misses a step and looks down at me when I throw his question back at him. “Are you sure you want to open your life to a mortal single mom and her daughter?”

“I have no doubts.” He stops dancing and pulls me close. “And, as I said, the mortal thing is not a big deal. The more magic you are around, the more you will absorb, and Hell is full of it. Even without time standing still in Hell, you would stop aging. Is that an issue for you?”

I lay my cheek against his chest and think about it. “No, not if I’m with you. But Mandy needs to be able to make her own decision when she is an adult.”

“The decisions will always be in your hands. And then hers.” He lets out a breath and I feel him shudder. “I will admit to you, the past few days--which have stretched long and wide, damn near an eternity--have been horrible. I’ve been impossible to work with as I contemplated you telling me no. In fact, I had convinced myself you would turn me down flat.”

“How could I with all your sweet words?” I trace his jaw with my fingers.

The chime of a large bell fills the air and I look around in confusion.

“The countdown has begun.” He hooks a finger under my chin and lifts it. “Are you ready to start a new chapter with me?”

“Yes.” The twelfth toll of the bell fills the clearing and his lips claim mine. It’s not slow and sweet like the one we shared on Christmas Eve. This is a kiss of claiming, deep and thorough, leaving me breathless.

When something comes hurdling at us and hits us at full speed we’re knocked apart.

“Happy New Year!” Mandy has an arm around both of us.

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Lucifer reaches down and lifts her in his arms so she's level with us. He kisses her cheek and smiles. "Happy New Year, Mandy."

She looks at him and smiles back with tired eyes. "You look happy."

"Happier than I've ever been." I hear the ring of truth in his words and my heart feels so full.

"Happy New Year, bunny. Have you had fun?" I kiss her other cheek and she leans her cheek against the top of my head.

"So much fun. We measured how far the Easter Bunny can jump, it was insane! And Ms. Aletta, that's the Tooth Fairy, offered to take me flying!" She rubs at her eyes. "But Rudolph ate something that didn't agree with his stomach and ran around in a circle, scared of his own poop, so I had to go help. He's okay now. Mr. Dan gave him something to drink and he stopped having the fire poos."

I open my mouth and look at Lucifer not quite sure what to say. All I can picture is the demented looking giant pug shooting fire out of his ass as he runs in circles.

He laughs. "It sounds like you've had a good night."

"It was one of the best, but Christmas Eve was better." She pulls away from me and lays her head on his shoulder.

My heart stutters and I swallow hard. Is it possible to see a sweeter scene?

“Did you have something to eat?” He asks.

“Mhmm.” She closes her eyes. “Mrs. Claus brought me a plate and made me eat. She looked different.”

“Santa and Mrs. Claus are here?” I look around. I have a thing or two to tell that elf.

“Somewhere.” Lucifer shrugs. “She’s my sister, after all.”

“You’ll have to explain that to me one day.” I tell him.

He holds out his free arm for me and starts walking toward the castle. “I look forward to it.”

By the time we get to Mandy’s room, she’s snoring softly and Rudolph is already tucked under her blanket. He lays her down and I carefully remove her shoes before tucking her in with a kiss on the forehead.

“Goodnight, bunny,” I whisper.

“Mhmm.” She rolls over and cuddles closer to Rudolph.

We leave her room quietly and I’m suddenly full of nervous energy.

“You look like you’re worrying about something.” The sweetness is gone from Lucifer's face and replaced with ravenous lust. His eyes travel over my body again and I know exactly what he’s thinking as he stalks toward me.

I take a step back and collide into the wall behind me. “What am I thinking?”

He places a hand on the wall next to my head and looks down at me. “You’re

imagining me naked.”

The surprise on my face must be blatant because he laughs. It has a seductive quality to it that makes me shiver. “Fair enough. I’m the one imagining you naked.”

“Oh.” I swallow.

He twirls some of my hair with his free hand. “I can wait, Lyla. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want you. Right now.”

“Oh,” I whisper again and he laughs.

“When was the last time someone made you feel desired?” His hand rests on my waist, his thumb rubbing a small circle.

I do some mental math in my head and figure if Mandy is eight, it has most definitely been longer than that. Maybe nine years? How embarrassing is that?

“When was the last time you made a woman feel desired?” I jerk my chin up, refusing to answer.

“I’d like to say tonight.” He leans down and nuzzles my neck. “But before that, it’s been a long while.”

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“What does a long while translate into in your lifespan?” My voice breaks as he opens his mouth and softly licks my pulse point.

“Much, much longer than you’re thinking.” The hand on my waist slips lower and his body presses closer to me. “You smell divine. And I would know.”

I laugh, feeling breathless as his lips travel from my neck to my shoulder.

“Then we should remedy that,” I say, replying to his earlier statement.

“Thank God.” He steps back and sweeps me into his arms. “Your room or mine?”

I giggle and wrap my arms around his neck. It’s my turn to torment him and press my lips to his jaw, licking and nibbling. He groans and starts walking toward the room that was made for me on my last visit.

“Your room. I can’t make it to mine.” His voice is husky and filled with desire as he crosses the sitting room and kicks open my door.

“Lucifer!” I chastise.

“I’ll fix it. I promise.” He strides to my bed and stops.

I work at his tie as he sets me on my feet. He shrugs out of his jacket as I finally undo the knot of his tie and slide it off his neck.

His mouth crashes into mine, his fingers tangling in my hair as he cups the back of

my head. I groan and press closer to him. My hands run over his chest, tracing the lines of hard muscles underneath. His free hand is at the small of my back and presses me tightly against him. I can feel every inch of him and I've never wanted a man the way I want Lucifer.

Growing needy, I pull at his shirt, not caring about the buttons that pop under my hands. I shove it from his shoulders and take a moment to admire him. And then I'm back, licking the hard lines I traced with my fingers earlier. My hands eagerly go to his waist and undo the button of his pants and grope for the zipper.

"Lyla," he growls. He threads his fingers through my hair and gently pulls me away. "Sweet, Lyla. You're going to be my undoing."

He pulls my face back to his for a long, slow kiss. He moves his hands from my hair, tracing my neck, then the curve of my breasts. I press into him, wanting more. So much more.

That's when he grabs the front of my dress and pulls. The sound of cloth tearing clears a little of the fog from my brain as my beautiful dress slips from my shoulders to the ground.

"Fairs, fair, love." He smiles, but it's his turn to go a little wild. His hands cup my breasts, gently kneading while his thumbs tease my nipples.

"Please," I whimper.

With a growl, his hot mouth finds one peak, swirling his tongue over it before sucking. I groan and grip his hair in an attempt to keep him right here. So good, it feels so good.

While his mouth is occupied, his hands are shamelessly exploring my body. I



whimper when he teases the lace panties I chose for the night. Somewhere deep inside, I was hoping the night would end this way.

Despite my grip on his hair, he pulls away to lavish my other breast with the same amount of attention.

I moan loudly and tip my head back. His hold on me tightens and I pull at his hair in desperation. When he slides my panties down my hips and gently slips his hand between my thighs I turn to butter. He growls again as he explores my core and I finally find purchase, wrapping my hands around his horns.

“Yes!” My hips move on their own, urging him to do more. “Please, Lucifer.”

I caress his horns, remembering his reaction during our first kiss and he stiffens. Suddenly the scrape of teeth meet my nipple and I continue to trace the curve of his horns while whispering his name and begging for more. When his fingers finally slip inside, I reach for his pants, sliding them down so I can capture his hard length.

He hisses when I stroke him, matching the speed he sets. As I near the peak he pulls away and I whimper. He rakes my hand off him and presses a gentle kiss to my palm.

“Not the first time.” He picks me up and I wrap my legs around his waist as he makes the way to my bed. “I want it all, Lyla.”

He sets me down and I lay back, spreading my legs in invitation. “Then come and take it.”

Instead of climbing onto the bed with me, he kneels and uses my legs to pull me toward him.

“A taste first.” He kisses my inner thigh, slowly getting closer to my hot core. “I need

to taste you.”

His lips are soft and gentle, a chaste kiss at first, before slowly growing into something more. As my hips move and writhe on the bed, he watches me and I keep my eyes on him.

“I need--I need--” I can’t finish the sentence, desperate for release.

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He pulls away slowly, gently licking and kissing, before standing up.

“Move back,” he orders. He’s shed his pants and there is nothing to hide the magnificent view.

I do as he commands, enjoying the way his eyes watch my every move. When he finally crawls onto the bed and covers my body with his, I’m not sure I’ll be able to last long. The heat of his body is enticing as I run my hands over him, delighting in every touch.

“Do you have protection?” I barely manage to remember to ask.

He chuckles against my throat. “No need. You will not conceive unless we want to.”

“Oh.” I have nothing to say to that, but when he settles between my legs I find more words. “Yes. I need you. I need you, Lucifer.”

“Lyla. My sweet Lyla.” He kisses my shoulder. “You have me.”

With that we’re one, our bodies moving in a dance as old as humanity. He whispers my name in my ear over and over, until it’s all I can hear. My name and the sound of our lovemaking.

“Lucifer!” I’m so close, the edges of my vision start to blur.

“Yes, love. Come for me.” His thrusts speed up. “Come for me, Lyla.”

And I do. Stars exploding behind my closed eyes, my body arching in the most sensual pleasure I've ever experienced.

"Lyla!" He shouts my name as he comes, gripping me tightly against him.

I sigh as our bodies go limp and realize my voice is hoarse. Was I screaming? I really hope the palace is sound proof.

He moves, swiftly rolling over, so I'm sprawled on his chest and not crushed by his mass.

"Lyla. My beautiful, sexy Lyla." His voice is full of smug pride.

I prop my chin on my hand and look at him. I reach out and trace his jaw. "My Lucifer. My wonderful, sexy Lucifer."

"For as long as you will have me." His eyelids are heavy as he opens them and watches me.

"Eternity, then," I reply.

"As you wish."

"Happy New Year, Lucifer." I lay my head on his chest and listen as his breathing evens.

"Happy New Year, Lyla." He brings my other hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to my knuckles. "May it be happy and filled with love."

"That is the best type of magic, after all." I snuggle closer to him.

He softly chuckles as he strokes my hair and lulls me to sleep. Contentment rolling through my body.

For the first time in forever, I am truly happy.

Epilogue

Lucifer-1 Year Later

“You have it, right?” I lift my glass to hide my mouth so no one can tell what I’m saying.

Fuchsia rolls her eyes and looks at me. “Yes, Mr. Bond,” she says, gently teasing me.

I set the glass down and sigh. “Who knows if either of them have learned to read lips in the last year? The other day Mandy wrote her history essay in Demon and Elvish.”

“She is currently talking with Jack Frost by the fountain.” Fuchsia raises an eyebrow. “I believe he was showing her how to draw snowflakes in the water.”

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“That little shit,” I growl and turn around to look for the boy. “I don’t want him around Mandy.”

“Why would that be, Master?” My friend lifts her glass and hides her mouth this time and I know it’s because she’s smiling.

“She’s too young to be courted.” Isn’t that obvious?

“She’s almost ten. In the time in history when Jack was originally brought to life, Mandy would be old enough to be betrothed.” Fuchsia takes a step back, canny as usual.

The glass I just picked up shatters in my hand and sends shards and champagne everywhere. “Centuries have passed since he was born. Things are different now. She is planning our trip to Disney World, not a wedding. Not any time soon.”

“Poor child. What will she do with you as her father?” Fuchsia cocks her head to the side. “Her suitors will face a fierce challenge indeed.”

I straighten my shoulders and adjust my tie. Father. Not a title I thought I would ever have. But I asked her a month ago if she approved of making our family official and she had agreed. The little sneak had even helped me pick out the--

“You’re sure you have it?” I look at Fuchsia again.

She aims her most droll stare in my direction. “You know that I do.”

“Of course. And the--”

“I have that as well.” Fuchsia sets her glass down on the table. “I will go finalize everything now. Are you ready?”

“Of course I am.” I straighten the arms of my tuxedo jacket and fiddle with the cuff links. Fuchsia hands me two small boxes that I tuck into my pocket. Of course, I’m ready. Unless she says no. I’m most definitely not ready for that. Maybe I should wait a while longer. We have eternity after all.

But no. Mandy is growing and deserves to have a stable life. Not that her life isn’t stable. I just want to be part of it. Officially. I’m the devil, after all. I’m selfish like that and a stickler for details. I have them, but I want it all. Titles included.

I watch Mandy playing with Jack for a little longer, but manage to restrain myself from going and interrupting. She is obviously happy and having fun. Instead, I turn my attention back to the crowd and look for Lyla.

My Lady is wearing a blue dress this year, as dark as the night sky. Crystals are scattered across it like stars. She looks like a goddess. The train of her gown swishing behind her as she crosses the grass, talking with Medusa. Gurch is trailing behind her, the ever faithful servant. Though, Lyla lectures anyone that calls Gurch that.

“Who knew you were such a romantic, Lucie?”

My thoughts grind to a halt as I recognize the voice next to me. I turn slowly and glare at the asshole.

“You really shouldn’t taunt me in my own realm, blood bag.” I sneer at his outfit. It’s mostly red, of course. He’s wearing a dark red flannel shirt, red vest, jeans, and an old baseball cap. “You do realize this is a black tie event, do you not?”

“Of course.” The old elf pulls at his jeans as if they’d been slipping down. “I dressed up for your special night.”

“This is ‘dressed up’?” I take a deep breath. “If you’re here, my sister must be nearby.”

“Of course, Lucie.” My sister appears next to me in a much more appropriate gown for the evening, even if it is red. Her white hair is glistening, bright eyes twinkling, her smile shining. “We couldn’t miss your big night.”

“What are you talking about?” I narrow my eyes. No one is supposed to know about tonight except for a few key people and I am certain they would never break my trust.

“Well, don’t worry about us, sweetie. We just want to see the fruits of our labor.” She tightens her shawl around her shoulders.

“You what?” I frown. The hobo posing as a lumberjack next to me laughs and it is much happier than the last time we crossed paths. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t worry, everything is as it should be.” My sister pats my cheek. “You know we love you.”

“You, yes.” I cut my eyes toward her undeserving husband. “Him, I would rather not contemplate.”

“As much as I enjoy our little games, you’re my brother in law. Of course I care.” The elf has the audacity to clap my shoulder as if we’re comrades... or friends.

“What games are you referring to?” I push his hand off my shoulder with one finger.

“Ah, well, let's not ruin those by talking about them.” He lifts the mug he is carrying



and I realize he's drinking hot cocoa with what smells like a heavy shot of peppermint schnapps. Disgusting. "Tell me did you ever figure out Mandy's Christmas Wish last year?"

He regards the girl with warm eyes. The difference in him from that night and now gives me the creeps. And I'm the Devil.

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“She wanted a dog. As you can see, she has one of the very best.” Rudolph sits next to Mandy, watching people as they walk by. He might be the runt of the litter, but he is doing a fine job of guard duty right now.

“No, no.” The idiot waves a hand as if I have it all wrong. I still have the letter in my office. I know for certain that she asked for a dog. “I asked about her Christmas Wish, not what she wanted.”

“You’re talking in riddles, which is a dangerous pursuit for simpletons.” I sneer at the man. I will never understand what my sister sees in him.

“A Wish and a want are two different things, Lucie.” My sister goes to her husband and slips her hand under his arm. “She wanted a puppy. And you did a magnificent job, making sure she had the best. But did you ever figure out what her real Christmas Wish was that night?”

“I--I suppose I do not know.” I feel off center and dislike the sensation.

My sister smiles. “I’m going to go say hello to Mandy.”

I watch her as she walks away. “You’ve got her talking nonsense now too.” I turn and look at Nicholas. “Is it so bad in the North Pole you’re both losing your damn minds?”

“The North Pole is in perfect shape as usual. Even better, thanks to you and your lady.” The stuffed sausage looks at me with a serious expression and that gives me pause. “I suppose you could ask Mandy.”

“Ask Mandy what?” I’m becoming annoyed. This is an important night and I don’t plan on spending it with him.

“What her Christmas Wish was.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Or you can ask me. I am the one that made it happen.”

“Excuse me?” I am incredibly insulted. I delivered on Mandy’s Wish last year. That was the whole point.

“Oh, fine. Fine. I’ll tell you.” The elf motions for me to lean forward. Without knowing why, I do as bid.

“Get on with it,” I hiss, figuring the sooner he has his say the sooner he will disappear himself from my life.

“She wished for her mother to be happy.” The old man leans back, the twinkle in his blue eyes is brighter than I’ve ever seen. For the first time, I feel like I’m seeing him as humans would.

“Mandy wished... for her mother to be... happy.” I try to process this.

“Yes. The very best type of Christmas Wish.” He takes a sip of his spiked cocoa.

“Her wish was for someone else. How could we not make it come true?”

“So you’re saying...” I don’t even want to finish my thought because it would mean I’m indebted to this tub of Red Dye 40 for the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. And I cannot abide that.

But he smiles his cheeky shit-eating grin and deliberately makes his eyes do that annoying sparkle. “You can thank your sister. She’s the one who knew that Wish would intersect with your deepest desire.”

“And what’s that?” I ask.

“To love and to be loved,” he says simply. “That is the wish of us all, is it not?”

Before I can respond, my sister reappears and hands me a single malt scotch.

“Don’t be hostile,” she says as I take the glass. “I just want you to be happy. That was my Christmas Wish. Has been for ages. To our delight, the Fates aligned all of our wishes last Christmas, the child’s included.”

I take a drink and then narrow my eyes at the elf. “How did you know I would take over Christmas?” I ask.

He chuckles a soft ‘ho, ho, ho’ and I roll my eyes. “Lay off the branding, old man. You don’t need to perform here.”

“I might not be as old as you, but even I know how to read people,” my brother-in-law says.

Jessica nudges her husband. “Be nice. This is a special night.”

Now I glare at her. “And how do you know that?”

She shrugs. “The way I have always known your secrets. It’s in our blood. Now, give that woman and her child their new wish.”

“And what wish is that?” I ask.

She grins. “I should think it obvious. Lyla’s wish is to be with you forever.”

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My stomach does a somersault. Well that I can oblige.

“And that beautiful girl of yours,” Jessica continues. “Her greatest Wish is that you will be her father.”

My heart fills with pride.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to tell me their wishes, are you?” I glance at my sister and fight my smile.

“If I don’t you’d never figure it out.” She pokes my shoulder. “I’m your big sister. It’s my job to take care of you.”

I roll my eyes, but there is no fighting my smile this time.

She takes my empty glass from me and I walk away from them both. Nicholas chuckles his trademark laugh and I don’t even care anymore. All that matters is Lyla and Mandy.

I find them talking with Mother Earth, who doesn’t often make an appearance at my holiday parties. This year she looks tired, which makes sense given the abusive relationship she’s in with humans.

I greet her and admire her gown of vines twining her strong, mountainous body.

She bows her head, sending golden leaves falling over us. “It is good to be here. I needed a break,” she says, before heading to the group of demons playing a strange

kind of game that looks like bobbing for apples but involves rotten sacks of puss.

Once I have the attention of Lyla and Mandy, I guide them to a special spot in a snow-covered garden with glowing winter flowers casting a blue hue over us.

Mandy smiles knowingly as I bend onto my knee and hold up the first box, opening it to reveal an Art Deco ruby and diamond engagement ring. “Lyla my love, this last year with you has been the stuff dreams are made of, and I never want to wake up without you by my side. Will you do me the honor of marrying me and becoming my queen?”

She gasps, one hand going to her heart, her eyes filling with tears. “Really?” The word is a whisper, carried on the wind.

Does she still doubt she is the most desirable woman in the world? I’ll have to work harder.

I stand and move toward her. “Yes, really.”

I can smell her desire to say yes, but she looks to Mandy first, which I fully anticipated. “What do you think, bunny?”

I pivot to the girl about to become my daughter and take a knee again. “I have a gift for you as well.” I open the second box and hold it out to her. A small ruby and diamond ring, much more modest than her mother’s, but magicked to grow with her so she never has to have it sized. “Will you do me the honor of being my daughter?”

This is the part she didn’t know was coming and she shrieks and throws herself into my arms. “Yes, yes, yes!” She says in Demon, making me chuckle.

She quickly pulls away and nudges her mother. “Mommy, say yes.”

Tears stream down Lyla's face as she nods, and I slide the ring onto her finger and pull her into my arms, kissing her deeply, parting her lips with my tongue and pressing her body into mine. As we kiss, Fuchsia initiates the rest of my plan and fireworks light up the sky, taking the shape of silver hearts.

When our kiss ends, Lyla looks up and smiles, then glances at her ring and sighs. "You have made me the happiest woman alive," she whispers.

I lean into her, my lips brushing against her ear so only she can hear me. "You'll be even happier later, I promise."

She smiles up at me, her face radiant, her eyes glowing as Mandy hollers to all our guests, "My Mommy is going to be Queen of Hell! And I'm going to be Princess of Hell."

"Long live the queen," I whisper, kissing my fiancé once more.

THE END