



# The Teddy Bear's Prize (A Date with a Demon #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Mia's love life couldn't get any worse—until she's ghosted after a third date and left with a three-foot-tall teddy bear. She doesn't realize her new stuffed toy contains a powerful archdemon who is watching her and waiting for a chance to break free.

Tobias would rather be overseeing his territory in the demon realm, instead he's stuck in a teddy bear. It's humiliating. When Mia's energy frees him from his plushie prison, the botched summoning ritual leaves him stranded in her world.

As their connection grows, Tobias questions if returning home is worth losing the woman who makes him feel alive.

The Teddy Bear's Prize is a low-stakes, high-steam standalone paranormal romance novella under 27k with a guaranteed happily ever after.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

ONE

Mia

“C’mon, Mia, let’s go.”

I look over my shoulder to where Jeff is standing at the entrance to the games pavilion, gesturing for me to follow. I pinch off another piece of funnel cake, gravel crunching under my boots.

Seriously? I’m not a dog. No, wait. . . I should give him the benefit of the doubt.

The carnival’s just crowded—okay, maybe it isn’t. We are two of maybe a dozen people who thought it was a good idea to visit a creepy carnival on Halloween, but that still doesn’t mean he’s issuing a command.

Don’t get me wrong, Jeff’s nice, but something’s missing. This is date number three, and I thought I’d be more invested at this point. It’s hard not to buy into the whole idea that “butterflies are just anxiety” and “you should date the man who makes you calm”.

What if you feel nothing ?

On paper, he’s amazing. A little taller than me, with shoulder-length dirty blond hair, a well-kept beard laced with red, and eyes that resemble sea glass. The man didn’t even scoff when I wore platform Doc Marten Mary Janes on our first date, which made me a few inches taller than him. He even has a great job as a Cloud Engineer at

the same company where I work, but he's mostly detached from my department. I'm just not that interested.

Jeff walks over, reaching for my funnel cake. I hold it out, offering him a piece. He takes the plate and grabs my hand, leading me further into the carnival. Then, with one swift motion, he tosses the half-eaten funnel cake into the nearest trash can. I'm not sure what the dessert did to offend him, but that felt personal.

The real problem is, Jeff also does things like that. There seems to always be a subtle judgment in his tone that he plays off as some kind of inside joke between us. If I laugh too much, he gives me a look of concern that makes me want to hide.

God forbid, Jeff finds out that I giggle when I'm flustered. One particularly naughty phrase during a heated moment can and will send me into a fit of nervous laughter. I can only imagine the look on his face if that were to happen.

Tonight is different, though. It's like he is extending an olive branch and actually taking an interest in the things I enjoy.

It started when he sent me a local news article about the Galloway Carnival stopping in Riverside during the Halloween weekend. The carnival is the stuff of legend, one of the few traveling still operating in the US with most of their original rides from the 1970s.

The carnival has been featured in at least six indie horror movies in the last decade and they pride themselves on perpetuating the vibe. Take tonight, for example, they set up on the oldest and overgrown fairgrounds at the edge of the city.

All around us, the towering blue spruce trees are encroaching upon the pavilion, the carnival an unwelcome visitor. Most of the rides are worn and well beyond the help of regular maintenance, their metal structures dulled with chipped paint and visible

rust. The traditional carnival music filters through old speakers, the tracks distorted and noticeably out of tune. Just add a full moon looming over us and you would have the perfect backdrop for a slasher flick.

It's almost surreal. All around me, the night seems like it is full of strange and intoxicating magic.

"No," I laugh, realizing where Jeff is leading me. I lean closer to him, lowering my voice, "These things are notoriously rigged. Please don't waste your money."

"I promised I'd win you something," he says, releasing my hand and looking over the stalls.

That is true, he said in the text he would 'win me the biggest prize they had'.

The carnival doesn't have much to offer in the way of games. Four full size stalls, two on each side of the gravel path leading from the food area, close enough that I can still smell the sickly mix of cinnamon and hot dogs. There's a row of basketball hoops, a spray he smells like the forest after a storm with a hint of spice.

"What are you doing?" Jeff laughs.

When I open my eyes, he's staring at me again, his brow lifted and his lips slightly pulled back into a smile. But it's not just him, the attendant is equally interested in my bear sniffing activities. At least from what I can tell, they're viewing it as more of a quirk than a defect. I squeeze the bear close to my chest and laugh like I'm in on the joke.

"He smells like cinnamon," I say with a smile.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

### TWO

Mia

It's a twenty-minute drive back to my house and Jeff has been on the phone with a colleague from work, arguing about an upcoming update to the servers for the last ten. I'm not completely detached from the project, my small team is going to be heading up the structural changes to the website, but I'm not sure I should be listening in.

"The servers are down?" Jeff asks, pausing, "You aren't supposed to push the updates to the test server just yet, that's why you have the sandbox environment."

His knuckles flash white as he grips the steering wheel, so I busy myself and fish out my phone.

Opening up the photo app, I scroll through the handful of pictures I took of the carnival landing on the batch that I shot at the ring toss. I don't recognize most of the shapes, aside from the odd pentagram and pentacle. They vaguely look like alchemical circles mixed with King Solomon's seals used to ward off evil spirits, but wrong.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles as I flip through the photos and I sense I'm being watched. I look in the passenger's side mirror, but the road is clear behind us.

Jeff doesn't seem to feel it, he's still engrossed in the call, explaining how they should ping someone else to restart the test servers because he's on a 'fucking date'.

I can't shake it. The sensation builds until it resonates like a physical touch on my shoulder. In the rear-view mirror, I catch the sight of two furry gray ears. Shifting, I glance at the teddy bear propped in the back seat, his face bathed in the glow of the red traffic light.

“Fuck.” Jeff growls, pulling out his earbud and tossing it to the cupholder, “I’m sorry, Mia.”

“It’s okay. I know how it is.” I turn around.

He nods to my phone, “What is that?”

“Just some photos from the carnival. There were these weird symbols painted on the side of the stalls. I’m wondering if they were leftover from some kind of film shoot or?—“

The light turns green.

“It’s probably some teenagers screwing around,” He turns his attention to the road, his eyes flitting to the rearview mirror, “According to the news articles I found when I was researching it for our date, the place gets vandalized at every stop. They just expect it at this point.”

I settle back into my seat, “You might be right, but this isn’t normal graffiti.”

“Looks like that witchy shit that you always have on your desk. My bet is still on the teenagers.”

That witchy shit is a small page-a-day calendar that shows the zodiac and lunar cycle. Jeff walked by one day, pointing to the calendar and announcing it’s almost Leo season.

Beside me, he fidgets, eyes going to the rearview mirror again.

“What is it?” I ask, turning around. The road is still clear.

“Nothing,” he grips the steering wheel, “I could have sworn that bear just moved.”

Jeff parks the car at the curb and pulls the teddy bear out of the back seat before I can stop him. Part of me was hoping I could use the bear as an excuse to slip into the house with little fanfare or as a bear-shaped shield to avoid the lingering promise of a goodnight kiss.

After the sub-par date, I was looking forward to pouring myself a glass of wine and watching one of my comfort horror movies before bed.

It’s a tradition I started in high school with my best friend, Erika, after we decided we were too cool to go trick-or-treating. It started with parent-approved late 90s teen horror, then quickly spiraled to the classics, Halloween, Nightmare on Elm Street and Friday the Thirteenth before we were factoring in b-movies and for a year in college we watched mainly foreign language films.

“I could carry him,” I gesture as I climb out of the car, shifting my purse to my side.

“Him?” Jeff laughs, hoisting the bear higher, “How do you figure it’s a ‘him’?”

I have no reasonable explanation to assume the gender of the teddy bear, other than it fits. Like someone whispered the truth in my ear while I was carrying him around the carnival.

“You’re right,” I play it off, waiting for Jeff to walk around the car and accompany me to the house.

“Did you give him a name, too?”

I glare at him sidelong, rummaging around in my purse for the rubber covering of my house key, “No, that’d be silly.”

The rental is a tiny two-bedroom house built in the late 80s with a cookie-cutter floor plan that is flipped and reflected down the entire street. I picked it because my landlord jumped onto the neutral trend from ten years ago and painted the outside a beautiful cool mid-toned gray with black trim that makes the bright turquoise statement door resemble a glowing portal to another dimension.

“This thing sure is heavy,” Jeff shifts the bear to the other arm as I unlock the door, “I can’t believe you carried it around the fairgrounds all by yourself.”

“Let me take him from you,” I open the door and reach for the bear, but Jeff ignores me and walks right into my house.

“Just tell me where you want it to go.”

I close the door behind me and toss my purse on the hall table, “The couch is fine.”

The bear looks right at home, his gray fur complimenting the dark chocolate leather couch and my little charcoal throw pillows. I’m glad I didn’t second-guess my choice.

“Thanks.” I fold my arms over my chest, watching Jeff take in my living room.

Similar neutral gray paint covers the walls with white trim instead of the black from the exterior. I’ve kept the theme going with a set of monotone curtains and dark wood bookshelves on the far side of the wall with a matching console underneath my 55” flat screen. I think it gives the space some warmth. Okay, I’ve been watching too



many home renovation shows.

“It’s early,” he looks down at his watch, “Just past 9:30. The night is still young. ”

“Yeah, I was probably going to just put on a movie and then go to bed.” I say, really hoping that he takes the hint.

Jeff crosses the room, running his fingertips over the spines of my books before picking up the little ceramic raven my mom bought me last Halloween, “Oh really? What movie?” He looks over his shoulder.

I don’t have an answer, so I panic, scanning my blu-ray collection and picking out the first one that calls to me.

“Scream.” I wince the moment my answer leaves my mouth, knowing how past partners have criticized my taste in movies. Namely, that I prefer camp over “real horror”.

“You’re going to watch Scream before bed?” He quirks a brow, returning the raven to her perch on my shelf.

“It’s a Halloween tradition.”

“The movie is pretty watered down as far as slasher flicks go, but I have to admit it’s a classic.”

I’m all too ready to launch into my defense of the series as a staple in the late 90s and 00s teen horror revival when his words finally hit me.

“You like it?” I stand up a little straighter.

“Yeah, I mean, I haven’t seen it in like ten years, so I’m not sure it holds up.”

It’s been pretty lonely here the last few months and maybe I’m just missing the comfort of having a roommate, but I am legitimately considering letting Jeff stay a little longer. I really hope I don’t regret it.

If I asked Erika, she would tell me I was being too hard on him. There’s just so much conflicting dating advice. Butterflies are good, butterflies are a red flag. You should be the one to approach men, but be careful that you don’t move into your masculine space. I know most of it is bullshit, but these days, it feels like everyone is operating with their own set of rules and I can’t catch up.

Jeff seems like a decent guy, albeit awkward sometimes, but who isn’t? Worst-case scenario, we can be friends. Right?

“Do you want to join me?” I quickly add, “Just for the movie and nothing else.”

“Just the movie,” he nods, a smirk tugging at his lips.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

THREE

Tobias

This was never supposed to happen. No one should be able to summon an arch demon, let alone bind one with a simple ritual. It had to have been a stroke of genius or just dumb luck, drawing the circle to bind me right before calling me to the mortal realm. The last person to use those two spells in tandem is still suffering the wrath of their prisoner deep in the demon realm, nearly two hundred years later.

I will make sure my captor screams for an eternity after confining me to this waking nightmare for what feels like months. Unable to speak, unable to move or stretch my powers aside from parlor tricks. I see nothing beyond the dim light of mortal souls dancing before me on my high perch.

I can only imagine the power vacuum my absence has caused, but I have clawed my way up from the dirt once before and I can do it again.

Then I see her and time stops.

Her soul shines like a beacon, casting a glow on everything that surrounds her. My powers stir, yawning and begging to reach out to touch her. Just a taste.

She must be a witch, and a powerful one at that. Soon I might be free of this torment, if I can convince her to help me.

I unfurl my shadows blindly, testing their limits, trying to get her attention. It would

usually be dangerous to attach myself to a witch, I've heard stories of them using our arrangements to keep demons under their thumbs as bodyguards or worse.

Their souls could prove powerful allies under the right circumstances, but that would mean we would actually have to trust each other.

I sense lust, anticipation, and frustration. My own emotions mirror the latter as I realize the witch's light has disappeared from view. I latch on to the nearest source, the mortal man's shallow emotions aren't much, but I can feel my powers grow stronger.

The world around me takes shape. Light from the souls bleeding into colors and shadowy figures through my rigid gaze. With enough power, I might have the means to shatter this seal myself. Though I have only survived on the dregs of what few emotions I can reach for so long that I cannot rush this, I could damage this fragile vessel and possibly rend the mortal realm in two.

"Well, Mia, what do you want?" He asks.

Mia. Now, I really see the witch, no longer the brilliant light, though that soul still shines brightly under her porcelain skin. There's a unique kindness to her brown eyes, though they look worn sharp from pain and heartbreak. I watch her slender fingers tuck a lock of black shoulder-length hair behind her ear, her eyes finding mine for a breath, then darting away.

Mia reaches out and catches me before I fall, holding me tight to her chest. Her emotions are so strong that I nearly mistake them for my own, my empathy is tied so closely to my powers that it threatens to crush me.

Tighter. I plea, Hold me tighter.

I'm not sure where the impulse comes from, but she squeezes me close, tucking her face into the crook of this form's neck, and inhales. This vessel dulls most sensations, I can feel the force of her grip, but nothing else. I long to know the comfort of her soft curves.

She continues to carry me around with her through the carnival. I'm addicted to how she seeks me out for comfort, even though she might not know why. I long to return the gesture, not in this vessel but with my own, if she will allow it.

No, I need to control myself, but she gives affection so freely, wanting nothing in return. Her longing coils around me like a leash, tethering me to her.

Before I know it, Mia is securing me in the backseat. Part of me misses her closeness, I can only see her face in the windshield's reflection for a few fleeting moments at a time, lit by the streetlights overhead. I would give anything to speak to her and ask her for help.

I am here. Look at me.

Even though my powers are only waking up, I get a reaction. Mia's brown eyes catch my gaze in the rearview mirror for a few moments before she turns in her seat. I can tell she's staring at me, but it seems like she's oblivious to my soul within.

Except, there, for a heartbeat, I catch the gleam of her subconscious. She looks like a deer caught in headlights trying to make sense of what she's seeing before her attention is called away again.

I don't understand. A witch with a fraction of her power should be able to recognize a trapped soul, so why can't she see me? Why has Mia closed herself off from her magic? Perhaps if I can get her alone long enough to break through the barrier limiting her subconscious, then I might communicate with her.

If the mortal man, Jeff, wasn't doing everything in his power to thwart my plans. The wretch goes so far as to invite himself into her home and almost guilts her into asking him to stay.

The desire stirring in his thoughts is so strong that I don't need to expend my power to read them. He looks upon Mia as his prey, and she wants nothing to do with him. I can sense her attention split between the movie and my presence, her hands gently squeezing my vessel's arm.

"I'm gonna go make popcorn," she stands, releasing my paw, "Do you want any?"

"No, I'm alright." Jeff reaches for the remote.

"You don't have to pause it," she smiles, "I've seen it so many times."

As soon as she's out of view, Jeff tosses me across the room, letting out a small victorious grunt as I hit the chair. I fall onto my side, my arm draped over one eye, obscuring my vision.

He shifts in his seat, palming himself and throwing a glance towards the kitchen. Of course, he sees her as his property. In his mind, he is owed something for taking her out.

These sorts of mortal men disgust me, ignoring the gentle balance of seduction with their selfish arrogance.

There must be a way for me to scare him off, a weakness I can press upon. Something buried within his thoughts.

I latch on to his frustration, following the thread. So much is buried underneath, resentment for chasing Mia for months before she accepted his invitations .

A pressure builds in my chest, no, an emotion. Jealousy. There's no way she would let him touch her. I don't need to read her mind to recognize her disinterest, but he wishes to press it. To make her feel obligated.

She doesn't belong to you.

Jeff sits bolt upright, looking around with the remote in his hand. He pauses the movie, frozen, before he eases himself back against the couch.

It's simple enough to push past his defenses and into his thoughts. I peel them away, one by one.

This is a trick he's used with other women, the ones he sees as too kind to refuse. Mia is kind, but I do not see her as helpless.

Jeff's thoughts don't let up with my intervention. They only get worse until I glimpse something deeper. He doesn't care for her or respect her. He sees this night as a means to an end.

Mia can take care of herself and I shouldn't intervene, I might not even have the power to do so, but by the way she held me at the carnival, I feel oddly protective of this witch so I must try.

I unleash my powers, testing their limits.

If you so much as touch a hair on her head, I will end you.

Fear coats my tongue as Jeff scans the room, his eyes finding mine. With a gentle nudge, his subconscious flares and I show him what I truly am.

“What the fuck?”

He stands and strides across the room to pick me up. I can feel his thoughts fighting against logic, the truth trying to overtake the lie. He stares right into my eyes, unblinking.

I latch onto him and call upon the powers, shadows twist into vines to coil around his feet and up his legs .

He tries to shake me free, but I have him frozen in my sights, unable to turn away.

You're going to leave and never contact her again. If you as much as look upon her, I will find you and twist your every dream into a waking nightmare.

His body shakes, but I keep him tethered until his eyes tear up and his jaw flexes into a silent scream, only then I release him.

"Shit." Jeff growls out, throwing me to the ground, "Hey, uh, Mia?" He stumbles forward, tripping over my shadows as they fade into the carpet, "I should probably get going."

"Really?" Mia asks from the other room, "O-okay."

After a few minutes, I hear the door slam.

"What are you doing on the floor?" She scoops me into her arms, "Did he throw you? I swear, what kind of person does that?"

Humans are terrible, little doe, but don't worry, I will protect you. No harm will come to you as long as I am near.

Mia holds me close as she checks the lock on the door and flicks off the overhead light before settling back on the couch. I sit patiently waiting for her to touch me



again, but instead she pulls me onto her lap, her arms wrapping around the vessel's middle. This time, I swear I can feel the ghost of her touch.

“Guess it’s just you and me.” She mutters, resting her chin on the top of my head.

Finally.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

FOUR

Mia

“You know, I never really liked Jeff,” Erika’s voice echoes through my small bathroom.

I stop brushing my teeth and look at the phone propped up against the backsplash, watching her scrub her face with a washcloth. It’s part of our nightly routine, okay, maybe it isn’t nightly anymore since she moved in with Paolo, but we try to video chat at least three times a week just to catch up.

I spit out my toothpaste. “What do you mean you never liked Jeff?” I ask, “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

Erika is gorgeous, her brown eyes lit with the vanity lights and her long bleached blonde hair bundled up in a messy bun at the top of her head. She continues wiping the remaining makeup from her eyes, effectively removing the outer bit of her eyebrows along with it.

I wish I was brave enough to shave mine, but they are sparse enough as it is. I never fully recovered from plucking them back in high school.

She shrugs, “I didn’t want to say anything because I was getting worried all of my advice was influencing you. It’s not fair of me to stand on the sidelines and meddle in your love life.” She glances down at the phone, looking me in the eye, “I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but he slid into your DMs, Mia. At work.”

That was the first red flag, but it was cute when he asked me about global variables. I thought he was making small talk, programmer to programmer, though it wasn't something we work with on the front end. I didn't realize until a few days later, when he kept getting an error message, that it was a legitimate question.

"I know," I sigh, "The crazy thing is that I found the teddy bear he won me at the carnival on the floor."

The tiny detail keeps sticking in my mind. The bear was sitting on the couch when I left the room and when I came back; he was crumpled in front of the TV. I know he didn't get up and walk on his own, so why would Jeff have a problem with a stuffed animal?

"You're going to throw it out, right?"

"What?"

"The bear," Erika reaches out of frame and grabs a jar of moisturizer, "The one Jeff won at the carnival." She channels Ashnikko and sings a few bars about putting it in a blender while smoothing the gel all over her face.

My first instinct is no, I'm not throwing him out. Even if Jeff won him for me, he's still from the Galloway Carnival, that has to account for something. There's no telling when they'll be back in the area, and winning a carnival game is nearly impossible.

"He goes with my decor," I shrug, looking at myself in the mirror.

"Hey, babes, I need to go. Paolo needs to be up early for work. Text me tomorrow? "

"Yeah, sure. Love you." I grab my phone and smile down at Erika.

“Love you, too. Bye.” Her voice trails off as the call ends.

I pad out into my bedroom, feeling the full weight of solitude for the first time tonight. My routine with Erika usually helps me forget, but the shift is clear.

It’s gotten worse since I began working from home a few months ago. They couldn’t justify renting the large campus downtown in the current economy, so we’re all remote until they finish work on the smaller location.

I’m not proud of the fact it’s also made me kind of a shut in. My schedule just never aligns with anything resembling a social life anymore.

I go through my normal routine of checking that the porch light is on, thanks to that one episode of Criminal Minds, and I test the locks on the front and back doors.

“Not gonna catch me slippin’,” I whisper to myself.

The gray teddy bear sits on the couch, staring straight ahead like he’s watching the TV. He. I catch myself again. It’s just a stuffed toy, there is no gender there. Still, I remember his soothing weight as I watched the movie.

“I can’t leave you in here all by yourself.” I walk over, gather him into my arms, and carry him to the bedroom with me, “If I’m going to talk to you like a crazy person, I might as well give you a name.”

It’s strange, now that he’s in my arms, I don’t feel so alone.

I should probably be concerned with how quick I’m getting attached to this teddy bear. I never really had a strong connection to stuffed animals when I was a little girl and it feels almost wrong that I would develop one this late in life. I’ll bring this up in my next therapy session.

But, for now, he needs a name. I hold him tight to my chest and unlock my phone to search for names. It needs to start with the letter T. Not entirely sure where that came from.

I shift the bear in my arms and enter ‘male names that begin with T’ into the search. My fingers still as I scroll past the name Tobias. It’s cute and has a certain old-fashioned charm, soft without being overly pretentious.

“Okay, Tobias, you’re going to be sleeping with me tonight,” I prop him against a pillow on the other side of my bed. “This whole talking to an inanimate object needs to stay just between us, though. Not that it’s weird for me, my Computer Science course had me talking through my code with a rubber duck.”

I cross the room and open my closet, grabbing a band shirt and the same black shorts that I used to wear while playing softball in high school. I’ve filled out a bit since then, so they fit me more like booty shorts, so now I sleep in them or wear them under skirts.

As I lift my shirt over my head, I feel the same odd sensation from the car ride home. The feeling that I am being watched. I pause and check the window, making sure that my blackout curtains are closed.

We have a love-hate relationship. They keep the sun from streaming into my room at the absolute butt-crack of dawn, but I have this irrational fear that someone could be standing on the other side without me realizing.

This is different, though. It’s not a massive invasion of my privacy, just the feeling of being watched. The chill that runs down my spine settles as a warm tingle between my legs, my nipples hardening under my bra. I look to where Tobias is sitting on my bed.

No, that's silly. The teddy bear isn't watching you, I think .

Still, I lower my shirt and dress in the bathroom, tossing my dirty clothes into the hamper by the door.

Tobias hasn't moved, but why would he? Why does some part of my brain keep expecting him to? Yet another thing to bring up with my therapist, I guess.

I climb into bed, lying on my side to face him. His fur is soft, and not what I'd expect from a toy that's been sitting on a shelf for who knows how long. He still smells like cinnamon.

With a tug, I pull him across the bed and fold myself around him. This is normal, nothing strange about cuddling with a teddy bear. Some people cuddle their pillows.

I sling his weighted paw over my shoulder and nuzzle against his furry neck, sinking into the comforting sensation of being held. Soon, I'm struggling to stay awake, dangling on the edge of consciousness, I can almost hear a deep voice whispering sweet nothings into my ear.

“How are you so sweet?”

In my mind, I'm no longer cuddling the teddy bear, but a truly gorgeous man covered in black tattoos. I lose myself to the fantasy, imagining his strong arms around me as I drift off to sleep.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

FIVE

Tobias

I stay awake most nights trying to slip into Mia's dreams, but either my powers are still waking up or hers are too strong for me to break through with this primitive form.

When I sleep, I dream of her. It's different from when I would dreamwalk in the demon realm. I forgot how chaotic dreams could be. It takes me a moment to control my thoughts without using another's subconscious as an anchor.

At first, my thoughts dwell on the memory of Mia in front of her closet. I replay the moment she exposed the smallest strip of her soft stomach and glanced over her shoulder to see if I was watching.

Of course, I was. This vessel lacks the ability to blink or turn its head.

Though if I didn't know better, I would have thought it was a dare. Especially the way she grows bolder with each day. It starts when she strips off her shirt on the way to the bathroom to change, until she is comfortable enough to undress in front of me, employing an elaborate trick to rid herself of her bra through the sleeve of her t-shirt and tossing it in my direction.

I can't pinpoint when I stop caring about returning to the demon realm and instead focusing on how long I can hold her attention, as fleeting as those moments continue to be. A lingering glance here and a question that hangs in the air between us until she

knows better. She can sense me, I know this to be true.

I tell myself it's a game, but in reality, I want her to see me. To know me as I am beginning to know her.

The room is dark aside from the glow of the early morning sun spilling over those dark curtains until Mia flicks on the light overhead.

Good morning, little doe.

"Good morning, Tobias," she says as she walks across the room, grabbing my foot and tugging me towards the end of the bed so she can fix the covers.

I've lived for hundreds of years, played within the dreams of millions of mortals, if not more. Their fantasies no longer phase me, but now, I find myself nearly driven to distraction by the way her shorts ride up her thighs as she bends over the bed. Wait, did she hear me?

She picks me up, staring into my eyes. There, I see it again, the tiny spark of recognition in her subconscious, but then it slips away.

"How did you sleep?" Mia asks, propping me against the pillow.

Well enough, I suppose.

"I'm completely losing it," she casts a glance over her shoulder, keeping her back to me as she gets changed for work, "Do you think it's time I finally got a cat? I think it'd be healthier than talking to an inanimate object."

If you wish to get a cat, then we shall find you one as soon as I can free of this spell.



She stares at me for a few moments as though she's trying to decide something, then carries me to her office.

It's the same shade of gray as the rest of the house. She has her desk set up against the wall closest to the door with two monitors, while a row of white bookshelves line the opposite side of the room. Instead of being lined with books, they're set up in smaller stacks with small potted plants to fill the gaps.

Mia sets me on the black leather love seat under the office's singular window, next to a large blanket printed to resemble a Ouija board and a pillow shaped like a planchette, giving me the usual unobstructed view of her workspace.

The more I learn about her, I can tell that she has carefully curated this room to make herself look palatable, stripping away pieces of her unique personality that are often misunderstood. Except for the collection of figurines on her desk. They are her own minor act of rebellion, much like the fact she's still wearing her sleep shorts from the night before with her business casual top.

She leans over the desk, fingers dancing across the keyboard before grabbing hold of the mouse, and clicking a few times. I can't see what she's doing from my vantage point, but once satisfied, she walks out of the room and returns with a steaming cup of coffee.

Mia slides into her computer chair and puts in her earbuds.

"Don't worry," she says, moving the mouse, "I'm in here early. Yeah, I'm not really sure what they're asking for. The original mock up is completely different. It'll be a miracle if we can get everything done before the feature launch. "

I watch as she smiles brightly at her colleague's reply, her fingers back on the keys. It feels good to see her so happy and confident, not withered like she was around Jeff.

She continues to work throughout the day, sneaking glances at me every once in a while. I note everything about her, like when she switches from coffee to hot tea in the afternoon and the type of music filtering through her headphones when she's not listening in on a meeting. How she works alone for long stretches and there have been days where she doesn't speak to a soul, except for me. Most days, she works through lunch or eats at her desk while watching a video on her second monitor.

When her day is over, she removes her earbuds and swivels in her chair to face me. There is a new familiarity in her gaze that takes me by surprise.

Mia? Say that you can hear me, little doe.

“Would it be too much if I ordered Chinese food for dinner?” she asks.

Mia watches me for a second, waiting, then with a blink the spell shatters, and she's back to looking straight through me. Shaking her head, she unplugs her phone from the charger on her desk and taps on the screen, holding it up to her ear.

“Hi, yes, I'd like to place an order. Delivery,” She gets up and walks out of the room.

That felt so real. She was so close. I was almost sure she could sense me trapped in this vessel.

I press against these miserable confines, testing the limits of my powers and beckoning my shadows. Slowly, the tendrils twist up from the floor, snaking against the walls until a shadowy veil covers the room. The well of power is deeper than before, but still not enough for me to separate myself from this binding spell .

“They said it'll be thirty minut—” Mia's eyes go wide, “What the hell?!”

Her hand reaches for my shadows, fingertips grazing the edge. The sensation is

overwhelming.

I shudder at her touch, releasing my magic in a panic. The sheer force shatters the lightbulb overhead, leaving us in darkness. I taste fear on my tongue, thick and sweet, as she stands there frozen.

No, I have gone too far. Now she will never trust me. I'll be thrown out and remain trapped in this vessel for an eternity .

Mia rushes across the room, scooping me into her arms, and ushers me into the hall, holding me tight against her chest before closing the door behind her. Her fear gives way to another emotion, comfort.

“Must be the wiring,” she says against my neck, “I’ll have to call the landlord in the morning.”

The wiring? That means she didn’t recognize my magic, maybe I have been mistaken. Mia might not be a witch after all, though her soul tells a different story.

Still, instead of running, her first instinct was to grab me, to save me, or at the very least, save this vessel. Her warmth seeps through me, and I feel the physical sensation for the first time since I have been stuck here in the mortal realm.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

SIX

Mia

The power surge or whatever the hell happened in the office earlier still has me a little shaken up. I've been in there once, but only to make sure my computer isn't fried. I hope whatever is wrong will not interfere with the launch of the new site this Sunday.

"The house was built in the 80s, so I'm sure it was just the wiring or something. It's probably in need of repairs. I know a couple down the street had to get rid of their popcorn ceiling after finding traces of asbestos." I lean forward and brush the second coat of black polish over my toenails.

"Well, you're more than welcome to crash here for a couple of days," Erika dips out of the frame, and I see her crossing the kitchen and opening the fridge.

She's been keeping me company since dinner, and I've been offering moral support while she tries out a new brownie recipe. I also have Tobias propped up at the other end of the couch with my comfort rewatch of Criminal Minds as background noise .

"I would, but I'm on call this weekend. Hopefully, I can get someone to look at it soon."

She looks over her shoulder, "Jason could check it out. He is a licensed electrician. I'll even tag along to run interference so you don't drool all over yourself."

Of course, Jason. Erika's older brother, who, besides being covered in tattoos, is devastatingly handsome and aging like the finest wine. It's really a shame that he is a fuckboy of the highest caliber.

I close my eyes, scrunching my nose. It would be nice to have the extra reassurance that the house won't burn down while I sleep, trapping me in a fiery blaze. Plus, there's no guarantee my landlord will send someone out before Thanksgiving, this might be the hot water heater all over again.

"Okay," I look down at my toes, dipping the little brush back in the polish. "If it isn't a big deal."

"I'll send him a text tonight," Erika grabs her phone.

"No—that's okay. It's almost midnight, it can wait. Erika."

Her video call screen goes gray and if I listen hard enough, I swear I can hear her fingers on the screen as she types out the text.

"Sent," she smiles at me when the video returns, "Hey, so, I'm planning to have Friendsgiving next Saturday since I'm flying with Paolo to meet my parents. I know it's kind of short notice. If you're free?—"

"Are you kidding?" I sit up. "Is there anything specific you want me to bring?"

"What is that thing you make with the fruit and marshmallows?"

"Ambrosia?"

"That's the one!" Erika looks at something out of frame, "By the way, Paolo is going to invite a few of his friends." She glances back at me, biting her lip and raising her

brows suggestively.

“I’m not sure I’m up for dating right now.”

“Because of Jeff? Has he answered any of your texts?”

“Nope. He’s listed as ‘Do not Disturb’ on Slack.” I paint my last toe and screw the top back onto the nail polish.

“Men are a mystery.” Erika shakes her head, looking down at her countertop. She straightens, waving her silicone spatula in my direction, “You deserve so much better, Mia. Someone who won’t leave you guessing and who isn’t afraid to shove your head down into the mattress?—”

I watch her take out her aggression on the brownie batter.

“On that note, I’m gonna get in bed and read. Good luck with your baked goods.”

“Thanks, babes. Love you.”

“You too,” I blow her a kiss and hang up, falling back against the couch.

I shut off the TV in the middle of Dr. Reid’s speech, then look at Tobias. Sometimes I swear it feels like he’s watching me with those rich brown eyes. It’s the same sensation from Jeff’s car, but I don’t feel threatened or like I’m in danger. I’m just aware of his attention.

What am I saying? He’s a teddy bear.

After checking all the doors and the locks, I pick up Tobias and bring him along as I get ready for bed. I follow my normal routine, brush my teeth, and go to change into

my pajamas.

The moment I take off my shirt, I sense someone staring at me again, but it's only me and Tobias, like always. The attention is a gentle caress down my spine that makes my skin heat.

I must be crazy, because I imagine that it's Tobias watching. It's driving him crazy, being so close to me and without being able to touch me.

I bite my lip and turn around, unclasping my bra. With one arm covering my breasts, I let the straps fall over my shoulders. Yep, I am insane. That's the only explanation for me going full voyeur in front of a teddy bear, but I can't help it. It makes me feel powerful. I can almost hear him whispering his encouragement with every move.

“Fuck, do you have any idea what you are doing to me, little doe?”

I lean into the sensation, untangling myself from my bra and letting it drop to the floor. With a deep breath and my heart hammering in my chest, I lower my arm, my nipples hard from the cool lick of the air conditioning overhead.

My hands glide down over the curve of my soft stomach, and I hook my thumbs under my shorts, shoving them over my hips until they clear my thighs to fall around my ankles. I step out of them and kick them towards the bed.

I'm left standing in my black panties, almost drunk on this fake scenario that I've drummed up in my head. It's taken me a while to feel comfortable in my body, and right now I am proud of my B-cup and the way my soft stomach curves into my full hips and thighs.

Part of me wishes Tobias was real, and he was standing there appreciating what he's seeing. The complete package, not just the pieces of me that past partners have picked

out to enjoy.

“This is so stupid,” I laugh, dropping my sensual facade and climbing into bed beside Tobias.

The comforter is cool against my freshly shaved legs, its weight making it feel like they’re being gently nudged apart. The top hem of the flat sheet brushes over my nipples, stoking the flickering ember of desire.

This doesn’t feel like a joke anymore.

I breathe out a moan, squirming in the sheets as I stare up blankly at the dark ceiling above me. Slowly, I run my hand over my breast, squeezing my eyes shut.

In my fantasy, Jason is at the door of my bedroom, watching me. His predatory hazel eyes wrinkle at the corners, and his knowing smile feels like a noose slowly tightening around my neck. I don’t think I’ll be able to breathe until he touches me.

He climbs onto the bed, hovering over me. I want to run my fingers over his buzzed hair as I guide his head between my legs, feeling his beard brush against my thighs.

With a groan, I take my nipple between my fingertips, rolling it and squeezing, allowing my other hand to travel down my stomach and under my panties.

I’m already wet from my little strip tease, so I fully shove them off and kick them down towards the end of my bed, letting my legs fall open.

Jason’s image looms over me, his lips parting as he stares into my eyes, ready to devour me.

“Let me touch you,” the deep voice says with a feverish timbre. “Please, little doe.”



That's . . . not Jason's voice.

The fantasy shifts, and my breath hitches at the sight.

It's the tattooed stranger from my dreams, well, not as much my dreams as the few fleeting moments before I fall asleep.

He leans down, dark brown hair falling over his sharp red-brown eyes, kind but hungry.

This is the first time I can clearly make out his face, and he's gorgeous, with a straight nose leading down to a playful and teasing smile. The way he stares at me feels like a dream come true, like I'm a being fully worthy of worship .

I caress my clit in slow, deliberate circles. Heat coiling low in my stomach with every brush of my fingertips. His pink tongue darts out, licking his lips, flashing sharp canines.

I reach out for something to hold on to, coming up with a fistful of soft faux fur, dragging Tobias on top of me. As I cling to him, it feels like the weight of his velvet paw brushes over my breasts with intent.

Please . The voice echoes through my thoughts.

"God," I cry out, putting more pressure on my clit, "Touch me, please." I dig my heels into the bed, my orgasm building quickly.

"You look so beautiful, Mia." He breathes out, and I feel the ghost of something nudging my legs open and settling between them, but never fully touching. "I can't wait to taste you and feel you writhe under me just like you are right now."

“More. I need more.” I squeeze Tobias closer.

“Fuck,” He growls close to my ear, “This is the best I can do for now.” His voice drops an octave, “Come for me, little doe.”

I shatter, rubbing my clit in slow, firm strokes, wringing my orgasm of everything that I can.

As the shocks subside, I let out a heavy sigh and giggle. I can’t believe I just did that. Tobias’ comforting weight on my chest threatens to pull me into a deep sleep, so I imagine my tattooed stranger holding me as I fully surrender.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

SEVEN

Mia

I wake up with a weight pressing uncomfortably against my hip. As I roll over, trying to move from under Tobias, my fingertips graze his fake fur. If that is Tobias, then—the realization settles deep in my chest and I open my eyes, squinting to adjust to the early sunlight spilling over the blackout curtains.

In the dim light, I see the teddy bear on his back. Half of his body is dangling off the far side of the bed. I shift in bed, sitting up onto my forearm and slowly look down to see a large light gray hand with black fingernails resting against my thigh.

“Oh, my g?—”

Another hand clamps over my mouth, cutting my words off with a whimper. I freeze, the unmistakable warmth of a body pressing firmly against my back.

“Shh—shh, calm down, little doe.” His hot breath feathers against the shell of my ear, “I won’t hurt you.”

I know that voice, I think .

“You had me worried there. Breaking the spell must have taken a lot out of you.”

He keeps his hand on my hip, but he’s not restraining me. Even the one covering my mouth isn’t restrictive. I get the impression that he won’t hurt me.

“Please, let me go,” I say against his hand, but it just comes out a garbled mess.

“Fine, I will release you, but you need to promise that you won’t panic. Can you do that, little doe?” He asks, “Nod your head.”

I nod slowly, and he pulls his hands away.

“Good.”

As soon as the weight lifts from my thigh, I fist the covers and scramble off the foot of the bed, wrapping myself in the thin sheet until it resembles a dress. I rush over and flick on the light, hoping that all of this is just some elaborate sleep paralysis demon bullshit that will disappear in the bright light of day.

Nope, he’s still there and close to six-foot four from the way he nearly dwarfs my queen sized bed, but his height isn’t the most impressive part of him. Not that. His skin is a light gray color, and he’s covered in black tattoo-like markings with no discernible pattern, and atop his head sit two short charcoal horns. Yes, he’s also completely naked, and his very impressive cock is resting against his muscled thigh.

I try my best to ignore all of that, instead taking in his gorgeous and familiar face. He looks just like my stranger from last night, the mystery man in my fantasy made flesh, but, you know, demonic flesh.

“Who are you?” I stammer out, “How did you get in here and will you please cover yourself?” I ask, holding my hand up between us .

He sits up, resting on his forearms, “You don’t recognize me?”

“I do—I mean, no, I don’t. I thought about you last night, but no.”

He climbs out of bed, rolling his ruby red eyes as he stands, then gestures to himself with a flourish. “Hm.”

“Was that supposed to do something?”

“My magic must work differently in the mortal realm.”

With a sigh, I go to the closet and dig out a pair of extra-large men’s gray sweatpants. They came in a two-pack with a solid black pair that I keep in rotation. I look over my shoulder and unceremoniously throw the pants at him.

“I’ll be able to focus better if you put those on.”

He chuckles, the low sound settles against my core.

I change into an oversized t-shirt and shorts from my closet before letting the sheets pool at my ankles. Behind me, I can hear fabric rustling and the demon’s feet shuffling against the carpet.

“You can turn around now.”

“Why were you naked, anyway?”

He hums, “It seems I was bound before I fully manifested in this realm.”

As I face him, I’m immediately drawn to the way the sweatpants hang low on his hips. He’s strong, but not in a ‘spend hours at the gym’ sort of way. The gray sweatpants were a huge miscalculation. His body is all lean muscle, with a soft stomach and a trail of dark hair that disappears below his waistband.

“Can you stop doing that?” He asks, quirked a brow.

“Stop doing what?”

“You’re thinking about my cock. It’s very distracting,”

“Well, it was just as distracting to see it.” I shoot back.

There’s a longing in his stare as he looks me up and down, like I’m standing in front of him wearing a cute lingerie set and not a well-worn vintage band shirt.

"Does that mean you can read minds, too?"

He laughs, “There’s no need, your thoughts are practically screaming at me.”

“I’m sorry, you’re just the first demon I have ever seen.” The word demon comes out more like a question, though I can’t think of any other descriptor that would fit. He has horns. “What was that you said about me breaking a spell?”

“Your desires gave me enough power to free myself from the vessel.” He gestures towards Tobias, who is still hanging over the edge of the bed, fighting for his little teddy bear life.

I look between the two; the pieces don’t click into place as much as wedge themselves there.

“Tobias?”

Demon Tobias’ eyes flutter closed as I say his name, when they open again those red eyes have a sharp edge to them that kicks my heart into gear.

“When you say my desires, you mean—Oh my god.” I hold myself tighter, “Was that because of you? The whole,” I gesture to myself, then to my black panties on display

in the center of the bed.

Tobias takes a step forward and I take a step back.

“No, an incubus can only feed on emotions that already exist. Last night was all you, my dear.” He tilts his head appraisingly, “I do owe you my thanks and my life. I have been trapped in that vessel, unable to move and locked in my own personal hell, for gods know how long. ”

At least I still have my autonomy, I guess, but that doesn't detract from the fact that there's a half-naked demon standing in my bedroom who used to be stuck inside of my teddy bear .

A teddy bear I talked to, cuddled with and might have done unspeakable things to. Oh god, this is a nightmare.

“What happens now? Can you just go back to hell or something?”

Tobias blinks at me, “Usually, if a demon doesn't strike a bargain within seven days, they are forced to return to the demon realm.”

“Kind of like a cross-dimensional visa,” I fold my arms over my chest, “I hope you aren't suggesting that we make one.” Not that I would be opposed to a deal if it's more of an Aladdin's lamp sort of situation and not ‘fully surrender your soul to Satan’.

“Of course not,” he almost looks offended, “I can only make deals with the one who summons me, it's written into the ritual.”

With all this talk about magic and demons, my impulsive thoughts win and I close the distance between us. I skim my hand over his forearm, trying to reconcile the fact that

demons exist, and that this one is gorgeous and so very gray. His skin is hotter than normal, I wonder if that's a normal demon trait.

"You've already been here with me for more than a week. Doesn't that mean you should just pop back?"

"Something must have gone wrong with the summoning ritual." Tobias' chest heaves as he stares at where my palm is resting on his arm.

The alchemical circles . "You were summoned," I pull my hand away then point to bear Tobias, which I guess never was the real Tobias, "then bound to the bear?"

"Yes, something like that."

"I might have an idea."



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

EIGHT

Tobias

Mia grabs her phone from the nightstand behind me and walks out of the room. “Are you coming?” She asks from the hall.

She is taking things a lot better than I had expected.

I have witnessed mortals breaking down after hearing that there are entire worlds beyond their perception, but maybe Mia had expected this all along. Though I do still sense that there is a war being waged by her subconscious.

I find her leaning over the chair in her dark office, her face half-lit by the monitor. On her desk, she has her cellphone connected to the computer with a thin black cable.

“I’m blaming you for the lights, by the way.” She doesn’t even look up from what she’s doing.

“I apologize, I didn’t think that they would be that fragile,” I move to stand beside her, watching the screen populate with photographs from the carnival, “What are you doing here, exactly?”

She’s working so quickly that I can barely read any of the little screens that pop up or the questions that they are asking of her.

I have only experienced this new technology through dreams. It is curious how

mortals push themselves beyond their limits until their dreams are nothing but computer code. All I need to do is watch, their fear, anger, and frustration is like a three-course meal.

“I’m uploading the photos I took of the ring toss and, more importantly, the strange symbols that were painted on the side of the stall.” She replies, drawing out the words as she continues working, “I’m going to run the images through a search engine to see if we get any matches.”

“You are talking about sacred rituals with the power to summon and bind demons. Witches have been guarding these spells for centuries, I don’t think that you are going to find a trace of them with some computer program?—”

“Found ‘em.” She says, looking over her shoulder with a smile. The expression melts from her face as her eyes flit to my lips and my chest. I am suddenly aware of how close we are when the sweet taste of her desire hits my tongue.

Perhaps if I were just to lean a little closer—“What do you mean you found them?” I turn to the screen.

Most of the pictures are too blurry to make out even a quarter of the symbols needed to lend nuance to the rituals, but there they are on the screen and available to all.

“This—this is incredibly dangerous. These spells are incomplete and mostly illegible,” I touch the screen, tracing part of the imperfect image, “if someone were to do as much as guess at what these symbols are, they could get hurt or bring about something terrible like a plague, an apocalypse, or worse.”

“There are things worse than a plague and an apocalypse? ”

“A gateway to a demon dimension would be a good example. They take a lot of

power to close.”

Mia stares at me, “Has that happened before?”

“Once or twice in my lifetime, but not in over a hundred years.”

“Once or twice in your lifetime? How old are you? No, focus.” She shakes her head and turns back to the screen, “Okay, see, right here the photos match a book called,” she points, “Shades of the Occult by Michael Albert Hughes. Weird, this search is saying there’s a copy at the local library—and it’s currently checked out. Figures. I’ll just put a hold on it.”

I brace myself on the desk, massaging the bridge of my nose, “Let me get this straight, not only has a mortal transcribed ancient spells strong enough to summon demons, but there is a copy at your local library?”

“We’re looking at the best-case scenario here, given your current predicament,” Mia says, standing up straight and folding her arms over her chest, “If you could free yourself from the bear without a spell, can’t you just use your powers to return home?”

“I could try but, I could also accidentally punch a hole through the fabric of the veil, which would be disastrous.”

Mia sighs, “Right, demon gateway. I’d rather not deal with one of those, I’m sure it’d be enough to make me lose my security deposit.”

The phone on her desk vibrates, the sound jarring enough to make us both jump.

She grabs it and swipes her thumb over the screen and sighs, “It’s my friend Erika, she just texted me to let me know her brother Jason is available to look at the wiring

today around 3.” She looks over at me, “Unless you can fix this with some sort of demon magic.” She points to the overhead fixture .

I shake my head, “My powers are limited. I cannot wave my hand and create like others can.”

“You’re saying that kind of magic exists? Real magic.” She wiggles her fingers at me.

“You didn’t know?” I tilt my head, “You surround yourself with movies and books containing it, but you don’t believe in it yourself?”

She sighs and taps her thumbs across the screen, “It’s an escape, a fantasy. Everyone wishes they could just ‘fix things’. It doesn’t mean that it’s possible.” She sets the phone down, “There, I told them that 3 was fine, but we’re going to have to figure a few things out. First, you’re going to need some clothes and then we can worry about how gray you look.”

I run my hand over my stomach, “You don’t like gray?”

“No,” her eyes follow the path it takes, “It’s not that I don’t like gray, it’s just that people aren’t usually?—”

“You are concerned about how others will perceive me. I understand. To everyone else, I look like a mortal. I revealed myself to you because I felt that seeing my true form would be less frightening.”

Mia laughs, “Yeah, you’re right. I think I’d be more freaked out if I woke up with a random guy in my bed. Thanks for that. Still, you’re going to need real clothes.”

She turns, going back towards her bedroom.

I follow her like a pup following its master, watching as she digs through her closet, until she emerges again with an arm full of black clothing and some old sneakers.

“Here.” Mia shoves the shirts into my arms and drops the shoes on the floor, “Those belonged to an ex boyfriend, don’t ask, hopefully they’ll fit.”

I look through the black shirts, choosing one that has a single phrase on it, ‘HIM’, then slip my feet into the black-and-white checkered sneakers. They’re tight at first, but anything on my body feels restrictive right now. I cannot fathom that mortals spend most of their lives wearing such things.

When I look over, Mia has already changed into a pair of black jeans that hug her hips and thighs in all the right places and a black t-shirt that features a photo of three wolves howling up at the full moon. She looks at me, tucking her black hair behind her ear before she smiles.

“How much of our world have you seen?”

“A little. It has been a few hundred years or so.”

Most of my knowledge of the mortal world is filtered through the lens of others’ dreams, distorted beyond recognition. Their subconscious is beautiful, turning the mundane into art in the most unique ways.

Still, I feel a tiny shock of excitement to step out into the world and see it with my own eyes and experience everything I have only brushed with my fingertips.

“Yes, well, a lot has changed in a few hundred years.” Mia grabs the keys, then checks the house before she walks out the front door and looks back at me expectantly.

“I hope so.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

NINE

Mia

These aren't the worst looks I've gotten walking around Walmart, but the comically large man next to me is garnering more attention than the nights Erika and I would make midnight snack runs in our pajamas pre-pandemic. On the bright side, most of the people I do make eye contact with accidentally seem to smile at us. As in, me and Tobias as a couple, but I still can't help but feel a little self conscious.

Not that he notices. Tobias is more interested in all the advancements made in the last hundred years. He wasn't exaggerating when he said he hadn't been in the mortal realm in a while. It took twenty minutes to get him into my tiny Nissan Versa because it looked like a "strange metal cage".

I watch as he walks through the men's section, his brows creased in concentration or derision, I can't tell which.

"What are these numbers for?" he asks, holding a pair of jeans, "Do I have to solve this equation to figure out what size I wear?"

Concentration, it is.

"You don't know your size?"

Tobias shakes his head, "It just manifests."

Of course. I grab the jeans and unfold them, holding them up to his hips, “The first is your waist, the second is the inseam. Let’s pick a few and we can take them to the dressing room.”

Tobias watches me with rapt attention as I fold that pair and put it away, then grab the next two sizes up, handing them to him.

Somewhere along the way to the fitting room, I stopped caring about the looks I’m getting from strangers, and instead focus on him. He is so cautious to interact with anything, always pausing for a second as if he doesn’t know what would happen if he touches it. It makes sense when I think about it, Tobias has mainly seen our world in dreams.

I wonder what his realm looks like, is it all fire and brimstone or is it just like a normal city? Is it just him or is there a Mrs. Tobias? A sharp pang of jealousy lances through my chest at the thought.

Oh. Do I have a crush on a demon? Truthfully, I might have also had a crush on the teddy bear too.

Probably because it's been him by my side all along, just in teddy bear form. Does that mean he’s been able to hear me this entire time? See me? I guess the only downside is that he’s not supposed to be in our realm. I will ultimately have to say goodbye.

What kind of supernatural avoidant attachment bullshit is this? I haven’t felt this level of connection with any of my exes and when I do, it’s a demon who will only leave me and break my heart .

Tobias disappears into the fitting rooms to try on the jeans and I stick close, looking at men’s underwear. Can’t say I’ve shopped for boxers before. I pick up a package of



regular boxers and a package of boxer briefs, trying to remember what my exes wore, but all I see is Tobias laying naked on my bed in his full demon glory.

I blush so hard that my cheeks hurt. You'd think that I haven't seen a dick before. I put the plain boxers back and keep the pack of black boxer briefs, plucking a bag of black socks from the end cap just for good measure.

"What are those for?" Tobias asks, walking up with a couple pairs of jeans in his arms.

"You don't know what underwear is for?" I tilt my head, placing the two packages in the cart, along with his jeans.

"I know what it's for, but why do I need it? You aren't wearing any."

I hear a loud snort from behind me and look over my shoulder to see a middle-aged man smiling down at a package of cotton shirts before walking off. Okay, maybe this is a bit more embarrassing than I thought.

Tobias growls and when I turn, his eyes are glowing bright red, the whites shifting to black. When he sneers, I can see the tips of new pointed teeth that I swear he didn't have before.

"Hey." I step closer, placing my hand on his chest, but he doesn't budge. "Tobias." I cup his cheek with my palm and his eyes dart to me. After a moment, his deep heaving breaths slow as his face returns to normal, "It's okay."

"You wouldn't believe what he was thinking," he says, his brows creasing in concern.

"I have an idea," I shrug, my fingertips grazing his sharp jaw before I pull away.

“Are all mortal men like this? ”

“Many people have spicy thoughts, it doesn’t mean they’ll act on them. That’s just human nature, Tobias. It’s the percentage that goes farther that is the problem.”

“Like, Jeff,” he tilts his head, looking down at me.

“What about Jeff?”

“He was going to try and pressure you into sleeping with him. I saw it clearly in his thoughts.”

“Oh,” my hand goes to my stomach. He wouldn’t have succeeded, but Tobias felt the need to protect me all the same. Suddenly, that night makes a lot more sense.

“Are you okay? I can sense you're upset.”

“I—yes. Thank you for looking out for me, Tobias,” I don’t want to dwell on the other emotions blossoming in my chest, but I’m sure he can feel them. The comfort, the appreciation, and buried deep beneath that, affection. “Okay,” I clear my throat, “Do you want to pick something special for dinner? It’s your first day in our realm.” I look up at him, “Can you eat?”

“I don’t know, but I would like to find out.” Tobias smiles at me, his sharp teeth are gone and replaced with just pointed canines. “Can we order Chinese food?”

These feelings will not remain buried for long.

We make it home at twenty 'til three. Just enough time to shove Tobias through the door with his new clothes so that he doesn’t stick out like a sore thumb or look like a wild weekend fling, the latter only because the truth would hurt my feelings.

“I’m going to make coffee. Would you like some?”

“Please,” Tobias calls out from the other room.

Let me touch you. Please, little doe. His words from last night echo in my thoughts, and I allow them to paint a vivid picture as I fix our coffee.

What am I doing? I need to control myself or I am no better than the guy at the store. Tobias is stuck with me for who knows how long, he doesn’t need me crushing on him the entire time.

As I finish adding vanilla creamer to my coffee, the door to my bedroom creaks open.

“I left your coffee black. I could never drink it, but I know people who like it that way,” I explain, looking down at my mug before taking a sip. It is amazing as usual, “I wanted you to decide before?—”

There’s movement out of the corner of my eye, and I look up to see Tobias padding into the kitchen. He’s still wearing the black shirt from before and dark wash jeans that hug his muscled thighs.

I shift uncomfortably, immediately my brain launches to a fantasy of him pushing me back against the counter and kissing me.

I blanch. Shit, he can read minds. How am I going to control my thoughts around him? Maybe I need to practice meditation or something like that.

“Mia,” he says, his gray hand grabs my mug.

“That has vanilla,” I mutter, watching as he places it on the counter.

Tobias catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tips my head back, staring at my lips and nothing else.

Oh, god. I take deep, conscious breaths. The expression on his face has me feeling a lot like prey. “What—what are you doing?”

His soft fingertips glide across my cheek, before threading through my hair to grip the back of my neck, “Does that mean I can kiss you? ”

I gather his shirt into my fist, wrestling with the urge to pull him closer or push him away completely, “It’s not fair reading my mind, Tobias.”

“That isn’t an answer, my little doe,” he smiles, closing the distance between us, “Just say the word and I will end both of our agony.”

“Please.”

The moment his lips brush against mine, my knees threaten to give out. How in the hell are they so soft?

Tobias growls, backing me up against the counter, just like in my fantasy. He wedges his knee between my thighs to keep me upright, his other hand gently cupping my cheek.

When I give him a playful nip, he tugs my head back, gliding his tongue along my lips, teasing them open.

The first flick of my tongue has him humming low in this throat, pinning me in place.

The hard edge of the counter digs into my hip as he takes what he needs from me. He kisses me until I feel drunk and breathless, my lips almost tingling from the contact.

The constant pressure of his thigh is not enough, I can't move, and can't grind against him like I so desperately need and he knows this.

Each kiss is drawn out, fevered but unending. It feels like a dream.

And, like every other dream I've had, there's a knock at the door.

Tobias stiffens and pulls away, looking down at me, he looks just as dazed as I feel.

"Just a minute," I call out.

For a moment, I think, yep, that was my only chance. I have used up every ounce of romance the universe has ever allotted to me in that one kiss. It's all downhill from here.

But then he leans down and kisses me again and again. Each one is softer and more playful than the one before. This isn't for my benefit anymore.

The pounding on the front door continues and I finally gently gather the strength to push Tobias away, but not before giving him one last kiss. I have needs too. I dip out of his grasp and run my fingers through my hair to hide what I was just doing.

I walk into the living room with shaky legs, my lips feel swollen and I know they look worse.

It was just a kiss, I remind myself. It probably didn't mean anything, maybe it's some sort of demonic culture thing, he is an incubus after all. Aren't they pretty sexual? It doesn't mean I should catch feelings.

Not to mention showing interest and wanting more is the kiss of death for most relationships.

It's casual. I can do casual. Can't I? Fuck, I hope I can, because I would give anything to kiss him again.

With a slow exhale, I open the door to see Jason standing there in a plain white t-shirt, his tattoos on full display and his tool bag slung over his shoulder. He gives me a slow smile, looking down at my lips.

"Mia," he says, taking a step and wrapping his arms around my middle, his hand brushing dangerously low against the small of my back.

"Jason," I squeak out, giving him a quick hug then stepping back, "Come on in."

"Hi," he says, holding out his hand, "I don't think we've met before, I'm Jason."

"Tobias." My demon just glares at his hand.

Thankfully, Jason breaks the tension, "Erika mentioned the faulty light is in the office?"

"Yes!" I force out, ushering him further into the house, "Thank you."

Tobias gives me a look as Jason walks down the hall.

"Stop, I know what you're thinking, but Jason is harmless. I've known him forever, there is nothing there."

He makes a noise low in his throat.

When I turn to close the door, Erika is making her way up the sidewalk with her car keys in hand.

“Hey babes, sorry I’m late,” she says, her boots loud against the cement pavers, “I had to pick up a few things.”

“Don’t worry.” I let her pull me into a hug, “I’m just glad you’re here.”

She looks over my shoulder and I feel her muscles go taut.

“Mia, uh, why is there a demon in your house?”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

TEN

Tobias

Mia might not be a witch, but her friend is, and she recognized what I was immediately.

It takes a lot of training to see past a demon's glamour, especially without the full benefit of dreams, where her subconscious is attuned to every change.

Despite it all, she isn't afraid of me, though I am only getting bits and pieces of her emotions. Unlike Mia, she has herself almost completely shut off, a trick that some clairvoyants use to keep their peace and ensure that unwanted spirits aren't able to manipulate or influence their thoughts.

"These are old rituals." Erika says, tucking her blonde hair behind her ear, looking down at Mia's phone, "They were just painted there on the side of the ring toss?"

"I assume some set designer saw this book, *Shades of the Occult*, and thought the symbols looked cool and demonic." Mia says from beside me, folding her arms across her chest .

"I told you the rituals were dangerous." I lean closer to her, "That book should be locked away or destroyed."

"Do you at least know how to break the summoning circle?"



“It’s not that simple,” Erika moves her finger across the screen and holds the phone out to Mia.

Mia reaches out and takes her phone, “What do you mean?”

Erika spears me with a look, “You shouldn’t be here. Spells like these have clear rules etched in those symbols. The seal should have kept him in the summoning circle until a deal is struck or he'd be returned to the demon realm.”

“Yes, because of the cross-dimensional visa,” I say, borrowing Mia’s explanation.

She quirks a brow and glances at Mia, “Something like that. The only thing I can think of is, maybe there’s a stronger magic keeping you here? Some kind of attachment?”

“It must be me,” Mia mutters under her breath, “I guess I got pretty attached to the bear over the last week.”

I taste the sour tang of shame in her words. Does she think I don’t care? That I am here with her against my will? I want nothing more than to wrap her in my arms and show her the comfort that she craves. Erika continues to watch me, almost daring me to say something.

“It could be. A lot of magic is about intention,” Erika says, taking another sip of her coffee.

Intention. The magic of will above all else, manifesting your wants and desires into reality. Could my desire to protect her be what is keeping me here?

“How do we send him back?” Mia asks.

Erika looks down at her mug, “That depends on if he even wants to go back. ”

Mia stands up straighter and I look up to see Jason step into the kitchen, adjusting his tool bag over his shoulder.

He ignores the rest of us, speaking directly to Mia, “So, it looks like the bulb went out. I checked the levels on the fixture along with the other outlets to make sure everything was stable. You’re safe. Just throw a new bulb in there and you should be golden.”

“That’s great! I’m sorry I brought you all the way out here for something small.” She laughs.

“Better safe than sorry, especially with some of these older houses. The good news is that it looks like the outlets were updated in the last decade.” He notices me staring and flashes a nervous smile.

“I’ll walk you out.”

Mia escorts Jason from the kitchen, leaving me alone with her friend. Erika sets down her cup of coffee.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but if you hurt my friend, I will make sure that your return to the demon realm is permanent and very painful.” She says, a sweet smile stretching across her lips.

“I would question your loyalty if you didn’t.” I lean back against the counter, “I’m surprised you have kept your powers a secret for so long.”

“I know better than to meddle with fate,” she quickly averts her gaze, looking over towards the door, just as Mia steps into the kitchen, “I should get going.”

“Thanks for stopping by,” Mia says, wrapping her friend in a hug.

Erika pulls away then looks between the two of us, “If it comes to it, I’m positive there is a ritual in the book that can send Tobias home.”

There is one last threat embedded in her words. The spell she is describing would ultimately banish me from the human realm.

“What did you think?” She asks, gesturing to the empty Chinese food containers.

“It was good,” I wave my hand as she offers me the last crab rangoon, only because I can sense how much she loves them, “I really liked the chicken.”

Mia bites into the flaky pastry and hums to herself, covering her mouth as she chews. She finishes and tucks her feet under her, curling up further against the couch, “Can I ask you a question?”

I can’t take my eyes off of her, “Anything.”

“What is it like in the demon dimension?”

I lean back against the couch, all too aware of how close she is and how good she smells, our kiss still lingering in my thoughts.

“Oh,” I clear my throat, “it’s not much different from the mortal realm, except there are no cars or any of this modern technology that you are accustomed to.”

“What do you have instead?”

“Magic,” I smile, “It would solve most of the world’s problems, but I know the witches have been fighting to keep it hidden away in fear of starting another war.”

“Another war?” Mia leans in close.

“Why do you think folklore is so rich in magical beings? It fell out of fashion to worship The Old Gods and with that, in fear of being hunted, those from other realms respected the veil and returned home.”

“Is that why you have that treaty with the witches?”

I shake my head, “Our conflict started long before that. Witches are in tune with The Gods and when The Gods didn’t listen, some witches turned to demons for help. They would bind us to objects in order to use our powers or to keep us around for protection.”

Mia runs her fingers across her neck, flattening her palm to her chest, “That sounds horrible.”

“Just as Erika mentioned, the summoning ritual requires an exchange, a deal. At times, it's a life or a soul. Sometimes, you can find a loophole. It only takes one angry demon to rend the veil that divides our worlds. The last time, it caused a bit of a mess.”

“Like the demon portal.” She nods, and I notice her eyes skirt over my body, searching.

“Ask me, little doe.”

“What kind of demon are you? What are your powers?”

“Mortals call me an incubus. A lot of your myths are mistaken, it’s not only about sex. I mainly walk through dreams and feed on the emotions there, giving the subconscious a gentle nudge. There is also this,” I lift my hand, calling the shadows,

their ethereal form winding up my forearm, threading between my fingers and grabbing at the air, “A remnant of my magic from the demon realm. I can call the shadows to do my bidding. I have little use for them outside of dreams.”

She slowly lifts her hand and drags a fingertip along the spine of a single tendril, her eyes going wide as it coils around her finger. “I didn’t think they would feel solid like this,” she smiles, biting her bottom lip.

I don’t have to read her mind, all of her wicked thoughts are written on that beautiful face as she plays with my shadows.

Each stroke of her fingertips sends a new sensation through my body, I shift, feeling my cock pressing uncomfortably against my boxers. Maybe I was wrong, they might have some use after all.

“Careful, little doe,” I purr, “They’re quite sensitive.”

“Sorry,” Mia pulls her hand away, her cheeks flushing a bright shade of pink that travels down her neck and hides beneath her t-shirt.

It would be so easy for me to slip my tendrils around her waist and pull her onto my lap and kiss her senseless, leaving her needy. Who am I kidding? I am the desperate one, I cannot move past our kiss and I am already trying to find the correct combination that would allow it to happen again aside from reading her mind.

Not that she is much of a mystery after touching my tendrils. With a wave of my hand, I dismiss my shadows and watch as her lips part in surprise.

She blinks and glances down at her watch, “Damn, I should get to bed. I’m going to be on call all day tomorrow.” She pauses, “I hope you don’t mind sleeping on the couch. I converted the spare bedroom into my office after Erika moved out?”

I hold up my hand, “The couch will be fine.”

She gives me a soft smile and touches my shoulder, “I’ll get you a blanket and a pillow.”

Home is a distant memory as I lie back on the couch, adjusting myself. If the Old Gods above can hear my prayers, perhaps I will be lucky enough to dream of her again tonight.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

ELEVEN

Mia

It doesn't bother me that I just found out that my best friend since high school is a witch. It makes sense; she taught me everything that I know about astrology, manifesting and even how to read tarot. Her spreads were always superior to mine. Even the deck she got me for my birthday last year puts me on blast whenever I use it.

No, I'm fine with that.

What bothers me is the last thing she said to me as she was climbing into her car.

By the way, if you get the chance, you should totally bang that demon.

Trust me, I want to. It's ridiculous how much I want to. I want to touch him, to taste him, and to have him pressing me into the mattress. I'm sure I will dream about that kiss for the rest of my life. Not to mention his shadows, I can't stop thinking about all the filthy things he could do with them.

I can read the room and I know, at least from our small make-out session in the kitchen, that he's attracted to me, too. But, like an idiot, I told him to sleep on the couch. I can't help it. I panicked.

Dammit, Mia, don't get attached. This isn't the new normal, just one very weird and very satisfying day. He will always return to the demon realm. Don't fall in love.

Sure, he's gorgeous and remarkably gentle with me, but he's still a demon. Even if his darker side only comes out to play to protect me. Ugh.

I pad across the bathroom, reaching behind the curtain to turn on the shower, testing the water with my fingers.

"Stupid." I hiss to myself, pulling my shirt over my head and letting it drop on the floor before stripping out of my shorts, kicking the small pile of clothes towards the wicker hamper.

I step into the shower and close my eyes to feel the warm water pelt against my skin, making my hair stick to my neck. It doesn't take long for my thoughts to wander.

In my fantasy, Tobias opens the door to my bedroom after hearing me in the shower and strips down to join me.

It wouldn't happen in a million years, but this is my feral daydream, so I can't decide which I want to feel first, his shadows or his strong hands.

I keep my eyes closed and reach for the shampoo bottle, instead, my fingers graze the smooth tile wall. The water blurs my vision as I reach for the bottle again, this time knocking it over completely, the corner landing right on top of my foot.

When I go to pick it up, my elbow slams into the wall of the shower, taking out two other hair products. The sound of them hitting the tub is enough to wake the entire neighborhood, if not the whole town, and I'm stuck here partially blinded and in pain .

"Mia?" Tobias asks.

"Shit." I hiss under my breath.



I can hear the concern in his voice, and he's a lot closer than I expect. I imagine he rushed to the bedroom as soon as the first bottle hit.

"I'm okay," I grit out, standing up straight after retrieving the shampoo bottle, "I just dropped something."

"No, you're hurt. I can feel your pain." He's closer now, just on the other side of the curtain, "I'm coming in."

The thin fabric rustles, "No, Tobias, your clothes!"

There's the unmistakable sound of a zipper and heavy jeans falling to the floor and I turn to see Tobias step into the shower, completely naked. I keep my eyes shoulder height, watching as his gaze skirts all over my body. It's not the least bit sexual, just appraising until he stops at my left elbow.

"Here," he takes a step forward and brushes his fingertips against my skin.

"It's okay, I just?—"

The pain is gone.

"How?" I look up into his eyes, his brows knitted in concern as he takes the shampoo bottle from my hand.

Tobias smiles and nods, "Turn around."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to wash your hair, if you'll let me."

“O-okay,” I turn and hear the cap to the shampoo bottle. The next thing I know, he is gently combing it through my hair. A chill shooting down my spine as his fingertips glide over my scalp.

This is so intimate and there’s nothing sexual about it. He hasn’t even tried to touch me.

“Pain is tied to emotions,” he explains, gently tapping my side, directing me to turn back towards him again. “I just follow the thread and I’m able to dull the sensation as well.”

“That’s kind of incredible. You’re almost like a healer.”

Tobias chuckles, “There is a first time for everything.”

He slips a finger just under my chin, tipping my head back, rinsing the shampoo from my hair. With his attention focused on that one task, I better look at his face.

Tobias’ red eyes are darker and closer to a blood red in the shadows, but I have seen them glow like embers when he’s angry. There is a slight curve to his horns just behind his hairline that doesn’t hinder the way his dark hair falls down towards his brow.

Without thinking, I reach up and brush his hair, damp from the shower, back and out of his face. His eyes snap to mine and I can’t stop the gasp that escapes my lips at the sight of him.

“You are,” he exhales, “so beautiful.”

Oh, yep, I’m going to bang this demon.

Leaning onto my tiptoes, I tangle my fingers in his hair, gently coaxing until he gets the message and leans down. Letting out a soft moan as his mouth covering mine, hands grab at my sides and squeezing.

I don't have time to stop and wonder if he's noticing my stomach, the dimpled fat on my thighs, or the light dusting of stubble on my legs.

Tobias just breathes me in, his lips skirting across my jaw and then down my neck with a graze of his teeth while he explores. His arm snakes around my waist, tugging me closer while his other hand brushes over my breast, fingertips lightly grazing my nipple. It feels so good. I need more.

The warm water streams down my back as Tobias peppers kisses across my shoulder and down my collar bone, trailing down lower until his mouth closes over my breast. His tongue is hot against my skin, nipping at the sensitive flesh, and sending chills through my entire body.

"Oh," I mutter, threading my fingers through his hair and pressing his face against my chest, the growl caught in his throat rumbling against my skin.

Tobias sinks to his knees, kissing my hip, then resting his forehead against my stomach, his horns gently nudging me, "Fuck. You smell so good. I bet you taste just as sweet."

A growl catches low in his throat, he grips my hips before reaching back and grabbing my ass, leaning forward to run his tongue along my pussy and over my clit.

"Oh god."

"There are no gods here, little doe, just your devil."

Tobias grabs the back of my thigh, pulling my leg to rest on his shoulder.

I yelp, trying to regain my balance, my palm splaying against the shower wall.

Black shadowy tendrils slip from between the tile, coiling around my forearm while others twine around my middle and my thigh to stabilize me, rooting me in place.

They're warm and slick, like his tongue.

He takes his time, each lick methodical, like he's learning me, memorizing every taste.

I close my eyes, lost in the lazy rhythm he set, letting water cascade over my head and down my shoulders, warmth spreading across my abdomen and drawing higher.

I could get used to this.

Tobias runs his tongue along the length of my pussy, dipping between my folds, each time it brushes over my clit I shudder.

He hums against my flesh, the sensation threatens to make my knees buckle. I rock my hips, seeking more. He flicks his tongue, once, teasingly.

"Tobias," I gasp, my eyes fluttering open, digging my nails into his shoulder.

When I look down, thick dark translucent tendrils have coiled around my stomach, two creeping up and circling my breasts. They squeeze, their tapered tips rubbing back and forth over my nipples, the sensation almost overwhelming.

"What is it? Did I hurt you?" He stops, pulling away to look at me, his entire face has changed, the whites of his eyes have gone black and his red irises are practically

glowing in the low light.

Fuck, am I into this?

It's not even a question. I've never been so turned on in my entire life. My sweet demon has gone feral with lust.

He sits back on his feet, panting, his thick cock resting heavily on his thigh. The tip is blushed a darker gray and I can almost see it pulsing in time with every movement of his shadows. Careful, little doe. They're quite sensitive.

"No, I need more."

"Tell me what you want, I will give you anything you desire." He purrs, his tendrils tightening around my breasts.

At first the words die on my tongue, I've always felt so awkward asking for what I like in the bedroom. Usually it feels like my pleasure is an afterthought.

A new thicker tendril slithers up my leg, brushing over my sex, slipping between my folds, teasing and insistent.

"My clit," I breathe.

His eyes darken, "You want me to suck on your clit?"

The thick tendril nudges against my pussy, almost stealing my breath away .

"Please," I whimper.

Tobias' mouth closes over my bundle of nerves, his tongue slow and teasing at first.

The tentacle continues putting the slightest bit of pressure along my folds, my muscles tightening in anticipation.

It finally sinks into me, twisting and rolling against my walls. He chooses that moment to pull my clit between his lips and I see stars.

The shadows wind tighter, pulsing and twitching, making my orgasm roil through my body in what feels like endless waves. He doesn't stop, his mouth fixed on my pussy as he growls and fucks me with his magic.

As I come down, his licks turn sharp, each one making me shake.

“Wait,” I whine, nudging at his shoulders, “It’s too much. I’m sensitive.”

He releases me immediately, his eyes glowing and hazy. I notice his own release dripping down his thigh. Slowly, the shadows retreat through the breaks in the tile.

We use the rest of the hot water to clean each other off. Nothing about this feels casual, from the soft reverent touches or the way he smiles down at me, pushing my wet hair away from my face.

Why does he have to return to the demon realm again?

After we get out, I dress in my regular pajamas while he puts on his boxer briefs. I turn down my covers and look to see him walking towards the living room. He’s going to sleep on the couch.

“You can sleep in here with me,” I say, my heart hammering in my chest, “if you want.”

This holds more weight than what we just did in the shower.

If he kissed me, I bet I could still taste myself on his lips. I'm used to the quick exit, not the lingering touch. I'm already thinking up excuses why it wouldn't work, reminding myself why I shouldn't get attached, waiting for him to refuse, but he just turns and smiles, the look of relief clear on his features.

“Please.”

### TWELVE

Tobias

I understand it now.

The half-formed dreams filled with longing, with nothing but an obscured face, a body without a soul. They used to confuse me. Why would so much emotion be tethered to a thought, an ideal?

Now, waking with Mia using my chest as a pillow, it all makes perfect sense. This is what they are dreaming of, the memory that has been long eroded until it is not much more than a suggestion.

So, this is what humans call affection, attachment, fondness, this might even be what they describe as love. I am excited, but I cannot deny that I am also terrified. This feels fragile, like a mortal life. Not much more than a blink of an eye to a demon. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

"Morning," she mutters, looking up at me, her cheeks pink.

It reminds me of the first morning.

"Good morning, little doe."

She sits up, looking down at me, her black hair falling over her shoulders and curtaining her face. I let my fingertips graze her cheeks as I tuck her hair behind her



ear. She doesn't flinch at my touch or shy away, she just looks at me like this is natural, expected.

I can't say I have ever experienced this. My demon form is usually a thing of nightmares, I send mortals screaming if they aren't shocked awake when they see me. Mia has never looked at me with anything other than surprise and sometimes concern.

"You aren't afraid of me." I tilt my head.

Mia's eyes search my face, "Do you want me to be?"

There's a teasing, breathy quality to her voice that makes my cock twitch. I sit up in bed to hide the evidence with the covers. She sits back on her feet.

"I meant my full demon form."

"I was a little surprised. I thought this was it," she says, placing her hand on my chest, I quickly cover it with my own, letting her warmth seep through.

"If you want, I could glamour myself so that you see me as a human like most others do."

"No," her hair bounces with a shake of her head, "I like you this way."

Something beyond the warmth of her touch spreads across my chest. I could become addicted to moments like this.

"Is that why you like those scary movies?" I smirk, "You have a thing for monsters."

Mia stammers, "No, at least not all of them. I kind of have this thing." She looks away, "It's stupid."

“Tell me, little doe.”

“I’ve never told anyone this,” she pauses, “but I have always had this fantasy of playing psycho killer, you know, being chased by someone wearing a mask. Letting them have their way—” She laughs, “it sounds so wrong when I say it out loud.”

I let my powers brush against her thoughts without breaking through. I see flashes of dark clothes, a white mask, the haze of lust and without weight of choice, fully consenting to her desire until it is a pliable thing against my fingertips, bending, but never breaking.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” She looks back at me.

“I will chase you whenever you want me to, if it will make you happy,” I smile, watching her cheeks turn that lovely shade of pink, remembering how it crept down over her breasts last night until it covered most of her body, “I know better than anyone there is a thin line between fear and arousal.”

Her lips part with a sharp intake of breath, eyes drifting down my chest to where I hold her hand against my skin.

From the look in her eyes, I half expect her to break into a sprint. The idea alone is making my thoughts fuzzy to the point I am almost salivating at the prospect of it all, the mix of her emotions, sweet and tart, against my tongue as she comes apart beneath me.

Her phone chimes a warning, and she moves her hand to grab it from the bedside table, “We can talk more about that later,” Her voice is an octave lower than usual, “I need to get some coffee and get ready for work.”

Mia climbs out of the bed and walks into the bathroom. I get up and pull on a pair of jeans that she bought yesterday and a black shirt. She walks past, dipping into the closet and a few seconds later coming out with a dark purple shirt and a fresh pair of black pants.

I follow her out into the kitchen, watching as she grabs two mugs from the cabinet, setting them out on the countertop.

“Can you teach me?” I ask.

She looks over her shoulder, “How to make coffee?”

“I want to learn.”

“Okay.”

It always struck me how unique mortals are, especially when walking from one dream to the other. Their fears and enjoyment vary wildly, one happy moment might be torture to another. I didn’t realize that it stretched to every task, even the most mundane.

She walks me through how she makes her morning coffee. First, washing the electric kettle and filling it to the second line before setting it on the base and plugging it in.

It begins bubbling and hissing almost immediately as she turns and opens the cabinet, pulling out a thick canister of coffee.

“I like instant,” she says, placing her hand on the tin, “Erika had this fancy coffee machine and a little grinder when she lived here, and I admit freshly ground coffee tastes so much better,” Mia opens it and inhales, then offers it to me.

The smell is earthy and smokey with a hint of sweetness underneath that lingers there in my senses after she pulls it away.

“It just reminds me of summers with my grandma down in Oklahoma,” she explains, “when things weren’t that great between my mom and dad.” She looks back at me, brightening, “But in the morning, my grandma would make me ‘southern coffee’ like her mom used to make. It took me a couple years to realize that it was just mostly milk and sugar with enough instant coffee to make it that light tan color.”

I’m almost envious of the joy that the memory inspires and how she shines even brighter when she’s thinking about those summers.

“It sounds nice.” I incline my head, stepping closer to her.

Mia smiles up at me, “Do you have any memories like that?”

Only these moments that I get to spend with you.

But I don’t say that. “Nothing comes to mind.”

“Oh, speaking of Erika, she’s having a Thanksgiving thing this weekend since they’re going out of town. You could come with, if you’re still here,” as soon as the words fall from her lips, her expression falls.

The gravity of it settles over my chest, the unspoken truth between us. I almost forgot that I was a stranger here, that I do not fit. I was just beginning to feel?—

The kettle clicks and the rumbling water calms. She adds two spoonfuls of coffee crystals into the cups and pours the hot water over them, adding sugar and the creamer from the fridge that smells like her.

“I would like that,” I say, taking a mug.

“Good,” Mia smiles at me, “So, since witches exist, does that mean there are other supernatural creatures as well? Like, vampires, for instance.”

“Vampires exist. They’re half demons, the first species born here in the mortal realm through the use of magic.”

She watches me, her lips parted, “What else? Werewolves? Shifters? Fairies?”

“I wouldn’t speak so freely of the fae folk, even demons know not to mess with them.”

“Gotcha. Demons are afraid of fairies.” There’s a teasing lilt to her voice that makes me want to pin her against the counter.

I glare at her, “Demons respect the fae.”

Mia smirks and leans back against the counter, taking another drink of her coffee. Her eyes catch on something behind me and she curses under her breath.

“I have to go log on,” she reaches out and touches my shoulder. “I’m going to be kind of busy today, but you’re free to watch whatever movies or read anything I have. Okay?”

“Alright.”

I follow Mia into the living room, watching her walk down the hall and disappearing into her office.

Without her by my side, every moment lurches forward, one after the other. I spend

so much of my time bound to the rules of dreams that I wasn't prepared for how slow and deliberate a mortal life could be. I like it.

How could I possibly leave her?

Mia's living room is filled with her favorite books and movies. There are so many options ahead of me, I don't know where to start. I just know that I want to learn more about how she sees the world. I want to know her hopes and dreams that I might fashion my own.

She spoke of getting a cat. I wonder where I could buy one.

I walk around the room, my attention flitting across the items on her shelf, when I notice the white mask hanging on the far end of the wall next to a large movie poster. I carefully take it down.

It's solid, heavy, and seems to be made of wood. Along with the two large eyes, here are other holes cut out along the edge and across the jaw and brow.

There is no way for me to repay Mia for setting me free, but maybe I can start by making a few of her dreams come true.

### THIRTEEN

Mia

Over the next few days we settle into a rhythm, Tobias is with me in the kitchen when I make breakfast before work, then he fills his day with movies and television shows. I take my lunch break to catch up and we spend the evening together watching movies as I introduce him to a new food.

As it turns out, he has strong opinions on olives as a pizza topping, but not on his sub. He isn't a fan of Nightmare on Elm Street, which is to be expected since he has experienced dream walking. He prefers Jason and Ghostface, which makes me feel a little proud.

I have also done my best not to ask him to sleep next to me each night. Mostly because I know how much it's going to hurt when he's gone, but I have also failed. Every. Single. Time. I fall asleep beside him and wake up on his chest or warm in his arms.

Sometimes he wakes me with a kiss to my forehead before my alarm goes off. Sometimes that kiss turns into something more and ends with him grinding against me while I'm wrapped up in his shadows.

The feature roll-out went off without a hitch, but opened up more opportunities for us to add various calls to action to the site, so that is my current task. Taking what the UX/UI department has sent us and breaking it into usable elements with my team.

I'm putting the finishing touches on the code to add a particular item to favorites so the user will get an alert when it's on sale or back in stock.

I finally peel my attention away long enough to glance at the time.

Great. It's nearly seven . I just lost two hours of my Friday night. I was going to order Greek food and to think about it, Tobias usually pops his head in to check on me if I work late.

After saving and closing out of all my apps, I hover the cursor over my personal email. I hold my breath as I open the site.

I scroll over the newsletters and sales, searching for something from the library, but there's nothing. The book hasn't been returned yet, so that means I get at least one more day with Tobias without guilt.

I take out my earbuds to hear rain hissing against the metal roof. There's only darkness beyond the sheer white curtains and the distant rumble of thunder. I look closer, jumping as lightning arcs across the sky and a large shadow crosses in front of the window.

"Tobias?!"

The rest of the house is dark, the only light coming from the cracks of lightning and silent beneath the storm. All I can hear is my footfalls soon on the carpet as I pad out towards the living room.

Usually, I'd find Tobias lounging on the couch watching something on tv or with my tablet clutched in his gray hand, though lately for some reason he's been more interested in befriending the stray cats in the neighborhood. They want nothing to do with him without food involved.



Now, he's nowhere to be found. The TV is still on crackling static that causes the shadows in the room to shift and sway like a living thing. He wouldn't have left without telling me, would he?

"Okay, this is getting kind of creepy."

Lightning flashes and the crash of thunder hits, shaking the house.

I shut off the tv and toss the remote onto the couch and start back towards the bedroom. Shadows dance across the kitchen window in the burst of light, calling me towards the back door like a moth to a flame.

A prickle of recognition causes the hair on my neck to stand on end. I've seen this movie before. I've had this dream. Anticipation coils in my stomach with a sick twist of fear and desire, making my knees weak.

I will chase you whenever you want me to. No, he couldn't possibly be playing psycho killer, could he?

I turn the handle, the metal cool against my palm, the sharp scent of cold rain hitting my senses and reminding me of that first night. I close my eyes, thinking about how the smell will hang on his clothes, his skin, his hair.

The rattle of thunder shakes me from my thrall, my heart pounding in my chest.

It's pouring. The warm glow of the patio light barely cuts through the darkness, like a veil has come down around me, obscuring my view.

"Tobias?" My voice struggles to cut through the noise from the rain on my metal roof or the howling winds whipping the trees into a frenzied state .

I take a step forward and the shoulders of my shirt stick to my skin, but I'm still lured by the promise of shadows just past the light from my house.

Careful, little doe. You're going to get wet.

Tobias' voice wraps around me like silk. I don't just hear it; I feel it.

"Yeah? Well, you're going to catch a cold. Not to mention the neighbors might call the cops on your shadow puppets." I fold my arms against my chest, squinting out into the storm.

They can't see me and I'm thinking you can't either.

Lightning crashes and there he is, standing out in the center of the yard soaked to the bone with his black tee stretching across lean muscle. He looks even more gray in the twilight with those twisting black markings across his bare arms and neck, but it's his glowing red eyes behind a white hockey mask that root me to my spot.

Look at you, caught in my snare. Would you like for me to set you free?

Out of the corner of my eye I can see his shadows shifting, pressing in closer until they are wrapping me in their warmth to keep me from shaking. Their touch is a gentle caress in contrast to the creature standing in front of me, fully playing the monster.

No, I think.

"Yes," I stammer, wishing I was feeling his body pressed against me instead of his power.

You forget I that can read your mind, Tobias purrs , Let's play a game of hide-and-

seek, little doe, when I find you, I get to fuck you.

“That doesn’t sound like much of a game,” I rasp out a laugh, “What if I don’t want to play?”

The sky lights up and Tobias is gone, I’m wondering if he was even standing there in the first place. There’s no way to know what powers he has been hiding up his sleeve.

All you have to do is say ‘olive’ and I will stop.

“Okay,” I bite my lip to keep from giggling as I search for him between each pulse of lightning. I take a step back towards the house, his shadows melting away.

I’ll even give you a thirty-second head start. Ready?

Heat settles low in my stomach, thrumming against my core and my heart races in my chest, waiting. Another bolt of lightning and he’s standing there, just past the patio, shadows twisting around him.

Go.

I run back into the house, my legs feel heavy, my skin prickling with awareness as I close and lock the back door, counting in my head. One. Two. Three. Four.

It looks like the rain is coming down harder now, thunder shaking the house, the yard nothing but the dull gray mist of falling rain and Tobias is nowhere to be seen.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve. I jolt as I hear the front door slam, whipping my head towards the large archway leading into the living room, his shadows cutting through the flickering light from the television screen.

Seventeen. Eighteen. I push off of the frame, my bare feet slipping against the tile floor as I run towards the door leading out into the hall. Twenty. Twenty-one. I round the corner and rush into my bedroom, dipping into the large walk-in closet on the right, pressing my back against the corner just behind the clothes. I slide down and tuck my legs against my chest.

Thirty.

### FOURTEEN

Mia

Tobias hums an unfamiliar melody above the noise of the riotous storm, so I know exactly where he is. The sound is almost soothing enough to dull the ache between my thighs. The anticipation is a creature all its own, clawing against my skin, begging me to strip free of these soaking wet clothes.

His steps continue, heavy with intent, following my path into the kitchen, each footfall louder than the last. I can hear his sneakers squeaking as he turns on the tile leading towards the hall. He's getting closer and closer.

Keeping my back flat on the wall, I look out into the bedroom, my eyes slowly adjusting to the dim light streaming through the curtains from the house next door. Shadows wade in, slithering across the floor on their own, blindly seeking their prey. Tobias' checkered sneakers follow soon after, just a few feet short of the closet's threshold. I am so close that I don't need to turn my head to see them .

I clasp a hand over my mouth to stifle my whimper; the sound lost in his steady tune.

Tobias shuffles his feet, turning and walking away, his song fading with every step. I lean forward, watching him disappear into the bathroom, his steps loud against the tile.

This is my chance to escape, to put distance between us.

I push up onto my feet, watching for Tobias' shadow in the light of the bathroom, then turn towards the hallway.

The humming stops and I only make it two steps before strong arms wrap around my middle, lifting me up and flattening me against his chest like I weigh nothing at all.

"There you are, my little doe," Tobias growls in my ear, the cool wood edge of the hockey mask pressing against my neck as he breathes me in.

My little doe. The phrase echoes in my thoughts on a loop, a warm blush spreading across my chest. His. I want it to be true. I have never wanted anything so badly in my life.

"What is the safe word?" He asks.

"Olive," I murmur, arching my back into him.

"Good girl."

A flustered giggle dies in my throat as he carries me back into the bedroom and tosses me onto the bed.

I roll over, bracing myself on my forearms, and Tobias catches my ankle with an iron grip.

"You thought you could get away from me," he lifts the mask off with one hand and tosses it aside, his red eyes glowing in the faint moonlight. A crown of jagged shadows that resemble antlers, sit atop his head, his dark hair tousled and wild from the rain.

Tobias exhales a ragged breath, his eyes rake down my body as a lupine grin stretches

across his face, revealing the tips of his sharp teeth.

“Fuck,” I gasp.

“You are so beautiful,” he tilts his head.

He lets go of my leg, his hand going to the back of his collar. With one swift movement, he pulls off his shirt and tosses it aside. I follow his hand down to his jeans as he undoes the first button, one handed and drags the zipper down. Stepping out of his jeans, he crawls onto the bed in his dark navy boxer briefs, the outline of his cock pressing against his leg.

I move back towards the headboard in time with his advances.

A growl escapes through his clenched teeth. He fists the waistband of my black shorts in his hand, tugging me down closer to him.

I yelp as my back hits the mattress, and he furrows his brows, his predatory gaze slipping. If I blinked, I would have missed it.

He yanks my shorts down over my hips and across my thighs, tossing them onto the floor while shadow tendrils slip beneath my damp shirt, until it bunches above my breasts. He pulls it the rest of the way over my head, leaving me beneath him in my red bralette and black panties, my legs splayed wide between his hips.

Tobias stops, looking for something.

“All my tests are negative and I’m on the pill,” I stammer out, my gaze flitting from the bulge in his boxers up to those gorgeous red eyes, “if you’re looking for condoms.”

The otherworldly stare knocks the air from my lungs like he's ready to devour me whole. I follow the trail of black markings down his chest, watching them disappear under his waistband .

“Good,” he growls low in his throat, “because I know it will take an act of God to pull me away once I am deep inside of you.”

With a rough shove, his boxers are down over his thighs and his thick cock hangs there, its flushed dark tip already leaking pre-cum.

My mouth goes dry, I want nothing more than to run my tongue along the dark veins twisting up his shaft, savoring the salty taste of him dragging out every obscene sound caught in his throat.

Tobias fists his cock, stroking it from root to tip, rolling his palm over the head as he lowers himself over me. He hooks his thigh behind my knee, spreading me even wider.

Leaning down, he captures my lips in a searing kiss, his tongue teasing and exploring while his erection nudges against the hem of my panties.

I grind against him, wanting to feel more of his cock.

It would be so easy for him to pull them aside and slide deep, but he continues to kiss me, teasing me with his hips.

He grabs at my wrists and holds them above my head, two tendrils snaking up to restrain me.

“You have no idea how long I have wanted this, my little doe.” His hand teases at my bra, uncovering my breast, taking it into his mouth and teasing the tip with his



tongue.

“Oh,” I drag out, my voice shaking. I arch my back off of the mattress, squirming beneath him, wanting more friction, more of him.

He releases my nipple with a pop. “You walk into my dreams, night after night, teasing me with that perfect cunt of yours.” He reaches between us and hooks his finger under the elastic of my panties, his fingertip brushing across my folds sending shocks through my legs, “I need to feel it. To feel your fear, your desire. Fuck you until you’re a needy, shaking little mess drunk on my cock.”

“Look at you, already so wet,” Tobias smiles, then grits his teeth. I hear a long rip, the thin material separating us falling away.

He lines himself up, rubbing his cock along the seam of my pussy and over my clit.

I look between us, biting my lip as he notches himself at my entrance, a hand going down to grip my thigh.

I struggle against the shadow tendrils, wanting to grab his hips until he sinks deep, instead, Tobias nudges his thigh, spreading me wider as he slides in. Letting me feel every slow and agonizing inch of him until he’s fully sheathed inside of me.

A whimper escapes my lips as I look up into his eyes.

He’s shaking, his breath coming out in huffs as he leans to kiss me again, rocking his hips in short measured thrusts that light me up, sparks settling low in my stomach.

“You feel so good,” he brushes his nose against my jaw, choking out a groan as he drives deep.

Warmth coils up my thigh, slithering and twisting between us, the firm tip of his shadows rubbing my clit.

I twist my wrists, pushing against the shadows, until they wither away, then throw my arms around his shoulders, my nails digging in, clawing for purchase.

“You’re taking me so well,” He presses his face against my neck, claws gripping my thigh.

Sharp teeth graze against my shoulder, his rhythm driving me closer and closer until I’m practically shaking. All it takes is one firm swipe of his tentacle and I’m falling over the edge, toes curling as waves of pleasure crash through me .

“Don’t stop,” I choke out, wrapping my leg around his hip.

“Fuck,” Tobias groans out, reaching up and grasping the wooden headboard, his hips stuttering between thrusts.

It feels like my body is practically humming, his movements slow to a steady grind, red eyes darken as they stare down at me, white slowly bleeding into the black. The shadows supporting me slip away like the crown of thorns that sat above his brow.

“That was,” I huff out, my hand going to his cheek.

He stares at me, tilting his head to press a kiss to my palm.

“I have never felt anything like that,” he shifts his weight with a deep exhale, his cock sliding out of me.

I’m waiting for him to crawl out of bed and leave me behind, but he settles next to me and tucks me close to his chest, fingers tangling in my hair.

He holds me like I'm something precious, not something to be used and discarded.

I burrow closer to him, listening to his steady heartbeat, waiting for his next breath.

### FIFTEEN

Tobias

“Ready?” Mia asks, letting go of my fingers.

There is no easy answer to that question. I’ve spent most of my life climbing the ranks to arch demon, collecting souls and punishing those who threaten to stand against me. It isn’t in my nature to be afraid, so why am I? It might be that fact that these are some of the most important people in Mia’s life, aside from her family, and I am still trying to justify that there is a place for me in the mortal realm and by her side.

“I think so,” I flex my hand and let it fall at my side.

It doesn’t feel like I’m crossing enemy lines.

Erika’s light blue house stands out from the rest of the street. There’s a string of tiny lights shaped like stars twinkling along the roof’s white trim, and a few paper bats taped to the window left over from Halloween. It wouldn’t be a proper witch’s house without the tiny crescent moons dangling from the door frame or a bundle of dried sage hanging from the eaves to protect against evil spirits .

I eye the herbs and place my hand on Mia’s shoulder, dragging my fingertips down her arm. She exhales, her breath visible in the cold, then knocks and takes a step closer to me.

The door swings open, the scent of cinnamon and roasted meats spilling out into the front yard. Erika stands there wearing a deep emerald button top tucked into black trousers, her light blonde hair piled on top of her head in a bun. She looks between us, smiling.

“Look at you! You look amazing,” She pulls Mia into a hug. “I’m suddenly very glad Paolo didn’t invite his friend,” she whispers, glancing over at me.

“And you look beautiful,” Mia says as she pulls away.

“Come in, come in. ” She steps aside, “It is nice to see you, Tobias.”

“And you,” I nod, offering the Tupperware container filled with the marshmallow dessert that we spent the afternoon making, “Where can I put this?”

Erika closes the door behind us, “That is perfect. I can put it away for you. Food is going to be ready in thirty and I just opened a couple of bottles of wine.”

Mia shrugs off her dark gray wool jacket, revealing the black dress underneath with her thick black tights, placing it in a room with a pile of other coats. I feel a little underdressed with my long-sleeved shirt. The cold isn’t a concern since my shadows keep me warm and I still haven’t been able to tap into the rest of my powers.

She reaches out, grabbing hold of my bicep to guide me further into the house. The party itself presses in on me like a dream, there’s so much conversation happening at once that I can only catch bits and pieces.

Most of my apprehensions begin to fade as Mia makes introductions. I'm surrounded by her friends from high school and college, along with Erika’s partner’s close friends. There are at least a dozen people spread across the living and dining room.

Everyone is so glad to see her, she commands their attention effortlessly while I am struggling to keep my thoughts my own.

It's simple enough to keep my focus on Mia, but with every new voice I catch a glimmer of their emotions or a memory strong enough to break through their subconscious until it feels like I am drowning in it.

The edges bleed together until I cannot pick one feeling from the rest. It wasn't this bad when we were out in public, but I could keep myself at a comfortable distance from most of the crowds.

Anger, frustration, happiness, lust, and love. I latch on to the latter, hoping to pull its tether and find Mia on the other end, but as soon as I get close, it slips away.

This is all too much, and I cannot breathe.

"Are you okay?" Mia presses close to my side, running her hand up my arm, "We can go get some air."

I look to see her brows knitted in concern. The expression spreads across the strangers like wildfire, their emotions reacting to my quiet agony, "No, I'm fine I?—"

Erika slips between the half-formed crowd, "Tobias, can I borrow you for a moment?" She looks over at Mia, "Paolo went to pick up more ice and I need someone strong enough to lift a twenty-pound turkey."

Mia nods, "Go ahead."

"Of course," I mutter, allowing Erika to lead me through the crowd and into the kitchen.

As soon as I pass the threshold, the weight slips from my shoulders. The silence of Erika's tempered emotions allows me to collect my own and order my thoughts .

"Where is this turkey?" I ask, looking across the countertops that nearly encompass half of the room.

"It's still cooking," she laughs, "I just know that look, I felt the same way when I came into my powers. The fates never stop whispering and I imagine it's the same for you, being so in tune with emotions, but there are ways you can protect yourself."

"I figured you were a seer."

"You catch on quick. Here, this is how my mother taught me," she grabs a clear glass from the counter and fills it with water, walking over and placing it in my hand. "Pay attention to the surface of the water, imagine you are there surrounded by the clear glass. A barrier that keeps your thoughts and emotions inside, but others out. Focus on the water and how it settles."

I look down at the glass, taking deep, even breaths. In my mind's eyes I construct the wall, brick by brick, watching the water ripple. I blink and the water stills, as do my emotions.

"Better?" Erika asks.

"Yes," I set the glass down on the counter. "Why are you helping me?"

"It's about time for us to bury old grudges, don't you think?" She walks towards the door, looking over her shoulder. "At the very least, for Mia's sake."

"For Mia's sake?" I tilt my head.

“Yeah,” Her brows crease, “You don’t know? Shit. Okay, I should really get back out there.” Her mask slips momentarily, and I sense her embarrassment.

Before I can form a sentence, Erika slips back out into the party, leaving me alone. What should I know? Why does it feel like I’m missing something right in front of me?

As I step out of the kitchen, Mia gives me a cautious smile and crosses the room to meet me, touching my arm, “Better?”

“Is the turkey a code for something?” I tilt my head.

“No, but Erika talked me out of a few panic attacks back in college. I figured yours might need magical intervention.”

“She is a good friend. You’re lucky to have her looking out for you.”

Mia nudges against me, “It seems like she’s looking out for you too.” She slides her hand around my waist to rub my back in slow circles.

When it’s time to eat, the group settles in the living room, scattered across the couch and the loveseat, while some people stand against the wall with their paper plates. Mia sits beside me, balancing a plate on her knees, while picking at the green beans with her fork.

“Excuse me.” Paolo says, clearing his throat and running his hand over his short dark brown hair, “I just want to make a toast to my partner and tonight’s wonderful host for pulling this together on such short notice.”

Erika smiles and folds in a mock bow, “Thank you.”



“The moment I saw her at Jimmy’s party last year, I knew she was the other half of my soul,” he watches her, “She radiated this,” he pauses, gesturing with his hand, “light that I couldn’t ignore. It’s likely the reason that you are all here tonight.”

Light. I remember the way Mia’s soul shone brighter than all the others. I have never seen its equal in all of my years. The answer has been there all along, a force more powerful than most magics. A bond that is not easily broken.

I listen to Paolo, but my attention wanders to Mia. She’s watching with a soft smile on her face that is so beautiful it threatens to break my heart .

She straightens and turns, her eyes finding mine. Her soft gaze is like a siren’s song, it always has been, calling me to her side. It resonates deep within my chest, in my—that is what Erika was trying to say. I just didn’t think that it would be possible, not after hundreds of years.

I know better than to meddle with fate.

Mia isn’t a witch, she is my soulmate.

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*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:23 am*

SIXTEEN

Mia

How could I have let this happen?

At the very beginning, I made a promise to myself not to get attached to Tobias. I could do casual, nothing had to come of our connection, just a little earth shattering sex between two consenting adults and then we could go on with our lives. But, no, I had to fall in love.

It all began with Paolo's speech. You would have to be blind to not see how much they both adore each other. I remember the night Erika came home after their first date. I was still up in bed reading and she leaned against the door frame, smiling at me with that dreamy "I just met the Prince" sort of look in her eye.

That's how I wanted my story to go. The type of love you know exists because you love that hard, it's just a matter of if, but when it will happen to you.

Turns out, when it does, your cynical and traumatized brain wants to push it away or question every single aspect of it. I've spent most of the night trying to reconcile the fact that Tobias belongs somewhere else. Why would he want to give up the ability to walk through dreams and live here in the mortal realm? Hell, I barely want to stay here in the current state of things.

Tobias follows me into the house, his fingertips grazing the small of my back as he passes, I close the door behind him and flick the deadbolt. He's already walking into

the kitchen as I turn to throw my keys onto the little table next to the front door. A giggle escapes my lips at how comfortable he is, like this is his house, too. It could be. I think, immediately disappointed with the traitorous thought.

“What are you doing?” I ask. I can’t help but take in his broad shoulders or how he fills out those jeans. My thoughts flicker to how he looked earlier on his knees, helping me straighten out my tights.

Tobias glances over his shoulder, his brows creasing, “I was going to make tea.”

“It’s,” I fish my phone out before putting my purse away, “nearly midnight.”

He turns to me, “I can make decaf. I just wanted to spend time with you.”

‘I love you’ sticks in my chest, but I blink and push it down.

“Okay, I’m going to go change out of these clothes,” I gesture to my dress, “and get cleaned up.”

Tobias pops back into the living room, leaning against the door frame, “I could help.”

I think back to that first time in the shower and shake my head, “No, I think I can manage.”

He nods, looking crestfallen, but I need to get my wits about me right now. There is no way I am in love with Tobias, not after a week and not when I’m not sure he feels the same.

I walk to the bathroom and wash off my makeup, then climb into the shower.

All the while, I continue to wrestle with my feelings for Tobias and what I should do.

I try to explain it away, to focus on the logic of the situation while going through every piece of dating advice that I have ingested.

The difference is, Tobias isn't human, he's a demon. None of the normal "rules" apply. He's in my life through magical intervention. That's it. I have been so wrapped up in everything that I forgot.

The world is different from what I thought, true magic exists. There is proof of it standing in my kitchen making me herbal tea right this moment.

If there was any moment to take a leap of faith, it would be this one.

I towel dry my hair, run a brush through it, then put on my 'happy sushi' pajama pants and a black tank. My heart is thundering in my chest as I walk out into the hall. The kitchen light is off and there's a warm light coming from the living room.

Tobias is leaning over the coffee table, striking a match and lighting one of the white candles from my pantry. He's already lit nearly a dozen other ones spaced out on the end tables, using the set of tiny glass zodiac candle holders that Erika got me for my birthday.

"You wouldn't be planning on sacrificing me tonight, would ya?" I ask with a laugh, more than half joking. To anyone else, the gesture would feel ominous, but knowing Tobias, it's...romantic.

He gives me a bright smile, "Not unless you're offering." He straightens, looking around at the candles, "I wanted this moment to look more like my dreams."

"Your dreams?"

"This is what I see when you visit them. You are the light in the darkness." He closes

the distance between us, I crane my neck to look at him, “I recognized it the moment I saw you, I thought you were a witch, but still I whispered my prayer to The Old Gods that you could find and release me.”

“You thought I was a witch?”

Tobias frowns, tucking my hair behind my ear, his fingertips grazing my jaw as he searches my face, “My little doe, I am telling you that you are the only thing I dream about.”

“How? You can dreamwalk. You have seen things I could barely imagine.” I shake my head, “I dream about books and movies.”

He gives me a wicked smile, “You also dream about being chased and pinned down while I fu?—”

I place my hand over his mouth, “Tobias.”

He tilts his head, wrapping his fingers around my wrist and placing a kiss on my palm, “I have only lived within the bounds of others, while these days with you have been my own. For the first time in my life, I have felt my own emotions and had my own dreams to play within.” He flattens my hand over his chest. “I want to stay here with you. If you would allow me.”

“Yes. Of course. I want you to stay.”

Tobias presses my palm against my chest, his other hand tangling in my hair, as he leans down to kiss me. It’s slow at first, soft and lingering, breathing me in with every brush of his lips. His hand falls from my hair, circling my neck as his thumb nudges my chin, urging me to open myself to him. His tongue brushes against mine, it feels like he is ready to devour me. The steady thud of his heart under my

fingertips, keeping time with my own.

Finally he releases me, I am breathless and swaying like the candle's flames.

He whispers against my lips, "I love you."

"I—"

A shock of cold lances through my palm, and I wrench my hand away, taking a step back. Tobias watches me with his lips parted, his red eyes glowing brightly in the dim light.

"What was that?"

"I—I don't know. I feel strange, like something is pulling me away." His voice shakes, he sounds scared, "Oh."

"Pulled away where?" The question comes out sharper than I intend, "Tobias, ignore it. Stay here, you belong here. We broke the binding spell. You belong with me."

He extends his hand, but I can't feel his touch. I reach out, my fingertips slip easily through his form like I am trying to catch a shadow.

"No." I grab for him, "I want to make a deal, please, Tobias."

He mouths something to me, his voice mute, it looks a lot like. I am sorry, my little doe.

Shadows coil around him until he is nothing but a dark silhouette, then collapse to the floor like smoke, extinguishing the light from every single candle in the room in their wake and leaving me in perfect darkness.

“Tobias?!” I cry out.

It’s no use. He’s gone.

I don’t understand it. Why would they send him back now? He spent months in the mortal realm as a teddy bear just to—return seven days from when he was freed. Without a contract, without something to bind him here, the treaty forces him to return.

All I know is that I need to get him back, I can’t let him slip through my fingers, even if it costs me my soul.

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### SEVENTEEN

Mia

Without Tobias, the house is more empty than before. I leave out the candles in the same pattern, unlit, hoping that somehow they would act as a beacon to bring him back to me, even if in my dreams. That's the only reason I fall asleep, cuddled up in the fetal position with the teddy bear he used to inhabit. It still smells faintly of cinnamon.

I think that if I could talk to him again, to tell him I love him and that I am trying to bring him back, then things would be okay. The summoning ritual broke before I could say those three words, the ones that I fought against foolishly in fear that he didn't feel the same. Now he's out there in the demon realm, however it might be, without knowing.

I wake up, make coffee and check my emails, hoping that my hold was ready, to no avail.

Frustrated, I sit down at my computer and go onto the library's website, searching the database only to find my hold is gone completely.

"Dammit." I check the time and call the local branch, leaning back in my chair.

The phone rings twice and someone answers.

"Hi, I'm trying to track down a book and my hold was just lifted. It's Shades of the



Occult by Michael Albert Hughes.”

The sweet librarian places me on a brief hold then returns after a few moments, “I’m sorry, that book is no longer in our database. We usually have a thirty-day window for them to return it before we cancel all holds.”

I sit up, my chair squeaking, “Lost? Is there a chance you could order one?”

In the silence, I can hear the click-clack of her keyboard. She hums, “That title is out of print. Even if you were to fill out a purchase request, we cannot fill it.”

“Thanks for checking.” I hang up, staring blankly at my monitor, my eyes going to the folder on the corner of my screen titled “Galloway Carnival”.

Clicking on the folder, I bite my bottom lip and start scrolling through the photos. There’s at least two clear images showing the circle that Erika identified as part of the summoning ritual.

I reach for my phone and shoot her a quick text to make sure she’s awake. She responds almost immediately and I pull up a video chat.

The tears start the moment I start to explain to her what happened. She stares at me bare faced, her blonde hair piled on top of her head with her brows drawn in sympathy. Her hand goes to her chest while I recount my last moments with Tobias.

“Will you help me?” I ask, my mouth is dry and I feel like I just ran a mile.

“Just to be clear, you’re asking me to help you summon a demon, ”

A shadow passes behind her, and I frantically wave my hand, “Wait, is Paolo home?” I ask, my voice low. There’s a burning pang in my chest realizing that I might have

just outed my best friend as a witch.

Erika laughs, “Oh, don’t worry, he knows.”

“He knows Tobias is a demon?”

Through the connection, I can hear Paolo’s surprise, he pops into frame, leaning over Erika’s shoulder.

“He does now,” she chuckles and turns to her partner, whispering something under her breath that her mic doesn’t pick up. He smiles and kisses her forehead, then walks away. When she turns back to me, she fixes me with a stare, “I’m going to tell you the truth, babe, this is completely out of my depth. You will be stumbling through the ritual without the text to guide you.”

It hits me like a punch to the gut. Of course, my best friend can’t just up and summon my demon boyfriend.

“But,” she pauses, “that doesn’t mean we can’t create a new ritual.”

“Will that work?”

She shrugs, “It should. Most of those summoning spells are archaic and useless unless you want to wade through the Latin. Their only purpose is to stroke the ego of the witch who wrote them. Magic has progressed in the last hundred years, much like the rest of the world. The top scholars have confirmed it’s all about intention, and not the spell itself.”

I let out a sigh, “Great, when can you come over?”

Erika shakes her head, “This one is on you. Whatever spell you choose will draw on

your connection to call him to you. Just be aware of the price if you make a deal with him.”

Well, that sounds ominous.

After Erika and I exchange goodbyes, I gather up a few supplies and pad into the kitchen, since it’s the only spot in the house large enough to summon a demon. Or at least that’s what logic tells me.

Using my favorite kohl pencil liner, I get onto my hands and knees and begin plotting out the design, based on the original summoning circle. I start by working on the main four points at the center, then slowly expand out with every ring. Thirty minutes and half of an eyeliner pencil later and I’m finished.

The whole thing looks vaguely satanic, so it might work.

Now, I just need a spell. Is it supposed to rhyme? It feels like a summoning spell should at least be a little poetic. Too bad I don’t have a poetic bone in my body.

Instead, I settle for the only summoning spell I know by heart. It shouldn’t matter if what Erika said about intention was true.

“Tobias.” I say, holding onto the way he looks, his smile. “Tobias.” I pause, then repeat one last time. “Tobias.”

It feels stupid the moment I try it, but it worked for Beetlejuice.

The lights flicker overhead and when I look back at the circle, shadows begin to gather around the outer ring, twisting and building until they nearly reach the ceiling before forming a familiar dark silhouette.

When they fade, Tobias is standing there in the demonic flesh, dressed in a dark red button down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and black pants and boots.

Fuck, and I had him in jeans and a t-shirt. It almost feels like a travesty.

“Mia?” He asks, his eyes going wide. “How did you summon me?” He reaches for me, the air rippling as his fingertips graze the barrier of the circle.

Right, he’s still bound.

“I believe this is where we make a deal.” I fold my arms against my chest.

He watches me, tilting his head, “And what do you desire?”

“I want us to spend the rest of our lives together, and when I die, I’m going with you to the demon realm.” I lift my chin. “That’s my final offer.”

“You would hand over your life and brave the demon realm. . . for me?”

“I love you. I’d walk through hell if it meant that you would be by my side.”

Tobias’ eyes flare and he punches through the barrier, the magic raining down onto the vinyl floor in tiny sparks, and closes the distance between us, his finger catching the underside of my chin.

“Does that mean we have a deal?” I take a step back, the edge of the counter digging into my hip.

“There’s no need to bind me, my little doe. I have always belonged to you in a way that is stronger than any magic.” He places my hand on his chest, “You have me, mind, body and soul .”

“We’re soulmates?” I choke out a laugh, “My soulmate is a literal demon? I just can’t?—”

Tobias laughs, his hands going to my waist and lifting me onto the counter, he steps forward, notching his hips between my thighs.

I cross my ankles to cage him in, tugging at his collar.

“So, about these clothes.”

He gives me a wicked smile.

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Tobias

Six Months Later

“Fish wearing roller skates!” Erika calls out.

Paolo and I share a look, then he lowers his gaze and shakes his head. If I squint and tilt my head, Mia’s scribble on the large pad of paper does look a lot like a fish wearing roller skates. Though it might be the wine, making my brain a little fuzzy.

Mia grabs the side of the easel, putting the blue marker to paper again. She adds arrows pointing towards the drawing. One after another. She wears the same look, working on a new string of code for her company’s website, a similar level of tension in her shoulders while the tiny hourglass on the table counts down.

Erika claps her hands, pointing, “Magic School Bus!”

“Yes.” Mia hisses out, crossing the living room and high fives her best friend before bending over and grabbing her glass of wine and downing the rest of it.

I reach over and grab the card, “Are many of your school buses magical? ”

Beside me Paolo snorts, and Erika is smiling at her partner like a cat.

“No, babe, it’s a children’s cartoon. There isn’t an actual magic school bus.” Mia glances at Erika, “Right?”

“Right.” Erika nods.

“I’m not sure how this is fair,” Paolo grabs a chip, holding it before popping it into his mouth, “Tobias isn’t familiar with most of these references.”

“It’s fair because Tobias is an amazing artist and he can draw pretty much anything. Plus, with the teams split like this, we actually have a chance at winning.” Erika leans back against the couch.

I wouldn't say I can draw anything, in my mind, I am still a novice, but I do enjoy it out of all the hobbies I have tried over the last few months.

Mia lifts her glass to her lips again, frowning, “I’m going to open another bottle of wine. Anyone else want some?”

Erika and Paolo echo their approval while I watch my little doe as she slips off towards the kitchen.

“Now?” I ask, looking between the two of them.

“Yes, go,” Erika hisses, nudging me.

I stand, following Mia into the kitchen, with my palms sweating. The small ring has been burning a hole in my pocket since the moment I bought it a month ago under Erika’s guidance. It took everything in me not to drop to my knees and present it to Mia that very night and every night following, but I felt her birthday would be more appropriate.

“You better not be fraternizing with the enemy in there,” Erika calls from the living room.

“My house, my rules.” Mia replies. “Hey,” she glances over her shoulder, “do me a

favor and grab the cheese plate from the fridge. ”

“Alright.” I reply, doing as she says and placing the wooden tray filled with several types of cheese on the countertop beside her. Taking a deep breath, I step back and lower myself onto one knee, reaching into my pocket, I pull out the ring, white gold and distressed, designed to look like gnarled branches surrounding a blood red ruby.

“Do you want to keep drinking white or should I break out the merlot?” She asks, turning around, searching before her eyes fall to mine. She clasps her hand over her mouth, her eyes already shining with unshed tears, “Tobias?”

The fear wells up in my chest and I can feel my form shifting; the shadows gathering at my crown, my vision sharp from my demonic senses.

“I know I cannot offer you the same things that a mortal could, in terms of traditions, but I feel this one is way too important to ignore.” I look down at the ring, “Mia, my heart, my little doe, will you take this ring as a symbol of my love for you?”

She smiles and holds out her hand, biting her bottom lip, “Yes,” she laughs, “Of course I will, Tobias.”

A sharp breath escapes my lips as I slide the ring onto her finger. Mia just about throws herself at me, firmly pressing her lips against mine. I nuzzle against her, softening and wrapping my hand around her throat, tipping her head back until I can brush my tongue against hers, pulling a soft whimper from her lips.

She pulls away, looking up at me, her eyes glazed over. “I love you,” she whispers against my lips.

“I love you too,” I grab hold of her as I stand, her feet dangling in the air while I pepper kisses on her neck and shoulder before gently setting her down. “Do you like it?”



“It’s beautiful,” she smiles down at the ring, twisting it on her finger, the ruby almost glowing as it swallows the light.

“I will say this is much better than the demon tradition of marking one’s partner.”

“You were going to mark me?” She looks up at me, blinking, her cheeks pink. “You can still mark me—I mean, if it’s tradition.”

“Enough of the cute stuff. Get back in here so we can finish kicking your butt,” Erika says.

Mia shakes her head and smiles up at me, “You know, I could let you two win.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” I tuck her hair behind her ear, “I already have the greatest prize of them all.”